

Toshio Satou

Illustration by
Nao Watanuki

4

Suppose

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

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Suppose

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



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✱
Micono Zol
Head of the
second-year cadets.
Irrked by Lloyd's
success.

The
upperclassmen
have their
eyes on the
"troublemakers"
Lloyd
and his
friends!
They'll
prove who's
strongest in
the **dungeon**!






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"A bad guy."

**"What
do I
look
like
to
you?"**


Sou
An enigmatic figure who
knows about Kunlun.
Working in the
shadows of Azami.



PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1

Suppose a Kid from the Last Dungeon Boonies Entered a Starter Dungeon

CHAPTER 2

An Old-School RPG Twist: Suppose a Starter Dungeon Became a Key Location in the Back Half of the Game

CHAPTER 3

A Compulsive Cringe: Suppose a Daughter Found Her Father Making Merry in a Dive Bar

CHAPTER 4

Forgotten Inventory: Suppose an RPG's Starting Inventory Proved Vital to Escaping a Later Crisis

CHAPTER 5

Anxious Allan: Suppose a Secret Was About to Blow Up in His Face Like He'd Been Hired Based on a Forged Résumé

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NEW YORK

Copyright

SUPPOSE A KID FROM THE LAST DUNGEON BOONIES MOVED TO A STARTER TOWN 4

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 4

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Character Profiles

Alka

Chief of the town of legend. Dotes on Lloyd like he's her own son. Seems to have history with the enigma named Sou.



Lloyd Belladonna

Excessively strong villager raised in the town of legend. His accidental accomplishments in the military drew the ire of some upperclassmen.



Marie the Witch

Disguises herself as an information broker on the East Side but is actually the princess of the Azami Kingdom. Enjoys living with Lloyd too much to drop the pretense.





Allan Lidocaine

Son of a decorated noble family. Meeting Lloyd has only spread his fame.



Riho Flavin

Skilled mercenary. In it for the money. Lately seems preoccupied with Lloyd's every move.



Selen Hemein

Former Cursed Belt Princess. Devoted to Lloyd, who changed her destiny. ♥



Choline Sterase

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



Chrome Molybdenum

Former head of the royal guard. Returned to the military after meeting Lloyd.



Phyllo Quinone

A martial artist who admires Lloyd. Was trained by someone from Kunlun.



Sou

An enigmatic mystery man. No two people come away with the same impression of him.



Shouma

A Kunlun villager. Prone to yammering about "passion." Currently traveling the world.



Micono Zol

Head of the second-year cadets. Nicknamed Godspeed. She has it in for Lloyd.

Prologue

In a back alley stood a man: average height, average build, getting on in years.

His hair was white, though there was something oddly young about him. At first glance, he looked fifty, but if someone told you he was a thirty-year-old in an aged disguise, you might be inclined to believe them.

He wore an old brown suit with a snazzy coat. A strange sort of man.

There was an ineffable air to his manner and comportment that seemed downright unreal.

On the one hand, the old clothes suggested he had fallen on hard times, yet he also seemed like the sort of eccentric gentleman who *liked* his vintage wardrobe.

It was like he was an actor, and this back alley was his stage.

It lay on the East Side.

In the district where the dregs of Azami washed up, the back roads were infamously unsafe for unwary travelers to wander.

How infamous? Ask any guide, and they'll say, "Don't go in there! Never go in there! Promise you won't go in there!" with the intensity of a method actor auditioning for a role.

Folks who'd long since given up on life stared vacantly, sitting in piles of unlawfully dumped trash. What rare boisterous shouts could be heard were almost certainly just another fistfight. The locals avoided this place as diligently as tourists.

Yet, here stood an old man, in the middle of the night.

A trio of unsavory-looking roustabouts approached, eyes gleaming, certain they'd stumbled across some hapless prey.

A ruffian with a particularly grim countenance let out a stream of smoke...and not from the *good* kind of leaves. The distinctive scent filled the alley.

“Whatcha doing here, old-timer?”

He glanced at his companions, signaling them to surround the man and cut off his escape.

One of his two friends leaned in, peering at the old man’s face.

“You lost? I’m afraid this is a toll road.”

“And it’ll cost you whether you’re passing through or turning back.”

“If you drop all the valuables on you, we’ll even walk you home!”

Unpleasant laughter pealed through the alley.

“Hmm,” the older man grunted, unimpressed.

The three muggers stared at him, confused.

He took a good look at each in turn. “What do I look like to you?”

Their eyes went wide for a moment, then they sneered.

“Huh? A tourist, of course. A loaded one.”

“What? Are you lookin’ to buy some leaf?”

“A-are you a cop?!”

Three very different answers.

The older man just looked bored.

“As expected, I suppose...,” he muttered, making sure they could not hear. “I heard there were treasures buried in the East Side—but clearly not here.”

He reached into his pocket and fished something out.

“Valuables? Yes... Will this ring do?”

He held up a silver ring before one ruffian’s nose.

“Ohhh? Heh-heh-heh, that’s what I’m talkin’ about!”

He hadn’t expected it to be that easy, but he quickly grinned and reached out to take the ring.

Without batting an eye, the old man grabbed the ruffian's wrist...with unimaginable force.

He let out a sharp grunt in pain.

The pressure forced his fingers open. They shook. He forced the ring onto one of them.

"This ring is made of mithril, you see. A lovely ore that amplifies the wearer's magic. But it constantly absorbs your magic, so if you don't have a considerable amount to begin with, it'll drain you completely in no time."

Even as the old man spoke, the mugger turned pale, his faced withering in wrinkles.

His companions let out a shriek of horror.

The elderly man watched until the thief was nothing but a pile of ash and clothing, then he picked up the ring.

"Less than a minute with the pure mithril? Oh, you asked if I wanted your leaf. If you like them that much, perhaps you'd like to grow some."

He spun around, pressing right up against the second brute.

"If you take this, I can't guarantee you'll remain human—but that's what you want, yes?"

Before the ruffian could even try to run, the older man grabbed his chin, forcing a pill into his mouth.

The ruffian struggled, but there was a gulp, and he swallowed the pill.

Suddenly, the man's skin thickened like tree bark, rootlike tendrils sprouting all over his body.

"Ah...aughh..."

Covered in pale green roots and leaves, the man let out a sob...and withered away.

The remaining man collapsed to the ground without a word.

"He can't even control the treant, much less serve as a seedbed... Let's mark that down as 'needs improvement.'"

Finally, the elderly stranger turned to the last of the three muggers, proffering a vial.

“You wish to escape the long arm of the law, yes? If you see me as a cop, you must have a guilty conscience. Drink this, and your legs will be as strong as an insect’s, and you’ll grow a sturdy, protective shell.”

The tough guy seemed too stunned to respond, so the elderly man shook his head and forced the vial between his lips.

He twitched once and was covered in an insectoid exoskeleton.

But this cracked like an eggshell and began leaking blood-like fluid. And like the two companions before him, he crumbled to dust.

A guilt-free sigh echoed through the alley.

“Clearly I’ve got my work cut out for me. If an ordinary human can’t survive the conversion, there’s no point.”

He glanced once at the three piles of ash and clothing, then left the alley behind.

“That soldier is the only one who could harbor Abaddon’s power... A sad soul, so overcome with love for his country and despair for its future that he allowed a demon lord to control him. Hmm?”

A blinding light flashed in his eyes.

This was the light of a magic stone in the hands of a policeman. Sharp eyes sized him up.

“What are you doing here?”

“.....”

The old man did not respond.

“...Mm? A tourist?” the cop decided, unprovoked.

Without a word from the man, the matter had been settled.

“More or less,” he replied, as if this wasn’t the least bit odd.

The officer nodded and began lecturing him on how dangerous these alleys

were.

“You can’t be wandering around the East Side at night. You’re going to get mugged! Didn’t the tour guides warn you?”

“I’m terribly sorry.”

“Word is, there’s some crazed stalker running around lately... Get mistaken for a creep like that, and there’s no telling what could happen to you. Best get back to your lodgings.”

The man bowed his head. Having escaped the law’s attention, he wandered off.

Behind him, he could hear the cop yelling. Perhaps he’d found the piles of clothing. No matter.

“I need new pawns...pawns that can kill Alka and the guardian beast of Kunlun. Then I can free the Last Dungeon from that centuries-old spell...”

Sounding like the chorus in an old play, he vanished into the night.

The next day...

Morning dawned at Marie’s shop on the East Side.

Drifting out of the window, the smell of breakfast reached the nose of a passing cat. It stopped, letting out a plaintive meow.

As if summoned, a gentle-looking boy appeared...seeming almost apologetic.

He wore a linen shirt and a pair of canvas trousers, which were partially covered by an apron. He balanced a saucer in one hand, and there were clearly small fish in it. Was it cat food?

He looked around, making sure no one was watching. Then he put the saucer down, speaking softly. “I’m really not supposed to do this... The neighbors insist I shouldn’t feed any cats.”

Heedless of Lloyd’s concerns, the little creature began gorging itself.

“Ha-ha-ha. Well, I’ve got work to do. See you later.”

The cat meowed back as if it understood. Lloyd managed a half smile and ducked back into the kitchen.

He finished washing his hands just as the pot came to a boil. He began adding grain to the pot—oatmeal, probably. Filling and healthy, a pleasantly plain, ideal breakfast meal. Lloyd melted some cheese in yesterday's leftover soup and added that to the oatmeal, risotto style. It looked amazing.

“...Morning.”

First, the cat. Now a woman in a black robe. The smell had roused her from her bed. She staggered into the kitchen, eyes bleary with sleep.

She was running her fingers through her bedhead, trying to straighten it out... then she gave up and collapsed on the table. Back to sleep. One step away from having woodgrain wrinkles on her forehead all day.

She wore an unusual brooch pinned to her robes, and... Well, she didn't exactly wake up with the black pointy hat fixed to her head, but this witch definitely dressed the part. Her name was Marie, the owner of this shop.

She wasn't exactly a domestic goddess—in fact, she was the princess of this kingdom. Once, she had been forced into hiding here, and this experience seemed to have eliminated all memories of table manners. She was your classic spinster slob, the kind of woman who ate food right from the pot to avoid having to wash another plate.

Lloyd placed a beautifully plated dish in front of her. The mouthwatering scent of this fresh-cooked breakfast got her back up off the table.

He looked at the wrinkles on the robe covering her ample chest and the woodprint on her forehead, mustering the same half smile he'd given the cat.

“Time to wake up, Marie.”

This, too, was the same tone of voice he'd used with the little animal.

Eyes half-open, Marie took advantage of his kindness.

“Can you feed me, Lloyd? Ahhh!”

She opened her mouth, waiting. Lloyd's smile grew strained. Even the cat had more dignity. Marie was more like a baby bird waiting for its mother to drop food in its mouth.

“Um.”

“Ahh!”

“...Ah-ha-ha...well, uh...”

But before Lloyd could reluctantly attempt to feed her, a tiny shadow appeared at his side.

“Okay, Marie! Say ahh!”

“Ahhh... Yow!”

There was a horrible crunch, and Marie let out a grunt like a grizzled old man.

Wincing, she pulled something out of her mouth—a plate. Who had shoved a plate in her mouth?

“Mornin’, Marie! Awfully early to make bizarre requests of my beloved Lloyd! I oughtta put you back to sleep for good. That’ll cure your napping habit! Permanently.”

A tiny little girl was standing in front of Marie, wearing an icy grin.

“Ch-Chief.”

“M-Master... Good morning.”

Marie slid to her knees in front of the child, offering her a very formal greeting. She was wide awake now. And shaking like a leaf.

This child’s name was Alka. She was Marie’s teacher and the chief of Lloyd’s hometown, Kunlun. This village lay on the frontier of human civilization, surrounded by monsters...so it was off *all* the charts. It was the kind of place where people defeated demon lords with their brooms, harvested wheat on a monthly basis, crossed two mountains to go shopping, donned the hides of legendary creatures to cook, and farmed with legendary weapons.

She had most likely teleported herself here this morning. This petite grandma cast runes—the wisdom of the ancients—like the rest of the world used a bicycle. Now she sat eating Lloyd’s oatmeal and shaking her head.

“Good morning, Chief,” he said.

“Mornin’, Lloyd! Tell me...does this sad person regularly request the ‘ahh’ treatment?”

“No, that was new.” He turned bright red.

Alka assumed the expression of a veteran cop faced with a first-time offender.

Marie had donned her glasses and hat and now was scratching her cheek sheepishly.

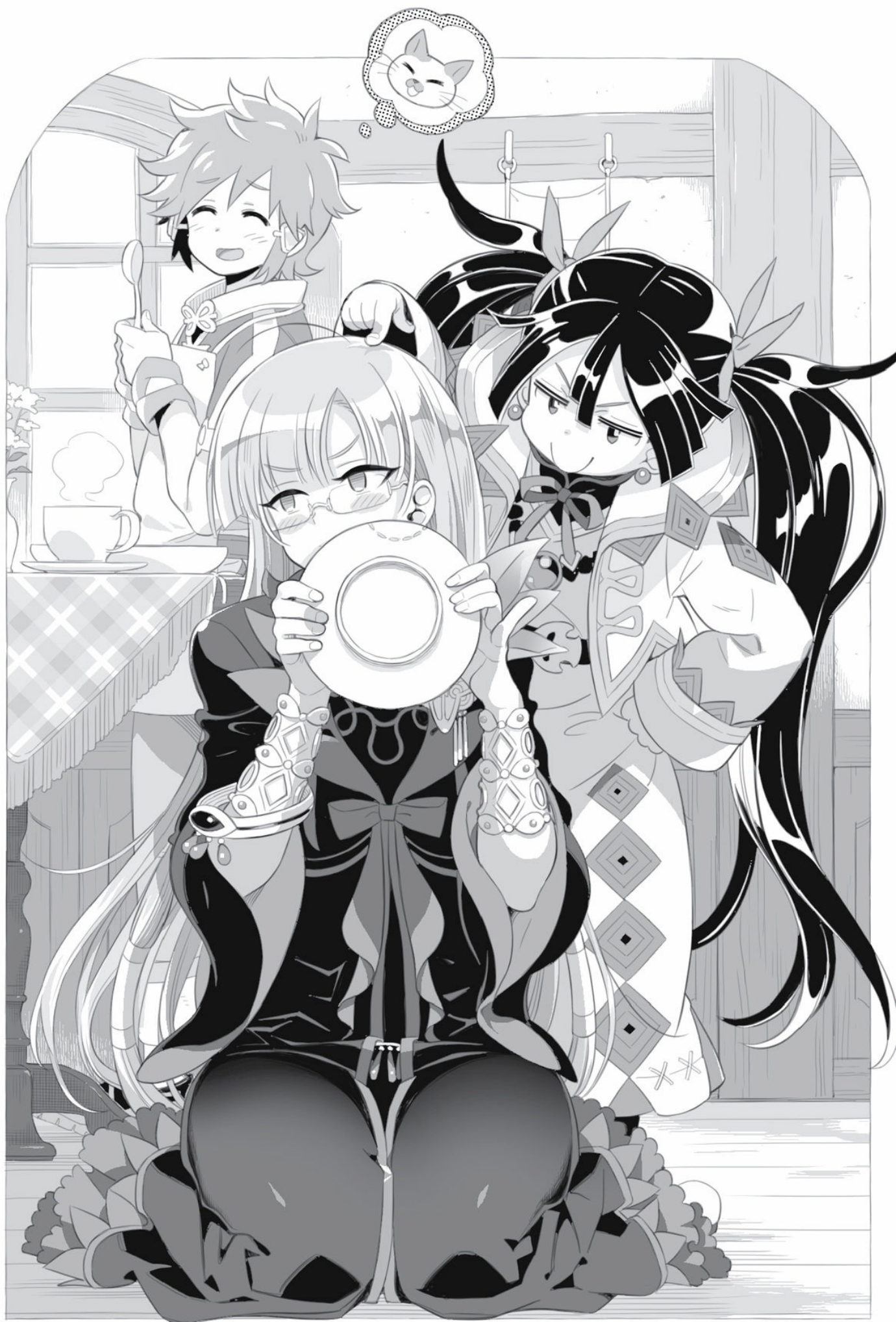
“Did I really do that?”

“You totally did! You’re lucky to be alive. I just developed this rune called the *spear of light*, and I nearly used it on you. Power and accuracy ain’t bad, but the speed of it is bonkers! Nobody will be dodging that successfully for the first time.”

“Do you really *need* something like that?”

Marie had nearly been run through with a *spear of light* as thoughtlessly as a prankster playing a trick on their sleeping friend. She turned toward Lloyd.

“...Augh.”



And let out a soft groan. His face was still flushed. Seeing that made her turn red, too.

A wave of guilt washed over her, like when memories of drunken exploits come rushing through the fog of a hangover.

“...Oh god... I’m really falling to pieces, aren’t I? I’ve gotta get a grip...”

“Getting comfortable with each other is no excuse to get carried away!” Alka admonished. “You’re acting like a boy who’s never gone out with a girl before, Marie.”

Alka pulled out a fashion magazine, tapping an article called “101 Types of Shitty Men.”

The illustration was captioned: “If a guy acts like you’re dating at the first hint of kindness, *run*.”

Marie clutched her head in horror. “That hits way too close to home.”

“You need to work on developing your common sense and intellect. Best you’ve managed so far is developing that rack.”

Taking this trashy magazine as gospel raised questions about Alka’s brain, but Marie failed to realize this and settled for bowing low before her. A peaceful morning genuflection.

As this sun-drenched ritual of remorse came to a finish, Marie admitted, “I have nothing to say.”

Alka was still fuming. “Good! You need to grow up! Okay, then! Lloyd—ahhh!”

“I take it back! I’ve got something to say! Your age is in the triple digits, and you’re the single most childish person alive!”

“We must look after our elders. It’s only proper.”

This was just sexual harassment. A dirty old woman at large. Alka did an impression of a baby bird every bit as alarming as Marie’s, but Lloyd just shook his head.

“Sorry, Chief. I’ve got to get to school.”

“What do you mean, Lloyd?! You usually leave much later! If you go now, not

only will there be no classmates, you won't even find the elderly teacher who's retiring this year and shows up to greet everyone at the gates! At best, you'll find Chrome Molybdenum in the staff room!"

Marie almost gave in to the impulse to ask why Alka was so intimately familiar with the details of the academy staff, but Lloyd spoke up first.

"Chrome asked me to come see him this morning, so I figured I should leave early."

"He did? But your exam scores were flawless, both written and practical! You'd think he'd be demanding to see Allan, who flunked all his written tests, or Selen, who wrote a long essay about how great you are."

"How do you know that?" Marie hissed.

Alka just kicked her in the shin. Loose lips earned painful punts.

"I messed up the practical test, so...I bet that's what this is about."

Lloyd looked so unconfident that Marie quickly whispered in Alka's ear, "Master, what did he do wrong?"

"Oh, it was just a minor oversight," she whispered back. "They told him to deliver some supplies to a military base near the Azami border, but he accidentally went a country too far and delivered them to a base of the Jiou Empire."

"That's an international incident!"

Definitely not "minor." It also meant Lloyd had covered a distance in half a day on foot that would normally take two days by train.

"Don't scream in my ear! You're making them ring! And don't worry. He made it back to complete the practical test in the nick of time, and I wiped the memories of everyone on the Jiou base. I may have gotten a little sloppy and erased, like, a week's worth of memories, but no biggie."

This terrifying statement left Marie clutching her forehead.

"A week's worth of memories from everyone on base? You've created a new urban legend..."

Lloyd had heard the part about the international incident and was looking worried.

“Y-yeah...if our military has someone as weak as me messing up every little thing, it’s bound to cause an international incident eventually.” He hung his head.

“Er, no, that’s not what...uh...,” Marie spluttered.

Lloyd was from Kunlun, and his capabilities were far beyond those of your average human.

However, he’d also been the *weakest* kid in town, and that had left him with a debilitating lack of confidence. He interpreted all events as proof he was a wimpy failure. He’d covered a two-day railway trip on foot in a matter of hours, and yet here he was, drooping.

Marie was itching to do something about that and constantly looking for ways to convince him he was actually strong, but any time she tried telling him the truth, he didn’t believe her. Not “Normal people can’t stay underwater for an hour,” nor “Broken bones take months to heal. It’s downright strange that it takes you an hour.” It was like how your stomach can’t handle rich food when you’re starving.

I need him to understand our standards, but...I’m starting to lose touch with them myself.

The more comfortable Marie got with the status quo, the more she was enjoying her time with Lloyd.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I know how weak I am. The last time I tried to go in a dungeon, I barely got out alive... Oh, sorry, I’ve got to go change.”

Lloyd darted off to his room.

Marie watched him go, then turned to Alka.

“Master, is that true? He went in a dungeon?”

Lloyd conquered most dungeons without a scratch, so she found it hard to believe he’d struggled.

Meanwhile, Alka just took a long sip of tea, then nodded, like she was

reminiscing hardcore.

“He hadn’t even turned ten yet! I took him into the dungeon to help carry baggage.”

“At that age?!”

“It proved pretty rough on him. Not even ten, and he ended up facing the secret boss at the back of the hidden passage in the depths.”

“A hidden passage?! The secret boss?! Those things actually exist?!”

Marie’s voice got a bit too loud.

Rumors of adventurers finding hidden rooms in dungeons had been around since the beginning of time.

Only a lucky few of them ever stumbled across such places, and if they did set foot inside, they’d be surrounded by terrifying monsters far more powerful than anything else around.

Such things were usually considered tall tales, but Alka talked about it as though it were a daily routine.

“Out of habit, I accidentally opened up the secret door, and vicious monsters came pouring out. Lloyd probably thinks that was a normal dungeon... Anyway, it was just cute the way he clung to my arm, quivering in fear! That’s why I kept concocting flimsy excuses to make him come with me.”

It seemed a similar tactic to how boys took girls to a haunted house so they could get closer.

“You act like it’s fever time on a slot machine! Like, half Lloyd’s self-esteem problems stem from you, Master.”

Alka took another sip of her tea. “It sure takes me back,” she said. “The monsters in that last dungeon were real tough. Normally I can handle things with a single finger, but those took three!”

Marie just stuck her chin on her hand, glaring at Alka through half-lidded eyes. Like she was just done dealing with her bullshit.

Alka was hardly one to care what her student thought, but she downed the

rest of her tea and jumped to her feet.

“That dungeon thing reminds me! I’d better go.”

“Home already? You usually demand refills and snacks.”

“Yeah, but the world’s kinda in danger. I gotta travel around...”

“Th-the world’s in danger?!”

Alka seemed unusually serious. A bead of sweat trickled down Marie’s cheek.

“Someone’s trying to open the lid on the kettle of hell. I dunno what they’re thinking, but they keep unleashing monsters on par with the demon lord! Way worse than that locust one.”

Alka was talking about the demon lord Abaddon, who’d possessed Marie’s father and nearly taken over Azami.

“That’s...not good.”

Alka gave Marie a pat on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. Nothing’s gonna happen so long as I’m around. Bye!”

With a reassuring nod, Alka opened the door...

“Eek! Ch-Chief! I’m changing, here!”

...to Lloyd’s room. A Peeping Tom. A pervert.

Lloyd was in front of her, blushing red, his skin so soft she just wanted to suck on it. The underwear of the day were a pair of black boxers—very grown-up!

“Whoopsie! Wrong room! My bad! Heh-heh-heh,” Alka chuckled, fooling nobody.

Marie shot forward like a rocket, slamming the door closed, her eyeballs dutifully poring over every inch of Lloyd’s body as she did.

“Master! Peeping on Lloyd in the middle of a dramatic speech totally ruins it!”

So much for gravitas. Globbs of blood were dripping from Alka’s nose like hot sauce.

“My body needed an eyeful! Like seamen needed lime juice to avoid scurvy! I was craving Lloyd juice! Freshly squeezed! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

She cackled like a demon lord. Marie argued like the hero here to slay her.

“Apologize to all seamen! What happened to the world being in danger? I bet you’re just making that up to get out of working the fields!”

“You’re wrong! That’s only, like, forty percent of it!”

“So nearly half.”

“I was just craving city air! I’ve always dreamed of moving to the big city! You’ve gotta keep up with the latest fashion trends or you’ll be left behind!”

Alka emphatically pounded her fashion magazine. Clearly at least 80 percent of her motivation was getting out of farmwork.

“The villagers will be forced to lock you up again... Also, Master, I’ve never seen you wear anything but those white robes.”

“True. I just use the *restoration* rune every evening, and they’re as good as new!”

“Rune magic shouldn’t be used like an odor eliminator...”

Paying no heed to Marie’s chiding, Alka grabbed her sleeves and did a little twirl...on the table. She might be well over a hundred years old, but she definitely acted like a kid.

“White is the new black! The times have come back around! Live long enough...!”

“If you live for centuries, trends will come and go... Nothing is forever.”

At Marie’s remark, Alka gave a grave look—one traced with a rare hint of forlornness.

“Some things are for life... I know someone who can’t grow out of being desperate for change... Now they’ve grown unrecognizable.”

This sounded significant.

Marie just scoffed. “What? You sound like a failed bard making up nonsense lyrics.”

Brutal.

“I was being serious! And you call me a failed bard?! You’re no student of mine!”

“Serious, my foot! You were raving about fresh-squeezed Lloyd seconds ago, you kid grandma!”

Mornings were always like this.

Grinning at Alka and Marie’s usual squabbling, Lloyd sneaked past them, leaving the shop behind.

Even though everyone knew nothing was forever, it didn’t stop them from wishing that wasn’t the case.

This was Lloyd and Marie’s *modus operandi*. He went off to the military academy in the morning, came back in the evening, made dinner, and every now and then, the village chief would stop by to raise havoc.

It was a routine no one wanted to alter...until they encountered the one who’d changed too much. That was how this story would unfold.

“You called me a grandma again! Your punishment will be this rune that makes your eyebrows look funny!”

“Eaughhh! Stop that, Master! Argh, they’re all bushy now!”

Marie might have changed too much before things really got started. Her brows were dense enough to balance an entire coin...

Chapter 1

Suppose a Kid from the Last Dungeon Boonies Entered a Starter Dungeon

The staff room at the Azami Military Academy.

Surrounded by busy instructors, a large man was hunched over a desk, working on something.

This was Chrome Molybdenum, a former royal guard and the teacher in charge of Lloyd's class.

His big, square frame was squeezed tightly behind his desk, and his pen darted from one page to another—grading written exams. Occasionally, the man would grunt or mutter, “I taught you this!” and that just made him seem even more unapproachable. His students' grades did not look promising.

The teachers around him were keeping their distance, watching him like forest creatures observing a bear emerging from hibernation.

Chrome's battle with the answer sheets crested, and he paused to stretch. The sound of creaking bones echoed through the room, with the distinctive pops and snaps characteristic of action anime.

“Wazzup, Chrome? Bushed already?” asked a small brunette instructor. She was standing behind him, clutching a mountain of paperwork.

Choline Sterase was still quite young. At a glance, you might mistake her for a student. But despite the gap in years, they were both instructors here.

“Choline,” Chrome grumbled, turning wearily toward her. “I swear grading papers uses muscle groups I never exercise otherwise.”

Choline picked up one such answer sheet. “Aha,” she exclaimed meaningfully. “That is a string of made-up responses for ya. Gives you a headache, don't it? I've been there.”

“Yeah... Maybe I should have just made the whole thing multiple choice.”

“That won’t do the students any favors, though. Gotta balance it out! Flexibility ain’t your strong suit, Chrome.”

Chrome frowned at this. “I flex plenty.”

“Not your muscles! I mean your *mind*. Gotta be more adaptable! Oh, here’s the notes from the meeting.”

Choline put some documents on his desk. The sheer quantity of them made Chrome’s eyes go wide.

“That’s...a lot. What did you discuss?”

Choline sat down at her own desk, took her shoes off, and flopped against the backrest. She seemed even more exhausted than Chrome was.

“Uh, it covered a bunch of stuff... First, reports of weird monsters in the dungeon outside Azami. Locals are frightened, so we discussed countermeasures.”

“Outside Azami? The low-level dungeon we used to use for exams?”

Choline nodded and pointed at a document summarizing info on the dungeon itself and another summarizing the results of the initial investigation.

“Also, we got reports of missing persons on the East Side. Those rumors spread to town with the dungeon ones, so now people think monsters are disguised as humans, kidnapping folk, and devouring them in the dungeon.”

“People going missing is never a *good* sign.” Chrome scowled, remembering similar incidents in the past.

“There were some weird stories circulating even before these reports came in. Some man wandering the backroads asking people what he looked like. Suspicious, right?”

“What he looked like? That sounds like an urban legend. Are we sure this isn’t a cover story being spread by the perp to distract us?”

Choline sat up, spreading out the documents and pointing to where the reports were collected.

“We got multiple reports of this actually happening. But the weird part is, none of the reports give the same physical description of the guy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, other than his gender, we got everything from ‘rich man,’ to ‘delivery guy,’ to ‘tourist,’ and ages ranging from midthirties to over seventy.”

“There’s no chance its more than one person? We might wanna check the correlations here.”

Her explanation finished, Choline began massaging her feet. She’d been in that meeting a *long* time.

“We discussed all reports on this, exchanging strategies and opinions on how to narrow down the cause. We had government mages there, too... Even the king.”

Chrome looked surprised. “His Majesty was there? He’s back to active work? Did he look well?”

The king of Azami—Marie’s father—had spent several years possessed by Abaddon, the locust demon lord. He was saved by Lloyd (who remained unaware of his own feat), and the threat to the realm had been averted.

Unfortunately, years of possession had taken its toll on him, and it’d taken time for the king to recover.

Chrome was naturally concerned, but Choline just sighed dramatically.

“Not only was he fine, he was fired up about this. Sounds like he read one too many books while he was bedridden. He kept dropping fancy jargon on us. It was exhausting,” she said.

“Just make sure you don’t start doing it, too. Well, he was always very dedicated. If he thought it would help the realm, I imagine he studied diligently,” Chrome replied.

While it wasn’t manifesting in the most productive of ways, Chrome was glad to hear the king was back to his old self. Now his subordinates just had to perform the necessary follow-through.

Chrome smiled, scratching the side of his neck.

“He kept calling the schedule an *itinerary*,” Choline said.

“Hmm.”

“And then he called the agenda a *docket*. We sat down, and he started right in, saying the first item on the docket was the reports of missing persons, and none of us knew what he meant... Believe it or not, there’s actually a glossary page mixed in with those documents, so I guess we’ll all have to bone up on this new business-speak. I think the king said he ‘outsourced’ the creation of that, but he just meant he asked someone to type it up for him.”

“Yeah, maybe he’s trying a little *too* hard.”

Chrome had meant to keep that to himself, but it slipped out by accident. Deliberately trying to use difficult words was not a good sign. They already had perfectly good words for all these things, so what purpose did it serve to make up longer ones?

Choline gathered up the paperwork and tapped it on the desk to straighten stray pages before tucking the bundle away.

“Well, he was in good spirits, and it’s your job to ensure his enthusiasm leads to good things.”

“Why is it *my* job?” Chrome asked.

“We have to keep our eye on the East Side. People going missing? How’s a frail maiden supposed to sleep at night?!”

“Are you even listening?”

“Thank goodness our army has a working cog like you, willing to patrol the streets all night long.”

“I don’t even qualify as human now?”

Bored with teasing Chrome, Choline collapsed on her desk, sighing.

“Ugh... Looks like more meetings are in our future. All day tomorrow and the next day! I’m dreading it already. *And* we got orders to investigate the dungeon outside Azami pronto. That’s the bigger problem! It’s too much to handle! There’s only one of me!”

“If there were two of you, I’d just have to hear you grumble twice as much, and that would be too much for *me* to handle. But if they’re pulling you in on this, you’d think word would come my way, especially about the dungeon thing. That’s a much more pressing concern for us than the missing persons.”

As a new teacher, Chrome had his hands full grading exams. Scoping out a dungeon on top of that made it seem like the work would never end. The man buried his face in his hands.

““Hah.””

Just as the two of them let out a synchronized sigh, the staff room door swung open, and Lloyd stepped in, looking nervous.

