



SLAYERS

13 *PRESAGES OF INCARNATION*

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1: The Demons Act, Their Goals Unknown

Once upon a time, there was a great battle. No one was spared involvement—neither gods, nor demons, nor any living thing.

Our story begins in a time of distant legend, when God and the Dark Lord clashed over the continued existence of our world. God departed, leaving behind four avatars; the Dark Lord was divided into seven pieces and sealed away, survived by five retainers of his own. This stalemate lasted until a millennium ago, when one of the seven fragments of the Dark Lord revived to do battle with one of God's avatars. People called it the Incarnation War.

And now, according to the dragon elder Milgazia, the very same war was on the verge of breaking out again.

The rain was coming down harder and harder, forming puddles on previously dry ground. The villagers grumbled as they splashed their ways home.

The door to a small eatery in the corner of town opened with a soft sound. "Whewww... Talk about outta nowhere." I shook the water off my cape as I headed for the farthest table.

When the elf Mephy had told us rain was on the way, we'd made for this village seeking somewhere to speak privately. As promised, the downpour began abruptly just as we hit town.

It was too late to grab lunch at this hour, and too early for dinner. Perhaps because of that awkward timing, the six of us were the only customers in the joint. That suited us just fine, of course—Milgazia in human form and wearing clothing resembling leather armor was bad enough, but the elven Mephy in her curious white platemail really would have stood out like a sore thumb in a crowd. But most importantly, we couldn't exactly dish on demons trying to rehash the Incarnation War with other people around.

We took a seat at the table in the back of the shop. A waitress came, and me,

Gourry, Luke, and Mileena put in some light orders.

“And the other two?” she pressed.

After gazing at the menus, Mephy and Milgazia said...

“Shredded cabbage.”

“Just water.”

“You guys are the worst customers ever,” I found myself commenting. The waitress also seemed a little indignant as she withdrew into the back room.

“Unlike *humans*, I refuse to engage in the barbaric practice of murdering other animals for food,” Mephy announced in a clipped tone. A vein bulged on Luke’s forehead. But before he could say anything...

“You’re just a picky eater. Your father finds it very frustrating as well,” Milgazia pointed out.

“Uncle Milgazia! Don’t tell them that!” she protested in a harsh whisper.

I guess even elves have people who try to hide their fussy eating habits behind principles...

“Says the guy who only ordered water,” Luke chimed in.

“Dragons lose the need to eat much after reaching a certain age. We absorb ambient energies instead,” Milgazia responded.

“Dragons? H-Hey, hang on a minute!”

Oh, that’s right... We haven’t told Luke and Mileena about that yet.

“I forgot you guys don’t know each other. Let’s play the introductions game.” Me, Gourry, Luke, and Mileena went around the table while the waitress brought our orders.

“I am Milgazia, the leader of the dragons of Dragons’ Peak in the Kataart Mountains. As I’m sure you’ve figured out, the form you see before you is merely a temporary guise created through transformation magic.”

“Aha...” Luke whispered low, and cast a glance at Gourry. “*That’s* why you called him a big lizard.”

“Forgive me for repeating myself, but please do not call me a big lizard.”

“Ahh! Sorry, sorry!” Luke apologized desperately as he realized Milgazia had slid in close to him.

“So...” The last of the introductions, invited by the quiet Mileena (who’d been ignoring all the hubbub) came from the elf at the table.

“I’m Memphys. Memphys Rhinesword.”

Silence hung over the group for a while.

“And...?” I urged her expectantly.

“And what?” she responded without so much as a glance my way.

Grr...

“And, uh... What’s your deal, exactly?”

“Obviously, I’m an elf. Does that really require an explanation?”

Grrrrr!

“F-Fair, but... Listen, Mephy, when you’re trying to make nice with people, it’s common courtesy to open up a little about yourself, right? Basic stuff like ‘I like to wear weird armor’ or ‘I’m a stupid picky eater so I only eat cabbage,’ y’know?” I grinned.

Twitch! Twitch! My taunting raised a vein in her forehead.



“You will call me Memphys, not Mephy! I don’t approve of mere humans addressing me by my nickname! Though I suppose providing a bit more information *would* make our interactions more harmonious...”

“Right? Heeheehee...”

“Did you know that even on moonless nights, elves can see in the dark?”

“Stop it now, Mephy.”

“But Uncle—” Memphys started unhappily.

Milgazia ignored her and let out a soft sigh. “I’ve known her family for quite some time. The elves have also realized something is amiss and are currently looking into it, so I brought her along of my own accord.” His offhand explanation of her presence here caused the shadow of fear over my heart to grow darker.

“In other words... the elves agree that recent events suggest another Incarnation War?” I asked.

After a period of silence, Milgazia nodded firmly. He then began to describe to me what he’d seen a thousand years ago.

An air of instability hung over the world. Several states began to bolster their militaries in what felt like preparations for action, and skirmishes along borders were frequent. Not much provocation was needed for those small conflicts to turn into full-blown war—war that dragged multiple nations into it.

Nobody realized it for a while—not even the elves, who at that time still coexisted with humans to a certain degree—but amid all the fighting and chaos, demonic activity began to find its way into the mix... and little by little, it picked up. By the time those involved took notice of what was happening, it was too late. The nations were exhausted, and most of their would-be heroes had already fallen in battle at the hands of other humans.

Demidemons thus ran rampant in the wild, terrorizing anyone fortunate enough to have survived the war. Countless lives were lost. Countless nations fell into ruin. Dragons, who had chosen to remain neutral in conflict amongst

humans, at last realized that there was a conscious force guiding these events. It occurred to them that even the initial surge in militarism may have been incited by demons who'd infiltrated the various nations' brain trusts.

Thus dragons, elves, dwarves, and humans... All living things worked together to purge the wilderness overrun with demidemons. But as it turned out, their mass spawnings were only a diversion. While all eyes were focused on the wilds, the Dark Lord's five lieutenants assembled in the Kataart Mountains, which were then still part of Aqualord Ragrafia's sacred territory. The lieutenants destroyed the temple and slew the priests of Aqualord while avoiding direct conflict with the great god, gradually turning Kataart into a lifeless realm.

Aqualord was their target. When the people realized this, the united army the dragons had mustered headed for the Kataart Mountains to aid Aqualord... And then the Dark Lord appeared.

"Huh?" I found myself dumbly interrupting Milgazia's story. "The Dark Lord showed up? Where'd he come from?"

"We don't know."

Come on... I was pretty shocked by his flippant answer.

"Nobody knows what happened. No one who was there to witness his arrival lived to tell the tale. Was he simply hiding his presence until that moment, or was the seal broken somehow? Whatever the case, Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu appeared abruptly in the Kataart Mountains, and with that, any chance we had of victory vanished. The Priest of Hellmaster Fibrizo had already been destroyed, but my people were decimated by Xellos, Priest of the Beast, and our elite corps of elves, dwarves, and humans were divided, unable to work in tandem. We were managing to stay in the fight, but Shabranigdu's revival extinguished our last hope. The rest... is just as the legends say. Chaos Dragon Gaav fell, then Hellmaster's General... and then Aqualord, who died while sealing the resurrected Shabranigdu in ice. As for exactly how those battles unfolded, no one present survived to recount them. It's between the gods and the demons."

For a while, none of us said anything. Everyone aside from me and Gourry hadn't even touched their food as they listened in silence.

"I've heard that the Kingdom of Dils is now strengthening its army. There have also been mass demidemon spawnings of late. With Hellmaster Fibrizo gone and the demons' forces depleted, there's only one reason they'd behave in such a fashion—to take revenge by reenacting the Incarnation War. We and the elves are in agreement on that front."

"What about the dwarves?" Mileena interjected. It was a natural question. Milgazia had just told us they were our allies in the original Incarnation War, after all.

He responded with a frown. "I haven't contacted them. Their numbers have dwindled since the Incarnation War. I don't want to drag them into this battle, and if I'm honest, I don't think they could help much even if we did enlist their aid. Besides, just because we dragons and elves agree about the cause doesn't mean we're correct. It's entirely possible the demons simply want us to think this way. That's why several groups of elves and dragons, including us, have currently been dispatched to investigate. We were looking into a great demonic presence we detected in Dils."

"And that's when you ran into us?"

Milgazia nodded slightly in response. Then, as if recalling something, he said, "That reminds me. Two years ago, I felt a similar powerful demonic presence..."

Memphys also nodded. "Yes, a very high-ranking one. We felt it too. It had us in something of an uproar, but before we could take action—in less than a day, really—the presence simply vanished. I wonder what that was..." She shook her head slightly and brought her cup of water to her lips.

"Say, Lina," Gourry called, looking my way as the conversation reached a lull. Knowing him, I figured he was gonna ask something stupid and wholly unrelated, but... "Two years ago, huh? You think they're talking about the time we beat that Dark Lord Shabby guy?"

Blurgh! The casual way Gourry dropped that bomb elicited a communal spit take from Milgazia, Memphys, Luke, and Mileena.

“H-Hey! You can’t just spring that on people!” I screeched.

Milgazia continued to choke on his water, and all Memphys could do was stammer “wait, wait, wait” over and over again.

“H-Hang on here... You talkin’ about Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu? There’s no freakin’ way!” Luke declared with a disbelieving stare.

Meanwhile, Mileena put on a brave front, despite a little sweat dripping down her forehead. “I don’t think he’s the type to lie though...”

“Y-Yeah, true... Doubt he’s got the brains for it. So, how the heck’d you beat ‘im?”

“Um, well...” With a little glance over at Milgazia and Memphys, who were both staring at me now too, I hesitantly scratched my head. “I maybe sorta kinda cast a teeny-tiny itty-bitty incomplete Lord of Nightmares spell onto the Sword of Light, which turned out to be Dark Star’s weapon Gorun Nova, teehee!”

Hearing this, Memphys and Milgazia totally froze up. *Guess they know a thing or two about Dark Star and the Lord of Nightmares, huh?* Luke and Mileena looked none the wiser, however. They just frowned a bit.

“I dunno what that all means, but... I’m guessin’ it’s a big deal, yeah?” he grumbled.

“It’s bigger than a big deal!” Memphys cried in response. “What were you people thinking?! Do you even realize that you could have destroyed the entire world?!” Her way of speaking had completely changed, perhaps due to her hysteria.

“Well... I didn’t at the time, no...”

“You can’t just use spells when you don’t understand their consequences! I swear, you humans...”

“Hey, c’mon. That’s all in the past!” I insisted, unwilling to look back.

“You don’t even seem sorry!” Memphys shrieked, even more agitated now. Milgazia, meanwhile, remained frozen beside her.

Hmm... guess I shouldn’t tell ‘em about the time I let the Lord of Nightmares

take over my body to kill Hellmaster! Teehee!

“This has nothing to do with the problem at hand,” Mileena put in dryly to stem Memphys’s rage. “What we need to focus on is what happens from here, right?”

“I-Indeed... Anyway, Mephy, we can chastise her another time. For now...” Milgazia said, finally recovering, though his voice was still shaky.

“U-Understood, Uncle Milgazia.” Memphys nodded reluctantly in response.

Milgazia looked around the group once more. “You mentioned that you defeated General Sherra as well. But if the demons’ goal really is to restart the Incarnation War, that likely hasn’t thwarted their plans. If you’d be willing... I’d like to ask you humans for your help.”

The sound of the rain was the only disturbance to the otherwise silent night. We were staying at the village’s solitary inn. Either the first-floor bar didn’t do much business or the downpour had dampened spirits, because the last of the chatter died down early in the evening. There’d been barely anyone around when we’d gotten dinner too...

Whew... I hung up my cape and sighed deeply before throwing myself onto the bed. *Can’t help but feel like I’ve stepped in it big this time...* I thought to myself, gazing glassy-eyed at the lamp hanging from the ceiling.

Ultimately, we hadn’t been able to turn down Milgazia’s request for aid in his investigation. Luke had grumbled his heart out about working pro bono, but Milgazia explained that should the Incarnation War come to pass again, money would be the last thing on everyone’s mind after the revived Dark Lord wiped out all of creation—including him and Mileena. Thus, feeling his partner’s gaze burning holes in the side of his head, the loudmouth mercenary eventually agreed to go along with it.

That said, we weren’t exactly doing this for free. Milgazia said that they’d give us some weapons developed by the dragons and the elves in exchange for our help. Memphys looked less than thrilled about that part, but Milgazia insisted it would increase our side’s combat potential and she dropped the argument.

In other words, those draconic and elven weapons were as good as ours! I'd started drooling a little over the prospect. Elves were way past humans in terms of magical power and knowledge to begin with, and they'd made these puppies to fight demons! They had to be way better than your average magic sword or mystical blade! We'd snap 'em up for ourselves, and the second this business was all worked out, I'd research 'em thoroughly and then sell 'em for a fortune!

...

Of course, getting to that business-worked-out stage wasn't gonna be easy. We were picking a fight with demons, after all—and not your piddly everyday demons. This whole shebang had big-shot baddies like the General of the Dynast running errands. That meant the real mastermind was most likely Dynast Graushera, one of the Dark Lord's lieutenants. If worst came to worst, we might find ourselves up against all of demonkind.

The only silver lining I could see in all this was that our end goal wasn't explicitly defeating them. We were just trying to find out what they were up to. Granted, that still pretty much guaranteed we'd come to blows.

...

Hrm, thinking about it like that, maybe this *was* a little reckless. But Milgazia was right. If the Dark Lord was on the verge of incarnating, someone had to deal with it. The last time I fought the Dark Lord, all the elements had fallen into just the right place to let me defeat him. There was no guarantee I'd be so lucky a second time. Which meant we had to prevent it from happening if at all possible. I'd have to be pretty selfish to just say, "Gosh, that's nunna my business! Take care, Master Milgazia!"

I gotta do it. But I don't wanna. Such thoughts went around and around in my mind, until... *Huh?*

The sound of dripping water interrupted my mental loop. It wasn't the rain. It was coming from the other side of the wall opposite my window—from the inn's hallway.

A leak in the roof? No... That wouldn't be creeping up on my room, now would it? That's gotta be...

A foreboding chill ran up my spine. I put my cape back on, drew my shortsword, and silently made my way over to the door. I put my ear to it but couldn't hear any footsteps on the other side. Still, the dripping was definitely getting closer. If something was out there, there was a chance it had nothing to do with me... But at the same time, odds were just as likely that it *did*, meaning I needed to take a look-see.

Plip... Plip...

Concentrating on the rhythm of the dripping sound, I gauged my timing and —*Wham!*—threw the door open to leap out into the hall!

Plip... Plip... Droplets of water splashed against the floorboards.

I looked down the long, straight corridor dimly illuminated with orange lamplight. I didn't see anyone, but...

“?!”

Something in the corner of my eye caught my attention. Among the shadows cast by the lamps...

The ceiling?!

I looked up and—*Ghhhk!* Biting back a scream, I took a half-step back. Partly obscured in the darkness, a woman's head hung upside-down from the sooty ceiling. She had long, flowing black hair and an attractive face with glassy, wide-open eyes. Water leaked from her pale, slightly parted lips, drizzling down her hair and onto the floor.

Plip...

From the stub of her neck grew... roots? Blood vessels? Whatever you'd call the protrusions, they twisted and writhed as they clung to the ceiling. Obviously this creature was neither living nor dead. There was only one thing it could be—a demon.



“Li...na... In...verse?” she burbled from her dark heights, as if she were talking underwater.

The moment I heard those words, I began chanting a spell. Obviously, this demon was no friend of mine. So if she knew my name... Yup, we were enemies.

But before I could finish my spell, I felt a surge of malice! In response, I immediately leaped to the side. When I did... *Fwwwsh!* The water dripping from the demon’s mouth became a torrent that tore through where I’d just been standing.

Geh! What a gross attack! As I scowled, I heard something clatter to the ground. When I looked to see what, I saw the top half off the door I’d left open landing on the floor. It had been cut neatly in two on the diagonal.

Sheesh... That torrent’s got more cutting power than most swords.

Of course, knowing that gave me plenty of ways to avoid it! And if I beat this demon in a single strike, I wouldn’t have to worry at all!

“Zellas Bullid!” The ball of light I produced shot straight for the dangling head. Some of its roots quickly detached from the ceiling and grabbed for the incoming ball of light!

Ha! Pathetic! My chosen spell called on the power of Greater Beast. Blocking it was going to take something a lot more powerful than that.

Pop! The light easily blew through the roots that twined around it and hit the head directly! *Splloosh!* It burst, dousing the surrounding area with water. The roots still attached to the ceiling spasmed and... *Blurble...* Immediately, a new head sprouted from them!

Gehhh! What in the world?!

Gazing at me in my shock, she opened her mouth wide and—*Vwum!*—a silver flash of light obliterated the head once more, scattering another splash of water.

“Gourry!”

“She’s pretty, but in a weird way... Friend of yours, Lina?”

Standing there unassumingly was my good ol' blond swordsman pal, holding his unnamed magic sword in one hand. *He'd be looking pretty darn cool... if he hadn't strapped his breastplate on over his pajamas, that is.*

"Can't say I know her, though she seems to know me. Watch out for when she spits water."

"Got it... Uh-oh!"

"Erk!"

In the middle of our banter, we both yelped a little. The demon had regrown her head again... this time, five at once. I knew demons were inhuman, but seeing a swarm of dangling heads all dribbling water and giving you a glassy-eyed stare was seriously unsettling stuff.

"What the— It's got a whole bunch of them now!"

"Guess they were on special! That tells us the heads aren't her weak point, though!" I shouted before moving into a spell.

At the same time, Gourry dashed at the demon. *Fwwwshwwwshwwwsh!* It exhaled torrents of water from its multiple mouths, cutting up the floor and the walls. I kept up my chant while dodging desperately. As for Gourry...

"Hyah!"

Vwoosh! Slash! He dodged and sliced his way through the torrents as he closed in on the demon. Then, with a mighty sweep of his sword, he cleaved all the heads, effectively cutting off their means of attack.

"Lina!" Gourry called, leaping back as he signaled to me.

Nice one, man! I'd just finished my chant, so I fired it off... "Blast Ash!" My target? Behind me!

The black something-or-other the spell produced would destroy anything it hit. At least, that's what it was supposed to do.

Vwip. Yet the spreading darkness coalesced to a point and disappeared... inside the palm of a newly appeared demon.

This one looked human, with masculine proportions, but instead of a head, it

had a winding cluster of horns. I'd sensed its presence and pretended to go for Root-Head to catch the new guy off guard... Too bad he apparently wasn't stupid enough to fall for that trick.

"Why are you playing around, Mianzo? Carry out your orders at once," the horned demon commanded, unfazed by my attack. I didn't know where his voice was coming from given that he had horns where a mouth should be... But hey, dude was a demon. They didn't necessarily need mouths to talk.

"Then... I suppose I'll pull out the stops... Tselzonarg..." Root-Head—or rather, the now headless root ball demon Mianzo—responded.

Hey, wait just a minute! I know what happens when a demon "pulls out the stops"!

But before Gourry or I could react... *Kra-boooooooooosh!* A sudden flash of light burst the inn apart.

"Ugh..." I poked my head out from behind the wood and stone rubble that had landed around me. The rain was falling hard.

Where'd they go?! I quickly surveyed my surroundings and spotted them. Both demons were standing in the downpour. Mianzo had taken a form like a tangle of ivy growing out of the ground with a woman's head still dangling upside-down from the cluster's rough midpoint. They weren't looking (if you could call it that) at me. They were squaring off with...

"What... What is a dragon doing here?!" Tselzonarg clearly sounded shaken.

"Do I need to explain?" Milgazia said boldly. "Did you really think we'd let your demonic schemes go unchecked?"

"Then... I will have to get serious," Mianzo said in her muffled voice.

Following that... *Vrrrm!* Mianzo's body rippled with a sound like the thrumming of insect wings. In that same moment, countless small lights flashed around Milgazia. A teleporting attack? No! A direct attack from the astral plane?! Even a dragon wouldn't survive—

"That won't work." Contrary to my worst fears, Milgazia simply responded

with a light wave of his hand.

Yeah, that's what I said. He just waved his hand. That was all he did. Yet with that gesture alone...

"Wh... What?!" Mianzo quavered slightly and let out a moan of surprise.

This was... They were duking it out purely on the astral plane, leaving me to spectate?! A deathmatch for their very souls was taking place on a level humans couldn't comprehend... which, to be honest, didn't exactly make for thrilling viewership.

