



# SLAYERS

11

*DELUSION IN CRIMSON*

BY HAJIME KANZAKA

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RUI ARAIZUMI



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# 1: Insurrection?! The World's a Dangerous Place These Days...

"C'mon, lady. Why don'tcha give us all you got while we're still bein' nice?"

"If ya don't—"

It was a pleasant morning on the main road. The handful of bandits who'd popped out from the trees were interrupted in the middle of their usual cliches... by my attack spell!

Or, at least, that's how this would usually go. What had *actually* quieted them this time was the sudden appearance of a presence deep in the woods. Hatred, sorrow, rage, hostility... It was like a mix of every negative emotion humans possessed. Miasma.

"Wh-What the...?"

It popped up so abruptly that even the bandits, a notoriously slow-witted lot, hushed up as they began scanning the area around them. And while they were doing that, I was quietly reciting a spell.

"You... You think our ears're playin' tricks on us?"

"No... There's something there! An' it's close!"

The bandits whispered to each other in tones bordering on shrill as the presence drew nearer. Then came a rustle of underbrush, and...

"Hraa—"

"Blast Ash!"

*Fwwsh!* Before it could even finish its roar, the brass demon diving out of the forest was reduced to dust... by my attack spell.







“Boy, this stuff keeps happening lately, huh?” my companion Gourry pondered aloud as he gazed up at the clear blue sky overhead.

After blasting that brass demon, I’d blasted the cowering bandits (natch) and helped myself to their spoils of the day. We’d since continued down the narrow road through the forest.

“You mean the demon I blew up?” I asked.

“Yeah. That stuff,” Gourry replied, glancing over his shoulder. I looked back as well, but the spot where we’d fought the demon was well out of sight by now.

“I guess it is happening a heck of a lot more than it used to...” I whispered with a sigh, unable to hide my gloom at the thought.

Lesser demons, brass demons... They were bottom of the barrel as far as demon species went, and I’d beaten that last one lickety-split, but that didn’t mean they should be taken lightly. Any demon at all was a major threat to even your run-of-the-mill swordsman or sorcerer. And yeah, in isolation, they were easy pickings for someone of my prowess... But even I might end up in real trouble if they caught me off guard or swarmed me.

You used to be able to count on the fact that they rarely appeared in large numbers—operative phrase being *used to*. For the past half year or so, it was just as Gourry had said. They seemed to show up wherever we went, wreaking their particular brand of havoc.

For instance, we’d be staying at an inn, they’d suddenly attack, I’d kill them all with a spell, and then I’d end up having to pay for the damage to surrounding buildings. Or I’d go to raid a bandit base for fun and funds, only to find it already ravaged by a roving demon horde, thus forcing me to huck a Dragon Slave at a nearby mountain to vent my rage about the lost income, only to end up dealing with complaints from the locals. Just all kinds of terrifying attacks.

And for some reason, this was all happening more and more often. I still didn’t know why. But...

A kind of nebulous anxiety—*Something’s happening out there*—was taking root in people’s hearts.



“Huh... Guess something’s up,” I remarked, stopping just as I was about to pass through the town gate.

We’d arrived at Telmodd City on the border of Lyzeille. It was a pretty big place and had been developed in a planned manner... which sounds nice and all, except that “planned” basically equates to “boring.” About the only distinctive feature Telmodd had going for it was the fact that it was totally walled off, which wasn’t especially remarkable as cities went. But, eh, enough of my thoughts on urban planning.

“What’s wrong, Lina? Why’d you stop?” Gourry asked, puzzled.

“Look.”

I pointed at the rightmost stone gatepost, which was affixed with a sign that read: *“Attention, all traveling sorcerers. If you have no other urgent business, please report to the local sorcerers’ council immediately.”* It was signed by the sorcerers’ council at large.

“What’s that mean?” he asked, still baffled despite the simplicity of the message.

I’ll concede that, on the face of it, it just sounded like a request for visiting sorcerers to check in. But what got my attention was the wording. It wasn’t asking for us to stop by the *Telmodd City* council, but the *local* council. That suggested this was a mass-distributed request. In other words, they were in the market for a *lot* of traveling sorcerers. Plus, the message didn’t contain so much as a hint about the reason for the request, which told me it was serious enough that the council didn’t want the general population to know about it. In fact, I’d seen a similar notice once before...

“I guess we’ll just have to go check it out,” I said, passing through the gate.

Gourry and I got the lowdown at the sorcerers’ council, enjoyed a light lunch at a local eatery, and were just setting out for our new destination when...

“Excuse me... Might you be Lina Inverse?” called a voice from behind us as we walked down the main drag.

“I might be. Why?” I responded.



I turned to see a girl standing there. Well, I say “girl,” but she was probably my age. Maybe even a little older. She had short, blond hair and green eyes, and was really quite beautiful... though her charm was somewhat dampened by the black hat and cape she wore, marking her as a sorcerer, as well as the troubled expression on her face.

“Um... I overheard your name at the council. You’re *the* Lina Inverse everyone talks about, aren’t you?”

“Depends on what they’re saying. Uh, not that I’m about to ask for quotes.”

“Well, just a lot of rumors that... I’m not sure I could exactly define as complimentary.”

*Twitch.*

“That’s probably me, then, yes...” A vein in my forehead throbbed as I processed that unflattering choice of words, but I managed to respond quite calmly.

“I need a favor from you! Please, take me to Crimson!”

“Hey!” I squawked, seizing her hand and pulling her into a nearby alley. I lowered my voice so that no one else could hear us. “Keep it down! If you’re asking for an escort to Crimson, you must know what’s going down there, yeah?”

“Yes, of course,” she responded firmly, trying to hide the desperation in her eyes.

So, what’s going down in Crimson Town, you ask? Attempted insurrection by a branch of the sorcerers’ council.

When I said I’d seen a notice similar to the one at the front gate before, I wasn’t kidding. That was when a sorcerer, serving as a minister in a small kingdom called Lagd, staged a rebellion using the local sorcerers’ council. I’d helped put that to bed with a fellow sorcerer, and together we’d saved the king. The minister was punished, and the whole thing came to an end without much harm done, but...

This time insurrection was brewing in Crimson at the edge of the Empire of

Lyzeille. The chief conspirator was the head of the local sorcerers' council, a position without much political power at all. Apparently, however, he'd killed the local lord and seized control of the city. When news of this reached the capital, the emperor had dispatched his army to quash the rebellion.

Now, in practical terms, it was really only a matter of time before they put the whole thing down. But in a show of good faith and in the interest of reinforcing trust between institutions, the sorcerers' council was hoping to handle it first.

Thus they were instructing all battle-ready sorcerers to make for Crimson. Except, with all the unpleasant rumors swirling around these days, they'd asked that we go in secret so as not to raise any alarm. Clean things up quietly and make an official announcement after the fact—that was both the council's and the empire's preferred policy.

In other words, this was definitely *not* something we should be talking about while standing in the middle of the city's main thoroughfare. The way this girl was looking at me, though, suggested she definitely had her reasons.

"Okay, well... let's hear your story. First, what's your name?"

"Aria Ashford..." It wasn't she who responded, but a cracked, aged male voice from nearby.

I turned in surprise to see a shadowy figure standing deeper down the alley. He was dressed in unadorned black, with a dark cape and hood pulled so low over his eyes that it was difficult to make out his face. He was short—shorter than me, even—possibly owing to his hunched posture.

"Who... are you?" Aria asked uncertainly.

"I see," the old man said, ignoring her. "So this is one of the assassins you're hiring... to destroy Lord Kailus."

"Wait a minute. Are you...?!"

"You may call me Zonagein. Now... show me what you can do."

*Fwee...* A sharp whistle echoed through the sunless alley. I couldn't parse all the details of the situation in the here and now, but there was one thing I was damn sure of—that sound was this old man's declaration of war.



I began to recite a quiet spell, Gourry drew his sword, and then...

“What?!” Gourry and Aria shouted in unison, stunned.

The darkness was... writhing. It was an unsettling sight. The umbra of the alley seemed to pulse and shiver around Zonagein. No, wait, it was...

When Aria realized it herself, she let out a soft shriek, for what had looked like writhing darkness was actually dozens of rats pouring into the shadows! There was no way they’d been there the whole time. They must have responded to the old man’s whistle.

“Does that mean... this guy’s a beastmaster?!”

Still, it wasn’t like a bunch of rats—not even a whole dang mess of ’em—could be any threat to me in this situa—

*Krik.* Interrupting my train of thought was a soft sound from the back of the alleyway, like a door straining on its hinges. Beside me, Gourry, who was about to charge forward, stopped in his tracks. And then... *Crack! Krika-crack!*

“Ah...” Aria quietly groaned as the sound grew louder and louder.

It was coming from the dozens of rats gathering around Zonagein. Although... was it really fair to call them rats anymore? The no-longer-really-rats were transforming before our eyes. Their flesh and bones snapped and burst, forming new ones in their stead. Creatures once small enough to hold in my hand were now the size of my arm span and growing.

To be honest, I was pretty curious about what they were gonna turn into, but this clearly wasn’t the time for idle speculation. Instead...

“Freeze Arrow!” I swapped targets, taking the spell I’d meant for Zonagein and unleashing it on the transforming rats. A dozen or so icy bolts froze the creatures one after another.

At least, that was the plan. But—*Fwifwifwish!*—every one of my frigid projectiles dissipated anticlimactically on impact!

“No way!” I shouted, shocked.

What kind of creature could brush off Freeze Arrows like this? I only knew one answer. Demons.

“Heh heh... What do you think? A rare and beautiful sight, hmm?” Zonagein said, as if to confirm my suspicions. He smiled at me confidently, surrounded by the lesser demons he’d forged from the rats.

*Krakoom!* There was a sudden burst of fire and explosions, followed a second later by the screams of bystanders.

Gourry, Aria, and I had just leaped out and to the side of the alleyway as a hail of Flare Arrows (courtesy of the lesser demons) shot out into the main avenue. Fortunately, collateral damage was kept to a minimum, as—maybe due to the time of day—there weren’t many people around.

“Everyone run!”

No sooner had I yelled that than the lesser demons emerged onto the street. This started a new wave of screams, and the few passersby still present quickly took off in panic.

*Okay!* Now that we were out in the open, we could fight!

“Gourry! Back me up!” I began reciting a spell.

“Right!” Gourry charged, sword drawn, at the lesser demon horde.

“Hraaagh!” Seeming to realize the incoming threat, one of the lesser demons let out a howl that conjured a dozen Flare Arrows. But before it could fire them...

*Swsh!* Gourry leaped in, slicing his sword through the creature’s stomach!

“Graaagh!” The demon cried its last and fell, its flaming arrows dissipating into nothing.

*One down!*

“Amazing!” Aria remarked from the sidelines, marveling at Gourry’s swordsmanship.

But this was no time for wide-eyed spectating! There were plenty of lesser demons to go. In fact, they were still spilling out onto the street.

Gourry cut through a second, and by the time he felled a third, I’d finished my



spell.

“Bram Blazer!”

This was a spell that sent a blue light piercing through its target. It felt like a shockwave to living things, while dealing some serious damage to the undead and demons alike. It’d normally put the latter in a whole world of hurt, but this baby was amplified. The blue light I shot forth flew through several demons poking their heads out of the alley and...

“Graaaaagh!” They collapsed with a scream. This little stunt caught the attention of several other demons that had previously been focused on Gourry.

“Aria! Get away!” With that, I drew the shortsword from my hip and sprang forward while chanting quietly.

“Hragh!” howled a lesser demon in my path, producing a volley of Flare Arrows that rained down on me in a shower.

I dodged them with a light leap to the side, and... “Elemekia Lance!” I released the spell I’d been working on. While watching out of the corner of my eye to make sure it met its target, I turned and began my next incantation.

Lesser demons were strong and tough with magical power to spare, but teamwork was beyond them and they were pretty stupid, so their attacks were fairly rote. Gourry and I always had to stay on our toes against a swarm of ’em, but on the flip side, they weren’t too scary as long as we were cautious.

Soon enough... “Assher Dist!”

*Kra-pash!* My spell vaporized the final lesser demon. That just left that Zonagein guy!

“Oho... You made quick work of those lesser demons. Impressive indeed,” came a voice from above.

Surprised, I looked up to see the petite black figure perched on top of a nearby roof. He must have used Levitation or something to get up there while we were cleaning up the demons.

“Why not stop watching and come on down?” I called. “You wanted to test us, right? If the lesser demons didn’t do the trick, doesn’t that mean it’s time for

you to fight us yourself? Or did you climb up there because you're scared?!"

"No, no... I merely seek great heights. You know what they say about smoke and fools." He brushed off my provocation leisurely enough, even throwing a little self-deprecation into the mix.

*Dang... I guess age really does come with experience.*

While I was staring up at the old man, Gourry took a smooth step forward. "Then why don't we come up there and join you?"

"Don't do it," I said, my eyes still locked on Zonagein. Gourry seemed to think he was just small potatoes... but I saw him differently.

Lesser and brass demons were created by summoning low-tier demons from the astral plane into mindless small animals, transforming them in the process. Earlier, Zonagein had called the local rat population to him first—fodder for an instant swarm of lesser demons. Even your average "pretty good" summoner could only muster up a handful of demons at a time, which suggested exceptional skill on Zonagein's part.

It would be easy enough for us to fly up to the roof, but our actions would be limited severely while we were in the air. Zonagein potentially had talents beyond just summoning, and he'd no doubt want to use them while we were compromised. That was why I'd hoped to bait him down, but he wasn't biting. In that case...

"Well? Not coming?" he taunted.

"No," I said flatly.

"Hmm... I see. What a pity. Well, it makes little difference to me," he said with his usual leisure. "But are you sure you can say the same for yourselves? If I wished, I could turn all the rats, cats, and dogs in this city into demons."

"Oh yeah? Well, whatever floats your boat. No skin off my nose."

My casual reply finally seemed to rattle Zonagein. "Eh? You think I'm bluffing, do you? Or do you think you can handle thousands of lesser demons at once?"

"Neither!" I declared, raising a finger decisively. "What I'm saying is that we're just gonna ignore whatever you do and walk away!"



“What?!” Gourry, Aria, and Zonagein all cried in unison.

“W-Wait a minute now! What in the world...” the old man on the roof fretted.

But, true to my word, I turned away and launched into a brisk walk. “C’mon, Gourry, Aria. Let’s get outta here. While the old man’s playing up on the roof, we’ll head to Crimson and beat that wicked council chairman.”

“Hey, come back here! If you won’t, I... hrm... I’ll destroy the whole city!”

“I think he’s trying to tell us something...” muttered Gourry.

“Oh, just ignore him. Standard old guy ranting.”

“You sure about that?”

“But... he said he would destroy the city,” Aria objected.

“Don’t worry about that, Aria. He’s just talking to hear himself talk,” I said without turning back.

Truth is, I wasn’t bluffing either. I had my reasons for thinking this way.

The fact that he’d brushed off my earlier attempts at provocation suggested that Zonagein wasn’t the type of guy to lose his cool and act rashly. Plus, at the very start, he’d said that he wanted to see what we could do. That meant his real goal here was to take our measure. He wouldn’t destroy a city in a fit of pique.

“W-Wait! Come back here, I say! You can’t really be so irresponsible! Young people these days...”

Without another glance at the griping old man on the roof, the three of us left Telmodd City in the dust.

“Okay, Aria. What’s the deal, exactly?” I asked.

“Well, I’m happy to explain, but... why here?” Aria quietly asked in return.

Just outside the city limits, we’d departed the main road and entered a forest of moderate size nearby. I hadn’t stopped to ask questions until we were fairly deep inside it.

“Why else? It seemed pretty obvious that that Zonagein guy was gonna come

after us once he got off the roof. His most likely course of action would be to search the road from Telmodd to Crimson, meaning he'd eventually catch up to us if we'd stayed on said road. Of course, we're still going to Crimson... We're just gonna hide out here for a bit first and chat, and then go at our own pace once he's breezed by," I explained, spreading my cape out on a patch of grass and taking a seat.





“Ah... I see,” Aria said agreeably.

By contrast, Gourry was skeptical. “But Lina, if that old man *doesn't* come after us, aren't we just wasting time?”

“Let me put it to you this way, Gourry. Would you prefer to head straight for Crimson and risk ending up with lesser demons a-go-go?”

“Well, no...”

“Right? So here we are. You ready to dish, Aria? Why are you itching to get to Crimson, and why is that Zonagein guy after you?”

“Well...” She spread out her cape and took a seat herself. She looked down for a while, deep in thought, and when she finally looked up again, she spoke very frankly. “I need to save my big sister.”

Her sister's name, she said, was Bell. She was a kind, beautiful woman that Aria was proud to call family. Bell had met a man and fallen in love. If this were a fairy tale, they'd have gotten married and lived happily ever after... but unfortunately, reality rarely played by the rules.

One day, Kailus, the once-married head of the Crimson sorcerers' council, fell in love with Bell on sight. Kailus had a great deal of influence, and his management of the council and abilities as a sorcerer were indeed prodigious. But he was considered lacking in what some would call the human graces. Despite his prestige in sorcery circles, he wasn't especially well-liked. There was a reason his wife had left him.

On top of all this, Bell was nineteen while Kailus was well over forty. Nobody thought he stood a chance at wooing her, yet Kailus pursued her nonetheless. Bell refused him because she was engaged... but it wasn't long after that her fiancé died under mysterious circumstances.

Rumors spread that Kailus had killed the man to take Bell for himself, all while making it look like an accident. Nobody knew who started the rumors, but people assumed that Bell would never find it in her to care for a man with such suspicions hanging over him. Except...

“Shortly thereafter, my sister married Kailus,” Aria whispered, her eyes cast downward. She spoke without detail, haltingly, as if not particularly pleased to be sharing this information. “I asked her why, but she wouldn’t tell me... She only gave me a troubled look. And soon after, she stopped seeing me. But from what I’ve heard, she’s not happy in the slightest.”

*Go figure*, I thought to myself as I listened to her story. I had no idea why Bell would have agreed to marry this Kailus person. Sure, you couldn’t rule out that she might’ve fallen in love with him somehow, but... From what Aria’d said, Kailus seemed like *that* kind of guy. You know, the type that makes a grab at whatever strikes his fancy but loses interest the minute he gets his mitts on it. Whatever Bell’s motives for marrying the guy might have been, I couldn’t imagine her prospects for happiness were good.

“I’ve been doing research at the Crimson council,” Aria continued, “and one day on my way there, a messenger stopped me. He said that my sister wanted to see me. She’d never contacted me like that before, so I quickly went to meet her. That’s when she told me...”

“That Kailus was plotting an insurrection?” I asked.

Aria nodded firmly. “Probably with the intent of getting the council involved. She told me to go and alert another council office. Sairaag used to be home to the largest council closest to Crimson... but it was mysteriously destroyed two years ago.”

“Bwuh?!” Gourry and I found ourselves shouting.

Aria cocked her head to the side. “What is it?”

“Oh, er. Nothing, nothing...”

In truth, me and Gourry had maybe-sorta-kinda been involved in the destruction of Sairaag... *Actually, I never actually reported all that to the sorcerers’ council, did I? O-Of course, I’ll totally get around to it... sometime...*

“So your next best bet was Telmodd City?” I urged Aria on, sweeping the part about Sairaag under the rug.

“Yes... It’s possible there were others closer by, but Telmodd was the only city I was certain had a council branch and that I knew I could reach.”

“I see...”

I could imagine it'd be pretty dispiriting, under the circumstances, to head to a city you didn't know well and get lost on the way, or to arrive only to find it didn't have what you were looking for.