“Excuse me... Oh, Colonel Chrome. Lloyd Belladonna, reporting as ordered.”

“Lloyd? Oh right, I asked you to stop by.”

“Did I mess up on my exams? Am I getting expelled for flunking?!”

I see Lloyd’s self-esteem hasn’t improved, Chrome thought.

“No, no, nothing like that,” he assured. Then he lowered his voice. “Just between the two of us, you were one of the top scorers, both practical and written. So have a little more confidence, okay?”

Lloyd brightened up immediately. “Thank goodness! I broke so many weapons during the practical exam, I was certain I’d failed.”

He sighed with relief.

Choline leaned over to whisper in Chrome’s ear. “How’s that possible? I thought you used pretty sturdy weapons for that test?”

“Yeah...we did...,” Chrome rasped.

“Sounds like you’re gonna need to ‘outsource’ a whole new set.” Choline winced. “Accounts aren’t gonna be pleased about that.”

“So what did you want to see me for?” Lloyd asked.

Chrome pushed the threat of accounting from his mind and focused on his request.

“So the people upstairs want us providing lunches for some upcoming

meetings. Apparently, they heard good things about the cafeteria food and want to boast about it to the VIPs that'll be attending."

"Oh, that's nice!" Choline said, drooling at the thought. "Sometimes, all we get is solidified grease and dry rice, and nobody wants that. Give us a nice hot meal! If Lloyd's doing the cooking, these boring meetings will be worth sitting through!"

She slurped her lips like a kid waiting for dinner. Students *did* tend to treat her like a child for a reason.

Lloyd replied with a cheerful smile. "I'd be glad to! Ask me anytime. How many are we talking? I'll need to put an order in with our suppliers."

"Hmm, good question... How many were there today, Choline?"

Choline assumed the expression of a crafty strategist devising a brilliant plan. Ignoring Chrome's question, she inched closer to Lloyd and planted her hand on his shoulder.

"Lloyd! I have a favor to ask."

"Yes? Wh-what is it?" he stammered. Even he found the woman's grin worrying.

Choline clapped her hands together, begging him. "Please," she said, looking up at Lloyd. "Can I ask you to handle this dungeon investigation?"

"Wh-what?!"

"There's this rumor some weird monsters showed up there, and the locals are getting really nervous."

An uncertain look crossed Lloyd's face. He didn't exactly have great experiences with dungeons.

"M-monsters in a dungeon..." he repeated, sounding scared.

Chrome leaned in, whispering, "Choline, you know Lloyd is convinced he can't do anything right. Laying this job on him..."

"That's what I mean when I say you aren't flexible. All that matters here is the outcome," Choline said back.

“Really not getting your point.”

“He doesn’t have the confidence to investigate a dungeon? No problem! This is what’ll give it to him. One step on the road to correcting his low self-esteem. What’s more, it’ll be good for Azami. A win-win.”

“Hmm,” Chrome grunted, unconvinced.

“And if this monster is legit dangerous, who better to take it on? And you know, there’s a lot of upperclassmen unhappy that we made an exception for Lloyd’s late admission.”

“Yeah... His appearance works against him, there. And the more attention his friends get, the more problems arise...”

Allan was an heir to a local lord and had the top brass pushing his name. Riho had won the sorcery tournament and was always on the lookout for her next score. And then there was Lloyd’s stalker, Selen...and the most recent addition to the group, the martial artist Phyllo. Their combined power had destroyed campus facilities three times this month alone, and Chrome remembered accounting sneering, *Since when are doors consumables?*

“So here’s a good chance to rack up a clear and obvious achievement! This dungeon investigation’s a must-have for him! A must-have!”

Was this more lingo from that meeting? The compulsion to use all these new terms was the sinister side of such jargon. It was kind of obnoxious, and Chrome hoped Choline would get over it soon.

“I hate to ask when he’s clearly reluctant, but...you’re right, it might be for his own good.”

Chrome turned back to Lloyd, bowing his head.

“Sorry, Lloyd. Would you take care of this for us? Obviously, not by yourself. Bring anyone you like.”

“O-oh, well if I’m with the others... O-okay, I’ll see what I can do!”

Choline waved her hands, trying to ease the tension in the boy’s smile.

“Don’t stress it! They’re just rumors. Those lunches are a bigger deal.”

“Thanks for taking care of both problems, Lloyd.” Chrome bowed his head, which just made the kid all the more flustered.

“Don’t worry! I want to be the kind of soldier who can accept any request with a smile.”

As he often did, Lloyd flashed them a grin. Then he turned and left.

Clouds drifted past the peaceful landscape, the wind carrying the smells of grass and wildflowers into the clearing below the hills. This pastoral locale, not far from Azami, concealed the dungeon Lloyd and his group were to investigate.

It was beneath the ground. The well-tread corridors had long since had their treasures cleaned out, and the monsters on the early floors were more like slightly furrier animals.

The place was full of traps and other dungeon accoutrements, however, so the government had once used it as a beginner’s qualification test for adventurers and returners alike.

A girl was standing outside the entrance to that dungeon like she was waiting for her date.

Her soft hair was blond, and she was beautiful—but any charm she might’ve held was almost completely nullified by her sinister belt.

Selen Hemein. Some time ago, her face had been wrapped in an irremovable cursed belt, and she’d spent her childhood pitied and abhorred, mockingly referred to as the Cursed Belt Princess.

Thanks to Lloyd, though, not only had the curse been lifted, but she was now able to control the belt at will. It was made from the hide of Vritra, the guardian beast of Kunlun. Alka had originally used it as an apron and had accidentally sliced it up with Excalibur. Unsure what else to do with it, she’d added some metal bits, called it a cursed belt, and sold it to a merchant for dirt cheap. After learning the whole story, it was clear who really should’ve been cursed.

The upshot of it all was that Selen had become worryingly devoted to Lloyd and was now equally abhorred as an obsessed stalker... Curse or no curse, she was a pitiable girl.

Despite the growing file on her exploits down at the station, she was perfectly made-up and dressed to impress today, like she was on a date.

“Oh dear, I’m far too early. I just couldn’t wait for my date with Sir Lloyd!”

Clearly, she had the wrong idea. Well, the mysterious inner workings of her mind interpreted any invite from Lloyd as a date, so perhaps this shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Last week, she’d helped him hand out supplies to the class and said it was like they were *slicing into the wedding cake together*, much to the confusion of everyone around.

The belt bounced around happily as Selen basked in joy like an eager child as she awaited Lloyd’s arrival.

Next to Selen was a tall girl wearing clothes suited for vigorous activity, hair gathered in a sporty ponytail. She stood perfectly still, arms dangling like the limbs of a weeping willow—also waiting for the boy.

“...”

She waited patiently, her expression never changing, like a loyal dog.

Phyllo Quinone. She and her sister, Mena, had worked as mercenaries, calling themselves the Quinone Sisters. As a martial artist, she’d fallen in love with Lloyd’s strength, asked to become his disciple, and eventually enlisted in the academy alongside him.

“Deep in a dungeon, surrounded by darkness... Anything could happen! Oh, Sir Lloyd! Let’s take this back to my place!”

Once again, Selen seemed disinclined to do anything at less than full throttle.

“...It’s a dungeon...and I’m here...so this isn’t a date...,” Phyllo said, mincing no words.

“Oh?” Selen sounded annoyed. “What else could this be, then, Phyllo?”

“...A picnic. Fun for everyone.”

Neither of them seemed to understand the concept of a dungeon.

Phyllo pulled a deck of cards and some chips out of her pocket and held them up like a proud child.

Selen clicked her tongue. “You’re sadly misinformed, Phyllo.”

“I am?” she said, staring the other young woman right in the eyes.

“Yes,” Selen proclaimed. “All the magazines agree: Nothing makes you horny like mortal peril. They call it the suspension-bridge effect! We are about to enter a dungeon at great risk to life and limb...inevitably that means crossing a certain romantic line! By that logic, surely you can see that dungeon exploration is a form of dating.”

What logic?

“...I see.”

Don’t sound convinced! Suspension bridges certainly provide their thrills, but generally don’t arouse people.

“That said, Sir Lloyd’s such a shy boy—he couldn’t bring himself to invite just me and asked you along to hide his shame. Yet, I am always up for *anything*! He’s so cute when he gets flustered.”

Drool dribbled down Selen’s chin.

Having listened to her entire logic-bending spiel, Phyllo nodded gravely.

“...Ignoring your delusional comments... Peril makes you horny, huh... Very educational.”

Something like that wasn’t worth remembering, seriously.

While this idiocy was going on, a group of angry-looking people stormed in front of them. Like Selen and Phyllo, they’d donned military uniforms—the main difference being the armbands on their shoulders that marked them as upperclassmen.

“Oh?” the woman at the head of the pack sneered. “The troublemakers of the first-year class? Up to no good, I assume.”

She had a dynamite figure and bold lipstick, and she seemed used to wrapping men around her finger. Her uniform was very tight, and it looked like she could pop a button if she felt so inclined.

“Who are you?” Selen asked, frowning.

“Clearly, you have no idea how to speak to your superiors, much less take the time to learn who they are. I’m Micona Zol, head of the second-year class.”

She gave the two first-year students a withering look.

“And you’re the infamous stalker, Selen, and the walking force of destruction, Phyllo.”

“I’m not a stalker! My love is pure, if rather acrobatic.”

“...Destruction...? That’s not fair... That doorknob was just...worn out.”

Even Selen had trouble buying that one.

“Phyllo, that doorknob didn’t have time to get worn out! They’d just replaced it after you broke the previous one! What’s-your-name, feel free to correct your impressions of me alone.”

An extremely faint trace of displeasure appeared on Phyllo’s typically impassive face.

“...I don’t think your love is very pure,” she argued. “Last weekend...”



Selen was not about to let her finish *that* thought.

“Certainlyyyyyy, I may have heard Sir Lloyd was going shopping for clothes, locked up the store staff, stole their uniforms, helped with fittings and alterations, and accompanied him intimately into the dressing rooms, but that’s entirely within the range of ordinary relationships.”

Her love may not have been “pure,” but her every action was 100 percent *pure* criminal behavior.

Between the collector of stalking incidents and the demolitionist who made accountants weep, Micona’s pack seemed genuinely horrified.

As if to encourage them, the leader called to them with grandiosity in her tone. “Your reputations precede you...and we’ve allowed you to get away with it for far too long. That ends today!”

Both Selen’s and Phyllo’s heads tilted. Neither had the slightest idea what was ending.

“What brings a bunch of upperclassmen out here anyway?”

“Heh-heh-heh...you see...”

Before Micona could explain any further, a big, confident man with a two-handed ax arrived.

Allan.

“Phyllo, Belt Princess, don’t go starting fights.”

“...I didn’t start this one.”

“We didn’t! They seem to be trying, though.”

The large man turned toward the upperclassmen.

The group was radiating hostility. They seemed to loathe him even more than the girls. Despite being faced with such angry glares, Allan just shrugged.

“Sheesh, looks like you’re telling the truth for once.”

“If it isn’t the *famous* Allan Toin Lidocaine. A rising star, receiving an *unnatural* degree of support from the top brass, guaranteed a *promising* future.”

Now understanding why the upperclassmen disliked him, Allan sighed softly, then aimed his most undaunted smile at Micono.

“Not like I wanted to be famous—it just worked out that way. But who exactly are you? I’m afraid I only remember those who’ve proven themselves worthy.”

“Oh? So you don’t have time for your upperclassmen, I see. But famous as you may be, it would behoove you to show respect to the head of the second-years, Micono Zol. That is, if you wish to graduate with your limbs intact or have any hope of promotions in the future.”

Micono let out a haughty laugh, and her minions joined her.

Allan’s grin never wavered.

“Promotions? Once I’d have jumped on that word. Not proud of it.”

“Are you implying it’s no longer a goal?” Micono said, clearly assuming he was bluffing.

Allan folded his arms, like he was chiding a pack of unruly children. He was taller than any of them and had the face of someone much older, so he definitely looked like a PE teacher...but let’s not tell him that.

“Listen, the world isn’t all about promotions or success. There are people out there who blow all that stuff out of the water. You meet one of them, and it’s like the first time you see the ocean, like the culture shock you get your first time overseas. They flip everything you thought you knew upside down. Make you realize how small you really are.”

He spoke with passion and a trace of self-mockery, describing events that had made a lasting impact on him. Micono’s response was icy cold. She clearly wasn’t interested, but Allan kept trying to chat her up.

“I see... And this culture shock would be the unhinged stalker and the thoughtless property destroyer? Did seeing them in action drive you mad?” She glanced briefly at Selen and Phyllo and then looked downright sorry for him. “You poor thing.”

Allan followed her gaze.

“She’s got a point there! You two gotta get it together. You’re ruining my cool

speech!”

Very few things could survive proximity to these weirdos. They dragged everything down to their level.

Both girls looked confused. It went over their heads. Eyes as clear as the sky above... Their behavior wasn't improving any time soon.

Micona seemed to think this was her moment. She snapped a finger at her minions, who handed her a magazine of some kind.

“You profess to a lack of interest in promotions, yet you are happily getting your photo snapped for army ads. Allan Toin Lidocaine, future star... Oh my, you're flashing *two* peace signs.”

He was the featured player in the “promising rookies” section of this recruitment ad.

“I have no excuses...,” Allan croaked. He'd turned bright red.

It was definitely the kind of photo that felt mortifying in the cold air of the morning after. The feeling was akin to looking back at your yearbook and seeing signatures accompanied with lines from popular anime or manga back in the day or being the only one making a funny face in the class photo.

If he'd had a pillow with him, Allan would definitely have buried his face in it.

Selen and Phyllo weren't gonna let him off the hook that easily, though.

“So this is why you got summoned by the office and had to miss class.”

“...You wanna be an idol? With that face?”

“Shut up!” Allan spluttered. “I can't exactly tell the top brass, ‘No!’ And nobody said anything about this ‘future star’ crap.”

This just seemed to make the upperclassman all the more jealous. And who could've blamed them? It totally sounded like some kind of humblebrag.

Outside the dungeon, the tension in the air had grown so volatile that the pastoral vibe had been completely destroyed. A fight was likely to break out at any moment.

Fortunately, Chrome arrived.

“Mm? Why are there upperclassmen here?”

He’d come to check in on his students. After finally freeing himself of grading and escaping the drudgeries of office work, Chrome had visited only to find fresh trouble brewing. He rubbed his temples. His eyes were strained, his shoulders stiff... He probably should’ve stocked up on vitamins E and B12.

Chrome rolled his shoulder, and it crackled like a raffle wheel. Then he stepped between the two groups.

The appearance of a teacher instantly eased the tension. The power of a drill sergeant.

“What’s going on here? Do I have to increase your training regiments?”

Everyone fell silent. Micona spoke up first.

“No, Colonel Chrome. We were just having a few words with some unruly underclassmen. It’s our duty as their seniors—and mine as head of the second year.”

She made her case so smoothly and eloquently that the three younger students—none of whom were known for their debate skills—were left fidgeting uncomfortably.

As for Chrome’s response...

“Er...who are you, again?”

It was pretty—no, it was *extremely* brutal. Micona froze, smug grin stuck on her face.

“Oh...I get it.”

“So...in actual fact...”

Allan and Selen exchanged glances.

Phyllo, never the master of tact, just laid it on out there.

“...So you aren’t actually famous at all?”

Immediately, Micona’s companions both spun toward her.

“Hey! Don’t just say that to her face!”

“Uh-huh! And after I restrained myself from sneering, ‘Oh, I thought you were soooo important?’”

“...If you’re going to say it anyway, why stop yourself at all?”

Micona had definitely acted like she was famous and they ought to know who she was, but if even the teachers didn’t know her, it certainly came across as delusions of grandeur.

“Uh, sorry, I’m pretty new, so I don’t know all the students’ names yet,” Chrome explained, trying to make her feel better.

One of her followers stepped in. “Everyone knows Micona!”

“Just don’t!” Micona said. “I’m not... I’m...”

The supportive remarks fell on deaf ears, because her ego had instantly deflated, and she slumped over, looking pale. Not made of stern stuff, it seemed.

Now that the tense mood had given way to awkward comedy, a former mercenary with a mithril arm strolled up—Riho.

She frowned, seeing their investigation had gotten off to an odd start. A girl from a year above her was on her knees. It seemed nobody knew what to say to her. Selen and Allan had serious looks on their faces, and they were insisting that Phyllo apologize.

“Mornin’... What’s this? You bullying this poor girl?”

From their physical positions, it was easy to assume the entire pack was picking on her.

Her friends waved her over like they’d spotted their savior. Riho’s frown deepened.

“Mercenary! You know everything, right?”

“Riho! We need your intel network!”

“...Mm.”

“Please, Riho Flavin!” Chrome called out. “You know her, right? She’s famous, I think.”

“You, too, Chrome? What’s goin’ on here?”

Riho looked at the depressed girl and thumbed through her notebook.

“Geez...mm? She’s the head of the second year, Micona Zol, right? The second-years are all muscles for brains, but even in that group, she’s physically adept, *and* she can use magic, *and* she’s so fast they call her ‘Godspeed Micona’... Why is she depressed?”

When Riho rattled off a description as detailed as any Wikipedia entry, the crowd erupted in cheers. Completely baffled, she went with the flow and raised a fist in response.

As the cheers died down, Micona got to her feet.

“Thank you, Riho,” she said. “Honestly...why didn’t you get here sooner? You could’ve spared me this mental torment!”

“You always scold people while thanking them? How annoying.”

Riho scowled at Micona, but the second-year was back to acting as arrogant as when she’d arrived.

“Since I’m now proven to be well-known, do you really think it a wise decision to treat me with such disdain?”

“Famous or not... Why are you here? We’re here because our classmate asked us to help investigate this dungeon.”

This was a pretty reasonable position, but the second-years, Micona included, all sneered.

“We *know*,” she said. “And we know the neighbors have been complaining about weird monsters in this low-level dungeon. You’re here to investigate and, if need be, eliminate them.”

“Then what brings you—?”

But before Riho could finish, Micona held up a finger.

“We came to challenge you! Which of us is superior? Today, this matter will be settled for good!”

Micona seemed confident she knew the answer already, but the first-years

replied with only blank expressions.

“The rules are simple! Whoever defeats the strange creatures first or reaches the lowest level of the dungeon and verifies its safety will emerge victorious!”

“It isn’t that simple!” Riho snarled. “You can’t just start a contest without prior approval.”

Chrome looked as appalled as his students.

“...Is there no end to the troubles? I need a break...”

Micono started laughing haughtily as Chrome rubbed his temples, like he was getting a headache. Vitamins alone weren’t going to cure his problems. He needed painkillers, stat.

Riho was clutching her head, too.

“This sounds like a huge mess... What if we just let you have Allan’s head on a platter instead?”

“Hey, wait! I need my head where it is!” Allan yelped. This was a universal truth. All humans needed to keep that in place.

“Exactly, Riho. Even if you gave it to them, there is nowhere they could possibly display it.”

“...The preservation costs alone...”

Some very grisly counterarguments.

“We don’t need *that*,” Micono emphasized. Then her voice dipped low into a fearsome growl. “No. Let us be very clear. You are all unfit for our military. They might inflate your accomplishments, Allan Toin Lidocaine, but there’s still one worse than you...”

There was a glint in Micono’s eye that was downright unnerving.

“Who are you speaking of?” Riho asked, searching.

The upperclassman opened her mouth to answer...and their surroundings grew dark. Everyone looked up at the sky.

“Hmm? Was it supposed to rain today?”

What had clouded the sun wasn't a bunch of rainclouds—it was dust. A cloud of debris was rising from the distance.

"A smoke signal?" someone asked. Whatever it was, it was getting closer—looming like a thunderhead above the capital, blocking out the daylight.

There was a low rumble, like the earth itself was shaking.

All eyes turned from the sky to the road.

Like a stagecoach kicking up dust in its wake, a gentle-looking boy with an apologetic smile came flying toward them—at speeds that easily set a new record in this universe.

"Sorry!" Lloyd yelled, immediately apologizing. "I got caught up making food! I made enough for us to eat later, too!"

He held up a heap of lunch boxes. His friends immediately understood the reason for the dust cloud: Lloyd had clearly been running just that fast. By this point, that much was par for the course.

The second she saw him, Selen broke into a smile. The light faded from her eyes, and a stream of drool ran down her cheek. She raced toward Lloyd—moving at a fairly impressive clip herself.

"Oh, Sir Lloyd! I've been waiting so long! Come, let us explore this dungeon together! And in those dim chambers, we shall explore each other's bodies and become true adventurers!"

"Selen, you oughtta be thrown into a dim cell."

The word *dungeon* did originally mean *prison*, but perhaps it wasn't necessary to bring that up here.

Meanwhile, Phyllo was wordlessly attempting to wipe the dust off Lloyd's face.

"Oh, Phyllo, don't worry about—mmph!"

"...Whoops, you were so adorable, I accidentally hugged you."

Physically, Phyllo was definitely a match for Lloyd, making her the only person capable of putting him in a wrestling hold. According to her, this was actually

because Lloyd chose to let her do so.

This fuss over his arrival was all too typical, but this time, it was happening under Micona's baleful glare.

She looked ready to kill him, much to the alarm of those around her. Even her own minions looked rather spooked.

"...Lloyd...Belladonna...", she growled, like he'd killed her parents, cheated on her, or eaten the last pudding in the fridge...

She inched closer, and Lloyd caught the look in her eyes. He looked gravely back up at her.

"Um... Yes?"

Micona's glossy lips curled up mechanically, like she was doing her level best to act as if everything was ordinary—but this only proved the depths of her anger.

"You're Lloyd Belladonna! I've heard the rumors...", she said with a murderous civility. This attitude really didn't blend well with their quaint surroundings. "An ordinary cadet, working in a cafeteria—but inexplicable things keep happening around you. Like your unusual admission to the academy."

"That was because Lloyd helped me out of a jam, and I—," Allan tried to explain.

Micona held up a palm, stopping him.

"That's not all!" she exclaimed. "At the Student Sorcery Tournament, you made your first appearance in the finals and won your round by baiting your opponent into blowing herself up."

Lloyd had won that round fair and square, but his spell had been so ridiculously powerful, the audience had assumed it was Mena's summon backfiring. Unsurprisingly, Lloyd himself had thought the same thing...

"...My sister didn't blow herself up," Phyllo insisted.

Micona ignored this, too.

“And then your opponent’s sister, Phyllo Quinone, gets herself admitted late in an equally unorthodox fashion. Clearly, some sort of underhanded deal is going on behind the scenes.”

“What? You think Lloyd cheated somehow?” Riho asked.

“I do—and so do all the upperclassmen,” Micona said. “There’s something fishy going on here... That’s why he’s got Selen acting as his bodyguard around the clock.”

Selen denied this claim with her entire being. Her cursed belt formed a giant X in the air for emphasis.

“Hold it right there, lady! I’m *no* bodyguard! I’m Sir Lloyd’s partner-for-life—”

“Cut the act, Selen. This is the only reasonable explanation for your perverse behavior.”

“I’m not acting! This is from the heart! Pure, unabashed, unadulterated—”

Phyllo reached out and physically restrained her.

“...Selen is out of touch with common sense.”

“Let go of me, Phyllo! You’re the last person who should be talking about that! I saw you taking advantage of the confusion to give Sir Lloyd a hug—augh, I can smell his scent on you!”

“...Stop sniffing me.”

Micona let out a dramatic sigh. “The way you insist on maintaining your bizarre pretense...is almost admirable. But you’re the reason the reputation of all our cadets is plummeting. And that I cannot accept.”

Allan and Riho both looked equally grim—a mix of *I wish she was acting*, and *You’ve got us there*.

Micona took this to mean she’d hit the nail on the head, however, and she only grew more bold.

“As a result, the top brass are trying to restore the academy’s reputation by turning Allan into some sort of idol—given he actually possesses some degree of talent. However, after determining his looks were an...acquired taste, they

quickly brought Lloyd in to be the new face of their PR campaign...”

Tears welled up in Allan’s eyes at this brutal evaluation. They streamed down his unappreciated face.

“And this blatant promotion really rankles... After all, they’ve paid no attention to us. The time has come to prove if you’re worthy of joining our ranks. No matter how you look at it, you’ve been hired purely because of your looks. I couldn’t see them through the dust storm, but I assume you had the cavalry escort you? That’s the only explanation for all that rumbling and debris.”

“Hmm, you *would* think that,” Riho muttered.

Who in their right mind would’ve ever suspected Lloyd caused all that by running?

Despite having legs like a horse, Lloyd winced when he heard he was just a pretty face. It was completely unfounded, but his upbringing had left him with debilitatingly low self-esteem.

“You can’t do anything alone—but the army is no place for a man who needs to be carried by those around him.”

“I—I know...” Lloyd hung his head.

Chrome gave him a comforting rub. “None of this is true, Lloyd. Look at your friends.”

Lloyd looked around.

Selen’s sunbeam smile, Riho’s reassuring nod, Allan’s confident smirk, and Phyllo’s barely perceptible grin were all on display. Between their warmth and that of the sunlight, he could feel himself coming back out of his shell.

Feeling much better, Lloyd smiled and nodded.

As if that settled things, Riho turned toward the older students, advancing on them.

“Very well. My friends may be lacking in good looks and common sense, but they have what it takes to be good soldiers—and you’re gonna eat those words.”

“Why’d you look at me when you said ‘good looks’?” Allan demanded.

“...Mm.”

“I don’t need your sympathetic pats on my shoulder!”

As more bickering began, Micona ran her fingers through her pixie cut, looking irritated.

“Does that mean you accept our challenge?” she asked.

“What challenge?” Lloyd inquired, lost. Riho quickly filled him in.

When she was done, he turned back to their leader.

“Okay!” he said firmly. “I can’t speak for myself, but I’m sure we can prove the others are worthy of being military cadets for Azami!”

He’d left himself out. That just made Micona’s voice dip into another low growl.

“Riding on their coattails? Well, this will be the last time you can sit back and let them carry you.”

Riho clapped her hands, grinning wickedly.

“Then let’s put it this way. If you achieve your stated conditions for victory, you can tell the whole school of our defeat. Maybe that’ll change who the top brass choose to support. But if we win, you promise not to come after us anymore. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Hear that, Chrome?” Riho grinned like it was all settled.

She was really good at this sort of thing. The rest of the group wasn’t exactly comprised of skilled negotiators...

“As a teacher, I should probably stop you...but it’s a good chance to see what you all can accomplish. Hopefully this conflict leads to peace in the future.”

Chrome had clearly decided Lloyd proving his strength would settle everything. He scratched his head a moment, then stepped in like a referee.

“Right, I’ll be monitoring this contest. Reach the end of the dungeon and

prove it's safe, or locate and dispatch the weird creatures within. Remember, our objective is to quell the fears of the local citizens, so no true soldier would dare make a false report."

With this seal of approval, the second-years roared enthusiastically.

"Hell yeah!" "Let's do this!" "You're on!" "Ready for this?"

...Um, muscles for brains. They were exactly the kind of meatheads that'd get rounded up at the first hint of oncoming war.

The dungeon battle between first-and second-year students began.

However...

"...Lloyd...Belladonna!"

The murderous rage in Micona's eyes suggested envy far beyond anything she'd voiced aloud.

The entrance of the dungeon looked less like a cave and more like an edifice in a foreign country shrouded in boulders.

From the brick walls and the hardwood floors, down to the mud path that led to a space with ornate little details, each section had its distinct flair, none of which looked cohesive. Scholars argued over their working theories as to why, which ranged from differences in design sensibilities between the gods to a visual display of their collective history.

...While the place possibly carried historic significance, the adventurers were concerned about other things. This dungeon was very low level, meaning it had been searched inside and out. In fact, travelers used it as a landmark that indicated Azami was close.

As a result of the dungeon being seemingly guileless, neighboring residents and eyewitnesses of the weird creatures had kicked the rumors up a notch, gossiping among themselves that pirates had started to occupy the place or that someone was experimenting on monsters native to the dungeon.

At the entrance, Micona sat down near the remnants of an old firepit, which must have been set up by camping adventurers in the past.

"All right... Time to get them to atone."

“Micona, shouldn’t we get a move on? The first-years have already started exploring,” said her right-hand student.

Micona straightened her spine, straining the buttons on her tight shirt.

“I already have a map of this place—marking monsters, traps, and a little shortcut through it. We’ll get to the destination in no time.”

In her hands was clutched an outline of the dungeon...which even included minuscule details of the various pitfalls. The other students gaped at her.

“How did you get that?”

“The dungeon used to serve as the site for the recruitment exams. I guess maps were sold to prospective students looking to get a leg up... None of the bookstores had one, so I had to hit up an antique shop...and paid top dollar for it.”

“Geez, you’re prepared...”

Micona filled them in on her plan. “It won’t mean anything if we just win. We’re going to weaponize the traps and do them in—so they never treat us with disrespect again.”

She pointed to the spots in question and assigned tasks to the other students: shoving them into pits, setting up snares on one of the moving floor platforms... Borderline criminal offenses.

Why was she going so far? Her minions weren’t the biggest fans of Selen and Allan, but Micona seemed to have something...*more* that was motivating her.

She tousled her pixie cut, daring them to speak up against her.

“Anyway, we need to make sure Lloyd Belladonna never dreams of becoming a soldier again and hurt him enough to send him back to the boonies... If we can do that, then...”

Micona trailed off, instead turning to execute her plan.

Meanwhile, Lloyd’s team was getting a strategy briefing from Riho.

“Our plan is to put Lloyd in front and charge ahead. That’s it!” She didn’t bat an eye.

That wasn't technically a plan. If this was soccer, it would be like saying, "Just try to pass the ball forward." Which could be surprisingly effective...

Put the strongest party member in the front and have him pull them all along. The plan made sense, but Allan seemed dissatisfied.

"I get it, but...that doesn't leave anything for us to do."

"I don't approve of putting Lloyd in danger!" Selen protested. "But...you heard how they mocked him. I think it's time they got a taste of his capabilities."

"Yeah, this isn't about taking it easy ourselves."

"I feel like it definitely is for you, mercenary...," Allan said, rubbing his temples.

Phyllo spoke up next.

"...Dungeons like this have lots of blind spots in corners. There might be attacks from behind or traps deliberately activated to take out your opponents. The back of the formation is as critical as the front. So don't sulk."

Riho clapped her hands, cackling.

"Heh-heh-heh, I see! They're letting us go first, hoping we get injured so badly we can't graduate. If they make it look like an accident, they're off the hook—but two can play at that game."

Riho couldn't wait to see the looks on their faces, and that glee soon spread to Allan and Selen.

"Then there's work for the rear guard! Heh-heh, we'll show them not to insult a man's looks."

"Heh-heh-heh, we'll teach them a thing or two about my future husband!"

Who were the bad guys here again?

Lloyd had lost track of the conversation ages ago. He was just looking from one person to the other, confused.

"Um...so you're sure you want me in the lead? I've never been deeper than the first floor of any dungeon."

What Lloyd referred to as the "first floor" was actually the final one. When

Alka took him with her, she always used the shortcut to warp straight to the bottom. She sold the rare items found there to help the village cash flow—most real treasures around the world had Alka's fingerprints on them.

"...Don't worry, you're very strong," Phyllo assured.

Lloyd just scratched his cheek. "Ah-ha-ha, joking to relieve the tension... Thanks, I'll do my best."

Would he ever figure out she wasn't kidding?

One of Micona's minions was standing at the bottom of a gentle slope in a spacious room of the dungeon, looking disgruntled.

I like Lloyd's cafeteria food! I don't want him getting hurt...

Sure, Lloyd's late admission made no sense, and his friends were getting all the wrong kind of attention, but this? The second-year might've been Micona's follower, but he didn't think it was right to do anything that risked killing Lloyd.

Still, going up against Micona never ends well... Sorry, Lloyd.

The second-year was hiding behind a rock, waiting for Lloyd to appear.

Before long, the group appeared, chatting and laughing—with no trace of any tension at all. As far as anyone could see, they'd completely forgotten they were in the middle of a competition. That, or they were certain of their victory. Probably both, to be honest.

