



SLAYERS

14

HATRED IN SELENTIA

BY **HAJIME KANZAKA**
ILLUSTRATIONS BY **RUI ARAIZUMI**

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1: The World Is Never Free of Power Struggles

“Twilight—the witching hour,” I said poetically, looking out over the city where the last oranges of day were blending with the first purples of night. “I think I’ve heard it called that before. When the world is painted by sunset, dark forces find footholds where shadow meets light. They can sneak in through gaps in your heart and drive you mad.”

“So you’re saying...” my traveling companion, Gourry, began as he followed my gaze. My dude was handsome and an excellent swordsman, but tragically, he had stale pasta for gray matter. In the evening breeze and waning sunlight, his long blond hair looked like a flickering flame. “You’re saying it’s the twilight’s fault we’re lost, and not your whim to go exploring the city’s back alleys?”

“...”

“...”

A gust of wind filled the silence, and then...

“Gahhh! Fine, it’s my fault! It’s all my fault!” I was forced to apologize.

Selentia City in the Kingdom of Ralteague was known as the City of Temples. It served as a center of worship for Flare Dragon Ceifeed, with five great temples to him, making it a common pilgrimage destination for believers from all corners of the known world. Me and Gourry had been wandering through the area, so we’d decided to drop by when we realized we were close. And though we’d arrived in the early afternoon with the sun still high in the sky, well...

“But hold your horses, Gourry!” I said, pointing at him emphatically. “I object to you saying it was a whim! Inspired by the rundown appearance of downtown and seeking my fill of its quaint desolation, I made the conscious decision to go where my feet took me!”

“Um...” My words inspired a good think from the big lug. “So you’re basically saying ‘I wandered in’? That’s still basically a whim.”

Ah... c-crap! Warrior-slash-genius-sorcerer Lina Inverse’s patented obfuscate-

with-equivocal-language technique works on most people, but it failed me against this jellyhead!

“Guh... You’re a formidable opponent, Gourry!”

“Uh, how so?” he asked, casually unaware of my inner monologue.

I flipped my cape back decisively. “Heh. I admit defeat... this time. Very well. I’ll use Levitation to get a better vantage point and scout out which way to go next.”

With that, I chanted my spell... and abruptly dismissed it.

“Lina,” Gourry called.

“I know,” I responded. I could hear it drifting on the wind from down the street—the clanging of metal against metal. Blades. Someone was dueling. And natch, I wasn’t eager to go sticking my nose into that someone’s fighty business. “Anyhoo... let’s beat it.”

“Yeah.”

We nodded to each other, turned away from the noise, and...

“It stopped,” Gourry remarked.

The sound of the swordplay had ceased. *Is the fight over?* Just as I wondered that... *Crash!* The wall of a nearby house collapsed with a roar!

What?! Rubble flew and dust spewed. The big lug and I leaped back just in time to avoid getting a faceful of it.

Was that... an attack spell?! I could sense someone in the debris cloud, which was tinged orange in the setting sun.

“Who goes there?!” bellowed a man’s voice.

As the dust settled, I spied two figures. One held a longsword and wore light mail. A warrior. The other was dressed all in black, with his entire face covered except for his eyes. Your archetypal assassin. He held a large dagger in his hand.

Guess they’re the ones fighting, huh?

It was the warrior who’d addressed us, and now he continued. “A sorcerer and a swordsman... Who sent you?!” he demanded.

Er, who “sent” us? Uh...

“We’re just passing through, actually,” I said, truthfully.

This reply caused the warrior to fall silent for a few moments, and then...
“Aha. But of course. You wouldn’t be stupid enough to admit to it,” he whispered, seeming to draw some kind of conclusion.

Yeah, that was the honest truth, bud... Except I was getting the impression he wouldn’t believe me if I told him that.

The assassin just stood there silently—until he made a sudden leap! But he wasn’t coming at us. Dude was fleeing! Maybe he’d assumed we were enemies and wasn’t up to a three-on-one, or maybe he’d realized we were innocent and didn’t want to drag us into their conflict. One way or the other, he disappeared into the shadows in the blink of an eye, and his presence vanished thereafter.

“Hmm...” The warrior smirked in the direction the assassin had fled. “I guess he realized he couldn’t take me and ran. That only leaves...” He turned his glare on us. “You two!”

Ugh, this freakin’ guy...

“If you tell me who hired you and leave this city immediately, I’ll let you go! Understood?”

“Um, I think you’ve got the wrong idea here...” Gourry said, scratching his cheek.

The man arched an eyebrow. “I see... You think I’d be at a disadvantage two-on-one! However—”

“Dug Wave.”

Whooooom!

“Gyeeeeee!”

My spell sent the warrior flying.

Yech, what a jackass...

“Listen, Gourry. You don’t have to give guys like that the time of day. It’s a big waste of breath.”

“Sorry, wasn’t thinking. But what was that all about, anyway?” Gourry whispered.

“Dunno,” I replied. “But one thing’s for sure... We’ve gotten ourselves into another fine mess.”

“I see... So you saw that, did you?” The aged chairman sighed as I finished my story, but he didn’t look surprised.

Gourry and I had come to hit up the Selentia City sorcerers’ council the following day. We’d stopped by to say hello to the chairman while relaying to him the facts of the fight we witnessed... and that was the answer he gave.

“Wait... You know what that was all about?!” I asked.

The white-haired, white-bearded chairman nodded, his expression pained. “Are you aware that this town is also known as the City of Temples?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And are you aware that our central temple was burned to the ground two months ago?”

“I hadn’t heard *that*, I’m afraid.”

“That’s when it all started...” The chairman launched into a torrent of words.

Selentia City was known for its temples, but said temples were actually just multiple branches of a single complex. In other words, at the city’s center sat the main temple consecrated to Flare Dragon Ceifeed, and then at each of the cardinal directions stood a temple to his corresponding Dragon Lord avatars. Traditionally, the high priest ran both the main temple and the temple system in general, while four head priests handled the day-to-day business at each of the branch temples.

However, just two months ago, a mysterious fire had burned down the main temple, killing the high priest and several other priests working there. As for what happened afterward... Well, it was exactly what you’d expect. There was a feud for the position of high priest.

It’s a mistake to think clerics are inherently good people, see. Greed is a

driving force for many humans, and clerics are nothing if not human. And in a place so high on religion that it earned the moniker “City of Temples,” being high priest essentially meant you ran the joint.

It was a matter of course, then, that such an upset would kick off a squabble between the head priests of the four temples. They’d never exactly gotten along to begin with, and now the only person with the power to keep them in check was gone. With all that, plus the brass ring of the high priest title in their sights... Frankly, it would’ve been weirder if they *hadn’t* started fighting.

The first formal discussion on the matter had quickly devolved into a mess of self-aggrandizing and mudslinging, which had then escalated to willy-nilly accusations of arson. If it hadn’t been for the moderator—the chairman of the sorcerers’ council, who was a friend of the late high priest—they might have come to blows on the spot. Though if you ask me, letting them settle things with a battle royale then and there might have made the following months a little more peaceful...

Instead, the unresolved discussion had sown the seeds of discord to come. The various priests began hiring thugs and mercenaries to antagonize, and then outright fight, the other temples. The duel we’d witnessed the night before was just a small part of the ongoing battle.

“Wow... pretty corrupt stuff, huh?” I remarked honestly.

“Please don’t say that,” the chairman responded with a wince.

“But aren’t these guys supposed to be holy men? We saw a bona fide assassin last night. Whatever the circumstances that led to it, it all seems a little much.”

“I agree with you, but unfortunately, they don’t. The issue remains that we still don’t know exactly what caused the original fire. Some believe it was set intentionally to kill the high priest and vacate his position, which makes the situation the perfect breeding ground for paranoia. Each priest fears they could be targeted next, and that the only way to survive is to kill the arsonist first.”

“Aha...”

It had started with one priest hiring a few thugs—just a light bodyguard detail. Then another priest, believing fair was fair, hired some goons of their

own. This led yet another priest to get paranoid and hire trained warriors... And so on and so forth until we ended up here, with first-rate fighters tangling with genuine assassins.

“Now if I may, Lina Inverse...” the chairman began.

“Hard pass, thank you,” I said with a grin.

The chairman went silent for a time. “I hadn’t said anything yet.”

“Well, given how this conversation is going and the fact that you used my full name, I felt pretty sure that you were about to ask me to engage in some busywork I’m not really feeling.”

The chairman smiled brightly in response. “I’m always hearing good things about you, you see...”

Erk... He’s going with the ignore-objections-completely strategy.

“I said I’d have to pass,” I reiterated in my sweetest tones.

“I’ve done what I can to settle things down. I’ve even gotten them to agree to meet again in ten days’ time to talk things out and finally decide on a new high priest...”

“How many times must I say that I pass?!”

“...But there’s a good chance that someone will try something before then. We must prevent that at all costs!”

“Hahaha! But once again, *hard pass!*”

“And as I have utmost faith in your abilities...”

“I really should be going now.”

“Pleeease! I beg of yooou!”

“Graaah! Get your hands offa me!”



“So... we’ve got a job to do, Gourry.”

“Huh?” We’d left the sorcerers’ council behind and returned to the restaurant in the inn where we were staying. My leisurely comment earned a scowl from Gourry. “Hey... Didn’t you say you were gonna pass on work for a while and take it easy?”

“Nope,” I responded, firmly and without shame. I mean, yeah, I probably had said something like that just yesterday afternoon, but the present situation called for a little compromise.

Damn it. I really didn’t wanna take this job...

The chairman’s request was thus: “Make an appearance with each of the four head priests and see if that gets them to back down.” In other words, apply some silent pressure and let them know the sorcerers’ council was watching them.

But his plan wasn’t gonna work. That much was obvious. People who’d escalated to the point of hiring assassins weren’t gonna back off that easily, and the bloodthirsty lot might even see us as an obstacle between them and “justice.” In short, we were liable to end up with a target on our backs as well.

Still... after the elderly chairman had finished crying on my shoulder (not even exaggerating here), he offered up a reward of fifty gold—or a hundred if things worked out—and not even I’m so work-averse as to turn down an offer like that.

Now, I know what you might be wondering. Why is the *sorcerers’* council so invested in *temple* drama? The answer’s obvious enough if you know the whole story. See, they usually keep it hush-hush, but the council and the priesthood are actually pretty cozy behind the scenes. They don’t go around telling people, but under the table—which makes it sound worse than it really is—the sorcerers’ council sells their developments in healing magic to the priesthood.

The priesthood has less organizational power than the sorcerers’ council, see, so they don’t have the means for a lot of their own magical research. But humans being the materialistic creatures they are, people will take a blatant scam religion that tells them what they want to hear and provides the miracles

they want to see over the honest-but-miracle-free variety. The blunt truth was that no matter how grand and lofty their ideals, a church that couldn't provide healing would quickly find itself without customers—er, followers. And that, in turn, would make it hard to keep the doors open.

So, at the end of the day, temples in various towns had to buy up the magical techniques developed by the sorcerers' council to provide healing, antidotes, purification, and other "holy miracles," while their clerics frequently took private lessons at the sorcerers' council. In other words, temples were the council's cash cow. Especially in a place like this, where temple tourism was the city's main source of income, the funds the clergy invested in the council were significant. That relationship had fostered friendship between the local council chairman and the high priest, and was why the current squabbling among the branches pained him so dearly.

Anyhoo, I finished my lunch and left the inn, heading down the city's main road to the north. I'd just given Gourry a quick rundown of the sitch.

"Huh. Guess this city's got a lot going on, huh?" he said rather indifferently.

"Way to make it sound like it's none of your business after we've been roped into things."

"Okay, but now *you're* making it sound like it just happened rather than you volunteering for it..."

"Erk! That's an extremely rude thing to say to a girl, you know!"

"Um, I'm not sure your gender has anything to do with— Wait, Lina."

"Huh?" I hummed as I followed Gourry's gaze.

The avenue was lined with white stone buildings and merchant stalls. Children ran up and down the lane. But amidst these extremely ordinary sights, something stood out.

A massive burned-out cathedral.

It was made out of stone, so the basic structure remained intact, but its soot-covered spire peeked over the roofs of the houses around it.

"Guess that's the temple that got toasted..."

“Want to check it out?”

“We can stop by there anytime. Our top priority today is the upcoming meeting between the head priests, so we should try to talk with all of them before the day is out.”

“Oh!” Gourry said, slapping his fist into his palm. “Is that where we’re going? To one of those priest guys?”

Splat! I tripped over my own feet and fell unceremoniously onto my face.

“Of all the— Where the heck did you think we were going?!”

“Well... I just figured we were taking an after-dinner stroll.”

“You know what... Okay, whatever. We’re currently heading to the Water Temple on the north side of town. It venerates Aqualord Ragraia, and it’s led by Head Priest Ceres. We’ll stop in on him and come back this way before—”

“Hang on a minute!” Gourry suddenly interrupted me.

“What now?”

“Lina, are you about to list off all the guys we’re gonna meet with today?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Ha! You fool!” Gourry declared with a triumphant expression. “You really think I’ll remember the skinny on all four of them in one go?!”

“Don’t sound proud of that! Though you’re totally right, of course... Wait. Are you suggesting that if I introduce them individually as we meet them, you *will* remember?”

“...”

“Come on.”

“Some things in this world just aren’t meant to be.”

“Don’t sound proud of that either!”

Wham! I delivered a hard chop to the back of Gourry’s head.

Only quite some time later did we arrive at our destination.

Boy, this city is... huge...

Before us stood a grand temple. It had a refined design in blue tones—probably a nod to Aqualord—and the grounds were vast. But perhaps due to the recent chaos, the gardens and such seemed neglected, and there were a number of real roughneck types loitering around the entrance as we approached.

Hmm... looks like they're really letting the place go. Still, I wouldn't learn anything until I talked to the man in charge here, Ceres.

"Is the head priest around?" I called to the goonish gaggle.

"Huh? What's that?" The guy who spoke up had to be their leader. He was sitting with his back to us, but slowly stood up when I hailed the group. "What do you want with the head pr—"

He turned our way, and... *Hang on a dang minute!*

"You!" he shouted when he laid eyes on us.

I had the same reaction. "Hey, goon! I mean Luke! What brings you here?!"

"That's what I was gonna ask— Hang on, walk that back! Did you just sneak in somethin' to piss me off there?!" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

A tall but slightly shifty-looking guy sporting short black hair and light mail armor... There was no question. Treasure hunter in name, lovestruck clown by game... this was Luke the spellsword. We'd run into each other a few times in the past, and we'd actually just finished a little collaborative project. We'd gone our separate ways after the fact, but...

Here we meet again. Yeesh.

"Just your imagination. Totally," I insisted without flinching. It was then I realized that his usual companion—rather, the lady he was always tagging along with—was nowhere in sight. "Say, where's Mileena? She finally get sick of you and give you the slip?"

"Pfft! No freakin' way! The ties of love and trust between Mileena an' me are as strong and thick as a climbin' rope!"

"Yeah, I've heard of stronger..."

“Shut up! We both took the security job here! Mileena’s just standin’ guard inside!”

“Hmm... Sounds like she didn’t want to take the same post as you.”

“That ain’t what’s goin’ on, darn it! But anyhow... Tell me what you want already!”

“Ah... Right, right. This is no time to be getting my rocks off teasing you.”

“Then why’re you tryin’ to start somethin’?!”

I ignored that one and explained, “Like I said, I’m here to see the head priest... Ceres Laurencio, I believe.”

“Oh?” At this, Luke’s expression changed. Though a blithering fool on the subject of Mileena, he was actually a damn good fighter. “Since I’m still part of the outer guard here, I’d better ask... What’s your business? Or rather, whose side are you on?”

“The side of the mediators, the sorcerers’ council,” I replied without hesitation.

“Hmm...” Luke fell silent for a moment. “All right. I trust you. If you were lyin’, your buddy there woulda started lookin’ confused.”

“Wait a minute! Are you suggesting Gourry’s my personal lie detector?!”

“Well, ain’t he? Anyway, I hear ya. Follow me,” he said, then turned around and started walking.

There were a few things that didn’t sit right with me, but picking at them right now wouldn’t benefit anyone. My goal at the time was to meet the high priest, after all. And so, me and Gourry passed through the group of—roughnecks? Mercenaries? I couldn’t be sure—hanging around the entrance on our way inside.

“This way.” Luke guided us through the grand entrance hall and into the corridors further in.

For a supposed tourist destination, there weren’t many tourists—er, worshippers—inside the temple complex. Of course, given the situation and all those shifty-looking characters hanging around out front, it was understandable

that people were giving the place a wide berth. There were clerics here and there, but they seemed vastly outnumbered by the mercenaries/goons/what-have-you. No sight of dudes in assassin garb, but of course, there wouldn't be.

Eventually...

"Right here." Luke stopped at a room deep within the temple, then gave the door a few firm knocks. "Luke here, sir. You have a visitor."

"A visitor?" replied the voice of a young man.

"She's with the sorcerers' council."

"Let her in."

Luke opened the door into a modestly sized room. Inside were three unfamiliar faces and one I knew well. The latter was a beautiful platinum blonde with leather pauldrons—Luke's traveling companion, Mileena. Her eyebrow inched up slightly at the sight of me and Gourry, but that was the extent of her reaction.

Two of the remaining three people in the room were a man and woman who also looked like mercenaries, while the last guy was sitting at a desk laid out with documents. He looked about twenty-five and was rather attractive, with dark hair and an overall vibe erring slightly on the wrong side of the line between "affable" and "spineless." Given his garb, I took him for the head priest.

"You're from... the sorcerers' council?" he asked in a reserved—timid, rather—tone as he stood up. "I'm Ceres Laurencio... the one in charge here."

"I'm Lina Inverse, here by request of the head of the sorcerers' council on a matter of city security. This is my companion, Gourry."

"City... security?"

"Yes." I smiled brightly. "I'm told there's been a bit of trouble lately. I'm here to keep an eye on things, to make sure nobody does anything foolishly rash." I'd meant the line to come off as a nasty insinuation, but...

"That's right! There has been a *lot* of trouble lately!" Ceres nodded in firm agreement, either good at playing dumb or genuinely ignorant. "Everyone's

been so on edge since the fire! They've all just been poking and prodding at each other—someone's even been sending hired goons after me! I'm terrified! I've been forced to hire security of my own, but I still can't get a wink of sleep. And that's to say nothing of the expenses they're racking up..." he rattled off in a single breath.

"Um... er..."

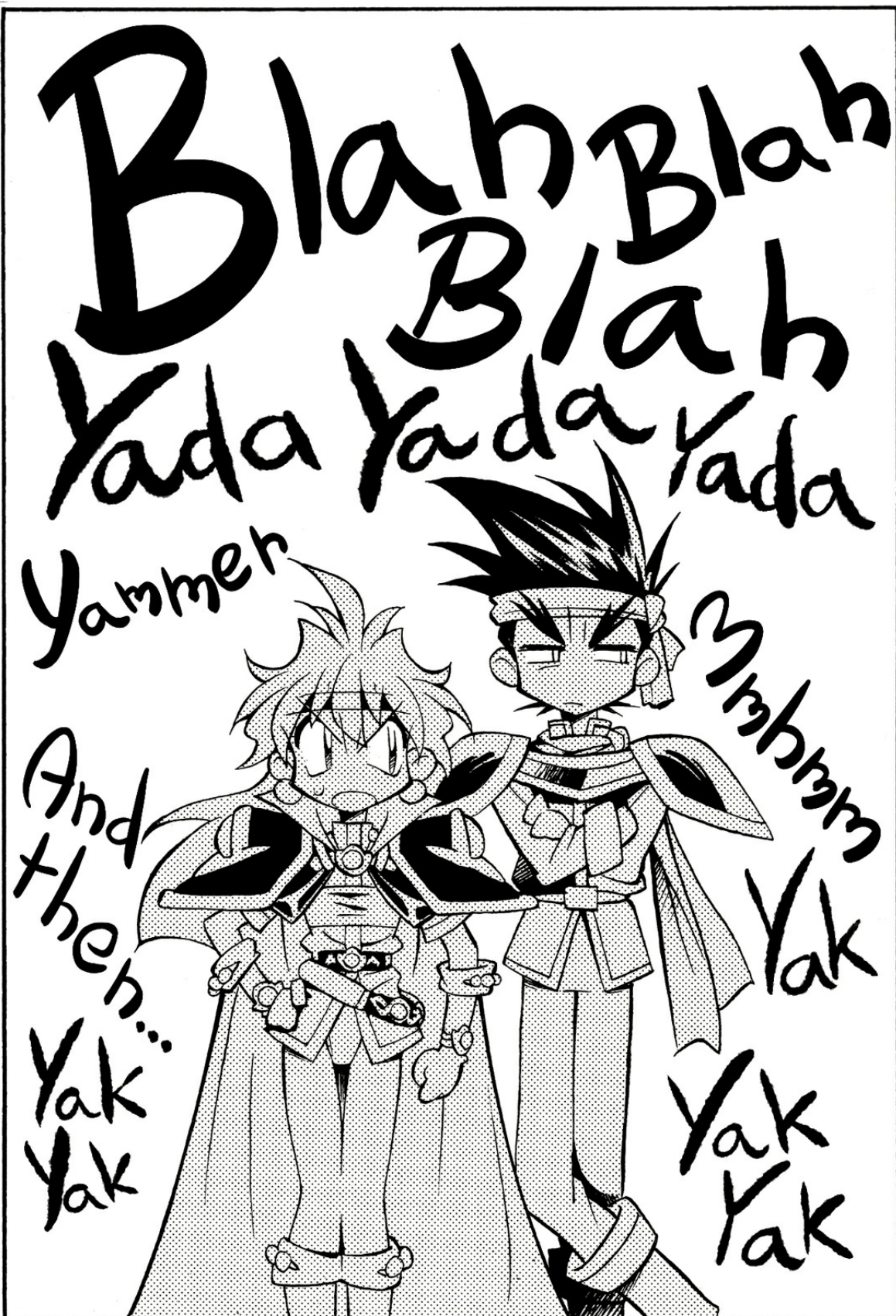
"The late high priest put me in charge of this temple which, as you can see, venerates the great Aqualord. You probably know that the old stories claim Aqualord was defeated by the revived Dark Lord in the Kataart Mountains a thousand years ago. Ah, of course, that's merely legend. I personally believe that the great Aqualord is hale and hearty and watching over us even now! But there are those who don't share that faith, which makes things difficult for us."