“But... Kailus seems to have made his move before I was able to spread the word. I managed to make it here and report to the council... But the very next day, I heard that Kailus had assassinated the local lord and that the emperor's army had mobilized.” She let out a soft sigh. “It seems the town is fully under Kailus's control now. I don't know what forces he's mustered, but if the imperial army is taking action, it's only a matter of time before the city is retaken. And if that happens, my sister might be drawn into it...”

“I think I follow. You want to beat the army to Crimson and do something about Kailus?”

“Yes... Of course, I'd handle it myself if I could, but while I can use some attack magic... it's really only at a 'better than nothing' level. I have no proper combat experience either.”

Her story checked out. During our tussle with the lesser demons, she'd just dithered around, unsure of what to do. Jumping into a fight took a degree of experience, guts, and abandon... that Aria just didn't seem to have.

“So you were waiting for someone to take you back to Crimson... and that's when we showed up?”

“I know I'm asking a lot. I know that I'll be a burden and that things might not work out even if we make it there, but...” she started, then stopped.

“But... you still want to save your sister?” I asked.

Aria nodded silently.

*Hmm... I see...*

I had my own big sister back home... although she was way stronger than me, frankly. Even if trouble found her, she'd break her own way out with a smile. That made it kind of hard for me to relate to Aria's concern for her older sis.

“Well, I will say,” I began, scratching my head, “hearing your story does make

me wanna sock this Kailus guy one, but...”

“But what?” Aria looked at me nervously.

I shot her a wink in reply. “But I dunno what he looks like, so I’ll need someone to point him out to me.”

“You mean...?!”

“We’re going to Crimson. Together.”

“Thank you so much, Mistress Lina!”

“Just call me Lina. Now, let’s camp out here for a bit and then head back out.”

“Of course!” she agreed with a smile.

I had to wonder if she realized that I hadn’t pressed her about why Zonagein was after her.

Kailus likely knew that Aria had left town, but he shouldn’t have known that she was in Telmodd. Nevertheless, Zonagein had found her here. It was possible that Kailus had simply sent a lackey to every city in the area... The part that struck me, though, was that Zonagein wasn’t there to capture or kill Aria, but rather to test the mettle of the sorcerers she’d hired—in other words, me. This was further evidenced by the fact that the lesser demons hadn’t even spared her a glance during our throw down in the city.

There had to be more to this than met the eye.

At first, our journey went smoother than expected. From what we heard in the villages we stopped by, old Zonagein had indeed passed through ahead of us, just like I’d hoped.

*Ha! Sucker!* I thought smugly to myself.

At least, I wished I could just be smug about it... The truth was, we couldn’t put off a fight with Zonagein forever. We might even end up facing him in Crimson Town, where he’d have plenty of buddies to back him up.

There was another kink in my tricky little scheme too. According to intel we’d picked up on the road two days after leaving Telmodd, the imperial army’s



vanguard had also moved through not long ago. It was only a unit of two hundred soldiers, so they probably wouldn't attack Crimson outright, but it was a sure sign we needed to hustle.

And then, on the fourth day of our journey...

"It can't all be smooth sailing, I guess..." Gourry said, coming to a stop on the forest road we were traveling.

"Huh?" Aria likewise halted and gave Gourry a questioning look.

"He's saying we've got company," I said dryly. "Company that's not great at hiding its presence."

"...Well, I don't exactly make a habit of this kind of thing," came the voice I expected from the woods. With the rustling of brush, the same black-clad figure that we'd met in Telmodd emerged.

"Hey, Master Zonagein. Super tracking skills you got there. Funny how you didn't notice us taking a break in the forest after leaving Telmodd."

"Now, now. I found you in the end, so let's let sleeping dogs lie," he said, easily brushing off my mockery once more.

He really did seem like a pretty smart guy. His strategic choice of location suggested good judgment too. The forest was great for ambushes, what with all the cover around. But it played to Zonagein's strengths in a more specific way... The thick greenery. The sprawling wild. Woodlands teemed with small animals, each one a potential vessel for Zonagein's demonic summoning powers.

That said, I wasn't exactly helpless here.

"I guess you have so little faith in your own abilities that you're gonna sic your lesser demons on us again?" I asked, trying to bait him once more.

I figured he'd brush this off too and move right to the summoning. Then I'd use the time I'd bought to whip up a big spell of my own! However...

"Oh, not at all. Sorry to disappoint if that's what you were counting on," Zonagein replied, casually quashing my plan. "Having witnessed your fight in the city, I know that lesser demons would be nothing more than a nuisance to you. Not that I mind that, of course... My companion informed me that they

would get in the way of his fight anyway.”

“Your companion?” I asked with a frown.

“Oh, yes. Allow me to introduce him. You hear that? Stop hiding and come out, Graymore,” the old man called.

A chilling hostile presence rose up behind us.

*What?!* I quickly turned back and saw... more of the forest? No. There was definitely something moving in the shadows of the canopy. Soon enough... a figure stepped out from the trees and into the afternoon sunlight.

“A lizardman?!” Aria shouted in shock.

It was an adequate description. He was covered in scales the color of dead leaves and had a long tail, both typical traits of lizardfolk. But there had to be more to this Graymore guy. Zonagein was putting more faith in him than the dozen or so lesser demons he could summon, after all. Plus, apparently Graymore had been hiding behind us this whole time—and we hadn’t sensed him.

“Now then, Graymore... Which would you prefer?” Zonagein asked.

“The swordsman,” Graymore replied simply.

Then—*Fwsh!*—the claws on both of his hands extended. Ten in all... and pretty long. The longest one was the length of a full sword, the shortest that of a dagger. Were those his weapons of choice? I slowly turned back to Zonagein.

“I see,” he said. “Then I’ll be fighting you, little miss.”

“Looks that way. But y’know, if we’re gonna chat like this, you should have the decency to show your face.”

“Oh? I didn’t realize I was hiding it,” Zonagein replied, unceremoniously raising his lowered face.

“Huh...” I murmured when I caught a peek of the visage beneath the hood. He was a white-bearded old man who might’ve even been pretty good-looking in his younger years. “You look pretty normal.”

“Were you expecting something monstrous?” He gave me a wincing smile.

“Well, kinda...”

“I’m very sorry to disappoint you. Not that I came here to please you, of course...”

“Yeah, fair point.”

“But we could talk for ages like this if we wanted... Shall we begin?”

“Sure thing!” I said, drawing the shortsword from my belt, reciting a spell under my breath, and charging straight for Zonagein.

In that instant, he turned around and retreated into the forest. His hands were still hidden under his cape and he showed no sign of brandishing a weapon, but I couldn’t let my guard down. There was always a chance he could produce a knife from its folds to throw at me.

Zonagein kept his back to me and maintained some distance as he fled. But I wasn’t gonna run this game of tag forever!

“Freeze Arrow!” I released my completed spell at Zonagein.

It wasn’t a one-hit-kill number, but it would be quite disabling if I nailed him. Even a glancing blow should slow him down some. As my frigid bolts rained down, Zonagein easily dodged them by taking cover behind a tree.

*Hmm... Figured that would happen.*

In a forest full of obstacles, I knew it would be hard to land a decent hit with projectiles. Frankly, I’d have considered it a lucky break if a single arrow had found its target. My *real* plan was to fire off a few simple Freeze Arrow barrages and get Zonagein to write me off as the win-through-force type. Then I’d spring a Van Layl, which conjured tendrils of ice along the walls and ground, to freeze him over before finishing him off with a bigger spell! So to keep up the ruse, I began chanting another Freeze Arrow, when just then...

“Van Layl!” It wasn’t my voice that echoed through the trees, but Zonagein’s.

*What?!*

Frosty vines spread out in all directions from Zonagein’s current location, letting out an icy crackle as they went. And, of course, “all directions” included toward me!

*Crap! He got the drop on me!* I sprang back, but the tendrils continued to spread.

*Darn it!* I cursed to myself as I thrust my shortsword into the ground. Zonagein's icy vines crawled up its blade. That bought me a little time, which I used to do an about face and flee the scene.

I emerged from the forest, arriving back where we'd started. Gourry and Graymore were already locked in combat.

*Shing! Cling! Clang!* The striking of metal against metal rang out over and over. It seemed like Gourry was the one on the defensive!

From what I could tell, Gourry had the superior skills... but Graymore had ten claws of varying lengths on his side. His movements seemed sporadic at a glance, but they came in nonstop waves. It was all Gourry could do to keep dodging him. He wasn't getting a chance to turn the tables. Every time he tried to put distance between them, Graymore would close in to keep the upper hand.

We believed Gourry's new blade to be a powerful magic one, though I didn't know exactly what it did. Between it and his skills, though, Gourry easily should've been able to cut through Graymore's sword-claws. But...

Graymore took a step forward and—*Zwee!*—something whistled through the air. It was his tail! Graymore lashed at Gourry's feet! Thankfully, Gourry leaped back at just the right time. That left Graymore off balance and immobile. Gourry's sword flashed!

*Ting! Ta-ting! Ting!* Several of Graymore's claws moved to block it, snapped, and went flying!

*Now's your chance!* I thought, but instead, Gourry took another step back.

*Fwsh!* The broken-off claws returned to their former length.

Aha... Definitely a tricky opponent. I would've liked to offer a little spell-based support, but anything I fired off ran the risk of hitting Gourry. More importantly, I doubted Zonagein was gonna give me the leeway. I could feel his presence just behind me even now!



*Okay then!*

“Van Layl!” Without stopping, I placed a hand on a nearby tree to unleash my spell and kept running. The spreading vines of ice froze their way down the trunk to the ground, then the grass...

But when I looked back, I saw no sign of Zonagein. Nevertheless, I could sense his presence looming nearby.

*Where is he?!* I quickly scanned the area and... “Above?!” I looked up and saw a figure hovering high between the trees.

“Freeze Arrow!” It was now Zonagein’s turn to rain down icy bolts.

“Fireball!”

*Fwoosh!* A flaming globe met the icy arrows and burst into a shower of red fire.

As for who’d cast it, that honor went to... Aria?! The burst of flames scorched the treetops and Zonagein among them.

“Harrgh!” came a pained voice beyond the fire.

*Okay! Now!*

I quickly chanted a spell... “Bram Blazer!”

And I fired it into the flames! I couldn’t see Zonagein amidst the blaze, but I didn’t see any escape for him either! My blue bullet pierced the inferno... but yielded no sign of a hit. Had I missed?!

“Freeze Arrow!” Zonagein’s voice came at me from another direction.

*When did he—* I reflexively ducked behind a nearby tree. But...

“Augh!” Aria cried out.

*Damn!* I could see Aria crouching on the ground some distance away. She’d taken a direct hit from the Freeze Arrow, leaving her left leg iced over from the shin down.

Zonagein was standing not too far off, at the edge of the forest. How had he gotten over there? A Levitation spell wouldn’t have moved him that quickly...

“A Fireball in the middle of the forest? How reckless,” he remarked, slowly approaching Aria. The quiet muttering that followed was definitely a chant.

*Oh crap! Is he going for Aria?! I had to save her, but my spell wasn't gonna make it in time! And the sword I might have used to slow him down was currently frozen in the forest! In that case...*

“Bram Blazer!”

*Bwoosh!* Suddenly, with no warning at all, a shockwave of blue light sent Zonagein flying. He fell dramatically to the ground, but managed to get up again. He glared in the direction of the spell's caster...

“Now, now, old man. It's a man's duty to be kind to beautiful ladies.”

Our new arrival was an unfamiliar face. He struck a rather pretentious pose as he stared down Zonagein.

“Ngh...!” The old sorcerer looked between me and the new guy and, perhaps realizing he was now at a disadvantage, cried out to his companion. “Graymore! We're leaving!”

*Shing!* Claw and blade clashed.

“Guh!” Gourry toppled, either overpowered or off balance, in a way that exposed his back to his opponent. Graymore raised his claws. But at that exact moment...

“Graymore! We're leaving!” Zonagein's cry echoed from the forest.

This gave Graymore the tiniest bit of pause, which Gourry used to twist around and strike at him with the sword in his right hand! *Clink!* Graymore was unfazed. Gourry's slash, executed from an unstable position, was easily swept aside by the lizardman's claws. However...

Following the momentum of his slice, Gourry kept twisting. A streak of light flew from his left hand!

“Gah!” Graymore let out a quiet cry, then fell onto his back and lay motionless. A razor-sharp *something* was stuck deep between his eyes.

What was it, you ask? It was one of the claws that Gourry had snapped off

earlier. He must have scooped it up when he toppled over, and then used that feint with his sword to create an opportunity for the deadly throw.

*Was that planned or improvised, man? Either way...*

Upon seeing Graymore fall, Zonagein silently retreated into the forest and disappeared. I'd have preferred to finish him too, but incautious pursuit was the root of all injury. Besides, I was way more worried about Aria at the moment. I ran over to her and inspected her frozen leg. Fortunately, her boots and pants offered a degree of protection, but we still had to do something about it, and fast.

"First, we need to warm up your leg."

"Hey, is she okay?" the unfamiliar man asked in concern.

I turned to him and replied, "Treatment first. Introductions later."

"My name's Dilarr," the man said as he dumped some sticks onto the fire we'd started to warm Aria up, right around the time the adrenaline of the fight was wearing off.

This Dilarr fellow looked a little over twenty. Black hair, black clothing, a little on the scrawny side... If he put a little more effort into grooming, he might pass for handsome, but his scraggly facial hair and dirty clothes put the kibosh on that.

"Ah... thank you for saving us," Aria said, bowing her head to him as she warmed her leg by the fire.

He waved his hand dismissively. "Hey, it's nothing. It's a man's duty to save a beautiful woman in distress," he replied lightly. "By the way, may I have your name?"

"I'm Aria."

"Are these your assistants?"

"Hey," I barked with a glare.

"More or less," she replied.

“Hey!”

“I was just kidding,” Aria said, waving her hands defensively as I turned my glare on her. “But they are helping me. I’m on my way to Crimson.”

“Crimson?!” Dilarr’s eyes opened wide. “Then... you’re also answering the council’s call for aid?”

“‘Also’? Is that what you’re doing too, then?” I interrupted.

He cast a sidelong glance my way. “Just so you know... when highly attractive men and women are talking, it’s not polite for the ugly to butt in.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Ahh, Lina! Calm down!” Gourry quickly held me back before my rage could pick up steam.

“Oh, let me introduce them. This is Mistress Lina Inverse and Master Gourry,” Aria said with a smile, when just then...

*Steppa-steppa-step!* Dilarr scuttled back dramatically, gazing at me in terror. “L-Lina... Inverse? Er, I mean... Mistress Lina Inverse?”

“Yeah?”

“*The* Mistress Lina Inverse?”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that definite article right there... but yeah, I’m probably the gal you’ve heard stories about,” I answered with a glare.

“Yeeeeeeek!” Dilarr suddenly prostrated himself on the ground. “Please forgive me! I didn’t know! I meant no offense! Forgive me! Don’t kill me! I’ll give you all the money I have!”

“Hang on now!”

*Just what kind of stories are people spreading about me?!*

“Er... Master Dilarr, there’s no need to be frightened. She’s not as bad as the rumors suggest,” Aria said with a wince. Unfortunately, that didn’t make me feel a whole lot better.

Dilarr quickly scrabbled up to Aria, seized her shoulders, and whispered earnestly into her ear, “It’s not worth it, Aria! I don’t know what circumstances



brought you to them, but keeping such company... Aren't you afraid you'll catch the Lina Inverse?"

"I'm not a disease!"

"Ack! She heard me!" Dilarr quickly scuttled away again.

*What's with this dude?*

"C'mon, don't worry so much. I've been traveling with her for a while and..." Gourry began cheerfully enough, then petered into silence. After a lengthy pause, he scratched his head and concluded, "Actually, I got nothin'."

"Don't sound so hopeless! You're acting like nothing good has happened to you since we started traveling together!"

"But Lina... *has* anything good happened to me since we started traveling together?"

*Guh... Well... okay, maybe not, but...*

"A-Anyhoo..." I turn away from him and back toward the other two. "Aria has to get to Crimson. For reasons."

"Reasons?" Dilarr inquired.

"Yes..." Aria launched into her halting explanation again.

"Hmm... I see." Once Aria finished her story, Dilarr (who had returned to the fireside) scratched his chin with his thumb and said, "But Aria, if you're headed for Crimson, let me give you a warning. Don't take the main road there."

"What? Why not?"

"Well... as you can probably imagine, I'm a fellow sorcerer. I'm heading to Crimson myself at the council's request. The reward's a pittance, but I'm low on cash and it's usually best to do what the council says. There's just one problem... The imperial army's squatting a half a day's walk down the road. Seems they've been held up by guerrilla attacks from lesser and brass demons."

*Demons?!* I found myself scowling at this news. I would've assumed the attacks to be Zonagein's handiwork, but as far as I knew, he'd been out looking

for us. That meant Kailus had another summoner of his caliber working for him... which in turn meant that the imperial army might not have such an easy time taking the city back after all.

But while I was contemplating all this, Dilarr went on. "As a counter against demons, they've been drafting every sorcerer that passes by. In a 'volunteer capacity,' if you know what I mean. They almost got me too, but like hell I'm going to take orders from some military hard-head. So I went on the run, and that's how I bumped into you guys. If you want to get ahead of the army, you'll have to go around them."

*Aha... Makes perfect sense.*

"Still... taking the scenic route is really going to set us back. It'll be days before we hit Crimson," I mused, folding my arms thoughtfully.

A detour to avoid being drafted might mean we arrived after the whole thing was over.

"I wonder..." After a brief pause, Aria whispered, "I think there might be a way."

## 2: Forward Ho! Destination, the Sorcerers' Council!

I'd never been to Crimson Town myself before, but I'd heard about it. It was a series of small islands in the middle of a large lake, connected by bridges, that had eventually grown into a city. It was crisscrossed by canals, and most travel there was done by boat. It was a pretty popular tourist destination too. But they said that all of the buildings there were painted white, which left me with one nagging question about the place. Namely, why call it *Crimson*? However...





“Aha... so that’s where the name comes from.”

All my doubts were dispelled the moment I gazed down upon the city from the mountaintop. Evening was just breaking, with the sun starting to sink behind the mountains. The water in the canals glimmered red in its waning light, and the buildings took on a burning scarlet hue.

*Yeah, okay, “Crimson Town” makes sense now...*

“It should be just down this way,” Aria announced as she emerged from the brush behind me.

Her suggestion to reach Crimson while avoiding the imperial army had been to get off on a side road, scale an unassuming nearby mountain to reach the lakewater’s source, and then follow the river down. Frankly, it seemed unlikely that the imperial army and Kailus’s men hadn’t thought of the idea of getting into town via its waterways, but somehow, we hadn’t run into either on the way here.

See, Crimson sat upon a lake fed by several rivers, the largest of which cut through these mountains. Aria said that, when she was little, she’d frequently explored her way to its headwaters with her big sister. To think those childhood adventures would prove useful at a time like this... Was that a good or ill omen for us?

“Well... we’d better get a move on,” Dilarr said, putting a presumptuous arm around Aria’s shoulders.

Yeah, this guy’d ended up tagging along too. He couldn’t simply walk away from the sorcerers’ council mission, after all, but he also couldn’t get past the imperial army on the main road on his own. This was pretty much his only recourse. That was his excuse, anyway... but in practice, he mainly seemed to want to hit on Aria.

“E-Excuse me, Master Dilarr...” she stammered.

“Hmm? Oh... Heh. You scared, Aria?”

“She doesn’t like it, you jerk!” *Crack!* I introduced Dilarr’s face to my bootheel. “Come on, Aria. You need to be firm with these guys, or they’ll just

keep escalating.”

“R-Right...” she responded vaguely to my friendly warning.

“Ow, ow... Y’know, I think maybe you’re a little *too* firm...”

“All part of my charm!” I quipped.

Dilarr fell silent, grimacing.

