

Toshio Satou

Illustration by
Nao Watanuki



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Suppose
a Kid from the LAST DUNGEON
BOONIES Moved to Starter Town





“Come
on—
this
way!”

“Um...
I
don't
get what
you're
trying
to do
...”

A date with Riho in **broad daylight**?!

Lloyd's being
unusually **assertive**!





PROLOGUE

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LAST DUNGEON
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to a Starter Town

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SUPPOSE A KID FROM THE LAST DUNGEON BOONIES MOVED TO A STARTER TOWN 2

TOSHIO SATOU

Translation by Andrew Cunningham

Cover art by Nao Watanuki

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TATOEBA LAST DUNGEON MAENO MURANO SHOUNEN GA JYOBAN NO
MACHI DE KURASUYOUNA MONOGATARI volume 2

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Character Profiles

Alka

The chief of the legendary town. Dotes on Lloyd like her own son. Could easily destroy the world on a whim.



Lloyd Belladonna

An excessively strong villager from the town of legend. Earnest, kind, and honest. A people pleaser who knows little of the real world—and his own strength. Travels to the royal capital with dreams of becoming a soldier.



Marie the Witch

The Princess of Azami, disguised as an information broker on the East Side. Hosts Lloyd at her house for...reasons.





Allan Lidocaine

A promising young man. Drawn to Lloyd's strength and would follow him anywhere.



Riho Flavin

Skilled mercenary. In it for the money. Unable to take off her mithril arm on her own.



Selen Hemein

A girl saved from a curse by Lloyd, who she believes is "the one."



Chrome Molybdenum

Owner of the cafeteria, personal guard to the princess, and an instructor at the military school.



Choline Sterase

A female instructor at the military academy. Flummoxed by the powerful new students.



Rol Calcife

Headmaster of Rokujou Sorcery Academy. Seems to have history with Riho...



Phyllo Quinone

Mena's younger sister and a martial artist. Riled up by Lloyd's unnatural strength.



Mena Quinone

A brilliant young magic instructor from Rokujou Sorcery Academy. A foodie.

Prologue

“Heads up, we’re reaching the end of the pavement,” the man at the reins said to the two passengers sitting in the carriage. “It’ll be bumpy from here on out.”

The horses objected to the unpaved path ahead, but the driver soothed them. He was a brick of a man with a square jaw, a former royal guard currently teaching at the military school. His name was Colonel Chrome Molybdenum.

Inside the carriage were a boy staring out the window like an excited child and a woman dressed like a typical witch, complete with a pointy hat and black robes.

The woman leaned forward to speak to Chrome, taking in the view of the sunset as she did. “We’re about halfway there.”

“And why are we going to a place like this again, Your Highness?”

“Chrome. No titles—not while Lloyd’s around.”

“Pardon me... *Marie*.”

“Much better.”

This exotic-looking witch called herself Marie. She ran a small shop on the East Side of the royal capital, but she was really Princess Maria Azami of the Kingdom of Azami.

When her father was possessed by a usurper of a demon lord, she had disguised herself, fighting to save her kingdom—a situation that had been neatly wrapped up recently, all thanks to the timely intervention of a certain someone.

Now she was finally able to enjoy life again. Perhaps things weren’t that easy, though; they weren’t in a carriage this late for nothing, after all.

“Again, why do you need to go all the way out here?” Chrome pulled

something out of his pocket—a leaflet. He frowned at the lettering, which was quite flashy—sort of like a flyer advertising a sale at your local grocer. “To Nandin Village, aka the Village of the Holy Sword. So named because of the Holy Sword stuck in a mound nearby.”

Marie sighed, clearly well aware of his concern. “Basically, there are plans to have the cross-continental railroad run past the place. One thing after another has made that railroad a symbol of our alliance with the Jiou Empire, so improving international relations, *blah-blah-blah*...”

“A good thing, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, and right as they’d bought up nearly all the property needed to lay the tracks, they got to the woods near this village, and...”

At this point, Chrome remembered just how touchy the villages around here could be.

The woodlands and marshes to the north of Azami were pioneered late, and many areas remained untouched by human hands.

The Jiou Empire was located across the northern border, and as relations between the two countries worsened, pioneering efforts slowed even further. Meanwhile, as trade boomed with Rokujou (which was the kingdom to the west), trade roads and sea routes sprang up, bringing money into the kingdom.

This left the residents here with a strong tendency toward self-reliant, “expect nothing from the government” attitudes, and many villagers were exceedingly hostile to outsiders or focused on the bottom line.

Chrome scowled, jumping ahead of Marie. “They started driving a hard bargain?”

“Yeah, and their argument was a strange one. ‘We can’t allow the woods where the Holy Sword lies to be cut down for a railroad.’ Even though we deliberately planned things so that the railroad would go nowhere near the location of the sword itself.”

“Greed can make people do the silliest things.”

“Yeah,” Marie said, scratching her cheek. “So my fa—I mean, *the king* foisted

the problem on me, hoping I could negotiate a peaceful resolution. When I protested, you know what he said? ‘You’ve got to get it done, Maria! Otherwise, the only way we can improve relations with Jiou is by forcing you into a political marriage!’ So, well, desperate measures.”

“Ah...hence, Lloyd?”

They both looked back at the boy with a gentle disposition staring happily out the window.

Lloyd Belladonna. A boy with physical abilities you would never imagine from looking at him.

He hailed from the legendary village of Kunlun, where he’d been the weakest kid in town. Growing up there had left him prone to severely underestimating his own talents and extremely lacking in common sense. Both of these caused no end of headaches for those around him.

For example, he tended to act like all monsters were just normal animals. He believed broken bones could be healed in a day and thought that holding your breath underwater for an hour was totally normal—the list could go on and on. Oh, right—he’d also resolved the threat from the demon lord without ever realizing what was actually going on.

If anyone tried to explain that he was strong, he would pass it off either as a joke or as an attempt to make him feel better... He was both friendly and modest.

Marie smiled in his direction and then sighed.

“My father’s idea is that if we take the Holy Sword out of the Village of the Holy Sword, it’ll just become your average village, and they won’t be able to use that sword as a bargaining chip.”

The leaflet from earlier had headlines on the front like, “Try your hand at the legend!” and “Whoever pulls the Holy Sword is the rightful owner!” And the back was packed with ads for inns and restaurants and assorted leisure facilities.

The village sounded perfectly developed, really, but Chrome decided to focus on a different concern. “But if you use him for this, won’t your master object?”

Chrome pictured an itty-bitty girl in a white robe with twin black pigtails—who looked to be in middle school.

Her name was Alka. She was the chief of Kunlun, village of living legends, and despite her youthful appearance, her actual age was well over a hundred—a phenom known as the *loli* grandma. But if you called her that, she might well teleport directly to your location and place all manner of terrible curses upon you using the power of ancient runes.

Body of a child, age of a tree, mind-set of a pubescent boy—all her worldly desires focused squarely on Lloyd. So, well, no need to mince words about it. She was a monster.

She had told Marie time and time again that Kunlun villagers were never to interfere with human affairs, only with demon lords and natural disasters—but this time they had an excuse.

“Thing is, she’s actually under house arrest back in Kunlun.”

“She is?” Chrome balked.

That sounded like a pretty big deal.

“Heh-heh-heh,” Marie said, grinning. “Apparently, the villagers figured out she was skipping out on work to teleport to the capital and see Lloyd, so they’re pissed.”

“...Teleport, huh.”

She had used a skill beyond mortal man like anyone else would a bicycle. Chrome rubbed his temples.

“Yeah, so to make up for what she skipped out on, she’s stuck in the field until the harvest is done. Serves her right! Hyuck-gweh-heh! And in the meantime...”

Years of pent-up resentment were written on her face. Chrome wisely decided not to prod any further and focused on the horses.

Meanwhile, Lloyd finally thought to ask about the purpose of their journey. “Marie, why the excursion?”

“Just a little volunteer work! Gathering a little trash.”

This was, of course, a lie. All Marie wanted to do was put some tears in some miserly villagers' eyes.

"Trash?"

"Yeah, some stones and things in the way of the railroad."

There was a note of sarcasm in her voice, but with no knowledge of the circumstances, Lloyd remained completely oblivious to it. His eyes sparkling, he gave her a look of great respect.

"You're amazing, Marie! Good deeds for no rewards! I see, that's why we're going so late! It's all so no one will know! You really are a hero—Oh, wait, right, you hate when I say that, sorry."

"R-right..." Marie managed a strained smile.

An earlier misunderstanding had forced her to claim she was the hero of the realm, and she had yet to find an opportunity to clear that up. The pure sincerity in his eyes brought only pangs of guilt. It was like she was a boy who'd found himself in a web of lies about being a total player—when he'd never even gone out with a girl before.

Overhearing this, Chrome grimaced, then called back, "We're still a ways out, so you two should get some rest."

Marie settled herself into a more comfortable position, closed her eyes, and thought:

With that sword gone, they'll have no leg to stand on, and the railway plans can proceed. I won't be forced into a political marriage. I do hate to use Lloyd like this, but... Well, we don't know if he can pull the sword yet anyway.

The light of the setting sun on her eyelids turned everything orange. By the time they got there, it would be late at night—the perfect moment.

Meanwhile, Lloyd perused the leaflet, looking baffled. "So...why are we traveling by this really slow carriage? If we just run across the treetops, we could be there in like twenty minutes, tops."

"...Who am I kidding? He'll absolutely pull the thing out."

Lloyd had a different way of looking at the world, and it wiped the smiles off

both Marie's and Chrome's faces.

WELCOME TO THE VILLAGE OF THE HOLY SWORD!

FAMOUS FRIED SWORDS! EARN BONUS POINTS!

EARN TRIPLE SWORD POINTS EVERY WEDNESDAY!

The party stared at the signs and banners pushing mystery points. They'd arrived after midnight, but even at this hour, the town was obnoxious. Lord knows what it was like in daylight.

The village, named Nandin Village for the sacred bamboo that was their original main source of income, was located in a clearing in the forest. But several decades ago, they'd found a mound with a sword stuck in it that no one could remove, which had led to a bump in tourism—and they'd started calling themselves the Village of the Holy Sword instead.

An extremely literal name—hardly a good one—but, given how hard they were pushing the thing, clearly appropriate.

"It's neither clear what you get for earning points or even what gets you points, which is inherently suspicious."

Shaking her head at the point scam, Marie moved forward, Lloyd and Chrome behind her.

It wasn't long before they spied the mound with the sword in it, surrounded by even more banners.

It was a stone dais, like a moss-covered grave, with an equally moss-covered sword sticking out of it. Only the hilt was bare from all the people who had tried extracting it.

In the moonlight, the sword certainly gave off a sacred air.

But the banners declaring 5 POINTS FOR A CHANCE TO PULL! totally killed the vibe.

"Hmm, the village economy seems to revolve around the point system."

"Chrome, don't sound so impressed," Marie reprimanded gently.

The villagers' efforts were hardly admirable.

"Sorry, I just thought they'd clearly put a lot of work into it."

“Heh...and those efforts are causing us problems. Threaten me with political marriages, and I’ll make sure you feel it.”

“Remind me not to cross you...”

Marie’s sinister grin only deepened.

“By the way, Marie,” Lloyd said, waving a trash picker, “what should I be doing here?”

“Oh, Lloyd, can you start gathering trash around here? Start with that mound.”

“Roger that!” He shook the bag in his other hand open and started picking up trash around the mound. Even from a distance, they’d seen plenty of empty bottles, cans, and discarded leaflets and brochures all around it, left behind by tourists.

Lloyd diligently filled his bag with them.

“Heave-ho...heave-ho...”

Toss... Rattle. (The sound of an empty can.)

Toss... Rustle. (The sound of a magazine.)

Shnk... Schiing. (The sound of the Holy Sword pulled out and put in the bag.)

Toss... Clnk. (The sound of an empty bottle.)

““ ””

They’d expected it, but still... Marie’s and Chrome’s faces when he just picked up the Holy Sword along with the garbage were a sight to behold.

They both sort of deflated. Like, think about it. He’d drawn a sword that no one could draw as if...it was just another empty bottle or discarded magazine. If the challengers of years past had seen this, they’d have shrieked in horror.

“Sorry, Marie! What do we do with sharp objects? This sword’s ancient but still technically a weapon? Is there a special holding place for dangerous trash?”

Both pairs of eyes clearly considered Lloyd the greater threat.

“Right, well...can’t leave something like that lying around! Better take it home

with us.”

Just then, a middle-aged man with even less hair than you’d expect at his age came striding toward them, clearly on patrol.

“What are you doing?! It’s outside Holy Sword business hours!”

“Oh dear. The village mayor.”

It seemed this man was actually in charge here. He was so mad there was steam rising off him.

“Who do you think you...? Wait, you’re the Witch of the East Side!” he shrieked. “I don’t know if the castle sent you, but you oughtta know right from wrong! How many times do I have to tell you the railroad isn’t welcome here?”

At this point, Lloyd stepped between Marie and the furious mayor, bowing low.

“Sorry! We were just trying to help! We’ve been cleaning the area for you!”

“C-cleaning...? I don’t care what the reason is; entering the mound vicinity at this hour is sacrilege! You defile the Holy Sword! Shame on you!”

“W-we do? I’m so sorry!”

“I bet you just came to scatter more trash here out of spite! What is that rusty blade you have there? We don’t leave any tetanus hazards lying around! Good lord! Where do you think you are? This is a scared village, built to honor the sacred sword! Blasphemers!”

“...Pot calling the kettle...,” Marie muttered. For all his talk of the sanctity of the sword, he’d just dismissed the thing as a rusty tetanus hazard.

And he’d utterly failed to notice that the sword in question wasn’t there. Yet he was foaming at the mouth anyway. It was downright comic.

“...Well, if you don’t grasp the situation, we can’t really negotiate. Mayor, notice anything different?” Marie gently nudged him toward a eureka moment.

“Yes, people like you don’t belong anywhere near the Holy Forest! This is the Holy Forest of the Holy Sword! The very trees are scared! The river brings blessings! And since ancient times, one thing has watched over us like a mother

—the Holy Sword that’s...gone?! You’re *KIDDING!*”

Having finally spotted the difference, the mayor did a really dated-looking pratfall.

Relieved that he’d finally caught up, Marie immediately launched into negotiations—negotiations primarily fueled by a personal grudge.

“It is gone, isn’t it? I wonder why.”

“...I—I know! The Holy Sword is now invisible to unscrupulous people at night! How holy of it!”

“So why can’t you see it, either? Aren’t you the mayor of holy town?”

“*Hngg.*”

Looking aghast, the mayor lunged up onto the mound. He crawled around, making sure it hadn’t fallen behind any signs or into any cracks in the stone, like someone checking for lost change under a vending machine.

“It’s gone... It’s gone! It’s goooooone! The ancient, noble, historically significant Holy Sword’s hilt! The blade, only half visible, was somewhat worse for wear but bestowed such dignity!”

“Totally different from this rusty lump of tetanus.”

“Of course! How dare you even compare it to that traaa—aiiiieee!”

He seemed to have worked it out at last. His eyes nearly bugged out of his head.

“Don’t touch it! You’ll get tetanus.”

“G-give it back! It belongs here! You can’t just yank it out; it’ll cause damage to—!”

“Damage to what?”

The mayor was starting to sound like the warnings on an NES cartridge.

“J-just give it back! Without that, the village...isn’t the Village of the Holy Sword anymore!”

“Don’t be silly! You used to be Nandin Village, famous for sacred bamboo. You

can just go back to that way of life! And the Holy Sword belongs to whoever pulled it out. You get what you get, and don't get upset."

"But! But if we lose the sword now, all our projects go kaput! No more Holy Sword Forest Camp! No more Holy Sword Forest Golf Course! No more Holy Sword Forest Art Museum! No more Holy Sword Forest Park! Hotel Holy Sword! The breach of contracts alone will wipe the village out!"

"Serves you right."

For all their talk of not disturbing the sacred forest, *this* was the reason they didn't want to forfeit the land? This only deepened Marie's scowl.

Faced with certain doom, the mayor's eyes grew unfocused, and he started making strange noises. "Ababababa..."

"And *there's* the damage. Whatever! We're looking forward to your answer on the cross-continental railroad situation. Just be grateful we're paying decent prices for this non-Holy Forest."

Leaving him foaming at the mouth, the party turned to leave.

Lloyd had stood there looking confused the whole time.

"Um, what Holy Sword was he talking about?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it, Lloyd," Marie said, looking like her personal worries were at an end. "This will help the railway negotiations move forward. A weight off my shoulders."

Chrome took the sword from Lloyd, then leaned in to whisper, "Your Highness, what do we do with this sword?"

Marie put a hand to her chin, thinking. Then she smiled and slapped Chrome on the back.

"Make good use of it, Chrome!"

"Huh?"

"I didn't actually think that far ahead. Hmm, that greedy mayor may get a fake sword ready and try and keep the scam going... We'd better publicly announce the sword has been pulled through the proper channels." Marie

stretched and got ready to board the carriage.



“Hmm... For a place called the Village of the Holy Sword, I sure didn’t see any Holy Swords,” Lloyd commented. “Unless it was that dirty thing? Nah, no way. I pulled it out no problem!”

Lloyd’s self-deprecation was puttering right along, certain he was hardly strong enough to extract a Holy Sword. Would anything ever make him see the light?

Meanwhile, Chrome had been saddled with quite a burden. He looked down at the ancient sword in his hands, muttering, “*Sigh...* What next?”

But his sigh was swallowed up by the starry sky above.

Chapter 1

A Head-Tilting Dilemma: Suppose Your Mixer Was Attended Only by a Very Lackluster Crew

"Siiiiigh..."

The next day, a sleep-deprived Chrome stumbled into the faculty office to find Choline Sterase sighing deeply while staring at a list of names.

"....."

Raising an eyebrow at this depressing welcome, Chrome frowned at her, then grabbed a scrap of paper and dropped it in front of her.

"Siiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiigh..." Another deep sigh caught the scrap of paper, sending it wafting away through a sunbeam across the row of desks.

Three and a half yards... This must be a bad one.

The arc of the paper was a good measure of the depth of the problem.

"Good luck with that," he said and attempted to skedaddle, pretending not to have noticed. But no sooner did his hand touch the door than Choline's voice pierced him in the back.

"Chrome! You're s'posedta ask what's wrong!"

Escape thwarted.

Choline spoke with a rapid-fire accent from the western reaches, and ordinarily, she was fresh-faced enough that she could be mistaken for a student. But today she was glaring balefully at him through her brown bangs.

Hopes dashed, Chrome's square shoulders slumped.

"Yeah, I...just didn't see a way to help."

"You see a girl in trouble, you gotta try and help! Be a little more sensitive! Even if you can't do squat, just having someone to talk at can really help a girl

deal! Take a hint!”

Her cries echoed through the office. People turned to look, wondering if there was some sort of emergency, but they all just went, “Oh, Colonel Choline,” and went back to work.

Chrome had been unfortunately selected as her sounding board. This must be how a hostess feels dealing with a bad drunk.

“So what’s the problem?”

“Chrome, you ever hear of the Continental Student Sorcery Tournament?”

“Uh, sure. Huge tournament; draws from every military, sorcery, or agriculture school across the continent.”

“Zactly. And you know where it’s being held next?”

“Afraid not.”

Choline sighed dramatically and shoved a multicolored leaflet toward him. “It’s here...right in Azami.”

The leaflet fluttered in the gust of her sigh. The words *Kingdom of Azami* were definitely written on it.

Chrome felt like he should really have known they were hosting an event of that scale, so he made his square frame as round as he could. “I—I see...,” he mumbled.

“Forget about it! Outside of the people involved, the majority of the populace don’t even know it exists. I mean, Azami ain’t exactly known for magic. Nobody cares!”

“Hmm, true enough.”

Like Choline said, the people of Azami had never really been interested in magic.

This was a kingdom developed by commerce, so they tended to benefit more from advances in weaponry and science.

Magic tended to be more of a focus inland, in regions as yet undeveloped or with limited access to iron. But in Azami, the only magic really valued was that

used in ice production.

“A tournament drawing the greatest talents the world over might get some attention, but one for students? It might be a big deal elsewhere, like in Rokujou, but here? And as a sorcery instructor, that just makes me sad.”

Chrome finally began to see what Choline was worried about.

“So you’re working on...?”

“Who to enter. We’re hosting, so we gotta make a decent showing!”

Azami’s military academy had an entrance exam that emphasized physical skills and relegated magic to a written test. It was like giving someone a group of students on sports scholarships and telling them to put together a team for the choir competition. A disaster in the making.

“We mostly teach countermeasures for dealing with magic crime. But when it comes to actually using it...”

“And we thought war was brewing with Jiou, so nearly all the cadets have muscles for brains! That’s why I’m stuck here running through the background intel on the new students.” She glared at the list of names again.

“Well, what about Selen Hemein?” Chrome said, pointing at a girl’s name. “She’s from a local lord’s family—might have studied a spell or two.”

The picture next to the name was a blond girl with a short bob, smiling quietly. At a glance, she looked rather reserved.

But Selen Hemein had spent ten years with a cursed belt wrapped around her face and had become a local legend—the Cursed Belt Princess, they called her.

Thanks to Lloyd, the curse had been broken, and it was now an artifact waiting at her hips for a chance to protect her.

Because of this, she was entirely devoted to Lloyd. Tales of her stalker-ish escapades had elevated her from a local legend to a living one. A classic tale of wasted beauty.

“Hmm,” Choline said, folding her arms. “I asked Selen once if she knew any magic...”

“Oh? What did she say?”

“Said she didn’t but was definitely interested. Wanted to at least learn some healing spells. I mean, having someone who knows those is totally welcome and all, but she only wants them so she can heal her crush if he gets injured! I s’pose I was once prone to such pure intentions myself...”

“Liar.”

“It’s true! I was super passionate about learning healing magic!”

I meant the part where you called yourself pure... Chrome controlled the impulse to voice this thought; stepping on an avoidable land mine would just draw this conversation out even further.

“Well, I guess she’s a candidate anyway... Oh, also, you’re in for a long lecture on how pure I used to be later, so brace yourself.”

A bead of cold sweat ran down Chrome’s cheek. He brushed it aside and began attempting to change the subject.

“I bet this could be a good teaching challenge! You’re our healing magic expert, Colonel Choline! Rokujou Sorcery Academy’s reputation may have fallen in recent years, but any graduate of that school is still a bona fide elite! I wish I’d had a teacher like that!”

“.....”

Choline just fixed him with a pointed stare. Desperate to alleviate the rising tension, Chrome hastily pointed at another name.

“Oh, what about Riho Flavin? She’s a mercenary. She’s probably picked up a spell or two. Certainly knows how to fight a mage.”

Chrome had pointed to the single most evil-looking girl on the list.

Riho Flavin. The one-armed mercenary. Her beady eyes made malicious smirks look natural on her, though her massive mechanical mithril arm looked out of place on her slender frame.

She’d only enlisted in the school as part of a deal to escape a warrant out for her arrest, but she was more interested in money than she was in training.

Choline glanced down at the list. "I've asked her about it, too."

"Oh?"

"She put a price on the intel."

"...In character, at least. Hard to tell if she doesn't want to answer or is just strapped for cash."

"Yeah, could be both. But if she can make that mithril arm function, she's got to have a natural capacity for magic."

"Mithril, huh? How'd she end up with something like that anyway?"

"I'm curious myself, but it'll have to wait till your next paycheck."

Her gaze made it clear he'd be the one paying for that intel.

Ignoring this, Chrome pointed at a male student. "Well...what about Allan?"

He'd indicated a big guy with a cocky grin.

Allan Toin Lidocaine. From a heavily decorated family, he was a pretty tough guy.

Once conceited and prone to picking fights, events had led to him declaring Lloyd his mentor and revering him.

"Just look at that face! Muscles for brains," Choline dismissed, right off the bat.

Chrome stared at the picture again. "Yeah...", he admitted.

"In general, girls are better at magic," Choline muttered. "They say maidenhood and magic power go hand in hand."

"Uh, then..."

It seemed like Choline wanted to imply she was a maiden, but knowing full well she couldn't even be trusted to wash her own dishes, Chrome ignored this.

His finger wavered awkwardly over the list for a minute...then finally landed on one final face.

"...Can't forget him, can we?" Chrome clearly hesitated to suggest him at all. He'd pointed to the very bottom of the candidates—to Lloyd. He quickly

glanced around to make sure no one could hear them. “Lloyd can use ancient runes. His raw magic talent is probably head and shoulders above everyone else...and possibly the rest of the body parts and those of several other people’s.”

“Hell no!” Choline snapped.

Chrome looked surprised at the vehemence in her tone. “Uh...why not?”

“Think about it! This kid goes in front of a crowd of people from all across the world and starts tossing off runes? He’ll have an army of scouts breathing down his neck. Rokujou would definitely be recruiting him hard. Might even wind up with mad scientists wanting to experiment on him and discover the secret behind his strength!”



Mad scientists? Sounded like she'd been reading too many comics. Normally, Chrome would have said as much, but...

"Yeah... I can actually see that."

After witnessing Lloyd's power with his own eyes, pretty much anything seemed possible.

Frustrated, Choline messed up her hair.

"And he'd be so outta place! It'd be like bringing a racehorse to face off a bunch of kids at a sports festival. The kids would go home crying, and their parents'd be so pissed. I don't wanna win like that!"

Chrome had no response to that.

Choline folded her arms, making her mind up. "Right! I'm gonna do a proper diagnosis for magic abilities, then run a class teaching everyone basic spells! Maybe there's some hidden talent out there! Okay, that's that! Better start getting ready! See ya later, Chrome!"

Having solved her problems on her own, Choline stormed out of the office.

"See? I didn't do anything," Chrome muttered.

Yawning, he turned to start his actual work...when his eyes lit on the tournament leaflet.

"They're having trouble making people care about it, huh? Maybe there oughtta be an extra prize of some kind."

One thing sprang to mind immediately. That Holy Sword.

Oh yeah... That would count as a proper channel for announcing it, for sure. An official prize from the Azami government.

Having found a way to unload his personal problem, Chrome quickly finished up his work and headed to the tournament offices.

A short while before Chrome and Choline's conversation...

The cadets were all in a lecture hall, slumped in their seats. Chrome, the instructor from hell, had spent the morning doing his best drill-sergeant routine and worn them all out.

Two hundred push-ups, three laps around the campus, maneuver training carrying the full weight of a military march... Each of these alone would have counted as an effective punishment, but somehow, they'd all made it through.

Perhaps not alive. They were so drenched in sweat, they looked like they'd come straight to class from a swim meet. Only Lloyd Belladonna was waiting for the teacher's arrival with any vitality in his expression.

"Oh boy, I'm so excited! Magic class!"

Riho gave him a little side-eye, then peeled herself off the desk. "You're certainly in a good mood," she observed.

"I am! I'm finally a student here, which is what I always wanted! I'm enjoying every moment of it!"

Circumstances had conspired against him, and he'd failed the entrance exam. He'd cleared the physical portion too fast for the eye to see—and since nobody had seen it, he'd failed.

But after everything had settled down, he was finally allowed to join as a special exception. Naturally, he was thrilled.

"I feel the same way!" Selen said, throwing out a thumbs-up so hard it was positively quivering. "Oh, to share classes with you, Sir Lloyd! Oww..." Apparently, she'd actually strained her thumb.

"Sit still," Allan warned. "The whole point of lectures is to let your body rest."

He sauntered up from behind Lloyd with his "cocky jerk" vibe somewhat dampened by the rigors of the school's training. Even with his family's military history, this morning had been brutal. Claiming that lectures were time to rest was certainly the sort of idea that justified Choline's "muscles for brains" evaluation.

Meanwhile, Lloyd just looked downright guilty.

"You're sure this is right? I mean, giving everyone such a light workout just to make sure I can keep up... Maybe I should tell Chrome to work us all harder..."

Lloyd could cross the continent on foot in a week's time, so this training had been like a stroll in the park.

Please don't! You'll kill us! shrieked Riho internally.

The other two quickly changed the subject.

"M-magic class should be a lot of fun! Working out all day can be such a snore! Right, Selen?"

"Exactly! I am positively sick of exercising, Allan!"

Lloyd proved sufficiently distracted. "Yeah!" he agreed. "I wonder what class will be like?"

Seemed like they'd escaped the threat of extra workouts for now. All three breathed a sigh of relief.

With that settled, Riho began explaining the mechanics of magic class. "Sorry to dash your hopes, but Azami isn't really big on magic, so this really is a way to take a breather. We kinda just sit and listen to Colonel Choline chatter away."

No sooner had the words left her mouth than the door slid open and...

"*ATTEN-SHUN!*" Choline came bursting in, all fired up, also in drill-sergeant mode. This was clearly not going to be a chatty day.

"Why's everyone lying around like a bunch of princesses?! You maggots have to earn the right to rest! You there! No talking!"

Choline had clearly lost her mind again. Oblivious to the class's horrified looks, she launched into a fiery lecture.

"Good news, everyone! We're canceling magic lectures! Instead, we're gonna spend a few days practicing magic!"

Riho instantly threw up a hand in protest. Her entire face screwed up with confusion. "Uh, Colonel Choline? We've been told that cadets didn't need the ability to use magic, just the knowledge required to fight magic crime. When did that change?"

"Weak sauce, Riho! Sure, practicing something you may or may not learn is less effective from a public safety standpoint than learning countermeasures..."

"My point exactly!"

"But wait, there's more! By learning firsthand how difficult these skills are to

obtain, you will deepen your understanding on those countermeasures and improve your capacity to deal with the criminals in question! Also, there's a magic tournament coming up, so I need to find people with the potential to enter it, but that's entirely beside the point!"

"...There it is. The actual reason," Selen muttered.

"Oh, right, that's in Azami this year," Allan said. "I suppose they don't want the army looking too shabby."

Lloyd raised his hand. "Um, wouldn't the upperclassmen be better for this? Who entered last time?"

An obvious question, but the answer was even worse than anyone expected.

"Oh, the last round of contenders started swinging their fists before anyone got a spell going and were disqualified for rules violations."

"You suck at picking people."

Choline ignored Riho pointedly, giving the room a glare. "So anyone with a good head on their shoulders and the ability to use a spell or two is in. Welcomed with open arms."

Seemed like her standards were set so low they were almost underground. Riho began seriously worrying about the future of the kingdom.

