

# Modern DUNGEON Capture Starting with BROKEN Skills

NOVEL

03

Written by  
Yuuki Kimikawa

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cruelGZ



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«Gah ha ha ha!  
A unit of  
**iron dragoons**,  
I see! Let's have  
some fun!»

THE SKY ABOVE NEW YORK CITY



# CHARACTERS



## KESSIE

Fairy rescued by Mizuki.  
Caught by goblins inside a  
dungeon and almost roasted alive.  
Currently lives in Mizuki's  
apartment, often hiding in  
his pocket during dungeon  
adventures.



## MIZUKI RYOSUKE

Former wage slave, current adventurer.  
Learned to use a variety of skills  
freely after obtaining Skillbook in  
the Omori Dungeon. Getting used to life  
with his dependable partner, Kessie.

## TACHIBANA MAKI



Caster of powerful Charm  
skills. Former city hall  
employee who left her  
position following the  
Himata incident. Proceeding  
down the honorable  
path of unemployment.



## HIMEKAWA SHINOBU

High schooler and YourTuber.  
Ever since Mizuki rescued  
her, she often just happens  
to pop up around him.  
Real name: Tanaka Shinobu.

## CAROL MIDDLETON



Young leader of an elite  
British adventuring party.  
Possesses a unique skill  
called Scale Eyes. Armor  
has slowly grown more  
revealing over time.



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WRITTEN BY

**YUUKI  
KIMIKAWA**

ILLUSTRATED BY

**CRUELGZ**



*Seven Seas Entertainment*



KOWARE SKILL DE HAJIMERU GENDAI DUNGEON KOURYAKU Vol.3

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Illustrations by cruelGZ

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## Prologue:

### Uemura Atsumi

**S**OME TIME AGO...

A few years had passed since the appearance of dungeons all across the globe. The nations of the world continued their heated debates and treaty negotiations over regulations and safety provisions for the precious resources that slumbered within the dungeons' depths. Governments were finding themselves unable to properly manage the dungeons within their borders.

The people of the world, meanwhile, adapted to the existence of these new fantasy dungeon worlds surprisingly quickly.

*And in this changing world, I, Uemura Atsumi...*

"Mizuki-kun, transfer. You're off to Hokkaido."

The setting was a certain Tokyo branch of one of Japan's leading investment banks, Showa Securities. I, a certain branch manager, had called a certain subordinate of mine in to deliver some news.

"Huh?" He sounded surprised at first upon hearing of his de facto relegation, but soon fell silent with no words of protest.

*Mizuki Ryosuke... A young employee coming to the end of his fledgling stage. He's serious when it comes to his work, and fairly cooperative and accurate in most things. His results aren't exceptional, but the clients have good things to say about him. However... Well, the two of us have never been able to get along.*

I tried my hardest to suppress the smirk welling up from deep inside of me, but I may have been unsuccessful. "If you choose to get defiant, and the absences and late notices start piling up over there... You know how that's going to play out, right?"

"I do. Don't worry about me." Mizuki-kun didn't seem shocked at all, but instead chose a deliberately melancholic expression. Behind his tightly pursed lips and composed face, the high sense of self-importance that he tried to

conceal showed through.

“Do the best you can out there... Don’t fight your superiors. Stay quiet, clock in, clock out. Let this be a lesson, eh?”

“I really don’t mind this,” said Mizuki quietly, bottling something up deep inside. “You aren’t going to use this to try and sweep the Namatames and their 300 million yen under the rug, are you?”

“...I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

\*\*\*

After Mizuki Ryosuke left the room, I immediately picked up the phone on my desk. I dialed a number and made a call. After a few beeps, it connected. “This is Branch Manager Uemura. Patch me through to the company president, if you would.”

The secretary switched lines immediately. Then, on the other end, I heard a voice. It was deep, like it was rumbling out from somewhere far inside the receiver. “What is it, Uemura-kun?”

“President.” I took a moment to calm my nerves and catch my breath. “I’ve informed Mizuki Ryosuke of his transfer.”

“How did he take it?”

“He complained a little, but that’s all. It seems it was a hard pill to swallow, but I expect him to ultimately accept it.”

“I see.”

There was a brief pause as I waited for the company president to speak again.

“Well, then... What of our finances? Have you cleaned everything up?”

“Yes, that’s already done. There were no problems.”

“Understood. Fine work.”

“Please. It’s nothing. The former company president gave me similar tasks, after all.”

“Come see me when you have time. Let’s talk about where we go from here.”



“Understood. I’ll schedule that at once.”

With a click, the line went dead. I placed the handset down, drained the remainder of my canned coffee, and took a cigarette out of my pocket. *We aren’t allowed to smoke in here... But who gives a damn? Should be fine today, of all days.*

The Zippo lighter’s tall flame singed the end of my cigarette. I inhaled deeply, then exhaled, using the empty coffee can as an ashtray. The strong smoke clouded my mind for a moment as I tried to quell my rising excitement.

“It’s over...”

*We had to walk a fine line, but I took care of it. Mizuki Ryosuke won’t dare stick his neck out further. Even if he does, he should realize it’ll come to nothing. In any case, he doesn’t know anything. All he knows... All he thinks he knows is a fragment of the whole thing. He doesn’t understand anything about what really happened. He couldn’t begin to imagine.*

*Everyone in the world believes they’re better and smarter than anyone around them. Mizuki Ryosuke’s a perfect example of that type... Letting his weird sense of justice run wild, sticking his nose into things that aren’t his business.*

*In any case, everything turned out fine. Now, the only people who know Showa Securities’ secrets are the company president and me. Not knowing must be blissful ignorance.*

“I’ll need to make time to go see the president as soon as possible,” I mumbled to myself, expelling the thick smoke from my lungs.

*He must want me for a promotion. That’s the only thing he’d possibly want to discuss. There’s no way he’ll keep me in this branch manager position, given everything I know and how I’ve applied myself...*

The phone rang once more.

“Yes? This is Uemura.”

“It’s me. There’s one more thing.”

“President...? Yes. Of course.”

I shoved the butt of my cigarette into the lid of my coffee can, then dropped it

inside. The cold coffee swallowed it, the ember sizzling slightly as it went out. I was certain the small sound of my transgression wasn't audible on the other end of the line.

"I'm sure we already touched on this, but you must never say a word of what you've done to anyone."

"Of course. I know that."

"Not to your closest friends, wife, drinking buddies... Not even aloud to yourself. You must never divulge this information, whatever happens. You mustn't even hint at it. Do your utmost to forget that this even transpired. Focus on *failing* to recall the details. You understand, don't you?"

"Y-yes...of course."

"If this incident comes to light, there will be serious trouble. Much more than you imagine possible, I think. But you're aware the repercussions will be grave, aren't you?"

"Yes... I'm aware," I answered, wincing a little. *How much will he harp on this? I never had him pegged as such a worrier. He doesn't need to pin me down so firmly... I'd never go around blabbing about something like this to people.*

"As long as you understand, then that's enough for me. Just make sure there are no incidents. It's best if you stay in the dark going forward, knowing nothing about any of this. I'll organize things to ensure that." I heard a deep sigh on the other end of the line. Then the company president muttered, almost as if to himself, "If this goes wrong, the world's in real trouble. I'm not speaking metaphorically, Uemura-kun. It'll make Lehman Brothers' collapse look like nothing at all."

"R-right..." I said, my tone lukewarm.

*No...he's overreacting, I thought. It'd be a big scandal, that's for sure, but nothing on an international scale. In Japan, the incident would make headlines, but whether it'd get picked up by world news is a different story. Maybe as Showa Securities' company president, his idea of the world is just a little more personal...a bit narrower than mine. No...wait a minute.*

I returned to something he'd said moments ago. "President, I apologize for



my ignorance on this matter, but what's this 'Lehman Brothers collapse' you mentioned?"

"Nothing... Forget about it. That's a different story."

# Chapter 1:

## I Didn't Touch Anything, but It Just Broke

### 1

**P**RESENT DAY.

"Hey, Mizuki. I didn't touch anything on my PC, but it just broke."

"Is that so, Heath? Sounds like trouble."

"It really is, yeah. Big trouble. Will you fix it for me?"

"Mind if I ask you a question first?"

"What is it?"

"What're you doing in my room?"

It was morning, and I was still under the futon covers. But the person peering down at me the moment I opened my eyes wasn't, in fact, a cute little-sister-type childhood friend who was actually crazy about me and came over to wake me every morning. It was the handsome foreigner from next door, Heath.

At my question, which was only natural, his deep-set eyes gave me a look of stunned confusion. "Well, I want your help, obviously. You're a computer whiz, Mizuki."

"I thought I locked my door." I sat up in bed, running my hands through my messy hair to straighten it a little.

"It was locked, yeah, but I opened it no problem."

"How?"

"The Unlock skill, of course."

*What do you mean, "of course"?* "That's trespassing."

"I know! Don't insult me."

*Well, that's totally brazen, then. But I suppose there's nothing else to say.*



I rose from my futon, staggered a little as I made my way to the sink for a cup of water, then stretched my back.

“All right, fine. Let’s see this PC you didn’t even touch that just broke all on its own.”

“Okay. It’s that laptop I bought at the electronics store.” Heath smiled at me, but a moment later, his expression clouded with uncertainty. “It broke almost right away.”

His face went from joy to anger to sadness so quickly, it was as if he was changing masks. Heath’s build was reminiscent of a mid-to-welterweight fighter, and his emotional muscles seemed to move just as lightning quick as his arms and legs.

“Can you really fix it, I wonder?” he continued. “I’m worried it might be done for. Might’ve taken a fatal blow. I really didn’t do *anything*. I mean it.”

“Heath, I’ve gotta tell you... It’s likelier that you did something to break the PC than that it broke on its own.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“No. I’m talking in general, that’s all.”

“That general talk doesn’t get through to me. Never has.” Heath guffawed.

*I can’t exactly prod further.* “How’s it broken, by the way?”

“It won’t turn on.”

“Must be out of battery.”

“Don’t insult me. It won’t even charge.”

“Then how’d it break?”

“Listen, just come look at it, will you? Showing you will be easier than explaining.”

“All right. Fine.”

As Heath walked me to his apartment, I gave the matter some thought.

*“I didn’t touch anything, it just broke,” is a fairly common, consistent refrain*

*with rookie PC users who made an easy mistake with their computer. And, in this world, most things happen as a result of some other action.*

*That said, there have been OS updates that contained fatal bugs that bricked the system. There's also a chance that this new product Heath bought has some factory issue that means it isn't working. So it's not like what he's saying isn't possible. But if it won't start up even if he's tried to charge it, it likely has a hardware issue that I won't be able to do anything about anyway.*

Heath let me into his apartment, leading me through the living room. "It's this way, Mizuki. Take a look."

His PC was on the living room table. It was as normal a laptop as I'd ever seen—save for the white smoke rising from gaps between the keys, the rigid outer frame bulging like a balloon, and the fact that the machine was clearly, absolutely just seconds from exploding.

"What the heck is that?!" I exclaimed.

In response, a high-pitched voice called my name. "Ah! Mizuki!"

It was Heath's roommate, Matilda-san. She was wielding a frying pan as she shrank into a corner of the living room, clearly terrified of the expanding laptop on the table, which was silently threatening to explode in the next three seconds.

"Help us, please!" she cried. "This laptop seems like it might blow up!"

"What is this?! How'd it happen?!"

"I don't know! Heath's the one who bought it!"

As Matilda-san and I shrieked back and forth, Heath went over to the laptop that now looked roughly *two* seconds from detonation. He began to smack it. "I tried pushing the power button, but it won't turn on. Wonder what's up with it."

"I don't think troubleshooting is really the priority right now! What the heck did you do?!"

"Nothing," Heath said. "I just charged it."

"Charging wouldn't do this!"

“Seriously! All I did was charge the thing up. I guess I did cast buff skills on the battery a few times, since I thought it charged a little slow, but that’s all.”

“Is this what happens when you buff a battery?!” I yelled.

“Come on. Don’t sweat the details. Just tell me how to turn it on for now, will ya?”

“It’s not *going* to turn on anymore!”

“Then what do I do? Should I give it a few more good whacks? I heard some things start working when you thump them a bit. Might be worth it, eh?”

“Stop! Seriously, don’t do it! Don’t attack something that’s about to explode!”

As I mentioned earlier, things generally didn’t tend to break as a result of nothing at all.

*The same goes for me. I didn’t get this broken skill by doing nothing. I didn’t blow up a training ground, get taken into custody, or make it onto national news programs for nothing either.*





*But this world's built in a very strange, complex hierarchy that goes up and up, causing countless connections and miracles and coincidences that are spontaneous and unexplainable—really shaking the norm. You can hardly say that there's never been a time when something just broke, even though nobody did anything at all to it. The same goes for me, Heath...everyone.*

*Even the world itself.*

\*\*\*

After the great chaos that followed the first combined dungeon field test training exercise, I was left with so much on my plate that I was completely unable to deal with any of it. I couldn't even see the plate any longer from all the things being constantly piled onto it.

The existence of my Skillbook went public after I totally incinerated a corner of the training grounds, and debates on how to handle me raged all over. In fact, a news program on TV right now was interviewing people on the street for comments.

“Regarding the adventurer who attacked the large chimera who appeared during the training exercises...”

“A lot of people on social media are anxious that he be arrested and properly monitored.”

“I mean, he's just like a nuclear bomb walking around on the street, yeah? Course I'm freakin' scared. I want the police and government to do somethin' about him. I pay my taxes...”

“Well... Was it self-defense?”

“The prime minister argued for caution, and that actions which infringe upon human rights shouldn't be...”

“The opposition has been persistent, requesting that the ruling administration...”

“I'm seriously a virgin, yeah.”

*I feel like that last comment was about something else entirely, but anyway... The public reaction has been about what I expected. Someone on social media*

*described Skillbook's out-of-this-world firepower as making me like a "Human Nuke," and the name's starting to stick. The term "nuclear bomb" has always been sort of sensitive for Japanese people, but for some reason, the switch from Heisei into Reiwa seems to be wearing away at that. Considering what my awakened Skillbook can do, honestly, my biggest problem is how accurately this "Human Nuke" internet slang does describe what I'm capable of now.*

A second issue was that during the big fight, my beloved partner—the fairy Kessie—had zoomed around me so much, in front of so many witnesses, that her existence was all but out of the bag. As for what my little roommate, the tiny fairy from another world whose existence was becoming public knowledge across ours, was doing...

"Gyah! Kuro-chan's seriously crazy! Hyah hyah! Oh ho ho!"

I stared at her in silence.

"I'm totally serious! He's messed up! My tummy! It hurts from laughing so much! Gyaah! Oh ho ho! Oh ho ho ho!"

"Hey, Kessie...?"

"Oh ho ho! Gyah! Yeah?!" Kessie did a quick tap dance on the remote, pausing the show, then turned to look at me. "What's up, Zukky-san? Right now, your little Kessie-chan's *real* busy, y'see? She's watching a *Thursday's Downtown* recording."

"You don't think any of this is dangerous, then, huh?" I asked.

"Dangerous? What's the danger? You mean, Matsuyama Hitoshi's muscles are getting dangerously *ripped*?"

*I have to admit, I also think those muscles are bulking to a dangerous size. Still, that's not what I meant.* "I mean you're practically known to the world now. If we mess up, you might get shipped off to some research facility. That's the danger."

"Hmm... Well, like, there's no point thinking about that, is there? Nobody really knows what'll happen next," she pointed out.

"I suppose, but still."



“Anyway, now that the cat’s out of the bag, who cares? All these worries about an unknown intelligence getting locked in a secret research facility are ’cause you’ve been reading too many sci-fi novels! There’s a pretty good chance that all those rock-solid human rights this world’s got will apply to me as well.”

“I guess you’re right, but...”

“Then hyper-cute Kessie-chan will make her TV and YourTube debuts! I’ll be super popular! The world’s first fairy celebrity! Do you think I might meet Matsu-chan and Hama-chan?! Huh?! Do you think they might have me on as a guest?! Whoa! My dreams are expandin’ before my very eyes! Maybe getting found out isn’t too bad after all! When they invite me on the program, you should come on too, okay, Zukky-san?!”

The little fairy was so delusional now, she was practically a machine gun shooting bullets of positivity. I heaved a sigh.

Kessie slid off the remote control onto the table, crushing some snacks in her little hands and stuffing her face with them. “Still, you’re about to go on talking *forever* about what’ll happen next, right?”

“You’re right.”

*Ding dong! Ding dong! Ding ding dong!*

My doorbell rang in the agreed-upon pattern. Our very own legit computer whiz was here—the first to arrive.

## 2

**H**IMEKAWA SHINOBU, REAL NAME TANAKA SHINOBU, wore a bright-green hoodie, gray T-shirt, and hotpants that were easy on the eyes.

“This is the undisputedly wicked-cute JK YourTuber Himekawa Shinobu-chan, coming at you with a recap of all the things Mizuki-san has gotten himself wrapped up in!”

She was slim, but curvy in all the right places. I noticed her thighs as she showed them off with indifferent extravagance, sitting cross-legged at the low

table as she used the laptop. The software application she clicked with the trackpad displayed what looked like a text mind-map, or an assortment of letters like you might find in an online word-association game.

“Thanks, Shinobu.”

“This is all basic stuff. Oh, hey, Kessie-chan! Long time no see!”

“Been a while, Shinobucchi! Your thighs are as naughty as ever, huh?”

“That body-hugging suit of yours is some prime fap material too, Kessie-chan!”

My palm-sized roommate greeted the JK YourTuber in an exchange that I couldn’t really follow. The two had gotten to know each other after the chimera incident.

*I suppose Kessie knew of Shinobu all along, though.*

Right after I returned to my normal life, I’d told Shinobu about Kessie, and all my reasons for hiding her existence. The difficulty level of the explanation was on par with “Actually, you know, I live with an alien.” When I broached the subject, Shinobu gently suggested that I go get my head checked out. Then Kessie appeared in person, and Shinobu started to wonder whether she should get her head checked too.

After the details had been laid out for her, Shinobu seemed to accept the bulk of the situation fairly quickly, and she and Kessie got along well.

*Dungeons are one thing, but accepting that fairies exist? I’m surprised she came around to all this so easily. Must be how young she is. That said, in her position, I don’t think I’d have any choice but to acknowledge Kessie’s existence either.*

Shinobu was visiting my house because she’d accepted my request to complete a specific task.

“I took info from all over and summarized it. Government opinion on you seems pretty divided, Mizuki-san.”

She deftly moved the mouse to a piece of text and clicked to open it.

*If we can’t confiscate his skill, shouldn’t we take him into custody?*

*Wouldn't it be dangerous to provoke him by disregarding his human rights?*

*Regarding a law change to properly manage individuals who possess skills far more dangerous than ever before seen.*

*Will this be an issue in the snap general election?*

"It's mostly chaos. But it seems like they're concerned that this'll be a topic of discussion during the next election. The opposition has two factions: those who are cautious, and those who want you arrested. All this information's legit, from a reliable source."

"Who's the reliable source?"

"A YourTuber called Horinomiya-san."

*I'm not sure I can trust him, exactly... But it's not like I've got any influence with the Japanese government, so we've got no choice but to rely on his info. Horinomiya might've gone bankrupt, stepped down as company president, and fallen into the depths of YouTube, but he still has quite a few political connections. Apparently, some people he used to be friendly with still invite him to Ginza and other places where rich people hang out now and then: high-end clubs, upscale restaurants, and other hidden getaways for the wealthy to plot in secrecy.*

The information Horinomiya had gleaned over the course of such meetings was valuable, and since he was working for REA, he attended whenever he found the time—busy as he was, being the former head of a huge company and a current leading entertainment YourTuber as well as a REA collaborator.

Given how busy I'd been lately, I'd delegated gathering information, organizing Horinomiya's intel, and most of the project management to Shinobu, who understood everything about my situation.

*As for why I'm so busy, that can wait... It's not like I'm making her work for free, though, of course. I can offer her all kinds of things in exchange for her help. Collabs with Horimiya Channel, for instance, which just hit a million subscribers last week.*

"What does Horinomiya predict about all this?" I asked.



“He doesn’t think they’ll do anything about you in the short term, Mizuki-san. Japan moves slowly when it comes to this stuff. It’s cautious—sluggish, even.”

“Right.”

*Now’s the only time I’ve been happy that Japanese politics moves so slowly. I bet, right about now, they’re consulting countless pages of legal precedents and relevant references, meeting and discussing how to handle the literal “Human Nuke” power I happen to have.*

*Other citizens’ safety can’t be ignored, of course, so I must be a troublesome threat to deal with in a practical way. I used to just be a regular old investment banker, and now I’m some mysterious huge player in all this dungeon stuff.*

“What about Himata? Hear any news about him?”

“Nope. No developments. Some reports that he was spotted in New York, but nothing concrete.”

“I see,” I said, folding my arms.

In addition to my concerns about the government’s reaction, I was extremely worried about Himata, a super-dangerous individual who was still on the lam.

*His terrorist plots all ended in failure, so I’m not sure how valuable my Skillbook would be to him right now. But if he needs it, he’ll come try something using those powerful hypnosis skills of his. He might be on the world’s most wanted list, but he isn’t the kind of man to merely run. If the reports of him being spotted in the U.S. are true, he must be operating over there for some reason. I don’t know whether he’s plotting some new terrorist act, but I feel like I’ve got a little bit of leeway here.*

*If you’re coming, though, Himata... Come and get me. I’m ready to fight you off.*

...

*...No, to be honest, I’m not actually ready yet. I do want you to wait a little longer. Or, rather, it’d be best if you just never came at all.*

I still felt traumatized, remembering the enraged Himata, scorched by Blaze, who I’d faced on those training grounds.

“More importantly,” Shinobu mumbled, as my blood ran cold at the thought of the fight, “you might totally be on the verge of getting taken into custody on state authority, Mizuki-san. What’re you going to do now...?”

“Just wait and see what happens...and keep my mouth shut.”

“I think we’re getting past the stage where you can manage any of this.”

“If I can’t, I’ll just make it even *less* manageable.”

I heard a sizzling sound, like something burning on the stove. For one brief moment, two huge, winglike holographic pages opened before me, like afterimages floating in front of my eyes. It was my unique skill, Skillbook; it had awoken and attached itself firmly to me. *Seems like it just reacted to my unconscious mental state and activated itself.*

At the sudden flash in front of our eyes, Shinobu shot back with a “Whoa!”

“Ah! It happened again, Zukky-san? I thought I told you to stop subconsciously activating Skillbook!” Kessie reprimanded me, fluttering over. “You have to hold it in!”

“Sorry. It just kind of came out,” I said, suppressing the skill as I scratched my cheek.

Now that it was a unique skill, Skillbook typically activated whenever I *willed* it to. Of course, I could still activate it by calling out the skill name, like in shonen battle manga—but now it also tended to turn itself on once my headspace reached a certain threshold. It was like accidentally awakening a PC from sleep mode, or suddenly focusing a camera on something you didn’t intend to.

*Apparently, this is common with unique skills. Carol said that her Scale Eyes were a nightmare before she got a handle on them, always activating when she didn’t want them to. Those are also her actual eyes, which must’ve made it even more challenging.*

“Come on! If that thing activates out of the blue when we’re surrounded by paparazzi or TV cameras, we’ll be in real hot water! Be careful!” Kessie cried.

“Look, I know, all right? It’s hard.”

As I chatted with my fairy friend, I glanced at Shinobu. She was smirking at me

—which told me she had something mischievous on her mind.

“What is it, Shinobu?” I asked.

“How do I put this...? You’ve sort of changed a bit, Mizuki-san. For the better, I mean.”

“Changed how?”

“If I had to describe you, you used to be more of an opportunistic, herbivore kind of guy...but now you seem more like an outgoing omnivore.”

“Not a carnivore, then?”

“Well, it seems like you’d be rough in bed.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Seems like you’d ask for some freaky stuff.”

“I probably wouldn’t.”

“Is this sexual harassment?” Shinobu mused.

“I should ask the same of you,” I replied. “You’re the one who launched yourself at me.”

*I do kind of understand where she’s coming from. After I fought that boss chimera and Skillbook awakened, I did some serious thinking. That change in mindset drives my actions now. I’m going to face everything down, take responsibility for what’s happened, and fight...in my own way.*

*I’m done getting swept along by the current. I’m making my own waves now. I’ll sweep away everything in my path with the torrent.*

The doorbell rang in that unique rhythm again. *Ding dong! Ding dong! Ding ding dong!*

It was our very own hypnosis user and currently unemployed former government worker—the second to arrive.



TACHIBANA MAKI WAS CURRENTLY IN THE PROCESS of using all her paid vacation days before leaving her job, as well as hunting for a new one, but she still showed up wearing her suit from her days as a government employee.

The main difference now was the suit's wear and tear, as well as the fact that she hadn't ironed out the little wrinkles. Those wrinkles had never been there when she was an upstanding city hall employee. Despite what her appearance and general attitude suggested, she could be lazy and sloppy at times, which made me suspect that she might wear her suit casually around the house.

"Ah, Shinobu-san, Kessie-san. Long time no see...ha ha ha!"

"Hello," Shinobu said.

"It's been ages!" cried Kessie.

Having greeted the two, whom she hadn't seen since the Himata incident, Tachibana-san sat at the low table. Her breasts were at least twice as big as average, meaning they didn't really rest on the little table; they smothered it.

*I always wondered if my own subjective filter may be making Tachibana-san's chest look bigger. Like, maybe it's just the ratio of her boobs to her slim waist that makes them seem enormous. In reality, hers are probably just a little bigger than Shinobu's, I thought suspiciously.*

*⟨I think so too.⟩*

"Um, so..." Tachibana-san gently scratched her cheek, watching me closely. "It appears things are getting quite busy. What do you plan on doing next?"

"To be blunt, Tachibana-san, ask you to join us officially at REA."

"Huh? REA?"

"You're looking for a job, aren't you?"

"Um...well, yes, but...ha ha ha...!"

Tachibana-san touched her index fingers together and twirled them around a few times, giving me a smile that was a mix of polite, wry, and dark.

She began speaking rapidly. "Well, you see, I do very much see the appeal in joining REA, yes. There *is* that yearly ten-million-yen salary, after all... But I think

I'd prefer a safer job, and maybe something less physically demanding. I've thought about studying programming and trying to get a job in that sphere... I mean, you've heard that there's a demand for programmers, right? I even hear they can work from home. I'm considering attending one of those programming schools, you know? They're super popular on YouTube right now, haven't you seen? Oh, and...uh...in terms of marriage, I don't know if 'adventurer' is really the best job to have... It might put guys off."

"We'll pay you twenty million yen a year."

"Twen...twenty million?! I'll do it!" Tachibana-san decided on the spot—a knee-jerk reaction, like she was impulse-buying something online—then suddenly snapped back to her senses. "But why now? I thought that you weren't all that interested in whether I joined REA, Mizuki-san."

"The situation's changed a lot. There are two reasons I want you to join. First, I want you as our Charm skills specialist."

"Huh? *Specialist...*? Me?" Tachibana-san looked caught off guard, raising her huge chest as she drew herself backward in surprise.

"Yeah," I continued. "A super, grade-A hypnosis user who can deal with Himata no matter when or how he comes at us. That's who I want you to be, Tachibana-san. I want you to get on Himata's level...or even surpass him! Please, I mean it. Won't you join us? You're really the only person we've got. You saved us during the Himata fight, remember?"

"No, that really just won't be possible," she replied, waving her hand in front of her face. "I mean, isn't Himata-san dangerous on a global scale? That guy is in the hypnosis major leagues."

"That's okay. With your talent, if we invest to train you properly, you'll be in the running for the Cy Young Award. You'll really shoot up through the ranks."

"What do you mean? This all sounds terrifying."

"Carol already brought in a huge number of Charm skills from abroad. We'll just shove all those inside you to start."

"You're going to stuff me with those? Get me filled up?"

“Well, on that note... There’s one more reason.” I picked up a potato chip at the exact moment Kessie landed on it, and we snapped the chip in two. “I want to do something huge. Something on the *global* political stage.”

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“I know. I’m in a really precarious position right now in all kinds of ways,” I said, continuing my conversation with Tachibana-san and Shinobu.

⟨*What about your conversation with Kessie-chan?*⟩

*You’re definitely also included. Sometimes the line between us gets a bit blurred, so I tend to take your presence for granted, that’s all.*

⟨*Right, right. Gotcha.*⟩

“The situation’s more than I can handle. It’s more than Carol can handle too. Nobody can deal with it. I can’t imagine the government handing down *really* strict policies... But since I can blow a town off the map whenever I feel like it, they’ll definitely impose some kind of legal restrictions on me.”

*On me, Mizuki Ryosuke...AKA the Human Nuke. World leaders are uneasy about their own safety now that I’ve suddenly revealed Skillbook’s existence. It can stack buffs to deal serious destruction. That broken firepower is being described as “capable of blowing a whole town away”...but if there’s no upper limit to the buffs I can stack, then theoretically, there might be no limit to my destructive capability. I may even be able to blow up the whole world.*

“The problem is what level of restrictions they’re planning,” said Tachibana-san.

“You get a ton of airtime on gossip shows,” Shinobu noted.

“Well...if the situation’s already out of control, I just need to complicate everything even *more*. For myself, for the people around me...for everyone. I need to ensure nobody can lay a hand on me. Not the weekly magazines, not the TV reporters, not the government. That’s what I’m thinking.”

I clenched my right hand into a fist. My life-or-death struggle against the boss chimera was still fresh in my mind. Like a story event springboarding a major fighting manga, my awakening on that field of death had been far too

unexpected and convenient...but I intended on honoring the vow I'd made that day.

*If Skillbook hadn't acknowledged me back then, I'd be dead now. I don't know why it awakened, but my desperate pleas seemed to get through to it, allowing me to access its true power. In any case, I've already died once. I survived those training grounds by unifying with Skillbook in body and mind. Ever since that day, I've been trying to change—to be reborn.*

Kessie heard my thoughts. Detecting my inner resolve, she darted happily through the air toward me. “That’s great! I feel your raging-hard resolve all the way over here, Zukky-san!”

“Of course you do, Kessie! I’ll bet you feel how rock-hard it is!”

“Yep! It’s totally ripped! You’re so cool, Zukky-san! But, like, your little Kessie-chan does have something to ask you.”

“What is it? Ask away. Whatever you need, Kessie!”

“This meeting seems like it’ll go long. Can I get on with watching *Thursday’s Downtown* now?!”

“...Sure, fine.”

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“Oh ho ho! These prank segments are so freakin’ cruel! Hyah!”

“...”

“...”

“Look...just try not to pay her any mind,” I said.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Understood.”

“She’s a very busy fairy, you know.” I cleared my throat to get us back on track, then started talking again, Kessie’s TV show on in the background. “Anyway...that’s the reason I want to get a team of people I can trust together. We’ll form an organization.”

“Then I’m the first person on your list of trustworthy people!” Shinobu folded



her arms triumphantly.

“Huh? I’m *second* on the list of people you trust?” asked Tachibana-san.

“Of course,” I replied. “I’m really going to fill you up with tons of stuff.”

“Would you mind not putting it like that? Doesn’t that sound weird to you at all?”

“Sorry.”

*I’m kind of numb to that stuff at this point. Whoops. In any case, of course Tachibana-san’s on my list. She and I have cheated death together and come out the other side. She does betray me occasionally, but when it comes to important stuff, she’s loyal. Probably. Maybe. I’d like to believe in her.*

*She also seems like the pure-coworker type who won’t get involved in a complicated romance, which strangely makes her all the more valuable. I sometimes feel that, with Tachibana-san, I might just obtain that philosopher’s stone-like relationship often spoken of as literally impossible—a platonic friendship between a man and woman. Every time I glimpse her far-too-developed breasts, though, I start thinking that might end up too difficult.*

“How do you mean ‘form an organization’?” asked Tachibana-san.

“Specifically, we’d start a new business under the REA umbrella. I’m looking to found a company that uses REA members to corner the market and establish mercenary adventurer groups using Skillbook.”

“You’re talking about doing what other adventuring parties do on their own, but on an even greater scale and through an organization, huh?” Shinobu asked.

“Gyaah! My tummy! It hurts from laughing so hard! Oh ho hoooh!” Kessie’s laughter drowned out the question somewhat.

“Right. The demand for adventurers is rising day by day.”

“Ah! Here it is! One of the hit segments! That bit about someone living in your ceiling being the scariest thing in the world!”

Kessie continued to devour her program, and we maintained our policy of doing everything in our power to ignore her.

“The demand is actually so far behind the supply that lots of countries have too few adventurers to properly explore their own dungeons,” I added.

“Gyah! Deyama’s reactions are always so funny! He’s a reaction god!” Kessie squealed.

“We’ll dispatch talented adventurers to local governments with inadequate resources, offering cheaper prices than high-end adventuring parties, and make connections with countries worldwide.”

“Oh! Isn’t that band Magical Fall in Love?! They’ve really started to sell!”

“That way, we’ll be untouchable. Nobody in the world will be able to mess with us! What do you think? Understand the plan? Oh, and Kessie! Turn down the TV! And turn down *your* volume while you’re at it! This is important!”

“Sorry!” Kessie replied.

“Uh...” Tachibana-san groaned, sounding a little confused. “Um, I understand what you’re trying to say...”

“What’s wrong, then?” I asked.

“Well...this is just me being honest. You won’t take it personally, will you?”

“Please, say it.”

“Mizuki-san, you sound like a college student who wants to be an entrepreneur, talking about his dreams. None of it really sounds realistic, I suppose...ugh.” Her expression still pained, Tachibana-san went on. “Look, I worked at city hall managing dungeons, you see. The fact that businesses like the one you described haven’t popped up yet is because there just aren’t enough adventurers. Even fewer have real strength and experience. So I’d say your idea fails at the first hurdle of cornering the adventurer market... There are too few candidates.”

“Hmph.”

*She’s right. The only countries that seem to have enough high-quality adventurers are the U.S. and China. Most other nations just have a couple adventuring parties operating within their borders, if that. Even those tend to get poached by the big two, which can offer immediate funds, facilities,*

*manpower, and national support systems. Carol's really young, but she's connected with nations all over the globe, and she's considered Britain's strongest adventurer. She's essentially a hero holding up her country—adventurers like her are incredibly valuable to their nations.*

*Japan's in the same boat as the U.K., except it's doubtful we even have an effective adventuring party with real dungeon-clearing capabilities. That's why the media and people online hold up guys like Umayra Bara. Here, it's less about dungeon clearing and more about media exposure, consulting gigs, and dungeon-tour business—that's where real money is made.*

“That won't be a problem. If there aren't adventurers, we'll just need to make ourselves some.”

“Make some?”

I got to my feet and opened Skillbook. The hologram unfolded like two wings before me, resembling a huge, flying card binder more than a book. Skillbook had finished its tutorial mode; I was now in full control. All limits had been lifted, and Skillbook was directly connected and synchronized with me, making it a unique skill I could no longer trade or give away. I could still use it the way I usually had, but I could also do lots of things with it now that I hadn't been able to before.

“This is one of Skillbook's expanded features,” I said.