Lloyd took in the sinister pattern on the tiles that dotted the roomier chamber. "It really opens up here...and it's kinda creepy."

His worried voice echoed through the room.

The hidden student gulped.

He's here... I've gotta do this.

Breathing quietly so as to avoid detection, he strained his ears, trying to hear what the rival group was saying.

"...Our voices are echoing. The floor underneath...is hollow."

"If we don't follow the right order or the right pattern, I bet there's pit traps."

Well spotted.

The second-year student glanced down at the map in his hand, impressed.

The entire floor was a pit trap. Not adhering to the proper sequence would cause all the tiles to flip over. There were cushions below, placed there during the old soldier selection exams to prevent serious injuries, but falling at a bad angle could still mess them up.

By pushing a switch in the back, you could disable the trap holes for a set amount of time.

“I bet there’s a switch at the back that disables this temporarily. Go hit that for us, Lloyd.”

“Got it! I’ll see what I can do!”

Lloyd bravely stepped onto the floor. Hiding in the shadows, the second-year student got a pebble ready.

When the time’s right, I’ll toss this stone, trigger the trap, and flip the entire floor... Sorry.

He was feeling worse about this by the minute. He watched as Lloyd made ready to attempt the crossing.

“Um...well, if this pattern is numbers...”

Lloyd began slowly picking his way across, one tile at a time.

When he reached the center of the floor, the older student threw the rock at an incorrect tile.

Tink... Clink!

“Huh?”

The floor flipped, catching Lloyd off guard. He let out a yelp and fell.

“L-Lloyd!” Selen shrieked, running to the edge. She peered down into the darkness below.

Sorry, kid...

But before the older student could feel any guiltier...

“Oof.”

Lloyd came bounding out of the pit, moving every bit as fast as he’d fallen—like a video playing backward. The second-year couldn’t believe his eyes.

Lloyd’s jump carried him right to the other side of the tiles.

No ordinary person could’ve cleared a distance like that. If the person who’d designed the trap saw such a feat, they’d have nightmares.

Lloyd had just completely invalidated all the craft that went into the design. His own friends appeared every bit as stunned as their opponent.

Without even breaking a sweat, Lloyd pressed the switch at the back of the room and then called to his friends.

“They really got me there! Never occurred to me that the pattern was a fake and the right solution was to fall in once! There I was, all afraid of the pitfall, but it was super shallow! That was only, like, the depth of a five-story house!”

Had Lloyd been an ordinary person, such a fall would’ve broken more than a few bones.

“Uh, right...”

“But there were some soft cushions down there, which made it pretty hard to jump up! They were kind of dusty, too, so if you’ve got a sore throat, I wouldn’t recommend it. Maybe I should swing by and wash them all later?”

Concerned by the sanitary conditions of the safety measures, Lloyd demonstrated both his incredible physical talents and his best-wife mind-set—and just like that, the group cleared this floor.

As they ventured deeper into the dungeon, the older student watched them, eyes bugging out of his head.

“...Maybe we were all wrong about him. Maybe he really did earn that admission...”

“...Mm,” someone grunted from beside him.

The second-year jumped and turned...to find Phyllo staring at him.

“Yikes! When did you get here?”

“...Tell Mico-whatsit how strong my master is...and tell her to make it harder for him.”

She retreated as silently as she'd approached.

“H-harder?!” he shrieked.

“...If his life isn't in danger...he won't get horny...”

This confused the upperclassman completely. Terrified, he began backing away.

“G-got it! I'll tell her... You and Lloyd are both really—”

There was a clunk, and the floor flipped. The temporary stop had ended.

“...Ah.”

The older student had backed up too far and triggered a tile. He plunged down.

“...Hang in there,” Phyllo encouraged and briefly put her hands together.

Then she bounded over to the exit, jumping just like Lloyd had.

“I'll tell her...you're really dangerous...”

The older student lay buried in cushions, lips mouthing the same words over and over in terror.

On the floor below the one with the trap holes, another second-year student saw Lloyd's group approaching.

“Tch, he blew it? Fine. You gotta get a little rough to teach their ilk a lesson.”

This new guy really seemed to have it in for Lloyd's group. With a cruel sneer on his face, he licked his lips.

Once he spotted them, he put a sign up against the wall—one he'd made himself. Given his face, his handwriting was surprisingly cute, but let's ignore that.

Riho noticed the sign and pointed to it.

“Mm, this way, Lloyd! Awfully cute handwriting...”

“Lloyd! Looks like we go this way!” Allan said. “So nice of them... Something

this adorable couldn't possibly be a lie!"

Never suspecting a thing, Lloyd led his party down the gentle slope.

Heh...fools. They have no idea that path leads to a dead end!

The devious upperclassman watched them leave, then turned his gaze toward the pile at the side of the passageway—logs and other materials for repairing the dungeon, leftovers from when they'd held recruitment exams here.

The timbers had been secured by ropes. Those bindings were the only things keeping them from rolling downhill.

"Just as they reach the dead end, these logs will come tumbling toward them! They'll have no way to escape serious injury!"

The second-year picked out the thickest log, waiting for his moment.

"Nothing down here."

"Hngg, a dead end? I thought that sign was a bit too nice!"

They seemed super chill about it.

This was the moment the upperclassman had been waiting for. He cut the rope with his knife.

"Heh-heh! Dodge this!"

With a rumble, the logs began tumbling down the slope toward the first-years.

"Bwa-ha-ha! That's what you get for trying to outshine your elders!" the upperclassman cackled, certain that victory was his.

A moment later, however, shards of what had been giant logs came flying back in his direction, like he was standing next to a wood chipper.

Amid the cloud of wood chips...

"...Mm."

Phyllo came walking back up the hill, a timber in one hand.

It looked for all the world like she was taking out the trash—or had just finished a drink and was about to toss the empty can in the recycling. She

placed the huge log back where it had been.

“H-how...?!”

Unable to comprehend what he was seeing, the poor upperclassman found himself pinned underneath it.

“...Takes me back. I used to train by punching rolling boulders to pieces.”

Was she reminiscing?! Her total lack of expression made the whole thing even more terrifying.

The rest of the party came up the slope after her. Riho was awkwardly scratching her cheek. “Should have known it was a trap!” she said. “This is your fault, Allan. Never believe a sign in a dungeon.”

Allan looked hurt. “Wait, what? You said we should go this way before I did!”

The older student was too busy trying to escape from under an enormous piece of wood to hear the exchange.

“Ugh, Allan made us waste so much time! Let’s hurry before he screws up again.”

“Stop right there! It’s not gonna become my fault just because you say so as loud as you can! I ain’t standing for it! Are you even listening?! You messed up first!”

But Allan had already cost them enough time, so they hurried on down the other passage.

All the while, the heavy log continued to slowly crush him. He struggled in vain to extract himself.

“Ow...owww...”

Barely able to breathe, he let out an agonized groan...and suddenly he was free.

How? Did he die? Then he saw Lloyd’s smiling face pulling the log off him... one-handed. Lloyd propped the thing against the nearby wall.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “Sorry, looks like you got hit by the trap we set off.”

Since the upperclassman was the one who set off the trap, he thought Lloyd was being sarcastic, but the boy's smile was so genuine, he immediately abandoned that idea.

"I-I'm okay."

Lloyd looked relieved and quickly stacked up the rest of the logs...one-handed. Each one had to have weighed over two hundred pounds each—definitely not something any ordinary human could've lifted. Most people would've failed even with both hands. Except maybe on Christmas Eve—when at least one person was wishing they could fling around a fir, cursing everyone who had a date.

"Lloyd! Come ooon!"

"Oh, right behind you!"

He bowed once to the upperclassman and darted off.

"...Were we the ones wrong about him?"

That strength—of body and character—might've made Lloyd even more impressive than Allan and Phyllo. The older student staggered to his feet, staring after the group as they moved on.



*

Things continued like that until an hour into the dungeon exploration. A group of second-year students were gathered in a safe zone in the center, looking exhausted.

All of them had tried to spring traps on Lloyd's party, but their plans had backfired.

"So...what went wrong? Why are they still doing fine?" Micona demanded.

Her minions awkwardly tried to explain.

"I dropped him in a pit...but he just jumped out."

"I tried to bury them in logs, but they smashed them all."

"I made the moving floor platforms take them in circles, but they just seemed to enjoy the ride."

"I tried to scare them by saying, 'Turn baaack!' in a spooky voice, but they just laughed and critiqued my high pitch."

The second-years' efforts to obstruct progress had been treated like attractions at an amusement park.

"Micona, it's time to change tactics. Instead of crushing them, let's find these weird creatures and take them out first. We stand a way better chance that way."

"Damn you, Lloyd Belladonna..."

Micona's personal grudge was only getting worse, however.

"Fine, change of plans. Get to the bottom of the dungeon, clear out these weird creatures...but if you get the chance, make sure Lloyd Belladonna doesn't leave here in one piece."

"M-Micona, why are you so...?"

Sensing their lack of morale, she decided to rouse their flagging enthusiasm.

"All of us were accepted at the military academy to prepare for an oncoming war with Jiou. To that end, many of us had our slates wiped clean, a blind eye

turned toward past mistakes—all to improve our military’s combat potential.”

No matter what their reputations, no matter how meatheaded they were, they’d become cadets because war was on the horizon.

But the king’s change of heart—in actuality, it was just him no longer being possessed by a demon lord—had turned the winds against the second-years. The deeds of their successors were the final straw—their treatment grew worse and worse, and the resentment it engendered had finally been unleashed.

This reminder got Micona’s minions worked up again. All except for those who’d witnessed Lloyd’s power firsthand, anyhow.

“Yeah, we can’t let them do as they please!”

“That Lloyd kid is super weak, but the teachers are always fussing over him! I know why you’ve got it in for him, Micona!”

They “fussed over” him because there was no telling what crazy stuff he’d accidentally do if they gave him free rein...

But seeing her minions all fired up again, Micona kept her speech going.

“If we blow this chance, we’ll all be stationed in the boonies or relegated to monster culling. We’ll have no opportunities to get promoted! This is a fight for our honor! We need to show the top brass who we are! Prove that looking after themselves will just get them hurt! We need to crush this upstart Lloyd Belladonna!”

Before anyone could object, Micona began spitting specific instructions.

Only when her minions had all left the safe zone did her lips twist.

“Yes,” she muttered. “This is a battle to get back my—”

With that loaded statement, Micona departed for her final battle with Lloyd’s party.

Meanwhile, the members of Lloyd’s party were basically having a picnic. Between Lloyd’s and Phyllo’s physical capabilities, the dungeon and the upperclassmen presented no challenge at all. They were just here on a pleasure jaunt.

“Man,” Riho said. “Having Lloyd along makes dungeons so easy... We oughtta try a top-level dungeon next.”

“Really, Riho?” Selen pounced. “Trying to steal a leg up on him?”

“Ha! No way. We’re talking dungeons. Not dates.”

Phyllo was instantly right beside her.

“...Entering high-level dungeons incurs a lot of expenses. Like dates.”

“What exactly is your definition of a date?! Fine.” Riho gave up. “I won’t ask him!”

Selen and Phyllo exchanged a high five. There was nothing quite so passionate as rivals teaming up to defeat a common enemy.

“So, Sir Lloyd, how about we take a rest in the shadows, just the two of us?”

“...Can we train together somewhere? Perhaps in those shadows.”

Both Selen and Phyllo immediately started trying to steal a leg up on Lloyd themselves. Completely unable to detect ulterior motives, Lloyd just turned around. “Huh? Why?”

Seeing his befuddlement, Allan stepped in like a protective manager.

“No attempts at tempting Lloyd! Geez, can’t you think of anything else? Remember where we are, girls.”

“Don’t lump me in with them!” Riho complained.

Allan simply ignored the comment.

Before Riho had a chance to whine about that, however, the group reached another open area.

A mysterious structure loomed in the center. Nothing else about the chamber was remarkable in any way, and there were no signs of a door or stairs leading farther down. Perhaps this was the end of the dungeon.

“Is that an altar? Don’t see anything else here,” Allan said, on guard with his ax at the ready.

“Oooh, this is so scary, Sir Lloyd!” Selen chose this moment to get clingy. She

was not a good actress.

“Hey now, you’re not getting away with *that*, m’lady! There ain’t nothing here. Guess those strange creatures were just rumors.”

Sparks flew between Selen and Riho, and Lloyd tried in vain to soothe them. Selen was sticking her tongue out whenever Lloyd wasn’t looking, which only served to further annoy Riho.

“Geez... Let’s head on back. Chrome owes us dinner for all this work,” Phyllo declared.

Suddenly, the martial artist’s grim expression grew grimmer, and she braced for combat.

“Phyllo?”

“...Mm.”

Keeping her center of gravity low, she moved toward the patch of bare ground at the center of the floor—and the mysterious structure.

The construct’s reddish surface was giving off a dull light. Curiously, the whole area was covered in a thick layer of grime, except for that strange thing in the center.

As everyone realized how odd this was, Phyllo took a deep breath...

“Hah!”

And unleashed a powerful middle blow. The earth shook. Dust fell from the ceiling. The force of her punch shook the air around her.

“Phyllo! What’s—uhhhh?”

Even as Lloyd spoke, the mysterious structure began to move. What had been a looming sort of pillar seemed to unwind, slithering and revealing its true form.

“Hiss...”

A giant snake. Its body was covered in dark-red scales the color of scabs. It was so big, so thick, that no one had realized what it was at a glance.

From across the room, the thing had looked like a pillar, and from even farther away, you would’ve assumed it to be a funny-shaped cloud.

“Is this...the creature? Uhh...”

Allan wasn't quite over his fear of fighting non-humanoid monsters and instinctively took a half step back.

The snake's eyes opened. It glared down at Phyllo.

There was a strange pause.

Then the snake closed its eyes and went back to sleep.

“...Mm?”

When Phyllo looked surprised, Riho went into full mom mode.

“Come on, Phyllo! You can't just punch snakes! You've given us a fright!”

“...Sorry,” Phyllo said, then looked down at her fist, puzzled.

“What's wrong?”

“...It feels like I barely fazed it...but that was my full strength...”

This time, Riho stepped up, her mithril arm glittering with magic power.

“Probably just one of those null physical damage types. They're pretty much always weak to magic. Step back.”

Then she held up her mithril arm, and a blazing inferno blanketed the creature.

Foom.

The flames made their cheeks sting. The snake monster was clearly barbecue—or maybe not.

“You're kidding?! That did nothing?!”

It didn't even budge. The creature was still fast asleep.

Selen shot Riho a gleeful smirk.

“Always weak to...what, again?”

“Shut up! Geez, I give up!”

Both fists and magic proved ineffective. There was nothing left that an ordinary adventurer could do.

“...Master, this one’s all yours.”

“Huh? Mine?” Lloyd looked alarmed.

Everyone stared at him expectantly. He was from Kunlun. They were sure he could handle this.

“Ohhh, you’re so cute when you’re flustered!”

Well, one of them was less expectant than enraptured, but ignore her.

“Please, Lloyd!” Allan begged, legs quivering like a newborn deer. “If you can’t handle it, we’re outta options! Give it a shot!”

“Ah-ha-ha, this is no time for jokes. I really don’t think I can do anything here, but...it can’t hurt to try!”

After all, the request to handle this monster had come directly to him. It was his responsibility to at least try to exterminate it. Even so, his mind was racing.

If Phyllo couldn’t do it, and Riho’s fire failed...then my wind spell might work... or should we sneak out while it’s sleeping and fetch Chrome?

Then Lloyd heard footsteps from behind.

“Having trouble there, first-years?” called an all-too-familiar haughty voice. Micona and her pack of minions stepped out from the passage.

“For all your arrogance, you sure took your time getting here!” Riho said. “Too busy playing cheap tricks along the way?”

She had spotted several familiar faces behind Micona.

Immediately, those second-years who’d tried to set traps looked very shifty, but their leader was clearly trying to plaster this over with confidence. “No, we simply gave you the first shot at everything. Doesn’t seem like you got anywhere.”

Allan muttered angrily under his breath but let Micona’s needling comments slide.

“I suppose this means it’s up to us now? We’ll handle this strange creature for you.”

“Hey! You think you can just hog all the limelight?”

“...Not fair.”

Selen and Phyllo objected strenuously. Waiting until your opponents had worn the enemy down and then swooping in to finish it off was clearly foul play—if this were a game.

Before the argument could get any more heated, however, Lloyd stepped in.

“Go ahead! Our main goal is to exterminate it, after all.”

“L-Lloyd?!”

“And defeating it together is a good opportunity to show some respect for each other’s abilities! That happens all the time in novels. Ah-ha-ha.”

Caught completely off guard, Selen clearly didn’t know what to think.

Even more surprisingly, Riho said, “I agree with Lloyd. Let’s see what our second-years can do.”

Everyone looked shocked by this. Normally she’d be the first to object. She pulled Selen and Phyllo in for a huddle.

“Let them try,” she whispered. “There’s no way they stand a chance against this thing, so let’s let them take a shot at it and see if we can spot its weakness.”

“...Clever.”

With Riho’s intentions clear, the party agreed to let the upperclassmen exterminate the giant snake.

Micono clearly hadn’t expected them to step aside without a fight, but she assumed they were just underestimating her and gave them a nasty glare.

“...You think you can treat me with disrespect? Fine. I’ll show you why I’m famed as Godspeed Micono! You’ll see why I’m so very, very famous!”

The events before the dungeon incursion had clearly become a deep-seated trauma for Micono. Between the double *verys* and the way she’d worked variants of *famous* into the dialogue, her desire to communicate this point seemed to be having a detrimental effect on her vocabulary. At best, she just sounded desperate.

Despite the goofy vibe, the sigils she wove enveloped her entire group, the

light of her magic casting a soft glow around the dungeon interior.

Her minions' bodies blurred, each of them vibrating like an engine.

As they throbbed, Riho sounded impressed.

"So that's the source of the *Godspeed*...a physical buff spell."

Micono flashed them a single proud smirk, then raised her hand, pointing at the snake. Her team moved to surround it.

"An all-out attack by trained warriors with their physical attributes enhanced... We're a match for any foe! Just you watch."

Micono swung her arm down, and every one of her fellow students became a blur, rocketing forward.

""""Rahhhhhhh!""""

Their bellows echoed through the chamber.

A few minutes later...

"How...how is it unharmed?!"

Dozens of blows from swords and axes, and the creature had not even bothered to wake up. Micono was down on one knee, stunned.

"Micono! Are you okay?"

"I—I can't believe our assault did nothing!"

"Don't give up! We can win this!"

Supported by minions on all sides, Micono managed to get to her feet. Oh, by the way, all this happened very fast, with everyone moving like blurs. A serious scene was totally undermined because, to Lloyd's friends, it looked like they were watching it on fast-forward.

"This just looks silly," Riho commented.

Micono shot her a glare...so fast her face looked like a smear.

"Shut up!" she yelped. "We'll show you how good we are! We just...need a weakness! Find it!"

Another few minutes passed.

“...No luck?” Phyllo muttered, growing impatient.

“Oh, be quiet! You had your chance. Now it’s ours! Wait your turn!”

“I think it really should be our turn again by now...”

“Silence! Not yet! Just a little longer! Defer to your elders!”

“Sounds more like abuse of power,” Riho muttered, but the second-years clearly didn’t care. They were poking at every inch of the snake like they were surveying road repairs.

What happened next?

“And I’m out with a pair of eights.”

“Arghhh, I’ve lost again!” Allan cried.

Lloyd’s party members were happily playing cards. Phyllo had brought some with her, and they were being put to good use. They’d already finished their lunches, and only snacks were left.

Sick of getting last place in the card game, Allan glanced over at the second-years, who were looking about ready to cry. “Come on, find that weak point already! I’ll be stuck buying lunch for them all week long! Oh, wait! I got a good card, finally! Never mind, Micono! Take your time. Heh-heh, just you wait, Allan’s about to domin—”

“...Revolution,” Phyllo said.

This reversed the value of all cards in play.

“Please, hurry uuuuuuuuuup! You’re killing meeeee!”

At this rate, Allan was likely to be treating the rest of his group for a month.

Whether in response to his cries or not, one of the older students let out a yelp of joy.

“Micono! We found it! There are signs of scales being peeled off on its back!”

“Nicely done!”

She ran around to see it herself, and Lloyd’s group trailed after her.

They found a strange, rectangular scar, clearly left by something sharp. The

scales there were a totally different color.

“That’s clearly the weak point! Everyone, hit—”

Before they could swing, Riho jumped in front of them, grinning.

“Right, right, time’s up! It’s our turn!”

“W-wait, you can’t just swipe it from us now!”

Micona’s hand clamped down hard on Riho’s shoulder, but the girl just smiled pleasantly back at her.

“We aren’t!” she said, eyes sparkling. “Only you could’ve found the weak point. I respect your hustle! You fought very well.”

“But we’ll lose the battle! You can’t trick us with compliments!”

Riho let the sparkles in her expression fade. In their place arose a sinister smile.

“Tch, not that easy, huh?”

“Of course not! And you running a con on everyone all the time is why we’ve got it out for you! Just the other day, you were over by the school store, selling watered-down potions, telling people they were for charity.”

“They were! All profits went to charity. The charity in question just happened to be my empty wallet! And it’s their fault for buying something so obviously suspicious.”

“They tasted terrible!”

“...Sorry.”

Face-to-face with an idiot, Riho felt a brief pang of guilt.

Allan joined in the diplomacy, still shaking like a fawn around the monster.

“What are you doing, mercenary? You can’t shake down other cadets! Have you no pride as a soldier of Azami?”

“...Given how bad those knees are rattling, I don’t think you should be talking about pride.”

Riho glared at Allan, and Micona began angrily mussing her own hair, grinding

her teeth in rage.

“Fine, let’s show you what being a soldier is all about! Assemble!”

Both Lloyd’s team and Micona’s own minions gave her a look of horror, like a baseball team when some dipshit alumni decided to start barking orders. Here they were, bottom of a dungeon, the target monster right in front of them, and she was doing this? Totally backward. This was like showing up to work late to “dress for the job you want.”

“I said assemble! Can’t you hear me?! Do it, now!”

“Uh...sure.”

“What’s with that attitude? That’s why you first-years are...”

“Silence!”

A stern voice echoed across the dungeon.

Everyone looked around, searching for the source of this voice.

It...came from the snake. He (?) had raised his head and looked down with narrowed eyes.

“...Uh?”

“What is your problem? I’m trying to sleep here, but you’re not even trying to keep your voices down! Just squabbling, playing games...!”

This silenced Micona completely. The monster was scolding them like an irate boss.

The monster let out an annoyed sigh. Coming from a body that large, it was like a warm breeze rushing past their cheeks.

“*Sigh...* I suppose I can’t blame you for attacking me in this form. Oh, sorry, not to change the subject, but that attack earlier, on my back? It really hit the spot. You’re very good.”



“...Mm.”

The monster’s tone changed to that of a boss praising his subordinates, which certainly caught Phyllo off guard.

“Blows like that just glance off me, though, ha-ha-ha!”

The mood briefly lightened, but the snake’s harsh glare caused everyone to stiffen back up again. It seemed like it was ready to get to the point. This monster was *good* at lecturing people. It knew how to make them hang on every word.

“But the rest was just unacceptable. Here I was, pretending to sleep until you went away, but one group of you surround me and start rubbing me all over while the rest of you sat down and started playing cards?”

“Uh...,” Micona floundered.

Paying her no heed, the large snake continued to drone on.

“And finally, you find the sensitive spot and gather round, gleefully staring at it...pointing directly at it and laughing among yourselves!”

It wasn’t nice to mock people’s distinguishing features, was it? Even between friends and family. Wait until they bring it up themselves, kids.

None of the cadets had the slightest clue how to process the concept of a snake monster being sensitive about the scar on its back.

“””” ...””””

“Nothing to say for yourselves? I should point out that using your position to dole out orders is technically an abuse of power. Did nobody teach you this? Keep that attitude up and you’ll find yourself without a single person following you for any worthwhile reason. You should really stop grinding your teeth, too! It destroys them! And builds weird muscles, making you square-jawed. Plus, it can give you headaches!”

Apparently, Micona had reached the limit on how many lectures she was prepared to endure from a monster. The teeth-grinding was clearly a sore spot for her.

“Shut up! You’re just a monster! Blah-blah-blah-blah-blah!”

She held a hand up, issuing directions to her minions. This finally snapped the other second-years out of their surprise, and they surrounded the snake again.

“Hmm. You certainly are disciplined; I’ll give you that...”

Micona yelled over the monster again, casting her *Godspeed* spell on her followers.

“...Geez Louise, I see I’m going to have to give you a piece of my mind.”

“We know your weak point, so this fight is ours!”

Leaving a blurry afterimage in its wake, Micona’s hand dropped.

At that signal, the upperclassmen charged, focusing their attacks on the monster’s scar, one blow after another.

““““Rahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!””””

The snake sighed, flicking its tongue.

Then it grunted once, smacking the ground with its tail. A fissure ran across the floor, and the shock wave that followed hit the second-years *and* Lloyd’s party.

““““Aughhhhh!””””

Everyone staggered. *Godspeed* meant little if you could barely stay upright.

“If I know where you’re hitting me, it’s easy to compensate.”

Before anyone could recover, the snake raised its tail again.

“Good night.”

And thumped it down.

The tail was bigger than most trees. No one could survive being crushed beneath it.

The second-years stared death in the face...until someone shot in front of them, moving like a bullet.

“Look out!” Lloyd cried.

He tackled the tail, changing its trajectory.

“Wh-whaaaat?!”

Knocked onto their knees, Micona and the other upperclassmen couldn't believe their eyes. Lloyd had just batted aside a blow so powerful, it could crack a dungeon floor, after all.

He and the monster hardly noticed the others' surprise as they were too focused on each other, though.

“Mm! That's more like it!” the beast said, observing the tingling in its tail. “Let's see how you handle this!”

It swept the tail sideways, scraping along the surface of the ground. Lloyd blocked it bodily.

“Yes! Lloyd can handle any monster!” Riho hooted, pumping her fist like they'd already won.

“Th-that's real heavy...”

Lloyd dug his feet into the ground...but it was pushing him back.

“...Is my master...losing...?”

“Seriously?!”

“Lloyd!”

This was the first time any of them had ever seen him struggle.

“...! Hnggg!”

With a grimace, Lloyd managed to push the tail back.

“Oh! You held it off? One more!” the serpent declared, raising its tail again.

“C-come at me!” the boy said, bracing himself.

“Don't mind if I do!”

But before the snake could swing again, it suddenly flinched, shifting its coils.

There was a *thunk* as a weapon hit home.

“You were shaking like a leaf a moment ago—but that wasn't half-bad!”

“Y-yeah! I come through in a pinch!”

The sound had been that of Allan’s ax. He’d forced his quivering legs forward and landed a blow right on the snake’s weak spot.

“...Right.”

With the snake’s attention on Allan, Phyllo started grabbing upperclassmen by the napes of their necks, tossing them toward the floor entrance.

When she’d finished throwing them all, she dusted her hands off, looking pleased with herself.

“...They got away.”

With no one left to protect, Lloyd brightened up. He pulled his feet out of the holes in the ground.

“Thanks, Phyllo!”

“Hit me with your best shot!” the snake roared, catching the boy’s punch with its head.

“Ugh, that didn’t work.”

“No, no, that was pretty good! Nicely done!”

“Thanks for the compliment, monster.”

“You’re quick on your feet, but...you’re an emotional wreck! No confidence! Such a shame.”

Once more, the tail lanced forward.

It sent Lloyd flying.

“Aughhhhh!”

Just before Lloyd hit the wall, Selen’s cursed belt formed a cushion to catch him.

“A-are you okay, Sir Lloyd?”

Selen was normally one to take advantage of the chaos and try to rub her cheek against him, but seeing him struggle seemed to banish those thoughts from her mind.

“...Owww...been a while since I broke anything...”

Lloyd staggered to his feet, rubbing his chest.

No trace of confidence anywhere. He looked like a child on their first trip to the store alone.

He had no idea what to do next.

The snake, however, was staring at the cursed belt, surprised.

“I see... I thought you had a pretty skilled group assembled here. That woman send you?”

What woman? Everyone looked at one another, confused.

But whatever conclusions the monster had reached, it nodded to itself and slithered toward the back wall.

Then it flicked a rocky protrusion and glanced back at Lloyd’s party.

“I believe apologies should be done in person, not via proxy. Tell her she needs to come herself.”

The beast pulled the lump down. There was a sound like millstones grinding and an immense vibration.

“Wh-what’s going on?”

A moment later, a huge chunk of wall disintegrated to sand. Beyond it lay darkness, and beyond that—the sounds of mechanical grinding and something writhing in the shadows.

“...Machinery?”

“Tell her...I’ll be waiting. In the real bottom of this dungeon.”

“W-wait!”

While they stood aghast at the spectacle, the snake bowed its head and slithered off into the darkness.

Both the sights and Lloyd’s strength had left Micona reeling, but she recovered and began barking orders.

“A-after it! Don’t just stand there!”

“““Roger that!”””

The second-years charged boldly after the monster. She watched them go, grinning triumphantly.

“Well? See how quick they adapt? This is the advantage that a year’s experience brings!”

“Geez, you don’t even scout the hidden passage first? Don’t blame me if anything happens,” Riho said, shaking her head.

“Ha! Decisiveness makes all the difference! Caution when planning, daring in practice! The key principles of life.”

“...I feel like you were daring from start to finish.”

Phyllo’s remark annoyed Micona all the more.

“Shut up! Just watch! We will be the ones who roar with triumph—”

At that point, a roar echoed in the depths, from the direction her minions had boldly charged.

“See?!” Micona said. “It seems they’ve already won. All we needed was the weak point! That snake took pity on Lloyd Belladonna and went easy on him, but a well-trained unit of upperclassmen with the super-famous Micona Zol’s *Godspeed* spell can take care of anything! That’s why it had to go all out on us!”

The lengths to which Micona’s mind worked to rearrange facts proved exhausting for those around her. She *really* didn’t want to admit Lloyd was actually good. And she wasn’t about to stop insisting she was famous, either...

“We’ve won this contest al—”

But...

““Aaaaaaah!””

The cadets’ voices were coming back this way, and the sound was clearly less a roar of triumph and more shrieks of horror. Micona’s grin faded.

As the screams of the second-years reached a fever pitch, they burst back into the room, weapons abandoned, both hands up in surrender.

“What? What happened?!”

“Micona, look out! There’s—”

A horrendous, earsplitting howl drowned their voices out.

A moment later, a reptilian body covered in thick brown scales burst out of the hole in the wall—a dragon.

“A d-dragoooooon?!” Micona shrieked. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined such a high-level monster would be here.

The beast was thrashing around wildly, like they’d just opened its cage and let it free.

Huffing and puffing, it loomed over them. Some second-years were still trying to fight back, but it wasn’t going well. Getting a few hits in was the most they could muster before they got knocked away hard, flung back with their weapons in hand.

“Micona, we’ve gotta run! We don’t stand a chance!” someone shrieked.

Face twisting like a demon, Micona stared the dissenter down.

“Don’t be stupid! Victory is in our grasp! One more step, and we can get Lloyd Belladonna kicked out!”

Not even trying to hide her grudge, Micona turned her glare toward the ferocious beast.

Casting *Godspeed* once more on herself, she strode forward to face it.

“Yo, yo, yo! Not a good idea!” Riho yelled. “That’s a dragon...and can your body even take any more?”

Her concerns were valid. Buffs like *Godspeed* could enhance physical capabilities, but the spell effects took a severe toll on the body, and it was common knowledge that such things should always be used in moderation.

This was especially true when someone with physical strength used the spell—the greater their predisposition to the magic, the greater the backlash. It could cause lasting damage to eyes and internal organs.

On top of that, Micona had cast *Godspeed* several times already. Her body was vibrating, giving her all the power it could muster.

Micona leaped forward onto the dragon's back. She wedged her sword under its scales, prying one off.

The beast was shaking with anger and pain. It leaned forward, flexing all the muscles on its back.