"Well, the reward won't be worth it, so I doubt anyone here will be interested in—"

Snap! Snap!

"—guess they are."

Riho's grumble had been interrupted by the audible crack as Lloyd and Selen snapped to upright positions, hanging on Choline's every word.

Common sense never really applied to either of these two. Lloyd with his inhuman strength and Selen with her stalker tendencies weren't about to let low standards bother them.

"I get that Lloyd takes everything seriously and is curious as all hell...but why are you in?" Riho asked.

Selen ignored this. Hand raised high, she asked, “Colonel Choline! I really, *really* want to learn healing magic! I want to heal the man I love when he gets injured! And thus, tie the knot!”

Her cheeks were ever so slightly flushed. If healing injuries tied the knot, all doctors would be polygamists.

“...Geez,” Allan said, shaking his head at her ceaseless delusions. “You’re better off carrying a bandage around...or maybe just rubbing random grasses on it. Be more likely to work than a spell cast with ulterior motives...”

“How dare you! When I become this kingdom’s premiere healer, I won’t give you an autograph.”

“You sure dream big... I mean, have you even cast a spell before?”

Selen just shook her head, appearing exasperated. “What a stupid question. I can’t even use a *single* one,” she declared proudly.

“Why are you bragging about this, again?”

“I am a blank slate! A clean white canvas! One waiting to be painted in Lloyd’s colors!”

Clearly, her brain was packed with lewd fantasies.

“Geez... What do you think, Lloyd?” Allan asked, a note of exhaustion creeping into his tone.

Lloyd just looked confused. “Er, I’m totally lost here. I’m not any good at magic or anything, so I really respect anyone who can use fire or healing spells.”

This only got Selen even more worked up. Like adding fuel to her stalker fire. “Understood! Colonel Choline! Teach me some fire magic, too!”

Respect = Love was an equation only a stalker brain would formulate, and Choline looked ready to scold her for it. “It’s not that easy...”

“It’s not that easy, Selen,” Riho interrupted. “Fire magic is the easiest to remember but also the most dangerous. Explosions can cause a major fire, and if you fail to convert the magic energy properly, you could implode.”

Riho had stolen the words right out of Choline’s mouth, and she was left with

nothing to say. “Mm” was all she managed.

Meanwhile Selen wasn’t letting Riho’s arguments get the best of her.

“Then healing spells! Those won’t bring any risk with them!”

“Yeah, but healing—”

“Nope, m’lady, healing spells are the worst! Even pros take a year of training to heal an ounce of body mass! Take a pinch of your midriff, then imagine spending a year of your life just to heal that! And if you don’t use the spell just right, you’ll leave bits of dirt and rock to fester inside the healed wound, requiring expensive surgery afterward. It never ends!”

“O-oh...”

The specifics were finally enough to silence Selen.

Seeing this, Choline forgot about her drill-sergeant act. “Whew,” she said, sounding impressed. “Riho! You sure know your stuff. Leaving dirt in a wound is a common early mistake in healing magic, but I’m surprised you knew that.”

“Uh, well...” Riho scratched her cheek awkwardly. Maybe she’d gotten a little too worked up.

“If it’s that hard, all the more reason to take advantage of Colonel Choline’s expertise,” Allan said, trying to smooth the situation over. “After all, she’s the best healer in all of Azami. With her teaching you...”

Choline’s ears twitched when he said *best healer*, and she snapped back into her drill sergeant character.

“Right you are, Allan! As a reward, you can come over to my house and screw the drain pipe!”

“I don’t just go for any wet hole...,” Allan objected, entirely flummoxed by this shocking return.

“Healing magic sounds really cool! I’d love to learn it, too!”

“You’re such a good boy, Lloyd! As a reward, here’s a coupon for a free donut at the café!”

Lloyd’s comment elicited a response not from the drill sergeant, but from the

normal Choline. Maybe she should work a little harder on the whole character-consistency thing.

“That’s some preferential treatment!”

“Shut it, fleabag! You have the nerve to talk back to a superior officer? You like donuts with *that* mug? Is there a young maiden inside there?!”

She was steadily deteriorating from drill sergeant to just plain mean. Allan’s eyes filled with tears.

Meanwhile, Lloyd looked down at the coupon, saw *For couples only* written on it, looked bemused, and then stuck it in his back pocket.

At this point, Selen’s mind had finished converting the entire conversation in her favor and piped up again.

“If I learn healing magic, I can go to a donut café with Lloyd and do this and that... Mwa-ha-ha-ha... I’m in!”

The donut café would object to this. Please.

But Selen’s enthusiasm just got Choline even more worked up.

“Well said! Choline’s Healing Boot Camp is gonna go off!”

Riho just propped up her head with her arm, eyes half-lidded. She was clearly past caring. “So what’s the plan, specifically? Generally, people take a knife to a plant, but...”

“No time to take it slow! We’re gonna start by trying to heal a real person’s injuries! You can even keep the spell formula open for all I care. You can’t beat practice and experience!”

“Eh-heh-heh. So we need injured people, then?” Selen started shoving Allan toward the hallway.

Outside the class, Allan was quickly stripped half-naked. All eyes locked on him.

“Wait, what the hell are you doing, Belt Princess?”

“Oh, look, we have here a man famed for being all tough!”

“Hell no! Don’t you dare! Hey! Don’t stare!”

But if anyone stepped in, it would be like they were volunteering to get hurt.

“Don’t worry! Your face basically has a gaping wound, so this may be your one chance in life to become handsome!”

“What? I’ll have you know I’m considered quite dashing! Wait, Colonel Choline?”

He’d turned to find Choline next to him deploying a spell formula. The flames wreathing around her fists certainly didn’t look like a healing spell...

“We can’t get anywhere in the Continental Student Sorcery Tournament without coming together as one—and without a few sacrifices!”

“Coming together? Sacrifices? Isn’t that super contradictory—
GAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

Ultimately, his injuries proved too severe for any healing spell, and Allan was sent to the hospital.

Class was canceled.

Around the same time, on the North Side—the gateway to the Kingdom of Azami, filled with souvenir shops, restaurants, and luxury hotels, all revolving around the tourism industry.

In a room at one of those luxury hotels, a woman with an intimidating aura was seated commandingly on a couch.

She wore a gray suit that had clearly been custom tailored. On the slender side, with long, glossy black hair, she was likely in her midtwenties.

But it was her eyes you noticed first. As provoking as they were provocative, their single most defining feature was the kind of arrogance capable of irritating literally anyone she made eye contact with. Think the kind of woman who would never make it in customer service, no matter how beautiful she was.

“So? Any results?”

She spoke with the distinctive accent of the western regions but made it sound smooth and elegant.

She was speaking to two girls who stood before her.

One was a blond, built like a supermodel—the kind of girl who could pull off any kind of outfit. Except today she was wearing plain, well-worn, bulky trousers and a faded jacket. Her face was devoid of expression, and her hands hung limply at her sides.

The other was a small girl with eyes that barely opened. This one was highly expressive and wore a hunting cap and a miniskirt, like a journalist aiming for a wholesome kind of sexy.

“Don’t get greedy, Rol!” the smaller girl—Mena—said, grinning at the woman in the suit. She reached down and poked Rol in the shoulder.

Rol frowned at her. “I am your boss... You could act like it!”

“Sure, but that’s *such* minutia. Wait, what were we talking about again?”

Rol sighed and decided to pick a different battle. “Minutia? Says the one who forgot the most important thing! I asked you to investigate, remember?!”

“Oh, right! We found some really good kebabs!” Mena said, throwing her a thumbs-up. “We’ll show you later.”

“I didn’t ask for an evaluation of the local cuisine!”

“Oh, details, schmetails! Are you more a salt or a sauce girl, Rol?”

“Says the one who doesn’t care for details!”

“It’s everything, Rol! If you don’t know which faction you’re in, your superior will think you’re super indecisive when you get drinks after work! Totally ruin your reputation!”

“You’re doing a great job of that right now!”

Mena simply would not listen. She’d straightened out her hunting cap, clearly dead serious about this. Was she a food journalist?

“Salt people talk big about bringing out the flavor of the ingredients, but it’s the sauce that gives a shop its unique flavor. It’s like the difference between a lead actor getting by on his face alone and a veteran character actor who brings nuance to the performance.”

Rol rubbed her temples, enduring the lecture. Then she turned to the other

girl, who'd been hovering like a zombie in the background.

"Phyllo, how'd it actually go? Can I get a real answer from you?"

".....Mm." Phyllo allowed a very long silence to pass before grunting expressionlessly.

Mena immediately translated. "She said the kebabs were great! The seasonings were particularly good at a place toward the harbor..."

"You're stuck on kebabs, too?! No, literally all she actually said was 'Mm.' How much info can you cram into a grunt?!"

"Sisters just get these things. Right, Phyllo?"

"...Mm."

"Aww, Phyllo! You won't get anything for complimenting me!"

These two were a regular vaudeville act. Meanwhile, the word *sisters* had made Rol's brow furrow even further.

"Sisters don't work like that..."

"Yeah, we're definitely split on the salt/sauce thing."

"Get off the kebabs!" Rol got off the couch, advancing on Mena. Phyllo didn't bat an eye.

"...Mm."

"Why, Phyllo! I know you're just joking to alleviate the tension, but that's plain insulting."

"What did she say? Specifically?!"

"I already know we won't win if you sue us, so I really shouldn't."

"She said something that incriminating?!"

This was taking a lot out of Rol, and her shoulders were heaving. Mena took over the couch she'd vacated, sprawling out on it.

"Anyway, Azami's a pretty big place! And its main pitfall is that it's got good food everywhere! My belly can only take so much!"

With nowhere left to sit, Rol settled for crossing her arms angrily. "So you

learned absolutely nothing?!”

“No, no, not nothing. There’s an information merchant on the East Side. Sounds like that’s the place to go to learn about what’s what in Azami.”

“Why didn’t you go there, then?!”

“They say when you’re traveling, money just flies away.”

Both Mena and Phyllo put their hands together, flapping them like wings.

Rol officially ran out of energy to argue. She rubbed her temples. “So you’re broke...or at least don’t know how much the information broker will cost, so you’d like your war chest upped?”

“Bingo! Nail on the head.”

Scowling, Rol tossed her a hefty roll of bills. Mena grinned and tucked it away in the pouch on her hip. She gave the plumper pouch a pleased pat.

“Thanks, Rol! Expect great things.”

Rol sagged against the wall, waving them away. “Get out of here... We don’t have much time.”

Mena jumped to her feet and gave her a theatrical salute.

“Mena and Phyllo, the Quinone sisters, are off to conquer all the fried foods! And we’ll tease some info outta that broker while we’re at it!”

“The other way around! Wait, no! The fried food part is entirely unnecessary!”

Mena waved both hands and left.

And Phyllo stood in front of Rol. “...Don’t worry.”

The first time she’d said anything besides *Mm* all day.

“Phyllo! Your sister may be useless, but you’ve got it together! I know you do!”

“...We’ll bring you souvenirs.”

“I take it back! Get outta here, the both of you!”

Rol’s scream echoed through the room. Had this been an apartment, it would

have earned her a complaint from the landlord.

Either way, these three were clearly up to *something*.

Elsewhere: the East Side. This was the least safe part of Azami, and squabbles of some kind were happening from good morning to good night. With rows of stalls selling curios and black-market items, it was a wonderful district so overflowing with character you had to be a bit of a character yourself to survive.

On the East Side that evening, Marie—owner of the shop where Lloyd was staying—was elegantly sipping a cup of coffee, looking very pleased with herself.

After all, she accomplished a lot the day before. The mayor's reaction had been highly amusing, so she'd earned herself a little satisfaction.

"Nothing like the joy of relaxing with a cup of java."

This was a store, though, right? She didn't really sound like she was a merchant.

Just as she finished her coffee and started carrying the cup to the kitchen, she realized something unfamiliar was standing in the shop.

In front of the shelves of wares was a blond girl in a jacket, arms hanging limply at her side, gaping.

"*Kah!*" Marie realized suddenly this was a human being and coughed awkwardly.

The girl just watched her coughing fit blankly—like all the muscles in her face were nonfunctional, like a mannequin, completely immobile.

"Um...can I help you?"

Marie belatedly realized she was technically still open—again, not exactly the greatest merchant alive—so she tried communicating with the blond. However...

".....Mm."

...was all the response she got.

“Mm?”

“...Mm.”

“Mmm?”

“...Mm?”

Both looked equally confused. But just before the repeated *mms* piled up enough to cause a buggy Gestaltzerfall, the door to the shop slammed open.

“Phyllo, I said wait a sec! The relative proportions of our legs, endurance, and enthusiasm are all totally different!”

This time it was a small girl with smiley eyes, sporting a hunting cap.

It seemed she knew the girl with no facial muscles and that she was capable of human interaction, so Marie turned toward her.

“You’re friends with blank-face here? Just...take her!”

Any clerk talking to a customer like that would definitely warrant a complaint to management. Life was tough that way.

“We’re actually here on business.”

“You are? What kind? Oh, right, I forget. The shop’s still open...”

Honestly, a stray gust of wind could blow her work ethic, which was barely held together by a hair, away.

But the girl in the cap didn’t get mad, so presumably she was used to dealing with the preverbal girl’s fallout. She doffed her cap politely.

“I do apologize for the confusion! I’m Mena Quinone. My cutest features are my eyes! And this is my little sister, Phyllo Quinone. Her cutest feature is her expressionless face! If you’re an information broker, I’m sure you’ve heard of the Quinone sisters?”

“...Mm.”

Calming down somewhat, Marie ran their description past her stock of intel.

“The Quinone sisters? A pair of mercenaries, the elder good at magic, the younger martial arts?”

“Bingo! And we’re temporarily teaching at Rokujou Sorcery Academy.”

Marie gave them a long stare. “So what do you want? Everything I sell is over there.”

She pointed at a pile of medicine strewn all over the place. Professionalism? What’s that?

Mena never even glanced at it. She moved closer to Marie, clearly after something else.

“Nah, we’re good on medicine. But three thousand leagues in search of someone brings us to Marie the Witch.”

“I see... So you require my services as a witch.”

Their goals identified, Marie recovered her stride.

She sat down and took a deep breath.

“According to tradition, witches grant wishes in exchange for payment of equal value. You must be ready to make a sacrifice. With this in mind, what is it you wish for?” Her usual spiel delivered, she flashed a very witchy smile.

“.....Mm.” Phyllo nodded gravely. Then she reached into her bag. “... Here,” she said, handing Marie a bag with a fresh churro in it.

“A sacrifice...of a churro.”

“...Mm.”

Marie was flummoxed again. Phyllo’s expression remained dead serious, so she couldn’t tell if she was pulling her leg.

Meanwhile, Mena looked at the churro and did an extremely theatrical double take.



“Chomp... Ah! This is the cinnamon-sugar churro that Phyllo so adored! I asked for a bite, and she refused! For her to turn this over... Its significance cannot be denied!”

“You just took a bite out of your sacrifice!”

Mena wiped the sugar crumbs from her lips and grinned. “Nice! Very nice! You may not be as good as Rol, but you ain’t bad at delivering reactions, Miss Witch! Anyway, to the point.”

Marie suddenly felt a lot of sympathy for whoever this Rol character was.

Mena held out a photograph. It showed a tall, slender girl with a hood pulled low over her smiley eyes—and a suspiciously lumpy right arm. Marie recognized her instantly.

Mena’s eyes briefly opened. “We’re looking for her. Riho Flavin.”

A classmate of Lloyd’s, she’d come here any number of times. Marie knew she’d been a rather infamous mercenary before.

She had the option of just telling them that.

But if they were looking for revenge or were out to harm her... Marie adjusted her glasses. “So what business do you have with her?”

“Heh-heh-heh. Who do you think you’re asking? You have before you two errand girls...who have no clue what this is about!”

“That’s...the first time anyone’s sounded...so proud about that...” Marie shook her head.

But an instant later, Mena’s vibe changed dramatically. “If you’re worried, then you know where she is—which means you know her. Maybe she’s even a friend?” Her eyes were open now, watching Marie closely.

“You’re...actually pretty sharp.”

“It’s not that I’m not sympathetic. If someone came at me like this about Phyllo, I’d be worried about the same things.”

The tension between them was high.

An uneasy silence settled over the store.

Then Mena laughed. “Sorry, sorry, don’t mean to intimidate! I seriously dunno why! The boss didn’t say. I told her all this confidentiality stuff is why she has no friends, and she punched me for it! I dodged, of course.”

“G-good...”

Mena’s eyes had snapped shut again, and she was back to her previous cheery tone. The tension dissipated.

Marie was relieved.

And...she did not realize that the reins of this conversation were now entirely in Mena’s hands.

“But, well, it’s been a long road, and we really like our current job. You see, Phyllo gets all worked up when she sees strong men—it gets her fighting spirit going—so she always challenges them to a fight, and we always get fired for it. But working at a sorcery academy? There’s no strong men anywhere! We can relax!”

“...I always won,” Phyllo said, throwing up a peace sign.

Marie did her best to smile. “That must have been hard...also, extremely not peaceful. More like...assault...”

“And our budget here is pretty decent, so we’re hoping that money can smooth things over.”

With the momentum totally out of her hands, Marie struggled to come to a decision.

“.....!” Phyllo dropped the peace sign, flinching.

“Phyllo?” Mena asked, looking worried.

Phyllo turned to the door, staring through it. Like an animal that had spied its natural predator.

When Mena leaned in to peer at her face, Phyllo moved protectively in front of her.

Her arms had hung limp this whole time, but now she slowly moved them to waist height—a combat stance.

Her expression remained blank, but her entire body made the gravity of the situation clear.

Feeling the rising heat, Marie gulped.

A silence settled over the room again.

And a moment later, the door swung slowly open. Outside was...

“I’m home!”

...a gentle-looking, totally worry-free boy—Lloyd—back from school.

An instant later...

“.....!” In sharp contrast to her minimalist movements, Phyllo lunged forward with astonishing speed and...

“Oh, customers? Take your time—!” Lloyd bowed politely.

“...Heh!” Phyllo jumped, so high she nearly hit the ceiling, hurling herself at Lloyd.

Meanwhile, he’d only just raised his head from the bow.

“Haaaaaaaah!” A flying kick with her full weight behind it was aimed directly for his forehead.

There was a dull *thunk*. Its impact blasted through the shop.

“Uh...Lloyd?!” Marie yelped.

That was a very strong kick. And he’d been completely defenseless after that bow. Anyone normal would have suffered a cracked skull or a broken neck.

...Anyone normal.

“...What?”

Lloyd was just standing there like nothing had happened. His forehead was slightly redder, but...you know, like someone who’d fallen asleep at their desk.

Wasting no time, Phyllo launched into a roundhouse kick the second she touched down.

With a whizzing sound like a tree trunk hurtling through the air, the pages of the ancient books in the back rustled.

Phyllo's kick landed square in Lloyd's chest.

"...Um?"

Lloyd didn't budge.

Her foot still raised, Phyllo's eyes met Lloyd's.

Each seemed equally surprised. Phyllo slowly lowered her leg.

She looked Lloyd over. He was uninjured. He hadn't even been knocked off his position.

"...Mm?" She cocked her head, forgetting to attack again.

"Mm?" Lloyd did the same.

Her face didn't show it, but her eyes were running all over Lloyd's body. His forehead was slightly red, and there was some dirt on his chest, but he remained standing in exactly the same place—which was enough to rattle anyone.

There was a long silence, broken by a passing bug, the kind you get if you're growing vegetables.

When he saw the bug, Lloyd clapped his hands, as if it all made sense.

"Oh, I see! You were trying to swat that fly! And you just happened to hit me instead."

"...A fly?" Phyllo had no expression, but her voice made it clear how shaken she was.

"Well, your foot may have hit me a couple of times, but don't worry about it! I'm the one who was too out of it to dodge! Wow, city people really use their legs to swat flies? I suppose you don't want your hands getting dirty!"

Lloyd had clearly taken Phyllo's confusion as remorse about accidentally hitting him.

Phyllo took a step back. Having her strongest kick confused for a fly swat would certainly do that; it was literally being told, "Your attack couldn't hurt a fly."

"Phyllo hit him, and not only did he not fall down..." Mena's eyes had opened

wide, clearly on guard against Lloyd.

“Thank god it was just Lloyd,” Marie muttered. “We’d be taking anyone else to the hospital right now.”

“Um, you’re both customers, right? My name’s Lloyd Belladonna. Marie’s letting me stay here.”

Mena must have taken Lloyd’s relaxed manner as a sign of the unfathomable. She hastily introduced herself in return. “Right! I’m Mena, and this is Phyllo! They call us the Quinone sisters! We’re just here trying to locate someone! Not here to make enemies.”

At this point, Lloyd saw the picture in Mena’s hand and, without a second thought, blabbed everything he knew.

“Oh? That’s Riho, right?”

“Yes, we’re looking for Riho... Wait, you know her?”

The honest boy never so much as considered questioning her motives! With a gentle smile, he politely spilled his guts.

“Yes, we go to the same military—”

“Wait, Lloyd!” Marie tried to cut him off. They didn’t know what these two were after!

“...Mm.” Phyllo moved in front of Lloyd again.

“Yes?”

She was staring directly at him like she wanted to say something.

“Wait... She’s still trying to fight?” Marie squeaked. This seemed like a powder keg ready to go off...but instead Phyllo bowed low.

“...My name’s Phyllo Quinone. Please make me your student.”

“Harhhh?!” Lloyd hadn’t seen that coming and was clearly thrown for a loop.

“...You seem to be quite an accomplished martial artist. What style do you follow?”

“Style? I don’t know about anything that fancy...”

“.....Even more curious. I’ll do anything you ask. Cook for you, do your laundry...serve as your herald in tournaments...just, please...”

Unable to tell if she was joking or not, Lloyd clearly had no idea what to make of this.

“Um, no, I mean... This is Marie’s house... I couldn’t say anything...”

Phyllo spun around, staring at Marie. “.....My name is Phyllo, and I’ll be living here as his student.”

“Huh?” Marie just gaped at her. Who just invited themselves to live in your home?

Without waiting for any further response, Phyllo turned back to Lloyd, clearly having taken that as consent. Somehow.

“...So as your student, I will begin by washing your back. Where is the bathroom?”

“Er, um... Please stop trying to take my clothes off...”

A scandalous scene was starting to unfold as she tried to get him to shimmy outta his clothes. Certain readers may be very excited!

“...Get out! And don’t ever come back!” Marie screeched, sounding just a little jealous. If this were a manga, the store windows would have shattered.

Having succeeded in prying Phyllo away, Mena waved good-bye. “See ya later!”

Those two were just too much for Marie, who was left fuming. “I’ll have to reset the wards on the door! Where’s the salt?!”

“Ah-ha-ha...” Lloyd laughed listlessly.

“Lloyd, what’s gotten into you?” Marie snapped. “You like having girls come after you like that? Or...”

Marie was about to ask if that girl was his type, but before she could...

“Owww...,” Lloyd groaned weakly and crumpled to the ground.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Lloyd? Are you hurt?”

“Uh, yeah... My ribs are broken.”

“Whaaaaaat?”

Nobody else would ever sound so casual about broken ribs.

Lloyd staggered back to his feet, probing the injury with his fingers. “Here and here... Breaking two ribs from a kick meant to swat a fly? I’m so weak.”

“Er, wait... Your ribs are actually broken?”

Characters in manga can be all badass, like, “Guess that snapped a few ribs,” but when that happens in real life, the pain is excruciating, shooting through your body with every exhalation. It’s not an injury you can laugh off! It’s serious!

This was the first time Marie had seen Lloyd show any signs of pain at all. Coming from Kunlun, a town beyond the mortal realm, he could be attacked by monsters or whatever and emerge entirely unscathed. Nothing got to him.

But now he was clearly in considerable pain.

“If she managed to injure Lloyd...she’s really dangerous.”

The Quinone sisters were famous for a reason, clearly.

“Ah-ha-ha,” Lloyd said, smiling weakly. “I used to break bones all the time back in Kunlun, but it’s been a while...”

“All the time?! No, you need to rest and...”

“Mm? No, this is nothing.” Lloyd slowly rose to his feet. “Broken bones don’t take more than three hours to heal, even for me. In Kunlun, Grandpa Pyrid used to heal them with a single shout!”

“Uh...right; sorry I asked.”

Marie had momentarily forgotten he was from the village of superhumans. Of course, the laws of the real world didn’t apply to Kunlun.

“Oh, right...gotta make dinner! But first, I’d better change.”

While anyone else would be critically injured and confined to bed, Lloyd just changed clothes and hurried to the kitchen, preparing their meal as always. It seemed the pain no longer bothered him.

“I suppose there’s no use worrying... We’re going to be living together awhile, so I’d better just get used to it,” Marie muttered. “For a while? Yes, and hopefully forever...,” she added, her cheeks slightly flushed.

No one was looking, but she quickly used the brim of her hat to hide her face until the blush subsided.

W-well, if things work out...

It was no real secret that the reason Marie made no attempt to return to be a princess, even though they wrested control of the kingdom back from evil, was...

“Hmm-hmm-hmm...”

Because Best Wife, Lloyd Belladonna, had stolen her heart and her stomach. Lloyd normally would be staying at the dorm at the military academy, but suggesting it to Marie’s former guard, Chrome, they’d used his late acceptance as an excuse to keep him commuting from here—so she was pretty far gone.

“I know... I’m doomed...”

But this lovesick maiden was definitely enjoying it.

When her blush faded, she removed her hat only to find...

“Helloooooo, Mariieeeeeeee.”

The chief of Kunlun, Marie’s master—Alka—was sitting on a chair and waving at her with a broad grin. She must have teleported here.

“I know... I’m doomed...”

This overpowered *loli* grandma was *grinning*. Fear rose within her, and Marie’s expression grew strained. Her blush had gone straight to pale. Her circulatory system was getting quite the workout.

“...Come ’ere.” Alka beckoned to her.

She soon had Marie on her knees. Forcibly pulled to the floor, Marie glared at Alka, as if betrayed.

“I thought you were stuck in the village for the time being!”

“...While we were harvesting, a little bird told me something. So I sneaked

out.”

“...I have no idea what you mean,” she said guiltily, sweating bullets and clearly already regretting it.

“Then how do you explain that little jaunt to the Village of the Holy Sword?”

“You found out already?”

Alka had made it very clear that she was against using Lloyd’s power for political purposes, and she was obviously here to find out why Marie had broken that rule...so Marie used the excuse she had prepared.

“I didn’t use him! Not intentionally! Lloyd just went to pick up trash of his own accord and mistook the sword for garbage and yanked it out while he was picking up all the magazines and empty cans around it.”

Poor sword.

“I don’t care about the dumb sword! I care about the trip! You went with him on a little holiday! And you enjoyed it!”

Poor sword.

“Uh, yeah...it was...like a day trip, I guess.”

“I’m so jealous! You dare enjoy something like that when you knew I couldn’t tag along!”

“I certainly enjoyed it, yes, but...I regard it as a gift from god to make up for all the trouble he caused me!”

“You don’t even deny it!” Farm work back home had put Alka in full-on toddler tantrum mode. She stomped her foot. “That’s why I said, ‘The sad witch at Lloyd’s lodgings might be using love potions and black magic to brainwash him!’ And the villagers wouldn’t believe me!”



“We just went on a trip! And just because I’m a witch doesn’t mean I’d do anything like that!”

“No, no. You can’t be too sure, especially with the way you’ve been acting. If you lose all your senses, you’re capable of anything! You might suddenly cast off all your clothes and bury your face in Lloyd’s crotch, inhaling deeply! Now that I remember that, I wanna do it again! It’s all your fault!”

“*Again?! You mean you’ve already done that?! Someone with as little sense as you has no right accusing me of anything, you loli grandma!*”

Hearing the commotion, Lloyd glanced their way from the kitchen, smiling like he would at two squabbling kid sisters. “Oh, I thought that was you, Chief! Welcome!”

“Lloyd! It’s been too loooong! I need a smoooooch!”

“Er, I’m a grown-up now, Chief... Um, good luck with work back in the village! Oh, right, Marie, you’ve seemed tired lately, so I made some honey-soaked lemon. Eat a few later on!”

Alka’s jaw dropped at this preferential treatment, and Marie scratched her cheek sheepishly.

“Explain this discrimination! Is it black magic?! Confess!”

“No, but even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell!”

“Fine! I’m just gonna help myself to Lloyd’s homemade honey-soaked lemon!”

“.....Don’t.”

The unnaturally long silence before that made Alka’s ears twitch. She pounced.

“Oh? Why *shouldn’t* I? Or is it that you don’t want to share food that your crush made just for you? You’re in love with Lloyd, aren’t you?!”

“Hey! What—what are you talking about?”

Marie had turned bright red, and Alka crossed her wittle feetsies like a tiny teacher, lecturing. This was not at all attractive.

“How inappropriate! Think of the age gap!”

“...You’ve lived longer than most trees, so you’ve got no right to talk.”

And extremely unconvincing.

But Marie’s rational, pinpoint criticism rolled off Alka like water. Saying whatever she wanted was a right granted exclusively to the elderly—and quite an obnoxious one.

“If you’ve grown so man-hungry, you’ll stop at nothing to ensnare Lloyd in your wiles...”

“I hate to even imagine what’s going through your head right now.”

Alka suddenly clasped her hands together, voice rising in pitch. “Which means it’s time for...drumroll, please...a surprise physical!”

“Huh?”

Before the sound even finished leaving Marie’s mouth, Alka had her pinned against the wall—her movements far faster and more powerful than you’d ever imagine from her size. Marie was helpless to resist.

The impact caused a rain of dust to fall from the rafters.

“No excuses!” Alka snarled. “Hands against the wall! Any signs of resistance will be met with a big *boom*!”

“What?! Where?! Depending on the part of the body involved, the damage can be irreversible! Don’t— AUGH!”

“Fine, then how about a little cling?” Alka pinned Marie’s hands to the wall and started doing something with runes.

“Cling?” Marie said. “...Augh! They’re stuck to the wall!”

Marie’s hands were flat against the wooden wall, and she couldn’t peel them off.

“Hmph! Be glad I didn’t fuse them on a molecular level!”

“What does *molecular* even mean?! The way you drop new words is really terrifying!”