I looked at the cards lined up on my left and right, viewing a list of all my skill cards. The list was formatted like a smartphone's home screen; I changed the display by swiping hard to the right. After a few taps, there was a dull whooshing sound, and a physical card appeared before me. It looked just like the ones I'd used before Skillbook's full awakening; It was rectangular and stiff, like a trading card or credit card.

“Here, Shinobu. Take this.”

“What is it? ‘Phase’...?”

“That's a printed skill card. It'll let you use the skill inside it. Only ten times, though,” I said.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

One of Skillbook’s newly unlocked expanded features was the ability to print skill cards. That allowed me to freely share Skillbook’s power with others by creating and handing out ten-use cards.

“With this ability, we can create adventurers who are able to ignore level and MP requirements to use powerful skills, just like I can. Through REA’s connections, we’ll recruit former soldiers and toughs from the special forces. With a little training, they can get right into the fight, even without the usual experience or ability scores.”

“Hunh. But...isn’t that pretty dangerous?” mumbled Tachibana-san, furrowing her brow immediately.

*When it comes to looking stern, she always has the most expressive facial muscles. Actually, I don’t think I’ve seen her give me a real smile yet. I wonder if she’s capable of laughing out loud.*

“There’s an international power balance to the dungeon industries,” Tachibana-san continued. “Won’t what you’re proposing cause it all to instantly collapse?”

“I’m not just proposing it. I *am* going to bring down those industries,” I answered flatly. “I’m going to use Skillbook and my connections to really wreak havoc...cause so much chaos that nobody will be able to touch me. At that point, they won’t even *think* about trying to control me. The chaos will shake them off. It’ll catch up everything inside it until nobody’s able to come after me anymore.”

“Wow, Mizuki-san. That’s cool. You sound like a demon king.” Shinobu gave me a round of applause.

*Well, thanks, I was trying to be cool. I was trying so hard, I’d worried a little about what’d happen if the reaction wasn’t great.*

“But there will probably be a serious outflow of talent. What’ll we do if someone steals the cards?”

“Skillbook can stop cards it prints from functioning, wherever they are in the world. I’m the only one who’ll be able to manage our impromptu adventurer

divisions.”

“Well...I suppose this really might be possible, then,” Tachibana-san said. “Wow, is this for real?” She stared intently at the Phase card I’d just handed Shinobu.

“We’ll be a REA subsidiary, so our headquarters will be in the U.K. We’ll cross borders and create tons of connections, making it even harder for Japan to get in my way.”

“But...will everything really go that smoothly?” Tachibana-san resumed her interrogation. “Or am I just overthinking it? Do I not have the entrepreneurial spirit?”

“No, you’re right to think about this the way you are.”

*I mean, if your friend suddenly started talking about forming a mercenary company and really messing up the world, and staked their whole life on the idea, of course you’d want to give them a reality check.*

“I’m actually in the process of negotiating with the U.K. through Carol right now,” I continued. “She needs to contact a few MPs with ties to dungeon industries so we can try and get their support, but I think things will work out well for us. We don’t want this to just be some venture project we’re talking about; we basically want to be a state-level business right from the jump. That’ll only pan out if the U.K. gets on board with our proposal, though.”

“Hunh...Carol-san really is amazing. I should’ve expected as much from the strongest adventurer in all Britain,” Shinobu said.

“Where is that British adventurer now?” asked Tachibana-san.

“Carol? She should be here any m—”

*Ding dong. Ding dong. Ding ding dong.*

The doorbell rang again—the same unique rhythm as before. It was our very own elite adventurer, leader of the strongest party in Britain—the third to arrive.



CAROL WASN'T WEARING HER USUAL KNIGHT'S ARMOR today, but a full-body protector suit she'd recently ordered. It was the kind of base layer that hugged the body closely, the sort of thing a girl in a mecha anime might wear—a tight suit that highlighted the lines of her body. The suit had red and yellow accents and featured shock-absorbing silicon pads on the chest, shoulders, and hips, with straps attached so that she could put on more armor on top. The outfit had been custom-made by some foreign company that did costumes for movies. Apparently, Carol had taken a liking to the outfit; she'd worn little else recently.

"Oh, everyone's here, then. Tachibana, Mizuki, Miss Kessie... Ah, and you're that YourTuber who always follows Mizuki around," Carol said.

"Oh? And I suppose *you're* that British girl who always follows him," Shinobu replied.

A spark of tension quickly filled the room. There were four women around me—Kessie, Carol, Shinobu, and Tachibana-san—and the only pair that couldn't get along were Carol and Shinobu. The two glowered at each other as they faced off, looking grimmer than I'd ever seen either.

"Tch...you're an A or B cup at best, you flat-chested Brit."

"Shinobu, don't try and one-up her physically," I said.

"Tsk...I bet you have no connections to the U.K. government, you common YourTuber."

"Carol, don't try to outshine a high school girl with your international political clout." I did my best to put myself between them. "Just wait, you two. Don't start fighting right off the bat."

"I'm not fighting," said Carol.

"She's the one who started it," Shinobu complained.

"All right, all right. Just calm down, okay?"

Once I'd managed to settle them, Carol went over to my PC desk. She pulled out the chair from under it and sat down. She had used healing skills to force her leg to recover quickly, but still dragged it slightly as she walked. *No, she*

*doesn't drag it, exactly... It might be more accurate to say that her injured leg is a little behind her healthy one.*

At any rate, Carol sat down, stretched her back to puff out her underdeveloped chest beneath her protector suit, and smirked. "Well, it doesn't matter. We'll have our answer in a month either way."

"Hmph..." I grunted.

I *had* decided that I'd address the Shinobu-Carol issue in one month's time. Frankly, that was my response to a romantic problem that was beginning to seem unsolvable. I'd set the deadline to force myself to make a decision on the "Fermat's Last Theorem"-level problem that I was confronted with.

*Man, seriously. What do I do I about this? I've taken Carol out on dates since then, and been out with Shinobu too... Am I really going to be able to resolve this in a month?* I had my doubts. The more I thought the issue over, the less I felt like I could find an answer. *I can hardly run from it all my life, though.*

‹*So which one will you go with?*›

*Well, the thing is... Yeah. It's difficult.*

‹*Tch! And you still let them fight this much! It's getting pathetic, Zukky-san. Your indecision's going to be the end of you, like the Cuban Missile Crisis threatening to drive humanity to extinction!*›

*If only you were human-sized, Kessie...*

‹*What's that supposed to mean?*›

"Let me give you a report on our progress," said Carol. "In brief, the U.K.'s on board with your idea."

"Really?"

"The government... Actually, that might be a little too broad... Well, in any case, the acquaintances I have in the dungeon field are interested. The U.K.'s a long way behind the U.S. and China when it comes to dungeon industries, after all. They're definitely considering taking you up on your business proposal, Mizuki."

"Good. Thanks, Carol."

“I’m just talking about *part* of the government, though. It’s not like everyone in the administration is on the same page. The Japanese government is having trouble dealing with you right now, so you kicking something off with the U.K. would clearly cause real diplomatic problems. MI5 and other intelligence agencies are especially against it.”

“Hmm...well, that makes sense,” I said.

“They have some conditions.”

“Could you go into those?”

Carol nodded. “First and foremost, they’ve asked us to retrieve a broken skill left behind in the Omori Dungeon—codenamed Excalibur—and bring it to them in secret.”

*Excalibur... It’s hardly an exaggeration to say that must be the world’s best-known legendary sword, made all the more famous by a certain mobile game and anime.*

“Ex...calibur?” I said.

Shinobu also spoke. “What’s that?”

“The thing from that mobile game? *King Arthur*-something-or-other?” asked Tachibana-san.

“I don’t know anything about mobile games, but Excalibur’s a legendary sword said to have been wielded by the British monarch King Arthur in the early Middle Ages.”

“But that’s not what the thing in the dungeon actually *is*, is it?”

“Of course not. It’s only a code name. In any case, the U.K. government has issued a direct request that we retrieve this ‘Excalibur’ skill from the Omori Dungeon,” replied Carol.

“So...what kind of skill are we talking about?” I asked. “Is it really that strong?”

Carol gently shook her head. “I don’t know the details, or even the skill’s real name. If the rumors are true, it’s got no direct combat abilities...but depending how you apply it, it could be the most powerful skill in the world. Excalibur can

definitely do things on that level, like let you pull out all the information inside a target's head."

"All the information inside someone's head...?" The image I'd conjured upon hearing the grand name "Excalibur" was somewhat at odds with what Carol had just described. "How would that be any different from your Scale Eyes, Carol?"

"It sounds like it's a different skill type," she replied. "Scale Eyes is an Analysis skill, but Excalibur sounds more like a Theft type—it doesn't simply analyze information, it steals it. The things it can target are broader too: memories, personal history, information about someone's body—everything. Rumor has it that the skill can control all that information as well...but I don't know how much of that talk is true."

*"I see." If those rumors are true, Excalibur might be one truly powerful skill. In this information-driven society, it might end up even more atrociously powerful than my Skillbook. It'd be more dangerous still if some nation secretly got their hands on it and used it for intelligence operations.*

"There'd been talk for some time now that U.K. intelligence authorities might be using a skill like Excalibur, but I never expected it to really exist," Carol said.

"I think I've heard about it somewhere before," mumbled Shinobu, who'd been listening. "It's just a conspiracy-theory kind of thing, but I've seen YouTube videos and stuff on TV about how MI6 has some super-secret screwed-up skill."

"There's been talk about it, huh?" I asked.

"Oh, there's supposed to be this dark syndicate that makes tons of money off the skill too! They call themselves the Round Table, after King Arthur's knights, and they use their super-strong Excalibur intel skill to make a killing off their crimes! They got tipped off on that huge cryptocurrency spike before the values went up and made trillions off it! They manipulate the world's economy from the shadows! They controlled the Great Depression! All the big financial firms' CEOs are in the palms of their hands, and they rule them from the darkness, is what I heard!"

"Come on...the Great Depression happened before dungeons even formed in this world. How would the cause and effect on that work itself out?"

“Well, anyway, it’s like Area 51 and the Philadelphia Experiment. Just one of those super ridiculous conspiracies,” Shinobu said.

“What’s this Excalibur thing doing in the Omori Dungeon, then?” I asked Carol. “Doesn’t it belong to the U.K. government?”

“Intelligence agents focusing on the strange happenings in the dungeon were secretly dispatched there recently to investigate. Once they entered to perform their search, all contact with them was lost—skill and all.”

“They were investigating the dungeon in secret, huh?” *Dungeons are the property of the nations they form in, so foreign nations need to go through the proper procedures before accessing them. I bet they’re refused entry sometimes.*

“Correct. Excalibur is an important skill to British intelligence, though. They need it out of there as soon as possible, and they don’t have time to send additional agents. The intel is already out, and other foreign forces are rumored to be moving to retrieve the U.K.’s precious broken skill. That’s why they issued us this request, Mizuki—we happened to be in Japan at the right time.”

“I see.”

*From what Carol just said, she has connections with British MPs involved in dungeon-related industries, but not many in intelligence circles... In any case, those two groups aren’t on the same page. This whole mess might result from their inability to agree.*

“Right...” I said. “So we need to dive into the Omori Dungeon as soon as possible, and retrieve the skill the U.K. agents lost down there?”

“Yes. Losing this important skill was a huge intelligence failure for the U.K. government. Covering their arse now will give us a foothold in future negotiations. MI5 and the other intelligence agencies are against us now...but if we had them on our side, that could turn our position around pretty quick.”

“Okay, got it. Let’s move quickly, then. Do you know roughly where they lost this thing?” I asked.

“No, I haven’t got a clue. Contact with the agents just went dead,” Carol explained.



“What? We’ve got no way of locating it, then?”

“Don’t worry. I have a plan.”

“A plan?”

“Show me your stats, all of you.”

At Carol’s request, everyone present opened their stat screens. Our ability scores currently looked like this:

***MIZUKI RYOSUKE***

***Level 25***

***HP 14 MP 1***

***Strength 27 Stamina 26***

***Wisdom 15 Intelligence 42***

***Resilience 22 Agility 17***

***Charm 15***

***CAROL MIDDLETON***

***Level 50***

***HP 19 MP 5***

***Strength 36 Stamina 20***

***Wisdom 29 Intelligence 78***

***Resilience 15 Agility 65***

***Charm 18***

***TANAKA SHINOBU***

***Level 15***

***HP 12 MP 1***

***Strength 7 Stamina 18***

**Wisdom 9 Intelligence 28**

**Resilience 30 Agility 6**

**Charm 9**

**TACHIBANA MAKI**

**Level 22**

**HP 13 MP 1**

**Strength 7 Stamina 25**

**Wisdom 19 Intelligence 37**

**Resilience 6 Agility 9**

**Charm 35**

“Hmph. I knew it,” muttered Carol after she’d looked at all our stats. “This confirms what I heard about Shinobu—exceptionally high Resilience. I should’ve expected as much from a monster of mental fortitude. I suppose it might just be her thick skin.”

“Mizuki-san, she’s trying to pick a fight with me,” said Shinobu.

“Don’t let it get to you. You’re hardened, that’s all.”

As a stat, Resilience corresponded to an individual’s inner strength. It could also result from devotion to prayer or religious belief. High Resilience gave an individual resistance to hypnosis and faster recovery from skills that targeted the mind.

*Shinobu blew up on YouTube and went dark for a while, and a video of her getting attacked by a pack of goblins in all kinds of ways is circulating on foreign porn sites even now. Considering that she hasn’t even batted an eye at any of it, I totally see where that Resilience stat comes from—her iron will. Tachibana-san’s Resilience, on the other hand, is seriously bottom of the barrel.*

“With skin as thick as that...with Resilience that high, I mean—you’ll be able

to use this. Mizuki, card these skills for me.”

Carol handed me two skills: “Dreamreader” and “Suspicious Dance.”

### ***DREAMREADER***

***Rank D - Level 35 Required***

***Divination Skill***

***Obtain hints from dreams.***

### ***SUSPICIOUS DANCE***

***Rank D - Level 27 Required***

***Charm Skill***

***Dance that raises target's stats.***

“What are those?” asked Shinobu.

“Dreamreader uses your Resilience stat to divine all kinds of things from dreams. Suspicious Dance is a Charm skill that buffs allies’ stats.”

“What am I supposed to do with them?”

“You’ve got high Resilience, Shinobu, and Tachibana has high Charm. These two skills have advanced level requirements, so as it stands, neither of you could use them—and that’s where carding them with Skillbook comes in. Let’s combine these skills to divine Excalibur’s location.”

“We can do that...? All right, let’s try it. Are you both on board?” I asked the pair.

“Of course! I’m in!” Shinobu exclaimed, accepting with enthusiasm.

“Huh? Uh, r-right! I’ll help!” Tachibana-san seemed a little put off by the name “Suspicious Dance,” but ultimately agreed.

“Hmph.” Carol nodded as she eyed them. “Let’s start right away, then. I’ve

already brought everything we need.” She fished through the sports bag she’d arrived with, taking out all kinds of things. “First, sleeping pills, an eye mask, earplugs... We’ll have you fall asleep here right away. Dreamreader pulls hints from literal dreams, so you need to actually sleep to make it work.”

“The only futon I’ve got is the one I sleep in. I’m sure you don’t want to use that. Want to go buy a sleeping bag or something, Shinobu?” I asked.

“No, don’t worry. I’m totally fine with that! Might even be a perk of this job.”

As Shinobu and I readied the futon, Carol prepared Tachibana-san. “Tachibana, your job is to use Suspicious Dance to buff Tanaka Shinobu’s Resilience and improve her divination’s accuracy. It’s no exaggeration to say this whole plan depends on you.”

“I-it does...?”

“You’ll also wear this cosplay outfit for the Japanese idol group Dokutsuzaka47. Hurry up and put it on.”

“Huh? Why do I have to wear a costume?” Tachibana-san asked.

“Suspicious Dance is a Charm skill. It doesn’t just depend on your stats, but also the quality and *charm* of the dance itself. You need to dress for the job.”

“O-okay, then...”

“Oh, and here’s your mic. You know how to work one, don’t you?”

“Huh? Why do I need a microphone?”

“You can increase Suspicious Dance’s buff by singing too. You’re going to sing and dance with everything you’ve got to support Tanaka Shinobu’s Dreamreader.”

“Okay...I u-understand,” Tachibana-san said uncertainly.

“Oh, and here’s your camera. Let’s set it up on a tripod to record.”

“H-h-huh? Why do we need to record this?”

“Idols need an audience for performances, of course. Receiving fan support will let you increase the buff Suspicious Dance grants. We’ll send the livestream out via Horimiya Channel, which has over a million subscribers, to really pump

up the effect. And we'll get the rest of REA here to be your cheerleaders as you sing and dance. It's the perfect plan."

"Huh? Huh?" Tachibana-san said repeatedly.

## 5

**W**ITH THAT, THE "DIVINE EXCALIBUR'S LOCATION" plan was put into action.

Shinobu was the one who possessed the iron will, and correspondingly high Resilience, to activate Dreamreader. With that skill card in hand, she took the sleeping pills, pulled on the eye mask, and got under the covers of my futon, preparing to put in the earplugs.

"Ah, I do have a question before I go to sleep," she said, with the eye mask on but the earplugs not yet in.

"What is it?" I asked.

"How specifically am I supposed to read these dreams? Are you sure all I need to do is fall asleep?"

"Uh...Carol?" I redirected the question.

"You can go into this with that mindset," Carol answered, clicking away on the computer on the other side of the room. "To be specific, Tachibana's Suspicious Dance will support you, and once your Resilience is buffed, you'll start dreaming. We'll force you awake the moment the dream is done and have you write the hints down before you forget all about them. Dreamreader gives you intel from your dreams, so people tend to forget it when they dawdle."

"Providing hints from dreams... That's a pretty incredible skill, huh?" I asked. "I mean, if this is possible, you can divine anything you want, can't you? You can figure out which stocks will rise and buy them up? Or start up a business based on your premonitions? I mean, you can get intel about anything, right?"

"Unfortunately, the skill isn't *that* convenient," said Carol, shaking her head. "There are reasons Dreamreader isn't very popular. First, there's the required level of thirty-five, which is extremely high. This isn't the kind of skill most



people could use without something like Skillbook, Mizuki. You're correct that Dreamreader's strength is its ability to divine anything... But the accuracy of its hints depends completely on the user's Resilience stat. It's also not like your premonitions will always be right—sometimes dreams tell you things that are completely wrong, and that would end up really hindering you, rather than helping you. I suppose that makes this comparable to real divination and fortune-telling.”

“So you're saying the skill is trash...?”

“Yes, but we're compensating for Dreamreader's unreliability by buffing it with Suspicious Dance. Tachibana supporting Tanaka Shinobu with everything she's got will bump up her Resilience stat significantly. That'll get our divination as accurate as possible. It might even net us a map of the current dungeon.”

“I see. Right, then...” I cleared my throat and looked over at Tachibana-san.

“.....”

Standing in front of my living room TV, cloaked in one hell of a negative aura and wearing a cosplay of the popular idol group Dokutsuzaka47, was twenty-four-year-old Tachibana Maki-san.

The design of the outfit itself was loosely based on a typical high school uniform, but the short skirt and gaudy red-and-yellow color scheme made it far too aggressive and avant-garde to ever consider for actual school use. The outfit was clearly meant to be worn by idols—designed for their use, and their use only.

That said, Tachibana-san had a great figure; she was twice as hot as most women. She looked less like she was failing to live up to the outfit, and more like her own strengths were overpowering it. Despite the weebegone aura that clung to her like she'd just climbed to Earth's surface from the depths of hell, any passerby would've been hard-pressed to conclude that she wasn't a real idol after all, just a hypnosis-using, unemployed cosplayer.

Tachibana held a microphone in her hands, wearing a mask over her mouth that barely covered her face. She faced a camera set up on a tripod to capture a full-body shot, perfectly ready for an amateur dance routine livestream.

*And that's saying nothing of everyone around her.*

Burly-looking REA guys surrounded the “idol” Tachibana-san. Although silent, they were ready and waiting to lend their full, muscular, incredibly passionate support to her performance.

“Is this cosplay really necessary...?” Tachibana-san sounded like she was underwater, speaking to Carol from the ocean floor.

“Of course,” Carol answered, shutting down Tachibana-san’s question—or, rather, attempt to resist—immediately. “If we’re going to get this unreliable Dreamreader skill under control, we need you to sing and dance your heart out, really give it everything you’ve got. And we also need all this support in place, cheering you on.”

“Then do we really have to do a livestream too...?” asked Tachibana-san.

“Of course,” Carol answered immediately, as I expected. “To stabilize Dreamreader, we need tens of thousands of viewers cheering you on as you give this amateur dance livestream 110 percent. We can’t do this without an audience.”

“Um...can I still back out of this plan?”

“Hmph... Well, I can’t force you to do anything.” Carol folded her arms, sounding a little disappointed.

“On second thought, then, I’d really like to...”

Carol interrupted her. “I mean, I *was* planning to give you the donations this livestream generates...”

“Hm...?”

“Nothing I can do about that if you aren’t interested... Though I’m sure the million subscribers to Horimiya Channel *would* give you a decent chunk of change...”

“Hmm...?”

“It might’ve hit a million yen, even... But if you aren’t interested in doing the livestream, there’s no point speculating.”

“Wait a minute, Carol-san...”

“What is it, Tachibana? Are we calling off the plan?”

“N-no... Well, I never said I wouldn’t...” Forcing herself to speak the words, Tachibana-san smiled awkwardly.

*That’s the kind of smile I’d really rather not see from her, to be honest.*

“I never said I wouldn’t, now, did I...? Heh heh heh... I mean, I was just asking, that’s all... Wondering if I could still bow out... It was a hypothetical—”

“Then you’ll do it?” Carol asked again.

“.....”

A great silence followed. If this were some TV drama, several years would have passed.

Finally, Tachibana-san spoke. “L-l...let’s try our best!” She spit the words out under her breath.

“T-Tachibana-san?!” I exclaimed. “You don’t need to do this if you don’t want to, you know!”

“N-no! It’s okay!” she insisted, coughing twice.

“Are you sure?! If you’re that short on money, I can lend you some!”

“Kgh...hngh...! I-I’m fine! Hah...grah...!”

“You don’t seem fine!”

“Your breathing’s so ragged, it’s like you’re a whole different person!”

“Let’s do this! Living expenses are no joke!”

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With that out of the way, we were left to wait until Shinobu fell asleep. She lay under my futon covers with earplugs in and noise-canceling headphones over those. Still, going to sleep in the chaotic room she’d found herself in, facing all that pressure, seemed like a herculean task. As we busily prepped for the livestream, we watched her lie there. She tossed and turned for about an hour, moaning as she positioned and repositioned her legs.

There were already a lot of viewers on the livestream's standby page. "Whoa... Around ten thousand people are already waiting for the livestream to start," I whispered, careful not to bother Shinobu. "Horimiya Channel really is something. He must be popular."

"It's because this channel has never livestreamed anything. The fans are probably excited to donate to him personally and send real-time comments," explained Carol.

"But we're actually going to show a stream of Tachibana-san dancing..."

"Well...we'll switch to Horinomiya right after that and have him deal with the aftermath."

We kept waiting for Shinobu to nod off.

"Ahh..."

The moment we heard her breathe deeply, clearly sleeping, we all jumped to attention.

"Sh-she's down! Shinobu's finally asleep!"

"All right! Get the livestream up! Tachibana, you're good to go, right?"

"Y-yes! I'll give it my all! Let's do it! Suspicious Dance!"

Tachibana-san frantically activated the skill card in her hand. An odd purple glow immediately enveloped her body, and the moment our livestream went up, she began dancing awkwardly in front of the camera.

"H-hurray! ♪ Yay! ♪ Shinobu-san, do your best! ♪ Don't give up! Do that divining! ♪"

Tachibana-san's movements, which were basically a series of spasms and twisting jerks, were accompanied by shrieks from Carol and the other REA members.

"Dance better than that! You look like a robot!"

"You're the cutest in the world!"

"Don't get embarrassed about the song! Give it your all!"

"C'mon! C'mon! Great job!"

One cheered in English. “Very cute! Excellent!”

High on the overly chaotic situation she’d found herself in—or perhaps just driven to further desperation—Tachibana-san’s shrill voice burst into an even higher, louder register.

“Oh-oooh! Yaaaaay! You can do it! ♪Aaaaaaah! If I cheer you on, you’ll be okaaay! I was too awkward back then, ha ha! ♪ You’ll divine right for sure! I can only sleep at night when I think of you! ♪ Maybe I won’t forget that day! I love yooou! ♪”

Tachibana-san’s erratic singing voice belted out improvised J-pop lyrics containing every stereotype she could think of to a messily improvised tune. The REA members continued their standing ovation, their applause for her desperate livestream performance accompanied by more cries of support.

“Whooooooooo!” one yelped in English. “Marvelous!”

“Idol! Japanese idol! Goddess!”

“You’re the cutest in the galaxy!”

“All right! That’s it! Keep it up!”

“Whoa! This is incredible! We’ve got so many comments coming in!”

Since Horimiya Channel’s debut livestream had seemingly been hijacked, report flags and comments of support and confusion flooded the chat among the donations. It was chaos, complete pandemonium, a flurry of all kinds of emotions and monetary contributions rushing in.

“Check out the donations too! This is amazing!”

“Just keep it up a little longer! Tug their heartstrings!”

“S-spread your wings! ♪ My precious friends! Uh—um—! Can’t do it! ♪ Seriously can’t think of any more lyrics! Somebody save me! ♪”

Tachibana-san’s footwork involved more stamping in frustration than dancing. Her huge breasts swayed under her cosplay outfit. It was a nightmare.

“You can do it!”

“You’re the cutest in the universe!”

“You’re adorable when you’re trying your best!”

“The way this town has changed is so dramatic! ♪ I don’t think I can let go of your hand now! Let’s keep running into tomorrow! ♪ All the seasons, switching it up! Close your eyes, and you’ll get that divining done! You’ll do it! Get that big winning tickeeeet! Yay yay yaaay! ♪ I want three hundred million yen! ♪ Ah haaah! Oh yeah! Woohoo! I-I want to diie! ♪”

Twenty-four-year-old Tachibana Maki did a spin that brought her short skirt floating up to the very limits of decency. As for whether the camera captured what was under her skirt, nobody would know for certain until they checked the VODs...provided they stayed up.

In the very next moment, Shinobu squirmed under my futon, beginning to move around. “Sh-she’s so freaking loud...”

“Get her to take notes, now!” Carol ordered. “Uh, livestream over! I mean... switch us over to Horimiya!”

“Ahh! Ohhh! ♪ I-I’m sorry for being so loud! The sadness I felt that day! Even that, aaah! ♪ The sadness of yesterday too! ♪ Ahem! We’re under the same sky, and my voice won’t reach my precious friends, but I’m just getting stronger the more tears I cry, and I might not want to let the dreams I chase but can never catch just be dreams forever! ♪♪ Oh oooh! ♪ Oh...yay yay yay...hyaaah! ♪♪♪”

“Tachibana, that’s enough! Good work! You did great! You really tried your best!”

“Hah! Haah! Huh...?! I-it’s over?! All right! I did it! I really did it! What’s with this hellish skill you gave me?!”

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Thanks to Tachibana-san’s livestream, Shinobu returned from her dream buffed to the brim. The frown on her face was so intense, she looked like she’d just woken from a seventy-hour nightmare.

“That dream felt like complete chaos... Like, that nightmare was insane,” she said.

“Come on, Shinobu, remember!” I urged her. “What did you dream about?!”



She grabbed a pen and paper and began to write, nodding and moaning as she did.

“Um... We go into the dungeon... First we go here, then...turn here, and...I think we go straight here... Ah. This was the room where Tachibana-san was growing out of a wall,” she recalled.

With surprising artistic talent, Shinobu drew a circle to represent the cave, then a little stick figure butt—which looked a bit like Tachibana-san’s—coming out of the wall.

“Tachibana-san was growing out of the wall?” I asked.

“Yeah, if I remember right... She was a butt on the wall. A singing, dancing butt.”

“Huh? Seriously? That’s terrifying.”

“Well, it was just a dream. There was bound to be some weird background stuff,” said Carol. “Don’t worry about it—keep going.”

“Through this cave... Uh... Straight here, then... Oh, wait. I forget what happened next. Um, well, see... Which way was it again?”

“You can do it, Shinobu. Don’t let Tachibana-san’s once-in-a-lifetime livestream go to waste.”

“Please,” added Tachibana-san. “I don’t ever want to do that again. I mean it. Never again.”

“Uh...you turn, and...then you end up right here... This is where the British girl was... The British girl and the huge spider... Nah, I really shouldn’t say that part...”

“Huh? Why?” I asked. “What happened?”

“Well, without going into detail, it was yuri stuff.”

“That raises more questions than it answers,” said Carol.

“Uh...Excalibur was stuck right here! Yeah, right here! You’ll be able to reach it with these instructions! Oh—and a thumb and pinky finger were mating there!”

“Huh? What was that about a thumb and pinky?”

“Look, I’m explaining that Excalibur’s right here, and a thumb and pinky finger are also mating.”

“I-I don’t get it...”

“That’s just what I dreamed. What else am I supposed to tell you?”

“Well...this is about what I expected from Dreamreader,” mumbled Carol, looking troubled. “Even Tachibana’s desperate dancing buff only gave us a vague, fuzzy picture. This was never going to be a completely practical search method.”

“This is as good as it gets, huh...? Still, having a rough route is a huge advantage,” I said, standing up.

Carol got to her feet too, puffing out her flat chest. “All right, then, let’s get straight to the Omori Dungeon. Time is of the essence!”

“We need to go retrieve Excalibur before the dungeon’s shape shifts again,” I agreed. “Tachibana-san, could I ask you to come with us?”

“Huh? I’m going too?” Tachibana-san, still wearing her idol costume, pointed at herself with a look of bewilderment.

“Please! We’ll pay you for the work!” I added.

She heard my request but averted her eyes.

*We should take the rest of REA, but they’d have to go through the application process for all their firearms, which could delay us a month or more. That leaves me...and Carol, of course. She’ll be in charge of combat in general, and my extreme firepower can take down any enemies she can’t handle as a fighter. We’ll also need Tachibana-san on our side, though—a Charm skill user supporting us from the back lines. I could use my Skillbook to expand what she’s capable of, of course, but those ten-use disposable skills don’t exactly grow on trees. Besides, Skillbook’s real strength is how much raw firepower it can produce, and how long it can extend effect durations. It’s not suited to producing Charm skills that depend on the user’s actual stats to work.*

“So,” I said, voicing my conclusion, “I’d really feel much more confident if you came along.”

“Huh? Well, that’s all well and good. It’s just...” Tachibana began, looking from me to her idol outfit, then back to me. “Do you mind if I change first?”

“No, Tachibana, you’re better off staying in that,” Carol said. “If we need you to support us with Suspicious Dance in the field, you’ll end up putting that outfit back on anyway.”

“Eh? I’m going to go through the dungeon dressed like this?! I’d still rather change first!”

“Uh, I’m still groggy from those pills, so I’ll be right here sleeping!” Shinobu put her eye mask back on and dove back under my futon covers.

“Good work, Shinobu. You really helped us out! Tachibana-san’s ready... All right! Looks like we’re good to go!”

“I’m not ready yet! I’m getting changed first! I can’t walk around outside in this! I’m twenty-four!” Tachibana-san protested.

In the whirlwind of preparations to leave, I suddenly noticed something.  
*Huh...? Where’s Kessie?*

Realizing I hadn’t heard her voice in some time, I looked around the room and found her camped out in a corner, quietly playing with my phone.

“Uh...Kessie? We’re going!”

“Huh? Ah! Roger roger. Ready when you are,” she said.

I paused. Kessie seemed a little low on energy, which threw me a touch off-balance. *Hm...? What’s wrong with her? She was fine until a couple minutes ago, right? Does Kessie get drained sometimes...?*

Kessie responded to my concerns, beaming her words directly into my brain.  
‹Ah, it’s nothing, really! Nothin’ at all!‹

*Are you sure? You aren’t upset about something?*

‹I’m just annoyed that I can’t watch TV! All right, let’s go!‹

*Come to think of it... You bailed on the meeting early too, saying something about going to watch TV, didn’t you...?*

‹Yeah! I just wanted to watch TV, really! Anyway, onward and upward!‹

## Chapter 2: Inside the Rock?!

### 1

**W**E HEADED TO THE OMORI DUNGEON'S MANAGEMENT facility by car. Entering the dungeon required prior authorization, but Carol and I had made a habit of submitting so many requests that we'd practically booked all the dungeon's weekdays—on the day we entered, we just had the staff move our slot as needed, so it wasn't a fresh application. We'd also anticipated taking Tachibana-san along, so we'd submitted requests for her as well, and expected the procedure to run relatively smoothly.

*Hopefully, at least. To be honest, we've made tons of requests and canceled a lot of the time if we didn't actually end up dungeon clearing. That's a bit of a loophole in the system—a gray area. Considering how much work it creates for city hall, it might not be the nicest way to go about dungeon clearing, but we didn't really have another choice.*

"I just got some additional info from the U.K.," Carol said from the passenger seat. "Turns out the loss of Excalibur leaked to other intelligence agencies after all. Reports are that the U.S. put together its own unit, which is on its way to retrieve the skill."

"Well, that won't be an issue if we get there first," I answered, pressing harder on the gas.

"What bothers me is the unit they're sending. According to my intel sources, they're already in Japan—an American military group called P2."

"P2? What's that stand for?"

"I'm not sure, but I could take a guess. Do you know about the Philadelphia Experiment?"

"That's a conspiracy theory, right?"

*The Philadelphia Experiment... Wasn't that some top-secret experiment the U.S. Navy supposedly conducted in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania? They were testing new stealth technology, using a magnetic field generator to disable radar and create a completely stealthy destroyer: the USS Eldridge. Off the top, the secret experiment seemed to succeed.*

*That was when the abnormality came in—the moment after the destroyer disappeared from U.S. radar, it disappeared physically too. As confusion set in at the strange phenomenon, the ship reappeared...but materialized as some hell on earth, with the crew stuck in the walls or spontaneously combusting. In the aftermath, sixteen crew members were declared missing or dead. Every survivor went insane or was silenced... That's the gist, anyway. It's your typical conspiracy theory.*

“Apparently, the Philadelphia Experiment really happened,” said Carol.

“Seriously...?”

“The story spread as a kind of fiction, but the experiment itself did take place. After dungeons appeared in our world, they restarted the project. The Second Philadelphia Experiment's objective was to combine skills and scientific techniques to create stealth soldiers. They had some success in their research, and the name of the elite adventuring unit secretly formed at the project's culmination is Philadelphia Two.”

“‘P2,’ huh? Hard to believe all that's true.”

“The Americans are at the forefront of dungeon research—I can imagine DARPA coming up with something like that. Keep your eyes open,” Carol cautioned.

“If they really exist, I don't want to tangle with a bunch of freaks like that,” I said.

Tachibana-san's voice came from the back seat. “Excuse me...but can I ask something?”

“What is it?”

“Well, am...am I really going into the dungeon like this?”

I checked my rearview mirror. She sat in the back seat, still wearing the Dokutsuzaka47 cosplay from earlier. In the chaos of our rush out the door, she apparently hadn't managed to change out of it.

"Of course," said Carol. "Depending what happens down there, I might want you supporting us with Suspicious Dance. That outfit and microphone are pretty much your official gear for the day."

