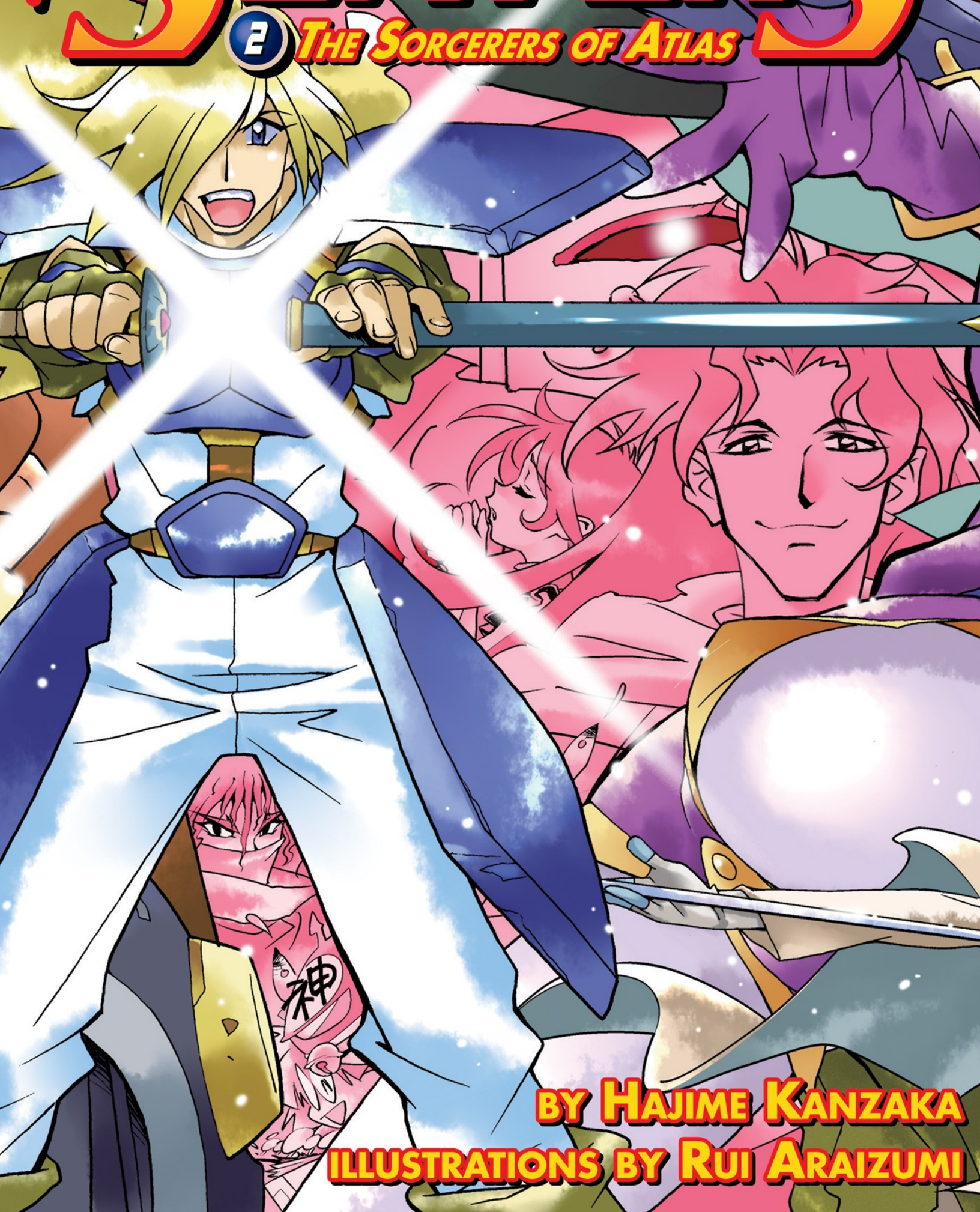


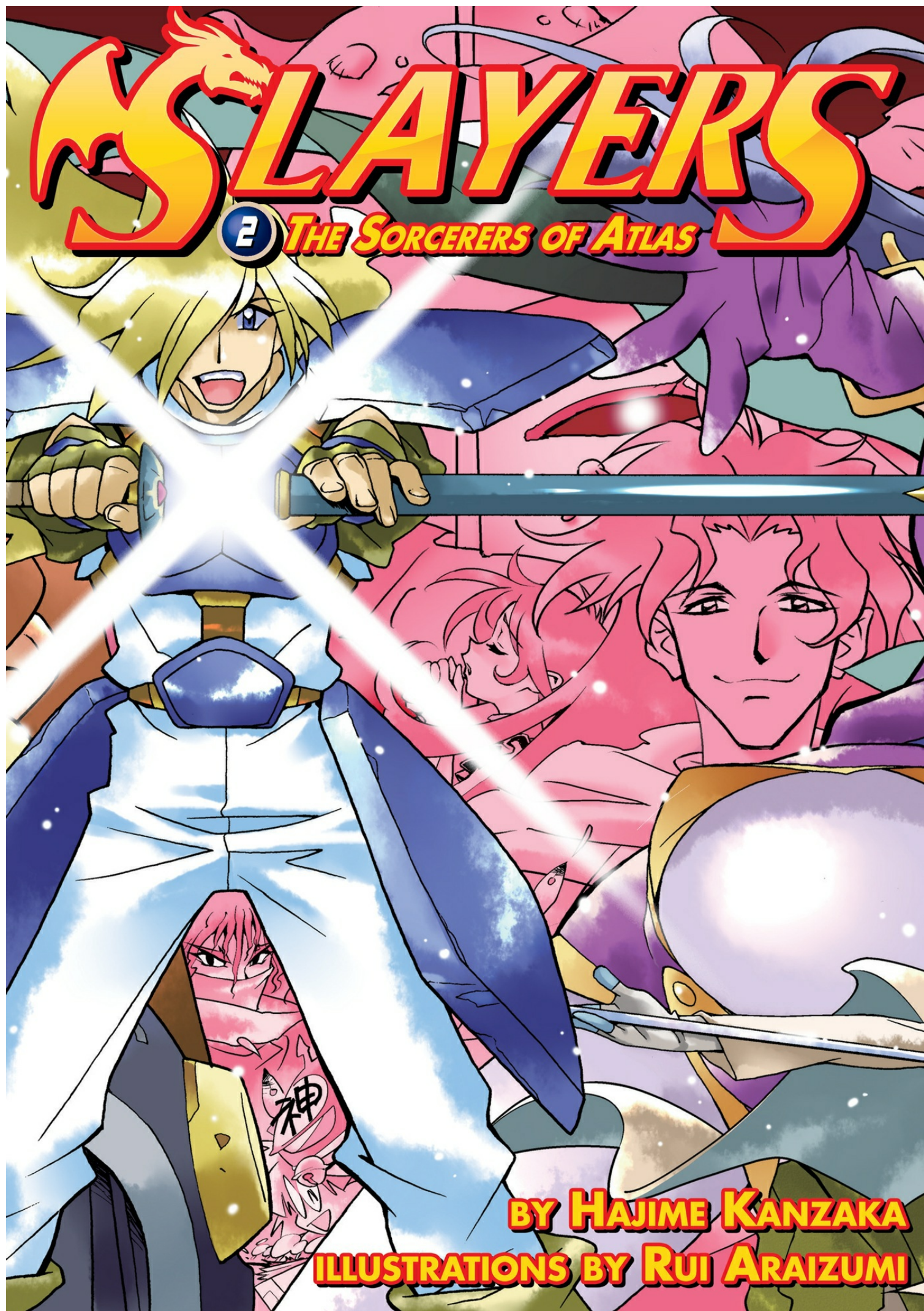
SLAYERS

2 THE SORCERERS OF ATLAS



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1: How About Not Taking Every Job That Falls Into Our Laps?

The tavern was a war zone.

Hey, I see you over there, leaping to conclusions. This one wasn't my fault, okay?

It *was* like a scene straight out of hell, though. Punching, kicking, biting. Overturned tables. Food flying everywhere—some still on the plate.

What a tragic waste...

See, we were in this little joint here in Atlas City, and while the dining wasn't bad, the diners were bottom-of-the-barrel. Seriously. Mercenaries, punks, and lowlifes, the lot of 'em. There are certain places that just draw those kinds of people naturally, and this was apparently one of them. The melee had become self-sustaining at this point, and didn't seem like it would be winding down any time soon.

Ah, there's another one down.

Oh, and so you don't go getting the wrong idea, I'm not any of those things I just said. I'm no mercenary, I ain't no punk, and I'm certainly not a lowlife. I just wanted some good food. This place gets rave reviews, and a brawl just so happened to break out while I was there. I was under no obligation to participate. I'm a pacifist, see? So, like any good pacifist, I was crouching under a table in a corner, munching on some chicken and watching the show.

How'd this all get started, you ask? Well, it was the silliest little thing. See...

"Hey. You on your own, babe?"

The guy making a pass at me chose to do it while I was sitting at the counter, polishing off my fourth bowl of noodle soup. He was a redhead and not especially good-looking, though I guess he wasn't without his charm. I pegged the bastard sword on his back as his weapon of choice, and his outfit consisted

of a rough-hewn tunic, pants, boots, and leather armor. Basically your typical mercenary type.

I gave the guy a once-over, then turned back to my now-empty bowl.

“I’ve got a companion. I’ll try the chicken sauté next, if you please,” I responded flippantly as I put in my next order with the cook.

The man let out a whistle, then tutted at me with a wag of his finger. I guess he thought it made him look cool.

“Hey, don’t be an ice queen. If this companion of yours is leavin’ a charmer like you on her own, he ain’t much for me to worry about, is he?” he said, brazenly putting a hand on my shoulder.

I wasn’t gonna object to the “charmer” part (I am extremely charming, obviously), but if I humored every guy who laid a line like that on me, I wouldn’t last a month.

“So, what’s your name?”

“...”

“I’m Lantz.”

“...”

“C’mon, say somethin’.”

Brush.

I felt a strange sensation on my backside. Wait, did he just cop a damned feel?! My hand moved before I knew it, snatching a nearby tray from the counter and slamming it down on his head. I was expecting a proper “thunk,” but instead I got...

Crack!

Huh, that was louder than I expected... Oh, crap, I nailed him with the corner of the tray! But this was legitimate self-defense! I swear! I mean... wasn’t it?

“Blarghragh!” Lantz let out an overdramatic scream, reeled around in an exaggerated fashion, and crashed into a nearby table.

Of course, there were people sitting at that table.

“Hey! The hell’re you doin’?!”

One of them shoved Lantz hard, sending him flying... right into another table. Naturally, the same kind of ruckus repeated itself there.

And soon enough, the whole place had broken out into a brawl.

See? When you break it down step-by-step, this Lantz guy was really the one who started it! I was an innocent victim of circumstance! Don’t you agree?!

“Say, Lina, why is the person who started all this hiding down here?”

A familiar voice abruptly interrupted my thoughts, and I turned to see a good-looking blond guy wearing a black breastplate and a longsword. He was crouched down next to the table, peering at me suspiciously. This was my aforementioned (recently-acquired) traveling companion, Gourry.

“The person who started all this? What’re you talkin’ about?” I asked as I took a bite of some fried fish.

Gourry promptly reached for some of the on-the-bone meat I’d been saving on my plate and took a bite himself.

“I’m talking about you. You knocked that guy out with the corner of a tray, didn’t you?”

“You saw that?!”

“As I was coming back from the washroom.”

“Hey, I was the victim! He started hitting on me, and then he touched my freakin’ butt! My butt! And without even paying!”

“...You let people pay for that?”

“That’s not what I’m saying!”

“Do you even know what you *are* saying?”

“Of course not!”

“Look...” Gourry sighed, putting his fingers to his temples. “You could’ve shown a little restraint. That way, I could’ve laid him out later in a more discreet manner.”

I glared at him.

“There are times you absolutely should *not* show restraint, not even for a second! You only talk so high and mighty about it because you’ve never had your butt fondled by some weirdo jerk!”

“Well, I suppose that is true...” Gourry scratched his head, looking troubled for a moment before turning his attention back to the intensifying brawl. “Still, you can’t just let this go on.”

“What? You think my involvement would *deescalate* things?”

I mean, it’s true that rushing out there with a Fireball would give everyone something bigger to worry about... But I had one small reservation about that plan: I came here to eat, not to get arrested.

“Yeah, you’re right. You’d probably just make things worse.”

“Then it’s best if I just wait it out here, see?”

“Hmm...” Gourry fell pensively silent.

“Actually, maybe you’re right. I should do my part to try and break this up... Oh, I know!” I raised a declarative finger. “How about this? I’ll suddenly scream and fall over. Meanwhile, you’ll be standing over me, sword in hand, and say something like, ‘Heh, too easy.’ I bet everyone’ll stop fighting to gawk.”

Gourry scowled at this idea. “And you’ll clear me of murder afterwards... how, praytell?”

“Eh, well... we’ll figure something out.”

“I need a better plan than that! I could end up arrested!”

“C’mon, that’s just part of the fun!”

“It most certainly is not!”

“Jeez, you’re a stick in the mud. But, hmm, in that case...”

Just as I was about to share my next great idea, a sudden gust of wind blew through the pub and quickly quieted the chaos within. Traveling like a wave radiating out from the door, it hushed the shouts and jeers of combat into shocked whispers.

Gourry stood up and looked toward the pub entrance, letting out a curious hum. Intrigued by the commotion, I also got to my feet behind him and peeked out to see the source of the new disturbance.

At the door stood a man who appeared to be cloaked in darkness. He had long, ebony hair and wore some kind of black tunic made of a material I didn't recognize. A scarf covered his mouth, and he wore a kind of longsword on his back that I wasn't familiar with.

He looked about the same age as Gourry, not much over twenty or so... but rather than Gourry's noncommittal air, he had a menacing quality about him that sent a chill up my spine. That was precisely what had hushed the other patrons so suddenly.

It was immediately apparent that this man was a skilled swordsman—skilled enough for Gourry to take note of him, anyway. In summary: dude was good-looking enough, but definitely also the kind of guy you want to give a wide berth at all times.

"I'm looking for bodyguards," he said.

His voice was exactly what you'd expect, cold yet crisp... Yeah, like an over-sharpened blade, you could say.

"If you want money and have confidence in your skills, then speak up. Master Talim is the sponsor. The job pays well," he continued bluntly.

Hmm... I'd give him a C minus on his pitch, but an A for clarity. Nevertheless, the inside of the pub remained as quiet and still as a wasteland.

See, there was currently a bit of a kerfuffle going on here in Atlas City. The chairman of the city's sorcerers' council, Halciform the White, went missing about six months ago. His two vice chairmen, Talim the Purple and Daymia the Blue, had been fighting for his seat ever since. Mr. All Black was apparently here recruiting for Talim's side.

Obviously, I wasn't interested in getting drawn into someone else's power struggle, but...

"I'll hear him out," I said, standing up.

“Wait, you’re—”

The guy who cut in was the jerk who’d started the brawl by touching my butt, the vile and villainous Lantz. After his afore-described inauspicious opener, he’d spent most of the fight getting knocked around in a similar fashion. His face was accordingly in rough shape.

Aw, poor baby! Hee hee hee...

But though Lantz cut in on me, one look from the man in black silenced him.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Wait, so did this guy and Lantz know each other? Sheesh, pick better friends! Both of you!