"Um... er..."

"So to be perfectly honest, our temple isn't nearly as popular as the others, which means, well... to be blunt, we receive only a fraction of the offerings the others do. When the main temple was around, they helped us manage, so we still had plenty to work with. But ever since it burned down, each of the temples has been acting independently, which has made our inferior position very clear. And now, on top of that, I have to fund security..."

"Yeah, meant to give you a heads-up before..." Luke said quietly, standing beside me as Head Priest Ceres went on and on and on. "This guy's a nonstop river of complaints. You see why I wanted to be stationed outside now, even if it meant leavin' Mileena behind?"

Yeah, you really coulda warned me about this one, man... I thought grumpily at Luke as the head priest droned on.



As night fell on the town...

"Wait, how is it night already?!"

"Probably because that guy talked for so long..." Gourry said in exhaustion as he walked alongside me.

Darn it... I'd set out first thing in the afternoon in hopes of getting around to all four temples today, but we only managed a single one! It was way too late to hit any of the other branches now, plus I was exhausted from listening to that guy gripe, so I decided to just head back to the inn for the night.

We'll just have to drop in on the other temples tomorrow...

"Grrr! This is all Head Priest Ceres's fault!"

"But if you didn't want to hear him talk, why didn't you stop him?" Gourry offered.

I wagged a scolding finger at his shallow objection. "Don't be so naive. Gossip and complaints frequently hold the keys to mystery!"

"Mystery? What mystery? I thought this was about us trying to stop the four priests from fighting."

"Ohoho. But there *is* a mystery! Look, man, this all started when the main temple burned down and the high priest perished, right? The real root of the trouble is the fact that we don't know what *caused* the fire. There's a rumor it was arson, so now the priesthood is all paranoid, hence the feuding. Now let me ask you this... How'd the fire start? Was it an accident? Or was it intentional? If the latter, who was behind it? If we can solve that mystery, we can put the whole thing to bed!"

"I see. So you decided to listen to his whole rant in case it gave you a clue."

"Right!" I nodded firmly.

"So, did it?"

"It did not, hence my annoyance."

"I see..."

As we walked and talked, we caught sight of the seared spire once again.

Hmm...

“Gourry, let’s check out the remains from the fire.”

“Sure, if you want.”

Taking a slight detour from our path back to our inn, we set a course for the main temple. There was no fear of getting lost. It was such a popular tourist trap that we could follow the big avenue straight to it without thinking.

It was a big open space with fountains, gardens, benches... and the husk of the massive burned-out building. There were a number of flowers laid in front of the door and two listless-looking guards at the entrance, perhaps stationed there to keep people from messing around inside.

Hmm... Will they let us in?

Needless to say, I could always use a flight spell to slip in through one of the blown-out windows. But if anyone caught me, I’d get pegged for a suspicious intruder on sight... Was the risk worth it when there was no guarantee I’d find anything useful inside?

Well, while I was mulling that over...

“Hey, Lina! They say we can go in,” came Gourry’s voice.

“...Huh?!” I jerked my head up and saw him standing with the guards and grinning at me.

“H-Hey!”

As I ran over, one of the guards said affably, “I’ll show you around.”

“Um... okay. Could you show us to the high priest’s room?”

“Of course. Follow me, if you would.” With that, he entered the building.

“What exactly did you tell them, Gourry?” I asked quietly as we followed a few steps behind.

“The truth, of course. That we’re working for the sorcerers’ council and we wanted to see inside.”

And they just let us in? Talk about lax security... which doesn’t really bode well for whatever investigation they conducted.

“Could you share the results of the investigation?” I prodded as we followed the guard up the stairs.

“It was just an accidental fire,” he said with a strained smile as he glanced back at me over his shoulder. “I know there are nasty rumors going around, that it was a hit job or arson... But there always are, aren’t there? That doesn’t mean anything.”

We reached the top of the stairs, passed through a hall, and headed for another stairway. The white temple walls were scorched and dingy with soot from the fire, and the floor was covered with a sort of crunchy charcoal... most likely the former carpet.

“The high priest liked to use candles rather than magical light in the cathedral, and he also burned incense. We think one of them caught the tapestries or the carpet and spread from there. All right, here’s the high priest’s room...”

The quarters the guard indicated were smaller than I expected. I could see the sky through the broken window. There was no furniture left, just ash on the empty room’s floor. The walls seemed to have warped from the heat, and there were footprints in the ash—probably from the people who’d investigated before us.

Guhhhhh...

“I’m not sure there’s anything here that could help you, of course. Is there anywhere else you’d like to see?” the guard asked.

“Hey, is anyone else here besides us?” Gourry, who had been quiet up until now, spoke up suddenly.

“No, not that I know of...”

“Lina,” Gourry said, looking at me seriously. “I think... someone’s watching us.”

Huh? I hadn’t sensed anything. Gourry’s instincts were leagues better, however, so that wasn’t anything to go by.

“I’m sure it’s just your imagination. It always feels a little eerie, standing around in a place where someone died,” the guard said casually.

But between our laid-back guide's assurances and Gourry's animal instinct, I'd trust Gourry any day of the week.

"You know where they are?" I asked him.

"Think so."

"Let's go."

With that, Gourry left the room, and I ran after him!

"Ah! Wait!" We ignored the call of the guard behind us, darted down the stairs, and ran down the hall.

"They're on the move!" Gourry shouted, changing direction.

We ended up in a long corridor. The ceiling... probably used to be stained glass or something, but it, too, was now broken and the orange of the setting sun painted the ruined walls and floor below.

"Over here!" Gourry said as he dashed through one of the hallway doors. I was one step behind him.

The room was empty. The only way in or out was the way we'd come, and the only furnishing was a scorched chandelier hanging from the ceiling. But that was it. There was nothing—and nobody—else there.

"They disappeared?" Gourry whispered softly.

"Excuse me! I can't just have you running off on your own..." the outraged guard scolded us as he caught up from behind, then looked past us into the empty room. "See? I told you there was nobody here!"

Nevertheless, an uneasy feeling rose in my chest.

"One of them definitely did it!" the head priest of Flarelord Vrabazard's temple, Francis Dmitri, insisted in annoyance.

We'd wasted all of yesterday listening to Head Priest Ceres's griping, so Gourry and I had set out first thing this morning to the branch temple on the east edge of the city. Once again we were escorted in by one of the bodyguards and/or roughnecks hanging around the temple, and *that* was Head Priest

Francis's rage-cracked response the second we finished introducing ourselves. He was a man of about forty, with short blond hair and a wine-red robe hanging on his broad-shouldered frame.

"We felt the loss of High Priest Joshua very keenly. He was a fair-minded, generous man. God would never take such a man in a pointless accident! Which means it must have been a malicious assassination!" he continued, offering a theory based more in ideology than logic.

"Well, either way... In about ten days, there'll be a summit to choose the next high priest. I'm sure this goes without saying, but please don't do anything thoughtless before then," I implored him.

"Thoughtless?!" he scoffed, his eyebrows jumping. "Holding these slapdash talks to choose a new high priest when the old one was just *murdered* is thoughtless! I've agreed to participate out of respect for the head of the sorcerers' council, but if one of the other head priests is behind the assassination, I'll see to it that he pays! And I certainly can't have him becoming the next high priest! I'll do whatever it takes to stop that from happening!"

"Even if it means *you* can't become high priest as a result?"

"I don't care about that!" Head Priest Francis responded immediately.

Ohhh! Oh nooo! You sometimes meet priests and shrine maidens like this, willing to rush head-first into self-sacrifice to foil a given "evildoer." One of my old traveling companions was exactly the type. The main difference between her and Francis here was that this old man was totally lacking in charm.

Well, I guess it would be creepy if he *were* charming like her, but y'know.

"Hahh." I let out a sigh. "That's very reassuring, but... Even if it turns out that the fire was arson and one of your three fellow head priests is the killer, the other two are still totally innocent. Don't forget that, okay? Anyway, we should be going."

"Hmph. Well, I hope you can learn the identity of the killer before the summit. Before things *really* get out of control."

Spoken like someone who's about to let things get out of control...

“This is bad news,” I whispered grumpily. We were walking the road to our next destination, the temple to Airlord on the west side of the city. “That Francis guy seems raring to cause trouble.”

“And it’s still possible there is no ‘killer.’ The fire really could have been an accident,” Gourry added.

At this, I shook my head and lowered my voice. “That was no accident. I know the authorities are passing around that stupid story... But it was definitely murder.”

“Really?!”

“We saw the high priest’s room yesterday, remember? The tapestries and carpet in the hallway leading up to it were charred crunchy... while the priest’s room was but ash. Plus, the walls were deformed. That means his room alone was exposed to heat high enough to warp the place and incinerate everything inside. It’d be one thing if he had kindling or oil stored in his room, but no unassisted fire would melt the walls like that. I think someone used an attack spell to roast the priest in his room, then set other fires around the building to make it look like an accident.”

“So... one of the head priests?”

“I can’t say that for sure yet, but—”

“Well, if it isn’t Mistress Lina and Master Gourry!” came a familiar voice from nearby all of a sudden. I looked to see... Head Priest Ceres, escorted by Luke and Mileena!

Guh... Not good! I can’t afford to get swept up in another bitchfest!

“Um—”

“Oh, Master Luke and Mistress Mileena informed me after our meeting that you’ve known each other for some time. But fate is a funny thing, isn’t it? For us to meet again so soon...”

I can’t get a word in edgewise! This guy is the wooorst!

“Truth be told, I visit the main temple every day to leave flowers in the high priest’s honor. I just happen to be on my way back now. Master Luke and

Mistress Mileena tell me to limit my time outside because of the danger, but the high priest was such a help to me when he was alive. I thought flowers were the least I could offer. And I figured I could rest easy with these two by my side —”

“Well, well. Is that a head priest lookin’ for converts in the middle of the city? He’s got passion for his work, at least.”

It wasn’t me who interrupted Ceres’s monologue, but a group of about ten roughnecks loitering on a street not too far off. Most likely someone’s hired goons.

Great job, thugs! You stopped him! As a reward, I’ll show a teeny-tiny bit of mercy when I cream you!

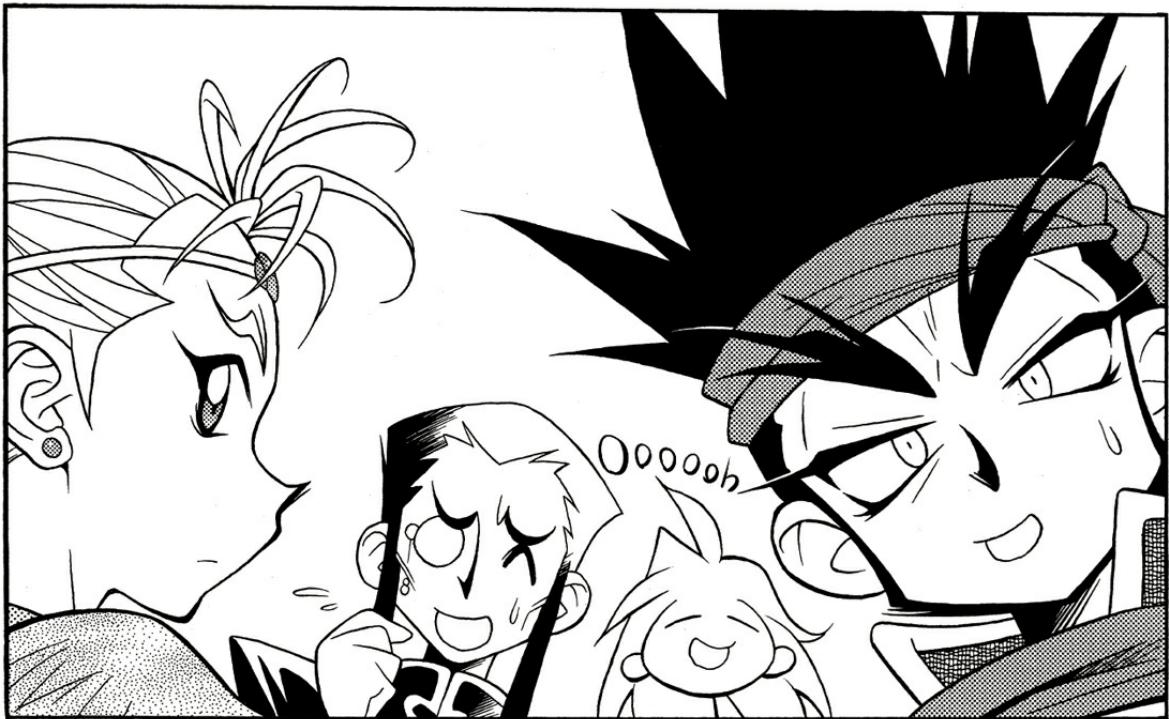
They sauntered up to us with the kind of swagger that just screams, “I’m an uncouth piece of shit!”

“Course, the priest of a crummy god like Aqualord’s gotta go the extra mile, right?”

“But doin’ something like this in the middle of a city? Pretty scummy. Really ruins the atmosphere for innocent civilians like us.”

“Innocent civilians?! If anything’s ruining the atmosphere here, it’s your ugly mugs!” I blew up.

Twitch! My honest opinion turned things frosty real quick.



“Ahhh! Mistress Lina, what are you saying?!” the head priest cried. I ignored him, of course.

“What was that, girlie?!” one of the punks said threateningly.

I put on my best timid little girl act. “O-Oh, nothing, really... I just, you know, feel like your breath pollutes the very air around you... That’s all.”

“Why... you stupid bitch!”

“You’ll pay for that!”

“You think you can take us?!” they jeered, all charging at me together.

Yeah, I do, actually.

“Dimil Arwen!”

Bah-bwoosh!

“Graaaaaaaaah!” My spell sent the roughnecks flying.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” I said as I looked down at them twitching on the flagstones. “I’m here on behalf of the sorcerers’ council to keep the peace in these parts. There’re lots of dangerous folks in the city in light of recent events, and I’m supposed to stop ’em from making a scene.”

“B-But... you’re the one who just made a scene,” one of them argued while still twitching.

I snorted in response. “Hah. No one ever told me I couldn’t make a scene!”

“Now you’re just splitting hairs...”

“A valid strategy, but never mind that! What matters is that I prevented you lot from starting something! Now get talking already! Who hired you?”

“And if I don’t say?”

“Burst Rondo.” *Kerfwoom!* “That’s what happens. Hey, are you listening?!”

“I... am...”

“Sooo, who hired you?” I grinned.

“Master Bran... of the west...”

“Oho! Thank you so very much for the help!”

“This just seems... How should I put it?” Head Priest Ceres started muttering.

I waved my hand dismissively. “C’mon, it’s fine! Think of it as an act of god and leave it be!”

“An act of *which* god, exactly?”

“Well, anyway... I can understand wanting to lay down flowers, but you really ought to avoid going out if you can help it. Roving goons might set their sights on you to pick a fight, and that’ll spell all kinds of trouble,” I explained.

Gourry nodded firmly beside me. “What she said. We don’t know who assassinated the high priest yet. You shouldn’t wander around so much or they might come after you too!”

Erk! Everyone froze when he said that. *You, you... mayobrain!*

“Ah! Assassinated?!” Ceres repeated hoarsely. “Then... someone really did kill the high priest?!”

“Yeah. Lina just said so. Something to do with how bad the high priest’s room was burned... Right?” he said as he patted me on the head.

You...! You...!

“So you should probably stay inside as much as possible.”

“R-Right! I understand! Master Luke, Mistress Mileena, let’s go!” The priest then scampered away, looking white as a sheet.

“Sure! Take care!” Gourry waved as he watched them go.

“You... worms-for-brains!”

Crash!

“Guh?!” My full-power flying kick hit the big lug square in the back. “Hey! What was that for, Lina?!”

“That’s my line! What were you thinking, Gourry?!”

“Huh?” he replied with a scowl.

I leaned in, my voice hushed. “Come on! Why’d you up and tell him that the

high priest was murdered?!”

“Huh? I thought that would be the best way to get him to back off...”

“Yeah, but as far as anyone else knows, it still could have all been an unfortunate accident!”

“But *we* know, so it’s a good thing, right?”

“It is *not*! I mean, it is a good thing that we know, but we can’t go around telling people yet!”

“How come?”

This friggin’ birdbrain!

“Because! The only reason the four priests have kept the kid gloves on thus far is because there was a chance this *wasn’t* a conspiracy. If it gets around that it really was a hit job, they’re all gonna freakin’ lose it! Especially that Head Priest Francis jerk we just met! He’ll take it as vindication and go ballistic on the other three! Plus, there’s still a chance that one of the four head priests is the killer! Maybe they’ll think, ‘If I’m gonna be outed as a murderer anyway, what’s a few more bodies on the pile?’ They might decide to ice the other three before they can do anything... but not before they make a move on the investigators! *Us!*”

“Ohh.”

“Don’t ‘ohh’ me! We don’t have a choice now. We’ve gotta find the culprit before the enemy gets serious, even if we have to play a little rough to do it.”

“Then... what do we do?”

“For now, we continue on. We’ll go see Head Priest Bran at the western temple dedicated to Airlord Valwin.”

Of course... this is going to change up my strategy a little, I thought to myself.

The western temple was painted white and cyan to mimic the sky and surrounded by large, neatly tended gardens. Color aside, though, the building was exactly the same shape as the northern and eastern temples (the latter of which had been brick red). Here too, perhaps because of the recent chaos, I

didn't see any worshippers around. But what *was* different was the absence of roughnecks on the lawn. I figured the guys I busted up in town earlier were originally posted to defend the place. They'd probably caught wind of Head Priest Ceres offering flowers every day and gone to heckle him, only to get beat up by me.

At any rate, no flunkies hanging around just made it easier to get inside. Gourry and I reached for the door, pushed it in, and...

"Geh!"

We both gagged at the choking scent of blood from within.

2: Sparking the Flame of Hatred in Selentia

Whoosh! Instantly and wordlessly, Gourry took off. I followed along without question.

The interior of the temple looked a match to the other two branches we'd visited. The only difference was... well, the dead bodies lining the halls. There were corpses of roughnecks and clerics in a roughly two-to-one ratio; the assassins must have planned their attack for when security was lightest.

Eventually we turned a corner and came out into a long, straight hallway. At the end stood a door. If this temple's layout was the same as the others, it should lead to the head priest's room.

Just then... "Hah!" Gourry stopped, unsheathed his sword, and sliced through what looked like thin air!

Krr-shah! Krr-shah! I heard a soft sound echo out as he did, so he must have cut through *something*. I was behind him and couldn't see what had happened, but I could guess.

The corpse-littered hall was lined with pillars. From behind one of them... a dark figure appeared.

An assassin?! The killers are still inside the building?!

And they weren't alone. A total of four figures stepped out from behind the pillars. They must have sensed our approach, hidden, and stifled their presences in the hopes of catching us in an ambush. But Gourry's animal instincts had picked up on their hostile intent, and he'd stopped whatever it was they'd tried to throw at us. I was hoping we could take these guys alive so we could ask who hired them. *In that case...*

Gourry had his sword at the ready and was slowly edging closer to them, but I grabbed the corner of his shirt. He seemed to catch my meaning, because he stopped and cried out, "Who are you people?! Are you the ones who killed everyone here? Where's the head priest?"

Obviously, no self-respecting assassin would answer something like that. The dark figures just chuckled haughtily at Gourry's vain question.

But even if his question was in vain, it still bought me the time I needed—to cast a spell! I released the puppy I'd been chanting! "Sleeping!"

"What?!" A muted yelp of surprise escaped the assassins' mouths.

I'd just cast a little magic number that (as the name suggested) put everyone in a given area to sleep. The reason I'd stopped Gourry from getting too close was so he wouldn't get caught in it and we could capture one of our assassin friends.

"Ngh..."

"Mm..." Two of them fell over with quiet moans.

And the other two... didn't?! Well, I'd once heard that Sleeping didn't work so great on people with exceptionally high willpower...