The way she was hunched over made Marie's voice sound like it was coming from her hindquarters.

"Let's start this check! First, Lloyd just changed out of his uniform, so I'll have to savor those trousers!"

"...Uh, from the lead-up, I assumed I was being subjected to the physical..."

Plastered to the wall, Marie had been bracing herself for indignities, but...this was Alka.

"What would be the fun in *that*?!" She scowled.

"Fair point, *loli* Grandma!"

Ultimately, Alka's entire purpose was fueled by her desires, and nothing else ever mattered.

"*Sniff, sniff!* Ah, the trace lingering warmth of Lloyd's cute round butt, cradled in these folds—just mere moments before! Hmm?"

At this point, Alka heard a rustle and pulled a piece of paper out of Lloyd's back pocket.

"What's that?" Marie's backside asked.

"...Good question," Alka replied grimly.

"Wh-what did you find in Lloyd's pants?!" Marie yelped, her rear end twitching.

"Why would he have something like this tucked away in his trousers?"

Alka held a scrap of paper out before Marie. A free coupon for a donut café—and one marked *couples only*.

"...Pfft."

When she saw *couples only*, Marie let out a snort so hard the coupon quivered.

"I call that a very dirty trick! Sneaking a couples coupon into a boy's butt pocket, waiting until you see him going, 'Oh, a free ticket, but only for couples... Who should I go with? Maybe the chief?' and then having the nerve to step up and suggest, 'Well, how about we be a couple for a day?' All so you can sink

your witchy fangs into him!”

“I’d never do anything like that! You are so far down the rabbit hole... Plus, the part where he’d even consider inviting you is pure delusion!”

“Silence! Verdict! Guilty! Judgment! You must be punished! I thought I’d spare you an explosion, but the penalty now applies!”

She started forming runes in the air, casting a curse of some sort on Marie.

“Whoa, wait! I’ve got nothing to do with that! Stop using runes!”

“Then can you explain how Lloyd had this coupon in his pocket?”

“...Uh...”

“.....”

“Maybe...he’s in love with me?” Marie suggested, embarrassed.

BOOM!

An almost-comedic explosion echoed through the shop.

“Dinner’s ready! Marinated chicken with fish and chips!”

“Oh, that’s what I’m here for! Gasp! It looks so good!”

Lloyd brought the food, heaped on large platters, to the table, along with several smaller plates to serve it up on. Then he realized Marie was missing.

“Uh, where’s Marie?”

“Mm? Oh, she had urgent business to take care of.”

“O-oh, I see... Hmm?”

Disappointed, Lloyd looked down...and saw a familiar black robe lying there. And upon closer inspection, some underwear.

“Marie appears to have left her clothes behind. Why would she do that?”

“Well, I’m sure it was...urgent naked business. Don’t worry about it! I’m sure it’s for the benefit of the realm!”

It could be the most well-intentioned business in the world, but a naked hero was probably more of a detriment—not even a net zero.

But Lloyd accepted this and placed Marie's portion on a plate, carrying it back to the kitchen.

But then he saw a butterfly fluttering around.

"How'd that get in here? I'd better let it out."

"Oh, leave it be, Lloyd. It'll go back to normal in time."

This last phrase confused Lloyd, but Alka's extravagant feeding distracted him. Thoroughly satisfied, she soon made her exit through the closet back to Kunlun.

Left alone, Lloyd cleaned up and retired to his room.

Late that night in the empty store, the butterfly began glowing—and then a human form, Marie, dropped to the floor. Naked.

"Gahhh...that *loli* grandma! She turned me into a bug! At least it wasn't a cockroach..."

Lying in a heap, she cursed her name. Naked.

"Welcome back, Marie! What business was it? Should I warm up your...er...?"

Lloyd's gaze lit on Marie, where she lay scrabbling on the floor. Naked.

"Uh...L-Lloyd...there's a reason for this..."

"..."

Looking very serious, he turned and went back to his room. Why was his landlord scuttling around on the floor naked? The only way to process that was to sleep on it and forget it in the morning.

"....."

Her reputation and her dignity in tatters, Marie grimly located and donned her clothing and fell asleep where she was.

Maybe she was better off not going back to the whole princess thing. It would never do for things like this to happen to a *lady*.

Chapter 2

A Brazen Invitation: Suppose Someone Tried to Hit On You with a Pick-Up Line from a Cheesy Magazine

The reception room at the military school: a place of quiet dignity far removed from the sweat-soaked practice grounds and the swish of the teachers' pointers in the lecture halls.

The couches provided wrapped themselves around you like a cloud, making it the perfect place for a nap (per Riho).

The tables were made of cypress, using only the best, knot-free planks. On the tabletop were sweets to accompany tea, the candy in particular mouthwateringly good (per Riho).

The paints and vases decorating the room were antiques of subdued shades and hues, all of which would fetch a decent price if sold (per Riho).

Perhaps they should start locking the door...

The room was mostly used for school-related business deals, but that was clearly not what was happening there today.

There was a small woman in an Azami military uniform—Choline. Normally expressive as all get-out, today she was grimly serious.

Across from her was a woman in an expensive suit—Rol Calcife. She seemed as calm as Choline was tense. An elegant smile played across her lips.

She was flanked by a girl in a hunting cap and an expressionless blond—those in the know would instantly recognize them as the Quinone sisters.

"Why are you here, Rol?" Choline hissed. Her eyes never left Rol's face.

"Golly, you certainly hate me, hmm? I thought we were old friends," Rol said, not at all intimidated. "Manners dictate you greet representatives from the host country."

This visit appeared to be related to the Student Sorcery Tournament. Officially.

“I can’t see you caring about a tournament... You only move when there’s money in it.”

“That’s hardly fair. I’m headmaster of the Rokujou Sorcery Academy. Naturally, we’re putting everything into this tournament... Although, well, the participants are randomly selected by their seating arrangement. But whoever participates, we’ll hardly lose to the likes of Azami.”

Her elegant smile never wavered, but her words were laced with poison.

“...You snake.”

Rol was like a reptile lurking behind a porcelain mask. Even when Choline let an insult slip out, her expression never changed.

“Did I touch a sore spot? Well, Rokujou’s reputation isn’t what it once was, but we’re still better than the meatheads in Azami.”

She absently flicked the medallion pinned to the front of her suit. Most likely the symbol of the headmaster’s office.

“So you kicked people out of your way and sweet-talked the teachers into putting you in charge,” Choline observed.

Clearly, some history here—but even this didn’t get a rise out of Rol.

“That’s hardly fair, is it? Just sounds like sour grapes, Choline.”

“This is why you went through school without making a single friend,” Choline muttered, loudly enough to be sure it was heard.

This barb finally seemed to gouge out a piece of Rol’s heart. Her smile remained locked in place, but the furrow in her brow started drumming an eighth-note beat.

“Big talk from a failure who only mastered healing magic.”

“Can’t help who I am! And I was soooo busy being popular. You wouldn’t know what that’s like.”

The air between them seemed to warp. The corner of Choline’s mouth was

twitching as rapidly as Rol's brow. A drum battle for the ages.

"Your records at Rokujou were so poor you were forced to flee to Azami."

"You wanna talk about records?! All you did was suck up to the teachers! And I didn't run! A friend invited me here! I've got great friends even now that I'm grown up! My life is happy!"

This was clearly pushing Rol to her limits. Her smile didn't fade, but now her leg was starting to hop. Her tea was gonna spill!

Seeing their boss at a disadvantage, the Quinone sisters backed her up.

"Now, now, Rol, don't get all pissed because the obvious truth got dug up."

"...If...you have no human friends...you could get a pet...?"

"You both shut up. This is business."

Sorry, they were piling insult to injury instead of backing her up.

This farce concluded, Choline leaned over the table, scowling. "How 'bout we cut to the chase? I got work to do here."

Rol pulled a photograph out of her pocket. It showed a girl with smiley eyes and a mechanical arm. Recognizing her, a flash of surprise crossed Choline's expression.

Rol didn't miss it. "You know her, right? This is Riho Flavin."

Why would Rol be after Riho? Knowing full well everything this woman was involved in spelled trouble, Choline chose her words carefully.

"You came all the way to Azami for this?"

"I'm even busier than you are...and we've already done our homework. No use trying to hide it. Will you just call her here?"

Choline sensed dark intentions behind that perma-smile and considered her options.

Three against one. A disadvantage even on home ground. And this was Rol and the Quinone sisters.

"...Fine, I'll call her. But she skips class a lot, so you may not be that lucky."

With no idea what Rol was after here, her best option was to pretend to summon Riho, while giving her a chance to escape. Choline rose to do just that...but circumstances conspired against her.

“...” Phyllo suddenly twitched. Her dangling arms rose to a fighting stance.

“Wait...you mean?” Mena turned to the door as well, watching it cautiously.

Choline and Rol both held their breath, wondering what was happening.

A moment later, familiar cheerful voices came through the door.

“Yeah, it’s the best place to hang when you’re skipping! And they have candy!”

“But we shouldn’t be skipping, right?”

“A secret rendezvous with Lloyd...”

The door opened without a knock. Riho strolled in like she owned the place. “We shouldn’t...,” Lloyd objected, following, and Selen behind him, as close as possible, like, totally plastered against him.

“Augh, Riho!”

“Oh, whoops, occupied, eh... Rotten luck.”

Assuming she was about to get in trouble, Riho started to turn back...and then Rol slowly rose to her feet.

The porcelain-smile mask fell away, replaced by a villainous sneer, like a snake who’d spied the prey for which it had been waiting.

Riho’s eyes went wide, and she trembled. “.....Rol.”

“We meet again, Riho,” Rol growled, a sinister noise that seemed to rise up from the darkest depths. She moved to stand before Riho. “Glad to see you doing well. And that mithril arm intact.”

The mechanical fist clenched—out of fear or anger.

“Glad you care more about it than me. Proves you haven’t changed.”

Rol laughed like she saw right through Riho’s brave facade. “You expected anything else? Almost looks like it’s part of you. Isn’t that *nice*.”

Watching from the sidelines, Selen turned to Choline, whispering, “Colonel, who is this smug woman?”

“Oh, classmate of mine from Rokujou Kingdom. Rol Calcife. Smugness is her middle name... She was better at wrapping teachers around her finger than magic.”

“I see! A born politician.”

“God knows how many people were forced to drop out because of her... All to make herself look better.”

“I did hear that Rokujou Sorcery Academy’s reputation has been in free fall.”

“She’s rotting the place from the inside.”

The bitterness in Choline’s voice was enough to silence Selen.

Meanwhile, Riho and Rol were still going at it.

“Let’s get right to the point. You’re coming home, Riho.”

“Ha! That’ll never happen.”

“You know what that mithril arm is for.”

“Exactly!”

Rol stepped in close, whispering in her ear, “You don’t care what happens to the orphanage?”

Riho’s shriek was like nothing they’d ever heard come out of her. “You asshole! Don’t you dare!”

Clearly, that was the reaction Rol had wanted.

“Good... You know that place would collapse with even a slight decline in patronage. The allowance you send them won’t keep them afloat three days.”

“...They raised you, too. And you’d use them as hostages?”

“That’s in the past. What matters is now.”

“I guess you have changed. For the worse,” Riho spat.

Rol shrugged it off. “No use running. I can just drum up another arrest warrant and keep on your back.”

Riho was left gnashing her teeth.

There was a long silence.

Rol broke first. She sighed, looking like she was dealing with an obstinate toddler. “Fine. You’ve got until the Student Sorcery Tournament drawings begin. I’ll be in Azami till then...and expecting an answer.”



“...Tch.” Riho clicked her tongue but made no other response.

“Don’t forget the orphanage. Right, you two, work’s done. Off we go!”

Flashing one last reptilian smile, Rol left.

Mena and Phyllo moved to follow, but as they did, Phyllo stopped in front of Lloyd.

“...I’m still waiting for your answer,” she said.

“Er, answer?”

She was so close, he could feel her hot breath. He’d turned bright red.

“Who are *you*...?” Selen was not the sort of person who could let *that* stand. Her eyes bored into Phyllo.

Phyllo failed to notice. Her blank-faced stare focused exclusively on Lloyd.

“...I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

“Phyllo, come on! You can flirt with Lloyd later!”

Phyllo clasped Lloyd’s hand briefly before reluctantly allowing herself to be dragged away.

“Well? Lloyd, what happened between you and that woman?!”

“Uh, I don’t even know...”

Things were growing ugly—baselessly, but still. Meanwhile, Riho was standing stock-still, shaking.

“Uh, Riho? You okay?”

But Riho didn’t even notice Choline’s question.

“...Shit,” she said, biting her lip. Her eyes locked on her left arm.

The light streaming in the window caught the mithril arm, giving it a forlorn gleam.

In the faculty office at the military academy a few days later, Choline was angrily staring at a list of names, surrounded by teachers focused on their own work. If she’d had a red pen tucked behind her ear, she’d have looked like your

typical guy at a racetrack.

Naturally, Choline was not angry at a horse race or a bike race but struggling with the selection for the Student Sorcery Tournament.

Rol's challenge had only poured flames on the fires that Choline had already stroked. She was desperate to get a group together that would have a decent showing.

"Why are they all jocks?! Magic matters! You agree, right, Chrome?!"

Chrome nodded mechanically, having long since made his peace with this. "Yep, yep."

"*Sigh...* I had hopes for Riho, but she's dead set against it, and Selen won't go unless Lloyd does, but if I put Lloyd out there... *Hngg.*"

"Yep, yep."

They'd looped through this same conversation several times already, so his smile-and-nod had long since become pure reflex. Chrome was in the zone.

Then the office door slammed open. Selen stormed in, stalking wordlessly over to Choline, the fury radiating off her so palpably that teachers automatically apologized in her wake.

"Hey, what's up, Selen Hemein?" Chrome asked, surprised.

Paying him no attention, Selen drew level with Choline and snapped, "I demand an explanation."

"Er? Why? For what?" Choline blinked, totally befuddled.

Selen's glare grew even fiercer.

"First, that woman! The salacious one with the clearly inappropriate relationship with Lloyd! How?! Who gave her permission to clasp Lloyd's hand?! What's their connection? What answer did she refer to? Start with that! Tell me everything you know if you want to live!"

"You stormed into the teachers' room for *that*?!"

Selen's priorities were always Lloyd first and then oxygen, water, and food.

Choline pressed her fingers to her temples. "Oh, right... I forgot you're this

way, Selen,” she said, giving up. “That was Phyllo Quinone, younger of the famous mercenary duo the Quinone sisters. She’s a master of the lost martial arts from ancient times, which is the style founded by Pyrid the Fierce God. You’ve heard the legends, I gather? About how Pyrid shattered a mountain with his fist and carved out a sea with a single kick?”

“D-list celebrities always boast about nonsense. And what’s her relationship to Lloyd...?”

“Well, obviously, that’s their business, and I don’t know squat about it.”

“Fair. I’ve asked Lloyd, but he just says he doesn’t really know her, so I’m getting nowhere... Clearly, she’s some sort of vile succubus trying to bend Lloyd to her will with pleasures of the flesh.”

The light had returned to Selen’s eyes, and she happily changed the subject.

“Anyway, what about Riho? You know anything about that? You and that Rol lady were classmates, right? Riho isn’t one to talk about these things.”

“...I really wish I knew something, but I’m clueless.”

“Then the reason Rol wants Riho is...?”

“Sorry. I have no idea whatsoever. You’ll have to pry it outta *her* somehow.”

Rol and Riho clearly had history. And not a pleasant one.

“She almost never speaks about the past,” Chrome said. “Or her mithril arm.”

“*Sigh...* I need her to go back to being the old Riho soon.”

Wow, she really is worried about Riho! the two teachers thought, smiling. But they were forgetting one important thing: This was Selen.

“It’s not fair that Lloyd’s all worried about her and leaving me in the dust! He’s so nice that he might eventually get worked up enough to say she can use his body as she pleases to cheer her up! He’ll offer himself up to her, and their bodies will speak a language that...! Why can’t I be in her shoes? Oh, now that I think about it, there have already been signs! We must appoint a love supervisor at once! Excuse me.”

Sounded like she was the one getting worked up. Having delivered that

torrent of words in a single breath, the love supervisor darted out into the hall... Hopefully, she wouldn't get herself arrested.

Well, the protagonist of this series is one to worry about other's bad moods like they are his fault, which meant Lloyd was thinking of little else but Riho.

On the way home from school, he was so lost in thought that he'd bumped into a pillar, leaving a red mark streaked across his forehead (and a crack in the pillar). But he eventually reached the shop on the East Side.

"I'm home!"

When he opened the decrepit door, he found Marie looking just as worried as he did. She was dithering back and forth, clearly at a loss as to how to proceed.

Only one thing was on her mind: She had embarrassed herself in front of Lloyd in a most unladylike manner. She had done such a good job convincing herself he thought less of her for it that she'd gotten no work accomplished all day.

"Oh... Welcome back, Lloyd."

Lloyd, of course, had already forgotten all those indignities. Or at least, he'd used his magic phrase, "City folk sure are different!" to put a positive spin on them.

So he just smiled at her like he always did, assuming she must be hungry.

"Eh-heh-heh, for dinner tonight, I figured I could rework some leftovers from the school cafeteria! Just you wait and see."

This smile won Marie over every time. Certain once again that he didn't hate her, she grinned back. So easy!

"Sounds great! I'm looking forward to it."

"Mind wiping down the table? And setting it?"

Their relationship was very much like a mother and a little kid. Hey, you two! Don't forget that she's your landlord and you're her guest!

Watching Lloyd in the kitchen, Marie started humming to herself, as if her crisis of a moment before had never happened. With her worries gone, her

mind was blue skies again.

And another thought crossed it.

Right, my dumb master, the loli grandma Alka, can't come here nearly as often! What could be better? This might be my best shot!

Shot at what, exactly? Still, with the other village leaders furious at Alka for dereliction of duty, she definitely couldn't show up often until the harvest was done. She had to be the world's least authoritative chief...

Marie's emotional state had been akin to your nerves when cops lurk around, even though you're totally innocent. Alka could watch her from a distance, teleport here, and place all manner of curses on Marie with the power of runes. And eat for free. Yeah, she was more like a bandit than a cop, really...

But now Marie was released from that, so...it was safe for her and Lloyd to engage in a little physical contact! Maybe she could sneak over and take a bite of the food and get scolded for it.

"Oh, right, Marie," he said, startling her out of her reverie. "I could use your help with something."

"Gweh!" She let out a weird squawk, and he laughed.

"Nothing that surprising!" he said, stirring the pot, lid in one hand. He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Just something I could use another perspective on."

"Oh, sure! Go ahead! Lay it on me!" Marie thumped her chest dramatically, and Lloyd relaxed a little.

"Well...a friend of mine's got a problem and is clearly really depressed about it. I'm trying to figure out how I can cheer her up."

Marie's mouth snapped shut. Then a thought crossed her mind.

Wait, could he mean me?

She certainly had been depressed, worried that he hated her. Maybe this was some roundabout way of comforting her? Marie figured she'd better check.

"Hmm? A girl you know?"

"Uh, yeah. Which is why I'm not sure what to do."

“.....*Foom!*”

“Er...what?”

This was the sound of her delusions exploding. To Marie, he’d just confirmed her suspicions, and she was now convinced he was trying to cheer her up. Endorphins were practically leaking out of her.

“Yer such a good boy!” she squealed, inexplicably acquiring a western accent.

She coughed, trying to cover the slip, forced the grin off her lips, and then pretended she hadn’t figured it all out.

“Hmm, well, I suppose you could play it safe and invite her to a meal.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, you know, build the connection between you, get to know each other better...kind of a date, really.”

“A d-date?!” Lloyd instantly turned bright red, which was adorable! Marie was screaming inside. “But who would be happy if a wimpy lump of nothing special asked them out?”

“What are you talking about? Of course, she’d be thrilled! Be a little aggressive! Take her hand and pull her along! /—I mean, all girls like that!”

She was pushy in a way you can only be when talking about yourself.

“Do they? Well, okay. I’m glad I asked you! Thanks!”

Lloyd bowed his head, and Marie did, too, thankful he was thinking of her (in her delusions).

“Not at all!”

“Then I guess I’ll ask Riho on a date tomorrow!”

“...Whaaaaaaaaaaaaat?”

Caught mid-bow, Marie’s head alone snapped up, staring at Lloyd. This was disconcerting to look at.

But Lloyd had already turned back to the pot he was stirring. It smelled like stew. A creamy one.

“Uh, Lloyd...can I ask...?”

“Oh, I’m making stew!”

“Er, no, not about that...”

“And some iced tea with it!”

“Y-yeah, but...uh...”

He took the iced tea out of the fridge and poured it into a couple of glasses.

“I’m glad I asked,” he said, smiling to himself. “Riho’s been so gloomy lately... and won’t tell us why. Meanwhile, Selen’s been biting her nails and uttering curses under her breath...”

“.....”

Marie deflated. She’d clearly jumped to conclusions and then dug her own grave by pushing him into a date.

“Are you okay there, Marie? ...Yikes...”

Marie had started gnawing her fingernails, mourning her own vapidty—and was clearly not in a chatting mood.

“Is nail-biting a new trend?” Lloyd muttered to himself as he began ladling out the stew.

“Lloyd...what happened while I was in the hospital?”

It was the next day, in class.

The moment Allan entered the room, he made a beeline toward Lloyd. In the previous class, he’d been carried to the hospital in critical condition, obliterated beyond what healing magic could handle. The doctors said it was a miracle he’d survived.

A drop of sweat rolled down his boorish, bandage-wrapped face, his eyes focused on...

“.....”

...Riho, looking extremely grumpy. But not just any old bad mood; every so often, her face would droop, regret written across it. It would take a lot of

courage to speak to anyone in this state.

At first, the classmates had assumed she was just having a bad day, but after several bad days in a row, they were all avoiding her like the plague.

“None of us know why, either... I’d love to help, but...” Lloyd was at a loss.

This made his self-appointed mentee snort mightily and thump his chest. “Well, that’s what I’m here for! Consider me at your service! I’ll see if I can figure this out for you!”

But another girl stepped in to stop him.

“Hold it right there, you insensitive brute!”

Selen appeared, standing right up against Lloyd.

“I’m neither of those things!” Allan protested.

“How soon you forget! Remember how you called me the Cursed Belt Princess and accused me of stalking Lloyd? Thanks to you, that got me questioned by the police.”

“That’s got jack all to do with delicacy, lady. You were *literally* engaged in criminal behavior.”

Allan’s reasonable comeback rolled off her like water off a duck’s back. With utter confidence, Selen turned toward Lloyd, speaking passionately.

“You see, Lloyd? Leave this to me! I shall cheer Riho up! And once you see my success...mwa-ha-ha...”

“Uh, okay... I don’t get why you’re laughing, but worth a try!”

This pledge secured, Selen spun around and headed straight to Riho, utterly sure of herself.

“...*What*, Selen?”

“Heh-heh-heh! Riho, you seem down in the dumps!”

“...You noticed? Then go away.”

Riho offered no leads whatsoever, but Selen was not so easily defeated. She whipped a photograph out of her pocket and held it up in front of Riho.

“This calls for emergency measures! I shall allow you the privilege of seeing the best of my secret stock of Lloyd photos. It breaks my heart to share these, so they’d better work.”

Even from a distance, the pictures had images of something the color of skin. In fact, they seemed a little *too* fleshy... And served as definitive proof of her snooping.

“.....” *Hmph.*

There was a very long silence, and then Riho turned away.

“Right, time’s up, Selen.” Allan grabbed her by the collar and dragged her back to Lloyd.

“Objection! She took a very long look at it! Riho! You should at least thank me! Hey! Let go, Allan!”

The man with the big ax deposited Selen by Lloyd, who just looked anxious. Allan flashed them both a confident grin. “Guess I’m up next!”

“You certainly seem sure of yourself. Yet I doubt you understand the first thing about how women think,” Selen said, straightening her collar.

Allan wagged a finger at her. “You’d be wrong, Selen. Wrong from the very start.”

“Wrong how?” Lloyd asked.

“Listen, Riho earned her infamy as a mercenary. She kept herself fed in the harshest conditions. You’re better off not treating her like some glove-wearing lady. She’s an ill-mannered, flat-chested—”

“Uh, um...,” Lloyd yelped, his horror proving how nice he was.

“—So it’s best to approach her just like you would another guy. Simple! Go for an easy dirty joke, laugh about it, and she’ll feel better!”

Allan turned and strode confidently over.

“Yo, mercenary! Have I got a joke for—”

Before he even finished the sentence, Riho’s best punch landed straight in his face. She’d swung the mithril arm, of course.

“A-aughhhh! Those wounds had finally closed, too!”

Riho followed the punch with an extremely serious kick, which scored a smash hit on his ass. Hole in one!

“E-EEK...ohhh...” In throbbing pain, Allan hobbled away, clutching his ass.

“He won’t be back soon,” Selen said, coldly analyzing the situation.

Lloyd cast a worried glance after him but then nodded firmly and went over to Riho himself.

“Your turn now, Lloyd?” Riho asked, looking thoroughly annoyed.

“Yes, Riho. Um...”

“I don’t even want to talk to you, Lloyd. This is my problem—” She fluttered a hand, shooing him away.

But he was undaunted. He spoke so loudly, his voice echoed through the classroom.

“Will you go on a date with me?”

“...*What?*”

Riho just gaped at him. Like, he’d just asked her out? In broad daylight? In front of everyone?

A stir went around the room: “Seriously?” and “Lloyd’s a man now,” and “*Kua-w-se-drftgy-fujiko-1-p!*” ...One of them seemed to be speaking in tongues.

Lloyd stared intently at Riho, oblivious to the commotion scoring the scene.

“Uh, well...I don’t understand what...” Riho had turned uncharacteristically red.

Lloyd took her hand, holding it tight. “Let’s go! Come on!”

“Huh? No, wait... What about class?”

“You’re far more important, Riho!”

The last thing the class heard was the hiss of steam leaving her flushed face.

The two of them entered a café on the South Side. The light of lanterns reflected off the copper dishes inside, giving the whole place a warm,

welcoming vibe.

“This place is supposed to be good. I just haven’t had a chance to come here before... Oh, don’t worry about paying. Colonel Choline gave me a free coupon!”

“Uh, sure.”

“I’ve been secretly thinking about trying to reproduce the flavor of a famous shop, so this would be perfect.”

“Uh, sure.”

Riho was barely answering, her mind still not having caught up with the intensity of his invitation. Or the fact that they were still holding hands. Lloyd turned and looked sheepishly at her.

“Er... Sorry. I kinda pushed you into this.”

“N-no, it’s fine. I just...didn’t expect you to go all macho.”

“Ah-ha-ha, well, I am a man.”

“Y-yeah, you are.”

“Let’s order! The donuts here are supposed to be great! They serve lunch and dinner, too, but it’s the donuts that people line up for.”

Lloyd babbled on about the shop, but one word in particular caught Riho’s attention.

“...Donuts.”

“Hmm? You’re a fan? See? You’ve got a girly side.”

“N-no! I didn’t mean...!”

“You don’t have to pretend. I think it’s cute! And being girly isn’t bad, you know.”

Lloyd was clearly teasing her—probably as payback for the crack about his macho act. Riho was totally not handling it, shaking her head forcefully enough to resurrect her bedhead.

“I’m not *cute*! I’m an infamous mercenary! And mercenaries are...sweaty! We

like salty things better than sweets!”

Riho certainly had a waterfall of sweat running down her. But she looked so obviously like a girl rattled by an embarrassing situation that you would never take her for a mercenary now.

“Er? You sure? The donuts are supposed to be really good.”

“Sh-shut up! A mercenary’s word is her bond! Bring me the saltiest thing at this establishment! Stat!”

“Uh, well, okay. Excuse me? A donut and...”

Thunk!

A matter of seconds after the order was placed, a plate with a giant pickle (whole) was dropped in front of Riho.

“Our shop’s prized homemade pickle! And here’s your donut and coffee.”

So much vinegar was wafting off the thing, it was making her eyes sting.

“...”

“...Um, Riho, are you sure about this?”

“...*Munch. Munch-munch-munch-munch. Oh! Munch-munch! Boy, this is just great! Munch-munch-munch-munch, blegh, munch-munch-munch. Yeah! Chomp-chomp. Nothing like pickles after you work up a sweat! Blergh. Goddamnit!*”

There were definitely a few dry heaves mixed in, but she soldiered through. She could see Lloyd looking very apologetic through the tears in her eyes. The staff were starting to whisper. If she ever came back, they would definitely have nicknamed her Ms. Pickles.

“Um...I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize! I love pickles! Pickles forever!”

“I didn’t mean the pickles... I mean, I’m about to ask something you might not want to answer.”

“...*Sigh.*”

“B-but I’m worried about you! You’ve been in the dumps...and I didn’t know what to do. So...”

“So a date?” Riho let out another vinegary sigh and buried her face in her arms. “You give everyone the wrong idea for someone you don’t even like.”

“What? I like you a lot, Riho.”

“Snort!”

It seemed pickles had gotten in her nose somehow. She might be smelling vinegar for a while.

That took her out of commission, and Lloyd had to pat her on the back. The warmth of his hand and the pickles left her looking rather tired.

“...You know the guy’s supposed to pay on a date, right, Lloyd?”

“Oh, yeah, I had heard that before. I bought Selen something at a bakery, and she said, ‘If a man pays, that makes it a kind of date.’”

“What a happy woman.” Riho flashed Lloyd a grin with a hint of her old spirit. “But even if you do pay for it, I’m a mercenary... I don’t like leaving debts unsettled. So I guess...”

“?”

“Fine, I’ll fill you in. Just you. A piece of my life story.”

Lloyd’s face lit up like a light bulb. He smiled like a child who’s been taken to a toy store and told they can buy whatever they want.

“Th-thanks!”

While this was going on, a woman was observing them so closely she’d forgotten to blink. Need a hint? Think *stalker*... Oh, well, guess that’s kinda just the answer.

“Kua-w-se-drftgy-fujiko-1-p!”

Selen has seemingly not yet recovered the capacity for language. There was a voice-like noise spilling out of her, and her dry eyes were plastered to the café window. People walking by were giving her a wide berth.

That mercenary! Riho Flavin! You just loooooove getting your back patted,

don't you?!