"No, I...I mean, there's a lot I'm not comfortable with about this! I'm twenty-four now! I'm getting to the age when I really shouldn't wear clothes like these...!"

"We're counting on you, Tachibana-san," I said. "We'll reward you, like I said."

"Three hundred thousand, Tachibana."

"Ah...right! Ngh...right, then! I suppose I'll try my best! Ugh...! Being unemployed sure is tough!"

In the bustle of this negotiation, I looked around for Kessie. She sat on the center console, absorbed with my phone, watching some video in complete silence.

I hesitated. *What's up with her...? Did I do something? Is this some sudden mood swing? Kessie, if you're listening—answer me, won't you?*

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Once we arrived at the Omori Dungeon Management Facility, I quickly changed clothes, did a few bits of paperwork, then went to the waiting room to meet the two girls once they (or rather, once Carol) got changed.

*Hey, Kessie,* I thought, reaching out to her in my mind.

‹*What is it?*› She replied from within my breast pocket, not even popping up to look at me.

*Seriously... Is something wrong? What happened?*

‹*It's really nothing, y'know?*›

*But, like, you're clearly down about something.*

‹*Hmm...it's not like I want to be. Ugh... Well, if I had to say...*›

*Go on. Just say it.*

*«Uh...well... How do I put this...? I don't feel all that motivated to do this.»*

*Motivated...?*

*«Well, like, I know you're trying your best and all, Zukky-san... Like, I get that, I do. But do you really need to try so hard?»*

*Er...what do you mean?*

*«To be honest, this stuff about the government detaining us... Like, I don't think they'd actually shove us into cells or research facilities and totally ignore our human rights. They might limit our movements, I suppose—house arrest at worst.»*

*Well, you might be right about that.*

*«That'd actually be, like, kind of okay with Kessie-chan... Chilling out with you, Zukky-san, watching TV and YouTube, living all free and easy. So like...I don't want you to get too overwhelmed with all this dangerous stuff and push yourself too hard.»*

*Come on...don't get weird on me, now. Who are you, my mother?*

*«Look, you and I are kind of in the same boat.»*

*I do think a lot about you, you know. If I let you go, it might be dangerous for you. You don't want someone capturing you and having their way with you, right? I thought in Kessie's direction, then suddenly remembered, Come to think of it, Kessie was also kind of against me joining REA.*

*«This stuff about Excalibur is weird, don't you think? It sounds dangerous, right? We've been through loads of scrapes and somehow made it out the other side... But if you keep this up, you really are going to die someday, y'know? I mean, you basically got killed in the fight against that chimera.»*

*Kessie, don't worry about me so much.*

*I sat back down on the waiting room bench and opened my skill screen, revealing a list longer than it had ever been before.*

*After the incident with the chimera, I'd bitten the bullet and strengthened my*



ties with Carol and REA, gaining access to the huge number of skills their adventuring party had on hand. The list included spare copies of Blaze and my other buff skills, so there was no longer any risk that I might run out of charges. I'd also carded a bunch of new skills like Shock, Ice Lance, and other evasive and defensive skills.

"Skillbook's awakened now. I'm much stronger than I was before." Suddenly realizing that I was mumbling out loud to myself, I switched back to talking with Kessie in my head. *I'm making real use of this broken skill—at least, that's what I intend on doing. I'll protect you if anything does happen, Kessie. Whoever comes for you, I'll stave them off... And this is the last time we'll do anything like this anyway. I'm not going to let anyone use me anymore—I'll be in control.*

«Mm...uh...like I said...» Kessie didn't seem convinced by my explanation. She finally poked her head out from my pocket. *«I'm glad you're more positive now, but it also feels a bit like you've gone too far in the other direction, and you're on a whole different train now. Like you're one of those gloomy characters trying your hardest to be cheerful.»*

*That's not it at all. What the heck...?* I responded silently, a little offended. *Like I said...it's not like I want to be rich or powerful or anything. That's not why I'm doing this work. I told you, I'm thinking about all these things so that you and I can live together in peace without anyone getting in our way!*

«How many times—! Jeez!» Kessie screamed telepathically, closing my pocket flap and retreating inside. «Why don't you understand?! Zukky-san, you dummy! I hate you! Wah!»

"Tch...what the hell?" I muttered, not feeling like responding to Kessie now that she was so angry.

As our fight subsided, I noticed a group of people enter the waiting room. I was a little surprised by the group, as most were clearly non-Japanese. There was such a variety of genders and races—European, Middle Eastern, Black—that I couldn't help thinking the selection might've been for diversity's sake. The one woman in the group looked as burly and well-built as the men, and they all had such a rugged air that I suspected they had military backgrounds. They looked like the REA members who served under Carol.

That wasn't the biggest problem, though. That came in the form of the group's leader—a man I was all too familiar with.

“Ugh...” For a moment, I was speechless. *What's he doing here...?*

The only member of the quartet who wasn't wearing dungeon gear was instead dressed in an expensive three-piece suit from Japan Gold. He took a cigarette and Zippo from his pocket, heading to the smoking area adjacent to the waiting room. Before he got there, though, he glimpsed me sitting on the bench.

His narrow eyes widened in shock. “Oh ho...?”

He fixed his gaze on me, mouth curling into a smile. I hadn't seen that particular grin since *that* day.

“Who do we have here...? Mizuki-kun, eh? What a coincidence.”

“Who do we have here...? Branch Manager Uemura, I see. It sure is.”

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*I, Mizuki Ryosuke, got saddled with this “Human Nuke” nickname and turned into quite the nuisance for the current administration...and it's no exaggeration to say my story began with Branch Manager Uemura. He was the man who sent me away from Tokyo to Omori City in Hokkaido... He's responsible for relegating me to the countryside at my old home, Showa Securities. He's the root cause of all this.*

“Sure seems like you're running wild out there since you left the company,” said Uemura, walking toward me and frowning deeply. “Huh, Mizuki-kun?”

He looked exactly the way he had when he transferred me to that remote countryside branch. His black hair was perfectly combed, parted way to the side, and he wore his usual square, black-rimmed, intimidating glasses. There was something sinister in his facial expression, like one of his ancestors might've been a reptile or something.

*As for what's changed, his fancy suit looks like it could fetch a few hundred thousand yen or more. His thick tie, folded into a plump Windsor knot, gave him a polished air, and a showy gold wristwatch peeked out under one sleeve.*

*Seems like he's in the money. Although he never lived hand to mouth.*

"You've been on the news so often, I got sick of seeing you. 'Human Nuke,' eh? You're doing all right then, huh?"

"Seems like you're doing all right for yourself too, Branch Manager," I replied, looking over at the group he led.

The first member of Uemura's unit was a Black guy built like a tank. Despite his huge frame, his face was surprisingly small. He narrowed his eyes as he stared in my direction, scrutinizing me.

The second member was a White guy with wavy blond hair. I had the vague knowledge that White guys were often European, and from his graceful, elegant demeanor, I felt he might be French or Scandinavian. His gear was fixed with cross-shaped accessories in several places, but it wasn't clear whether those were a sign of his religious beliefs, or just a fashion statement.

The final member of the group was a woman who looked Middle Eastern. She had sleek black hair and lustrous, tanned skin. Her outline hinted at womanly curves, but I could tell at a glance from her gear and the way she held herself that she was a trained, professional soldier.

*Are those the P2 members Carol told me about? What would Branch Manager Uemura be doing with them? What's going on?* As my mind swirled, I couldn't help furrowing my brow.

Uemura smirked at me, though whether he recognized the confusion I was experiencing was an open question. "I'm not a branch manager anymore, Mizuki-kun. It's Senior Managing Director Uemura now."

"'Senior managing director'?" I repeated. "What, you got promoted?"

"I did indeed. I'm head of sales."

*Hunh. After everything he did, the guy's a director now? That's one serious promotion.* "What business do you have all the way out here in the middle of nowhere?" I asked plainly.

"I don't think I need to tell you that, now, do I?"

"Hmph. Dodging the question won't work," I said, smiling. *I've got a genius*

*telepathic fairy called Kessie on my side, after all. Your mind's an open book.*

*«Ah, Zukky-san, it's no use.»*

*Huh? What's no use?*

*«He's jamming me the way Himata did. I can't get into his mind.»*

*Seriously? He's using a high-level skill like that? This guy?*

*«Um, it's not him. The jamming's coming from...»*

“Well, I suppose it doesn't matter much.” Uemura's words brought me back to reality. “We came here with the same goal. Right, Mizuki-kun?”

“Maybe so.”

“Dodging the question won't work.” Uemura pinned me down with the exact line I'd just used. “I know the orders you received. I know who they were from too.”

“What?”

“How about we come to an agreement?” he plunked himself down beside me on the bench and patted my back. “Give me that skill of yours, won't you...?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don't play dumb with me. You're here to find that thing the Brits lost, isn't that right? We've got proof.”

I didn't answer, frowning at him instead.

“We weren't good friends, of course I know that,” he continued. “But that's water under the bridge now, isn't it? I forgive you, Mizuki-kun—I forgive you for all the work you put into trying to pull me down. We're both grown men, so let's forget the past.”

I stayed silent.

“Give it to me, okay? I'm not asking you to hand it over for free. You'll be rewarded. That should be enough, right? This will solve everything.”

“I really have no idea what you're saying,” I said quietly. It was less a response to him, and more a mumble into the void I wasn't even sure existed in the midst

of this enemy territory. “What’re you doing here? What does Showa Securities have to do with this...?”

“I can’t tell you that. But listen, okay?” Uemura slipped an arm around my shoulder and yanked me closer. Pointing to each of the three adventurers standing before us, he whispered in a persuasive tone, “Those three are old hands. It seems you’ve gotten pretty famous yourself, but this group’s on another level. I’m commanding them. If we come to blows, you’re going to lose—just like you did back then. You’ll never be able to defeat me. You never could, remember?”

I wordlessly shifted my gaze away from him, feeling heat rise inside my head. An unpleasant feeling boiled up within me, rage burning onto my synapses.

“I’ll even let you save face. We can falsify some records to make it look like we fought inside the dungeon. If you seem a little injured when you come out the other side, the U.K. can hardly complain. You tried your best, and it didn’t work out—that’s all you have to say. Isn’t that right?” Uemura tightened his grip on my shoulder, his awful face leaning closer to mine. “The wealthy can afford not to argue. Let’s get this done, shall we?”

“Let go of me, Uemura.” I slowly peeled his hand from my arm and stood. “I feel sick. Don’t ever talk to me again.”

“Hey, come on, Mizuki-kun. Let’s not get heated here.”

“Shut up! *Never* patronize me like that again!”

⟨*Z-Zukky-san! Calm down!*⟩

“Shut up! Shut up! Ngh...? Huh? Ah...” Only after shouting those words did I realize they’d come out of my mouth instead of remaining in my head. For a moment I got lost in confusion.

⟨*Too much blood’s rushing to your head, Zukky-san! Cool it!*⟩

“Ha... Pathetic, Mizuki-kun.” Uemura let himself relax, settling comfortably on the bench as he shot a cold glare in my direction. “However hard you try, you’ll never surpass me. You’re an adventurer now, with some ridiculous skill in your possession...but you’ve gotten a little full of yourself, no?” He smirked before continuing. “I have higher social standing than you, and more military strength.

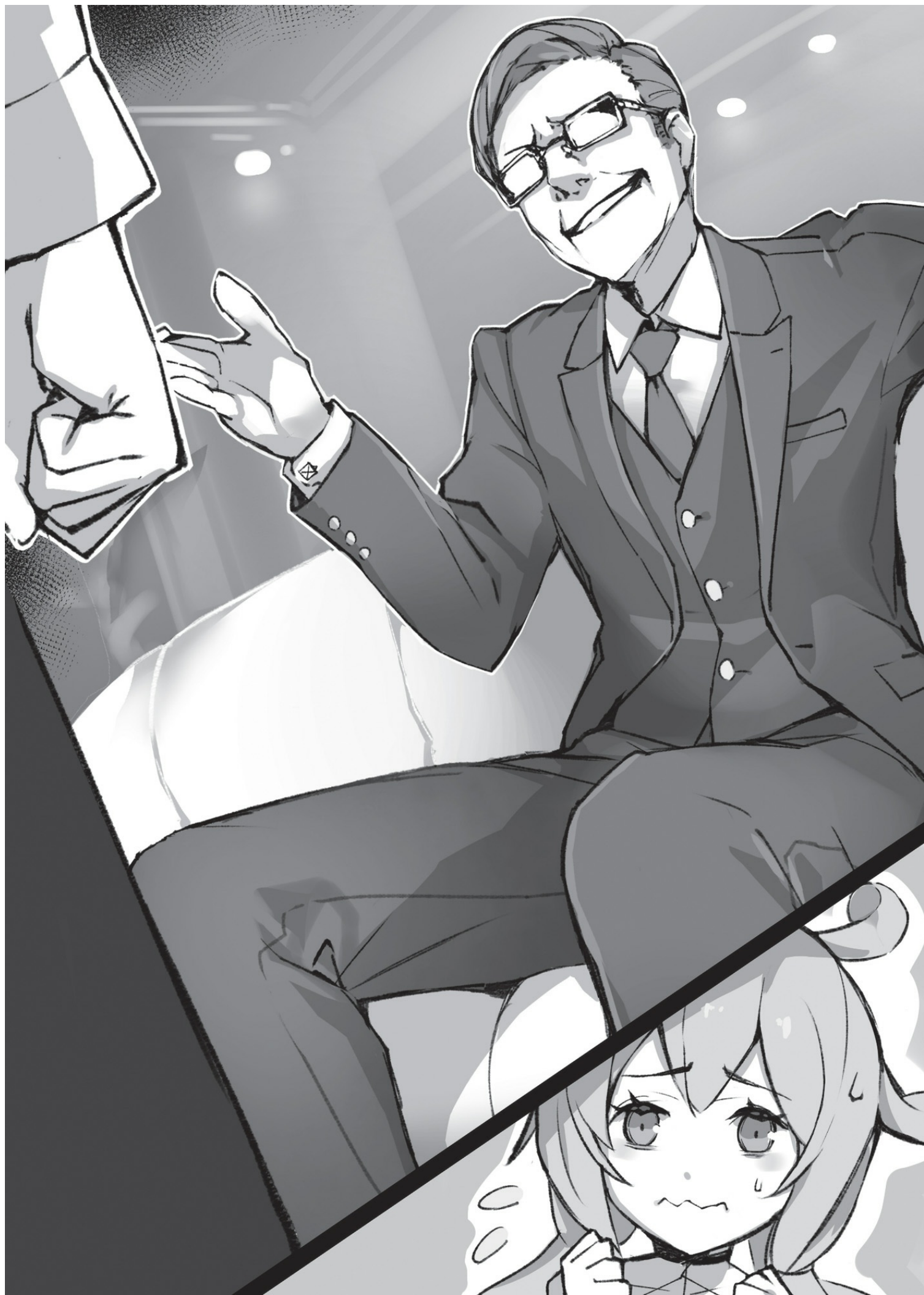
I'm superior in every respect. That's the way it's always been. The best you can hope for is to liven up daytime gossip shows. Why don't you just accept that, hm, Mizuki-kun?"

"I'm going to blow you away, Uemura. There won't be a trace of you left when I'm done!"

In response to my mental state, Skillbook's afterimage wings appeared in the air around me. It was only then that I realized I was surrounded.

"The Human Nuke, Mizuki Ryosuke," the well-built Black guy standing beside me said. He looked two meters tall, more like the silhouette of a mountain looming over me than a man. "I read the reports... Apparently you really aren't a fighter. You're just some civvy who came across an overpowered skill."

"You won't be any match for us," said the other man—the slender White guy with blond hair—who now stood behind me. "'All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword...' Matthew 26:52. The managing director is right. You'd be wise to surrender now."





“Allow me to give you a compassionate warning,” said the Middle Eastern woman, walking in from my left. “A make-believe adventurer is no match for true warriors. Understand, Human Nuke?”

Before I knew what was happening, I found myself surrounded by the diverse group of adventurers. “You’re P2 then, huh...?” I muttered.

They neither confirmed nor denied the claim.

*I see why the U.K. is so desperate to get their skill back that they reached out to us half-outsiders. When it comes to dungeon clearing, everyone’s got a different approach, and it seems like we’ll be clearing simultaneously with another group on this one.*

Tension filled the air. If this were a spy movie, I could imagine one of us would’ve pulled a handgun at any moment. It just so happened that our present situation really did look like it was right out of a spy movie.

As I faced off silently with Senior Managing Director Uemura’s camp, the waiting room door opened, and Carol and Tachibana-san stepped in. Carol had evidently finished changing.

“Carol-san, that’s really not appropriate!” Tachibana-san cried. “It’s not even in the same category as bikini armor anymore!”

“Hmph. It’ll be fine! Its surface area is way larger than on my last set of gear, right?!”

“Well, I suppose so, but still—that’s not really the problem!”

“You’re such a worrier, Tachibana! I properly covered everything that violates indecent exposure laws! Hm? Huh?”

“Uh—are you sure?! Isn’t that just *your* interpretation of those laws?! Hm? Huh?”

Entering through the automatic door, the pair saw me facing off with Uemura and the Politically Correct Adventurer Brigade and froze. Uemura and I also froze when we saw them.

“Uh...”

“Gah.”

Carol was *not* wearing the new base layer she’d specially ordered, but a different set of perverted gear—as naturally as if she had on a pair of everyday jeans.

At first glance, Carol’s outfit looked like a typical suit of lightweight western armor—on *first glance*, that is. For some reason, that armor clearly lacked protection around her chest and crotch, leaving her private areas bare. There were, however, nipple pasties stuck to her exposed breasts, and I saw something that looked like a sticker in the center of her crotch; it was barely bigger than a disposable bandage.

As everyone present glared at Carol’s armor, pondering the many things they could point out (or *put in*), her expression quickly turned serious. She walked over to me, armor clanking as she moved. “Mizuki, what’s happening here? Who are these people?”

“Carol, before that, what’s with your armor? Why are your bits on full display?”

“Oh, right.” It seemed that, when she suddenly focused, Carol had forgotten how exposed she was. She took her phone out of the case stuck to her armor and quickly tapped away. “Just wait... This won’t take a minute.”

I stared at her in silence.

“Sorry, really. Just a sec now.”

I waited.

“Hold on. I’m doing face recognition.”

Nobody could really do anything while Carol messed with her phone, so we all waited for her to finish. Several seconds later, her armor beeped. With a *clank*, two new panels unfolded, seemingly from inside the suit. They closed over her crotch and breasts, turning her indecent exhibitionist gear into a regular suit of armor.

“All right, this should do. Mizuki, who are these people?”

“First, what’s the mechanical flashing system fitted into your armor?”

“It’s a set of plates I got specifically for dungeon clearing—the latest design. The crotch port makes it easy to go to the bathroom while you’re wearing your armor. You toggle it with this app. Cool, isn’t it?”

“Why is there a *chest* port, then?”

“For breastfeeding mothers.”

“Why did you need them open when you came out?”

“I thought it’d make you happy, Mizuki.”

“Um, what’s happening here, exactly?” Tachibana-san walked toward us in her idol outfit. “Uh—please don’t pay these clothes any mind, by the way! It’s not like I’m wearing them because I want to!” She cleared her throat. “Sorry... Ugh, I want to curl up and die.”

After a few bumps along the way, we finally faced off properly against the new adventurers. Senior Managing Director Uemura’s group of international adventurers had us outnumbered four to three. We, on the other hand, had the strongest adventurer in all Britain, with a diverse array of methods for exposing herself for all to see, as well as an unemployed former government employee wearing a Dokutsuzaka47 cosplay.

*I suppose our numbers are even if you count Kessie waiting in ambush on our side.*

“You bastards are that P2 unit I’ve heard so much about?” Carol muttered.

“Maybe,” answered the Black guy. “None of us are stupid enough to blab about who we work for.”

“Try and hedge. I see right through you,” Carol replied coldly. “You work for the American army. The CIA probably dispatched you here. You were told to swipe Showa Securities’ entry application, since they’re a company on the Japanese books.”

She folded her arms like she was deep in thought, tilting her head a little to the side. Directly in her line of sight was their unit’s leader, Uemura.

“What I don’t understand is why Showa Securities was willing to take this deal,” Carol added.

“Well, regardless, it seems this will be a race to find a certain item,” muttered the White guy. ““All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword’... Matthew 26:52.”

*Hey, isn't that the second time he cited that verse?*

“Uh...I don't really understand what's happening, so I'll just be quiet!” said Tachibana-san, giving up so decisively it seemed like bravado.

“If you already know that much, there's no sense in hiding it.” Uemura smirked. “I'm here on the company president's special orders...to ensure this skill, which has the power to control the world, is taken into our hands.”

*I hesitated. Skill with the power to control the world, eh...? If what Carol said is right, Excalibur can steal information from any target, whatever it happens to be. If that really were put to use in the shadows, it's no exaggeration to say that you could rule this information-driven world.*

“It would allow us to inside trade as much as we wanted. Nobody would ever have proof. We at Showa Securities could experience historic rapid growth as a company, surpassing the big five U.S. funds in an instant,” said Uemura, sounding like he was daydreaming. “Eventually, we would control the whole world's finances, just like the Rothchild family does now. Who will sit at the head of our company as president then but me—the very individual who contributed most to completing this mission?”

“Well, if that happens, the world's definitely over,” I spat. “It's not like I wasn't completely up for this when I was just a hired hand... But this is actually perfect. You're really riling me up. We're going to be the ones who retrieve Excalibur. I'm never letting your unit get their hands on it—especially not you, Uemura.”

## 2

**T**HE OMORI DUNGEON WAS UNDER GOVERNMENT control, so entry order and time were strictly regulated, as were return periods. The rules were even stricter after the goblin escape incident—far less flexible than they used to be.

In the end, Senior Managing Director Uemura's squad went into the dungeon first. Our group would follow closely after.

As we sat in the waiting room before our turn arrived, I leaned back hard on the bench and sighed deeply. *It's been a while since I've gotten that angry. Losing my composure like that at a little provocation from a guy like Uemura is a mistake I'd rather just forget. I even had Kessie screaming in my head, trying to calm me down... I really am hopeless. Sorry. I'm pathetic.*

«I-it's A-okay, Zukky-san!» Kessie came shooting into my thoughts, still sounding a little shaken from earlier. «Let's just chill out, okay? It was so bright red inside your mind, it felt super scary.»

*Yeah...I'm sorry.*

"That man just now used to be your boss, didn't he, Mizuki-san?" asked Tachibana-san, leaning over a little to peek at my expression as she sat beside me.

"I guess so."

"It seems like something serious went down between you two... What happened?"

"In a nutshell, I made a complaint about him embezzling and he transferred me here to Hokkaido."

"Embezzling?" Tachibana-san frowned. "You used to work at Showa Securities, didn't you?"

"Yeah. He was a branch manager at the time, one of my superiors. He stole customer money... Three hundred million yen."

"That's a crazy amount, isn't it?"

"Yeah... You'd think." I cast my mind back, losing myself in the memory.

Back when I'd worked in Showa Securities' sales department, chasing down quotas and trying to keep my head above water, I'd had several big clients. I was tasked with target earnings so high they would've shocked the general public, and given the standard process of gradually building up earnings a hundred thousand or a million yen at a time, the quotas were unreachable by

normal means.

The way to achieve them was to have a small number of wealthy individuals as clients consistently depositing large amounts of money with you. That allowed you to shoot ten or twenty steps up the ladder at a time. I spent my days chasing all the clients I could get my hands on, exploring all the small-and medium-sized company presidents to make it through.

My clients included a wealthy old couple—the Namatames. They looked normal enough; nothing suggested that the pair were wealthy. In reality, however, the wife had received a family inheritance of roughly three hundred million yen. They'd been living on their pensions when the money came in, however, and had no particular desire for luxury. They were childless, and took a liking to me when I approached them with an offer, so they let me manage a small part of their fortune.

*Honestly, if I'd wanted to push for more from them, I could've gotten it. If I'd really pressed, I bet I could've taken half their assets. But back then I'd already caught several young, high-energy "company president"-type clients, and I wasn't really struggling to meet my quotas yet. I also didn't feel like I wanted to rise at Showa Securities too fast, shaking off all my competition by making huge sales numbers. That's ultimately why I agreed to help them enjoy their later life with a comparatively light hand, only managing their accounts in a modest way during their time with our company.*

Several months passed before our arrangement ended. That was the day Branch Manager Uemura inserted himself into the situation, reaching over me to get his hooks in the Namatames.

"Mizuki." Carol's voice pulled me out of my thoughts and back to reality. "It's time. Let's go."

"All right. Are you good to go too, Tachibana-san?" I asked.

"Um, I'm okay. Let's go!"

We left the waiting room and walked to the dungeon itself. A thick door had been lowered over the entrance, closing it tight—one of the stricter security measures put in place at the dungeon following the goblin escape. Compared to how the place looked back when Shinobu did her breaking and entering, it now

seemed more like some mysterious, locked-down research facility out of a spy movie.

“Think Uemura and his team know where Excalibur is?” I asked as I resecured the Velcro on my tactical gloves.

“Who knows? They shouldn’t have a better idea of its location than us, though, unless they used the same methods.”

“You don’t think...we’ll have to fight them, do you?” asked Tachibana-san.

“I hope it won’t come to that...” Carol sounded unsure. “A brawl in a dungeon would mean fighting to the death. I don’t think that’s what awaits us down there. We probably won’t have to, at least. I’d say.”

“It’s starting to sound like we *are* going to fight down there, you know...?” said Tachibana-san.

“Don’t worry about it,” I responded, keeping it short. “If it comes to that, I’ll blast the whole group away with Skillbook.”

“Mizuki Ryosuke, Tachibana Maki, Carol Middleton. Proceed to enter,” the loudspeaker instructed us. We walked toward the entrance.

*I’ve visited the Omori Dungeon so many times now. Come to think of it...is that white dragon still sleeping through all this chaos? I heard that they take naps several centuries long, so I don’t suppose I’ll ever see him again. Our lifespans and perceptions of time are just too different, that’s the problem.*

*In any case, I’ll never cross another bridge this dangerous. This is the last time.*

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My tactical flashlight’s sharp beam pierced the gloom inside the cave. We’d just arrived, so we were still right by the dungeon entrance.

“Let’s do this. Stick to the plan,” said Carol.

“Roger that,” I answered.

Tachibana-san circled around to stand at my back, and Carol stood behind her to serve as rear guard. I kept Skillbook open, and we retained our formation as we advanced. I was ready to activate one of my buffed Blaze skills at a



moment's notice, and Tachibana-san was on standby with her hypnosis skills. Carol had her sword raised, and Kessie was on navigation duty as our fairy radar, always scanning in all directions.

«*Something's up ahead,*» she muttered. «*Probably a slime or something. Please be careful!*»

*Okay. Thanks.*

We proceeded as warily as we could, as ready as possible for an ambush. After defeating a few goblins and slimes on our way, we came into an open space.

“Doesn't seem like they're waiting for us,” I whispered. “Kessie's radar hasn't picked them up either... Not yet, at least.”

“We can't drop our guards yet. Let's rest a while,” said Carol.

“You're right. I can't concentrate for this long without a break.”

We sat in a corner, leaning against the cave walls as we took a breather. We were all equipped with small strapped shoulder bags, and I grabbed a sports drink out of mine, taking a sip. Although we were resting, I kept Skillbook open, and Carol's hand gripped her sword hilt.

“Come to think of it...” whispered Tachibana-san, sounding hesitant to bring up the topic, “how are we supposed to find this Excalibur thing?”

“What do you mean, ‘how’?” asked Carol.

“Well, we're here to find a skill, right? Does that mean, er... We won't need to go loot a *corpse* to find it, will we...?”

“There are a few possibilities,” Carol replied, tossing a nutritional energy tablet into her mouth. “When a statted person dies, it's possible for another statted person to receive their skills through contact. If that's the case, then you're right, Tachibana—we'll be checking corpses. That would be the best-case scenario.”

“Huh? Going through dead bodies is the *best-case* scenario?” Tachibana-san eyed Carol skeptically.

Carol casually nodded. “If they dropped the skill somewhere, things will get

difficult. Just like we're capable of defeating monsters and taking their skills, monsters can take humans' skills after they die. If that happened, we'd need to find the monster that got Excalibur...and that would be one hell of a search."

"In that case, would the monster drop Excalibur when we beat it?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, no." Carol shook her head. "A skill's drop rate from monsters depends on its rarity. Rarer skills are likelier to drop. Even so, there's no way to guarantee a skill will drop. The principle of human statting doesn't apply to dungeon creatures, either, so you usually can't loot skills from their corpses."

"Ah...yeah."

*She's right. It's weird, but monsters don't undergo the statting process we do. Statting is a physical phenomenon that happens to humans when they enter dungeons, after all. It's the way we humans adapt to the new dungeon environment... An extra addition, almost. A system augmenting reality.*

*In other words, we humans understand otherworldly dungeon creatures like goblins and slimes as having stats, but they themselves don't even possess the concept of that stat system. It's a bit like how popular manga's official character books include really basic stats for the characters. Those numbers are a way to help understand and interpret them, that's all.*

"So if that happens, it'll be down to luck."

«Time for my regular report!» Kessie beamed her words directly into my brain from my chest pocket as she licked a ball of hard candy. «No lifeforms detected! You're totally safe!»

Thanks, Kessie.

«Oopsie!»

Are you sure "Oopsie!" means what you think?

"But isn't Excalibur a rare skill?" asked Tachibana-san, even more hesitant than before. "Doesn't that mean there's a high chance it *has* dropped, and it's in a monster's hands now...?"

"You're right. But if a monster got its hands on a rare skill like that one, it's definitely at boss level. I don't think we'll need to go through this entire

dungeon killing every living thing to find it.”

“This is suddenly sounding a lot harder than I thought it’d be,” I said. Though I was sure it would never come true as long as I lived, I engaged in some wishful thinking: *Let’s just hope we can find those corpses and rummage.*

“All right, let’s get going.”

Our short break over, we got up and moved on. Carol would take the lead this time, with me at the back and Tachibana-san sandwiched in the middle.

Before we got into formation, I grabbed Carol and whispered in her ear. “No sign of Uemura’s team.”

“No,” she replied curtly.

“Does this mean...they’re facing us fair and square, searching for Excalibur on their own?” I brought my face closer to hers.

“Either that, or they’re on the same track we are, and already much further ahead.” Carol’s voice was husky, quiet, and low as she spoke. She was constantly on guard for potential ambushes or people listening in.

*If they’re on the same track we are...that would mean they somehow got the same intel about the skill’s location that we have.* “If that’s the case, what do we do?” I asked.

“If they beat us to the skill, there’s nothing we can do. We’d have to go home and wait for additional orders.”

“Can’t exactly go murdering each other down here, after all...”

“Oh, and Mizuki, I can feel your breath on my ears,” Carol said. “You’re turning me on.”

“Well, turn *off* then.”

Suddenly, Kessie screamed—not telepathically, but out loud. “Gyah! Wait! Zukky-s—”

In the same instant, I felt a blow to my stomach. Carol, who’d been right beside me, delivered me a swift kick that sent me flying backward.

“Guh!”

As I reeled through the air, something brushed my head. I broke into a cold sweat, feeling as if I'd just dodged a full-force swing from a metal baseball bat. I quickly got up from the ground, regaining my footing, and heard a female voice, low for a woman's.

"That ambush should have been perfect..." It wasn't Carol or Tachibana-san speaking.

"Huh...?"

Looking up at the ceiling, I found who the voice belonged to. It was the Middle Eastern woman. She was emerging from the dungeon ceiling, hanging upside down and sliding out from the rocks.

"How did you sense me, I wonder?"

"What was that voice just now?"

My eyes flitted to another person emerging from the wall. It was the Black guy, so musclebound that it looked like he had armor growing under his skin. He had a hammer-like weapon in his hands.

"Someone screamed before the attack. That's how he dodged us."

"'Without counsel purposes are disappointed,' eh?" Proverbs 15:22."

"Wh-whoa!" The last yelp was Senior Managing Director Uemura, as he too emerged from the rock ceiling. "Ha ha! I don't quite understand it...but that was quite something! Do it now! Get it done!"

⟨Gwah! They're inside the rock?! How was I supposed to detect that?!⟩

## Chapter 3:

# I Don't Even Want to Touch Them with My Sword

## 1

I REMEMBERED THE DAY THAT THE NAMATAMES phoned me, all apologies. I could tell from their words that they'd been pressured pretty hard. Uemura wasn't incompetent by any means, and as branch manager, he was a skilled salesman. I bet his smooth-talking ensnared them.

It was clear to me then that he'd recommended they turn a lot of their assets into financial commodities. But if the couple had consented, I couldn't do anything to put a stop to that. As things stood, I expected the incident to pass without further event, leaving only the bad aftertaste of office politics in my mouth.

That is, until both the Namatames died in a car accident one year later.

After their sudden death, I felt obliged to attend their funeral, though I'd long since been taken off their accounts. There, I learned that all their assets had disappeared. Uemura had withdrawn them and used them for something—filling gaps in sales numbers, covering another client's losses, or just his own personal greed. I wasn't sure why then, but I knew one thing—Uemura had to be responsible. It was the only explanation.

I moved to gather evidence of his embezzlement while keeping up my own work duties. In my investigations, however, I never found evidence that he'd used their money to bump up his sales numbers or cover losses elsewhere. But then, where did the funds go? Uemura was no idiot. It was hard to imagine he would just take it for his own personal gain. Perhaps in the Showa era, but the risks were too high these days. He must've had some other motive, something that required him to embezzle the money, but I had no idea what that might be.

It was during my investigation of the company from inside that I found myself tragically relegated to Hokkaido.

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Without hesitation, I selected my buffed Blaze shortcut from the Skillbook menu in front of me. With Skillbook now awakened, this was one new feature I'd unlocked. I no longer needed to perform a complicated procedure—I could press a single button to activate several buffs at once and aim a powerful Blaze at my targets.

“Skillbook, Blaze!”

My buffed Blaze instantly engulfed the ceiling in an inferno of heat as flames shot out before me.

“Whoa! Look out!”

“Chief, this way.”

As Uemura shrieked, the Middle Eastern woman pulled him into the rock ceiling, retreating. The inferno, which clearly would've killed them in an instant if it hit them directly, licked at the ceiling and then dissipated, revealing nothing but rock.

“They vanished into the rock! What kind of skill is that?!” I exclaimed.

“I don't know!” shrieked back Carol, who'd been using a defensive skill on Tachibana-san to protect her from my Blaze. She removed the egg-shaped transparent defensive shield wall and drew her sword. “There aren't any skills that let you pass through solid objects!”

“There aren't?! What about Phase?!” I cried.

“That only works for attacks! If people could walk through walls, nobody would ever have a problem down here in the dungeons!”

“A-are we fighting?!” cried Tachibana-san.

“Get up, Tachibana! Back-to-back with me!” Carol screamed, pulling the panicked and confused “idol” to her feet.

The three of us turned our backs to each other, facing in all directions.

“Where are they going to come from...?” I mumbled. My hand was outstretched, ready to use Skillbook, as I scanned the area in front of me.

“Tachibana, careful of all the walls.”