Then it roared, charging at Micona.

She dodged like a matador, grinning at the dragon as it passed—then sprinted after it, aiming for the peeled patch.

“All right! I’m gonna sink my blade in the gap in its scales!”

Launching off a crumbling wall, Micona bounded onto the dragon's back again, took a firm grip on one scale so it couldn't buck her off, and raised her blade in the other. Using all the elevated strength of her enhancement spell, she thrust downward.

“Gotcha!”

With victory in her grasp, Micona had let her guard down.

When a second dragon lunged out of the darkness, she noticed a moment too late.

“—————! Another one?!”

It had never occurred to her that there would be multiple monsters. Startled, she let go of the scale as the dragon flung her away.

She managed to land safely and get back on her feet, but in the worst location—she was flanked by the dragons.

Micona swore under her breath, eyes bloodshot, looking from one monster to the other.

The dragon in front of her inhaled, readying a breath attack. At this distance, there wasn't going to be anything left of Micona but ash. Fearing for her life, she took a desperate leap toward the gap between the two monsters.

“Gah... Ugh!”

Pained grunts escaped Micona's lips. Her buffed legs had carried her through multiple feints and sudden turns. The toll on her stomach, lungs, and organs

was growing, but she managed to slip between them.

Even so, she barely avoided the breath attack. The g-forces of her sudden turns had left her grimacing, blood pouring from her nose.

Relief at avoiding the fire let blood go down the wrong pipe, and she started coughing.

“Koff, koff... Oh crap.”

The beasts had closed the gap, and Micona found herself with her back against the wall.

She had no time for self-recrimination. The dragon with the missing scale was rearing back, angered...about to breathe fire. A quiver ran up its body, and a red light flashed around its jaws.

“...I’m not losing here,” Micona yelled. “You’re nothing but a dragon! Nothing but a stepping stone in my way!”

She raised her sword, like being bathed in flame was nothing to be afraid of... and charged toward the dragon.

A desperate attack tantamount to suicide.

But a moment later...

“Hup!”

A soft cry—from someone literally using the dragon as a stepping stone.

“L-Lloyd Belladonna!”

Yep, it was Lloyd. He’d planted a foot on the monster’s head just before it unleashed its fiery breath. Then he’d kicked it in the jaw.

That forcefully clamped the maw shut, making the dragon’s own attack explode inside its mouth. It toppled over, smoke billowing from its mouth.

Lloyd immediately closed the distance on the other dragon and unleashed a powerful punch to its underbelly.

His frail-looking arm visibly dented the monster’s guts...and the impact of the blow, far stronger than the visuals alone, cracked the floor around his feet.

The dragon let out a wail. It bathed the roof of the dungeon in fire, and the entire floor took on a reddish hue.

“...Huh? A single blow?”

Lloyd had jumped farther than Micona could've at max buff. On top of that, he had gone up against dragons barehanded, which wasn't something any mere mortal was capable of. The sword slipped out of Micona's hands, clattering to the floor. Even she couldn't dismiss this as “the enemy went easy on him,” and her mind was left reeling in confusion.

Of course, Lloyd was completely unaware of what he had just accomplished. He picked up the beasts' tails, moving them out of the way, and then dusted off his hands like he'd just finished moving a rather heavy desk.

“Hmm...dragons? I see two big lizards... Why did everyone run away?”

He thought about it for a moment, then tapped a fist to his palm, as if he'd figured it out.

“Right! City people aren't used to lizards. I never see them out here! I imagine you would be surprised when a bunch of them come rushing out!”

In his mind, these beasts were like worms in the fields or bugs under any old rock.

Lloyd hadn't even broken a sweat, and his friends all acted like that was normal.

“Geez, he even thinks dragons are lizards?”

“That's my master!” Allan hooted.

“...No...he's *my* master...and...you should maybe stop letting your legs shake like that...”

While everyone gathered round Lloyd to praise him, Selen approached Micona, grinning triumphantly.

“Soooo, Micona? He may have let that snake slip away, but it'll take you dozens of reincarnations before you'll stand a chance against my Lloyd!”

She'd lost. Abject defeat. All Micona could do was hang her head.

“He’s a monster... I was up against a true beast... I have to become one myself. This can’t be real... This isn’t right...”

Lloyd walked over to Micona as well, and she braced herself, afraid he might be looking for retribution.

However, he never even noticed the look in her eyes, instead flashing her a happy smile.

“Are you okay? Got a phobia of lizards? Is that why you’re all crouched over?”

Micona’s legs had collapsed under her, but Lloyd managed to put a positive spin on that. With a gentle grin, he held out a hand.

“Ugh!”

Micona slapped it away hard enough that the crack echoed through the chamber.

Now he looked upset. Had he said something wrong?

Micona stood up, collected her sword, and pointed the blade at Lloyd.

“...You act like you’re above me! From your movements, I bet you’re cheating somehow! You aren’t capable of doing anything by yourself! How dare you act like this!”

“Uh... I—I don’t...”

Being told he couldn’t do anything by himself really got to Lloyd.

And then...came more roaring from the depths of the hole in the wall—indicating the presence of at least several more monsters.

“More of them?! How many dragons are there?!”

“No, Selen, those are just liz—”

Before Lloyd could finish, Micona staggered to her feet, aiming the tip of her sword at the oncoming creatures and trying to step toward them.

Her *Godspeed* had worn off. Her eyes empty, she was muttering under her breath.

Only sheer force of will had her on her feet at all.

Riho rubbed her temples, appalled.

“We’d better get her out of here. Otherwise, she’s gonna keep going until it kills her!”

Allan pushed his quivering legs into action, scooping Micona up in his arms.

“Micona, I apologize for manhandling you! Phyllo, grab her legs.”

“...Heave-ho!”

Micona tried to struggle, but the two of them carried her away at top speed.

“L-let go!”

The entire dungeon began to tremble. Loud crashes boomed from all around, like someone putting together a gigantic puzzle.

More dragon howls echoed in the distance...

“Yikes! Is the ground moving?”

“Wh-what now?”

“Get out! Before this place comes apart!” Riho screamed, taking charge. “Don’t leave any wounded behind! Anyone left here is monster chow!”

As vibrations shook the place apart and cries grew closer, everyone broke into a desperate run.

Riho’s group was in the lead.

Behind them, Lloyd gathered a dozen injured cadets on his back, muttering to himself all the while.

“I can’t do anything alone...”

This faint whisper was drowned out by the roars of the pursuing beasts.

Their investigation had ended in chaos—the lower reaches of the dungeon instantly turning into a place filled with high-level monsters. The military command quickly upgraded the dungeon rating from low to advanced and barred entry to the place.

They’d let the mysterious monster get away, and this made the king go into overdrive, coming up with all sorts of plans that drove Chrome and Choline

batty.

The fallout of that would eventually reach Lloyd, Micono, and Marie...but at the time, they were none the wiser...

Chapter 2

An Old-School RPG Twist: Suppose a Starter Dungeon Became a Key Location in the Back Half of the Game

A few days after panic broke out in the dungeon...

The military still had their hands full dealing with the unprecedented transformation of a low-level chamber into one filled with dragons.

They'd built fences around the space itself, stationed guards just in case any monsters tried to leave, set patrols to keep a constant watch on the perimeter, visited all neighboring areas to spread the word...

They were so busy that the cadets at Lloyd's school found themselves with some unexpected time off.

On one of these free afternoons, Micona Zol was wandering the East Side.

The space between her brows had a permanent crease.

She was still fuming about her abject failure to take Lloyd Belladonna down a peg.

He'd been so sure of himself as he'd reached out a hand to her. According to Micona, it was an obvious insult, though her ego was making her paranoid. It was quite common at her age, really; any time things weren't going well, she saw everything in the worst possible light.

There was a minor wound on her arm, one suffered fighting the dragon. She'd received basic treatment, but it still hurt, making her wince every now and then.

"I'd better...get some medicine," she muttered.

This was the reason she needed to visit a shop on the East Side—one run by Marie the Witch.

I haven't stopped by in three or four months? You avoid a place for a bit, and it starts to feel like it's been forever.

The shop stood halfway up a gentle slope. Used potion pots lined the front, and an aged wooden sign advertised medicines sold within. Micona looked like she was visiting a familiar train station near a school she'd graduated from a few years back.

A twinge of pain pushed her forward into the store. The door opened stiffly, and inside...was the same old place with the same old Marie, sipping coffee while reading an old book.

"Um," Micona began.

The shopkeeper's gaze drifted slowly upward, but when she saw the visitor, she brightened up immediately.

"Oh, Micona! It's been ages!"

"Yeah, sorry about that."

Marie pulled a chair out for the young woman, and Micona thanked her for it and sat down, feeling somewhat sheepish.

"It really has been a while—how long do you think?"

"I believe it's been nearly four months."

"That long? You used to come by every week—almost every day. No longer getting injured?"

"Basically, yeah."

"Good! I remember the first time you came here. They'd worked you so hard, you were covered in scratches, and you'd come looking for better medicine."

"I...haven't forgotten."

"So if you're here, does that mean you got hurt again? Lemme take a look." The older woman leaned forward, and the table caught the weight of her chest. She peered into Micona's face.

She slowly held out her injured arm. Marie unraveled the bandage, looking closely at the wound.

“Oof, there’s pus! You’ll be needing disinfectant and something extra for that.”

In only a moment, the shopkeeper had retrieved the medicine and was gently applying it to the wound.

“Mm!” Micona winced. It stung a bit.

Marie grinned. “Come now. You can handle that! You’re a soldier now!”

“...Yeah.”

Micona kept her eyes on her lap, letting Marie work. She bit her lip and was doing her best not to interfere.

A few minutes later, a new bandage was tied securely around Micona’s arm—but even with the pain gone, there was sweat on Micona’s brow, and her breathing was heavy.

Paying this no attention, Marie gave her freshly wrapped arm a pat and smiled.

“You’re all good now. Why don’t you rest here a bit? We’ve got some catching up to do! I’ll put the kettle on.”

“...I wish I could stay forever.”

“Mm? What did you say?”

“N-nothing! My chest just feels tight...”

“Is it?” Marie put a hand on her own forehead and the other on Micona’s. “Mm, your temperature is a little high. Want something for the fever?”

Micona let out a silent squeak, her breathing growing even more shallow...

Let’s take a peek inside her mind.

Marie! Marie! Stay like that! Don’t take your hand off my forehead! Someone bring us some glue! May our foreheads stay linked forever and our lips locked, breaths mingling!

Another pervert in the mix.

Those little grunts of pain sounded awfully like lustful moans. Was it on

purpose?

Please pick up on the pain in my heart!

Clearly, Micona needed a lot more disinfectant. Possibly some sedatives. Maybe the kind for horses...

“You like your coffee black, right? Take this fever medicine with hot water.”

Oh... Once someone remembers how you take your coffee, you're basically a couple. Only thing left is to get married!

Micona stared down at the black surface of the coffee, her eyes unfocused.

Marie started getting worried. “...Are you sure (you don't want any cream or sugar)?”

“I'm sure (that I want to marry you)!”

Marie had no idea her proposal had just been accepted.

“Good! It's been so long I was worried your taste (in coffee) had changed!”

“No! Never! Still madly in love! Always will be!”

“...G-good, I'll...use the good beans next time.”

Still convinced they were talking about coffee, Marie decided Micona must've just been excited to see her. She took another sip.

Micona followed her lead.

“Oh, right! We should have something sweet lying around—let me check.”

When Marie put her cup down and turned her back, Micona spied her chance.

“Godspeed,” she whispered.

Having cast that buff on herself, she quickly switched her mug with Marie's.

Why? Well, because swapping used coffee cups led directly to indirect kisses.

Hands trembling, Micona raised the new mug to her lips, lovingly. It was black, but to Micona's tongue, it tasted sweet. Not literally... Just, erm, emotionally?

This is why I went through all that training and mastered the Godspeed spell... I had a knack for it, but it wasn't easy.

Such a misuse of talent. But hey, if kids can learn to work the computer to watch porn or play X-rated games and senior citizens can get their portable DVD players to play rental porn videos, what's the difference?

Truth was, Micona didn't actually like her coffee black. She was just suffering through it because it allowed her to steal some kisses. Lust conquers flavor—call it personal growth.

Blissfully unaware, Marie located some cookies on a nearby shelf and put them on the table between them. They had peanuts baked in.

"Afraid that's all we have," Marie said and took a sip of her new coffee.

"...Ahn." *Gulp*. Micona pumped a fist, moaning.

Marie gave her an odd look. "Um, something wrong?"

Oblivious to her concerns, Micona's mind was flooded with dopamine. Her entire body was twitching.

Exchanging indirect kisses? That's basically using tongue! Congrats! Your Indirect Kiss has evolved into a French Kiss!

Please don't treat this like a monster-collecting game.

"Uh, sorry... Oh?" Micona suddenly made a show of looking out the window.

"Mm? Oh, the cat? It's taken up residence nearby."

"*Godspeed!*" Micon muttered.

She'd stacked another layer of buff on herself, and in the instant Marie's eyes were on the window, she took a cookie and tangled the cookie in Marie's hair at an indiscernible speed.

"Cats are so cute... Ah!"

"Mm? What now...? Yikes?!"

Micona had leaned over the table, her face almost touching Marie's.

She could feel Marie's breath on her as she reached for her head.

“Er, uh...wh-what?”

Micono whispered in her ear. “There’s a cookie in your hair.”

“Why would there be...? There actually is?!”

“Eh-heh-heh, you can be a bit of a ditz sometimes, Marie.”

Did getting cookies in your hair fall under the domain of ditz? Marie wondered. While she wasn’t looking, Micono pumped her fist again.

Success! I’ve dreamed about suddenly moving in close enough to feel her breath on me! And I pulled it off so naturally! The cookie in the hair was the perfect excuse! Thank you, Godspeed! My existence has been justified!

Naturally wasn’t really the word, and this string of inexplicable events was tugging at Marie’s memory.

“Hmm, that’s weird... Is this déjà vu? Who are you reminding me of?”

Probably either Selen the stalker or her master, Alka. Their romantic interests might be different, but the complete lack of self-control was definitely in the same wheelhouse.

“Sorry I’m so out of it,” Micono said, coming back down to earth.

“You must be worn out. Your injury keeping you up?”

“I’m definitely not getting any sleep tonight.”

This conversation wasn’t exactly adding up.

“You do seem tired,” Marie noted, then forcibly changed the topic. “So I heard something awful happened in the dungeon? Is that why you aren’t in school?”

“Yeah, that’s right... I’m impressed you know. Well, you are an information broker.”

Marie brushed the compliment off. “News does tend to trickle down, but this time, I heard it direct from the source.”

“The source?”

“Yes, my roommate—Lloyd.”

“.....Ngh!” Instantly, Micona was scowling.

Lloyd chose that exact moment to return from his shopping.

“I’m back! I think I got everythi—Oh, you’re...!”

Micona turned toward him, not even trying to hide her hostility, wearing her emotions on her sleeve.

I forgot...or I wanted to! This man! The man who robbed me of my joy!

The reason she had stopped coming to Marie’s shop was...

“Um, Micona, right?”

...because Lloyd had started living here. Micona had swung by at least once a week—and seeing how happy he made Marie was too much for her to bear.

He’d stolen her rightful place. Truthfully, Marie just thought Micona was a friendly customer, but in Micona’s mind... Well, the more she thought about it, the more she despised Lloyd for it.

That was why she’d rounded up her classmates and focused their frustrations, using the attention Lloyd had gathered as an excuse to turn him into a common enemy.

Officially, it’d all been to regain their respect as second-year students—but it was actually just a personal one-sided vendetta against Lloyd. Before she knew it, Micona found herself the de facto leader of the second-years. That’s the power of love!

Lloyd, however, had picked up on none of this. He was too innocent. Frankly, even if he wasn’t, he’d never have worked it out. All he knew was that Micona had it in for him for no apparent reason.

Meanwhile, nobody had mentioned this friction to Marie, so she was quite surprised.

“Um...you two know each other?”

“Y-yes...”

“We’re cadets at the same school. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

Micona’s clipped tone definitely suggested there was a *lot* more, but she was

clearly trying to keep Marie out of it. Getting her involved would just make things more rainbow-colored.

There was a tense silence, but Lloyd decided this was his chance to clear the air.

“Um, Micona... Did I do something wrong?”

Just then...

“Meow.”

The cat had clearly been waiting for him to get back.

Micona turned toward the cat, trying to shoo it away.

However, this momentary distraction allowed her to recover somewhat, and when she turned back to Lloyd, there was a gleam in her eyes.

“You catch my drift?” she added, like it was entirely obvious.

An idea did strike Lloyd, but...he couldn't get himself to believe it.

“But...what else could she mean?”

“Answer me!” Micona snapped.

“But...argh, I knew it was wrong, but how can I resist?! She's so cute! And she'd come begging, big round eyes staring up at me, like she couldn't live without me!”

“Er, Lloyd? Who are you talking about...?” Marie was getting really rattled.

Micona cut her off, leaning over the table like a veteran cop who's got the perp right where she wants him.

“You slept together? You got physical?”

“Er...well...sometimes, on days off...we just lie in bed together all day long. I rubbed her belly, and she seemed to like it!”

“Heavy petting?! Flirting! All! Day! Long! Hahh...hahh...hahh...”

Micona was just straight up panting now. Clearly her lungs weren't functioning right. Her eyes were glazed over like she was suffering from alcohol poisoning.

Heedless of this, Lloyd wheeled around, facing Marie. “Does that count as flirting?”

She had no idea what he was talking about, but the word *flirting* made her flush red.

“I—I guess... All day? Belly rubs? Did that happen? I don’t remember... I mean, I wouldn’t mind, but...”

This was the last straw. Micona stood up so fast her chair fell over. There were tears in her eyes.

“I shouldn’t have asked!” she wailed, sprinting out of the shop, hand clamped over her mouth.

Lloyd and Marie stared after her, dumbfounded.

After a long, awkward silence, Marie asked, “What exactly were you talking about, Lloyd? When did you give me a belly rub?”

“Er, not you, Marie! The cat.”

The little animal let out another needy meow. Lloyd went over to it and started scratching its throat.

“Just a minute.” He turned back. “I’m sorry, Marie, I know you said not to feed the stray cats, and I’m sure Micona is very strict about these city regulations, and that’s why she’s so angry with me.”

The pieces of the puzzle were clearly falling in place. Marie nodded.

“I suppose I did see you rolling around with that cat on your day off and rubbing its belly... I’m both glad it was a cat and sad it wasn’t me, but...why *was* Micona mad? Does she not like animals?”

The two exchanged a look, baffled.

Only the cat’s drawn-out meow broke the silence.

While that was getting cleared up, Micona had already run a considerable distance.

Stumbling a little over the crumbling paved stones of the East Side, she ran on, heedless of her path.

I knew it! They're not just roommates! I knew they'd gone all the way!

They had not actually gone anywhere. Lloyd and Marie were an innocent boy and a hopeless girl, after all. However, the world at large would assume otherwise. Nobody ever believes a pair who goes to a hotel together and then insists nothing happened afterward.

At last, Micono wore herself out and slowed down, biting her lip and blaming herself.

I never belonged there... Indirect kisses? Cookies in her hair? So stupid.

Hey, at least she worked it out.

Eyes blurred with tears, she walked on, not looking where she was going...so of course she bumped into someone.

"Augh!"

She let out a yelp, staggering back.

There was an older man in front of her.

"....."

"Uh, sorry," she muttered.

It was getting pretty warm out, but he was wearing an old trench coat.

Curiously, that seemed normal—like everyone wore coats this time of year, or like he belonged here in front of her.

"Hmm, take care," he said, unperturbed.

"Excuse me again, Father."

"Father?" he asked.

Micono did a double take, surprised.

Why did I think he was a priest?

Unsure why she'd called him that, she hastily looked away and rushed off.

"A priest? She might have potential," the old man muttered, vanishing down the alley.

After Micona left, Lloyd got to work feeding both the cat and Marie...

After doing the bare minimum of wiping off the table, Marie just flopped down on it, waiting for food. Even little boys helped more than her...but she just wanted to gaze rapturously at Lloyd's back as he stood in the kitchen.

Marie's face was still a bit red from the day's events.

I had a feeling he wasn't talking about me, but if he had been, my mind would have snapped.

If her crush treated her like a pet, saying, "It's cute how you beg for food...", well, that would be the perfect inciting event for someone's horny fanfic.

Realizing she was flushed and grinning, Marie slapped her cheeks, trying to get herself under control.

Don't, Marie! Princess Maria! You've got to go back to the castle someday! You can't just let the urges get the better of you!

This comfortable life was only temporary. That included staring longingly at Lloyd's back.

I'm a princess, and Lloyd is a soldier... We're from different walks of life...but that's the romantic part! Wait! All I have to do is get Lloyd promoted up the ranks! He totally has the potential. He's on the path to success already! Chrome's personally leading him from one success to another... His future is bright!

Marie's attempts to restrain herself had somehow become extremely optimistic projections. She really took after her master sometimes...

Heedless of Marie's fantasies, Lloyd began plating dinner. This was clearly a more elaborate dish than usual, and Marie licked her lips, then started shoveling it down the hatch.

"Mm, you really went to town today. Is it a special occasion?"

"No, we just didn't have school today, so I had time to start the marinade and take my time in the market... I'm taking a swing at some new ingredients, too. I heard avocado and shrimp are great together, but it took some courage to try!"

Pouring his free time into housework...making him the best wife and wise

mother.

Marie dug into the avocado and shrimp salad. She was more a “helpless bachelor,” so it came as no surprise when she spoke with her mouth full.

“Is the dungeon thing making Chrome too busy to teach? That place was so low level, it was mostly a landmark for traveling merchants. Having it bumped to a top-tier dungeon is a real shock.”

“Yeah. They’ve got to micromanage everyone going in, as well as watch over the security and posted guards. And there was a really tough monster in there—I couldn’t do a thing against it.”

Lloyd looked downcast.

Marie put a hand to her chin, thinking.

Is this just a typical misunderstanding? Or was he really helpless against it? That would be bad.

Marie might need to beg Alka for help...or maybe pretend it had injured Lloyd. Mulling the idea over, she took a bite of bread.

Lloyd was sitting across from her, looking so depressed he hadn’t even taken a nibble—like a child told they were so naughty they couldn’t eat dinner.

“So many problems happened because I let it get away...”

Marie remembered hearing that they’d set up major detours to ensure the safety of the merchants, and that had led to traffic jams. People were in a panic, insisting this was the prelude to a disaster.

She placed a hand on Lloyd’s shoulder, comforting him.

“Well, feeling responsible isn’t a bad thing. But don’t worry, these things always work themselves out in time. If need be, I’ll step in and help out.”

Normally that would have been enough. Lloyd would have said, “You will? Thank you! How can I make up for it?”

Heh-heh-heh, and then I can use that as a pretext to tempt him into anything I want!

Ignore her rose-colored glasses.

Lloyd's actual reaction was far more reluctant than Marie had anticipated, however.

"Y-you will...? Well, it's nice of you to offer, but..."

"...Hngg?"

Marie seemed to have sucked in too hard, lodging a piece of avocado in her nose. She'd be stuck smelling that musky odor for a while.

After a few minutes of spluttering, she looked up at Lloyd again...and decided she'd better probe him to find out why he was acting so unusually.

"What happened?"

"Oh, no...nothing..."

Definitely something.

Lloyd was staring awkwardly at the floor.

But if he doesn't want to share, what can I do? Sometimes, grown-ups need to let things be. I'm sure it's not like he has a girlfriend or anything...right? Or did he finally notice I'm an attractive girl? That might be it! Oh yeah!

Marie stuffed more bread into her mouth, every dumb thought running through her brain clearly spelled out on her face. It was quite a spectacle.

After dinner, Lloyd was washing dishes.

"...Huh? What's this?"

Marie had found a small booklet mixed in with the day's shopping. It definitely wasn't just some flyer. She reached out for it.

"Ah! Don't!" Lloyd yelped. He never raised his voice.

Marie froze. "Huh? Should I not look?"

"N-no, that's not... Give me a minute."

He was acting very shifty. Marie looked him over carefully.

Lloyd wiped his hands on his apron, then gave her the booklet.

"You see, there's a plan in the works with the king personally in charge. The Adventurers Guild was handing these out in the square today."

“The king himself?”

This was Marie’s father. As a child, she’d known him to be a dedicated leader, but he’d spent years possessed by a demon lord and was now fighting hard to restore the peoples’ faith in Azami and the throne.

Marie was almost afraid to look.

To those seeking self-improvement, we offer the perfect plan—the Kingdom of Azami’s officially sponsored top-tier dungeon monster-hunting life hack!

This definitely seemed suspicious.

The picture on the cover was a photo-realistic drawing of an elderly woman smiling in a park, and it looked more like something from a life insurance ad. The copy itself was an uncomfortable mix of self-help buzzwords and pleasant-sounding vagaries that nobody would bother reading.

“This is how they hire monster hunters? What’s this country coming to...or our king...?”

Clearly, Marie’s father wanted to dispel fear of the crown and help the country out of this crisis. That much was clear. Unfortunately, this earnestness was coming on so strong, the result was just sinister.

“They want to make things safe and take swift action, so they’re gathering high-level adventurers to clear out the new dungeon,” Lloyd explained.

“But this cover... I really wanna know how they decided on it,” Marie said.

“Chrome’s eyes seemed dead,” Lloyd offered.

“He fought to the bitter end.”

Certain this was all her father’s fault, Marie took her glasses off, rubbing her eyes.

That aside, why had he looked so alarmed when she’d reached for this stupid thing? That didn’t make any sense to her.

If this had been porn, it would’ve made a lot more sense... We could laugh about how Lloyd was a boy and get closer...and oh, look, I’d be the closest woman at hand! Wouldn’t that be nice?

Proximity was really not the best motivation for these things. The sheer depth of Marie's delusions was leading her into a high-level quest of her own. One only solved by self-control.

She had a long writhe and then calmed down a bit—sort of a postcoital nirvana—which led her to a decision.

"Lloyd, I'm going to accept this quest. It says here there's a briefing for all assembled adventurers in the audience chamber... Okay."

"Huh? Wait..."

Lloyd looked genuinely surprised. Marie read a lot into that response.

He definitely doesn't want me coming. Frankly, I don't want to get mixed up in my earnest dad's dumb plan, but...this is the only way to figure out what happened to Lloyd. I've got to join these adventurers and accept this quest.

"Y-yeah, I'm sure you can defeat that monster easily. Thanks..."

See... He can barely get it out. What's going on here, seriously?

The two ate the rest of their meal in silence. Marie took a big bite of shrimp as if to say, "I *will* get to the bottom of this."

Chapter 3

A Compulsive Cringe: Suppose a Daughter Found Her Father Making Merry in a Dive Bar

The audience chamber in the Azami castle's interior.

Some of the damage sustained during Marie's magic duel with demon lord Abaddon had been repaired.

This chamber had once been used to receive visiting dignitaries or as a place of judgment, but those traditions had died out. Diplomatic meetings took place in reception rooms designated for that purpose, while a new government branch had been established to handle the judiciary process. These days, it was used exclusively for celebrations and ceremonies.

Normally a solemn place, today it was overflowing with people. Choline looked over the faces with evident delight. The number of grim countenances before her topped even the entrance tests for the academy.

"Better turnout than I expected! The lure of a top-level dungeon, plus a quest by royal decree—and if the reward's good enough, the adventurers come running."

This chamber was to be the site of a briefing given personally by the king himself. Despite the silliness of the ad, quite a crowd had gathered. High-level dungeons were just that tempting.

"But some of these people are borderline criminals," Chrome growled. "This is the castle, Choline. Don't let your guard down."

Chrome was on duty as a guard, keeping an eye out for any suspicious activity.

The occupation of adventurer had no real minimum requirements and was open to all manner of people, no matter their personal histories. It was a dream job that gave anyone a chance to strike gold.

As a result, they were at the bottom tier of society, and if a child ever expressed a desire to become one, their parents would vehemently reject the idea.

A handful had obtained significant status, becoming world-famous. The desire to be like those few successes kept the occupation's ranks filled. Basically, like modern-day You—ubers.

Choline was as glib as Chrome was grim.

"Most of our students are one step shy of criminals! See?"

She pointed at Lloyd and the other cadets, who were also working security.

"...I could stay standing the rest of my life if I was by your side, Sir Lloyd!"

His stalker, Selen, looked at him with eyes glazed over from ecstasy...which wasn't exactly making her an effective guard.

"Geez, I'd rather be joining those guys. A new dungeon? Government rewards? And with Lloyd in tow, we'd clean it up."

Riho was a former mercenary with a record, though in actuality, she'd only been framed for those crimes.

"...Lots of powerful warriors here... Would love to go a few rounds with them."

Possessed of an endless thirst for strength, Phyllo was as taciturn as she was tenacious—with a tendency to damage property.

"Wow...so many adventurers..."

Innocent but immeasurable, the boy from the legendary village of Kunlun—Lloyd.

Undoubtedly, it was a lineup that could give real criminals a run for their money. Chrome's scowl deepened.

"...Keep an eye on them, too."

"Ya know how to work a girl... Oh, here comes the big guy."

Even as Choline joked, every other guard grew extra tense. Picking up on this, the adventurers straightened up. The king had entered, flanked by his guards.

The king of Azami. He'd backed off on the idea, but everyone knew he'd been calling for war with the Jiou Empire, and he was widely feared for it.

However, that was when he'd been under the possession of Abaddon, the demon lord; the man himself was one of mercy and diligence. He was the kind of person so dedicated to arriving ten minutes early that he arrived ten minutes earlier than that, for a total of twenty minutes early. Since they couldn't exactly tell anyone about the whole demon lord thing, his bad reputation was unlikely to be restored anytime soon.

"...Hmm."

The king took a seat on the throne, examining the crowd with great dignity. His weakened condition had resulted in a significant loss of weight, and he once again resembled the vanity statue in the square. This had also increased his gravitas.

The adventurers gulped.

And the king spoke.

"Whoo-hoo! I would like to give you all a royal welcome!"

"" "" "" ""
...

He was way too enthusiastic. Given his fearsome reputation, nobody had any clue what to make of this.

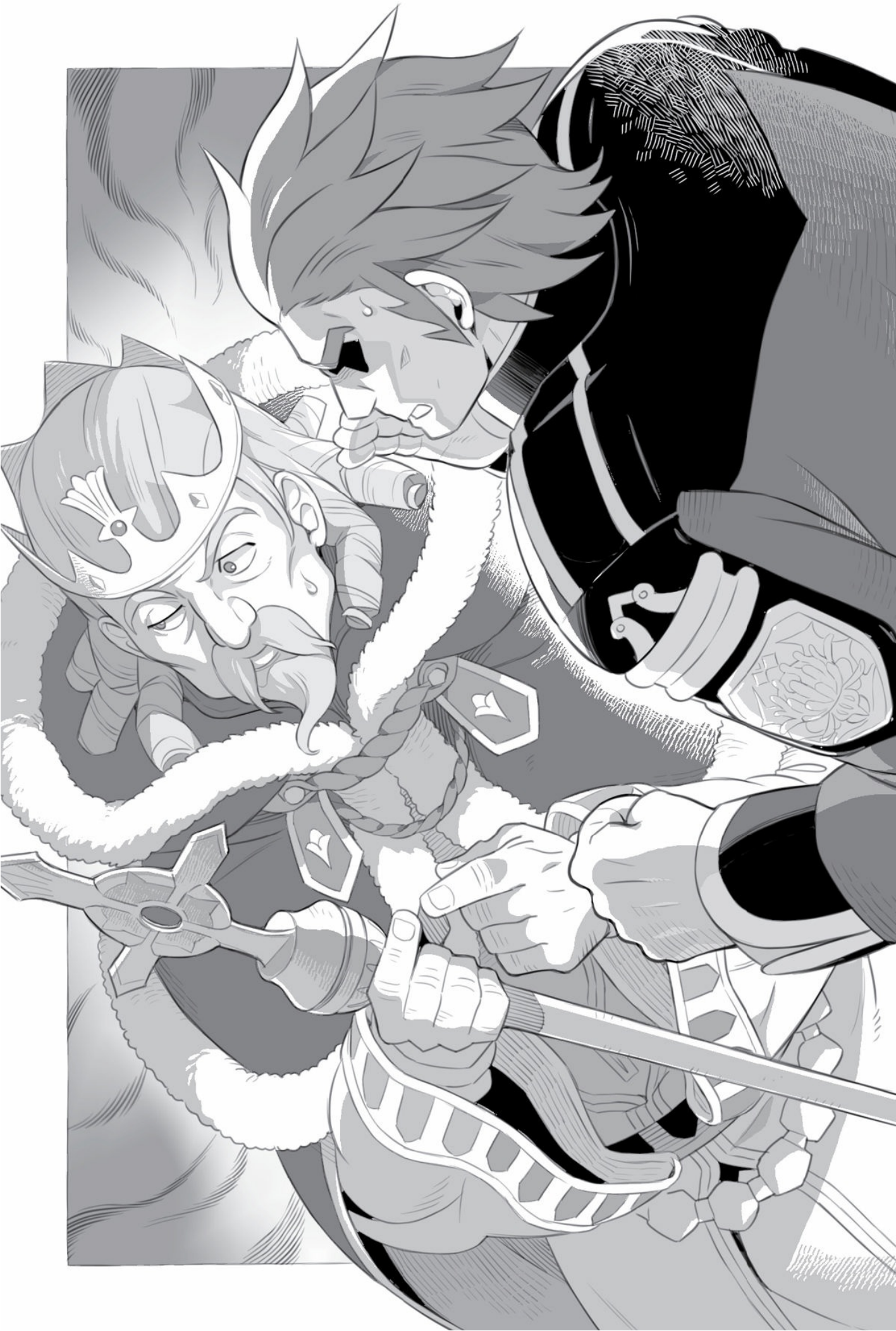
It was clearly an unprecedented blunder, but that was, in itself, horrifying.