Since she was outside, she couldn't hear what they were saying, but desperate to know what they were talking about, she attempted to silently infiltrate the café.

I've got to be very quiet... I know Lloyd can detect any human within a hundred-yard radius...

Her daily stalking efforts had given her a very precise measurement of Lloyd's detection range. Her next measurements might well be for a prison uniform.

Inside the shop, Selen crept forward.

I'm still safe... If I don't speak, he won't notice me over the din.

"Ah, ow... At least it didn't bleed, but I'd better stop by the drugstore and get some ointment just in case."

At this point, Allan walked by, clutching his hindquarters. Apparently, he'd decided to buy medicine for his butt injuries and come all the way to the South Side in his quest. This feeling of shame is virtually universal.

But for Selen, at this moment, he was nothing but an obstacle to eliminate.

Sch-sch-sch-sch. (The sound of her scurrying along the ground.) "Mm? What? A roach? No, Sel—"

Shiiing! (The sound of a rapier shoved up the butt.)

"Mwahhhgh!"

Thud... (The sound of her seizing the opening to deliver a chop to the neck.) "Hahh..."

Allan fell over, blood spurting out his backside, and he was swiftly deposited in the shrubbery. All of this took less than five seconds.

Hmph... I thought I might need that move someday. I was right to learn it.

And wrong as far as society was concerned.

Back from that comic aside.

Inside the café, Riho and Lloyd both looked very serious. Allan, meanwhile,

was also in serious condition, but let's ignore that for now.

"I guess I mentioned it before, but I'm an orphan. A war orphan."

"Uh, yeah."

"Was lucky enough to get taken in by an orphanage in the region of Flavin. That's where I met Rol Calcife."

Riho took a breath, hesitating, and then let it out.

"She was like a big sister to me."

"That...snakelike woman?"

Riho chuckled at this.

"A snake, huh? She's a snake now, but she wasn't always. Back at the orphanage, she had a real knack for magic, enough to earn herself a scholarship to Rokujou Sorcery Academy. One of us made it to the big time! We looked up to her."

There was clearly a lot of regret in her voice, so Lloyd stayed quiet, listening.

"She used to teach me magic. She was good at it. I could see why she'd earned that scholarship."

"So that's why you know so much?"

"Back then, I didn't really have full range of my left hand—because of burns I'd suffered in the war. I envied everyone who could help earn money for the orphanage. And then Rol came back."

The fingers of her mechanical arm snapped together, delivering a clear, metallic noise.

"—And she brought this arm with her."

"She gave it to you?"

"I was thrilled. My idol bringing this to me? I could help earn money for everyone."

But then Riho's tone dropped low.

"When I found out why, I ran for it."

“Ran for it? ...Why?”

“Mithril has the power to absorb a human’s magic and amplify it,” Riho explained. “The more you hone your skills and the more it becomes part of you, the stronger the effect. It’s like a plant that’s dug its roots into my useless arm, sucking magic out of me even as we speak. But because of that, I can move it as I please.”

She set her mithril arm down on the table with a clunk. With the lights of the shop reflecting off it, it was quite beautiful.

Lloyd absently reached out to touch it, and Riho pulled it back.

“Oh, better not touch it barehanded. Even if you just brush the surface, it’ll suck magic out of you.”

“...Even that light a touch?” Lloyd said, looking worried. “Then if you’re wearing it, it must be...”

Riho nodded wordlessly. An even gloomier look passed over her, and she moved to the real meat of her explanation.

“Rol put this arm on me to fill it with my magic power...trading my life to pull out the Holy Sword.”

Lloyd’s expression grew grim.

Riho held her arm out in front of him. A moment before it had seemed almost beautiful, but now that he knew it was a threat to her life, it was terrifying.

“The Holy Sword is somewhere in a forest north of Azami. You need a lot of magic to pull it. They say no normal human could do it.”

“But with mithril...”

“Yeah. Rol thought if I filled it with my magic to the brink of death, it might be possible for me to retrieve it. And she happened to find an orphan with unusually high magic—me. That’s why I became her target.”

Lloyd fell silent. The only sound was the bustle of the café around them.

“I don’t know why she wants it...but now she’s holding the orphanage hostage to coerce me into pulling it out. And that ain’t good.”

“Wow...”

“The ‘sister’ I idolized is telling me to go die for her. I did everything I could to get this arm off me, but nothing works. The mithril is fused with my flesh... It’s too late.”

She showed him where the metal met her arm, the scratch marks from all the times she’d tried to pry it off.

“So I ran. Rol framed me for some crimes, leading to a warrant for my arrest. Still, I worked my ass off, earning as much money as I could...because that way, I could repay the orphanage for everything they did for me.”

Lloyd nodded to himself. “I see.” This was why Riho was so focused on money.

“I couldn’t quite believe—I still don’t want to believe Rol would do this. But if she’s threatening to crush the orphanage that raised her...I can’t trust anyone.”

Lloyd had never seen Riho look this lost. Before he knew it, he’d taken her hand—the mithril one.

She didn’t have a chance to pull away, turning bright red.

“—! Didn’t you hear me? It’ll drain your magic!” she sputtered.

“I don’t care...and...” Lloyd tightened his grip, looking very sincere. “...I won’t ever betray you, Riho.”

“.....Mm.” After a long pause, Riho dropped her gaze, her face burning.

“Well, I’m only a cadet because someone took pity on me. It may be years before I can really be of any use to you, but...”

Lloyd gave her mithril arm a reassuring squeeze.



The girl across from him returned a smile tinged with embarrassment.

“You already are,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Oh... Okay!”

Just as the romantic vibe reached its peak, a sinister visitor made its appearance.

“Lloyd, you traitoooooooooooooooooooooor!”

Selen made a dynamic entrance from beneath a nearby table, tears gushing. Her stealthy approach had left her covered in dust and grime.

“Good lord, Selen! Just look at you! How did you get so dirty?!”

Lloyd’s girl-powered, best-wife nature immediately made him scold Selen—kinda like your typical mother reprimanding a teenager for staying out too late.

“That’s all you care about?! You’re so *mean*! And you, Rihoooooo!”

Riho had been staring wistfully at the hand she’d been holding, but this snapped her out of it. She jumped, and her eyes went wide.

“Huh? Wait, m’lady? When did *you* get here?”

Selen leaned in, scowling, their faces inches apart. “Riho.”

“Uh, yes?”

“You’re a traitor, too. I’ve got a lot of complaints—a LOT! But why didn’t you tell us about the arm before?!”

Riho’d assumed she was about to get chewed out for holding hands with Lloyd, so she was caught completely off guard. Her eyes went even wider. If they’d been ellipses before, now they were full-on circles drawn with a compass.

“Y-you heard that? Wait, *you* were worried about me? Legitimately?”

“Someone’s after your life, *and* they framed you for a crime?! That’s evil!”

“Y-yeah...” Riho was still coming to terms with the idea that Selen was capable of worrying about anyone besides herself.

“I myself have been repeatedly framed for stalking, so I know exactly how you

feel!”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

Correction—Selen was exactly as she’d always been.

“Plus, the way you couldn’t make friends is like how I spent my childhood locked in my room! I’m an old-school loner! And you’re like a mini me!”

“I don’t wanna be.”

“But never fear! Lloyd and I won’t let anyone get away with hurting you!”

“Yeah? That bit about me being a loner did actually hurt my feelings.”

“—Plus, school’s no fun without you.”

“...Yeah?” Riho looked around sheepishly. Lloyd was nodding vigorously.

“Point is! We won’t let you trade your life to pull out some dumb Holy Sword! Let’s hit this lady with a Dear John letter so hard her eyes roll up in her head and take her eyelids with them!”

“I’ll help, too! In any capacity! I’ll make sure you survive this!”

“...Heh-heh... That all sounds pretty good.” Riho held out her hand. The others both placed their hands on it, smiling.

In this donut café, they swore their own Oath of the Peach Garden, symbolizing their loyalty to each other.

“We won’t let that Holy Sword get pulled out.”

The Holy Sword in question had already been extricated by Lloyd the other day, but all of them, Lloyd included, were none the wiser.

The Opera House on the East Side—packed with red carpets galore, elaborately carved marble columns, brilliant stained glass, and soaring ceilings covered in paintings of angels.

On weekends, the place was packed with tourists, and when operas or plays were staged, it filled to the brim. Even on weekdays, there was no shortage of people to gawk at the beauty of the building itself.

It was one of the most popular attractions in Azami. Currently, the house was

rented out for the Student Sorcery Tournament drawings. A bold choice of location for the host country, but...

“This place is totally dead.”

As if proof of the host country’s disinterest, the press attending from Azami were not nearly as fired up as those from Jiou or Rokujou.

“Wow...it’s really pretty...”

“Eh-heh-heh, so are you, Sir Lloyd.”

Lloyd was doing the country-bumpkin stare and Selen her usual romantic stampede.

“Colonel Choline must be here somewhere...”

Choline had been forced to attend the drawings with her team still not chosen, and the contrast between the different countries’ enthusiasm levels may well have given her an ulcer.

“Oh well,” Selen said. “We’re really only here to deal with this Rol lady...and that thief, Phyllo...”

They glanced over at Riho, who was staring into the distance, her face set at a new level of grim.

Lloyd and Selen watched over her, worried.

Her gaze passed over the crowd of excited students to a trio clearly *not* matriculating.

A snakelike woman in an expensive suit—Rol—was walking toward them, grinning. She’d noticed Riho staring. Phyllo and Mena followed.

“Here we all are!” she announced maliciously.

Riho ground her teeth. “Rol...”

“I don’t need to ask, do I? That orphanage is sooo precious to you.”

Dead center on the red carpet, they faced each other down, like boxers in the ring.

Meanwhile, another match was starting.

“...Your answer.”

“Um, Phyllo?”

Phyllo had taken Lloyd’s hand, gripping it tightly and staring into his eyes. He’d turned bright red. If you didn’t know what was happening, you’d assume this was a fated reunion.

Sensing danger in Phyllo’s attempt to one-up her, Selen placed herself between them. Breathing heavily from her nose, she unleashed a torrent of words, speaking on Lloyd’s behalf.

“How many times do you need to hear it? Sir Lloyd’s answer is no! It’s common sense! A man and woman who just met can’t just start living together! Sir Lloyd only wants to live with me!”

...Yeah, that wasn’t on his behalf at all. That’s pure id. Also, common sense? Says the girl with none.

“...And you are?”

“Glad you asked! I am Sir Lloyd’s wife! In the future!”

Phyllo appeared to have no interest in this delusion and turned her attention back to Lloyd. She grabbed his hand again, moving too fast for the eye to see.

“...I’ll do anything... I’m curious...about the secret of your strength...please...”

“I’ll do anything, too! Better yet! You can do anything you want to me, Sir Lloyd! I can be *curious*!”

There was sort of a strange love triangle forming here. It seemed like the original goal had been lost somewhere in the fray.

“Oh, just ignore them, Rol,” Mena said. “You two just keep going.”

Though they both appeared to have a bone to pick, Riho and Rol recovered from the interruption, resuming their face-off. It’s important not to let these things get to you.

“Riho, you couldn’t cook. Couldn’t even peel an apple! Who gave you the hand that let you?”

“When I heard my life was nothing but a tool for you to get a Holy Sword...I

didn't feel that grateful."

Rol shook her head dramatically. "You might not die!" she insisted, as if rationalizing with a stubborn child. "I entrusted the mithril arm to you because your magic was just that good! You remember how I used to teach you?"

Rol slowly held her hand out—the same hand Riho had held so many times at the orphanage. The image overlapped with her memories.

Rol had seized her chance to leave, swearing she'd do what she could to help the orphanage. The old Rol Calcife still lived on in Riho's mind.

"...You were like a sister to me."

But this woman only looked like the old Rol. This was a snake.

"—I need your help now. Won't you do this for me?"

Riho felt the memories crumble away. Her mouth pursed. Then she sighed. "Rol..."

"What, Riho?"

"I used to think it didn't matter if I died."

Rol looked surprised.

"Those burns left me with a useless arm...but the chance to help you, to help the orphanage? If it was for the sister I'd looked up to..."

Riho hung her head, her hair obscuring her expression. She was shaking, but from anger or sadness, no one could tell.

The distinction was lost on Rol, who grinned. "If you looked up to me, then what could be better? Let's—"

Cracckkkk! The sound echoed through the hall.

Riho had slapped Rol's hand away.

Rol clutched her reddened hand, glaring at Riho. "You little..."

"If it was for the old Rol Calcife! A good teacher! A good sister! For the Rol who would have done anything for the orphanage!"

"I'm the headmaster of the Rokujou Sorcery Academy! I have friends in the

government—real power! You can't get away with doing this to—!"

"It doesn't matter how important you think you are! You're an empty, hollow shell of a woman! I called you a snake earlier, but I take that back! You're nothing but molted skin! You're what happens to a snake when they get so greedy and go so fast their own skin peels clean off!"

Their shouting was starting to attract attention. With no regard for the stares, Rol unleashed the full weight of her fury, appearances be damned.

"You'll regret this. When you see what I do to the orphanage..."

But Riho didn't let the malice get to her. She was way beyond that.

An official was launching into an explanation of the rules, but neither of them noticed. They kept their eyes locked on each other.

"Even without you, I can keep the orphanage afloat. But let me say one thing. Because I ran from you, I made myself some good friends... That's the only thing I'm grateful for."

"Your friends can't help you."

The orphanage no longer mattered to Rol. When she was certain of that, Riho's glare made it clear they were through.

"I guess we're done here. Shame we can't be as close as we used to, Riho."

"Yeah. You made that impossible, Rol."

There was murder in Rol's stare, but Riho met it head-on.

"You've never once beaten me!" Rol snarled. "You never have, and you never will. I'm gonna make your eyes pop out of your head!"

"Please. You're gonna be on your knees screaming, 'No way!'"

"Yeah? Not if I make you scream 'No way!' first!"

Ignoring the speech onstage, Rol turned on her heel to leave.

But as she did, a stir ran through the hall. The official had announced a surprise of some kind, but Rol and Riho had been too busy arguing, and Lloyd's group was too caught up in their lover's tiff (LOL) to notice.

All turned to the stage to find Chrome in full dress uniform, cradling a large bundle.

As everyone watched with bated breath, Chrome dramatically unwrapped the cloth...to reveal a beat-up sword.

“This surprise bonus prize goes to the winner! The legendary Holy Sword, recently pulled from the mound in Nandin Village!”

““Nooooooooooooooooo way?!””

Both their eyes popped out of their heads.

In the hallway of the Opera House, some distance from the noise of the main hall, stood Chrome, looking satisfied with a job well done, and Choline, looking confused.

“Ha-ha! Well, Choline? Did you see the looks on those reporters’ faces? Perfect surprise.”

His square face was beaming like a child who had pulled off a sweet prank.

Choline was a wreck.

“Good for the tournament itself, but...we still haven’t picked a team... The more news coverage it gets, the bigger the embarrassment if we deliver a poor performance.”

Attention can be a double-edged sword.

Behind them, Riho spotted the pair and came striding over, Lloyd and Selen in tow.

“Riho? Oh, you and Rol were getting into it—”

Completely ignoring Choline, Riho grabbed a fistful of Chrome’s shirt.

“Gah... Riho? What—?”

“Explain!”

“What? Ugh!”

“On your knees, square jaw!” she barked in a ferocious enough tone that Chrome did as he was told. At his age.

“...Um, so...why...?”

“First, apologize.”

Afraid to disobey, Chrome prostrated himself. “I dunno why, but I’m sorry!”

This seemed to break the dam, and Riho let it all come flying out.

“Why was the Holy Sword removed?! Why didn’t you say anything sooner?! I wouldn’t have spent the past three days scared as hell about what Rol would do! Give it back! Give me back this week of anxiety and fear! Compensate me in cash!”

Riho held out a hand for the money. Confused, Choline looked at Lloyd and Selen for help.

“What’s goin’ on? What happened with Riho and Rol? They good now?”

“Er, not exactly...”

Lloyd filled Choline and Chrome in on everything Riho had told him about Rol and the mithril arm.

Choline knew Rol from school, and her expression clearly said, *Sounds like her.*

After Lloyd was done, she was silent for a while.

“That sounds rough,” Choline offered, at last. “The Holy Sword, huh? She must be planning on gifting that to someone out West to shore up her own position.”

She knew Rol well enough to know how her mind worked. Meanwhile...

“H-hmm...”

The one most troubled by all of this was, of course, Chrome.

He clearly felt pretty guilty for turning the sword at the center of all this into a prize on a whim.

“Colonel Chrome... Where did you get that sword? The legendary sword that no one could free for decades? Not like anyone could just go grab it for you.”

Chrome wordlessly pointed at Lloyd, who was lost in thought.

“Hmm... That Holy Sword looks a lot like the garbage I picked up the other

day...but it couldn't be, surely..."

"I guess he could, yeah."

This all-too-convincing explanation left everyone heaving a giant sigh.

But why had the sword been pulled? Before they could demand an explanation, Rol appeared, face twisted like the devil incarnate.

Her elegance a distant memory, her hair a fright, she looked less like a snake than a frog.

"Hey! Rihoooo! You knew all along?! You came here to mock me because you knew the sword had been retrieved and your life was never in danger?! And you knew Rokujou Sorcery Academy wasn't putting their weight behind this tournament and convinced them to dangle it in front of us as a prize!"

She'd apparently taken this for a clever scheme. Even though they'd both shouted "Nooooo way!" together.

"Ha-ha!" Selen crowed, seizing her moment. "I'm afraid your ambitions have been thwarted. Time for you to go far away and take the Phyllo woman with you! This tournament isn't something you can win with any old lineup! Or are you gonna make yourself into a student and enter personally? You can't do that! So take Phyllo and get outta Azami!"

Clearly, keeping the Quinone girl away from Lloyd was the primary goal here. Her entire speech was just telling Phyllo to get out twice.

Rol's head drooped, staring at the ground.

But...a moment later, her shoulders started to shake.

"Heh."

Then a sinister laugh started burbling up from the depths of her belly.

"D-did we break her?" Choline asked, worried.

Rol grinned wide, flashing her canines, and tore the medallion—the mark of the headmaster's office—off her suit and threw it on the ground.

With dilated pupils, she began frantically stomping on it. Everyone just stared at her. Having thoroughly flattened the pin, there was a silence, broken by her

voice.

“I just need that sword... Who cares about the headmaster’s office?! I don’t need the thing!”

“Y-you’re really gonna quit your job and start calling yourself a student? For this tournament?”

“Damn right!” Rol snapped before Choline even finished. “The Holy Sword! That sword is all I need! Rank and honor are nothing compared to it! You’re going to regret making me get my hands dirty. You’ll be facing me and the Quinone sisters now... You’d better be ready to lay your lives on the line.”

Rol drifted away like a spirit of the damned.

The sheer depth of her obsession left everyone speechless.

“Why...does Rol want this sword so bad?” Choline asked, staring down at the flattened medallion.

Riho nodded, as if making up her mind. She turned to Choline.

“I’m in,” she said. “Put me in this tournament.”

“R-Riho? I thought you were against it...”

“...She taught me magic. Which is why I hated it. But if she wins and gets that sword...god only knows what she’ll do with it.”

Riho clearly felt like it was her responsibility to stop her older sister’s madness. Choline was forced to nod.

“Well, fine! I’d love to have you!”

“Then I’ll join, too!” Selen added, getting swept up in it. “I think we’ll all feel a lot better if we can pulverize that woman!”

Selen was likely talking about Phyllo here, and like 80 percent of her woes were the imagined relationship between Lloyd and Phyllo.

“And I’m sick of seeing Riho look all upset.”

“...Heh.”

The remaining 20 percent had shown itself. Fleetinglly.

With two candidates set, it was time for Lloyd to gingerly raise his hand.

“Um...can I join?”

“Lloyd...,” started Riho.

Lloyd scratched his cheek. “I’m not sure how much use I’ll be...but I don’t want to see you sad, either.”

He gave Riho a gentle smile, and her cheeks turned slightly pink. “...Thanks.”

Selen’s cheeks turned pink, too. Oh, and her hands are shaking. Which meant this was rage and jealousy.

Listening to all this on his knees, Chrome slowly turned toward Choline. “...You’re sure about this? Putting Lloyd in there...”

“Rol Calcife broke the rules first. You fight cheats by cheating! This is what true sportsmanship is all about!” She gave him a smile that was anything but gentle.

“...Choline...”

“Chrome, I get your point. Don’t worry. I’ll train him and make sure he can adjust his powers so nobody dies.”

This just made Chrome break out in a cold sweat. “...Can I please stand up now?” he asked, fidgeting. His toes were tingling.

Choline grinned broadly and stomped on those nubbins. “Right, Azami Military Academy Team, move out! Let’s get to training!”

““““Roger that!””””

“AUGHHH! C-Choline! They’re numb! They’re so numb!”

Chrome’s bellow signaled the start of Riho’s revenge.

The next day, Colonel Choline and Chrome stood at the podium in a training room, looking very serious.

Training rooms had much higher ceilings than the lecture rooms, and the walls bore signs of frequent repairs. The sweat of previous cadet classes had given the room a distinctive vibe.

In the center of the room stood Riho, her old self again, flanked by Selen and Lloyd—all three standing at attention, like good soldiers, waiting for training to start.

“Hmm, yep! Just feels much better seeing Riho lookin’ cocky rather than depressed.”

“Thanks? ...Look, I just want to blow those assholes away.”

“I’ll help in any way I can!”

“Me too... *If* I can, that is...”

All three seemed ready to go.

“All right!” Choline huffed. “Man, in all my team instructions, this is the first time I’ve ever seen cadets enthusiastic about magic lessons! Most of them just act like it’s recess... You try and teach them, and they’re all, ‘Wouldn’t it be easier to just punch them?’ or ‘I prefer throwing rocks.’ Ha-ha-ha...”

Choline had talked herself to the verge of tears. Her hollow laugh echoed through the room.

“Um...I’ll do the best I can?” Lloyd offered.

But this demonstration of kindness broke the dam on her waterworks. The snot started flowing, too.

“*Sniff*... Right, I’m gonna work sooooo hard today! Chrome, you brought the things?”

“...Yeah, yeah, hold your horses.” Chrome pulled a number of scarecrow-esque dummies out of the prep room—similar to the dummies from the entrance exam, but instead of iron plates, these were covered in protective amulets.

“Most important thing when learning magic is repetition! Use the spell over and over until the process of it is etched into your brain!”

“So that’s why you’ve got dummies with magic-resistant items? Geez, those must cost a fortune.”

The amulets were pieces of cloth with spells written on them. Riho appraised

them, shaking her head.

“Our budget is definitely hurting,” Choline admitted.

“I paid for them. I’m the one hurting here,” Chrome grumbled.

He’d been forced to fork up the fees for these expensive training dummies as punishment for turning the Holy Sword into a prize.

As he wiped the tears from his eyes, Choline smirked at him. “My conscience is hurting, too!” she insisted.

Clearly, nobody believed her.

But she just merrily passed out some worksheets, brown hair flouncing.

“Anyway, this is a rundown of basic spells. These days, magic is split into three main approaches. Riho, can you name them?”

“You can use words, aka *chants*; pictures and letters, which are known as *sigils*; or tools, called *conduits*.”

Choline nodded along like a teacher listening to her prize student. “Yes, perfect! The ancient runes I was telling you about technically qualify as sigil magic... Lloyd, you might know the most about that!”

“Uh, I do?”

“...Self-awareness as low as ever, I see.”

Lloyd scratched his cheek apologetically.

“Lloyd’s basically a genius!” Selen said. “But what are the specific advantages and disadvantages of each approach?”

“Good question, Selen! First, chants! The most popular approach! You say a specific set of words to activate the spell. Simple stuff like, ‘Illuminate darkness — *Light!*’”

She actually cast the illumination spell as she spoke, a glowing orb of light appearing on her palm—the first thing she’d done all day remotely “magic instructor”-ish. It drew a chorus of ooohs and aaaahs.

“With practice, it can be just that smooth,” she declared, grinning.

“Very cool! I’d love to learn to chant!” Lloyd said.

“Not so fast,” Choline said, wagging her finger at him. “Biggest problem here is that you can’t use magic if you’re out of breath or unable to talk! You get surrounded by monsters, running for your life, and then you can’t even cast a spell properly? Or there’s smoke everywhere, making you cough? And mages with hay fever are basically out of commission all spring.”

Choline launched into a solo comedy sketch. “Yo, why can’t you chant a spell?” “Cause I got hay fever, dude!”

This seemed like it might go on awhile, so Riho started explaining how sigils work.

“Sigils pose similar obstacles. If you hurt your fingers, you won’t be able to write. That ever happen to you, Lloyd?”

“Oh, absolutely. The day after shattering every bone in my body, I couldn’t use runes to clean at all!”

“...Uh, right... Wait, *every* bone? Uh, does that heal in a day?”

“Sorry. I know that’s a really long time. I’m so weak... After all, it takes everyone else like an hour or two.”

This approach to broken bones left Riho with a broken psyche, and before she recovered, Choline wrapped up her one-woman show.

“What, you’re already done with sigils? Then next up is conduits! If you’ve got a magic stone, anyone can use the thing. Even square jaw here.”

“Rude,” Chrome grumbled. His hand went to his jaw, feeling the shape of it. Then he spoke from personal experience. “Uh, yeah, I’ve used them before. But they drain more magic than chanting does. A few uses, and you end up exhausted. Plus, they get worn with wear.”

You always have to pay for convenience. Just like eating out or taking a cab.

“*Hngg...* So which approach is best?” asked Selen.

Choline and Riho answered together. ““All of them.””

“What?”

This caught Lloyd and Selen off guard.

“Best approach is to do it all at once!” Choline explained. “If you inscribe a sigil on a conduit while you chant, even if you stumble over the words a bit or your fingers aren’t quite dexterous, you can use the conduit at comparatively low cost.”

“It’s like how you adapt on the battlefield. Balance is key,” Chrome said, experience lending weight to his words.

“Well, now you know the basics, let’s get down to practice! Gimme a hand here, Selen.” Choline took out a brush and quickly drew a pattern on Selen’s clear skin.

“A sigil?”

“A basic one. Mages in the old days used to tattoo all kinds of spells on themselves. You, too, Lloyd.” She drew one on Lloyd’s arm, then explained how to use them.

“Trace the pattern like this... Then here...chant something burny and end with *flame*.”

“Understood.” Selen took a deep breath, then put one of the dummies in her sight and chanted, “—Burn to ash! *Flame!*”

There was a mild *foom*, and a fist-sized fireball flew toward the dummy.

When it hit its mark, it turned to sparks and vanished.

“Oh, that was pretty easy,” Selen commented.

“You’ve got a knack for it, m’lady!”

Rare praise from Riho. She smiled broadly enough to flash her canines and then shot a fireball herself.

It was several times larger than Selen’s and took several seconds to reach the dummy, shrinking as it flew before vanishing in a shower of sparks. Seemed she could get that much power from the sigil alone.

“Those resist charms are pretty good! Can’t get through to them.”

Choline whistled. “Hot damn, Riho!”

Riho shot her a wink. Selen looked somewhat frustrated.

“...I was all happy at the compliment, but she just used me as a springboard to make herself look good! Colonel Choline! Teach me something harder!”

“Selen,” Choline said, trying to talk her down. “Basic magic is amplified or diminished by your innate magic power. You can adapt the spells themselves in all sort of ways—*Flame Arrow*, or *Flame Wall*, et cetera, but it’s all basically fueled by the same source, so you can’t neglect the fundamentals.”

Lloyd raised his hand. “But there’s some really incredible fire magic out there! I’ve read about it in books. Is that stuff really achievable by honing fundamentals?”

“Hmm, you mean advanced magic,” Chrome said. “That stuff definitely isn’t part of the typical magic people chant.”

“Yeah, that stuff gets into the realm of *summons*,” Choline said. “Which is beyond the capacity of humans. You know, summoning waterfalls, flames that burn for three days and nights, ice that can seal magic... Advanced spells are a whole different category, not anything you’re gonna get to in a day’s practice.”

“And those spells have their own downsides,” Chrome added. “Long chants leave you immobile and open to attack—and that applies to famous mercenaries and the headmaster of a certain sorcery academy, too.”

That gave them a fighting chance. Riho nodded grimly.

“And the three of you have better core skills than most! Don’t let their spells hit you, slam your own spells in when you spy an opening, and you’ve got a good shot at winning! Now, let’s practice!”

““““Roger that!””””

Hearing the enthusiasm in their voices, Chrome finally made his peace with the expense of it.

“Well, having everyone practice like this is what teachers live for...,” he said, as if trying to convince himself. Which he was. “The amulets should last awhile... They were a good purchase! A worthy expense.” He chanted as if this was a spell he was casting on himself.

That was when Lloyd hesitantly raised his hand. “Um, can I try chanting?”

A chill settled over the room.

“...*Gulp.*”

Everything about Lloyd was beyond human. Everyone made sure to stand a safe distance away, prepared for anything, watching nervously.

“Uh, so you do this and then... Burn like ass! *Fwame!*”

Hmm? He must have been so nervous that he got a bit tongue tied.

“Eh-heh-heh... Lloyd’s so cute...”

Shnk.

A moment later, the dummy was a pile of ashes. Something well beyond the power of fire or flame had hit the dummy, emitting enough heat to warp the floor around it.

Lloyd stared at the heat wave for a moment, then scratched his head apologetically.

“Uh, sorry... I messed up. I guess I can only cast really zany flames...”

“.....”

He had messed up, saying the wrong words...but the resulting power left everyone speechless.

“It’s okay,” Chrome said—to himself...trying to convince himself not to care that a dummy he’d purchased with his own money had been reduced to ash in an instant.

“Oh, okay! Good, I’ll try again! Next...”

The results spoke for themselves.

Fire magic? The dummy was reduced to ash.

Lightning magic? The dummy was reduced to ash.

Wind magic? The dummy was torn apart.

Ice magic? The dummy was pulverized.

Chrome's tears? Priceless.

"That's right... I thought it would help everyone... I used half my savings..."

He was cradling his knees in the corner, talking to a stain on the wall.
Condition? Grave.

Lloyd's magic was clearly not something that could be used against another person or this would be less a tournament than a public dismemberment.

All of them were at a loss for words, but eventually, Choline managed to pry her lips open.

"Right, Lloyd, seems you're best at wind magic, so let's use that during the tournament."