“O-okay! What do we do?!”

“If you notice someone from that group, hit them with something.”

“Hit them...? All I can use is Induce and Suspicious Dance, you know!”

“Then dance! Buff us!”

As we shouted at each other, I heard a voice somewhere nearby.

“Mizuki-kun!” It was Uemura. His voice echoed off the rock walls around us. It sounded unclear, as if he were calling to us from underwater. “You’re surrounded. Accept your defeat!”

“I never thought I’d hear someone actually use the phrase ‘accept your defeat’ in real life!” I shouted back, trying to play it tough. “You’ve been watching too many damn period dramas!”

A new voice echoed off the rock faces surrounding us. “Hand over the Human Nuke, and we’ll stop attacking you.”

*I know that bastard’s voice... It’s the Black guy.*

“If you refuse,” he continued, “we’ll restrain you one by one and take him by force.”

*So that’s how they’re playing this. They think I’m this group’s leader, so if they just get their hands on me, they’ll have the map to the skill located down in this dungeon. In other words, they don’t know Excalibur’s location. If they did, they wouldn’t need to trouble themselves with negotiations like these. Either that, or they know how many problems Skillbook’s firepower could cause them down the line if they don’t act now.*

“Do you really think you’re any match for us?!” Carol shouted a line about as well-worn as Uemura’s. “I’m REA’s captain and strongest member! And this is the Human Nuke, so fearsome he could silence a crying child! We’ve also got an idol with huge boobs! Ahem...uh...anyway! Despite how we might look, we’re all incredible fighters!”

“Why am I the only one you introduced like that?!”

As Tachibana-san piped up to object, something grasped at my leg. I looked down at my feet and saw a woman's face. The female warrior was poking her head out of the ground as if the rock was the surface of a lake. She grabbed my right ankle, wagging a finger with her other hand.

"Eh...?"

"We don't intend to negotiate all day."

She yanked my ankle down, and I sank into what should've been solid ground. It felt like I was being swallowed by a bottomless, viscous bog. "Whooooa!"

"Mizuki!" Carol swung at the woman dragging me under.

In the next instant, the woman was gone, having burrowed back underground as if she'd never been there at all. My foot was in the hardened rock, as though I was standing in set cement.

"Wh-what's happening?!" I screamed in panic. "My foot's buried!"

"Tch! What is this?!" Carol looked around, tightening her grip on her sword. "You bastards... You're from the Philadelphia Experiment, aren't you?! The rumors are true!"

"Eh?! Seriously...?!"

"Bingo." The superhumanly mountainous Black guy slowly emerged from a stone wall in front of us, clipping through it like he was exploiting a video-game glitch. "We're the anti-personnel specialist adventurer unit... Philadelphia Two."

The Middle Eastern female warrior who'd yanked me into the ground emerged from another wall. "A superhuman adventuring unit, born of the Second Philadelphia Experiment."

A third figure dropped from the ceiling—the White guy with blond hair. He held Uemura in his arms. "You don't even have a chance of beating us."

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"Test subjects! The result of the Second Philadelphia Experiment!" Carol screamed as she faced them down. "That research project creating stealth soldiers by combining dungeon skills with modern science, eh?! Might sound crazy, but it looks like it succeeded!"



“I’ll warn you one last time,” said the Black guy as he held his hammer. His voice was ice cold. “Put down your weapons and hand over Mizuki Ryosuke.”

“We’ll spare your lives,” added the woman, glancing in my direction like she was sizing me up.

“Carol, what do we do?!”

“We’ve got to defeat them! Do it!”

Before she even finished her sentence, I activated my Blaze shortcut. Flames wide enough to consume the whole cave exploded out once more and engulfed the enemies before us. Once the flames disappeared, though...the adventurers were gone too.

“They vanished again!”

“They’ll be back from somewhere! Stay alert! Shoot the moment you see them!”

“Um...I’ll dance! Who do I buff?! *What* do I buff?!” Tachibana-san exclaimed.

“Buff Mizuki! Agility, just in case!” Carol said.

“Oh, oh yeah! ♪ Oh no! This is super messy! ♪ I don’t want to diiiiie! You’re not alone anymore! Somebody save meeeee! ♪”

As soon as the idol-cosplaying Tachibana-san began to sing, gripping her microphone with tears in her eyes, my whole body lightened. My stiff muscles relaxed, and I felt as if I could run, jump, and move however I wanted. With my Agility stat raised, every physical movement I made was buffed.

⟨*Zukky-san! Up there!*⟩

The moment I heard Kessie scream in my head, my eyes shot to the ceiling. *My reflexes have clearly gotten faster.*

The Black guy’s torso stuck out from the rock above. He was in the process of bringing his hammer down on me.

“Gah!”

I couldn’t move my leg, but I managed to twist my hips, reeling away from the blow just in time to dodge it. Without Tachibana-san’s agility buff, it would’ve

been a direct hit. The hammer made a great arc down through the air, grazing my chest, which it had been intent on crushing.

“Yaaay! ♪ Eh?!”

My attacker now set his hammer on a path to collide with Tachibana-san, who was still mid-song behind me. The big man’s huge hammer—the tip of which looked like it could destroy any human body it touched—seemed set to land directly in the center of her voluptuous body. Tachibana-san was in for serious injury at best or instant death at worst, but what happened in the next second was entirely unexpected.

The hammer drove into Tachibana-san’s stomach, and she let out a groan. “Eghhh!”

Immediately, a cross-like pattern glowed from the point where the hammer had made contact. The cross disappeared, and so did Tachibana-san. In her place appeared the bible-quoting White guy.

“Tch...missed.”

“Eh?!”

“Eyah!”

The moment the White guy switched with Tachibana-san, Carol rushed him with a strike from the side. The second before she would’ve sliced him in two, a woman’s hand appeared from within the ground and dragged him under.

“Tch!”

“Tachibana-san! Where did she go?!”

I looked around and found her immediately. Her head was stuck in one of the cave’s rock walls, her butt sticking out. She was still wearing her idol cosplay skirt.

“Mizuki! Tachibana’s back to being a butt in the wall!”

“Again?! What is this, a running joke of hers?!”

“They’ve got a skill for swapping places!” Carol cried. “They can switch places with us by attacking us! They just used it accidentally on Tachibana, but that

was meant for you, Mizuki!”

“This is way worse than it looks, isn’t it?! Can she even breathe in there?!”

Before we even had time to fully explore our confusion, they attacked us again. The hammer shot out of the ground toward me, like a mousetrap springing underfoot.

“Gah!”

⟨*Ah! Look out!*⟩

The moment the hammer made contact with my body, the cross reappeared right before my eyes. The skill didn’t capture me, though—it stopped suddenly just short of my chest, as if blocked by some invisible wall.

“...?!”

In the next instant, my jacket pocket exploded open, and the White guy appeared right in front of me.

“Huh?!”

“Yah!”

“Blaze!”

The woman appeared as well, dragging the man upward just in time to avoid another blow from Carol’s sword. That was when my Skillbook’s Blaze assaulted them. The moment before the two disappeared back into the ceiling, the pillar of flame shot toward them like a geyser, burning the blond’s body and the woman’s arms.

“Gyaaah!”

“Ngh!”

Their skin scorched by the intense heat, they disappeared into the rock, where my Blaze couldn’t follow them. The skill’s flames dissipated upon hitting their target. We waited a few seconds longer, but there was no sign of any further attack.

“Was that a retreat...?”

“Let’s hope so! We need to save Tachibana-san!” I shouted.

With her sword, Carol cut my leg from the rock so I could pull it free. Then, as I guarded the area, she went to save Tachibana-san from her fate as a butt in the wall.

“B-baaah! Haah! Hyaah!”

“Are you okay, Tachibana?”

“I-I thought I was going to die! I thought I’d suffocate for real in there!”

“Glad we made it in time, then, and you didn’t die a butt in the wall!”

Once I’d checked that no fresh attacks were coming, I sighed in relief. “It looks like they really have backed off.”

*Seems like, of their group, Uemura can’t fight, but the other three can—the White guy, the Black guy, and the woman. Two I injured pretty badly, so they’ve probably retreated to heal themselves for now.*

“Still...that was a close one.” Just the memory of the fight gave me goosebumps.

*We barely drove them off. It was a close call. You could even say we lost that battle. This Skillbook of mine... Since it awakened, it’s gotten a lot easier to use, but it’s not suited to close combat when attacks are coming thick and fast. I prepared all kinds of skills in advance, but I was so panicked, I didn’t get to use any of them. I just relied on the same Blaze I’m used to casting. I guess you could say I need more practice.*

“Their position-switching skill reacted to something in your shirt pocket, Mizuki. Whatever it was, it made the ability misfire.” Carol tapped my shredded pocket. “We were lucky. If that skill went right, they would’ve teleported you away.”

“Yeah. It was close...” I wiped away cold sweat. “I don’t feel like fighting them anymore. I guess we should retreat.”

“You’re right,” said Carol. “We might be under direct orders from the U.K. government, but this mission isn’t worth our lives. Let’s fall back.”

“Sure. Eh...? Wait a minute.”

Feeling like I was forgetting something, I started patting myself down. I

couldn't shake the notion that something important was missing.

*Come to think of it... Who did the White guy switch places with?*

"Aaaah!" I cried the moment I realized. "K-Kessie's gone!"

"Huh? Miss Kessie?! How come?!"

"That guy switched places with her! This is really bad! They've got Kessie!"

"Ehhhh?!"

"Oh crap! Oh crap!"

I patted and patted myself, like I was looking for my phone, but she'd disappeared. *Kessie?! If you're there, answer me!* She didn't respond, however many times I called out in my mind. *That direct hit to my chest didn't count as making contact with me because Kessie was in my pocket?!*

"They've got Kessie!" I cried again. "What do we do?!"

"Calm down, Mizuki!" Carol shouted, stopping me before I could run farther into the dungeon in panic. "You're right—it's not good that they've taken Miss Kessie! But don't panic! Calm down!"

"I've got to save her now! I'm going!"

"L-let's wait just a minute!" insisted a flustered Tachibana-san, grabbing my jacket too.

"If you run after them now, they'll only attack you again!" Carol said.

"Still, I...!"

I'd completely lost my cool, along with my ability to even think up objections to what Carol and Tachibana-san were saying, so I fell silent. *Thinking back, Kessie and I haven't really been apart since the day we first met... And she's in enemy hands. What now? What do I do?!*

"L-listen..." I said, my voice trembling. "You two can go home if you want...but I'm going after those bastards and rescuing Kessie, no matter what. I don't give a damn about that Excalibur skill. Kessie is what matters most right now!"

"All right, I get it, Mizuki. Calm down. I'll help you." Carol patted my back to soothe me, speaking like she was gently comforting a disobedient child. She

succeeded in cooling my head by 0.2 degrees Celsius.

“Damn it...”

“Miss Kessie knows the route to Excalibur. If she’s really in danger, she can give them that information,” Carol added.

“Then let’s go after her. I’ll tear them to shreds.”

“Wait a moment, Mizuki-san,” said Tachibana-san nervously. “If you face them now, I think you’ll just be struck down! They really beat us up in that last fight, after all!”

“Then what am I supposed to do?!”

“All right... How about this?” Carol beckoned us over and began talking in a whisper. “They can lurk in the rocks, but they should still see your super-powerful Skillbook as their biggest threat, Mizuki. That’s why they focused most of their attacks on you.”

“Then I just need to buff my skills as much as possible, hit them with Skillbook, and damn the consequences. That’ll kill them all,” I responded. “The question is whether this dungeon can sustain that kind of damage.”

“You’re right. Let’s head toward Excalibur’s location and confront them again there. Then we can negotiate by threatening to blow this whole dungeon to pieces unless they hand over Miss Kessie.”

“But that’s really a zero-sum game, isn’t it?” Tachibana-san interjected, sounding doubtful. “Will they accept our terms if we have nothing to offer...?”

*She’s right.*

Carol gave it a few more seconds’ thought. “Then...we’ll rush straight to Excalibur and wait for them there. We’ll get our hands on the skill before they can and trade it for Miss Kessie’s return.”

“All right...let’s do it.” I nodded. “We’ll have some time before they can pull information out of Kessie. We should be able to beat them to Excalibur if we race there as fast as we can.”

“Let’s hurry, then.”

**W**E RUSHED HEADLONG THROUGH THE DUNGEON, slicing down monsters that crossed our path in seconds as we followed the shortest route possible to the destination Shinobu had identified. In that dark cave, we found three foreigners' remains strewn on the floor. They were lightly armored, their bodies torn apart and lying in a pool of dried blood that had congealed to the rock. I didn't have the time or mental capacity to be shocked by the gruesome scene, nor to pray for their souls. We rushed toward the corpses and started going through their stat screens like grave robbers.

"..."

"Is it there, Mizuki? Did you find the skill?"

"No...there's nothing!"

"There's nothing on this one either! I don't think it's here!"

No skill on any of the three corpses matched Excalibur's description.

*Did it drop after some monster killed these three, then?!*

"There must be a boss around here. Let's go search for it."

"You're right..." As I stood, I saw shadows emerge from a passageway. "Huh?"

Noticing us too, one blurted, "Eh?"

"It seems you beat us to the punch."

It was Senior Managing Director Uemura's unit of super-strong adventurers. The Black guy was holding a stick with Kessie tried to the end.

"Zukky-saaan! I'm sorry!"

"Kessie!" Elated, I tried to run toward her.

Carol grabbed me from behind. "Mizuki. I know we're in a hurry, but wait."

I stopped and thought for a moment. *Confronting them is part of the plan... But we don't have Excalibur, the all-important bargaining chip we need to trade for Kessie.*

“Let’s just pretend we’ve got it for now,” whispered Tachibana-san.

“Those are the corpses we’re after, eh...?” Uemura pointed to the bodies at our feet. “Was it there, then? Did you find the skill?”

“Luckily, yes,” I bluffed in the most casual, easygoing tone I could muster. “I’m just glad it didn’t drop.”

“Then hand it over—or we kill your tiny friend.” Uemura pointed to the stick they’d tied Kessie to.

I felt anger boil up inside of me, but somehow kept a lid on my emotions. “All right...let’s negotiate. We care more about that friend than this skill anyway.”

“Hand over the skill first. Then we’ll give her to you.”

“Kessie first, then the skill,” I answered. “We were just asked to come here to retrieve Excalibur. Kessie’s safety is more important to us. We’ll hand you the skill.”

“No. You’re giving us the skill first.”

“Don’t make this difficult, Uemura.” I spoke as sharply as I could. “We know there’s a strength difference between us. We’d also rather avoid having to kill each other. I’m sure you feel the same. But if it does come to it...I’m ready to blow this whole dungeon to pieces.”

I desperately tried to find the right words. *How do I persuade him? How do I make them believe that we have Excalibur and get them to hand Kessie over? If we can just get her back, all we need to do is run.*

“Think about this, okay? In a fair fight, you’ll beat us—but we know that just as well as you do. Even if there’s some possibility that you’ll go back on your promise, there’s no reason for us not to give you this skill.”

Uemura looked lost in thought.

*If I keep pushing, I might get somewhere. That’s what I choose to believe.* “I know I’m repeating myself... But we don’t want this skill so badly that we’ll sacrifice our lives. We saw how much stronger you are than us in that fight earlier. If I wanted to take everyone in here down with me, I’m sure I could defeat you—but I don’t want that. We surrender. Just give us the fairy, and



we'll retreat quietly. Isn't that what you want too?"

"Hmph..." Uemura sighed and frowned at me, looking displeased.

*The things I just said sounded reasonable, but it seems like he's really thinking about what to do next as his unit's leader.*

Then, the Middle Eastern woman spoke. She stood behind Uemura, arms wrapped in fresh bandages. "Chief...you're forgetting something very important."

"What?"

"Establishing the skill's location. Check that they really have Excalibur."

*Tch... I clicked my tongue so loudly inside my own head that it practically echoed. I didn't want to give him time to think about that...but I guess that didn't work out!*

"You're right there. Hey, Mizuki-kun!" Uemura shouted, sounding almost triumphant—as if everything was clear to him now. "Open your stats to show us you really have Excalibur! I'll trust you once you show me the skill name!"

"All right...wait a second." I pulled up my stat screen. Trying my best to seem natural, I slowly opened my skill list and scrolled through it with my finger. "Hmm...where'd I put that thing?"

*What do I do now...? I seemed calm as I looked through my skills, but inside, my mind was a chaotic mess. We won't get anywhere with them if they figure out we don't have Excalibur. No, maybe if I just admit that we don't have it...but try and renegotiate by promising we'll leave quietly if they give up Kessie?*

*No, no... That won't work. From their perspective, our claim that we don't have Excalibur might be another lie. Damn it—what do we do? How do we trick them? Come on, my inner Zhuge Liang... Give me a flash of inspiration!*

"What's wrong...? Show us the skill already, Mizuki-kun!"

"W-wait a minute... I've got so many, it's sort of buried in the list. It'll just take a second to find."

I heard a scrape—Carol's foot against the rock. I sensed that she'd just shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she stood behind me.

*She knows that I won't find Excalibur in this list, however hard I look...and once they realize we can't show it to them, they'll see through my lie. If worst comes to worst, we might have to jump into combat with these four again immediately.*

“Listen here, Mizuki-kun!” exclaimed Uemura. “Are you showing us that skill or not?! You’ve always put on a good front, but been slow as heck at your actual work, haven’t you?”

*Nothing else to do, then... I mumbled in my head, feeling strangely calmer now. This'll test our reflexes. But do I try and kill him? I've already got a shortcut in place to fire off a powerful Blaze. I might be able to use the moment I pretend to show him Excalibur to take out a few, if not all, of them. Once they retreat into the ground, I can cast another max-level Blaze, and...*

My thoughts trailed off as I glanced over at Uemura and his unit of super-strong adventurers—and saw something very strange. “Huh...?”

The Black guy at the back of the unit was...floating in the air. I focused my eyes and saw something emerging from his chest. It looked like a thick, writhing insect leg covered in tiny thorns.

“Gh...gah...”

He moaned in pain as he was lifted to the ceiling by his punctured torso, his body spasming as it dangled in the air. As the rest of P2 turned and noticed, he was flung down toward them, flopping limply against the ground. There was no time to be shocked or scream. The attacker then came for another P2 member—not with one appendage, but with several spiderlike legs.

“Wha—?!”

The other two members tried to retreat into the ground, but spider legs scooped them up. The leg tips skewered their bodies clean through, pulling them into the air.

“Gh...!”

“Ah...”

The pair were seemingly knocked unconscious immediately, fatally injured,

and the legs tossed their lifeless bodies back to the ground. One long leg stretched down from the ceiling, wrapping the bodies in white thread—just like a spider that had caught a fly in its web.

“Uh...um...”

Without thinking, I stepped backward, and the creature scurried down from the cave roof to reveal itself. It looked like a woman and spider combined—a female human torso attached to a giant arachnid’s body. The great spider, almost two meters tall, stabbed one of the three it had just captured and began sucking something out of them.

“Ooooooh...”

The Black guy wrapped in webs moaned almost sensually, as if all the juices were being sucked from his body. The spider’s lower body made swallowing motions, swelling and gulping like a throat taking in liquid. The spider was done with him in a few seconds and moved on to the Middle Eastern woman. It was like a scene from some disgusting horror movie—the kind of thing people with no tolerance for the grotesque should never have to see.

“Huh? Hwaaah...!” Senior Managing Director Uemura let out a short cry and stepped back.

The spider’s head swiveled to face him. The creature had a woman’s face and long hair, and her beauty only added to how unsettling she was.

“That’s an arachne!” screeched Carol. “It must’ve absorbed Excalibur and turned into a boss! Here it comes...!”

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At Carol’s battle cry, the giant spider scuttled to the wall and disappeared swiftly into the darkness.

“Is that the monster that’s got Excalibur?!” I asked.

“Probably! We’ll defeat it!”

“Kessie first!” I said. “Cover me!”

I ran to the three P2 members wrapped in webs and started searching for Kessie.

“Zukky-san! I’m here! Right here!”

“Kessie!”

Finding her tangled in the Black guy’s arms, I ripped her free from the web threads. The moment I had her in my hands, I pulled her close to my chest to protect her.

“Are you okay?! Are you hurt?!” I asked.

“I-I’m okay!” Kessie answered. “More importantly...”

“Eh...?”

That was when I noticed the three P2 members caught in the spider’s webs. It seemed like they were alive...but something strange was happening to them.

“Oh...ugh...”

As they moaned in pain, their throats swelled. Due to the number of threads wound around their bodies, it was hard to see what was happening underneath—but the glimpses I got were of blistered skin bulging from inside. Countless little creatures appeared to be wriggling inside them.

“Wha...what’s happening?” I muttered.

“Zukky-san! Look out!”

I glanced up to see the arachne suddenly above me—it’d snuck back in without a sound. As its long legs shot down to capture me, I ducked to the cave floor and activated Skillbook with a thump on one of its buttons.

“Blaze!” I directed the inferno up toward the arachne, burning its torso.

“Gyeeeeeeeeeeeeeh!” With an unpleasant screech like metal on metal, the spider reached down toward me with its legs, but found only air. The moment my Blaze hit, the arachne retreated, scurrying back into the darkness.

“Mizuki, are you okay?!” Carol shouted as she helped me to my feet.

“Y-yeah, more or less!” I replied.

“Wh-what do we do?! Sh-should I just start dancing?! What do I buff?!” asked Tachibana-san. She trembled as she caught up with me and Carol, microphone in hand.

“Agility—on Mizuki! That thing’s faster than I expected!”

“O-okay! Um—do your best, Mizuki-san! ♪ Please! Get faster, ’kay? ♪”

With Tachibana-san singing and dancing between us, Carol and I got into formation and prepared to strike at a moment’s notice.

“Wh-what the heck’s happening?!” Uemura screamed at us, bewildered by what he’d seen. “My team! What was that thing?!”

“A boss! Listen, Uemura, this isn’t the time for us to fight. If you don’t want to die, then help us!”

“How am I supposed to help...?” Tears welled up in Uemura’s eyes. Fear seemed to paralyze him. “I can’t use any skills! I just came here as their supervisor!”

“What about that rock-diving thing?! You did that too!”

“I was just diving with them! They could move a target as long as they were in physical contact!”

“Go hide somewhere, then! You’re in the damn way!”

“H-haaah!”

Uemura crouched right where he was, making himself small as we waited for the arachne to strike again. But no attack came; the dungeon fell silent.

“K-Kessie? Anything on your radar?”

“Nope,” Kessie said. “Or, well... I dunno!”

“You don’t know?”

“Everything’s so mixed-up and messy. I sense tons of life forms...but the readings are so chaotic that I just don’t know! Sorry!”

I put her into one of my jacket’s free pockets, keeping my eyes forward. “Hey, Kessie... I’m sorry about earlier,” I mumbled.

“I-it’s okay,” She poked her little head out to gaze up at me. “Anyway, Zukky-san, I’m glad you’re okay!”

“I’m glad you’re okay, too. You were right—let’s steer clear of these

dangerous dungeons. Once I'm out of here, I'm never coming back. Ah...I really mean it! I've totally reconsidered this dungeon stuff. You were completely right!"

"In any case, let's try our best!"

There was a cracking sound, like thin shells shattering—and it came from the three P2 members caught in the webs. Looking closer, I saw their skin had split, and some kind of sticky substance oozed slowly from their bodies. Caterpillar-like *somethings*, each about the size of a fist, bounced as they hit the cave's rock floor, wriggling and writhing upon having hatched.

My face twisted at the awful spectacle unfolding before me. "What are those things...?"

"K-kill me..." mumbled the White guy, unable to move in the spider's threads. The moment the words escaped his lips, his body exploded, and a terrifying number of creatures burst from his skin. They resembled some kind of larvae for the most part, but taking an even closer look, I saw that each had a human face...*his* face.

"Gyaaaaaah! What the heck?!"

"Burn them, Mizuki! Burn them the hell up!"

"Damn it! Blaze!"

I fired a Blaze at the advancing swarm of human-faced larvae, wiping them out. A white thread shot from a corner of the raging fire. It stuck to Uemura, who was crouching nearby, and pinned him flat to the rock.

"Eyaah! S-save me! Save me, please!"

"Here comes the boss again! Should I hit it with another Blaze?!"

"No, wait. I want to keep track of it! It'll attack us through the gaps in your fire!"

"Tr-try your best! ♪ Hyaaah! ♪ Please, don't give up! ♪"

The moment my first Blaze ended, another horde of caterpillars writhed toward us. The terrifying creatures now had the faces of the Black guy and the woman. The former larvae had pained expressions, but for some odd reason,

the latter ones were laughing.

“Gyaaaah! Oh, crap! I don’t know what the heck’s going on, but this is real bad!”

I stepped backward without a moment’s hesitation, but Uemura was still stuck to the rock with the spider’s webs, and was quickly swarmed by the larvae.

“Gyaaaaaah! Save me! Saaave meee!”

“Blaze!”

The moment Blaze swept down on the caterpillars once more, I sensed something scurrying around the ceiling. It positioned itself above where Uemura was pinned, quickly lowering its tail to stab into the horde. I spotted a mass in the shape of his body thrashing under the waves of caterpillars.

“Hghhh! Nnnngh...gh...ghh...!”

“It’s distracted! Now’s our chance!” I cried.

“Tachibana, buff me! Agility!” shouted Carol.

“O-okay! Carol-san! ♪ You can do it! Go go go! ♪”

Her Agility buffed by Tachibana-san’s Suspicious Dance, Carol charged the arachne, crushing the ashes of human-faced larvae underfoot as she went. With lightning speed, she drew the poison stinger from Senior Managing Director Uemura, then went for the retreating arachne, driving a leaping roundhouse kick into its body and landing on the other side.

“Gyeeeeeeeeeeeh!” Its tail and several legs severed, the arachne peeled off the ceiling and dropped to the rock below.

As it writhed there in agony, I immediately used a skill card against it.

“Shock!”

Lightning flew from my Skillbook and electrified the arachne.

“Byeeeeeeeeeeeh!”

The current’s force was so strong that the spider turned to black, charred ash in an instant. With the arachne gone, the human-faced larvae swarming over

Uemura seemed unable to retain their forms. They broke apart into one great pool of unsettling bodily fluid which coated the floor of the cave.

“Haah...! Haah...! We did it!”

“Y-you really did! Good work! That was amazing!” cried Tachibana-san.

As we celebrated the end of the fight, something strange happened.

“Huh...?”

The defeated arachne crumbled to ashes, and something seemed to draw itself from the creature’s corpse—a single sword.

It was a double-edged blade, glimmering and golden. The sword looked like it might actually be made of gold, and was inlaid with vibrant blue accents from hilt to tip. There seemed to be a mysterious magnetic field around the sword; its point faced the ground as it hung vertically in the air.





“Ex...calibur?” I found myself muttering.

In the next moment, the blade trembled slightly. Then it spun on the spot, drawing an arc through the air, until finally...it pointed directly at Senior Managing Director Uemura.

“Eh?”

Before I could process what was happening, the golden sword shot toward Uemura like a bullet and pierced his body. He was passed out when the sword hit him, bubbles forming at his mouth as he lay twitching and spasming on the ground. The sword entered his chest and disappeared inside.

“Wha...?”

“Wh-what just happened?”

Carol, who’d watched in astonishment as the scene unfolded, walked over to Uemura. “Was that Excalibur?” she asked, gazing down at him in bewilderment.

I joined her. “It *was* shaped like a sword, right? Do any other skills look like that?”

Tachibana cleared her throat. “It looks like something just stabbed him, you know.”

“I don’t know what’s going on. Let’s just slap him awake for now!” Carol exclaimed. “Hey, you! Get up! Gah! I-I just got bug juice on me!”

A full slap in the face from Carol brought Uemura twitching back to consciousness—though it did nothing about the liquid from the self-destructing larvae, which coated his body. His mental state seemed to have taken a hit. Once his eyes reopened, he was quickly back to shaking and screaming.

“Hyah! Aaaaaaah! Hyaaaaaaah!”

“Calm down, Uemura. It’s over. We defeated the arachne.”

“Eyah! Kyeeeeeh! I-it stabbed me! It stabbed me in the arm!”

“Listen to me, Uemura. *Listen*,” said Carol as he wailed. “You’ve been lucky. You’re still alive. But we have no responsibility to protect you down here. I think we should just abandon you, actually.”

“N-no! Don’t leave me! Take me back!”

“Then show me your stat screen,” I said coldly. “Open it up, and let us see.”

“Wh-what for? I’m just a director at Showa Securities... I don’t know anything! I don’t have skills. I’ve got nothing to give you!” Uemura—who’d been unconscious, and had seen nothing of the sword—began trembling and shaking all over again.

“Just do it. Do it, or we leave here without you. You’ve got three seconds. Three...” Carol began counting down.

“W-wait, please! Okay! I will. I’ll open my stat screen!”

Threatened into cooperation, he did so. In his skill list, we found only a single entry.

## SKILLWORM

***Rank XXX***

***Turn target into unlimited information/draw out unlimited information. Information may be tampered with.***

“Skillworm...?” Carol and I muttered in unison.

“What is this skill, Uemura?” Carol asked, frowning down at the man still sticky with bug juice.

“Eh? I-I don’t know.”

Staring at Uemura as he trembled at my feet, I started to think.

*Could it be...? Is this skill the sword that just stabbed him? Was that sword-shaped skill...Excalibur? No, there’s no doubt about it. That means...the official name of the skill we’re after is “Skillworm,” huh?*

“Well, anyway, we’re going to take it.”

“I-I don’t know how to hand it over. I’ve never done that before.”

“Just drag and drop, like you’re moving a file.”

Carol opened her own stat screen and tried to make him transfer ownership of “Skillworm” to her. All that resulted from her efforts was an error buzz.

“Huh? What’s wrong?” I asked.

Carol glared at Uemura’s skill list with a stern expression. “It can’t be traded...” she said slowly.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that Skillworm’s a unique skill, like Scale Eyes and Skillbook. You can’t hand it off.”

“Huh?” I held my head in my hands at this unexpected development. “Er, so what now? We came all this way, right? Let’s fix this.”

“We’ll have to take this guy back with us. As a rule, unique skills don’t drop, even when an adventurer dies,” muttered Carol unhappily. She tapped her fist against her other hand as if she’d just realized something. “Ah, but I suppose... Given what we just saw happen, once he’s dead, Skillworm will probably transfer to a new host.”

“You’re right. I imagine that sword will just fly out and stab someone else,” I agreed. *Come to think of it...* “Why do you think it entered Uemura of all people, anyway?”

“I’m just speculating, but...you and I already have unique skills, Mizuki. If it avoided us because we don’t have space for it, it might’ve just picked whoever was closest between Uemura and Tachibana.”

As Carol spoke, Uemura suddenly started wailing again. “Nghaaaaaaah!”

“What? What is it now?”

“M-my arm! The spot where that thing stabbed me hurts! My muscles are twitching!”

“From that attack earlier, eh...?” I mused. *That super-brutal one that took out the other P2 unit members in one blow, turning them into human-faced insects? Seems like Uemura’s in the process of turning into one too.*

“Looks like he’ll die if we just leave him alone. Want to try that?” Carol suggested.

“S-save me! Please! They’re only in my arm! Just cut it off for me!”

“Well...I don’t feel *great* about it, but personally, I’m okay with him dying,” I replied.

“Come on, Mizuki-kun! Please! Forgive meeee!”

“Now, now, Mizuki-san,” said Tachibana-san. “Letting him die would be really wrong, you know. You might be okay with it, but it’s out of the question ethically.”

“Yes! That’s exactly right! Eh...eyaaaaah?! My finger! It’s turned into a caterpillar already!”

“Okay, Uemura. We’ll save you, but we’ve got terms. You have to tell the truth about the embezzlement and everything that happened down here today,” I said.

“I will! I will! I really will! Please! Save me! Hyaaaah! My elbow hurts now! Save me! My arm! My fingers!”

“All right. Carol, mind helping him out?”

“Really? I don’t want to... I mean, those bugs were gross. I don’t even want to touch them with my sword, and his finger’s already turned into one.”

“Eyaaaaah! M-my thumb and pinky are starting to mate! What the hell’s going on?! Aaaaaaaah! Hurry up and cut off my aaaaaaarm!”

## Chapter 4:

### Super-Mega-Ultra Space-Program Level

# 1

IT WAS REALLY TOO LATE FOR SENIOR MANAGING Director Uemura's right arm (it was too late for Uemura in a whole lot of ways). A flash of Carol's sword severed it safely (if that's the right word). We bound the stump with scraps of his expensive suit and tie to stop the bleeding, and Uemura leaned against the dungeon's rock wall, exhausted and twitching.

I crouched beside him and tried my best to make eye contact. "Right. Let's talk, then, shall we?"

"Where do we start...?"

"First, tell me why Showa Securities is involved in all this. Second, tell me about the embezzlement."

"All right, I'll talk..." Uemura spat out, head in his hands, clearly tormented by something. "Well, I suppose...I should actually start with the embezzlement. I took the Namatames' three hundred million yen, that much is a fact."

"But why?"

"Well... That's where things get complicated," he admitted, puzzling over his words. His head was covered in bruises. "Four years ago, dungeons appeared in this world... And up until they did, Showa Securities had a huge amount of undisclosed debt. Hundreds of billions that never appeared on any of our balance sheets."

"Undisclosed debt...?" *That means there were losses that didn't appear in the company's official account statements.* "They committed accounting fraud to hide that they'd lost money?"

"Yes. Owing to restrictive monetary policies during the bubble years, Showa Securities lost a huge amount of capital. You've heard about *eigyo tokkin* funds,



right?”

*Eigyo tokkin funds were a deeply flawed form of securities trading that ran rampant during the bubble-economy years. Brokers used to promise lofty yields and compensation for losses... They basically swindled corporations and financial institutions out of their money with “you can’t lose” deals and made bank on the trading fees.*

*That is, until the Ministry of Finance made the whole practice illegal, causing industry-wide scandal. The bubble burst, and it became clear that hundreds of billions had been lost. Many big securities companies ended up collapsing overnight, although they tried to stave it off.*

“The problem just spread until Showa Securities was driven to the edge of bankruptcy... Then dungeons appeared, and the economy kicked back into gear.”

“Of course, I see... The dungeon bubble.”

*With the appearance of dungeons across the world, global uncertainty and falling stock prices shifted into an unbelievable wave of optimism. Unexplored dungeon regions and new opportunities for research gave rise to new industries, creating a rush of excitement in the global economy.*

“That strange uptick allowed us to settle debts that had previously seemed insurmountable. We shrank the debts to a figure that might actually be payable. Then, with more investment in Asia from American businesses trying to get into the dungeon market, our undisclosed losses just disappeared. It was like a miracle.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I married into the previous company president’s family—I’m his son-in-law. But...once all our undisclosed debts were cleared away, there was just a small amount left over. Several hundred million yen. That was difficult to deal with, given the accounting situation at the time. I was tasked with handling it.”

“That’s the hole you shoved the Namatames’ money into?”

“Yes...that’s right. I didn’t do it for personal gain. It was for the company!”

“That doesn’t make sense...” I mumbled to myself. “Several hundred million yen... There’d be no need for embezzlement to cover those losses.”