“Anyhoo... Take us to the river, Aria.”

“All right,” she agreed, leading us through the brush.

After some more walking, I began to hear the sound of rushing water.

“Here we are,” she said, at last coming to a stop.

“Here?” Gourry looked around uncomfortably. “This looks like... a waterfall to me.”

“It is,” Aria replied confidently.

Indeed, a massive stream of water was roaring down the cliffside. We’d come out on a ledge about halfway up the fall, and you could’ve fit a two-story building between where we stood and the river below... Actually, what lay below was less a river and more of a gorge. Vast quantities of emerald water gushed between its banks.

“You’re not gonna tell us to jump in, are you?” Gourry asked cautiously.

Aria winced while waving her hands. “Oh, of course not! There are two or three more waterfalls up ahead. We’d die if we did that.”

*Aha...* That explained why the imperial army and Kailus’s goons weren’t poking around here.

“We just have to make it down one way or another, and then we’ll be in Crimson.”

*Right. So we just have to...*

...

“Hey, wait a minute!” I slinked over to Aria. “‘One way or another’? You mean you haven’t even thought about how we’re going to get there?!”

“N-No, I have! I simply meant that there are several ways to go about it. We could travel along the water with Levitation, or we could follow the valley down the mountain road... The mountain road won’t exactly be easy going, but I could handle it even as a child, so I don’t think you’ll find it excessively difficult.”

“Those are out, unfortunately,” I said easily.

“What?”

“Either method would get us found by Kailus’s forces. You and Kailus are both Crimson locals. If you know these routes, then he does too. The road you mentioned isn’t meant for large groups, so even if the imperial army’s aware of it, they won’t use it. That’s why it might *seem* like Kailus doesn’t have anyone posted along the route... But as we get closer to town, I bet there’ll be lookouts, at the very least. Even if we travel at night, whether we’re floating by with Levitation or creeping through the brush, they’re bound to spot us. Then they sound the alarm and... I won’t say the game’s over, but it definitely gets harder.”

“B-But... we can’t turn back. Finding another route now would take much too long.”

“Hmm...” I muttered, glancing at the viridescent water splashing noisily downward. “Say, Aria... this river’s pretty deep, right?”

“What? Why, yes. It would be deep enough for boats to travel if it weren’t for the waterfalls.”

“Okay. Then I know what to do.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

I pointed to the plunge pool at the bottom. “We go *in* the water.”

*Ssshooosssssssh...* For a time, the only sound to be heard was the rushing of the fall.

Then...

“Whaaaaaaaat?!” Gourry, Aria, and Dilarr all cried out in unison.

“Hang on a minute, Lina! You’re not asking us to swim, are you?!”

“We can’t do that! I told you there are more waterfalls downstream!”

“I’d rather take my chances with the enemy forces!”

“I never said we were swimming, damn it!” I shouted over the three whiners. “I mean, duh! We’d die! I’m talking about using a Lei Wing spell to go underwater in a *protective wind barrier*! That’ll ensure us an air supply, and if the water’s deep, we can dive low enough that we’re not visible from the surface.”

Of course, a typical Lei Wing could never carry four people, caster included... But an amplified Lei Wing courtesy of the talismans I’d gotten from a certain someone should do the trick.

“Oh, that’s perfect!” Aria exclaimed.

“No arguments here, then,” Dilarr agreed readily.

“You sure? That seems pretty darn reckless too...” Gourry was the lone remaining voice of dissent.

I ignored him, of course. Granted, his response was actually the most rational one of the three... But rather than admitting that, I simply smiled and said, “Then it’s decided. Let’s head out. We’ll tether ourselves together. Be careful not to drop any of your gear in the water.”

And with that, I started on my own preparations. Needless to say, I’d retrieved the shortsword that Zonagein had briefly frozen back in the forest. It wasn’t the best sword by any stretch of the imagination, but I wasn’t interested in paying for a replacement. To make sure I didn’t lose it in the water, I tied the hilt to the sheath, then looped the string around my belt to hold the whole thing in place. I attached the tether around my belt too. By the time I was done, the others looked more or less ready to go.

“Okay... everyone ready?” I asked them.

They nodded. I nodded back and began reciting a spell under my breath. When it was ready...

“Lei Wing!”

Wreathed in a barrier of wind, we plunged into the river.

“You tricked me! Mistress Lina, you tricked meeeee!”

“Don’t talk, Aria! You’ll bite your tongue!”

Her and Dilarr’s shrieking echoed through the wind barrier. Of course, I understood the impulse to scream.

Traveling underwater in a bubble *sounded* easy enough, but this was no gentle cruise. For one thing, the bottom of the river wasn’t flat and smooth. It was filled with rocks and trenches that churned the water, making it impossible to predict the speed and direction the turbulent current would take us at any given moment.

So that’s how we were sailing... Although I suppose it would be more accurate to say “swept along.” I could slow our descent a bit when we went over a waterfall, but other than that, we were basically at the river’s mercy. I probably don’t need to tell you how that felt for the passengers.

So, like I said, I understood the impulse to scream given our precarious situation... but I didn’t appreciate the accusations of trickery. I’d said this trip was doable, not that it was comfortable or safe!

In contrast to the screamy twins, Gourry remained silent. Every time I glanced back at him, he seemed to have an expression on his face like, “Ah, my lot in life.” After all, he had no choice but to ride this out until we reached Crimson.

We’d passed through—rather, fallen down—what felt like three waterfalls so far. Based on Aria’s earlier description, I figured we had to be closing in on town by now, but I couldn’t even poke my head out of the water to look around. I’d have to bring the whole bubble topside to do so, which would draw the attention of any nearby enemies. That left me to infer our position from the state of the water around us.

Once we hit the city, the current should dissipate and we should be able to see signs of life up above. The sun was almost completely down now, so visibility wasn’t great, but with the strong moonlight that night, it was still possible to make out anything close enough.

*Speaking of, it does kinda feel like we’ve slowed down a bit.* I scanned the area

around us while keeping control of my spell and...

When I glanced right, I fell silent.

“Mistress Lina?” Aria noticed the change in my demeanor, followed my gaze, and...

She, too, went silent when she saw it. The... eye.

In the water right outside the wind barrier, a single eye was watching us. It was about the size of a fist, and it was keeping pace like it was tailing us. To be honest, it was pretty dang freaky... In fact, it was terrifying. I couldn’t make out what it was attached to, but I could tell that—whatever it was—it was floating in the water behind the eye, and it was big.

“Um...” Aria turned toward me, both her smile and her voice strained. “It’s probably... a fish?”

It didn’t look like a fish to me, though I didn’t say that aloud. Instead, I picked up speed. We quickly put some distance between us and the eye, but...

“Gwah!”

I heard a strange splashing sound as Dilarr cried out. I looked to see numerous green tentacles breaking through the wind barrier from behind, wriggling around as if searching for us.

“What the...?!” Gourry drew his sword (no mean feat in the cramped space of the barrier) and sliced through one of the tentacles.

*Stupid me! It’s a city on the water! Of course they’d have aquatic sentries!*

“They’ve found us! I’m going up!” I yelled.

Staying underwater now was all con and no pro, so my goal was to shoot us to the surface. But as soon as we began to rise—*Wham!*—the whole wind barrier jolted like we’d hit something.

“Mistress Lina! Above us!” Aria cried.

I looked up to see two strange figures looming large over our bubble. With the surface to their backs, I could say for certain now that they weren’t fish. They flitted around, darting through the water and...



*Fwsh!* Two blade-like fins cut into the top of the barrier.

“No!” Gourry quickly parried them, but even with his incredible swordsmanship, the unstable footing in the bubble made it hard for him to make full use of his talents.

One of the deflected fins began to withdraw as if cowed, but then plunged at us again.

“Aria! Cast Freeze Arrow!” I called.

“Huh? But that would—” She hesitated, bewildered.

Dilarr, however, began chanting. “Freeze Arrow!”

Dilarr’s arrows manifested *outside* our bubble. In other words, out where the looming figures were. Of course, I didn’t know if the spell would work on them or not... But at the very least, it should freeze the water around them. And sure enough, the Freeze Arrows began emanating ice to snare our attackers and hold them in place. So trapped, their fins dislodged from our barrier as we sped away.

*Okay, now up we go!* I focused my mental energy on propelling the wind barrier, shooting us up through the depths and into the night. The sky was bright and starry. Moonbeams glittered on the water’s surface. I could see winged creatures overhead, and houses cloaked in darkness below. We were well within Crimson Town now.

*Wait... Winged creatures?!* I quickly looked around again.

Now, “winged creatures at night” calls to mind images of bats and owls and such, but what was currently hovering in the skies over Crimson wasn’t any of those. Its wings were bat-like, to be sure. But the creature resembling an unpainted life-sized doll carrying a spear was decidedly *not* a bat. Said creature was looking right at us with its eyeless, mouthless, noseless face and leading a flock of a dozen or so other creatures that resembled lesser demons with wings.

*Oh hell! A navy and an air force?!*

Still, I didn’t have freedom of movement right now. I piloted us down to a nearby street and dismissed my flight spell. As I did...

*Splloosh!* Multiple figures popped out of the water. They were covered in scales that glittered wet in the moonlight, and seemed to be a combination of fish and lesser demons. They had arms and legs with protruding fins much the same shape as the ones that had cut into our barrier earlier.

“Tch!” When he laid eyes on the fishy figures, Gourry drew his sword and charged.

“Wait, Gourry—”

*Wha-bam!* Before I could finish, Gourry and I both toppled over.

I sprang back up immediately. “We’re tethered together, remember?!”

“S-Sorry!” Gourry quickly got to his feet, severed the rope with the sword, and took off again.

I freed my sword from its sheath and got to work cutting myself free from the others too.

*Swsh!* Gourry’s blade glinted in the moonlight as it cut down one of the fish-like demons.

“Hrooooo!” Another of its kind a bit further away made a sound like it was howling at the moon. When it did, dozens of cold arrows appeared before it!

*These are...!*

“Gourry! Time to make tracks!” I called, turning around and doing just that.

Our current array of foes consisted of a handful of fish demons, a dozen or so flying demons, and that winged doll thing. We could beat ’em, of course, but it would take time we didn’t have. Reinforcements would surely arrive before we could finish the job. For now, we needed to regroup.

“H-Hey! Lina!” Gourry quickly took off after me. Aria and Dilarr, naturally, followed suit.

*Fwoosh!* As we ran, I heard the sound of wings tearing through the air. Sensing hostility approaching from behind us, I ducked into an alley while chanting a spell.

I looked up to see multiple flying creatures against the sky visible between the

buildings. As I'd suspected, their wingspans didn't let them enter narrow alleyways... But that didn't necessarily mean that we were safe. They could always attack from above!

"Hrooooo!" The demons howled overhead.

At the same time, I released my own spell! I put my hands on the alley wall and... "Blast Wave!"

*Bwam!* A giant hole opened into the house on the other side.

"This way!" I cried as I leaped through it, followed by the other three.

"But isn't this someone's—"

Before Aria could voice her objections—*Crababababash!*—dust billowed up in the alley. The airborne demons had probably fired down a volley of some attack spell or other. Obviously, I'd anticipated that, which was why I'd barged into the building beside us.

Aria was worried about the house's owners, but the place seemed abandoned to me. There weren't any lights on in the windows, after all. It was too early to retire at this hour, but too dark out to putter around inside without any light. And, in further support of my suspicions, the room we'd jumped into was completely desolate. Not one scrap of furniture to be seen. It was hard to say if the owners had skipped town when the chaos had started or if the building had been uninhabited for longer than that, though.

At any rate, the big question now was what to do next. The enemy knew we were here. They'd probably come after us soon. They'd bust in, overwhelming us with their numbers...

*Or, more likely...*

I softly began to chant a spell.

Some time later, the demons unleashed their magical assault on the building.

*Thunk... Whumpa-whump...*

"Called it," I whispered softly in the dark while listening to the muffled commotion.

“Called what?” Aria asked.

“That they’d try to blow up the whole house with us in it,” I replied, though our current circumstances weren’t conducive to casual conversation. I quietly chanted a spell, and... “Lighting!”

*Poff!* A small magical light appeared in my hand. I could finally see for myself that we’d all escaped unscathed.

“Say, Lina... can you get us a little more space?” Gourry asked. “Kinda cramped in here.”

“I was flying by the seat of my pants, man. I mean, I can open things up... but not too much. We’re underground, after all.”

After we’d leaped into the empty house, I’d realized the demons were going to nuke the place, so I’d used the tunnel-digging spell *Bepheth Bring* to open a hole in the floor and escape underground. I could open the hole as wide as a room, but digging a tunnel that big with no supports was more likely to cause a collapse. Still, wriggling around together in uncomfortably close quarters did feel stupid. We weren’t worms, y’know?

I recited the cant under my breath and... “*Bepheth Bring!*”

Swaths of earth were carved away at my command. I had to wonder... where exactly did all that dirt go? Not that this was really the time for philosophical questions. Anyhoo, we soon had enough space for everyone to sit in a circle.

“Sheesh... what a mess.” I spoke up first, naturally. “I figured Kailus would have his home turf well guarded, but I wasn’t expecting a full sampler platter of demons.”

“Demons? You mean those piscine and avian monsters?” Dilarr asked, his brow furrowed.

I nodded. “Not sure about that flying doll-looking thing... but the other winged monsters and their fishy counterparts are probably lesser demon bastardizations. Or maybe genuine lesser demons of an unusual pedigree. One of the fish guys earlier cast *Freeze Arrow* with a howl, just like lesser demons do.”

This was pure speculation on my part, but I could imagine that Zonagein had created lesser demons to serve as a navy and an air force by having them possess fish and birds the same way he had with rats in Telmodd.

Dilarr scratched his chin with his thumb. “Boy, this is a fine situation we’re in... I might’ve been better off getting bossed around by the imperial army.”

“I’m sorry... for dragging you into this,” Aria said despondently.

Dilarr responded quickly, “No, I’m not blaming you, Aria! It’s just, you know, sensitive people like you and me aren’t cut out for this kind of thing. That’s all.”

“Oh yeah?” I interjected.

“I wonder what that’s supposed to mean...” Gourry mused with me.

“Er, wait! I wasn’t saying you’re *insensitive*!” Dilarr backpedaled.

This guy was gonna talk his way into serious trouble someday...

“At any rate, the first order of business now is figuring out how to proceed from here,” I said. “Honestly, with all these demons roaming around, it might be easiest just to blow up the whole city...”

“Please, Mistress Lina! Don’t! There are still innocent people here!” Aria pleaded fervently.

“Sh-She’s right! It’s not worth it! Reconsider! Please!” Dilarr begged with equal intensity.

“I was just joking, you goons!”

“Sounded pretty serious to me...”

“Get off my back, Gourry! Anyway... if we want to infiltrate the enemy’s base and just take out Kailus, we need to figure out how to get there. Aria, do you know where we are in relation to where Kailus might be?”

“Kailus is most likely at the sorcerers’ council. But as for where we are... I don’t know the entire city by heart, and I couldn’t even get a general idea in the dark like this.”

“So you got nothing.”

“I’m sorry I’m so useless,” she said, slumping over.

“Hey, no big. But that does mean our top priority is getting our bearings. Therefore...” I began chanting a spell.

“Hang on, Lina. You sure it’s safe to poke our heads topside?” Gourry asked in a rare bout of insight.

“Fair point. The demons could still be hanging around, but there’s no guarantee we won’t be greeted by a swarm of them even if we wait around a while. And I don’t think we have much time to waste in the first place.”

The entrance to the hole we’d made had likely been sealed when the demons leveled the house. We could asphyxiate if we stayed down here too long. And even if we didn’t, the demons might be cautious enough to dig into the rubble to make sure we were dead. If they found the entrance to our little hidey-hole... They’d flood us out, no question. Either way, it seemed to me that staying put would only turn up the danger, so I began whispering a spell.

“Bepheth Bring!”

*Whum!* As I touched the earthen wall, soil shaved away to create a long tunnel stretching out ahead of us.

“How’s about we keep digging, go a ways, then come up somewhere else?”

The group nodded in firm agreement.

It was too bad...

“Bepheth Bring!”

...the work was so monotonous...

“Bepheth Bring!”

...that it was getting kind of annoying.

“And another Bepheth Bring!”

Just chanting and chanting...

I couldn’t say how far we’d made it before the earth we were tunneling through began to turn muddy. I held up my light and, as expected, found the ground below us soaked through. (Incidentally, my light source was a Lighting



spell cast on the tip of my drawn shortsword. Typically, magical lights can't be extinguished until their timer runs out... but this way, if I needed darkness, I could just sheath my sword.) "We're hitting water..." I grumbled.

"We are under a lake, after all. There are canals running overhead, too. Oh... and we really don't want to hit one of those, so perhaps we should dig deeper," Aria proposed.

"Right. Got it." I used my next Bepheth Bring to tunnel us in a more downward direction as we kept crawling through the mud.

"Boy, this is seriously rough going..." Dilarr complained from behind me. "My clothing's sopping. I feel gross."

"Buck up, Dilarr. Aria and I aren't whining, are we?"

"Yeah, I guess not... But there's gotta be an easier way."

"We can do this above ground if you want, but if the enemy finds us, you're on your own."

"Well, that's not exactly appealing either... I get it! Just shut up and keep crawling, right?"

"Yep," I replied, then began to chant my umpteenth spell.

"By the way, Lina," Gourry piped up as I started incanting, "there's something that's been bothering me these last few minutes... Hey, are you listening?"

Of course I was. But I couldn't respond mid-chant.

"The ground feels a little different..."

*Oh, come on...*

"Bepheth Bring!" I cast my spell, carving out a new section of tunnel, and replied while I was groping along, "Of course it does. It's basically all mud now."

"That's not exactly what I meant..."

"Then what did you—"

No sooner had I said that than—*Splut!*— my right hand sank into the ground.

*...Huh?*

And then...

*Splloosh!* Water flooded up from below.

“Glug... Glurk...” I groaned and blinked a few times. The first thing I saw was a blanket of luminescent moss overhead.

I looked myself over and picked myself up. Fortunately, I was still intact. Gourry, meanwhile, was laid out beside me.

I glanced around and could see we were surrounded by water. It was a lake, dotted with islands barely large enough to build a one-room hut on. Gourry and I had washed up on one of them, and Aria and Dilarr on yet another nearby. Above us, the whole ceiling was scattered with softly glowing moss.

“...An underground lake?” It wasn’t me who murmured that, but Aria, who was also apparently just coming to.

Yup. We’d found ourselves in a subterranean pool beneath Crimson. This was the first I’d ever heard of such a thing existing, mind you.

“Oww... Hey, what is all of this?” Dilarr asked as he, too, sat up.

I cast a glance his way and replied, “I suspect there’s an underground river feeding this thing. We must’ve been passing over it when...”

“When the floor gave way?”

“You got it. Hey, Gourry, wake up already!”

“Mm...” As I shook him, Gourry stirred and let out a moan. Then he sat up with a start. He looked all around, and his eyes stopped on me. “What I was gonna say is that it felt like we were walking on a really thin board.”

“I... I see...” I scratched my head, wincing.

“I didn’t know there was an underground lake here either...” Aria whispered in awe as she looked around. I’d just used a Levitation spell to reunite us on the same island.

The light from the luminescent moss wasn’t especially bright, and the stone

pillars around us holding up the ceiling impeded our vision significantly. But even so, the fact that we couldn't see the edges of the lake... Was it bigger than the town of Crimson itself? I could understand why a lifetime resident of the city like Aria was so surprised to find out such a place existed. As for the more pressing matter at hand...

"So I guess you can't tell where we are in relation to the city above, huh?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not. I'm sorry," she replied.