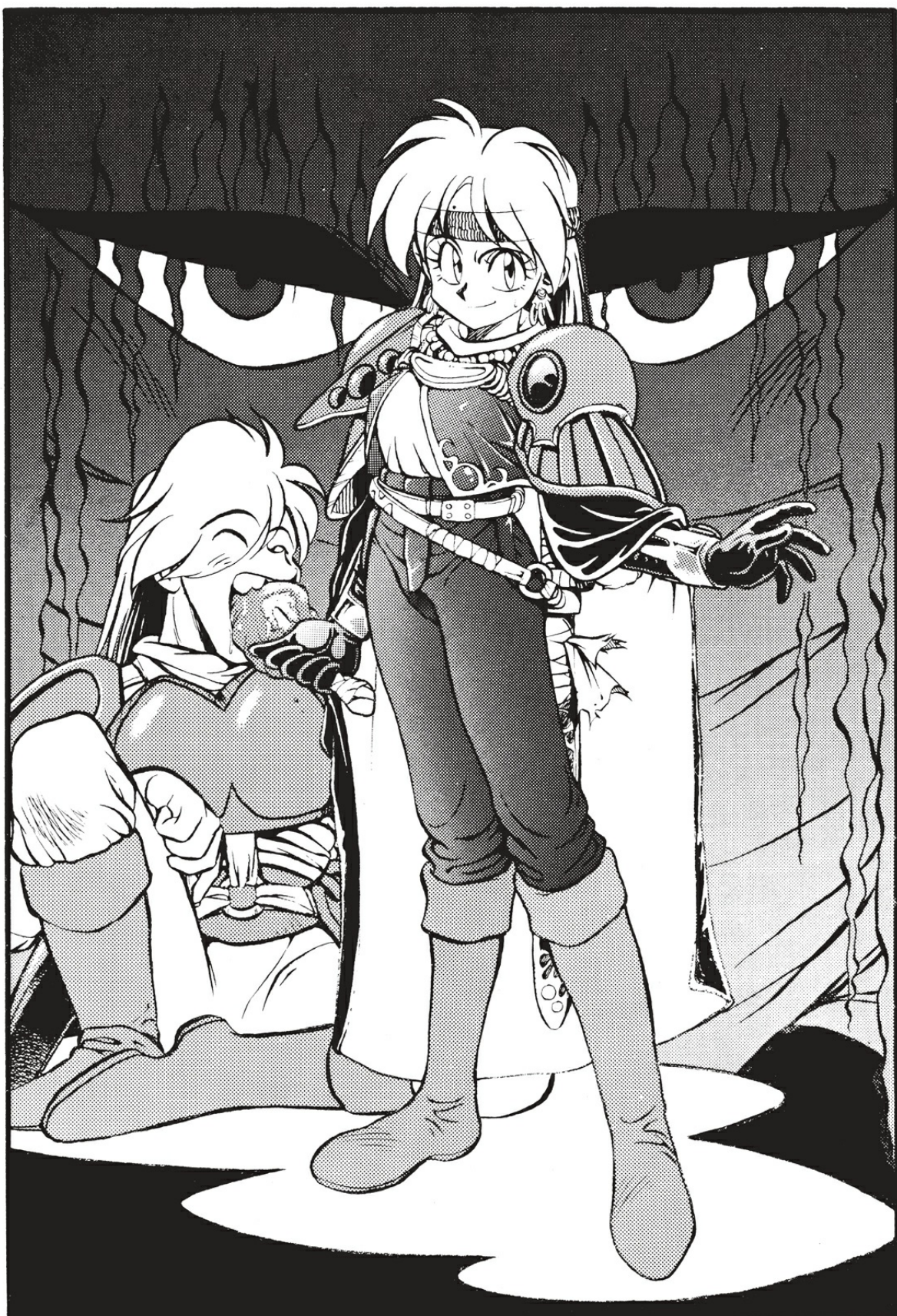
“M-Master Rod...” Lantz stammered. “Well, see... Master Talim sent me on a little errand, and I—”

“If your errand is finished, you can head back now,” the man in black replied bluntly.

Then, without affording Lantz so much as another look, he turned to me again. I felt another chill run up my spine as his grim eyes stared directly into mine.

“You’re a sorcerer?” he asked briefly.

I was currently wearing a new outfit I’d just bought in town: a cream-colored tunic with an indigo robe and matching pants. I also had a black bandanna, my sword on my hip, and my shaved-down turtle shell pauldrons on my shoulders, complete with a black cape hanging from them. Everything was studded here and there with jeweled amulets too, so, yeah... The whole getup just kind of screamed “sorcerer.”



Of course, I'd met one idiot who'd thought I was a fishmonger or a waitress...

"You have fire in your eyes. What's your name?"

"How these things usually go is, the guy doing the hiring introduces himself first," I said breezily, even though I knew his name already.

Of course, internally, I was totally sweating bullets. He seemed like the kind of guy who would jump you over the slightest offense. But I couldn't let myself be intimidated.

"Rod," he answered, more readily than I'd expected.

I let out a quiet exhale. This guy was exhausting!

"I'm Lina."

"Oh?" I picked up a faint tone of interest in his voice. "So you're Lina, are you? I've heard the rumors."

Bad ones, I assumed. You know, Bandit Killer and Queen of Destruction and all that jazz.

"Very well. Follow me," Rod said, then turned around.

I figured I'd play along for now.

"Shall we, Gourry?"

"...What, me too?" he asked while standing up unceremoniously.

And just as he did... Rod leaped right at us, his hand on his sword hilt!

I was sure he was going to draw, and I clearly wasn't alone in that. The whole pub was expecting a bloody swordfight to break out.

Everyone except, apparently, for Gourry.

Either he was oblivious to what was happening or he was just playing dumb, because the second Rod was about to strike, Gourry bent over, plucked a fried dumpling I'd been saving off of my plate, and popped it into his mouth.

The air of hostility hanging about Rod receded, though he still had an intensity about him that was far beyond that of your typical swordsman.

"Not bad," he remarked.

“Well, I like to think I’m above average, at least,” Gourry replied modestly to Rod’s assessment.

Okay, so... My boy Gourry here might be lacking in intelligence, common sense, mental acuity, and brains, but he’s also a top-class swordfighter. I’d like to think I’m above average with a blade myself, but I knew I couldn’t hold a candle to Gourry.

Rod must have made him for a swordsman in an instant.

“I’d love to duel you sometime,” he said.

“But work comes first, right?” Gourry responded breezily.

“That’s right. Work first, then violence!” I quipped.

“Could you pick a less incendiary way of showing support?” Gourry quipped back as he bonked me on the head.

Atlas City was a prosperous castle town built around Castle Vale, home to Duke Litocharn, and was something of a nexus of commerce. At noon, its streets would be crammed with market stalls and carts. You know, the fun kind of place where people loved to fight, where thieves and pickpockets ran rampant, and where mob justice against suspected thieves and pickpockets ran equally rampant.

But by this time of day, all that hustle and bustle had died down. The stall merchants were packing up their wares while young girls skipped home, showing off their beautiful new hair ornaments. And sitting above it all atop the hill looking over town was Castle Vale. Burning crimson in the setting sun, it was a picturesque sight.

We walked through the streets toward it, the buildings growing conspicuously taller and taller as we went. This setup was common in castle towns like Atlas City. Public facilities and whatnot increased as you got closer to the castle. Profile and quality of life were accordingly much higher here.

As for the sorcerers’ council building, it had the privilege of sitting quite close to the castle. Any big city like this probably had a church, a sorcerers’ council, and a warriors’ guild, all of which held some sway in local politics, but... the

sorcerers' council here in Atlas City was special. While not quite on the level of the Saillune Priesthood, it was particularly influential. Sometimes even more so than the local lord, Duke Litocharn.

Given all that, I wasn't surprised at all to hear there was infighting over something as prestigious as the chairman's seat. It's just... Okay, look, sorcerers are supposed to live their lives "seeking truth," you know? And frankly, being a sorcerer myself, I found all this open grasping for power just the slightest bit gauche.

Hmm? How exactly am I seeking truth, you ask? Never you mind that!

As the town began its descent into darkness, sorcerers in the employ of Duke Litocharn were casting Lighting spells along the streets. Hmm... Given that I'd arrived at the pub some time after noon, that meant lunch and the ensuing brawl had taken up about half my day. Not a very productive afternoon, huh?

"Say, Lina," Gourry said, lowering his voice so he could whisper to me without Rod overhearing. "What made you want to take this job? You're the one who said you weren't interested in working while we were here."

He was right. I had intended for our stay in Atlas City to be all about R&R. I was still pretty worn out from a certain major incident I'd gotten wrapped up in not long ago (through no fault of my own whatsoever, mind you). I'd thusly told Gourry pretty firmly that I wouldn't be up for any work while we were in town. But...

"It was the only way to get out of there scot-free," I whispered back. "Besides, I haven't agreed to anything yet. All I said was that I'd hear him out. So, once I do, I can just say, 'Oh, okay. Thanks but no thanks.'"

"I dunno about that..." Gourry scratched his head. "Given what I've heard about Talim, I don't think he's the kind of guy who's going to take no for an answer."

"So we fight our way out. If it comes down to that, I'll be counting on you, Gourry,"

He gave me a sulky scowl.

"Traveling with you doesn't bode well for a person's life expectancy, does it?"

“Sure doesn’t,” I said with a grin.

But that grin quickly faded. I whipped around in a daze. There were nothing but crowds of people passing by, yet...

“What’s wrong, Lina?” Gourry asked.

“I, uh, just got this feeling someone’s watching us...”

“Oh, you felt that too?” he asked like it was nothing.

Ugh, come on, man...

“...Let’s take the back way,” Rod muttered.

My nose was met with a rank odor and my ears were treated to the sound of a dog barking somewhere nearby. We were currently in an alley behind a row of dingy brick rental houses where the sun’s rays barely penetrated. We were just one road off the main avenue, but the change in atmosphere was quite stark. Of course, that was fairly typical in a big city like this.

We appeared to be the only people traveling along the dank, stagnant street. It was pretty obvious why Rod had chosen to come this way: he’d also sensed watchful eyes upon us. By moving to a deserted area, he was trying to lure the watcher out into the open. Talk about hotheaded...

Rod came to a stop all of a sudden and announced, “That’s enough.”

I knew who he was talking to.

“He’s telling you assassins to drop the games already,” I added loudly.

I sensed movement. Several men then appeared from behind nearby buildings, pouring out into the street to block our way forward. I turned around to see several more boxing us in from behind as well. Their dress was ostentatious enough that it practically announced them: “Ladies and gentlemen, we are bandits!”

Wait a minute...

I’d felt quite a few gazes on me before, but one was chilling enough to give me goosebumps. It clearly hadn’t come from any of this riff-raff. Who was it,

then? I was certain it hadn't just been my imagination...

"You workin' for Talim?" one of the bandits asked, bringing me back to the situation at hand.

"Well, we hadn't worked that out yet, exactly..." Gourry said, playing dumb.

"I'm sure they mean to kill you either way," Rod said coldly.

The assassins all responded with a knowing chuckle.

"There's no backing down now, so I guess you'll have to show me what you can do," the swordsman in black said to us—well, more specifically, to Gourry.

No backing down now, huh? How presumptuous of you, sir! Just who was it that led us into this mess in the first place?

"Sorry, but I'll pass," I said breezily. "I haven't agreed to take your job yet, and fighting these guys here and now will basically lock me in. So if you concocted this little setup, sorry, but I'm not falling for it."

"You think I set this up?" Rod asked, looking me up and down with cold eyes. "I'm hoping you *won't* take the job."

"Huh?"

"After all, I can't fight my own allies," he said, staring past me, right at Gourry.

Talk about scary!

"But your assessment is otherwise correct," he continued casually. "I'll dispose of them myself."

A murmur of excitement ran through the group of assassins. One man against ten—it was easy enough to say, but impossible to pull off without a monumental disparity in skill. Still, I had a feeling that Rod might be able to hack it. I could get a good read on a person's ability just by watching their posture, and if I'm being honest...

These assassin guys just plain sucked! Talim's rival, Daymia, must have been the one who hired them, but holy cow, talk about craptastic! They probably weren't any more competent than rookie soldiers, *if* that.

Upon completing my assessment, I pointed at Rod and addressed the

assassins: “You heard the man! If you wanna kill us, you gotta kill him first!”

“Darn... That’s harsh,” Gourry said with a wince.

He’d surely realized that these guys were no match for Rod too. He wouldn’t have been so calm about the whole affair otherwise.

“Dammit! Don’t take us so lightly!” one of the men shouted.

And with that completely unoriginal and lackluster line, he charged straight at Rod. Following his lead, perhaps, the other assassins drew their weapons. Rod watched them keenly as he reached for the sword on his back. He too then took off in a run.

One assassin crossed blades with the black gale that was Rod, and not a moment later, his head popped into the air. Rudely awakened to the power of their foe, the man behind the first victim flinched... It was too late. Rod passed him by and, just like that, the man was dead. The remaining assassins were rightly shaken.

“Tch! Retreat!” one of them shouted from the back.

Some might argue that was a coward’s line, but it was also probably the smartest idea any of these dolts had had all day. Nevertheless, as the assassin in the back turned to run, a man with a bastard sword and a face covered in welts blocked his path.

It was Lantz, the tavern jerk.

“Geh...”

The assassins all froze in place. One tried to charge Lantz, but was easily defeated after one or two exchanges.

Huh, wasn’t expecting this loser to actually be decent...

Rod—who’d already polished off his own immediate attackers—then joined up with Lantz. From there, it was a completely one-sided slaughter. The whole thing was over before either Gourry or I could get a comment in edgewise. Rod unceremoniously used his scarf to wipe the blood from his sword, then glanced over at Lantz questioningly.

“A group of guys left the tavern after you did. Looked kind of like they were

following you,” Lantz rattled off before Rod could even ask. “I ended up tailing them, and it turned out I was right. I’m sure you didn’t need my help, though...”

“I didn’t,” Rod said bluntly.

Lantz was taken aback for a second, but decided not to press the issue. Instead, he turned to look at me and Gourry with disdain.

“Still, Master Rod...” he began. “You really think Miss Pint-Size and Mr. Pompous here will be useful?”

P-P-Pint-Size?!

“Lantz,” Rod hissed before I could object myself.

A visible shudder ran through Lantz’s body.

“I’m the one who recruited them.”

In other words, questioning our ability would be questioning Rod’s judgment. Realizing his mistake, Lantz turned pale.

“S-Sorry, Master Rod...”

“Never mind that,” Rod responded in his typical dour tone as he began walking once more without sparing Lantz another glance.

We followed, of course, and from behind us, I could hear the distinct sound of Lantz clicking his tongue. I whipped around with my hands on my hips. I was about to tell him to speak up if he had something to say, but before I could get the words out—

Blub!

The ground beneath my feet transformed!

“Wh-What the heck is this?!” Lantz screamed.

He’d already sunken down to his shins. The street below us, you see, had abruptly transmogrified into a sea of mud.

“Looks like this one’s on you, Lina,” Gourry said nonchalantly as he too sank into the mud.

“Way ahead of you,” I replied.

Incidentally, Rod was watching with calm interest as he also descended into the mud. I, however, turned my eyes toward the new player on the scene.

“Oho... A sorcerer, eh?”

The speaker was a man floating in the air overhead, backed by the darkening sky above. He wore a black hooded cape, a jeweled amulet around his neck, and beautifully crafted pauldrons styled after the heads of brow daemons. Though, I have to say, he was kind of on the pale side... In other words, pretty much your archetypal sorcerer.

“So, let me guess: You sent those guys after us to see what we could do, right?”

“That’s right. And they served their purpose well,” the sorcerer said with a grin.

“Entreating bephemoths—spirits of the earth—to convert the ground to mud and hold us in place while you attack from above... Not a bad plan. Too bad I’m here,” I said, looking up at the guy.

I myself was casually standing atop the sea of mud courtesy of a Levitation spell. I’d cast it the moment I felt the ground change under my feet, and it had kept me from sinking like the others.

“Your presence is irrelevant. All who oppose Lord Daymia will fall before Caluath the sorcerer!”

“Don’t go promising things you can’t make good on,” I said, floating into the air before incanting another spell. “Lei Wing!”

In a flash, I was right beside Caluath.

“What?!” he shouted in surprise.

Lei Wing was a spell that created a barrier of wind around its caster to allow for high-speed flight. It wasn’t too popular these days because it was harder to control than Levitation and wasn’t especially practical, but I personally liked it. It was quite useful in certain situations.

Caluath was currently occupied maintaining both his spell that turned the ground to mud and his own Levitation spell. And since not even the most

powerful sorcerers could keep up more than two spells at once, that meant his hands were already full and I had nothing to worry about.

I was, however, so focused on controlling my Lei Wing that the best I could probably muster was a casting of Lighting. Offensive spells were out of the question. But at the very least, that put us on equal footing.