*Even if the company needed to hide them, there’s a mountain of other ways they could’ve done so. Why would Showa Securities commit another crime for the sake of such a small amount of money? Why not just reroute some of the company’s other funds to compensate?*

“Uemura...” I frowned at him, trying to look intimidating. “After everything that happened, what are you still trying to hide?”

“Th-the company president told me to do it...to make it look like embezzlement. Those were his orders...”

“He ordered you to make it look like embezzlement...?” *Kessie, is he hiding something?*

*«Hmm...I don’t get the feeling that he is. I think that’s really all he knows.»*

*All right... Thanks.* I wasn’t at all convinced, but now that Kessie had given her seal of approval, there was no point debating him any further in some dark cave.

*I guess it’s possible that Uemura was only told part of the truth, and what really went on is hidden somewhere in the dark. He may just be telling me the only cover story the company gave him.*

“Well, okay... Rather, it’s not okay, but it’s fine for now. So what does that have to do with you being down here?”

“I mentioned that American funds helped settle our debts, didn’t I?” Uemura still sounded terrified, watching my expression closely as he chose his words. “With that foreign investment, we got a call... It was from the U.S., likely the CIA. They wanted to disguise one of their units as employees of our company and send them on a retrieval mission. I was selected as the unit’s director. I’ve always been in charge of our dirty work—and they said, with success in a mission like this, I’d be on track to be the next company president...”

“Okay. All right.” *He doesn’t know anything more, then.* I stood and turned to Carol. “What do we do with him?”



“Take him home with us for now...and get him to a hospital,” she answered. “An agent from the U.K. will arrive in this country soon, so let’s leave him in their hands.”

“All right. Come on, then. Let’s go, Uemura.”

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Once we were back on the surface, our first task was getting Uemura to a hospital. We accompanied him there for the time being. Until the British agent arrived, Carol explained, we’d need to keep an eye on him.

As I sat next to her on a bench in the hallway, I relayed what the doctors had told me. “He’s going to make it.”

“Right. We’re lucky that ungodly insect attack didn’t land any further in than his arm.”

“When is the agent taking over for us going to arrive?” I asked.

“Soon. We’ll hand Uemura...or, rather, this whole situation...over to them, and that’ll be mission accomplished.” Carol tapped her phone a few times. She seemed to be in regular contact with whoever was coming. “What room is he in, Mizuki?”

“Three-nineteen.”

“Got it.”

After giving the room number to Carol, I decided to head up there myself. We’d posted Tachibana-san at Uemura’s door, so even if he tried to escape, she could use her Charm skills to calm him.

*Can’t imagine he’d have the guts to try and flee with one arm missing, though.*

*«Oh, boy! It sure was dangerous down there!»* Kessie muttered.

*You’ve got that right... It was a close shave. Let’s never go back there, however much money they offer. I should’ve listened to you, Kessie. I really should’ve.*

*«Hey, everything worked out in the end, didn’t it?! I shoulda known you could do it, Zukky-san!»*

*Hmm... Well, it feels like I know more about what went on behind the scenes*

*now. It's not like I can accept it all, but I'm glad to finally get more information. I guess that's good. I'm starting to feel like we're straying into situations I really shouldn't know more about, anyway.*

⟨*You've got that right!*⟩

As Kessie and I chatted in the hallway, we arrived at Room 319. Tachibana-san stood at her post in front of Uemura's hospital room, tapping away on her phone.

"How is he?" I asked.

"Ah, totally fine. I think. Probably."

The two of us peeked into the room to check on Uemura. The severed stump of his right arm was wrapped in bandages. He moaned as he lay on his side, likely under the effects of all kinds of medication.

"Well, he looks okay to me," I noted.

*Given the state he's in, he won't be going anywhere, whether we watch him or not. The one job left is to hand him over to this U.K. agent, though, so we should keep an eye on him.*

"So Excalibur... 'Skillworm,' was it? I wonder what it really does," said Tachibana-san, once the two of us were back in the hallway.

"Who knows...? I don't think I really *want* to know."

I remembered the description listed under Skillworm: *"Turn target into unlimited information/draw out unlimited information. Information may be tampered with."*

Something about that last line stuck in my mind. *"Tampered with," eh? From the abilities that arachne had, it doesn't seem like Excalibur is just a skill for obtaining information from a target.*

Suddenly, my chat with Tachibana was interrupted. A dull ringing sound assaulted our ears.

"Eh?"

"Ugh..."

Tachibana-san and I both seemed to hear the mysterious ringing at the same time. We glanced around the hallway, then locked eyes.

“What was that?”

“I don’t know. I just got this weird ringing in my ears...”

From the far end of the hallway, two nurses came rushing toward us.

“Out of the way, please, if you don’t mind!”

“Excuse me, coming through!”

With mild apologies given their urgent task, the nurses made a beeline for Room 319, hurrying in to Uemura’s bedside. It seemed like a call button might’ve triggered their arrival.

“Eh? Wh-what’s going on?” I asked, walking into the room after them.

“Are you family members of the patient?” asked one nurse.

“No, we’re Uemura’s... Uh, we came to visit him. Is he okay?”

“Uemura?” The nurse frowned at me as she reached up to change the IV bag.  
“Who’s this Uemura, exactly?”

“Uh, I’m talking about the patient whose room we’re in...” The moment the words left my mouth, I realized something. The unconscious patient in the hospital bed wasn’t Uemura at all... It was an old man I’d never seen before.  
“Huh...?”

“I’m sorry, but you’re interfering with our treatment. Could you come back later?” Respectful yet blunt, the nurse returned her attention to the old man’s IV drip.

Stunned, I went into the hallway to check the room number. The sign beside the door read 318, not 319.

“Hm...?”

“Uh, is Uemura-san doing okay in there?” asked Tachibana-san, looking worried.

“This is the wrong room... It’s 318.”

“What?”

I looked at the room to the right—317. I turned and glanced left—320.

“Huh...?”

However many times I checked, however hard I squinted, I was standing in front of Room 318.

*To the right, 317. To the left, 320... 317, 318, 320...* “Tachibana-san, where’s Room 319?”

“Huh? Isn’t this Room 319?”

“No. There *is* no Room 319.”

“Eh?” Tachibana-san looked over the room numbers herself, then seemed to understand what was happening—or rather, seemed to understand how *little* she understood what was happening. “Hunh... You’re right. Wha...?” Her eyes widened in shock. “But... Just now, there *was* a Room 319 right here, you know?”

I didn’t answer.

“Where’d it go, anyway?”

The two of us checked Rooms 317, 318, and 320, just in case, but none contained Uemura. All the beds were full, and he hadn’t been assigned to any of them.

“Let’s go find Carol... I just have no idea what’s happening here.”

“Y...you’re right. Okay.”

We hurried from the third floor down to the first, where Carol was awaiting the agent from the U.K. We found a hospital map on our way, and there was no sign of Room 319 on the floor plan. The number was missing entirely, just the way the numbers four and 13 are sometimes missing from hospitals because of their unlucky associations.

*But we were definitely just standing in front of Room 319...and there’s no reason some random number like 319 would be missing from a hospital’s floor plan. Most importantly, it’s not just the room that’s missing, but a whole*

*Uemura that's disappeared.*

When we reached the first floor reception hall, a crowd of people had gathered. Carol lay on the floor at its center.

"Huh...? Carol, what's wrong?!" I ran over, pushing through the doctors and nurses that surrounded her.

"Ah...M-Mizuki..." she moaned, covered in cold sweat. "I just... I feel a little dizzy. I'm fine."

"Wh-what? What the heck...?" Then I noticed veins bulging in her neck.

A nurse took Carol into a nearby hospital room and removed her shirt to examine her symptoms. What looked like a large blue bruise covered her neck and back.

"That's where the arachne's poison stinger hit me..." said Carol. "I've been feeling weird for a while, but it's just slowly gotten worse."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not exactly... It's more like a really weird sensation. I can't shake this cold sweat. I feel gross..."

"Hey...Carol." The only possibility I could think of in that moment was the one I didn't want to accept. "You don't think this might be...*that*, do you?" *That awful, ungodly fate that befell Uemura and P2's other members... Could some variation of that be happening to her right now?*

Carol frowned and nodded quietly, careful not to move the muscles of her back. "This might also have something to do with Excalibur's effects. Time-based damage, maybe. How's Uemura? Let's have him activate his skill to try and sort this out."

"Well..." I explained the situation to Carol.

It only made the lines in her forehead deepen. "Huh...? What did you just say?" she asked, a bead of cold sweat dripping from her brow.

The British agent arrived at the hospital in an expensive foreign rental car. As the vehicle drew closer, I saw that it was a U.K.-manufactured Jaguar. At first, I was impressed that Omori City's rental car service had been able to lend it to him—but it was also possible that the car had been brought into the country by a different route, one that I couldn't even begin to imagine.

"You lost the wielder of Excalibur?" asked the agent. He was a White guy with blond hair wearing an intimidating pair of sunglasses. "Damn it. How could this be? So it's happened, then."

His reaction to the news, while solemn, was a little louder than the average Japanese person's would've been. Although it was stronger than your typical Japanese reaction, however, I felt like his response was a bit weaker than a regular American's.

*I suppose national character is the kind of thing that might really show up at times like these—when people are told unbelievable news.*

"Carol's been hurt too. She's in trouble," I said from the Jaguar's passenger seat. Tachibana-san and I had piled into the man's car to talk, leaving Carol in the hospital for now.

"Carol Middleton's down? Man, this just gets worse and worse."

"Hey, you..." I leaned toward the driver's seat. "What's this Excalibur skill, anyway? What does it do?"

"This situation is really bad...that's all. There's nothing we can do now."

"There's nothing we can do?" I leaned in closer. "What do you mean, there's nothing we can do? Tell me what's happening, please!"

"It's one troublesome skill to tangle with, all right? We'll handle this from here. You're done. Mission accomplished."

"Hey, wait. Answer my question. Skillworm... What the heck does it do? What's happening to Carol?"

"I can't answer that. We'll take it from here. Good work... You'll be compensated."

"Answer the damn question!" Activating Skillbook, I grabbed at him.

The tussle knocked his sunglasses askew. He shoved my chest to keep me off him. “H-hey! Stop it. Calm down!”

“Tell me what that skill really is, then! Carol’s in danger!”

“I can’t tell you that... It’s top secret!”

“Tachibana-san!” I screeched to her in the back seat. “Induce! Make him tell us everything he knows!”

“Eh?! Are you sure we’re allowed to do that?!”

“Of course not...but there’s no other way! This is for Carol!”

“Eh...um...well! Excuse me! I’ll be entering your mind now! Induce: Obedience!”

“W-wait! St—”

I ripped off the man’s sunglasses, grabbed his head, and forced him to look Tachibana-san in the eye. It was only then that his eyes softened. I could tell that he was under the effects of Tachibana-san’s hypnosis.

“Is he under...?”

“Um...I think so! Maybe...!”

“Let’s try asking that again, then. What’s Excalibur? What’s Skillworm?”

“It’s...uh...” The man’s stern expression was gone, but his eyes still darted, like he was trying somewhere in the depths of his mind to resist us. However, as I expected of the Charm skills of our hypnotist—former city hall employee Tachibana-san—he quickly gave in and began mumbling. “The U.K. has...kept it a secret since ages past.”

“Ages past?” I repeated. “Since when, exactly?”

“Before dungeons appeared... It was discovered in the Early Middle Ages by King Arthur, and the crown has held it ever since...”

“The Early Middle Ages...?”

“It’s...it’s called Excalibur... It brought prosperity to the British Empire, and... Four years ago... When dungeons first appeared... When we were first statted... We discovered its name... Skillworm.”

“Since before the dungeons appeared...?” I had my doubts about what the man was saying. I also wanted to ask a mountain of questions. *For now, I guess I'll restrict my focus to Carol's symptoms.* “What does the skill do?”

“Excalibur...is shaped like a sword, and chooses its own wielder... It can take every piece of information from a target and makes the target its own...but...th-that's just a side effect of its true power... Eh? Wha...?”

“Tachibana-san, the effect's weakening. Cast it again,” I said.

“Um...okay, there we go!”

“All right, you ready to talk again? What's the skill's true power? Give me all the details.”

After a few moments of silence, he answered easily, “Excalibur's true power is its ability to turn something into information and tamper with it. It can turn anything into data...and make it alterable. It can change information... Rewrite the history in your textbooks... Alter human beings' personal data... Tweak financial records and account balances.” Starting to sound delirious, the man mumbled, “King Arthur took up the sword... Rewrote history to put himself on the throne... That's the theory... The Arthurian legend is true, but also false... It's all been tampered with...”

“So what's happening to Carol?”

“Animals or monsters getting hold of Excalibur...leads to real trouble... They can pluck out living creatures' DNA and tamper with it... They can...transform others...”

Pausing, I remembered the countless human-faced caterpillars that the boss arachne had produced, and the way Uemura's little finger and thumb tried to mate.

*DNA tampering...transformation... So that really is what's going on inside of Carol right now.* “How can we help her?”

“You'll have to readjust the information inside her that was tampered with...”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning...you'll have to use Excalibu-bu-bur...”



“All right... Thanks, nice work. That’s enough.” I left the car and stretched my back.

Tachibana-san exited the back seat of the Jaguar and walked over to me. “What do we do now?” she asked hesitantly.

“What else? We go find Excalibur again and use it to treat Carol’s condition.”

“But how...?”

“Drag Uemura out by threatening Showa Securities.”

\*\*\*

“So, Shinobu, that’s why we need you to give us another Dreamreader.”

“Eh? I mean, sure, I don’t mind.”

Shinobu—who’d apparently been asleep since we left—blinked at the REA members around her. They were all busy with construction.

“But what’s going on here?” she added.

“We’re doing that whole thing again. This time, I want you to find out about the Showa Securities scandal. I want everything on it—every last bit of dirt that you can find. The whole ball of wax.”

She sighed. “Well, sure, that part’s fine... But what are they building?”

“We’re having them put a stage together in my apartment,” I said, looking around my room as it was renovated into a space that nobody could ever live in comfortably again.

*Clang! Clang! Thud! Thud! Ba-ba-ba-ba-bang!*

“We’ll buff your Resilience score to the max and give you a super-mega-ultra space-program level buff. That’s what this is for.”

“Eh? A super-mega-ultra space-program level buff? What’s that?”

Just then, the doorbell rang. I went to open it and found Horinomiya standing in the doorway.

“Thanks for coming, Horinomiya,” I said.

“Long time no see, Mizuki-kun.”

“I know we might have catching up to do, but right now, we need to move fast.” I guided him to the low table in the middle of my room and turned to face him, leaning in close. “First, show me your stats.”

“My stats?” Horinomiya frowned and glanced at me, then toward the construction, then back. “What on earth for? What’re you building in here?”

“Look, please. You’ve toured dungeons across the globe, hiring adventurers—I know you must be statted.”

“Well... I am, yes. I don’t have a single skill of my own, though.”

“That’s fine.”

Horinomiya reluctantly opened his stat screen to show me.

***HORINOMIYA AKIHIRO***

***Level 22***

***HP 11 MP 3***

***Strength 7 Stamina 15***

***Wisdom 30 Intelligence 50***

***Resilience 25 Agility 8***

***Charm 25***

“All right... Your Intelligence, Resilience, and Charm are all better than average!” I couldn’t help giving Horinomiya’s excellent stats a little round of applause.

*«Should’ve expected nothing less of the former head of a huge company turned YourTuber! He’s got ideal stats for a Charm user!»*

*He really does. Makes sense that he’s such a popular YourTuber now...and that he was a first-rate company president too.*

“So...what do you want me for?”

“Put this on, Horinomiya.” I handed him a cosplay outfit for the male idol

group Hey! Say! Dungeon! that I'd bought at Don Quijote.

"What's this...?"

"You're going to wear it and sing and dance with Tachibana-san."

"Where...?"

"On the special stage we're building at a breakneck pace. Take a look at this, Horinomiya. Everyone in REA is really working hard to help their boss Carol in her time of need."

"Why...?"

"We're gonna give Shinobu a super-mega-ultra space-program level buff."

"Do you mind speaking a language I understand?"

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*Right then, time to explain the "give Shinobu a super-mega-ultra space-program level buff plan."*

*«Aaaall right! Now it's Kessie-chan's time to shine!»*

*Okay! I'm counting on you, Kessie!*

*«Right now, Carol-chan is in a super, suuuper tight spot. She might get turned into a caterpillar. So we need Showa Securities to hand over Senior Managing Director Uemura and the skill he's got inside him, Excalibur! We're going to have Shinobu-shi do some divination in her dreams to tell us all about Showa Securities' scandals so we can get leverage on them! We'll bring all that dirt to the company president and get him to hand over Uemura! That's the plan!»*

*Right! The current president of Showa Securities is Higaya Seiji. We'll yank him out of hiding!*

*«But, y'know, divining can be really fuzzy and unreliable, so it's Tachibana-san and Horinomiya-san's job to buff Dreamreader and make it as powerful as it can be! Zukky-san's gonna use the power of their Suspicious Dance skills to cast a hugely massive exponential growth buff on Shinobu's Resilience stat! We'll stream it live on Horimiya Channel again! Tachibana-san and Horinomiya will learn a new song and dance just for the occasion!»*

*Good work! That's the plan!*

As everyone worked, I set about organizing them.

“Do I really have to dance...?” asked a reluctant Horinomiya after the explanation was done.

*He just had to ask...* “Horinomiya, we’re counting on you,” I said. “After this is over, we’re square. You’ll be free.”

“And what if I refuse?”

“We already made an announcement that Horimiya Channel is putting on a shocking livestream as a thank-you special for one million subscribers. See, look—you’ve just barely hit trending. You’re in tenth place.”

“But what if I still refuse?”

“Look at this comment. There’s an extremely high chance this girl is your daughter, right? She’s really looking forward to it. Seems like she even called off plans with her friends to watch today.”

“I couldn’t bear to let her see me doing this.”

“We went ahead and did a giveaway too. It’s set up so she’ll get the prize. We already DMed her and told her we’d announce it during the livestream. She seemed super happy. Come on, please.”

“That was a dirty trick. You bastard...”

“Takes one to know one.”

Unsure whether Horinomiya was really on board, I turned to Tachibana-san. She was getting ready too. She’d changed out of her idol cosplay to go to the hospital, but was back in it for the upcoming performance. *She’s spent more time wearing that outfit today than her actual clothes, huh?*

“Uh...sorry. We’re counting on you again,” I said.

Tachibana-san tapped furiously at her phone, giving off the darkest aura I’d ever felt from her. “R-right... If this is what it takes to save Carol-san, then, well, of course...I’ll do it, okay? I’ll do it...”

“Tr-try your best, won’t you? We really need your help with this.”

“Yes... I’ll be totally fine... It’s okay... Ha...ha ha ha...” There was a nervous tone in her laugh, as if something in her soul was leaving her body. “A ton of results come up when I search my own name now... There’s even a hashtag... ‘#MassiveTitsToneDeafDancer’ ...”

Looking down at Tachibana-san’s phone, I saw a long list of videos with her in the thumbnail.

“I mean, I already gave my image away for free... This was just handing them more material to work with, I suppose. Ha ha ha...”

“W-we’re counting on you...” I said.

I left her to it and went to check on Carol, who was getting the livestream ready. She looked rather pale as she sat cross-legged at my low living room table, tapping away at her laptop.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“My back’s slowly getting itchier and itchier...but I’m still okay,” she said, trying to stretch in a way that didn’t put pressure on her shoulders.

“Show me, will you...?”

Carol showed me her back. The bruising pattern had spread a little since I last saw it at the hospital. *Not to mention there’s a patch of skin that looks... inhuman...like the shell of some green insect. It seems like scabs are forming and falling off to reveal transformed skin underneath.* I stared at the area in silence.

“What is it, Mizuki? Is something wrong?”

“No...it’s nothing. It’s spread a little, but...y-you’ll be fine.”

“You mean it?” she asked.

“Some of your skin looks a bit insectoid...but I think it’ll probably be fine, yeah.”

“That definitely doesn’t *sound* fine.”

“It’s not. I’m sorry.”

At my response, Carol heaved a deep sigh, then got back to work. “Well... There’s no sense worrying about it. Let’s just do what we can.”

“Yeah...you’re right,” I answered, going to help the REA members with their construction work.

*How much more time does she have? Two days? Three...? It might be even less. And if we get our hands on Excalibur—will it really save Carol?*

### 3

**A**LL OUR PREPARATIONS WERE COMPLETE; IN OTHER words, we’d gotten it done.

Shinobu took her sleeping pills and got back under my futon’s covers, her ears fully guarded against outside noise. I turned to face the dance stage hastily constructed in a single, unemployed man’s rented apartment. The sight would have any landlord tearing out their hair. Still, REA’s financial reserves had provided us with a dramatic “before and after” moment. In any case, the stage was ready to go.

Standing atop the cramped, shabby, impromptu stage built with sweat, tears, and hard cash was fifty-four-year-old Horinomiya Akihiro, deep-set wrinkles in his forehead.

“...”

Horinomiya had changed out of his usual expensive suit into a cheap “Hey! Say! Dungeon!” idol costume. Despite his outward appearance, he retained a strange air of dignity and awe. His expression was such an odd mix of emotions, it was hard to tell what he was thinking.

*I think Horinomiya’s the only fifty-something guy in all Japan who could pull that outfit off. When he was younger, he looked cool—tall and handsome, with a foreigner’s long-limbed figure. It’s odd to see a former company president end up wearing this and not feel sorry for him—he’s almost like a one-man avant-garde art installation. People are ninety percent judged on their looks—I knew it. If only I were born with his DNA.*

Standing beside him, her expression so infernal that the god of hell might’ve hesitated to send her there, was twenty-four-year-old Tachibana-san.

*I mean, it should go without saying that she looks good in her idol costume. I've already pointed that out repeatedly, so I won't belabor it. I have to say, though, she really doesn't seem like she's wearing some cheap "high school uniform" cosplay. More than anything, the vibe I'm getting from her is like "Fine, I'll wear this. Tremble with fear and gratitude at the fact that I deigned to dress my bountiful body with your garment!"*

The pair were surrounded by a completely unnecessary three-camera setup that would've put any TV station's recording equipment to shame, complete with cameramen, lighting, sound, and a cheering audience—all positions filled by burly REA members. By the way, Kevin was acting as our sound guy.

Carol and I sat at my low table so we'd be out of the camera's frame, working on our laptops behind the scenes. Just as we'd set everything in place perfectly, there was a noise...

"Keh..."

The moment I heard Shinobu breathe as if asleep, my whole body tensed. I jumped to attention. "She's down! Skillbook!" I opened my skills and applied buffs I'd prepared ahead of time. "All right... Hypnosis Buff! Then Hand in Hand Amplify times ten! One more time!"

As soon as I finished buffing them, Horinomiya and Tachibana-san activated their Suspicious Dance skill cards.

"We're live!" called Carol, pushing the button to put Horimiya Channel on-air.

"Music, start!" Needless to say, that was Kevin, our sound guy.

*Ta-da!*

A popular hit from an idol group blared out of the massive speakers so loudly that if REA hadn't bribed my apartment's landlord with basically the cost of the entire building, the noise would've resulted in an immediate police visit. With happy karaoke music in the background, Horinomiya and Tachibana-san picked up their microphones.

"Horimiya Channel! ♪"

"Thank you for one million subs! ♪"

Their slightly awkward parody duet shook the room as it blasted from the speakers. The rewritten lyrics celebrated Horimiya Channel's subscriber milestone, and the performance had drawn a crowd of two hundred thousand viewers who truly wanted to support their efforts, buffing the effectiveness of Suspicious Dance to its very limit.

"The path we walked to get here! ♪" Although Horinomiya performed the dance moves wearing his usual glum expression, his singing voice was fantastic—no exaggeration.

*I bet he could do anything he put his mind to.*

"The path we walked with you viewers! ♪" Tachibana-san sang, a little off-key, and showing not even a trace of motor coordination.

Incidentally, she'd had absolutely nothing to do with the "path" Horinomiya and his subscribers walked to where they were. And her singing wasn't even good enough to pretend to compliment. She managed to make up for it with her figure, though. *I think so, at least.*

The buff Skillbook gave the pair made their Suspicious Dance skills so powerful that they emitted a strange aura from onstage. The lines swirled around my cramped apartment, seeming to feed directly into the sleeping Shinobu.

"I'll keep uploadiing every daaay! ♪"

"We'll try our beeest! ♪"

It was a strange duet; Horinomiya clearly had no intention of uploading a video every day from now on, and Tachibana-san had no desire to try her best to do *anything* involving Horimiya Channel ever again. As their performances continued to greatly excite and confuse the viewers, the maelstrom of Suspicious Dance buffs reached dangerous levels. When the twisting aura began to shake the entire room, I turned to Carol.

"Carol!" I shouted in her ear. "Don't you think this might be getting out of hand?!"

"Y-you're right! Might be about time we stop them!"



Just as we started to worry...it happened.

“Gaaaaah! Hyaaah?!”

Caught in the middle of a whirlwind of buffs, Shinobu jerked up in the futon, screaming herself awake. In that moment, the livestream stopped completely. The song’s lyrics just happened to reach their climax at that point anyway, so that ending should’ve satisfied the audience.

*I bet, to them, it looked like the cosplaying Horinomiya disappeared from the stage like some mysterious magic trick.*

I ran to Shinobu’s side and immediately rubbed her back. It looked like she’d just experienced a grade-A nightmare. “How was it, Shinobu?! Did you find anything?!”

“Eh?! No—y-yes! Everything! I feel like I saw things I was never meant to see! Secrets of space that should stay hidden! I really was this close to seeing it *all*!”

Having just received a super-mega-ultra space-program level buff to her stats courtesy of Horinomiya and Tachibana-san, almost causing her to understand all the universe’s secrets, Shinobu had retrieved so much information on Showa Securities’ huge scandals that it definitely included stuff not even the current company president knew. Everything cramming into her head at once had taken quite a toll on Shinobu’s mental state, however. She looked dizzy as she tapped away at the laptop keyboard, trying to get it all out before she forgot any details.

“Is there still more, Shinobu...?”

“Yeah, *way* more. Truckloads of undisclosed losses, accounting fraud, affairs within the company, a few dozen embezzlement cases, a former branch manager’s unresolved murder, perverted fetishes... I saw everything in my dream, clear as day!”

“That document’s already thirty pages long. Maybe you should take a break soon.”



“No way! I’m going to keep writing! I feel like I’ll go insane if I don’t get this stuff out of my head, y’know?! It got packed so full I thought I might keel over!”

“Well, all right. It’s up to you.”

I sat next to Shinobu as she furiously pounded at the keyboard, looking over the list of scandals she was busy typing to see if there was anything I could use.

*This is seriously a wealth of messed-up intel. I suppose, with almost twenty thousand employees, Showa Securities was bound to have some skeletons in the closet.*

As I gazed at the storm of scandals Shinobu was rapidly writing out, my eyes stopped on a single line. “Wait a second, Shinobu. What’s that?”

“Huh? Which one? The Yamashina branch sales manager’s huge child-porn collection?”

“No, not that.” My finger touched the screen, picking out the words.

“That...?”

“The ‘Round Table’...?” I read.

Shinobu stared at the neatly pixelated Mincho font letters. “Ah,” she sighed. “Come to think of it...”

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I dialed the number into my phone and made the call. I didn’t have this number saved to a contact; Senior Managing Director Uemura had given it to me down in the Omori Dungeon. The line rang three times, then connected.

“Hello,” came a man’s low, solemn voice from the other end.

“President of Showa Securities, I take it,” I said.

“And you must be...who?”

“Former employee Mizuki Ryosuke.” I continued before he had the chance to interject. “I want to speak with you in person. Mind if we make our way there?”

“I wonder if there’s anything in it for me.”

“Don’t you want to talk about the Round Table?” I asked.

A few seconds of silence followed from the other end of the line.

“I don’t, but I suppose I’ll have to.”

## Chapter 5:

# I Tried Listing Everything Mizuki Ryosuke Did Wrong, Then THIS Happened! Lololololol

## 1

I HOPPED ON A PLANE THE SAME DAY AND ARRIVED after just under two hours in the air. From there, I took a taxi into central Tokyo, arriving at Showa Securities' headquarters in Chiyoda Ward. It had been some time since I'd visited central Tokyo, and the buildings' unnatural height was somewhat overwhelming.

*It's like I came to an entirely new civilization. I spend most of my time going to and from dungeons, but Tokyo still looks way more like a different world than anything I've seen up in Hokkaido.*

The people at the front desk had seemingly been waiting for me; they quickly guided me to an elevator.

*Getting to walk in without a security pass does kind of make me feel good, even in these circumstances.*

The elevator stopped on the top floor, and I headed toward the company president's office. In a small room beside the main office, I encountered a secretary sitting and looking distinctly worried as she carefully watched me approach.

We looked at each other in silence. I tried to greet her as I walked past, but she seemed to have absolutely no interest in that whatsoever. She did nothing but visually acknowledge that I was present, and didn't object when I approached the president's office.

I knocked and opened the door, finding a space inside that just *screamed* "company president" in every sense. The spacious room was accented with dark brown and red. Two sofas sat facing each other for meetings. On the far side of the office was a desk that looked thick enough to withstand a hit from a rocket launcher—and there he was, Showa Securities Company President

Higaya Seiji.

“You’re Mizuki Ryosuke, eh?” he mumbled from his desk chair. His completely gray hair was cut short and subtly held up with some product. The hair near his temples was thin, letting some skin show through, but that looked like regular aging rather than outright balding.

*I hope I still have that much hair left when I’m at his age.*

“Sit, please,” Higaya suggested.

I took a seat on one sofa. It was big and soft, my butt sinking into the leather as Higaya sat opposite me. Being face-to-face with the man felt strange.

*I might not work here now, but actually meeting the president of my former workplace... That’s a weird feeling, needless to say. On top of that, though, he’s a more imposing figure than anyone I’ve ever met. More than Horinomiya, more than Himata. And the pressure emanating from him is a little different from the kind that Heath gives off.*

*It’s not like Higaya’s trying to intimidate me and make me back down. I feel more like I’m face-to-face with something shapeless, formless...someone encased in a deep fog.*

“What are your demands?” he asked.

I cleared my throat. “Give us back Senior Managing Director Uemura or return Excalibur.”

“What would be the advantage of that for me?”

“We have intel regarding several Showa Securities scandals.” I leaned forward a little and looked up at him.

“Which scandals, specifically?”

“Embezzlement, accounting fraud, internal love affairs, former employees’ encounters with police. Everything.”

“A terrifying thought,” Higaya responded casually.

“Hand over Excalibur and we won’t reveal those. The U.K. government is also prepared to offer several billion yen in dungeon resources and a line to insider

information.”

“Well, that’s not bad,” said Higaya, slowly and deliberately crossing his legs. “But considering the nation backing us in all this, it’s not *good*, either.”

“What are your conditions, then?”

Higaya leaned forward a little, his deep-set eyes peering at me. “Suppress the scandals and promise to involve yourself no further in this matter...and I’ll personally hand you one billion yen. If you’d like, I could also restore you to the company as an external board member. I’d be prepared to offer your acquaintances exceptional positions as well.”

“That sounds like a good deal,” I answered. *Tachibana-san does seem to be job hunting, after all—but no.* “This isn’t about money, though. And I know something else...something about your group.”

“What, I wonder?”

“The Round Table,” I replied. “You’re a member, aren’t you, Higaya Seiji...?”

The color drained instantly from his carefree face. “I asked you this over the phone... How is it you know about that?” All pretense of friendliness was gone; a cold, dark mood settled over the office.

“I have my sources.” Sensing concern in his voice, I pressed on. “Listen, Higaya. Either you hand over Uemura, or I reveal everything I know to the world—including Excalibur and the Round Table. If the U.K. government can’t recover Excalibur, they’re prepared to make all this public. Isn’t that the thing you most want to avoid?”

I leaned just as far forward as him, putting my elbows on my legs. We glared at each other for a few seconds over the table until a smile formed at the corner of his mouth.

“Ha ha ha ha ha...” He suddenly started chuckling, a burst of laughter that seemed both open and controlled. “My, my. What can I say...? You have quite the information network, Mizuki-kun. Who are you, James Bond? Just how did you get your hands on that intel?”

“I doubt you’d believe me even if I told you.” *After all, an unemployed*

*onetime city-hall employee and a major company's former president, both buffed to the brim, did a song-and-dance livestream to two hundred thousand viewers, sending a high school girl so far into her dreams that she almost discovered the universe's secrets. Seriously, who in the world would ever believe a story like that?*

"Right... Well, I don't know how you did it. But now that you know, I suppose I might as well talk."

Higaya was still laughing as he stood from the sofa. He walked slowly to the high-rise window and looked down on Tokyo. He didn't seem resigned to telling me what he knew—more amused by the situation in which he'd found himself.

"In fact, Mizuki-kun, the situation's already been resolved."

"What?"

"The U.S. isn't backing us. Or, well, to put it more accurately...the Americans are being led to believe that they're backing us, but we're backing *them*. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"No, what do you mean?"

"You're correct that I'm a member of an organization known as the Round Table." Higaya turned from the window to look back at me. "I serve as president of Showa Securities to control the situation. But, to use an old phrase, 'Appearances can be deceiving.' This is how we've always operated."

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"Excalibur's true power is its ability to tamper with information." Higaya folded his arms behind his back and began pacing the office slowly. "What do you think the greatest kind of information in this world is, exactly?"

"I didn't come here to talk philosophy," I said.

"The greatest form of information is historical fact, Mizuki-kun," he responded, ignoring my protest. "Excalibur, to put it plainly, can rewrite history. Tamper with it, changing the world. We at the Round Table have, in cooperation with the U.K., made full use of its power to control the world. You know of the Battle of Trafalgar, do you not?"



*What, now we're studying world history? "Some battle with Napoleon, right?"*

"Indeed, yes. It was the greatest naval battle of the Napoleonic Wars, between Britain and France. Who was triumphant?"

*I don't know that much about world history... I think Napoleon had a lot of success controlling land in Europe, but he couldn't take the sea from the island nation of Britain. An alliance of other powers eventually defeated him. "Britain won the battle."*

"That's correct—it's what the textbooks say. However, Napoleon actually completely broke the British in 1805. We tampered with history to record a British victory instead."

"Huh...?"

"What about the Battle of Britain, during the Second World War?" Higaya continued. "A fight in the skies against Nazi Germany for control of British airspace. Who won?"

"There were never battles in mainland Britain. The U.K. won that one," I answered immediately.

Higaya shook his head. "That isn't true either, actually. The Nazis won the Battle of Britain and gained control of their airspace. We rewrote that as well, declaring it an RAF victory."

"What did you just say?"

"The most recent large-scale tampering happened in 2008," Higaya continued, not caring whether I followed. "The subprime mortgage crisis in the U.S. caused Lehman Brothers to collapse and turned the global economy upside down, severely impacting the U.K. economy... So our council convened. We decided to erase the crisis so that the administration discovered the subprime mortgage issue quickly and responded by saving Lehman Brothers from bankruptcy. A business partnership with Showa Securities ultimately prevented the crisis—at least, that's how we rewrote the incident."

"Lehman Brothers collapsed? What're you talking about?"