"Whoa, Colonel Choline!" Riho yelled, dragging her to the side. Lloyd looked surprised.

"Hey, you're stretching my collar!"

"What are you thinking? He can't cast any of those on a person!"

"True enough, but at least the wind spell left the dummy in recognizable pieces! Arms and...heads..." She pointed at the severed head of the dummy he'd hit with wind magic.

"Not that much better than being pulverized, is it?" Riho shouted.

"True, but...he's not using it on normal humans! We're talking Rol here! And the Quinone sisters! They're like living secret weapons! When you're fighting anyone else, put Lloyd in as your third slot and make sure he never gets a chance to do anything!"

With something that overpowered, it's best to bind it yourself...which brings a whole new meaning to the word *bondage*. Very kinky.

"But that means the two of us can't even come close to losing," Riho groaned, rubbing her temples.

"Look, Lloyd," Choline said. "Your magic is a little bit unusual. It's gonna be hard to use in a real fight. Don't look so sad!"

Lloyd was already settling into a self-deprecating grin, certain his skills were

too weak to ever be useful in combat.

Reality, of course, was the other way around: They were too dangerous! But it wasn't that easy to overcome the low self-esteem with which growing up in Kunlun had saddled him.

Choline felt sorry for him but resisted the urge to comfort him and quickly changed the subject.

"Er, um...so! Riho, do you need to practice?"

"About that, Colonel Choline," Riho replied, giving her a grim look. "Can you teach me healing magic?"

"Mm? Well, sure...but they'll have healers on standby."

"Not for that. Also, there's something I'll need the day of the tournament..." Riho leaned in, whispering. Choline's eyes went wide.

"What?! Don't be ridiculous! That's suicide!"

"You can do it! You're a healing expert, right? I'll do the training I need to do a quick heal on the spot."

Riho bowed low. It was possibly the first time Choline had ever seen Riho genuinely humble herself.

"...All right. But...don't push yourself."

"I won't. And I'll owe you one."

What was Riho's secret scheme?

"...I know. Ah-ha-ha. It's a hard life."

Would Chrome ever stop pouring his soul out to the wall stain?

The first day of the Continental Student Sorcery Tournament was almost at hand.

Chapter 3

A Cliché of Clichés: Suppose a Tournament from an Old-Timey Battle Manga Came to Life!

The day of the Continental Student Sorcery Tournament, there were blue skies over Azami's coliseum, Maria Stadium. When the king's daughter was born, he'd been so excited that he named the place after her.

While there had been little interest leading up to the event, news of the Holy Sword had really gotten the public's attention, and the place was packed with tourists and reporters.

And the news that Rol from the Rokujou Sorcery Academy had stepped down from her prestigious role to enter a student tournament was also the talk of the town.

The hall was quite worked up, and this was clearly affecting the team led by Choline.

"Geez, too many people here," Choline grumbled. "Can't blame them for talking after that headmaster's stunt, though." She stood there, dumbfounded by the colossal crowd.

"Wow... So many people," Lloyd said, looking ready to run for it. "More than the entire population of Kunlun!"

"You're cute when you're scared...!" Selen offered, worked up for very different reasons... So basically, operating at her normal capacity.

At the center of the group was Riho, looking determined, her eyes gleaming. As the noise of the crowd erupted, she kept her mithril arm cradled to her, glaring at the entrance.

"Come at me... I'm not about to lose..."

Her quiet oath was drowned out by the boos of the crowd.

Rol's group had appeared—and the crowd wasn't a fan of her stunt. The world considered her a coward, like a professional baseball player showing up to play in a little league game.

Rol sailed over to them, unaffected by the booing—possibly even enjoying it. “How are you, Choline?”

“Great, and you, Rol?”

Steam poured out of their ears as they made eye contact.

Mena immediately destroyed the mood. “Sup, dudes! Rol made us pretend to be students even though we're way too old! I'm Mena!”

“...You seem cheery.”

They were enemies, but Riho had been feeling sort of sorry for the sisters...so this attitude surprised her.

“Well, it's not permanent. We're gonna win this dumb thing and enjoy our student discounts all over Azami!”

This declaration certainly got a rise out of Riho.

“...Oh? Big talk,” she replied.

Mena's eyes gleamed. “You seem like you'd be pretty good at magic, but this is three-on-three. The other two strike me as physical fighters...but this is a magic tournament. I know you've got a lot riding on this, but this is our job... Just don't blame us when you lose.”

Mena clearly thought they had this in the bag.

Riho's brow twitched. “You've got a burly fighter yourself.”

Said fighter, Phyllo, was ignoring everyone but Lloyd, moving directly toward him.

“...I really want an answer...”

Phyllo's approach was like a tackle or... Nah, pretty much just a tackle.

But Selen saw her coming and nimbly slipped between them. Phyllo hit the brakes.

“Ha! I know how you operate, you thief!”

“...Phyllo. Not thief...”

“Oh, how *polite*! I’m Selen Hemein. No use hiding it—Lloyd and I are lov—”

“Wow! You’re the Cursed Belt Princess?!” Mena yelped.

A stir ran through the crowd.

“That was before! These days, I’m Lloyd’s lo—”

“I heard you have a cursed belt that’s actually an artifact that protects you from all malicious attacks... Weapons are limited to magic items, but there’s no such restrictions on armor. Could be trouble...”

Selen was getting sick of being interrupted right before the important bit.

“Well, that ain’t the only reason we’re confident,” Choline boasted.

But Rol’s confidence clearly matched hers.

“Yet you have this boy who clearly serves no use other than to boost your team’s numbers. Hoping to win every match, huh? I almost pity your selection pool.”

Lloyd’s fearful expression certainly would lead to that conclusion.

“Urp...,” he gulped, deflating. But...

“““You’ll see.”””

Everyone else knew better.

“Did I hit the nail on the head? ...You poor thing.”

“Yeah, well... You go ahead and think that.”

Lloyd was more than just an ace up the sleeve—he was like bringing a cannon to play rock-paper-scissors. But the boy himself was totally unaware of that.

“...Mm.” Phyllo, well aware of his strength, tugged Rol’s sleeve—presumably warning her to be careful.

“Don’t worry. No matter how easy this is, your reward will be the same.”

But this was entirely lost on Rol.

The matches were ready to begin.

The shocking news that the Holy Sword had not only been retrieved but was a prize for the victors resulted in Choline's team utterly failing to check the brackets at the drawing. They quickly briefed themselves on the tournament rules and brackets.

"Uh... Three people per team, generally one-on-one matches, only attacks allowed are with magic, conduits like wands, and magic items like magic stones."

"But any defensive equipment is okay," clarified Selen. "Hmm, people might have magic-resistant amulets..."

"We don't want anyone getting badly injured, so we've got healers posted. Having decent equipment doesn't hurt, though, no," added Choline.

Lloyd looked relieved to hear this. "Good! I was scared I'd get hurt."

Everyone else looked at him like he was nuts. This was the boy who'd torn through all those expensive resistant amulets.

"So...when do we fight Rokujou's team?"

Choline scanned the brackets. "They're on the opposite side! We gotta take it to the finals."

"Hmm, looks like the Rokujou Sorcery Academy team is up first."

The announcer called their name a moment later, and the Rokujou team took the stage. All of them were immediately showered in boos... Well, they were all aimed at Rol.

The headmaster herself entering to claim a prize—to the audience, this made for the perfect villain.

Listening to the jeers of the crowd, Rol's usual smug look was nowhere to be found. Instead, she was fixing each and every jeerer with a serpentine stare.

"Shaddup! Silence! Just watch me win!"

The crowd got even angrier. She certainly had the basics of a pro wrestling heel down pat.

Neither of the Quinone sisters appeared bothered by any of this. Mena was still grinning, and Phyllo just stood there, expressionless.

“And they’re up against...”

A moment later, a group of knights in heavy armor strode slowly from the waiting area, headed to the ring. These were clearly no ordinary opponents.

“What? Knight in shining armor...at a magic tournament?”

“Temple Knights...from the Azami Temple School.”

“What’s a Temple Knight?” Lloyd asked.

“Good question,” Choline said. “Knights of the temple are our trump card when fighting magic crime—they specialize in it. To the point where our school has them stop by to give guest lectures sometimes.”

“Normally, they equip swords, but these guys have monk staffs studded with magic stones. Even their heads are covered in full-plate helmets... They’re really not messing around.”

One of the Temple School instructors overheard Riho and shot her a stern look.

“You there, military cadet! Of course we’re not messing around! Our school takes this tournament very seriously.”

“Why?” asked Selen.

With folded arms and fingers tightening around them, the teacher responded, voice choked with passion. “You see, with the attention that the Holy Sword brought to the tournament, they want to make a good show...so that ‘girls will like them!’ they told me, tears flowing.”

“...Riiiiiiiiight.”

“Men aren’t their faces! They are their potential! Thus, full-plate armor! A pretty face isn’t the mark of a real man!”

Upon closer inspection, this instructor’s face definitely was a step in the direction of “zoo animal.” Also his body odor...was kinda zoo-like.

Incidentally, Temple Knights were known for training day and night in full

gear, so...the odor went with the territory.

Appalled by basically all of this, the girls looked toward the stage...

“...Girls.” “Say something.” “You say something!” “...Are you trying to kill me?”

...and regretted it immediately with secondhand embarrassment.

These unpopular boys were being approached by a beautiful (if expressionless) girl with a model physique—Phyllo.

“...Hi.”

““““Oh, hi!””””

Phyllo gave out just enough of a “dispassionate beauty” vibe to wrap the Temple Knights around her finger.

“...Dibs.” “For real?” “What?! It’s my turn!” “...Drop dead.”

This was definitely the kind of team that would leave a mixer still single.

Armor clanking wildly, the Temple Knights settled things in a no-holds-barred round of rock-paper-scissors, and with the turn order finally established, it was time for the battle to begin.

“First match! Rokujou Sorcery Academy versus Azami Temple School! Start!”

At the ref’s bellow, the armored knight charged forward.

“*Hngg!* Win and prove my worth! To get girls to like meeeeeeeeeee!”

The stones at the tip of his staff glowed, becoming wreathed in fire.

Putting the force of his charge behind it, he thrust—

“...Mm.” Phyllo didn’t bat an eye.

She just leaned sideways and gave the staff a quick tug.

And the Temple Knight went flying through the air like a ball of cotton, landing on his back.

“Gah!”

It sounded like all the air in his lungs had been forcibly ejected.

A fall onto one's back in full-plate armor must be one hell of a body blow, but the Temple Knight was not so easily daunted.

"Great moves!" he roared, praising his opponent as he scrambled to his feet.

As he did, a shadow fell over him.

He looked up, puzzled.

"...Mm." Phyllo was rummaging through her pocket.

She'd closed the distance between them in an instant.

The crowd was just as shocked by this as the knight.

"Hngg."

Just as the knight was fully upright, Phyllo held out a bronze stone.

A magic stone.

The Temple Knight quickly held out the buckler attached to his left hand.

Fire? Water? Lightning? Or an explosion?

He could soak at least one blow from any of these.

The shield was his pride as a Temple Knight. He watched Phyllo carefully around the rim of it.

"...Mm."

With that faint noise, there was a deafening explosion, right before the knight's eyes.

"Sh-she just hit him with the stone!" Riho screeched.

The crowd reacted a moment later.

The Temple Knight's armor was blown off, leaving him half-naked, limbs flung out like a frog on its back.

...And his face was sort of frog-like, too, FYI.

"I—I just want to be popular..."

Yeah, that'll have to be way in the future.

Phyllo was just standing there—the palm of her hand smoking with shards of

the magic stone embedded in it.

She glanced down at it like she would a skinned knee but soon lost interest and started walking toward the Temple Knight.

“W-winner! Phyllo Quinone!” the ref yelped, sensing danger. “Quickly, get a stretcher!” He placed himself between them.

“...It’s over?” Phyllo repeated. She turned and left the stage, taking her place by her sister’s side.

“She’s insane,” Choline said, as horrified by Phyllo’s entirely emotionless behavior as she was by her total lack of concern for her own injuries. “It’s like punching with a bomb. And destroying a magic stone every round is hardly cost effective!”

An expensive battle technique must have been coming directly from Rol Calcife’s personal funds. It definitely had the crowd buzzing.

She clearly meant business.

This was no ordinary tournament.

Meanwhile, the second match was starting.

Totally unaffected by any of this, Mena was flouncing up onstage, skirt twirling.

Her opponent...a grimly silent Temple Knight.

“...Girls...”

“Whatever. This ain’t that kinda establishment.”

A taciturn knight versus a chatterbox.

The ref gave the signal.

This time, the Temple Knight didn’t charge in.

After that last display, he was playing it safe, watching for his opponent’s every move.

“...Go on.”

“Sorry...my sister’s just ridiculous. I’m a totally ordinary mage.”

She used a sigil to deploy a spell, and a moment later, a mass of water shot out of her hand toward the knight.

“Here’s a *Water Ball*!”

“...This...was covered in class...”

Spitting a cliché line from an amateur manga, the Temple Knight swung his arm, slicing the ball with his buckler and deflecting it.

She’d drawn that sigil accurately and quickly. The Temple Knight knew she really was a normal mage.

Deciding he didn’t need to worry, he quickly advanced...

But Mena showed no signs of backing away. She just wagged her fingers.

“Eh-heh-heh. But—I am a water specialist.” The wagging fingers suddenly snapped closed. “A simple deflect won’t end my spells.”

The remains of the *Water Ball* suddenly covered the Temple Knight’s face.

“Gah...cough... I’m dying...”

Unable to breathe, the Temple Knight started thrashing at the side of the stage, drowning on dry land. He managed to get his helmet off, but his movements were growing slower and slower...

Ten seconds, then twenty. Looking like he’d dunked his head in a goldfish bowl, he was clearly in agony—screams went up from the crowd.

“Whoops, I keep this up, he’ll die—man, it’s hard to know when to stop with humans!”

Mena released the spell.

The water dissipated, and the Temple Knight collapsed, limbs sprawled in all directions.

With water pouring out of every hole on his face, his mouth was wide open like a yawning hippo, his face blue from lack of oxygen. And his face was sort of hippo-like, too, FYI.

“W-winner! Mena Quinone! Someone give the kid CPR, now!”

“...Please let it...be...a cute girl...”

“He seems fine! Just drag him offstage!”

And like that, Rokujou Sorcery Academy had two wins, qualifying them to the next round.

“...I figured Rol was the biggest threat, but those two are bad news, too.”

As if the boos of the crowd were pleasing to the ear, Rol glanced over at Lloyd’s group, grinning.

The matches afterward—well, honestly, they were pretty forgettable.

After those two bouts, everyone else just looked like nothing special. No matches were as one-sided as the Temple Knights’ had been.

“Only surprises here are the Rokujou Sorcery Academy people, huh?” Selen observed.

Choline shook her head. “Well, before they went nuts, people thought Jiou Monk Seminary had the best shot at winning this.”

But before she could explain further, a group of young men wrapped in yellow cloth stepped forward. They carried the scent of incense on them—their hands clasped symbolically, their shaved heads gleaming in the light.

“I believe you are from the Azami Military Academy. We’re from the Jiou Monk Seminary.” The student monk in front placed his palms together and bowed low.

The two behind him went all the way down to the ground in prayer.

“Uh, hi...”

“There have been many problems between Jiou and the troops of Azami, but as monks-in-training, we have no ties to those matters. Please pay them no concern. I look forward to a good match.”

He seemed like a really nice guy, which sort of pulled the rug out from under the Azami brigade.

“R-right...”

He was clearly nice. But the students praying prostrate behind him—well, that

was just plain weird.

“Um,” Lloyd said. “Why are those two praying?”

“Ah, they are offering up a prayer of thanks for their first encounter with a female in eons. Pay them no mind.”

“I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Is everyone in this tournament so desperate?” asked Selen.

Like students from an all-boys school at a girls’ school festival—No, high school boys would never go this far. They’d just get a bit too close and try to catch a whiff of the girls.

Ignoring the girls’ glazed looks, the lead monk continued his spiel. “They may go for the occasional body contact during combat, but please, pay that no mind. We look forward to a good fight!”

“Oh, *hell* no! We’ll absolutely mind the hell out of that!”

But Riho’s cry was met with placid, unwavering shades of worldly desires.

“Later.” They left, heads sparkling.

“*That’s* the best they have to offer?” Selen asked, incredulous.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Choline said, shaking her head. “Monks of Jiou hole up in the mountains, training...just as their hormones start raging. They almost never come down to populated areas...making them desperate for the slightest glimpse of the fairer sex. So...”

“What?”

“This Continental Student Sorcery Tournament is the one means their students have of experiencing the real world! The battles are fierce and bloody, and the contestants are truly the seminary’s best!”

“It’s like dropping starving leeches into your fish tank...”

“Their monks use techniques that seal your magic powers. Acquiring that skill requires both natural aptitude and a ton of hard work...but that’s why they’ve been able to conquer so many neighbors.”

“Meaning horniness expands the empire, eh...”

“Wait!” Lloyd spluttered. He’d been listening intently and saw this as a clear threat. “You mean they fight by sealing other people’s magic? If your magic gets sealed in a magic tournament, you’ve got no way to win!”

Riho seemed unconcerned. She knew how to handle this. “They can only seal your magic if they touch you. So don’t let ’em.”

She gave Selen’s cursed belt a pointed glance.

“Oh...she’s a good match, all right!” Choline said.

Whether she got that hint or not, Selen seemed confident. “I wouldn’t let anyone but Lloyd lay a finger on me! I’m going to send those baldies packing!”

She headed up onstage, cackling.

“The Azami Military Academy versus the Jiou Monk Seminary! Start!” the ref yelled.

The monk threw himself forward, muttering under his breath, eyes wide open, hands making groping gestures. There was a very small electric current running over the hands, so this must have been a lightning spell.

“Allow me to massage the worldly desires out of you!”

Said a bundle of worldly desires.

“Go away, creep! I will defeat you in the name of true love!”

Said the stalker.

In a sense, this was a duel worth watching...but Selen had known nothing about magic a few days before. Only one thing could make up for that...

Snap! Craaaaack!

“What?!”

“Ha! My impenetrable defense! Nothing gets past the cursed belt!”

The cursed belt. An artifact from Kunlun, it was originally the hide of Vritra, the Divine Beast—now made into a piece of equipment that would protect its wearer from any malicious intent. The curse had caused nothing but suffering for most of her life, but now it had become her trademark look.

The monk changed directions, moving his palms on a new trajectory—from the boobs to the thighs, to be specific.

But again, the belt slapped him away, like an experienced hostess brooking no nonsense.

Having been properly chided, the pervy monk's serene expression faded, his nostrils flaring with anger.

"Hngg... C'mon, just a little!"

The whiny kid inside him was coming out.

Selen exploited this opportunity. *"—Flame!"*

The chant and spell deployment took some time, showing how hastily she'd acquired these new skills. And the flame produced was hardly significant—but it was flung directly at the face from a short distance. Effective enough.

"Hngg! Let me grope you!" Burning, the monk desperately struggled on.

"...Flame!"

"Buttocks!"

"...Flame!"

"T-tits!"

"...Flame!"

"...At least...the legs...please..."

Witnessing the monk go from medium rare to well done, the crowd began shrieking.

They were yelling things like, "One more to finish him!" or "That's our Cursed Belt Princess! No mercy!" or "Stop ruining the rep of the local lords!" That last one had to be Allan.

For ten minutes, Selen's clumsy spells made him into roast beef until he crumpled to the ground without ever managing to touch her.

"Chagrin! Chagrin..." he sobbed. Like, seriously wept.

"Winner! Selen Hemein!"

When she heard that, Selen looked relieved and dragged herself off the stage, looking exhausted.

“Well done, Selen! That belt’s amazing! You totally handled him.”

“Thank you...but I’m so out of magic...”

She did look really drained. She’d had to endure the student monk’s sexual harassment attacks on top of using recently acquired skills.

“A-are you okay?” Lloyd asked, worried. As if she’d been waiting for that very moment, Selen collapsed against him.



“Oh...I feel faint! But I’ll be okay. Clinging to your side will allow my magic to recover faster...”

“Er, uh...th-that tickles!”

“That’s the magic! Proof that my magic is recovering!”

Selen’s logic was suspect but her desires fulfilled.

Seeing no point in arguing the matter, Riho just grabbed Selen by the nape of her neck and peeled her off Lloyd.

“I think drinking a magic potion will help you recover a lot faster than clinging to Lloyd.”

“What are you talking about?! The victor deserves a reward! ...*Mmph!*”

Riho shoved a small potion bottle between Selen’s lips, silencing her. It went down the wrong pipe, and Selen was left coughing.

“*Gah, hack, cough!* So...so bitter! *Blegh!*”

Magic potions were made from flower petals and butterfly wings mixed with weeds, so they were gritty, bitter, and tended to sting. If they weren’t proven to be effective, nobody in their right mind would ever drink them.

Leaving Selen choking, Riho waved a hand and walked away. “Geez... Time for the next match! Later!”

“G-good luck!” Lloyd said.

Riho shot him a genuine smile—a rarity. “I got this.”

Riho took the stage to find the first monk they’d spoken to already standing there, forming symbols with his hands.

A relaxed stance, a calm demeanor—this one could be trouble. Riho braced herself.

“Oh, you’re next?” he said. “Which means that boy’s your team leader? Surprising.”

“We got our reasons.”

“Oh? I’m curious.”

“Sorry, but that’s not for perverted monks to know.”

“Heh-heh. Can’t have you looking down on us. Me and that last man? From completely different dimensions.”

“That’s quite the claim.”

“Yes! I only love in 2-D.”

“Ew.” She’d thought he’d be trouble. But not in this way.

“So before the sun sets, I need to tour all the bookstores in town! Sorry, but I’m gonna end this one quick.”

“Oh, okay. I agree with that last part.”

Sensing they were ready, the ref gave the signal. “Right! Start!”

“I’ll go easy on you,” the monk said, his serene expression never flickering. He held out his hand.

Riho regarded the handshake suspiciously...but then bared her fangs and accepted it.

“I’ll go easy on *you*,” she said.

She held out her mithril arm. The monk’s expression clouded.

“...That’s...”

“Cheating? You were trying to use that handshake to touch me and seal my magic, right?”

“...But my techniques won’t work on a false hand. In which case...!”

The monk withdrew his hand, immediately deploying a spell.

“Divide! *Flame Wall!*”

A wall of fire appeared between them, splitting the stage in two.

“Thin wall! I guess this is part of your whole 2-D shtick?”

“What?!”

For the first time, she got a rise out of him. Riho stuck out the mithril arm, holding the palm toward her opponent and moving it around like she was

stirring the fire.

“How...?”

“This is nothing... *Thunderbolt!*”

A bolt shot out of her hand like a rocket, and lightning struck the monk's stance.

“*Hngg!*” He quickly leaped back, clearly flustered but already calculating his next move.

“If the wall of fire does nothing...then I'll have to touch her directly and seal her magic...*if* I can touch her anywhere but that arm...”

“And? How you gonna do that?”

“...What?!” He looked up to find himself surrounded by walls of fire.

Walls thicker than his own, in all directions...

“I'm outclassed...”

The crowd and the monk seemed equally taken with the power and grace of the gleaming mithril arm.

“Hard to read books when you're covered in burns.”

“I-if my fingers are clumsy, I might flip too many pages and see crucial spoilers! I'd like to avoid that.”

Perhaps it was not a fear we all share equally, but the monk accepted his defeat.

“Winner! Riho Flavin! Azami Military Academy advances to the next round!”

She left the stage to a chorus of cheers.

“Well done, Riho! The power of mithril strikes again.”

“If I can control it, it's a great weapon...but if I let it, the thing'll drain my magic and...*boom.*”

Riho glared down at it...and then Lloyd stepped up, holding a little bottle.

“Good work, Riho! Here's a potion.”

“Oh, I’m good. I’ve got plenty of magic left...”

“Don’t be silly, Riho,” Selen said, clutching her shoulder. “No reason to deprive yourself!” Her face twisted demonically, tears welling in her eyes.

“...Are you seriously holding this against me?”

“I can still feel it in my nose!”

“W-wait, don’t pour it in mine! It’s not a nasal spray!”

Lloyd turned to look around. “Hmm, I don’t see Marie anywhere... She said she’d be here, cheering me on.”

But he didn’t see her pointy hat in the stadium.

Back at Marie’s house on the East Side, trouble was brewing.

“Where are you going all dolled up?”

“...Er, shopping?”

The moment Marie tried to leave to watch the match, Alka had sensed something and teleported over.

Fully done up, perfume sprayed over her black robes—it was definitely not a look for a shopping trip.

“Liar! Before Lloyd came, you were way too lazy to ever wear makeup! Any time you ran into someone you knew, you were forced to hide yourself like someone with a guilty conscience!”

“How do you even know that?!” Marie yelled, turning bright red.

Alka thumped the table. “You’re not off to see Lloyd strut his stuff, are you? I’ve looked into this! You tried to use the fact that I can’t go to keep it hidden from me!”

“So how did you find out?!”

Just then...the vibration of the table thump dislodged the lid of a small box on top.

Inside—clearly a lunch, stuffed with all kinds of food, neatly arranged.

“...Ah!”

“...A lunch, huh. Not made by Lloyd, either. He’d do a better job.”

Yep, this was Marie’s *special* lunch, made with love. All her pent-up gratitude—which, let’s be honest, is just love—crammed into this offering unto Lloyd.

But just before she left to deliver it to him at the tournament location, she’d been caught by Alka, the Love Cop.

“...It’s for me.”

“LIAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR! Would you decorate your own lunch with *HEARTS*?!”

“Yes, I would! I love myself!”

“Liar! Before Lloyd came, you were a dried fish of a woman living on canned food and coffee! You ate so few vegetables that you got constipated and had to force yourself to choke down some veggies *raw*! You were so starved for home cooking, you’d specifically deliver things to neighbors at dinnertime to trick them into inviting you to stay for supper!”

“How much time did you spend spying on my life?! This is criminal!”

Marie was technically the princess. Yet after that list of horrors, this sounded totally unconvincing. Digging up all manner of indignities certainly left her red-faced, though!

Alka took a quick glance back at the crystal. The villagers were starting to notice her absence.

She angrily clicked her tongue. Reluctantly, she started dragging her feet back toward it.

The crystal served as an Alka-exclusive teleportation gate, allowing her to travel from one end of the continent to the other in the blink of an eye—well beyond what any mortal could accomplish.

“...Sadly, the villagers are getting suspicious. I have to get back.”

“Bon voyage! Don’t let the door hit you on the way out!” Marie gave Alka a merry wave.

“Marie, you’d better not be planning on going to see Lloyd in action without telling me.”

“Heavens, no!” Marie said, sounding like she was reading cue cards. “It would never do for a student to go see something that her master can’t!”

Alka scowled at her. She was obviously going. This called for desperate measures.

“Okay, fine. Then just to be sure, I’ll put a curse on you that makes you get a gurgling stomachache every ten minutes.”

“What? That’s mean, even for you!”

Alka ignored that protest, drawing something in ancient runes.

“Just making sure you keep your word and don’t sneak off to see him! You spoke words of respect for your master, and in return, I offer you a solution to your constipation! Do me the honor of accepting it!”

“Don’t worry, master! Lloyd’s cooking has me smooth and regular!”

“Now you’re just bragging!” Alka slammed the runes into Marie’s belly. Marie quickly turned green, goose bumps rising all over. That first wave was already hitting her.

“You *loli* grandmaaaaa! Aughhhh!” With a scream, she vanished into the toilet.

Grinning, Alka shouted through the door. “Whoops, I might have overdone it a bit! That rune was for serious blockage! Well, if you prostrate yourself before the crystal and repent in detail, perhaps I’ll release the spell early.”

Then she vanished into the crystal.

A few minutes later, Marie staggered out of the bathroom.

“You monster... Curse the ancients who left those stupid runes with her...”

With these frequent, severe spasms, she could never go see the match. Marie was done for.

“Knowing her, it’ll wear off this evening...and it’s...”

The church bells rang twelve times.

“Oh god... She’d better not have set it to midnight! I can’t take twelve hours of this!”

Marie turned pale at the thought.

A few minutes later, Marie was supplicating herself before the crystal like a drought-plagued tribe praying for rain.

“Noon, huh?”

The church bells were just audible over the din of the hall. The finals were swiftly approaching.

The unusually fast pace of the tournament was a combination of Rokujou Sorcery Academy’s rampage and Azami Military Academy’s steady forward march.

Phyllo and Mena. The Quinone sisters’ battle with the Temple Knights had been enough to make all further opponents lose the will to fight.

Meanwhile, on the Azami side, Selen’s impenetrable defense soon forced her opponents to give up, and the ordinary spells that Riho’s opponents used were no match for the high-level ones afforded by her mithril arm.

These two pairs were now facing each other onstage for the finals.

As the two teams lined up to greet each other, Choline spoke to Rol. “Do you remember when the two of us squared off in mock combat when we were students? We each won once.”

Rol just looked surprised. “Nope, it’s been totally wiped from my memory. As long as I get that Holy Sword, nothing else matters.”

“...Right.”

Whether it was because her attempt to start an argument had whiffed or because the change that her old classmate had undergone came as a shock, all Choline could manage was a sad response.

“First-match contestants, stay put. Everyone else, clear the stage, please.”

First up was Phyllo versus Selen.

This was quite a matchup; even world tournaments rarely saw anything this good. The crowd was getting pretty hyped.

On the one side, Phyllo Quinone, who went around punching people with

magic stones.

On the other, Selen Hemein, with her absolute defense protecting her from all magic as she slowly whittled them down.

The proverbial spear and shield.

Selen herself was getting heated for entirely different reasons.

Everything that this woman's done with Lloyd! It's envia— Unforgivable!

Meanwhile, Phyllo was paying Selen no attention at all, waving at Lloyd behind her.

“Ah...ah-ha-ha...” Riho was elbowing him in the ribs. Maybe a bit too hard.

“Tempting the husband before the wife's very eyes! Have you no common sense...?!”

You mean the kind of common sense that mistakes an imaginary marriage certificate for reality?

But as the delusion took hold, the light in Selen's eyes faded. The dark, empty orbs bore through Phyllo...who seemed entirely unconcerned.

“...Common sense?”