The sorcerer turned to face me...

“Die, impudent girl!”

...And a set of Flare Arrows appeared in front of him!

What?! No way!

“Ack!” I shouted as I dodged the incoming projectiles.

They were weak enough that I could have deflected them with ease by altering the strength of my wind barrier, but I was too shocked to think straight.

“Heh. What’s wrong, girl? You seem rather surprised,” Caluath said with a high-pitched laugh, his pauldrons laughing right along with him.

Wait a minute. Pauldrons don’t usually laugh, do they? Unless...

“That’s right,” he proclaimed triumphantly. “These are no mere pauldrons. They’re living things!”

Living things? Those brow daemons on his shoulders? I knew that brow daemons could use some mid-level magic, and their heads *were* about the size of the ones on Caluath’s shoulders right now. But... where the heck were their bodies, then?! Brow daemons were quite a bit smaller than humans, but certainly not small enough to fit under this guy’s cape.

“They’re no ordinary brow daemons, you see. They’re chimeras Lord Daymia made as a gift for me. Charming little slaves, aren’t they? They allow me to maintain three spells at once!” Caluath conveniently explained.

Of all the things to brag about! Eesh...

All this really meant was that he was totally dependent on the brow daemons to get anything done. The spell turning the ground to mud, Levitation, and whatever spell he attacked with—that was one spell apiece for him and his two

chimeras. If he hadn't spelled that out for me, I would've assumed he was just that good... Guys like him really burn my bacon.

"Light, appear!" I called, launching a Lighting spell at Caluath.

Levitation didn't allow for much in the way of agility, so I figured he wouldn't be able to dodge it.

"Gah!" he screamed, proving me right.

The ball of light I released must have blinded him good.

"Wh-Where have you gone, girl?!" Caluath moaned.

"Skyeek!" the brow daemon on his right shoulder squealed.

"Above me?!"

Caluath must have understood whatever language it was speaking. He turned to look upward, even though his vision was still compromised.

Slam!

I landed right on his face. After using Lighting to blind him, I'd used Lei Wing to soar directly above him... And then I'd dismissed the spell.

Splat!

I dropped the sorcerer into his own mudpit, head-first. His upper half sank right in, while I stood victoriously atop his protruding rear end. See, I'd already started reciting my next spell on the way down.

"Freeze Arrow!"

I shot the subzero arrow I'd conjured right into the ground, freezing the mud hard in an instant. A single shiver ran through the sorcerer beneath me before he froze in place. The brow daemons on his shoulders—apparently defeated just as easily—were forced to drop their spells, thus returning the sea of mud to solid ground.

For such a dramatic entrance, Caluath had gone down pretty easily. His undoing was probably thinking that being able to cast multiple spells at once made him invincible. Everyone knows it's not about the number of spells; it's about how you use them!

“Easy-peasy.”

I turned back to face the other three, and... Oh.

“Yeah, great. Awesome. Now... you think you could do somethin’ about *this*, please?” Lantz asked.

He and the other boys were still up to their waists in the frozen ground, teeth chattering.

What delicious Loania lamb rolls! Perfectly spiced meat in a green vegetable sauté, complemented by a delicious and fragrant diluted honey wine. And these fried moule shrimp? To die for!

The dinner laid out for us was a truly luxurious feast. If I wasn’t here on business—and if Rod and Talim weren’t around—I’d be in hog heaven.

Talim the Purple, seated at the head of the table, was a portly fellow in the first years of old age. Appellations such as “the Purple” and “the Blue” were sort of like titles handed down by sorcerers’ councils—along with appropriately-colored robes and capes—to those who held important positions or had performed great service. It wasn’t a ranking system, so there was no “best color” to have.

If you’ll indulge me on a little tangent here, I myself was once given a color title by the local sorcerers’ council as a special guest. When participating in official council events, you were supposed to attend in the robe you were given, but... Like hell I’d ever done that.

Why, you ask? I wouldn’t be caught dead in that stupid outfit. It was pink! Freakin’ *pink*!

When I brought it home, my sister had a good laugh at my expense.

“Lina the Pink?! You know what men say about a girl who wears pink!” she’d crowed.

Shut up! It’s not my fault! I didn’t pick it!

The council had assured me it was “a befitting color for such a charming girl.” But seriously, what the hell kind of black magic practitioner wants to go around

wearing pink?! I couldn't exactly throw the robes in their faces and storm out, though, so I'd put on my best strained smile and oh-so graciously accepted them at the time, but...

Ah, I digress. The point is that Talim's purple was also a real piece of work. Nothing against purple, of course, but it's gotta be on the right person. Slender, mysterious bad boys could pull it off. But this fat old guy shoveling food into his mouth, clad in those dazzling purple robes? Well, all I can say is, it wasn't exactly an appetizing sight.

Talim was completely bald, with beady eyes that were constantly blinking. But worst of all, he was smoking a cigar! At dinner! Maybe he was having it in place of wine.



I just wanted to scream, “Don’t smoke while people are eating!” Then hit him with a Bram Blazer or something for emphasis. But I just barely managed to restrain myself. My, how I’ve grown!

His story about his conflict with Daymia since the chairman’s disappearance wasn’t too different from the rumors going around the city. The main difference in his account was that, rather than a mutual clash, he claimed that Daymia was the one picking a fight, and thus he was only hiring mercenaries for his personal protection.

“I just want the two of you as *bothyguards*, little miss.” He had a bit of a lisp, and his voice was higher-pitched than you’d expect based on his appearance. The way he pronounced “bodyguards” was particularly noteworthy. “He may send assassins after me from time to time, but of course, I won’t stoop to his level.”

I had to wonder about that...

“Of course, once I’m chairman, I’ll deal with him properly— Well, that wording might give the wrong impression. Really, I’ll probably just strip him of his position.”

“But what if Daymia is elected chairman instead?” I asked plainly, but he just laughed me off.

“Oh, he won’t be. I’ll be the next chairman, no doubt about that. I can’t deny that his magic is rather powerful. A fair margin better than mine, even. He’s also the second son of a noble family, so he’s quite well connected. But he’s, you know...” He stopped there to lower his voice and point to his head. “A little off in *this* department.”

“Ahh...” I responded vaguely.

Gourry, who didn’t seem to care about any of this, was singularly focused on picking out every single green pepper from his vegetable stir-fry. I guess I couldn’t hold that against him, but c’mon. Rod, meanwhile, stood next to Talim, silently watching Gourry with his usual hostility flaring. It was honestly exhausting to be the only adult in the room.

“Sorcerers are supposed to take their research seriously, but he treats it all

like some sort of game.”

“I bet your ears are burning,” Gourry suddenly interjected.

Why was *that* the only part he decided to pay attention to?! I kicked him under the table as hard as I could, but Gourry didn’t even blink. He just kept picking the green peppers out of his dinner. There was something almost admirable about his determination.

Talim continued on, not seeming to notice any of our shenanigans.

“He claims to be researching immortality when, in reality, he’s just locked himself up to play with his homunculi and chimeras. Toying with life for fun... It’s a disgrace to our profession, honestly!” he said, sounding genuinely worked up about it.

“Immortality, huh?” I echoed in a quiet voice.

Plenty of people out there were desperate for the secrets of immortality. Five hundred years ago, the sovereign of the prosperous Principality of Letidius had offered an enormous bounty across the land to sate his quest for eternal life. It threw the country into a frenzy, with people committing all kinds of atrocities in their sovereign’s name. In the end, civil war and invasion brought his nation to ruin, and all the guy had to show for it was his head on a pike.

It all happened over a period of two years, and the whole affair was ugly enough that sorcerers now referred to it as “the Dark Ages.” I hope I don’t have to give examples, but apparently there were some very public and very distasteful experiments performed during that period. I mean, think about it. After you dose someone with a supposed elixir of immortality, what’s the easiest way to test if it worked? All sorts of experiments were carried out, none of them successful.

They say there are some sorcerers who’ve lived longer than two hundred years, but records are spotty. Some even say there are those who’ve made pacts with demons for eternal life, but what they achieve is only a facsimile of immortality. Entropy is the law of the universe, plain and simple, and trying to circumvent that with magic is a fool’s errand.

So, long story short, based on what I’d heard about him so far, this Vice

Chairman Daymia guy was *not* someone I wanted to voluntarily associate with.

“The council election committee knows about it, too. They’d never instate him as chairman.”

“Ahh...”

I couldn’t do much but nod in response. What was there to say?

“As for me, I study the language sorcerers use,” Vice Chairman Talim said, suddenly changing the subject.

Oh, crap... Is he about to start talking about himself?! You see guys like this all the time! Ones who’ll take any excuse to start bragging! Then they go on forever and ever until the listener is begging to be put out of their misery!

“Obviously, much of magic requires tools and rituals, but the most important element of spellcasting is the words that govern the laws of cause and effect. Specifically, the incantation. But how is it that mere words hold such power—the ability to make the impossible mundane? That’s my field of research.”

Aw, hell. The guy was clearly building up steam for a long-haul lecture, so I decided to try and steer things in a different direction.

“So what was Council Chairman Halciform studying? Before he disappeared, I mean,” I interrupted forcefully.

A jolt ran through Talim’s body.

Huh?

That certainly wasn’t the reaction of someone mad about being interrupted. He seemed genuinely shaken.

“Ah, the chairman... Yes, the chairman...”

He hesitated there.

“He was researching... life. Yes, he was researching life,” he said, clearly dissembling.

It was obvious as hell that he was hiding something.

“By the way, are you sure you should be dishing all this dirt on the inner workings of the council?” I asked, watching Talim closely. “We haven’t actually

agreed to take your job yet.”

“No matter,” the vice chairman said with a light wave of his hand. “Naturally, if you don’t accept my offer, we’ll just pretend this never happened.”

“...Huh?” I found myself bleating.

“You can’t get good work out of people if you’re constantly manipulating them with the carrot and the stick. It’s important to me that you *want* to do this.”

Hmm...

I’d expected him to try and twist my arm a little more. To be honest, I was kind of prepared for this to turn into a fight. But whether or not Talim really meant what he said, his perfectly reasonable demeanor took the wind out of my sails a little.

“The point is that while I’m getting up there in years, I’m not ready to die yet. I really am looking for skilled bodyguards, so I’m hoping for an enthusiastic response,” he declared, shooting me an awkward wink across the table.

Brrr!

I almost spat my pork stew out of my mouth.

Darkness settled over the city as Gourry and I walked down the now-empty streets.

If we headed a little further downtown, we’d hit inns and bars catering to travelers, the red light district, and other areas still well lit in the dead of night. At present, however, we were in the middle of a residential district. With all the windows of the houses dark, it appeared everyone was asleep.

The streets were dark too, of course. There were lamps along the road with lighting cast on them, but they were intentionally dimmed in order to extend their longevity. All in all, the full moon overhead provided more light.

I’d given Talim a vague response when I left his residence. I told him I’d think about the job, but I just couldn’t muster any real interest in it. Really, what bugged the most was that when I told Talim who I was, he didn’t react at all.

It's not like I'd expected special treatment or anything. It's just that... Not to brag or whatever, but I'm pretty famous. Okay, maybe "infamous" is a better word for it. Rumors about me say I chuck Dragon Slaves around willy-nilly and destroy natural landscapes, that I turn beaches into inlets of death in the name of "magic experiments." And yes, the fact that all the rumors about me are true makes it even worse! So you'd think the vice chairman of a sorcerers' council in a big city like this should have at least *heard* of me. But he didn't show the slightest bit of recognition when he heard my name!

Most likely, he didn't believe me. He was probably thinking something along the lines of, "She's just pretending to be someone famous, but as long as she's good, that's all I care about."

Any time I'd brought up Council Chairman Halciform, Talim had looked right shaken, so I could tell there was more than met the eye about what was going on here... but I didn't pry further because I never intended to take the job.

While I was mulling all this over, someone grabbed me by the back of my collar. It was Gourry.

"Uh, the inn is that way," he said in a patronizing tone. "You know, even if they water it down for kids, alcohol is alcohol. Guzzling it down because it tastes good is still going to get you drunk."

Hey, who's drunk?

"Who're ya callin' drunk?" I asked.

Okay, okay, so maybe I was slurring my speech a little, but I was still all there! The only reason I'd taken a wrong turn was because I was thinking so hard. That said, despite having drunk quite a bit of real wine himself, Gourry was both walking and talking perfectly straight.

"Just follow me, okay?" he offered.

I burped in the affirmative and followed after him, keeping my eyes locked on his back. After just a few steps, however, I smacked right into him.

"Hey, don't jus' stop..."

As I started to complain, I felt the familiar dark of night take on a sinister

shade. I turned my eyes in the same direction Gourry was looking and saw that a shadow had overtaken the moon. It wasn't a cloud... but rather two figures sitting atop a nearby roof, blocking out the moonlight.

Their forbidding presence sobered me instantly.

"Izzat—"

Okay, so maybe I was still slurring my words a little. But I wasn't drunk, I swear!

At the very least, I can assure you that the two silhouettes squatting on the roof were *not* some alcohol-induced hallucination. And their menacing aura... I'm not sure how to explain it to anyone who's never met a magical being before. It prickled like a chill, like a foul smell.

"Demons, eh?" Gourry whispered.

One stood with legs spread wide, its cape billowing in the wind. It wore a mask made of alabaster stone—like a white version of the devil masks used in masque—and a pitch-black headwrap that hid everything but its eyes. Perhaps because it was backlit by the moon, but apart from the eyes of its mask, the demon appeared to be nothing more than a silhouette of a cape flapping in the darkness.

A dark, more-or-less humanoid figure crouched next to it. It wore the left half of a white mask that seemed to be made out of interlocking pieces overtop a featureless, full-face black mask.

Okay... It was all snapping into place. This had to be who was watching us just before Daymia's assassins had attacked this afternoon.

Rustle...

Long coils of black hair danced in the wind from the head of the demon wearing two masks. It pointed to us with one unusually long hand.

"Guests of Talim?" it said in a voice that could only be described as "sticky."

A green gem mounted in the white half of its mask glimmered briefly. Was that its eye?

"It appears you haven't yet taken his job offer. See that you don't... If you

care to leave the city alive, that is.”

“Heed us. Or don’t, if you so choose. But know that your decision will change the course of your lives,” the one in the stark white mask said.

In contrast to his friend, his soft voice almost seemed majestic. If he were a church priest, I bet he’d have a ton of female followers.

I let out a snort in reply, however.

“Oh pleashe! You guysh can’tellush whaddado...”

Intimidated by my forcefulness (I think), the two demons drew back.

“She’s trying to say, ‘Oh please. You guys can’t tell us what to do,’” Gourry translated earnestly.

Two-Mask clicked its tongue and said, “What do you advise, Lord Seigram? We can’t have a conversation with a drunk...”

“It is of no concern, Gio. Our mission was to issue a warning and nothing more. We’re done here,” White-Mask—the demon called Seigram, apparently—said distastefully.

Two-Mask Gio sighed, then turned back to us: “So... just stay out of this. Understand?”

“He said, ‘Ju’shtay outtadis. Unnershtan?’” Gourry translated earnestly.

Thank you! That was totally unnecessary! I started to wonder if maybe he was a little drunk after all.

“Now, consider yourselves warned,” the demon said. Following that, they both rose into the air and melded into the darkness. Once the seething miasma of their presence dispersed, the shining white light of the moon returned.

“Heh heh... Takeshom gutsh ta pikafite widda great Lina...”

“She said, ‘Heh heh... Takes some guts to pick a fight with the great Lina,’” Gourry said, translating my monologue for no one in particular.

He’s drunk! He’s definitely drunk!

We both rested soundly enough that night. After stirring, I woke up Gourry in

the room next door, and we moved downstairs to enjoy a light breakfast while we discussed our next move.

“So who do you think those guys were? You think Daymia’s raising demons or something?”

“Which guys?” Gourry asked, looking confused as he held his fork midway to his mouth.

Ha! You left yourself open!

My right hand moved in a flash. I skewered a strip of stewed chicken on his plate, and it disappeared into my mouth before anyone knew what happened.

“Ahh! Hey!” Gourry snapped out of his stupor, raising his voice to a shriek.

“That was your own fault for letting your guard down!”