One of the remaining pair rushed at Gourry with a large dagger in hand. The other ran over to his fallen comrades. *He's gonna wake them up to rejoin the fray, huh?!* Too bad it wasn't that easy to rouse someone from a Sleeping spell!

Gourry turned toward the charging assassin and greeted him with a slash of his sword. The assassin responded in kind with an arcing swing of his dagger. Just before their blades met... the assassin drew a second dagger with his left hand! His plan was to block Gourry's strike with the first, then counterattack with his offhand dagger while Gourry was distracted! But—

Clink! Gourry's sword cut through the assassin's dagger and right into the assassin himself! His underperforming noggin notwithstanding, Gourry's sword skills were first-rate. On top of that, he was wielding the legendary Blast Sword, storied for its peerless cutting power! The combination of Gourry's sheer swordsmanship with the Blast Sword's sheer might must have really caught his opponent off guard. The guy slumped to the ground without even a cry in protest. That just left three—

Before I could finish that thought—*Blam!*—an explosion rang out. One of the assassins had placed his hand on the corridor wall and blown it in! He'd probably used an attack spell like Blast Wave. He then passed through the hole

he'd created and leaped outside.

That's weird. I was sure he'd wake up his buddies fi— Oh, hell no! I ran up to the sleeping assassins and found their throats cut. *That son of a...*

He hadn't gone over to his comrades to rouse them. He'd been making sure that they *never* woke up! I could understand a decision like that to keep feckless comrades silent... But was it professionalism that drove him, or simple bloodlust?

"Lina!" Gourry ran up to me.

I shook my head. "No luck. The guy who just ran off killed 'em."

"Should I go after him?!"

"No... I doubt it'd make a difference. Let's investigate the priest's room instead. Although... I think I know what we're gonna find."

Indeed, it was just as I expected. A man in priest's vestments lay dead among countless mercenaries—head priest of the west, Bran Conchnir.

The whole city was abuzz. Which was understandable—someone had hired assassins to murder a temple head, after all. Selentia had never before been host to such a brazen act of brutality. It lent credence to the rumors that someone had killed the high priest and disguised it as arson.

Gourry and I never learned the identities of the slain assassins, or who hired them. Naturally, we were interrogated thoroughly after the incident, but the sorcerers' council vouched for us, so we were released the same day... on the condition that we remain in the city until the matter was resolved. Thus, the two of us didn't get to visit Ryan Seinfeld, head priest of the southern temple, until the next day.

"You! You were the first ones on the scene yesterday!" he declared pompously the moment we made our introductions.

Head Priest Ryan was a big man, about forty, with streaks of white in his brown hair and a deep, solemn voice. If he were standing at a lectern and giving a recitation, he'd probably come off as a holy man brimming with gravitas. But

lounging back in his chair, surrounded by a dozen lackeys-for-hire and barking at me, he looked like your garden variety, short-tempered earthly old fart.

“Maybe *you’re* the assassins using this ‘mediators’ story as a cover! Well? Explain yourselves!”

Assuming this guy wasn’t the mastermind, he was probably pretty stressed out over the news that one of his peers had just been offed. So I could understand the paranoia. But understanding someone’s behavior and brooking it aren’t necessarily the same thing.

I nodded heartily. “Well, given your personality, I can completely understand why someone might want to send assassins after you, but...”

“What?!”

“Seriously, chill. We’re not them. We wouldn’t even bother squishing a maggot like you.”

“Hey, Lina...” Gourry whispered in a hushed voice in response to my provocation. Needless to say, I ignored him.

Head Priest Ryan’s face purpled with anger. “Did you just call me—”

“C’mon, shake it off. What’s a little jape compared to treating someone you just met like a bloodthirsty assassin?” I jeered with a grin.

“You...!”

“Anyway,” I said crisply, cutting off whatever he was about to say. “I get that you’re scared, but don’t do anything careless. People might start to think *you’re* the one behind all this. Just remember that, okay? We’ll be off now.”

With that, I turned my back on the still sputtering Ryan and his glaring mercenaries.

“Hey... you sure you should have said that, Lina?” Gourry asked quietly as we headed for the temple exit.

“It’s fine. If he’s not the ringleader, this will shift his anger from the other head priests to us, which will keep him from escalating. And if he *is* the ringleader, he’ll definitely come for us first. Then we can turn the tables and solve this lickety-split!”

“Huh... And here I thought you snapped at him because he insulted you.”

Erk.

“Ha. Of course not. All part of my plan!”

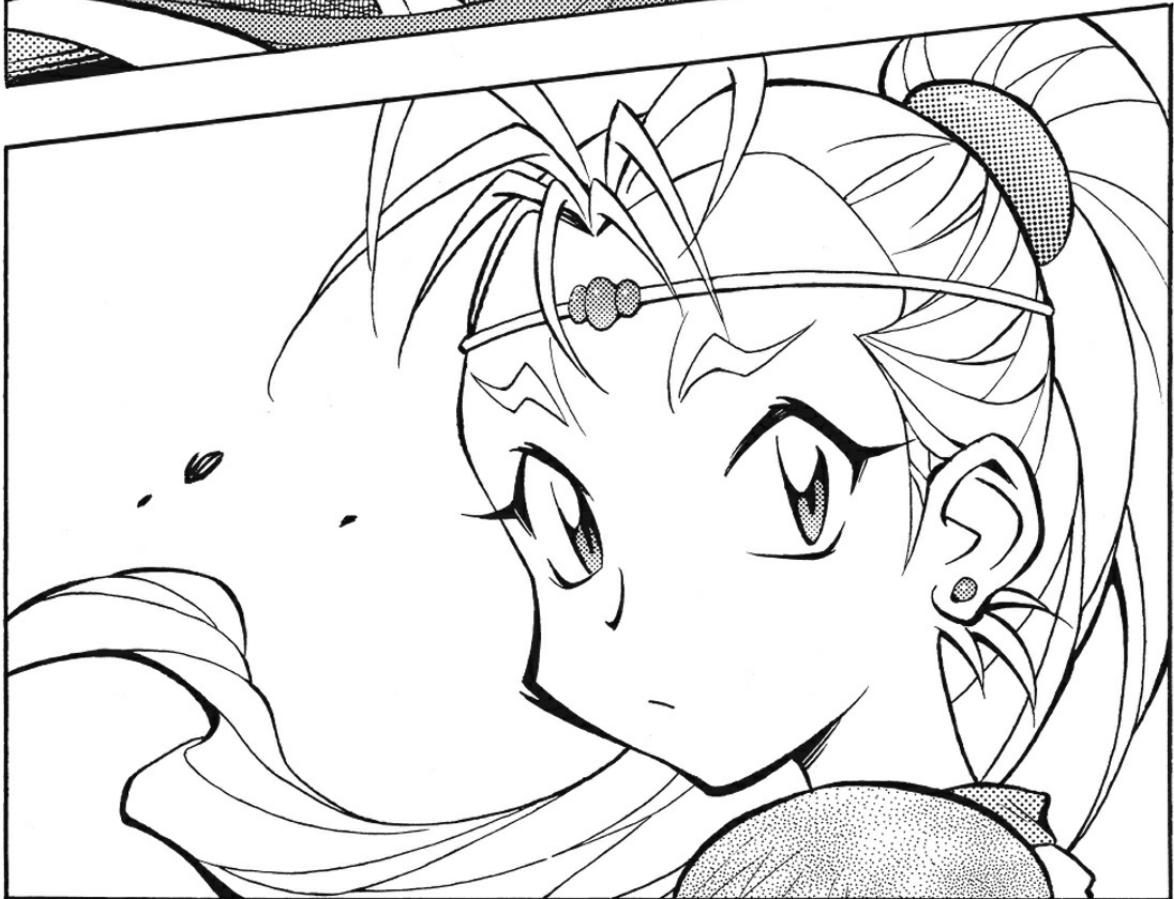
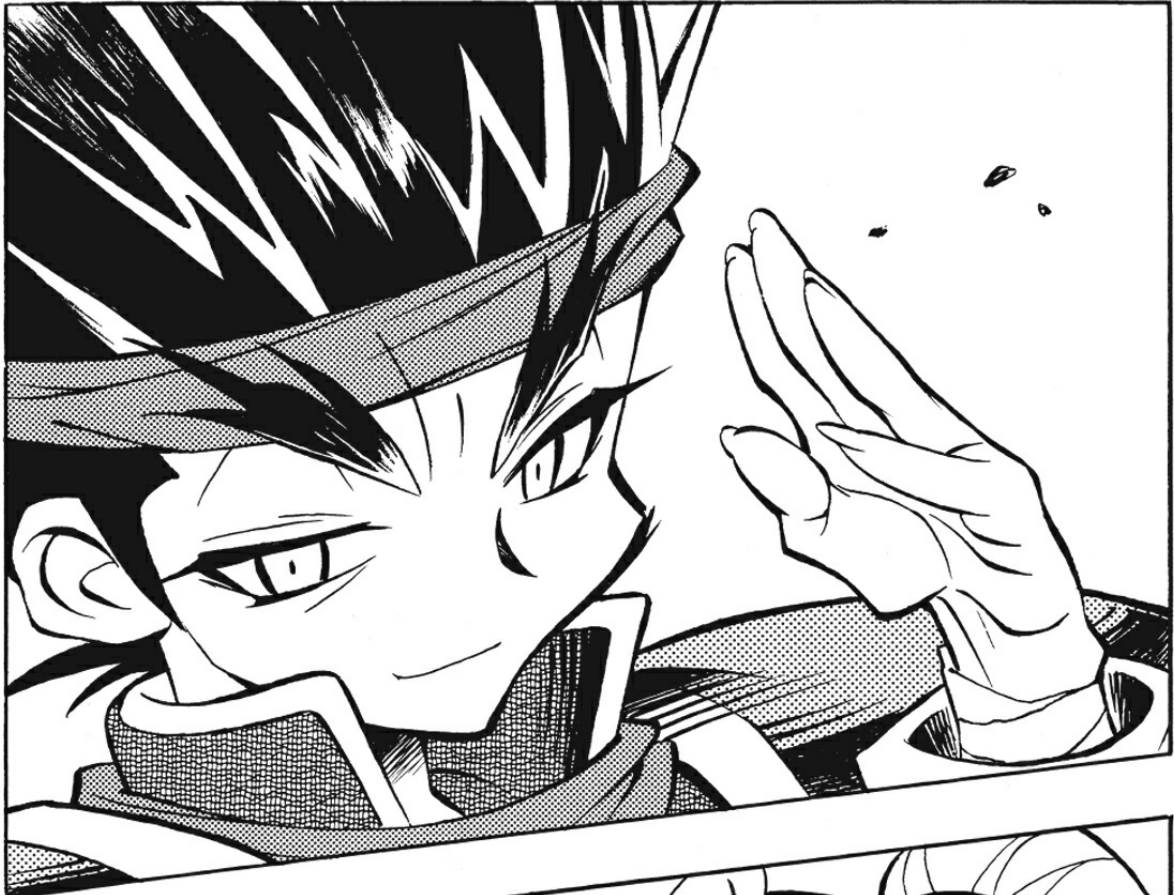
“It didn’t sound to me like your heart was really in that ‘ha.’”

“Purely your imagination!”

When Gourry and I exited the building...

“Hey.”

We found two familiar faces waiting for us. “Luke! Mileena!”



I took a quick look around, but there was no sign of Head Priest Ceres. We walked up to the two of them. “What’s up? I don’t see your boss around... Don’t tell me Luke caught him eyeing Mileena and popped him one so you both got fired from your bodyguard gig.”

“Plausible, but no,” Mileena responded quietly. “Head Priest Ceres sent us.”

“He sent you?” I asked with a frown.

This time, Luke piped up. “Yeah. There was that whole ordeal yesterday, an’ then he heard the head priest of the west was killed... He wants this thing solved ASAP, but his trust in city authorities who can’t tell arson from murder ain’t exactly at an all-time high. Plus, he figured you guys might need backup, so he asked us to lend you a hand since we know you an’ all.”

“Well, no complaints here, but... doesn’t he need you guys to protect him?”

“Yeah, I was pretty worried about that myself. But on account of what happened yesterday, the town guard’s finally gotten off their asses and sent men to watch the priests... ‘Sides, if my boss says I’m okay to go, who am I to argue?”

“Hmm...” I responded absently.

The real question here was Head Priest Ceres’s motivation. Luke claimed he was inspired by the prior day’s events, but wouldn’t that make him want *more* personal protection? I could tell the town guard had indeed sent a security detail. There were now soldiers posted at the southern temple—but only half a dozen or so. Assuming the other temples got the same treatment, that wouldn’t be enough to stop professional assassins.

A favorable interpretation of the situation could be that Ceres was infuriated about the murder of his fellow head priest and wanted the case solved ASAP. A less favorable interpretation could be that he just wanted to get on our good side in the hopes that it would benefit him for the high priest vote. And the least favorable interpretation? That *he* was the one behind everything and he’d realized that having our old acquaintances Luke and Mileena close by was inconvenient for him, so he’d concocted a pretext to send them away.

But whatever the case, I had to admit, I was happy to have the help.

“All right. We’ll accept your aid.”

“Great. What’s our first move?”

“Getting info, I think—from the place with the cheapest inns and the shiftiest businesses!”

The place in question was a downtown area on the south end of the city, even further south than the southern temple. Every city had a place like it, even the so-called City of Temples—seedy shops, dive bars, and dingy homes lining dank streets. A natural den for goons and thugs. We were looking for professional assassins, so if they were hiding anywhere, it’d probably be here.

The best setup from the perpetrator’s perspective was likely to have the assassins mixed in with the mercenaries on bodyguard duty most of the time. That would make it easy to stay in contact and give the ringleader extra security. At the same time, the assassins probably wouldn’t want to show their real faces to a temporary employer. Instead, they’d want to lie low most of the time while stopping by the perpetrator’s dwelling once a day to make contact and receive orders.

In short, I figured we’d have the best odds of finding them around here. I mean, sure, there was also a chance that the assassins were staying at a luxury hotel in the middle of the city. But they’d be way too easy to track down there, so even if there *was* a chance, it was slim.

“All right. Let’s split up into teams and ask around. Me plus Gourry and Luke plus Mileena... Or, that’s what I was thinking, but it seems there’s no need for that now,” I whispered.

“Yeah. Let’s just be glad they saved us the trouble,” Luke murmured in response.

“C’mon, guys... You can’t spring surprise attacks on people when you’re radiating malice like a lantern, y’know? Why not just show yourselves already?” I called out.

A brief silence fell in the wake of my declaration, and then...

“If you insist.” A man appeared from the shadows. He was followed by

another... and another, and another. They came out from around corners and from behind this and that. These guys weren't assassins, though, but a group of a dozen or so ordinary thug-types.

"Someone don't like the way you're pokin' around. Figured we oughta teach you a little lesson," said the apparent front man, a dude with a scar on his cheek.

Hmm... I thought for a moment, then began to chant a spell under my breath.

"Heh. Boy, you guys're stupid," Luke snorted. "You really think you dime-a-dozen meatheads are a match for us?"

"What was that?!" The front man's face purpled. "They're mockin' us! Get 'em!"

"Yeah!" the cannon fodder shouted as they rushed us. When they did...

"Diem Wind!" I shouted, unleashing my spell—a magical gust capable of, say, blowing back a kid with an umbrella. Basically nonlethal. But I wasn't firing it at the thugs. Instead, I was aiming almost directly overhead.

Fwoooooom! Suddenly, there was a flash and a roar from on high.

"What?!" the thugs shouted in shock.

Of course, it wasn't my Diem Wind that had exploded. Rather, it was an in-transit Fireball that I'd intercepted and detonated midair. Said Fireball was probably courtesy of assassins hiding on a nearby rooftop.

See, whoever wanted us dead right now was likely the same person who'd hired the assassins. They had to have known a big band of goons wouldn't stand a chance against us, which begged the question—why send such pissants instead? The answer was obvious: they were just a decoy, and the real threat was elsewhere. That's how I figured there were assassins on the rooftops, their own malice masked behind the blatant hostility of the roughnecks, just waiting for the moment to strike. Hence, I'd prepared a spell to deal with that possibility, and it had turned out I was right on the money.

"Hey... Hey! Don't lose your cool! She just did it to scare us off!" the thuggish front man shouted, apparently assuming the explosion had been my doing.

“Y-Yeah!” his goons shouted in agreement, taking him at his word, before they charged once more.

Argh! Use your darn brains, peons!

The assassins didn’t give a damn about these flunkies. If I hadn’t stopped that Fireball, it would’ve hit them too. But they were none the wiser. So, ignorant to the real threat, they charged right at us and...

“Freeze Bullid!” *Zing!* The ice spell Mileena fired tore through the thugs, rendering a few of them immobile on the spot.

Gourry then drew his sword. “Hah!” With a bold cry, he lashed out!

Fwp, fwp, fwp, fwp! His sword released a strange sound as several of the thugs went flying through the air screaming. He must have struck them with the flat of his blade.

Well... that was still pretty reckless! Most swords would break if you did that. Then again, it kinda would’ve been overkill for Gourry to go full Blast Sword on these twerps...

Luke was also having an easy time tripping the guys up, while I was fighting back with my shortsword as I worked on my next chant. To be honest, even as amateur fighters went, these guys were the bottom of the barrel. It barely felt like a real fight at all.

But they weren’t our real enemy. And the minute the lot of us were engaged in the melee...

Crackle! I heard a soft popping sound overhead.

Yep, here we go! I quickly leaped back to get some distance from the roughneck I was trading blows with, then threw my shortsword overhead at a diagonal angle! Not a second later...

Crackacracka-pop! There came an incredible sound, like the air itself was ripping apart. Streaks of light coalesced around the shortsword I’d tossed up, then struck the goon standing below it! I’d anticipated and nullified the Fireball the assassins had thrown earlier, so this time, they’d gone with an area-of-effect lightning spell that couldn’t be thwarted with wind magic. But—

anticipating this move too—I'd thrown my sword into the air to act as a lightning rod. Tough break for the dude beneath it, of course.

“Curse you! What was that spell?!” the thuggish front man howled, once again presuming the magical fanfare was my handiwork.

Argh! How are you that stupid?! Take a hint already!

Just then... *Whoosh!* Leaping down from the nearby windows and roofs, several black-clad figures dropped onto the battlefield.

The assassins show themselves! I thought. *Guess blocking their spells enough times got their goat!*

“Wh-Who're they? Blah, whatever! Just get 'em all!” the front man shouted, his inability to grasp the situation now reaching the realm of the ridiculous.

This guy can't be serious! He's gotta be joking!

And so, the chaotic brawl began.

“Graaah!”

I easily dodged a slash from an incoming goon, got around behind him as his momentum carried him past me, and dealt him a chop to the back of the head.

“Gek.” He let out that odd little sound and was about to fall when I grabbed him by his collar, swept his legs out from underneath him, and flipped him onto his back. I then snatched up the shortsword that fell from his hand to replace the one I'd thrown.

But the second I grabbed the blade, a black-clad figure raced into my vision—an assassin! Something streaked out of his hands toward me! *Throwing knives?!* Except, in that same moment...

“You bitch!” Another goon ran at me to avenge his comrade!

You stupid...!

Two dull thuds rang out, and the goon shuddered just before slumping to the ground. He'd leaped into the path of the incoming knives and taken both in the back. The assassin clearly hadn't expected this, because the turn of events gave him a moment's pause.

“Freeze Arrow!” I took the opportunity to release the spell I’d been chanting!
Ziziziziiing!

But of course, these were professionals I was dealing with. The assassin quickly leaped away to avoid a direct hit and got behind the goons, letting them turn to ice in his stead.

“Hey!”

“You stupid bitch!” more thugs shouted, charging at me again.

Hey, don’t blame me! You’re the ones who started this!

I made up my mind to blast them all back at once and began chanting a spell under my breath.

Meanwhile, my three companions were wrapped up in their own fights.

Gourry cleaved through the thugs’ swords and knocked away the assassins’ incoming knives. Whenever there was a momentary break in the onslaught, he’d charge in and send one after another to the ground.

Luke deflected a thug’s sword, and when the guy was staggered, he kicked him in the side—right into another incoming thug.

“Gwuh!”

And as the man tumbled over...

“Dug Wave!”

Whooooom! Luke used an attack spell to blast ’em both to kingdom come. A second later, one of the assassins ran at Luke, and...

“Die!” One of the thugs ran at the assassin!

In a slight panic, the assassin moved to counter the thug’s blade. Both were probably hired by the same person, but the thugs apparently hadn’t been told that the assassins were on their side. That was natural, of course. Even if they were dime-a-dozen goons, nobody was gonna smile and say “Sure thing, boss!” when cheerfully informed that they were the expendable bait for hit men. And everything probably would’ve gone off without a hitch—except I’d blocked the

assassins' spells enough times to draw them into the brawl, resulting in major confusion on all sides.

Mileena deflected a blow from another thug and then, without even turning around, launched a spell behind her! "Fell Zaleyd!" She was aiming for an assassin approaching using the thug as cover. He clearly never expected to get made, because he took the blast head-on.