Chrome rushed over to the king at speeds that belied his bulk. They began whispering furiously.

"What are you *doing*, Your Majesty?!"

"I read that a little humor is the best approach when everyone's on edge."

"Humor? That was a joke? Please don't do that."



“Hmm, I’d hoped to dispel the fears the demon lord created, but...I guess I wasn’t meant to be a comedian.”

Clearly saddened by the populace’s groundless fears, the king had been attempting countermeasures.

“A joke or two isn’t gonna change your rep overnight. Even if it did, it wouldn’t be for the better!”

“Bumbling is better than scary!”

Chrome was already getting a headache.

Meanwhile...

“””” ””””

The assembled adventurers still looked terrified. Unable to determine the king’s intentions, they simply assumed something sinister lurked behind the man’s facade.

The members of Lloyd’s group, on the other hand, were shaking their heads.

“He tried to get the party started, huh?”

“Yeah, Lloyd, there’s no way that approach would work,” Riho replied. “Everyone is cringing. Even m’lady would know better.”

“Ah! Sir Lloyd! Riho’s being mean!”

“...Hands off him. You’re on duty...and the king clearly has brain damage.”

Fortunately, the king heard none of this.

“I see... A misstep, then.”

He stepped forward once more.

The crowd—adventurers and guards alike—gulped, afraid of what he’d attempt next.

“Sorry, everyone. It seems my attempt at humor fell flat.”

The king just apologized for his misfire. Something no celebrity would ever do. This alone was awkward enough, but...

“It appears the wordplay was a little too obscure! You see, I thought that, being royalty myself, offering a *royal* welcome would warrant a huge laugh!”

He was now explaining the failed joke. Perhaps his innate diligence led to this error. The truth of it is, nobody has ever laughed at exposition.

Once he was done thoroughly beating the concept to death, he said, “I do apologize for the tangent. Let’s get down to the quest. Choline, if you please.”

“Er...I gotta go up there now?”

Having cooled off the crowd to an unprecedented degree of cringe, the king proceeded to quickly toss the whole mess to Choline, forcing her to start the briefing in the worst possible way.

“S-so let’s all pretend that didn’t happen and start with the monsters on the upper floors...”

She managed to run through her briefing, occasionally throwing in a few royally mandated buzzwords.

“But based on that, we think there may be even nastier monsters waiting farther below, so look out,” she concluded.

A stir ran through the crowd. Choline scratched her head.

“Uh, did that not make sense?”

“Choline, you didn’t mention the reward,” Chrome urged.

“Oh, right! I thought I was forgetting something! Did I overlook it?”

Everyone in the gathered audience was waiting to hear what the reward for completing the quest was.

Choline hastily looked back over her notes, wondering how she’d missed it... but then shook her head.

“Crap. There’s nothing here. That’s weird...”

At this point, the king coughed pointedly.

Once he was sure everyone in the curious crowd was looking at him, he rose to his feet dramatically, planting a hand on Choline’s shoulder.

“Sorry, Colonel Choline. I thought it would be best if it was a surprise—coming directly from me.”

“A...a surprise?”

That sounded ominous. The soldiers around them all looked nervous. What did the king have up his sleeve this time? Nobody trusted him.

“Seeing as this quest has gathered adventurers of considerable skill, no ordinary prize will suffice!”

The king glanced around the room. The adventurers were staring up at him expectantly. Well, maybe 80 percent anxiously.

“Steady... Steady...,” Chrome whispered, like a monk in prayer. His expression was definitely 100 percent anxious.

Oblivious to this, the king spoke passionately, with great confidence, like a politician on the eve of an election.

“Azami has prepared a rewards program designed to meet the demands of people of all races and creeds!”

There was definitely a bit of spittle flying. The king pulled out a booklet, holding it up.

“You may choose the reward of your liking from this catalog!”

Like a wedding registry?

It seemed terribly ordinary after all that buildup. A few people were grumbling loudly, but Chrome and the other soldiers all looked relieved.

“So that’s what the printing fees were for,” Choline said.

“Yeah, when he said surprise, I got scared, but this is entirely reasonable,” her colleague agreed, flipping through the catalog.

A pretty impressive cash payment, Azami citizenship and a house... Really impressive stuff for a monster hunt. The adventurers’ grumbling soon gave way to hoots of admiration. They were so easily swayed—almost as fickle as baseball fans or politicians.

“Yeah, thank goodness there was nothing like the throne itself!”

“Don’t even... Ugh, my stomach... I’m dying. But this will be tough enough. We’ll have to find a house and land...”

He could see Lloyd’s group poring over the catalog, foreheads pressed together, gaping at the pages.

“That’s so much money! Wow! A year’s worth of meat?! That would help the household budget.”

Lloyd’s mind was in full wife mode.

“A house! A love nest just for the two of us!”

Selen’s stalker brain had gotten ahead of reality again.

“I’m gonna quit the army and become an adventurer.”

The rewards had taken control of Riho’s mind.

“...Mm.”

What Phyllo was thinking, no one could tell. Basically, everyone in Lloyd’s group stayed true to their character.

“These rewards may be a bit too good, but...within the realm of allowable, right, Choline?” Chrome asked.

“Eaughh!”

“C-Choline? What is it?”

Her moan did not sound like agreement. It was more a shriek of horror.

All eyes fell to her.

“C-Chrome... Is this a good idea?!”

Finger shaking, Choline pointed at one of the offered prizes. It read...

“Marry whoever you like!”

“Eaughhhhhhhhh!” Chrome let out the exact same shriek.

He went dashing up to the king, catalog in hand.

“What the hell is this?!”

It was hardly the proper voice to take with royalty.

The king looked at the reward, frowned, and then winced.

“Oof, that’s a misprint... We’ll certainly offer support arranging a marriage, but...it was the end of the catalog, and I guess we neglected the fine print.”

It seemed the king had only intended to offer matchmaking services or to foot the bill for a ceremony.

Chrome’s grip on the catalog tightened so much that it made creases in the paper.

“This is way beyond a misprint!” he accused. “This is clearly abusing governmental authority to force a marriage without consent! You’ve gotta correct it!”

“Crap... If they read it that way... I’ll announce the misprint at once!”

It was already too late, however. Chrome’s desperate pleas—particularly the word *marriage*—had echoed through the chamber...and found their way to the worst people.

“Mm? Marry who you—”

“—Like?”

“...Mm.”

Three sleeping tigers awoke.

Lloyd flipped to the relevant page, looking surprised, too.

“Ah-ha-ha, that must be a joke. The king sure does have a sense of humor!”

“Great sense.”

“Lovely!”

“...Mm.”

All three were clearly raring to go.

“Eaughhh!” Chrome’s stomach passed to the great beyond. Rest in peace.

Other adventurers were getting excited, too—mostly men with the kind of face that made marriage a distant proposition. The women around Lloyd maintained a solid lead on the passion front, though.

““““Long live the king!””””

Shouts erupted from all around the room. Instant monarchists.

This left the king feeling like he'd done a good deed, especially after his failures earlier... Having the whole crowd cheering for him definitely went to his head.

“Th-that's right! We're trying to solve the declining birth rate! Two birds with one stone!”

“A stone? Try a meteorite about to land on human rights! Fix this now!” Chrome insisted.

“The kingdom supports a citizen's right to love! Procreate and pop 'em out! We've got your back!”

He was talking like a tour guide for a bridal suite, but he *was* the king, right?

Just enough adventurers were on board that their roars of approval drowned out all else.

Unable to walk it back, Chrome, Choline, and the other soldiers were forced to let their lord carry on.

“We can't let him go anywhere... He'll just take a big swing and miss and wind up in the next country.”

“Argh, Selen and Phyllo are both into it, too... This is bad. This will end in bloodshed.”

Chrome clutched his head, certain the girls would be tripping each other up the whole way through the dungeon, turning the expedition into a living hell.

We're doomed! Nothing makes the king happier than when the citizens are happy! How can we go against the masses here?

“Um, excuse me.”

A question arose from the crowd, as if in answer to Chrome's hopes.

Oh! I dunno who you are, but please put an end to this! This has to come from the mouth of a citizen!

Filled with hope, he searched the crowd for the speaker and located them...

“Um, Your Majesty! I have a question about this reward!”

Both her voice and hand were raised. It was Cadet Micono, in uniform and on duty as a guard.

“Why is a guard asking about the reward?!”

Micono was so confident that no one besides Chrome thought to question her actions.

“Yes, what is it?” the king asked, pointing at the raised hand like a schoolteacher.

F-fine! I don't care who does it. Just make the king acknowledge the ethical concern!

By way of the king's generosity, Micono was allowed her question.

“It says we can marry whomever we like...”

Go on! Tell him that makes no sense! Chrome urged in his mind.

“Does that include people of the same gender?”

“That's beside the poiitiiint!”

Chrome had not seen that one coming.

“Hmm, we hadn't considered it, but sure, why not?”

The king was not about to let an impromptu comment get in his way.

““““Ohhhhhh!””””

The people roared with approval...well, a certain segment did anyway.

“Praise the day! Azami officially backs my marriage to that beautiful boy!”

“This is the best day of my life!”

“Rowr!”

Some very excited adventurers out there. Respect.

“If it makes the citizens happy, we want nothing more!”

“Doesn't really affect the birth rate, though...”

Chrome hung his head, resigning himself to backing the romantic aspirations

of anyone who asked, whether they were a baboon-faced adventurer or a dungeon-crawling drag queen.

He gulped, feeling like a few of that latter group were definitely looking his way.

There sure are a lot of people here who don't exactly have marriageable faces... Fixing them up will be a total nightmare... Hngg!

From somewhere in the crowd, Chrome sensed murderous intent. An assassin? He kind of wanted to kill the king himself right now, but...he wasn't about to do that. Chrome braced himself, searching for the killer...

“.....”

He saw Marie glaring at him from below the brim of her pointy hat.

Why are you here, Princess Maria?!

She was here as an adventurer, searching for answers on Lloyd. Uninterested in the quest from the start, now she was forced to witness her father digging his own grave and basically offering to force two people to marry regardless of ethical considerations—as a reward. She looked like a girl handed a bill for damages caused during a drunken cabaret catastrophe.

The difference was that Marie had seen the entire string of failures live and in person. The glare directed at Chrome was clearly blaming him for not stopping this.

A chill ran down his spine, and he tried to clue the king in.

“Your Majesty, uh...”

Before he could tell the king that his daughter was here, His Majesty leaped to his feet, waving both hands at the crowd.

“Adventurers! Leave it to me! We'll guarantee the first two years of any marriage! Or divorce! If you decide to switch partners, we'll be there for you!”

With tears in his eyes, the king spoke with all the passion of a cell phone sales rep explaining how easy it was to add new lines to a plan.

“I don't think anyone's afraid of me now! Azami has a bright future.”

Only the ugly ones were happy. The rest of the adventurers were starting to look downright alarmed.

“.....”

The look of cold fury in the eyes of the king's daughter, Princess Maria, couldn't have seemed more dauntless. Most actual assassins looked less dangerous. Modern bodyguards would have pounced on her the moment she moved a hand near a pocket.

However, the king remained blissfully unaware, thoroughly enjoying himself... and he wasn't even done.

“And to wrap things up, I'd like to arrange a little meet and greet!”

“What are you thinking?!” Chrome yelped. No one had mentioned this to him.

“You should have read the docket. It was right there at the end! ‘We may have time for handshakes.’”

“What's a docket?” Chrome was plain baffled.

“Chrome,” Choline offered. “The thing summarizing the key points. I gave you a copy!”

“Oh, that docket... That's why I hate these fancy words.”

Using weird names disrupted the whole flow of their response chain. It caused nothing but trouble.

Chrome glared down at the page, and there definitely was a mention of the king shaking people's hands buried in the fine print.

His knees crumpled.

I've gotta stop this by any means necessary! Even if it means punching His Majesty!

“Such a tiny font!” Choline chortled. “Even if you had read it, you wouldn't have taken it seriously.”

Heedless of Chrome's concerns, the king barked orders to the people organizing the handshake event.

“Don't be so shocked! This is a standard business practice! Raise everyone up

with fancy jargon, then come back down to their level with a display of friendliness. Really helps with team synergy! I'm sure this surprise meet-and-greet event will work out just fine!"

"Please throw that book away."

"I will become the world's friendliest king, available to any and all! We'll show how peaceful Azami is!"

"Abandon that idea."

Might as well invite assassins in the door. Security as flimsy as your average JRPG king? Chrome felt dead already.

"Too much dedication is a problem in itself."

"I think this issue is way beyond *that*..."

The king had his handshake event up and going—initiating phase one of his Approachable King Project in action.

This basically just involved shaking the hand of every adventurer on the way out while expressing his appreciation for their efforts. It was more like a celebrity's fundraising event than the more hardcore handshake events that idols held.

This sudden, manufactured opportunity inexplicably impressed Lloyd.

"...I bet the king is trying to get a sense of everyone's individual strength! He can tell how good they are just by shaking their hands! Very impressive."

"Uh, sure, let's go with that," Riho said, shooting Chrome a look of pity.

The instructor was on his knees, unmoving, as if his heart was broken. Was he even breathing?

"Chrome, quit sulking! You're my bodyguard, right?" the king demanded.

He raised a face stained with sweat and tears. "I would never have let this happen if I'd had the slightest clue...", he rasped.

"You're a grown-ass man! Quit your grumbling. You need to be more flexible!"

Grown-ass kings shouldn't be hosting meet and greets without running it by

their bodyguards first...but Chrome swallowed those words, taking his place at the king's side.

"If any alarming fans appear, it'll be your job to peel them aside. As the situation warrants! Flexibly!"

Can I peel you away from here?

It was far too late to stop things now, however.

Most adventurers appeared rather nonplussed, awkwardly shaking the king's hand as they left.

Totally normal reaction.

One after another, they stepped up and offered a handshake. Every now and then, a particularly ugly adventurer would profess their profound gratitude, or an overly eager adventurer would try to shake Chrome's hand instead of the king's...but either way, the event seemed to be capturing the hearts of the people, whether that be with fear, gratitude, or sexual excitement.

"You sure are popular, Chrome!" Choline said. "You have my deepest sympathies."

"Your face says otherwise," he grumbled.

Indeed, her grin only got broader with every pass that came his way.

By this point, they'd worked their way through half the line.

"....."

An adventurer in a witch's outfit, pointy hat and all, appeared before the king, offering her dainty hand.

"Oh, a bona fide witch! I expect great things from you!" the king boomed, and he shook her hand.

An instant later...

There was the sound of grating cartilage.

"Uhhhh, miss? You might be gripping me a bit too tight there! I appreciate the enthusiasm, but if you could tone it down *just* a bit..."

As he stammered, the brim of the hat rose, and Marie's eyes gleamed beneath it.

"Oh, sorryyyy, I've just been such a big fan of yours, ever since I was a child."

"O-ohhh?! Why are you—?!"

Between the surprise appearance of his daughter and the stabbing pains in his hand, the king's voice had turned into a yelp of fear.

"You start things off with a bad pun," Marie growled. "Then you offer up nonconsensual marriage as a reward and get so carried away you host a meet and greet? This is beyond mortal comprehension. I am. Truly. Impressed."

Each of those last lines was accompanied by the sound of crunching bone. Clearly, it was the sound of the king's cartilage giving way and his muscles ripping.

Paralyzed with fear, he looked to Choline and Chrome for help.

"G-guards... A little help here? Colonel Choline!"

She appeared momentarily distracted by her bangs, pretending not to notice.

"Oof, I've got some split ends! I gotta go in for treatment."

"I bet you've never had treatment in your life!" the king roared.

"Your Majesty, I believe this situation calls for flexibility," Chrome assured.

"She's certainly testing the limits of my hand's flexibility! Stop her, pleaaaaase!"

His hand was definitely crumpling there. Any compound fractures would take at least six months to heal!

Meanwhile, Riho just cooed, "Ohhh, she's pissed. Can't blame her."

"Any daughter would be furious if her father attempted this kind of event."

"...There was no excuse for that 'Whoo-hoo!'"

Once Marie was done thoroughly mangling her father's hand, Chrome finally pulled her away.

"Ahem. Apologies to everyone here, but due to the king's sudden illness..."

“Oh, let him keep shaking hands! You don’t want anyone thinking he’s ungrateful.”

“I do hate to appear ungrateful! I’d be happy to shake all your hands some other time.”

“If there’s a next time, it’ll be your spine!”

Marie made a strangling gesture with her hands, then stalked away. The king collapsed to the ground, looking quite unwell. This outcome had met projections. He’d earned his dues.

“Wow, Marie!” Lloyd said. “The king must have been *very* impressed with her strength. I knew she was the secret hero of the realm!”

“Uh, yeah, totally what happened,” Riho muttered, clearly way past caring.

Even as Marie strode away, however, she was still frowning to herself. “Forget the king... Why was Lloyd acting so distant from me earlier? It doesn’t make sense.”

Attending the meeting had done little to clear up that mystery. Marie concluded that her only option was to ask him directly.

Meanwhile, the seeds of trouble were beginning to sprout.

Micona was staring at the marriage reward, breathing heavily.

“This is perfect! I’ll gather all the upperclassmen, hit that dungeon up again, slay that monster, and rub it in their faces! Come on, everyone! No more guard duty! We got a dungeon to crawl! Ignore those dragons and go straight for that snake! Then Marie and I—”

But before she could finish, her minions interrupted her.

“Sorry, Micona... We can’t help you this time.”

The line of second-years behind her were all looking put out.

“Wh-what do you mean?” Micona asked. This sudden betrayal came as a shock to her. “We’re a year ahead of them! That should be all it takes—”

A particularly displeased student spoke for the group.

“Lloyd proved his strength to all of us last time. And not just that—he proved

he's a better man. He saved nearly all of us from those dragons... How can we hold a grudge against him after that?"

"That's just another one of his tricks!"

"And you're acting pretty weird, Micona. This is personal for you—and we want no part of it."

"What? But we're friends! Hey! Wait!"

Her followers were following her no longer. They turned their backs, returning to their posts.

Micona was left grinding her teeth, glaring furiously in Lloyd's direction.

"Lloyd...Belladonnaaaa..."

Lloyd remained oblivious to the hostility aimed his way. He was flipping through the catalog, thinking to himself.

"...I've gotta do this... I *will* do it," he muttered.

What was he so determined to do? And why was he pushing Marie away?

Meanwhile, the girls were observing him closely.

"Marriage... I've long thought we might require outside influence. This is the opportunity I've been waiting for."

"Y-yeah, when you think about it, top-tier dungeons should have plenty of treasure, and I'd love to take a stab at one, and it might be worth killing that monster while we're at it."

"...Our time has come. That's all."

No one needed to point out that this could only lead to dire consequences.

Their minds were made up.

So was Lloyd's.

Micona Zol...was still reeling from her setback.

Any of these sparks could've led to fires.

And...there was another force at work here.

One with deep ties to Kunlun...

After the briefing, Micona's feet had carried her to Marie's shop on the East Side again. She looked shell-shocked.

The events in the dungeon the day before—whether trickery was involved or not—had resulted in a humiliating defeat, and he'd even saved her life...and those of her minions. Lloyd had left her in a real bind.

She was alone now.

Her sigh drifted up toward the sky above.

This empty feeling had been with her ever since she'd been forced once more to face the fact that Lloyd had stolen the heart of her one true love.

"I've lost," she whispered, unaware she spoke the words aloud.

Marie was probably inside her shop.

Micona's muscles were still throbbing with pain from the buffs she'd stacked on herself the other day.

Not long ago, she'd have used that as an excuse to see her love...and that fact just made her sigh again.

If she saw Marie and Lloyd together now, it would break her heart. Perhaps it already was broken...

"I want to see her, but..."

Micona turned to go. She had no idea what to do next. Everything felt hopeless.

Drops of rain began to fall. Heedless of them, Micona paced forward blindly. The crowds around her scattered, trying to stay dry, but Micona couldn't bring herself to care if she got drenched.

"What can I do...?"

The rain caught her whisper, carrying it to the ground at her feet. Mingled with the flowing water, it was swept far, far away. *I wish my feelings and I could be swept out to sea*, she thought, giving in to the despair.

"Is something troubling you?"

A pleasant voice. One that stepped right in and made itself at home.

Micono looked up to find a man standing in front of her.

He was getting on in years and had tried to shelter himself from the rain. It looked like something out of a movie.

Despite being clad in a red trench coat, the man reminded Micono of a clergyman or priest. She'd never been inside a confessional, but this was the type of person she imagined sitting across the wall.

"...Yes?" she said, brushing the wet hair out of her eyes.

He beckoned to her. She felt like she belonged next to him, under those eaves.

She joined him there without hesitation.

"You seemed troubled," he observed, in the exact tone a doctor uses to inquire about your health. "Old men do love to fuss over other people's problems."

He stroked his chin as he said *Old men*. His hairline was receding a bit, and his eyes seemed calm—he was maybe in his early fifties. Had he not called himself old, Micono might've assumed he was in his forties, perhaps even taken him for a thirtysomething in disguise.

"What do I look like to you?" he asked quietly.

"A priest?" she said. Answering a question with a question was hardly polite, but she had to ask. She'd just been thinking she could open up to one.

He scratched his cheek, nodding slowly.

"Mm...I thought as much."

"Um... Am I wrong?"

"Not quite right, not quite wrong. I'm something very similar."

Then he crossed himself, looking the part.

He glanced up at the sky, at the clouds thickening above, at the rain dripping from the eaves.

“Doesn’t seem likely this will let up soon,” he noted, stepping right inside Micona’s heart. “So it doesn’t matter how long your story is. And if you don’t want anyone else to hear, I promise the drumming of rain will take care of that.”

Micona listened to the sound of the rain for a moment, and then she began to speak.

“The love of my life...was taken from me.”

She told the man her story. Her feelings and passion for Marie were evident in every word and gesture. It was clear how much this woman meant to her and how much her minions’ betrayal had hurt.

Once it was all out there in the open, Micona sighed, bubbles forming at her lips.

The man heard her out. Seeing the surge of emotions had waned, he asked, “So what do you want?”

“Hmm?”

“Sometimes, it’s not enough to state the facts and your feelings about them. Sometimes, you must not hide a thing. You should put your desire into words.”

“My...desire?” Micona looked up at him, eyes wide.

“Yes. What is your—?”

“I want to kill him,” Micona said without a second’s pause.

Her eyes had narrowed instantly.

The man must have sensed that Micona’s feelings were more convoluted than such a statement implied. His smile was a little bit sardonic.

“If I can escape Alka’s clutches...she’d be an asset. Hmm...”

While the man considered the matter, Micona let herself rage, heedless to his reaction.

“Kill him! Refute his very being! Show my classmates! Slaughter that filthy talking snake in that stupid dungeon! And marry my one true love!”

“A talking snake?” Emotion entered the man’s voice for the first time.

He'd maintained such calm, measured tones that this caught Micona off guard.

"Er...yeah."

"Describe it. How did it speak?"

"Um...it was sort of arrogant? Tall enough to reach the dungeon ceiling. A weird scar on its back..."

"No doubt about it! I may be on the run, but...to find the thing I seek... This must be the hand of fate."

With that, he turned and headed into the depths of the East Side.

"...? Where are you going? It's still raining."

Wasn't he taking shelter?

"Come with me," he said without looking back. "I will grant your desire... A small thanks for telling me about the snake and revealing my destiny."

He didn't seem to care about getting soaked.

"Come with you? Where are we going?" Micona asked again.

The man looked up at the sky.

"...Hmm, well, if I'm a priest... Perhaps a church?"

It was like he'd just thought of the idea.

Micona frowned, but if her desire was to be granted...she could only trail after him.

By the time they reached the church, the rain had turned into a downpour.

The sun had set, and it was too dark to see the church interior. The scent of mold suggested this place had been abandoned for some time.

"There are several buildings like this on the East Side. Location matters, whether you're a church or a restaurant. Perhaps it's blasphemous to speak of congregations like they're mere customers..."

Speaking in level tones, the man in the red trench coat proceeded to light some candles. Clearly, they were remainders from when the church was in use.

They flickered fitfully.

Micono glanced around. It looked like someone had been squatting here. There were very unchurch-like empty cans and beer bottles, as well as some old newspapers that had clearly been used as blankets...

Why would a priest bring me here? she wondered.

"Find a place to sit," the man urged. "Someone will be joining us soon."

Micono found herself accepting this. Something about his voice banished the doubt from her mind, and she followed his lead.

The groan of the decaying wood mingled with the patter of the rain.

These sounds made her uneasy.

As if excising that unease, someone flung the church doors open—marking a boisterous, flashy entrance.

"Sup! Sorry I'm late! Why call me to the church out of nowhere? You suddenly start believing in god? After all that time swearing you could only rely on your own two hands? Very passionate!"

It was a young man with a deep tan who was dressed like a mountain climber. He entered with a rapid-fire burst of words that made it very clear he rarely listened to anyone.

The silence of a moment ago was now a distant memory, and Micono had all new reasons to be nervous.

"Don't bring up the past the moment you arrive, Shouma."

"Nah, I mean... Oh, who's this girl?"

Noticing Micono, the young man went right over to her, looking her over from every angle.

"What?" she asked, frowning, not at all pleased to be treated like this.

"You have a sudden compulsion to pray? You come across a ruined church and just dash right in to meet the saints? Love your passion!"

"Of course not!" Micono snapped, jumping to her feet. This raised a cloud of dust.

The newcomer appeared delighted by this response. He glanced toward the older man.

“The love of her life was stolen by another, and she aims to get them back, even if she has to get rough. Think you can help?”

Shouma nodded violently, as if this all made perfect sense.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! So that’s why you looked like a priest? Full of passion, eh!”

“Looked?” And why do you keep saying passion? This is serious!”

Most of what Shouma was saying bothered Micono, but he just seemed tickled pink by it all.

“Oof, I like it! Keep that drive going, girl! Don’t give up—no matter what you want, no matter what you have to do! I love it! The last person I helped was this gloomy introverted secretary, so this is even better! What did he think you were again?”

“A merchant, I believe. An affluent one, the kind who deals directly with governments. Never came across anyone so nakedly desperate to suck up to money before, but he did quite well for us.”

“I suppose you could pass as a merchant,” Micono offered. “But...no, you still look like a priest to me. What do you mean? Your appearance tells you something—?”

Shouma started reminiscing about the secretary, as if cutting that thought off before Micono could finish it.

“His frustration with his own powerlessness was just the best! I dug it. I helped him out a bunch, and that only endeared him to me! You know how parents love the problem children most of all?”

Micono had no idea who this secretary was, but the more Shouma talked, the more she wanted to punch him. When she took a step forward to land her attack, the older man spoke up.

“I hate to interrupt your fascinating story, but do you have anything for her?”

Shouma thought about this a moment. He started rummaging around in his

pockets, muttering to himself.

“Hmm, stealing someone from a lover? Something to improve your appearance or charm them...”

Micono cut him off immediately.

“My appearance doesn’t matter. What I want is to end this thief’s life!”

Shouma smiled like a teacher handling an energetic student, shooting her a thumbs-up.

“To hell with good looks, right? Say no more! Oof, the passion! I’ve got just the thing for you!”

He produced a bottle and some pills from his pocket.

“Medicine?”

“That mess with the treants means they’re new and improved! We adjusted the blends so you don’t get so dang big. The other one’s from Abaddon—no special powers, but it lets you fly and boosts your physical abilities.”

Micono had never heard of treants or Abaddon, but she pounced on that last phrase.

Even with her *Godspeed* raising her abilities as high as possible, she’d been no match for Lloyd.

He could easily defeat her before she landed a single hit...

“Those sound highly sketchy...but also worth a shot.”

“Nice, nice! You found a good one! Here! Go on. Take whichever you like. I’ll grab some water...”

In the instant he looked away...

“If I’m gonna bring him down, I can’t beat around the bush!”

Micono washed the pills down with the liquid in the bottle, like she was taking her cold medicine with an energy drink.

“Ah,” the old man said.

Shouma realized she’d taken both. “Er, wait...uh...you took both of them?”

That sure is...passionate! Very passionate, but...yeesh..."

He blinked at her.

"What? Was that bad?"

"No one's ever tried..."

Micona started coughing violently, like her body was forcing all the air out of her lungs. Her entire abdomen started convulsing.

Ba-dump. Ba-dump. It felt like her heartbeat was rocking her entire body.

"Will she survive?" the elderly man asked, entirely unperturbed.

"Only one thing I can say for sure."

"Oh?"

"If she pulls through...that'll be hella passionate!"

"...Oh."

Micona was knocking over pews and candlesticks, unable to get herself under control.

"Pretty sure she's got growing pains all over. The treant roots are acting like new muscles."



“I wouldn’t know—I’ve never actually grown.”

The older man stroked his wrinkles. At his age—but he’d never grown? This would normally beg several questions, but Shouma seemed to understand what the other man had meant.

Micona’s back was swelling. Like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, thin, colorful wings unfurled in a spray of blood.

“That would be Abaddon’s doing. After the wings grow, they usually get coated in a shell...but no telling what this mix will do.”

Shouma was scribbling in a notebook, watching Micona’s changes like a scientific child taking observations of morning glories.

The older man stood perfectly still, beholding it all.

Micona heard drops of water falling. It sounded like the rain had stopped. She saw a fallen candlestick and a broken candle... She must have knocked that over. The moonlight made it easy to see.

Strange noises came from all over her. Her bones creaked like she’d been asleep for far too long, but there was more to it than that.

She opened her eyes and stared at her hand. Alongside blood vessels, Micona could see something that resembled long, thin plant roots that were woven through every inch of her.

She sat up and felt an odd sensation coming from her back—as if there were two lightweight cloths attached to her.

When she stretched her spine, there was a rustle—a dry rasp from whatever it was. It did not take her long to realize these were wings.

“She’s awake,” noted a terribly calm voice.

Micona looked in the direction of the sound and found the elderly man looking back at her.

“What happened to me?”

She knew she’d changed, but a proper explanation felt necessary.

Shouma was suddenly right in front of her. He showed no concern for her

well-being, launching right into an excited volley of words.

“Niiice! Very cool! Very passionate! You’ve done the impossible!”

Annoyed, Micona reached out a hand to silence him. She tried to grab his shirt.