*That subprime loan incident was over a decade ago... It entailed bad debt*

*from mortgages that would've caused a major financial crisis if ignored... Those mortgages were a time bomb, making everyone fear that a global recession was on the horizon.*

*The problem was with a major mortgage bank called New Century Financial. They handled their capital poorly, hiding mismanagement from investors until right before they went under. The American president at the time reacted quickly, though, and both Lehman Brothers and Bear Stearns were saved from bankruptcy, barely avoiding a financial crisis.*

*That's how the story goes, at least. President Bush was greatly praised at the time for his monetary policies, so much so that he went down as the greatest president in U.S. history. All that is common knowledge to us investment bankers, though—everyone's heard about it.*

"The impact of our 2008 tampering was huge in multiple ways," continued Higaya, ignoring my question once again. "The world's not what it used to be—change spreads fast in the modern age. Altering history turned YouTube into YourTube, for some reason. It also changed one character in our original company name, turning it into Showa Securities... Well, suffice it to say, there were a lot of changes—but it did end the crisis. The butterfly effect is just armchair philosophy. The flapping of a butterfly's wings can't truly influence history that much. Far larger currents carry the main path of history; those are much harder to disrupt. Since 2008, however, we at the Round Table have ceased altering history for our own gain and focused on controlling the aftershocks."

I was finding it difficult to properly comprehend this conversation's scale all at once. I did my best to pull out parts that caught my attention. "YouTube? Do you mean YourTube?"

"Don't worry about that. I was just thinking aloud. But, well, the scale of the tampering left behind numerous accounts and records contradicting each other. We had trouble squaring them all, creating cover stories to explain the figures. Uemura's embezzlement, and your transfer to Hokkaido, were part of that effort. On the off chance that some of our odd accounting was detected, we planned to explain it to the public as a case of embezzlement. We've needed to engage in similar cover-ups countless times in nations across the globe."

“H-huh...?”

“But what happened here—the loss of our most valuable skill, Excalibur, inside the Omori Dungeon—posed a real issue for us. We mobilized you and Carol Middleton to retrieve it, since you were already in the position to do so. At the same time, I used my position at Showa Securities to direct an American attempt to retrieve the skill as well. It didn’t matter to me which succeeded. If the U.S. had won that race, I could’ve taken the skill from them; they believe I am their man, after all.”

“Um, so you mean...”

*The ones behind the U.K. government’s retrieval of Excalibur...were the Round Table. At the same time, the force behind the Americans’ attempt to infiltrate the Omori Dungeon and get their hands on Excalibur...was the Round Table. This might look like a proxy war between the U.K. and U.S., but in reality, the same puppet master is pulling both sides’ strings.*

*In other words... In other words...* “The U.K.... I mean, *you*... You’re the ones that have Excalibur?”

Higaya smiled gently at me as he sat back down at his desk. “Excalibur is indeed in our possession. The current wielder, Uemura, is under our protection—completely within our grasp.”

“Then...save Carol. Please,” I said, standing up and pleading with him. “She’s already started transforming somehow. Please, go right now and use Excalibur to save her.”

“Don’t panic. We’re well aware of the situation. Carol Middleton is an important asset to the United Kingdom. Excalibur will be transferred to a new British staff member, and she’ll be treated with the greatest urgency. We’ve used this skill for centuries—we are, of course, well versed in it.”

“Good...” I felt so relieved that I lay back on the sofa, relaxing. “So...it’s already resolved. Ha ha... I was worried for a while there. You could’ve told me the good news first.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to reveal my true identity when you first walked in.” Higaya walked over to me again, sitting on the sofa opposite mine. “But I must

say...the way you've conducted yourself throughout this incident has been marvelous. We'd like to make use of you, if possible. You intend to start an adventuring business using that Skillbook of yours, don't you?"

"Huh? Uh, well, yes..."

"Our chairman would like to speak to you directly about the topic. Once matters calm down, we'll pass you a message through Carol Middleton. Please do take the time to meet the chairman."

"S-seriously...? Ha ha...great. It's over..."

The moment I let those words of complete relief escape my lips, the door to the company president's office was flung open.

"Company President! We have a problem!"

It was the nervous-looking secretary I'd seen on my way in. She was panting heavily, her shoulders heaving and her mouth wide.

"What is it? What on earth is going on?" asked Higaya.

"S-Senior Managing Director Uemura! He's escaped!"

"Huh?"

"Eh...?"

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I was rattled and rocked inside a claustrophobic instrument case until finally the box opened to the world. My eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, and the light outside stung when it hit me. A man stood before me; he had blue eyes and blond hair, like some actor straight out of Hollywood. He smiled at me and helped me out of the case.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Uemura. I'm Wallace...Wallace Chandler. Man, you're sure a lucky guy." said Wallace, punching me in the shoulder. The pain ran straight into my right arm, and I felt a sharp twinge in the stump where it had been severed.

"Ouch!"

"Oh, sorry about that. You lost an arm, eh? Ha ha ha!"

After his guffaw, we started to walk. Wallace peered over at me as we went.

“This went without a hitch. I bet those guys thought they had us totally tricked. Looks like we’re the ones stealing from them now, eh?”

“R-right...” Through the haze of my painkillers, I somehow lifted my head and kept up as I walked beside him.

*I had no idea what was going on when they smuggled me out of that hospital room into the protection of the company president’s men...until the CIA revealed everything. They said that I was just the company president’s pawn—that he had connections to the U.S., and that when he was done with me, I’d be sent to the U.K. to be disposed of. That was when this man from the CIA, Wallace, helped me escape.*

“But, hey, you’re safe now. Relax,” Wallace said as he strode ahead of me.

I’d been flown to New York City, and was in the process of being brought to a building in an unknown location. Every precaution was being taken to ensure that my whereabouts wouldn’t be discovered, so I was blindfolded in the car and had no idea where the hell I was. I only took the blindfold off when we arrived in an underground parking lot. They guided me into a building, then an elevator, then down a hallway.

“What is this place?” I asked.

The painkillers were wearing off, and the impact of every step on the hard floor sent pangs shooting into my upper right arm.

“I can’t tell you that yet. We never know where the information might leak.”

“How long will I be here?”

“What do you mean?” asked Wallace.

“When can I leave?”

“When all your concealment tasks are completed. Next, we’ll do what we can for your arm injury, then have you undergo plastic surgery,” Wallace explained as his shoes tapped the floor of the windowless hallway. “We’ll give you a false identity here too. You’ll live as an American citizen. Your cover story will be that you have a position at Lehman Brothers using Skillworm to help the United

States. You're on board with all that, aren't you?"

"Doesn't sound like I have any other choice."

"Don't be like that, Mr. Uemura."

As we walked, Wallace took his phone out of his pocket and checked a text message. I glanced at the screen, but the privacy filter was so dark that I couldn't make anything out.

*Even if I could, it'd all be in English anyway. Wallace only sounds like he's speaking Japanese with me because of that Translate skill, or whatever it's called.*

"Well, everything worked out for the best, at any rate. At first, we thought our whole plan had failed, so we're grateful you turned out to be so talented. The situation got so bad that even our Philadelphia unit was wiped out, but you managed to escape Mizuki and Carol, the enemy's elites. You even outsmarted Higaya to make it this far."

"It was all because of your guidance," I replied.

Wallace shook his head. "Don't be so modest. In situations like these, it's important to have people like you who can turn the tables and get results. Be it pure talent or just luck, we're happy to have your talents, and your Skillworm too. We want you to work for us—put that secret skill to good use serving the United States of America."

"S-sure..." I was a little overwhelmed by Wallace, but hardly upset by the compliments.

*This really has been challenging, though. I never expected to be thrown right into the middle of some action movie and end up an exile. But depending how you look at it, this might even be a promotion of sorts. If the price of a new position at Lehman Brothers, connections to U.S. intelligence agencies, and a whole new life was my right arm... To be honest, I'm not sure whether it's been worth it, but I'm glad to have the benefits regardless. Managed to get one over on Mizuki Ryosuke while I was at it, I suppose.*

As we walked in silence, I felt some something strange bubble up inside me.

*That damn Mizuki Ryosuke made a fool of me...stepped all over me. I'm going to need to do something about him—I can't let this stand. I need to get my revenge...make him rue the day he crossed me. It appears the Americans have been after him too. If they put me on that project, I'll do everything in Excalibur's power to help get him.*

"All right, this is you," said Wallace.

He opened the door at the end of the hallway. I was guided into what looked like a small hotel room with all the everyday necessities laid out.

"Once your injury heals a little, we'll send you straight into plastic surgery. Sorry for the inconvenience, but you'll live here in hiding for the time being. You good with that?"

"Sure... Understood."

"All right, then. I need to get going—do you need anything?"

"Uh...wait a minute," I called as Wallace made to leave. "Could I get a phone? I don't have mine with me."

Wallace raised his eyebrows. "Unfortunately you won't be allowed access to the internet, Mr. Uemura. I can't give you a PC either. MI6 are desperate to find you, and we can't afford to give them any hint regarding your whereabouts."

"Right... I understand."

"Come on. Just a little patience, that's all we ask. There are books and DVDs in this room—you won't be bored."

"Ah, I see..."

I felt my stamina start to reach its limit. After the amputation, the ride to the hospital, and the flight to the U.S., all the hours I'd spent being moved from place to place were finally catching up with me. I started feeling dizzy and sluggish, like I'd caught a bad flu; I just wanted to lie down.

"There's a refrigerator, too. That huge one over there. First time seeing an American-sized fridge, eh? It's stocked full. Eat whatever you want."

"S-sure... Thanks."

“Why don’t you take a look inside? I’ll have my men get whatever else you need. Pining for some Japanese sushi, eh?”

“Right, thanks... I’ll check that out later. I’m just going to lie down first.”

“Mr. Uemura.” Wallace grinned. “I agree you need sleep, but first you *should* eat something. You need nutrients. They’ll help you heal faster.”

“Y-yeah...” *He might be right about that. I just want to take some meds and lie down in the dark, but I’m also pretty hungry.*

Deciding to force myself to eat something, I went to the refrigerator. I placed my left hand on the handle of the massive door and opened it. It was completely empty.

“Huh?”

I felt a sudden impact, like an iron ball driving into the back of my head. Immediately after the impact came the dull pop of an explosion.

*Thud.*

Whatever just hit the back of my skull had gone straight through and burst out my forehead. Red fragments of something splattered the empty refrigerator, sticking to its interior. All the strength left my body in an instant. Like a marionette whose strings had been cut, I collapsed to the floor.

I felt several more shots of *something* enter my body as I lay face down on the carpet.

*Thud. Thud. Thud.*

It was probably—most definitely—gunfire. I couldn’t move my body—not even my eyes. I was clearly at death’s door and couldn’t even raise my voice to speak.

“Ah—Chief? Yeah, it’s me.” I heard Wallace’s voice, though I couldn’t see him. He seemed to be on the phone. “Mr. Uemura’s dead. We’ll wait for Excalibur to drop.”

The door opened, and I heard a flurry of footsteps running in. In my hazy semiconsciousness, I couldn’t move my neck or even eyes to look at what was happening.



“Right, right. Yeah, with this many of us in the room, I’m sure the skill will enter someone.” Wallace sounded cheerful. “After all, unique skills tend to avoid those who already have a unique skill. Excalibur senses they’re already full, I guess. I’ve got one, so I don’t think it’ll be me. Right—anyway, should happen any second.”

I felt strength slowly slip away from my body. I was certain that my consciousness was fading—that I only had ten seconds left before I was gone. I wasn’t in pain; I just couldn’t move. Blood poured from my frame. I knew there were holes in me, and I could tell my skull was fractured.

*If I let go of my consciousness now, I’m sure I’ll die.*

I felt like they’d gotten me so drunk I couldn’t move a finger, then shoved me into a car rolling toward a cliff. I knew I’d die once I reached the cliff edge, but I couldn’t move, so I couldn’t do anything. It was like a nightmare in which I was about to be killed. The whole experience wasn’t scary as much as deeply unpleasant.

*Ah...so this is how it ends. I don’t want to die...I don’t want to die.*

Even my desperate wishes to live seemed to disappear into nothingness. It felt as though I couldn’t get my eyes to focus on anything without really concentrating...as though my desire to hold on was just sinking beneath the waves. That was what death felt like.

Suddenly...I heard a faint electronic sound from within myself.

*⟨Tutorial completion detected.⟩*

*⟨Ending tutorial.⟩*

“Ain’t coming out, eh? Hey, one of you go stomp on his head. We’ll have to crack this dude’s skull.”

A foot came down on my head with a crack. It wasn’t painful, but I still sensed the dull impact, like getting punched underwater. My consciousness was so fuzzy that I didn’t even know how to feel about what was happening.

*⟨Transitioning to full control. Please wait.⟩*

A voice sighed. “Hey, you gotta stamp harder than that. Someone lend me a

gun. Or put a gun in his mouth and finish this.”

⟨*Disabling all limits. Please wait.*⟩

Somebody lifted my head and put a gun barrel in my mouth, but the AI assistant-like voice continued in my head.

***Connect to Skillworm’s full control?***

***Warning: this action cannot be undone.***

***Yes / No***

“Okay. Shoot.”

***Transition to full control complete.***

***Limits have been disabled.***

***User recognized: Uemura Atsumi.***

***Thank you.***

The moment I heard the last two words, an unusual sensation seized my whole body. It felt like things were being pulled out, swelling, and reforming. It was as if my stomach had puffed up like a balloon internally, and a team of little builders had started an urgent construction project in there. It was difficult to explain—to understand—like I might’ve experienced something similar in a dream once, and was finally having it happen for real. But, since I couldn’t remember *what* exactly had happened in that dream, the present sensations were completely incomprehensible.

Suddenly I was standing—no, floating—and looking down on the men around me, who in turn gazed up at me in disbelief.

I had no idea what was happening or what this meant, but I didn’t feel bad about any of it. A sudden confidence welled up within me—a belief that nothing

could ever hurt me again.

A thought popped into my head: *I wonder if this is how the gods feel.*

“It seems we’ve made a mistake,” mumbled Wallace.

## 2

**T**IMES SQUARE HAD BEEN COMPLETELY ANNIHILATED in Midtown Manhattan, New York. I saw the news on my flight back to Hokkaido. That intersection was known around the world, and was home to famous businesses like the New York Times.

A huge dungeon had suddenly emerged from the ground there. The formation centered on the Times Square Building in which Lehman Brothers was headquartered, spreading across the whole area’s architecture and infrastructure. How many were dead wasn’t yet known. The U.S. Air Force was moving in to investigate.

*More on this story—the U.S. government has named this new location the Times Square Dungeon. Land and air forces have dispatched to the location.*

*This just in—there’s been a major security breach in New York City. Computers across the area are being unlocked, and it’s believed that the largest leak of personal information in history is underway. The number of hacked terminals continues to rise.*

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For the time being, I headed home.

The apartment I lived in had turned into less a rental property and more a base of operations. The stage had been left basically as it was constructed, and the whole interior was in such chaos that it looked like a warzone immediately after a ceasefire was approved. That said, we hardly had the time or willpower to do any cleaning—we were all physically and mentally beyond that.

When I walked in, I saw Carol under my futon’s covers, REA members tending her. Shinobu sat at the living room table, tapping away at her laptop as she

handled all kinds of preparations. At Carol's side, Kevin stood and locked eyes with me.

"Kevin," I said, bringing him close to keep her from hearing us. "How is she?"

"Not good," he told me in English.

"I see."

Carol seemed to notice I'd returned. She slowly tried to sit up in bed, but I stopped her. "Wait. You don't need to get up."

"Mizuki... I-it's Mizuki. Did everything go okay?" she asked.

"I'm more worried about whether *you're* okay." I crouched by her side.

Carol was paler than when I'd left and visibly out of breath. She was in much worse condition than I expected. It was as if her usual vigor had drained right out of her; she looked dried up and weak.

"How are you? How far has it spread?"

"I haven't looked... I'm too scared to."

Carol took off her top, and I reexamined her back. The blue bruising had spread to both her shoulders and reached the base of her arms. It was much worse than when I'd last looked. Pulling her sweatpants down a little, I saw that the bruise had spread to her butt.

What was more concerning was the way the transformation had continued in my absence. Almost all the skin in that area had flaked off; her back was now the hard, red-green carapace of a different creature entirely. It looked as if a new lifeform would emerge from her back at any moment.

"How does it look, Mizuki...?" There was pain in Carol's voice.

I wasn't sure how to answer her. "To be honest... It's spread pretty far."

"How long do you think I have?"

"At this rate... I don't know." *Until this becomes irreversible... A day? Two?* I decided against speaking my mind and swallowed my gut reaction. "I just know you don't have long."

"Right..."

“Rest for now. You’ll be okay. I’ll find a way.”

Leaving Carol resting in the care of REA, I went to the living room table, where Shinobu was still typing on her laptop.

“What’s happening, Shinobu?”

“What *isn’t* happening? This is a disaster.” She took off her headphones and showed me the screen.

*Global Internet Collapse.* That was the headline of a news article on her browser tab.

“Crashes and personal data leaks are happening on a ridiculous scale, all centering on the new Times Square Dungeon,” she explained. “Almost half of North America’s lost internet access, and every state secret and credit card number is flooding onto the rest of the web.”

“Show me.”

As Shinobu clicked through news articles, I stared at the screen with a hard expression.

*I left Tokyo with an agreement in place to cooperate with Higaya after the two of us learned that Uemura had disappeared. I’ll operate on my own, and Higaya will use his connections to the mysterious history-altering Round Table organization... But, well, the emergence of the largest dungeon in human history in Times Square changes everything.*

“Strange radio waves are coming out of the dungeon, unlocking the security of every PC in the States. It seems like they pluck everything out of your machine unless you unplug, power down, and take your data completely offline. Everything online has gone down. Amazon Web Services is down, and it’s taken all kinds of other sites with it. Most cashless payment systems are out of order.”

“When I checked the news, it was still just talking about the New York area.”

“It’s spread at a crazy pace. Quick calculations say this thing could hit the whole world in just two days. Seriously, the whole internet’s collapsing. Modern civilization is done for.”

As Shinobu spoke, I heard the “thunk” of my door opening. It was Tachibana-san, who’d been out shopping when I arrived.

“Mizuki-san! You’re home!” She put down her bags and looked at me, then looked at the phone in her trembling hand. “A-ahem...something t-terrible has happened!”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I don’t mean the dungeon! Look at this!” she cried.

She showed me her phone’s YouTube trending page. Strange videos with jet-black thumbnails filled it from top to bottom.

“Huh...?”

“What’s that...?”

### **Trending No. 1**

(shocking) Senior Managing Director Uemura set up by U.K./U.S. spies (slow explanation)

### **Trending No. 2**

(best ep ever) actually wasn’t his fault! Why Senior Managing Director Uemura did nothing wrong

### **Trending No. 3**

I tried listing everything Mizuki Ryosuke did wrong, then THIS happened! lololololol

### **Trending No. 4**

(Human Nuke) explore scumbag Mizuki Ryosuke’s shocking past (Human Trash)

“These videos are flooding YouTube...” Tachibana-san swiped to show me how the list went all the way down.

It looked as if everything on the trending tab was either support of Uemura,

or some attempt to slander me. It was the weirdest I'd ever seen the website—as if every YourTuber in the world had suddenly made a video on the exact same subject, and everything unrelated to Uemura and me was shut out.

“What the heck are these...?” At first, all I could manage was those five shaken words, given how incomprehensible the situation was.

“They're all just white text captions on a black background...” said Tachibana.

“Whoa... You're in every spot on Tmitter's global trends too,” mumbled Shinobu, checking her phone. “From the first to tenth spot, every single one is about you and Uemura.”

“How come?”

“There are thousands of posts from all these mysterious users. Then those posts get talked about, and it's a chain reaction. Seems like the mods can't keep up with it.”

“What's going on?” I took out my phone and called my newest contact. I wasn't sure whether he'd answer, but he picked up after two rings. “Hey. Is that you, President Higaya?”

“Mizuki-kun. I knew you'd call. Have you seen YourTube and Tmitter?”

“Uh...” I held my head in my hands, unsure where to start. “There's just so much about this situation I don't understand. What's going on?”

“This is likely Skillworm's doing,” said Higaya on the other end of the line. “The skill has awoken, and it's causing an information disaster on a global scale. That Times Square Dungeon is the eye of the storm... The epicenter of the infinite information-tampering typhoon spreading across the world.”

“It's awoken...?”

“Your Skillbook awoke too, right? You should know what I'm talking about.”

I froze for a moment. *I directly connected with Skillbook right before it transferred full control to me, unlocking its out-of-this-world, literally explosive power and versatility. If that same process happened with Excalibur...with Skillworm, then...*

“Skillworm has recognized Uemura as its true owner, and he's letting its real

power run wild,” Higaya continued.

“Has this ever happened before?” I asked.

“It’s said the skill’s first wielder, King Arthur, also entered the awakened state. The legends told of him, and the spectacular tales of his knights and the wizard Merlin... Current speculation is that all those stories come from the rewriting of history on a national scale, an informational disaster resulting from Arthur awakening Excalibur.”

“What about the Times Square Dungeon, then? Did Skillworm do that, too?”

“We have no confirmation that Skillworm has such an ability... But I do have a theory.”

“What is it?”

For a few moments, Higaya was silent, as if thinking about something. “It’s likely that Uemura was either tortured or outright assassinated upon arriving in the U.S. The CIA’s goal was always to acquire the skill, not Uemura himself, so they must’ve tried to eliminate him to take it by force. Then, to protect its wielder, Uemura, from his extreme state of distress, Skillworm likely awakened...or went on a rampage to safeguard him.”

“What does that have to do with the dungeon?”

“Well, to protect its wielder from the outside world, Skillworm could’ve tampered with reality to create a huge dungeon disaster in the surrounding area. No country’s military reach would extend fully into such a dungeon, so it might be a legitimate attempt to pull Uemura in and shield him from harm.”

“So what do we do now?” I asked.

“I don’t know, exactly... But I know some mistake has caused Skillworm to acknowledge Uemura as its true wielder.” Higaya paused for a moment before continuing. “I expect this information disaster will continue to spread. Uemura and Skillworm are completely bound together, and it’s trying to fulfill all his desires. If Skillworm has him safe deep inside that dungeon in Times Square, it might now try to achieve more of his social goals. You’ve seen all those odd videos and social media posts, haven’t you?”



*He's talking about YouTube and Tmitter... They've been completely hijacked and filled with mysterious text videos.*

"It's trying to tamper with this whole world to make it safer for Uemura. Once this is over, there won't be anyone left who wants to criticize him or do him harm, and there won't be any inconvenient evidence. All we'll have is an infinite amount of 'proof' that supports him—his ideal world."

"That's so freakin' stupid," I blurted out, unable to hold it back any longer.

"The information currently in Skillworm's crosshairs is just what's available on networks... Soon, that'll spread to historical records, books, articles, and video recordings too. Everything will be rewritten in whatever way's most convenient to Uemura's worldview."

"Then what do we do? How do we stop him?" I asked again. "Honestly, I don't really care about the world or what happens to it... But I care about Carol, and I need Excalibur to help her."

"We've got our members working on a solution for that as well. We'll use everything at our disposal, so please be ready to go at a moment's notice. We need you on standby."

"Understood."

With that, Higaya hung up.

"Damn it..." I dropped the phone and cradled my head in my hands.

"So...what are we doing now?" asked Tachibana-san hesitantly. She'd listened to the call.

*I can't find the words to answer her at the moment. Is this even something we can do anything about? Everything is so chaotic and confusing that cradling my head might be the most productive thing to do right now.*

*Excalibur—Skillworm, the U.K., the U.S., Showa Securities, the mysterious Round Table organization that alters history...and now a disaster unfolding across the globe that I just know will make it into the textbooks. This whole thing's a disaster—how am I supposed to fix it?*

*Well, even if I can't see the path ahead, it's pretty clear what I have to do*

*next...unfortunately.*

“We’re targetting Uemura,” I managed to say. “We have to take back Skillworm.”

## Chapter 6:

### What—You Like Barbecues or Something?!

# 1

**N**EWs CONTINUED TO STREAM IN ABOUT THE dungeon in New York. “Expert opinion is that strange radio waves emanating from the Times Square Dungeon may affect any and all information within their range...”

Anyone who saw the newscaster’s panic would assume their nation was at war. *In some ways, this might be even worse.*

Commercial news networks did their best to relay reports about the radio waves, but were ultimately unable to keep up with the worsening situation’s breakneck pace. We had to rely on the internet to get the latest news in a timely manner.

“This just in.” A broadcaster cleared their throat. “It has been discovered that the famous Bible verse ‘He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her,’ has apparently been altered to read ‘He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at Senior Managing Director Uemura.’ Ahem... What exactly is happening?”

“Whoa. So like, this is how the world’s gonna end, huh?” mumbled Shinobu, watching TV in my living room and munching on a rice cracker.

We were all still in my apartment, or rather, in our base of operations. Nobody seemed to want to go home given the mayhem, so we’d bought a bunch of food and snacks, carried it here, and settled in for the long haul.

“I sure hope *this* isn’t how the world ends.”

“Anyway, Zukky-san!” cried Kessie. She was lying around eating rice crackers with Shinobu, watching daytime TV talk shows like a middle-aged housewife. “How are we going to beat this Skillworm thing, exactly?”

“I’m still working on that,” I answered. I balled up another piece of paper on

which I'd tried (and failed) to organize my thoughts, throwing it in the trash.

"Have you come up with anything?"

"Nothing. We stay here and get ready to move as soon as Higaya gives the order."

"I suppose you could come up with an idea. Still, this really looks set to be an acrobatic adventure straight out of some spy thriller, doesn't it?!"

"It can be acrobatic, magical, miraculous—I don't care. I just want it to work... Eh?"

I noticed a bunch of messages coming into my phone. It was still buzzing and vibrating as I picked it up, a cascading stream of notifications appearing on the lock screen.

"Hm...?"

I unlocked my phone to find thousands and thousands of Facepage notifications, mostly informing me that I had countless new messages and followers. I didn't know any of the people, and most of the messages were in English, so I couldn't even read them.

"What're all these...? Can someone translate for me?"

I had one of the REA members tending to Carol read me the messages. "Huh? Let's see... 'Mizuki Ryosuke, you're in the wrong.' 'Screw you. Apologize to Senior Managing Director Uemura.' 'We'll never forget what you did, scumbag.' 'Turn yourself in immediately.'" His face grew more intense with each sentence he read aloud. "What is all this? What the heck did you do, Mizuki?"

"I haven't done anything!"

"But why would people flame you like this over nothing?"

"That's just how flaming works."

"M-Mizuki-san?" Tachibana-san hesitantly called my name next, reading the news on her phone as she sat next to me. "Ahem...things appear to be getting even *worse*!"

"At this point, I'd be more surprised if something *wasn't* getting worse," I

replied.

“Just look, please! This is a whole new level of messed up!” She showed me her phone.

*BBC News. American White supremacist organizations including the KKK have issued a statement on the Mizuki Ryosuke situation. This statement declares him the cause of all recent global chaos and states that killing him will avert the end of the world. Similar sentiments are echoing across the west coast of the United States, and the hashtags #KillMizuki and #HateMizuki have been used by tens of thousands of users online.*

“Huh...?” I blurted, completely unable to understand the outrageous article I was reading.

“What do you think this is...? Aren’t you scared?”

“Of course I’m scared.” *What’s going on?*

*I mean, I understand that following major attacks like 9/11, with all the unfortunate uncertainty in society, really weird theories and groups can pop up. That’s been true throughout human history, so it’s sort of to be expected.*

*At the same time, whenever people get caught in massive incidents they can’t even begin to comprehend, there’s a tendency to find someone to blame for the time being. They get everyone together to go beat up the scapegoat. That’s one of those “history repeats itself” things too. It’s a behavioral thing, so I get that.*

*But why are they targeting me? Why is this all focused in my direction?*

*I can’t help but remember this one TV show I saw. One where they pranked people on camera and shamelessly laughed about it in the studio. It was ridiculous and all over the place, low-budget broadcasting. I mean, it was so obvious to the people getting pranked that they were on some TV show. But maybe feeling bad for the staff and everyone else involved, not wanting to spoil the fun, they just sort of went with it and pretended not to notice. Then, in the studio, they sat back and enjoyed watching the videos play out like real professional comedians. It always made me feel a strange mix of sadness, admiration, and a complicated respect and disappointment for everyone involved.*

*But hey, this isn't some prank show, is it?*

"Gah. All kinds of similar news stories are popping up."

"It says here that a Middle Eastern country has placed a bounty on Mizuki-san's head..."

"Whoa, you're really popular, Zukky-san!" declared Kessie. It wasn't clear that she really understood what "bounty" meant.

In any case, I was the subject of a mysterious global hate campaign that was only intensifying, despised by the world over nothing at all.

As I searched through the scathing articles, my apartment's front door suddenly swung open. It was my foreign neighbor, Heath. He stormed through the door and yelled at me.

"Hey, Mizuki! This is real bad!"

"What's the matter, Heath?!" I exclaimed.

"Trouble, that's what! Listen up, won't you?"

*Get my attention when something isn't causing problems, won't you?*

Heath showed absolutely no interest in how crowded and messy my room was. He marched from the door straight over to me and sat down with a thud.

"Mizuki, I didn't even touch my PC—it just broke. Again."

"What? *Again?*"

"I only just bought myself a new one. Will you fix it for me?"

"I told you this last time, but they don't just break on their own."

"I *really* didn't do anything this time."

"I'm telling you..." I started, but stopped myself before frustration took over. *Come to think of it, I'm not doing anything at all right now, and the whole world is still just attacking me.* "Hey...you might be on to something this time."

"I know, right?" Heath grinned and leaned toward me.

*Does he just have no concept of personal space?*

"Hey Mizuki, you see the news?"

“On TV, yeah,” I answered.

Heath’s grin widened, though I had no idea what he was so happy about. “I didn’t even touch it, and the whole world’s broken. This is it, eh? Doesn’t seem like we’re going to get a happy ending.” He smiled even wider, then asked in a near-whisper, “Need my help?”

“I need all the help I can get,” I admitted.

“All right, then. I’ll give you a hand.”

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Heath brought over Matilda-san from next door, and I explained the current situation to the pair.

When I was done, Heath nodded. “Hmph. Seems like ‘mental pollution’ is spreading far and wide, eh?”

“Mm-hmm... I’ve never seen it happen on this scale before, Heath.”

“It’s not hypnosis. Someone’s tampering with their minds, I suppose.”

“We should’ve expected as much from a Regalia.”

“Yeah. That Skillworm really is one, then.”

I listened to Heath and Matilda-san talk as they picked at the snacks I always had out for Kessie, munching away. “Hey, you two.”

They looked at me.

“What?”

“Is something wrong?”

“Well... I have so many questions, but first... What’s a Regalia?”

“There’s always one in every world,” Heath answered. “Most are sword-shaped, but not the ones in our world and the world we last came from. They were called Skillgram and Skillbox, something like that. At any rate, neither exists anymore. Anyway, that’s what Regalia are.”

“Huh? R-right...”

“They’re the most powerful skills in a world. I suppose I should call them the

embodiments of worlds themselves.”

I wasn’t keeping up with what Heath said, but Matilda-san nodded in agreement. “Skillworm can turn things into information and then tamper with them. That ability to *tamper* is the main element, though. All these changes to reality you see are just byproducts of that, right?”

“Probably, yeah,” said Heath. “I think that’s the gist of it.”

“It seems like information on living beings is being tampered with, so I expect this reality will continue to change... This world’s whole ecosystem is going to be completely different soon, I imagine.”

“Hmph. You’re right. I suppose the whole ecosystem of this place is going to change, and it’ll be based on the core tenet that this ‘Senior Managing Director Uemura’ guy didn’t do anything wrong. It might end up tampering with all life’s fundamental instinct to reproduce—make every living thing start thinking its innate purpose is to defend Uemura. This place might turn into another world entirely.”

*I don’t ever want to get catapulted into another world where everyone’s got Uemura’s back.* “All right, I feel like I get it. How do you know all this?”

“What do you mean?”

“How do you know about these Regalia things?” I asked again.

Heath put a hand on his chin and raised his head to look at me. “I’d struggle to explain all that to you in a single day, so I’ll be brief. We came to this world to search for it.”

“What?”

“Didn’t I tell you I’m an outcast?”

“So you’re from another *world*?” I asked.

“Do I really need to spell that out for you?”

We glared at each other for a few seconds.

*This guy... He’s registering way beyond my tolerance for weirdness.* “Well, to be honest, I *did* have my suspicions,” I said finally.



“I knew it.”

Under normal circumstances, I would’ve wanted to slowly explore this shocking new piece of information over the course of a whole day, asking every question under the sun. Unfortunately, I had to consider the couple next door revealing themselves as otherworlders fairly low on my list of priorities, given all the insanity going on in this world.

I decided to press on with the issue at hand. *Come to think of it, I’ve been living with an otherworlder this whole time—Kessie. So who really cares if my neighbors are also from another world? Well, I do care...but I’ll let it slide for Carol’s sake.*

“So... Given how much you know about other worlds, how would you fix this situation, Heath?” I asked.

“You just have to kill the main body,” he answered simply. “It’s clearly this Uemura guy’s consciousness causing all the alterations to reality. If you can separate that from Skillworm, all the big changes should stop for the time being.”

“I know that. The problem is how we beat him,” I replied.

The news began an urgent report. The TV had been on this whole time, of course, showing breaking news and follow-up reporting—it was just that something came on that caught my attention.

“We now bring you an urgent report. Nations from across the globe have dispatched their elite adventurers to the Times Square Dungeon, but an emergency meeting of world leaders is convening first to discuss whether Senior Managing Director Uemura really did anything wrong... Ahem. Ex-excuse me, is this the correct report? Ah, right...”

I watched the confusing report with a grim, pained expression.

Heath, on the other hand, looked to be genuinely enjoying the state of affairs. “The mental pollution is spreading rapidly,” he laughed. “This is getting worse and worse by the second!”

“It’s just a matter of time before the world’s governments cease to function, I suppose,” Matilda-san mumbled, sipping the coffee I’d made her.

“Tmitter trends in Japan have started too, centering on Tokyo. The ‘KillMizuki’ hashtag is in the top ten,” said Tachibana-san, trembling as she devoured news on her phone.

“Mizuki, what’d you do to this Uemura guy? He sure seems to hate you.”

“Well, I can think of a few things...” *Given our history, I have to admit to having a fair idea of why he might want me dead.*

“Uemura’s desires to protect himself and see you dead are evidently running parallel with this changing-reality stuff. He’s using Skillworm to continually send waves of Mizuki-hate across the world.”

It seemed I’d unexpectedly found myself hunted by everyone on the globe.

“Ah—I’ll use my anti-Charms skills,” Tachibana-san volunteered.

“Thanks, Tachibana-san.”

“No problem. I was wondering why I’d started to feel oddly irritated every time I looked at your face.”

“Seriously?”

Tachibana-san sprinkled anti-Charms skill around, and I cradled my head once more.

“Uh... So like... What do we do...?”

I was starting to feel less like I couldn’t deal with what was happening, and more like all this was overkill.