"I... I'll show you!" The young blond thug whose sword Mileena had just deflected tried coming at her again, but she responded with an offhand swing at his face. "Yeek!" The guy quickly ducked down to dodge it—but lost his balance and fell flat on his face. His sword ended up grazing Mileena's side, but regardless... "Geh!" She stepped on the fallen thug's back and swung at her next opponent.

That was about when I finished up my spell. "Diemilar Wind!"

Whoosh! An explosive blast of wind sent several of the gang members and one of the assassins sailing.

Okay! That really thinned out their numbers.

"These... These guys are tough!" one of the roughnecks shouted.

Better late than never, I guess? Not much time had passed since the battle began, but we'd already halved the number of roughnecks and defeated two of the five assassins.

It was then that the head thug cried out, "All the more reason to take 'em out! Let's do this!"

Are you freaking kiddin' me?! Just back off already!

"Right!" the gang agreed enthusiastically.

Seriously, guys! Enough's enough!

"Rrragh!" With a passionate cry he couldn't possibly back up, one of the goons hefted his sword and charged me.

I chanted a spell, raised my shortsword, and then suddenly... a strange chill ran up my spine. I leaped to the side almost instinctively.

Whoosh! A slice appeared in my cape as it fluttered over my shoulder. *Whunk, whunk, whunk!* I heard a series of soft thuds as the man charging at me spat up blood and hit the ground.

What?!

Someone must have thrown knives from behind me—knives that ended up finding the goon when I dodged. At least, that's what I had to assume... Yet there weren't any blades in the man's body.

A wind attack spell, then? Seems a little too precise for that...

"Look out! One of these guys has some strange abilities!" I called out, putting my comrades on alert.

"Strange abilities?!" Luke shouted back as he kicked a goon away.

"What do you mean?!" Gourry jumped in as he cut down one of the remaining assassins.

That was when one of the roughnecks spoke up. "So you finally caught on..."

At his words, the battle drew to a pause.

"Huh? Hey..."

"What? What's he talkin' about?"

Quite a few of the roughnecks seemed as confused as we were.

"Guess it's time to drop the act," said their front man.

"Act? Hey, what're you talkin' about?!"

"No need for you to know."

As he spoke, several of the other roughnecks jolted! *Whunk! Whunk! Whunk! Whunk! Whunk!*

"Guh!"

"Geh!"

Some from their throats, some from their chests, others from their sides... Blood began to spray from the now-motionless thugs who fell to the ground. A few of their presumed allies had suddenly turned on them. I'd said these guys

were bottom of the barrel, and they really didn't stand a chance here. The only men left standing were three goons—or rather, three men *posing* as goons—and two assassins.

“What’s going on here?!” Gourry asked.

“There were assassins mixed in with the roughnecks!” I responded.

I guess this was why the front man had kept pushing them to fight despite the situation growing more and more ludicrous. But even if the assassins’ goal was to catch us unawares, raining down attack spells on their brothers in arms was pretty gutsy... What would they have done if I hadn’t blocked those attacks?

“No use hiding it now... And with the rabble out of the way, it’s time we all get serious.” All expression disappeared from the face of the scarred man who’d been playing the part of the roughnecks’ boss. Instead of a third-rate thug, he now looked like a heartless killer.

They’re coming...

Whoosh! The assassins all charged at once. Gourry made his move at the same time. *Slash!* He struck out as one of the assassins ran past him, slicing the dude in half! And then...

“Flare Arrow!” Luke and Mileena simultaneously unleashed the same spell, piercing the remaining four.

“Gah!” Each assassin took a direct hit, but only one of them let out a scream and collapsed. The other three continued their charge.

That didn’t work?! Even Luke and Mileena seemed a little shaken. Next...

“Okay!” One of them—the blond guy that Mileena had stepped on earlier—whipped out his left hand. He was outside of sword range, but Mileena immediately leaped to the side and...

“Guh?!” A cut appeared on her bicep, but there was no sign the guy had thrown anything.

Wait, was that... a shock wave?! That must mean these men are...

“Mileena!” Luke quickly turned to her, but the former front man was standing between them.

“You’re dealing with me!” the man shouted.

“Get outta my way!” Luke bellowed back.

The man parried Luke’s sword with his own, and in that instant, spears of flame appeared between the two of them! Luke quickly leaped back. He twisted his head around and just barely dodged the incoming flaming bolts.

Meanwhile, the last of the assassins was charging at me, his hands readied in a curious position...

Not so fast! I released the spell I’d chanted! “Blast Ash!”

Whom! A black patch of void appeared in his path and swallowed the man whole! It was fortunate that had been the spell I’d chosen. If it had been a Fireball instead...

Gourry quickly turned around and moved to support Mileena. But just as it became clear what he was doing, Mileena’s opponent leaped back to get some space from Gourry.

“Sorry, but I don’t have any plans to fight you!” the blond man said to Gourry. He then glanced at his companion I’d just turned to ash, and... “Tch! I told you not to underestimate them... clumsy fool! Get back, Zychael!”

Obeying the blond man’s order, the former front man facing off with Luke retreated some distance.

“Who are these guys?” Luke asked breathlessly.

“You haven’t realized it yet?” I answered.

“Actually, yeah, we’ve fought them before, haven’t we?” Gourry said, perhaps remembering them on instinct.

“Yup... Like Gourry said, we’ve tangled with their ilk before,” I echoed.

They’d taken hits from Luke and Mileena’s Flare Arrows without a scratch, and produced flaming javelins without incantations. To do that, they’d have to be...

“Demonoids...”

Back in Solaria some time ago, we'd encountered a madman with ambitions of restoring his lost country. His plan was to possess human hosts with demons summoned from the astral plane—or rather to fuse the two, creating beings with tremendous magical power. Superficial magic attacks didn't work against them, and they were capable of conjuring simple attack spells without the need for incantations. They effectively had the magic power of lesser demons with the intelligence of humans. Some could even blink through space despite having physical forms. I'd come to call these creatures demonoids.

Me, Gourry, Luke, and Mileena (plus a few add-ons) had managed to stop the madman and finish him off in the end... But I never imagined we'd run into the remnants of his lackeys here.

Ah, of course... The reason they'd been able to resist my sleeping spell back in the western temple wasn't because of their impressive wills. It was because they were technically no longer human. A mere Fireball or bolt of magical lightning wouldn't so much as scratch their demon-enhanced hides—hence their plan to rain such spells down from on high earlier. It wasn't nearly as reckless a strategy as I'd first thought.

"Demonoids? Call us what you like, I suppose," said the blond, a smile audible in his voice. "One way or another, I really do have to repay that debt..."

"What debt?" I asked, my brow furrowing. I'd thought we felled all the demonoids we'd crossed paths with in Solaria.

"You don't remember, eh? Then... let me remind you!" he shouted as he swung his left hand.

He hadn't thrown anything. But Gourry instantly darted in front of me and slashed his sword! *Krr-shah! Krr-shah!* A tearing sound reached my ears just like the one I'd heard in the western temple.

Is that...?!

It was clear to me now. The blond man had produced an invisible shock wave as sharp as a blade with a mere swing of his left hand. I'd fought a guy with similar powers back in Solaria, but...

"No... No way..."

“Oh, look at you. You finally remembered?” he taunted.

“But we killed him!”

“You didn’t. You just cleaved me in two... then *assumed* I was dead and walked away.”

That was absolute nonsense. How could he regenerate from being cut in half?!

“Come to think of it, their boss did just happily float around even after we cut his bottom half off...” Luke said grimly.

Then... this guy’s really...

“Zord... wasn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes, exactly. So you *do* remember.” A small smile appeared on Zord’s face. “Not all of us were in Solaria, you know. We were scattered all around in case something happened. But then you lot beat our boss, so we had to sell our skills elsewhere—with plans to *fully* repay what we owed you in due time. Our numbers are looking a little thin now, however, so we’ll withdraw for today...”

“Yeah, right.” Luke snorted. “You really think we’ll just let you go because you ask nice? Huh?”

Luke had a point, but Zord scoffed. “Say what you will. Let me guess—that you’ll chase us down and kill us. Do it *if you can*. You might be raring to go... But what about the girl there?”

Hey...

“What?” Luke whispered hoarsely as Mileena limply fell to her knees.

Wuh?!

“Bwahaha! See you later! Chase me if you want!” With those mocking words, Zord and Zychael withdrew.

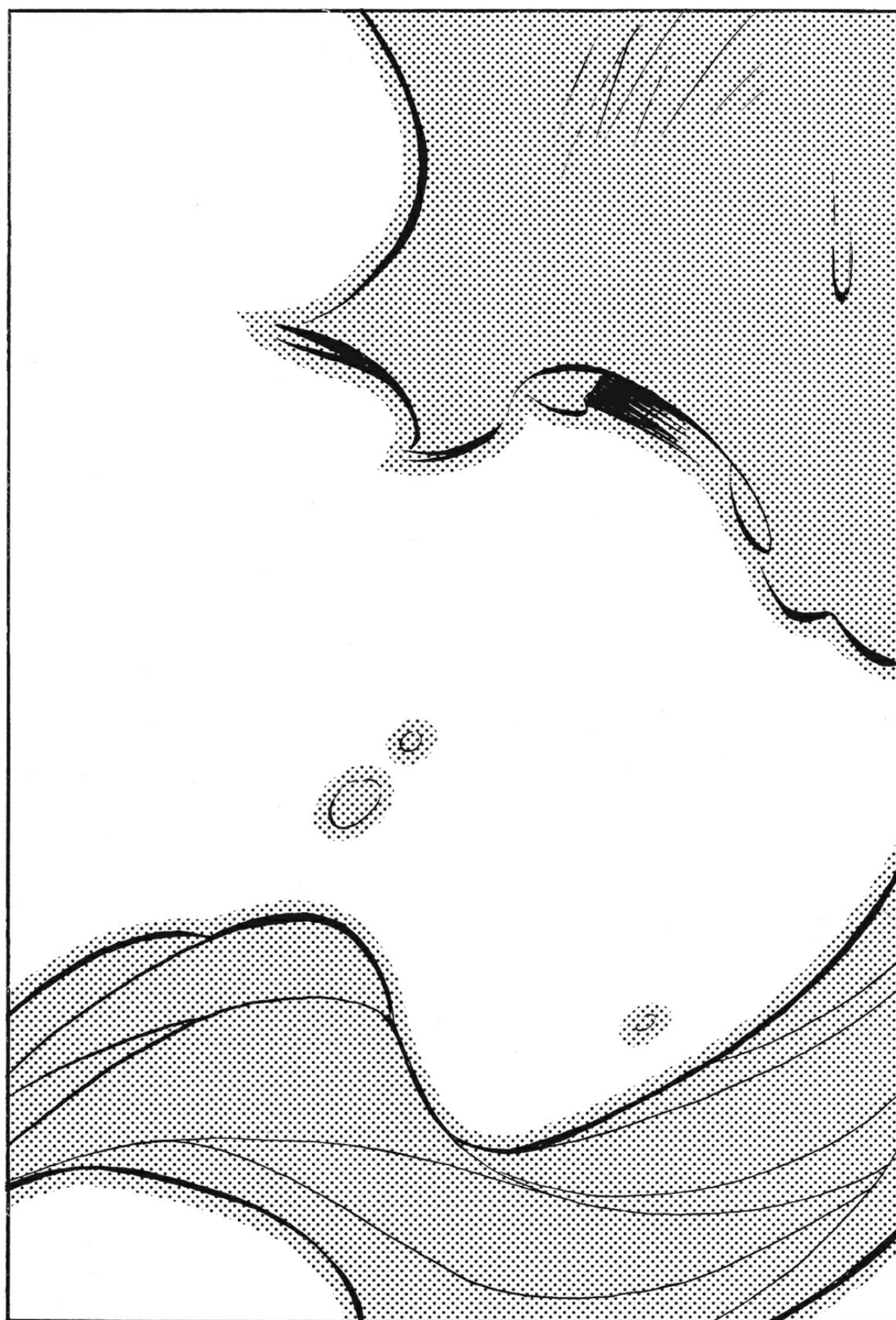
“Mileena?!” Luke swiftly ran to her side. Her already pale face was a shade whiter now. She was in no condition to be chasing assassins.

“I was... careless...” she said, a hand pressed to her side.

I suddenly remembered how, when Zord was pretending to be a roughneck

and collapsed in front of her earlier, his sword had grazed her there... *No way!*

“I think it’s... poison,” Mileena said, her face covered in a faint sheen of sweat.



So it really was... The reason Zord had paused the fight and chatted about old times was to wait for the poison to take effect.

“Hold on!” I quickly started chanting a spell, but Mileena held up her hand to stop me.

“Dei Cleari...” She tried an antidote spell. It wasn’t capable of completely neutralizing all poisons, but it was worth a try. I hoped it would work, but...

“That’ll just be a stopgap! We’ll get you to a magical doctor!”

“Yeah! Hang in there, Mileena!” Luke said as he took her on his back and chanted a spell. “Lei Wing!”

With that, they took off into the sky!

“Whaddya mean, there’s no doctors?!” Luke shouted at the receptionist, his tone fit to kill. We were at a clinic on the south side of the city. “Why the hell not?!”

“They... They’ve been dispatched to the temples!” the woman said quickly, cowed by his intensity. “Because of the fighting among the head priests! We’ve been treating minor illnesses with herbs, but—”

“So the doctors are at the temples?!” Luke said, storming off before she could finish.

Mileena, still on his back, was taking shallow breaths now. The poison Zord had used on her was clearly going to take more than your average antidote spell to cure.

“They gotta be here!” Luke screamed at the top of his lungs.

We were at the southern temple to Earthlord Rangort. We’d announced that we had a poison victim who urgently needed to see a magical doctor, but when we tried to get inside, the mercenary at the door informed us that there weren’t any at the temple.

“They *told* me they were here!” Luke insisted. “There can’t just be none inside!”

“Dunno what to tell you,” the mercenary said with a mocking smile. “The head priest says there aren’t any, and I gotta take his word for it. Oh, that’s right... He said, ‘If you’re gonna work for the northern temple, you should get Ceres to help you.’ Only reasonable, eh?”

“You son of a—”

“Luke!” I shouted just as Luke was about to jump on the guy. “Arguing won’t get us anywhere. I mean, yeah, we could knock this goon aside and drag a magical doctor out here, but... they might still cut corners on the treatment to spite us. What do you want to do?”

Luke briefly fell silent at this. “Let’s head to the north side of town.”

The wind blew by, rustling the green trees outside the window. It was peaceful... A peaceful afternoon.

“Could you... give us a minute alone?” Mileena said softly.

She was lying in bed in a room in the northern temple. Silently, Gourry, Head Priest Ceres, and I turned to exit. The priest’s face was ashen with regret.

Just minutes ago, Luke had pleaded with him. Begged him to remove the poison. To use a Resurrection spell. But High Priest Ceres could only mutter “I’m sorry” over and over again. And that was that.

We left the room and closed the door behind us. The last thing we saw was Mileena on the bed, reaching out for Luke’s cheek. When we next opened the door...

Luke was gone. The only sign of his departure was the open window, its curtains swaying in the wind. Mileena still lay on the bed, so peacefully she could have been sleeping...

Two days had passed since Luke’s disappearance. Naturally, we hadn’t just been sitting around on our hands. We tried asking all around town after Zord and his buddy Zychael. I doubted they were stupid enough to give their real names anywhere, but they *had* shown their faces, which was bound to make finding them a lot easier.

By that evening, the name of an information broker had turned up in our search. I couldn't tell you how many roughnecks we'd beaten up in the meantime, but frankly, who really gives a damn? Gourry and I climbed the stairs to the cheap apartment where the broker supposedly lived, and...

"?!"

When we hit the dimly lit corridor, we both stopped in our tracks. The dingy old hallway was filled with various smells, but there was one pungent aroma that stood out among all the others... The scent of blood, recently spilled.

One door down the hall was ajar. It belonged to the apartment of the broker we'd come to see.

Whoosh! Gourry and I took off in unison and barged through the door.

We found a blood-soaked man lying on the ground inside—the broker. He was covered in cuts, but he was still breathing. When he saw us, he let out a weak, frightened gasp. "Please... no more... I told you... where they were..."

Damn! In that instant, I realized exactly what had transpired.

"How about you tell me *one more time*," I began. "Where are Zord and Zychael?"

"I told you... they went down the road to the east... to the Flower of the Ocean Inn..." the man said, half-crying, not even realizing he was talking to someone else now.

"Fine. I'll call some help for you," I told him, then climbed back down the stairs with Gourry, paid the old landlord a little gold to call a doctor, and headed to the inn the poor guy had indicated.

"What's going on here, Lina?" Gourry asked.

"We're two steps behind Luke," I responded with a hard expression.

The reason he had disappeared was to get revenge, plain and simple. He'd spent the last two days collecting intel, and he'd gotten to the broker before us. So now we were off to the Flower of the Ocean Inn in his tracks... But we were spared much of a search for the place.

Fwoom! There was a sudden blast of light and sound, and a building down the

road blew up. *There!* I dashed toward it.

We were surrounded by shocked bystanders, all looking for the source of the explosion. Flames billowed out of the building and rose higher. On the street out front, lying among burned fragments of wood, was a cheap copper sign inscribed with a wave and some kind of flower. If this was the place, then...

“That way!” Gourry said and took off running.

Shouts of terror from people around us. Panic and screams. The heat and crackle of flames. Emotions and sound swirled in the chaos, but I could sense just one especially powerful feeling flowing clearly from a particular direction.

It was... hatred.

That must be him. If we followed that hate, we were bound to find Luke. He was there, among the raging flames.

The battle—or whatever it was—seemed to be taking place behind the inn. Gourry turned the corner into an alley, and we ran down the narrow backstreet until we came out into a clearing amid a jumble of buildings.

We could see the burning inn close by, and on the ground lay... things. Long things. Short things. Large things. Round things. Gourry and I just stood there, speechless. They were clearly... human body parts.

The cheek of one round lump on the ground had a scar on it. *Zychael...*

“Gyaaaah!” No sooner had I recognized it than I heard that scream, and something else fell from a roof at the edge of the plaza. It was a leg.

Gourry and I both looked up in shock. On the roof of a building facing the plaza was a dark silhouette, backed by the flames. It was squatting there, one hand dangling a man off the edge and the other hand holding a sword. The sword flashed with orange and...

“Gyaaaaaaah!” The dangling man trembled and screamed.

Splat. Something else fell into the plaza. I couldn’t bring myself to check what it was.

“Who was it?” The dark silhouette asked while moving his hands quietly. It was Luke’s voice. “Who hired you?”

“I... I already told you. Francis... of the east...”

“I can’t hear you so good.” Luke’s voice was languid.

His hand moved again. And then... Zord screamed.

“Who hired you?” Luke repeated.

“Please... stop...”

“Hey, c’mon. Answer the question.” Once again, Luke’s sword flashed. Once again, Zord screamed.

Zord, who was now... very small... struggled as he said, “It was Francis! Francis! Francis, Francis, Francis! Stop, stop, stop, stooop!”

“Now I’m sick of hearin’ your voice,” Luke said, and then...

“Luuuuuuuuke!” I called out, freed at last from my long paralysis.

Slowly, he turned around to face us. There was an unsettling glint in his eyes. “Oh... It’s you guys. Don’t worry. I’ll be puttin’ an end to this soon.” He could just as well have been exchanging idle gossip. His right hand moved.

“P-Please... please, please...”

What followed was a soft, wet squelching sound. What had once been Zord was now silent.

“Not even you can survive all that, right?” Slowly, Luke rose to his feet and tossed what remained of Zord into the fire. “I’m gonna finish this now. You guys should get outta the city if you can. Don’t really want you seein’ me like this.” With that, he turned around and disappeared from the roof.

I couldn’t pursue. I couldn’t even move.

I didn’t know he was that devastated... I never even knew a person could have so much hatred stewing inside of them. As for me... I don’t know if I’m sad, or afraid, or what. I mainly just want... to throw up.

“Lina...” Gourry said. His voice was soft. “Lina... Are you okay?”

I’m fine... I meant to say, but only a sob came out. I managed to nod my head in the affirmative.

“We’re going to stop him. We’re going to stop Luke,” Gourry assured me.

“I know,” I managed to respond at last.

Then Gourry and I turned and began to run.

Toward the eastern temple.

To stop Luke.

3: The Priests' Blood Flows in the Darkness of Night

The setting sun painted the temple of Vrabazard the color of blood. We could see roughnecks loitering out front, just like the last time we visited.

Guess the trouble hasn't kicked off yet...

Gourry and I made a beeline for the entrance.

"Hey, hold it! Oh, it's you council guys. Whaddya want— Hey! Wait!" One of the ruffians started yelling when we failed to slow down or respond.

I cast a glance back at the lot of them. "Head Priest Francis is in danger. We need to see him," I said.

"Huh?"

My words stunned the hired mob into silence, so we left them behind and entered the temple. We already knew the layout of the place, so we strode right toward the head priest's room and—*Wham!*—threw the door open with a bang. Inside we found Priest Francis and four mercenaries.

"You..." He stood up as the mercenaries began whispering to each other. "What in the world are you—"

"Zord and Zychael are dead," I said bluntly before anyone else could speak. That was enough to make Francis freeze up. "I think you know what I'm talking about, right?"