"Even if you are a dragon, to completely shrug that off...!" Tselzonarg hissed.

"We don't remain the same forever, you know. Living creatures, unlike your lot, have the power to grow in the face of changing circumstances. Once we know what you can do, it's inevitable that we'll work out ways to guard against it. That's all."

"I see. In that case..." Tselzonarg's head-horns creaked to life and...

Wreeeeeeek! With an ear-splitting sound, they elongated in a flash, streaking toward Milgazia! Mianzo's body also vibrated again!

Simultaneous attacks from the astral and physical planes?!

Still... it seemed the demons had forgotten that Milgazia wasn't their only opponent. *Fwash!*

"Geh!" A streak of light tore through the darkness, frying off Tselzonarg's extended horns.

"Wh-What?!" he cried as he beheld Memphys before him in her strange white armor. "Impossible! An elf? This can't be..."

Paying Tselzonarg's shock no heed, Memphys lowered her raised left hand, and with her right, removed a piece of her left tasset. Getting a good look at it, it was a bit like an oddly shaped sword.

"Dis Shield! Mana Conversion!" She held it at her hip and... "Zenaph Slade!" In the motion of a quick-draw, she swung it through the air.

"Gaaah!" Instantaneously, Tselzonarg's scream resounded.

The shockwave of light had disappeared, then popped *out of his back*. As Tselzonarg collapsed, his body crumbling to ash, Mianzo groaned with the realization that she was now at a disadvantage.

“Chaotic Disintegrate!” Milgazia wasted no time unleashing a torrent of light upon her.

“...!” Mianzo was consumed by the light with a voiceless scream. When the light faded... there was nothing left of her.

“H-Holy cow...” I turned back when I heard that whisper behind me to see Gourry, Luke, and Mileena all standing there dumbly. They must have joined us at some point. I was pretty sure Luke was the one who’d commented. In response...

“Hey, you guys!” I shouted. “What are you just sitting around for? Why didn’t you help?!”

“You were just sittin’ there too, y’know!” Luke accused.

“Ah!” I didn’t have a comeback for that! “W-Well, it all just happened so quickly...”

“Same here,” Gourry said.

“That was impressive, though. They destroyed two demons so effortlessly,” Mileena breathed.

“No... Only one demon,” Milgazia corrected. “The rooty one escaped before I could finish her. Though we did injure her badly.”

“That’s all right, Uncle. If she comes back, we’ll just destroy her then,” Memphys declared, walking up to us as she returned the sword-or-whatever to her hip. “Still, what in the world were they doing here?”

“We can discuss the details later. For now, we need to get outta here,” I said, interrupting her.

She turned a scolding glance my way. “Why? Are you afraid of demons?”

“Yeah, right. I’m just saying things are gonna get really annoying if we stick around. Did you forget we’re in the middle of a village?”

“Ah...” everyone said in the same breath.

“Whew... I don’t think anyone’ll track us down here,” I said, sounding like a common criminal as I stopped in the forest a good ways from the village. It would give us shelter from the rain, too, for all that it was dying down by now.

“But... are you sure we should’ve just run like that? Doesn’t it just make us look guilty? We wrote our names in the inn’s logbook and everything,” Gourry pointed out.

“No need to worry about that,” Memphys pronounced as she fixed her wet hair. “I didn’t write my real name.”

Hang on. You little bitch!

“Regardless, it’s probably for the best we avoided an investigation there,” said Mileena. “Even if we insisted that demons destroyed the inn, we don’t have any proof and there’s no guarantee the authorities would believe us. Someone might have witnessed the fight, but we can’t count on that. And given that we have a dragon and an elf with us... if the authorities were particularly prejudiced, they might leap to the conclusion that *they’re* the ones who destroyed the inn.”

Girl had a point. In fact, the aftershocks of Milgazia’s and Memphys’s attacks against the demons *had* blown in a few houses nearby...

“I’d say Mileena’s right. Gettin’ chewed out for somethin’ demons did would be a waste of time we can’t afford.” Luke, Mileena’s perpetual yes-man, nodded in fervent agreement.

“Pardon, but I feel that I should clear up a misunderstanding,” Milgazia said, stone-faced. “It wasn’t the demons who destroyed the inn. It was Mephy.”

The group remained silent for a time. Eventually, I alone dared to ask... “Um, you’re joking, right? Right?”

“No, I’m not. Isn’t that clear from my expression?”

Yeah, nope! You’re stoic even when you’re making those weird jokes of yours, old man!

...Wait...

“Whaaat?! You’re saying...”

“I saw that you were fighting demons and was trying to help you, but the inn proved far less sturdy than I expected. The whole place came down. I don’t see why it’s a problem, though. It’s not as if anyone inside died,” Memphys explained without a shred of regret.

Says the person who didn’t sign her real name in the logbook... Boy, what a piece of work!

“Of course, none of that really matters. The real question is why those demons attacked you.” She changed the subject from a statement that would get her a knife to the kidney if the innkeeper overheard her.

I mean, I know grilling her over that little rampage won’t get us anywhere now, but damn...

“Indeed. Their motives remain unknown.”

Wuh? Milgazia was agreeing with her! Hmm... maybe living spaces—or rather, property damage—just don’t mean as much to dragons and elves?

“Still, if you ask me, blowing up that inn was pretty uncool...” Gourry threw in casually.

Twitch. Milgazia and Memphys both froze up for a moment.

“Well... as they say, all things with form eventually fall.”

“Y-Yes... In the bigger picture, our priority really should be evaluating our current circumstances and anticipating what’s to come.”

Okay, scratch that. They just don’t like to face consequences!

“Well, putting aside the matter of the inn’s destruction and your personal moralities...” Mileena began. At this, the dragon and the elf twitched again, but she ignored them. “First things first, why were we attacked? It’s well within the realm of possibility that the demons could strike again even as we stand here, and ascertaining what they’re after could aid us in dealing with them in the future.”

“I’m not sure if this helps or not... but the demons recognized me and knew my name,” I confessed.

Gourry scratched at his head. “Then maybe this was... revenge? I mean, we just beat Sherra. She was a pretty high-ranking demon. Maybe they’re getting us back for that.”

Huh... So he can think straight from time to time.

“That seems highly unlikely. It’s difficult to imagine demons being motivated by sentimental emotions like a desire for vengeance,” Milgazia said.

“Yeah, he’s right. And there’s no way they’d send two small fry for a job that big. I mean, we killed the freakin’ General of the Dynast. If they really wanted revenge, you’d think they’d muster up a little more oomph,” I agreed.

“Then why *did* they attack us?” Gourry asked.

“Well, that’s what we’re trying to figure out. Ah. Speaking of which, the second demon that appeared—the one Memphys beat—told the first to ‘carry out her orders at once.’”

“You mean... killin’ you?” Luke asked.

I shook my head. “The vibe I got was more like, ‘Stop wasting your time on this trivial stuff.’”

“You’re saying the demons were there for a different reason, and one of them simply happened to know your name?” Mileena asked.

“I’m saying it’s not impossible. I didn’t recognize either demon, but maybe they were part of the gang looking for us during the Gyria City incident and we just never crossed paths? That would explain how they knew my face and name.”

“It’s also entirely possible that they *were* after you, and they fled in fear when they saw *us*,” Memphys boasted. “They thought they could easily stamp out a group of mere humans or they had other allies lying in wait, but then you proved more powerful than expected—that is to say, you had Uncle Milgazia and me on your side—and they fled in terror. That’s just as plausible, isn’t it?”

I couldn’t disagree, even if the way she phrased it kinda pissed me off. But all

that aside...

“A-Anyway, uh, I kinda doubt they’ll come after me again—”

“Indeed. I truly doubt the demons see you as a high priority,” Memphys said, preening.

This little bitch...

“...True. Well, we don’t have much to go on, and stewing over it won’t do us much good...” I tried to sound friendly despite the way the corner of my mouth was twitching. “So let’s move on to our next topic: who’s to blame for blowing up the inn?”

“Wait! Why is that the next topic?!”

“Why *wouldn’t* it be? The rest of us wrote our names in the logbook. I don’t want to see mine on a wanted poster. In my opinion, the best way to resolve this would be to hand over a certain psychopathic elf to the authorities, tell them she’s the real culprit, and have her take the heat. Don’t you agree?”

Memphys recoiled for a moment at my suggestion, then glared fiercely back at me. “I believe justice would be better served if the thoughtless person who picked a fight with demons inside the inn took the heat!”

“Ohhh... Then it seems we have a difference of opinion!”

“It does appear that way... Of course, it’s a relief, in a way, to know that my mind works differently than that of someone so shallow.”

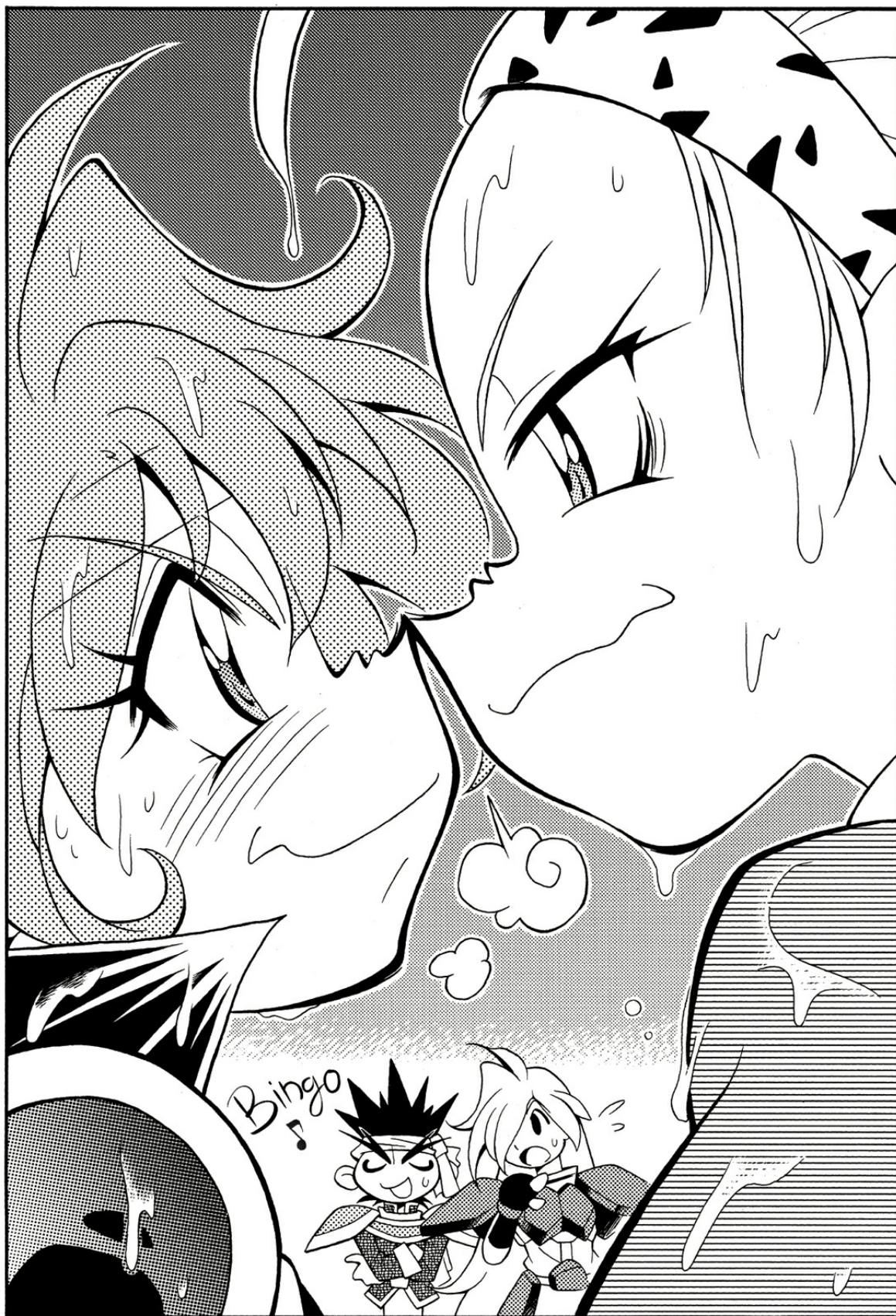
“Well, well. You have quite a way with words... Heeheehee...”

“It sounds to me like we have a looooot to discuss... Heeheehee...”

Sparks flew between us as we glared at each other. Memphys was a little taller than me, so she had the advantage.

“Hey, I just realized something...” Gourry said to Luke as they gazed at us from the side. “Those two don’t really like each other, do they?”

“Bingo,” Luke responded wearily.



“What’s that?” Gourry muttered all of a sudden as he looked down the main road into the distance.

It was around noon the day after I’d managed to smooth things over by using my patented fast-talking skills to pin the blame for Memphys’s destruction of the inn on wild demidemons. Our first stop was going to be the elf village to beef up our gear, but we had to go by Gyria to get there. Essentially, we were doubling back the way we’d come.

In other words, Gourry was looking toward a town we’d passed through two days ago.

“What’s what?” I asked.

“It looks like... smoke,” he replied.

Luke, Mileena, and I all shared a glance. We knew the big lug had exceptional eyesight.

“Smoke? I don’t see it myself...”

“Neither do I. Surely the human is just seeing— Ah! Wait!”

The four of us sped off, leaving Milgazia and Memphys in the dust.

“Are you certain about this?” Milgazia called as he ran to catch up.

“Positive!” I responded immediately. “Unlike his brains, his eyes work real good!”

“Hey... Lina...”

“I see. In that case,” Milgazia said, cutting off Gourry’s protest, “this is no time for mere running.”

“Huh?”

“Rola Za Road,” the dragon elder whispered, and then...

Whum! The scenery started streaking past me as I felt myself being dragged along.

“Huh?” someone said in confusion, and it wasn’t just me. We were all sailing down the road together at incredible speed—even though our legs weren’t

actually moving.

“No need to be so stunned. It’s simply one of Uncle Milgazia’s spells,” Memphys announced proudly, her arms crossed.

I looked down and saw that my feet were indeed planted firmly on the ground. Yet the entire group kept moving forward.

No way... Was he entreating earth spirits, bephemoths, to move us along via the ground under our feet?! No, if that were the case, surely I would’ve felt the wind... Or was he interfering with the wind at the same time? If he was, that was some pretty damned high-level magic! After all, he was forcing the normally unshakable earth to carry us swiftly along without so much as a bump. I didn’t see any sign of a wind barrier either, which meant he was making the wind blow around us in time with the speed and direction of the moving ground.

I’d known, academically speaking, that draconic magic was way beyond what humans could do, but it had never really sunk in until just now. To think that dragons could do something like this so easily, without even a chant, just for transportation...

Wait a minute...

“Master Milgazia, might I ask how you came to learn this spell? Why would a dragon need magic for swift terrestrial travel?” I inquired. “You guys can usually just fly...”

Milgazia responded airily, “Oh, it’s because I assumed human form for my journey with Mephy. The going was quite slow, so I worked out this spell.”

You... You just worked it out? Like it was a no-brainer? Dragons sure are something, huh? Even though most of the stories I’d heard involved them getting owned by someone or other...

“There is smoke, isn’t there?” Milgazia whispered not long after we set off.

We were close enough now that we could all see it. Gourry had been right—there were multiple streaks of smoke rising into the sky over our destination. And the sight rapidly grew closer until...

“There!” someone shouted as we crested a low hill.

At the bottom of it stood a small town near a large forest. The place was smothered in chaos and fire. Even from this distance, we could see villagers fleeing in terror—fleeing from a horde of lesser demons wreaking havoc! There seemed to be people putting up a good fight, but there were too damned many of the bastards and more seemed to be pouring out of the forest every minute.

“Demidemons, eh?” Memphys said, stepping forward as she appraised the situation. *Vwum!* With the hum of a collapsing vacuum, white wings sprouted from her back. Rather, the back plates of her strange armor abruptly changed shape, becoming a pair of long, skinny wings. “I’ll go on ahead, Uncle.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” Milgazia said approvingly.

She responded with a wink, then lightly touched off the ground. A moment later—*Nroom!* With another piercing sound, she streaked through the air, leaving a vapor trail in her wake!

We were already moving pretty fast with the aid of Milgazia’s swift-travel spell, but she easily outstripped us as she made a beeline for the village. All we could see was her silhouette getting smaller, and smaller, and... bigger?

She was definitely still getting farther away, but at the same time, her white armor was shifting and expanding. It increased in size until it swallowed up her whole body.

“No way...” I whispered, stupefied.

The elf was now a winged white giant as she landed in the midst of the demidemon horde.

Each beam of white light she fired raked across the ground. The lesser demons caught by them directly were turned to dust, while those they just missed were blasted away along with the surrounding greenery.

Not that anyone asked me, but is it okay for an elf to trash a forest like this...?

I was pretty sure I’d heard that her people lived in harmony with nature and considered environmental destruction taboo. Maybe it was Memphys’s lack of

respect for said taboo that had led her to pair up with Milgazia and come out on this mission...

Anyway, by the time we arrived on the scene, she'd already scattered most of the demons. Some of them had reached the town, though, and she wasn't about to blow away buildings to get to them.

Okay! Time to show off what we can do too! We'd clear out the rest of the horde, then hit the mayor up for some sweet coin as a reward!

Milgazia dismissed his travel spell and we all ran into town. A few demons noticed us coming and shot nasty glares our way. But a lesser demon horde without a leader was unwashed rabble compared to us! They were about to get wrecked! I recited a spell under my breath, but...

"Zellas Phalanx."

Roarrrrrrumble! Long before I could finish my chant, a dozen balls of light conjured by Milgazia streaked toward the lesser demons, homing in on them and pulverizing them upon impact.

Um...

I found myself calling off my own spell in favor of equally useful actions like "standing" and "staring." Gourry, Luke, and Mileena looked similarly deflated. Milgazia's little number looked like a multi-target Zellas Bullid, but damn... Way to just drop that, dude.

"What's wrong? There are still more in town. Let's go."

"Uh..."

"Oh... r-right..."

"Yeah, let's go..."

"Good idea..."

At Milgazia's urging, the four of us nodded aimlessly and continued on into town.

"I think that's the last of them, Uncle."

We—well, mostly Milgazia—had just finished polishing off the straggling demons in the village when I heard a voice behind us. I turned to see Memphys, now returned to normal from her white giant form.

“And the ones in the forest?” Milgazia asked.

“I finished them already, naturally,” she responded, then turned around to face us. “And I can see you *really* made a difference here.”

Grr...

Candidly speaking, there wasn't much humans could do compared to Milgazia's casting speed and power. Memphys would have known that too. She was just lording her (correct) assumption that we hadn't done much over us. I'd have to counter with a petty insult of my own!

I gave her my brightest smile and said, “Actually, we barely did anything. Milgazia beat most of the demons in town, and *your armor* cleared up the rest. Golly gee, *that armor* really is something!”

A vein bulged in Memphys's temple. “Surely you're not suggesting that the armor is more impressive than I am.”

“Perish the thought! Surely it's but your own insecurities about your reliance on it that makes you think so.”

“Heeheehee... You have a way with words as well, I see.”

“Nothing compared to a certain psychopathic elf I know. Heeheehee...”

Eyes glinting with ferocity and lips curled into smiles, Memphys and I launched into our umpteenth glaring contest since we'd met.

“But seriously, what *is* that armor?” Gourry asked, seemingly oblivious to the friction between us.

Memphys turned to him and puffed out her chest. “It's a weapon codeveloped by elves and dragons, as is what Uncle Milgazia is wearing. He's wearing Ritual Armor, which amplifies his ability to influence the astral plane. Your average pure demon can't hold a candle to him wearing it. Mine is semi-living armor that lets me control my connection to the astral plane to a degree, and it changes shape at will. It's called Zenafa Armor.”

“Oh? So it really is the armor that does it... all...” I was letting the explanation go in one ear and out the other while concocting my next burn, but suddenly I was seized by a chill. *Control her connection to the astral plane... Semi-living armor... Zenafa... Could it be?!*

I found myself scurrying away from Memphys, an accusing finger leveled at her. “Zanaffar?! Y-You mean *the magic beast Zanaffar*?!”

The anti-magic armor Zanaffar had been reproduced based on a manuscript of the Claire Bible, a record of otherworldly magical knowledge. A Zanaffar had destroyed the Magic City of Sairaag over a hundred years ago... and much more recently, nearly killed me and Gourry and our friends before we stopped it. Its spirit was cut off from astral influence, and it was capable of shooting laser breath like that of gold dragons. But... the Zanaffar that we knew only *looked* like armor at first. In time, it would overtake its wearer, eventually transforming them into a giant, rampaging magical beast.