"Like I said, no big. None of us are badly hurt, which means we weren't swept very far, for sure. But we don't have much other choice now... We'll just have to open another hole."

*Sst!* It was then I felt a presence appear far behind us. I reflexively whipped around to see... the surface of the lake perfectly undisturbed.

"What is it?" Aria asked.

In lieu of response, I began chanting a spell. The presence I felt... I knew it wasn't just my imagination. Gourry, who had the instincts (and smarts) of a wild animal, seemed to sense it too. He drew his sword and gazed penetratingly into the water. Then...

I caught sight of a figure flitting beneath the surface. A lot of figures, in fact! */s it them?!*

I didn't have to wonder long, for—*Splash!*—more of those fish demons burst out of the still water! Their scales glimmered in the glow of the luminescent moss. And the second they appeared...

"Freeze Bullid!" The subzero bullet I fired froze over a part of the lake. Some of the demons landed on the glacial surface, while others were trapped in the ice.

"Raaaaagh!" Gourry dashed at our incoming foes, light on his feet in spite of the slick terrain.

But the demons weren't going to sit there and be slain. "Hrooooo...!" Their howling echoed through the dimly lit lake cavern, and before them appeared

countless arrows of cold!

*No, those are—*

*Nroom!* The projectiles whistled through the air as they sped toward us. Gourry pressed his charge and cut down several of them. When he did—*Bloop!*—they scattered to the ground in sparkling droplets.

“Water?!” Dilarr shouted from behind me.

Indeed, the arrows the demons had conjured were made out of water, not ice. That was no reason to underestimate them, however!

*Vreeeoom!* One liquid bolt whizzed right by me, tearing a hole in my cape. Fired at high speed under high pressure, water was still nasty as heck!

“Aria! Dilarr! Freeze the lake and give us some legroom!” I shouted without even a glance behind me.

“R-Right!”

“Understood!”

I then began chanting a spell.

While this was all going down, Gourry had sliced through two more demons. He was heading for a third when, all of a sudden, he stopped in his tracks and leaped to the right. At almost that same time...

*Crash!* Countless watery arrows broke up through the ice, shredding the area where Gourry had just been standing. It was a barrage from more enemies below. I couldn’t see anything at the bottom of the lake, which meant I had no idea how many there were... so for now, I’d just have to beat the ones I could see!

“Dynast Breath!” I fired a spell at one of the silhouettes lurking in the water. I cast a glance at Gourry and saw he’d already polished off most of the demons on the ice.

*Okay! Time to retreat back to a single island and lure the demons onto land!* I was about to share my plan with Gourry, when just then...

“Eek!”

“Aria!”

I heard Aria shriek, Dilarr cry out for her, and then a loud splash of water! I turned and saw a panicked Dilarr staring at a fragmented patch of ice floating on the water’s surface. Aria was nowhere to be seen.

*No way...*

“She fell in!” he shouted, his anguished scream echoing through the cave. “Can’t... Can’t we do something?!”

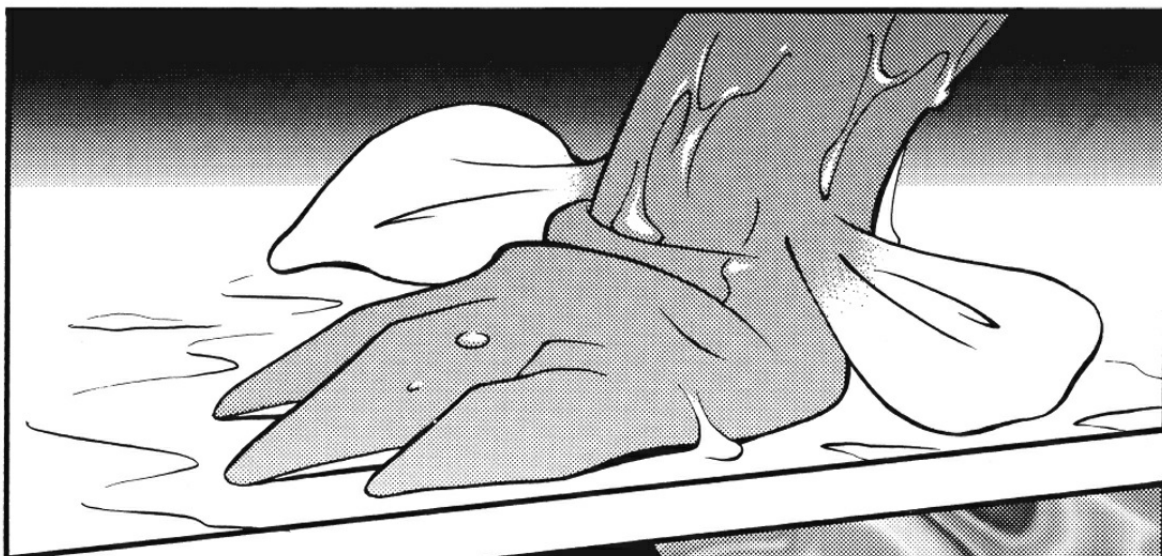
If the water were safe for diving, I could have used a Lei Wing to dive in, find Aria, and save her. But that would mean releasing my wind barrier to grab her and swim back up to the surface... and our enemies wouldn’t just sit idly by while I did that. In fact, what were the odds they’d ignored Aria when she fell in? In all likelihood, she was already...

“Where’s the girl?!” Gourry asked as he returned to us.

Dilarr and I could do naught but stand there in silence. The demons’ attacks had been quelled for now, but...

*Bloosh!* I heard a splashing to my right. All three of us whipped around in surprise.

On an island not far away... stood someone I’d never seen before. If I had to describe him, I’d say he looked like a drowning victim with an aqua hue. But this was no drowning victim, nor was it a zombie... His body was swollen as if waterlogged, but large fins grew from his feet, and there was webbing between the fingers of his taloned hands. Where a human would have a nose and a mouth, he had a mess of green tentacles. I guessed those were what had wriggled their way into our wind barrier on the way into Crimson Town... Pretty gross, honestly.





In most cases, I would've greeted this guy with an attack spell on sight, but in this case, I had to show restraint...

He had Aria in his arms.

"She's still alive... for now," came a wet, muffled voice. It sounded like someone talking with their mouth full.

"Mm..." As if to confirm the claim, Aria stirred and slowly opened her eyes. "Ah... Wh-What?! No!"

Waking to the gravity of her situation, she struggled desperately, but the arm around her refused to budge. The creature clamped its free hand over her mouth to keep her from chanting a spell.

"Gotta say... I'm impressed you knew we were here," I threw out there.

"Don't underestimate Narov... After I attacked you in the canals above, I doubted you'd try to use them to reach Lord Kailus again. But I didn't think you'd be willing to go walking around the city either. Which meant you had only one path left..."

*Oh?*

"Hmm... So you're Narov, huh? You may be in charge of the underwater security here in Crimson, but you're not as smart as you think you are."

"What was that?" he asked, his expression unreadable.

I puffed out my chest. "You said we only had *one path left*... meaning this is the way to the sorcerers' council! It was very kind of you to volunteer that information!"

"What? Are you telling me... you didn't know?"

"That's right! We just stumbled here through blind luck!"

"I'm not sure that's worth bragging about..." Gourry commented quietly from behind me. I ignored him, of course.

"I see..." Narov's expression remained unchanged. Not that I'd be able to tell if it *did* change. "Then I only need to finish you here. Don't bother resisting, by the way. I assume you know what will happen to this woman if you do."

*Splish!* As Narov threatened us, about a dozen fish demons surfaced to surround the island we were standing on. It wouldn't be too hard to beat them... if they didn't have Aria hostage, anyway.

Time for some good old-fashioned fast-talking!

"Heh. Please," I scoffed. "So, fill me in. If we don't resist, what guarantee do we have that you'll release Aria unharmed?"

"I give you my word. Once you're defeated, letting this one woman go... will pose little threat to Lord Kailus," Narov claimed brazenly.

I raised my voice a little. "Gimme a break! How stupid would I have to be to take a hostage-taker at his word? You may think Aria's not much of a threat... but you'd have nothing to lose by breaking your promise and killing her to be sure! Besides, I've got a policy about aqua-colored guys with face tentacles..." As I spoke, I took a small step to the side. At that exact moment...

"Freeze Arrow!"

Dilarr unleashed a volley of frigid bolts that froze the water from our island to Narov's in an icy bridge. Gourry immediately dashed across it.

"What?!" Narov shouted in shock right before Gourry leaped at him and —*Swsh!*—bisected his head.

While I was talking to Narov, I'd realized that Gourry and Dilarr were whispering behind me. I'd then heard Dilarr chanting a spell. That's why I'd intentionally raised my voice to draw Narov's attention. Then, when I heard Dilarr finish his incantation, I'd simply moved aside to let him do his thing.

Narov reeled back and began to collapse without as much as a scream. Gourry freed Aria from his arms.

*Pwaaash!* When Narov's body hit the water, the demons around us howled in chorus. "Hroooooooooo!"

Liquid arrows were pointing at me and Dilarr from all sides! Had the loss of their commander led the demons to attack indiscriminately?! Fortunately, I'd guessed something like this might happen!

I ran over to Dilarr and placed my hands on the ground. Just as the demons

unleashed their watery barrage...

“Bepheth Bring!” I cast the spell I’d chanted at my own feet!

*Whush!* The ground beneath us instantly disappeared, and Dilarr and I tumbled down a short ways. I’d carved out a trench that spiraled outward like a snail’s shell. It put us low enough that the arrows passed harmlessly over our heads.

*Okay... Now things are looking up!*

I quietly chanted a spell, and then... “Blast Ash!”

*Vwum!* I peeked my head up out of the trench to fire, turning one of the fish demons to powder.

The battle was moving in our favor. We were all holed up in my makeshift bunker, popping up here and there to fire off spells. Any demons that dared to charge in close were swiftly cut down by Gourry’s blade. The same scene repeated over and over again as we steadily thinned the enemy’s numbers.

After all, the water surrounding the island had been frozen solid, and we were currently in a crater below ground level. In order to hit us with an attack, the demons had to get closer. And in order to do that, they had to crawl over the ice. We just had to nail ’em once they were in our range. As long as we didn’t let our guard down, we had this in the bag. If Narov were still alive, he might’ve been able to think up a plan, but right now, all the demons could do was mindlessly press their offensive. Before long...

“It’s gotten quiet,” Aria said. We’d killed more demons than I could count at this point.

“Yeah,” I responded, poking my head up to scan the battlefield. There wasn’t a demon in sight. “Looks pretty safe...”

“Did we get them all?” Dilarr sighed as he stood up.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. I don’t see any more, but they could be in hiding,” I said, standing up with him to take a proper look around.

There was neither hide nor hair of demons anywhere. We could assume for

now that we'd vanquished the enemy. In which case...

I turned back to the group. "If what Mr. Greenie-Blue said was true, there's a way to get to the sorcerers' council from here somehow. How do you guys feel about searching it out and busting in?"

"But Lina, how would we even go about finding it?" Gourry asked, looking around uncertainly.

Dude had a point. The underground lake was massive. We didn't know what said way looked like, and locating it wouldn't be easy... Under normal circumstances, that is.

"Besides... there'll be enemies guarding it too, don't you think?"

"Of course, Dilarr. But let me ask you this... Would you prefer to return to the surface and look for the council building while fending off dive-bombing demons?"

"No, that's... a little too dangerous for my tastes."

"Right? So we're doing things my way. I've got a plan. Aria, Dilarr, you can both use wind barriers and Levitation and stuff, right?"

"Ah... I think so."

"Sure, of course."

"Okay. I'm gonna cast a Levitation to get us all off the ground while you two each cast a wind barrier around us."

"Why bother with that? Isn't Levitation enough?" Dilarr grumped.

"You'll see. Let's go," I said, taking hands with Gourry and Aria as I chanted. Dilarr then took Aria's hand and... "Levitation!"

I cast my amplified Levitation spell and the four of us lifted off. Aria and Dilarr then finished their own chants to complete a double-layer barrier around us.

*Okay. All ready!*

I started carrying us through the air. Visibility wasn't great. The luminescent moss wasn't universally present along the roof of the cave, and some of the patches without it looked like tremendous black holes. We normally wouldn't

have stood a chance of finding an entrance when we didn't have the faintest clue what it looked like, but...

"Listen... I know I'm playing along and all, but are you sure you can find the way like this?" Dilarr started complaining not long after we took off.

"C'mon, we'll be fine. Just don't whine so much that you get distracted from maintaining your wind barrier."

"Didn't plan on it... But are you really, *really* sure about this? If we wander around for a while only for you to concede it was a wild goose chase, that'll be quite a bit of egg on your face."

"I know—"

*Wham!* At that exact moment, a jolt shook our wind barrier.

"Lina! Behind us!" Gourry shouted.

"On it!" I cried. I then shifted the spell to turn us around and descend.

Not far back was one of the lake's small islands... one with a stone pillar stretching all the way to the ceiling. That was where the attack had originated! *Wham! Wham!* Countless water arrows continued to rock the barrier.

*There!* I strained my eyes and saw a few creatures swarming around one spot on the water's surface. I made a beeline for them.

"Hey! Hey! What are you doing?!"

"Mistress Lina! This is much too reckless!"

"Quiet! Hold the barrier steady!"

We were rapidly closing in on the island. As we approached, I could see the enemy more clearly. *Two fish demons and... What the heck?*

A single streak of red light appeared beyond the arrows of water flying at us. A foreboding chill ran up my spine. I quickly changed course, and no sooner had I done that than the red light made contact!

*Thrum!* It easily broke through our two-layer barrier. *Not good!*

But just before it struck me, Gourry cut down the red light!

“Lina! Let me down there first!”

“L-Let you down?”

“Just do it!”

“F-Fine! Dilarr, Aria! On my signal, drop the barrier! Then cast a blast of either Flare Arrows or Freeze Arrows at the enemy! Got it?”

“B-But...”

“You sure about this?!”

“Just do it! Gourry, you ready?”

“Yeah, anytime!”

I glanced over at the enemy. Another volley of watery arrows splattered against our wind barrier, and another red light appeared beyond them.

“Now!”

The barrier vanished. The red light closed in. I shoved Gourry toward the pillar, and the recoil got us both moving as the red light streaked through the place we had been. Gourry sailed through the air and...

*Krrk!* He impaled his sword into the pillar! Dragging it through the stone to reduce the speed of his descent, he slid down the pillar... straight toward the mess of demons! Naturally, they weren't about to ignore that. They looked up at Gourry and...

“Freeze Arrow!” Aria and Dilarr both finished their spells in the nick of time.

Their frigid volley rained down on the demons locked on Gourry. Obviously, a spell like that wouldn't hurt them... but it was sure as heck enough to distract them from the descending swordsman!

“Dilarr, another wind barrier! Aria, Levitation!”

“Right!”

“...What?”

Dilarr and Aria quickly began chanting—the former without hesitation, and the latter only after a moment of uncertainty. Meanwhile, all but one of the



demons seemed confused. The lone holdout still had its eyes locked on Gourry. It screeched, and arrows of water manifested around it.

*Not good!*

The demon fired at Gourry, but—*Skreek!*—he suddenly changed the course of his descent, dodging the projectiles with ease.

*Of course!* He could alter his angle of approach by shifting the position of his sword in the stone pillar. *You're pretty clever from time to time, Gourry! Even if that might've just been instinct kicking in...*

Gourry successfully landed smack in the middle of the enemy swarm. But we weren't just sitting on our hands here either!

"Windy Shield!"

"Levitation!"

"Concentrate on keeping those up no matter what, you hear me?" I warned Dilarr and Aria as they cast their spells. Then I dismissed my own Levitation and began chanting my next spell.

Battle had broken out between Gourry and the demons below. With his skills, he could easily prevail over two demons, but he seemed to be struggling against our singular non-demon opponent.

*Sheesh... Better help the big lug fast!*

"Fireball!" I unleashed my slightly altered Fireball.

The typical version of this spell created a ball of light between your palms that would explode when it hit something, scattering flame everywhere. But this one... The ball of light appeared a bit behind us, outside the wind barrier.

*Okay, let's go!*

"Break!" I snapped my fingers, and—*Fwoooooosh!*—red flame engulfed our wind barrier!

"Gwah!"

"Raaagh!"

Aria and Dilarr's screaming swirled around in the wind barrier, which was now

—propelled by the blast—streaking toward the battlefield at explosive speed. *Kra-pwash!* We smashed into the water near the island. Unsurprisingly, this got the demons' attention.

Dilarr dismissed his wind barrier, and when he did...

"Blast Ash!"

*Vwum!* I pulverized one of the demons. Obviously, I'd been chanting the whole time we were falling.

"Aria! Abort the Levitation!" I now called.

"Ah... Right!" She quickly did as she was told.

We splashed down into knee-high water. I figured the remaining demon would charge us, but it seemed to be retreating instead. I slowly waded over to the island, accompanied by Aria and Dilarr.

Gourry was still glaring at the non-fish-demon creature. It truly was a strange sight. The best way I could describe it is a massive lump of swollen, pale flesh... Like a melting ball quite a bit larger than a human is tall. The flesh itself wasn't quite transparent, just unhealthily pallid. And right around where a human's chest would be protruded a curiously out-of-place relief—the face of a young man with golden hair, so handsome it looked like a carving. But as if to prove it was more than just a decoration, the mouth on the young man's face opened.

"A pleasure to meet you. You may call me Aileus." It was an unabashedly human voice. "I'm aware of most of the situation. I must say, Narov proved more fragile than I expected. He was quite strong, so he really should have just faced you head-on rather than resorting to cowardly hostage tactics." He spoke casually, as if we were having some pleasant chat. "Still, it would be a shame to let him just go like that. I think I'd like to get more use out of him."

"What in the world do you mean by that?" Dilarr asked.

"This, of course." A bright smile appeared on Aileus's face.

*Brble...* The flesh next to the man's face began to swell.

"Urgh!" Aria let out a noise of disgust.

For beside the countenance of young Aileus... grew the still-bisected head of

Narov!

### 3: Showdown in the City of Crimson Water

“Graaaaaaaah!” Narov’s vertically split head cried out. The tentacles around his mouth squirmed and writhed.

*Hang on... Did this guy absorb Narov’s dead body?!*

I wasn’t sure how powerful Narov had been when he was alive, but at the very least, this development had given his creepiness a real shot in the arm. Nevertheless, I had no obligation to let him show off what he could do! I began a quiet chant, but before either Aileus or I could make a move...

“Elemekia Lance!” Dilarr let fly a spell from behind me—one capable of dealing damage directly to the spirit and taking out a lesser demon in one hit.

Aileus was basically a lump of flesh growing out of the ground, so he had no way to dodge it. Dilarr’s spear of light hit him dead-on... but the young man’s face didn’t bat an eye, and Narov’s face just kept howling and waving its tentacles.

Then—*Fwsh*—the section of flesh hit by the Elemekia Lance flaked off like a scab, and...

“Graaaaaaaah!” Narov’s head let out another cry. Countless points of light appeared around him, causing the air itself to creak!

*Guh!*

“Dodge!” I called to my crew, aborting my spell and quickly taking some distance myself.

As I ran, our opponent unleashed his light in all directions! I managed to dodge the first few points streaking toward me and—*Vrm!*—then came a sudden, powerful vibration hard enough to hurt my ears. It was followed by a wave of heat and steam.

“Everyone okay?!” I called out.

From beyond the haze, I could hear each of my allies reply...

“I’m fine!”

“Think so...”

“I’m alive, at least!”

It seemed everyone had managed to survive, but that was a hell of a spell Aileus had just fired off... That had to be a Blast Bomb. It was a real doozy, basically like firing off multiple powered-up Fireballs at once. The balls of light had burst against the water’s surface, creating the surge of steam.