"Ah..." he whispered hoarsely, then sank into his seat. The mercenaries, who knew nothing of the situation, kept their hands on their sword hilts and shared inquisitive glances. "I..." Francis's face contorted with shame as he shook his head slowly. "It's not... my fault."

"Cut the crap!" Gourry barked.

That sent a tremble through Francis, and the mercenaries gripped their swords a little tighter. But...

"How many people are dead?! How many lives lost at the hands of your

assassins?!”

His words caught the mercenaries off guard. Understandably, of course. Francis surely hadn't told them he'd hired hit men.

“Did you also kill High Priest Joshua and make it look like an accident?” I asked.

“No... no, please... please hear me out...” Francis said weakly, clutching his head as he shook it back and forth. “I received... a revelation.”

“Huh?” I asked, furrowing my brow. *A revelation? Where's this coming from?*

“When High Priest Joshua died in that fire, I lost a major source of support in my life. I kept asking myself... how could such a fine man just perish like that? I prayed to the gods I believe in... to Lord Ceifeed... to Lord Vrabazard. And then that night... I heard a voice.”

“A voice?”

“It spoke in my ear as I prayed... Yes, I'm sure it was the voice of God. It revealed to me that the death of the high priest was no accident... That it was assassination perpetrated by the wicked. That the same evildoer sought to cast the city into chaos. That I might be next, and that to protect myself, I needed power... ‘Gather power,’ it said... That's what the voice of God told me!”

“That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!” I hissed, but he didn't seem to hear me. He just kept rambling on.

“And so... I hired people. If one of the other three head priests was the killer, I wanted to send them a message: ‘I know what you did. I won't let you do the same to me. One day, I will expose you.’ At first I just hired hot-headed amateurs, but then the other head priests began hiring people too... So I had to escalate to professional mercenaries. I couldn't afford to let them overpower me if one of them was the killer, after all. Then they all followed suit. And then... before I knew it... I was hiring that assassin named Zord...” Francis confessed, torment and regret etched deeply on his face.

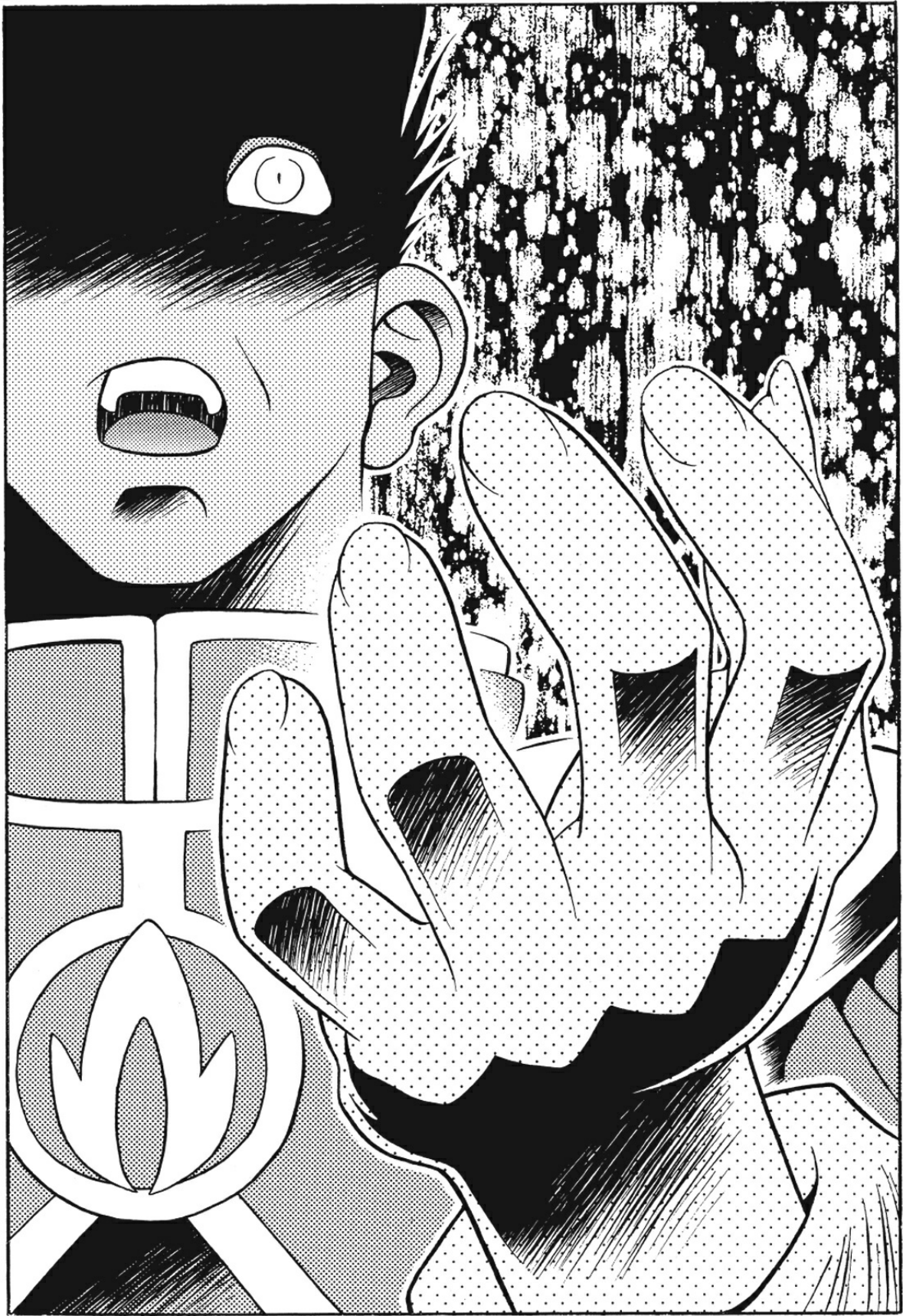
“And you ordered him to kill Head Priest Bran of the West?” I prodded.

“No!” Francis shouted frantically, looking up at me again. “I didn't ask for

that! All I ordered him to do was keep the other priests in check—lean on the mercenaries they'd hired a little and get them to back off! That's all! That man... Zord killed Bran all on his own!"

"You really expect me to buy that?"

"It's true!" His voice cracked. "A few days before the Bran incident, he came by to give me his nightly report. He seemed in unusually high spirits. I asked him why... and he said that he'd run into some familiar faces. That he was about to start 'really enjoying this.' I didn't think... he meant..."



Familiar faces...? Wait a minute!

A few days before the Bran incident would have been the day we arrived in town. The day we'd stumbled on an assassin and mercenary in the slums. If that assassin was Zord, then...

"I heard several assassins attacked Bran... But I only hired Zord! I'd assumed someone else was responsible for the deed, but that night... Zord came to me laughing, saying 'This is what you wanted, isn't it? I brought my colleagues by to help.' But that's *not* what I wanted! This... None of this is what I wanted! I just...!" He buried his face in his hands.

Aha... I get it now.

Zord must have recognized us that night, realized that two-against-one was dicey odds for him, and withdrawn. But that didn't mean he'd given up on his desire for revenge. So he'd called up his old comrades and started a bloodbath, all in defiance of Francis's orders. His aim was to drag us into this fight. And in the end... it was Mileena who...

"I didn't... ask for this," Francis moaned softly, his face hidden by his hands, as if he was trying to convince himself. "I didn't... I didn't want Bran to die. It's not... my fault..."

"You can think that if you want," came a voice out of nowhere. It was Luke.

Then, suddenly—*Fwssh!*—darkness wreathed Francis's body! Nobody knew exactly what had happened at first. And as we stood there, paralyzed in our shock—*Crash!*—an incredible roar sounded out, and...

"Graaaaah!" Francis's wail echoed throughout the room.

All I could do was stand there dumbly. I couldn't even begin to imagine what was unfolding. Luke had ambushed Francis; I knew that much, but why shroud him in darkness? And what was that crash—

Of course!

"Luke!" I shouted as I took off running, vaulting the priest's desk in a dash toward the darkness.

"Lina!" Gourry cried, hot on my heels.

I plunged into the patch of darkness... and came out the other side into a world of orange. There were nicely trimmed garden trees, a long flagstone path, small fountains, and statues all dyed the color of sunset.

“Lina! Where are we?” Gourry whispered as he emerged from the same hole in the wall behind me.

“The courtyard, I think,” I said. The head priest’s room was right next to it, after all.

The ground around us was littered with collapsed bodyguards and priests. Were they unconscious? Were they dead? Hell if I knew.

It had taken me a second to process what we’d just witnessed. Luke had used a spell called Dark Mist, which conjured a sort of black fog that cut visibility to zero within a given area. He’d cast it from the other side of the wall to shroud Francis. Then, while Gourry and I were still too flummoxed to react, he’d cast a second spell to break through the wall and drag Francis outside.

And now I caught sight of them, silhouetted by the setting sun, standing on the roof of the breezeway.

“Yeah... figured you’d follow me. Knowing you... Yeah. I figured you would,” Luke said, a wry tone in his voice. It was hard to see his face, covered in shadow as it was, but Francis was already dangling limp in his arms.

“Enough, Luke! All he did was hire Zord! He didn’t tell him to do this!” I cried.

“Yeah... I know. I was listenin’ in from outside, so I know the whole situation. That’s why... unlike with that Zord asshole, I made it painless.”

What?!

Fffft... thud. Francis’s body fell from Luke’s arms, struck the edge of the roof, then tumbled to the ground below.

“A long time ago...” Luke continued, his voice distant. “I did that kinda thing too. Killin’ people for money an’ all. Meetin’ Mileena made a new man outta me. But now... these assholes went and made me remember. Dammit.”

“It’s... It’s okay now, Luke,” I said.

“No... it ain’t. Not yet,” he quietly rebuffed me.

“Luke!”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d keep out of this. But I know sayin’ that ain’t gonna do any good, you guys bein’ big busybodies an’ all...”

“This isn’t right!”

“I ain’t gonna argue with you there. I don’t think it woulda made Mileena happy either. But... if I don’t do this...” There, Luke trailed off. Silence fell, punctuated only by the dusky wind blowing. And then...

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

“There he is! Over there!”

I could hear the mercenaries finally emerging through the hole in the wall. Their arrival was Luke’s cue to leave.

“Luke!” I cried as he turned to go.

He looked back over his shoulder at me. “I’m almost done. Don’t try to stop me. Next up... the south,” he said, then took off running along the rooftop.

“Hey! Get him!”

“Wait, you bastard!”

The mercenaries were quick to pursue. Meanwhile, I... I just stood there.

“Lina! We’ve got to go after him!” Gourry urged me, but I didn’t move. “Lina!”

“He said not to,” I replied, hushed. “Luke... doesn’t want us to stop him.”

“Lina?” Gourry got around in front of me, seizing my shoulders in his hands. “This isn’t like you. What do you think Luke meant just now? It sounded like ‘please stop me’ to me.”

Ahh... My breath momentarily caught in my throat. He was right. Luke had said where he was headed next. Would he have mentioned that if he really *didn’t* want us to stop him? If he’d wanted to throw us off his trail, he would have pretended to stand down and then gone and done it anyway. There would’ve been no way for us to stop him then. Yet for seemingly no reason, he’d given us his itinerary...

“You’re right,” I nodded quietly.

Luke must have been torn between two contradictory feelings: a desire to stay true to the peace Mileena had afforded him and his seething hatred for those who'd taken her from him. Neither had fully won out—not yet.

“Let's go, Gourry.”

“Sure.”

I chanted an amplified Lei Wing, then took off into the sky at top speed with Gourry in tow. Our destination? Head Priest Ryan at the southern temple.

Stars twinkled in the twilight sky. The sun had already dipped below the horizon, and the dying rays of red on the city's west side offered little resistance against the encroaching darkness. Night was falling.

Such was the hour that Gourry and I touched down at the southern temple. Your typical tourist trap temples closed their doors at night when business died down, and indeed, the southern temple was locked shut by the time we arrived. One city guard and one mercenary stood posted at its front entrance.

“Lina Inverse and Gourry Gabriev from the sorcerers' council,” I announced as we approached, before they could even ask.

“What do you want?” the soldier inquired, his expression cautious.

“We have information that someone is coming to kill Head Priest Ryan. We need to see him,” I said.

“What?!” the soldier and mercenary shouted in unison.

The mercenary's face drained of color. “A-All right. I'll show you the way...”

“Wait!” The soldier stopped him. “Give us the details.”

“There's no time!” I insisted.

“If you need to talk, we can do that just fine here! Why do you need to get inside so badly?!”

“To protect him, of course!”

“The head priest has more than enough bodyguards already!”

I understood why the soldier was wary. He thought we might be assassins

who'd come for Head Priest Ryan and we were just making excuses to try to get close to him. I couldn't blame him for thinking that, given the situation. But I also couldn't just back down. Luke was getting closer by the minute.

I looked around for a while before laying eyes on a gate lamp by the entrance. It was a little taller than me, with a post as thick as my wrist, and atop it sat a statue of a young woman holding a chalice. A magical light hung over the chalice.

I pointed to it. "Gourry, cut that."

Gourry immediately sliced his sword through the air! *Swish! Crrreak... Crash!* He cleaved the bronze pillar on the diagonal, causing the lamp to crash into the garden. It was an undeniably spectacular feat of swordsmanship.

I looked at the soldier again. "If we were assassins, we wouldn't bother talking. We'd just kill you and get our way. That'd be faster, right? Consider that we're *not* taking that route. Look, the guy on his way is really tough... If the soldiers guarding the priest can all do what my buddy here just did, maybe you don't need us after all. But if not, Head Priest Ryan is dead—no ifs, ands, or buts. So? What's your call?"

"V-Very well..." I wasn't sure if it was Gourry's skill or my argument that persuaded him, but the soldier acquiesced. "B-But... I'm coming with you."

"Suit yourself. Let's go," I said.

Gourry and I left the mercenary behind and followed the soldier into the temple. Inside was full of mercenaries, but there was no sign of the priests that were usually in the mix.

"No holy men at this hour?" I whispered to myself.

The soldier must have overheard. "It's dinnertime," he explained. "Head Priest Ryan should be eating in his private room, and the other priests take their meals in the dining hall."

That's right, it is about that time. In which case...

"Hurry!" I shouted.

"Huh? All right..."

At my prompting, the group sped up, and we soon arrived at the head priest's quarters. *Bang!* We kicked the door in to find a group of five soldiers and mercenaries standing around Head Priest Ryan, who was just bringing a forkful of food to his mouth.

"Who...?" he stammered. "Wait, you're the ones from the sorcerers' council —"

"Head Priest Ryan, someone's coming to kill you!" I declared.

"Wh-What?!" Ryan and the mercenaries rose to their feet with a clatter.

"Have you eaten any of that food yet?"

"No, I was just about to start. Don't tell me...!" His eyes widened and he tossed the fork away. "It's poisoned?!"

He looked fearfully at the dishes on the tray. A warm vegetable salad, fried whitefish, bread, and soup. His fork had only just speared his first mouthful of the fish.

"Let's test it," I said, picking up the tray and taking a scowling bite from each dish. "Try some, Gourry," I urged him as I handed the food over.

"Right." He took a bite out of each dish as well.

Head Priest Ryan continued watching us with dread.

"Hmm..." I said, considering. "I think, fortunately, the food's okay."

Of course it was. Luke hadn't had time to get ahead of us and poison the man's meal. I'd just made that up so we could get a bite to eat.

Hey, don't judge me! Undernourishment compromises both brain and muscle power. There was no way we could fight or argue down Luke on empty stomachs.

"Still, this room isn't safe. It abuts the courtyard, and he could blast you with a spell from outside. Let's move to a bigger chamber, preferably an interior one with no windows—and a shortage of hiding places," I suggested.

Ryan immediately rose to his feet. "U-Understood! To the dining hall, then!"

"Aren't the other priests there eating?"

“I’ll kick them out!” he declared without hesitation. “Come on! Follow us, all of you!”

Leaving his dinner behind, the head priest strode out of the room, surrounded by his soldiers and mercenaries. Gourry and I followed after them.

We soon came to a vast room with a large table at its center. Ryan commanded the priests dining there to vacate, then ordered his mercenaries to clear the table. The priests, unaware of the situation, looked unhappy about this, but Ryan clearly didn’t give a damn. I mean, I’m sure it’s hard to be considerate when your life is hanging in the balance, but still...

After we cleared the place out and sat down at the central table, Head Priest Ryan let out a sigh. “Now, all this about someone trying to kill me... Why? What’s going on here? Is one of the other head priests behind it? Is it the same person who killed the high priest and Bran? Are there lots of assassins? Shouldn’t we be on the run instead of holing up here? No, maybe what I need is more soldiers to protect me! Speaking of which... I heard that there was a fire in the city. Is this connected?!”

“Calm down. One question at a time, okay?” I said, trying to soothe the snippy priest.

To be honest, I wasn’t entirely sure what to tell him... I didn’t know if I should reveal that Luke was the one after him. If I spilled the beans, he might start to think that Ceres, Luke’s employer, was the ringleader. On the other hand, if I kept my mouth shut, Ryan might never realize what his selfishness had wrought...

“This isn’t the guy who killed the high priest and Bran,” I said. “It’s someone with... a more personal grudge against you.”

“A... A personal grudge?! Don’t be absurd! I’ve never offended anyone!” he insisted brazenly, without any self-reflection.

With a sudden swell of internal rage, I found myself raising my hand, and... *Wham!*

“Guh!” Ryan took a fist to the face and fell to the floor.

“Your Holiness!”

“What are you doing?!”

The mercenaries looked at us accusingly, but...

“I could’ve done much worse than that. And you’d have deserved it.”

It was Gourry who spoke up, not me. That old priest’s words must’ve really gotten his goat.



“What? What are you talking about?!” Ryan demanded as he cradled his cheek.

I looked down at him. “A few days ago, a couple visited this place. The woman had been poisoned, and you refused to treat her out of spite just because she was in the employ of Ceres of the North. She’s dead now. The man she was with cared deeply for her, so he wants to make you pay. The only way to make it right would be to bring her back to life. And since you seem kinda slow on the uptake, I’ll say it outright—you basically killed her.” My statement had the mercenaries and the soldiers glaring angrily at Head Priest Ryan.

“Wait, you... You’re accusing me of murder?! H-How dare you! Absurd! I... I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“The mercenary who turned us away at the door told us he was acting on *your* orders.”

“That... That’s... It’s some kind of mistake! And I... I never... It’s not like I poisoned the girl myself! He should go after whoever did!”

“Already did,” I said casually. Ryan then froze and fell silent. “You said you heard there was a fire nearby, right? That’s where he killed the guy. Tore him apart piece by piece while he was still alive. Then he threw him in the inferno to finish the job.”

Ryan’s knees began to knock. Seemed like he was finally catching on.

“B-But...” He looked at me pleadingly. “He’s just one man! That means it’s not the group who killed Bran! So... with all this security, I have nothing to fear!”

“I’m telling you he killed *Bran’s assassins* in that fire. Who do you think is the bigger threat?”

“Yeek!” The old priest gasped. “But you... You’ll protect me, won’t you?! G-God entrusted this city’s guardianship to me! I can’t... I can’t die yet! Please, protect me!”

“I don’t know what stupid thing ‘God’ entrusted you with, and I don’t care,” I informed him. “I’m under no obligation to protect a jackass like you.”

“Please!”

“I just wanna stop the guy on the rampage, from the bottom of my heart... And it just so happens that means keeping you free from harm.”

“I-I’ll give you anything! Just save me! P-Please! I’m begging you!”

“Then sit down and shut up.”

“Y-Yes! Of course!” Ryan said and quickly took his seat.

It’d be nice if the old bastard would just pipe down and stay put, but...

The layout of the southern temple was probably the same as the other branches. Luke had been a bodyguard at the northern one, so it would be safe to assume he knew the basic ins and outs of the place. Meanwhile, Gourry and I didn’t have a great handle on what was where... meaning moving Ryan around too much would only play to Luke’s strengths.

The question, then, was how Luke would approach us if we bunkered down. There were no windows in the dining hall and only two doors, which were some distance away from where Ryan was sitting. Luke couldn’t use the same strategy he had at the eastern temple now that we’d changed rooms. Ryan was too far from any outside walls.

We’d been slow to react last time because it was all so sudden, but now that we knew the trick, he wouldn’t catch us off guard with a Dark Mist again. In other words, if Luke was going to spring a surprise attack on us, there were only two ways he could do it—either from above or below.

“Is there a basement under this room?” I asked.

“Eh? No... only the annexes have basements. Should we move to one of those?” Ryan asked in turn.

“What’s above here?” I asked, ignoring him.

“What? That’d be the priests’ dormitories... Of course! He’ll come from overhead! That’s it! Yes! Send all the guards to the floor above us! You there! Get five or six guards in the courtyard with nothing better to do and take them upstairs! Around rooms five through seven of the priests’ dormitories! Understood?!” One of the mercenaries left the room on Ryan’s command.

After that, the hall was silent for quite a while. We had nothing to do but

anticipate Luke's arrival.