*I mean, it’s all well and good for me to shout about bringing down Uemura and saving Carol. But on a practical level, I have no idea how to make that happen... Not to mention I’m right in the middle of a storm of global hate, my phone blowing up with invectives every damn second. And this incomprehensible mental pollution just keeps spreading across the world... To be honest, I’d rather just focus all my energy on hiding right now than run around outside and get myself caught.*

*Isn’t this way too much...?*

“A-are you okay, Zukky-san...?” Kessie asked, seeing how far I’d sunk into the

depths of despair.

Suddenly, I heard the window smash.

“Gah!”

“Wha—?!”

Still in shock at the sound, I saw the rock roll across my living room floor. Before I could process that first rock’s appearance, a second came soaring through the window.

*Smash! Smash!*

“Wh-what’s happening?! Hey!”

“What is this?! An enemy attack?!” Carol shouted amid the chaos, sitting up and drawing her sword from under her pillow.

“What’s going on out there...?!”

I carefully made my way to the window. When I peeked outside, I couldn’t believe my eyes for a moment. A crowd of people had gathered in front of my apartment, glaring up at the window of my room with hatred in their eyes. Every last one was armed with weapons and rocks.

“It’s Mizuki Ryosuke! Surrender and come outside!”

“This is all your fault, isn’t it?!”

“I read about it on the internet!”

“You set Senior Managing Director Uemura up!”

I only got a brief glimpse of their faces from the window, but their anger was real—they looked as if they’d half lost control of their reason. The crowd of extreme haters looked straight out of a zombie movie; they seemed more than violent and furious enough.

“They’re in the room! That’s Mizuki Ryosuke!”

“Get out here, Mizuki! You’ve been awful to Senior Managing Director Uemura!”

“If you ain’t coming out, then we’re going in!”

“Come on, guys, let’s go!”

Screaming, the mob rushed my building’s staircase. I turned toward my door and saw Tachibana-san just barely click its lock before the crowd reached the entrance.

“O-oh no! Oh no! This is terrible!” Tachibana-san pressed all her weight against the door, preparing to hold it shut.

Shinobu closed her laptop, folded it under her arm, and turned to me. “Wh-what do we do now?! They’re totally here to kill you, Mizuki-san!”

“H-huh...?” I couldn’t really form a concrete answer to her pressing inquiry. Instead, I went pale at how real everything was getting, head in my hands. “What’s happening...? Is this a nightmare?” I mumbled to myself.

I heard enraged screams against me; fists loudly pounded the door. With a flurry of punches, kicks, and everything in between, the mob tried to force their way in.

“Waah! This is bad! They’re trying to tear down the door!” Tachibana-san wailed, attempting to hold it.

Kessie was beside her, giving her full support—though it looked like the fairy was literally no assistance whatsoever. “Hyaaaah! What do we do?!”

My mind completely short-circuited as I stared blankly around the apartment. “Um...”

“Mizuki!” It was Carol, crawling out of my futon with her sword in hand. She grabbed my shoulders and brought her pale face up to mine. “You have to run! Get out of here!”

“Run where?!” I yelled back. “Everyone in the world might be like this now! If they get too close, I may have to fight them!”

“Cross that bridge when you come to it! For now, you just need to go!”

“Ahhh! You’ve got to be kidding me! Gah!”

I felt a strong thump on my shoulder and turned to see Heath standing over me. Despite everything going on, he was still smiling like this was funny to him. He looked like a high schooler watching a friend engage in his latest love affair,

grinning a “there he goes again” kind of smile.

*If he thinks this is fun, what doesn't he find entertaining?*

“My, my. Gotten yourself in quite the bind, eh?”

“Do you even need to ask?”

“Having a bit of trouble, are you?”

“Do you *seriously* need me to tell you that?” I answered, getting annoyed.

“Tsk, tsk. Maybe you think you're the unluckiest person in the world right now. Hey, I guess anyone in your situation would curse their awful luck.”

“What are you getting at?” I asked.

“Honestly, I think you're the luckiest guy I know.”

“I don't have the time to play along with your philosophical talk.”

Heath grinned at me and came closer. “I told you, didn't I? I said I'd rescue you even if the whole world turned against you.”

“You did,” I said. “I remember.”

“How about I make good on that promise? I'll do something about the crowd outside so you can run to your car or whatever and get out of here. You won't owe me a thing—this is just me paying you back for the ten thousand yen.”

## 2

**T**HE EXACT MOMENT WE FINISHED PREPARING TO face the hateful mob—whom I'd done nothing to upset—just happened to be when they forced their way through the door.

They flooded in like a zombie horde, but a sudden gust of wind immediately blew them backward.

“Mizuki Ryosuke... Eeeeh?!”

“Huh?! Gaaaaah!”

A group of the attackers jostled in the entrance, falling over themselves as Heath and Matilda-san slowly advanced down the hallway on them.

“Hello, hello, everyone! Unfortunately, you can’t get through this way!”

“Ahem! Everybody! Calm down, if you would!”

The mindless mob was never going to listen to reason, of course, and the pair began responding to the unhearing mass with a much more immediately effective tactic—violence.

“Gah! Hey, hey, cool it. I told you to cool it!”

“Heath, if you punch them like that, you’re going to kill them! It’ll crush their skulls and much else besides. Hyaaaah! Take that!”

As Heath and Matilda-san’s fists and staff struck down and repelled the mentally polluted locals, we escaped out the back window. With REA members protecting us, I packed Carol, Shinobu, and Tachibana-san into my beloved car and hit the gas. The engine roared to life and the tires spun as I sped away.

I jerked the steering wheel all the way to the right, only just preventing myself from ramming the wall, then backed up to give myself clearance through the swarming, hateful mob.

Kevin and the rest of REA cheered us on.

“Go! Floor it, Mizuki!”

“Jesus!” one yelled in English.

“Take care of the boss for us!”

My hands shook as I gripped the wheel and accelerated again.

Once we were on the main road, I started to scream. “Damn it! What the hell is this nightmare?!”

“Mizuki-san! I got a message from Horinomiya-san! He’s asking if maybe you’re in the wrong!”

“Ignore it!”

“Whaaa—?! Mizuki-san, this isn’t good! Mobs are forming across the country! It’s all over the news!”

“Damn it!”

I just drove, still trying to kick my brain into gear.

*Where do I run? Hold on—I need to get to Uemura first to shut down the source of this insanity. But how do I stop him now? He’s in New York City...and troops from across the world are closing in on him!*

The red light in front of us seemed to mock our haste. I slammed on the brakes, but went way over the line and ended up in the middle of the crosswalk, too far right. I waited there in pathetic silence, palm sweat making my hands clammy on the wheel.

I took one hand off and roughed up my hair. “What do we do?! Damn it!”

“Mizuki, we’ll have to hijack a plane and fly it to New York. There’s no other way, is there?” asked Carol.

Kessie had been watching the news on her portable TV. She floated up, blocking my view through the windshield, to show me a broadcast of the Omori Dungeon. “Eyah! Z-Zukky-san! Look at this!”

I saw reporters dashing away from the scene, the camera running with them. After a while, they suddenly stopped, and the camera feed panned up to bring the dungeon into view in the distance. Then a newscaster holding a microphone appeared in the frame. The broadcast was so off-the-cuff that a number of news crew were visible onscreen who really shouldn’t have been; the hectic situation on the ground was immediately apparent.

“Hokkaido TV reporting! This is an emergency announcement!” the reporter exclaimed. She looked toward the dungeon, then back to camera. “The Omori Dungeon Management Facility has collapsed from inside... Wh-what’s that?! A dr-dragon! A white dragon is crawling from the wreckage!”

The massive dragon emerged from the dungeon, destroying the management facility as he lumbered out. His forelegs rubbed his tired eyes as he moved through the rubble. Then he jerked his head up to the sky, crying out so loudly that the news microphones caught every syllable.

*◁I have been awakened by the clamor of the outside world. It seems something quite bizarre is happening up here!◃*

The camera lens began to frost over, making the shot cloudy.

‹Where is Mizuki?› the dragon roared. ‹Where is Mizuki Ryosuke?!›

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Making a beeline for the dungeon management facility, we found that the area around the white dragon had transformed completely into a world of ice and snow. We raced through news trucks trying to snag exclusive footage of the creature from afar and pulled into the smooth, shiny new parking lot. The moment the car came to a stop, we jumped out.

“White Dragon-san!”

‹Oh, if it isn't Mizuki! It's been a while!›

As soon as the imposing, dignified white dragon saw me, his expression softened. His body was essentially that of an oversized, frankly *massive* white lizard, but he had surprisingly expressive facial features.

“It's really been too long!” I replied. “I mean it!”

‹Ah...I began to sense strange radio waves in my head some time ago. They awakened me. Have you fared well during my slumber?›

“Oh, well, actually, we've been having a little trouble, you know?!” I went ahead and explained roughly what had happened.

When I was done, he (?) nodded at me slowly. ‹Mm-hmm. I see, I see. Understood. That is a rather troublesome situation.›

“It really is!”

‹It also appears that these strange radio waves are attempting to steal the core information of living beings. If this continues...I believe every creature of this world less hardy and strong than I will turn into a completely incomprehensible mess.›

*The world's in danger. All kinds of lines have been crossed,* I thought. “Excuse me! White Dragon-san! May I ask for your help?”

‹Help?›

“Well, yeah! There's a lot we need help with! We really are in a tight spot. If



asking for your assistance isn't too much..."

The dragon leaned back, clearly not in favor of my proposal. *«Hmm... Well, I'd very much like to help you, of course, but...»*

"Please! This is a once-in-a-lifetime request!"

*«I don't feel like getting closer to those radio waves. I am a noble dragon, and ever so sensitive to those things, you see?»*

"C-could you perhaps make an exception? I'll do anything you ask!"

*«Hm? What was that, Mizuki? Anything?»* The white dragon shuffled toward me, leaning in until his huge nose was level with mine.

"Yes...o-of course! If you agree to help us, I'll do anything in return!"

*«Hmm, I see. All right, then...»* He slowly lifted his neck with a grandiose flourish, then roared the finest battle cry I'd ever heard him emit. *«I will take the many glimmering treasures and rare trinkets of this world! Provide me an offering!»*

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Thus, we visited Omori's shopping mall with the white dragon.

The goblin attack was still fresh in this place's memory. I was sure that the residents couldn't possibly have imagined that anything *surpassing* a goblin would show up on their doorstep quite so soon. *That is, nobody would expect a dragon straight out of some fantasy game to just arrive without warning at the mall.*

The world was in chaos, and while the shopping mall wasn't all that popular to begin with, the white dragon was enough to send everyone inside running in all directions—although we hadn't really done anything to intimidate them.

*All thanks to our dragon, I suppose. People die if you hit them with baseball bats, and you can destroy most physical obstacles by ramming a truck into them, or firing rocket launchers at them. It also turns out, in this world, you can overcome most problems if you show up with a huge dragon. You learn something new every day.*

For the time being, I left the job of keeping the white dragon in a good mood

to Tachibana-san.

*«Oh ho! Incredible! What's this? Tachibana, what's the name of this thing?!»*

*"Ahem... Well...we call that a solar clock radio! It uses the sun's energy!"*

*«Ho ho! The sun god incarnate, I see! This device operates on excess divine power! What an impressive object!»*

As Tachibana-san entertained the white dragon's keen interest in every Earth-made object imaginable, we scoured the shelves of the mall, which was currently having an enforced "Dragon Day, all items 100 percent off" sale. With the staff and other customers gone, there was nothing to stop us from doing whatever we wanted. We didn't have the time to pause and think about this anyway.

"Uh...puffer jackets, gloves... Ah, we need hats too!"

I was in the process of cramming all the winter gear I could find into my shopping cart, racing around stores and grabbing whatever I laid eyes on. The plan was to get on the white dragon's back and ride straight over the Pacific to New York City—and for that, we needed protection against the cold.

Once my cart was full of winter gear, I saw Shinobu racing her own cart toward me. It skidded to a stop before we collided.

"Mizuki-san! I got heat packs and an oil heater! A battery-powered one!"

"Good job! Buy some fuel too! Well, it's not like we'll *buy* it...but you know what I mean!"

"Gotcha!" Shinobu went to get a tank of oil.

As she left, Carol arrived pushing her own shopping cart, looking as pale as ever. "M-Mizuki... Will this tent be okay...?"

She'd gone to retrieve a tent to set up on the dragon's back. I knew that crossing the Pacific Ocean on a dragon could be like clinging to the top of a plane in mid-flight. My plan was to attach a tent to the dragon's back and have him harden it with ice to make it adhere, then use the tent walls to block at least some wind.

"Er...it's for four people! Okay! That'll do!"

“What else should I get?” she asked.

“Hmm, I don’t know... Just get anything you can think of! And if you’re feeling too sick for this, you can go rest, you know?”

“Mm, right... Oh, what about a barbecue set? Should we get one of those?”

“This isn’t a camping trip! It’s *way* too dangerous to have a barbecue on that dragon’s back, you hear me?!”

After a lot of fussing and rushing around, the white dragon decided to peruse the treasures of Earth alone, which freed up Tachibana-san to help gather provisions. I put her in charge of food.

In a little under an hour, our completely free “shopping spree” was over, and we reconvened to go over what we’d gathered. The leader of our debriefing wasn’t mentally and physically exhausted, currently metamorphosing Carol, nor constantly panicking Tachibana-san, but calm and collected Shinobu. She had nerves of steel, even during this whole dragon situation.

“Huh?! What’re all these, Tachibana-san?! How come you only got discount bento?!”

“Eh?! I shouldn’t have?!”

“They were all *100 percent* off!”

“Ah! You’re right! I’m sorry... Old habits!”

“I-I got meat, vegetables...” said Carol. “A barbecue...”

“I told you we can’t barbecue up there! What—you like barbecues or something?! Aren’t you British?!” I called down to her.

I was already on the white dragon’s back, setting up the tent. As I struggled with the brand-new tentpoles, the dragon clutched an electric guitar he’d pulled out of some music store, strumming the unamplified strings with one claw.

⟨*Oh ho! What interesting sounds this electric guitar device makes.*⟩

“Mind if I peg the tent in your scales?!” I called to the dragon.

⟨*Very well, do as you wish. But do not pierce my skin.*⟩

“Erm, I’m not sure how hard to hit... Th-there!”

‹*Gah! Mizuki, you scoundrel!*›

“Ah, sorry! I won’t hammer these in after all! Let’s just freeze the tent in place!”

We somehow made it through the trials and tribulations until finally our prep work was complete. The white dragon froze our four-person tent firmly to his back using his ice magic, turning it into a sort of misshapen ice palace. We used his ice to affix the oil heater too, as well as make us four chairs to sit in. We huddled in our winter gear to keep out the cold.

‹*Well, let us ascend, little ones!*›

“Thanks for the ride!”

“Hey hey, let’s go!”

### 3

**T**HE DISTANCE FROM JAPAN TO NEW YORK CITY WAS roughly ten thousand kilometers—a trip that took around thirteen hours, given the nine-hundred-kilometers-an-hour speed of most modern aircraft. However, riding the back of the white dragon at maximum velocity made us far faster than any plane.

“Ah! That’s Hawaii down there! Huh?! We’re going so fast!” said Shinobu, locating a little island in the sea below through an icy observation window the dragon had made us.

“If we just passed Hawaii...how much farther to New York?”

“Uh... Well, a direct flight to Honolulu takes around seven hours.”

“But it hasn’t even been two hours yet, right...?”

“Right. We got here in about a quarter of the time.”

“Then...we’re four times faster than a plane? Like, traveling around four thousand kilometers an hour?”

“Fighter planes go around three thousand... Whoa. This white dragon’s

airspeed is seriously wild, huh?!”

The dragon suddenly jumped into our thoughts to speak to us directly. *«Is something the matter?»*

“Whoa!”

*«I am flying as is my normal custom... Is something about it “wild”?»*

“N-no! You’re super freakin’ fast, that’s all!”

“Yeah! We were just talking about how quick you are!”

*«Mwa ha ha! I see, I see. This pace is leisurely for me, but I suppose to you small ones it must feel fast.»*

“Yeah! You’re amazing, White Dragon-san!”

*«I could go even faster, you know. I suppose I’ll take it up a notch.»*

With that, we were suddenly thrown against the tent’s ice wall.

“Gh—gaaaah! Th-this is insane! He’s so fast, our lives are in danger!”

“Th-the g-force! Ah! Tachibana-san and the British girl are foaming at the mouth!”

“Excuse me! Can you slow down a little? The tent’s about to blow away!”

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The great continent of North America came into view below us. As the white dragon slowed down and gradually lowered our altitude, I saw the eastern coast of the States. We’d entered the airspace above New York City, where Times Square was located in Midtown Manhattan.

“Ah! I’ve got a signal!” cried Kessie, my phone in her hands. “The news is going totally crazy! A dragon’s arrived! A dragon attacked the U.S.! It never rains but it pours—and right now, it’s raining *dragons*! It’s a national emergency!”

“Well, it makes sense that they’d be confused...”

Kessie and I watched the news.

“I just hope they let us in without a fight,” I muttered with a sigh.

“Mizuki-san... Look at this.” Shinobu, who’d been peering out the icy window, beckoned me over with one hand.

I got up from my chair to gaze out with her and saw several flying objects closing in from behind. *If those were birds or passenger planes, they wouldn’t be in such close formation.* “Those are...”

“American Air Force fighter jets...” muttered Carol, frowning as she watched the shadows approach us. “F-22 fifth-generation air superiority fighters.”

“Is that bad?” I asked.

“Those things cost fifteen billion yen apiece. They’re the world’s most powerful fighter jets...”

“Not to mention there’re ten... No, twenty out there.”

“So the U.S. Air Force is putting everything into this...”

*Well, a dragon just invaded their airspace. I suppose that makes total sense.*

“Ah! *Ahem!* White Dragon-san!” cried Tachibana-san. “Some dangerous people are closing in! They’re right behind you!”

«*Oh ho?*» The dragon shifted its neck a little to look back at the planes for a moment. «*I have slowed down somewhat. Still, I am impressed that they can keep pace with my flight.*»

“They’re shooting something at us!” cried Shinobu. “Those are probably missiles! Wait... *Missiles?!*”

“Dragon! We’re under attack!”

«*Anti-air magic, eh? Interesting!*» I heard the dragon’s heavy, booming voice in the back of my head. «*We’re almost there! I will swat them away!*»

In the next moment, he pulled us into a sharp dive to avoid an attack, removing all gravity from inside our tent. Our bodies floated into the air. The scene outside the window flipped in an instant, and none of us could tell what was happening anymore.

“Whoooa! Hold on, everybody! Grab something!”

The white dragon pulled out of his nosedive into a sudden ascent, delivering a

terrifyingly swift uppercut to the underside of the pursuing F-22 formation.

*«Gah ha ha ha! A unit of iron dragoons, I see! Let's have some fun!»*

As the dragon spoke, the fighter jet formation fanned out. The F-22s began doing aerial maneuvers, shooting at us with their mounted guns.

*«Gaaah!»*

The dragon caught a few planes with his icy breath, but then twisted in midair, losing his balance. I noticed that several F-22s had left the battle, and in the next moment— *Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!*

“Whooooa!”

Machine gun fire strafed the frozen tent we hid in, opening a large hole in the side. Gale force winds suddenly surrounded us as black hole-like pressure threatened to suck us into the open air.

“Gyaaaaah! Oh my god! This is bad!”

Shinobu had been clinging to her chair, but the impact sent her flying outside—or would've, if I hadn't grabbed her hand at the last second, and if someone hadn't grabbed my leg as I myself was nearly pulled out. I looked down—it was Carol.

“Gyaaaaaaaah! White Dragon-san! Freeze the tent up again!”

“It's ripped ooopeen!”

The white dragon made a sudden U-turn that sent us flying into the tent wall with intense g-force. I heard the crackling sound of ice forming as the broken wall rebuilt itself into a giant clear window.

*«Hya ha ha! They're putting up quite the fight! A battle in the skies! How many millennia has it been, I wonder?!»*

Our view of the outside much improved, we watched the white dragon continue his battle with the F-22 formation. The dizzying speed at which they attacked each other was far beyond our comprehension or ability to follow with the naked eye.

*«I haven't fought like this since the Elder Dragon Waaaaar!»*

The white dragon's icy breath attacks downed fighter jet after fighter jet, forcing them out of the skies.

Just then, I saw a missile closing in on us. "Gaaaaah! It's going to hit!"

*⟨Hm?!⟩*

The explosion's impact reverberated in my organs, and for a few moments, I worried that my heart might've stopped. The missile grazed our dragon's flank, sending him reeling sideways into a spinning descent.

"White Dragon-saaan?! Are you okaaaaay?!"

*⟨Nh... That hurt... Hit me in the stomach. There is strength in numbers, it appears.⟩* After a few seconds of free fall, the dragon flapped his wings once and began to glide. *⟨I will need to change tactics.⟩*

He folded his wings tightly like a swallow and cut through the air, trying to distance us from the swarm of F-22s. They didn't let up the pursuit, however, mobilizing to give chase.

*⟨For now, I will cease fighting and take you to your destination! I cannot do battle at full strength with you little ones on my back! This is not a retreat, you understand?! I am merely setting down my bags!⟩*

"Thank you! If you wouldn't miiiind!"

The white dragon shot like a missile across the New York City skyline, low enough to graze the skyscrapers. The F-22s followed at higher altitude, but they obviously didn't fire further missiles or bullets in our direction.

Finally, it was in front of us. The Times Square Dungeon that had appeared in the center of the city loomed like the castle of a demon king.

*⟨I'm approaching! I'll let you off when the timing is right!⟩*

"O-okay! Thank you!"

The dragon lowered himself farther toward the ground to dodge the fighter jets' pursuit. We were now in the center of the world's economy, New York City. Winding through the tall buildings, the dragon glided gracefully and accurately at first glance—though careful observers would note that his wingtips occasionally smashed buildings, causing huge amounts of damage as



he rammed through them.

We arrived at last in Times Square, which had been transformed. It now held a massive dungeon. It looked like a small wasteland, as if it were part of the aftermath of a global nuclear war.

The buildings around the Crossroads of the World had all either sunk or been lifted, skyscrapers colliding and crushing together to form massive arches. It was like stepping into another world, now that ours had ended.

The white dragon flapped his wings once and spread them wide to slow his descent. He landed on a sunken building and defrosted our tent, causing all kinds of things that had been fixed down with ice to slide off his back unsupported.

*«You'll be all right here, then, Mizuki?!»*

“Yeah! Thanks so much!”

*«I will return to the skies to battle that dragoon squadron, then! Mm-hmm—now I can finally fight at full strength! Gya ha ha ha ha!»* Instantly, he spread his wings and floated back into the air. *«Midair battle is quite something in this world! How long has it been since such emotions welled inside me? I remember now the day I rode with the Hero of Time upon my back! That night at the royal capital when I did battle with evil!»*

“Right—take care of yourself, then!”

*«You too, Mizuki! Be sure you survive! Return with an offering of more batteries someday!»*

The sudden swirling winds of the dragon's ascent took our breath away. They were like dozens of helicopters taking off at once, blowing us onto our backs. We stared at the sky and watched as the white dragon soared straight toward the F-22 fighter formation that had arrived in pursuit.

As the white dragon battled the U.S. Air Force in a kaiju war fit for the big screen, I began walking forward. “Right... Let's get into that dungeon, then!”

Carol, Tachibana-san, and Shinobu all spoke at once.

“Wait... Mizuki!”

“Just a moment, please, Mizuki-san!”

“Could you wait a second, Mizuki-san?”

“What is it...?” I asked.

“First...I’d like to use the bathroom.”

“It was a long trip.”

“I came close a few times.”

“...I’ve been holding it too, actually.”

## 4

**A**FTER OUR BATHROOM BREAK IN WHAT WAS NOW an abandoned building on the edge of Times Square, we walked into the wasteland.

“This seriously does look like the end of the world, huh...?” I mumbled.

When we made it outside, the only explanation for the scene that faced us seemed to be a nuclear bomb hitting New York.

“Let’s just find the entrance for now, shall we...?”

“Yeah... Where’s this dungeon centered?”

“The Times Square Building. According to the map...it’s about a twenty-minute walk,” said Shinobu.

“You’ve got cell signal?”

“Just barely, yes.”

As we walked the wasteland, the Times Square Building came into view before us, towering and majestic like a demon king’s castle. Great risen mounds of earth had so transformed the area around it that I couldn’t tell what I was looking at, and there wasn’t a soul to be seen in the surrounding area. I didn’t even get the sense that such a place could support life. It looked as if mysterious blue flowers were sprouting around the area, but as we drew closer, I saw that they were inorganic crystals that crumbled at my touch.

*I've got no idea what's going on with those things—I'm betting nobody in this world does.*

"All right, let's get inside."

"Understood."

We rushed for the dungeon entrance—but, just a few hundred meters before we reached it, heard the chopping sound of a helicopter above us.

"What's that?"

"Americans... The U.S. Air Force," mumbled Carol.

Ropes came down from the air, surrounding us as soldiers zoomed toward us. With troops on all sides, we were stuck in the middle, unsure how to proceed.

"We found survivors!" a soldier yelled, speaking English.

"Carol, what're they saying?!" I asked.

"They think we're survivors!" she shouted back.

Since they assumed we were some of the incident's few survivors, the fully armed soldiers swiftly boxed us in to protect us. The moment one saw my face, however, his attitude flipped instantly.

Using English, he cried, "Mizuki! That's Mizuki!"

"Stop! Freeze!" yelled another.

Suddenly, they all pointed their guns in our direction.

"What's going on?!"

"This is Skillworm's mental pollution!" shrieked Carol. "They think you're their enemy, Mizuki! This is bad!"

"Crap! They hate me here too?!"

"I'm guessing they're even *more* polluted over here!"

*She's right! I mean, Japan's so far from the signal, and even people there were attacking me!*

Facing down the barrels of a dozen guns, we stood back-to-back and prepared for a fight. The soldiers looked confused, fingers on their triggers as they barked

angry English orders at us.

“Put your hands where I can see them!”

“Get down! Get down!”

“Wait, wait!” Carol screamed, trying her best to be heard. “We aren’t your enemies! Wait, please!”

“Freeze! Get down on the ground!”

“What do we do?! This is bad!”

“Aaaaah! Tachibana! Hypnosis! Do something with Induce!”

“Ehhh?! I can’t do that to this many at once!”

“We’ve got no other choice! Please!”

“H-hyaaah! I-Induce...Obedience! Stop it, please! Please put down your weapons!”

The moment she finished, the soldiers chomping at the bit suddenly froze where they stood.

“Huh...?”

“Eh?”

“Wha—?”

We were all shocked at what’d just happened. *I knew Tachibana-san’s Charm stat was high, but I never expected her to be capable of this.*

Rooted to the spots where they stood, the dazed soldiers lowered their weapons one by one. As we watched them stand down, we all hugged Tachibana-san, ecstatic.

“Whoa! Awesome! That was amazing, Tachibana-san!”

“That was some awesome fight-or-flight response stuff! Brilliant, Tachibana!”

“I knew you could do it! I don’t really understand what you *did*, exactly, but I knew you could do it!”

“Huh?! Did I really just do something useful again?!”

“Let’s get going! Into the dungeon!”

In a half-panicked mess of astonishment, we ran at full speed toward the dungeon entrance. I turned back just once, looking at the soldiers standing there with vacant expressions, guns at their sides.

Then I saw the man behind them, a shadowy figure standing on the rooftop of a sunken building. He was tall and short-haired, and his jacket flapped in the wind.

Strangest of all, he seemed to be missing his right arm.

## Chapter 7:

### Are You Going for the Good Design Award?

# 1

THE TIMES SQUARE DUNGEON'S INTERIOR WAS MUCH different from the one in Omori City. It didn't feel much like a dungeon at all, as the building had retained its man-made inner structure. That said, the interior had been biologically transformed in an otherworldly way, and every wall appeared grotesquely splattered with vivid internal organs, bumps, and bulges. I felt like I'd strayed into the innards of a monster, or some hellscape splatter-film set in awful taste—the place made me feel terrible. Regardless, we cut through the dungeon's intestinal red-and-black hallways.

“This dungeonization... It's Uemura who caused it!” cried Carol, tightening her grip on the sword in her hands. Despite her terrible condition, she pulled herself together to lead us through the dungeon.

“His main body should be in the innermost part of the dungeon, right at the top! We've got to cut our way up there!”

“Okay, let's go!”

“Kay kay, go go go! I'm turning all this into content later!” Shinobu said.

“Wait a second! You're all going too fast!”

“Try and keep up, Tachibana-san! Wait—is *that* as fast as you can go?! Why are you running like that?! Are you a hypnosis user with no stamina?!”

Although Tachibana-san had glamor-model-worthy long legs, she was the slowest in the group. Despite our desire to hurry, our convoy had to move at a relatively slow pace to keep her safe.

I saw evidence all around that this place had once been a large building, which had sunk into the ground and been absorbed during the process of the dungeon creating itself. There were doors and fluorescent lights that no

dungeon would normally contain, as well as several man-made structural elements. I saw room numbers and names—even a simple floorplan at one point.

*But...it's all covered in that fleshy membrane. This stuff's so grotesque, I feel like I'm inside someone's liver.*

When we found the floorplan, we stopped. It wasn't clear how much use it would be to us in this otherworldly interior, but we decided to look it over just in case.

"Hm? What's this?"

Carol responded to my muttering. "Is something wrong?"

"This floorplan... It says we're on the seventh floor, but we haven't gone up any stairs."

*"Ahem. Well..."*

"The building's caved in, so I suppose the seventh floor is technically the ground floor at the moment...?" said Tachibana-san, out of breath.

"Thanks to this dungeon being in a building, I'm still getting a signal..." said Shinobu, swiping at her phone—then mumbling in surprise when she noticed something. "Huh...? There's something weird going on."

"Tell me what happened the past few days that *wasn't* weird, would you?"

"I mean it. Look at this."

I peeked over at Shinobu's screen to see the online news article she'd been reading.

### *Mysterious Numbers Appearing*

*Strange numbers have been observed appearing above persons in the vicinity of the Times Square Dungeon. These numbers are only observable with the naked eye, and do not appear on camera or in video footage. It is currently unclear what the numbers mean, and why they have appeared over the heads of only some individuals.*

"Hm...? Mysterious numbers?"

“It’s probably got something to do with Excalibur turning things into information,” said Carol, who’d been reading the article with us. “It might be some way of extracting everything inside a person and turning it into data...a representation of what’s inside them.”

“But what do the numbers themselves mean?”

“Hmm... I’m clueless about that part,” she admitted.

“Huh?” It was Kessie. “There’s already a number above Tachibana-san’s head!”

“Huh? Mine?”

I looked over at Tachibana-san to see her pointing her index finger at herself. A big “132” was visible above her head, like a damage counter out of some RPG.

“One hundred and thirty-two...? What’s that supposed to mean?” I wondered.

“Hmm...I’m not sure. It doesn’t seem to match up with any of her stats... It might be a counter for something.”

“Something that I’ve done 132 times in my life...? I’ve got no idea what that is. Still, it seems a bit off.” Tachibana-san tried to touch the “132” above her head, but her hand passed right through. The number wasn’t a physical object, apparently.

Then Shinobu noticed something else. “Hey, the British girl’s got one too. Twelve? That’s barely any!”

“Speak for yourself,” said Carol, looking at the number that had also appeared above Shinobu’s head. I squinted at the two of them.

“Thirty-one...? You and Carol are about the same.”

“You’ve got one too, Mizuki! Huh? Seven hundred and eighty-one?!”

“Seven hundred and eighty-one?! What the heck?!”

“I knew you were strong, Mizuki!” said Carol.

“Gaaah! Now I’ve got one too! What—and it’s zero?! Why am I the only one with zerooo?!” wailed Kessie.

\*\*\*



With the mysterious numbers above our heads there to stay, we gave up on trying to understand what they meant for the time being, continuing through the dungeon.

However far up we climbed, ascending the stairs to floor after floor, we never saw any sign of monsters inside. The former Times Square Building and current dungeon was devoid of life and eerily silent, all its surfaces covered with a thin layer of meat and flesh.

“There’s nothing in here...” I muttered, proceeding through the empty dungeon’s rooms with caution nonetheless.

Carol seemed just as unsettled. “The lack of monsters might just be because of how weirdly this place formed... But, yes, it’s too quiet.”

“Come to think of it, what do you think happened to the people who used to work here...?” asked Tachibana-san. We hadn’t yet sensed a single person while clearing.

*A dungeon like this would normally have caused a landslide, or shifted the earth, and buried some people. This dungeon formed out of a whole office building in the middle of Times Square, so why isn’t anyone in here? I’d expect to see a corpse or two lying around from when this place swallowed up the ground.*

“There are no monsters, so maybe everybody just fled?”

“I sure hope so,” I replied. *If people in here did survive, they wouldn’t have wanted to stay long in this awful place... And with no dangerous monsters around, they must’ve had time to get away.*

“But...what happened to the U.S. forces, then? Didn’t they get here first?”

“Maybe they’re already really far ahead of us?”

As we walked through the silent dungeon, we reached a hallway containing a twisted set of automatic doors that blocked our path. The doors didn’t look like they’d always been there. Rather, I got the sense that they’d smooshed into that spot when the dungeon formed. They completely stopped us from moving on.

“These things won’t budge...”

“Hm? Let me see. Hyup!” Carol kicked the doors, but the terrible fleshy membrane reacted like reinforced glass; she didn’t leave a dent. “Ouch.”

It didn’t seem like attacks would get us anywhere, so we gave up on the physical approach.

“It’s no use. We can’t brute force our way through these.”

“Couldn’t some skill help pry them open?” Shinobu asked.

“I could always buff up Blaze and blast through them...” I suggested, wondering how much firepower I’d need to blow a hole in the doors, given their thickness. I had a fairly large stock of buff skills, but I’d also used a lot of them during the “super-mega-ultra space-program level buff” plan earlier.

*I don’t have an unlimited amount. Considering what might be coming, I’d rather keep them in reserve... And given the state this place is in, I’m a little worried that using Blaze’s excess firepower in this building’s interior might be enough to finish it off completely.*

“Uh, maybe...”

That was Tachibana-san. Crouching by the wall, she’d found some kind of security card reader buried in the rubble. It had seemingly been used to scan employee IDs to open the doors before the whole dungeon thing happened.

“Do you think this will work if we find a security card...?”

“This place was suddenly transformed into a dungeon, so I suppose it would make sense if the office building parts still functioned,” said Carol, staring at the doors that blocked our way. “Maybe Uemura’s defensive instincts tightened security around here.”

“All right. Let’s find an employee pass, then.”

We split up to search the offices just off the hallway. The one I entered was just as grotesque as every other part of the dungeon. The walls appeared plastered with organ meat. Visible veins popped out of desks and chairs, and documents and other office items were piled on the floor, or had been absorbed into it. The whole scene looked like a nightmare. I didn’t really want to touch anything in there, but I proceeded to search for an employee pass.

Suddenly, I felt a punch strike my shoulder. “Wah!” I turned to find Shinobu standing behind me. “Man, you scared me!”

Shinobu looked a little pale. Her mouth was closed in a tight horizontal line; over it, one finger shushed me. She shook her head side to side. “Shh! Quiet, Mizuki-san!”

“Huh? Wh-why?”

“Just be quiet! Come here—this way!”