Hang on... does that mean...

“I do believe that’s what humans call it, but you really should know that ‘Zenafa’ is a chaos word that roughly translates to ‘governing magic.’”

“Should I?! Wh-Why do you even have that thing?!”

“We haven’t been sitting idle since the Incarnation War,” Milgazia said. “That conflict taught us how powerless we were against a seriously engaged demon race when the dragons we’d believed would be our main fighting force were effortlessly torn apart—not even by one of the Dark Lord’s lieutenants, but by one of their Priests. Ever since then, dragons and elves have been working together to develop various weapons in preparation for when the demons attacked again. Lina Inverse, I guided you to the Claire Bible once. Why do you think I knew the way?”

“Ah!”

Of course. The fact that Milgazia knew the way to the Claire Bible was a sign that he’d visited it several times himself. He’d used its otherworldly expertise to research armaments effective against demons. If he was drawing on the Claire Bible, then it was natural that he’d come upon the same solution that whoever was creating its manuscripts had: Zanaffar.

“Then... why didn’t you resist when Xellos came by with us?”

“The weapons are being made in the elves’ village. It would have been suicide to face him unprepared.”

“I... I see. That would explain it. But wait...” I turned my gaze to Memphys once more. “So that’s not gonna eat her and make her go berserk, right?” I asked timidly.

She just scowled at me. “What nonsense. Of course not! Ah, but I suppose humans with their piddling magical abilities wouldn’t be able to properly control the Zenafa. Or perhaps the one that ran amok in the human world was the result of you failing to fully comprehend the Claire Bible’s wisdom and creating a faulty version using inferior techniques, hmm?”

“So... There’s no need to worry? You’re not secretly being controlled? Your horrible personality isn’t the result of the armor?!”

“I find that last question quite offensive, but I can assure you there’s no need to worry. Of course, this was designed for an elf wearer, so don’t expect me to lend it to you humans. Besides, I wouldn’t want my Zenafa to be infected by your horrible personality!”

“Ohhh... Look at you, stealing my insults.”

“Hardly. I’m simply applying them where they best belong. Heeheehee...”

“Heeheehee...”

“Another staredown...” Luke whispered, sounding exhausted.

I was reminded that all the Claire Bible talk was over his and Mileena’s heads, and judging by their lack of questions, they’d accepted that. Or maybe they saw this as one of those “ignorance is bliss” situations.

But just as Memphys was about to run her mouth some more...

“It’s you!” came a familiar voice from a short distance away.

“Huh?” I looked and saw a man heading our way. He looked as familiar as he sounded. “You’re...”

“Thank goodness... I’ve been looking everywhere!”

“Gatekeeper No. 1!” I shouted.

And with that, the gate guard we’d met in Gyria City—yeah, okay, so I still couldn’t remember his name—faceplanted right then and there.

2: Upon Return to the City, a Glimpse of Demons

“So... what’s going on here?” I asked once we’d made it to a fairly quiet part of town. I would’ve preferred to do all the lengthy discussing over a good meal, but the city was still recovering from the attack and the citizens were scared enough as it was without us dishing on demonic plots within earshot.

“Hahh... Well, the truth is...” Gatekeeper No—er, I mean Maias—began hesitantly, glancing at Milgazia and Memphys.

Obviously we’d played the get-to-know-each-other game on the way. To avoid complicating matters, I’d simply introduced Milgazia and Memphys as “trustworthy companions,” and Maias as “just some gatekeeper.” When he’d inevitably objected to that, I’d added that we met him in Gyria. Even so, Maias’s reluctance to spill the beans was understandable. He barely knew the four of us—much less Milgazia and Memphys, who were total strangers to him.

“I’m not entirely sure where to start,” he said at last. “It seems like things might not be as over as we thought.”

“Huh?”

“After you guys left, wild demons started showing up in the city...”

Demidemons?! In the city?! The other six of us shared a glance.

“So... I came after you in hopes you could help us out again,” Maias continued.

“Seriously, why doncha just do it your— Gck!”

“Could you tell us more?” Mileena asked, clamping a hand over Luke’s mouth mid-gripe.

“The night you left, those... I think you called them lesser demons. They suddenly started appearing here and there...”

“‘Here and there’? So we’re talking *multiple* demons?” I asked.

He nodded. “Only one at a time, but they’d appear in multiple locations

simultaneously. I'd never even seen one before..." The color drained from Maias's face as he seemed to relive the encounter in his mind.

I couldn't blame the guy. Lesser and brass demons were barely a step up from cannon fodder to us, but they were a serious threat to your average swordsman or sorcerer. Their tough hides and magical resistance allowed them to shrug off most weapons and standard attack spells. Facing one would be like something out of a nightmare for Maias, who likely didn't have much experience in live combat to start with.

"We were able to defeat them all thanks to the combined efforts of the guards and the mercenaries, but the following day, Sir Jade came to visit..."

"Jade?" Milgazia inquired.

"A knight we met during the Gyria brouhaha," I said, trying to keep it simple.

"Sir Jade told us... that the castle's been sealed off."

"Huh?" For a second I just frowned, trying to wrap my head around what he'd said. "You mean... they wouldn't let him in?"

"Not exactly. It's not just Sir Jade... The castle's been sealed off to everyone. I haven't seen it myself, but he said that the gate had been closed since the prior evening, and there was no way to find out what was happening inside."

"What in the world? You mean there were demons in town and the castle never sent anyone?!"

"Yes... apparently," he responded, sounding pained.

I was stunned into silence—understandably, I'd like to think. Normally, dispatching royal soldiers would be the first response to a demonic attack on the city. But if the castle never sent backup and the gate remained closed the next day... There were two possibilities I could conceive of. Either the king was a bit of a—okay, a *total* coward—or something even worse was going down inside the castle walls.

"Sir Jade said that he suspected foul doings in the castle. He wanted to investigate for himself, but given the clearly extraordinary circumstances at play, he asked me to recall you. Of course, he said he'd gladly reward you for

your aid...”

Without a word, I cast a glance at Milgazia and Memphys. The appearance of demidemons in Gyria so soon after the defeat of Dynast’s General, the sealed-off castle... I was certain this all had to be connected to the demons’ plan somehow, and my dragon and elf companions signaled their agreement.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go to Gyria City.”

And so, we returned to the capital of the Kingdom of Dils. It was quiet—but not a tranquil kind of quiet. It was the quiet of persistent dread.

We hadn’t even been gone ten days, and when we’d left, the city was filled with merchants and children at play, signaling that the average townspeople’s life hadn’t been affected by the drama in the castle. But now... the streets were practically deserted. Anyone who *was* out and about moved at a brisk, fearful pace. It was like a totally different city.

It had been several days since Maias came to find us, and we hadn’t run into any trouble on the way into town. Normally there would’ve been an inspection for anyone coming and going from the capital, but there was nary a soldier to be seen at the gate when we arrived.

Dang. Chain of command’s broken down that bad, huh?

“Now, should we go to see Sir Jade first?” Maias offered. Naturally, there were no objections. There wasn’t much else we *could* do until we learned what was afoot.

Jade’s family home had been destroyed amidst the last Gyrian crisis. After all that settled down and he received his reinstatement, the kingdom had offered him a vacant estate. It wasn’t a great look to have a vagrant knight, after all. But...

“I don’t think he’s here,” Mileena said before we even touched the front door.

“Huh? How come?” Maias asked as he reached for it.

“The cobwebs,” she responded.

Oh, right... There was indeed a small spiderweb between the knocker and the

door. In fact, there were quite a few of them nestled here and there among its intricate carvings.



A spider could weave a web overnight, but this many spiders with this many webs? Unlikely. Their presence suggested Jade hadn't been around for several days.

"Yeah, he ain't been back for a while," Luke agreed.

"True. And there's no sign of anyone inside," Gourry chimed in.

"Then he's somewhere in the city... Or in the castle," Maias suggested.

"Maybe," I said gravely.

Jade's last known communication was that he was going back to the castle to investigate. The logical conclusion, then, was that he'd run into trouble there. Unfortunately, when you combined "something hinky's going on inside the castle" with "Jade never came back," well... it led to some pretty unpleasant speculation.

"Anyway, first things first," I continued, "we need intel. Like the skinny on what's been going on around here since we've been gone. Anywhere we can find that out, Maias?"

"Well, there's a place we guards frequent..." he replied absently. Then he whispered to no one in particular, "Do you think Sir Jade is all right?"

Not a one of us responded.

"I got no clue what's goin' on," the man spat after downing his vodka.

We were in a bar-slash-restaurant in a corner of the city. It looked respectable enough, given the decor—the kind of place you might call "warm and homey"—yet it was hosting a rather seedy clientele at a relatively early hour. Maias had approached one of said seedy patrons, who, since he was dressed like a soldier, I pegged for a comrade of his. Based on the guy's drunkenly glazed eyes and unkempt beard, however, let's call him Seedy Patron No. 1.

"If I had any idea, I wouldn't be here drinkin' first thing, would I? Can't ya get that through your head, Master Maias?" he went on.

"I... I understand, but... I had business that called me outside of the city the day after the first attack, so I don't know what's been happening here in my

absence,” Maias said, refilling his glass.

The man shot him a withering glance. “Ohhh? You been outta town, eh? Ain’t you the lucky one. Spared all the shit we hadda go through... Y’know what we hadda go through? Do ya?” The man leaned in, glaring.

Maias shrunk back. And then... *Wham!*

“How the hell would we?!” I cried as I slammed an empty wooden tankard down on the man’s head. The audible crack it produced brought silence to the restaurant.

“Hey!”

“Listen to you! Bitching, bitching, bitching! Everybody feel sorry for the damned coward day-drinking himself out of reality, boo-hoo! How could we know what you’ve been through *when you won’t freaking tell us?! If you want us to know, then start talking!*”

“Who the hell are you?!” he demanded.

“Never you mind! Just get to it already!”

“Nuh-uh! You crack me on the noggin an’ I’m supposed to bow and scrape? ‘Yes ma’am, whatever you say, ma’am’? Now I ain’t gonna tell nobody nothin’!”

“Will too!”

“Will not!”

Sparks flew between me and the man.

“Well, if you absolutely refuse to tell us...”

“And I *do!*” he declared.

I pointed at Milgazia. “Then I’ll make you listen to one of his jokes!”

“Wh-What is the meaning of this, human girl?” the dragon elder objected. I ignored him!

“Eh? What’s the big deal? Who cares ’bout some joke?” the man scoffed.

“Heh... You’ll find out soon enough! Master Milgazia, tell this man the funniest joke you know!”

“T-To what end, precisely?”

“Just do it!” I commanded.

“Ah, very well. Some time ago, while Mephy and I were traveling...” Milgazia began hesitantly.

A deathly quiet hung over the bar... wrought by Milgazia’s joke.

Ah, crud... Stewing in the silence, I became keenly aware of my error. That is, getting Milgazia to tell a joke meant that I had to sit through it too! I hadn’t realized it until it was too late.

There are jokes in this world so lousy—lousy actually isn’t the half of it, but you get the idea—that your mind rebels against committing them to memory. I’d never thought dragons were great comedians... but never did I think they could bomb *this* bad.

Milgazia and Gourry seemed to be the only two unfazed by the attack. Luke and Maias had collapsed, and though Mileena was trying to act unaffected, I could see her forehead dripping with sweat and her eyes wandering in a daze. Even Memphys was laid out on the table, twitching spasmodically. The rest of the diners, having overheard the joke, were suffering similarly.

“What is the meaning of this, humans?” Milgazia asked again, stone-faced.

But there was nobody left with the strength to answer him— Wait! Just then, Memphys shakily picked herself up and said, “You... Your jokes are... just so funny, Uncle...”

Hang on one damned minute! She thought that lousy gag was funny?! I’d assumed her twitching was from agony, but she was really busting a gut?! Man, I knew I didn’t get dragon humor at all... but I apparently didn’t get elf humor either.

“F-Forgive me... I was wrong,” groaned Maias’s guard pal.

“Yeah... sorry. I was wrong too,” I replied, offering a rare apology of my own.

“Again, if I may ask, what is the meaning of this?” Milgazia pressed.

But just like before, I couldn’t muster the strength to answer. I had to wonder

if, used as a spiritual attack, his jokes might actually be enough to take out your average pure demon.

“I’ll come clean if you’ll spare me another one of those. But... I really don’t know much,” the man began, mustering up what remained of his willpower. “Ever since that day, the demons have kept coming. Not every night, but most of ’em. Sometimes it’s only one, sometimes it’s five or six scattered about town, sometimes it’s that many all in the same place. And the castle gate’s been shut tight all the while.”

He sighed, then continued, “We’re not getting orders, let alone reinforcements. I don’t know if they’re afraid of the demons or if there’s something else going on... All I know is that we’re exhausted. People have started fleeing the city. Some of our fellow guardsmen have run off too. Not that I blame the bastards. Who’s to say I won’t end up face-to-face with a demon on my patrol this very night? I’d be long gone myself if I had anyplace to go... But ah, now I really am just bitching. That’s all that I know, at any rate.”

Wow. He really didn’t know much, did he?

“Has there been, er, any talk about why the castle’s gate has been kept shut?” I asked.

“There’s been talk, sure. Some say the king’s turned coward and holed himself up, some say he was assassinated and they’ve locked the place down to cover it up. Some say that mercenary woman they outed as a spy is still alive and gave the order. Some even say demons have already raided the castle and no one’s alive to open things back up,” he rattled off.

I quietly made eye contact with the rest of the group. Everything except for those first two possibilities he’d listed was... Well, the king dying or turning coward wasn’t exactly a *good* thing, but it would at least be a domestic problem. Meanwhile, if Sherra really had survived or demons had killed everyone in the castle, that went beyond just “wow, this kingdom’s got problems.”

“But no word about what’s really going on in there? Surely there are at least merchants still coming and going,” I inquired.

“Not even merchants are allowed in or out. And it’s not like anyone’s willing

to climb the walls to investigate... Well, I guess someone might be, but since I haven't heard of anyone trying, that means either no one's done it... or they've done it and haven't come back."

Hmm... I'm thinking we've squeezed enough blood from this stone.

"Thank you. That was helpful," I said.

"Oh, right. This might be overstepping, but lemme tell you one more thing," the man said as we stood up to leave. "All the mercenary recruitment lately means the city's full of hotheads, so the demons aren't the only dangers out there. Especially with the castle locked up tight and the guards... well, in the condition we're in." He downed another cup of booze with a self-recriminating air. "Be careful out there."

"I'm sure we'll be fine," Memphys responded offhandedly. "If anyone accosts us, I'll give them what for."

"Please don't," our party demanded in unison.

We already knew she was all too happy to fire off a blast of light from her Zanaffar—Zenafa, rather—armor inside a building to win a fight. Her idea of giving someone "what for" could easily involve burning Gyria City to the ground before the demons' plan even got rolling.

"Anyway, we appreciate the heads-up. Now let's head to Maias's and get to planning," I said as I stood up again, but then stopped.

Maias was still collapsed on the table. Guess he still hadn't recovered from Milgazia's joke...

"My, my, my! Isn't this tiny! How can you humans *live* in such horrid little places?" Memphys proclaimed as we arrived at Maias's place.

It was an apartment on the second floor of a relatively new building in a residential district. Maias had told us before that he'd moved to Gyria City to become a soldier, and this was probably the best housing he could afford on his salary.

"Well... it is a bachelor apartment, after all," he said.

But Memphys kept looking around the room, either not hearing him or actively ignoring him. “Where’s the warmth? It’s truly suffocating. Plastered walls and floors, just like that human inn we stayed in last... Only the tiniest of windows for outside air. Not a single spot of greenery.”

She was being absolutely absurd. For starters, any apartment would feel tiny with seven people crammed in it.

“You can whine about it later to someone who cares,” I said. “We’ve got planning to do.”

Memphys scowled, but before she could object...

“I reckon the quickest option is sneakin’ straight into the castle, yeah? Though I guess that’s kinda reckless...” Luke put in.

Milgazia nodded in agreement. “Very true. Our conversation with that bar patron suggested that asking around won’t yield much. We wouldn’t be able to confirm the veracity of any information we did collect until we have a better idea of what’s happening inside the castle... And we don’t have the time to wait around for someone to come out and tell us. Thus, we have no choice but to enter ourselves.”

All present nodded in agreement.

After getting the lowdown at the bar-slash-eatery, we’d decided we would do a little recon of the castle. Our method was simple: get up close, then have everyone except for Gourry and Maias use a Levitation spell to have a peek at what lay beyond the ramparts. There was nothing but empty lawn between the various buildings of the castle complex. I mean, I was glad not to find corpses littering the courtyard or anything, but it was still strange for there to be no sign of people whatsoever. There’d normally be soldiers at training or, failing that, at least a few people milling about... But for as long as we watched, we didn’t see a soul.

We’d then landed, regrouped at Maias’s place, and decided that there was no way to know more until we infiltrated the castle proper.

“No time to waste, then. We go tonight. Any objections?” I asked.

Everyone nodded in agreement. Except...

“Um,” Maias spoke up hesitantly. “Am I... coming with you?”

No one said anything. We all knew he’d just slow us down, but none of us wanted to say it.

“We need a home base!” I declared abruptly. “If we run into trouble at the castle or we get separated and have to split, it’s best to have this be our meeting spot. We need you to stay here and hold down the fort!”

“Oh... Of course!” he responded, his face lighting up.

Huh, okay... Guess he didn’t really wanna go to the castle anyway.

“I, Maias, shall keep our home base secure!” he pronounced.

Memphys smiled brightly. “Oh, good. That really is for the best. You’d just slow us down anyway.”

Ah... The bitch went and said it. I wasn’t sure if she realized it or not, but Memphys was the only one smiling in the suddenly frosty room.



The moon was but a sliver, leaving mostly starlight to illuminate the city—a perfect night for an aerial infiltration.

“I see light,” Milgazia whispered as he flew alongside us, keeping pace with our Levitation spells.

And indeed, faint light could be seen streaming from the windows of our destination up ahead—the castle complex surrounded by its vast lawns. Whether it was lamplight or magical light, I couldn’t tell. But either way...

“That means someone must be inside. No guarantee they’re human, though,” I whispered back.

Memphys caught up to me at that moment. “Doomsaying won’t restore your dignity, you know.”

“Shut up,” I snapped back. I knew perfectly well that I didn’t look dignified at the moment—not with Gourry riding on my back.

As you’ve probably surmised, he was the only person in our group who couldn’t fly on his own. That meant *someone* had to carry him... And the moment the subject had come up, all eyes had fallen on me. I was thus currently employing an amplified Levitation to get us both into the castle airborne.

“Heh heh heh... Look at you two, gettin’ all close,” Luke teased. “Too bad you’re not as cozy as me and Mileena. Ain’t that right... babe?” He trailed off as he looked to the silver-haired sorceress only to be met with a wall of indifference.

Hmm... his passion falls on deaf ears, as usual.

“By the way, Lina...”

“Bwuh?! H-Hey, Gourry, don’t talk into my ear like that!”

“Oh, sorry. But what building do we start with?”

“Huh? We talked about this, man. The western tower.”

The castle complex consisted of a central keep and a tower stationed at each of the cardinal directions around it. The four towers sprouted from rectangular

buildings that abutted the castle's outer wall and connected to the keep via corridor. There were a number of freestanding facilities as well. We'd chosen the western tower because it was the farthest from the front gate.

"Yeah, I know," said Gourry. "But there're lights on, so doesn't that mean there're people there?"

"Geh... You've got a point," I admitted hesitantly.

The building at the base of our destination tower, which I'd presumed to be some kind of barracks, was definitely one of the places with light in its windows.

"Should we change our plan?" Milgazia asked.

After some thinking, I shook my head. "I'm betting most of these places are occupied, and it's not like we'd learn much from sniffing around somewhere abandoned."

"I agree. Excess caution won't yield us answers," Mileena added.

Milgazia nodded in agreement as well.

We thus continued our approach toward an illuminated window of the western tower building. It was paned with opaque glass that made it impossible to see what was happening on the other side.

Makes sense for a military facility though...

I obfuscated my presence and pricked up my ears, but I couldn't hear anything either. I could *sense* life inside... but was it human or otherwise? Moreover, how many of them were there? That much, I couldn't say.