Thanks to that, we now couldn’t see our enemy at all. Of course, he was in the same predicament... or so I hoped, but it wasn’t wise to make assumptions about a guy who’d already surrendered his humanity. Plus, that wasn’t the only thing working against us. Because I’d been using my shortsword like a torch with Lighting cast on it back in the tunnel, I’d lost it when we were swept away by the underground channel. It wasn’t a fatal blow to me or anything, but it was always nice to have a blade on hand to deflect attacks or distract opponents. But, welp, no use crying over spilled swords!

I began to chant a spell...

...!

And suddenly, inexplicably, I felt a chill run up my spine. I moved to the left on instinct. No sooner had I than—*Skrch!*—I felt something lash out of the mist, brushing by my pauldron.

“Guh!”

“Wuh?!”

I could hear Gourry and Dilarr yelp through the fog at almost that same moment. Was Aileus using it as a smoke screen after all?! I wasn’t about to let him have it that easy!

“Diem Wind!”

*Fwoosh!* My powerful blast of wind blew the misty haze away, and once I could see again, I beheld the bizarre form that Aileus had taken. The lump of flesh was still rooted to the ground, with the face of the young man and Narov bulging out of it as before... But now a few dozen arms had sprouted from it.

Well, I call them arms, but of course, they weren't *human* arms. They were more like the branches of a dead tree, unusually long and multi-jointed.

*Of course... So that's what came out of the mist.*

Now, when the fog cleared completely...

"Fireball!"

*Whoom!* Dilarr's spell scorched Aileus. Gourry charged him at the same time, and Aileus reached out as he approached.

"Hng!" Gourry sliced at him with his sword! I expected to see Aileus's severed arm go spinning through the air, but instead...

*Zing!* There was a hard sound as it was merely deflected to the side. Apparently this guy was tougher than he looked.

Moreover, the part of Aileus's body that was burned by Dilarr's Fireball earlier just flaked off, allowing new flesh(?) to swell up in its place. It was exactly what had happened with the Elemekia Lance earlier. His entire body was probably similar to a lizard's tail, capable of being shed and regrown at will. But if that was the case, there had to be a critical part of him that couldn't regenerate... And *that* would be his weak point.

"Graaaaaaaah!" Narov's head screamed once more.

It was like a mindless howl to human ears, but I figured it for a spell chant. The writhing of his mouth-tentacles was probably the formation of spell sigils. At any rate, now that I knew he had hella magic up his sleeve, I couldn't let him finish that chant!

"Hell Blast!" Aria cried.

"Zellas Bullid!" I did the same.

We launched our spells simultaneously. Hers broke through Aileus's arms to hit the young man's face. Meanwhile, mine swerved around the arms to pulverize Narov's head!

*Bullseye! That should interrupt his spellcasting!*

But Aileus himself showed no sign of slowing down. He was using five or six of

his arms to keep Gourry in check while the rest continued to sporadically attack me, Aria, and Dilarr. Fortunately, Aileus's control of the arms seemed imprecise. Their aim was poor and their movements predictable such that even Aria the greenhorn could dodge them. Nevertheless, this wouldn't actually end until we took the dude down.

Aileus's face where Aria had hit him flaked off, but more flesh swelled into place immediately to reform his visage. "It's pointless, you know..." it whispered.

"I don't believe it!" Aria cried out hopelessly.

*Hmm... She really isn't used to fighting at all, is she?*

I'll concede that this guy's face just *felt* like it was screaming, "Hey! Got your weak point right here!" But a regenerator type like him wouldn't leave an obvious weak point so exposed. His face was probably a decoy meant to draw our fire.

Meanwhile, Narov's head was still in the middle of regenerating from my hit... Maybe it was slower to recover since it wasn't originally a part of Aileus's body. Still, it was clearly going to come back and start chanting new spells. I was really hoping to finish this before then, but...

Aileus's real weak point was likely somewhere deep inside his body. If we just kept hitting him with standard magical attacks, he was just gonna keep on sloughing off the damaged flesh.

*Wait, in that case...*

While dodging swipes from his arms, I quietly chanted an amplified spell. "Bram Blazer!"

*Whom!* A blast of pale light capable of killing even a lesser demon plowed through Aileus's body!

"H... Hraaaagh!" A death rattle echoed through the dim underground cavern.

His branch-like arms let out a dry rustle and began to droop limply over the island. I'd figured a piercing spell might be able to hit his weak point, and it looked like I was on the money. Aileus's body began to crumble like baked clay.

“I think we did it,” Gourry sighed in relief.

“Looks like.” I nodded in response. “So, anyway... the way forward is probably somewhere on this island.”

“Wait a minute,” Dilarr piped up, glaring at me. “When you said you had a plan to find the way... did you mean *this*?”

“Yep,” I admitted casually.

In short, there were bound to be enemies protecting the path to our destination. So if we made ourselves obvious enough, they were bound to come for us. Essentially, my plan had been to wander around, wait for enemies to attack, and figure wherever they were camped out for the way forward.

“Are you crazy?! You could have gotten us killed!” Dilarr shouted.

“But I didn’t, so really, what’s the harm?” I countered sweetly.

Fists shaking, Dilarr was about to argue more. “You... You little...”

But he was interrupted when Aria called from right behind the pillar in the center of the island, “Mistress Lina! Could this be it?”

I went to look and found her pointing to a hole at the base of the pillar. But...

“It’s pretty small,” Gourry whispered, frowning.

My guy had a point. The hole seemed to go pretty deep, but it was only barely wide enough for me to crawl through if I took my pauldrons off. Even if this led somewhere, Gourry and Dilarr wouldn’t be able to use it.

“I don’t... think this is it. That Narov guy said it was a path, so I’d expect it to be big enough for him to pass through it, at least,” Dilarr said perceptively. And he was right. There was no way Narov or those fish demons could shimmy through this narrow passage.

*But... Wait a minute. Could it be...?*

I quietly chanted a spell—“Lighting!”—and tossed the magical ball of light I produced into the water.

*Pwsh!* Visible below the island, in the now-illuminated depths, yawned a large underwater cave.



*Plip... plip...* I could hear the sound of water dripping around us. The air was damp.

We'd entered the waterlogged cave via a Lei Wing, traveling through it that way until we finally reached air. At that point, I'd dismissed the spell and we'd started walking.

If this really was the path to the sorcerers' council, it was reasonable to expect an enemy ambush up ahead. The fish demon that had disappeared during our battle with Aileus had probably fled here... or more likely, returned to base to report our raid. If all we cared about was speed, flying would have been better than walking, but walking seemed the safer choice given the likelihood of enemy attack.

Incidentally, there was luminescent moss on the ceiling and walls down here too, so we didn't need to prepare a light. That said...

"Boy... it sure is a long way," Gourry sighed after we'd been walking for quite a while.

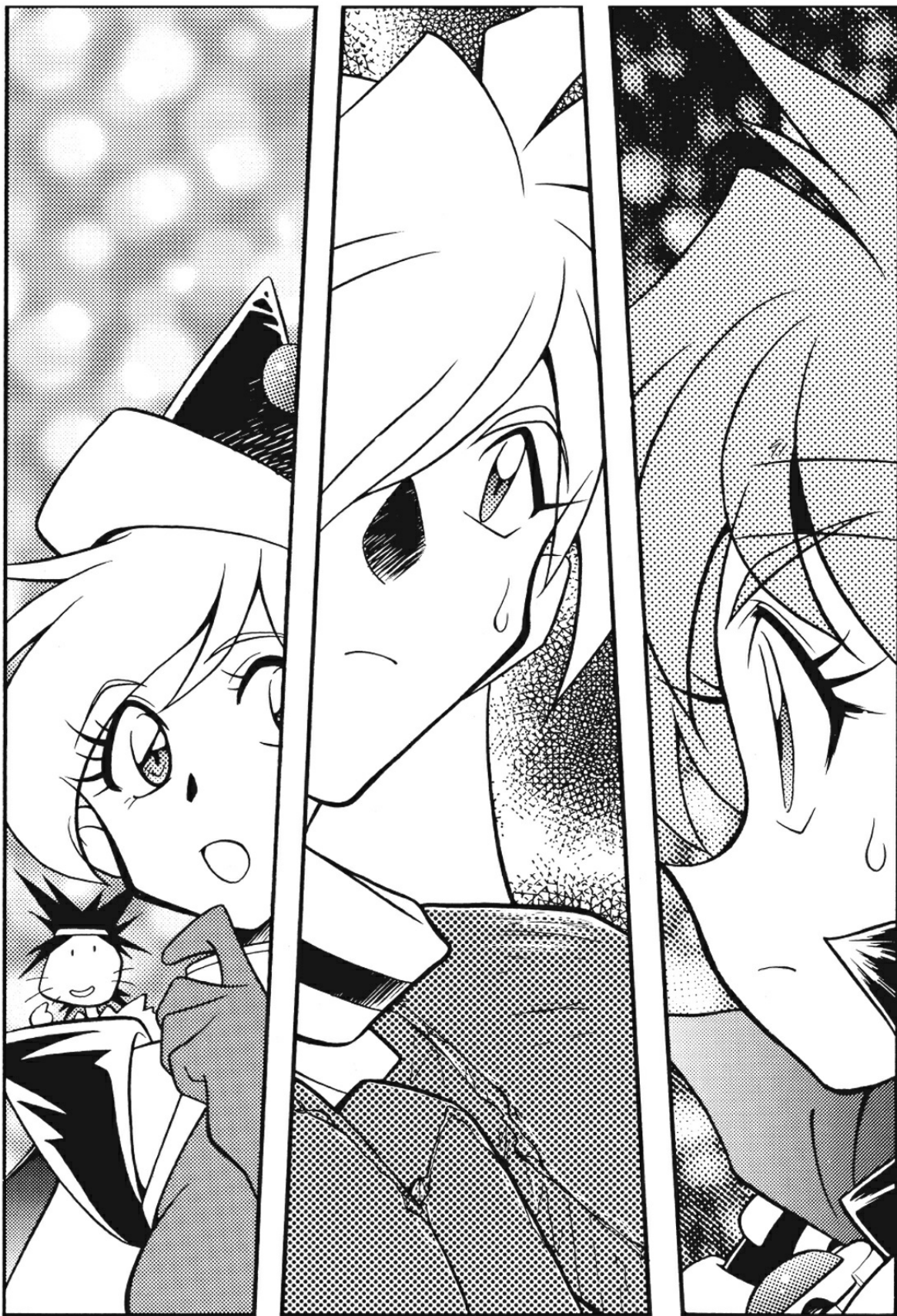
The path was slippery, making it hard to pick up the pace, and the monotony of the scenery added to the feeling that we'd been walking forever. But even then, this path was freaking long. I wondered if it had taken us even lower than the underground lake.

"But I sure hope that, after all this walking, we don't find out we took the wrong cave," Dilarr said, sounding exhausted.

I couldn't blame him for feeling beat. We'd entered Crimson Town around sunset, and it was probably past midnight by now. In other words, apart from the time we'd spent unconscious after our impromptu little trip on the underground river, we'd been going pretty much nonstop. I'd question the humanity of anyone who *wasn't* exhausted at this point.

Aria was seeming pretty spent herself. She hadn't said a word since we entered the cave. Still, we had no time to rest at the moment. We needed to infiltrate the enemy base and clear things up as soon as possible. To be honest, I'd started to mull over the idea of just blowing up the sorcerers' council

building with a Dragon Slave the minute we got there... But then again, Aria's sister could be inside. Well, I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.



“This looks like the right way to me,” I offered.

“What makes you say that?” Dilarr asked.

“Well, duh... They made a path.”

“A path? You mean this thing we’re walking right now?” Gourry asked in Dilarr’s stead.

“Exactly. See those stalactites on the ceiling? They should have corresponding stalagmites beneath them, but the ground here is flat. That means someone cleared them out for better passage. Speaking of, I think we’re close to our destination too...” With that, I turned my eyes up ahead. Both sides of the passageway were lined with jars of various sizes. “The place is obviously used for storage, meaning there’s gotta be someone nearby doing the storing. Say, Aria, you were part of the Crimson council, right? Did you ever hear anything about an underground pathway?”

“Well... I’d heard there was an underground storehouse... but there was a dedicated group to manage it... so I never went there personally...” she responded haltingly, sounding tired indeed.

*Hmm...* A place like this connected to the council basement surely would have generated at least a little talk, right? Or was there something about this underground passage that necessitated keeping it a secret? We’d just have to keep going and find out.

I pressed onward as I thought this all over, and the number of containers and other tools whose purpose I couldn’t identify gradually increased in number as we went. Finally...

“I’d say that’s a jackpot,” I remarked as I came to a stop.

I was standing in front of a metal door which looked completely out of place in the ongoing stone tunnel into which it was built. Had someone been expanding their basement, happened to hit this cave, and just slapped a door there? Yeah, right. Despite its slapdash placement, the door was reinforced with stone. I couldn’t sense any enemy presences behind it... but there could always be someone capable of cloaking themselves.

“All right... Moment of truth. We’re going in,” I said.

Someone gulped. Gourry silently drew his sword, preparing for a surprise attack. Dilarr whispered a spell under his breath. I put my hand on the door, pushed, and...

“Oh, go figure. It’s locked.”

“Hey!” Dilarr roared, interrupting his spell just to yell at me.

But c’mon. Of course a door in the middle of a cave system was gonna be locked.

“Hmm, hang on. I think it’s a simple latch. In which case...”

After a little inspection, I took a slim knife I’d stored in my pauldron and slid it between the door and the frame. I then dragged it upward and... I felt movement accompanied by a small clink. Seemed I’d undone the lock.

*Okay!*

“Now here we go,” I said as I gave it a push.

A heavy, metallic creaking resounded as the door slowly opened inward. It looked like there wasn’t an ambush waiting for us, at least. But...

“Seems pretty small for the council’s basement, huh?” Dilarr whispered as he looked around.

“There are definite signs of life here too...” Gourry added. When I looked to see, he was indicating various cooking and cleaning implements strewn about.

They were right... This place was only a little larger than a room in any standard home. There was a single unlit lamp hanging from the ceiling, and more than half of the things lying around were obviously for household use.

*What in the world...?*

I chanted a spell. “Lighting!”

I tossed my magical light up toward the ceiling, and when it was in place, I could see clearly... that this was the basement of a private dwelling. There was a stairway further inside.

“I can’t help feeling like we’re in the wrong place...” Gourry observed.

“W-Well... we should probably go upstairs and see what’s up, at any rate.” After laughing him off, I made a beeline for the staircase in the back. The other three quietly followed me.

The stairway was steep and narrow. There was a simple lock on the door at the top, but I pulled a pin out of my pocket, stuck it into the hole, and opened the thing with ease. After making sure there were no signs of life on the other side... *Creak...*

Beyond the door was a hallway. I walked out into it, followed by Gourry, Aria, and then Dilarr.

“This isn’t the council hall...” Aria whispered with a glassy-eyed expression.

*Yeah... Knew it.* It was a rather large mansion with excellent stonework, but it was still a private residence.

“Ugh... Hell, was I wrong, then?” I muttered.

“Should we try to go further down the tunnel instead?” Gourry asked.

“Yeah, guess we probably should,” I conceded.

We turned to head back down the stairs when...

“This is... Kailus’s mansion.”

Aria’s trance-like words stopped us in our tracks.

“Are... Are you sure?!” I asked.

“I’m certain. I only came here once—before the insurrection, when my sister called me here—but I’m sure of it. I recognize this place,” Aria responded with confidence, then swiftly set off.

“H-Hang on! Aria! Where are you going?!”

“My sister’s room,” she replied without turning back or slowing down. In fact, she picked up the pace. With no other choice, we followed after her.

All right... So we’d mistakenly assumed the “path” meant the “path to the sorcerers’ council,” but it actually turned out to be a path to Kailus’s mansion. Narov must have realized the misunderstanding... but he’d been under no obligation to correct it, of course.

Aria proceeded without fear despite the likelihood that enemies were near. She only stopped when she reached a door. She took in a deep breath, reached for the handle, and before we could even try to stop her, she yanked it open! And then...

“Sister...” There was a tremble in her faint voice.

It was a large room, furnished with a canopy bed and a nightstand, illuminated by nothing but the moonlight streaming in from the terrace windows. Beside the bed sat a rocking chair, and standing next to that was a girl who looked very much like Aria. Her long, silver hair glimmered in the moonbeams.

“A... Aria?” she asked.

“Bell!” Aria cried, running to throw herself into her sister’s arms.

“Aria... what are you doing here?”

“I came to save you! The imperial army is coming to stop Kailus’s rebellion. Just the thought of this city becoming a battlefield with you here, I... I came to save you!” she gushed, her voice choked with tears. Her reunion with her sister seemed to have released all her pent-up emotion.

Bell stroked Aria’s hair gently, then turned her gaze to us. “Who are these people?”

“Her bodyguards... more or less,” I replied. “But introductions later. For now, let’s clear out. There’s no telling when the goon squad might show.”

At my words, Aria suddenly looked up. “Th-That’s right... Sister, you must come with us.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be happening...” a new voice cut in, echoing through the room. A familiar one.

“Zonagein?!” I shouted, whipping around to see the familiar diminutive figure standing there in his hooded cloak.

Next to him was a man of about forty with raven hair. He wore a high-collared cape embroidered with silver thread along with various jeweled amulets dotting his outfit—which didn’t much suit his cheap villain mug.

Given the timing, I had a guess as to his identity. “You wouldn’t be Kailus, by chance, would you?”

“I would. I praise you for making it this far... but it’s the end of the line for you. Prepare to meet your doom.”

“Pfft!”

Kailus frowned in annoyance at my abrupt laughter. “What’s so funny?”

“I just knew you’d say something like that!” I took a wide stance and pointed boldly at Kailus. “You look like a third-rate villain, and you talk like one too! Even a kid would find you hilarious!”

Kailus’s brows arched even higher, but perhaps fearing another reprisal from me, he desperately held back his anger. “Fair... Fair enough, girl. But cliché or not, you will still die here.”

“Well, well! We’ll see about that!” I said as I drew up against the wall. Just then...

“Fireball!” Dilarr, who’d been chanting behind me, unleashed a blazing globe!

*Fwoosh!* The burst of flames to follow licked the corridor. We hid behind the open door to ride out the heat. This was the same distract-and-strike tactic we’d used against Narov underground. And there was nowhere to escape the attack in this narrow, straight corridor. But...

*Zing! Crash!*

An arrow of light streaked through the still-swirling smoke to pulverize the door we were using as a shield! I flew back from it and began chanting a spell. As the smoke dissipated, far down the hall, I could see Zonagein and Kailus.

*They got that far that quickly?!* Just as I was thinking that, I heard a strange rustling sound, and suddenly... Zonagein was right in front of me! With that same bizarre speed, he’d come all the way back down the hallway. I reached instinctively for my missing sword...

*Wham!* I heard a heavy impact from right above my head. Gourry had come running to block something black lashing down at me.

*Is that...?*



It looked like a spider's leg. A giant one. And I could see a number more growing from the old sorcerer's back.

"Impressive... But then, you did defeat Graymore," Zonagein said, his spider legs skittering him backward.

Even though he'd sold out his humanity, he apparently still wanted to avoid a close-quarters fight with Gourry. In that case...

I released my incanted spell. "Bram Blazer!"

I turned and shot the blue light at a new hostile presence behind me! It hit a woman in green who'd appeared down the hall at some point, but just as it made contact—*Vrm!*—she unleashed a blue light of her own that filled the corridor!

"Guh!" As it did, a shockwave racked my body. Its power was on the low side, but that was a Bram Blazer for sure! Had she reflected my spell back in a dispersed form?!