The wait was interminable. What was taking so long? Not that I was eager for Luke to show up in a murderous rage, but when we'd parted ways, he'd made it sound like he was coming directly here. An awful lot of time had passed for that to be the case. Maybe he was already inside the building, biding his time.

"Is... Is he really coming after me?" Ryan finally asked in terror, unable to bear the silence. "You're sure there wasn't some mistake? Perhaps he made you think he was after me while he went after Francis in the east."

"If that's what you think, we can leave right now."

"N-No! Please don't!" Ryan yelled, frantically waving his hands.

"Besides," I started to say, but just then... I heard footsteps approaching from down the hall.

"Is... Is that him?!" Ryan clamored fearfully.

The mercenaries sprang to life, yet the arrival at the door was an out-of-breath priest.

"Head Priest Ryan!" he called.

"What's wrong?!" Ryan leaped to his feet in response.

"E-Emergency!" the priest cried as he fell to his knees before Ryan. "A messenger just came from the eastern temple! Head Priest Francis was killed by an intruder!"

"What?!" Ryan exclaimed in shock.

"We know," I said. The entire room froze. "We saw him kill Head Priest Francis right before our eyes. And after the fact, he said he was headed south next. That's why we're here."

"No... No! That means..."

Before Ryan could say whatever he was gonna—*Fwoom!*—we heard a distant rumble and several screaming voices.

"Wh-What was that?!" the priest gasped.

"Something's happening in the courtyard!" one of the mercenaries in the

hallway announced.

“Ah... fine! Send all the guards to—”

“Stop!” I interrupted Ryan swiftly.

“What?”

“It’s probably a diversion! He’s causing a ruckus in the courtyard to draw attention there! Then when your guards scatter, he’ll strike!”

“B-But there’s just one of him, isn’t there?!”

“Yeah, but he has his ways! He could have summoned a rock golem to raise havoc for him! So stay put, would you?!”

“Good call, right down to the rock golem... You know me pretty well.”

I flinched when I heard his voice. Need I even say who?

“Who’s th— Ghhk!” Down the hall, I could hear the bark of a mercenary cut off by a groan.

Then *he* appeared at one of the doors, his naked blade at his side. *Luke...*

“Hey. You’re Head Priest Ryan, right? I’m here to kill the shit outta ya.”

Immediately, a figure tore across the room. *Gourry!*

In a split second, he’d closed the distance to Luke, drawn his sword, taken a stance, and blocked the path! *Nice one!* Luke had only just appeared in the doorway, but the big lug wasn’t going to let him through!

“That’s enough!” Gourry shouted.

“Yeah, figured you’d come. Really, really wish you hadn’t. Didn’t wanna mix you guys up in this...” Luke muttered as he readied his sword and squared off with Gourry. “Since I know I can’t beat you in a straight-up swordfight.” A self-recriminating smile appeared on his face.

“Eeeeeek!” Ryan screamed, and I moved to cover him.

“I’m not gonna feed you some platitude like ‘I understand how you feel’!” I shouted. “But I can’t sit by and let you continue this rampage!”

“Yeah... Sorry about all the trouble I’m makin’. But I just can’t stop myself,”

Luke said, his gaze locked on Gourry.

Luke knew that he couldn't best Gourry in terms of fencing skill, but there was more to it than that. There was a decisive difference in their weapons of choice. Luke had a magical sword with a pretty good edge and an interesting property that let him temporarily store a spell in it. Meanwhile, Gourry had the legendary Blast Sword, which was so unbelievably sharp that we'd had to put a protective spell on it just to keep it under control. Luke's sword would be toast on the first clash. He had to know that... yet he showed no sign of backing down. Did he intend to fight to the finish, even if the outcome was already evident? Or did he have a plan in mind?

"Let's go!" Luke howled as he swung his sword.

Gourry's blade flashed in response. And the instant the two streaks of light neared each other... *Whoosh!* A gust knocked Gourry's blade off course! Had Luke charged his sword with a wind spell?!

Normally Gourry could slice through a whirlwind, but despite his determination to stop Luke, his swordplay was lacking its usual ferocity.

"Grk!" Nevertheless, he channeled the momentum of his deflected blade into another strike. His target? The sword in Luke's hand! He was going to slice it in half to neuter his attack power.

But... *Whoosh!* Another blast of wind knocked Gourry's blade off course again! This time, Luke stepped in. Gourry backed up to keep his distance.

I was wrong... I suddenly realized, stunned. Gourry wasn't holding back in the slightest; it only looked that way because the wind wreathing Luke's blade was just that incredible. That was the only way to explain it deflecting Gourry's strike not once, but twice! Luke had known Gourry would be here, so he'd decided to play up his defense rather than offense. Which meant...

In anticipation of Luke's next play, I began chanting a spell under my breath. Gourry couldn't risk moving back any farther. He dealt out a third and then a fourth slice, but Luke's sword knocked those away too. Against an ordinary opponent, Gourry would've had the foresight to predict the path of the wind and cut through it. But though he wasn't as good as Gourry, Luke was leagues better than "ordinary." By focusing on defense, he could continue to use his

wind barrier to throw Gourry off. Looking at it that way... it was pretty impressive!

As Luke thus deflected the umpteenth strike, he bellowed, “Gust!”

With that—*Vwoosh!*—the wind stored in the sword was unleashed, rushing forth in a howl!

Caught by surprise, Gourry couldn’t keep his balance. He was forced to leap back with the wind rather than fight it, and when he did, Luke took off! He darted at Ryan the instant Gourry was out of the way!

Fortunately, I’d predicted this. I immediately unleashed the spell I’d chanted. “Diem Wind!”

Vwoosh! My own gust pushed Gourry back in the direction he’d come, closing the distance between him and Luke again!

“What?!” Luke cried in surprise.

“Graaaaah!” Then Gourry raised a war cry, and through it, I heard Luke’s sword hit the floor.

Gourry hadn’t knocked it out of his hand, however. Realizing that a hit from Gourry’s Blast Sword would be the end of his blade, Luke had dropped it the moment they made contact. The improvised nature of Gourry’s attack had failed to cut through Luke’s weapon instantly.

“Rrk!” Luke drew back into the hall, realizing he was now at a disadvantage.

But we couldn’t let him get away! If he escaped, he would just come after Ryan some other way! If that happened, what would be the point of any of this? We needed Luke to let go of his hatred and back down for good. I didn’t know how we were going to do that, but the only way to try was to open a dialogue.

“Gourry! After him!” I shouted, giving chase.

Gourry followed after me, and when we hit the hall... *Bwsh!*

Where Luke had just retreated was shrouded in darkness—another Dark Mist spell! Gourry stopped instinctively. Then suddenly...

Fwoosh! Flames began to lick out of the darkness along the ceiling!

“Waaaaagh!” the mercenaries shouted in surprise.

The flames stuck to the ceiling, suggesting Luke had cast a fire spell upward from beyond the Dark Mist to keep us in check. Except I wasn’t gonna let that stop me! I ran headlong into the blackness!

Within a few steps, I was out on the other side... and I came to a halt. There were magical lights in sconces lighting the corridor, but just down the hall was another patch of Dark Mist.

“Lina!” Gourry quickly caught up with me. We shared a glance, nodded, and took off running again. We passed through the second dark cloud only to find a third lying beyond it.

Argh! Give it up already, man! Without even slowing down this time, Gourry and I plunged in. We came out at an intersection. The hallway just beyond was obscured by yet another patch of darkness.

Doubt clouded my mind. “Stop!” I shouted, doing so myself.

The Dark Mist diversion... The first try made sense. Even the second. But a third? Luke had to have known that wouldn’t work. So what was with the fourth? It looked to me like he’d intentionally put it past the intersection in an attempt to convince us he’d gone that way. But if he *really* wanted to give us the slip, the obvious move would have been to cast Dark Mist at the intersection itself and then pick a side.

Doing it like this suggested... Was he trying to mislead us, or make us *think* he was misleading us when he truly had gone that way? Or was it possible...

“Let’s head back, Gourry!” I said, whipping around and running back into the darkness we’d just come out of.

“Right!” Gourry responded, following suit.

We backtracked until...

“Waaagh!” the mercenaries cried out, surprised by our sudden reappearance.

“Calm down!” I scolded them while getting a look around the room. There was no longer anyone in the central chair. “Where’s the priest?!”

“H-He took his guards and ran out of the other door!” one of the mercenaries

responded.

Damn! I'd belatedly realized Luke's plan. The purpose of the fire on the ceiling wasn't to stave off me and Gourry. It was to smoke the already terrified Ryan out of the dining hall. Meanwhile, Luke had pretended to flee in order to lure us down the hall, all while using his superior knowledge of the building's layout to get around to the other side of the dining room and head Ryan off.

That strategy potentially explained why he'd taken his time getting here from the east temple. He wanted us to explain the situation to Ryan and let his fear metastasize.

Gourry and I dashed across the room toward the other door. Just then...

Krr-crash! Further down the corridor, the ceiling caved in with a roar!

"P-Please! Stop!" I could hear Ryan screaming beyond the reverberations of destruction.

Not good! We kept running regardless. The dust hadn't settled yet, but this was no time to worry about that. We climbed over the fresh mountain of rubble on the floor. Like the guard in the dining hall had said, the priest must have had his security detail with him. There was a handful of mercenaries collapsed nearby, but no sign of Luke and Ryan.

Where are they?! I reached out with my senses and picked up the sound of combat in the distance. *Is that them?! No, it's the golem in the courtyard...*

"Aaagh!" Over the distant din, I could hear Head Priest Ryan!

"This way!" Gourry shouted and took off running. I did the same.

We came out of the corridor, turned a corner, and... Given our general heading, I was pretty sure we were en route to the backyard. Normally there would be guards all around, but there wasn't a single one in sight now. They must have all rallied to the courtyard earlier.

Gourry and I continued down the hall and—*Wham!*—slammed open a door that had been left ajar! We exited the building into the quiet night.

Here and there, lamps cast a faint magical light. The lawn was neatly trimmed and the trees were well tended. Shadowy silhouettes of bronze statues stood

around us. I could still hear the melee from the courtyard, which seemed to have drawn the majority of the temple guard. There were only a few here out back—all collapsed on the ground.

Standing silently among them... was Luke.

"I just don't get it," he said softly.

There was a black mass at his feet... I looked down to see it was the body of Head Priest Ryan. *Dammit!*

"Humans... Sometimes it feels like they can survive anything, but then... the littlest thing kills 'em."

I failed to stop him. I clenched my teeth hard.

"Fightin' those demons... Again and again, I thought, 'Man, we're so dead.' But we managed to pull through every time an' win. But after all that... Seein' Mileena get ganked by a second-rate asshole like Zord... It just don't seem real. It just... It ain't right."

"Luke..."

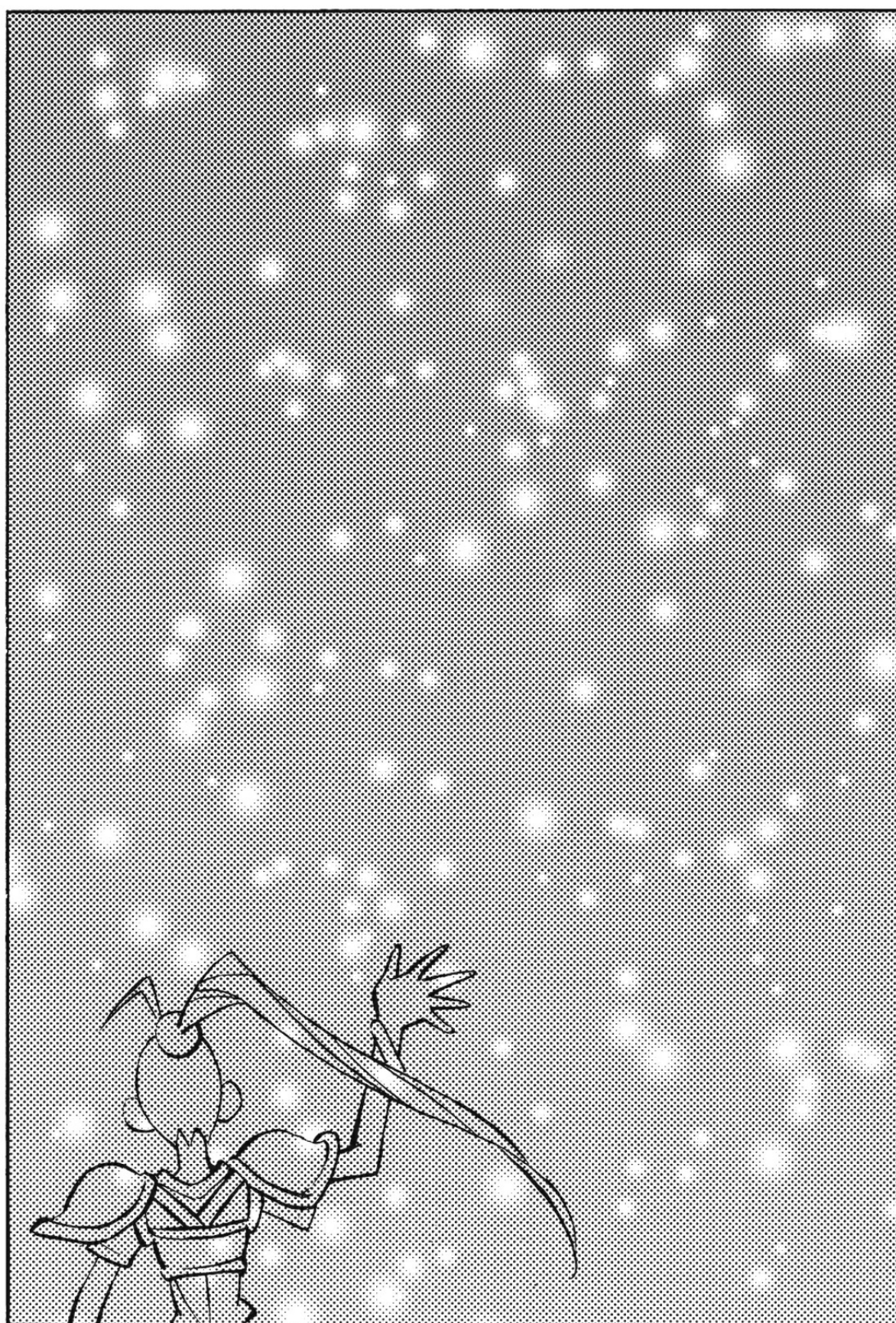
"Even this guy... He died just like that. I didn't wanna listen to him raisin' hell, so I thought I'd cut his vocal cords. Even made sure to miss the artery so he wouldn't die too quick, but... Guess it was the shock, because he just went... flop. Sucks, 'cause I really, really wanted to make this guy suffer..."

"Luke..."

"It ain't enough. It still ain't enough..."

"What?" His words sent a chill down my spine. The hatred inside of him hadn't been quelled. I could still feel it emanating from him.

"I thought killin' this guy would be the end of it. That it'd be enough. That afterward, they could just arrest me or kill me or whatever. Mileena ain't comin' back either way, so what do I care? That's what I thought. But I guess not, 'cause that awful voice... just keeps risin' up in me... sayin' to keep goin'... That it still ain't enough. If only Ceres and his people had better magic... If they could've used Resurrection, they could've saved Mileena!"



“Luke!” I cried out.

It was true that Head Priest Ceres and his magical doctors had failed to neutralize the poison and that none of them were capable of casting Resurrection. Yet Zord’s poison wasn’t just designed to be incurable by typical antidote spells. By the time we’d reached the northern temple that night, it had already circulated throughout Mileena’s entire body and exhausted her stamina.

I mean, yeah, she might have made a comeback if we’d been able to fully excise the poison. And a spell like Resurrection, which borrowed life force from the surrounding area to transfer to the patient, could have recouped enough stamina to allow her to fight off the last of the poison herself. But to blame what happened on Ceres just seemed so...

“I know! I’m just makin’ excuses and takin’ it out on other people! That’s what my head tells me! But... But my heart... My heart’s tellin’ me it still ain’t had enough!”

“Snap out of it, Luke!” Gourry shouted. But his words couldn’t reach Luke’s heart either.

“Next up... the north.”

“Don’t do this, Luke!” I took over. “You’re just feeding the hatred in your heart! If you kill Head Priest Ceres, next thing you know, you’ll be turning your rage on us! And if you manage to kill us, then it’ll be someone else next! In the end, you’ll have no one left to turn on but yourself! If you surrender yourself to hatred, you could destroy the whole city and still never be satisfied!”

“Okay, fine. What would you guys do? It’s easy to tell a guy to just stop... But what if the same thing happened to you? What if some asshole killed your partner an’ someone told you to put your hatred aside? Could you do it? If someone said it wouldn’t help, could you just say ‘oh, right’ and let it go?”

“I...” I didn’t know what to say.

Slowly, Luke turned around. “This is it... This has gotta be the end of it!”

“Luke!” I called...

But my cry was drowned out by the sound of Luke unleashing his spell. He took flight to the north.

To the temple of Head Priest Ceres.

4: The Darkness in the Human Heart

“So... he’s coming?” Head Priest Ceres whispered glumly after hearing my story.

We were currently in his quarters at the temple to Aqualord. The tumult in the courtyard was still ongoing when Luke fled from the southern temple, but Gourry and I had decided to leave that to the guards while we gave chase... or tried to. We’d taken to the skies with an amplified flight spell but found no sign of him anywhere. Had he taken cover somewhere, perhaps? With little other recourse, Gourry and I had come straight to Ceres and told him everything—including that his life was in danger.

“He’s... out of control. And at the same time, he wants to be stopped. The fact that he left before us but still isn’t here yet is proof of that. Somehow... we will stop him.”

“Very well,” Ceres said with a firm nod. “I’ll assist in any way I can.”

“Thank you,” I replied with a nod back. “Now, as for where to keep you...”

“I have a request as far as that goes,” he said, interrupting me. “Could we hole up in the cathedral?”

“The... cathedral?” I frowned at this suggestion.

The best place to protect someone was somewhere it was hard to stage an ambush and easy to stage an escape—and with lots of room to fight if it came down to that. The cathedral certainly had roominess going for it, and it was pretty defensible in some respects. But it was also full of pillars, pews, altars, and other kinds of obstacles, making it the perfect environment to sneak up on someone or mount a raid by breaking in through the stained glass ceiling. In other words, it was far from an ideal shelter.

“Hmm...” I grimaced.

But Ceres looked at me earnestly. “Please. I feel like that’s where I should be... no matter how things turn out.”

He sounds like a man prepared to die... It wasn't in me to fight him when he put it like that.

"Okay," I acquiesced. "Then let's get all your guards—"

"I have a request regarding that as well," he interrupted me again.

What he suggested this time was truly insane.

The vast room was illuminated by magical lights in sconces shaped like young women on the pillars and walls. A blue carpet with an emerald green pattern ran between the rows of pews. And at the end of the wide aisle stood the altar to Aqualord.

Head Priest Ceres was standing there. Gourry stood to his right and I to his left, as if to support him. We were the only ones in the cathedral. The other mercenaries and soldiers remained deep within the temple.

For me and Gourry to be his only guards... That was the reckless suggestion that Head Priest Ceres had proposed. Obviously, I'd been opposed to it. It left him way too exposed. But then he'd said, *"This is something we must resolve between us. I don't want to get the mercenaries caught up in it."*

I understood his logic. I hated to admit it, but it wasn't like having a crowd of soldiers and mercenaries hanging around would help us stop Luke anyway. In fact, being surrounded by people who didn't know the whole situation might rob us of the opportunity to talk things out. So maybe this was for the best after all.

In the end, Gourry and I had agreed to the plan. But naturally, while the hired mercenaries did whatever they were told, the city soldiers and priests weren't so easily convinced. We'd had to lie to them and say that Head Priest Ceres wanted a conference with them in a back room of the temple. Then, when they'd all gathered in place, I knocked them out with a Sleeping spell. That would keep them out of the fray if things got rough.

"You know what we gotta do, right, Gourry?" I asked the big lug.

"Yeah. If he won't back off... we'll have to get serious," he replied with a hardened gaze.

With Head Priests Francis and Ryan, we'd been more sympathetic to Luke than to his quarry. But that wasn't the case here. We had to stop Luke now... even if it meant hurting him. Thinking back on our skirmish at the southern temple, we'd consciously assumed there wouldn't be any serious bloodshed. And the result of that? Head Priest Ryan was dead now. But this time...

"I will stop him. For sure," I whispered.

Then, as if waiting for that cue... I heard footsteps. They were distant, coming closer little by little. With a heavy sound, the door to the cathedral slowly opened. *Creeeeak...*

"Hey... sorry for the wait," he said, stepping into the magical lighting of the room. He was still wearing the same unassuming expression.

Luke...

"I had to double back on my way here to pick up my sword from the south... But this is a pretty considerate welcome," he continued.

"We decided it was best if there was no one to get in our way," I replied.

"Yeah... Good call there."

"You won't stop, will you?"

"I plan to. After this."

"Luke..." I said with a sigh. "What did Mileena say to you?"

Luke abruptly looked away, lips pursed.

"She asked us to give you two a moment alone... What did she say to you then? Did she ask you to avenge her? Did she ask you to kill all the head priests? Or..."