“Okay, if that’s the way you want to play it... Take this!”

“Ah! My precious fried egg!”

That was unforgivable! Thunder clapped behind me as I flipped him the bird. (Oh, Lina! You’re so crass!)

“Gourry, you knave! Just because we’re traveling companions doesn’t mean you can filch eggs off the great warrior-slash-sorcerer Lina Inverse! Even if the world might forgive you, I never shall!”

“Have you ever considered that all your bluster might just be compensating for a fundamental selfishness?”

“You shut up! If that’s how it’s gonna be... Take this! And this!”

“Hey! My sausage! Then... take this! And this!”

“Excuse me, sir, miss...”

“You brute! I’m not done yet! Take this!”

“Urgh! A devilish move! Now take this! My shocking two-level attack! Feint!”

“Monster! Fiend! Well, if it’s come to that...”

“Sir? Miss?”

“Take this! My secret finishing move! Hah!”

“Curse you! You’ll never get my last piece of chicken! Take this!”

“Sir! Miss!”

Silence.

Gourry and I snapped out of our frenzy, right in the middle of locking knives and forks across the table. The innkeeper was looking at us with a very strained expression.

“Could you please eat your meal in peace?”

A piece of chicken dropped from our locked silverware to the table with a splat.

“So, really, who did you think those guys were?” I tried asking one more time after we moved our discussion to Gourry’s room.

“Seriously, *which* guys?” he asked again from the other side of the small table.

“Uh, the two demons we met last night? Duh.”

“Demons?”

Oh, come on...

“You know, the spooky dudes who showed up on our way back from Talim’s place?”

“Oh!” Gourry exclaimed, clapping his hands together. “I don’t remember that at all.”

Erk! I nearly fell outta my chair.

“See, when I have too much to drink, I totally black out. Can’t remember a thing from that point on. People say I don’t seem the slightest bit drunk when I’m like that, though. So, as far as last night goes, my memory cuts off around dinner. Everything after that is a blank.”

“You almost sound proud of it...”

Ha, I *knew* he was drunk off his ass! With no recourse, I recounted to Gourry the events of the previous night.

“Huh? That really happened?”

“Sure did.”

“Hmm, I really don’t remember it at all. But I’ve gotta hand it to myself... It’s pretty impressive that I can drink so much that I black out, but still stay conscious.”

“Don’t admire your own stupidity. Besides, you’re getting us off-track.”

“Hmm...” Gourry pensively put a hand to his chin. “Well, I guess the most likely scenario is that the demons are assassins hired by Daymia.”

“I guess so. That’s the usual pattern, anyway.”

“Wait, does this mean...” Gourry started with a wince.

“You bet,” I said, rising from my chair. “I wasn’t gonna take the job before, but if I turn it down now, it’ll look like I got scared off by some silly little demons. Ergo, we’re taking the job!”

The city was teeming with life. The marketplace was open now, which meant the stores and streets were jam-packed with people.

Argh! So annoying! Where did all these people come from?! They make it hard to walk! Not to mention breathe! Make way, jackasses!

We stepped off the main avenue onto a less crowded street, and I let out a sigh of relief. Of course, “crowded” is relative—there were still quite a lot of people here too. Certainly enough of them that Gourry and I would have trouble finding each other again if we got separated.

“What the hell are so many people doing out here? There a party or something?” I muttered.

“I mean...” Gourry said. “We’re here too.”

“I know that! I just wanted to vent,” I responded, continuing to grumble to myself as I walked along to Gourry’s right.

As we went, however, I detected someone approaching from the side. There was no sign of hostility or ill intent, but they were clearly focused on me.

“Please,” called a girl’s voice.

I turned in her direction. She was dressed all in white, her hair the color of the setting sun. Her eyes were focused forward, though she didn’t make a move aside from speaking again.

“Please stay out of this.”

“Huh?” I gawked, finding myself slowing to a stop.

“What’s wrong, Lina?” Gourry asked.

“Well... I just...”

I turned around again, but the girl was already gone. I quickly scanned the area and spotted her on the other side of a crowd of people. She glanced back at me and bowed with a strange kind of desperation in her eyes.

“Wait!”

I tried to follow after her, but it was too late. She’d long vanished into the throng. All I could do was stand there and stare.

Crash!

As I did, someone ran into me.

“Hey! Don’t stop in the middle of the road, you shrimp!”

“Shrimp?!”

Whack!

I let fly an unhesitating kick into the balls of the old jerk who ran into me, then went back to staring off into the crowd.

Don’t you hate it when assholes ruin a good mysterious atmosphere?

2: The Strange Creatures Lurking Atlas at Night

“Oho! So you’ll take the job, then? Wonderful!” Master Talim said cheerily as he tore into a barbecue skewer between puffs of his cigar.

Can you even taste the food like that, man?

We were currently in the courtyard behind Master Talim’s mansion, seated around his tea table to discuss the job. And if you’re wondering why I’m suddenly calling him “Master,” it’s because I’m officially working for him now. So, seeing as how he’s my employer and all, I can’t go around addressing him without proper respect.

“How delightfully reassuring! I’ll be able to sleep soundly at night no matter what bizarre assassins Daymia chooses to send,” he proclaimed with a radiant smile. Okay, maybe “radiant” was going a little far, given the guy’s appearance.

“Not to rain on your parade, but I hope you won’t let your guard down, sir,” I cautioned him. “Now, if I may ask, regarding the duration of our service...”

“Well, let’s see. The council chairman election will be in half a month’s time, so I suppose until then. I can handle things myself after that. Now, as for your payment... There’s all your necessary expenses plus a per diem...”

Master Talim ended up quoting me a much higher offer than I’d expected. Either the guy had cash to burn, or he really was as appreciative as he claimed. Of course, it still wasn’t anywhere close to adequate compensation for dealing with full-fledged demons, but I knew what I was walking into when I took the job. I couldn’t exactly turn picky now.

Once we were done hashing out our contract with our new employer, Gourry and I decided to have a look around the estate. It was important to get the lay of the land, after all. We’d just had a look around the first floor, and were about to ascend the stairway to the second when...

“Sightseein’, you two?” came a jeering voice.

“Oh, yay. It’s you,” I said, my nose stridently wrinkled.

Leaning against a pillar, arms folded and sneering at us, was Lantz.

“We’re not sightseeing. We’re scouting. We need to identify defensible points and escape routes in case it comes to that. Not that I need to explain myself to an ass-obsessed perv like you,” I said, glaring at him in reproach.

Lantz’s nostrils flared... but he calmed himself quickly.

“Oh, hey, didn’t recognize you guys. I thought you were just some kid wanderin’ around with her guardian.”

Some kid?! Grrr!

I may be vertically challenged, but I don’t need anyone to remind me of that!

“Ooh, so you like playing grab-ass with *kids*, do ya? You’d better fix that malfunctioning personality of yours if you ever want anyone to like you.”

“Hngh...” Lantz grunted in futile rebuttal.

“Your silence speaks volumes. Must suck not having any friends, huh?”

“Sh-Shut up!” he fumed.

I nodded in overdramatic fashion as I replied, “Yes, it’s all coming together. That’s how people like you turn out...”

“She’s right,” Gourry chimed in. “If you don’t put any work into fixing your personality...”

Yes! You go, Gourry! Sic ‘im!

“...You’ll end up just like Lina here.”

Urk! I slammed my head onto the railing. It hurt, but just a little.

“Wh-What gives?! Whose side are you on?!” I clamored.

Gourry scratched his head, looking confused.

“Wait... You don’t seriously think of yourself as a sweet, lovable person, do you?”

“Lay off, darn it!”

“Well, anyway... Uh, Lantz, was it? Sounds to me like you’re mad that Master Talim likes us, that Rod accepts us, and that we showed up out of the blue and

started throwing our weight around without bothering to prove ourselves to you.”

“Yeah, sorta,” Lantz said sulkily.

“But... you saw me beat Daymia’s sorcerer, didn’t you?” I cut in.

“Oh, please. All you did was body check a guy into the mud. You weren’t that good; he was just that stupid.”

Rrgh! I mean, yeah, the guy was stupid. But still!

Methinks Lantz was just still mad about the day we met. Who holds a grudge over being clobbered with the corner of a serving tray, though? That’s just petty!

Actually, thinking about it... Maybe that’s kind of understandable.

“Okay. In that case, let me show you a sample of what I can do,” Gourry offered casually, unperturbed, and drew his sword.

Hey now!

“Why, you...!” Lantz growled, reaching for his own blade.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m not trying to start anything.”

Gourry hastily waved off Lantz’s concerns as he pulled a small gold coin from his pocket. He then held his sword parallel to the ground with one hand, blade upright, and placed the coin atop it with his other. The coin lay there perfectly still, maintaining its precarious balance on the sword’s edge.

So far, this was standard street performer fare. Wait, unless...

“Hyah!” Gourry shouted, pulling his blade straight back.

I heard a faint metallic clink. Then another. My eyes went wide. Lantz’s too.

The coin was now on the floor, neatly cut in half. The mere act of pulling his blade out from beneath it had bisected the coin. You needed more than just talent to pull off a trick like that. It demanded incredible focus, skill, and speed.

“A-Awesome!” Lantz proclaimed in genuine awe.

Meanwhile, I took a few steps up the stairs. Gourry was busy sheathing his

sword with a triumphant smile on his face. He never saw it coming.

“You bastard!”

Slam!

I executed a flying drop down the stairs, driving one knee right into the side of his head.

“Wh-What are you doing to my bro?!” Lantz shouted at me while helping the confused Gourry up.

Your “bro”? When did that happen, exactly?

“Wh-What in the world...? Y’know, Lina, that would’ve killed most people...” Gourry complained, shaking his head as he processed what had happened.

I put my hands on my hips and glared down at him.

“Even for a demonstration, wasting money is unforgivable!” I proclaimed. “I only gave you what you rightly deserved!”

I might be a master of black magic by trade, you see, but I come from a family of merchants. I’d grown up on the adage: “A real merchant never wastes a single copper!”

Incidentally, my big sister had a gig waiting tables back home while I was a sorcerer. It seemed unlikely that either of us were ever going to become a “real merchant.” But just because I didn’t want to live a life devoted to money didn’t mean I could just go around wasting it! The sight of Gourry squandering a gold coin so thoughtlessly just set my blood boiling.

“H-Hang on a second. That just means I have to make a profit off of this, right?” Gourry asked.

“I guess so. But how are you going to profit off of *that*?”

Gourry plucked the two pieces of the coin off the ground and showed them to Lantz.

“Well? No brag, but it’s a really clean cut, don’t you think?”

“Y-Yeah, for sure...”

“I don’t show this trick to people very often. Would you like to have it as a

good luck charm? Just fifteen lieves.”

“Hell yeah! Sold!”

Lieves were the local currency. Ten of them were worth about one gold coin.

Oh, so we’ve got two merchants in the party, do we?

“So...” After placing the bisected gold coin into his pocket with great reverence, Lantz glared down his nose at me. “What exactly can *you* do? If you’re bossin’ around my bro here, you better have some chops. Or are you just some little duckling trailin’ behind him everywhere?”

D-D-Duckling?! I snapped.

“Oh, I’ll be *happy* to show you what I can do!” I shouted as I began to recite a spell.

“Gwah! No, Lina! Please, not that!”

Gourry, however, clung to me with such desperation that I generously decided to indulge his request and call off my Dragon Slave.

“Wow, sure aren’t many people around here, are there?” I said as I strolled down the street.

Lantz just looked at me condescendingly.

After finishing our tour of the Talim estate, we’d decided to scout out the rest of the city and do a little sightseeing on the side. For some reason, Lantz volunteered to act as tour guide; it seemed he’d taken a real shine to Gourry. The markets were concentrated downtown, however, so the area closer to the castle was almost completely deserted at this time of day.

“We’re here, bro,” Lantz said as he came to a stop.

Just across the road was an extremely large house. The property was probably comparable to the Talim estate in size, but the building itself was way bigger. It was about three stories tall and took up most of the land it sat on, leaving barely any room for a lawn.

“Oh, is this it?” Gourry whispered.

“Yeah. That’s Daymia’s residence,” Lantz responded congenially.

“Wonder why he built such a big house...” I muttered.

“Figure it out for yourself,” he snapped at me.

...

What the heck? I know favoritism when I see it! This guy is *definitely* holding a grudge!

“N-Now, now, Lina...” Gourry said placatingly when he noticed the angry glint in my eyes.

“Alright, then let’s get going!” I proposed.

Gourry’s and Lantz’s brows furrowed simultaneously.

“Get going... where?”

“Daymia’s place. Where else?”

“What?!” Lantz squeaked. “Are you nuts? You want the three of us bustin’ in there in broad daylight?”

“Who said anything about busting in?” I responded. “I figured we’d walk up and talk to the doorman or something. They can’t attack us just for knocking, and it’s a good way to feel ’em out.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Gourry said, arms crossed. “Master Talim mentioned the guy was kind of off in the head... and if we do end up in a scuffle somehow, he’s apparently well-connected. It wouldn’t be hard for him to paint us as the bad guys in the situation.”

“Hrmmm...”

I didn’t know what to say. I was a little taken aback, to be honest. Gourry hadn’t made a sound argument since... well, ever. I guess he had a shrewd side beneath that oblivious exterior.

“Well, maybe you’re right,” I said, giving in easily enough. “I’m not exactly jumping to meet the guy myself. So the next place to hit up should be, let’s say... Chairman Halciform’s house.”

I gave the dragon head knocker a firm pair of raps.

According to Master Talim, Halciform had an assistant named Rubia who'd been living alone in the chairman's mansion ever since his disappearance. I wanted to get her story.

But there was no response at the door.

"Guess she's not home..." I mumbled, looking up at the manor.

"Coming!" someone suddenly called from deep inside.

Huh? I know that voice...

Several moments later, I heard the door unlock. It swung open, and when the girl on the other side and I caught sight of each other, we both froze up.

Hair the color of sunset, eyes brimming with sadness... Yup, this was the girl who'd approached me on my way to the Talim estate, implored me to stay out of this, and then vanished.

She didn't do anything openly suspicious like slam the door in my face, but she regarded us with extreme caution.

"Can I help you?" she asked as though we'd never seen each other before.

Ahh, okay. If that's the way you want to play it...

"Would you be Mistress Rubia?" I asked.

She nodded.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. We're investigating the disappearance of the council chairman, you see..." I lied openly.

Her expression changed slightly.

"I've already told the council everything I know. If you're really with them, you should have my full testimony. Please leave me alone now," she said as she moved to close the door, offering no room for debate on the matter.

"Just one question!" I insisted, anxious to know the truth behind what Master Talim had tried to hide from us. "What was the council chairman studying before he disappeared?"

The girl twitched. It was practically the same reaction Master Talim had given me. Her hesitation only lasted for a moment, however, before she looked straight into my eyes.

“He was studying... life. That’s all I can say,” she concluded by closing the door.

“What’s her problem?” Lantz said, disgruntled.

“Hmm...”

“Stay out of this,” huh?

“What are you grinning about?” Gourry asked me.

“You could say,” I said with a dramatic flourish of my cape, “that things have gotten just a little more interesting.”

“Um... Okay?”

I tossed and turned in bed that night.

See, Gourry and I had decided to leave our things at the inn and stay at Master Talim’s place. It goes without saying that assassins are most likely to attack at night, so it’s not a good look for a bodyguard to waltz out after dark with a simple, “It’s getting late, so I’d better head back to my inn!”

As for why we didn’t go fetch our belongings... Well, as long as we were in Master Talim’s employ, there was always the chance that someone might set fire to his house. In that event, our priority would have to be rescuing our employer, and after escorting him to safety, it was unlikely we’d be able to double back to save our stuff. And that would be terrible.

Actually, terrible would be an understatement. My bag was loaded with magic items that weren’t necessarily useful to most folks, but were quite valuable. Even if I sold them at rock-bottom prices, I’d make enough coin to buy out Talim’s estate, his mercenaries, and his household belongings—the whole lot—and retire into a life of luxury.

So, yeah, you get the picture. Magic is an expensive business, and the thought of all that money going up in flames... It’s enough to make a girl lose sleep.