After the light receded, the woman in green— No. When I looked at her again, I realized my mistake. She wasn't *wearing* green. Her face, her torso, her hair, her limbs... Her entire body was translucent like an emerald.

With this new addition to Kailus's side, we were definitely in a fix. I'd been hoping to bump the guy off here and skip straight to the denouement... but things were shaping up to be a little trickier than that.

"Back into the room!" I said, retreating back to the sisters. "Aria! Bell! We're getting out of here!" I shouted before starting a chant.

Once Bell was out of the mansion, I could bring out the big guns and level the whole thing!

"Don't let them escape! Get them! Zonagein! Mycale!" Kailus's voice, coming from the hallway, stopped Aria in her tracks.

"Did... he just say..." she muttered.

"What're you doing, Aria? Get moving!" Dilarr shouted, kicking open the terrace window.

"I..." Aria swiftly began running again.

Gourry stood off against Zonagein when he appeared in the door and... “Wait! Don’t go!”

By the time he shouted that, Aria, Bell, and Dilarr were already on the terrace. Just as the three of them halted—*Whunk!*—a large scythe-like object speared through Dilarr’s chest from above. Slowly, he collapsed to the ground.

“Master Dilarr?!” Aria screamed, sounding pained.

Gourry and I dashed for the terrace ourselves. The minute we stepped out onto it—*Whoosh!*—something sliced through the night wind, but Gourry’s sword knocked it away. I supported the collapsed Dilarr with one arm while taking Aria’s hand with my other. I checked to make sure Gourry was holding on to my shoulder, and then unleashed the amplified spell I’d been chanting!

“Lei Wing!”

At the very least, I thought we’d be able to use it to get us out of there. But just as my spell activated...

“Eek!” Bell shrieked. I looked and saw something like a dead tree branch grabbing her leg.

*Wait, isn’t that...*

“Sister!” Aria cried. Bell’s hand had slipped from her grasp!

“Flee!” That was all Bell could say as she fell from my completed wind barrier.

The four of us took off into the air, leaving her behind.

“Please—!” Aria just managed to hold back a full-throated scream. She probably meant to ask me to go back and save her sister... but she probably also realized that Dilarr needed treatment.

Except... I could already feel the warmth leaving his body. I knew what it felt like when someone was dying.

In the abandoned building, there was only darkness, musty air, and silence. Nobody tried to speak. Not me. Not Gourry. Not Aria.

After taking flight, it had taken us a while to shake off the pursuing air force

and find shelter in this vacant old house. Dilarr was already dead by then. I'd used magic to dig a hole in the basement, given him a simple funeral, and then...

The three of us just sat there in the darkness. I couldn't say for how long.

Eventually, Aria whispered, "I... What should I do?" There was no emotion whatsoever in her voice. "I couldn't save my sister. I let Master Dilarr die..."

"It's not your fault—"

"It *is* my fault!" she insisted—or rather screamed—interrupting me. "I... If I'd held on more tightly, I could have saved her! If I hadn't wanted to come to Crimson, Master Dilarr... Master Dilarr might not be...!"

"I think I'm more responsible for Dilarr. I didn't realize *he* would be out there, so my plan was all wrong," I whispered with a self-reproaching smile.

"'He'? You mean you know who did this?" I heard Gourry ask in the darkness.

I nodded, even knowing he couldn't see me. "I think... it was Aileus. The guy we fought on the island in the underground lake."

"You mean... he survived?" Aria whispered.

"It's less that he survived, and more... I think the version of him we defeated underground was just one part of him. When we Lei Winged it out of Kailus's manor, I glanced back and the whole place was covered in vines with these round lumps stuck here and there..."

"You mean...?!" Gourry gasped.

I nodded again. "Yeah. I think Aileus is really flora rather than fauna. His above-ground and underground bodies are connected somewhere..."

The fact that he'd entwined the whole mansion meant that his presence was dispersed, which was why Gourry and I hadn't sensed it right away. It was potentially possible that whatever was covering the house was just someone else with abilities like Aileus's, but that scythe-like thing that hit Dilarr... It was the same shape as the fish demons' fins. And given that we had one fish demon underground unaccounted for, it seemed more likely to me that Aileus had absorbed it rather than there being a discrete but similar entity hanging around.

If I was right about all that... then Aileus was a truly dangerous foe. I had no idea where his weak point could be either. We could probably eliminate the problem by blowing the whole mansion away—operative word being *probably*. You could kill an animal by crushing its head, but some plants could regenerate from their roots or even a single leftover branch. If Aileus had plant-like properties, he might be able to regenerate completely from any scrap we left behind.

“They’re sure a tough bunch to deal with,” I muttered. “I don’t know how formidable Kailus himself is, but there’s Aileus, plus that flying puppet with its winged demons, and then Zonagein and that Mycale person...”

“Actually, about that...” Aria interjected as I was listing off our enemies. “When I joined the council... there was another girl who joined at the same time. We were assigned many of the same projects and we became friends. Her name was... Elydia Mycale.”

“Huh?” I breathed.

“And... I just remembered... that one of the people who ran the underground storehouse... was named Aileus.”

“Wait, you don’t mean...!”

Aria’s only response was silence.

“Can I ask... if Mycale and Aileus were supporters of Kailus?” I ventured.

“Well... I only knew Aileus by name, so I’m not terribly familiar with him... But Elydia openly hated Kailus.”

“Hey, where exactly is this going?” Gourry asked.

I let out a small sigh. “It’s shaping up... like Kailus turned the members of the council into chimeras under his control.”

“But... is he even capable of such a thing?” Aria questioned. “Kailus was a jack-of-all-trades. He was familiar with attack and healing spells as well as curses, magic item artificing, and chimera creation... but at the same time, he wasn’t especially knowledgeable about any of them. I wouldn’t think him capable of making chimeras that advanced.”

“So there’s someone else running things, you think?”

“It’s... possible. But I don’t know Kailus particularly well myself... It’s also possible he knows a lot about chimeras and I simply wasn’t aware of it.”

“I see,” I responded vaguely.

Still, I wouldn’t have pegged Kailus for a serious chimera researcher based on what I’d seen of his mansion. They tended to be the kind of folk who kept big laboratories in their basements—and I’m not just saying that. Creating chimeras required a lot of space, and your average sorcerers’ council wouldn’t let anybody take up that large a share of their communal facilities. Besides, sharing space with others in the same field usually resulted in stolen theories and techniques. That’s why chimera researchers with the funds to make it happen preferred to build their own dedicated facilities somewhere in their own houses, typically a sequestered basement.

Of course, it’s not like I’d seen every corner of Kailus’s mansion for myself. It was possible there was a secret basement apart from the one we’d come through, or maybe a lab on the second floor, as unusual as that would be. But even if that were the case, I felt like there should’ve been signs... And there was certainly no way he’d been using council facilities to turn everyone there into chimeras.

“Mistress Lina, about Elydia... I mean, Mycale... Is there no way... to return her to normal?” Aria asked.

I didn’t have an answer. I knew another guy who’d been turned into a chimera and was searching for a way to restore his humanity. I didn’t know how he was doing now, but he’d had one hell of a struggle with it in the time I’d known him. In the words of another acquaintance, just because you knew how to make a juice cocktail didn’t mean you could extract the orange juice from it once it was mixed.

In Mycale’s case, it also seemed pretty clear that she was being mind controlled. If it was just the work of a Marionette spell, defeating Kailus should solve that problem. But if her mind had been overwritten using brainwashing or a similar technique, then...

“Ah... I suppose not.” Aria’s sad voice resonated in the darkness.

"I personally don't know much about chimeras, so I can't give you a definitive answer... but if it is possible, it won't be easy."

"I... I see." There, she fell silent.

"Say, we should probably get some rest," Gourry offered, as if waiting for his chance. "We can't do anything until we recharge our stamina. We're gonna finish this tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah... right." I nodded in response. "Let's get some sleep for now, Aria. Tomorrow, we'll... We'll get Bell back and make Kailus pay."

Evening arrived the next day. The light streaming in through the abandoned building's windows had just turned red with the setting sun when we decided to make our move. Our destination? Kailus's mansion.

"How do we get there?" Gourry asked.

"We'll take the waterway," I answered. "If we go on land, we risk the air force spotting us, and underground, we risk getting lost and running into the same issues as last night. But that Narov guy is gone and there should be fewer fish demons in the canals now. Granted, our enemy might be expecting that much from us, but it still seems safer than going by land. We'll dig a tunnel from here, link up to a canal, then use a Lei Wing to head for Kailus's mansion underwater. Aria, please show us the way."

"I will," she said firmly with a nod.

I nodded back and began to chant my spell.

"Incoming!" Gourry cried out as we neared Kailus's mansion.

I could see something approaching through the crimson-tinted water. It was Aileus's tentacles!

*Vroosh!* Several scythe-like objects pierced my wind barrier to get to us. *Zing!* While grabbing me with his left hand, Gourry swung the sword in his right to deflect the attack. And then...

"Freeze Bullid!" Aria conjured her spell outside the barrier! It froze the

surrounding water solid, trapping the tentacles in place. It was the same spell Dilarr had used on the fish demons the day before, and it was impressive how quickly she'd learned to use it! "We're almost there, Mistress Lina!"

"Okay! Going up!" I directed my barrier to ascend out of the water and into the air.

Indeed, we were right next to Kailus's estate. As before, the whole building was tangled in Aileus's vines, and we could see the air force scattered in the skies above it. I ignored them and made a beeline for the mansion! The air force pursued us, and Aileus's scythe-tentacles darted out to block our way. I'd been hoping we could just bust in through the terrace, but oh well!

"Fireball!" Aria incanted. Her spell appeared behind us, rushing our way, and...

*Bwoom!* It burst when it made contact with the wind barrier!

"Whaaaaa?!"

The explosive force accelerated us forward—right through the tentacles and the terrace window, throttling us into the mansion!

*Whew, I know I used the same tactic yesterday, but... Aria really must be pissed!*

At any rate, I dismissed my spell and landed us on the floor inside.

"Hey, Aria..." Gourry said with a troubled expression, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Just so you know, learning from bad role models can really set you down the wrong path in life."

"What's that supposed to mean, Gourry?" I asked sharply.

"Oh, nothing... Anyway, let's get going."

*Don't ignore meee!* I wanted to object, but Gourry was right; we didn't have time for petty squabbling right now.

We'd intentionally come in through Bell's room, but she wasn't anywhere to be seen. They'd probably moved her elsewhere.

"Here we go!" I proclaimed, kicking open the door and moving into the

hallway. We needed to find out where they'd taken Bell. "Aria! Do you know where they might have put your sister?"

"I don't!"

"Okay, then we'll just have to search everywhere!"

Purely on instinct, I picked a hall and ran down it. Aria and Gourry followed. We kicked in every door we came across until the three of us reached the entrance hall. And there...

"My, my... A bit reckless, aren't you?" asked Zonagein, who'd arrived silently on the legs growing from his back.

I then heard the creak of floorboards. When I turned to look, I spotted Kailus slowly descending the stairway that encircled the great hall, accompanied by the silent Mycale.

"Aha... so you've returned," he said. "And you're down one member."

"Where is my sister?!" Aria shouted angrily, apparently aggravated by his words.

"Bell, you mean? She's in the mansion. That's all I'll say, but I must ask... Do you think you can do something with that knowledge?"

"Oh, I'm gonna do something all right," I informed him, striding forward a step. "Aria, stay calm. Don't let this hack get your goat."

"You...!" Kailus began to shriek in rage.

"If he's such a hack," Zonagein interrupted quietly, "how did he kill one of your allies?"

Aria was about to protest, but I raised a hand to stop her. "A war of provocation is a waste of time for all of us."

"You're right. In that case... Let's get to it!" Zonagein began to scuttle across the floor.

Gourry moved to meet him, sword at the ready. Just as Gourry was about to strike, Zonagein leaped upward! He spun once midair, and...

"Bram Blazer!" He released the spell he'd chanted! His target was... Mycale?!



*Shah!* Mycale's entire body shone with light. Its power was low, but a shockwave erupted in time with the light, hitting me, Gourry, and Aria!

*Hey! That kinda hurt!*

Zonagein landed behind the temporarily stunned Gourry, and without turning back, swung two of his legs down at him! But Gourry sensed the attack coming. He reflexively leaped straight forward to dodge, then dashed ahead toward Kailus! Mycale interposed herself. And then...

"Icicle Lance!" Kailus released a spell at Mycale's back.

*Bwoosh!*

"Guh!" The spell, scattered by Mycale's body, turned into a blizzard that caused Gourry to back off fast.

*She can even disperse that kind of spell?!*

Kailus using the spell-scattering Mycale as a shield while he sat back and watched... That was a tricky strategy to counter. If I hit him with an attack spell, Mycale would block it and reflect it back at us. But if we moved into melee range, Kailus would cast a spell for her to spray us with.

Granted, that didn't mean we were helpless. I was confident Mycale couldn't disperse every single spell. If we hit her with something big enough, it would destroy her for sure. The real question was, exactly how big was "big enough"? If I slapped her with a Dragon Slave, there was no way she'd be able to withstand it, but I couldn't drop a bomb like that indoors. And if I used a slightly weaker Dynast Blas or a Zellas Bullid, and she happened to refract it back on us...

I mean, those were spells that could wipe out a pure demon in one hit, so even a dispersed version would probably do us in. And after hearing that Mycale was a former friend of Aria's, I wasn't eager to just kill her. That meant our smartest move now was to attack Kailus from several angles at once.

*Okay! In that case...*

"Gourry! Keep Zonagein occupied!"

"Got it!" he responded, then spun around to face the old man.

My eyes remained locked on Kailus and Mycale as I began chanting my next spell.

“Got time for me after all, eh?” Zonagein said as he moved several legs to block Gourry’s sword strike. Appendage and blade clashed, and both parties held for a split second before...

*Fwee!* There came a sound like a whistle, and a thread shot from Zonagein’s mouth wrapped around Gourry’s sword hand!

“Ngh!” Gourry groaned, and just then...

“Icicle Lance!” Aria fired a spell at Zonagein’s flank!

He quickly leaped up off the floor with his spider legs, sending him over Gourry’s head with the string still wrapped around his hilt. Gourry, his movements restrained, was at the disadvantage, but...

*Now!* I dashed straight for the place I predicted Zonagein would land. Zonagein realized what I was doing and hesitated for a brief instant. He was trying to decide if he should attack Gourry or deal with me first! And in that time...

“Flare Lance!” I launched the spell I’d been chanting as I ran, then took a deep breath and held it.

Mycale quickly moved to intercept the spell and disperse it back at me. I closed my eyes and—*Fwoom!*—powerful heat surrounded me. Me and Zonagein both!

“Gah!” he cried.

Indeed, that spell wasn’t meant to be a surprise attack on Kailus, but rather an attempt to hit Zonagein. Flare Lance typically had the power to roast an opponent in one hit, but I’d purposefully dialed it back some. Combined with the effect of Mycale’s dispersal, it was just hot enough to toast your skin a bit.

But what happened when you *inhaled* heat like that? Unlike me, who’d closed my eyes and held my breath, Zonagein had seared his own lungs. His expression was one of agony.

*Whunk!* Behind him, having escaped the blast of heat, Gourry ran the old

sorcerer through.

“Ghhk!” He let out a near silent scream as the spider legs on his back clawed at the air. And then...

“Dam Blas!” Aria, who’d also been outside the dispersal zone, unleashed a spell of her own.

There was no surviving all that. Zonagein’s back legs spasmed repeatedly, then fell still.

“One down, two to go,” I said, shooting a bold smile at Kailus.

“Hng!” he grunted. His face twisted with hatred, but it was also marred by panic.

I glanced around, maintaining a grin. “You’re in a pretty sticky sitch, yet I don’t see the flying guys or Aileus rushing to your aid... I’m guessing they’re stuck outside, huh? That means all you’ve got here to protect you is Mycale, the one-trick dispersal pony... I hope you’re ready for pain, Master Kailus,” I said with absolute confidence.

I was sure a threat like that would drive Kailus outside to seek the aid of Aileus and his winged minions. I was counting on it, in fact. Once Kailus was outside, I could use a big area-of-effect spell to finish him off for good! And once I’d beaten Kailus, there’d be no need for us to fight Mycale or Aileus. But...

“Ha... haha...” Kailus let out a pregnant laugh and slowly walked up to Mycale’s side. “I see... But this... This is my dream, and the likes of you will never ruin it!”

With that, he grabbed Mycale by the back of the head.

*What’s he—*

A hard cracking sound rang out. Green fragments shot through the air.

“Elydia!” Aria screamed.

Kailus had shattered Mycale’s head with his hand.

*What the?!*

“Haha... ha...” Kailus embraced Mycale’s body from behind as it slumped

over, headless.

“What are you doing?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? Haha... I won’t know what to do if I don’t...” Kailus replied, his very answer mad. The glint in his eyes told me his sanity was gone. I didn’t know what he was planning, but...

The first one to notice was Gourry, who cried out, “Their bodies!”

I turned his way for a moment, not understanding. He was looking straight at Kailus. I turned back again... and saw it for myself. Slowly, Mycale’s body was sinking into Kailus’s.

*Is he... absorbing her?!*

It seemed Kailus was no longer human himself. Soon, he’d completely swallowed Mycale.

“Bwahahahahaha!” Kailus’s crazed laughter echoed through the room.

## 4: Crimson, When the Marionettes' Feast Ends

"Freeze Arrow!" Aria fired a flurry of frigid projectiles to interrupt the mad laughter reverberating around us.

*Hey, hang on!*

Rather than dodging the arrows, Kailus just tanked them! Then—*Whoosh!*—a freezing wind assaulted us, exactly like the one Mycale had refracted. Except, actually, this was more "chilly" than "freezing"...

"Just as I thought..." Aria breathed.

Of course! She'd dialed back the power of her Freeze Arrow in an experiment to see if Kailus had absorbed Mycale's power.

"Bwahahaha! That won't work! Don't you see? Mycale's power is mine now! Your spells can't harm me!" he cackled, apparently failing to realize that it was just a test.

*Sheesh, what a hack...*

Yet while Kailus was third-rate in the brains department, he still wasn't to be trifled with. We had no way of knowing if Mycale was the first person he'd absorbed... In fact, it was safest to assume he'd gone on an absorb-a-thon before this and had a host of weird powers to choose from.

*But then...*

A doubt flashed through my mind for the briefest of moments, but I didn't have time to dwell on it. Our priority now was figuring out how to beat Kailus.

"Just so you know, I have more than just Mycale's abilities! Allow me to demonstrate!" he bellowed, then let out a bestial howl. A dozen icy bolts appeared in the air around him.

*A lesser demon's power?!*

Kailus launched the arrows... straight at himself!

*Not good!* The ensuing wave of biting cold rushed over us even as we leaped away.

“Guh!” Gourry groaned slightly, but readied his sword and dashed at Kailus. However...

“Hraaagh!” Kailus howled again, retreating backward. Another blast of cold followed.

*Sheesh, this guy really knows how to use his abilities!* Had he just fired the Freeze Arrows on their own, Gourry would’ve been able to knock the icy projectiles aside with his sword or dodge them. But there was no deflecting sheer cold. Naturally, the diffusing of the blizzard meant that it barely did any real damage, but repeated blasts would eventually lower Gourry’s body temperature enough that he’d be too numb to move properly. Not even the big lug could dodge a Freeze Arrow when he could barely feel his legs.

Kailus certainly talked like a washed-up villain, but he made the grade in terms of skill. That meant we’d have to counter with some schemes of our own.

“Gourry! Aria! This way!” I cried, then darted down one of the corridors that branched off of the entry hall. “Lend me a hand, Aria!” I called. I explained what I needed from her, and we began chanting spells together.

“Think you can escape?! Think again!” Kailus shouted excitedly as he gave chase. On cue...