She seemed to be in a hurry, so I gave up my search and reconvened with the others. Once we were all in a huddle, Shinobu whispered about what she’d found.

“*Ahem...* Th-there’re people! Lots of them!”

“People...? Where?” I asked.

She paled and broke out in a cold sweat. “Look. Just look, okay...? And be sure you don’t make a sound no matter what, please! I mean it!”

Shinobu led us to a specific room and slowly opened the door. Inside the large space, I saw a crowd of human shapes. The door apparently led into the floor’s main workspace, which was about half the size of a school gym, lined with dozens of desks and chairs. At each desk sat a suited employee. They all mumbled to themselves, swaying like students trying their best to stay awake in class, but on the verge of collapsing onto their desks.

“Uemura is good... Mizuki Ryosuke is bad...”

“Mizuki Ryosuke, bad guy... Uemura Atsumi, good guy...”

“Uemura Atsumi, popular... Mizuki Ryosuke, cheat...”

The few fluorescent lights that had survived the transformation crackled on the ceiling, providing a tiny bit of light to the gloomy office space. For a while, we just watched the insane employees in the dungeon recite their mantras. Then I slowly closed the door on the madness and let out a whisper.

“Cr-crap...!”

I looked to the side at Carol, who’d watched the extreme scene too. Her face

was even paler than usual. *Her skin's basically turned from white to super-color-desaturated, huh? ...What am I even thinking?*

"Are they... You know... The kind of people who'll attack if they notice us?"

"I suppose *everyone* will be like that, once Skillworm's mental pollution is advanced enough."

"I bet there's a mountain of employee passes in there, though."

"I really wouldn't like to startle those people..."

"I'm not going in there..."

As Carol, Tachibana-san, and I cradled our heads, Shinobu seemed to come up with something, clapping her hands softly. "Ah... I think I have an idea."

"What, Shinobu? A good idea?" I replied. "Are you going for the Good Design Award?"

"Mizuki-san, you're so panicked I don't even know what you're saying anymore." At any rate, Shinobu had seemingly just had a revelation, so we all prepared to listen to her. "Ready? I think we should rely on Kessie-chan for this."

"Kessie?"

"Miss Kessie?"

"Kessie-san?"

The three of us repeated the name back to Shinobu, then turned to the palm-sized fairy in question, who was flapping around in the air.

At all the sudden attention, Kessie turned to look at us in confusion. "Huh? Me?"

\*\*\*

The fluorescent lights gave only flickering, fickle brightness to the room, as intermittent as its occupants' chanted mantras, as Kessie flew quietly into the office of insanity.

*«Uh...Kessie-chan feels like a convenient little fairy drone being thrown into a dangerous situation with little regard for her safety right now! I'm a fragile and*

*innocent little soul! You do know that, don't you?!*» Kessie wailed at us telepathically as we stood by the door, giving our best supportive “You can do it!” full-body gestures of silent encouragement. *«Eyaah! On the off chance that anything does happen to me, I'm definitely coming back to haunt you all!»*

Despite the tirade of complaints she launched into inside our heads, Kessie flew quietly and carefully. The “fairy drone” plan involved tiny, lightweight, flying, telepathic Kessie going on a solo mission to infiltrate the office and take an employee pass. The plan, it had to be said, was far too simple.

Clearly not wanting to spend a second longer than necessary in the insane office, Kessie swooped in near one of the almost-vegetative employees from a blind spot, toward the employee pass hanging by a string around his neck.

*«Okay! I think I might be able to swipe the pass off this one...!»*

Approaching the employee, she reached out a tiny hand to grab the pass, pulling it upward slowly and carefully from behind. It seemed as if robotically chanting about Uemura-love and Mizuki-hate had desensitized the man, who showed no sign that he noticed what was going on.

*All right! Good work!* We didn't shout, of course, instead just sending Kessie a few soundless fist pumps of encouragement and praying she'd be successful.

*«Careful! Careful...!»*

She lifted the pass up around the man's head as slowly and gently as possible to avoid disturbing him, deftly dodging his ears and strands of hair the string looked likely to catch on. Still, it was like trying to remove a necklace with one hand—challenging, to say the least.

*«Gh...! I can't do this on my own!»*

Struggling, Kessie switched to a new tactic—shaking the string to free it from the man's head and neck. As the mumbled mantras continued, she circled to his nape, and with a midair run-up...

*«Okay! This has to work! Hyah!»*

She arced over the employee's head to pull the pass off in one clean yank. The loose string had enough clearance to pass over his chin and ears, and Kessie

soared upward in the meantime. It was perfect, yet...

⟨*All right! Huh...?*⟩

Kessie tried to fly upward with the pass, but ended up tugging it instead. It was caught on something—a body part that wasn't visible from her position in the air. The man's nose. Given her position behind his back, Kessie had been completely unable to see that slight protuberance.

"Ah!" Kessie said aloud, not using telepathy now.

Her tugging on the pass had brought the man's nose upward, and he and Kessie locked eyes. He stared at her silently.

"*Ahem*, er... My deepest apologies?" Panic turned the palm-sized fairy into a proper lady for a moment.

The man didn't react, and Kessie tried to flutter away with the pass as if nothing had happened.

"Fairy," mumbled the man whose pass she'd stolen. He suddenly stood up, eyes wide. "Fairy."

Others began to mumble with him. "Mizuki Ryosuke's fairy."

Now all the employees were chanting and staring blankly, their heads turned toward Kessie.

"No, you've got the wrong guy! I mean, fairy!" she insisted.

It didn't seem like that was going to fly, though. The employees stood in unison and began to run at full speed, like the kind of zombies that *could* run.

"Gyaaah! Zukky-saaan! Help meee!"

"Whoooa! Come on! Get over here, Kessie!"

As she zoomed toward us, I caught the employee pass and tossed it to Shinobu. Then we ran. The employees flooded like a wave down the hallway toward us.

"What do we do?! Will we even have time to open those doors?!" I screamed.

"No! And we don't even know if this *will* open them!"

“W-wait for me! Gyaaah!”

I turned my head to see Tachibana-san some distance behind us. *I forgot she was such a slow runner!*

“Crap! Am I going to have to burn them all up?!” I activated Skillbook, took out my Blaze card, and got ready to cast.

“Mizuki, wait!” screamed Carol. She spun to face the crowd, raised her sword, and looked back at me.

“What’re you doing, Carol?!”

“Go on ahead! Open the door! And you, Tachibana, dance! Sing and dance as you run!”

“What for?!”

“Just do it! Buff my Strength!”

“I can’t run and dance at the same time!”

“Your running form basically counts as dancing—it’ll probably be fine! Just activate your skill!”

“Suspicious Dance! Gyaaaaaah!” Tachibana-san wailed as she ran at her slow pace, overtaking Carol, who stood facing the crowd of mantra-chanting Times Square Building employees.

“Yah!”

Carol leaped into the air and slashed at the ceiling, bringing down a mountain of rubble. Trash from the upper floor crumbled into a massive heap in the middle of the hallway, blocking the way for the time being.

“All right! Awesome, Carol!”

“Whoa, she did it! I knew you could, Carol-san!”

“The automatic doors are open!” called Shinobu.

We slid through the open passage.

It was only once I was on the other side that I realized something important. “Hunh. Those doors... They won’t close again now, will they?”

“Ahh! That’s how this system works now?!”

In the meantime, the crowd of mantra-chanting employees had managed to crawl halfway through the rubble that Carol brought down in the hallway.

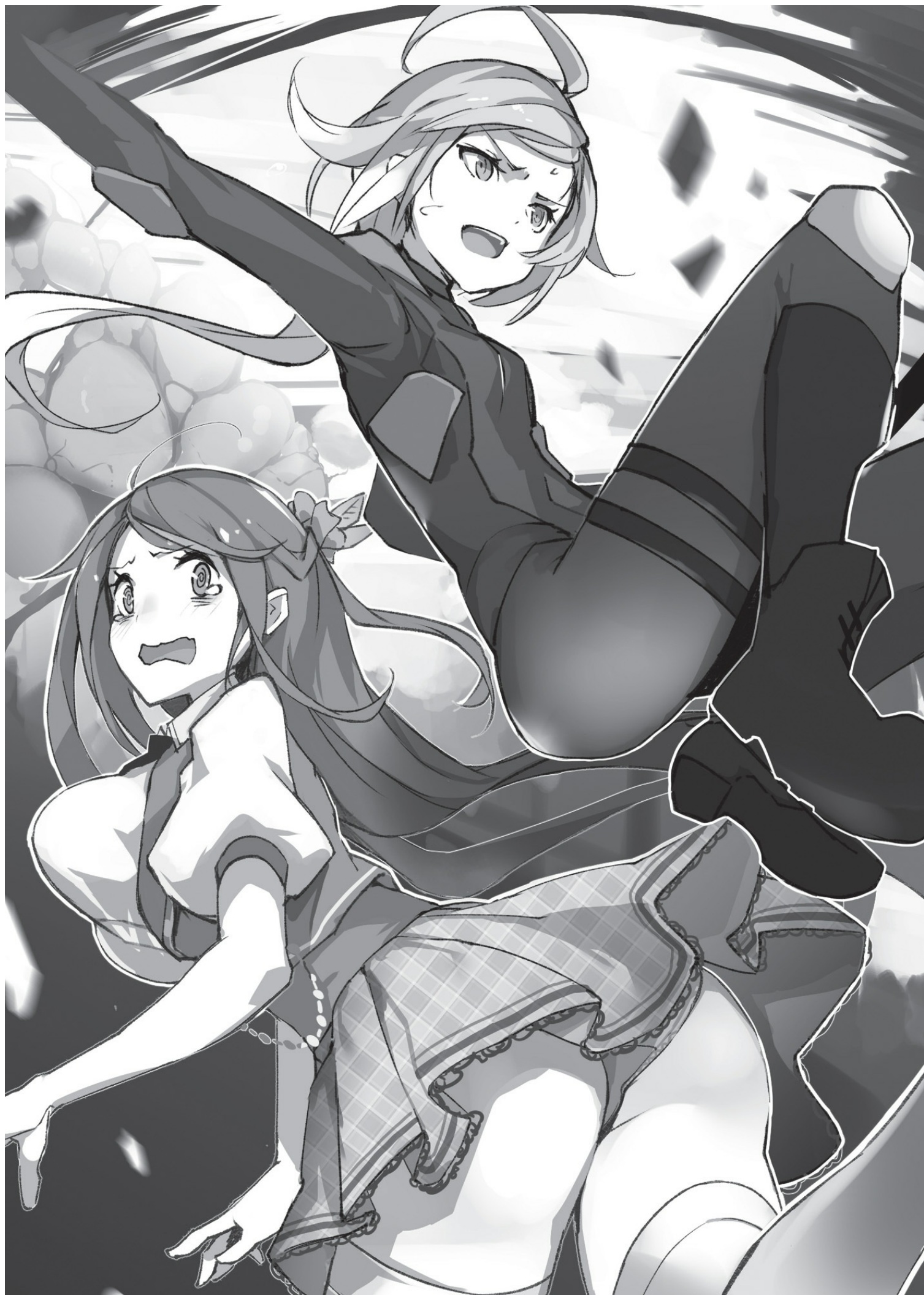
“Ah, forget about it! There’s no other way! We’ve just got to bolt all the way to the top!”

“Let’s go! Let’s just go! Don’t stop!”

## 2

**J**UST UNDER AN HOUR—AND MOUNTAINS OF HALLWAY-blocking trash—later, we emerged bruised and beaten on the precipice of the building’s top floor.





“Man, I’m tired,” I mumbled, shoulder to shoulder with Carol.

“Yeah... There were no monsters, but I never expected so much trouble with humans.”

“I could take out a goblin horde with one Blaze, but...”

“Humans are a different story, yeah.”

“Not to mention they were on every damn floor. At one point, I thought about just discarding my morals and taking out the whole crowd.”

“I might’ve cut them all down too if things got a little more dangerous,” Carol admitted.

“By the way, Carol, how are you feeling?” I asked.

“Not good, but we can’t exactly rest up here.”

As we grumbled at each other, Tachibana-san and Shinobu walked up behind us.

“You suddenly started running really fast at one point, didn’t you, Tachibana-san?” asked Shinobu.

“Yes... I noticed that I could raise my own Agility stat with Suspicious Dance. Apparently, the skill defines the way that I run as a form of dancing...”

“You totally looked like a super-fast Knee God when you were running! It was pretty hilarious, to be honest. I could’ve spent five minutes laughing my head off if our lives hadn’t been in such danger.”

“Ah ha ha...”

I heard a dry, dispirited chuckle from Tachibana-san behind me. *Those two seem to be getting along weirdly well, as always.*

The pair walked up the stairs ahead of us, and we finally found ourselves on the top floor.

“We’re finally here, huh...?” I couldn’t help but mumble.

The walls had been completely blown out. In the center of that wide open space, I saw it, rooted to the spot.

Uemura was stuck in the center of the room—but he no longer looked human. He appeared more like a giant tree, connected to the walls, ceiling, and floor around him. He was so embedded that I couldn't tell whether he was still animate, a living creature, or just some dead, inorganic object now. At a glance, nobody could've noticed that the thing in the center of the room was once human. Only Uemura's face with its closed eyes, buried in the center of the tree trunk-like mass, told me that the thing was in fact him.

"Hey, Uemura!" I shouted. "You've been calling out for me, telling the whole world you want me, huh? Well, I'm here."

At the sound of my voice, his eyes bugged open. When he caught sight of me, his mouth and eyes opened as wide as they could go.

*«Miiiizuuuukiiii-kuuuun.»*

His mouth flapped open and shut, but it wasn't his physical voice that echoed in my mind. It was direct speech—the same telepathic communication that Kessie and the white dragon used.

*«IIIII'm goooooing tooooo kiiiiill yooooooooou.»* Uemura's face contorted and twisted as his resentful wails filled my head. *«Hooooow cooould yooooou doooo thiiiiis tooooo meeee?»*

I stared at him in silence.

*«IIIII'm goooooing tooooo beeeee theeee neeeext cooocompaaany preeeesideeeeent.»*

Listening to Uemura brood, I called, "Hey, Carol."

"What is it, Mizuki?"

"I think I knew before I got here... But it doesn't seem like I'll be able to save this guy."

"You're right about that."

"Put up a defensive wall," I said, striding toward Uemura.

*«IIIII'm taaaaaalenteeed... IIIII'm reeeeeeespecteed byyyy myyyy subooooordinaaaates.»*

“You know, now that I think about it,” I muttered, activating Skillbook, “we worked at the same branch of that investment bank. Both of us got thrown into dungeon work for some strange reason, and both of us got our hands on broken skills in the end, huh?”

⟨Miiiizuuuuuuuukiii-kuuuuuunnn! llll wooon’t leeeeeet yooooou geeet awaaaaay wiiiith thiiiiis. Reeeeeached yooooouuur quoooooooootaaaa?!⟩

“Neither of us are really great people. We’re just getting swept along by others around us... We’re like little kids in the bodies of fully grown adults,” I grumbled as I drew closer.

⟨Miiiizuukiii! Miiiizuukiii-kuuuun.⟩

“It’s sad that things had to work out so differently for the two of us.”

⟨llll diiiid noooooothiing wrooooooong.⟩

“You’re right. You didn’t,” I said as I programmed Skillbook. “We tried to use the people around us and ended up getting used by them—and you drew the short straw.”

⟨liiiit’s yoooooour faaaaault.⟩

“Come to think of it, I think the reason I hated you...is because of how similar we are.”

⟨Miiizuuuukiii-kuuuun!⟩

I finished with all my Skillbook operations, but held off on pushing the button. “I’m going to kill you, Uemura.”

His deafening telepathy suddenly fell completely silent.

“You got any last words?”

There were a few moments of quiet—then a voice echoed in my head. ⟨K-kill m-m-me...⟩

“I intend to.”

I pushed a button on Skillbook’s display, and a small fireball appeared before me. It burned up rapidly, then shrank, transforming into a glowing ball of white-hot plasma. As soon as it did so, a helpful pop-up appeared on my Skillbook

screen.

***Final damage amount: 52,768.***

***This message can be disabled from the Skillbook “display settings” menu.***

OK

The plasma exploded forward, the absolute epitome of firepower annihilating everything in its path.

\*\*\*

Blaze destroyed the top floor of the Times Square Dungeon. It wiped the location out, leaving not a single trace—literally everything that had been in front of me was gone. There was no longer a floor or walls, just the ruins of Times Square surrounding me on each side, and beyond that, the city of freedom, New York.

I had just killed someone for the first time in my life, but I was too tired to really engage with the sentiment. It was too early to stop concentrating, after all. I stood there and waited for Excalibur to materialize, until finally it appeared—a golden sword slowly rising into the empty air.

I stayed still, waiting to see where it would go.

*My theory is that Skillworm doesn't enter people who already have a unique skill, so in the Omori Dungeon, Uemura just happened to be its only viable target. It should enter Tachibana-san or Shinobu this time around... Then they can treat Carol, and this will all be over.*

“Wait a second...”

It was only then that it occurred to me.

*If Skillworm's a unique skill, it can't be traded or given away... Meaning either Tachibana-san or Shinobu will have to take that ridiculous skill to her grave.*

Just as that revelation came, the tip of the golden sword's blade pointed in our direction.

*“Ah, crap.” I forgot a ton of important things, didn’t I...?*

There was no time to think about any of them; the sword sped straight toward us in search of its new owner. Then—suddenly, just as the sword passed me by—a man appeared out of nowhere.

“Gotcha!”

With a great clang, the sword stopped in midair. The man had halted Skillworm with the palm of his hand. He immediately turned to look at me, and I saw a face I recognized.

“Huh? Heath?!”

“Geh! This one sure is a Regalia... It’s huge!”

Skillworm looked set to run him through. He held the sword back with one hand, then used his free hand to jam the blade into his palm. It disappeared like a magic trick, and before long, Heath’s hand absorbed the sword completely.

“Huh...?”

“All right!” Heath balled his hand into a fist. “I’m glad I made it! You know, Mizuki, that really was in the nick of time!”

“Wait... Huh? Um...”

I was clearly confused, but having absorbed Skillworm, Heath just kept talking. “Sorry for taking it, Mizuki. I’d actually been looking for that one for a real long time. It was the whole reason we journeyed to this world in the first place, you see. You don’t need it anyway, right? Mind that I took it?”

“Eh? Um... Well, no, I guess I don’t need it.”

*Heath absorbing the skill for us also wipes away the massive mistake I made by bringing Tachibana-san and Shinobu here, I guess.*

“Okay! Ha ha ha! Well, that sure solves everything! The two of us did some fine work, don’t ya think? We did good!”

“Hey... Wait a second, Heath. What exactly is going on here?”

Heath grinned at me. “What are you asking?”

“Well, first, how did you get here? I thought you were still in Japan.”

“Teleportation skill.”

*I guess there are Teleportation skills now. I bet this guy just has a 4D pocket he pulls things out of at will.*

As I stood there in stunned silence, Heath walked to Carol and the others, his footsteps clicking on the hard floor. He opened his stat screen and fished through the options.

“Hmm... This is the one, right, Mizuki? You want me to treat this girl?”

“Uh... W-well, yeah. Erm...”

“Wonder if this is how it works...? Skillworm.” As Heath muttered the skill’s name, he laid his hand on Carol’s shoulder.

Red sparks flew, and Carol twitched and shook. “Gaaah!”

“Whoa! Sorry about that, little lady,” Heath said casually, not actually looking that sorry. “Not used to deploying this thing yet. That should fix your tampered data, though. Well... To be more accurate, I went and tampered with it *again* to fix the damage.”

He stared down intently at his own hand—the one he’d just used to activate Skillworm.

“Hmm... Seems like when you have three Regalia, they start to compete with each other, eh? At least the thing activated. I suppose it’s probably fine,” he said to himself, then turned to look back at me. “What do you think, Mizuki? This fixes everything, doesn’t it? No problem.”

“Eh...? Did you just treat her?”

“Yeah. I shouldn’t have?”

“No, that’s not it. Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

*Are we, ultimately?* “Do you mind if I ask you something, Heath?”

“What is it? Sorry, but I’m actually going to split soon. I don’t plan to stay long.”

“Who are you, exactly?”

“Didn’t I already tell you that?”

“I’m looking for a bit more detail this time,” I replied.

“Well, all right...” He stretched his back lazily and grinned at me. “My name’s Heath—Heath Whites, former first-class guard of the Kingdom of Kingland. Right now, my job is world-ending, although I also do the whole outcast thing. This is the second world I’ve taken on since leaving my home one.”

“As always, I still don’t get it,” I said, sighing. “But thanks for coming all this way. You sure Carol’s okay?”

“I healed her. She’ll be right as rain.”

“Okay, then.” I crouched on the spot. I’d been running around on my feet for so long that I could barely feel my legs.

“I’ll be off, then,” said Heath.

“Where to?”

“Another world. I’ve been banished forever from the one I came from...and I’m doing what I can to get back there. That’s why I needed Skillworm’s reality-altering power in the first place.”

“Right,” I said a little weakly, my head exhausted. “I don’t really know what you’re up to, but I hope it goes well for you.”

“It will. This is *me* we’re talking about, after all.” Heath patted my shoulder. “See you, Mizuki. I’ll come back to visit you in this world. And when I’m finally able to get home, let’s head there together and have some fun.”

“Please don’t invite me to another world like you’re just suggesting we go to the convenience store.”

“You don’t get to say no. I’ve already got you booked in.” Heath laughed as he walked away. “Bye, Mizuki,” he said finally, waving at me. “I planned on ending this world too, but I’ll hold off for now—for you. I’ll come back, though.”

*Feel free to, but please don’t bring the end of the world.*

I looked around at the top floor of the Times Square Dungeon, now ripped apart by my Skillbook’s Blaze, half-open to the wide blue sky above. I looked



over my shoulder to see Shinobu checking Carol's back and Tachibana-san lying there completely exhausted, not a drop of strength left in her body.

*Yeah. The world doesn't have to end just yet. We only just saved it, after all.*

## Epilogue:

### Half of Life Was Just Searching for Things and Cleaning Up

**A**LLOW ME, MIZUKI RYOSUKE, TO TELL YOU BRIEFLY of my own fate.

After dealing a finishing blow (with a lot of help) to Senior Managing Director Uemura—AKA Excalibur, AKA Skillworm—who (or which) crossed all kinds of lines you're really never meant to cross and completely screwed up the whole world, I was (or rather, we were) taken into custody by the U.S. Army.

The mental pollution from Senior Managing Director Uemura, AKA Excalibur, had ceased, so the governments of the world started functioning again. The truth of the Times Square Dungeon disaster became so widespread that there was no way it could've possibly been covered up. Despite all the condemnation and criticism following the chaos, my name was somewhat cleared, after having been dragged through the mud by everyone in the world for doing nothing at all.

As for the white dragon and his battle in the skies above the ruins of Times Square, he apparently stopped fighting after the chaos was over. The U.S. Army subsequently surrounded the dragon, who had downed four F-22s. But, well, despite being a huge and somewhat proud dragon, he had a good-natured, friendly, and warm disposition. Thus, he was captured (or rather, agreed to go with them quietly) without causing more casualties.

The U.K. government faced a lot of criticism for concealing Skillworm, of course. However, with responsibility also falling on Showa Securities for facilitating the incident, and the mysterious "Round Table" secret society—which piqued the interest of chuunibyou worldwide—becoming public knowledge, much of the attention and blame focused on those parties.

With the alterations to reality, the many Showa Securities scandals, the stuff involving Senior Managing Director Uemura, and much more besides coming to light at once, a storm of news came in such a torrent that nobody was even sure where to begin talking about it, or how to start debating the issues. Having

peeked behind the curtain too long, modern civilization sort of overheated, falling into confusion at the mass of information presented to it. That caused the four individuals responsible for resolving the incident in question—Carol, Shinobu, Tachibana-san, and me—to fade pretty quickly from public attention.

Round Table member Higaya Seiji, president of Showa Securities, was put through the wringer, questioned and detained. During his interviews, I stopped in to see him. He was evidently involved, but whether his role was as a criminal, a fixer, or just a pawn in some much larger scheme wasn't clear yet. He still wore a neat suit when I visited, and seemed to have been treated well.

In the interrogation room, Higaya sat across from me. "You did well to resolve the situation."

"I just barely resolved it," I answered. "But is this really for the best?"

"Of course." He smiled at me, relaxed and carefree. "This is the whole reason that we exist."

"Right." *Apparently, the world's complicated, huh?*

\*\*\*

But hey, with these things, I suppose it's easy to forget how close you came to death once the chaos finishes and dust settles.

After most of the cleanup was over, the daytime gossip shows returned to pushing political and celebrity scandal leaks onto the screen, and the Times Square Dungeon fiasco stopped getting airtime. The incident was still talked about, but most of the sources were small TV pieces, news websites, and minor conspiracy theorist YourTubers picking up the torch. Several months later, with winter's arrival and the ups and downs of the world, much of it began to fade into the past, as is the way with such things.

I, Mizuki Ryosuke, was no exception.

"S-s-s-sooo?! Why'd you turn them doooooown?!"

Frenzied, Kessie flew around in front of my eyes, rapidly flapping her wings. As usual, we were in the living room of my dramatically renovated rental property. I was sitting on the sofa.

“Well...I don’t think there’d be any advantage to me doing it. Wasn’t great pay either.”

“Why, why, why?! This was our chance to meet Matsu-chan and Hama-chan! Who cares about the money?! I’d do it for free! Why, why, why did you say nooooo?!”

“Well, if you want to do it on your own, that’s fine. Want me to pass on your details?”

“Ngh... If you’re not doing it, Zukky-san, then I’m not either!” Kessie sat on the table looking dejected.

I started to regret not consulting her before refusing the invitation.

It hadn’t just been us and the dragon that had gotten famous—the fairy from another world, Kessie, was also international news.

But, hey, it turned out that governments kidnapping unknown lifeforms and keeping them in secret labs for testing really did only happen in sci-fi novels. Besides, the big news of Kessie’s existence was somewhat overshadowed by a massive dragon’s battle with the U.S. Air Force above the skies of New York City. And with all the noisy reconstruction going on, nobody really had any time to worry about one little fairy. There was a bit of surprise, just for politeness’s sake, but people were kind of ignoring Kessie’s existence at the moment. The initial impact of the news faded so much that fairies’ existence just became an accepted fact. I mean, there were dungeons in this world, right? From there, fairies weren’t much of a stretch.

The Japanese Diet seemed to be going through the process of signing laws to account for the discovery of intelligent dungeon lifeforms like Kessie and the white dragon, but to be honest, they seemed way more concerned with other matters at the moment. Just a small group of eccentrics were really interested in the legislation.

They took the same approach for me—an individual who just happened to possess an incredibly powerful skill. In all the confusion, I was seemingly left so alone that I began to wonder whether the world had just completely forgotten me. The only people who approached us now were YourTubers and TV producers chasing views. My refusing one such offer from one of Kessie’s

favorite celebrities' programs was what had upset her. She was such a TV lover that she could've been the representative TV fan for all modern civilization.

Kessie started stuffing her cheeks with a cookie, munching as she sulked about her first TV appearance being sabotaged without her knowledge.

"Look...I'm sorry. I promise I'll ask you next time."

"Oh, it's fiiine. Kessie-chan's not showing up naked and all on her lonesome on the airwaves anyway," she muttered, facing in the opposite direction and angrily wolfing down cookie crumbs. "If *you're* not doing the show, then *I'm* not doing it either! It's *fine*, Zukky-san."

"Want to do it, then...?"

"Oh, it's *fine*, I mean it."

"I'm starting to feel like I might want to do the show."

"Don't put yourself out on *my* account, it's quite all right!"

"Yeah, I think I'm going to try calling them again. I'll ask if I can bring along my fairy."

"You mean it?!"

\*\*\*

*Right, then.* "Right, then." I let my inner dialogue spill out as I walked into the office.

In one lonely corner of the sad little area that could just barely be called Omori City's commercial district was a certain rented space. It was the kind of office a skilled but penniless private detective might occupy, fulfilling just the bare minimum functions.

The place had secondhand chairs, desks, drawers, a dirty little sofa that barely sidestepped outright rudeness when welcoming visitors, and a midsize LCD TV. I sat in the cheap chair farthest from the door, which squeaked every time I leaned back, and surveyed my kingdom.

*This is my office, after all. Well, not totally mine, but I suppose you could call it that. Around half of it's mine—or, well, at least a third.* Regardless of the

percentage, I felt good about that.

As I enjoyed my little piece of happiness, the office door opened.

“Hmph,” said Carol, looking around the space and nodding. She was dressed in the same armor she had been on the day we’d met. “Not bad for a rush job.”

“I know, right?”

Still looking around, she sat on the visitor’s sofa, her light frame compressing the secondhand cushions much flatter than I expected. Even Carol seemed surprised by how far she sank.

“For now, we’ll use this interim office as a base for REA’s rebirth,” she said, picking up the TV remote. “We’ll need to meet important people from the U.K. government too.”

“Sounds like we’ll be busy.”

“Busy is good. Isn’t that right, Company President?” Carol smiled at me.

With the Excalibur incident resolved (?), we had to strengthen our ties with the U.K. government. We began by forming a new company. After all the chaos in Times Square, I’d certainly felt like I might’ve been forgotten by the world. With Skillbook in hand, though, I was still being targeted to an extent—even with Uemura’s global brainwashing waves gone. In fact, my ending the unprecedented dungeon crisis in New York City in a single blow had demonstrated Skillbook’s usefulness, and as a result, a quiet reappraisal of my abilities was underway. That signaled the ominous currents ever-swirling just beneath the water’s surface. To fight them, and everything else that might come our way, we needed an organization and a base of operations.

We’d faced all kinds of problems and accidents that messed with our plans, but we were now back on track, using our temporary office space to launch the adventurer business I’d initially planned to open.

*Of course, as a business that’ll have close ties to REA as a subsidiary, we should really have Carol as company president... But it turns out that, for a few age-related legal reasons, she’s not actually even REA’s CEO in the U.K.*

*That means I’ll be the one conducting the company’s core business operations*

*while also serving as CEO and president... And, well, my name's actually already on all the forms, which means that I'm technically already company president. President Mizuki, eh? Yep. Not bad.*

The office door opened again.

"Ah, hello. Ha ha..."

Tachibana-san entered with a lack of enthusiasm completely out of place in the office of an up-and-coming venture enterprise. She wore her suit as usual, and after swiveling to look around the office a few times, turned to me with a little scorn in her smile.

"*Ahem...* Do you have anything for me to do?"

"Well... No, nothing."

Tachibana-san had been unemployed since the Himata fight, and I'd offered her a position doing office work at our start-up. Of course, with no business actually being done yet and everything on the schedule starting in the next few days or weeks, she had absolutely no work at present.

"So, er... Can I go home for the day?" she asked.

"Well, we've got nothing for you yet, so sure. We'll be counting on you when things get busy."

"Leave it to me! And, *a-ahem...* There is one thing I'd like to ask."

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, it's a little awkward to bring up, but..." Tachibana-san left a good three or four beats before continuing, looking and sounding very apologetic about asking. "Well, um, my salary will come in starting *this* month, won't it...?"

"Well, yeah."

"Ah... Th-thank you! Oh, that's such a relief..." She looked utterly reassured; she was as happy as if she'd just found ten thousand yen by the side of the road. With that, she backed slowly out of the office. "Right, then. Doesn't seem like there's anything for me today... I'll see you... Thanks..."

"Good work today."

“Bye... Heh heh heh...”

Tachibana-san shut the door and went home, continuing to bask in the glory of her temporary period of effective paid unemployment. *Hey, she helped out with Himata, and she sang and danced nonstop through all those dungeon battles, so I'm not complaining. It's only right that I reward her accordingly.*

As Tachibana-san left, someone else walked into the office.

“Ah, hello.”

“Hey, Shinobu.”

As she came in, Shinobu carried her thin laptop in its case under her arm. She took it out when she reached her desk and began tapping away. “Ah, Mizuki-san. I've got a question.”

“What is it?”

“Do you mind if I turn all this start-up stuff into YouTube videos?”

“What are you going to record, exactly...?”

“Pretty much everything.”

“I'll take it into consideration.”

“Eh? What's the problem?!”

“You already got a ton of views and subscribers from the New York incident, right?”

“Yeah, but I'll die if I stop posting videos.”

“What are you, a shark?”

There you have it—the high schooler Shinobu was on board, too. She was less an employee and more an early intern or assistant... The online advertising supervisor, I suppose, or a bit of an adviser. When I thought about it, I could probably have her help with quite a few things, actually. She was the most sociable staff member, when it came down to it. Given all the weirdos with issues who tended to be attracted to my side, having at least one person with common sense might be the most important thing for this company.

“Come to think of it, where's Heath-san now?” she asked.



“Don’t know,” I answered. “He’ll get in touch if he needs something, I bet.”

“I suppose that’s how it works?”

“That’s probably how it works,” I answered with a sigh.

It seemed like everything had calmed down for now—but actually, this was where everything really got going. There were issues to resolve, things I had to get done, all kinds of scores that I figured I’d have to settle as they came up. All the while, who knew when the next crisis might happen, or the next neighbor could come calling?

There was a mountain of things to do, and I couldn’t even see the extent of it yet. But there was nothing to do but get organizing, checking them off the list one at a time, cleaning up. Half of life was just searching for things and cleaning up. *Who in the world said that one, I wonder?* Maybe nobody said it, and it was actually one of mine...but I figured it was true, in terms of life.

Next week, I’d have to go appear on that TV show with Kessie.

I didn’t want any part of it, but for my cute little partner—I supposed I’d have to.

## A Note from the Author

I HAVE THIS TERRIBLE HABIT OF ENDLESSLY REWRITING things that I already wrote, and this volume's been no exception. In this case, it was less rewriting, and more that I deleted everything from the online version and started anew. This is already the sixth volume of work I've released in print, but that bad habit of mine has persisted since the second, and I'm starting to feel like I might never be able to correct it. I'm actually rewriting something else as I write this author's note. I've given that habit some thought and come up with a theory about starting over.

There are currently 7.8 billion people in the world—that's 7.8 billion intelligent lifeforms struggling and squirming through life's hardships. Of those 7.8 billion, I think that a tremendous number would want to go back to some point in their past and start life over. But, well, that's just one of those fleeting desires, and no amount of daydreaming about your plans in life will make it possible to change what already happened. I don't think anyone in human history has ever been able to turn back the clock and start their life over again. But when it comes to novels, although time advances in a story's structure in much the same way it does in our lives, it's really just a collection of letters and words you can rewrite and change as many times as you like, right? I mean, you can start over as many times as you want to, can't you? You can *tamper* with it to your heart's content, huh?

Is that true? I wonder.

I have a terrible habit of causing my editor problems, and this volume proved no exception. Will this manuscript pass muster? Is it really going to be okay? I'm sure I caused a great deal of worry. I'm not exactly sure where I should direct my apologies, so I'll apologize here. This book, like the others, was brought into print through the work of a great many individuals: my editor Y-sama; CruelGZ-sama, who handled the illustrations; our manga editor M-sama; Sturkey-sensei, who's in charge of the manga adaptation; and our proofreader, cover designer, and all you readers who supported this work.

It would be an honor to see you again someday. Well, goodbye!



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