“Stop saying *passion*! Tell me specifically what has ch—!”

In the instant she tried to grab him, roots stretched out from her hand, yanking on Shouma’s shirt for her. This felt entirely normal, as if the roots were her own hand and had always been there.

Shouma appeared delighted by this.

“Yes! You can do that now! Specifics? Well, you can stretch these roots out, and you’ve got wings, so I bet you can fly? Your legs are probably really powered-up, too. Your muscle fiber ought to have gone full locust.”

Micona forced herself to stay calm and examined her body again. There was a distinct sense that something had been threaded throughout her entire form. It felt light, and she could control both the roots and wings at will.

She saw herself in the shattered window glass.

“Is that...me?”

“You have been reborn,” the elder declared, as if he’d anticipated her reaction and prepared a speech. “Change is good. If your appearance is altered, that is no cause for dismay. Accept it as the blessing it is.”

“Yep, yep! Once you get used to it, it’s a blast! Abaddon’s power lets you fly, and the treant’s power lets you drain life energy from anyone and makes you super strong—what could be better?”

“Drain...energy? Super strong? A blessing...? I can kill that man...and Marie’s heart will be mine...”

Micona staggered to her feet, reeling the roots back into her hand. The motion had come on instinct.

“I’ll kill him... I’ll murder him...in that dungeon... I’ll take everything from him...”

Without so much as a glance at the old man or Shouma, Micono spread her wings and flew up into the sky.

Shouma watched her go, sounding deeply touched. “Man, you sure know how to pick ‘em. Love powers all! Too passionate!”

“Previous transformations didn’t work out this way?”

“No way. No one’s been this into it! We’re talking the king and a soldier, right? It was all we could do to control them with Abaddon’s power. And the secretary never thought about anything except money... Wait, did we do anything to the Rokujou headmaster?”

“She had such gaping openings in her heart, a little brainwashing was all it took. That reminds me: We *will* need the Holy Sword eventually...but first, that snake monster.”

“You found it?!” Shouma gaped at the other man. “You’ve been searching for decades, right? About time...!”

The elder nodded.

“Yes... Apparently there’s a quest to exterminate it. That girl is taking part.”

“Whoa. Well, she’s got blessings that rival that of any demon lord, so she might just pull it off!”

“Naturally, to ensure success, I’ll be joining this quest myself. She should prove an excellent distraction.”

“Not about to let those decades go to waste, huh? Good thing you found it before it fully recovered.”

The old man put his hand to his chin, as if he just had so *much* to do.

He looked like the captain on a long sea voyage. If he dressed the part, everyone would’ve definitely thought as much.

“Hey, hey,” Shouma said cheerily. “If you exterminate it, there’s a reward, right? What are you gonna ask for?”

“Alka’s life and my freedom.”

Shouma’s grin deepened.

“I thought so! Let’s hope that passionate girl does the trick.” He looked toward where Mikona had flown off. Without a change in tone, he added, “We’d better get moving. Or the chief’ll sniff us out... Whoop, there she is. Let’s book it.”

The man glared at the darkness. “I envy those who can change,” he muttered.

“Change is coming! For the world and for you. C’mon!”

With those loaded statements, they vanished, leaving only silence.

The abandoned church stood still, as if nothing had happened.

Only the remnants of Mikona’s thrashing remained.

Someone flew down from the sky above.

“Tch! A second too late! Lost their trail in the rain!”

Black hair in a pair of pigtails. A white robe slightly damp from her flight through the clouds. It was Alka.

Her eyes darted around the church like a detective investigating a crime scene. She picked up a shattered piece of stained glass.

“Fresh break... I dunno what you’re plotting this time, but I *will* thwart your ambitions.”

She tossed the shard away and rocketed off toward the sky.

“Say your prayers, Sou!”

Elsewhere...in the guardroom at the Azami Military Academy.

It wasn’t the most comfortable location, as it was only outfitted with a simple wooden desk and chair, a pile of gear, and a bed for naps.

It was here that the exhausted second-year cadets were waiting on standby.

“First, we’re guarding the king, and now we’re on night duty... They’re even working students to the bone, and it’s all that dungeon’s fault,” a beady-eyed cadet grumbled, slamming his cup down on the table.

“We’re getting paid for it, at least,” a nice-looking student consoled, trying to calm him down. “Hey, has anyone seen Mikona?”

“Who cares?”

“We were pretty mean, though.”

“So what?”

A third upperclassman joined in, leaning against the wall. “Her motives have been dubious for a while now, but this time around, it became impossible to ignore. No helping her unless she admits to it and explains. We’re all agreed on that, right?”

The nice-looking one took a bite of a bread roll, nodding.

The beady-eyed one seemed frustrated just thinking about it. He turned toward a fourth student, who was sprawled on the bed. “Are you gonna sleep all night? Time for you to take a shift.”

“...”

There was no response. The beady-eyed student clicked his tongue and stood up.

“Wake the hell up...uh...”

He’d slapped the cadet’s cheeks and found them cold to the touch.

“What’s up?”

“Crap! He’s cold—and his breathing’s shallow!”

He grabbed a dangling arm and tried to find a pulse. Things weren’t looking great on that front, either. Panic brought a cold sweat to the brow of the beady-eyed student.

“Huh? He sick?”

“He can’t be! He was fine earlier... Hmm?” The cadet leaning against the wall heard a strange noise from the rafters. “There’s something above us.”

He grabbed a nearby weapon and went outside. The other students followed.

The sky was clear, and the moon was bright.

The patrolling guards were all flat on the ground. No visible injuries—they appeared to be sound asleep.

“Yo, what happened?” The nice one ran over to a fallen comrade.

“A monster,” one of them managed to rasp...and then promptly passed out.

“What monster?” he asked—as something flew across the moon.

They all turned in the direction of the figure.

On the roof...was a monster covered in a pitch-black shell, surrounded by writhing roots. Micona.

They knew her well enough to recognize her. The uniform helped.

The cadets readied their weapons, calling out, “Micona? Is that you?”

She seemed disinclined to answer.

When she spoke, it was to herself. “I never needed companions... They just turn on me.”

Vacant eyes stared through the mask on her face.

“Whether you bear arms against me or not is irrelevant. I’ll take everything from you.”

“Micona! What’s gotten into—?”

Before one of the cadets could finish, roots shot out of her sleeve, wrapping around his neck. It was over before he could even try to resist.

“I’ll take everything from you, Lloyd Belladonna! I’m strong even without my minions!”

“L-let go!”

“You’re no longer my companions. You’re nothing but nourishment.”

The snared student went limp, unconscious. His weapon fell to the ground with a clatter.

No one knew what was happening.

“The more I drain, the more powerful I become—but it’s still not enough.”

“Y-you can’t—”

“I need no one who would oppose me.”

“H-help—!”

“I need no cowards who turn and run.”

In the silence that followed, Micona reeled the roots back in, her hideous visage surveying the scene.

“I need no followers. You’re all food to me. Only Marie will be by my side.”

Losing interest in the sight of her fallen friends, she turned her gaze to the moonlit sky.

“On the day of the monster quest, when the most powerful adventurers assemble...I’ll gather their strength and take everything from Lloyd Belladonna—and then Marie will be mine!”

Micona spread her gossamer wings and took off into the sky above.

Chapter 4

Forgotten Inventory: Suppose an RPG's Starting Inventory Proved Vital to Escaping a Later Crisis

Tweet, tweet.

Morning on the East Side. Birdsong made the early hours all the more pleasant. This was the only time of day when the bustle of the town took a break, a brief intermission between acts of chaos.

A crow pecked at a drunk passed out in the street. "Not dead yet!" the drunk rasped and brushed the crow away.

Consider the former statement redacted. The East Side never had moments of peace.

While the bird cheeped and the drunk groaned, Lloyd was busy sneaking out the back door of Marie's shop.

He had a linen bag on his back and the quest brochure in hand. It didn't exactly look like he was running an early morning errand.

He moved on tiptoes, radiating grim determination.

"Marie will *never* be up this early! Now's my chance!"

"And where do you think *you're* going?"

As if in reply, a black-clad figure appeared on the roof above.

"Marie?!" Lloyd's jaw dropped in surprise.

The witch descended gracefully... Well, more like she just took a whole lot of time clumsily clambering along the side of the building, like a cat who could get up a tree but not down.

Eventually, Lloyd was forced to help, and Marie was left regretting her decision to scale the building in the first place.

“I’m surprised to find myself here, too,” she muttered. “Geez, I really get into it where you’re concerned... Can’t really talk shit about Selen, Phyllo, or the kid grandma, can I?”

“But why are you awake this early?” Lloyd asked. “You’re usually sound asleep.”

“I can get up if I want to! I just cut my reading time down, went to sleep early, drank some chamomile tea... I had a hunch you’d try to go on this quest by yourself.”

Lloyd flinched. His reaction was so transparent, Marie wasn’t sure how to proceed.

“Uh...sorry! Gotta go!” Lloyd turned on his heel, clearly desperate to avoid this conversation.

Marie moved to follow, but...

“Argh, wait, Lloyd—guh!”

In her haste, she stepped on her robe and fell flat on her face.

Her undignified yelp made Lloyd stop and turn back.

“A-are you okay, Marie?”

Having given the cracked pavement of the East Side a passionate kiss, Marie staggered to her feet, clutching her nose.

“I...don’t think so. Hah!”

“Ah! Shoot!”

Marie had thrown her arms around Lloyd so he couldn’t get away.

“Come now,” she purred in his ear. “Don’t run away. Explain yourself.”

“Er, uh...M-Marie...”

“If you don’t, I’ll have to hug you all day. And, you know, that’s fine with me, but...”

With the mist wrapped around them and her arms tight against him, Lloyd finally gave in.

“Urp...,” he groaned. “Fine...I’ll explain.”

Released, he slumped against the wall of the shop, gasping.

They sat together in the chilly morning air like two classmates in the school hall.

“...Um,” Lloyd started, avoiding eye contact. He stared off into the distance.

“...Right,” Marie said, grabbing his chin and turning it toward her, enjoying the softness of his cheeks...a lot.

“Mmph...Marie...”

“Look me in the eye when you talk. Why are you avoiding me?”

She was clearly taking this matter seriously, and that really got to him.

“Well, uh...”

“It really hurts, you know. You don’t want to hurt a girl’s feelings, right?”

Despite the serious look on her face, her fingers were still making his cheeks wobble, like a teenage boy who just bought his first boob-shaped mouse pad.

If she kept this up much longer, it risked altering Lloyd’s coloration, but fortunately, he finally started to explain himself.

“So-somebody told me...that I can’t do anything by myself, and that makes me unfit to be a soldier.”

“And you thought that was true?”

“...When she said it, I thought she had a point. I’m only a soldier because Allan helped me out. I only won at the magic tournament because of Riho’s strategy. And I only beat my first monster because Selen, Phyllo, and Mena had it on the ropes.”

“But...”

Marie wanted to tell Lloyd those were all his accomplishments, but with his self-esteem at rock bottom, he’d never believe her. She cut herself off, deciding the best tactic was to let him spill his guts out.

“And this time, I let a snake monster get away, and then all these lizards came

out of the dungeon depths and created problems for the neighbors. We still haven't solved the problem, and I really want to make up for that somehow... and maybe I can't do anything on my own, but I'd really like to."

Marie adjusted her glances, wincing... At the same time, she was relieved this wasn't about her.

That explains why he's going off on his own...but his lack of self-confidence really isn't getting better.



Lloyd was so strong that destroying the kingdom would've been a simple matter for him. Here he was, however, shaking like a frightened animal, looking deeply apologetic, like a little boy trying to tell his mom why he'd fought with a friend.

"Heh." Marie smiled softly, reaching for Lloyd's head. She stroked it gently. "You're not making sense. I can't do anything on my own, either."

"Huh?"

This seemed like a complete surprise.

"I can't wake up in the morning or cook food. I was eating out of cans, for crying out loud! And I'm lousy at cleaning and laundry."

"...That's true, but what I'm talking about is..."

"That same thing."

Marie rubbed him a little harder.

"But thanks to you, I've got great food and a clean home. That's a huge help. And I'm helping you, too. I've taught you about life here, giving you information on the city and a place to stay. I mean, I feel like I'm definitely getting the better end of the deal, but..."

It was almost unfair how this living arrangement had worked out to Marie's advantage, but that aside, she was making a good point.

"Everyone supports each other in all kinds of different ways. Fishermen, farmers, even soldiers—we all have strengths and weaknesses. You may not be aware, but I bet you're helping out all kinds of people."

"...Oh."

"So it's wrong to think you can't do anything without your friends. Instead..."

"Instead?"

"Think to yourself, *If I've got my friends with me, I can do anything.*"

"Oh...I get it!" Lloyd's face brightened like a ray of light striking a prism. "All right! I'm sorry for this. I promise I'll do my best!"

“Mm-hmm.”

“You’ll beat that monster if I can’t do it! I feel a lot better about this now.”

“Mm?”

“Marie, you’re the hero who saves the kingdom from the shadows! With your support, I know this will work out! That’s what you meant when you said I could do anything if I had my friends with me! That’s so deep!”

I forgot about that!

Time for a recap. Marie had spent some time in the shadows, gathering information and attempting to free her father from the demon lord’s control. This had led Lloyd to (incorrectly) assume that Marie was a hero saving the country. In fact, it was Lloyd who had saved everyone. He’d mistaken monsters for bugs and banishing the enemy from the king’s body with his enchanted handkerchief.

Marie had taken advantage of his misunderstanding to pull off a number of different schemes. Lately, this had gotten to the point where she said things to Lloyd like “I’m so tired from saving the country all the time. Could you make me a parfait?”

A shudder of guilt made Marie’s fingers twitch, and she let out a strangled croak. Evidently, she was having flashbacks of her past mistakes.

While Lloyd muttered “So deep!” again, Marie wore a face that suggested she’d really stepped in the deep end.

Er, seriously? Even Lloyd couldn’t beat this thing! How will I do anything?!

With a huge smile on his face, Lloyd started stretching.

“I’ll do my best to handle this alone! And prove that I can do a lot on my own *because* I have friends with me!”

Looking at Marie in that moment, it was hard to imagine she was the one doing the cheering up a moment before. She had a hand on the wall, grunting, “Worse comes to worst, I’ll just have to run begging to the kid grandma...and hope she listens...”

Lloyd stepped up to Marie...

“Huh?”

...and he took her hand in his.

She freaked out.

“Sorry for making you worry. And thank you again, Marie. I’d better get going!”

Feeling bashful, Lloyd bowed low, his cheeks flushed. Then he ran off toward the dungeon.

Marie stared after him, flexing the hand he’d touched a few times. Then she turned bright red, as though the embarrassment had only then caught up with her.

She took a deep breath, waiting for the blush to fade.

“R-right...that worked out. And he *does* still like me.”

A gleeful smile spread over her face. She felt like they’d grown closer today.

“Sounds like I don’t need to go to that dungeon after all... I’m sure Lloyd will handle that monster just fine. And maybe he’ll wind up with that marriage reward!”

Counting her chickens before they hatched, Marie turned to go back inside.

“Morning, Marie.”

There she found Alka. Instantly dragged back to reality, the witch froze. Total system failure.

Crap... She definitely heard the bit about marriage...

Marie’s face still hadn’t rebooted. Locked into the smile, she slid gracefully onto her knees, carefully choosing a particularly rough patch of street. Her master had trained her well.

Alka, however, was in a very different mood.

“Marie, I need to ask you something.”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean anything by that marriage line. I don’t even know why I said—”

Marie's head was already halfway to the pavement. Fortunately, it was still too early for anyone to be passing by.

Alka displayed no interest in Marie's actions. In fact, she appeared to be rather baffled by them.

"Hmph, another skeevy fantasy? No matter."

"Har?" Marie aborted her protestation, stunned by her master's uncharacteristic generosity. "Did you eat something funny?"

"I'm the one asking the questions, Marie. Tell me, is there a dungeon around here?"

"A dungeon... Uh, what kind?"

"The kind where all the treasure chests are long since open, and it's only useful as training for rank beginners, and even the locals just think it's a landmark."

Alka's description immediately brought *that* dungeon to mind...the one Lloyd was headed to.

"I can think of one, but...why do you ask?"

Alka stared off into the morning mist. "I think an old acquaintance is there...or something like that anyway. If you know a place, would you take me there?"

The witch slowly stood up, dusting herself off. "Sure, but gimme a second. I'd like to eat breakfast first."

Marie tried to step inside, but Alka grabbed her arm.

"Sorry," she said grimly. "We don't have that kind of time. This is urgent...so we gotta fly."

"Er, fly—no! Whoa! Aaaaah!"

Without waiting for a response, Alka yanked Marie by her arm and activated some mysterious levitation effect. Desperately holding her skirts in place, Marie was in an instant state of panic. They were already flying over the rooftops.

"What are you so upset about? Lemme just get us up above the clouds; then you can point me to the dungeon."

“There’s no neeeeeeeed to go that hiiiiigh! It’s right over theeeeeere!”

From romantic ecstasies to high-flying thrills in the blink of an eye! The little grandma dragged Marie through the clouds. Seriously, it was a good thing it was so early. If anyone had seen this, Marie would never have heard the end of it.

What had once been a pastoral locale with gentle rolling hills and a dungeon used for basic testing was now completely transformed.

Armed warriors surrounded the dungeon, ready to spring into action the moment any monsters emerged.

According to reports from the scouting parties, the interior was swarming with monsters, each the equivalent of a low-level dungeon boss. Make it through those, and you’d find even more vicious monsters packed into the deeper depths.

The traps had all been replaced. They now used mysterious warp tech. One wrong step could send someone back to the floor entrance or trap them in an infinite, looping corridor...

Beyond that was truly unknown. They could only imagine what traps and monsters lay in wait.

“But that also means there may be some serious treasure waiting,” Allan mentioned. He was stationed at the site on guard duty. “The sudden change in rank was already attention grabbing, and with the quest rewards, there’s a whole lot of people willing to give it a shot.”

It sounded like the demand was higher than anticipated, so they’d been forced to call in cadets to help handle the volume.

He looked around at the glowering adventurers and sighed again—this time rather ostentatiously.

“Why did the king have to say whoever slew this snake monster would get to marry anyone they wanted?”

A significant number of the glowering adventurers were so ugly, they belonged in a zoo, but there were also some who were beyond ecstatic. The

rumors had also brought in a contingent of Temple Knights. There was quite a variety here, all told.

“If I weren’t on duty, I’d be giving it a shot myself,” Allan said, sulking. “When you hear you can marry anyone you like, it’s hard not to start thinking, *What about her...or her...?*”

The look in his eyes was definitely that of a lifelong bachelor staring at the staff photos on his first visit to a cabaret.

Then he shook it off, a vein on his forehead throbbing.

“Yeah...if only cadets weren’t on duty...so why—?” He pointed at some familiar figures in the crowd. “Why are you standing on that side of the line?!”

Allan’s shaking finger led the eye to Phyllo, Selen, and Riho. Not in their usual gear, either—they were totally kitted out, raring to go, clearly not just passing by.

They each glanced in his direction, then turned away as if he was of no interest whatsoever. Clearly, their minds were on something else entirely.

“I’m more interesting than that! No, wait—why aren’t you on duty?!”

Each of them delivered a prepared excuse in turn.

“...Stomachache,” Phyllo quipped, making a show of clutching her belly.

“I’m planning on catching a cold any minute,” Selen offered with an acrobatic demonstration of how ill she felt.

“I’m just playin’ hooky,” Riho snarled. “Got a problem?”

None of those counted as excuses. This farce just infuriated him.

“I got problems for days!” Allan yelled. “You could at least *try* to lie about it, mercenary!”

Selen and Phyllo exchanged glances.

“Playing hooky *is* a bit much, Riho.”

“...Tch.”

“You aren’t much better!” Allan roared. “Your lies aren’t fooling anybody!”

Not one of them cared what he thought, though.

“My life depends on this.”

“...Don’t worry, you aren’t invited to the wedding.”

“I-I’m just here for the treasure.”

“I knew you’d say that! But please, stop it! You’ll lower our reputation again!”

His desperate pleas fell on deaf ears.

Selen seemed to take pride in this. “What is reputation in the face of true love?! For love, I would plunge into a volcano or a dragon’s den!”

“Think of who you take down with you! What you’re doing impacts reps of the local lords *and* the cadets! Get your butt on these guard lines, now!”

“Oh, please, Allan. You’re only on guard duty and ranting because you’re scared shitless of the dragons, and that provides an excuse not to fight them.”

“Th-that’s not true! As a cadet of Azami Military Academy! As Lloyd’s disciple! I’m doing my duty!”

As if summoned by these words, Lloyd’s face emerged from the sea of adventurers.

“Oh, Allan! And everyone else!”

He was not wearing his uniform but his everyday wear. He was clearly here for the dungeon, too.

“L-Lloyd!” Allan wailed. “You’re shirking your dutyyyy!”

“Sorry,” he said, cringing. “But when I said I wanted to give the dungeon another shot, Chrome said, ‘Cool, cool,’ and gave me the day off.”

“Chroooooome!”

It was like a boss giving you permission to take paid leave because a new game came out. Allan’s fury was now entirely directed at their absent teacher.

“Sir Lloyd—here for me, of his own accord!”

“...Let’s beat this monster together and skip right to the ceremony.”

Selen’s and Phyllo’s brains were directly hardwired to their desires.

Then it was Riho's turn. She generally kept a solid logic cushion between her brain and her desires, which allowed her to rationally analyze Lloyd's participation.

"I bet he just feels guilty for letting that monster get away in the first place. Geez, Selen's and Phyllo's minds twist everything to their convenience."

"Uh, yeah," Lloyd admitted. "That's part of it."

"Part?"

"Mm, it's not the best reason but...well, it's a personal thing."

He seemed weirdly uncomfortable about all this, which made Riho all the more curious.

"Uh...mind sharing it?"

"I'm done hesitating. I know I've got a lot to learn, but...I place my trust in you."

This sudden burst of formality made Riho turn bright red. Guess that cushion slipped out.

"Er, then... W-well, if you put it that way...thanks?"

Selen was instantly by her side. "Hold up, hold up. He said that to me, not you."

"But Lloyd said...huh? What are you talking about, m'lady?"

"...You're both wrong. Master was talking to me. Our eyes met."

"What on earth do you mean, Phyllo? His eyes were locked on mine! I know that for a fact!"

They were all right. Marie had said he could do anything if his friends were there, so Lloyd had been addressing not just Riho, but Selen, Phyllo, and even Allan.

While his friends bickered, Choline's unenthusiastic voice rang out over the crowd.

"Okaaaay, time to get this dungeon cleared."

A ripple ran through the crowd. Everyone secured their place in line, ready to rush in.

“Let’s do this!” Lloyd said.

“...Mm.”

“Oh, Sir Lloyd! We’ll finish this, build a house, get married, and create a wonderful family!”

“Yeah, marr—,” Riho began, then interrupted herself. “Nope, treasure! All about the treasure!”

Armed with these expectations, Lloyd’s group joined the line of adventurers.

Left behind, Allan mournfully watched them go.

“So irresponsible... No, Lloyd’s not like them. He’ll be the hero of the realm in no time. Hngg, I’d better get back to my post.”

Grumbling, he turned to go.

As he did, he bumped into someone else.

“Whoops, sorry,” he said, bowing his head.

The old man he’d nudged looked him over, seemingly unconcerned.

“...Mm,” he grunted.

An odd sort of person.

He struck Allan as a scout, or maybe an appraiser.

“Sir, this area isn’t safe for ordinary citizens,” Allan announced. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Citizens?”

“Aren’t you? Soldiers have a duty to protect ordinary citizens, so go on home before you get yourself hurt.”

Allan was being a little high-handed, but this merely seemed to delight the elder.

“You see me as a citizen to protect... The military of Azami has some good men.”

That was sort of a loaded statement, but Allan just gestured for him to leave again.

“Go on. Get outta here. Careful on the way home.”

He gave the older man a pat on the back. As he did, someone called out to him.

“Allan, have you seen any of the older cadets? The ones who caused trouble for you?”

Allan peered over the crowd, spotting his commanding officer. “Nope, haven’t seen them around.”

“Oh...so I guess they’re the ones who collapsed at the guard post last night.”

Allan’s face clouded over. “C-collapsed? Food poisoning, or...?”

“No, apparently not. No external injuries, either...but they’re all comatose.”

“C-comatose...?”

That word reminded him of the mess with the treant at the hotel.

Treants again? But why just the upperclassmen?

As Allan hesitated, his CO changed the subject.

“No point worrying about it from here. Colonel Chrome’s looking into it. I want you filling in for them on the defensive team. I expect good things, rookie.”

“R-roger that, sir!”

Allan saluted and followed his commanding officer away.

Then he stopped, looking back.

“Did that old-timer leave?”

There was no sign of him, like he’d vanished into thin air... This bugged Allan, but his CO urged him on.

“What’s wrong? I’ve got a lot to brief you on. Let’s get moving.”

As though this was the starting point of a marathon, the adventurers were checking their gear, getting ready for the dungeon to open.

Choline was addressing the crowd through a megaphone. “Veteran adventurers may be sick of hearin’ this, but mess with other parties too much, and you’re outta here! Our goals are monster extermination and making this place safe again! Nothin’ else! Don’t forget, this is a top-level dungeon we know nothin’ about!”

“““““Yeeeeeeaaaaaahhhh!”“““““”

The crowd roared.

The king’s blunder had definitely left the mass of adventurers worked up. The scene at the dungeon entrance resembled the scene outside Comiket or any other convention.

“Right, then,” Choline exclaimed. “Dungeon’s open!”

With that, the newly built doors swung inward.

“““““Woooooooooo!”“““““”

A cheer erupted from the mob. Money, honor, marriage, Lloyd—all kinds of motivations had driven them here. These cries echoed through the first floor, just like when the doors open at Comiket.

The first floor shook, but another vibration put it to shame.

“...Hah!”

It was Phyllo.

She’d put the full weight of her strength, a match for Lloyd’s own, into a downward smash, as if trying to punch through to the floor below. Her blow rocked the entire dungeon.

The crowd surging forward lost their balance, falling to the ground.

Riho was flat on her ass as well. She looked up at Phyllo, who seemed proud of herself.

“Damn, Phyllo! They just said not to mess with other parties!”

“...I saw a bug... Eep. Gross. Scaryyy.”

“Who crushes ’em with their bare hands? And you’re the worst at acting!”

Phyllo displayed no visible emotions in response to this sound argument. Instead, she turned and ran on ahead.

“...Mm?”

Just as she thought she'd secured a lead, she heard a clattering behind her and found a young man giving chase.

“Rahhhh! I just want to be popular!”

“...You're...the stinky Temple Knight all girls hate...”

Vicious words had provoked their share of tears, but they did not slow him down.

“I'm the Temple Knight school student council president, Ben Zethonium! I remember you from the Student Sorcery Tournament! The martial artist girl!”

Apparently, the boy she'd destroyed at said competition was named Ben.

Temple Knights wore heavy plate armor, since their profession specialized in fighting magic. With a constant need for countermeasures against magic crime, his future was guaranteed...but since he spent most of his time training in heavy armor, the stench was like a kendo team's gauntlets. This left his romantic prospects far thornier than his professional ones. Poor kid.

“If I get through this dungeon, I can marry a girl! Get myself a beautiful, mild wife! Obtain true happiness! And prove how great Temple Knights are to the world!”

This last part was clearly far less important but earned brownie points for honesty!

“...No matter how hard you try, that future will never come to pass. Give up and let me win.”

“At least pretend like I have a small shot at it, for pity's sake!”

Ben really needed to address the BO first. He could only insist it was pheromones for so long.

The Temple Knight's loud sobs momentarily distracted Phyllo...

Shhhhpppp.

Like a snake that's spied prey, a belt stained the color of blood wrapped itself around her.

"No racing off ahead, Phyllo Quinone!"

Her face twisted like a demon's, Selen had used her cursed artifact to snare Phyllo.

"...Interference."

"Is not! I am merely using your momentum to propel myself through the dungeon! This is teamwork!"

Teamwork that benefited only one person hardly qualified.

"...Eek. Scary," Phyllo deadpanned.

"I'm confused, but this is my chance for victory! If I can pull—
laheaaaghhhhh!"

When Ben darted forward, a massive fireball hit him from behind, instantly barbecuing the poor boy.

"Whoops, you smelled so bad, I assumed you were a monster! What a blunder!"

Riho raced by, her mithril arm gleaming, a heat haze shimmering around her.

Despite the burning smell around Ben, his Temple Knight equipment had mostly kept him safe—although he was now sporting some singed and frizzled hair.

"...Riho," Phyllo warned. As the martial artist was dragging Selene behind her, Riho was able to match her pace.

Running side by side, the former mercenary made a proposition.

"Wait up now, Phyllo, let's all cooperate here. You, too, m'lady."

"The soles of my shoes are wearing down...huh? Cooperate?" Selen asked.

Riho nodded. She was clearly serious about this. The other two stopped to listen.

"Yeah, if we exhaust ourselves here, the monsters will get us. We don't even

know what's waiting up ahead. The veteran adventurers are a mean threat, too. We oughtta tackle this as a party."

Selen and Phyllo looked at each other, then nodded.

"Fine, I accept your suggestion. We're friends, after all!!"

"...Friends forever."

In the center of the dungeon floor, they put their fists together like their very own Oath of the Peach Garden.

As if attracted by the commotion, monsters appeared—a group of baby dragons. Despite being young, the creatures were still dragons, and even a veteran adventurer could be turned to mincemeat at the slightest error.

This was the perfect chance for the three cadet girls to show off their elegant teamwork.

It was a familiar sight for all students, past and current: People who say they're going to run a marathon together always betray one another.

"You handle this one! I'll go on ahead and work the next floor."

"I'm going to scout the floor below! For all of us!"

"...Take care of this. I'm going ahead."

Forget the Oath of the Peach Garden—these girls were all as rebellious as the Yellow Turbans at heart.

"Hey! That's not fair!"

"Says you."

"...And you."

All three had dashed off in the same direction. No stretch of the imagination would've called this teamwork. It was such a bizarre sight that it actively confused the monsters.

The three of them forgot their real foes and started bickering among themselves.

"How dare you try and slip ahead of me!" Riho accused.

Phyllo stood her ground, looking very serious. "...It's time we settled this."

"I agree!"

Yikes, so much for friendship. Even Riho was seeing red, oblivious to the other adventurers who were starting to pass them.

"Fine! Good a time as any! Let's find out which of us is stron—"

As she raised her mithril arm to fight, Phyllo turned and asked the urgent question, arms hanging limply at her sides.

"...Are you in love with Master?"

"Wh-what?"

Riho had never been more rattled by anything.

"Exactly!" Selen yelped, jumping on board. "You put a lot of work into pretending you don't have any feelings for Sir Lloyd, but you ditch me to go on a date with him, and then at the hotel, you demanded a massage from him! There's more where that came from! It's time you confess!"

The stalker clearly had to know. She pushed this topic with all her might, not about to let Riho wriggle out of it again.

"Uh, ummmmm... We're in the middle of a dungeon right now..."

"...On your knees."

"Again, dungeon? Baby dragons?! Shouldn't we take care of..."

Whump. Crack. Slap. Crunch.

The baby dragons were defeated!

"...We good now? On your knees."

A pack of monsters slain in seconds. Phyllo's usual deadpan radiated power.

"Th-that didn't even buy me time...", Riho wailed. She didn't have so much as a chance to make a run for it.

Wiping the baby dragon blood off herself, Selen pointed grimly to the floor.

"Get down, Riho. Try that rough patch of ground there."

The look in her eyes made Riho shudder. Thinking it unwise to push her luck, she got down on the ground.

“I want to hear it direct from your lips, or I can’t officially designate you a rival.”

“...Mm.”

Before they could demand an answer, the glittering warp devices in the floor depths lit up as one.

The ground rumbled. A massive dragon with scales like molten lava appeared from the warp zone.

“A d-dragon?!”

The sheer gnarliness of it rattled all three of them.