“Dam Blas!” I fired—not at Kailus, but the ceiling right above him!

*Crash!* It collapsed with a ruckus, raining down rubble of all sizes.

“Tch! A cheap trick!” Kailus backed up to avoid the falling debris, then climbed over it in the still-roiling dust to continue his pursuit. And when he did...

“Dam Blas!” On my signal, Aria fired a second spell at the ceiling. Dust now filled the hallway.

“More petty tricks!” Kailus leaped back again, cursing all the while.

Meanwhile, our team fled further down the hall. As we went...

“Dam Blas!” Aria slung another blast at the ceiling.

“Would you stop it already?!” Kailus bellowed, again pulling back to avoid the collapse, then clambered over the rubble to press his chase.

That was the moment I’d been waiting for.

“Ragna Blade!” Responding to my words of power, a black blade appeared in my hands. No way could he disperse *this* attack!

“What the—?!” Kailus shouted in surprise when he heard my voice in much closer proximity than he’d expected. “Hraaaaagh!” He quickly raised a war cry, sending an arrow of light he’d conjured straight into himself.

*Shahh!* Kailus’s whole body gleamed, and the light he dispersed shot up and down the hallway. When it did, I leaped and brought my black blade down on him... from directly above!

“What?!” Kailus finally caught on, but it was too late! The sword of darkness soundlessly cleaved him through.

See, after I’d signaled Aria to fire a Dam Blas on the ceiling, I’d cast the Levitation spell I’d been chanting and used the dust as a smoke screen to rise up through the hole she’d made. The second floor was laid out like first, so I’d kept pace with Aria and Gourry’s retreat down the corridor below while chanting my Ragna Blade. Aria’s next Dam Blas had opened a hole in the floor below me, and I’d leaped through it while cutting down at Kailus.

“Guh!” Kailus’s whole body instantly turned black. And then...

*Clu-pow!* It burst. When the dust settled, the only people in sight were Gourry and Aria.

“Did we do it?” she asked.

I nodded firmly. “As far as Kailus goes, yeah.”

“Then...”

“The question is... what will the remaining enemies—the ones Kailus was controlling—do now?”

There was still Aileus tangled around the mansion, the winged doll, and the flying lesser demons—and those were just the ones we’d met so far. I was hoping Kailus’s death had released his servants from their curse or mind control

or whatever it was. If it hadn't, they'd probably be coming for revenge, and I shouldn't need to explain what a pain in the neck that would be.

"We'd better check before we go save Bell. It wouldn't be a great look if we picked her up only to face a full-on assault on the way out. Speaking of which, can Bell use attack spells?"

"No, none..."

"No offensive magic whatsoever?"

"She can't use any magic at all as far as I know. I was interested in it when I was younger, so I joined the sorcerers' council. But my parents ran a small tavern and my sister usually helped out there instead... I think she preferred cooking to sorcery."

"I see. All the more reason to get a handle on things outside first. Let's see what we can from the windows there," I said as I opened the door to a nearby room.

It looked like a guest suite, about the same as the one we'd found Bell in before. I had a look out the window facing the terrace. There were no signs of any enemies... or of any hostile presences at all.

"What do you think, Gourry?"

"Not sure how anything could be out there... I'll step outside, just to be sure. You guys stay here."

"Got it. Be careful."

Gourry opened the window to the terrace, sword in hand. He scanned around for any signs of life, and shortly thereafter, set foot on the terrace. He then turned back to face the mansion, and...

"Whoa..." he breathed with a mix of surprise and confusion.

"What is it?!"

"Well, it's... Just come out, okay?"

Aria and I shared a look, then cautiously stepped out onto the terrace ourselves. We turned our eyes toward where Gourry was looking.



“Huh?”

“What in the...” The two of us breathed in equal bewilderment.

Aileus’s vines coating the mansion, along with the lumps of flesh scattered here and there among them... were all now completely withered. The lumps looked like large, dead flowers rustling dryly in the wind, while the... vines, tentacles, whatever they were... had turned brown, desiccated, and lifeless.

“Is he dead?” Gourry whispered.

A deafening silence fell over us.

“You don’t think...!”

A thought struck me. I swiftly cut back inside and across the room to reenter the corridor. Gourry and Aria followed.

“What is it, Mistress Lina?!”

“Just checking something!”

I ducked into the room we’d flown in through earlier tonight—Bell’s former room. I ran up to the broken window, exited to the terrace... and after a gasp, I just stood there in silence.

Out on the lawn lay the winged doll that had once commanded the winged demons, looking like a marionette with its strings cut. The flying demons, previously everywhere, were now nowhere to be seen.

“What’s going on here?” Gourry whispered from behind me. But of course, I didn’t have an answer for him.

“Is this... because Kailus is dead?” Aria whispered uncertainly.

Given the timing, that was likely the trigger. Yet while it was certainly possible to create chimeras whose lives would expire when a certain person died, you’d have to really jump through some hoops to get there.

“But why would Kailus set it up like this?” I asked.

“Well...” Aria thought a minute. “Perhaps he didn’t like the idea of his subordinates outliving him... Oh, or maybe he programmed them that way as an incentive for them to protect him! I’m sure that’s it!”

“Hmm...” I hummed thoughtfully at Aria’s theory. It would definitely explain a few things, but... Something just didn’t add up.

“Hey! Wait a minute!” I wasn’t sure if he’d heard us or not, but Gourry’s voice suddenly took on a serious tension. “If Kailus wanted to take everyone with him, then... isn’t your sister...”

Aria and I looked at each other, aghast, then booked it into the corridor.

“Sister! Sister!”

“Mistress Bell? Answer if you hear us!”

“Hey! If you’re there, say something!”

The three of us called for Bell as we scoured every room we could find. You’d think a place this size would have a servant or two around, but it was totally deserted. Our cries echoed through the empty mansion. After a good search, we concluded that, at the very least, Bell was nowhere on the first floor.

“You don’t think she’s...”

“Aria, don’t lose heart! There’s still the second floor!”

“R-Right...”

I ascended the stairs and threw open the door to a nearby room with an audible slam.

For a while, we just stood there. There was a wide-open window on the other side of the room, its lace curtains billowing in the breeze. A white rocking chair sat facing the night. Sitting in it...

“Aria?” Bell turned to look at her sister. There was a smile on her face that seemed somehow melancholy.

“Sister!” Aria cried as she ran up to her, and Bell stood up to embrace her gently. “Sister... Sister.”

“It’s... over, isn’t it?” Bell asked quietly, sweetly stroking Aria’s head.

“Yes... We beat Kailus. Now the city can be peaceful once more, and we can be together again...”

Bell simply gazed into the distance silently. It was like she was staring at

something in the distant past, now gone forever.

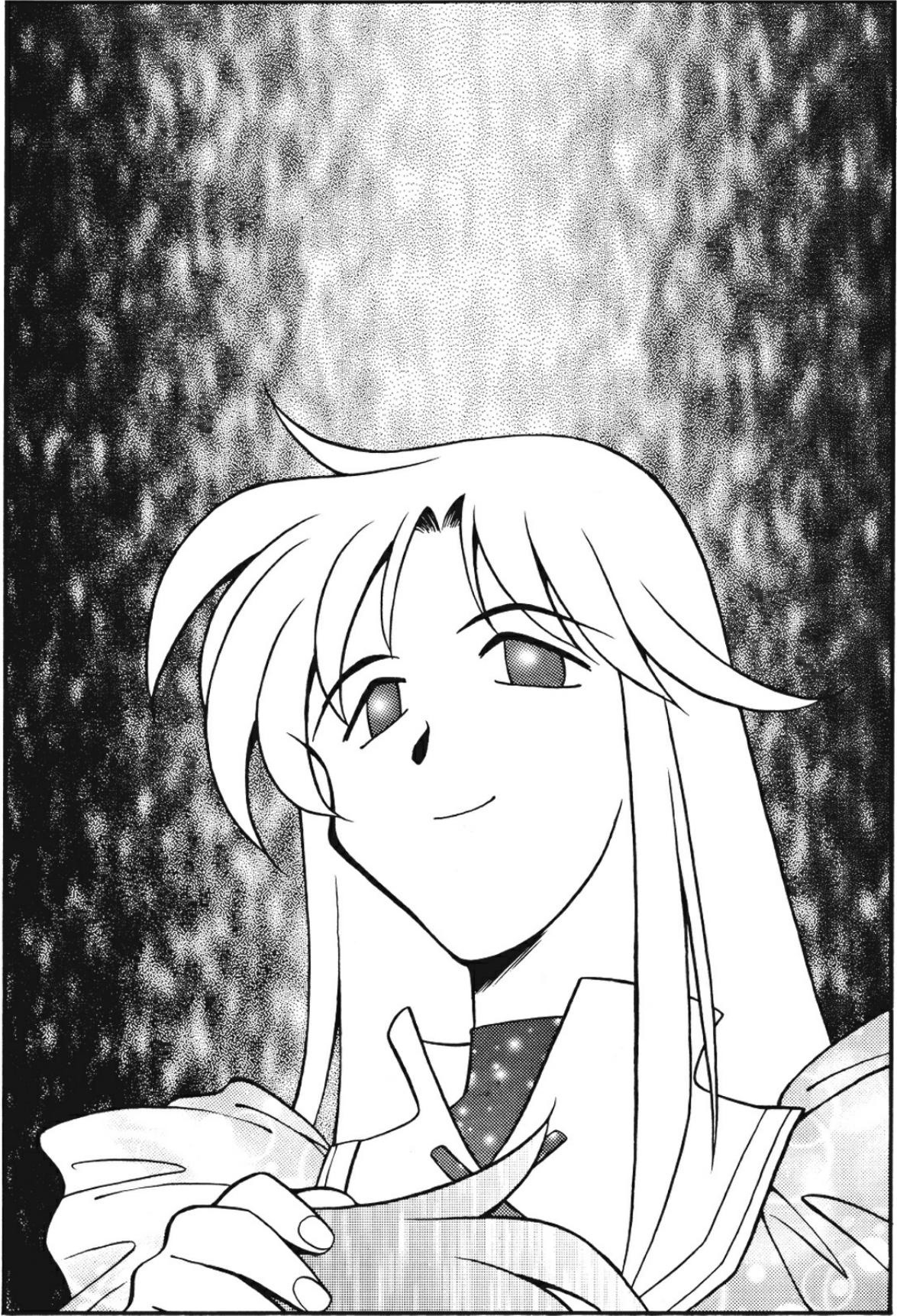
“Is there anyone left in the mansion?” I asked.

“No. They’ve all been gone. Since the day the insurrection started,” Bell responded, her gaze still faraway.

I knew it was a big damper on the sisters’ reunion, but there was something I had to know. “By the way, are you okay, Mistress Bell? Kailus seemed to have made everyone else into a chimera, including himself...”

Aria looked up in realization. “That’s right... Sister, are you all right? Did Kailus... He didn’t do anything to you, did he?!”

Bell just smiled softly again. “I’m all right, Aria. After all, it wasn’t Kailus who changed them. It was me.”



For a moment, none of us were sure what she meant by that.

“Sister?” Aria whispered hesitantly.

Bell simply continued to smile. At last, I saw it... the quiet madness dwelling in her eyes.

“What... are you talking about?” I asked hoarsely, but Bell didn’t even spare me a glance.

“Kailus... He deserved it. To lose his honor, his life... branded a traitor. He brought it on himself... by stealing my love... and my happiness...”

“You mean... Kailus killed him after all?” Aria asked, shocked.

*“Him”? Bell’s first fiancé?*

“He didn’t say it in so many words... but... in my heart, I knew he did it. And so I changed Kailus... the others too... to make him start that insurrection... and to die in the disgrace he deserved.”

“I... I don’t know what you’re talking about, Sister. What do you mean, *you* changed them?”

“Aria, I thought that I had given up. I thought that there was nothing left for me, that I had accepted my fate. But I was wrong. Despite all my resignation... hatred still began to amass in my heart. And so I changed everyone. I changed them all and incited insurrection in Kailus’s name.”

“You’re lying!” Aria shook her head fiercely. “That can’t be true! Because... if it was, it would mean *you’re* the one we’ve been fighting!”

“I love you, Aria... my one and only sister. But...” Bell smiled sadly. “But... after my love died, Kailus asked me to marry him. I rebuffed him, of course. Until one day, he said to me, ‘What if your little sister... if Aria... ends up like your fiancé?’”

Wordlessly, Aria began to tremble. I couldn’t see her expression from where I was standing.

“That was when I became certain... that Kailus had killed the man I loved. Though looking back now, perhaps he simply wanted me to think that so I’d do

as he wanted. Still, in that moment... I thought, 'I can't let Aria die... I just have to do as he tells me.'"

*So the reason she married Kailus... was because he coerced her by threatening Aria? What a bastard...*

"That... That can't be true..." Aria whispered tremblingly.

"It is, Aria," Bell responded quietly. "So... I love you... but at the same time..."

*"I also hate you..."*

Bell had sent her sister away because she loved her, so that she wouldn't get mixed up in the fighting. She also sent Aria away because she hated her, so that she would blame herself for leaving the city alone... and spread the word that Kailus was behind the insurrection. Perhaps Bell had sent Zonagein to keep watch over Aria too.

I couldn't deny that this explanation snapped a lot of pieces into place. If Bell's aim was to disgrace Kailus and get him killed, then after he was dead, she'd have no need of subordinates. On the contrary, having them put up too much of a fight against the imperial army would be contrary to her goals. That was why she'd programmed them to die.

*But... how did she do it all?!*

"It's not true!" Aria shouted, her voice trembling. "It can't be! Because... you aren't capable of any of the things you're describing! You don't even know anything about sorcery!"

"You're right... I don't know the first thing about it. Kailus made sure that I never learned, even after we married. I'm sure he was afraid... that I might take revenge on him if I did. And so... no matter how great the hatred inside of me grew... there was nothing I could do... until that person gave me power."

"That person'?" I whispered, my brow knitted.

It didn't sound like she was referring to her dead fiancé, or to Kailus.

Still smiling at Aria, Bell answered me, "They never gave me their name... But they realized that I craved power and granted it to me. So I used it. It would have been easy to simply kill Kailus, but that wasn't enough for me. I wanted

him to die a traitor. Thus I used my power to change everyone and exploit them.”

“No! You couldn’t do that!”

“But I did, Aria. And once we’re dead, it will all finally be over.”

“Aria!” Hearing those words, I made a beeline for the younger sister and grabbed her hand, tearing her away from Bell. I’d thought that she was going to kill Aria... But Bell just stood there, as still as could be, showing no sign of reaching for a hidden weapon.

“You’re lying, Sister!” Aria screamed, tears in her eyes.

Bell looked from her to me and Gourry. “I’m sorry that you have to be dragged in this. But it will be over soon. No matter what kind of man Kailus was, it wasn’t right for me to use innocent people for my revenge. That’s why I’m going to kill myself too. But... it is necessary that Kailus’s legacy remain that of a traitor... and so... you must die with me.” She turned her gaze back to Aria and raised her right hand. “Behold, Aria... This is the power I have been given. Come to me... Dulgoffa.”

*What?!*

Shadows appeared, coalescing in Bell’s outstretched right hand. Then the darkness came into focus, forming a pure black blade.

“H-Hey! Lina! Isn’t that—?!” Gourry shouted.

“Yeah,” I responded with a calm that surprised even me.

I knew that name... and I’d seen that sword before. Dulgoffa was a demon that took the form of a blade wielded by a high-ranking demon General called Sherra. Gourry and I had crossed paths with her once before, and we’d seen the kind of grotesque monster the demon-sword could transform people into.

*That explains how she “changed” everyone... It would’ve been easy with the sword’s power.*

“Sister! Stop this!”

“Let us... end this,” Bell whispered as the magical sword began fusing with her hand.

“No!” Gourry screamed, speeding across the floor. The sword in his hand flashed. He was probably hoping to stop the fusion by slicing the demon sword out of her hand. But...

*Zing!* The blade in Bell’s hand casually deflected his strike.

“What the...” Gourry whispered, confounded, as he leaped back.

Gourry’s skill with a sword was masterful. To parry a serious blow from him would require equally masterful skill, if not multiple arms like Zonagein. It was hard to imagine Bell had that kind of fencing training, and yet...

“You’re too late. The sword has been inside me all this time. Our fusion is nearly complete. I do not know how to fight... but... Dulgoffa does.”

Dulgoffa’s blade was drawing into Bell’s right palm itself. Her hand was stained black, and the darkness continued to spread. Nobody could stop it now. Bell’s whole body began to turn black until, at last, she was one with the magical sword.

“Sister!” Aria’s scream echoed powerlessly around us.

When Gourry and I had witnessed Dulgoffa transform someone previously, it was against the victim’s will. They’d become a true horror after the fusion—a writhing, hideous mass of flesh. But Bell had accepted Dulgoffa of her own free will. Not even I could say for sure if the being that stood before me now was Bell, Dulgoffa, or something else entirely.

Maybe this was what a true fusion with Dulgoffa looked like. In form, she looked quite a bit like Mycale. But whereas Mycale’s body had been a clear, sparkling emerald color, this being’s entire body was the shade of night, the black of void. Like a goddess carved out of pure ebony...





“Sister...” Aria tried to call to her, but in response, the being wordlessly raised her right hand.

“Move!” Gourry took off running. He flew straight at Aria from the side, sweeping her up in his arms without stopping.

Not a second later—*Crash!*—the wall behind Aria shattered from some invisible pressure.

*Not good!*

“Gourry! Skedaddle time!”

“Got it!”

I flew out into the hall. Gourry followed behind me, carrying Aria.

“Sister! Sister!” I heard her cry in agony.

Yet I knew there would be no way to restore her sister after this. We were going to have to... well, to kill her... but doing that in front of Aria would be cruel...

“Gourry! Let’s get outside for now!”

“Right!”

We rushed down the stairs and kicked open the front door.

“Aria! Once we’re in the city, go somewhere and hide!” I shouted. The lawn here at the estate was regretfully sparse of trees and other cover.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

I responded with silence.

Aria fretfully looked away. “I... I suppose that is the only option. I understand. Please do it,” she whispered, the words strained. “Master Gourry... I’m all right. I can run on my own...”

“Okay,” Gourry said, then set her down.

“Let’s go at least as far as the city together,” I said.

“Certainly,” Aria agreed.

I was afraid she might suddenly turn back, insisting on trying to convince her sister herself, but thankfully it seemed I had nothing to worry about. Except...

*Huh?!*

I felt a hostile presence incoming before we'd even managed to leave the property.

"Aria!" I cried.

We were running side by side, and no sooner had I pushed her away than something invisible passed between us, without sound or wind. And then...

*Crack!* A tree on the lawn far ahead of us snapped. I stopped and turned back to see the being slowly emerging from the front door. Guess getting Aria to safety was out of the question now... Aria seemed to be the main target, after all. It was likely Bell's conflicting love and hatred for her sister had snapped into a delusional fixation when she fused with Dulgoffa. Even if we hid Aria somewhere, Bell would probably ignore us and hunt her down first.

"Looks like we'll have to finish things here..." I muttered.

"Yes... it does," Gourry agreed.

We stopped our flight and turned to face the being that had formerly been Bell.

"Get back, Aria! But don't go too far!" I called.

"I won't!" she called back.

With that decided, I quickly began to chant a spell. The ebony being raised her right hand again. Her target this time was... me?! Right. She'd judged me an obstacle to her killing of Aria, and had thus decided to take me out first.

Keeping up my chant, I leaped to my right. An invisible presence then tore past me, and after unleashing it, the being charged straight for me. That was when I finished my incantation.

"Sight Frang!"

*Bwoosh!* Responding to my words of power, a thin mist rushed out to veil the area. This spell was usually used to make a quick escape, but I'd seen it used

before against invisible projectiles. You could track their trajectory more easily by watching for ripples in the mist.