"It don't matter what Mileena said!" Luke barked, cutting me off. His voice was near a scream. "This is... This is about how I feel! About what I can accept and what I can't! That's what matters!" With that, he let out a deep sigh. "I can see talkin' ain't gonna get us anywhere... C'mon, let's keep this simple. This is about whether or not you can stop me."

"Fine..." I agreed, not having much choice in the matter.

Luke was well aware that what he was doing was wrong. But he couldn't stop the hatred welling up in his heart. That left Gourry and me with but one course of action—to stop him.

“I will stop you. I don't think... I can hold back this time,” I said with a grim smile.

“I hear ya. I ain't sure I'll be able to stop myself takin' an arm or two of yours either.” Luke returned my smile as he drew his sword.

Then, in the magical light and with the stained glass saints watching over us, we squared off.

Luke took off first, tearing through the pews in a beeline for us. Gourry, sword drawn, likewise darted in front of the altar to put himself between Ceres and his attacker. Meanwhile, I began chanting a spell.

Luke closed in, and... “Abyss Flare!”

He fired a spell I'd never heard of! The instant he did—*Vwoosh!*—the carpet in front of him caught fire. The flames concealed Luke's form even as they spread, sweeping across the carpet. They were heading right for Gourry!

Too bad I'd predicted that Luke would use a spell to keep the big lug in check. “Diem Wind!” I unleashed a gust at the incoming flames—but they were unaffected!

Magical fire?! Luke must have anticipated that I'd use a wind spell to counter his cast. But in that case...

“Gourry! Cut through it!”

“Right!” Not questioning what sounded like a truly absurd request, Gourry swung his sword through the incoming waves of flame, which parted and scattered in its wake.

See, Gourry's Blast Sword was effective against magical beings, so it should be effective against magical fire too. That was my thinking.

But from the depths of the fading flames... Luke suddenly sprang forward, swinging the sword in his right hand at Gourry! The big lug twisted his own blade to block it, but just then, the tip of his sword wavered. Luke had wreathed

his blade with another wind spell!

“Hyaaaah!”

Clinng!

Yet when Gourry roared, half of Luke’s sword went flying! My dude had anticipated the currents of Luke’s invisible wind and kept his blade abreast of them on just the right course to cut Luke’s in two!

We did it! Or so I thought, but just then... Luke’s left hand moved. He had a second sword!

“Burst!” At Luke’s cry, the wind wreathing that sword blasted out—*Whoosh!*—and carried Gourry away with it!

Luke ignored him forthwith, tossed the sword in his right hand aside, and continued on his course for the altar and Head Priest Ceres. Too bad he’d forgotten about me! I rushed over to the head priest, grabbed his hand, and pulled him toward me, chanting all the while.

Wham! Luke kicked off the altar and sailed through the air at us. Just then, Gourry regained his balance and cut in, but—

“Diem Wind!” Luke unleashed his wind spell downward!

Whoosh! The gust made Gourry stumble and changed Luke’s path of descent. When he landed, Luke used his right hand to pull out a black dagger from behind him.

He pointed it at Gourry and... “Take him, darkness!”

Whoosh! A black cloud appeared over the big lug!

A Dark Mist spell?!

His second sword, and now this dagger... Did Luke know how to imbue his equipment with spells? Was that even possible?! He’d mentioned his previous profession to us before—was it a technique he’d learned as an assassin?

Gourry reflexively leaped back to get himself some space. When he did, Luke turned his attention to Ceres again.

“Lei Wing!” I immediately unleashed my spell, enveloping me and the priest in

a wind barrier that took us airborne!

I'd used my talismans to amplify this baby, making it nigh impossible to break through. Lei Wing was difficult to control, but in such a large cathedral, we had sufficient space to maneuver. I flew us to the back of the room, then made a U-turn. From there, I dove straight at Luke. There was no way he could dodge—so he'd sheathed his blade again and was pointing his open left hand at me?!

For real?! He's gonna try to bust through my wind barrier?! Or is this just a bluff?

I put my money on "bluff" and stayed locked on Luke. The second we collided, I saw his mouth move—and the wind warped around me! *Hey!* My wind barrier wavered, destabilized, then burst.

Krababababash! The head priest and I immediately fell to the ground and rolled end over end. Fortunately, Luke was blown back entirely by the crash.

Of course! I realized what he'd just done. The moment his left hand made contact with my wind barrier, he'd cast some wind magic of his own, creating interference between the two. My amplified Lei Wing was undoubtedly the more powerful spell, but it was unstable and hard to control, so any kind of interference upset the balance of the barrier and destroyed it.

Impressive... breaking a spell based on knowledge of its characteristics! I managed to stand up, helping Head Priest Ceres to his feet while I was at it. The shock from the landing—rather, from the fall—had left us both in pain, but we didn't have time to stand around nursing our wounds. Luke had been blown back too, but he was already getting up.

Gourry came charging in from behind. "No hard feelings, okay?!" he cried with a flash of his sword.

"Course not!" Luke cried in turn, drew another dagger, and unleashed the wind stored in its blade. Was he trying to blow Gourry back again?!

In the middle of his full-speed charge, Gourry suddenly leaped to the side to dodge the incoming gust—and Luke threw his dagger right where the big lug was going to land! There was no way he could dodge that! With no other choice, Gourry used his own blade to deflect the incoming dagger. When he did,

Luke sprang off his hands and leaped—at Gourry!

“What?!” Gourry froze for a split second. In a fight against someone we had to kill, he wouldn’t have hesitated to slice his foe out of the air. But Luke was just someone we had to stop. That created a moment’s delay in Gourry’s reaction.

Wham! Luke’s foot met Gourry’s stomach! “Guh!”

The big lug stumbled. Luke landed. Then he took off in a dash toward me, without a glance back at Gourry!

I didn’t have time to chant another spell! Could I stop Luke with my swordplay alone? The answer to that was a resounding *no*! Which left me with only one option!

“This way!” I took Ceres by the hand and ran, chanting up a spell as we fled.

We were in a corner of the cathedral, meaning the only escape from Luke was to duck out into the corridors. I did so without hesitation. I needed to buy enough time either to finish my spell or for Gourry to catch up with Luke!

Naturally, Luke pursued. The distance between us narrowed little by little. He chanted some kind of spell... But I finished mine first! I placed one hand on the wall beside me and released it.

“Van Layl!”

Tendrils of ice began crawling outward from where my hand met the wall. They would freeze anything they touched... potentially leaving a target with a nasty case of frostbite.

The icy ivy approached Luke’s legs, but... *Whoosh!* He leaped up, and once he was in the air—“Lei Wing!”—he activated a high-speed flight spell!

Losing sight of Luke, the frigid tendrils changed course for Gourry behind him! Granted, Gourry wasn’t just going to sit and take it either.

“Hahh!” With a slice of the Blast Sword, he scattered the incoming vines.

Meanwhile, Luke continued to close in on me and Ceres from behind. *You think you can get us that easy?!* I threw myself to the ground and pulled Ceres down with me! Luke thus sailed over our heads and plowed down the hallway

past us...

At least, that's what *should* have happened. I'd yanked on Ceres just a beat too slow. His ceremonial robes got caught in Luke's wind barrier, which took both of us for an impromptu ride.

"Waaah!"

It dragged me and Ceres all the way to the corridor's entrance, which was just as bad for Luke as it was for us. Having to carry two unexpected passengers with an already unstable spell caused him to lose control and crash land as soon as we hit the corridor.

While Luke was recovering from that, I grabbed Ceres's hand again and dashed into an adjacent hall. I could sense Luke pursuing behind us. While I was chanting a spell, I found a rather narrow branching corridor and turned the corner into it.

If he can avoid Van Layl, then how about this?! "Freeze Bullid!"

Zinnng! The frigid spell I unleashed behind us hit the wall, froze it over, and encased half the hallway in ice!



That should hold him in place! If Gourry can just catch up with us in time...

I looked back over my shoulder, and—*Ziing!*—just then, I heard the ice I'd conjured hitting the ground in pieces.

No way! He can cut through ice too?!

To cut through a block of ice in a corridor so narrow that you could barely swing a normal-sized sword... He must have prepped his blade with a fire spell!

But in the time it took Luke to hack his way through my ice, Gourry had started gaining on him. "Luuuuuke!"

Luke turned around and started kicking chunks of ice at the approaching blond swordsman. Even if Gourry sliced through them, some would still be the size of fists, and there was no way he could take that unscathed. It was impossible to dodge in this narrow corridor too, so he just moved his sword slightly to deflect the largest piece of incoming ice. As he did... *Zing!* The blade of the Blast Sword began freezing over!

Aghast, Gourry dropped his weapon. The ice grew from the blade to the hilt and eventually covered the sword entirely. If Gourry had let go even a moment later, it might have encased his hand too.

I had to admit that I couldn't tell exactly what Luke had just done. Infused the ice chunk he'd kicked with a Freeze Bullid spell, maybe? Regardless, Gourry was now unarmed, and Luke wasn't gonna wait for his opponent's sword to defrost.

Luke charged at Gourry. His goal was to lock the big lug down. He tossed his dagger aside and went in for fisticuffs. He switched from a dash to a feint with his left hand, then leaned low and went for a blow to the solar plexus with his right. Gourry dipped to the side to dodge the left hook, then deflected the right-handed punch with one of his own and dropped his hips to counterstrike with his right elbow. Luke turned while using his right hand to catch Gourry's wrist, then used his right leg to sweep Gourry's out from under him. He tried to get on top of Gourry as they fell to the ground—but Gourry struck Luke in the back with his left fist!

"Guh?!"

It was a blow from an unstable position, so it probably didn't hurt Luke too bad, but it was enough to throw him off. Once Gourry had escaped the grapple, he let fly a kick. *Slam!* Luke took it in the side.

Bet that one hurt! Yet in that instant, Luke grabbed Gourry's leg with his left hand!

"Hyagh!" Luke pushed Gourry against the wall, trying to force his leg out from under him again, then... "Ra Freeze!" He used a cold spell to freeze Gourry's leg against the wall!

"Guh!" Gourry let out a wail of pain.

Luke's hand, still on Gourry's leg, was similarly encased in the ice. But —"Raaaaaaaagh!"—with a roar, he yanked it away! I heard the sound of tearing flesh as blood splattered around him. A red handprint remained in the ice. Luke had freed himself at the cost of stripping off his own flesh.

"How can he be so..." Head Priest Ceres whispered from beside me.

So hellbent on killing Ceres? *Has his hatred really driven him this far?* Unease swirled in my chest.

With Gourry now locked in place, Luke turned his focus back to us. He pulled another dagger from behind him.

Okay, in that case...

"Flare Arrow!" I unleashed my spell, but—

"Ain't gonna work!" Luke howled with a swing of his dagger!

Vrsh! The gust it produced scattered my fire, turning it into a hot wind that blew past us.

Freakin' hell! How many charged weapons does this guy have?! It was back to running for me and Ceres! We could potentially take the long way around, circle back to Gourry, free his leg from the ice, and resume our usual tag-team play. I grabbed Head Priest Ceres's hand again... But Ceres didn't move.

Huh? I turned back to see him standing tall and staring down Luke. *Um...*

Luke, finding this unexpected as well, stayed his approach. And then... Head

Priest Ceres began striding toward him.

Luke instinctively readied the dagger in his right hand. Ceres grabbed his wrist—and pressed the tip of the blade to his chest!

While we all stood there dumbstruck, Head Priest Ceres said calmly, “Kill me.”

What?!

“You want to kill me, don’t you?” Ceres continued.

Confusion manifested on Luke’s face. “You... Y-You... Guess you don’t think much of me, huh?! You think this is enough to stop me?!”

“No,” Ceres replied. “If you’re willing to fight your former comrades to such a degree—to wound them like this—you must truly want to kill me.”

“Yeah... You bet I do...” Luke moaned, his expression pained.

“Then you may,” Ceres said quietly. “I can’t deny the responsibility I bear for the death of the person you loved. So... you may kill me if that will drive the hatred from your heart. Kill me if you truly believe that will end this.”

Uncertainty crossed Luke’s expression. “Hang on. You sayin’... you’re okay with that?”

“Of course I’m not. I want to live as much as anyone does. It’s just that... even if I escape you now, as long as your hatred still burns, you’ll come after me again. And as long as you three continue to fight one another, others will continue to be dragged into the conflict. I’ve seen enough of that for one lifetime. That’s all.”

At this, Luke went silent. And although I was right there, I couldn’t do anything. Luke was questioning himself right now. Any interference from me might inflame his hatred again, and then Ceres was definitely dead.

There was a moment’s deadlock. And then... I realized something.

“This place! Do you remember it?” I cried.

Luke thought a moment, then realized it himself with a gasp. Indeed, here we were... right in front of the room where Mileena had breathed her last.

Time stopped. Nobody moved. Not me. Not Luke. Not Ceres.

When the silence—whether it was long or short, I couldn't say—finally broke...

"Ngh!" Luke grimaced and retracted his dagger.

"Whew..." I don't know which of us it was that let out that deep sigh.

I looked over at Luke, but just as I was about to call his name—*Whoosh!*—he silently ran past Ceres and down the corridor.

"Luke!" I shouted after him.

"Don't," Head Priest Ceres said, holding me back. "Let him... Let him go."

I stood and watched as Luke leaped out the corridor window into the night. He was gone.

"He attacked me... But you hit him with a spell that annihilated him without a trace," Head Priest Ceres said. "That's what we'll say happened." His eyes were locked on the darkness into which Luke had disappeared.

And so, as far as the city knew, the whole ordeal had been resolved.

Nobody questioned Head Priest Ceres's report that we'd put an end to Francis and Ryan's murderer. The circumstances of High Priest Joshua's death were still a mystery, but since almost everyone involved was now dead, the unspoken understanding was that it would remain unsolved forever. Francis and Ryan had both professed innocence, but could we take them at their word? Bran, the first to be killed after Joshua, also could have been responsible and we would simply never know. Some even cast suspicion on Ceres as the massacre's sole survivor, but those of us in the know were aware that that was purely luck of the draw.

Of course, the citizens were quick to put the scandal behind them and the city would soon be bustling with tourists once more. I'd already dealt with the matter of my payment as well... That is to say, I'd turned it down. At the end of the day, I hadn't done a damned thing to help anyone.

The summit to choose the next high priest came sooner than expected, just two days after the incident. Ceres was the only surviving candidate, so they'd probably reasoned that there wouldn't be much debate on the matter. The

sorcerers' council head, roughly ten local bigwigs, and Head Priest Ceres gathered for the meeting. Gourry and I, having witnessed what went down, were also in attendance as observers.

"Now then... We'll leave the matter of rebuilding the burned temple for later. First, we must choose the next high priest." After the introductions, the council chairman, who was playing moderator, cut straight to the chase. "A string of tragedies has left only one of the four head priests alive to succeed Joshua. That leaves us with but a sole candidate. I thus move to instate Head Priest Ceres as the next high priest. Well? Does anybody object?" he asked the room.

No one should have, and yet... "I object."

Everyone present, dumbstruck, turned to look at the lone objector. It was none other than Ceres himself.

"H-Head Priest Ceres! What in the world...?!"

"I... I am pathetically powerless and foolish. This incident has made that painfully clear." His tone was calm, but strangely sad, in stark contrast to the panicking council chairman. "When High Priest Joshua passed... When I heard the news, I went to my cathedral to pray. That's when I heard a voice. It told me that High Priest Joshua had been killed, that the wicked would sow chaos in the city... that I needed to gather power if I wished to protect myself. I believed this to be the instruction of God."

It was a strangely familiar story.

"So when Head Priest Francis began hiring bodyguards, I thought perhaps *that* was what the voice was talking about! Thus I hired guards of my own. But... in the end, that just made the situation worse. It was even one of my own hired men that went on to kill two head priests. I cannot claim innocence in the matter."

"But you—"

"Furthermore," he continued, cutting off the council chairman, "I failed to save a poisoned girl who came to me for aid. That failure spurred the man I hired to kill Head Priests Francis and Ryan. My own ineptitude was a significant contributor in all that has transpired. I now believe the voice I heard that night

was not the voice of God, but that of my own suspicion and doubt. I conducted myself appropriately as a priest until that day, yet even that meager competence was achieved thanks only to the aid and counsel of High Priest Joshua. This incident has brought me face to face with my own powerlessness. Now I know that I could never fill his shoes. And so... I hereby take myself out of the running for the role of high priest.”

Clamor filled the council chamber at Head Priest Ceres’s announcement.

The sun hung low in the sky. It wouldn’t be long before the city was cloaked in twilight.

The summit had concluded with a decision that the discussion of the next high priest was best left for a later day. Which made sense. The council chairman and bigwigs had planned to get straight through appointing Ceres and move on to other business, and stumbling on that first step had complicated the rest of their discussions.

But, well, the question of the next high priest and future temple politics was Selentia’s problem. The whole mess was out of our hands now, except for one loose end. There was something I needed to clear up before we left the city. It was why I was here with Gourry right now—here in the cathedral of the burned-out central temple.

It was a vast, empty space of nothing more than soot-stained pillars propping up a high ceiling. The pews were gone. Virtually all of the stained glass had melted and crashed in from the heat; it was impossible to tell what any of it had ever depicted. Where the altar had once stood was nothing but a lump of char.

“Don’t you think it’s strange, Gourry?” My words echoed throughout the barren cathedral.

“What?”

“We didn’t actually solve the mystery. Not entirely. Who killed the high priest here in the central temple where it all started?”

“Huh? How should I know?” Gourry asked, scratching his head.

Of course, my question had been rhetorical. I continued on anyway. “Francis

of the West claimed that he heard the voice of God, but I figured he was just talking nonsense. And when Ryan of the South said he was chosen by God or some such, I figured he was just being arrogant. I dismissed them both. But today, Ceres also said that he heard a voice... Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"Well... there's definitely something peculiar about a bunch of guys saying they all heard God speak to them."

"If it was just one or two of them, you could assume they were hallucinating in their shock over the high priest's death... But for Head Priest Ceres who didn't even want to take his place? It just doesn't make sense. It's also possible that Head Priest Bran of the West heard a voice too, and he just got killed before he could tell us about it." I spoke as I gazed into the western sky through the burned-out stained glass. Nightfall was close. "So with all that in mind... the most rational explanation is that they really *did* hear a voice. Right?"

"Yeah, guess so."

"Now, Gourry... If you heard a completely unfamiliar voice out of the blue, would you think you knew who it was?"

"No way. How could I?"

"Exactly."

"What are you saying here, Lina?"

"I'm saying," I began, raising my index finger, "that the head priests had never heard the voice of God before. But their faith is still real. When they lost the high priest, a major guiding force in their lives, they prayed for direction... and what they got was someone sharing what sounded like advice. They became convinced it *must* be the voice of God. But it never actually identified itself, you see. All it said was 'the high priest was killed' and 'the culprit is trying to sow chaos in the city.'"

That sounded an awful lot like a different kind of Priest I knew. Never technically lying—just phrasing things in deceptive ways and using careful wording to get everyone jumping to the wrong conclusions. You know the type. If this "voice of God" had come from someone similar...

"Humans aren't capable of discerning the voice of God by ear. They can only

make inferences based on the circumstances and their own personal beliefs. So who did that voice really belong to? Well, it knew that the high priest had been murdered even though, at the time, the city's half-assed investigation hadn't concluded that. The only ones who would've known it wasn't an accident are an omniscient, omnipotent God and..."

"I get you." Gourry caught on to my logic at last. "The murderer, right?"

"Precisely." I nodded and looked up at the ceiling. "You're listening, right? Show yourself already!" My voice reverberated through the cathedral. "Or are you admitting you're too weak to face a couple of humans head-on? That you're only good for murdering helpless men in their sleep and spewing nonsense to lead confused people astray?" The words echoed and then faded.

"Heh... heh heh heh... heh heh..." A surreptitious laugh began to resound in their place.

So it is here... When Gourry and I had first come to the main temple together, he'd detected a presence that abruptly disappeared when he gave chase. If that wasn't just Gourry's mind playing tricks on him, we were probably dealing with...

"Very good instincts. It's true that I'm the one who fried the old man here and gave a few pointers to his remaining comrades..." The voice seemed to echo out from everywhere and nowhere.

I began chanting a spell under my breath as I looked around the cathedral. Empty windows. Rows of pillars. A charred frame of stained glass. A toasted chandelier. The black lump of an altar...

"But that's all I did. The rest was the doing of humans—gathering people here, hating each other, killing each other. I just had to sit here and watch. How amusing it was. Those people act so pious and call themselves holy men, yet they're blissfully unaware of the hatred and loathing they carry inside themselves. I nurtured that and watched the fear grow throughout the city. Day after day the hatred, the enmity, grew, grew, grew..."

Oh, shut up!

"Elemekia Lance!" I released the spell I'd been cooking up. My target? The

lone remaining stained glass window!

But just before it hit... *Gloop!* The stained glass—or rather the creature disguised as stained glass—oozed down, dodged my spell, and reformed once again on the floor.

“Ohhh, impressive. You figured out where I was.”

Of course I had. Stained glass frames were made of lead, which had a relatively low melting point. It was extremely strange to see only one still intact after all the others had been destroyed.