(Obviously, we had no guarantee that the inn wouldn't burn down either, but you just have to have faith after a certain point.) That said, my restlessness tonight wasn't for fear of my belongings. You could call it a premonition, I guess. I actually have them fairly frequently. Any night I'm exhausted but can't sleep is a stone-cold guarantee of an incoming attack, and tonight was shaping up to be one of those nights.

I sat up in bed. My room was pretty cushy—too cushy, actually, for a hired guard. Master Talim's excuse was simply that he believed in "chivalry" (pronounced with a hard *ch*, mind you). Incidentally, the boys were all crammed together, taking turns on night watch.

I got up and put my slippers on. I was wearing the same outfit from this afternoon, minus my cape which I'd set on my pillow. (I couldn't really sleep with it on.) I wanted to be ready to deal with any trouble that came my way.

Just to be careful, I grabbed my sword and slipped it through my belt before leaving the room. Hey, don't look at me like that! I'm just taking a little trip to the bathroom.

There were a few men in the hallway, all out cold. Some were wrapped in blankets on the floor, while others—probably meant to be standing watch—were fast asleep leaning on their swords. I pressed onward, careful not to step on anyone.

It had been a little overly hot during that day, but now that the sun was down, it got cold without a cape on. I managed to get my business done, but it was a chilly walk back to my room.

"Guh, I'm freezin' here..." I whispered before stopping dead in my tracks.

I drew up behind a nearby door—a small open one that led out to the rear courtyard. There was something... off... about the air outside. It wasn't a presence, exactly. Naturally, there were a dozen or so men on the watch outside as well, and there was nothing strange about their behavior. No, what I was sensing outside was a sort of chill in the air itself. It wasn't hostility or bloodlust, but it still gave me goosebumps.

Suddenly, a shiver shot up my spine. My gut told me things were about to get real... And then came clanging and screaming from the courtyard.

“Wake up, everyone! It’s an attack!” I shouted, kicking the nearest couple of sleeping guards before flying out the door myself.

The smell of blood stung my nose. There must have been casualties already.

I could see blades flashing in the darkness, illuminated by torches and moonlight. The greatest danger of night fighting is always collateral damage. “Oops, my bad” wouldn’t really cut it if someone like Gourry or Rod caught someone they didn’t mean to with their blade.

I recited a chant and tossed a few Lighting spells around the area. It was only then that I saw *them*.

The assassins were a curious bunch. About a dozen huge men... Actually, in terms of height, they weren’t much over average. It was their sheer mass that was so remarkable. Each one had biceps about as thick as my waist, and it was easy to imagine just how strong they were by their frankly absurd combat technique. They used steel poles spun like wagon wheels in their left hands to block attacks, while wielding massive executioner’s swords in their right hands for offense. I wouldn’t want to cross these guys, even on a good day.

But what really got me about them... was that they all had the same face. They looked about twenty years of age or so and were all completely bald. Their expressions were uniformly blank, too, not registering the slightest hint of bloodlust even as they sliced at their opponents.



Battle homunculi created by Daymia, huh?

Master Talim was right. If a guy who made things like this assumed control of the council, it wouldn't take long for Atlas City to gain an unsavory reputation all the way from Zephilia in the north to the Elemekian Empire in the south.

These beefy dudes weren't the only killers Daymia had created, however. I could see red orbs hovering just outside of my Lighting spell—they were the eyes of large wolves, whose purple-scaled bodies were dotted with thick spikes. If I had to guess, I'd say there were a few dozen of them.

We had a considerable advantage in terms of numbers, but as far as skill and morale were concerned? Uh-oh. There was just no way a few dozen hired mercenaries could compete with twisted beings bred for battle. More and more guards were pouring out of the house by the minute, but many froze in fear or turned tail and ran the minute they saw Daymia's bizarre creations. To their credit, some stayed to fight as well.

That included Rod, who practically blended into the dead of night. He burst forth from the pack, charging the closest homunculus as he drew his sword from his back. The homunculus raised his own sword high, but just as Rod reached him—he suddenly changed direction and veered right. The executioner's sword whistled through empty air, and I saw a flash of Rod's blade in the light of my spell.

As Rod sailed by the homunculus, I heard a thunk as the big guy's metal pole hit the ground in two pieces. In that same moment, blood spurted from his side. As he'd passed, Rod had apparently cut through the guy's abdomen and the iron rod right along with it...

But that didn't stop him from swinging his giant sword again. The homunculus seemed completely unfazed by the fairly deep wound. He didn't scream or even bat an eye; he just moved immediately into a counterattack. Perhaps they were designed not to feel pain.

Rod ducked, dodging the head-high sweep before springing forward. In an instant, he'd cut the guy in half, stem to stern. His bloody blade glinted red in the light.

Gourry held his longsword at his side as he approached another of the hulking homunculi with the air of a casual stroll. The big guy raised his sword expressionlessly, and an exchange of silver flashes followed. Gourry dodged his opponent's sword, then slid in close and drove his own blade right through the guy's forehead. His body slowly collapsed to the ground.

"Hah! Oh—whoa there!"

Gourry quickly leaped back as something tore through where he'd just been standing. With a flash of his sword, he struck the object to the ground... It looked like a slightly pointed horn. A purple-scaled wolf had launched one of its spikes at him, as fast as an arrow.

The wolf (if you could even call it that) then took in a deep breath like it was storing up for a release of power. A second later, more spikes came flying at Gourry. Were he a normal man, he'd have absolutely no way to dodge them all...

But only a fool would think something so basic could take down Gourry!

"You'll have to do better than that!" he shouted as he leaped off the ground.

He easily tracked and dodged the various spike attacks the lupine creature shot out as he closed in on his target. Gourry reached the wolf just as it was taking another deep breath. With a single upward slash, he cleaved its scaly body so quickly and smoothly that its feet didn't even leave the ground. The wolf then dissolved with the wheeze of a deflating balloon.

And Lantz, I gotta admit, was holding his own. He rushed one of the big guys straight from the front, locking his two-handed bastard sword with the homunculus's equally large blade. A split-second later, Lantz pivoted on their clashing swords, propelling himself into the big guy's personal space. He then let go of his hilt with his right hand and thrust an elbow smack into the guy's lowered jaw.

Wordlessly, the mountain of a man lost his balance. Lantz stepped in, and before the big dude could even recover, he brushed his fist lightly along the guy's chin.

Did he miss? No...

The big man toppled forward, falling to his knees. What had looked like a glancing blow must've rattled his brainpan pretty good. Lantz then circled around the guy and plunged his sword straight into his spine. It seemed his fighting style was a combination of swordsman and brawler moves.

"I can do this all night! Who's next?!" Lantz taunted. When it was one of the wolves that stepped up to the plate, however, he muttered, "Well, I'd prefer another one of those hulks, but..."

Now, surely I don't need to tell you that I wasn't just sitting around watching all this go down. The assassins wouldn't let me, for starters.

One of the wolves close to me began sucking in air. *Not good!* I sped through an incantation just before it fired all of its spikes at once.

"Diem Wind!"

The air in front of me contracted, channeling into a shockwave that I launched at the wolf. It was a wind spell on the weaker side, designed to stall an opponent at best, but it was enough to scatter the wolf's incoming spikes. The wolf—now covered in holes where the spikes had been—could only stand there, confused.

"Have at you!"

"You son of a...!"

"Take this! And that! And this!"

The moment they realized our opponent's attacks had been neutralized, my fellow mercenaries rushed the wolf, climbing over each other to be the first to kick it around. But just as I was enjoying that particular delightful scene, a shadow fell over me. One of the big guys was behind me!

I just barely managed to dodge a swing of his executioner's sword, and while I did that, I began to recite a spell. *Take this!*

I slammed a hand into the ground: "Bepheth Bring!"

This was a spell that invoked spirits of the earth, typically to create tunnels in the ground. I, however, had just cast it right below the big guy's feet.

His hands clawed at the air around him, but it didn't save him from being

dropped to the bottom of the large sinkhole that formed. It wasn't deep enough for the fall to kill him, but it wasn't shallow enough for him to crawl out of, either.

"All yours, fellas!" I called to a few nearby mercenaries.

"Sure!" came their cheerful replies.

The mercenaries, feeling properly confident against a helpless opponent, dropped stones on him from above, doused him with oil, and set him on fire. I felt a little bad for the big guy... But just as I was thinking that, I realized someone was watching me.

I turned around. There was a black silhouette standing against the white-painted wall near the front gate. A humanoid figure wearing a white mask... Seigram!

I took off running toward the white-masked demon.

"So... you decided to ignore our warning. Ah, well..." Seigram said, almost to himself.

I stopped just before reaching him, suddenly stricken with regret. Maybe it was because I'd been pretty drunk when I first met him, but I hadn't realized what a high-ranked demon he was. I'd clashed with a demon far beyond Seigram's level once and won, but it was a hard-fought victory that hinged on a few critical elements lining up in my favor.

Of course, I was pretty sure that I could bury Seigram if I used my secret spell. But... that move was just a little *too* powerful. Using it here would crater half of Atlas City.

A Ra Tilt could also do the trick. This was an incredibly powerful spell that attacked an opponent's astral form. Too bad I couldn't use it. More precisely, I'd never learned it.

I'd never had much call for it, and it was just a little... light on pizzazz, you know? I'd always figured a Dragon Slave or two would be enough to get me out of anything, but if I'd known this was gonna happen, I definitely would've had that baby in my back pocket... Ugh! Well, no point in kicking myself now! Just gotta get this done!

“Is it Two-Mask’s day off?” I asked.

I’d expected Seigram’s fellow demon Gio to be with him, but there was no sign of him at the moment. I couldn’t help wondering why.

“Gio Gaia? I wouldn’t know... I was only ordered here to observe the battle.”

“By Daymia the Blue?” I asked.

Gio aside, being able to summon and control a demon like Seigram... Daymia must be a powerful sorcerer indeed.

Seigram didn’t reply, however. We just silently sized each other up for a time.

What would he try first? I could feel cold sweat forming on my back. But just then...

“Hey, need a hand?” a voice asked from behind me, no respect whatsoever for the tension in the air.

I knew who it was without even having to look.

“Finished up over there, Gourry?” I asked, still glaring at Seigram despite an internal feeling of relief.

“Yeah, pretty much. They’ve still got Rod, so I figured they’d be okay even if I slipped out. But this is that demon guy, right?”

“‘That demon guy’?” *Really, man?* “Anyway... I’d appreciate your help.”

I took a step back so I was side-by-side with Gourry. In the absence of a big, flashy spell of my own, that weapon of his would be a lifesaver. But just as prospects for a plan were looking up...

“I’m sorry, but... I can’t fight you now,” Seigram said quietly.

“Wuh?” Gourry and I stammered, trading looks of surprise.

“I was ordered to witness the battle, not participate. I have neither cause nor will to engage you.”

“Not so fast!” I screamed. “You can’t send berserker homunculi and wolf chimeras at us and then back off! You might not wanna fight, but we sure as hell do!”

“I see... Then you leave me no choice,” Seigram said simply as he began to move forward.

Gourry and I both took an unconscious step back. White-Mask then leaped off the ground and into the air... but the next instant, he disappeared behind the wall.

He’d made a show of charging us to freeze us in place, before simply running away.

“You’re not getting away that easy!” I shouted, maneuvering around the gate and chasing after the fleeing silhouette of a black cape.

“Hey! Wait for me, Lina!” Gourry said, tagging along.

And so our pursuit through the dark streets began. The town was deathly quiet. The moon was hidden by the clouds tonight, so all we had to illuminate our way were the Lighting-enchanted street lamps.

Seigram darted through the chilly night air like a fish through water, his black cape flapping noiselessly in the wind behind him.

I feel like I’m dreaming, I thought, inspired by the strange scene. All I could hear was Gourry’s and my footfalls and the sound of our breathing.

White-Mask didn’t simply disappear into the night like he had after our first encounter. We wouldn’t be able to give chase like this if he had. Either that ability belonged solely to Gio, or...

Or Seigram was luring us somewhere.

I glanced at Gourry, who was either thinking really hard or not thinking at all. It was impossible to tell just by the look on his face.

Our strange parade through the night continued, sometimes down the empty avenue and sometimes down narrow back alleys.

It finally hit me: We were heading for Daymia the Blue’s.

Seigram suddenly vanished just before the big, old-fashioned building came into view. Just as I’d suspected, it was Daymia’s estate.

There was no sign of security out in the disproportionately small lawn, but I

could see light streaming from the windows above. I didn't like it. It was too obvious. A blatant trap.

"Had a feeling we'd end up here," I said.

"What? You know this place?"

Argh! Gourry's question literally brought me to my knees.

"Y-You... We were here just this afternoon! Lantz brought us!"

"He did?" Gourry folded his arms pensively before saying, "Hmm... I guess it just gives off a different vibe at night."

That's the issue?

"So, where are we again?" he asked.

"Daymia's house!" I cried.

"Ooh!" he exclaimed, clapping his hands together. "I thought so!"

"That's very convenient given *I just told you* where we were... But this is no time for a comedy routine! Let's get going already!"

"Get going where?"

For the love of everything, would someone please deal with this man for me?!

"Daymia's place!" I said, just barely managing to hold my temper.

"Hmm... I gotta say, though," Gourry began with a completely straight face. "My gut's telling me this is a trap."

"I know that, dammit!" I shouted. "It's the trappiest trap that ever trapped! But if we don't *spring* the trap, we'll never figure out what they're after! Call it foolhardy or reckless or just plain stupid, but to do nothing out of 'caution' would be even stupider!"

I huffed and puffed. Gourry turned to me and put his hands on my shoulders, still heaving from my rant.

Huh?

"Lina," he said in a quiet voice, staring straight into my eyes.

Him looking at me like that outta nowhere had me kind of antsy...

“I need you to listen to me,” he continued.

“What...? Why are you being so serious all of a sudden?” I asked, my voice cracking.

“All this shouting in the middle of the night is going to bother the neighbors.”

I laid into Gourry—specifically, into his jaw with my fist.

“This is so a trap,” I said in a hushed voice.

“Yeah, total trap city,” Gourry quietly agreed.

We were currently walking down an empty corridor inside Daymia’s estate. When I saw lights in the windows from outside, I’d just assumed the place would be packed with guards, but... there wasn’t a soul around.

Door after door lined the hallways as we proceeded. Seemed like this wing was being used as sleeping quarters for the mercenaries, because all we could hear inside was snoring. We opened the door to an evidently unoccupied room, however, and found it was an ordinary storage closet.

Would a guy in the middle of a deadly power struggle really have such lax security? The answer was... no, of course not.

That left only one explanation here. We were being lured somewhere... But where?

I was hoping we’d get there soon enough, but this mansion was seriously huge! The building looked ginormous from the outside, but it seemed even bigger inside. Moreover, it was laid out like a maze!

You’d try to walk straight, and then the next thing you knew, you’d be standing in front of the door you’d come in from. You’d think you hadn’t gone up a single stair, but you’d open a door and find yourself in the attic. It was like the place was designed by some mad architect. Granted, you’d have to be mad to be creating an army of homunculi in the first place...

Anyhoo, after a lot of wandering, we finally arrived at a door. It was large and covered in gold leaf, with a five-pointed star of exorcism carved into it. It was clearly the entrance to a ritual chamber. I couldn’t sense anyone beyond it,

though.

“Is this the place?” Gourry asked in a whisper.

“It’s gotta be,” I responded in kind. “I know it’s a trap, but we’re going in anyway. You ready, Gourry?”

“How could I possibly be?”

I glared at him.

“Don’t go soft on me now! Why do you always dig your heels in when we’re right on the threshold?”

“How is not doing whatever pops into your head at any given moment ‘digging my heels in’?”

“Look, sometimes life runs on spurious logic.”

“This is way beyond spurious!”

“Hey, look at you,” I said admiringly. “You actually know what ‘spurious’ means, huh?”

“Nope! I was just arguing!”

“...Ah...”

Gourry and I were going at it quietly, mind you. We were keeping our voices down, so our banter was lacking some of its usual vigor.

“Listen, Gourry, if you don’t want to do this, why did you follow me all the way here?”