“That's right! Just grabbing his hand and acting like his girlfriend without consent! Barbaric actions with no heed for his feelings! Anyone with common sense would know better!” Selen thrust a finger up, confident her point was made.

“Right back atcha,” said Riho.

“Pot calling the kettle...,” offered Choline.

She was literally calling out her own actions, so nobody found it very convincing.

“...You...do the same...”

“Sh-shut up! I'm allowed! I'm his wife! In the future!”

Even an opponent as silent as Phyllo was openly arguing against her.

“Um, can I start things?” the ref asked, unsure of himself.

“...Mm.” Phyllo nodded.

“Okay...final round, everyone! Phyllo Quinone versus Selen Hemein! Let the match begin!”

The crowd—which had been unable to hear much of their argument—erupted in applause.

“...Mm.” Phyllo whipped out a magic stone, and the audience roared again.

“...I’ll be fine. My bond with Lloyd is secured by the red belt of destiny!”

Selen had spent over a decade with this belt wrapped around her face, and when Lloyd freed her from that nightmare, it had left her somewhat uncomfortably devoted to him.

With the curse lifted, the belt had become much more useful, protecting her from all ill will.

But despite Selen’s confidence, Phyllo appeared undaunted.

As the crowd cheered, she walked forward, holding the stone before her.

It’ll be fine! This belt can handle any attack!

Phyllo swung her arm to smash the magic stone.

But the belt didn’t move at all. It just hung limp at her side, like it couldn’t be bothered.

It’ll be fine! It always protects me!

Phyllo’s swing had almost hit her.

I’m fine! I’m fine!

Just as the stone was about to strike her head, Selen lost her nerve and leaped backward.

“Why isn’t it doing anythiiiiing?!”

The stone hit the ground and exploded, sending Selen flying. She scrambled to her feet, covered in dust, yelling at her belt.

“What the hell, belt?! You’ve always protected me before! Aren’t you supposed to protect me from all malice?!”

The belt just hung there, unresponsive.

Was it on strike? Before Selen could ponder it further, Phyllo caught up with her.

“...Next.”

An even bigger boom shook the stage.

“H-how can you attack with insane force and zero facial expression? Is there no thought in your head? No emotions? Wait...is that why?”

Selen’s own monologue had given her an idea.

It protects me from all malice, but...if there is none...

On the sidelines, Riho and Choline were reaching the same conclusion.

“Y-you mean...”

“She’s not hostile at all?!”

No expression. A martial artist who lived to fight. If she bore Selen no ill will and just demonstrated her own skills...

She was no different from a machine. The idea horrified them all.

“That’s the most outrageous thing I’ve ever *heard!*”

Without the belt, all Selen had was a hastily learned, wimpy fire spell.

Did she stand any chance here?

Shielding herself from the blast, pebbles showering her body, Selen asked herself, *I can’t win? Against her? Against the thief toying with Lloyd’s heart?!*

There was a line she could not cross. Selen found that line again, marked it for herself, and stepped forward.

“Ten years belittled as the Cursed Belt Princess! Ten long years together! It won’t hurt you to listen to me once in a while! Otherwise, I might as well just have some string dangling off my hips!”

The belt endured this torrent of abuse in silence.

“...Mm.”

Another merciless attack with a magic stone.

Was she finished? Everyone thought so.

But then there was a snap, and the belt formed a wall, blocking the stone's blow.

The woven layers of the belt withstood the force of the blast, and the cry from the crowd was the loudest it had been all day.

"...Mm?"

"Heh-heh-heh...finally. Finally, it has awakened!" Selen roared, gleefully. Peals of laughter rang out. "My passions for Lloyd have risen! I have, at last, tamed the cursed belt!"

Phyllo just got ready for another attack. "...Again."

"Useless!" The belt snapped out, weaving together in front of her. "I can control it at will...and that makes me invincible!"

"...Then...double..."

Phyllo pulled out two stones and tried to slam them both home.

But...

"Nope!" Selen's belt wrapped itself around Phyllo's body.

There was a squeak as the leather pulled tight. Phyllo's movement stopped.

"...Ugh."

"I can squeeze tighter if you like," Selen purred, triumphant. She'd turned the tables and was sure she'd bested her rival in love.

"...Not that easy." Phyllo dropped the magic stones, clenching her fist.

A tiny gesture that no one in the stands could see.

Yet every hair on Selen, Lloyd, and the crowd stood on end.

A chill swept through the arena. Only Lloyd managed to remain calm—and only barely.

"Quite the aura...," he observed. "Reminds me of my grandpa's... Those fists might be more of a threat than the magic stones."

“More dangerous than an explosion?!”

Punching with the stones was nothing more than a means of attack that adhered to the tournament rules. Without those... Well, those stones were nothing but a burden.

Phyllo’s inflating aura seemed to be saying just that. It was like an intimidating heat haze writhing around her.

Selen’s spine had frozen stiff. Her triumphant look had faded, and she didn’t dare speak a word.

Choline’s lecture flickered across her mind. Phyllo had trained in the style of Pyrid the Fierce God, who legends claimed had punched a hole in a mountain.

I scoffed when she said that...but now I’m thinking it might be true...

She tried to get a grip on her emotions, focusing intently on Phyllo’s every move.

“...Mm.”

Phyllo snaked her hand through a gap and grabbed the belt...and went into a throw.

Selen’s body was flung helplessly through the air.

“Er, what?!”

She’d not been expecting that. Unable to stop it with the belt, she landed on her head.

“Bleargh!”

Not the most ladylike noise.

An instant later, the belt bindings went loose, and Phyllo leaped free.

She closed the gap between her and Selen instantly, ready to pound her fists down on her prone form.

The same fists that supposedly shattered a mountain.

“Wha—?!”

Her life was in danger. Selen’s final word was an instant away from being *Wha*

—?!

“F-foul! Rule violation!”

The ref flung himself between them, stopping the match.

“...Huh?” Phyllo turned to him, confused. From the ground below her came a low chuckle. Selen grinned up to her. Oblivious to her nosebleed.

“You finally did it, Phyllo! You swung a fist in a magic tournament!”

“...Urp.”

Her expression may not have wavered, but there was definitely a hint of dismay in her voice.

“This isn’t a street fight! This is the Continental Student *Sorcery* Tournament! Even for you...”

“Uh, sorry,” the ref interrupted. “Selen Hemein—you’re the one who violated the rules.”

“Wh-what? How?”

“Well, using the artifact to defend yourself is okay, but you attacked with it! And not magically. You physically restrained her with the belt...”

“...Oh?”

“I should have stopped it sooner...”

“...Uh-oh.”

Instead, she’d been thrown to her defeat.

“How you feeling? She really slammed you in the ground. Plus, getting disqualified on top of that...”

“Don’t rub salt in my wounds.”

Riho was definitely teasing Selen.

“Are you okay, Selen? You’re injured!”

“I’m fine! If I just cling to you, Lloyd, my wounds will heal faster!”

Her nose was gushing with blood, and her mystery logic was possibly even

more unsound than before.

“Well, we may have lost one, but let’s put that behind us. Next up is...”

Phyllo’s sister was already onstage. Mena Quinone on standby. She was doing stretches and what looked like practice golf swings. Like she was *trying* to wind people up.

But she was a water magic specialist.

Her trick where she suffocated people with a ball of water was to be feared.

And that was likely not the only trick up her sleeve.

“Unlike her sister, she’s a pure mage and a very good one...,” Choline muttered.

Mena Quinone was a mage who could probably do very well in the World Tournament. It was ridiculous that she’d even been allowed in a student one. Definitely a big leaguer in a little league game.

“With one loss, we’ve got nowhere to go,” Riho said, glancing over at Rol.

Rol noticed and shot back a triumphant grin.

“...I wanna put the fear in her so hard, every pore on her face opens.”

“What a coincidence, Riho! I was thinkin’ the exact same thing.”

Both turned their grins toward Lloyd.

“Lloyd, you’re up.”

“Huh?”

He’d been preoccupied with Selen’s clinging and just looked baffled by this sudden directive.

“Uh, but if I lose...”

His self-esteem was so low that he remained convinced he was only here because they needed three people. He seemed prepared to give up before fighting, so Riho had to gently ease him into it.

“Don’t be silly. You’ll be fine.”

“Er...but...”

“I know people always say this,” she interrupted. “But I know you can win.”

“Um...”

“I’ve got an eye for these things. Trust me.”

He looked down at the mithril arm she’d placed on his shoulder, thinking.

Then he looked up again, eyes gleaming.

“...Okay, Riho. I trust you. I don’t know what I can do up there, but...”

“Just do like you always do.”

Lloyd nodded and headed toward the stage, steady on his feet.

“...I’m a little worried,” Riho started.

“About Lloyd?”

“Hardly.” She cackled. “No, Mena Quinone. I’m sure she knows her defensive spells, so she probably won’t die, but...”

All concerns lay not with Lloyd but with the person who had to fight him.

A big leaguer might be able to run roughshod over the little league players, but there was nothing they could do against a bear or a tiger on the pitch.

They’d get eaten alive before they could even say, “Play ball!”

When Mena saw her opponent wasn’t Riho but Lloyd, she was a little shaken.

“Y-you’re...”

“Yes! Let’s have a good match!”

Lloyd bowed so hard he nearly cracked his head on the ground, and Mena bowed back, still a little rattled.

Calm down... Lloyd may be enough of a superhuman to withstand Phyllo’s assault back at the info broker’s, but magic is a totally unknown factor...

Recovering somewhat, she managed to get her usual insolent smile back. Hiding her real thoughts, disguising her secret tricks—this was how she navigated the world.

And I’ve got the perfect spell to use on humans—one that stops them from

breathing.

Her eyes opened just a crack, looking the boy over. He smiled gently.

His physical talents might be out of this world, but he can't hold his breath for ten minutes... Nobody can. I've got this in the bag.

She would never have imagined that this ordinary, nervous-looking boy could stay underwater for a full hour...

"Let the match begin!"

At the signal, Mena jumped backward.

Lloyd seemed unsure what to do, so he took a relaxed fighting pose, waiting for her to go first.

Stance is amateurish... I'm overthinking this.

You couldn't tell from looking at her that she was scrutinizing him. Smiling, she deployed a spell.

"Welp, time for this week's tricky-wicky magic show!" she announced, using the same *Water Ball* she'd been using all morning.

Block his breathing, force him to forfeit—the perfect spell for a one-on-one match.

"Mm?"

Lloyd didn't even try to dodge. The magic hit him head-on.

The crowd sighed loudly. "It's over." "He's done." Everyone was sure.

Lloyd looked like he had his head stuck inside a goldfish bowl. Mena grinned at him, adjusting her hat.

"Now I just gotta wait! I should have brought some milk and cookies."

Any moment now, he'd start to drown and collapse. Then she'd let him go. She braced herself, ready to release the spell at a moment's notice.

Five minutes had passed.

"Hang in there!"

This boy was every bit as strong as Phyllo. She had to wait patiently. Would

never do to underestimate him.

Lloyd's head was still in the bowl of water. He didn't seem to mind. She watched him like a hawk.

Ten minutes had passed.

"...Really?"

Lloyd was showing no signs of suffering.

Or did he pass out standing up?

But a moment later, he cocked his head.

Nope! Then...what?

If he hadn't passed out and he wasn't struggling to breathe...was he just standing there?

...All humans need to breathe, though... He can't be...

Twenty minutes had passed.

"What does this mean, boy?! What's the trick?! Fine, you got me! How did you do it? Dammit!"

The impish grin had long since faded, and the real Mena was showing. She was upset, like she'd lost something important.

The crowd had long since moved from wondering at the mechanics of his trick to cheering him on. This was probably the most excited they'd been all day. People were taking bets on how long he'd be able to hold his breath.

"Colonel Choline...how long do *you* think he can hold it?"

"No point betting, Riho. It'll be no contest."

They were both cracking jokes like an old movie.

Across the ring, Rol's pores and nostrils were all open, totally contorting her face into an ugly mug, yelling at the top of her lungs.

"Ref! Not fair! Violation! He's up to something!"

The Azami side just shook their heads.

“Nope, he’s not.”

“He can hold his breath for an hour.”

“Like anyone would believe that craaaap!” Rol was turning bright red now.
“Ref! Check him! He might already be dead!”

The ref seemed somewhat concerned. He took a few steps toward Lloyd.

“...Uh, Lloyd? Are you dead?”

“*Blub-blub!* (I’m not dead!)”

“He’s not dead!” The ref threw out a thumbs-up like it wasn’t his problem anymore.

“Cheating! Violation!” Rol screamed.

Mena was starting to sweat, unable to maintain the *Water Ball* much longer. She was scrambling to think of another move.

I never thought anyone would overcome this spell...but now someone has...

Whatever trick lay behind this, she just had to turn this into a straightforward magic duel. She could win that, she thought.

Her smile was long gone, her eyes open wide, boring through Lloyd. Like she was ready to kill him.

“You may have beat my *Water Ball*, but you haven’t beat me!”

She threw everything she had into it, shored up her defenses with a *Water Wall*, and blocked his eyesight with *Mist*.

I’ll finish this with an advanced water spell—Tidal Wave!

Advanced magic was classified as summons, and *Tidal Wave* was strong enough to wash away an entire military division.

Meanwhile, with his head stuck in the water, Lloyd was thinking, too.

Hmm... I thought she’d have a follow-up here, but she’s not doing anything...

He’d figured it was safer to wait and see, but he was starting to get worried.

And the ref had come over and asked him if he was dead, which was weird.

She can't be trying to stop my breathing and force a forfeit... Even I can hold my breath for an hour, so that would be really inefficient.

Once again, Lloyd's notions were miles from base.

Then, through the water's distortion, he saw Mena doing something. The water around him suddenly fell away, and cheers went up all around.

"Huh? What's happening?"

The crowd was clearly beside itself. This was because he'd overcome the invincible water spell, but that idea never occurred to him. From Lloyd's perspective, he'd just been standing there.

Before he recovered from his surprise, Mena deployed a spell, creating walls of water.

Like waterfalls in all directions. Once she was surrounded, a thick fog started spewing out from above her head.

"Mist...?"

Spraying like a broken sprinkler in all directions, it soon blanketed the area until the entire stage was obscured. Most people would not have been able to see through it, but it didn't really bother Lloyd. He just squinted a bit, peering through the mist and waterfalls, watching Mena closely.

Oh, she's chanting...

Chanting, weaving, and deploying a summoning for advanced magic took some time. Watching her struggle with it gave Lloyd an idea.

Right! This is a magic tournament! I need to cast a spell!

Lloyd was pretty mad at himself for forgetting this. He began chanting.

Honestly, I don't know if this will do anything...but Marie said what matters is that I try. And...

Riho had placed her faith in him. Wanting to live up to her hopes, he cast...a super beginner's spell, *Aero*.

"A-Aer-yo!" He tripped over his own tongue.

Normally, a blown chant wouldn't even cause a breeze, but this was Lloyd.

The air pressure around him was instantly disrupted. With an audible *whoosh*, a heavy gust gathered around his palm.

And from there, the gale rocketed toward Mena—blowing the *Mist* away, scattering the *Water Walls*...

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!”

...and slamming Mena into the wall a few dozen yards behind her.

The incredible force of it shocked the hall into silence. What kind of magic was *that*? There’d been no signs of anything this powerful brewing in the mist...

“A failed chant...,” someone whispered.

And the whisper began to spread.

“She was trying to cast an advanced spell, and it backfired!”

“Meaning...a fluke victory?”

“Not entirely... I mean, he did overcome the water spell, and that rattled her enough that she self-destructed.”

“Oh! A strategic victory!”

Lloyd caught pieces of this and put his own spin on it.

Oh, I guess she panicked and messed up her spell? Right, there’s no way my spell would have done anything. I mean, I totally tripped over the words and everything.

Lloyd bowed in all directions, breathed a sigh of relief, and walked off the stage.

“Sounds like she self-destructed!” he said. “But you’re amazing, Riho! I can’t believe you predicted all that and sent me in!”

“Uh, sure...right...”

Riho was trying to straighten her hair, which the gale had completely messed up. Meanwhile, the human weapon of mass destruction kept babbling.

“I’m glad I trusted you, Riho! Now if you win the next round, the tournament is ours! Good luck!”

Lloyd's performance had rather taken the wind out of her sails, but he grabbed both her hands and gave them a squeeze. He didn't mean anything by it, but...

"...Uh, thanks."

It was extremely effective. The WMD had pierced her heart. Although she didn't realize it.

"Right, right, too close! Maintain appropriate distance!" Selen blared, shattering the romantic vibe like a ref separating clutching boxers. Her heart had been pierced long ago, and now there was a wind whistling through the hole.

"We weren't— That's not what this is!"

"I think that response is a dead giveaway, Riho..."

Meanwhile, Mena was slumped at the base of the wall she'd hit, unconscious. Her gear was designed to protect against magic, but it had not done much for the impact.

Phyllo was cradling her, looking worried.

"...He's strong."

She glanced over at Lloyd.

"...Mm."

The corners of her lips curled up.

"Let's get her to an examination room. Make sure not to move her too much."

When the healer spoke to her, Phyllo quickly let the expression fade.

"...Mm."

She carefully picked her sister up and began tiptoeing toward the back. "That's a bit *too* careful," the healer commented.

They passed Rol, who didn't even bother to glance at Mena. She was more focused on gnawing her thumb in frustration.

“...Dammit. How could she have panicked and blown herself up?”

Naturally, Mena had done no such thing.

“She’ll pay for this later...but I suppose this doesn’t really derail my plans.”

Rol had not been expecting to get dragged up onstage herself, but there were still plenty of ways for her to win.

“Riho’s been fighting all morning...which means she’ll be worn out. And I’m the one who taught her magic... Plus, I know how to handle that mithril arm.” Her eyes glinted like a snake’s. “I give you credit for forcing my hand...but as long as I get that Holy Sword, nothing else matters.”

She slithered toward the stage like a serpent.

“I *will* get that sword and attain greater heights!”

The crowd was really worked up now.

But it wasn’t because this was the final round of the Continental Student Sorcery Tournament.

Their frenzy could be attributed to the fact that the person who was desperate to get the Holy Sword—to the extent that she’d cast aside her profession and made herself a student again—was advancing to the stage, paying no heed to the jeers.

The perfect villain. Rol Calcife took the stage for the first time.

The crowd’s heckling was getting downright ugly.

But Riho was as calm as the spectators weren’t as they roared in a frenzy. With too much running through her mind, her eyes were locked on Rol.

“My, aren’t you scary,” Rol purred. She had the eyes of someone who’d thrown everything away.

“Let’s settle this, Rol.”

“You’ve got no chance of winning, not one in a million. You had the misfortune of finding yourself under the tutelage of an incompetent fool who was never good at anything but outdated healing spells. If you’d at least had a reputable mage...”

Riho interrupted before she could say another word. “And that healing magic is gonna leave you in tears, Rol.”

Rol’s eyes widened for a second before she flashed a grin, baring her fangs. Her haughty demeanor was a thing of the past. “All talk, eh. Seems that’s the only thing that’s gotten better.”

The ref saw his chance and started the match. “The Continental Student Sorcery Tournament finals! Begin!”

The instant the match began, blue fireworks whizzed up from the center of the stage.

On one side, there were bolts of lightning. On the other, flames.

Both spells fired at once and crashed into each other hard enough to shake the entire hall.

Neither took so much as a step to one side—just firing spell after spell after spell.

Now, *this* was a sorcery tournament! The crowd’s cheers were every bit as loud as the roar of the spells.

They were evenly matched.

———For now.

“Uh-oh. Poor Riho’s gonna lose...,” Choline muttered, crossing her arms.

“Wh-what? I thought she was doing fine!” Selen said in surprise.

“Don’t forget about Rol’s rotten personality. You think she’d just go for a head-on assault? She’s baiting Riho into running outta magic.”

“Oh...because this isn’t Riho’s first fight!” Lloyd observed, looking worried. “While Rol came in at full strength...”

Riho was definitely starting to sweat. For the first time, she started moving around the stage.

Seeing her back off from the shoot-out, Rol smirked, certain her plan was working.

“Already getting low on magic? Geez, that mithril arm is so inefficient!”

Without giving Riho a chance to rest, she kept blasting fire spells at her.

Riho shot back, but the bolts were getting thinner. Her magic was dropping, making her chants less on point—she was clearly at a disadvantage.

Seeing her exhausted, Rol broke off her furious volley. “You’re done for. Why not just surrender?”

“No way!” Riho barked back, defiant.

Realizing Riho still had plenty of fight left in her, Rol returned to chanting. “This is getting boring... I’ll finish you with my next shot.”

Flaring in unprecedented size, flames coiled around Rol’s hand.

“How’s...oh?”

Riho’s reaction took Rol by surprise.

When Rol started channeling the fire, Riho had started to chant, too—but not a lightning spell.

“Heal!”

It was a healing spell. It seemed to be a slow one, as the wounds on Riho’s body were healing gradually.

“My, my, healing yourself?”

What for? Rol and the audience were wondering the same thing.

“You have some plan that will help you win a battle of endurance? Or is it just a bluff?”

She was trying to get a rise out of Riho, but Riho didn’t give her one. She just used the mithril arm to stack the healing effect.

“Whatever. No use trying to guess what goes through your head...”

Rol let the fire around her hand go out and started chanting a different spell.

With a serpentine smile, fangs bared, she shouted, “I’ll just make your trump card useless!”

Strong winds billowed out from her feet. Rol hadn’t moved a step away from her starting position this whole time, but now she was suddenly right in front of

Riho.

“Wha—?!” Riho yelped, completely unprepared for this burst of speed.

She must have used the wind to launch herself—

And it took Riho a moment to realize that, an opening Rol used to get in close.

With a grin wide enough to see the inside of her lips, both Rol’s hands grabbed hold of the mithril arm.

“Checkmate, slowpoke,” she hissed.

There was a crack, and the mithril hand came off. The shell fell away, leaving her thin, badly burned arm exposed.

“—————h!” Riho let out a voiceless scream, and the magic stored in the mithril vanished, leaving a shimmer of heat.

Rol shot her a satisfied smirk. “I’m the one who put it on you. I know how to get it off.”

The mithril arm hit the ground with a clang.

Her trump card was gone.

Everyone present knew right then that Riho had lost.

And Rol herself knew she’d won. She grinned ecstatically—waiting to savor the look of dismay and watching Riho’s face with anticipatory interest.

But Riho was grinning every bit as maliciously as Rol was.

“Thought you’d do that... Of course you’d want to kill the mithril arm. And...”

“Hmm?”

“...I was waiting for it! For you to get too close to protect yourself!”

“What in the—? No use bluffing now—”

“My trump card...is *this* arm!”

Riho’s hand struck the side of Rol’s face as hard as she could.

It wasn’t a metal limb, just an ordinary girl’s right arm—but the hit sounded like a thunderclap.

Smoke rose. Vibrations shook the earth.

Rol and Riho went rolling across the stage like their cars had crashed. Their resistance equipment minimized the damage, but the impact was still severe. Neither of them seemed capable of getting up.

Rol seemed to have hurt her legs. She managed to sit up but got stuck there.

This really rattled her. Her confidence had been blown away with the shock wave.

“What happened? What *was* that?!”

The crowd was wondering the same thing. All eyes peered through the smoke to Riho.

Somewhere in the stadium, someone let out a scream, and a stir ran through the stands.

“...Shit, that hurts.”

Riho was lying on the ground...and one arm, the healthy one, had been blasted so hard you could see bone—like her fist had been the center of the explosion.

Sweat running down her face, Riho grinned. “What were you saying about outdated healing magic? This shit works, you know!”

“What are you—?”

“But you gotta be careful. If you don’t realize there’s something in the wound, the healing magic will seal it under your skin. You might not be able to tell from the outside, but you can get gravel or bits of wood stuck in you. Or even...magic stones.”

Only then did Rol finally realize what had happened.

She gulped. “Y-you mean...you implanted a magic stone in your arm?!”

Just as Phyllo had been punching people with magic stones, this was a primitive way of fighting, without a need to chant or deploy any kind of spell. But to implant a magic stone in your own hand and disguise what was inside with healing magic...

“And, well, you always did mock healing magic, so I figured it’d be a nice surprise.”

Would you really go that far to win? Would you slice your own arm open and hollow out your own blood and sinew?

“Is this...a suicide mission? Are you ready to take us both down?”

“No, no, I had a plan for *that!*” Riho hopped to her feet, looking totally fine, even though she had clearly taken more damage than Rol.

What’s going on? When she figured it out, Rol gasped aloud.

Not only was the bone no longer exposed, the wound itself was gone... A layer of skin was already beginning to regenerate.



“Just to be sure, I stacked several layers of a slow heal spell on myself. Didn’t help with the pain, but...”

By the time Riho finished walking over to Rol, her body was totally healed.

“I...I thought you were wasting your time, but...this is why you cast all those healing spells?” Unable to get up, Rol was left grabbing dirt on the ground.

“How’s that for turned tables, Rol Calcife?”

Rol realized it wasn’t the injuries but fear that kept her frozen to the ground.

For the first time, she was afraid of Riho Flavin.

“But this match ain’t over yet, is it?” Riho asked, leaning over her, grinning.

Looming like a ghoul, her dead limb dangling—still intact, but clearly not functional—Riho started to chant.

“From your land, I wish not to summon a torrent—”

Rol flinched at the ominous words. “Wait, that’s—!”

“My words act as an offering—”

“That’s advanced magic...!”

“As one who does not wish to take on malice—”

“W-wait, don’t! Stop! You already blew all my resistance gear off!”

“Heed my will—”

“S-see, I can’t even walk! I can’t fight! I give up!”

But the ref had been blown out of the ring by the explosion and couldn’t hear her.

“Deluge, thy name is—”

“S-seriously, stop! Not yet! I don’t want to die! I’m sorry! I’m sorry for everything, just don’t—”

Rol’s pleas could be heard over the roar of the crowd.

“*TIDAL WAVE!*” Riho roared, right in her ear.

“Nooooooooooooooooooooo!” Rol let out a shriek, her eyes rolled up, and she

fainted, foaming at the mouth.

“There’s no way I can cast advanced spells... I mean, I’m already out of magic.”

Riho took one parting glance down at her former sister figure.

“Well...I guess you’re the reason I got so good at lying.”

Then she threw her good arm in the air, signaling her victory.

The applause nearly split the hall in two.

Chapter 4

A Jumped Gun: Suppose a Dumb Cop in a Detective Manga Picked the Culprit Based on Circumstantial Evidence

Those who knew her true nature deemed her a living nightmare.

Rol Calcife.

Even though she'd grown up in an orphanage, her unusual aptitude for magic had earned her a free ride to Rokujou Sorcery Academy.

This gave her the idea that she wasn't like others—that she was special. She grew up with an ego. She believed she had a bright future ahead of her.

But as we all know, the world is a big place.

Rol was a genius: Teach her one thing, and she'd pick up ten more pieces of information from it. That was just how it was.

But at a school for the best, not everyone stopped at ten.

There were any number of real geniuses—people who would go all the way to a hundred more discoveries—and people with less talent.

The latter had excelled in certain subjects more than others. Life didn't go as easily for them. But because of that, they were only too happy to work hard on what they were good at.

By the time her first year at the school was ending, she'd begun to realize the difference between her and those around her, and by the time she was halfway through, she realized the gap was insurmountable.

Both the real geniuses and the talentless ones that she'd looked down on had surpassed her.

People like Choline Sterase had honed their one trick, earning attention, admiration, and recognition.

She'd been a fool. But she couldn't accept that fact.

The pride she'd bottled up inside herself came spilling out, and she'd thrown herself into preparing for the future—battering up the teachers, manipulating people's reputations, choosing to drag people down, advocating that geniuses be expelled or penalized, doing anything she could to win the trust of the staff, even sacrificing teachers if necessary.

She managed to graduate Rokujou Sorcery Academy at the top of her class.

But her pride could not be reined in. She began getting her hands dirty, trying to impress the West's Ministry of Magic.

Leaking research data, mastering the forbidden art of necromancy—there was nothing she didn't try.

And she clawed her way to the position of Rokujou Sorcery Academy headmaster.

Convinced she'd reached the top, Rol found the reality much harsher.

The sorcery academy's reputation was in tatters. It was no longer lauded as the beacon of learning. The cause of this was obvious—the rot Rol herself had let fester. The school's culture was now all about undermining one another.

And the country knew Rol's weakness—they had proof of her misdeeds. By the time she realized she was doomed to serve them, it was too late.

"This isn't where I end!"

She heard stories about colleagues she'd kicked aside doing well for themselves and gnawed her lips until blood seeped out of them.

"I've got to reach greater heights!" She'd developed a habit of saying that.

Even in the top seat, Rol was unable to relax.

This is not where you're meant to be.

You belong where heroes go.

You've heard of a place called Kunlun?

Rol Calcife's name belongs among those legends.

But to get there, you need the Holy Sword.

“——g!”

Rol’s eyes snapped open. A stone ceiling loomed overhead.

Her lips were so dry they crackled when she moved them. She must have been out for a really long time. With some effort, she sat up.

Like a snake rearing up, her eyes darted around the room. *This must be the medical wing.* It was lit by light magic stones, and Mena was on the bed next to her, covered in fresh bandages.

She could still hear the noise of the crowd from outside. Sounded like the award ceremony was in progress.

“—The Holy Sword.”

The voice came from deep within her, laced with loathing.

“Holy Sword!”

She said it again. As she did, one of the Rokujou students originally scheduled for the tournament came in.

“A-are you okay, Headmaster?” asked a boy with some hesitation. He was still calling her *headmaster*.

“How could I be?” she growled. “You there, gimme a status update.”

The student gulped and nervously explained, “They’re handing the Holy Sword over to the winning team.”

“We can’t steal it right away, then...too risky.”

She flexed her hands a few times. Seemed like she could move but wasn’t up to fighting strength. She had to think.

Can’t steal it in a way that would attract attention—I’m at damn near rock bottom here, almost no pawns left.

She turned to the student, asking, “Did you locate a secluded place we could use in a pinch?”

“There’s an old lighthouse on the South Side that doesn’t seem to be in use.

No one goes there who isn't homeless."

"Sounds perfect. You figure out who pulled the sword? Worst-case scenario, we bribe them and..."

"We looked into it but ran into trouble."

"Trouble?"