I turned a questioning gaze to my companions as if to ask how to proceed. Milgazia and Luke responded in kind with their eyes alone. They simultaneously glanced at the same spot—the front door.

Time to go in, I guess...

No one objected. No one had any better ideas, at least, so we dropped down by the entrance. It was a large iron double door, seemingly designed for geared-up soldiers to be able to pass through with ease. Gourry and Luke quietly took up positions on either side of it. I approached straight on and checked the lock. There was a small keyhole near the handle. It was a real primitive setup that a

simple lockpick would make short work of.

I quickly pulled a wire out from under my pauldron... Don't go asking why I carry one of those around, though. Women have their secrets, got it?

With the wire in one hand, I placed my other on the door—

Creeeak...Crash!

It yielded to my weight and I tumbled right in!

“Wh-What?!”

“What's going on?!”

“Who are these people?!”

I found myself surrounded by clamoring figures. The doors had given way into a fairly open room, populated by soldiers sitting around or leaning against walls. There were roughly twenty or thirty in all, and judging from their reactions, they'd been napping until I crashed in.

How did you guys not lock your freakin' doors?!

“Wh-Who're you?” asked one sleepy-looking soldier.

“Er... ah... we don't mean you any harm, promise!” I said, waving apologetically.

“No harm, eh? Busting in in the middle of the night with lockpick in hand?”

Ack! Time for my patented fast-talking skills! But before I could get them revved up...

“Well... the truth is, we came from outside the castle. It was the only way to find out what was going on in here,” Gourry said brazenly, scratching at his head.

Are you crazy?! You can't just tell them that!

“Oh, is that all?” asked the soldier with a sigh of relief.

He actually accepted it?!

“You're not surprised?” Mileena chimed in.

The soldier we were talking to scratched at his chin. “Well, you're the... I can't

recall how many have come before you, but we've gotten kind of used to it. Don't go spreading this around, but we're not exactly happy with our orders here. At any rate, come on inside." He invited us in with a surprisingly friendly manner, and despite our hesitation, we obliged.

"Could you close the door behind you? The palace will get on our backs if they see us. By the way... I hear there's a bit of a panic outside the castle."

"It's a little beyond 'a bit of a panic'! Demons are showing up every night! It's major trouble! Why are you just sitting around here like it's none of your business?!" I tore into him.

Soldier No. 1 cringed. "I-It's not my fault! We were ordered not to leave the buildings! And it's our job to follow orders. It's not like we're enjoying this... We can't see our families. All we have to eat is rations."

"You can't leave the buildings? What in the world?"

"I wish I knew. When we ask, they just say it's classified and not to question it. Anyone who defies the mandate gets sent to the detention barracks. So what else can we do?" Soldier No. 1—who had to be a captain or something, given his apparent authority here—let out a small sigh. "I'm sure you came in here hoping to fix things, but... Look, I hate to say this, but we received a second order too."

"What was it?" I asked, feeling a chill up my spine.

The soldier spoke again, hesitantly. "Well, if anyone from outside shows up, we're supposed to catch them... and throw them in the dungeon."

An uneasy air filled the room.

"Oh... I get it. One of those 'if you don't wanna get thrown in the dungeon, you'll hafta bust your own way out' things?" Luke asked while reaching for his sword hilt.

"So if we give ourselves up peacefully, we won't have to fight you?" Mileena asked calmly, staying Luke's hand.

"I beg your pardon!" Memphys cried out indignantly.

But Mileena continued on. "You want to get to the heart of this matter as

much as we do. Your orders are absolute: anyone intruding on the castle must be thrown into the dungeon. But they never said that you needed to confiscate the equipment of anyone you arrest, or that you can't throw them into the same cell as previous intruders. So... there may be conditions under which we come along peacefully."

"Huh..." Soldier No. 1 breathed.

Hey! Nice thinking, Mileena!

Soldier No. 1 had said that there *were* others before us. If they'd all been tossed in the dungeon too, Jade might be among them. Mileena was basically offering to let the soldiers save face on the condition that they take us to the previously captured prisoners and let us work out the rest ourselves. Obviously, she'd included the nuance that if they didn't accept our offer, we'd adopt Luke's plan and put up a fight.

It was fairly tortured logic, but a convenient way out of this little dilemma if the guards were willing to take it.

"It's true that our orders didn't say we couldn't do that," another soldier put in shamelessly.

"And weren't you just saying that you hate locking people up for no reason and leaving them in purgatory, Captain?" another added.

Soldier No. 1—the captain—sighed with a wince. "I see. You're right that the order specified nothing about your treatment. All right, it's settled. So if you don't mind, we'll show you— Er, scratch that. We will *take you* to the dungeon."

"Any objections?" Mileena asked. The rest of us nodded with a wince... Well, everyone except for Gourry, who was clueless as ever.

"Uh... what's going on again?" he whispered to me.

"Just play along, mmkay?" I answered quietly.

"All right... come with us, then," the captain ordered.

Lamp in hand, he led the way. Another soldier with a lamp brought up the rear. We went through several doors as we moved deeper into the building,

where we reached a long, narrow hallway that spread out to either side.

“Watch your step,” the captain said as he turned right.

We were flanked by stone walls, and the ceiling overhead was quite high for such a narrow passage. There wasn't any light aside from the lamps the guards were carrying, so it was hard to say for certain, but it seemed like the corridor curved slightly. That suggested we were in the castle's outer wall.

“So, I've been meaning to ask... was there a man named Jade among the prisoners you've captured?” I questioned, just around the time the walk was getting monotonous.

“Jade?” The captain cast a glance back in my direction. “Isn't that the knight who was stripped of his rank and exiled, only to be abruptly reinstated later?”

“Yeah, that guy.”

“Hmm. I'm afraid not, and we do generally get the names of the men we take in... But while we're taking you to the dungeon under the north tower where we detain most folks, there are some chambers under the palace itself. He might have been arrested by someone else and taken there instead.”

Luke let out a groan. “So givin' ourselves up was a waste of time, huh?”

“H-Hey... Please don't start trouble now. You promised you'd turn yourselves in,” the captain begged.

“Yeah, I know. My heart would never allow me to pop off and spoil my beloved Mileena's negotiations.”

...

“C'mon, would you shoot me down already? I hate bein' left hanging...” Luke muttered listlessly.

Huh... When Mileena shoots him down, he gets despondent, but when she ignores him, he acts neglected. What a weirdo.

“Well, Jade might not be in the northern dungeon, but others who came from the outside will be. Some of them know the castle quite well. They might still have the information you seek.”

“How many people are we talking?” I asked.

The captain pondered the answer. “Let’s see. Not including your lot... twenty, at least.”

“Twenty?!” I shouted in surprise.

“Yes. Guards who were stationed in town, courtiers out on business before the gate closed... It’s at least twenty that I know of, so in actuality, there must be more. They all say the city’s in a bad way, and since most of us have family in town, it’s got us worried. I’d head out there this second if I could, but we’ve been ordered to stay here on pain of imprisonment. The higher-ups just think of us guards as tools, see. I wish they’d realize these ‘tools’ have hearts and souls too.”

So that’s why they went along with Mileena’s proposal...

Most soldiers, even disgruntled ones, wouldn’t have entertained Mileena’s convoluted little plan. They probably would’ve pegged us for assassins taking advantage of them instead. But these men were clearly at their wits’ end. Remaining on perpetual standby in service to no clear end while their families might be under demon attack... It was hard to remain loyal with that kind of fear eating at you.

“Anyway, I’d like to bring this nonsense to an end as soon as possible,” the captain whispered, revealing what seemed to be his—no, the soldiers’ true feelings.

After that, he said nothing more. We walked a while longer until the captain came to a stop at a door. Beyond it was a building that seemed identical to the one we’d just come from. The guard inside gave a casual salute as he entered.

“More invaders from the outside,” the captain announced. “We’ll be putting them in your dungeon.”

With that simple exchange, he opened another nearby door and escorted us down a stairway leading underground. The soldier returned the captain’s salute without even batting an eye at the fact that we were still armed.

Hmm... Guess his heart’s not in this either.

We descended the stairs and arrived at another door, which was guarded by yet another dispirited-looking soldier. After trading a similar perfunctory salute with the captain, he produced a jangling ring of keys and opened the door.

The mildewy smell characteristic of basements tickled my nose. A stone hallway stretched out straight ahead of us. On either side of it were candlesticks that smelled of burning animal fat, and rows upon rows of iron bars. The captain led us down the hall. The smell was part rancid, part sweaty, and part something I couldn't even describe.

We saw all kinds of people in the depths of the dungeon. A man in rags gazing at us with empty, hollow eyes. A man of indeterminate age paying us no mind as he paced his cell, muttering to himself. And then, just as I was starting to get sick of our little procession...

"You!" called a familiar voice from nearby.

Huh? I looked to see the source—a bearded man in early old age peering out at us from a cell with haggard eyes.

"You're Jade Caudwell's friends!" he hailed.

I knew this man... It was General Allus!

"What happened to you?" I asked the (former) general through the bars. The captain had stuck our three gents in the cell with Allus, and our three ladies in the cell opposite, before leaving without a word.

Allus was the one who'd introduced Sherra to King Wells to curry his favor, unaware that she was secretly a demon. In a way, he was sort of responsible for the whole debacle, but he'd come to see the light after Sherra went rogue. He'd even helped us wrap things up in the aftermath, and when all was said and done, he'd resigned from his post. In short, he was a man with good intentions but a terrible eye for character. But if he was here, that meant...

"I met the same fate as you, most likely... I sneaked into the castle to figure out what's going on, but I was found, arrested, and thrown in here," he said with a tired sigh.

"Then you don't know what's going on inside the castle?" Milgazia asked,

leaning against the wall with his arms folded.

This was Allus's first time meeting Milgazia, but it seemed he didn't have the energy to pry about his identity. He simply answered, "I don't know much, it's true... Although I'm retired now, I was a general here until recently, so I still have some sway with the men and King Wells. Right after they captured me, I asked the soldiers to reach out to His Majesty on my behalf. The response I received was, 'The king will not see him. Throw him in the dungeon.'"

"Sheesh... Nice king you got there," Luke grumbled.

"I do not blame my liege," the old general responded, shaking his head placidly. "To be honest, I have doubts that His Majesty ever heard my request."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I asked the soldier to contact His Majesty, but a mere soldier cannot contact the king directly. He would've passed word to his captain, who then would've passed it on to an advisor or minister. It's likely someone in that chain said, 'The king doesn't need to see him, so throw him in the dungeon in accordance with your initial orders.' I can't imagine a captain of the guard saying that... so I suspect it's the advisor or minister who doesn't want me sniffing around."

"Hmm..." That gave me an idea. "I've been meaning to ask. With you and Sherra gone, who's the closest to King Wells at the moment, with the most influence? And who would've only reached that position in the past year?"

"In the past year? Well, most of them, actually..."

"Huh?" I blinked. That sure wasn't the answer I'd expected. Most of the kingdom's bigwigs had been appointed within the past year? How?!

The former general nodded sagely, then continued. "There was a great fire in this city last year. The king at the time, His Majesty Dils Quolt Gyria, fell ill from the stress and died soon after. And because he had no sons, his younger brother ascended the throne. But power struggles are inevitable within a kingdom's highest estates. The change of reign saw most of the old ministers and advisors transferred elsewhere and new ones brought in. In that vein, I'd been King Wells's fencing instructor since his childhood... so, you see..." the general explained with a pained smile.

Guh. It was kinda hard to hear all this considering that I'd sorta had a hand in said fire... But wallowing in that wasn't gonna help anyone.

"O-Okay, so... is there anyone who wasn't even in the castle a year ago but is now serving in an important position?" I tried again.

Allus cocked his head thoughtfully. "Someone who wasn't even in the castle... There's the minister of trade, Lord Sardian. It's not a lofty position, but he does have some influence over His Majesty. There's also Sir Farial the court sorcerer. Lord Sardian is a relative of the queen, King Wells's wife. Sir Farial was recommended by the sorcerers' council."

"Hmm... I see. And those two are in the palace at the moment?"

"Most likely. Here..." With that, Allus sketched out a diagram of the palace and explained where we would likely find them.

"Nice. Can you tell me what they look like?"

"Sardian is... around thirty years old, slender, and finely featured with a seemingly out-of-place black goatee. Farial is in his twenties, I believe... but he's swarthy and burly in a way that doesn't suit his name or his position. Why do you ask?"

I stood back up. "Why else? I'm gonna bust outta here and track 'em down."

"W-Wait a minute. I'm not followin'," Luke argued.

I cast a glance over at him. "I'm saying, are we sure that Sherra was *the only* spy?"

A few gasps from the others followed.

Sufficiently powerful demons could assume human form. Sherra wasn't necessarily the only one pushing her master's schemes in the kingdom. We'd assumed that defeating her had put a bow on the whole thing, but what if there was another demon in the kingdom's brain trust? That would stand to reason if the current goings-on were all part of *their* scheme.

If only we knew what their endgame was...

Prior to the fire last year, Dils had been under the thumb of Chaos Dragon Gaav, who was plotting a rebellion against the demons of the Kataart

Mountains. Now, whoever these *new* demons were, they would've had to infiltrate the castle after Gaav's minions were out of the picture—which pointed to either the trade minister or the court magician that Allus had mentioned. We needed to get out of here and figure out which one it was. Not that I expected them to cop to it, but I figured Milgazia and Memphys could sniff out a demon in sheep's clothing.

"I'm not sure I follow myself..." admitted Allus, who was still ignorant of Sherra's demonic nature.

Since I didn't know how long it would take to explain the whole thing, I summarized with, "It's a really long story, so some other time. Gourry, we're movin' out. Get it done!"

"Okay! I don't really know what's going on, but I definitely know how to get us outta here!"

"That's all I need from you! Time to say goodbye to these cramped little cages! Step away from the bars, folks!"

Everyone did as requested, and Gourry's sword flashed through the air!

Crinch! I heard a sharp sound like a trembling ice floe. And then... *Crash, clatter, clank!* With a great racket, fragments of iron bars showered the stone floor.



Wow! Everyone looked impressed by the move. As one would expect from bars used in prisons, each one was about as thick as your thumb. To slice clean through them like that, not to mention a multitude of them at the same time... Gourry's current sword was magical, though we didn't know where it came from or if it had a name. It was sturdier and sharper than a normal blade, but even so, Gourry's skills were as incredible as ever.

"Now do ours too," I urged him.

The big lug walked out of his cell, up to ours, and unleashed a second slash. Once again, metal bars fell to the ground like they were no more than driftwood.

"Don't be too hard on the guards," said Allus, who showed no sign of leaving his cell. I responded with a wave, and the rest of us made for the exit.

We came to a wooden door. Milgazia led the way, reaching out to test it. Then, finding it unlocked, he opened it with ease. I'd expected there to be a guard on the other side, but there was no one in sight.

"The captain must have arranged this," I surmised. It seemed the guards were on our side.

We ran up the stone steps and stopped as we reached the top. The real trouble started here. The captain had said we were in the north tower, which meant there would be plenty of security around... But with no time to hesitate, we opened the door.

Clack. A single soldier was standing nearby—the captain who'd brought us in.

"That was fast... Are you ready? I've already explained the situation to the others," he said rather leisurely.

"You... did? Are you sure you should be doing all this?" I was grateful and all, but it seemed a little too good to be true.

The captain smiled bitterly in response. "To be honest... this isn't my first time seeing you. Not long ago, our kingdom was taken over by a mercenary named Sherra who turned everything upside-down. The night she disappeared... I spotted you here in the castle."

Ah, yeah. Quite a few guards saw us that night. I couldn't remember all of their faces, but it seemed he remembered ours...

"We guards have been reduced to tools for those in power," the captain continued. "We don't have the power to change anything. But the last time you people showed up, things changed. So I thought you might be able to change things again."

"You're wrong," interjected Milgazia.

"What?"

"You think you've lost the power to affect change... But you're wrong, human. Just now, in order to change things—in order to change things for the better—you aided us. That's it. That's the proof that you're more than mere tools. That you yet have the power to make the future a brighter place."

Milgazia's words struck the captain silent. "I like hearing it put that way... Don't just stand around here talking, though. Go on. And take care."

We nodded to him, then proceeded through the door he indicated. We passed through a few more until we came out into a large room, much like the one we'd entered through in the western tower. Similarly, this one was also filled with a few dozen guards.

"We heard the whole story. Give it your best," one said.

"Not sure what you're giving your best to, of course," chimed another.

"But don't be too rough, or you'll make more work for us," cautioned a third.

These guys were either that dissatisfied with their orders or simply that loyal to the captain. One way or another, they parted and allowed us to the door. We threw it open, ran outside, and—

"What?"

We froze in place—all *four* of us—back inside the chamber full of soldiers.

"Huh?"

"What in the world? Didn't you just..." A nervous buzz began to spread among the guards.

That's right. Six of us had just exited through the door leading to the courtyard. But now we were back inside—sans Memphys and Milgazia.

“Wha... What's going on?” Luke asked.

I knew the answer, but I wished I didn't. “Space has been warped... Probably by a demon.”

When I said the word “demon,” the nervous energy among the soldiers ballooned.

Standing among them, Luke smiled indomitably. “Heh, okay. I don't get how this works, but I guess we're separated now. Which means the enemy is either after them... or us,” he whispered.

“It's both... of course...” responded a muffled voice from on high.

Several guards cried out when they looked up toward the source... the ceiling, where a woman's head was dangling upside-down.

Mianzo!

3: The Demons Hiding in the Palace Assemble

“Fell Zaleyd!” The fight kicked off with an unprompted blast from Mileena. The spiral of light she conjured tore through the air, aimed at the demon on the ceiling! But...

Fwoosh! Mianzo’s roots produced a luminous sphere of their own to blast apart the incoming strike! The two spells canceled each other out!

“Waaagh!” The ensuing explosion was the soldiers’ cue to panic. Some of them must’ve seen the demons that had showed up the last time we were in town, but this one’s appearance *was* particularly terrifying.

While some of the soldiers threw open a nearby door and ran for their lives, others picked up spears and swords and rose to attention. Too bad swords and spears couldn’t reach the ceiling, and even if they could, they wouldn’t hurt a pure demon. As for the soldiers who ran, the strange warping of space caused them to reenter the room immediately through the opposite door, which only added to the chaos.

Then Mianzo’s roots—the portion that had just fired the intercepting ball of light—began swelling. Were they growing another head?! I feared so at first, but the swelling knot grew far larger than a head before—*Bloosh!*—exploding nastily to release a black *something* onto the ground below.

Thwap... It hit the floor lightly and then slowly rose up. It stood a head taller than the soldiers around it, but it was far thinner and black from head to toe. It almost looked like a mummy, but its form—too distorted to be human—and the purple light blazing behind its narrowed eyes suggested this was no mere undead creature.

“The demon... created another demon?!” Mileena cried in surprise.

“No,” I responded. “She was just storing it.”

“W-Waaagh?!” The already panicking soldiers thrust their swords and spears at the new demon in their midst.

Whackawhackwhack! The dull sounds of impact rang out. Some of the soldiers' blades missed their target and hurt their comrades. Others easily slid through the demon's body... And yet, pincushioned as it was, the corners of the demon's mouth curled into a smile.

"Fall back!" Gourry roared as he sprang into a run. But both his charge and the soldiers' retreat came a second too late.

Splush! The demon swung its hands, and several soldiers hit the floor with a heavy squelching sound, transformed into lifeless lumps of flesh.

"Damn you!" Gourry drew his sword as he approached the black demon, and—*Clink!*—he leaped back a second later, swinging to the side to block a silver blade that emerged from a nearby suit of plate armor.

Hang on a minute! They've got more demons?!

The silver blade remained crossed with Gourry's own as its wielder continued to extract itself from the armor. It looked like a silver water strider, except it was as big as a person and had a dangling mass of random organs where its body should be.

"Kraaah!" With a curiously bird-like cry, the black demon dashed at Gourry from his flank. And then...

Vwoosh! Luke swung for its arm. "The damned things just keep comin'!"

Realizing that Luke's sword was a magical one, the black demon leaped back to put distance between them. But you can bet Mileena and I weren't just sitting around and watching!

"Elemekia Lance!" I incanted, unleashing an amplified version of the spell.

"Elemekia Flame!" Mileena fired immediately after.

We were aiming up at Mianzo, and our one-two timing would make the spells impossible to dodge... At least, as long as she stayed stuck to the ceiling.