“Nice timing! Thanks a bunch, dragon!”

The perfect distraction gave Riho cause to celebrate. She even threw it a kiss, like an idol working the crowd.

“...Hah!”

Phyllo’s full-force roundhouse kick knocked out the monster’s front legs. It had been charging forward, so this sent it tumbling, crashing shoulder-first into the ground.

A deafening screech rang out as its back scales scraped across the dungeon floor, sparks flying.

It slammed into the wall but landed with its head facing them—so it tried to immediately launch a breath attack.

“This is important!” Selen snapped, and before it could spray fire, her cursed belt tied its mouth closed.

The attack was stifled too late, and the searing flames spilled backward down into its lungs. It was a sad sight, but Selen showed no mercy when romance was in the cards.

Amid pained sounds from the dragon, Phyllo swapped in and delivered a merciless mid-body strike.

“.....Mm.”

Her fist hit its unguarded belly, and the monster was down for the count.

The whole thing took ten seconds flat.

“That’s it?! You’re a disgrace to all dragonkind!”

The monster gave Riho an apologetic look (from Riho’s perspective), its gaze wet with sorrow (from Riho’s perspective), but its body fell limp to the ground.

“Argh! Hang in there, dragon! That’s not all you have to offer!”

No human had ever been more on the side of monsters.

Unfortunately, Riho’s friends weren’t done yet.

“...The finish.”

Phyllo’s toe kick left nothing to chance. Holding absolutely nothing back, it was like a keeper kicking the ball as far as possible. The dragon landed on the far end of the dungeon and did not get up.

Selen gave the immobilized monster a cold glare, then turned the exact same look on Riho.

“How dare you root for that thing, Riho!”

“I—I wasn’t rooting for it. I just... I meant, ‘Hang in there. Dragon...Slayer Selen!’”

“Dragon Slayer Selen? When did I earn that imposing name? No matter. You need to make your feelings for Sir Lloyd clear! Hold on.”

“...Crap.”

Phyllo had tried to take advantage of their double act to slip away, but Selen’s belt dragged her back.

“Crap, my ass, Phyllo! We’re a party! We’re party animals!”

This didn’t sound like the fun kind.

All they were doing here was holding one another back. They still hadn’t noticed the stream of veteran adventurers passing them by.

“Arghhhhhh! Wait for meeee!”

Even Barbecue Ben overtook them—and only then did they realize they were the last people left on the floor.

There was a moment's stunned silence, and then they began yelling at one another.

"What's the meaning of this?! Cooperating put us dead last!"

"Beating that dragon just helped everyone else out! What's the point of this party?!"

"...Extremely lamentable."

Blaming one another was futile.

As their bickering reached the level of an international dispute...

There was a rumble—once again, as if in answer to the tension in the air.

The shaking was stronger than when Phyllo had punched the ground. What was happening?

"I-is this an earthquake?"

At last, the tremors died down. All three braced themselves.

"...Might be a new monster. I'll check it out."

"Hey! Phyllo! You just want to get ahead of us!"

"Now, now, let's split the difference and have me go look. You two wait here."

Selen calmly turned to leave, but the other two girls each grabbed an arm.

"Don't you be sneaking off."

"...Yes...we're party animals. And friends forever."

...They were gonna be in last place all day.

"Owwwww..."

In the center of the earthquake, Marie had fallen on her ass.

She was in a dungeon corridor, surrounded by cold rock. Confused, she looked up to where she'd fallen from.

“Yikes...”

Sunlight filtered down from far above. She was lucky to have survived such a fall uninjured, she thought, belatedly breaking out in a cold sweat.

Next to her was the cause of the earthquake—Alka, letting her white robes flutter as she stared down at Marie, arms folded.

“Geez, I said we’re in a hurry! Flying’s nothing to scream about. You’re slowing us down!”

“You drag anyone above cloud level, I’m sure they’ll react the same way!”

“Stop freaking out. Don’t ya have any balls?”

“Of course not! No balls, and no luck!”

The impact from earlier had been caused by Alka’s forcible dungeon entry, plummeting like a meteor from the sky above.

Marie was doing her level best to take things in stride, but just the thought of that dynamic dungeon descent was enough to make her panic. It would be a while before she fully recovered.

“Enough girl talk! I’ve gotta move!”

It was unclear what part of this had qualified as girl talk, but Alka rolled up her sleeves, exhaling so hard she looked like a locomotive.

“Uh, Master? Where to? What about me?”

“Time we went our separate ways. Good luck getting home.”

Alka punched the dungeon wall.

The force was tremendous, so much so that it was hard to believe it came from her tiny arm. The impact tore open a hole to the passage beyond.

Brushing aside the dust raining from above, Marie desperately tried to get any sort of explanation out of Alka.

“Wh-what’s going on?!”

“Taking a shortcut, obviously. Tunneling your way to the shortest route is dungeon exploring, Kunlun-style.”

Alka waved a hand. “Later!”

She began burrowing through the dungeon like a human excavator.

Left behind, Marie couldn’t even muster the energy to get up.

“Huhh...”

They’d come from above. She didn’t know whether to go right or left or where the exit was. She felt defeated already.

“I guess I can’t get anywhere if I just sit here... Gotta trust my gut.”

Marie forced herself up and began following the passage, hoping to find a room of some kind. She’d barely taken two steps before...

“Yikes! What was that?”

She kicked something soft and peered down.

“Argh, it’s too dark to see!”

Marie wagged her fingers, chanting a light spell.

A small orb of light appeared, hovering above her palm. She shone the light at her feet, and saw...

“...A person? I think?”

In front of her was the hippo-faced Temple Knight, out cold, smoke emerging from his inexplicably charred hair. Picture someone who drank too much, missed their last train, and fell asleep in an empty train station. Basically, he had that vibe.

Marie held a hand near his mouth and confirmed he was still breathing.

“He is!” She sighed with relief. Then she sat him up, looking him over. “But I don’t see any injuries... I’ve seen these symptoms before... Eep!”

She’d glanced farther down the passage, and what she saw made her squeak.

“...Yiiikes.”

The corridor was filled with adventurers, all of them in the same condition as the Temple Knight. Marie recognized them from the gathering at the castle the other day.

It was like a mass grave. Except they weren't dead yet.

That wasn't the most startling thing Marie saw, however.

"...What are these roots?"

What looked like tree roots were wriggling wormlike across the floor.

"Are they alive? Nobody mentioned anything like this at the briefing..."

A shudder ran down her spine.

"A treant? I can't ignore *that*..."

She had to keep moving. Marie stepped forward.

The farther down the passage she went, the thicker the roots became. When she reached the clearing at the end of the passage...

"My, my, my."

Micona was sitting on the gnarled branches like they were her throne, legs crossed regally.

"M-Micona?"

"Ahh...Marie," she breathed, looking ecstatic. "What brings *you* here?"

Marie's attention was focused on the roots around them.

Quivering, they were like veins, piercing every wall in the room in a way that suggested they penetrated every recess of the dungeon.

Micona herself was perched not unlike a spider at the center of that web.

Marie could guess what this meant, and she gave Micona a searching look.

"Uh...I got lost," she said. "You?"

Maybe the treant was already here, and Micona had just happened to sit down on it. Marie wanted that to be true, but...

"I'm gathering power...and waiting for *him*."

Yup, she's done for. It's taken her over.

Marie's faint hope was immediately dashed.

Knowing that Micona was possessed by a treant parasite did help to clear her

mind, however.

This is bad... I dunno if I can handle this solo.

Marie had no idea how a customer of hers came to be possessed by such a thing, but if she did nothing, Micona would only commit more heinous acts.

They had always been friendly, so she wanted to help her.

“Ah...I can feel myself growing stronger... This is a blessing, indeed.”

Micona herself seemed really into it. Even as Marie stood worried for Micona, her roots were reaching out, draining the life energy from more adventurers.

Gotta keep her talking and trust the kid grandma or Lloyd will show up...

Fortunately, Micona was in control enough to speak. Marie’s voice shot up an octave, making her sound like a presenter on a variety show.

“Him? Micona, I can’t let that pass without comment! We talking love?”

Despite the weird voice, this was a clear attempt at distracting Micona with a worldwide favorite topic of gossip.

“Well...I suppose, technically, when you get down to it,” Micona offered reluctantly.

The roots pulsed in response.

Bingo! No girls can resist talking about love! But who could he be...and why does she need power?

With not the slightest clue the target of this love was herself, Marie just assumed they were talking about a boy.

Meanwhile, Micona was still talking, blushing, and fidgeting. This alone would’ve been cute, but all the roots in the room twitched with her, making it all creepy.

“You see...the love of my life is...so wonderful, but...someone stole them from me.”

Marie’s mind went into speculation overdrive.

I see...so she’s in love with this guy, but a girl stole him from her, and she’s out

for revenge?

The treant had taken advantage of this grudge, worming its way into Micona's heart. Marie found herself feeling entirely sympathetic.

"That must have been rough... You poor thing," said Marie, the one deserving of the most pity as the object of Micona's affections.

"Yes! It was! I was so sad...*hahh-hahh* ..."

Micona's wail gave way to heavy breathing. This always happened when you showed sympathy for weirdos. Take note.

Mistaking it for anger, Marie tried to deescalate the situation.

"Revenge is not the answer! If it was me, I wouldn't want anyone doing that."

"Urp!"

Since it *was* Marie, this hit Micona hard. Right in the heart.

That was a good one! I could be a counselor.

The witch patted herself on the back and kept talking, hoping Alka or Lloyd would show up soon. She had all the energy of a detective keeping a kidnapper on the phone until they could trace the call.

"So who are we talking about? You're making me curious."

This seemed to rattle Micona.

"There's nobody else here! Just me," Marie offered, as if they were chatting at her shop. "Go ahead. You can tell me."

From Micona's perspective, her one true love was prying a little too deep, and she was starting to nurse a faint hope that Marie was actually interested in her. This was why you shouldn't be nice to weirdos.

Marie cupped a hand to her ear, leaning forward expectantly. "Who is *he*?"

Micona named *him*—and her tone made it clear this was the target of her vengeance.

"Lloyd Belladonna."

"Huh?" Marie's expression froze.

No, no, no, no. Huh? Lloyd? What?!

Marie's speculation was instantly upended. She tried to sort things out, half to convince herself of the truth.

Micona's true love was stolen by...Lloyd? Lloyd stole a man?

It simply never entered Marie's head that Micona might've been in love with her. A classic straight girl blind spot, but...

But Lloyd is awfully cute, and he's good at cooking. We all joke that he's a great wife, so...it's not out of the question! Some hardcore adventurer is after his chastity!

She's just making things worse now.

Lloyd's domesticity and cutesy looks proved very convincing.

"So who was taken by him? Who's the one you love?"

Marie was hell-bent on finding out the identity of what she imagined to be some buff-manly adventurer.

Her grim look was like a shot right through Micona's heart.

"I—I can't... It's too much...," she stammered.

Yeah, I'd be embarrassed, too. I could never admit to a crush on a gay bodybuilder.

No one present had such feelings, but Marie fell silent, feeling like she'd dug up an awkward truth.

Meanwhile, Micona's love could no longer be restrained, and her roots reached out, snaring Marie.

"I can't stop myself...haah-haah ... Sorry, Marie!"

"Er...M-Micona, wait!"

"Don't worry! I won't drain you. Um...right! This is just to lure Lloyd Belladonna here! I'm only indulging the tentacle thing because I need to get that loathsome man here!"

The *right!* made it clear that Micona had just made this up.

“I’m not indulging any of this! Hey! At least make the bonds a little less tight! And put me down!”

“I can’t! I’ve hardened my heart! And carved this moment into it! Come to me, Lloyd Belladonna! Or don’t, I’m good.”

“Er...what? I couldn’t hear that last bit... Eep, not there!”

“Not *where*? Be specific!”

Micona was really kicking things up a notch, and Marie concluded the treant had its tendrils into Micona so deep, she could no longer think straight. Honestly, it was really all Micona’s doing. The treant was pretty blameless.

Panting heavily, Micona drew closer, and the look in her eyes was enough to make Marie yell for help...yell the name of the boy she loved.

“H-help! Lloyd!”

“*Aero!*”

A gust of wind shot out of the side passage—so strong the air pressure hurt Marie’s ears.

Behind the blast of air stood an ordinary boy with a pleasant smile.

“L-Lloyd!”

“I thought that was you, Marie. I was worried it might be cheating, but I figured it was better to use the dungeon-clearing technique I was taught in the country.”

Smashing through dungeon walls isn’t really a *country* thing—that’s Kunlun-specific!

With roots digging into her skin and the wind bouncing her around, Marie called out to Micona.

“M-Micona! Lloyd’s here, so could you let me go? I’m sure if we talk things out, we can clear the air! Lloyd doesn’t go that way! And as his guardian, I wouldn’t let him!”

Marie’s pleas fell on deaf ears.

“Lloyd...Belladonnaaaaaa! Why are *you* here?!”

“Er... Weren’t you waiting for him? Isn’t that why you tied me up?!” Marie asked.

“Whoops... I mean, there you are, Lloyd Belladonna! Why the big rush?!”

Try as she might, Micona just couldn’t keep the act up.

“Oh, Micona! Nice to see you again.”

Lloyd greeted her completely normally.

“Lloyd! So polite!”

“Marie, are you okay? I’m sorry. I bet you’re only here because you were worried about me, and now you’ve gotten stuck in these roots!”

He bowed his head, then looked at Micona, taking in the room as a whole. The size of it, the damage to the floor, the gaping hole in the back wall—and he realized this was the same room where the snake had been.

“This is where we met the snake, right?” he confirmed.

“Yes!” Micona cried in answer.

“Then back there... Sorry, I’m just gonna get Marie down. Do you mind backing up a bit?”

Lloyd glanced once toward Micona at the center of the room and then walked over to Marie.

An instant later...

“Huh?”

Roots formed a wall in front of him. He looked surprised.

“You just can’t stop mocking me,” Micona growled. “How can you look at this situation and ignore me?!”

“Oh, are these yours, Micona? I thought you were only sitting on them.”

“You really... No, fine, I’ll let that drop. I suppose you wouldn’t necessarily assume I was controlling them. Or realize—”

Suddenly, there was a loud noise from the passage leading to the floors above—followed by a tremendous roar, and then the flaming hot jaws of a thick-

scaled dragon.

“A dragon! Again?!”

Lloyd was as unconcerned as Marie was flustered. Meanwhile, Micona just strolled over to the creature.

The dragon turned its attention to her, red light gleaming in its open maw as it prepared to breathe fire.

Speaking to the monster, she finished the sentence she’d been in the middle of.

“That I’m no longer human.”

Micona held up a hand.

It was the same sort of motion she’d done when giving orders to her minions, but this time, it was the roots that answered.

In less than a second, Micona had the monster trussed and bound, jaws, claws, body, and tail.

“A dragon...with such ease?”

“Wait, is this a treant?”

Marie and Lloyd reacted quite differently, but Micona just flashed them a sinister smile.

“Lloyd Belladonna, witness the power that will take everything from you!”

Micona suddenly shot forward.

She hadn’t jumped. Instead, she’d spread her wings and began circling the bound beast.

“Huh? What?” Marie’s mind couldn’t keep up.

As Micona came in for a landing on the dragon’s nose, a dark shell began covering her, like a human-shaped insect.

“I’ve seen that before...”

“Just like Colonel Merthophan!”

When Abaddon had taken over the country, he’d forced Merthophan to go

berserk. The sight of it filled Marie with horror.

“Eh-heh-heh... Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh!”

Unable to stop herself from cackling, Micona swung a shell-coated arm down, hitting the monster’s head.

It dug in, like she’d punched loose soil.

As the dragon staggered, the roots coiled tighter, twisting and strangling.

The sound of breaking bones filled the air, and the dragon’s eyes rolled back in its head as it collapsed to the ground.

Micona looked happily down at Lloyd through the armor.

“With all the strength I’ve absorbed, I can do what *you* do! Are you ready to battle?”

“Uh, sorry, but the quest has to be my priority here,” Lloyd said, refusing politely. He turned to Marie and started helping her down. “This might hurt a bit.”

His total lack of interest infuriated Micona. Shell and all, she started stamping her foot.

“That’s a lousy reason to turn me down! Doesn’t this impress you?! Aren’t you scared?!”

“No, I’ve seen all this before. I dunno why you’re wearing that getup, but I’ve got better things to do here. Sorry. Will you take these roots off Marie? She’s really upset.”

“You just refuse to stop making fun of me! Fine! I have another idea!”

Micona huffed once, and the treant roots began to move.

Despite the veiny things having already been pushed well past their comfortable limits, they wound tighter and instantly dragged Marie across the floor toward Micona, dangling her in the air.

“Ah...eek?!”

Marie found herself wrapped in a tender embrace. She could not hide her surprise.

Micono could no longer hide her lust, either.

“Ah, hah, hahhh! Come! Lloyd Belladonna! Fight me! Or I’ll have my way with Marie! Oh...no need to rush.”

Beneath that shell had to be a very sketchy grin. Thank goodness it was hidden from view.

“Um, Micono? This is really freaking me out here!”

“My love demands it!”

For a second, Marie thought she saw the specter of Selen behind Micono.

“I don’t know what that—!”

“Okay,” Lloyd said, interrupting.

“Hmph. Someone can’t take a hint...”

If Micono didn’t want Lloyd to fight her, she should have been more specific.

Lloyd was looking at her the way a big brother does a misbehaving child.



“I get being afraid of lizards, but overcoming that fear is no excuse for getting carried away! It’s like you’re drunk—like alcohol has lowered all your inhibitions... Come to think of it, the last time I saw someone dressed like you, they were drunk, too!”

“I’m not druuuunk!” Micona roared, swinging toward him.

Their fists smashed together, and the shock wave blasted across the entire floor.

And the winner was—Lloyd.

“Grahhh!”

With a monstrous grunt, Micona was sent flying backward. She caught herself with her wings just before she slammed into the wall, forcibly hovering in the air.

“If I face Lloyd Belladonna head on, his cheating still has the advantage!” she said, gasping for breath.

He came after her again, taking a huge leap in her direction and using momentum to propel a dropkick.

“Hahhh!”

“Tch!”

Micona twisted herself, darting evasively and refusing to be so easily pinned down.

Clangggg.

There was a low rumble like a giant nail being pounded. Lloyd’s kick shattered the wall itself.

Even with his foot buried in rubble, his eyes never left Micona.

“Arghhh! Let me go! All this dangling is turning my stomach!”

With the superhuman battle rocking the floor, Marie was being tossed around like a moth in the wind.

Micona’s next attack used the treant roots—all of them, from all directions.

She'd already had them stretched all over the place. This was clearly a preplanned move she wasted no time in unleashing.

"Bind attacks from all directions! No escaping! You'll be caught! And torn apart! Drained to a husk! You cheater!"

Roots came at Lloyd from above and below, right and left. There was clearly no path to avoid them.

But just as it seemed like Lloyd would be subject to the most undignified of indignities...

"Why would I run?" he asked in a totally normal tone.

He knocked all the roots aside. One managed to wrap itself around his ankle, but he kicked it off like dust.

Scraps of bark were piling up beneath his feet like the sidewalk near a freshly mowed lawn.

"Uh...?" Micona managed, gaping at him. Her roots were so strong they'd even bound a dragon, but Lloyd made them look harmless.

"Hup!"

Lloyd grabbed a handful of the mulch, flinging it at Micona.

"Augh!"

A fastball. The difference was that the root was the size of a grown man. There was a thunderous *whoosh* as it passed right by Micona and slammed into the wall in the back.

"I get that controlling these is a good way to avoid having to touch the lizards, but that's no excuse for using them on people! Didn't anyone teach you not to play with brooms or mops? Same thing!"

"These aren't cleaning equipment! They're my power!"

Hovering in the air, Micona shook with rage. She hadn't abandoned her humanity to *clean*.

Lloyd wasn't trying to make fun of her. These inhuman powers were just the equivalent of a trash picker to him.

Micono was finally starting to realize that Lloyd's strength wasn't a hack, but instead the real deal. Frustrated, she ground her teeth.

"You're a monster," she spat. "You disguise yourself as a feeble little creature. The whole time I thought you were cheating, I bet you were laughing behind my back! Toying with me! Stealing the love of my life!"

"Are we done yet?" Lloyd called out. "The more you run around, the more the booze is gonna go to your head, and the worse the hangover will be."

He still thought she was just drunk. Micono's furious quivering subsided.

"...You insist on ridiculing me to the bitter end, I see. You use that guileless face to force opponents to underestimate you and take advantage of them. It even worked on Marie..."

Micono quietly landed on the floor, her mind clearly made up.

"I-is it over? Are you done now?" Marie asked. "Then let me go before—"

"I wasn't sure what toll this form would take on me, and I was scared to try—but I can't afford to hold back now."

The second-year student was muttering under her breath, as if arguing with herself—it was unclear if she'd heard Marie at all.

When the whispering stopped, Micono's fingers began twitching violently.

"Um...what is that?" Marie asked.

The light of magic surrounded Micono, moving through all parts of her body.

She took her time with this, a twisted smile on her lips. Then she let out a cry of anger, ecstasy, sadness, and pain. "I told you to remember me. The famous Godspeed Micono!"

"Godspeed Micono?"

Before Marie could say more, Micono closed the gap between herself and Lloyd.

The force of her leap carved cracks into the ground.

Her leg strength was terrifying.

With treant roots serving as muscles, her thighs bulging, she aimed a mid-kick at his torso.

“——!”

The speed of Micona’s attacks was far greater than before, and Lloyd did not have time to block it. He was sent flying helplessly away.

He slammed into the wall just like the chunk of root he’d thrown a moment before.

“That was so fast! Gah!”

Grimacing, Lloyd pried himself out of the wall and tried to recover, but— “Too late!”

This time, Micona used her wings to lunge even faster, approaching her opponent in the blink of an eye. Her hands clasped the sides of Lloyd’s head and slammed it into the wall behind.

“Uh!”

“I’m gonna grind your skull!”

Micona began rubbing Lloyd’s head against the wall, floor, and ceiling like she was writing letters in the dirt with a stick.

“Eek!”

The sight was so horrifying, Marie let out a shrill scream.

Micona only stopped when the floor was in pieces and the wall reduced to a dust heap.

Blood was running down the sides of her face, and from her eyes as well. It trailed down her nose and into her mouth. The spell must have been doing severe damage to her vision.

She spat out the blood, annoyed, and lifted Lloyd’s head. “...This is all your fault,” she snapped. “You took everything—”

Before she could finish, Lloyd grabbed her arm in both hands and threw her.

“Hah!”

“Aughhh!”

The force of the throw nearly wrenched the girl’s arm off. Micona was slammed back-first into the floor, crumpling her wings.

“That’s right; I forgot! Godspeed Micona, was it?”

Micona looked up and saw that Lloyd’s face was completely uninjured, despite all the abuse it’d taken. She shivered at the sight.

“What?! How are you still intact?”

“I’ve been through far worse back in the village. To my great shame.”

“The village?! What abusive kind of village is that?!”

“Kunlun.”

“From the fairy tales?! How stupid do you think I am?!” Micona shrieked.

As she did, treant roots shot out of her in all directions like missiles. Enhanced by the *Godspeed* spell, they came at Lloyd like spears hurled with tremendous force.

“Rahhh!”

Lloyd dodged each and every one.

Bounding off the roots, tying them together, threading the needle between tiny gaps in the flurry of attacks. Nothing hit Lloyd.

“Dammit! Damn you!”

With *Godspeed* activated, Micona’s attacks were faster than ever before, but she was still inexperienced with her new powers. The way she now conducted herself betrayed her actions far more than when she’d merely been attacking directly.

“Good job, Lloyd! Keep that up!”

Marie cheered Lloyd on...

“What’s all the ruckus? Is that Lloyd’s voice?”

“I won’t be fooled! You’re just trying to trick us into letting you...”

“...No, it really is him.”

Familiar voices could be heard down the hall. Riho, Selen, and Phyllo entered the shattered remains of the room.

Between their own squabbles and the occasional dragon fight, none of them were in great condition—and it seemed like they hadn't noticed the condition of the dungeon around them.

"Sure is a lot of noise... Another dragon?"

"I'll take on any monster or mongrel this place has to offer!"

"...Mm? Roots? And Marie?"

A number of Micona's offshoots had stabbed into the floor right in front of them.

"Riho!" Marie called. "Stay back! This place isn't safe!"

"Crap!" Lloyd had been dodging handily, but when he realized stray shots might hit the three new arrivals, he started to panic.

He stopped dodging and began deflecting the branches so they wouldn't hit his friends. Grabbing the things, he tossed them to the ceiling, or kicked them aside...

"Er, what?! Sir Lloyd!" Selen cried. Then she shrieked, "Augh!"

The sudden change in tactics had been too much for him, and he missed a root—which struck him square in the back.

"Aaaaaaah!"

He was flung forward, slamming into the ground right in front of the three girls.

"...Master!"

"Yo, Lloyd...what is this?"

"Is that Micona?"

Having finally landed a blow, Micona stopped the onslaught. She was out of breath and clearly needed a moment. Her *Godspeed* had likely worn off.

"Even with *Godspeed*...I only hit you once...and then only because you were

guarding your friends... You're a monster!"

If those girls hadn't shown up, Micona would've been the one on the ground.

Gasping and bleeding all over, she glared down at Lloyd. "This is hardly an even match...but this is my shot at finishing him off!"

All the offshoot roots began reaching toward him.

"Uh...," Lloyd grunted, struggling to his feet.

"Sir Lloyd! Are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine! Look out! Here they come!"

"...They...aren't attacking?"

This time, the roots weren't coming after Lloyd. Instead, they were thrusting into the floor, ceiling, and walls, burrowing off in all directions.

"Waiiit... If this is a treant... Urgh, bad memories."

They had snared the nearby dragon corpse, and Riho grimaced at the sight.

"Are they...draining the life force? From that beast?" Marie asked, horrified.

"You know the difference between us?" Micona asked Lloyd gleefully. "You have friends...and friends just lead to unnecessary pain! With the powers I've gained, I know I've made the right choice! What I need is nourishment! Stepping stones!"

Meanwhile, back on the surface, a rescue and a medical team waited on standby, ready to go at any moment. This was a high-level dungeon with dragons in it, after all.

"...It's awfully quiet," Allan observed.

He was near the entrance with the defensive squad.

Having been inside himself, he knew how scary the dungeon below really was and just how powerful its monsters were...yet not a single adventurer had retreated, nor had there been any reports of injuries. It was starting to feel suspicious.

The soldiers around Allan seemed to be having similar thoughts. "There must

be something going on in there,” someone said.

None among them suggested going to take a look, however. Allan knew only too well why.

The dragons.

The defensive squad exchanged glances, but nobody volunteered.

Allan folded his arms, considering his options.

“You’re only on guard duty because you’re scared of the dragons.”

...Shut up.

Allan’s brow furrowed.

Those words had only been said out of spite, but part of him knew he was running from danger. He couldn’t argue against it.

If Lloyd wasn’t joining him on the guard line, if they weren’t doing their duty here together...then why was Allan here? Should he have gone with the girls? And worst of all...

“The person I want to be...wouldn’t be stuck here.”

He’d been ashamed of his plan to climb the ranks and give orders from a place of safety just so he could avoid fighting the monsters he feared.

“I thought I made up my mind to follow in Lloyd’s footsteps, even if I can never hope to match him.”

Allan knew he was no match for Lloyd, or Selen with her artifact, or Riho with her powerful magic and mithril arm, or Phyllo, whose physical strength was every bit as impressive as Lloyd’s. The thought of it made his fingers dig into his arms.

“What’s wrong, Allan?”

His commanding officer was standing beside him.

This was all it took. Allan looked up.

“...Sir, I’m gonna take a look inside.”

“Can’t allow it. We’re the defensive line. It’s our duty to prevent the monsters

breaching the surface.”

His CO wasn't the only one against the idea.

“What are you thinking?”

“Leave them to it!”

“The adventurers can take care of themselves.”

However, Allan shook them all off, forcing himself to speak. “You know something isn't right! Not a single person has come back! If something's going down...by the time it reaches us, it could be too late! I'm going in!”

Allan hefted his ax, stepping toward the dungeon entrance.

His CO sighed and placed a hand on Allan's shoulder.

“Allan...”

“Don't try to stop me.”

“What are you talking about? If I let you go alone and you don't make it back, that'll be a real problem. Argh, cadets these days...”

With another sigh, the CO then lit a fire under the soldiers behind them.

“Men, are you going to let a mere student show you all up? Aren't you soldiers of Azami?”

Allan's eyes went wide. His CO's speech was working, and the squad members were visibly perking up.

“When you put it that way, no way am I staying quiet!”

“Hell no! We're not letting some cocky rookie outdo us!”

“They've had enough magazine articles about them!”

“Throwing up double peace signs in the photo!”

Half of this just seemed to be rooted in envy.

Once he was sure the squad was ready, the CO turned back to Allan.

“Right, we're accompanying you for now, but we're fleeing at the first sign of danger. We're here to rescue people, not to get rescued ourselves!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

The whole squad joined Allan.

He fought off his tears and led the others into the dungeon depths.

“Y-yo...”

Even right past the entrance, the sights were already rather sinister.

“They’re all...unconscious? Any injuries?”

“No, nothing that should’ve knocked them out.”

“Did the adventurers and dragons take each other out? But that doesn’t explain this...”

Monster and human alike were comatose on the floor. There were visible signs of a scuffle, but it was like everyone had suddenly keeled over simultaneously.

While the squad stared in confusion, Allan alone was struck by a sense of familiarity.

“Is this...a treant?”

Even as he spoke, a dragon lunged out of a side passage.

“Get these sleepers to safety!” the CO barked.

Allan’s legs were shaking again. He was frozen on the spot.

The large monster was almost upon him.

Allan had a flashback to a day not long ago, the day Lloyd had entered his life.

The foundation-day festival—swarms of locusts all around, and he’d been cowering...until Lloyd had helped him conquer that fear.

“Argh, why am I regressing? Staying stagnant is bad enough, but slipping back into old habits? No way I’ll ever catch him that way!”

“What’s wrong, Allan? ...Allan!”

Too worked up to hear his CO’s voice, Allan threw himself toward the dragon.

And...

“Rahhhhh! Hah!”

His ax landed square on its forehead.

There was a dull thud, and the beast staggered back.

“It’s faltering!”

“Ch-change of plans! Surround it! Allan gave us an opening! Don’t let up! Bring that thing down!”

Anyone not otherwise occupied charged in. With trained soldiers hammering it from all sides, the dragon never got back up.

“““Aw yeahhhh!”””

The defensive squad cheered. Allan was among them, panting hard.

“All right! Let’s keep this rescue going!”

“Yeah...mm?”

There was a rumble in the distance, and the smiles slipped from their faces.

“...Again?”

That same passage was serving up a second helping of dragon.

“Fine by me! Send as many as you like!” Allan cried, far more confident now. Once again, he was the first to charge forward.

But, well...he must have jinxed himself. The passage took him at his words and sent in not one, not two, not three...but fourteen dragons.

“Maybe a little too many!” he yelped.

“Run, Allan!”

“Dammit! I’ve come too far to turn back! I’m gonna at least buy you some time!”

Undaunted, Allan just kept on running forward. The soldiers all thought he’d lost his mind.

To hold the monsters’ attention, Allan bellowed, “Come at me, ya puny beasts!”

Thud...thuuud...

As if in answer, one dragon after the other collapsed to the ground.

“Huhhhhh?!”

None of soldiers could believe what was happening. With jaws hanging open, they were rubbing their eyes.

“Wh-what’s going on?” Allan asked, every bit as shocked as the others.

“D-did he knock out the dragons with a shout?” someone whispered.

“No way...”

“But...this is Allan.”

“The top brass are backing him for a reason...”

Things seemed to be getting weird.

“N-no, of course not!” Allan yelped. “Get those wounded outta here! I’m sure there’s more farther in!”

Allan’s denial only convinced them he really *had* defeated them himself.

...Nobody saw the roots winding round the dragons’ feet.