The student glanced down at his notes, sounding tense. "Seems to involve a suspicious individual called the Witch of the East Side, but how that became a prize at this tournament? We couldn't find any info there."

"Her friends and family?"

"She lives with...maybe a little brother? He's pretty popular with the neighbors. Seems like he's pretty weak. She's really protective of him."

It was the total opposite—he was so strong she had to watch him like a hawk to make sure he didn't cause trouble. Well, when she wasn't just doting on him.

"...If that witch is any good, probably best to get her on our side. We need help here..."

At this point, the door swung open, and Phyllo silently stepped in.

"...Mm," she said, expressionless.

Rol ignored her, continuing her conversation. "Anyway, find me anything you can on this Witch of the East Side."

But before she could give any further instructions, Phyllo said something besides *mm*.

".....I know her."

"This doesn't concern... Wait, you *do*?"

Phyllo nodded gravely. Then she began attempting to explain. "...We met before... She lives with a boy..."

"Oh! Good work, Phyllo!"

"...I plan to live there, too."

"Uh, um. Cool."

“...As his student.”

Rol rubbed her temples, cutting the girl off. This nonsense about living there wasn't getting them anywhere. She jumped ahead to what she wanted to know.

“Fine, fine—so you know that a wimpy kid lives there? The one everyone's so protective of?”

“...Wimpy?”

“You know who I mean. That kid's a friend of mine, so I want you to take him to the old lighthouse as soon as possible.”

Rol explained where the old lighthouse was, but Phyllo just frowned at her.

“...You...have friends?”

“Shut up! I do! I'll write a letter quick, so just shut up and wait!”

Wiping her tears, Rol grabbed a piece of paper from the dresser, scribbled a quick note on it, and shoved it in an envelope.

“Leave this in the house and bring him with you. Make sure the witch doesn't see you.”

“...Mm? ...Why?”

“We're playing hide-and-seek! It's all the rage in Azami these days,” Rol said, deciding it wasn't worth the effort to explain for real.

“...Okay,” Phyllo droned, accepting it without further question.

You won't accept friends, but you will play a game of hide-and-seek?!

Rol almost yelled at her, but if she did, it might ruin the whole plan. She swallowed her words and kept her voice calm. “From the top. The witch cares about this kid, so bring him to me without letting her know. Leave the letter for her to find. Got that?”

“...Mm.”

Without another word or sound, Phyllo swept out of the room.

The student looked at Rol, concerned. “Think she can handle it?”

“Well, she's certainly physically capable of it, but there ain't much goin' on

upstairs.”

“And...if we get caught kidnapping someone...both of us will be on the hook for it.”

Seemed like he was only really concerned for himself.

“Who cares? As long as I get that Holy Sword, nothing else matters...and I wrote ‘Quinone sisters’ on the letter, too. Don’t look so dang worried!”

She gave Mena a quick glance. She was just lying there, seemingly still unconscious.

“She can do this much to make up for her sister self-destructing...”

“Um, if we really do get the Holy Sword, you’ll really recommend me for a job at the ministry?”

Students today were so self-absorbed.

“Not just the ministry. You can have any government job of your choice—as long as you work yourself to death for me... Right, there’s something I need you to do at the lighthouse. You up for it?”

“Any government job? Y-yes! I’ll do anything you like!”

The dangled carrot was all he needed. She filled him in on what he was to do, and her little mule ran off.

“Yes...to death...”

Rol smiled to herself and left the room without making a noise.

A gust of wind rushed through the East Side.

Dust clouds rose, and an old man was so shocked that he threw out his back. A young woman had to hastily hold her skirt in place. Oh, look, a potted plant fell over.

That’s how fast Phyllo ran from the tournament hall to the East Side.

The sun was only just setting. The East Side marketplace had not grown dark yet, and the evening crowds had yet to arrive, so Phyllo reached her destination in no time.

“...Hide-and-seek.”

Remembering what Rol had told her, Phyllo put her back to the wall, shifting to stealth mode. Hide-and-seek and stealth missions are basically the same thing.

“...Was there a wimpy kid, though?”

Phyllo would never have classified Lloyd as wimpy. After all, he’d easily blocked her kick and just defeated her sister in a magic duel.

All but a few select people might believe Mena had failed her chant and self-destructed, but Phyllo knew better. Rol, however, didn’t...and this was the source of confusion.

“...And everyone’s...protective of him?”

She’d just have to look. Maybe there was someone else there.

Shortly after, she found the store—an old building on the side of a hill, decorated with old medicine pots. She slipped around back and stood up, peering through the window. The fence was taller than most people, but she hopped it easily. Total ninja move.

“...Where’s...the witch?” Phyllo frowned. The scene inside was very weird.

First...Marie was on her hands and knees, bowing.

That alone wasn’t completely unusual (in comparison to other things), but what she did next was beyond baffling.

“I’m so sorry! I’m really, really sorry!” She was repeatedly genuflecting to an empty table like she was praying for rain.

Then she stood up and picked a fist-sized crystal ball off the table, polishing it with a silk cloth—downright obsequiously. Apparently, she’d been bowing to the crystal.

This went on for a while—but about ten minutes later, she suddenly clutched her guts and vanished into the back. She came out looking exhausted and hopeless and began repeating the same cycle.

“...What?”

To anyone unfamiliar with the circumstances, this was exceedingly bizarre. Even Marie herself was wondering what she'd ever done to deserve this treatment.

Phyllo thought for a long time but then remembered Rol's words and arrived at a conclusion.

"...Protective... Important..."

The way Marie was gently polishing the crystal seemed to jog her mind.

"...I see...that crystal...is important. It needs protecting... You could break it with a single kick."

Which was definitely not true for everyone...

"...And...even inanimate objects count as friends...if you're Rol. Checks out."

Definitely a bit insulting.

Phyllo waited until Marie vanished into the back again and then snuck in.

"...Sorry... The door..."

Crack! The doorknob went flying off.

"...isn't locked... Good..."

There was nothing good about it, really.

She stepped inside, grabbed the crystal off the table, and shoved it in her pocket.

"...The letter."

As instructed, she dropped the letter on the table, spun around, and ran quickly back out—piles of books and potted plants collapsing from the winds in her wake.

At terrifying speeds, Phyllo ran all the way to the old lighthouse where Rol was waiting.

A few minutes later, a miserable-looking Marie emerged from...well, the toilet.

"Damn her... Damn that *loli* grandma... Using the wisdom of the ancients for

this! And what's with those ancients? Why'd they leave behind a rune that gives you the shits?!"

No use complaining to people in the afterlife.

"If Lloyd saw me like this, he'd never marry me..."

A girl who sprinted to the can every ten minutes could turn passion on its head.

And Lloyd was *nice*. If he saw her like this, he'd smile gently, look concerned, and tell her it was a sign that she was healthy.

"And that would make it ten times worse...!"

Between the naked-on-the-floor incident and a whole lot of nail chewing, her maiden meter had hit bottom so hard the needle almost broke. If they added diarrhea on top of that, the meter was never getting repaired.

Marie sighed and made ready for another rep of her genuflect-and-crystal-polish routine.

"Bwah?!"

But as she did, she tripped over something. One of the pots she was growing herbs in had fallen over, scattering soft leaves and stones everywhere.

Marie banged her head on the table, then used it to leverage herself back upright. She was so exhausted that she failed to notice the precious tortoiseshell brooch Lloyd had given her got torn off in the process. She could barely stand.

"Why is the pot...? *Gasp!*"

Another wave of pain hit Marie's guts—the biggest of the day.

This was a wave she had to ride! Her guts were *pumped*.

"...Dammit aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaall!" Marie scuttled back toward the toilet.

Today's battle will be a long one, thought her brain general, staring at the map of the war zone in her intestines.

Let's check in on what Lloyd's group was up to after the tournament.

Riho's victory left her showered with applause, but her condition was bad enough that she was rushed to the hospital.

Between the mid-match treatment and the skills of Choline, the expert healer, her arm appeared to be fully healed, but given her loss of blood and magic, it would be a while before she regained consciousness.

The award ceremony was quickly wrapped up, and then they left the press to Choline and went with Riho to the hospital.

On the way, Chrome spoke to Lloyd.

"Her life's in no danger, but would you mind getting a potion from Maria—*ahem*, Marie? They're better than anything on the market. Tell her that you all won while you're there! She'll be delighted, I'm sure."

Selen immediately said she'd go with him, but Chrome dragged her to the hospital, saying she needed to get checked on, too.

So Lloyd ended up back at the shop alone, the cloth-wrapped Holy Sword tucked under his arm.

He arrived just after the Big Wave hit.

"I'm home... Huh?"

He tried to enter like always, but his hand grabbed empty air. Confused, he looked down to find the doorknob ripped off.

Lloyd frowned and slowly eased open the door. Inside, he found potted plants and furniture tossed everywhere, like someone had sacked the place. "I'm back... Marie?" he called.

No answer. Because she was engaged in the toilet war zone.

But Lloyd was unaware of that, left staring in horror.

A ransacked room. No signs of the owner.

Lloyd feared the worst.

His eyes darted to the table, where he found a letter.

He recognized the paper—it was the tournament stationery. He quickly opened it and read the contents.

We have someone important to you.

No harm will be done as long as you steal the Holy Sword from Azami.

Bring it to the old lighthouse on the South Side. I'm sure you can manage it.

—The Quinone Sisters

As Lloyd gasped, his foot bumped something.

“.....!”

It was the tortoiseshell brooch he'd given Marie. Parted from its owner, there was a forlorn gleam to the reddish shell.

“She's never taken that off!”

Lloyd had been very happy about that.

This clinched it. Lloyd made up his mind—just as a noise came from behind him.

The front door opened, and in came...

“Excuse me, is Marie here? It's a little embarrassing, but I've got some hemorrhoids that could use medicating. Something stronger than the market—Oh, hey, Lloyd!”

Allan had come in looking gloomy, but his face brightened when he saw Lloyd.

“Allan!”

“Llooooooyd! That match was amazing! Seemed like the crowd didn't follow it, but you really got to strut your stuff out there! I got so excited, I ripped my hem—I mean, *an old wound* open! Which is what brings me here. You're back already? There a celebration? If you don't mind me crashing it—”

At this point, Allan finally noticed how worried Lloyd was.

“Allan...”

“What's wrong? Fill me in.”

Lloyd hesitated, afraid to say it out loud. But time was of the essence.

“Um...I think Marie's...been kidnapped.”

Well, that was entirely wrong. But given the circumstantial evidence, you can hardly blame him, can you? Sadly, the only thing missing was the crystal.

“Whaaat?!”

“The opposing team in the finals really wants that Holy Sword...and they want me to go steal it for them!”

Lloyd sounded bitter—if only he’d done something when he noticed Marie hadn’t come to see the tournament!

“I’m sure they grabbed her as a bargaining chip in case they lost—nothing else would have prevented her from coming to watch!”

Well, an upset stomach had. But this idea did not occur to him.

Lloyd’s story got Allan’s heroic streak going.

“Those curs!”

Nice one. He even threw in a good old-fashioned table thump!

“What should we do?” Lloyd asked. “Riho and Selen are both in the hospital... and...”

He wasn’t sure he could just give Rol the Holy Sword.

Wouldn’t that invalidate everything they’d fought for? It wasn’t his decision to make.

But Allan caught the look in his eyes and nodded. “Your mind’s already made up, isn’t it?”

“...”

Allan took his silence as agreement.

He offered words of encouragement. “But you’re worried about giving her the Holy Sword?”

“Uh, yeah...,” Lloyd said, dithering.

“Do what you think is right!” Allan roared.

Lloyd jumped, startled. “A-Allan?”

Allan grinned. “That’s what you taught me, isn’t it? I didn’t just ask to be your

student because of your strength—I asked because that swept me off my feet.”

“Ah-ha-ha— Strength? Me?”

Joking at a time like this! Lloyd thought. Allan didn’t think he was joking, of course.

He’d been desperately trying to get promoted before anyone found out his weakness—that he had no idea how to handle monsters. But when monsters had actually attacked him, Lloyd had come along, rescued him, and made him see the light.

“Look, if Riho says anything to you about handing over the Holy Sword, don’t worry—I’ll come get a scolding with you.”

Allan thumped his chest. It hit Lloyd’s ears like the beat of a drum.

“.....! Um!”

Which was more important: Marie’s life or a Holy Sword? There was no comparison.

He made up his mind. His eyes met Allan’s.

“Marie matters more than any sword! So I’m going to get her back! Will you help, Allan?”

The big man grinned, like he’d been waiting for that response.

“You got it! Let’s get going! Even if it is a trap, there’s nothing the two of us can’t fight our way out of!”

“...Right! Let’s go!”

Lloyd tightened his grip on the Holy Sword, and the two of them raced off toward the old lighthouse.

In a corner of the warehouse district on the South Side, Rol was perched in a room in the abandoned lighthouse.

The sun was setting now, and the orange light reflecting off the gentle surface of the harbor was very beautiful. Rol’s face, bathed in the same orange glow, was twisted in fury.

She was holding a crystal—the object Phyllo had brought by mistake.

“...How is *this* a wimpy kid?”

“.....It isn’t?”

“Of course not! How do you confuse *kid* and *crystal*?!”

“...It was important to her.”

“Sure, maybe a crystal is important to a witch, but... No, I was an idiot to have asked you in the first place.”

Spoken like a true abusive employer. Phyllo should probably have reported this to HR, but the thought never occurred to her. She just stood there, no expression at all, nothing approaching emotion on her face.

“...Mm.”

Rol leaned against a desk, rubbing her forehead. “Tch...I just want one thing to go right...”

At this point, the student from the tournament hall stepped forward.

“Rol, we just got word! The kid from the witch’s place is coming here with the Holy Sword! Another man is with him.”

Rol gaped at him. That was unexpected.

“...gh! Lloyd!”

But the most unexpected thing...was that Phyllo actually reacted. She ran over to the window, leaning out like a kid who’d just seen something neat, staring at the speck in the distance.

“Huh? I can’t see a thing. Where’re my binoculars? Wait, Phyllo?”

When she turned back with the binoculars, Phyllo had scrambled up on the windowsill. “...Mm.”

A few dozen yards up, her hair streaming in the sea breeze, lit by the evening sun, the look on her face...was joy—a big smile, from ear to ear, overflowing with happiness. Rol couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Uh, wait! Phyllo!”

“...Bonus round.” Phyllo leaped out of a window dozens of yards above the

ground. She kicked the wall of the lighthouse, bounded across a few warehouse roofs, and was out of sight.

Rol gaped after her, astonished by this transformation, but then decided things were working in her favor and regained her composure.

“Whatever! As long as Phyllo crushes him, we’re good. Just gotta collect the Holy Sword later! But I guess this dumb crystal really was important to her...”

Rol’s serpentine grin reflected in the crystal’s surface.

This might be a real score, she thought, carefully placing the crystal behind the sliding door of the office desk.

She turned toward the student, with a smile nice enough to give anyone chills.

“Wh-what is it, Headmaster?” he asked, every hair on him standing on end.

“There’s a chance there’s more than two enemies...and we need to make sure Phyllo doesn’t blow it. How many did you get?”

“Fifty-something homeless guys. They’re waiting for instructions down below.”

“Well, well...nicely done.”

“I-it wasn’t that hard. And if you’ll recommend me for government work, this much is the least...”

“Oh, yes...you wanted a job with the Rokujou Ministry or government, right?”

“Exactly! But they’d never look twice at someone at the bottom of his class like me...”

There was a hint of desperation in his voice.

But Rol wasn’t listening. She was already staring at the first stars as they appeared on the horizon, muttering to herself. “Curious about the identity of his companion, but the timing’s perfect... When darkness shrouds the scene, I’m at my best.”

“Er, um...?” The student gulped. It was already spring, but there was a chill in the air.

“Oh, don’t look so startled. There’s more lost souls around harbors than most people think.”

“S-souls?”

“Unfortunate accidents, all manner of crime... Not the sort of knowledge taught in school, is it?”

The student feverishly rubbed the goose bumps on his arms and looked up... to find Rol standing right in front of him.

He let out short shriek, and her hands clamped on his head.

She held him gently, like a mother cradling a child.

But her expression was pure snakelike malice.

“Oh, that’s right. You’re just their type. They love people like you.” Her mouth opened wide, like a snake’s grin. “I’ll need you to get *possessed*.”

The student’s expression went vacant. He groaned. Hollow eyes with no will of their own stared back at Rol.

“Long time since you had flesh, spirit. Make sure you heed my words.”

The only response was a repeated twitch.

“Go outside and attack anyone who approaches.”

With slight convulsions, it dragged its feet out the door.

“Only fifty more to go... Ugh, I’ve got my work cut out for me.”

She didn’t sound at all upset, though. Rol headed down the stairs.

“I must have that Holy Sword, no matter the cost—and necromancy will help me do that.”

Once the sun set, there were few people around the South Side harbor.

By this hour, the fishermen were all headed to grab food and drinks. The men of the sea rise early, get their ship work done, and drink the night away.

Lloyd and Allan sped through the deserted harbor.

Soon they were close enough to smell the sea breeze, the pavement beneath their feet growing worn.

This was the edge of the warehouse district. The old lighthouse loomed overhead.

The magic stones in the streetlamps had not been changed recently, and their lights were dim.

“I’ve heard they’re not using these warehouses anymore, and the place has become a haven for the homeless,” Allan said.

Moss-covered crates, nets, barnacle-looking shellfish on the wharf—this place had clearly gone to waste.

“...Marie might be in one of these warehouses,” Lloyd said grimly.

Her safety was all he could think about.

“Yeah... *Hngg?*”

A shadow had fallen from the sky in front of them.

Allan braced himself for a trap, glaring at the figure blocking their path.

“.....”

Functional trousers, baggy jacket. Figure like a model but no expression. Phyllo gave Allan a once-over. He gaped back—was it the magic-stone puncher from the tournament?

“Y-you’re from—”

“.....” Phyllo quickly lost interest in him and walked up to Lloyd.

Totally ignored, Allan was left unsure what to do.

Lloyd took a step forward, looking unusually grim.

And Phyllo?

“...Ah-ha.” She laughed.

This briefly rattled Lloyd, but he soon recovered, asking about Marie. “I read your letter.”

“...Letter?”

“Don’t play stupid with me!”

Allan had never heard Lloyd angry before. The hairs on the back of his neck rose.

Phyllo wasn't lying, though; she really hadn't read the letter.

"Where's Marie? Tell me!"

Phyllo looked confused. Marie was back at the shop. He lived with her. Why was he asking?

Now that she thought about it, Marie had been running back and forth to the toilet clutching her guts.

"...Dunno. But...more importantly..." She grinned again.

With the evening sky behind her, the smile took on an ominous pallor.

"...Fight me!"

She kicked the ground, shot at him, low to the ground, going for a tackle—and hit Lloyd with the force of a rampaging bull.

"—h!" Lloyd caught her with both hands.

The impact shook every light, rattling every paving stone around them.

Lloyd's foot sank into the pavement, but he stopped her dead in her tracks.

Phyllo's face briefly registered surprise, but then she grinned again. "...Ah-ha."

"What's so funny?"

She took a few steps back, taking a new stance.

"...When you beat Mena, I knew...you're worth risking my life to fight."

"L-life?"

"Ah-ha!" Phyllo laughed again. "...Martial artists are always searching for their place of death."

Scrunch!

From up high and down low, mid-height and a sweep of the leg—a furious volley of kicks were each easily caught by Lloyd.

"I don't know what you're talking about! And that whole student thing,

either! Or sudden challenges...”

“...Aim for greater heights, I thought. So I asked to be your student. But...not now.” Her eyes were wide open, looking more alive than ever before. “...You’re worthy of being the end of my path! Lloyd Belladonna!”

Phyllo’s fist struck home for the first time, delivering a devastating body blow.

“L-Lloyd!” Allan yelled, seeing him fold around it.

The shock wave followed, causing the air to shake and cracking the fragile walls of the nearby warehouse.

Both leaped back, watching each other’s faces. Lloyd looked more confused than pained. And that just made Phyllo’s smile broaden.

The only sound in the warehouse district was the clang of the wall collapsing.

Then an unprecedented level of energy began radiating off Lloyd. Allan and Phyllo both froze in place.

As the chill of his aura set in, Lloyd spoke. “I don’t mind fighting...but promise me one thing.”

“...Mm.”

“If I win, you’ll tell me where Marie is!”

There was a long pause, then Phyllo nodded. “...If that’s all you want.”

Meanwhile, Allan was so overwhelmed, he’d crumpled to the ground. “Th-that’s not what happens when *humans* clash...”

Lloyd held the cloth-wrapped Holy Sword out in his direction.

“Sorry, Allan,” he said. “Can you take this?”

“M-me?”

“She’s only after me. But I don’t know what cowardly tricks might be going on around us. Make sure no one steals the Holy Sword—”

But before Lloyd could finish, Phyllo closed the gap between them.

No signal, just right into it.

Phyllo towered over Lloyd, forcing him to look up at her. There was a

moment's pause, then both fists pummeled—one downward, the other up.

When they touched, the air exploded, shooting off a noise like a blown-out tire on a four-ton truck, enough to tear the eardrums of anyone nearby.

The wind blew Allan backward. "...Seriously?!"

Allan was an experienced fighter, so he knew just how ridiculous this was.

Particularly Lloyd's punches—he'd just swung his arm. He hadn't even put his back in it!

And yet, the outcome was this? Even as Allan marveled, Phyllo's body shot upward.



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“.....Ngh!”

She'd jumped. The moon was peeking over the horizon, and it was briefly obscured by her slim form.

She then used the height to her advantage, striking downward. Lloyd couldn't dodge it.

“Hngg!” He blocked the blow with both arms.

In midair, Phyllo's body twisted, going for a flurry of kicks. Her leg gleamed in the darkness like a blade.

“Gah!” He blocked that, too.

The pavement beneath him cracked, unable to handle the force. Water from the wharf began slowly seeping onto the road.

“...Whoops.”

Not wanting to get her foot caught in the cracks, Phyllo backed away.

“Allan! Now's your chance!”

“R-right!”

Allan snapped out of it and strode quickly away, careful not to step on damaged ground.

While Lloyd was watching Allan leave, Phyllo slowly moved toward him, flashing a killer smile.

I've got to win this for Marie...but can I?

Lloyd remembered playing with girls in Kunlun, getting a fracture from a light slap on the arm. Well...that had nothing to do with his strength, though. Kunlun was just off the charts.

Phyllo must still be holding back, Mr. Low Self-Esteem assumed.

So he was desperately racking his brains for a way to win.

I've got to win! There must be a way...

Then...he saw a waist-high wooden box.

That's it!

Having found an idea, Lloyd quickly picked up the box.

"...You're gonna hit me? With an old crate?"

She was an arm's length away. She watched him and the box carefully.

"Oomph."

But instead of hitting her with it, Lloyd placed it right in front of her.

Phyllo looked confused...until Lloyd plunked his elbow down on the box.

"...What?"

"I—I challenge you to an arm-wrestling match!"

Phyllo finally recognized the stance Lloyd had taken—the universal arm-wrestling pose.

But even with that knowledge... *Why?* She frowned at him.

"Y-you see," Lloyd explained. "In my village, we have a custom of settling these things with arm wrestling. My grandfather's idea!"

Obviously, this was a lie. The one lie he'd made up to have a shot at winning.

"...Your grandfather?" Phyllo asked.

But Lloyd's reply blew her mind. "Well, the man who raised me. Grandpa Pyrid!"

Phyllo's face twisted. ".....!"

"Uh... Huh?"

"...Where...are you from?"

"I'm from a village named Kunlun!"

Phyllo's laughter echoed across the moonlit sky. "...Ah-ha... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Lloyd was worried she'd figured out his lie, but apparently, that wasn't why she was laughing.

She'd been reluctant to arm wrestle, but now she smiled like she'd figured

everything out and banged her elbow down on the box.

“So...you’ll take me on? Good.” Lloyd was unaware that the man who’d raised him had also inspired Phyllo’s fighting style—the legendary hero, Pyrid the Fierce God.

Neither did he know his own village was believed to be a legend, too.

“...That explains your strength! Very well! Let us settle things the way your village does!”

Their hands clamped together.

“Ready...,” Phyllo said.

““Go!””

Snap! Cracks formed below both pairs of feet.

Two superhumans were wreaking further havoc on the pavement.

The box groaned.

“*Hngg!*”

“Uhhhh!”

Then the ground gave way, and Lloyd lost his balance.

“...Now!” Phyllo seized the chance, throwing her weight on it.

“Uh!” The back of his hand shot toward the ground. “Not yet!”

Lloyd’s foot slammed the ground...sinking it before his hand could strike.

Seawater sprayed upward, and Lloyd flipped his body, sending himself and Phyllo flying.

“Urp!”

“...What?!”

For a moment, both were hovering, the moonlight playing in the water spray around them.

In midair, they traded positions, attacking and defending in turn.

Whoever landed first would lose.

And a few inches above the ground...

...Phyllo was on top.

“Ha!”

She grinned, certain she’d won.

And then Lloyd raised his other hand, directly beside her.

“Aero!”

A gale blasted bodies sideways along the surface of the ground.

And Phyllo’s back hit the decrepit warehouse.

“No—!”

“Rahhh!”

Phyllo was pressed against a wall that read Warehouse No. 1, pushing through that wall and blowing the warehouse away—to Warehouse No. 2.

And on to Warehouse No. 3.

And Warehouse No. 4.

The momentum only stopped when she hit No. 5.

Covered in bits of warehouse, they slid down the wall to the ground...where the back of Phyllo’s hand landed first.*

*This is an arm-wrestling match.

Having somehow won the arm-wrestling (remember?) match, Lloyd heaved a sigh of relief.

“Whew...never figured arm wrestling in the city would be so action-packed! But hey! I won.”

He finally relaxed a little and took a good look at his palm.

“I actually chanted properly! I used magic...!”

He’d been so focused on saving Marie, he’d cast the beginner spell *Aero* without stressing it.

“Wow...I really can do it! Even a failure like me...if I’m helping someone

else...”

You’re not a failure, kid. But perhaps we shouldn’t yell at him. This could well be a big step toward greater confidence!

Anyway, he needed to find out where Marie was. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind...

Foom!

“.....!” Phyllo leaped to her feet, hurling herself at him.

“Crap! I have to knock her out? Is that a city rule?!”

There is no such house rule.

Lloyd cursed his own naïveté! But Phyllo was acting sort of weird.

Almost...sweet?

“...Marry me.”

“Wait, what? Huh? Why?”

“...A Kunlun villager is worth devoting my life to...and I can’t imagine marrying anyone but a fighter in the same style.”

Completely confused, Lloyd settled for freeing himself from her grasp.

“S-same style? L-look, I’ve got to get to Marie! I won, so tell me where she is!”

Phyllo seemed unclear why he was asking.

“...You need her blessing? Then let’s go to the store together.”

“Uh...the store?”

“...Mm.”

Phyllo managed to explain what she’d done. She did have the decency to leave out the bit about the toilet.

It slowly dawned on Lloyd that he’d leaped to all kinds of conclusions. He was relieved that Marie was safe, but...

“Er, uh...then Allan’s...”

He quickly turned toward the lighthouse.

Meanwhile, Allan was running along, regretting being here at all.

And not just because getting mixed up in this could be dangerous.

“...They’re too much!”

The difference between him and Lloyd—and even Phyllo—was painfully obvious.

And that made him panic—but still, he kept running, doing what he could.

“...Can I reach such heights someday? No, I *will*!”

Trying to cheer himself up, he raced blindly through the South Side.

“First, protect this Holy Sword until Lloyd wins!”

The best way to keep the anxiety at bay was to accomplish the task his mentor had given him. He threaded his way through the warehouse alleys until he came to a clearing.

“A wharf?” he muttered.

A figure loomed before him.

“Wha—?!”

It was a man in a Rokujou Sorcery Academy uniform—he recognized it from the tournament. But this man’s face was pallid, and he was shuffling along with clear purpose.

When he saw Allan, he drifted toward him. A rusty blade in his hand.

“Heh-heh-heh... Good timing. Just as I could use a little confidence boost.”

Allan grabbed his battle-ax and gave it a big swing—a simple attack, like an angry child venting frustration.

Hit head-on, the man fell over on his back and didn’t move again.

“Right on! This should let me blow off a little steam!” He swung his ax a few more times at nothing, roaring, “I’ll take you all on!”

As if answering his call, more men shuffled out of the alleys, all sporting a similar vibe.

They weren’t dressed the same, but all of them looked to be homeless. Some

had weapons, some didn't...

Shuffle... Shuffle...

And there were around fifty of them.

"Well, not that manyyy!"

Allan was an honest man.

But even as he yelped—well, shrieked—someone jumped him from behind.

It was the student he'd just knocked down. Moving even faster than before, he soon had Allan in a grappling hold from behind.

"You're kidding? How did that *not* knock you out?!"

Allan was surprised, but he still threw his opponent off him. The student landed hard on his back on the stone pavement, but this didn't seem to bother him.

"What's going on? Did you all take some weird drugs or something? I'm a budding soldier here! I've got the authority to arrest all of you!"

No reaction. He'd been hoping the word *arrest* would give them second thoughts, but no such luck.

"Shit! Fine! Be that way! I'll cut you all down! Just you watch!"

Allan took big strides toward his enemies, about to take an equally big swing at the ones in front when...

Kabooooooooooooooooom!

There was a flash of light and then a huge gust of wind right in front of him.

"Hngg!"

Had Lloyd just shown up? Or was it someone new? Bracing himself against the wind, he stared into the darkness from whence it came. There...

"Nope, nope! With necromancy, the possession only deepens when you knock out the host! You just make them stronger."

There was a reassuring lightness to her tone—it was Mena, wrapped in bandages.

“Uh, you’re...the water mage! The one who broke character while fighting Lloyd!”

She winced at the reminder, scratching the side of her neck.

“Urp, that was bad... It’s been years since I let my true self show! Ugh, I had to lie there listening to Rol trick Phyllo, race over to the info broker’s, read the note, and then race all the way over here! This is all Rol’s fault! If I took her to court, it’d be a slam dunk!”

Listening to her rant, Allan rubbed his forehead. “You’re sure about turning on your boss?”

“Boss, schmoss. I ain’t letting anyone use my sister for their own nefarious ends... She needs to get raked over the coals!”