Vwip... No surprise, Mianzo didn't hesitate to drop down to the floor, allowing our spells to crash harmlessly into the ceiling overhead. But this wasn't a bust—getting Mianzo on our level was an equally desirable outcome for us. It was hard to deal with the rooty monster while she was out of sword range, after all.

We'd just leveled the playing field a little.

The moment Mianzo landed, the mouth of her dead-eyed head spewed a high-pressure jet of water! Blood spurted and soldiers toppled. The trajectory of the jet moved toward Gourry's back, and... *Splut!* A spear thrust from a nearby soldier pierced the cheek of the demon's head, reducing its concentrated torrent to a messy shower!

Nice! Even if physical attacks can't really harm Mianzo, they can still defuse her physical water attacks! We can work with this!

Mianzo's roots lashed out to knock over the spear-wielding soldier who'd attacked her, the fall withdrawing the spear from her cheek. By then, me and Mileena had already closed in. The demon turned her head toward us... but it was too late!

Mileena produced a dagger from her pocket and buried it in the demon's cheek, splashing water over the two of us, but throttling the deadly geyser into nothing more than a stiff spray. Mianzo produced a second head beside her existing one, but I pulled out a dagger of my own and plunged it through that one too. Then, as Mileena and I finished chanting our next round of spells...

?!

Immediately, I kicked off the floor and slammed into Mileena, throwing us to the side. In that same instant, a pale hand sliced through where we'd just been standing. Once it completed its arc, the owner of the hand emerged slowly from Mianzo.

A fourth demon? How many of these things are there?!

This one was pure white and had four arms but—in exchange, I guess you'd say—no head.

"You dodged... that?" the white demon asked in surprise.

It was a close call, to be sure, and I'd been too close up to really see it coming. I'd just felt a chill run up my spine and moved on instinct.

But I didn't have time to explain that to anyone. Mileena and I exchanged a glance, then ran straight for the white demon.

Gourry was at a big disadvantage... At least, he should have been.

The water strider demon was using three legs to stabilize itself, and the remaining three to slash at him. Its speed was excellent, its blades were sharp, and its attacks came in brutal, unending waves. No matter how extraordinary Gourry was with a sword, it was taking everything he had just to hold them at bay... and he wasn't even fully succeeding at that.

But the demons had made one fatal mistake: They'd assumed the four of us were the only ones they'd be fighting. It was true that the soldiers weren't capable of killing demons per se, but...

"Hyahhh!" With cries of effort, they thrust out their spears, tangling them up in the demon's legs! Even if they couldn't hurt the thing, they could restrict the movement of its corporealized form. And that opening was all Gourry needed.

"Hah!" *Slash!* The big lug's sword cleaved the tip of a soldier's spear right along with one of the demon's legs, followed by its body.

"Skreeeeeeeee!" With a death rattle reminiscent of a real insect's, the silver demon fell to pieces, hit the floor, and shattered like fine porcelain.

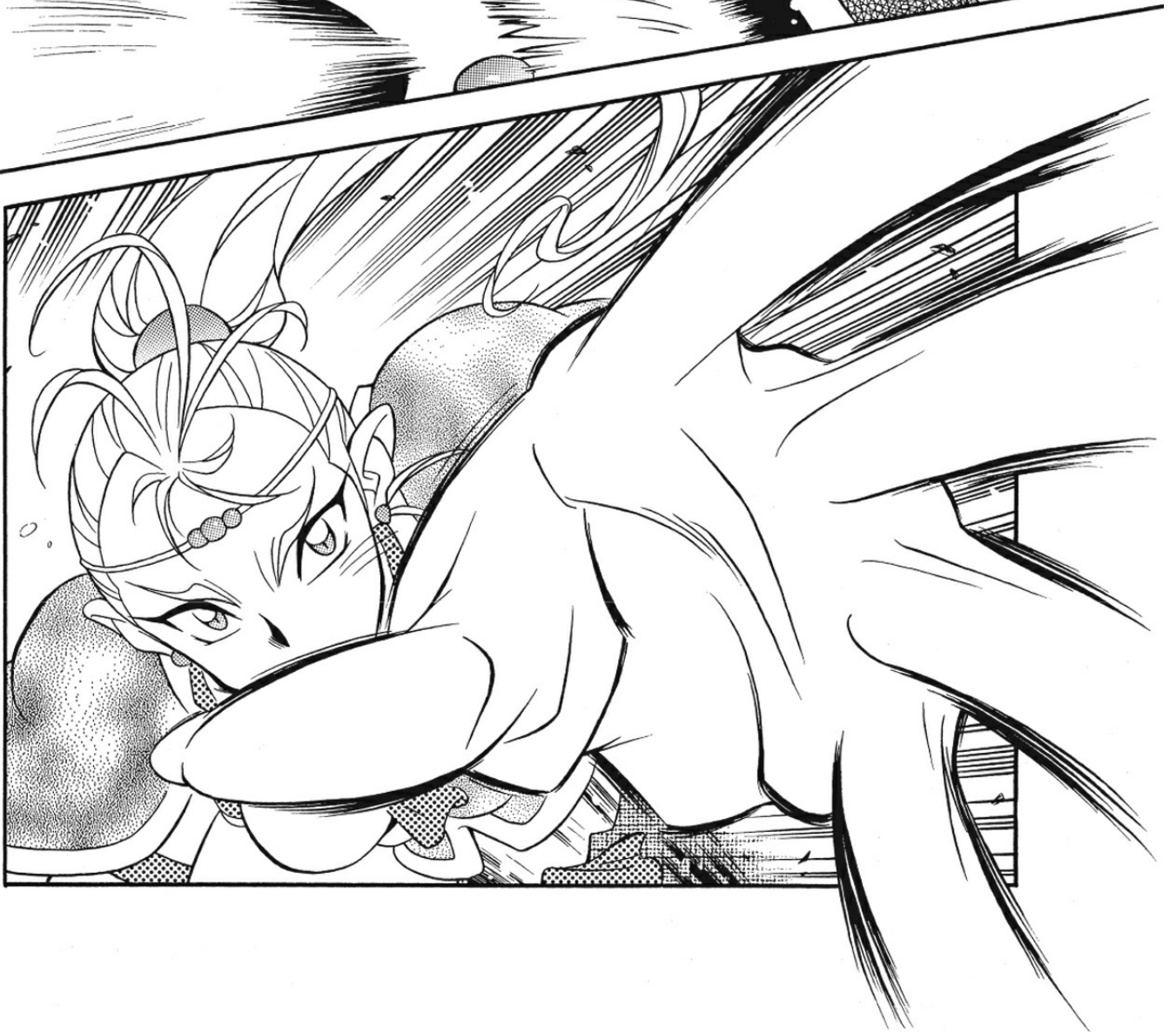
"We're saved!" As the soldiers lavished their gratitude on Gourry, he turned to face Mianzo.

Just before Mileena and I got in range of the white demon, who stood ready to counter, we leaped to the sides and unleashed the spells we had at the ready!

"Fell Zaleyd!"

"Hell Blast!"

Our target? Mianzo, who was focused on Gourry as he approached! The white light seared the demon's head, and the deathly lance pierced its tangling roots!



“Gyaaaaah!” With a scream, Mianzo turned to a pillar of ash. Gourry’s sword plowed through her pulverized body and kept going, impaling the panicking white demon as well.

“Go ahead and try ganging up on us...” *Slash!* Luke’s steel blade, bathed in light, cut through the black demon at the same time. “But you better send some less trash goons to do the job! Don’t underestimate us just ‘cause we’re human!” His magic-infused sword effortlessly felled the demon.

And with that, the brief battle came to an end.

“You... You’re so strong...” one of the soldiers said with a sigh of relief.

Things had gotten kinda hairy for a few minutes there, but the fight itself had been quick. I’d known me and Gourry would hold our own well enough, though it seemed like Luke and Mileena had gotten pretty good at tangling with pure demons themselves.

We’d figured out the trick, you might say. Keep the battle short, strike ‘em unawares, and aim for one-hit kills. Granted, I wondered what it said about me that I’d led the kind of life where I was picking up such tricks... Best not to think too hard about that.

Of course, we’d also gotten a little help from the soldiers, whom the demons apparently hadn’t factored into their plans. Still, our little support squad was far from unscathed. The majority were unharmed, but a number were seriously injured and I could peg a handful for dead at a glance.

“Who’s in the worst shape?! We can do a little first aid with recovery magic!” I called as I surveyed the room.

“Could you look at this one?!” came one response.

“This one too, please...” came another.

“I’ll bring medicine and bandages!” a soldier offered, darting into the next room.

A few of the injured soldiers had gotten off lucky, while most of them were in

a bad way. Luke, Mileena, and I did an okay job of shrinking their wounds with Recovery, but the spell only accelerated the natural healing process by taking an advance on the target's stamina. I wasn't sure how many soldiers we could really save that way. We could've done better with Milgazia and his more impressive healing spell, Resurrection, around, but...

"I went and got medicine and bandages!"

"Great! We're casting spells to close the wounds, but it's just a stopgap measure! Use the medicine and bandages to take things from there, and once these guys are stable, fetch a doctor— Wait, you *went and got* medicine and bandages?!" I cried out in the midst of the chatter.

Everyone else caught on a moment later. The strange barrier that kept the room sealed off from the outside world had lifted.

"Wait, we can leave?!" one of the soldiers shouted, walked to the door leading to the courtyard... and stepped outside.

"Then you don't have to stay here any longer. Go on," another soldier urged us. "We can tend to the wounded ourselves. But if there are demons in the castle, for whatever reason, you're probably the only ones who can fight them. So... please, go!"

His words caused us to gasp.

"Please... go on," added a soldier who'd taken a huge sweep to the gut from Mianzo. "We'll be... fine. Just... go on..." He forced a smile onto his pallid face. "I know protecting the castle is our responsibility, not yours... But stopping the demons will make it easier for us to get to a doctor. Please..."

"I understand," I said with a nod. The four of us turned to leave, with the soldiers watching us go...

Outside, we were greeted by darkness and a sky full of stars.

"They're not here," Gourry whispered as he looked around.

He was right. Milgazia and Memphys, from whom we'd been separated when entering the base of the tower, were nowhere to be seen.

“Say... you don’t think they got *got*, do you?” Luke asked, suggesting a frightening possibility.

Things might’ve gone down that way, sure... But I preferred to remain optimistic.

“It’s possible they’re stuck in their own warped pocket dimension. They also might’ve chosen to go on without us,” I countered.

“Yeah... I wouldn’t buy it from the dragon guy, but I can hear the elf girl right now. ‘Those humans are merely a burden to us anyway. Let’s go on ahead, Uncle,’ and all that BS.”

Yeah... sounds like Memphys to me.

“That leaves us with only one option,” Mileena said, turning her gaze... to the night-cloaked palace.

All seemed quiet inside the palace. We were standing at a back door on its northern side, trying to hear what lay beyond. At the very least, it was clear that Milgazia and Memphys weren’t having a big fight just inside.

“Doesn’t sound like there’s anyone nearby,” Gourry said softly, with his ear to the door.

Hmm. In that case... let’s have a look at this lock. I inspected the mechanism, then asked, “Gourry, can you slice the bolt through the gap in the door?”

“Think so.” He responded to my absurd request in his usual laid-back way, then took position in front of the door. The others backed off, and... “Hahhh!” With a shout, he cut a silver arc in the darkness.

Clink! We all heard a quiet metallic ring... And just like that, the lock was out of service.

“Dang... Your skill’s as crazy as ever,” Luke whispered, sounding halfway between awe and disgust.

Meanwhile, Gourry slowly opened the door. We entered a lobby of decent size, at the far side of which was a long corridor leading further into the building. Dim magical lights hung all around us, but there were no signs of any

people.

“Strange. Nobody standing watch over the palace entrances?” Mileena muttered.

“Yeah. Smells like a trap to me,” Luke responded.

“Either way, we have to keep going. It’s either the minister or the court sorcerer... We’ll go with the closest one first,” I said.

The others nodded in response, and so we began following the route that Allus had laid out for us.

“Y’know, Gourry, I’ve been wondering... Was that sword you got there always so sharp?” I whispered to him as we ran down the hall as quietly as we could. I recalled it being a pretty nice magic sword, but not strong-enough-to-take-out-pure-demons-in-one-strike kinda nice.

“Oh, this thing? It was that guy... Mil-whatsits?”

“Uh, Milgazia?”

“Yeah, him.”

Hang on, dude... You’ve been traveling with him for days and you still can’t remember his name?!

“He said that my blade wasn’t enough to beat demons as it was, so he drew this weird pattern on it to make it stronger.”

“Huh?” He made it sound so simple that I couldn’t help but blink. *He made Gourry’s sword... stronger?* “Th-This is the first I’m hearing about it!”

“Yeah, guess I never mentioned it.”

Yeesh... Using patterns—in other words, inscriptions—to strengthen objects was a form of magic we couldn’t perform. Which meant...

“Oooh, Gourry!” I cooed. “You’ll lemme have a good look at that sword later, won’t youuu?!”

“Sure... But you’re not gonna swap it for a copy and then sell it off, right?”

“Nonsense! I would never sell it off until I’d investigated it thoroughly!”

“Wait, so you *would* do it after that?”

“Who can say what the future holds?”

“That’s...” he started to object, but then stopped abruptly.

The rest of us came to a halt as well. The long hall was still empty, and the doors flanking it betrayed no sound. That left the singular door up ahead of us at the end of the corridor. We were aiming to pass through it, but...

“Is someone in there?” I asked.

“No,” Gourry replied, his eyes locked on the door. “*Something.*”

That warning sent a jolt of tension through the group. Gourry was implying that whatever lay ahead wasn’t human.

“What’ll we do? Take another route?” I hedged.

Luke snorted dismissively. “Doubt whatever’s in there is gonna let us hunt around for another way...”

“He’s right. Better to face it head-on than to improvise a detour and find ourselves surrounded.” Mileena nodded slightly.

And so it was decided. We approached the door, hesitated a moment, and then...

“It’s unlocked. Please come in,” beckoned a voice from inside.

On the other side of the door, we found a wide-open room. I didn’t know what it was originally designed for, but there was a door in each wall and a stairway leading up on one side.

A man stood at the center of it all, dressed in flowing indigo robes embroidered with symbols that likely indicated his station. He looked about thirty, with a goatee that seemed out of place on his soft-featured, fair-skinned face. He easily could’ve been mistaken for a scrawny middle-aged dude drowning in his own clothes if not for the keen light of intellect flickering in his eyes.

Could this be...

“I appreciate you coming despite the late hour. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I am Sardinian, this kingdom’s minister of trade—at least, superficially so.”

Knew it. He’s that guy Allus mentioned.

I smirked. “‘Superficially,’ huh? That’s pretty forthright. So you’re just gonna face us head-on, trickery be damned?”

“You would not be wrong to interpret it that way,” he said with a bow.

Hmm... so that’s his game, huh? To be honest, I’d been sweating over the possibility that he’d play human and sic more soldiers on us, so this was actually kind of a relief. Still, him coming right out and challenging us threw me off my game.

Guess he’s pretty confident, huh?

Generally, demons that could pass for humans were stronger than those that couldn’t, so it was safe to assume that this Sardinian guy was pretty powerful. Hopefully not on Sherra’s level, though...

“So you’re the jerk behind all this, huh? Spill already! What’s your plan?” Luke barked at him.

At this, Sardinian simply smiled. “I cannot reveal that, I’m afraid. For now, I’d like you to fight this pawn I’ve prepared. If you’ll allow me...” Sardinian snapped his fingers.

Whoosh! A red figure dropped down to his side from the stairs leading up to the second floor. It looked like it was made of clay dyed with blood and crafted into a human silhouette. It had no eyes, nose, mouth, or ears—just abstract patterns drawn on its face and body in black.

And the sword in its hands... The moment I saw it, I felt a chill up my spine.

No... it couldn’t be...

“Passin’ us off on your peons already, huh?” Luke snarked, apparently not realizing what he was looking at.

Sardinian just shook his head. “Perish the thought. To simply overwhelm you with demonic riffraff would be the height of vulgarity. Instead I shall fight you myself, alongside this specially chosen opponent. Allow me to introduce the

demon produced by Lady Sherra's innovative techniques... Jade Caudwell."

Sardian's words sent a shock through our group. It was just as I feared.



Lesser and brass demons were made from lower-rank demons—which were too weak to manifest in this world under their own power—possessing and transmogrifying non-sentient beings like animals. This wasn't a naturally occurring process, mind you. Sorcerers, or higher-rank demons, had to call them forth. This suggested that the current demon spawnings near the castle were the result of some mastermind summoning bottom-tier demons to possess the local fauna—cats, rats, dogs, et cetera.

Still, while it was easy to demonify small animals, humans had too much individual will to make hosts for lower-rank demons. Under normal circumstances, at least. If you could sufficiently weaken a person's will before calling a demon from the astral plane to possess them, humans could indeed get demonified something awful. We'd encountered a few examples of this in our travels. One of them being Jade's father, Grancis Caudwell.

Sherra's sword Dulgoffa created humanlike demons by crushing a person's will... And that was precisely the aura the creature standing next to Sardian gave off. I'd sensed it the moment I first saw it, and the worst-case scenario that ran through my mind had sent a chill up my spine. I desperately wished I hadn't been right.

There remained a slim possibility that Sardian was bluffing in an attempt to rattle us. That this wasn't actually Jade. But we knew that Jade had come to search the castle and that he'd been missing ever since. Sardian wouldn't claim this was Jade unless they at least had Jade in their custody—the lie could be exposed right away otherwise. And if the demons had Jade in their grasp, there was no reason to think they *wouldn't* use him in exactly this way.

Which means... that really is...

"Y-You... You son of a..." Luke hissed through gritted teeth. Sardian merely smiled in return.

"Be careful. This Sardian guy... He'll be tougher than he looks," I warned everyone.

Sardian shot me a strained grin. "Tougher than I *look*? How rude! I might just have to make you regret that. Let us begin... Jade."

When the demon snapped his fingers again, the so-called Jade charged at us!

We... We have to fight!

We all drew our swords and braced for battle. Gourry got out in front to meet Jade's charge, while the rest of us began chanting spells. We knew what Jade was capable of based on our time together. In terms of pure fencing skill, he was better than me, but not as good as Luke and way below Gourry. But how would possession affect that? We wouldn't know until we crossed blades.

Gourry and Jade ran toward each other, drawn together like magnets. But just as they were about to clash—*Whoosh!*—Sardian appeared right beside Gourry!

Did he blink through space?!

Sardian conjured a glowing ball of magic light, but before he could hit Gourry with it, the big lug leaped back in haste!

"What?!" Sardian shouted in surprise. He'd already released the ball, and Gourry's sudden retreat meant Jade was now in its trajectory instead!

It was coursing to collide with our former comrade, but—*Swip!*—a swing from Jade's sword dispersed the incoming orb. He must've had a magic sword too! Still, the swing left his midsection completely unguarded. Gourry quickly stepped in.

"Nothing personal!"

His sword drew an arc through the air... and the change happened instantly. What was an abstract black pattern on the creature's red clay face became the visage of Jade Caudwell.

The sight of the familiar face caused Gourry to flinch. With incredible reflexes, he stayed his blade just before it made contact. But Jade, without a moment's pause or even a chant, conjured a glowing globe and released it... right into Gourry at point-blank range!

He doesn't have time to dodge! If that hits him—

Whoom! There was a flash of light and an explosion. Gourry went flying.

"Gourry!" I canceled the spell I'd been chanting and ran over to him. Jade went to give chase, but a few magical attacks courtesy of Luke and Mileena

kept him at bay. “Gourry...”

“Hah!”

Huh? As I got close, the big lug sprang back to his feet, sword at the ready.
But... that hit him dead-on!

Yet while I saw a black singe on his shirt over his stomach, I saw no sign of an actual injury. “Hang on... Are you totally fine?”

“I smashed it with my hilt! C’mon, let’s go!” he declared as he charged at Jade again.

Oh... of course. To prevent a direct hit, he’d detonated the glowing globe with the hilt of his sword, leaping back in the same moment to mitigate the force of the blast. *Boy’s sure got superhuman reflexes, huh? Ah, well...*

I chanted a new spell, preparing to face Sardian and Jade once more.

“Tch! Clever child...” Sardian now conjured countless balls of light and rained them upon us.

Fwa-fa-fa-fa-fwoom! We all leaped back as multiple small explosions erupted at our feet. Then, Jade appeared from out of the smoke, still wearing his expressionless human face. Of course, this didn’t mean that he was back to himself. This was just a tactic meant to unsettle us.