“Heh-heh-heh... Humans just weren’t enough! Dragons are so much more nourishing.”

Miconna seemed to be gorging herself.

There was color on her face; her shell was positively glowing and...getting thicker?

“On your feet, Lloyd Belladonna! Let’s settle this.”

He was still in pain, but he staggered to his feet.

“...I can’t afford to lose here. I have to prove friends aren’t a liability!”

“Perfect! And I’ll prove friends can’t ever make you—”

Miconna was interrupted by a kind of glare no one had ever seen on Lloyd’s face.

“I’m not going to stand by while you hurt someone precious to me!”

Micono clicked her tongue, infuriated. “Is that precious person...Marie?”

“Of course!”

The darkness around Micono grew even more intense.

“...I’m gonna kill you.”

“And once I beat you, I’m gonna defeat that snake monster! Then I’ll be able to tell everyone I’m a soldier with pride!”

“Shut up! If it weren’t for you...your words...your very being...! I’ll take everything from you!”

Both parties flung themselves forward.

There was a crunch as their arms locked.

Foreheads pressed together, each one let out a roar.

“Micona!”

“Lloyd Belladonna!”

They were both flung backward.

As soon as they landed and recovered, they clashed once more.

The second impact left them both with a fist on the other’s brow. Blood trickled down Lloyd’s forehead.

Micona’s shell cracked open, revealing her bloody eyes.

Each combatant wore an expression that made it clear they weren’t ready to back down yet.

As if they’d shaken on it, both Lloyd and Micono leaped back once and then slammed together again.

This time fist struck fist.

The sheer pressure made a thunderous crack echo across the chamber—followed by smaller snaps from all around.

“Er, wait—yikes!”

“...! Marie! Over here! The room’s collapsing! Get to the passage!” Riho

yelled.

Marie scrambled over, desperate to reach safety.

Selen's cursed belt grabbed her just in the nick of time...

"...There it goes," Phyllo whispered.

As the duo in the center pounded away at each other, the damage from the roots and their blows finally proved too much for the room's structural integrity, and everything went tumbling to the level below.

Lloyd and Micona continued trading hits, even as they plunged down.

"Lloyd!"

"I'm going after him! Hold on to me! The belt can lower us safely!"

Selen's belt snapped around a protruding rock, and she and the other girls began heading down after Lloyd.

On the true final floor, Lloyd and Micona landed, glaring at each other.

The instant they touched down, fists sliced the air.

"Ungh!"

"Gah!"

Both staggered and fell. Shoulders heaving, exhausted, they observed each other carefully, trying to catch their breaths.

Lloyd rubbed the sores on his body, forcing the dislocated bones back in place.

Then he got back on his feet and started inching toward Micona.

She had put so much stress on her body that blood was pouring from her ears.

After wiping it off, she whispered, "I just gotta..." and sent roots out in all directions.

"Mm?"

Lloyd looked momentarily confused. He'd expected the attack to come at him, but she'd directed it elsewhere...

When he followed the attack, he saw the girls climbing down. He knew what Micona was trying to do.

“Wait, Lloyd! She’s deliberately targeting us!” Riho yelled, too late.

He tried to protect them, and the roots struck home, not giving him a chance to defend himself.

“Flawless! You were on guard, but no use! Having friends leads to abject failure, Lloyd Belladonna!” Micona crowed.

“That’s wrong!” he argued, a rare note of irritation in his voice.

“Based on what? The horrible injuries you just sustained?”

“Someone precious to me said I can do anything if I have friends!”

“Can you heal those injuries with friends?” she mocked. “You can’t! Can you get stronger? Not happening!”

“Even if my injuries aren’t healed and I can’t get stronger, I can keep on trying! They make me feel like I can’t afford to lose!”

Refusing to quit, Lloyd flung himself at Micona. It was clear his movements weren’t as crisp, however. The damage had taken its toll.

Micona lowered her center of gravity, a malicious smile spreading over her lips—and she absorbed his punch.

There was a *thunk*. Lloyd’s fist struck her belly, but the shell blocked the blow.

“Gah!”

“I do admire the courage it must take to come at me in so much pain.”

The shell swelled up, trapping Lloyd’s arm, and Micona began using him as her personal punching bag. His head snapped back and forth, but the light failed to leave his eyes.

“Your tenacity is your only redeeming quality, Lloyd!”

“If my body won’t move the way I want—*Aero* !”

Spying a brief pause in her flurry, Lloyd cast a wind spell on the palm of his trapped hand.

Micona let out a screech, the powerful gale blowing her away—but her smile suggested she'd been waiting for that.

"I'm afraid my body can handle any magic now." She glared at Lloyd—and let countless leaves stab every inch of his body.

An automatic counter to magic attacks—the power of the treant demon lord, the Erlking.

They were both down—but Lloyd's damage was far worse. Micona's hard shell must've resisted magic.

"Ha, I'm surprised you can still stand—guess I'd better switch to ranged attacks."

Aero had failed, but this fact did not diminish the light in Lloyd's eyes. His face was swollen, and he was bleeding all over but still searching for his next move.

"My legs are dead weights...I can't get any speed, so my punches will be even weaker... I can still use magic, though. If I could use *Godspeed* like her..."

Even as Lloyd's mind scrambled, Micona spread her roots, surrounding him.

"Out of tricks, Lloyd Belladonna? Then let me end this!"

As she let out this shriek of triumph, Lloyd's voice rang out.

"*Godspeed?! That's it! That's the only way!*" As her attacks sped toward him, Lloyd ran at them. "*Aero!*"

"Ha! Useless tricks again? Do you love my leaves that much?!"

His spell did not hit Micona—he'd directed the spell somewhere else entirely. Knocking the offshoots aside, Lloyd leaped forward at blinding speeds.

"Rahhhhhh!"

Ignoring the hail of leaves, he came right after Micona.

"Ngh! You used the magic to propel yourself forward? But..."

Micona was still able to block his blow. She purposely thickened her shell, weaving roots around herself.

Grinding her teeth, Micona braced herself—and absorbed the blow.

“I’m shocked you still had that in you, but that won’t be enough—”

“All right! I think I’ve got the hang of it!”

“Of what?” Micona asked, blinking at him.

A smile on his face, Lloyd spoke with the utmost confidence.

“My own style of *Godspeed! Aero!*”

He held his right hand to one side, chanting the spell. The leaves came after him, but the force of his magic sent him flying sideways too fast for them to follow.

Lloyd let the centrifugal force power a kick.

Micona did not expect this.

His attack landed square on the side of her head.

She screeched, and the shell covering her head shattered, crumbling away. Her eyes turned, glaring at him.

“The counter can’t keep up? Dammit!”

“One more! *Aero!*”

Keeping the momentum of his spin going, Lloyd used his left hand to fire a burst of wind at the ground.

The sideways momentum and this new gust sent him spinning right at Micona.

“Using chain cast to fly?!”

Aero wasn’t usually strong enough for that to be possible, but Lloyd’s spells were just that explosive.

He was using this trick to attack with far greater speeds than before.

Micona’s automatic leaf counter never even came close to him. They all flew wild, stabbing into the walls and floor of the dungeon.

“This! Is! Insane!” Micona yelled, desperately dodging. Her own speed was massively buffed, but...

“...More, more, more!”

Lloyd's speed burst was even faster.

Now he was casting *Aero* from his feet, changing his direction at right angles in midair, zigzagging in unpredictable directions too fast for her eyes to follow.

It was like fighting a typhoon. Lloyd's friends watched, shielding their eyes.

"I...I can't believe it... Even in this form... Even with everything I have...I still can't..."

Micona's wings flapped in frustration, eyes bloodshot, blood pouring from her nose and ears. Swearing under her breath, she scurried desperately away, but...

"Gotcha! *Aero!*"

Lloyd slipped right under her guard and hit home.

Spraying blood, spit, Abaddon's shell, and shards of treant wood, Micona was slammed wordlessly into a wall. The impact embedded her in the stone.

Lloyd landed on the ground and fell to one knee, breathing heavily.

"I did it!" he exclaimed, pumping a fist.

"Lloyd!"

Having watched the entire incredible fight, his friends all rushed over to him.

"Sir Lloyd! You were so amazing!"

"That was nuts. You really are something."

"...Master!"

And as they gathered round...a gentlemanly voice joined theirs, followed by clapping—well, more like a slapping sound.

"...Not a bad fight! It certainly woke me up."

With impeccable manners, the snake monster peered down at Lloyd's face, applauding by hitting itself with its own tail.

Lloyd staggered to his feet, facing the monster.

"I forgot... You're why I'm here..."

Despite his injuries, he put his fists up, and the snake's tail reached toward

him— “You’ve grown so tall, Lloyd! It does this old man’s heart proud.”

Instead of attacking, the tail rubbed his head. The monster spoke like a proud uncle doting on his nephew, and no one knew what to make of it.

“Um... Who are you?” Lloyd asked.

“You don’t remember? Ah, I suppose you wouldn’t. You were this wee little thing!”

Everyone gaped up at the beast, who awkwardly scratched its neck with its tail.

“I suppose I should introduce myself—belated, I know! My name is Vritra.”

It bowed its head deeply.

“The guardian beast of Kunlun,” it added.

“““Kunlun?!”””

Lloyd was as surprised as everyone else.

“Yes, Kunlun’s guardian beast—I mostly work to protect the seal and maintain Alka’s power.”

“Chief Alka’s power? But why are you in a dungeon outside Azami?”

Vritra stroked its chin with its tail again. “Follies of youth, perhaps? ...Why hasn’t she told you? I assumed she would have! I suppose that means... Anyway, why am I here?”

Vritra suddenly looked furious.

“There’s a good reason! That little grandma suddenly said she wanted to make an apron out of my skin and whipped out Excalibur! I’m a guardian beast! Of her own village! Not one word of apology! There’s a limit to any snake’s patience. I left to convalesce... Oh dear, sorry, I don’t know what came over me.”

The flash of rage passed, and Vritra bowed apologetically.

“To convalesce? So you don’t mean any harm to the locals?”

“Not at all! If my presence here is causing issues, I’ll happily move on. But

until that grandma apologizes... I was hoping you were all here on her behalf—or at least Lloyd.”

The snake looked quite sad. Everyone felt sorry for it.

“Another victim of the kid grandma... Er, wait a sec...” Doubt entered Marie’s mind. “I assumed the dungeon monster was behind the treant and Abaddon thing... So what actually happened to Micona?”

How had Micona ended up in this unnatural state?

Vritra had seemed like the obvious cause, but that appeared to be highly unlikely now.

“I’m afraid that’s unrelated to... Hmm?”

As if in answer, a new voice called out from the back of the chamber.

“That was me.”

Everyone turned to look. A man stood there, as if he had just appeared, as if he had not even existed a moment before.

This older man had been watching Lloyd’s fight in silence. Now he approached.

“This was her desire—I merely offered some assistance.” He glanced toward Micona’s battered form but quickly lost interest.

“Assistance? Then you’re...”

The man ignored Marie entirely, stepping closer.

“Hello,” he said, greeting Lloyd emotionlessly.

Lloyd and his friends grew very guarded. The way this man carried himself and the air of mystery about him all left them with no other choice.

Barely able to stand upright, the young man turned to face him.

“By the way,” the old man said, before Lloyd could speak.

The deadened tone was gone. Now his voice was pleasant, the sort of voice that demanded you listen close.

The tension in the air dissolved...and that only terrified all of them.

The elder didn't seem to care. His eyes remained fixed on Lloyd.

"Boy, what do I look like to you?"

"..." He hesitated. Then his eyes narrowed, and his tone grew harsh. "...A bad guy. I can't think of anything else."

The old man nodded, seemingly thoroughly satisfied, like a CEO receiving a positive financial report, or a king looking out over a peaceful realm. He possessed that same sort of aura.

"Ah, so that's who you are."

The man peered into his Lloyd's face, his voice elevating to the pitch of a general rallying troops.

"Boy! You wish to be a hero? For the smiles of the people? No matter the cost to life and limb? To battle evil, heroically?"

Lloyd was shaken by this but nodded. "Uh...well, that's why I became a soldier."

"Then now is your—"

Before the old stranger could say more...

There was a thunderous noise. Something was coming toward them.

"N-now what?!"

A pigtailed grandma came busting out of the floor.

"Found youuuuuuuuuuuu!" she roared, like a devil's shriek.

Alka's white robes were covered in dirt, but she shook herself once like a wet dog and they were as good as new. No need for bleach, detergent, or fabric softeners. Yet another way she was permanently over-the-top.

Her dramatic entrance made everyone yelp.

"Drat it all! I was trying to get to the bottom of this dungeon but went too far and nearly hit the mantle! But I finally caught up with you! Just what are you plotting this time?! Fess up!"

Her frothing rage did not perturb the old man one iota. He merely stroked his

chin, looking completely relaxed.

“You never change, Alka. Calm yourself. I’m in an excellent mood. We find ourselves in the presence of a familiar face!”

“How can I be calm? Familiar face? Who—?” At this point, Alka noticed the snake, and her eyes went wide. “...Vritra? Why are you...?”

Its massive body writhing, the guardian beast sighed. “We meet again, Chief. But I think there’s something you need to say before you act surprised.”

“What do I need to say? H-how’s it been?”

“Do you not remember?! After what you did to me?!”

This exchange was so ridiculous, it was killing all the tension in the room.

Then the older man grabbed Vritra, moving too fast for the eyes to see, slipping around to the wound on its back.

“Wha—?! You there, unhand me! That’s a sensitive spot!”

“I heard your wound had not healed, but for the guardian beast of Kunlun to be so badly injured—you were careless, Vritra!”

“You know me? Then you must be...”

“For a decade now, I’ve been fleeing Alka, gathering pawns. Finally my moment has arrived, guardian beast!”

Vritra tried to buck him off, but he wasn’t letting go.

“I can’t let this chance escape! If I eliminate you without a trace, Kunlun...and Alka’s seal will be weakened! And the world will become what I’ve long yearned for!”

Without further hesitation, he plunged his own arm into the wound, rummaging inside Vritra like a baker testing the temperature of the water.

“Hey! You! Knock that off!” the monster yelled, like a boss scolding a subordinate.

The old man’s brows twitched, and his lips curled up.

“Farewell, Vritra. Guardian beast of Kunlun. If you must bear a grudge, direct

it at her—and yourself, for taking Alka’s side.”

“Hngg... Certainly little good has come of supporting her. But if I’m gone, Kunlun will be in shambles... Not to mention the world!”

“I am well aware.”

No matter how the beast fought, the man remained utterly placid.

An instant later, its scales began to glow a bluish white, then turned to dust, vanishing.

“Vritra!” Alka yelped. “Argh, do you realize what you’ve done?!”

It was all over in an instant, before anyone could act. They could only stand and watch as the snake monster disappeared.

The elderly man raised his hand triumphantly.

“Vritra is gone, and the priestess of salvation’s power is no longer maintained. Now all I need to do is open that door.”

“How dare you, Sou!”

Alka broke into a run, but the old man—Sou—didn’t even raise an eyebrow. He just stood there.

“Resistance is futile. Your power no longer exists... You will wither away, Alka, and in time, I’ll—Gah!”

Even as he crowed with victory, the chief planted a blow right in the pit of his stomach.

“A-aughhhh... Huh? No! How?!”

The man staggered back, almost comically distraught. His confidence shattered as he found himself rolling across the dungeon depths like a dying cicada.

“...If Vritra is gone, Alka’s power goes with it! *Hack...koff...*”

Tears in his eyes, he barely croaked out the words.

All traces of his earlier dignity gone, he was reduced to an old man unable to recover from a fall. Lloyd and his friends could only watch in stunned horror.

Alka seemed every bit as surprised. "...I thought so, too, but...seems like I'm fine? Uh...why?"

Sou recovered enough to sit up.

"If the guardian beast is gone, leaving no trace behind, then how can you maintain your power? Unless..."

A haunted look entered his eyes, as if he'd just remembered something.

"I've heard stories! Vritra's skin was made into an artifact that automatically protects whoever equips it! If that equipment is out in the world at large—But I've been the world over and never heard tell of it!"

This was a miscalculation. Sou rose to his knees, shaking his head.

"Gosh! That artifact sounds so useful!" Selen exclaimed. "And a lot like my belt, now that the curse is lifted!"

Sou looked toward her, frowning.

Wriggle, wriggle.

Before his eyes was a strange, writhing belt.

"....." The old man picked up a pebble and tossed it at Selen.

Snap!

The cursed belt volleyed it like a tennis ball.

"....."

Toss...toss...

Snap! Snap!

"The skiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiin is right heeeere!" Sou roared, like he'd blown his entire fortune at the racetracks.

The shock was so great, he collapsed to the ground.

As if in response, a voice came from Selen's hips—from the cursed belt.

"Whew, I thought I was done for!"

"Eep! It spoke!" Riho yelped, jumping away.

“Now, now,” the belt said, its tone as gentlemanly as before. “Don’t look at me like I’m some sort of creepy-crawly! Such a shame that your schemes have been dashed. I may have lost my body, but there was a new host right here!”

“Hnggg...,” the old man groaned.

“Ha-ha-ha,” Vritra chuckled, sounding thoroughly pleased with itself. “I do apologize for taking possession without permission, young lady. I’ll have to make it up to you later.”

Heedless of all dignity, Sou rolled around on the ground for a minute, then staggered to his feet, turning to Alka.



“Nicely played. Was this why you crafted a belt and equipped it to a friend of yours?”

“Did I?” Alka looked puzzled for a minute; then, realization dawned. “Oh, I remember! I was using Vritra’s skin as an apron and accidentally sliced it up while making pasta! Since it was all stained, I called it a cursed belt and sold it for dirt cheap!”

“.....”

This left Sou speechless.

There was an awkward silence, and then the belt snaked out to Alka’s side.

“I suppose this is what they call ‘saved by the skin of my teeth’? Although it’s my back, in this case. Oof, such painful memories!”

“But...Vritra, why were you here?” Alka asked, baffled.

“You of all people should know the answer! You used Excalibur to carve off a piece of me while I was sleeping and turned it into an apron...of all things! I left Kunlun to express my indignation and convalesce! And! If it weren’t for that wound, Sou could never have come after me!”

“Ohhh, that’s right. You left a Dear John letter in lousy handwriting saying not to look for you! So I didn’t.”

“Apologize, you fool! Read between the lines!”

“...? ‘Don’t look for me’ is only one line?”

“I give up! You’re the worst! Absolutely despicable!”

Sou watched them bicker in silence, then rose to his feet, pried Micono out of the wall, and prepared to flee the scene.

“Running away?” Riho called.

Sou flinched, then awkwardly turned back. “At the very least, I’ve weakened Vritra! I still have a fighting chance!”

“Pretending you won? Ha!”

“...This girl has the powers of Abaddon and a treant. I’ll think of something

else...and free Kunlun—the Last Dungeon! Just you wait!”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than an earthquake shook the chamber.

“Wait! Come back here, Sou! We aren’t finished!”

He slung Micona over his shoulder. “I have nothing more to discuss.”

“Why? Why are you doing this? Why are you collapsing this dungeon and burying innocent people alive? Have you fallen so low?!”

Alka looked dead serious.

Phyllo just snorted, then slapped the chief’s shoulder, pointing to the crack in the floor she had emerged from.

“...I think this is because you were smashing through the walls.”

“”“ ”””

For a moment, only the sounds of the dungeon shaking filled the chamber.

“Take a hint, Sou! It would be a perfect ending if this was your fault!”

“I seriously have nothing to say to you.”

The old man vanished in a burst of light.

“...Argh, right! The dungeon’s collapsing! I’ll use my crystal to open a teleportation gate! Escape through it! Thank me as you dive in!”

Alka wasn’t fooling anyone! But the situation didn’t give them time to argue. Everyone leaped into her crystal.

“Sou...?” Lloyd muttered. “Where have I heard that name before...?”

He glanced once toward where the old man had stood, then vanished into the teleportation gate.

Chapter 5

Anxious Allan: Suppose a Secret Was About to Blow Up in His Face Like He'd Been Hired Based on a Forged Resume

Morning dawned at Marie's shop on the East Side.

Drifting out of the window, the smell of breakfast reached the nose of a passing cat. It stopped, letting out a plaintive meow.

As if summoned, a gentle-looking boy appeared...seeming almost apologetic.

The cat came bounding over.

The boy set down a saucer with a guilty smile.

Not long after, a figure entered the kitchen, a blanket over her head like a gunman patrolling the wilds.

"...Mornin'."

It was Marie. Never a morning person.

When the cat saw her, it abandoned the food, racing over to her. Marie jumped, and the blanket fell off her head.

"Yikes!"

It seemed the cat was after that blanket. It quickly made a bed out of it in Marie's arms.

"You really startled me."

The little animal was already sound asleep. Marie smiled as she cradled it.

"Oh, good morning, Marie. Feeling better?" Lloyd asked, peering out of the kitchen.

"Yeah, much better," she reassured. "I was just a little worn out from being tied up so long."

“That’s good... Well, time to eat!”

He quickly brought the food to the table: rice porridge, stewed vegetables, all easily digestible.

Oh, he’s looking after my health, Marie thought.

Having almost been crushed by the dungeon, they’d staggered home last night, but Lloyd had required only a night’s sleep to fully recover from his injuries. Now he was fussing over Marie’s well-being—ever the great wife, that one.

Marie hadn’t forgotten that glimpse of his manlier side, though.

“...I’m precious to him, huh?” she muttered, her ears turning red.

Lloyd looked alarmed and leaned in close. “Oh! Are you running a fever? You’re looking a bit flushed.”

“Eep! N-no, I’m fine; I swear!”

“You’re sure? You tend to bluff your way through these things. Ask for help if you need it! I love being useful to you.”

This made Marie turn even more red.

“W-well, let’s eat! It looks amaz—!”

Marie realized she was still cradling a sleeping cat. It had asserted dominance over her arms. If she moved at all, it might wake up.

“Uh-oh...”

Lloyd saw the problem and winced. “Yeah, I wouldn’t wanna wake it, either... What now?”

A mischievous grin spread over Marie’s face. “Well...you could feed me,” she suggested.

“Uh...,” Lloyd squeaked.

“I mean, we don’t wanna wake the kitty. And you did say I could ask for help...”

Lloyd stared sheepishly at the ground. He *had* said that.

“Um, okay...”

They were both blushing now. Lloyd awkwardly filled a spoon.

Before Marie could open her mouth wide...

“I do hate to interrupt your morning flirt,” said a gentlemanly voice at their feet.

Lloyd and Marie jumped.

“Er, uh...Vritra?”

“Yes, it’s me! I survived by possessing this belt, and—well, my owner and her friends will be here soon, so if you could cease flirting and prepare some coffee, perhaps?”

The cursed artifact came coiling up onto the table, spitting instructions. Vritra had clearly stretched out under the door to warn them of Selen’s arrival.

Meow? Hisss...

The sight of the wriggling belt startled the cat, which ran away.

“Your owner, huh...,” Marie said, looking worried.

Vritra calmly added milk and sugar to a coffee cup, stirring. “This looks delightful! But in this form, I cannot partake.”

That belt had always been strange, but now it was even stranger. As Marie gawked at it, Selen and Riho came in.

“Good morning, Sir Lloyd! Marie, are you feeling better? Are you *sure* you shouldn’t be stuck in bed?”

“How did you make that sound spiteful, Selen?”

“Well,” Riho said, by way of explanation. “Lloyd himself called you precious, so...how else would she react?”

The ex-mercenary looked pretty unhappy herself, but it was nothing like Selen’s level of consternation.

“Let me be clear!” Selen declared. “Calling you precious is nothing to write home about! After all, he said he loved me (in my dreams)!”

“Yeah, that’s a blatant lie. Don’t even try to read between the lines.” Riho sighed, clearly tired of being the voice of reason.

“But you’re all precious to me!” Lloyd protested, still blushing furiously. “I realize shouting that out there was really embarrassing, though... Ah-ha-ha.”

Selen and Riho both turned red at that first statement...and now it was Marie’s turn to look cross.

“Hmm,” Vritra muttered. “You may be a serious threat in the future, Lloyd. Not a field I expected you to excel in.”

Phyllo appeared in the doorway.

“...I’m precious, too? I am unworthy.”

“No point trying to seal the deal now! We’ve already filled out the marriage application!”

Riho started picking at her breakfast, too tired to argue with Selen’s delusions.

“She’s a free spirit,” Vritra observed, shaking his buckle. “Or maybe more like pure chaos.”

Then the true embodiment of chaos emerged from the closet—the chief of Kunlun, Alka.

“Whoo-hoo! Morning, everyone! That sure was a mess, huh?”

“Oh, good morning, Chief!”

Alka had a linen sack in her hand, and she immediately opened it up...to stuff Selen inside. “And in you go!”

No one could prevent this bold morning kidnapping. It was carried out with such practiced ease, they all just sat and watched.

“Hey! Stop! Let me out!” a muffled voice emerged from the sack. Selen sounded quite irate. Naturally.

“Mm? What’s wrong?” the chief asked, as if she’d done nothing odd.

“I mean... If you wanna haul Selen away, it’s fine by me,” Riho said. “But I feel like you should at least explain why?”

“...Morning kidnappings are bad. At least do it at night.”

“Master, I can’t just pretend not to notice in this situation.”

None of the girls seemed to object to the kidnapping itself.

“You’re all heartless!” Selen yelled. Then she went on the stump. “I want Sir Lloyd to kidnap me! And him alone! Come on and take me, Sir Lloyd! Make it a clean snatch! Mmph.”

Was there such a thing as a clean kidnapping? Mid-rant, her belt—Vritra—had freed itself from the sack.

“Halt, Alka! Where are you taking us?”

“Obviously, back to Kunlun so we can revive you!”

“B-back there...?” the belt stammered. “But...well...”

“Hmph. I’m sure you’re feeling a little awkward about going back—since you’ve been away for so long, even though you expected to return quickly. But that’s also on me. I should have apologized. Sorry.”

Alka’s rare display of remorse took Vritra by surprise. “You see right through me,” he squeaked. “I admit it.”

“Well, I’ve known you a long time. Same goes for Sou, but... Well, forget him.”

“Sou?” Lloyd whispered.

Alka pretended not to hear that. “Anyway, if I don’t get Vritra back to normal, there’s no telling what Sou will get up to next! He might even destroy Kunlun!”

“He can do that?” Marie shuddered.

The chief nodded gravely, poking Vritra. “This runaway guardian beast is the seal on my power and Kunlun’s... Well, something else important. Without him, we’re in serious trouble.”

“You mean,” Riho said, catching up, “you’re taking him back to Kunlun to completely restore him? And Selen’s just along for the ride?”

“Yep. If I ask, Vritra will say no, so I’m using force! Hmm, anyone else wanna come? Doesn’t need to be right now, but while I’m reviving our guardian anyway...”

Kunlun was a village from children's stories, and the idea of just dropping in like a bunch of tourists made everyone gulp.

Meanwhile, Lloyd was scowling, racking his brains...and finally he remembered.

"Sou!" he repeated, too softly for anyone to hear. "That's...the name of the main character in my favorite novel. That's gotta be a coincidence, though..."

He put the thought out of his mind.

Who would possibly imagine the hero of their favorite novel was out to destroy their hometown?

Meanwhile, in the audience chamber at the Azami palace...the king was smiling broadly. Adventurers, looking solemn. Around them, rows of armed soldiers.

And in the middle of all this...

"How did this happen?"

Allan was looking really stressed out. Standing bolt upright, he was so stiff, he seemed made of wax.

"Oh, don't look so tense, Allan Toin Lidocaine!" the king boomed warmly.

Allan grew even stiffer.

"You're the star of the day! Everyone's looking up to you!"

"The star? I didn't do anything..."

His Majesty raised an arm high. The band blasted out a fanfare. Allan's voice was completely drowned out.

"We will now begin the ceremony honoring the savior of the dungeon, Allan Toin Lidocaine!"

The soldiers and adventurers raised their weapons high, shouting his name.

"Allan! Allan! Allan! Allan..."

"I hear your courage and decision-making skills are unparalleled! You saved the adventurers and defeated a number of dragons!"

“No, no, no, no! I didn’t do that...!”

“No need for modesty! I’m told you defeated over a dozen of those beasts just by shouting at them!”

“I saw him!” cried a soldier who had personally witnessed this feat. “Allan said, ‘Come at me!’ and the dragons all went down, foaming at their mouths!”

“See? Your power drove the monsters away! The local residents are relieved to know the dungeon is no longer a threat.”

“No, no... I didn’t do that... I need no reward! I didn’t do anything to deserve one.”

“What?” the king said, his eyes widening. “You don’t need a reward? You are a true soldier of Azami! You acted out of duty alone! Those beasts can hardly be called monsters when faced with a man like you!”

His Majesty was reading a *lot* into Allan’s statement, but the adventurers were all very impressed.

“How wonderful! The model soldier!”



“And there I was, only caring about the reward... I’m ashamed of myself!”

“I’m a man, but you can have me anytime!”

Some adventurers were *really* into the idea. Tears flowed from their eyes.

Meanwhile, Allan was crying for a totally different reason. His reputation was out of control. Defeating dragons in one bold shout? They believed that?

He turned to Choline and Chrome, desperate for help.

“C-Chrome! Help me out here!” Allan begged. “You know I could never pull this off! This is almost certainly Lloyd’s doing... Why are you grinning at me?!”

“No, no, you were magnificent!” Chrome praised, beaming. “Since you refused a reward, I don’t have to run around like crazy trying to make it happen! You’re the best cadet we have!”

“Yeah, we don’t have to try and hook an uggo up with a wife or blow a wad of cash on a primo property!”

The two colonels had been terrified of dealing with the king’s crazy rewards, so this was the ideal solution.

“Chroooooome!” Allan wailed. But another fanfare drowned him out.

“Now, Allan, in honor of your deeds, I bestow upon you the title of dragon slayer!”

“What?! But I haven’t killed any dragons!”

The newly appointed dragon slayer was doomed to a life of unearned titles.

Afterword

“You aren’t meant to be a novelist.”

February. My feet had brought me to a hidden corner of the city...

Before me stood a fishy-looking elderly lady. She never glanced up from the scraps of paper on the table before her.

This was a famous fortune-teller—famous enough to be on TV.

My first novel was getting published soon, and I was nervous about it—so when I heard about her, I paid a little visit.

I took a seat on an ordinary chair, giddy as a little kid, and handed over a page filled out with necessary information—like a job application. A few minutes later, a printer spit out some scraps.

The words above are what she told me. Can you blame me for frowning?

The fortune-teller claimed I hadn’t been born under a creative star. If I chose to live as a novelist, I was going to face many trials and tribulations in my future.

Then she held out a hand for payment. Still scowling, I paid and left.

I shoved my hands into my coat pockets, let out a sigh that hung visible in the cold air, and looked up at the night sky above.

Fine. A new challenge in my thirties...even getting published at all was a stroke of luck.

I never thought it would be easy. But I’m going to prove I can succeed.

My hands balled into fists that stayed in my pockets all the way home.

A year later...

...I was balding.

That fortune came true! This wasn’t the kind of trial or tribulation I’d

expected at all. I never imagined she was talking about the hair on my scalp... You gotta laugh.

Good work, Toshio Satou. Stress gave you a bald spot.

It wasn't hair loss from age but rather a temporary condition...but if it never gets better, who can tell the difference? I'd best get to my acknowledgments before I start really crying.

Nao Watanuki—thank you for the beautiful illustrations. When I first saw Micono, she instantly jumped near the top of the characters I personally would want to marry. Obviously, Lloyd has a lock on number one.

Hajime Fusemachi—thank you again for the magnificent manga adaption. It's the thing I look forward to most every month.

To my editor, Maizo—I'm sorry for all the trouble. This time, I promise to do everything I can to present you a manuscript you can approve in the first round. (If I succeed, can you give me a reward?) To all my colleagues, thanks for your words of advice. I keep forgetting I'm a writer. Being able to discuss our work and outlines has been truly invaluable.

To all my readers, thank you for picking up my books.

I hope we'll meet again in the next volume.

From the writer afraid of his daily shower,

TOSHIO SATOU

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