

# Princess Drill

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# 1 ???

As the bell rings signalling the end of the school day, Minori turns to the student to her right with a smile. “Ikuri-chan, do you have plans tonight?”

The girl, tall and lithe, adopts an apologetic expression as she puts her books in her bag. “Sorry, Minori-chan. I do, actually. My mother’s birthday is this weekend, so I need to go shopping for a gift.”

Minori tries to stop her emotions from painting themselves on her face, and she runs her hand along the strap of her bag. Ikuri would feel even worse if she knew how much Minori had been looking forward to spending time with her. “Do you have any ideas for what to get her?”

The girls exit the classroom, walking toward the high school’s main entrance. “Not really,” Ikuri admits. “I was planning to just look around the mall until inspiration hit me.” She laughs, lightly slapping her hand against her forehead.

The weather is surprisingly cool given the proximity to summer, but neither of the girls complain. Quite the contrary: they walk in silence, simply enjoying the breeze through their hair coupled with the sun on their skin. Since the mall isn’t far out of Minori’s way, they walk together until they reach the entrance.

“See you, Minori-chan!” her companion yells excitedly as they part ways.

Minori, for her part, sighs and starts walking home. However, as she walks, humming to herself, she can’t quite shake an ominous feeling that something is wrong. She reaches up to her neck, tracing the chain down to the pendant: a silver, ornamental teardrop with red accents—her magical keystone. She checks her phone, but there aren’t any notifications from her JSDF handler. She sighs again, convinced that she’s simply overreacting, though her body remains tense.

A few minutes later, however, a large explosion rings out from behind her. From where she stands, the epicenter seems to be the shopping mall.

As she runs against the crowd of people trying to flee the scene, Minori rips her phone from her pocket and dials Ikuri’s number. No answer. She quickens her step, returning her phone to her pocket and gripping her keystone necklace.

“Oh, magical keystone, grant my wish! « Requiem! »”

At her words, a light glow permeates the air around her as her school uniform fades and is replaced with her magical battle dress: a dark silver metallic armor. Despite being a flexible skin-tight fabric, it boasts surprising defensive capabilities against both magical and physical attacks. Her long silver hair is tied into an athletic braid, and in her right hand is a short katana with a red hilt.



Minori stands at the bus stop, impatiently playing with the hem of her skirt. A few other students stand at the stop beside her, chatting amongst themselves, but she doesn't care much for their conversation. She sighs, regretting her choice not to walk to school this morning and hoping that the extra twenty minutes of sleep would be worth it.

Eventually, the bus arrives and takes them to the high school. Largely going through the motions this morning, Minori finds her classroom—class 2-3—upstairs and takes her seat in the second row.

"Good morning, Amara-san," the boy to her right says as she sits down.

"Good morning, Goya-san," she mumbles in return. It isn't that she doesn't like him. Goya Hideyo is the one person in her class that doesn't seem to have given up on her yet.

She takes her notebook out of her bag and stares blankly at it, but she can tell that he was staring at her. Her response was even more distant than usual, she knew. She had always been aloof, and most people gave up long ago on being anything other than simple classmates with her. She didn't seem like one to easily make friends, but it wasn't that she was disliked, either. She had top marks in her class, was fairly athletic, and—for some reason she'd never quite figured out—was considered one of the most attractive girls in her year. But only Goya had continued to show an interest in her after she hadn't shown much interest in being friends with anyone else. And, to her slight annoyance, she'd given up trying to push him away.

"Are you okay? You seem—"

Minori hides a small smile as Goya is cut off by the teacher entering the classroom, saving her from having to answer.

But then she frowns. He was right: she wasn't okay today. It was more than the fact that she didn't get much sleep last night. Or, rather, it was the reason she didn't get much sleep last night. Today makes one full year since... Minori forced the idea out of her head

as the teacher begins calling attendance. She vows to herself that she wouldn't make Goya—or anyone else—worry about her today, and she devotes herself to the lessons at hand. Partially just as a distraction, she might admit, but it works.