I knew that, and yet... it was still hard to fight an enemy made from someone you knew that still bore the face of a friend. In fact, I could sense hesitance from everyone in our group as they faced off against Jade.

Meanwhile, Jade was unfazed as he charged again. His target this time was... Mileena, the closest to him!

Shing! They briefly crossed swords. Jade swiftly withdrew his own to try a thrust instead. Mileena parried it, sliding her blade along Jade’s and channeling the momentum into an upward slash. Jade dodged it with a step back, then produced and fired another glowing globe.

“Fell Zaleyd!” *Whum!* Mileena unleashed a spell to intercept the orb, then leaped back to get some distance.

Jade tried to pursue, but he was kept in check by a timely slash from Luke.

Meanwhile, Gourry slipped past them both in a dash toward Sardian. *Shing!* Just as Jade's sword blocked Luke's...

"Dolph Strash!" Luke's completed spell streaked at Sardian!

If the demon tried to dodge or repel the incoming magical attack, Gourry would use that opportunity to strike. Defending against that kind of teamwork would be tough... At least, for a normal opponent. Sardian, however, kept his cool as he simply vanished into thin air.

He's gonna blink through space again!

In the moment Sardian was gone, Mileena and I ran up to Luke, while Gourry pivoted with a horizontal slash. Sardian reappeared—right in the path of his sword!

"Gaaah!" Sardian leaped away as he felt the sword slice through his stomach.

Yes! Even if it wasn't fatal, that had to hurt!

"I-Impossible!" Sardian's eyes quavered with fear as he quickly drew back. Dude apparently hadn't expected us to put up this kind of a fight.

We'd known that Luke's tag-team move with Gourry would force Sardian to blink through space to avoid it. The question, then, was where he would reappear. We had an inkling—behind one of us. Of course, we didn't know *who* specifically, so we'd all moved to cover each other. Mileena and I had positioned ourselves with our backs to the wall within range of Luke in order to lend a hand if Sardian appeared behind him while he was locking blades with Jade. Gourry, meanwhile, had launched a preemptive counterattack in case he won the honor—and Sardian had chosen the worst possible place to reappear.

"Elemekia Lance!" I released the spell I'd been chanting at Sardian as he took his distance from Gourry. The big lug closed in on the demon at the same time.

A flash of doubt crossed Sardian's face. He could easily dodge our double-team by blinking through space again, but he knew he couldn't take another hit like that last one. With no other recourse, he held his ground and batted away my incoming spell with one hand.

Pop! "Gwah?!" The pain from the hit seemed to be greater than he'd

expected.

A typical human-cast Elemekia Lance could take out a lesser demon-grade foe in one blow, but it was far from fatal for more powerful demons. A direct hit would smart, no doubt, but Sardian could tank it easily enough. That was why he'd chosen to slap down the spell and focus on Gourry. Too bad for him my Elemekia Lance was amplified, baby! It packed a little too much oomph to just bat away barehanded!

While Sardian was cringing from the unexpected hurt, Gourry's sword whistled through the air! He sliced diagonally down at the demon and wrought the third scream in a row from his throat. But before Gourry could land another blow on the backswing... Sardian vanished once again.

He reappeared some distance away from us all at the edge of the room, his face twisting in hatred... No, he was actively transforming! What lay behind his warped eyelids were no longer eyes, but black vortices. The hairs of his goatee linked together into small, winding black horns. This probably wasn't one of those dramatic "true form" reveals... Probably more that the damage he'd sustained was making it harder for him to maintain a human appearance.

"Damn you all..." All smugness had vanished from his tone.

Luke continued to keep Jade in check. Jade would unleash more magical attacks from time to time, but about all they did was force Luke to dodge them (easily enough) before regaining the ground he'd lost. That said, the sight of Jade's human face still seemed to rob Luke of the will to attack with all he had.

Once Sardian had teleported to a corner of the room, Mileena turned to Jade. Perhaps she was planning to beat Jade, then join in the dogpile on Sardian. She finished chanting her spell, her eyes still fixed on Jade, and—*Whommm!* Before she could unleash it, a sudden shockwave sent Luke, Mileena, and Jade all flying!

What?! It didn't seem to do much damage, because the three of them immediately sprang up, ready to keep fighting. The strike that had blown them all back hadn't come from Sardian. A new arrival had appeared on the opposite side of the room.

“You seem to be struggling to defeat these humans. It’s difficult to watch, Sardian,” said a large, swarthy man. I recognized him from Allus’s description.

Go figure. It wasn’t one of them; it was both of them. Court Magician Farial, another demon in human’s clothing...

“Stay out of this, Farial!” Sardian shouted, his voice seething with loathing. “I said that the two of us were enough to beat them, and I meant it!”

“I don’t care what you said. Your incompetence was so painful to watch that I decided, of my own volition, to join the battle. And you’re in no state to refuse my aid,” he said haughtily, then started walking toward me.

“Don’t take them lightly, Farial! It wasn’t mere luck that allowed them to beat Lady Sherra!”

“I know that.” Farial raised a hand in my direction.

Gourry leaped in front of me protectively. And then... *Whommm!* The subsequent shockwave that rattled my eardrums was far more powerful than the one that had blown back Luke, Mileena, and Jade. The aftershock alone shook the walls and loosened small fragments of stone from them. A direct hit would’ve shattered my bones and ruptured my organs... Thankfully, Gourry had sliced through the blast with his sword.

Farial clearly hadn’t expected him to do something as bonkers as counterattack a shockwave. I could see his eyebrow twitch.

I wasted no time leaping aside and letting loose a spell of my own! “Zellas Bullid!” The light I released became a beam trailing an afterimage in a beeline for Farial! It was a homing-type spell, and if it hit, it was sure to leave a mark!

Gourry followed in my spell’s wake. Farial stayed rooted to the spot, conjured almost a dozen bullets of light, and fired them at Gourry! It was clear he wouldn’t be able to avoid them all if he pressed his charge, so he stopped and raised his sword...

In that instant, every last one of Farial’s bullets changed course and pierced through my beam of light instead. *Zingazingzing!* Unable to withstand the barrage, my spell naturally fizzled out. Dude had faked out Gourry to stop him in his tracks and then counterspelled my Zellas Bullid, nicely putting the kibosh

on our team play. *Not bad! Guess he wants to prove he won't underestimate us like Sardinian did!*

Gourry resumed his charge at Farial, while I began chanting a new—

No. A chill ran up my spine, and I quickly leaped to the side. A silver flash swept through where I'd been standing a second ago. It was Jade! *Zinnng!* I just barely blocked his next strike with my drawn shortsword.

Sardinian took off running toward Mileena, who was chanting a spell and moving to meet him head-on. Maintaining his speed, the demon conjured two balls of light and unleashed them at Mileena. She boldly picked up the pace, slipping between the two attacks. When she did...

Bwoom! The balls of light burst! The force of the explosion pushed Mileena forward, and she lost her balance. Sardinian used the opportunity to close in... but he was forced to leap away when Luke swept in with a slash!

Magical light infused the blade in Luke's hand. He was wielding a sword I'd named the Magic Sucker. I had no clue where he'd picked it up, but it could absorb and store a spell in its blade to unleash later at the user's will. I wasn't sure what spell he had charged it with at the moment, but Sardinian clearly wanted to avoid taking a hit from it.

Luke rushed past Mileena in pursuit of the demon. Mileena regained her balance and joined the chase... That was when Sardinian disappeared. He blinked through space and resurfaced—right behind me!

Not good! There's no one in position to protect me! Worse yet, I'd just unleashed a spell! And I was still in the middle fending off Jade's strike! Argh! Desperate times call for desperate measures! I let the force of Jade's attack drive me back, then channeled that momentum into a leap... directly at Sardinian!

"Gah?!" Sardinian and I both let out a groan as we collided.

Obviously, he hadn't been expecting me to do anything so primitive as body slam a pure demon. He was so taken aback by my audacity that he completely lost his balance. I continued my backward skid to get some more distance from both Sardinian and Jade.

“...Nng.” I grimaced when I felt a sudden scorching pain.

When I’d slammed into Sardian, he’d apparently been in the middle of conjuring another magic orb—the early stages of which had fried my back on impact. I couldn’t see the wound, but I could still move my arms and breathe, so I figured it wasn’t *too* bad. Physically speaking, that is. The real problem was the persistent pain, which would make it tough for me to maintain the concentration necessary for an incantation. Pain itself could make a decent focus, but it would be difficult... no, impossible to cast a spell powerful enough to harm pure demons while *also* fencing and dodging incoming attacks.

Of course, I probably would’ve been killed outright if I hadn’t slammed into Sardian... but the aftermath was nevertheless a discouraging blow to our prospects. Luke and Mileena quickly ran toward me.

“Lina!” Gourry dashed over too, turning his back on Farial in the process. The demon followed, but kept a safe distance from Gourry based on his speed and the reach of his sword. “Are you okay?!”

I nodded. “It’s not so bad. It does hurt, though...”

My fellow spellcasters Luke and Mileena immediately caught my drift, and their expressions accordingly turned grim. I couldn’t pull my weight now. We were effectively down to three fighters.

Farial approached where we were clustered together. Sardian returned his attention to us as well, while Jade moved around to our side...

“Ohohoho... My, my. Defeated already? You humans are *such* high-maintenance allies.”

For once, that mocking voice was like music to my ears.

“What?!” someone exclaimed. I wasn’t sure if it was Sardian or Farial, but we all looked up together.

A figure donning blue clothes and white armor stood upon the railing of a second-story balcony. Her platinum hair fluttered in the... Well, there was no breeze inside, so it wasn’t actually fluttering. Nevertheless, the new arrival whose entrance had inspired a strange sense of déjà vu in me was none other than Memphis, from whom we’d been separated back in the northern tower!

“The elf?! It can’t be! You broke through our forces already?!” Farial cried in surprise.

Memphys smiled confidently in response. “My presence here should be all the answer you need. Don’t you think?”

Aha, so they were fighting demons elsewhere after all...

Memphys jumped boldly off the balcony, using her wings to land gently on the ground floor below.

“Then... that dragon too...” Sardian whispered.

“Indeed,” a familiar voice replied from the balcony Memphys had just leaped from. “We’ve cleared out your forces for now. Why don’t you tell us, then... just what you demons are planning?” Milgazia asked as he descended the staircase.

“Geh!” Farial hissed, glaring at Memphys in lieu of a response. For a moment, his brows twisted and the air around his chest turned hazy... but that was it. “Impossible! My blinking...!” he exclaimed in panic.

It was hard for me to ascertain exactly what had just transpired on visuals alone, but it seemed Memphys had done something to restrict his ability to teleport.

“In that case...”

Vreeeeee! Sardian let out an ear-splitting cry, and the air around Memphys warped. Her Zenafa armor was likely guarding against an attack from the astral side, the aftershocks of which manifested as distortions in the space around her. But while that was still going on, Sardian leaped at her! A pincer attack from both the astral and material planes!

Memphys was rooted to the spot, and Farial was keeping Milgazia in check in order to prevent him from helping her. Thankfully, Mileena was free!

“Ra Tilt!”

“Graaaaah!”

Her pillar of blue fire engulfed Sardian! A strike from the most powerful attack spell in all of shamanistic magic was enough to draw a scream even from a pure demon! And, not missing the interruption in the astral side attack—

“Dis Shield!” Memphys extended a hand toward the agonized demon.
“Megiddo Arc!”

Fwoosh! As she unleashed the words of power, an explosion of crimson flame consumed the demon’s body! *Raaaaah...*

Was that final roar the bellowing of the flames or a death rattle? Whichever it was, both the demon and fire soon disappeared, leaving only quavering sounds behind. Yup. The demons had been so shaken by Memphys and Milgazia’s appearance that they’d completely forgotten about us little old humans. So much for not underestimating us.

It was about then that Milgazia reached the bottom of the stairs. “What will you do?” he asked Farial, his eyes locked on the demon.

Farial gave him a hard smile back. “Don’t make me laugh. I hope you’re not still expecting me to divulge our plans. That wouldn’t be to my benefit in any way... Demons like us and living beings like you are incompatible from start to finish. That leaves only one path I can take.”

“Fighting, eh?”

“Precisely!” With a howl, the demon leaped forward, flying like an arrow toward Milgazia! He knew a projectile or an astral side attack would never work, so he was going to challenge the dragon elder head-on!

Whom! Their magic-infused fists slammed into each other, causing the whole world around them to shake!

“Hraaaaah!” Both howled as the violent collisions of magical power sent streaks of plasma scorching through the air. Strength and magic vied for dominance. And then... Farial’s arm transformed! Black tentacles sprang forth from his limb and wrapped around Milgazia’s right arm!

But in that moment, it was Farial who went wide-eyed in surprise. As his upper half lurched forward—*Zrrum!*—golden wings appeared from Milgazia’s back and beheaded the demon.

Whump. Its collapsed body turned the color of charcoal ash and then dissolved to dust. That was the end of Farial. But...

“Uncle!” Memphys cried in a trembling voice without so much as a glance at the dead demon. She was fixated on Milgazia’s right arm... or rather, the stump at his shoulder where his arm used to be. The missing appendage lay on the floor, right next to where Farial’s body had fallen and disintegrated.

What in the world...?

“No need to worry,” Milgazia assured us, sounding unperturbed as he picked his right arm up with his left. “I suppose I never told you, Mephy... I lost my real right arm a thousand years ago in the Incarnation War. This is a prosthetic created by magic, though it works so much like my old arm that even I forget it’s artificial sometimes.”

Wow... I guess he really did forget it if he was relying on it in a showdown with a demon and all...

I could only assume Milgazia had detached it intentionally when Farial’s tentacles ensnared him in order to get him off balance.

“Now, the last one left...” He reattached his arm and turned back... to our final opponent, Jade.

Jade hadn’t moved in a while. Rather, he probably couldn’t. The demon manifested inside him had instinctively realized that it couldn’t beat Milgazia and Memphys.

“I see... They used a human,” Milgazia said distastefully as he regarded Jade. He’d apparently realized on his own that this was a demidemon using a person as material.

“Ain’t there a way to fix him with your magic?!” Luke shouted.

The dragon elder shook his head. “I’m afraid that his humanity no longer remains. There’s nothing I can do. Even if there were a way to drive the demon out of him and restore his appearance, there would be no way to retrieve his soul. But at least...” Milgazia raised his hand to Jade.

Luke quietly pushed it aside. “At least... let me read you your last rites, Sir Jade,” he said in a hollow voice.

I’d forgotten... It was Luke and Mileena who’d first met Jade and taken on his

job.

His sword at his side, Luke slowly began to walk toward Jade. “Sorry, could you...” he started.

“I won’t interfere,” Mileena swiftly replied.

Perhaps realizing that Milgazia and Memphys had no intention to intervene either, Jade finally started moving. He and Luke thus faced each other, their blades at the ready. They broke into a run at the same instant. The distance between them closed instantly. They both raised their swords...

Suddenly, Jade produced a ball of magic!

“Graaaaah!” With a shrieking cry, Luke sliced through the magic ball—and Jade’s face all at once.

4: The Shadow Looming Behind the Throne

No trace remained of the man named Jade Caudwell. The demon who'd inhabited his body collapsed with one slash of Luke's sword and melted into a red sludge, which then powdered into nothing. I guess losing your humanity meant you weren't even allowed the grace of returning to the earth...

Luke slumped despondently and let out a sigh, short but deep.

"Mephy," Milgazia called in his usual manner, as if to lighten the heavy mood. "Lina Inverse is injured. Heal her."

Memphys obediently did so, walking around to my back and chanting up a spell.

"You're injured too. Let me see your hand," Mileena said with her trademark bluntness as she approached her fellow mercenary and began casting a Recovery spell. The afterblast from Jade's magic orb had hit Luke when he'd cut through it with his sword, although he hardly seemed to feel it.

The room was so quiet that it was like the battle never happened. A pleasant warmth spread across my back from the healing magic, and the pain receded.

"Hey... Memphys," I said, looking forward as I addressed the elf girl behind me.

"Yes?"

"You should really find a better way to make an entrance. You reminded me of this weirdo I knew once..."

I didn't even have to look over my shoulder to know a vein was popping on her forehead. "I beg your pardon! Is that what you say to the person who saved your life?! Can't you humans ever simply thank someone for their aid?"

Mileena responded in my stead, looking straight at Memphys and saying, "We're truly in your debt. Thank you, Memphys."

"Erk..."

What was that? I couldn't swear to it, but I thought I'd heard a soft groan behind me.

Then Gourry, who was looking our way, asked with a puzzled expression, "Huh? How come your face is all red?"

"B-Be quiet! That's none of your concern!" Memphys responded immediately. "More importantly, your treatment is finished!" she insisted as she slapped me on the back. The pain was completely gone now.

Wait... Aha, could it be? I slooowly turned my head and shot a sly glance at Memphys.

"Wh-What are you looking at me like that for?!"

"Oh, no reason. I just wanted to say thank you for healing me," I said, staring her straight in the eye.

She averted her gaze slightly. "I... I merely did what Uncle Milgazia told me to!"

Mweeheehee... That proves it. Oho, yes. Now I see everything...

"Hey, Memphys, is it possible that... despite your domineering manner... you're actually really shy?"

"What?!" The blush immediately spread all the way to her ears.

Ahhhhhha, bingo! Now I know exactly how to mess with her!



“Ohhh, I knew it! Look at you, goin’ all red!” I teased.

“Wha? Ah! Buh!” Memphys squeaked incomprehensibly.

“It’s true. Mephy has a history of being quite introverted around strangers,” Milgazia announced frankly with a sidelong glance at the elf in question.

“What? Uncle! Don’t tell them—!”

“What’s the harm? I remember your father lamenting to me about your clinical shyness.”

“Ohhh? So you’re really just a shy, innocent little girlie deep down, eh? Innnnteresting...” I taunted.

“Nngh!” She didn’t seem to have a counter to that one.

Milgazia continued, unfazed. “I also recall a human sorceress we met around then who said to you, ‘When you’re feeling shy, that’s the time to act domineering.’ This seemed to cure you of your bashfulness.”

...*Hmm?* That passing mention brought a scowl to my face.

“Oh? So I guess a *mere human* really helped you out, huh?” Luke interjected.

Memphys turned even redder still. “That... That was different! She was a truly noble person of unshakable self-confidence and policy!”

Oho? I had a feeling I’d met someone you could describe that way a few years back, before I met Gourry. A terrifying thought accordingly crossed my mind.

“Say, is there any chance this sorceress was... No, never mind.” Fearing the answer I might receive, I kept my question to myself. There are some things in this world you’re better off not knowing.

“What is it?” Milgazia asked.

“Really, never mind! A-Anyway...” I quickly decided to change the subject. “Master Milgazia, when we got split up at the northern tower... The four of us were trapped inside that strange barrier space, and I guess you guys were still fighting by the time we busted out. What’d they throw at you?”

“More of the same. Memphys and I were lured into a bounded space where we were greeted by demons—ten of the human-form kind.”

Gehhh! Ten?! So that's why Farial was so surprised they got out...

"I... I can't believe you made it through that."

"Well, Mephy immediately went to work in her full Zenafa armor mode, and while the demons were still trying to regroup from her initial assault, we picked them off one by one."

Wow, that's pretty damn wild! Still, I guess seeing an elf in weird armor suddenly transform into a giant and start tearing stuff up *would* freak out even a demon... At any rate, it sounded like we'd now polished off all the demons that had been sent after us so far.

"The question now is what comes next. We've cleaned house, but I get the feeling this isn't over yet," I volunteered.

"Hmm..." Milgazia hummed.

Judging from how they'd spoken to each other, Sardian and Farial were demons of similar station. And the fact that they'd referred to our favorite General as "Lady" Sherra suggested they were below her in rank. The demons Milgazia and Memphys had fought were probably on the same level. At least, I assumed they weren't ranked any higher given how Farial had called them their "forces."

As it stood, the setup suggested a bunch of Sardian-level demons were plotting among themselves with no real hierarchy—and I found that *highly* unlikely. There had to be a player calling the shots.

"Something about this just doesn't add up, yeah," agreed Luke. He was opening and closing his hands to check them after Mileena's healing spell worked its magic. "I wish someone would just come out all like 'bwahaha, I'm the boss' and explain their plan so we could smack 'em down already."