“To try to keep you from doing something stupid!”

“When have I *ever* done *anything* stupid?!”

“Always! All the time! What’s the first thing you’re gonna do when you bust through that door?”

“Probably launch a Fireball... or three...”

“See? Stupid! Besides, we don’t know the whole story yet.”

“Duh. Given the way Master Talim acted when I asked about Council Chairman Halciform... Well, Daymia here’s in on the drama somehow, so I want

to hear his side of things.”

“Huh?” Gourry gawked at my explanation, staring at me dumbly. “Hey, wait a minute! If that’s your plan, it’s all the more reason to show a little caution!”

Ugh, quit stalling me right at the good part!

“Hang on, Gourry!”

“Oh?”

I hushed him and put an ear to the door.

“What is it?” Gourry asked.

Ah, the fool. He had so much to learn about the way that I scheme!

“I don’t think we’re gonna have a choice about going in there soon.”

“What?!”

Gourry looked around in a frantic flurry, but the only sign of life was still behind the door. He then looked at me, his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“After all... I’m about to do *this!*” I declared, kicking open the door before he could say a word.

See? Now we didn’t have a choice!

Gourry just stared, dumbstruck.

After entering the now-open door, we came to a stop. A vast space spread out before us. It was a massive room in the shape of a perfect circle. It looked like it must take up about half the entire mansion, and the only noteworthy feature inside it was a pentagram, signifying exorcism, scrawled across the whole floor pointing northward.

A rune breaker...

Pentagrams could be used as the basis for barriers, which would weaken the effects of all magic therein. Of note, however, was the fact that such a barrier’s power drew from the pentagram’s total area, not the caster’s ability. In other words, as long as you could make it large enough, anyone could create a barrier powerful enough to seal even my magic. But... this one wasn’t too big for me to handle.

Across the large room was an altar with a man standing before it, a crazed smile on his face. He was balding, his remaining hair black with a beard to match. He had large bug-eyes that flicked restlessly around the room. And... he was wearing a blue cape.

“Master Daymia?” I asked.

The man drew back suddenly.

“Assassins from Talim!” he squealed in a higher-pitched voice than I’d expected. His already bulging eyes opened even wider.

We couldn’t help recoiling a little.

“I mean... I guess you could call us that?” Gourry replied all too honestly.

“I knew it! Haha... I knew it! The old toad! After what he made me do, he planned to kill me in the end! Yes... of course! Uwee hee hee! I knew it all from the start! Did he think I wouldn’t? Doesn’t he know who I am?!”

Gourry and I exchanged a glance. Hoo boy...

“Great job, Gourry. Now he’s totally pissed at us.”

“Don’t whine to me. You’re the one who took this job.”

On the other side of the room, Daymia kept shouting, his incomprehensible rambles mixed with incomprehensible laughter.

Guh, this stuff really freaks me out. Still, Daymia had said something interesting: “After what he made me do...” Based on his “old toad” comment, I assumed he was talking about Master Talim. But what had Master Talim made him do, exactly? I felt like that was the question I needed to press him on.

“Wait! We don’t mean you any harm!” I called out.

Daymia’s laughter trailed off as he gazed at us blankly.

“Talk about a bald-faced lie,” Gourry whispered from beside me. I ignored him, of course!

“You’re not... assassins?” Daymia asked in disbelief.

“No, we’re not assassins.”

Silence fell. A few moments later, a smile crept across Daymia's face, every bit as insane as before.

"I see... Uwee hee hee, I see! Yes, I see everything! If you're not Talim's assassins, then... you came to steal my precious chimeras!"

Wait, what?

"Yes, I see it all... but you can't have them! They're my darling children! You'll never have them! Never!"

Oh boy...

"No! We're not here to steal your dumb chimeras!"

"You're... not thieves?" Daymia stared at us in disbelief once more before breaking into a grin again. "Of course... Uwee hee hee, I see! If you're not thieves, then you must be assassins from Talim!"

Arrrrrrrrgh! I couldn't help clutching my head.

"Your own fault for expecting a real conversation outta this guy," Gourry whispered.

"Yeah, my bad," I said contritely. "I guess we'll have to take him in for questioning. Just don't be too rough, okay?"

"You're one to talk."

"Yeah, yeah. I know," I said with a dismissive wave before stepping forward.

Daymia recoiled dramatically.

"S-Stay back! Stay away from me! Fwah ha ha... Y-Your filthy hands are unfit to touch me! You cannot harm Daymia the Blue! You can't!"

Yeah, yeah. Whatever.

We ignored him and continued to approach.

"Stay back! If you come any closer, I'll... I'll..."

"You'll what?"

"I'll... do this!" Daymia exclaimed, yanking on a nearby cord.

Pa-kap!

The magic circle under us was suddenly a huge pit trap.

“Oh.”

Of coooooourse!

“Lina!” Gourry shouted, clinging to me as we fell. “Make magic go now!”

No kidding! I’m already on it!

“Levitation!”

My Levitation spell could support the weight of a whole carriage, easy. Daymia’s barrier would weaken it some, but not fatally. And so, our plummet...

Wait, it didn’t stop? Wuh? Okay, it had slowed considerably, but we were still on our way toward an unseen bottom below.

“What’s wrong? We’re still falling!”

“I know that! But don’t worry!” I had an inkling what the problem was, but no time to lay it all out for Gourry. “I can still support one person’s weight!”

Krrrk! Gourry’s face froze right up... Then he clung to me even tighter.

“H-Hey!”

“Lina! Let’s die together!”

“Hey! It was just a joke! *Hey!* Watch those hands, buddy! Gah!”

We lost our balance in midair and tumbled into proper freefall.

Fwoosh!

There was a splash and the crashing of water around us... I think? I wasn’t conscious enough to really process it.

3: The Sealed Sleeper Beneath the Water

“Guh...” I moaned softly as I opened my eyes.

“You awake?” Gourry asked from nearby. I could just make out his silhouette in the darkness.

“Yeah, hang on.” Still lying flat, I brought my hands together in front of my chest and incanted a spell. “Light!”

A glowing ball appeared between my palms, which I promptly tossed into the air. It came to a stop at typical ceiling height, but was dimmer than I’d expected.

“Where... are we?” I asked, scanning the area.

The large room we found ourselves in was even bigger than the ritual chamber we’d fallen from—big enough to house Daymia’s entire estate. There was water all around us of uncertain depth. I could just make out the tops of five pillars—each wide enough that you could build a small room upon it—peeking out from the surface. We were currently sitting atop one of them.

The pool itself formed a perfect circle that matched the layout of the room above.

“Another rune breaker, huh?” I said with a grimace.

“A wha?” Gourry asked.

“The theory involved is a little complicated, so I’ll skip that part. All you need to know is that it’s a barrier that weakens magic. That’s why my Levitation spell crapped out while we were falling.”

Typically, rune breakers were used to mitigate the power of attack spells, curses, and other harmful magics. But to see this one weaken even the innocuous Levitation...

I figured that having a barrier both above and below doubled the effect. Or maybe it even caused a resonance, which could then be channeled to interfere with the use of any magic at all. As far as that went, the proof was right there:

the Lighting spell I'd cast just moments earlier was already losing its brilliance. Guess Daymia hadn't made it to vice chairman of the sorcerers' council for nothing, huh?

"So... this complicates things," I muttered to myself.

"But if it's a barrier, can't we just break it?" asked my own personal Captain Obvious.

I heaved a grand sigh. It was true that you could ordinarily disrupt a rune breaker by sundering its founding pentagram, but...

"In order to do that, we'd have to knock down one of these pillars."

"Can't you do that with one of your spells?"

Seriously, dude?!

"Have you been listening to a word I said?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I just finished explaining that my spells are compromised right now! If I could use magic to solve this, I would have already!"

"I don't remember you saying that at all."

Arrrgggghhhhh! I think I'm getting an aneurysm!

"What are you clutching your head for all of a sudden?"

"No reason!" I said, plucking myself off the ground.

I could feel the water just running off me and my clothes as I stood up. Gourry and I were as soaked as sewer rats. Granted, if I was still this drenched, that meant I couldn't have been out for very long.

"Guess we'd better do something about our clothes, huh?" Gourry said.

"Yeah. We'll catch a cold at this rate."

"Hmm... Well, the usual thing to do," Gourry said with a sudden smirk, "would be to strip naked and warm each other up!"

Grr! I clapped my hands together in front of my chest, slowly pulling them apart as I started chanting.

Gourry's aura of smugness snapped over to panic.

"H-Hang on, Lina! I was joking! Just joking! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Please don't —"

His desperate pleas, however, fell on deaf ears.

"Fireball!"

I threw the molten ball of light, which nailed Gourry square in the face and exploded on impact!

"Glargh! Glurk!" He let out a series of undignified burbles as he felt the heat envelop his body—then suddenly stopped and stared at himself in amazement. "Wait... huh?"

The blistering heat of my Fireball had been dampened by the rune breaker, reducing it quite literally to a ball of hot air.

"Well? All nice and dry, right?" I said with a smile and a wink. "So, now that our clothes are taken care of..."

I took another look around the room and quickly came to the conclusion... that just looking around wasn't going to get us anywhere.

"Well? Anything?" Gourry asked nervously.

"Hmm... it's tricky." I turned my gaze overhead. The hole we'd fallen through must have closed by now, but the dark heights of the room were beyond the reach of my Lighting spell, so I couldn't actually see it to confirm that. I then turned my gaze back to the dark, flickering surface of the water. "I mean, you're probably right about breaking the barrier, but..."

"Yeah, we don't even know how deep this thing goes," Gourry said, joining me as I stared into the pool below. "Say, what's all this water doing here anyway?"

"I'm guessing Daymia's got water affinity," I answered, then curiously turned to look at Gourry.

"He's got what-the-what?"

Yeah, didn't expect him to know what that meant. Let's see, how to

explain...?

“Okay, analogy time. You know how people sometimes compare themselves to animals, like so-and-so’s got ‘the heart of a fox’ or ‘a real feline energy’?”

“Yeah,” Gourry said, nodding after a moment.

“You can draw similar associations with magic. Like, so-and-so’s got a connection to fire, or to water, et cetera.” I was limiting myself to the elements of shamanistic magic, obviously. Throwing in black magic, rituals, astral shamanistic magic, *and* white magic would only confuse Gourry, so I glossed over all that nuance. “So, you see, sorcerers with an affinity for water get better results when they use water-related magic.”

“So this ‘water affinity’ thing means that he’s a real watery kind of guy, right?” Gourry asked after a moment’s thought.

“You could say that. But people with an affinity for a particular element can boost the power of their magic by integrating that element. So putting his barrier in water like this makes it stronger. You follow?”

“Hmm...” Gourry crossed his arms. “So Daymia created a barrier that weakens magic. Then, by putting it in water, he made it more powerful?”

“That’s the idea,” I answered with a firm nod. “But it’s just a theory... And it still doesn’t explain what’s going on *under* the water.”

I chanted another Lighting spell and tossed the ball of radiance into the pool.

“Whoa...” Gourry breathed in awe as he watched it sparkle beneath the water’s surface.

Here we go again...

“You’re wondering why the water didn’t put it out, aren’t you?” I asked.

“Well, yeah,” he said, nodding vigorously.

“See, things like lamps and campfires burn fuel to generate light and heat. But Lighting is different; it’s powered by magic. It doesn’t burn physical matter in order to work, so the water doesn’t affect it.”

“Huh... Seems awfully convenient, but I think I understand,” he said, then fell

silent. His arms remained crossed as he stared into the illuminated depths.

Hrm... It was a hot minute before I could say anything myself. This thing was freakin' deep!

I didn't spy any carnivorous fish or other hazards in the water, but it was deeper than most humans would be able to dive. I could see some sort of pattern drawn all the way at the very bottom, probably the barrier's magic circle. And at its center...

"What's *that*?" Gourry asked.

Smack in the middle of the barrier was a giant submerged gemstone—like an emerald, but paler. There was a dark spot in the middle, suggesting something was inside, but it was impossible to tell what between the glare on the water and its obscuring depth.

"It's something," I replied vaguely.

Gourry and I sat there silently staring at it for a while.

Eventually, he softly whispered, "It looks like... a person inside a big emerald to me."

"Huhhh..." I muttered unconsciously.

"Yeah, it definitely looks like a person..." Gourry leaned forward and gazed at it.

He must have had good eyes. Mine were pretty sharp, but all I could make out was the shadow.

"We should check it out. My gut's telling me it's relevant to the barrier."

"Check it out? But how?"

"Well..."

Wham!

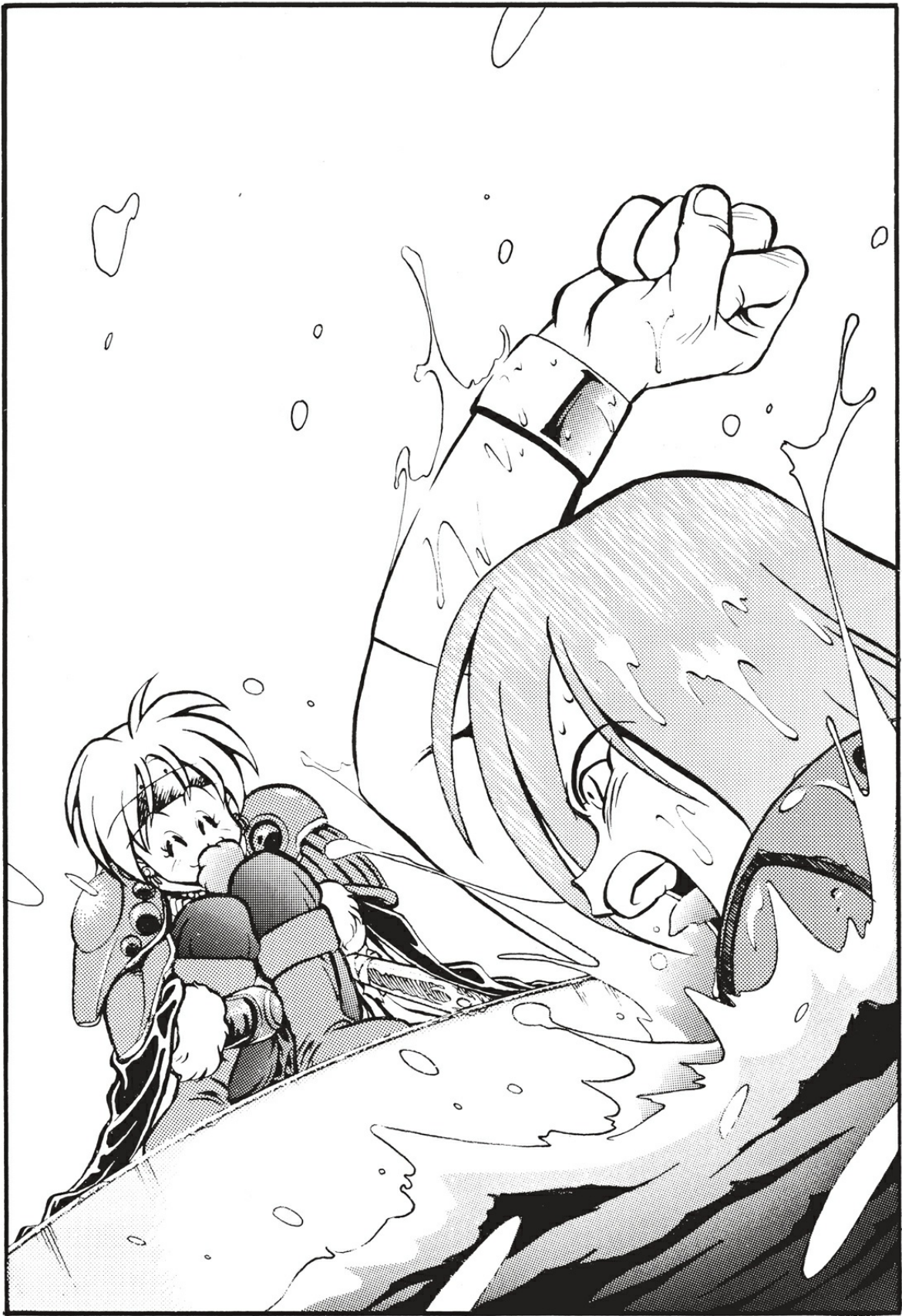
With no warning, I planted my boot on Gourry's back and shoved.