The being raised her hand once more. I felt a chill up my spine and jumped to the side again. I didn't see any movement in the mist, and yet...

*Crack!* I heard another tree split in the distance.

*Wait, can she fire those things without even disturbing the air around her?! How is that fair?!*

I counted the facts that she couldn't fire them off in rapid succession and that they were relatively easy to sense coming as wins, and kept on dodging them accordingly... but it wasn't exactly fun. We really needed to finish this ASAP.

As the being approached, Gourry interposed himself between us. I chanted a spell from behind him.

"Hyah!" With a cry, Gourry sliced at her!

*Shing! Clank!* I heard the din of metal on metal as she blocked each of Gourry's slashes.

At some point, she'd produced a black dagger in her right hand. It was longer than a normal one, but not long enough to be called a shortsword. She'd probably formed it from her own body instantaneously to parry Gourry's attack. But...

*Clang! Cling! Clank!* The metallic chorus continued as they traded blows. She seemed to be on par with Gourry in terms of skill, but as he was only human, she likely had an overwhelming advantage in terms of endurance.

*She makes for one tough opponent...*

Luckily, her invisible blasts seemed to require a degree of concentration to manifest, which meant they were off the table while she was locked in melee combat. With that in mind, I finished up my spell and... Seeming to realize what I was about to do, Gourry leaped back to put some distance between them.

*Okay! Now!*

I immediately fired! "Dynast Blas!"

Lightning struck the five points of a pentagram around her, then converged on her! But—*Vrm!*—her body trembled and a black mist enveloped her. It neutralized my magical lightning!

*Not bad! In that case...* I quickly began chanting my next spell.

Gourry moved to stop her again as she turned toward me once more. She blocked his sideways slash with her dagger yet again. Immediately, Gourry pulled his sword back and tried a thrust this time—but she produced another dagger in her left hand, using it in tandem with the one in her right to block his piercing attack. With her blades scissoring his, she lunged at Gourry!

“Guh!” Gourry quickly moved back.

While their deadly melee continued, I finished up my next spell! Gourry broke away from her again, probably anticipating my timing.

“Zellas Bullid!”

The ray of light I fired streaked straight toward her. She saw it coming and dodged it with a half step. As she did, Gourry attempted another charge, but...

*Zing!* She blocked his strike with the dagger in her left hand. Nevertheless, that held her in place for a brief moment!

*Yes! Just what I was waiting for!* The Zellas Bullid spell could be controlled by its caster mid-flight. Moreover, it channeled the power of one of the highest-tier demons, Greater Beast Zellas Metallium! Not even Dulgoffa could take that hit unscathed!

My ray of light had missed her once, but I willed it to change course midair, hooking it back around at her again from behind!

*Got her!* Just as I thought that, she artlessly raised her hand, brandishing her dagger. Then came a strange noise. *Wha—*

She’d cut through the incoming beam with her dagger! The slice had split it in two, dispersing the light on either side of her. The aftershocks of the scattering power hit Gourry, who lost his balance with a cry.

*Not good! One second’s opening could get him killed!*

And indeed, she swiftly struck at him with her dagger after cutting through

the light. Perhaps out of sheer desperation, Gourry ducked down low and swept at her leg with his foot.

Then, like it was nothing—*Whump*—she just collapsed.

“What the...” It had been so easy, Gourry couldn’t help but pause.

He hadn’t caught her by surprise or anything like that. It looked like she’d had a real amateur moment there.

*Could it be...?*

“Gourry! I don’t think she can handle kicks!” I shouted.

Bell had said that Dulgoffa knew how to fight. But when I thought about it, why had she gone out of her way to produce daggers in both hands? If she’d wanted a longer reach, she could have extended her arms themselves... So what was the big idea?

*Does Dulgoffa only know how to fight like a sword?*

If my stupid theory was right, then beating her might not be so difficult after all.

“Well... let’s find out!” Gourry said, sweeping her leg again as she started to right herself. Once again, she toppled helplessly. “Sorry! I really need to beat you!” After knocking her to the ground a second time, Gourry brought his sword down on her.

*Ding!* There was a hard metallic sound.

“What?!” All of us cried out at once.

She hadn’t blocked Gourry’s blade with her daggers. He’d plunged his sword right into her chest... without causing a single scratch to her ebony skin. Gourry swiftly and silently leaped away.

*Of course... Should’ve seen this one coming.*

If those daggers were physically a part of her—they’d just taken the form of daggers to capitalize on Dulgoffa’s skill—then it stood to reason that her entire body was every bit as hard. Gourry’s sword didn’t have a name, but it was still a magical blade of considerable power. If even it couldn’t pierce her hide, then...

“What do we do, Lina?!”

“How should I know?”

“Can’t you use a spell to make my sword sharper?!”

“No way!” I responded firmly.

Sure, there were spells to temporarily enhance the power of ordinary weapons by imbuing them with magic. But there was no telling what they’d do to a sword that already had magical properties. If you got lucky and the magics played nicely together, you could very well end up with a souped-up slicer... but it was just as likely that nothing at all would happen, or worse, that you’d break the enchantment and end up with a useless hunk of metal. Worst of all, you might get a bad reaction that caused the magic to go haywire and blow! And this was no time to be taking a gamble like that.

The being quickly picked herself up, flipped away, and ran for the house.

“Is she trying to escape?!”

“Get her!”

If she’d truly lost her will to fight, then we had no reason to pursue... but given that she’d fused with Dulgoffa out of a delusional fixation on Aria, I was guessing she wasn’t going to give up just because we’d bested her once. And if I’m being honest, I’d rather face a dozen brass demons than the prospect of something like her lurking out there with my number.

Besides, there was no guarantee she would limit her rage to us and Aria. Her fixation was specific at the moment, but what if she turned on the world at large? She’d already used Dulgoffa’s power to transform the innocent people of the Crimson sorcerers’ council, after all. We couldn’t leave her out there unchecked.

“Could that dark blade do it?” Aria called from behind me. “The one you used to kill Kailus. Could you use it on her?”

“It would be tricky, and I’d have to outfence her...”

Even if her mastery was limited to bladed weapons, she was skilled enough in that regard to go toe to toe with Gourry. She’d probably run me through before

I could get within kicking distance. More pressingly, that spell was a real drain on my magic... which was already pretty tapped from using it on Kailus earlier. I could cast it again, sure, but I wouldn't be able to keep it up for long. I'd probably get a few swings in at most, and I wasn't really confident I could land a solid blow in that short window.

As we pursued the being, she flew through the still-open front door and into the mansion. She stopped in a corner of the grand hall, beside the now-lifeless body of Zonagein. She reached for his corpse, and...

*Skrrk!* She stuck one of her daggers into him!

*What in the world is she...* Before I could even speculate, she withdrew the dagger and turned back to face us. *Wait, don't tell me...*

"Stop!"

At my warning, Gourry and Aria halted in the doorway behind me. We then watched as spider legs tore out from her back! *Kra-pash!*

*Ahhh! Freakin' knew it!*

"Retreat!"

"R-Right!"

"No objections here!"

We did a quick about-face to retreat. When we did...

"Freeze Arrow!" incanted a voice behind us. It was muffled, but it was clearly Bell's.

"Scatter!" The second we were out the door, we split up, letting the arrows of ice blow past us.

*Aaagh! Seriously freakin' bad!*

We reconvened and continued our retreat. I immediately felt a presence behind us. We turned to look... and she was right on our heels!

"What do we do, Lina?!" Gourry asked, sword at the ready.

"How am I supposed to know?" I responded in exhaustion.



“How could you *not* know?”

“I think she can absorb the power and knowledge of anyone she sticks with her daggers. So if she so much as scratches one of us, she’ll master our fighting styles too!”

“Are you sure?!”

“Pretty darn sure!”

It was clear from her appearance that she could absorb physical properties. That she could also absorb knowledge was a guess, but I felt it was an educated one based on the way she was suddenly busting out Zonagein’s greatest hits. Bell didn’t know the first thing about magic, and Dulgoffa wouldn’t have Freeze Arrow in its repertoire, so that knowledge must have come from the old sorcerer.

One way or the other, things were starting to look pretty grim for us. It would be impossible to beat someone with Gourry’s mastery of a blade *and* arachnid appendages without taking a single scratch. The spider legs would also make her tough to outrun, and an aerial escape was equally off the table. If we took to the skies, she’d just absorb the winged doll in the garden and take flight after us. And once she could fly, we’d be truly helpless against her. We really had to put her down here and now.

“She absorbs knowledge... Does that mean she absorbs memories too?” Aria asked.

“Well... sure, probably,” I responded, my eyes still locked on our enemy.

“Very well... I’ll finish this.”

“What?!” I couldn’t help looking over at her.

A genuine smile appeared on her face. “Please, save my sister.”

I...

For a minute, I couldn’t figure out what Aria was getting at. But then she took off running—straight for the being.

“Aria?!” I reached out, but my hand just missed her.

I finally got it. I understood what Aria meant to do.

“Tch!” Gourry took off after her, but he, too, was too slow. The spider’s legs were already reaching for her.

Aria thrust her hands forward like she sought an embrace. “Become one with me... Sister!”

And then—*Skrrk!*—the being’s dagger pierced her chest. Without hesitation, I began chanting a spell. I couldn’t afford to hesitate. I owed Aria this much.

*Hail, Lords of the four worlds’ darkness*

*I beseech your bond and beg you this boon*

Aria’s body fell limply to the ground with a soft thud. A spasm coursed through the spidery legs that bound her.

*By your powers combined, entwined,*

*Bless me with magic mightier than mine*

The talismans on my belt, my collar, and both wrists let out a faint glow. The being’s body began to heave, as if crying. I started off slowly toward her while moving into my next incantation.

*Blade forged of the freezing black void,*

*Be released under heaven’s seal*

“Hey! Lina!” Gourry called from behind me. He must have realized for himself that the violent rage had left her.

*Become mine, become part of me*

*Let us mete destruction as one*

*Smash even the souls of the gods...*

I stood before her, my spell finished. I quietly raised my right hand and recited the words of power. “Ragna Blade.”

Darkness took shape in my right hand, and the blade of pure void sliced through her.

I stared silently out into the city beneath the moonlit night sky.

“Hey, are you crying?” Gourry asked.

“Yeah, right,” I responded, looking back over my shoulder with a small smile.

We were on the street by the canal just outside of Kailus’s mansion. No one else was around.

“I was just thinking, it feels so... heavy,” I whispered, looking back over the city again.

“Hey, you mind if I ask?”

“About what?”

“Why’d she stop all of a sudden?”

“Aria stopped her... She used that being’s ability to absorb the memories of others to let Bell know how much she loved her.”

In that moment, Bell had probably heard her sister’s thoughts and come to understand her feelings. When the hatred vanished from Bell’s heart, it fractured the core delusion that had allowed her and Dulgoffa to attain a perfect fusion. That would’ve left Dulgoffa to absorb Bell against her will if unchecked, which was why I’d had to step in... To respect Aria’s sacrifice, and save Bell’s soul. Yet even so...

“C’mon, Lina.” Gourry walked up to me and placed a hand on my head.  
“Cheer up... I’ll carry half the weight for you.”

“Gourry...” I reached for him slowly... and latched an arm tight around his neck! “Look at you, Mr. Obligatory Expressions of Support! I think you just know I’d throttle you if you tried to brush me off!”

“Urk! B-But you’re throttling me anyway!”

“I’ve got to take my chances when I can, don’t I?! You’d dodge or fight back otherwise!”

“Of course I would! But... it looks like you’re okay, at least...”

“I guess I am... Just stewing in depression won’t do anybody any good.”

“True. Anyway... we stopped the insurrection, and the sword is gone,” Gourry

said with a smile. I smiled back, but halfheartedly.

He was right. After my dark sword hit her, her body had turned to ash and then vanished without a trace. That had probably done some damage to Dulgoffa, at least. But General Sherra was still out there, which meant Dulgoffa would be back. Why had Sherra given it to Bell? What were the demons plotting? I still didn't have the answer to those questions.

I silently kept staring at the moon in the eastern sky. The night had only just begun.

# Afterword

## Scene: Author + L

Au: Whew. Almost ate the big one there.

L: You survived?! Granted, I never put up a fight any of the other times you were killed in an afterword and then came back just fine... But reviving within the span of two simultaneously published novels still feels a little fast.

Au: What do you want from me? That's just how the world works. Anyway, this concludes the reprint of *Slayers: Delusion in Crimson*!

L: Even for the novels, which have a pretty high body count, a lot of people sure do die in this story.

Au: True. I feel like the fundamental philosophy of part 2 is that people are going to die, but it inspires those they leave behind to appreciate life all the more.

L: Hang on. Do you think you said something cool just now? I used my laser beam to break you down to your constituent atoms, you come back one volume later all "whew, almost ate the big one there," and you expect to sound like a credible philosopher on death and sacrifice?

Au: Erk... You do have a point there. Damn. How do I get people to take me seriously again?

L: Let's pretend you *actually* died last time, and I'll handle all subsequent afterwords myself!

Au: No freakin' way! You'd just make them stupid!

L: Well, excuse me! Actually, wait... are you under the impression that the afterwords where you appear *aren't* stupid?

Au: Er, w-well... never mind that now. Ahem. But reviving so casually because I have to keep appearing in the afterwords does take some of the gravitas out of the deaths in the series... Ah! I know! Why don't we try it the other way?

Everyone who previously died in the story will turn out to have been alive the whole time!

L: That's even more stupid! And it would completely undermine the drama! Think of volume 2, *The Sorcerers of Atlas*!

*Halciform: To take back my lost love...!*

*Real Rubia: Whew. Almost ate the big one there. Oh, Halciform, long time no see!*

*Halciform: ...Huh?*

*Rubia: Um, Master Halciform, is she...*

*Halciform: Wait, what? Rubia? You're... alive?*

*Real Rubia: Of course I am! You didn't really think that would kill me, did you, silly?*

*Rubia: (whispers) The real me is a very different person...*

Then Lina and Gourry would have nothing to do but eat!

Au: Is that so wrong?

L: You bet it is! Even Talim, who's just a head, would come back saying "almost ate the big one there!"

Au: Yeah, okay. I guess that wouldn't work, would it?

L: See? Even my world food tour would be better than that!

Au: Yeah, I have to disagree. But, thinking about it, it's hard to decide who lives and who dies in these stories. A while back I was talking with a certain editor over lunch, and he said, "By the way, what happened to Randy from the short story? He's part of the royal family, isn't he?"

I replied, "Well, I wrote that he'd stopped moving at the end of the short story, so he's probably dead."

And then he said, "What are you saying, Kanzaka-san?! People can't die in *Special*!" He was so insistent, I thought I was going to die... but I took those words to heart.

L: I guess it's not so uncommon. Really, you have to wonder what happens to all those bandits Lina's always blasting away as a gag.

Au: I do usually gloss over that, yeah. Sometimes I leave it ambiguous, or I don't even decide for myself. That's to let the readers imagine things. Sometimes I talk about the games or the *Knight of Aqualord* comic or the anime as a parallel "part 3," in major part because of that.

L: I see. So the reason you don't write about me is because you want to let the readers imagine my amazing adventures, and the infinite possibility they represent, for themselves!

Au: No, that's not what I—

L: If I just drop a title like "L vs. Beautiful Innkeepers Nationwide," then readers can enjoy imagining my exploits! That's your homework for next time, folks! Come up with my adventures based on that title and send in your letters before the next afterword comes out!

Au: Wait! The next afterword—

L: Well, see you in the next book!

*Afterword: Over.*



Slayers 11

## ***DELUSION IN CRIMSON***

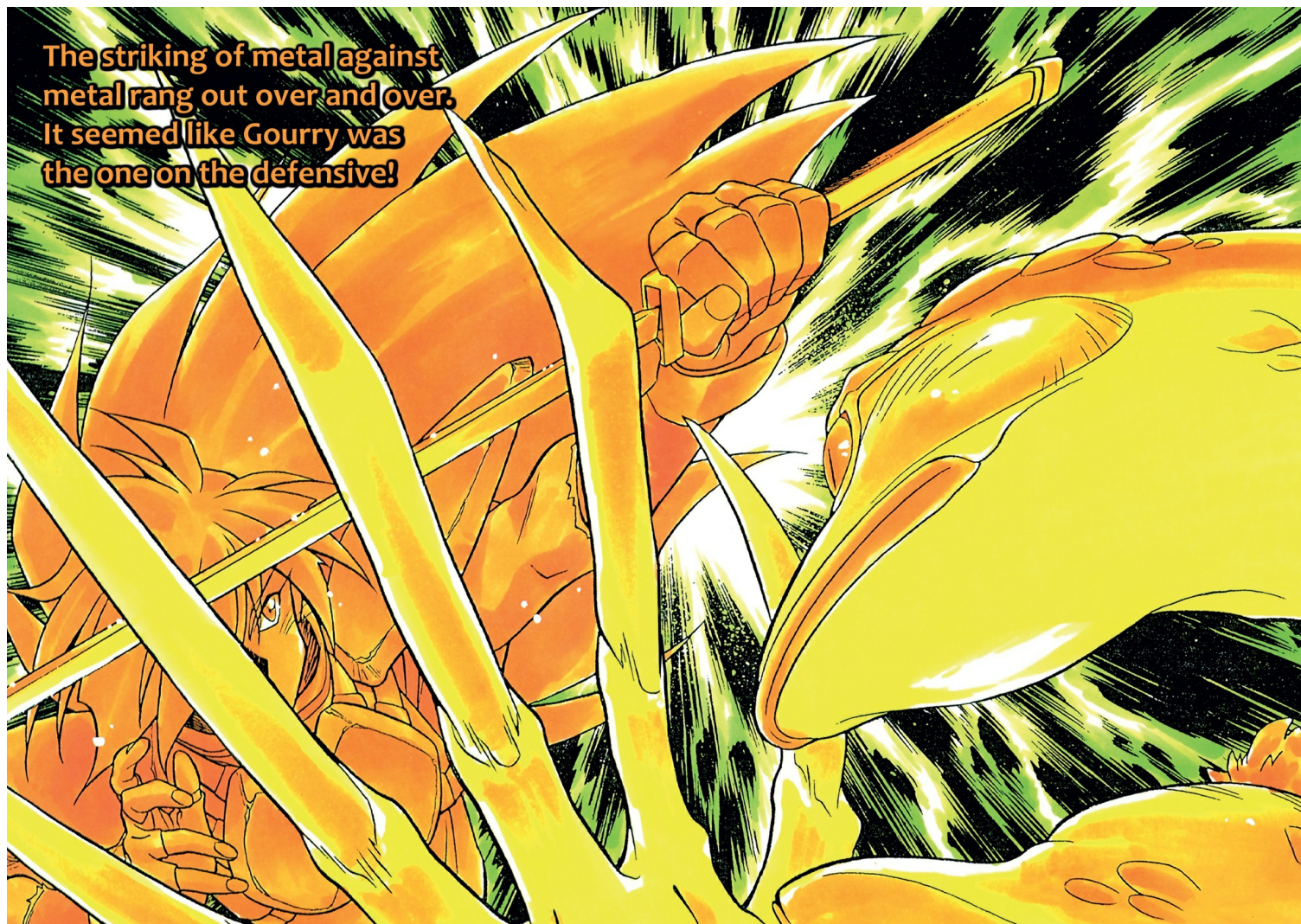
“Huh... Guess something’s up.”

We were about to enter the town when I spotted something displayed on the stone gatepost...





The striking of metal against metal rang out over and over. It seemed like Gourry was the one on the defensive!





I could already  
feel the warmth  
leaving his body.  
I knew what it felt  
like when someone  
was dying.





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