Too bad things weren't liable to be that convenient. That said, I wasn't exactly itching to deal with whoever was the ringleader of this whole circus... But Luke was right in that there seemed to be another mystery at hand. There *used* to be a proper boss here—Sherra—so...

Wait... Sherra? Boss? Hold up. This means... what if...

“Sorry, but... could you guys come with me?” I asked.

Gourry replied, “Need the potty?”

“No, darn it! What do you take me for, a little kid?!” I huffed. “I might’ve figured something out. It’s just a hunch, so I don’t wanna say anything yet... but I wanna see if I’m right.”

“What did you figure out?” Memphys asked.

I wasn’t sure how to answer her. To be honest, the foundation for my idea was as shaky as all get-out.

“I’ll humor it, whatever it is. We’re not doing any good by staying here,” Mileena said in the silence. And if she was on board, that meant...

“Mileena’s right. I’m comin’ too. Yeah.”

Yup, Luke would be tagging along as well.

“I’m okay with going too.”

Gourry... Your opinion wasn’t in question. That only left...

“It would be better than remaining here with nothing else to do,” Milgazia said, and Memphys couldn’t exactly argue the point.

“Then... You’ll all come with me?”

Everyone nodded in the affirmative, so I started to walk.

“By the way, Milgazia...” I said after vaguely retracing my steps for a time. “The assault that Sardin—that that demon mounted against Memphys earlier. That was an attack from the astral plane, right? I know you guys can block those, but is there any way for humans like us to block similar attacks from demons?”

“No.”

Wow... He stated it so plainly that it kind of took me aback.

“That said, demons would never use astral attacks in combat with humans.”

“How come?” Luke chimed in.

“There’s a human saying—‘a dragon will use all its strength to crush a

sparrow.’ But that doesn’t apply to demons. They think of humans less as adversaries and more as food... mindless dispensaries of negative emotions like fear. There are a few exceptions, like you people, but in general, humans are simply too weak to merit their attention. And even you are still far outranked by low-tier demons in terms of sheer magic power.”

“That’s a lot to take in, man,” Luke muttered.

Nevertheless, it was the truth. The greatest human sorcerers had to chant and invoke words of power to cast spells, but even bottom-of-the-barrel lesser demons could conjure up flaming arrows with a mere howl. Dragons and elves apparently had a similar ability too, if Milgazia and Memphys were anything to go by.

At any rate, Milgazia continued, “Don’t take it personally. I’m just apprising you of the demons’ frame of mind. They do not view humans as worthy foes, so to attack one from the astral side—in other words, to mount a *true* attack—would be akin to admitting they weren’t powerful enough to defeat an inferior being without resorting to their full power. That way of thinking can easily prove fatal to astral beings like demons.”

Aha... I see.

“Um... I don’t really get it,” Gourry said, predictably enough.

Aha... figures.

“Well... Simply put, demons are kinda finicky, so they won’t use weird attacks on us.”

“Oh, is that all? Why didn’t you just say so?” Gourry asked carelessly.

Milgazia fell silent at that.

Ooh... did Gourry piss him off? Whatever the case, as we were talking, we proceeded up the stairs and down a deserted hallway.

Wahhhh... ahhhh... The draft from the far end of the corridor brought with it a faint sound.

“What was that voice?”

“A moan...? No, more like a distant scream.”

Memphys and Milgazia instantly pegged it as a voice.

“You’re telling me... that was a person?” Luke scowled at this.

I’d heard the same howl in the palace when fighting Sherra last time too. I briefly regaled everyone of the legend. “The story goes that the local king went off to fight the demons and returned grotesquely transformed by a curse. And so here he remains tucked away in the castle, a formless lump of flesh unable to die.”

“Oh, I think we heard about that... from him.” Luke’s voice fell as he seemed to recall it was Jade who’d shared the story with them originally.

“We’re not going to investigate that, are we?” Memphys asked me.

“Of course not,” I said with a shake of my head. Getting to the bottom of a spooky rumor wouldn’t help us at all in this situation.

“Then where are we going?” she asked instead.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t tell her... that I’d kinda gotten lost.

Thinking about it, I wasn’t really all that familiar with the inner castle’s layout. Plus we’d come in a different way from last time, and this wasn’t part of the route that the former General Allus outlined for us. *Hmm...*

After a little more aimless meandering, we abruptly came out of the hallway and into a wide-open room. It was lined with marble pillars and a red carpet running the floor between them.

The audience chamber?

All that wandering had finally landed us at the VIP entrance. At the end of the red carpet sat an unoccupied throne, and...

A jolt of tension ran through me. There was a figure standing by the throne. He silently turned his gaze on the six of us as we came to a halt. He was dressed in heavy silver armor with a one-handed longsword on his belt. He was helmetless, and I recognized his face. Long black hair. Mid-thirties. The majesty of royalty etched on his visage.

“King Wells Xeno Gyria...” I muttered.

“No way...” Mileena and Luke whispered in shock. It seemed they’d finally caught on.

“What are you doing here? It’s awfully late,” came King Wells’s solemn voice, echoing in the empty chamber.

While keeping a certain distance from him, I began to walk down the red carpet. “I wonder what *you’re* doing here. To find the king hanging around his audience chamber at this hour, armed and armored...”

“I believe I asked you first.”

He took a few steps toward me. Without even thinking, I backed up just as many. Of course, I didn’t fail to notice the way his metal armor made no noise as he walked.

“I believe you know why we’re here already... *King Wells.*”

“Hmm...” At my words, the corner of his mouth curled up ever-so-slightly.

Whommm!

A powerful shockwave ran through me, stealing my breath away. “Guh!”

“What?!” I could hear Memphis’s and Milgazia’s voices rise up in surprise behind me.

That shockwave wasn’t a real attack at all. It was just him dropping the camouflage glamour he’d been using to mask his true aura—yet that alone was enough to shake my body and soul.

“Good instincts,” he said. “When did you catch on?”

“Not long ago...” The pressure he emitted was so strong that just talking was agony. “I knew it... because I once heard...” I widened my stance and puffed out my chest to try to endure it. “I heard that demons only serve... those with whom they make a contract... and those stronger than them. Which means...” I said, turning to him. “Which means the only one General Sherra would ever pledge her sword to... is you, Dynast Graushera.”

Silence filled the audience chamber. Who can say how long it lasted?

It turned out that there *was* no king for Sherra to dazzle with feminine wiles or brainwash with magical power. Everyone believed that His Majesty had changed upon her arrival... and while that was fundamentally incorrect, it was also entirely true.

Demons were astral beings. The strongest of them could make themselves look human. Was it not possible, then, that they could choose to look like a *specific* human? The king had changed, indeed... from the real one to an imposter.

They'd probably made the swap after Sherra infiltrated the castle. Since she was by the king's side constantly afterward, any changes in his behavior were attributed to her. But Sherra wasn't the real instigator of this plot. No, she was merely a diversion—a distraction from the even greater darkness behind her. The way that Sherra had smiled in the moment of her defeat... Perhaps it was satisfaction knowing that she'd played her part perfectly.

"Hahahahahahaha!" Graushera's laughter broke the silence. "What a powerful imagination. Was that all it took for you to figure it out?"

"It was a little more than that, actually. Closing the gate to the city to halt interference, the ridiculous order for the soldiers not to leave the buildings. Who would do that? This is a monarchy. Yeah, maybe a gutless king surrounded by demon advisors might meekly submit and do as he was told... but I had a much easier time believing the command had come down from His Majesty himself. Speaking of, what was the point of those orders?"

"The point? Don't tell me you think there's some greater plan at play. We're simply having a feast."

"A feast?" Mileena asked.

"Yes. The negative emotions that we feed upon... Anxiety and unrest. Fear and frustration. This wasn't a bad way to get them stirring aplenty in the city, don't you think?"

"So... sending those demidemon hordes was just setting the table, huh?" Luke spat out.

"Partly, yes... But more than anything, I crave battle." As he said that, he

began to walk. Slowly. Toward us.

“He’s... beyond strong,” Milgazia said hoarsely from where he stood beside me.

“I know.”

“Can we beat him, human girl?!”

“Of course not.”

“Then why?! When you realized what he was, why did you not propose that we flee?!”

“You really think he’d let us?”

Milgazia went silent at this. He was panicking. The golden dragon elder who’d lived through the Incarnation War... was panicking.

“What did you do to the other... to the real King Wells?!” I shouted at the approaching demon. I knew the answer already, of course. I was only asking to try to distract myself from my rising terror.

“Who’s going to notice one more wailing ball of flesh tucked away in the castle?” came his answer. He’d cast the same curse on the current king to transform him into an undying, suffering mass, then sealed him away in the same place.

A change came over the demon’s face, gradually, as he walked. Two horn-like appendages grew from his head, arching backward and hardening to cover his cheeks, his brow, and his eyes. This pressure that threatened to freeze my heart... Was it the fear of knowing that this was Dynast, or some deeper primordial terror?

“I won’t lose!” I yelled. I intended to rally myself and everyone else around me. “I can’t afford to! Not to someone so lazy that he names his subordinate ‘Sherra’ after himself!”

“Her name, eh? Sherra came to ask me about the same thing not long ago...” Dynast said as he walked, his face transforming into a silver helmet. His unhurried pace didn’t change. “Greater Beast said they also gave half their name to their Priest... To be honest, I don’t see the problem. Why would a mere

tool need a more interesting name?”

I gasped. “Is that... Is that what you told Sherra?”

“It is. The negative emotions of demons are also quite delicious.”

You bastard! That explained why she’d been so strangely desperate upon our last encounter here in the palace. The lord she served had said she was no more than a tool. Not like I was about to have pity on Sherra or anything... but I couldn’t just let this jerk run amok.

“I’ll defeat you,” I said flat out. “Your power may be terrifying... but I *will* defeat you!”

“Hahaha! How bold! I like it!” Another peal of Dynast’s laughter echoed through the chamber. He then stopped, howled, and brandished his longsword. “Very well! I accept your challenge, on my name as Dynast Graushera! Come at me, as lambs to the slaughter!”

That was the starting bell to our brawl.

“Fell Zaleyd!” Luke and Mileena unleashed their chanted spells the instant Graushera stopped talking. The two rays of light hit Dynast’s body directly.

“I’d have preferred something a bit flashier to open our battle,” the demon responded.

“What?!” Naturally, they were both shocked.

Another beam pierced the air—this one the laser breath from Memphis’s Zenafa!

“Such pitiful light...” A small black ball appeared in Dynast’s hand and absorbed the brilliant beam. “You really thought that could crush my darkness?!” The demon hadn’t taken a single step yet.

“Graaah!” Gourry charged forward in the wake of Memphis’s blast with a throat-rending cry.

Clink! Ping! Dynast blocked each one of his slashes with his own sword. “Oh? What skill! Let’s try this awhile!”

The flashes of silver light sped up between them with every strike. The din of clashing steel reverberated through the room. Milgazia took the chance to enter the fray.

“Vrabazard Flare!”

His spell shot toward the demon, but—*Vwoosh!*—Graushera swept his left hand to send the light arcing up toward the ceiling! *Kra-kash!* It opened a steaming hole in the roof and flew off.

“Too simple!” Dynast howled, swinging his left arm. *Whommm!*

“Ah—” The shockwave he produced sent Milgazia flying before he could even cry out. The dragon-man’s body crashed through a marble pillar before landing on the floor beyond.

“Uncle!” Memphys cried.

“I’m playing with this human right now! Don’t get in my way, dragon!” Graushera spat as he returned his focus to his melee with Gourry. Granted, even as he’d knocked Milgazia away with his left hand, he hadn’t missed a beat in their duel. That’s right—he was only using his right hand to fight.

Playing, huh? That’s exactly what he’s doing. But...

“Don’t underestimate me!”

Their blades continued to clash. Gourry’s sword slipped past Graushera’s and—*Clink!*—the thrust caught the demon in the left shoulder!

“Oh? Impressive,” Dynast said with a faint smile in his voice.

“What?!” Gourry drew back, confused. “You didn’t even feel it?!” he gasped in a shocked whisper.

Dynast replied, “No, I felt it. Like a drop of water hitting a stone. But don’t be disappointed, swordsman. Your skill is remarkable. But sadly, your weapon... is insufficient.”

“Ra Tilt!” Mileena unleashed a pillar of blue fire on Dynast, hoping that it might at least do some damage. This was the strongest attack spell in all shamanistic magic, after all! But...

Swsh! With just a swing of his longsword, Graushera cut through the flames enveloping his body.

“He’s incredible!” Mileena cried, a rare note of panic in her voice.

“No, girl! You’re simply pathetic! As long as you’re bound by the vessel known as life— Hmm?!” Dynast stopped short to block an incoming swing from Gourry while he was talking. “Do you think you’re distracting me? Really?!” he said, his voice filled with mockery.

But he was wrong. The Gourry I knew was way too stupid for that.

“Distracting you? Never! I’m more than a distraction!” Gourry’s swordplay picked up even more speed. The tip of his blade grazed Dynast’s armor repeatedly.

“I told you! That’s no more than a drop of water against a stone!”

See? Like I said. Stupid.

But...

“Are you... insane?!” A hint of surprise entered Graushera’s voice for the first time as Gourry really started whaling on him.

Yup... That was the big lug I knew. Defiance born out of sheer foolishness was what we needed right now. I’d taught him that myself long ago— *“If we walk into a fight believing we’re gonna lose, our chances of winning turn to zero. So even if the odds are against us... I’m gonna fight to win!”*

You remembered, Gourry!

“Zellas Bullid!” I fired a beam of light that set a course for Dynast.

“Hnn!” As the demon swung his longsword at my spell to cut it down, Gourry struck Graushera’s armor once more.

“Screw it, everyone! Let’s just dogpile the bastard!” I cried.

Luke, more than willing, charged Dynast. Mileena chanted her next spell, and Milgazia—who’d managed to get back on his feet—moved around to flank our target. Lastly...

“Memphys?” She was just standing there a little ways behind me, trembling.

“Get a grip!” I shouted as I ran up to her.

“I... I can’t...” she whispered timidly in response.

“What are you talking about? Where’d all that bravado of yours go?!”

“I can’t do this!” She shook her head, still trembling. “You... You humans... You can only press on because you can’t see what that *thing* looks like on the astral plane. When I tried to attack with magic... When I lowered my Zenafa’s astral barrier... I saw it! I saw Dynast’s true form! It’s so big... A massive, all-encompassing darkness! It’s just toying with all of us! Whatever wounds you manage to inflict mean nothing—it just channels a little more power to its material form to compensate. We can’t do this. There’s no way we can beat this thing...” Then she shook her head again.



“Sounds like that human sorceress you met was pretty lame, huh?” I jibed.

“What?” She furrowed her brow slightly in non-comprehension.

“Milgazia said that meeting her changed you. I didn’t know you back then, but I’ll bet this is exactly what you were like... Isn’t it, *Mephy*?”

“...”

“And if all your so-called growth was superficial... she must not have been very inspiring after all.”

I figured that Memphys would cave under the circumstances if I attacked her personally, so I’d chosen to go after the sorceress she admired instead. And the rest...

“The rest... is up to you. Will you quiver in fear, serving up a banquet of negative emotions for that demon until it kills you? Or will you bet on a tiny sliver of a chance and fight? It’s your call, Mephy. The choice is in your hands.” With that, I turned back to Dynast and began chanting quietly.

“That’s Memphys to you...” she said from behind me.

Aha. Attagirl.

“Ruby-Eye Blade!” Luke unleashed his spell, moving into position to pincer Dynast with Gourry. A magical red sword appeared in his readied hands in place of his other sword, now sheathed. It called upon the power of our world’s Dark Lord, Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu.

“Geh!” Graushera, apparently fearing a direct hit from this one, withdrew his own sword from his clash with Gourry. He then produced a magical light over it and used it to block Luke’s strike.

Clink! While Dynast’s attention was diverted, Gourry slashed at the demon’s armor again.

“Hahhh!” Dynast took a swing at Gourry with his left arm. Gourry blocked it with his sword hilt, but the big lug still went flying. Dynast must have produced a shockwave at the moment of impact. Or maybe he’d just overpowered the dude. It was hard to tell for sure.

Without missing a beat, Milgazia dove into the fray to take Gourry's place. He rushed right up into Dynast's personal space and slammed a fist into the demon! *Pow!* A flash of light appeared around his clenched hand. He'd probably infused it with magic directly as it struck.

"You'll have to do better than that!" Graushera howled, knocking Milgazia back to the ground with a left-handed strike. Just then...

"Ra Tilt!" Mileena's second spiritual strike wreathed Graushera. *Fwoom!*

"That won't work!" Dynast cried. And just like that, the pillar of flame shattered!

Zing! In the meantime, Gourry had gotten back up and moved in to strike at Graushera from the side. The demon turned to face him—then his gaze suddenly shifted and he swung his left hand! *Crackle!* I heard a soft sound in the air. I looked and saw his hand pointed toward Memphis, who was wielding a curiously shaped white sword.

Of course... He'd detected Memphis's slash incoming from another dimension and disrupted it before it reappeared in this one. But if we were gonna make this work, teamwork was the way to go!

"Zellas Bullid!" I shot another beam of light straight at Dynast.

"Can't you see it's pointless?!" He raised his left hand to block the blast, when...

"Zellas Phalanx!" Milgazia bellowed from behind me.

There was no way to avoid this double-sided attack! But just then... he must have run out of magic, because the light disappeared from Luke's hand. Dynast howled, producing a shield in his left hand to pulverize my spell, followed by a sweep of his now-free sword to destroy the ball of light Milgazia had fired.

Just then, something white streaked past me. *Memphys!* Dynast turned his attention there.

"Break! Attack!" At Memphis's cry, the dazzling white streak arced upward and fired its laser breath down at the demon!

"I told you, it's pointless—" He created a black sphere that sucked in the light,

but his taunt stopped short... for it was only the Zenafa in the air. “?!”

Memphys had temporarily removed her armor to dive at Dynast’s feet. “Rune Strayed!”

Nreeoom! The spear of light found its target. Dynast’s body trembled slightly, and... *Wham!*

“Ngh!” The demon unleashed a kick that sent Memphys sailing! She loudly bounced along the floor, coming to a stop not far from me.

“Mephy!” Milgazia cried, though Dynast’s gaze and the pressure he emitted kept him locked in place.

I scrambled to her side, but before I could reach her, her white armor returned on its own and wreathed her once more. *This is...*

“Hmm. Elves are such physically fragile beings,” Graushera spat with casual contempt. Memphys’s attack hadn’t affected him much.

“This guy is no joke...” Luke whispered.

“Really? I consider the amount of power I’m currently using to be quite a joke,” Graushera replied.

“Memphys!” I called to the still-collapsed elf.

Hearing me, she opened her eyes slightly and managed to sit up for a moment before buckling over in a coughing fit, sputtering up a bit of blood. With a gasp, I tried to start chanting a Recovery spell, but she stopped me and began her own chant, putting a hand to her stomach. I knew her Zenafa-enhanced healing magic would probably work a lot better than mine... but would Dynast give her the time to recover?

“You’re trying to heal yourself? Strange child,” Graushera said casually, even as he resumed his swordplay with Gourry. “Just submit to death already. Why do you actively choose suffering?”

The bastard really was toying with us. He could have killed us all anytime he wanted. We needed to finish this before he decided to do just that, so...

Memphys’s healing spell seemed to do the trick, because she managed to pick herself halfway up.

“Don’t push yourself,” I urged her.

“Do... you think this is a fight we can win without pushing ourselves?” she said with a smile in response.

“Dang... By the way, did I see that Zenafa thing attack and return on its own?”

“Yes. It’s tailor-made for me. It won’t listen to anyone else, though it can function independently to a degree...”

Aha...

“In that case... care to help me *really* push things?”

“Dynast Graushera!” I pronounced, glaring at Gourry and the demon he remained locked in combat with. “For a moment... For just one moment, we’re going to hit you with everything we have!”

“Go on and try! Do your worst!” Dynast shouted back. My declaration had done nothing to shake his confidence.

It was time to do this.

Hail, Lords of the four worlds’ darkness

I beseech your bond and beg you this boon

By your powers combined, entwined,

Bless me with magic mightier than mine

The four talismans on my body responded to my words of power, let out a flash, and temporarily boosted my magic power. Then, with a glance from me, Memphys took off running toward Dynast. I followed a beat later, chanting a spell under my breath. Memphys closed in on Dynast, and...