"Bwah!"

He made a satisfying splash when he tumbled from the pillar and hit the

water hard.

“What was that for?!” he yelled when his head bobbed up on the surface.



I crouched at the edge of the pillar and grinned down at him.

“Well, I figured you could be the one to investigate. I don’t wanna get wet again.”

“Ohhh... I see.”

For some reason, Gourry started grinning back at me. And then...

“Yeek!”

Hey, don’t pull my legs out from under me!

I tumbled into the water too, and in my surprise, took some into my lungs...

The world slowly went black around me.

“Ugh... blugh...” I sat up and coughed a few times.

“You awake?” Gourry asked me for the second time today.

“What the heck were you thinking?!”

“You’re one to talk,” he said, brushing off my interrogation. “I didn’t think you’d just up and drown, though. But I cleared your lungs, so you don’t have to be all upset about it.”

“Oh, please! Clearing my lungs isn’t gonna— Wait, you did *what?*” I asked hesitantly.

Did he... Did he mean mouth-to-mouth?! I could feel blood rush to my cheeks.

“Um, Gourry... when you say you cleared my airway...”

“I rolled you onto your stomach and stepped on your back.”

Grk! I fell flat on my face. *Y-You! Give a little thought to a lady’s feelings!*

“What’s wrong with— Ooh, I get it. You thought I did mouth-to-mouth or something,” he said teasingly.

“I d-did not!” I argued desperately.

“Aw, someone’s mad!”

“Am not! Am not! A-Anyway, back to the barrier! That’s the real problem

here...”

“Yeah,” he murmured, turning back to the water too. “Teasing you isn’t helping, even if it’s fun.”

H-Hey now...

“But it is what it is,” he continued. “And this is too deep to dive. No way I could hold my breath that long.”

“Hmm...” I folded my arms, still soaked to the bone.

“You got a spell that’ll let you breathe underwater, Lina?”

“Huh?” I replied, surprised.

“You know, magic. For breathing underwater. You got any?”

“Hrm...” I scratched my head.

“Guess not, huh?” Gourry said, disappointed.

“Actually, that was more of a ‘hey, this might just work’ kind of hrm.”

Gourry pushed me into the water again.

I climbed back out of the pool, dried myself off, and prepared for my dive—by which I pretty much just mean that I readied a spell.

“Be right back, okay?”

I had two spells in my repertoire that would fit the descriptor “let me breathe underwater.”

The first was a water spell that allowed me to safely breathe the water itself. The second was a wind spell that formed a pocket of air around me; I could take that into the water with me and it would be like diving inside a big bubble.

I ended up choosing the latter, as the former had a disqualifying flaw: I’d have to get wet again. As I started to chant, wind encircled me and lifted my feet lightly off the ground.

“Lei Wing!” I incanted, plunging into the water with great speed.

What’s that you ask? “I thought that spell was designed for fast flight, so how

did you learn it could be used for diving?” Well, you see, one time I was playing around with it at the beach, but lost control and went flying into the water. That’s just between us, okay?

Of course, the rune breaker was interfering with my Lei Wing too. The bubble it produced around me was a lot smaller than usual, and my movement speed was considerably slower. I decided I’d go up for air the second it got hard to breathe. Suffocating in my own bubble would be an epically embarrassing way to die.

That said, I couldn’t imagine running out of air before I reached the bottom...

I steadily drew closer to the large jewel. It had been hard to judge from the surface, so I couldn’t really appreciate how big the thing was. Now that I was down here, I could say with confidence: it was *definitely* large enough to hold a person.

“Hmm...”

The Lighting spell I’d chucked in the water earlier only dimly illuminated the bottom of the pool. To brighten things up, I tossed another one toward the giant gem... and was aghast at what I saw.

I floated there speechless for a moment, but there was indeed a man inside the enormous jewel. His eyes were closed as if he were sleeping.

“Th-This is...”

I hovered right up to the giant pale emerald in my bubble. This had to be the center of the rune breaker—in other words, where its influence was strongest.

As for the man sleeping inside the gem... His long hair, cape, and robe all marked him as a high-ranking sorcerer. He seemed to be of average height; he was a little too young to be called “middle-aged” yet a little too old to be called “young.” Though his eyes were closed, I thought he was pretty good-looking.

The tint of the emerald made it impossible to say exactly what color his robes were, but I had to wonder.

Could this be...?

A speculative thought crossed my mind.

But if that were the case...

I slowly moved my bubble closer. The second it made contact with the emerald...

“Who are you?” said a voice in my head.

“Telepathy?” I found myself whispering aloud.

“You’re... a woman? But I sense no hostility from you. That means Talim and Daymia haven’t gotten any new ideas into their heads, at least...”

“Um... I’m not entirely sure what you’re talking about.”

“Ah, no need to speak aloud. It’s telepathy,” the voice explained, much to my red-faced embarrassment.

Telepathy was the art of communicating mentally rather than verbally. So, obviously, when communicating telepathically, you didn’t actually need to *say* anything.

You had to be born with certain aptitudes in order to use telepathy, however, so it was beyond most sorcerers—myself included. That meant this guy was using telepathy to transmit his thoughts to me, then reading mine back in exchange.

It occurred to me that his technique couldn’t be magical. There was no discernible interference or interruption, despite the fact that we were smack at the center of the rune breaker.

“So, er... might I inquire as to your identity?” I asked.

“Ah, forgive me,” the man replied calmly. “I am the chairman of the Atlas City sorcerers’ council, Halciform.”

“H-Halciform?!” I found myself thinking extremely loudly. I knew it!

An awkward silence followed.

“There’s no need to shout... Rather, there’s no need for such surprise.”

“B-But this *is* a huge surprise, sir. Everyone says you disappeared six months ago...”

“Yes, those two made sure of that.”

“By ‘those two,’ do you mean...?”

“Talim and Daymia, yes.”

Whaaat?! I knew all along that there was more to the story, but... Ooh, that rotten old geezer!

“They had only the pettiest of motivations, I’m sure... My position, perhaps. One day, Talim... Oh, pardon me.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I just realized that I don’t know your name either. If you’ve made it this far, surely you’re no mere passerby.”

“I’m Lina. Lina Inverse.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of you...”

And so I gave Halciform the lowdown. Twice during my story, however, my bubble started to weaken and I had to resurface for air.

“...And that’s how I wound up finding you here.”

“I see... While I question the necessity of all the internal monologue and dramatic descriptions in your account, I believe I understand the situation now. It sounds like Talim had you completely taken in, though I can hardly blame you there. He lured me here as well, then sealed me inside this strange thing... He’s truly a distasteful man.”

No kidding. Ain’t nothin’ tasty about *that* face.

“...Excuse me?”

Ah, crap! I forgot he could read my thoughts!

“Oh, uh, nothing! Anyway, now that I’m involved, I’d appreciate it if you could explain to me what’s going on here.”

“Certainly. About six months ago, Talim summoned me for ‘important business,’ so I obliged. He ended up leading me to Daymia’s estate, and once I set foot in the center of the room on the top floor, a slime-like creature abruptly appeared. Before I could even cast a spell, it engulfed me and turned solid. Then they dropped me down here.”

“Aha, so this emerald thing is the hardened slime.”

“Yes. Talim and Daymia must have been conspiring to steal my seat as council chair... but it sounds like they’ve had a falling out since then. Ahaha.”

Seriously, dude? This is funny to you? You know *you’re* the one they trapped down here, right?

Nevertheless, I gotta say... Talim really cheeses me off! I knew he was hiding something when I asked about Halciform, but *this*?! Oooh, he’s gonna pay! Not for Halciform’s sake. No, *screw* Halciform! This was about *me*! No one pulls the wool over Lina Inverse’s eyes and gets away with it!

“Pardon, but I’d like to remind you that I can still hear your thoughts. It’s rather painful to hear oneself spoken of that way...”

Whoops.

“Oh, sorry, I misspoke... er, misthought? Anyhoo! Lina Inverse shall surely avenge you!”

“Well, it’s not as though I’m dead. I was more hoping that you would help me out of here.”

“Hmm... Okay. I just have to break this thing open, right?”

“Most likely,” Halciform responded (most unhelpfully, if I’m being honest).
“Er, my apologies. It wasn’t my intention to be unhelpful.”

Guh! Give me a break with this telepathy stuff!

“Gourry!” I cried as I burst out of the water. “I need your sword! Gimme!”

“Sheesh, a little warning would be nice,” he grumbled, sitting up from where he’d been lying atop the pillar.

What a jerk! Lazing around while I slaved away underwater... Ah, but no time for grumbling!

“You were right! There’s a guy trapped down there! I wanna bust him out, but I need your sword to do it!”

“Oh, fine.”

Gourry reached for the sword on his belt with one hand and produced a narrow pin from his pocket with the other. He poked the pin into a tiny hole on the sword's hilt, and a small piece of metal fell to the floor with a clink—the fastener which held the blade in place.

When Gourry then drew the sword, the blade remained in its sheath and he handed me the hilt alone. “Is he just messing with you?” you ask? Nah, not this time. I took the hilt in my hands and held it out in front of me.

“Light, come forth!”

A blade appeared from the hilt—a blade of sparkling light. This was the legendary Sword of Light that slew the demon-beast of Sairaag long ago. (Truth is, this sword is the main reason I'm traveling with Gourry. It manifests a person's spiritual power in the form of a blade, and I am *just dying* to study it.) Interestingly enough, even with Daymia's powerful rune breaker inhibiting magic around us, the blade of light I conjured from the sword was no less impressive than normal. I'd braced myself to get some crummy little dagger, but... Maybe the sword was fundamentally different from your standard magical item. I'd need to do some serious research to be sure.

“Quick check: This is just a loaner, right? I don't get to keep it, do I?” I asked over my shoulder.

“Of course not. Now get going,” Gourry called, shooing me away.

“Greedy bastard,” I pouted before reciting the same spell for the umpteenth—and hopefully final—time. “Lei Wing!”

“Val Flare!”

“Dam Blas!”

Crash!

The peals of light Chairman Halciform and I unleashed broke through the ceiling far overhead, causing light to stream down on us from the room above, along with dust and bits of rock. We, along with Gourry, then began climbing up toward the light.

After I'd busted the chairman out of slime jail, we set about using the Sword of Light to destroy the barrier by taking out one of its founding pillars. Okay, so I accidentally cut down the pillar Gourry was standing on in the process, but give a girl a break, okay?

The three of us then swapped a little more info on the situation, smashed up the floor—well, the ceiling—and ascended with a Levitation spell. As we approached the ritual chamber above, we were greeted with incomprehensible wailing.

"By the way, Chairman Halciform, Daymia's got two pretty powerful demons in his service, so be careful."

"Oho... I see," Chairman Halciform said... cheerily? What a weirdo.

Anyway, we rose up through the broken floor to find Daymia standing there, staring at us blankly.

"We're back," I said with a grin.

It would've been a super-cool entrance if I hadn't had Gourry clinging to my waist.

"Grwawmwrah!" Daymia clamored nonsensically, falling backward onto his rear.

The three of us then touched down on an undamaged part of the floor.

"Ch-Ch-Chairman Halciform!"

"Greetings. How long has it been, Vice Chairman Daymia? Half a year?" Halciform asked, the same cheerful grin still on his face.

It was... honestly pretty scary. Daymia seemed to think so too, having gone white as a sheet.

"N-No... no... it wasn't me! I didn't do this!" he managed to squeal out.

You kinda gotta appreciate the balls it takes to look at a guy who just broke out of *your own basement*, and say, "Nuh-uh! It wasn't me!"

"Oh, I see... Then who *did* do it, might I ask?" the grinning Halciform inquired.

Like I said: scary.

“T-Talim! Talim came! He flattered me! He made me do it! I always liked you, really! So... So please forgive me!”

Oh, come on, man! You’ve gotta do better than that!

“Ah, I see. I suppose I should have a talk with Talim, then.”

Huh? That took me a little by surprise. I glanced over at Halciform in confusion.

“Y-Yes...” Hope blossomed on Daymia’s face. “Yes, of course! Hail Atlas City’s great council chairman! Yes, oh yes! How worthy of that title you are!”

“Now, Mistress Lina, Master Gourry... shall we?” Chairman Halciform beckoned, turning on his heels and walking swiftly toward the exit (I assumed).

Gourry and I hurried after him.

“Are you sure you just want to... leave him there?” I asked, tossing a glance back at Daymia. He was crumpled on the floor, a smile flickering intermittently on and off his face.

“Positive,” the chairman replied casually. “He’s never exactly been a stirring conversationalist, but... his condition appears to have worsened while I was sealed away. I’ll speak with Duke Litocharn in a few days and hold a council meeting to deal with him. Oh, but in the meantime, kindly refrain from informing Talim that I’ve returned.”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem. He lied to us and manipulated us, so our contract is void. And even if it weren’t, I don’t think I could work with him anymore anyway.”

“Good. That sounds like it’s for the best.”

In that moment, I was struck with a strange premonition.

After that, the three of us made our way outside. The sun was up already, and the streets were filling with people headed out to work.

“Well, I should be returning to my house.”

“Of course. Mistress Rubia will be delighted to see you, I’m sure.”

When I said that, Chairman Halciform’s smile froze up.

“You’ve met Rubia?” he asked.

“She’s your assistant, isn’t she? Talim mentioned her,” I lied swiftly. I wasn’t sure why.

Gourry remained perfectly expressionless in spite of it. Either he had a great poker face, or he’d completely forgotten who Rubia was.

“I see... Well, do take care. Talim may yet try something, and I may ask for your help again.”

“You got it. We’re staying at the Silver Dragon Inn downtown. You be careful, too.”

“Of course. Now, I must be on my way...” he said with a wave as he turned away, his white cape billowing lightly behind him.

I stood there for some time, watching him depart.

When I woke up, the town was shrouded in twilight.

Gourry and I had ended up making it back to the inn where we’d left our luggage just before noon. We shared a bite to eat, then went to our rooms for some shuteye.

Gourry was already awake by the time I got up, however, so we then went to a tavern to grab some dinner and discuss our next move.

“Well, I guess we’re helping Chairman Halciform now, huh?”

“Hmm...” Gourry hummed unhappily as he poked at his green salad.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just can’t stop wondering... If Daymia was controlling those two demons, why didn’t he call for them when we broke into his house?”

“He was standing in the middle of a rune breaker, duh,” I said with a sigh between bites of pork sauté. “Demons are basically fonts of magical power, so even if he’d summoned them, they would’ve been helpless inside the magic-weakening barrier.”

“Okay, but we destroyed the barrier and left. It didn’t even occur to him to

send the demons to finish us off? You'd do that, wouldn't you?"

"Sure, but... the guy isn't exactly in his right mind. There's no way for a normal person to know what goes on inside his head."

"That's why I'm asking you."

"...What exactly are you implying?"

"Nothing particular," Gourry said, looking up at the ceiling. "You're just not exactly normal."

That's *extremely* particular!

"Well, maybe he *couldn't* summon them for some reason," I offered. "Maybe he didn't think we'd escape that easily, so he sent them off on some errand or something."

"Hmm... Yeah, I guess that'd explain it. But also, why didn't Talim and Daymia just kill Halciform in the first place?"

"Maybe... they wanted to use him for something later?"

"Maybe..." Gourry conceded, though he didn't look particularly convinced as he took an inelegant slurp of diluted herb wine.

I likewise took a sip of warm milk and postulated, "The real question is what Daymia will do next. He's a hard one to read."

"Yeah," Gourry agreed, nodding somberly.

I could imagine a few possibilities, but there was no way of knowing which direction he'd break in. The guy was bonkers, after all.

Option one: He might try to kill us and Chairman Halciform. Daymia probably had his reasons for keeping the chairman alive before, but they might no longer be at play.

Option two: He might attack Talim and offer his head to Halciform to beg forgiveness. I mean, that obviously wasn't going to make up for what he'd done. It might even get him in worse trouble... but those sorts of rational concerns might elude him until it was too late.