Sounded like she had good reason to be pissed, so Allan decided he could trust her.

“Then help me rescue this witch!”

Mena gave him a look of surprise. “Huh? Rescue? Marie’s back at the shop, though? I dunno if she’s exactly in the best condition, but...”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she’d run out of toilet paper... Whoops, eyes front! More coming.”

“Aughhh!”

A few of the foes Allan hadn’t knocked aside interrupted their conversation. He swatted one or two away, but with even more right behind, Allan started throwing barrels and crates, slowing them down.

“Well done! You may be a bit pathetic, but you’re not bad—at being a mage-protecting wall!”

“Don’t just stand there snarking! You’re a mage—hit ’em with another one of those!”

“What? And here I was, giving you a chance to show off... Kidding, of course.”

“Huh?” Allan gaped at her, and Mena grinned back.

“Nothing dumber you can do than pick a fight with a water mage on the

seafront.”

She pointed, and Allan turned to look...

“What the hell is that thing?! A—a water monster?!”

A massive water flow was wrapping itself around the men like ivy.

“A spell to summon a water snake... That flash and gust earlier were just a side effect of the spell.”

“That gust...was a side effect?”

She was, in her own right, totally unfathomable.

“If I hold on to them until morning, the spirits will dissipate... Why are you looking all depressed? Got a tummy ache?”

“No...just... Wow, the world sure is a big place...”

First Lloyd, then Phyllo, now Mena... All way beyond him. It was enough to discourage anyone.

“Don’t be silly! You’re still young! And biceps ain’t the measure of a man. You can’t lead anyone with strength alone!”

“The advice of a first-class mage means a lot to someone like me.”

“Cool, then gimme a hand punishing Rol for this stupidity.”

“If there’s a need for one as powerless as me, I’m happy to help.”

“...I really didn’t think she was *this* bad, deep down...so I’m hoping we can snap her out of it. It’s a subordinate’s job to cover for the boss... Wait, that’s the other way around! Ah-ha-ha!”

Mena’s eyes opened, glaring at the lighthouse in the distance. But a moment later, she was back to her usual impish smile.

Rol Calcife was watching all of this through binoculars from the top of the lighthouse.

Her lips twitching, she lowered the binoculars, spitting words like curses.

“Mena... You traitor! You dare get in my way?”

Everything was going wrong. Today... No, years back, when Riho had first run

from her. No, even before that, when she'd been at the sorcery academy... Blaming everything but herself, she took out her anger on the binoculars.

Grinding the shattered lenses beneath her heel, breathing heavily, she tried to think.

"I've lost my position as headmaster...and my failures here will reach their ears eventually. But so what?" She seemed to be trying to convince herself. "If I can just get the Holy Sword... If I can just drag myself to further heights..."

With her mind made up, Rol turned to the rows of possessed men behind her and gave them an order. "Secure an escape route for me! Even if it kills you."

Without even a nod, the hollow-eyed men drifted off down the hall.

"At least I've got necromancy... I *will* get them back for this... And someday, that sword will be—"

But before she could finish...

There was a *snap* and a *crack*. The sounds came from the desk behind her. Rol turned toward it, backing away.

"...Wh-what? Some sort of insect? No, wait, I put—"

—*the witch's crystal in there.*

"AAAAAAAAAAAH—Llooooyd!"

The desk split in two, and a cute little girl came bursting out like the story of Momotaro emerging from a peach in the river. But unlike the little peach boy, she was wearing clothes: a white robe with dangly sleeves, cute black pigtails, looking barely ten years old—the chief of Kunlun, Alka.

She'd skipped out on work to go see Lloyd on so many occasions that the villagers had gotten enraged. Until this very moment, she had been forced to help with the harvest. But she'd earned herself a rest at last!

And free again, her Lloyd deprivation meter at its max, she'd come flying over—unaware that the crystal teleportation gate had been moved to an unknown location.

She looked around the dimly lit room, then advanced on Rol.

“Where’s Lloyd?”

“Huh? Who are you, little girl?”

“Where’s Lloyd?”

“Were you playing hide-and-seek here? Geez, don’t I have enough problems —?”

“Where’s Lloyd?”

The repeated question was getting on Rol’s nerves. “I dunno! Shut up, brat!”

The temperature in the room dropped noticeably.

“Oh? I don’t know who you are, but clearly, you’re standing between me and Lloyd!”

Alka was past rational thought. Although it would seem she’d never been capable of it to begin with...

But either way, Alka stepped over to Rol and began using sigils to cast a spell.

“Th-those are...ancient runes!”

Quick, powerful magic from a little girl...

Rol’s mind couldn’t processes this. She just gaped at Alka.

“Lloyd!”

Light shone from the lighthouse for the first time in years.

Well, it wasn’t actually light, so much as...

Kabooooooooom.

...a side effect of the massive explosion.

The shock wave Alka unleashed pierced the heavens and vanished into the stars.

“What the hell?!”

Allan and Mena had been preparing to burst in, and instead, they were left gaping up at the fireworks.

“...I’ve been a mercenary a long time, but I’ve never seen anyone use magic

like that.”

Pieces of something black were falling through the light into the water.

“...Is that one human?”

One fragment was hurled toward them. An object clad in a familiar elegant suit, now hurtling through the air.

It passed over their heads and crashed headfirst into a pile of wooden crates. They were filled with unused nets, which seemed to have cushioned the blow enough to spare her life.

“I-is that Rol?”

“Er...Rol Calcife?”

No way. They looked closer, and it was definitely that woman, like a snake with its fangs broken, her legs twitching, out cold. For the second time that day.

“It really is Rol Calcife...”

“Who did this...?”

In the distance, Allan heard a familiar voice yelling, “I smell Lloyd this waaaay!” He began worrying about something else entirely.

“Th-then those black things were...”

“Possessed people. If they fell in the water, they might well drown...”

Mena seemed unconcerned, but Allan yelped, “Oh, shit! We’ve gotta rescue them!”

“Huh? What for? They’re total strangers— Hey, listen!”

Allan had just jumped in the water.

“Who cares if they’re homeless! They’ve all just been tricked by that Rol lady! We can’t just let them die—GWEH!”

Even in the water, they were still possessed, and he found himself under attack.

“W-wait, crap! I’m gonna die! Heeeelp!”

Mena shook her head but then grinned.

“For someone who puts himself down at lot, you sure do make people want to follow your lead.”

With a bitter laugh, she began casting a spell to save him.

Chapter 5

A Misunderstanding: Suppose Your Mom Kept Buying You a Random Snack She Thought Was Your “Favorite”

Several days had passed since Lloyd’s side emerged victorious at the tournament.

Azami Military Academy won! They were the talk of the town for days! ...Well, that was what they’d expected, but the reality was pretty different.

“Siiiiigh...”

Choline sighed deeply at the Azami Military Hospital. Riho glared at her from bed where she was recuperating.

“Colonel, did you come here to ruin my day?”

Ignoring Riho, Choline began reading aloud from her newspaper. “Breaking news! The sword at the Village of the Holy Sword was a fake! The village’s duplicitous mayor revealed as a tourism industry stooge! A consequence of slack government oversight!”

The only thing anyone was talking about was the failure of the Village of the Holy Sword and the collusion between the mayor and other government officials.

“I guess when someone pulled it out, they discovered it was a fake and got pissed off enough to expose them.”

And they were using the news to hoist him by his own petard... Modern society was a cruel place.

As a result, the tournament results were relegated to a footnote.

“And the back page is this! The mystery explosion at the old lighthouse! Forewarning of a natural disaster? Who cares! Why did it have to explode now?! Take a hint! Wait a day!”

But the *loli* grandma waits for no one.

“That explosion, huh?”

“How can I not sigh? Oh, the military school, reduced to this tiny corner! There’s more space given to this comic strip!”

But Riho was grinning at something else. “...I heard Rol was in the center of that explosion and pretty banged up.”

“Yeah, sounds like she was. Probably up to no good.”

“Hmm... I still wanna know why she wanted the Holy Sword so bad...”

Given that Riho’s life had been on the line for it, she felt she deserved an explanation.

“We gotta wait to hear more. She’s in this hospital! We’ll have to hit her up later.”

“...Yeah?”

“So, Riho. Is your arm all good?”

“Yeah, thanks to the recovery magic, this one’s doing just fine.”

“Good...and the mechanical side?”

“Doing all right. Not totally back to normal—I used way too much magic—but honestly, I think it’s ridiculous they’re making me stay the night.”

She gave her mechanical arm a flex. It was certainly moving a little stiffly, like it needed oil.

“Oh, moving already? To think it just went back to normal the second we stuck it on you.”

“The doctors said my body just got used to dealing with the mithril. I mean, I’ve been living with it for five years now. Early on, it was sort of stiff—but I’ll get it moving like it used to soon enough.”

“You sure about this? You could have gone with a normal mechanical arm.”

“I thought about it! But it doesn’t carry a death threat with it anymore, and...”
Riho smiled at the memory. “Someone told me it’s cool.”

Choline couldn't help but smile back...although her grin was a little bit mischievous.

"Aha! And that 'someone' is Lloyd?"

She'd hit the nail on the head, as evidenced by Riho's instant protests. Choline quickly found a massive mithril hand clamped around her shoulder.

"C-Colonel!"

"Uh, I was just guessing... Owwww! R-Riho! Yeah, okay! You're doing just fine! Point taken!"

"L-listen! I'm not doing this because Lloyd said anything! The mithril is functional! Helps me earn bank! What Lloyd said is irrelevant!"

That was basically like admitting it.

And right in the middle of this, with the best (or worst) timing, Lloyd came in. He slowly opened the door, wondering aloud, "Do you have a visitor?" and stepped in.

"Excuse me!" he said. "I've come to visit... Riho? Did you just say my name?"

"L-Lloyd! N-no, never mind!"

Selen peered over Lloyd's shoulder, clearly deeming Riho's fluster suspicious.

"Really?" she asked. "Are you sure you weren't just so lonely lying here alone you called out Sir Lloyd's name?"

"God, no, m'lady! I'm not you!"

Seeing Riho her old self again, Lloyd smiled. "Glad you're doing well. Uh, I brought you a fruit basket!"

He put it on the table nearby. Apples, bananas, grapes—standard stuff.

"You should be grateful!" Selen said. "It was pretty expensive."

She took out a knife and started peeling an apple.

"Uh, thanks, Selen..."

"Here, Sir Lloyd! I'll feed them to you. Say 'Ahh!'" Selen start stuffing apple in Lloyd's mouth, and Riho crooked an eyebrow at her.

“...Aren’t those usually for the person *in* the hospital?”

“For what we paid, we deserve to reap the benefits!”

Riho just let it drop. Lloyd held some apple out to her.

“Don’t worry, there’s plenty,” he said. “Riho, say ‘Ahh!’”

Riho instantly turned bright red. Downright jaw-droppingly obvious, huh? Choline’s grin got even bigger.

“Um... A-ahhh...” Riho opened up, and just before the apple reached her lips...

Swish! Snap!

The belt at Selen’s hips completely sealed Riho’s mouth.

“Gmmph! Bahh!” Riho gasped, managing to free herself. “What the hell?! What’s your problem?!”

“Whoops! The cursed belt got away from me. But it looks like Riho forfeits her turn, so I’ll be happy to accept that apple, Lloyd!”

The belt formed a heart shape, and Selen eagerly opened her mouth for the slice. The way that belt was writhing around now...it was definitely a monster.

“So she can finally control the thing at will...”

“You’ve upgraded from creepy to eldritch, Selen,” added Choline.

Selen seemed to have grown the most from the tournament. Well, not in any way related to magic, though...

And finally, the man who’d raised his reputation the most in all of this appeared.

“Yo! You hanging in there, mercenary? Sorry it took me so long, Lloyd!”

Allan came in carrying something under his arm. He must have been in a rush, because he was drenched in sweat.

“No need to bow your head, Allan. Finally done with those interviews?”

“Uh, yeah. Basically giving the same canned answers to the same questions over and over...”

Selen looked confused. The belt formed a question mark beside her.

“Interviews?” she said. “Who’d want to interview *him*?”

“You really don’t care about anything but Lloyd, huh? Look.” Choline spread out the paper, pointing to an article. It wasn’t front-page news, but it did have a photo of Allan with it.

“Is there finally a warrant out for your arrest?”

“Says the stalker. It doesn’t even look like a wanted poster!”

Allan seemed uncomfortable with the whole thing, though—like this article wasn’t anything to be proud of.

Curious, Selen quickly skimmed it. “‘Allan Toin Lidocaine sprang into action and saved residents affected by the lighthouse explosion...’ They’re calling you the ideal soldier! What the—?”

“Like it says. Allan happened to be in the area and helped drag some drowning homeless people out of the ocean,” added Riho.

“And since the top brass didn’t think the tournament would generate much buzz, they prettied the story up and pushed it hard. Congrats, Allan. I see promotions in your future.” Choline slapped him on the shoulder.

“This isn’t how I planned to get ahead,” Allan muttered. “But that’s how it goes sometimes.”

“You’re a little happy, though, right? You like being interviewed, and this pose you struck for the photos...”

“Well, the camera people talked me into—”

“Hold up, you struck a pose?!” asked Riho.

Allan nodded in silence. He currently came in as the least cool man in all of Azami.

“Well, now that you’re living proof that our military will never be a meritocracy, what gift did you bring?”

“Belt Princess, knock off the snark or you don’t get any.” Allan gave her a look, then held up the bag under his arm.

“Oh, showing off, are we? This better not be anything weird. Also, we already

brought fruit, so I want something else,” snapped Selen.

“Who put you in charge? But fine.” Allan seemed pretty sure of himself.

“Confident, eh?” Choline said.

“Yeah, I got told I don’t understand women and lived to regret it, so this time, I did my research! Time to reclaim my good name!”

He grinned and whipped off the bag, plunking the contents on the table dramatically.

All eyes locked onto—a jar of long green shapes in a yellowish fluid.

Pickles.

“Feast on these! A month’s supply of the café master’s special pickles!”

“...Oh.” Riho’s reaction was super flat. Total poker face.

“Er...huh? You aren’t happy?”

Selen glared at him. “Who brings *pickles* to a hospital visit? Even for you, that’s weird. You bring shame to the nobility.”

“Y-you’re the last person who should be leveling those accusations, Belt Princess! But...you *love* pickles, Riho! I heard you devoured them like crazy at the café. I mean, they even nicknamed you Ms. Pickles!”

“...Now...did...they...?”

After forcing one down that fateful day, she’d developed an intense hatred for them...but he had no way of knowing that. Poor man.

Allan was starting to tear up. His lips trembling.

“Well, let’s just ignore the man due for a promotion despite his lack of talent or tact. When the lighthouse blew up, what were you doing, Lloyd?”

Riho was piling on the spite, but Allan was past objecting.

Lloyd shifted around awkwardly.

“Uh, it’s sort of embarrassing... There were lots of misunderstandings, but...I was fighting Phyllo.”

“...Phyllo. That awful poker face lady! Clearly, you beat her into a pulp and

washed her down the sewer like a strawberry smoothie, right, Sir Lloyd?!”

Selen was not one to disguise a personal grudge.

At this point, Choline interrupted, looking apologetic. “Uh, actually there’s something I need to tell everyone...”

“...Mm.”

A voice came from the hospital room door. Everyone jumped and turned to look.

Phyllo Quinone had given no more signs of her approach than she did hints of her emotional state. A moment later, her sister, Mena, popped her head in, too.

“Eh-heh-heh! We’re here!”



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No appointment? No problem! said her broad smile.

“...We are,” Phyllo said, calmly putting her arms around Lloyd.

“Augh! Ph-Phyllo!”

This hug wasn’t some cute embrace—there was an audible creaking coming from Lloyd’s bones. Sounded like a lot of damage being done.

“Come now, Phyllo. Hugs aren’t supposed to send people to the hospital with compound fractures.”

“...We’re already in a hospital.”

“Oh, right! Then I guess it’s okay.”

“It isn’t! Geez!”

Phyllo hugged him like a small child hugs a puppy. Except with no expression. Selen was not one to let that stand.

“Kua-w-se-drftg-fujiko-1-p!” As Selen spoke in tongues again, her cursed belt thrashed.

At exactly this moment, Mena chose to drop a conversation bomb.

“Phyllo, don’t hug him like that! He’s gonna be your classmate, so you need to be careful with him.”

““““Huh?!””””

Everyone but Choline gaped at her. That left it up to the colonel to cough once and explain.

“Uh, so yeah. Phyllo’s agreed to transfer! Be nice to her.”

“Why?! This doesn’t even make sense!” protested Selen.

“Don’t look at me!” snapped Riho. “I’m as lost as you are.”

“Well,” Mena said helpfully. “We asked the top brass, and they said yes!”

She smiled at her sister, who reluctantly allowed herself to be peeled off Lloyd.

“...Best if I’m with my master,” added Phyllo.

Selen's eyes narrowed. Oblivious to this, Phyllo's hands reached toward Lloyd again.

"She's a good girl, I swear!" Mena said. "Uh, she does have a tendency to challenge boys and beat them into retirement, so watch out for that? Ah-ha-ha."

Choline's eyebrow twitched. "...That would be bad... Why'd we agree to take her? Just...keep an eye out for her, you guys."

Choline seemed to have no insider knowledge here. On the spur of the moment, she had clearly decided the best solution to the problem was to dump it on them.

"Handle her yourself!" Selen snapped. "Lloyd and I want nothing to do with it! It's Colonel Chrome's job to stand in harm's way! Why isn't he here today anyway?"

"Colonel Chrome is busy putting the Holy Sword in the royal treasure room," Mena said.

"Oh?" Riho interjected. "If you know that...then you're gonna be working at the castle?"

"Yep, seems like your country has a lack of mages. And I gotta pay for Phyllo's education...so I asked if they had any good jobs and got myself appointed magic instructor to the royal guard."

"Wow," Riho said, sounding genuinely impressed. "A mercenary getting that kinda job is a pretty big deal! And getting Miss Stone Face over here enlisted, too—you got a connection you're working?"

"That's a trade secret...but honestly, I'm as clueless as you are."

"...Good deeds always come back around," Phyllo said.

Mena winced. "Nah, we didn't really... I mean, the only good thing I've done lately was get a lady some toilet paper..."

"Toilet paper?"

"Nah, that can't have anything to do with it. Gotta be the tournament results..."

Who would ever imagine handing over a roll and saving the princess from a bathroom emergency would get you a job at the palace?

Either way, Choline now had herself a magic buddy.

“W-well, I’m glad I ain’t the only mage around! Like, sometimes it felt like there was no one I could talk to, so...glad to have you!”

“Cool! Look after my sister, would you?”

“...If I can’t be your student, then your wife would be the next...”

“Helllllll no! That position’s not available!”

The cursed belt snapped, which Phyllo easily batted away rhythmically, like a boxer with a punching bag.

“...This is good training. Let’s do this again.”

“I’m not a training machine! I’m Sir Lloyd’s partner in life! In the future!”

“...Thanks in advance.”

“I commend you for putting a positive spin on it.” Riho laughed, enjoying the commotion. “Oh...,” she said, soft enough that no one heard her. “So this is what fun feels like...”

It was the sense of fulfillment she’d never found chasing the big score, a meal ticket, or the horse race. She wasn’t yet comfortable with it, but...

—*Shove.*

“Mmph!”

Her mouth had opened in a smile—and a piece of fruit had been shoved in it.

What in the...? Apple? She turned to look and saw Lloyd leaning over her bed, smiling gently, still trying to get her to say “Ahhh.”

“Eh-heh-heh! Caught you with your guard down, Riho.”

That disarming smile made her eyes go wide...and then she stared at her hands.

“Y-you can’t just do that...you idiot...”

Selen was obviously not going to just watch *that*. The cursed belt grabbed

Riho's chin, pulling her face closer. "What's wrong, Riho? Why did you turn red? Was the apple so good it made you blush? The apple Lloyd *hand-fed* you?!"

"...Sorry?"

"Don't apologize! It's a yes-or-no question! Argh, I feel like I've lost again!" Selen collapsed on the bed, sobbing.

"...I can't do anything right," Allan muttered, bravely working his way through the abhorred pickles. "Dammit! I've got to hone both tact and talent until I'm worthy of being Lloyd's right-hand man!"

He was experiencing the same kind of sadness that comes when you notice your food gift approaching its expiration date.

"Hey, big guy! Enough sniveling! Take those salty tears out of here!" Selen chided.

"Shut up! It's not like I want to eat them all alone!"

"Wow, vinegar breath!" Selen had decided to recover by going after Allan.

Lloyd was busy cutting up a melon but paused to look happily around the room.

Marie, protecting the country from behind the scenes. Allan, earning his promotion. Riho, wielding her amazing magic. There are so many great people in the world...

Then he glanced out the window at the blue sky above.

Someday, I want to be stronger, too...to be a soldier who can stand proud with them.

It seems Lloyd Belladonna might not grasp his own strength for a while, huh?

As chaos reigned around her, Riho slowly slipped out of bed, took an apple from the basket, and turned to leave.

Only one person noticed her go.

"What's up?" Mena asked.

"Bathroom." Riho fluttered a hand.

“Oh,” Mena said, like she’d seen right through it. “Go on, then.”

A tad unsteady on her feet, Riho headed in the direction of a different hospital room.

Rol Calcife was slipping in and out of consciousness.

She couldn’t get her eyes to focus, just barely aware enough to tell she was in a hospital. One leg was wrapped in bandages and suspended in a sling, but she wasn’t at all sure it was hers.

There’s got to be some mistake.

A tiny child had been using ancient runes, the magic of legend, and unleashed the most absurd spell. It was the kind of lost magic that any mage would tell you was nothing but a fairy tale—except she’d seen it happen right in front of her.

The blow to her psyche had been every bit as bad as the physical one. It had loosened the grip her emotions had on her, forcing her to reflect on her own actions.

Ancient runes, huh... Wait, wasn’t Choline babbling about trying to revive those when we were students?

She could see Choline in their old school uniform, working hard with her friends. That girl had started out a one-trick pony and turned herself into a healing magic expert. Regardless of her overall grades, she got a lot of attention as a result.

I knew I couldn’t beat her... All I could do was stop at nothing to climb over everyone else and make myself headmaster.

Dirty tricks, bribes...everything seemed covered in a fog.

Oh...why did I ever want to be headmaster? I don’t...

She’d abandoned her position so readily. Had it ever meant anything more to her than being on top?

The fog parted to reveal a scene from her past, its colors so vivid...

“Yo, Rol! Whatcha gonna teach me today? Time for the big stuff?”

“No, nitwit. Keep drilling those fundamentals.”

“Pfft! This fire spell’s easy-peasy! You gotta teach something bigger!”

“If you mess up that spell, it’ll be a disaster! Fire magic is easy, but it’s the most dangerous! It blows up on you, everything catches fire. If you don’t channel the magic just right, you turn into a human fireball!”

“Then teach me some healing magic so I can fix those burns! The little ones hurt themselves all the time, so I really wanna know how to help them.”

“Dumbass! Healing magic’s the hardest one! Even pros take a full year of training before they can reliably heal people. A year just to heal a pinch of belly fat! And if you mess it up, you’ll leave a pebble or whatever inside festering. Happens all the time!”

“Ew, gross...”

“So practice your fundamentals. You may not be able to peel an apple, much less cook, but you’ve got a knack for magic, Riho.”

“Geez, trying to butter me up... Heh-heh. And you’re real good at teaching, Rol.”

“Ha-ha. I didn’t get a scholarship to Rokujou Sorcery Academy for nothing! This is easy.”

“You’re so lucky... I hope I can make it someday and help everyone like you do.”

“And become more powerful. Tell you what, someday I’ll be headmaster, and I’ll make sure you get a scholarship, too. And make sure everyone involved with the orphanage can take it easy.”

“If both of us make it, we can remodel the whole orphanage!”

“Hell, we can build a new one! A way bigger one!”

“Good luck at Rokujou, Rol.”

“I don’t need it, Riho. I’m gonna be the best there ever was...”

Oh... Staring blankly at the wall of the hospital room, Rol cried out inside. That’s right... When I started... That’s why...

She saw a shadow at the edge of her vision, inhaled a scent she recognized. She pulled her muddled mind awake, forcing her eyes to focus.

“...Hmph.” Riho was sitting on a chair, peeling an apple. Her mechanical arm wasn’t operating smoothly, but she was having no trouble peeling the apple anyway.

“Ri...ho...” Rol’s voice came out as almost a sob.

Riho looked up, surprised. “Oh...”

Their eyes met, and Riho looked uncomfortable. She’d seen that look on Riho’s face before.

“...Tch.” Riho dumped the peeled apple on the side table and got up to leave.

In a hoarse whisper, Rol called after her. “You...”

“.....”

“...You...can peel apples...now...”

This time, it was tears that blurred Rol’s vision. She was seeing her own little sister clearly once more.

“I’ll come again.” Riho moved quickly out of the room as the doctor came in.

The doctor was an older man with graying temples. “A friend of yours?” he asked.

There was a long silence, and then Rol whispered, “...Kind of like a little sister...that I always had to clean up after.”

“Oh yeah? Well, for now, you need to rest.” The doctor gave her a pat on the shoulder and left.

How did I forget? Why did I even want that Holy Sword?

Rol’s eyes closed. She looked at peace—like whatever had possessed her had been banished.

The doctor left the room, walking down the hall.

As he turned the corner, he peeled off the white coat. The chiseled lines on his face and his broad forehead gave him a look of great composure.

If he wore a white coat, he'd look like a doctor. Tails, he'd look like a butler. A karate uniform, like he ran a dojo. He was a man who always looked the part.

Right now, he was donning an old trench coat. This gave him the hard-boiled vibe of a veteran cop or private eye.

"Well, the Holy Sword's been pulled, so we're good."

His voice had a rasp to it, but there was something childish about the way he spoke. He didn't sound anything like he had in Rol's room.

"I messed with that kid—Rol's memories, so there's no chance anyone will find out it was me... Only question is how do I get the sword out? I can't touch it myself... Hmm."

A passing nurse bowed her head, and he bowed back. No one thought his presence here was remarkable. Once he was sure she was gone, he began muttering to himself again.

"Getting the king possessed by Abaddon was only one of my plans, but...my schemes have certainly been ending poorly lately. Though I guess I know who's to blame?"

He glanced around to make sure no one was looking, then made to leave through the window. Even behavior this strange looked totally normal when he did it.

"Well, well, well. I wonder when I'll be able to liberate the ultimate prison... The last dungeon..." Scratching his head, he let himself fall to the ground below.

"Well, if push comes to shove...I'll just have to kill you, Alka."

This dire statement echoed through the quiet halls in his wake.

Meanwhile, back at Marie's shop...

"It's too much! I can't stay hunched over any longer and plant seeds in a field that goes on forever!" Alka's robe was streaked with mud, and she was very angry.

"You're affecting business! Please leave," Marie said, not looking up from her book. She took a sip of coffee.

“Sure, I kept slipping away to see Lloyd even after I was in trouble! But it’s not fair that my extra punishment means I have to help plant the seeds! And not just help! I’ve got to do the whole thing myself!”

“Oh, please. That’s nothing compared to the toilet hell that your curse put me through! I ran out of paper, you know! If Mena hadn’t come by, things could have been real bad!”

There was a reason she’d gotten that royal guard magic instructor job so easily. If Lloyd (her crush) had been forced to hand her a roll of toilet paper, Marie would have been traumatized for life.

“I’m gonna die in a field... You don’t care if a cute girl turns into compost?!”

“You’re immortal! You wouldn’t die even if I killed you!”

“True! That reminds me: Are you looking after the Holy Sword properly? I could lay a proper barrier down for you if you want. Take several months, be really thorough...”

“How does immortality remind you of a Holy Sword? Look, the villagers are hunting for you.”

Marie pointed at the crystal ball, where furious-looking villagers were searching for Alka. “Jesus,” Alka muttered and turned to head back home.

“Well, not many villains can handle that sword,” the chief continued. “Just promise you’ll take care of it... And more importantly! If I make it through this alive, promise me that I’ve got a passionate kiss from Lloyd waiting for me!”

“I can’t hear you!”

“What’s that grin for?! Why, youuuuuuu... When I’m done seeding, you’ll regret this!”

Marie waved as the *loli* grandma vanished into the crystal ball. At the time, she had no idea just how much trouble that Holy Sword would cause.

And, well, you can’t forget the real plot of this gamelike story: Suppose you got to the final boss and found out an insignificant item in your starter pack was critical to its defeat.

Afterword

A long time ago, I did some acting onstage. I was hardly a great actor or even much of an actor at all.

But I took it seriously. I practiced hard and wrote a whole backstory for my character—and even tried to experience these scenes and visit the set locations in real life.

I think that experience came in handy when it came to writing novels. I view my work as a stage, and when it doesn't feel right, I run through the scene, play out each of the character's parts myself, and visit locations to serve as references.

I did the same thing this time: played the roles, wrote character histories, and on and on...

Lloyd in particular was difficult—mostly because he's a nice boy, which means we share no commonalities.

By the way, I did the same thing for my first novel, *Butt-Naked Berserker Shimamura*.

At times, I would act scenes out (i.e., get nekkid at home to think up ultimate moves), or read reference books (i.e., pore over porn), or visit locations with nudity (i.e., go to hot springs).

...I don't remember having any difficulty at all.

Thank you for reading! I'm Toshio Satou. I'd like to thank you for buying the second volume of *Suppose a Kid from the Last Dungeon Boonies Moved to a Starter Town*.

First, I need to thank some people.

To my illustrator, Nao Watanuki: Thank you again for the gorgeous illustrations. Particularly the Quinone sisters. Daaamn! They fine.

To my editor, Maizou: Thank you for all your feedback and assistance again.

To the editorial department, the sales and marketing teams, and the proofreaders at GA Bunko: I appreciate your support for this volume.

And finally, a word of apology to the editor in chief, K-mura: I am so sorry for brushing right past you at Roppongi Station.

On my way to the editorial department to autograph a book, I saw someone making intense eye contact with me, and I was all, “Geez, Roppongi’s hardcore! Better not meet his eye... Wait, was that the editor in chief?” I really can’t apologize for my actions enough.

And to everyone reading this book: Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I hope we meet again in Volume 3.

TOSHIO SATOU

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