“Your staggered pile-on attacks won’t work!” Graushera cried as the white figure sped at him. “Don’t underestimate me! You think the same trick will work on me twice?!” Forcefully knocking Gourry’s blade back, he ignored the Zenafa in the air and swept his sword low.

Please! You’re the one underestimating us! We wouldn’t dream of trying the same trick on you twice!

Memphys, absent her Zenafa, leaped back the second she landed, leaving Dynast's sword to catch nothing as it scraped along the floor! And then... *Kree-yom!* The Zenafa attached itself to Dynast!

"What?!" For the first time, Graushera cried out in shock. He probably didn't understand what we were trying to do.

I'll show you... It's this!

"Shield!"

In instant response to Memphys's command, the Zenafa activated one of its abilities—severing its wearer from the astral plane! That's right. We were using the armor to cut Graushera's material form off from his true body on the astral plane!

"What did you..." Even Dynast was taken aback.

"Ruby-Eye Blade!" Luke conjured his magical blade a second time and sliced at Dynast.

"Not so fast!" The demon blocked it, infusing his longsword with magic. His moves were confident, but slower than before.

From the other side, Gourry closed in on Graushera with a loud cry. The demon didn't bother to engage with him. Even if we'd halved Dynast's power—or worse—a single strike from the big lug shouldn't do much damage. Yet just as his blade made contact...

"Hraaaaah!" Milgazia let out a draconic howl. As he did, the symbols on the blade in Gourry's hand began to glow red.

Is that what Milgazia drew on the sword? Of course! He painted those with dragon's blood! Probably his own!

The sword, resonating with Milgazia's power, pierced Dynast!

"Gah!" The demon let out a small cry of pain. He'd felt that one, even if only a little!

Graushera raised his left hand and seized Gourry's sword. I could hear the quiet creaking of metal.

“Impudent brat!”

Kra-kinng! As Dynast howled, the blade snapped like a twig. But then, from within the broken blade... a narrower blade appeared!

“What?!”

We all stared at Gourry, shocked.

“The Blast Sword?!” Milgazia cried, even as the blade glowed with pale purple light and struck deep into Dynast’s side.

“Graaaaah!” Graushera’s scream rang out, and his swordplay became more furious.

Luke took the chance to jump in, mowing his sword through the demon’s side.

“Raaaaaaaagh!” With an inhuman wail, Dynast’s gaze froze—locked on the sight ahead of him. Yup, he was staring right at me in my approach.

Blade forged of the freezing black void,

Be released under heaven’s seal

Become mine, become part of me

Let us mete destruction as one

Smash even the souls of the gods...

Dynast knew this spell. I was borrowing the power of the Lord of Nightmares to forge a blade of pure void. He raised his longsword, probably intending to deflect me by unleashing a magical shockwave... yet swinging his sword through the air did nothing. The Zenafa’s wearer, sealed off from the astral plane, couldn’t be affected by magical attacks without contact, but in exchange, couldn’t cast any magic either. Not unless Memphys gave the order to lower the Zenafa’s seal.

I’d informed Mileena of this, which was why she hadn’t moved. But Dynast had no idea. The wounded Graushera, his sword still mid-swing, was completely vulnerable! I dove in, not about to miss my moment! And then...

“Ragna Blade!” Without a sound, my newly forged blade of darkness cleaved

Dynast Graushera in twain.

With a light, hollow clang, the white armor fell to the ground. Its wearer, Dynast Graushera, had been annihilated within it.

“Did we... get him?” Gourry asked.

“His corporal form, at least,” I said as I sank down onto the cold floor. “We used the Zenafa to cut off his manifestation—the eensy part of himself he forwarded into our plane of existence—from his real body. And we just barely managed to beat this small fraction of him.”

“Hey! Hang on a minute! Does that mean the real body is still out there?!” shouted Luke, who’d also collapsed to the floor.

“Yep.”

“So he’s gonna come back?!”

“He might. If he’s willing to show himself to humans in a weakened state.”

“I don’t think that’s likely,” Milgazia said in response.

“Yeah. So... it’s over.” I cast a glance at the elf standing nearby. “Thanks for going along with my crazy plan. Great job, Memphys.”

“Mephy... Call me Mephy,” she replied with a small smile.

In the morning light, we could see the stores and stalls along Gyria’s central avenue just beginning to open as people milled about. The castle gate was now open, and demons’ night raids had ceased. Life had returned to the city of Gyria.

It had now been a few days since our showdown with Dynast. We’d just finished dealing with the aftermath and gotten permission to leave today.

“It’s gonna be tough for this place, huh?” Gourry asked as he gazed into the distance.

“Well, as long as there are people like Maias around, things’ll go back to... No, they’ll be even better off than normal. I’m sure of it,” I responded baselessly.

In the end, most of the wrap-up involved Allus (after we explained the situation to him) using his influence in the castle to smooth things over. Now, that makes it sound all nice and tidy, but lemme tell you—it was no mean feat. The king vanishing overnight along with two high-ranked officials and several other people... There was no way that *wasn't* going to be an ordeal.

I couldn't say what had gone on in the castle or how Allus had pulled it off, but it had only taken a few days before everything resolved with the official announcement of the king's "passing of illness." I could speculate, though. I figured Allus had simply told them that the king was replaced by a demon. And to prove it, he'd taken the fastest route possible. In other words, he'd shown them that there were now two lumps of flesh shut deep within the castle somewhere.

Again, this is speculation on my part.

At any rate, while everything was being settled, the rest of us had been held "in custody" at Allus's mansion. It was a little psychologically stuffy at times, but it wasn't as if we could all fit in Maias's tiny apartment. It also spared us the expense of an inn.

Maias had taken it pretty hard when we told him about Jade, but we'd gone to say goodbye to him too. *"I thought about going home, but I think I might stay in this city a little longer. I don't know what I can do... but I want to try to help make it better, however I can,"* he'd said with a shy smile. I shouldn't have to tell you that Luke, Mephy, and I teased him quite a bit for that cheesy line.

And now, at last, it was time for the rest of us to say goodbye on the road.

"Well, I suppose this is farewell," said Milgazia.

Gourry turned to Mephy standing beside him and asked, "Are you going to return to the mountains?"

"Please do not say 'return to the mountains.'"

"You make us sound like wild animals."

"Ahhh... My bad, my bad," Gourry apologized as they both pressed in on him.

"Although, it's true that Dragons' Peak is a mountain... and Mephy's village is

also on a mountain. But I do think we'll be wandering about a bit longer. We never learned what Dynast was really planning in the end, so it's entirely possible he'll try it again."

The man had a point. We'd fought Graushera and won, but we hadn't destroyed him entirely. We'd never learned what he was up to either. We couldn't say just yet that the mass demon spawnings were over for good. Things were far from resolved, and there was no guarantee that the heretofore silent Greater Beast Zellas Metallium and Deep Sea Dolphin wouldn't move in to pick up the slack. But still... for now...

"That's right," Milgazia said as if remembering, pulled a set of small leather pouches out of his pocket and gave one to each of us. "I never gave you those weapons I promised, but think of these as thanks for helping us... or payment, if you'd prefer."

Gourry stared at the contents of his pouch. "Rocks?"

"It's orichalcum, stupid!" I yelled right into his face.

"Waaagh! Sorry, sorry! I didn't recognize it!" he apologized quickly.

Wait... this is orichalcum?!

"Whaaaat?!" Me, Luke, and even Mileena all cried out in shock as we checked the content of our own bags.

Wow... it really is... The pouches weren't particularly large, but each one was full of orichalcum bits the size of pebbles. They were easily worth a couple hundred gold coins.

"Gourrryyy! Give me that bag, and I'll buy all your meals for the next ten days!" I said in my sweetest tones.

"Whoa! You mean it, Lina?!"

"C'mon, don't act like you're defrauding the guy," Luke jibed as I haggled with Gourry.

"I don't think she's acting," Mileena interjected before turning to Milgazia. "Are you really sure about this?"

The old man nodded slightly. "There's a place you can find it on Dragons'

Peak, and it's all I have to offer."

Whaaat?! Dragons' Peak has an orichalcum deposit?! If only I'd known, I'd have hit that up the last time we were there! Not that we'd really had the time for that...

Still, what a relief. I was starting to think we'd done all this pro bono.

I'd originally played along on the promise of receiving weapons made by Milgazia and Mephy's people, but we'd never actually made it to the elf village. Then Jade was supposed to pay us... but, well, that whole thing happened. And Maias didn't exactly seem to be rolling in dough, so I couldn't ask him to cough up compensation. Well, I guess you could say that finally learning the identity of Gourry's sword was payment enough.

The legendary Blast Sword... Why had it had another blade forged on top of it? The answer to that had become immediately obvious. True to rumor, its sharpness was... downright absurd. You could drop it blade-down and cut clean through the cobblestones. If you tried to swing it while in a scabbard, it would cleave right through the blade casing. In fact, with one made of wood or leather, just trying to sheathe the blade would shred the thing.

In short, it was way too dangerous to just tote around like normal. We'd have an accidental bloodletting on our hands if Gourry so much as tripped while we were out on the road. It was less a legendary sword and more a gag gift, the result of prioritizing cutting power over every other concern. I suspected that someone had probably forged the secondary blade of high-grade steel over the first just to make the dang thing usable. It was absurd. Absolutely insane. In the end, we'd had to ask Milgazia to draw a new inscription on the sword to blunt its edge and get it under control. Of course, in Gourry's hands, it could probably still cleave most rocks.

At any rate, I was over the moon that we'd managed to net ourselves a little profit off this whole operation.

"You were a great help to us, humans. If anything happens, we'll hope for your aid again."

"Sure. Except... I mean, I hope we *don't* find ourselves in any situations where you guys need our help, you know?"

“Yes, quite true,” Milgazia said and then smiled. “Well, we really should be going. Thank you for everything.” With that, he turned to go.

“Take care, all of you,” Mephy said with a wink, then followed him.

“See you again somewhere... someday,” I called after them.

Soon enough, the golden dragon elder and the elf maiden in white armor disappeared into the growing crowd out on the streets.

“What about you guys, then?” I said as I turned toward our other companions.

Luke puffed out his chest. “Whaddya think? We’re still treasure hunters. We’re headin’ back out on the road—”

“Don’t you dare say ‘on a private honeymoon for two’ or anything like that,” Mileena warned sharply.

Luke froze up in response, thoroughly busted.

Hmm... You got a rough road ahead of you, but give it your best, Luke.

“See you...” someone said.

“Later...” someone else replied.

With that, Gourry and I and Luke and Mileena went our separate ways.

“Say...” Gourry piped up after we’d walked a ways, as if some thought had just occurred to him. “What are we gonna do next? You said you were gonna find me a replacement for the Sword of Light, and it seems like you have.”

“Oh...” I said quietly. *Huh, that’s right. That was what we were doing, wasn’t it? But if we’ve found him a sword, then...*

“Don’t sweat it,” Gourry said, patting me on the head with his left hand.

“Huh? Don’t sweat what?”

“It’s not like I need a reason to travel with you. How about we just go where the wind takes us for a while?”

“Guess so...”

Gourry mussed my hair, and for some reason, I didn’t mind.

Afterword

Scene: Author + L

Au: We've arrived in hot pot season! This has been the reprint of "Presages of Incarnation"!

L: A story in which a middle manager gets the shit beat out of him?

Au: Don't call him a middle manager, the poor guy. Though it's true he's between a bit of a rock and a hard place. Now it's time for a confession—I think some people have realized this, but in the original afterword for this volume, I told a blatant lie.

L: Eh? What kind of lie?

Au: I said something like, "I don't actually know what the 'presages of incarnation' are in this novel. I was tossing things back and forth with my editor about the subtitle, and we both eventually got tired and decided on something that sounded cool but wasn't at all relevant to the content."

L: I do remember you saying something like that.

Au: In reality, both the previous novel and this one contain a lot of "presages." Though the real clincher is in the next volume.

L: And saying that would've ruined the surprise, so you lied?

Au: Teehee!

L: Don't do that. It's creepy. But if you kept it a secret last time, is it really okay to spill the beans now?

Au: There was a wait between volumes last time, so I said what I did to prevent spoilers. But since a lot of people already know the story and we have multiple volumes on sale at the same time, I figure it's fine.

L: I understand lying to try to prevent spoilers, but... Hey! You mean all that talk about there not being any side stories about me was just subterfuge?!

Au: Oh, no. I was telling the truth then.

L: Right. Yes, of course. I suppose you would have to say that. I see, I see.

Au: Um, are you...

L: I get it now. Listen up, everyone! Look forward to a big surprise reveal in the future!

Au: There's no surprise reveal!

L: Anyway, see you all next volume!

Au: Listen to me!

Afterword: Over.



Spurred on by my
request, Milgazia
began to tell us...

A deathly quiet
hung over the bar.

Slayers 13

PRESAGES OF INCARNATION

“Ohohoho... My, my. Defeated already?
You humans are such high-maintenance allies.”

That intro pose...
I was sure I'd seen it somewhere before!



“Graaaah!”

**Gourry followed
in the wake of
Memphys’s light.**



Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!

[Meg/ED]

Well, since we signed off last time contemplating Jade's prospects in this volume, shall we start off this time by addressing the elephant in the room?

[Liz/TL]

Yeah... poor guy. Above-average-but-not-exceptional adventurers are just not faring well here in the second arc.

[Meg/ED]

This admittedly wasn't as unexpected as Dilarr's rather abrupt end, but it hurts in a different way. Jade was a genuinely good guy, and we actually don't see a lot of those in *Slayers* (as most of our cast is flawed in very humanizing ways)! Maybe that should have been a red flag unto itself. But I've been stewing on his untimely demise for weeks now, and I'm still not entirely sure what to make of it. It definitely darkened the volume, but I'm torn. The author has told us previously that the deaths in this arc are meant to inspire us in some way, so I don't want to dwell on Jade's death to the point of missing the lightness in this story.

[Liz/TL]

I think it's just surprising because most of the story is spent looking for Jade, and even though Lina is pretty darn pessimistic about their chances of finding him throughout, the "rules of storytelling" suggest that we should at least run into him and exchange a few words before tragedy strikes.

But I think in part because of how short and efficient these novels are, and in part because of Kanzaka's "make the world feel bigger than our heroes" philosophy, he frequently eschews traditional narrative setups and payoffs, in

favor of just... letting the villains act really rationally. Lina basically has to explain to us why we *shouldn't* expect the trope you'd see in a typical story where, because we didn't see the transformation ourselves, it should turn out the demons were lying about it being Jade.

I'll bet if we got an anime adaptation of this arc (and they decided to leave all the darkness intact), we would see his transformation on-camera.

[Meg/ED]

That's true! I was also wondering if we'd get a bit of story from Jade's perspective (like, maybe him sneaking around in the castle beforehand) if this got animated.

[Liz/TL]

Oh, that would be really good. I bet we would. Or maybe he and Lina would run into each other in the castle before getting separated, or opting to scout out separately for a while... At the very least I bet we'd get the "prologue" where Jade tells Maias to go looking for Lina. Or maybe as a flashback.

[Meg/ED]

Exactly. That would certainly raise the personal stakes, but in truth, it's not *really* like the ante needs to be upped when the premise of this volume is potentially having another Incarnation War on our hands, right?

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, and how do the events of this volume tie into that? The author is cagey about it in the afterword, but we'll just have to wait and see as we get into the arc climax... On the brighter side, at least Maias survived and gets to keep being a guard! So you know, good for him.

[Meg/ED]

I was glad to see Allus still kicking too! And speaking of the brighter side, it would be criminal not to give due credit to our two guest stars this volume.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, having Milgazia and Memphys around was a treat! And “constantly upstaged” Lina is a really funny Lina.

[Meg/ED]

Seeing our virtuoso sorcerer on the back foot is comedy gold for sure. It’s also a really good reminder that there are beings in this universe far more powerful than what we’ve seen up until this point—and that’s a double-edged sword. I was admittedly quite worried for Milgazia for a second there in the final fight (the same way I was worried for Luke last volume), but I really enjoyed the fact that this kind of somber volume ends on a high note with some good old-fashioned teamwork.

[Liz/TL]

Showing how casually more powerful Milgazia and Mephy are throughout most of the book and then showing them cringe in terror at the thought of fighting Dynast was really effective.

One of the things I didn’t really get from the anime as a younger person (and I’m not sure if that was the show’s priorities or my own—you inevitably pick up far more subtle details about a work as a translator than as a viewer) was a real sense of how much more powerful the demons get as you go up the hierarchies. I feel like the novels want you to be acutely aware of how hopeless it should feel for a human to go up against one of Shabranigdu’s lieutenants with the Giga Slave off the table.

While we’re talking demons, can we mention how freaking creepy Mianzo was? Sometimes the series’ demons can fall into a bit of a rut of “monocolor and featureless” but the dripping lady-head root-demon is one hell of a memorable image.

[Meg/ED]

Agreed. We have different moods of scary in *Slayers*, and Mianzo is firmly filed in the full-on creepy category. We haven't talked a lot about the series art along the way, but I was really glad we got an illustration of her! That's going to haunt me like the picture of copy-Rezo did.

[Liz/TL]

Ooh, it's good. I can see why, if you were choosing what from the volume to portray, you'd choose that. A+ design work, plus the visceral element of her always talking like her mouth is full of water. And that setup was pure horror. The idea of being in a rainy house and hearing the drip-drip-drip of a leak... but it's getting closer? Masterful. But I digress. We were talking elves and dragons, yes?

[Meg/ED]

Yes, of course! I really hope this isn't the last we see of Milgazia and Mephy. I think they make a great duo and they're a lot of fun to have around, but I also understand that they're a little *too* powerful to take on every adventure. Hopefully we can catch up with them sometime under less dire circumstances—even if that's unlikely, given their disinclination to meddle in human affairs.

[Liz/TL]

Yes, although there's an implication that Mephy had some meddling done by another woman from Lina's past...

[Meg/ED]

I absolutely adore the dashes of backstory and lore that get thrown around in this volume. A certain larger-than-life sorceress may go unnamed here, but we all know in our hearts who that really was.

[Liz/TL]

Ohoho...

[Meg/ED]

For anyone who isn't already aware, whenever Lina mentions something that happened to her in the past or someone she used to know, that's often (if not always) a nod to events and personalities of other *Slayers* canon (namely the prequel/side story novels).

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, like the story of how she first met Wizer, I believe, was originally a side story. Will we get to those ourselves some day? Here's hoping!

[Meg/ED]

I'll second that!

[Liz/TL]

This is a little bit of a digression as well, but the experience of being an anime fan in the West has always been a strange one, hasn't it? With the way we frequently only get the tip of an iceberg in a franchise. Back when you and I were new to this, we'd usually only get the anime version of something (which was occasionally a two-part OAV or a movie that just animated "the good bits" and was incomprehensible on its own) without any of the manga source material.

Things are so much better nowadays. Publishers can get fully caught up to a currently-running light novel or manga before the anime adaptation even airs (in simulcast form at that!), and for the really big franchises we might even get the games and merch and stuff. Basically, we get to have an experience that's a little bit closer to what the original audience gets.

So if some day we do get to bring the short stories over, you could read through them in publication order and get a taste of that experience. It's just such a cool idea. I wonder how differently it would make some of these

mainline novels read, you know? Interesting thoughts for potential futures, at least!

[Meg/ED]

I'm so grateful for how far we've come since *back in the day*, but yeah, it'd be great if we could have the full context of the series in English eventually for people to enjoy. Myself included. I'd love to explore that.

[Liz/TL]

(stares straight into the fourth wall) If we do, it'll be thanks to a lot of awesome people who bought the mainline novel series and proved that the demand was there. (ahem) Anyway, anything else to discuss this time around?

[Meg/ED]

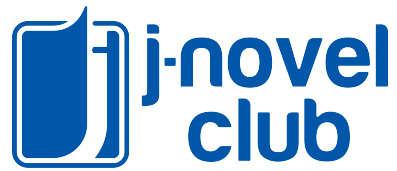
There's a lot more we *could* touch on (like, we never got to the dwarves!), but I'm feeling heartened after our discussion so far. What about you?

[Liz/TL]

The dwarves! What's up with the dwarves? But yeah, there's not much to discuss there except "I really wanna know what's up with *Slayers* dwarves"... so yes, I think it's time to move on. See you next time for... almost assuredly... more tragedy? (laughs weakly, sweats)

[Meg/ED]

Things have to look up at some point, right? Right?



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Slayers: Volume 13

by Hajime Kanzaka

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SLAYERS Vol. 13

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