At least until lunch. As usual, she takes her food to the roof, sits under the pale blue sky, enjoying the breeze through her hair. What is unusual was that someone else came upstairs: Goya.

He comes up beside her, indicating the space in front of her. "May I sit here, Amara-san?"

Caught slightly off-guard, she hesitates slightly before nodding. Goya takes his spot opposite her, opening his lunch box while Minori keeps eating from hers. She tries her best to avoid eye contact, unsure how to appease her newfound lunch partner, knowing quite well what his intentions are.

When the silence had long been awkward, Goya finally speaks up. "You've been quiet today. More than usual, anyway." He chuckles, hoping to lighten the atmosphere, but she simply frowns in response before standing up and walking over to the fence surrounding the roof, staring out into the distance.

"I'm fine," she replies unconvincingly, and she hears him sigh in response. She turns back toward him. "I appreciate your concern, but you don't need to worry about me."

"I want to worry about you." He notices the possibly romantic implications of what he just said when she glares at him, and he backpedals slightly, his tone awkward. "I just think somebody should, at least. And I like to think that you don't dislike me quite as much as you do everyone else, so it might as well be me," he finishes with a goofy smile.

"I do enough worrying all by myself," she says quietly, facing away once again.

Behind her, Minori hears him stand up and, a few seconds later, feels his hand on her shoulder. She flinches. "I'm not going to push you, Amara-san. But if you ever want to talk about what's on your mind, I'll be happy to listen."

That feeling in her heart comes rushing forward at his touch and his words, that feeling that she'd thought she'd buried a year ago. The fleeting bonds of friendship. Despite herself, she relaxes slightly, though her voice is still cautious.

"It's just that today marks one full year since one of my friends from my old school in Fujiwara passed away."

Just. She wanted to yell at herself for reducing her best friend's death to "just". But it also

wasn't true: it wasn't "just" that Sono Ikuri had died one year ago, nor that she'd died in what was labeled as a terrorist attack, but that Minori herself had been there, unable to stop them, unable to save Ikuri. She had been a member of the Japanese Self-Defense Force's magical combat units after discovering her affinity for magic. The attack had come out of nowhere, but Minori had, coincidentally, been nearby, and rushed to the scene. She'd escaped unharmed, but Ikuri had been shopping at the mall that was attacked, and she didn't make it. The incident had been haunting Minori ever since.

All of this was a secret, however. People knew about the existence of these magical units and the Maidens who were their strongest cards, of course, but the identities of these Maidens were classified information. Minori certainly couldn't tell anyone that she had been one of Japan's strongest Maidens. And if the strongest Maiden couldn't stop the attack... Well, it was one of the reasons that Minori had transferred to Kamakura instead, leaving the JSDF. Depressed, lost, and uncertain, she wanted to get just a little further away from her past failures, even if she did still carry the keystone—her teardrop necklace—that would unlock her powers.

And today, she was wearing her hair in a ponytail held by a red ribbon that Ikuri had given her just a few weeks before the attack. Surprisingly, Goya hadn't commented on the new, slightly uncharacteristic accessory.

"But Ikuri-chan would have wanted me to move on by now," Minori whispered to herself, shaking her head. Despite the fact that she knew she was right, it didn't help to fill the painful emptiness in her heart.

Goya was quiet for a few moments, surprised at the revelation. He knew that Amara had transferred to Okazurete High School at the beginning of the year, but she had never once spoken about her life before coming to Kamakura.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he says quietly, pulling his hand back. Unsure of what else to say, silence falls between the two students. Eventually, Goya speaks again, his words slow and hesitant. "I lost my grandmother when I was little. I'm not trying to say that this is the same, but my parents always said that the best way to help you move on is to make new, happy memories to associate with the day." After another short pause, he adds, "Do you have plans after school today?"

"Not really," Minori responds. "I was thinking about walking around the city."