Not that I felt like spelling that all out for this thing...

Said “thing” writhed its way into solid form. It was a mix of many shades, all the colors from the stained glass. It stood about two heads taller than Gourry and had a more or less humanoid shape, but no eyes, nose, mouth, or ears on its face. Instead, it had wide-open eyes and mouths all over its body.

Yeah, I knew it was a demon...

“You’re right,” I said. “That was all the doing of humans after you stoked the darkness in their hearts. I guess a low-ranked demon like you isn’t capable of more than cheap tricks and petty arson...”

“How dare you! I, the great Tzenui, will not be mocked by a human!” The demon’s voice swelled with anger.

I brushed it off and held my right hand out to Gourry. “Lend me your sword a minute. I should be enough to take this jerk down.”

“Stay sharp,” Gourry said, unsheathing the sword and handing it to me.

“I will,” I assured him and took it.

“You’ll pay for this insult!” Tzenui howled and dashed at me.

I held the sword ready and began chanting a spell.

“Hgah!” Tzenui breathed fire from the mouth on the right side of its chest.

But I leaped to the side and dodged it. *Fwoom!* I saw flame burst behind me in my peripheral vision.

Tzenui turned to face me, and just before I entered sword range, its head

extended straight down at me!

Makes sense...

I remained strangely calm and used the sword to sweep at my feet. Tzenui's extending head trick was just a feint. It had also transformed its toes, sending countless eyes and mouths streaking toward me—but the Blast Sword sliced through each and every one!

"Gwuh?!" Letting out a pathetic scream, Tzenui dove backward. And behind it...

"Blast Ash!" My spell called darkness into being!

"Gah!" The demon, its back against the darkness, quickly dove away. It then leaped again, this time high enough to cling to the cathedral ceiling. "Geh... N-Now your sword can't reach me!" it declared triumphantly.

I ignored him and began reciting a new spell.

Thou who art darker than twilight

Thou who art redder than lifeblood

I swear in thy exalted name

Obscured, deep in the flow of time...

"Die!" Tzenui breathed fire at me while crawling along the unstable ceiling. But...

Bwoosh! One swing from the Blast Sword in my hands tore through the incoming flame, the remnants of which failed to penetrate the spellcasting barrier generated by my incantation.

"What?!" Tzenui uttered in shock. It unleashed more flames, but they all met the same fate.

And then...

So all those in equal measure—

Fools that they are to block our path—

Shall face destruction unconstrained...

I unleashed my finished spell at the ceiling. “Dragon Slave!”

Fwoosh! Red light coalesced around Tzenui’s body and...

“Geh!”

Swallowing up that attempt at a scream—*Roooooooooooooooooar!*—a massive burst of light pierced through the ceiling! It hit the demon dead-on and blew the roof off the temple!



The temple grounds surrounding the building were fairly extensive. Not much risk of collateral damage. It was all too easy—an anticlimactic end for the demon that had sown so much hatred in the city. It disgusted me how much of a joke it was.

Just... Just one worthless little demon did all this...

I stood with my back to Gourry and wiped at my cheek silently.

I looked up at the clouds drifting by through the temple's now nonexistent roof. At some point, the sky had taken on a lush crimson color.

To the north of Selentia, practically the city outskirts, we stood on a low hill with a great view. The well-tended grass was dazzling in the gentle sunlight. There were no people around, just white grave markers.

This was Selentia City's cemetery.

In one corner stood a small stone marker bearing a woman's name. Gourry and I stood before it with flowers in our hands. A variety of flowers, old and new, had already been laid in front of it. I didn't want to think about who had brought them. Where was he now? Nobody could say. We hadn't seen him since our last encounter.

"It's all over," I said as I crouched low to lay down my flowers. "I finished off the demon spreading hatred in the city. Damn thing was a total small fry..."

The wind blew over the verdant hill.

"Say, Lina..." Gourry piped up as if just remembering something. "That demon you beat in the temple yesterday... I'm glad it came out in response to your prodding. But what would you have done if it hadn't?"

"Oh, there was no doubt in my mind that it would come out. Granted, it was a gamble that it was still inside the temple at all..."

But as long as it *was* there, I knew it would show itself. I'd been sure of that much. After all, everything I'd said was less prodding and more a compulsory summoning ritual.

An acquaintance of mine had once told me that demons don't use astral

attacks against humans because they refuse to take us seriously. To give a “puny human” their all in combat was like admitting they weren’t strong enough to beat us otherwise. And for demons, beings of pure spirit, such a mentality would result in a massive power-down.

I’d capitalized on that. Failing to show itself would be like saying it wasn’t good enough to fight a human one-on-one, right? So once I’d guessed we were dealing with a demon, I’d made my declaration on the assumption that it was hiding nearby. If it had heard me and still refused to come out, that would’ve been akin to admitting it wasn’t strong enough to defeat me, which would have undermined its power... or possibly destroyed it outright. In other words, once the demon had heard me, it’d had no choice *but* to come out.

“Is that how it works?” Gourry asked dubiously.

“Yep, that’s how it works,” I responded simply, sparing him the in-depth explanation.

“But who’s going to be the next high priest here? I thought Master Ceres would’ve been really good for it, personally...”

“Well, if he says he doesn’t want it, no one can really force the guy. I guess the sensible thing to do would be to drag in a likely suspect from another city. But either way, it’s none of our business anymore.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Gourry muttered.

After that, all was silence aside from the wind blowing past.

“Welp, guess we’d better get going,” I said to the grave, then stood up.

“Where to?” Gourry asked.

“Anywhere we want. We can figure it out later. After... After we get out of this city.”

“True...”

And so the two of us turned and started walking.

A thought occurred to me about the man who’d disappeared. Had we really saved his soul? There was no way of knowing.

...

I silently shook my head and left the windswept hill behind.

Afterword

Scene: The Author and L

Au: If you hate someone, you hate everything related to them! And with that, let's get into the reprint of *Hatred in Selentia*!

L: It's definitely a turning point in the story, isn't it? During the writing of part 2, fans kept asking if Zelgadis and Amelia would show up, and this story is the reason they didn't, I guess.

Au: That's right. It can be hard to write around those healing spells that are so common in books and games and such.

L: Indeed. Sometimes in *Dr*gon Qu*st* and the like, a villain kills a character during the story, and you're like, "Can't we save them with K*z*ng?" I think about that a lot.

Au: Same, totally. In that *So-and-So Fantasy* series, there's a character you've been fighting with the whole time who suddenly dies in a plot event. And you think, "Wait a minute, I've always been able to bring you back with L*fe before!"

L: There's also an issue of verisimilitude. A girl who's been shot by submachine guns, exploded by giant snakes, and tossed around by the neck by wolves yet always managed to jog back to the party up and dies just from one little stab?

Au: Ah, yeah. I remember getting to the end and thinking, "Wait, she really died from that?!" Though I do like the game otherwise. So in terms of believability and structure, there's probably a way we could have done this storyline with Amelia present, but it would have taken a lot of extra steps and explanations to get there, not to mention drag everything out a lot longer than necessary.

L: So you just left her out.

Au: Yeah. But looking back at it now while doing typo checks for the reprint, I

realize I really got swept away by emotions while writing this story. Sometimes I feel like, “Wow, I really lost my cool in this part.”

L: Maybe you should’ve just rewritten it then?

Au: Part of me wishes I could. When we first decided we were doing the reprints, my editor told me it was okay to check for typos, but not to make any major content changes. When I was reading it over for checks, I understood why he impressed that onto me.

L: What do you mean?

Au: There were so many places where I found myself fighting the urge to rewrite. If he’d given me *carte blanche* for revision, I’m extremely confident that I’d have ended up changing the story completely and ruining the balance!

L: Don’t say you’re “confident” like it’s something to be proud of! But anyway, why not just change as much as you want? Have me completely take over the protagonist in volume 8 and give me free rein! I’d travel around the countryside meeting up with monsters, and fifteen minutes before the episode ends, I’d say, “Don’t you see this chaos?!” and flash my void up to the screen!

Au: The *Mito Komon* formula?! But if you did that, there’d be no good guys or bad guys left.

L: There’d be *no one* left! No one left to cause trouble. In other words, true peace!

Au: That’s not how this works! Peace doesn’t mean anything without people there to enjoy it! It’s just void!

L: Oh? But isn’t it frustrating when they depose one evil magistrate, then a few years pass and another evil magistrate is appointed to do the same bad stuff all over again?

Au: Yes, but... That’s no reason to destroy everyone. You sound like the final boss in a video game.

L: Well... I kind of am, man.

Au: Ha! I completely forgot, now that you mention it!

L: You forgot? Wow. You’ve really been playing with fire then. Maybe I should

do something to reset your priorities... Actually, that reminds me.

Au: (cringing) R-Reminds you of what? I was sure you were going to attack me there...

L: Well, you remember how I sometimes murder you in the afterwords?

Au: That's a very uncomfortable question, but... yes.

L: And then in the next afterword, you're back to life like nothing happened. It feels like when you have the hero of a video game reviving again and again.

Au: Oh. Well, I don't recall getting scolded by the king or a priest. And as for why I'm always back to life the next time... That's just how the world works, isn't it?

L: Don't wrap this up with a pat little saying! Then again, you might be right... Anyway, that's it for the afterword.

Au: That's very offhand! Um... See you next time, everyone!

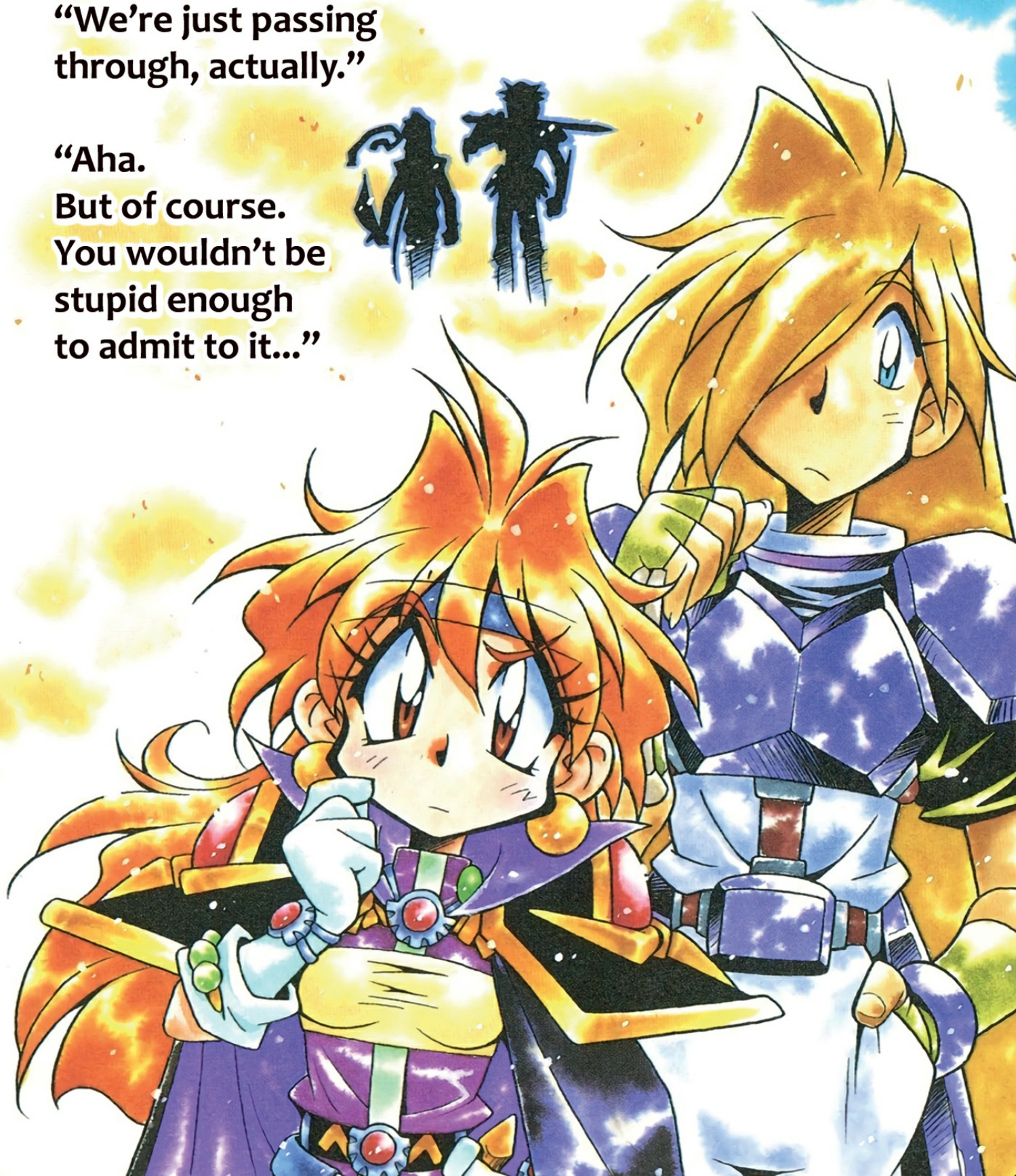
Afterword: Over.

HATRED IN SELENTIA

“A sorcerer
and a swordsman...
Who sent you?!”

“We’re just passing
through, actually.”

“Aha.
But of course.
You wouldn’t be
stupid enough
to admit to it...”





“Luuuuuuuuke!”
Slowly, he turned around to face us.
“Oh... It’s you guys.”

“So... he’s coming?”
Head Priest Ceres
whispered glumly after
hearing my story.



Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!

[Meg/ED]

I have to say... we've had a grim couple of volumes, but this one's a standout for me.

[Liz/TL]

It's an interesting one. (Do I always say that?) I think we've talked a fair amount in the last few volumes about guest characters dying in kind of shockingly and unceremonious ways—Dilarr, Aria, most recently Jade. It feels like death is getting closer and closer to the protagonists, like that plot armor is getting less and less reliable. And then... well, here's where that leads us.

[Meg/ED]

This is definitely an escalation, to be sure—the unceremonious factor notwithstanding. Since we've now spent about as much time with Luke and Mileena as we have Zel and Amelia, I would classify this as our first real party death.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, Luke and Mileena are definitely “of the party,” despite being kind of tsundere about it. Though maybe keeping them at arm's length is meant to make this a little less gut-wrenching? If Kanzaka did this with Amelia, I admit, I probably wouldn't ever forgive him (haha). I think Lina would be a lot more inconsolable as well. Of course, it's hard to separate the feelings I'd have based on what's written in the novels vs. what I've developed over 70-some episodes of anime. Still, is it fair to say that even novel-Lina has more protective feelings towards Amelia, whereas she regards Mileena as a cool and capable peer? So the tragedy is personal, with Mileena, but it's still a little more abstract than it

might be with the part 1 party.

And of course Lina has the line at the end about how she didn't even know Mileena's last name. That makes it sting, still, but not in the same way.

[Meg/ED]

That's a really smart point. The certain distance we keep from Team Luke facilitates our understanding of Mileena's death through Luke's heart and not Lina's. But that also adds a tragic element of *not* getting to know her. It twists the knife a little differently than Aria or Jade, whose motivations and story lines both we and Lina understood.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, I think she carries a feeling of guilt... she knows Luke well enough to not want to hurt him, to feel a personal *stake* in stopping him, but not well enough to have the emotional power *to* stop him. When she tries, the best she can do is call on Mileena's memory. She doesn't say this outright, but I suspect she probably also feels keenly that she's a being of destruction in a moment when a skilled healer was what was needed. That's not to say she carries any actual blame for what happened, but I find that feeling of "I wish I had been the person for this moment" to be a deeply relatable one.

[Meg/ED]

I also felt that profoundly at the end of the third chapter when Luke asks Lina what she'd do in his position, and she simply can't answer him. There's a lot to read between the lines there.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, that's true. If Lina lost Gourry, who could talk her down? (Let's hope that one isn't foreshadowing for anything...)

[Meg/ED]

Her lack of an answer seems to suggest she'd be doing the exact same thing—or that the thought is so extreme that she literally can't imagine being in his shoes. Either of which really makes you feel for Luke, I think. Especially when he admits that he *knows* what he's doing is wrong, but there's nothing else he *can* do. There's a pitiable helplessness to his grief (murderous though it may be).

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, and when I think about it, I don't believe Lina would actually go on a killing spree to try to feed the emptiness that comes with a loss. With Luke, we're given the info that he used to be an assassin, and that wanting to be worthy of Mileena was what was helping him escape that darkness. But that sort of explains why violence and murder become the first tools he reaches for. You can blame him or sympathize with him, but he certainly *feels* helpless, like he's been plunged back into this against his will.

[Meg/ED]

I don't actually think Lina's a killing spree kinda gal either—but I don't think she's beyond a grandiose act of revenge! If this particular storyline ever got an anime adaptation, maybe we would lean into that in a comedic over-the-top way. In fact, come to think of it, Lina suggests to Ryan at one point that the only way to sate Luke would be to bring Mileena back, so maybe we could've scripted a happier ending into an adaptation too. (And maybe even get a flashback episode of how Luke and Mileena met!)

[Liz/TL]

They could certainly something-something with the Claire Bible if they wanted to. It's hard to imagine why you'd bother to go here if you're just going to undo it, though. Maybe they'd do a plot where Mileena is on her deathbed and they have to find a special healing flower to save her. That's the sort of plot you'd usually see in a story like this, really, so the fact that she just... dies is what makes it shocking. "Someone dies because the heroes don't (or can't) act quickly enough" is not usually a mood writers of fiction usually go for.

[Meg/ED]

True! The setup and circumstances of the poisoning would certainly need to be fiddled with some. And on that note, it was nice of our old pal Zord to show up, wasn't it? It could have been any random flunky to do the deed, really, so throwing in the callback to how we met Luke and Mileena was a nice(?) touch

[Liz/TL]

The fact that Zord is an established villain does give Mileena's fate a little more gravitas than if he'd just been a bandit of the week, at least. Honestly, Zord's appearance here occupies this really interesting space in the chain reaction of things that go wrong in Selentia... I should mention, I really like this novel a lot from a plotting perspective. I really like the sense of cruel inevitability to how things build up, how there are all these elements in play that are random but logical, how none of them are tied to any one person, yet they add up to this horrible perfect storm.

And then there's the way that, after all this crew has been through, the mastermind of it all isn't a lieutenant of Shabranigdu, it's not Xellos, it's not some other General or Priest, it's not even a clever human-disguised demon infiltrator. It's just some shitty little mid-tier demon working its shitty little demon tricks. It probably didn't even realize how effective its plot was going to be. The little bastard got *lucky*.

[Meg/ED]

I also really like this volume. I didn't want to, mind you. It could have easily been a cheap bloodbath and nothing more, but there's a poignance to it that might be unparalleled in the series so far. Lina's cold anger at finding out some two-bit demon was responsible for it all hit me harder than any amount of screaming and crying ever could have.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, there's a cruelty to it, but again, it's combined with a sort of inevitability... and it brings it back to Lina's feelings of guilt again, since she realizes Zord wouldn't have gotten set off on his revenge quest if she and Gourry hadn't shown up in town in the first place. Again, there are things in life that aren't actually your fault, that you can't actually control, but that you're going to kick yourself for regardless. She was an unwitting part of this shitty little demon's chain reaction, and that's an awful feeling.

I also love the scene where Ceres stops Luke. I mentioned earlier the idea of being "the person for the moment"—and Ceres gets to be the person for that moment. But at the end, he doesn't feel noble about it at all. He doesn't seem to feel like he's managed to do anything more than save his own life.

[Meg/ED]

Ceres kinda steals the show at the end! I also really enjoyed the scene of him stymieing the council meeting because it underscores how genuine his development is. Although... I confess that I initially suspected him when he was introduced and we were tricked into thinking this volume would be a self-contained mystery/intrigue plot. My bad.

[Liz/TL]

He's definitely a character that could have gone either way. I think the fact that the mystery/intrigue plot was so well established is what makes the reveal at the end so effective. The best twists are ones you don't see coming because the writer has given you something equally interesting to engage with, after all. I found the politics of Selentia itself to be just really well sketched and engaging, which is quite an achievement in books this short.

[Meg/ED]

I could gush all day about the subtle and not-so-subtle writing choices that make this series so compelling, even after all these years... but I'm scared of what comes next. I'm actually okay closing this story out with Luke running off into the night and Lina contemplating what we've lost in the windswept

cemetery. Yet when I scrutinize how everything has led up to this point, I get the unshakeable sense that this isn't really over.

[Liz/TL]

Well, it's no secret that there's one volume left in the arc. A lot of the previous volumes have ended almost in anticlimaxes without clearly establishing new stakes, so what could it possibly be building up to? It's kind of unsettling!

[Meg/ED]

I have the foresight at this point not to expect a picnic. There are too many unresolved threads from the previous volumes for that.

[Liz/TL]

They weren't able to establish if the mass demon spawnings were for sure connected to Graushera, for one.

[Meg/ED]

Ah, jeez. Well, shall we reconvene to bear witness to the finale of part 2 next time?

[Liz/TL]

Let us move forward with a determination to see this through, wherever it leads us.



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Slayers: Volume 14

by Hajime Kanzaka

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Megan Denton

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