Other options: He might remain cowering at home. Or he might skip town.

Maybe I should've taken care of the guy before we left his estate, despite Chairman Halciform's dissuasion...

"The other big question is what Talim will do. If he realizes we've bailed and decides to take action, he might try to get in touch with Daymia."

"And they might team up again."

"Right."

"Which means the only thing we can do is..."

"Protect Halciform from the shadows?"

"Yup. Even if we have to do it pro bono. But dinner first, then we'll get going. Hey, barkeep! One more dinner special!"

4: Who's Pulling the Strings Here?

The streets were deserted at this hour. The sky had gone dark, with only dim light streaming from the buildings around us. Gourry and I walked side-by-side, silent, down the road.

The night air was chilly. I'd left my cape back at Talim's place, so for now I was using my spare. The trouble was that I have very slight shoulders, you see, so I don't look very cool in just a cape. That's why yesterday—rather, very early this morning—on the way back to our inn, I also picked up some leather pauldrons, which I was wearing right now.

I was glad I hadn't left my sword behind too, but those shaved-down great turtle shell pauldrons were expensive. So, yeah... once this was all behind us, I was gonna have to go back and get 'em.

A dark, lonely road took us uphill. Our only company was a sorcerer in a black cape who was walking along, casting Lighting on the street lamps...

"And... where might you be going?" asked a familiar, slimy voice.

Gourry and I stopped in our tracks. The only other person present was the sorcerer lighting the lamps. Wait, did I say "person"? Scratch that. I could now see the unkempt silver hair fluttering in the wind and the unusually long arms that were casting the spells.

I called out to him with a small smile on my face, "Here to slow us down, Master Gio Gaia?"

"No... Not to slow you down," he replied, turning around slowly. His green eyes glinted. "To finish you."

With steps as light as a passing breeze, he began to walk straight towards us, the hem of his tattered robe flapping behind him.

"Gourry. Have *it* ready," I said in a low voice.

He gave me a quick nod.

I was referring to the Sword of Light, obviously. Physical attacks wouldn't even scratch pure demons like Gio and Seigram; hurting them with magic could also be a challenge, as some spells wouldn't work at all.

But aside from the physical destruction it could cause, the Sword of Light was also capable of cutting directly through an opponent's astral form. In other words, it could destroy a creature's fundamental existence—an ability that made it quite effective against demons.

I mean, sure, there were some demonfolk that were out of the sword's league... Nevertheless, I figured it would do the trick against the likes of Gio and Seigram.

"I think that job might be a little beyond you," I said quietly. "Maybe if you were with your white-masked friend..."

"White-masked friend? Do you mean Seigram the Faceless?"

Faceless? What was that supposed to mean? That there was nothing under his mask, perhaps?

"He's occupied elsewhere. But if you don't think I'm capable of defeating you... why don't we test it and see?" Gio bid, gliding toward us without making a sound.

"I'd think twice about that if I were you." I raised my right hand with my palm facing Gio, who watched silently as I chanted. "Dug Wave!"

The ground under the demon's feet suddenly exploded. The blast clearly wasn't going to hurt him, but it wasn't meant to—it was purely a distraction.

Gourry, Sword of Light now in hand, plunged into the rising dust cloud. The second he did, Two-Mask came leaping out of it. It seemed he hadn't noticed Gourry.

"Elemekia Lance!" I shouted, casting another spell right on the heels of the first.

This one was a magical lance designed to weaken an opponent astrally, and I threw it right where I was expecting Gio to land. He evaded this one by stopping cold mid-descent.

“Brat!” he screamed, swiping at me with his right hand.

A nausea rising in my gut told me to jump out of the way, and I listened.

Vrmm!

Something buzzed past my ear like a speeding airborne bug. It sent a few strands of my hair flying and tore through the edge of my cape.

My nausea remained in its wake—*A miasma shockwave!*

Now *that* was dangerous. Not even a giant could survive a head-on hit from one of those bad boys. If Gio had caught one of my limbs, the miasma would have permeated my body through the wound and left me dead as a doornail before long.

Apparently, I was going to have to take this guy seriously after all... and the longer the battle went on, the more of a disadvantage I’d be at. I swiftly fired off another spell. This one conjured small, red balls of light that would send high-speed vibrations through whatever they hit, inciting explosions and destruction.

“Dam Blas!”

The ground ruptured here and there, generating a large, curious smoke screen. It obscured the area completely, meaning I couldn’t tell where Gio was. And while demons could sense human malice and hostility, both Gourry and I were cloaking our presences right now—meaning Gio shouldn’t be able to locate us either.

So, before he thought to indiscriminately riddle the entire area with miasma shockwaves...

“There you are!” I cried, launching a spell at my own feet before jumping away and crouching down.

A shockwave ripped through the smoke, cutting clean through where I’d been standing moments ago.

“Aaaaah!” I let out a dramatic cry, feigning as if the strike had really hit me. It was a passionate performance, if I do say so myself. In order to trick a demon, you gotta fake it like it *hurts!*

“Hah! Easy prey...” said Gio Gaia, falling for my trick and stepping out of hiding.

He’d probably dismissed Gourry as a threat from the start and thus wasn’t the slightest bit disconcerted that he was nowhere to be seen now. He had no idea about the Sword of Light... which was just the way I wanted it.

My performative scream wasn’t just to lure out Gio. It was also a signal to Gourry.

“Hmm? Where is she?” Two-Mask asked, looking around as a white flash of blade tore silently through the air. Then came an agonized scream.

“Gwaaaaah!”

Gourry had lopped off Gio’s unnaturally long right arm. A reflexive dodge, however, saved the demon’s life just in the nick of time.

“Wretch!”

Two-Mask leaped back, raking at Gourry with his remaining arm. Even for a swordsman of his caliber, the incoming shockwave was just too close-range to dodge!

“Hahh!” he exclaimed.

My eyes went wide. So did Gio’s... for Gourry had just used the Sword of Light to disperse the shockwave, converting it into a harmlessly passing breeze.



“Impossible! Is that the Sword of Light?! I wasn’t told!” Gio screamed, frozen on the spot.

Yeah, of course not, you jerk. The only people in this city who knew about our secret weapon were me, Gourry, and Chairman Halciform. Who did he *think* was gonna tell him?

Now, there was something else important that Gio was unaware of: that I don’t have a chivalrous bone in my body. I had absolutely no intention of waiting for him to pull himself back together after the shocking reveal.

“Elemekia Lance!” I incanted, my spell running the demon through this time.

“Gwaaaaah!” he screamed once more.

Elemekia Lance, which targeted an opponent’s astral form, would inflict incredible exhaustion on a normal human, leaving them in a weakened state for some time. But against demons, who were almost exclusively astral beings, it was like cutting their strings entirely.

Still... Gio Gaia wasn’t dead yet!

“Gourry!”

“Right!”

Gourry charged the demon, who promptly leaped away. The Sword of Light flashed in the darkness, but missed him by a hair.

“The next time we meet, you die!” Gio spat before taking off into the night, too fast for any mere human to follow.

Gourry clicked his tongue, sheathed his sword, then walked over to me.

“Guess he got away. And with some hella cliched parting words, too,” I remarked.

The dust began to settle around us. Our fight had caused quite a commotion. There was no way the locals hadn’t noticed, but no one had actually come out to see what was going on. Maybe they were too afraid to get involved.

Smart folks. Convenient for us, really. Now...

Ah, wait. It seemed one person *had* shown up—a man standing alone at the

top of the hill, his red hair shining in the light of the street lamps.

“Hey, Lantz?” Gourry called.

Lantz’s face was ashen, for reasons I couldn’t identify.

“Where... Where have you guys been?” he asked in a trembling voice.

“What’s wrong? What happened? You’re acting weird,” I said, drawing closer.

He took a frightened step back. “You... Did you guys go to Daymia’s house?”

“Huh?”

Gourry and I exchanged a glance. For a second, I thought Lantz had realized we’d teamed up with Chairman Halciform... but that wouldn’t account for the way he was acting.

“Did something happen?” I prodded.

“I asked if you were there! Now tell me!” Lantz barked in response to my question. He didn’t sound angry, though... He sounded afraid.

“Yeah, we were. But—”

“All right!” he shouted, his voice faltering again. “Then are you the ones who did it?!”

“It”?

Was he asking if we’d saved Halciform? I just couldn’t imagine why he’d be so freaked out about that...

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “What’s going on at Daymia’s place? Like I said, we were there... but we didn’t do anything. We left right away. Now we’re here on other business.”

I was lying through my teeth, but the truth would only complicate things at this point. My main priority in the moment was simply getting him to calm down.

“You didn’t... do anything?” he asked, blinking suddenly. He looked like he’d snapped out of a trance.

“I swear. I mean it. Just look me in the eye.”

I met his gaze, and we stared at each other for a while. I was struck by the urge to do that “suddenly look away” gag, but it really didn’t seem like the right time. I did my best to refrain.

“Come on. Talk to me. What happened at Daymia’s?” I asked, our gazes still linked.

Lantz let out a deep sigh before finally replying, “I dunno how to explain it... Just come with me, okay?”

Gourry and I exchanged another glance, then nodded firmly to each other.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Daymia’s residence stood silent in the moonlight. My body was racked with an ice-cold tension. The place didn’t look any different than it had the prior night. At least, not physically. But now there was a dark energy looming over it that definitely hadn’t been there before. Just what was going on here?

“This atmosphere... It’s really something,” Gourry whispered unconsciously. I could see the sweat beading on his forehead.

“All right... Let’s go on in. Not that I’m thrilled about the prospect myself...” I said, urging the group onward.

I could hear Lantz audibly gulp beside me.

The three of us passed through the open gate. The air—heavy, sticky, and cold—seemed to cling to my body. Somehow it felt even more intense here than it had on the street.

Cloying hostility, sorrow, despair... This dark air was an amalgam of all those and more. This was miasma.

The front door wasn’t locked, so I pushed it open. A rancid odor emanated from the house like the stench of rotting meat.

“Guh...” I groaned.

“What the heck is that? I could understand the smell of blood, but...” Gourry whispered to no one in particular, wrinkling his nose.

“This way,” Lantz beckoned.

With an uncomfortable grimace, he led us further into the mansion. The wretched smell only got worse as we advanced.

“You disappeared last night,” Lantz suddenly began, perhaps talking to distract himself from his fear. “We’d just finished off those beasts and were about to celebrate when we realized you were gone. We figured if they’d gotten you, you woulda left bodies behind... But seein’ as it’s dangerous to go around at night, we decided to wait until sunup to look for you. So this morning, me and Master Rod split up to search. We were supposed to meet back up at Master Talim’s place around noon to swap notes on what we’d found. Noon came around, but Master Rod never did.”

“You mean Rod’s gone?” I asked in surprise.

Obviously, we knew what particular series of shenanigans had kept us away, but for Rod to have disappeared too...

“I had no idea what was goin’ on. So I decided to keep searchin’, now for all three of you... and by the time I thought of Daymia’s place, it was already evening. I figured you mighta come here for some reason and maybe got yourselves into trouble, captured or even killed. Then I thought Master Rod mighta realized what happened to you first, come here himself, and got into the same trouble... So I swung by. But there were no signs of life. Just that weird feeling hangin’ over the place. And when I came inside... it was like this,” he said, looking around demonstratively.

We were in one of the many strange, winding corridors we’d traversed the night before. Some of the doors lining the hall were now thrown open, and I was seized by an impulse to peer into one of them.

“Guh! What the heck is this?!”

The floor was soaked through with bizarrely colored fluid. Shards from countless crystal vials littered the room, dotted with writhing gobs of flesh.

A cat-like creature without eyes or fur lay on the ground. It let out a low yowl, pawing at the air with its unnaturally short limbs.

A creature like a snow-white bat flopped among what looked like scattered

intestines. Its veined wings spasmed in fits and starts.

I also saw a small dog with a snake's eyes and scales, a bird with a mass of tentacles growing from its stomach, and other such oddities. It was like a bizarre circus—the kind you'd maybe take a kid to if you really wanted to scar them for life.

"What... What are those things?!" Gourry shouted in my ear, snapping me to my senses.

"Daymia's chimeras!" I found myself shouting back.

I recognized a strange set of tools packed together on a table in the corner. I'd seen the same in a sorcerers' council building in another kingdom. There, as I recalled, they were making mini-dragons to serve as pets and bodyguards. Nothing like the warped creations scattered around here.

"Let's go... This ain't what we're here to see," Lantz urged me.

I wasn't gonna argue with him there. I'm not partial to lingering on sights that could make a girl lose her lunch.

As we proceeded down the hallway, however, we came across one strange scene after another. Sometimes I wasn't even sure what I was looking at. One open door revealed a slime-like creature filled with various weapons and armor. One a room crammed full of mercenary corpses, now converted into armed mummies. And then...

"Huh? What was that voice?" I asked, stopping cold.

"What voice?" Gourry echoed.

It sounded like laughter... Though it was faint and far away.

"Laughing, right?" Lantz asked, his voice hoarse.

"You heard it too?" I asked in turn.

But Lantz shook his head.

"No... it's just... the thing I saw..." A shudder ran through him. "It laughed."

"Wait, what did you see?"

For some reason, Lantz didn't answer me.

It came as no surprise that Lantz brought us to the same large door Gourry and I had busted through the previous night. The same door that led to the vast room with the powerful rune breaker. The same door we'd come out of this morning.

The familiar laughter was growing louder and louder. Its source was beyond this door: Daymia the Blue. He'd had a strange laugh the first time we'd met him, but it sounded even more bizarre now.

"Is this the place?" I asked.

Lantz only answered me with a silent nod.

"Here we go," Gourry proclaimed, moving forward and forcing the door open without needing a cue.

Mad laughter poured out through the slowly opening crack in the door. Gourry took a step inside and glanced around, his eyes coming to a stop in a particular direction. It was a blind spot for me, so I couldn't see what he was staring at.

"What in the living hell..." he rasped.

I looked to Lantz.

"I'm staying put. You couldn't pay me to look at that thing again," he said, waving me off with a disgusted expression.

I moved out in front of Gourry to see what had him so frozen... and there it was, lying on the floor.

I let out a wordless exclamation, then stopped, breathless.

It was a massive hunk of flesh. Its surface, composed of winding organs, pulsed and writhed without end.

Hiss! A part of the disgusting blob bulged out, producing a small, fleshy snake. But before it was even half-formed, it arced over toward another bulb of flesh, which bit into it and tore it apart. When the gruesome spectacle was over, they both sank back down into the larger mass. This grotesque process repeated in a continuous cycle all over the giant blob of meat. And with each devoured snake,

Daymia's laughter grew louder.

Daymia... whose face was pasted into the center of the flesh-lump. That was the source of the laughter.

"Raognut Rushavna..." I whispered, sweat trickling from my temples.

I'd first heard that name in a foreign palace. Dils Rwon Gyria—King Dils II of Gyria, also known as the Resolute King... Twenty years ago, he'd led five thousand of his most elite warriors on a quest to slay the Dark Lord of the North, the alleged source of all chaos in the world. It was said that he and his soldiers never returned, that they'd all been killed by the very being they'd gone to vanquish.

Yet in truth, one man *had* returned: King Dils himself.

His guards found him in the audience chamber the next day... a large lump of flesh seated upon the throne. While devouring the flesh-snakes that came out of its own body, the lump begged the soldiers in their king's own voice: "Kill me."

Indeed, the wretched mass was the Resolute King, transformed by a dark curse.

One of the soldiers, driven to pity, brought his sword down on the inhuman thing... But all he wrought was greater agony for their former liege. Unable either to save him or put him out of his misery, his loyal men simply locked him away, not breathing a word of his fate to anyone.

Even now, they say that when night falls, the sad voice of King Dils can be heard moaning on the wind, pleading for death. Those afflicted with this dark curse could only die when the caster was killed... and now Daymia was its latest victim.

I had to hold back the urge to vomit.

No human was capable of using that spell. That meant the one who'd done this to Daymia must have been... the white-masked Seigram.

Fresh air had never tasted so sweet.

We tumbled our way out of Daymia's mansion, racing to fill our lungs outside.

"So... you wanna tell me what all that was about?" Lantz asked after a few minutes. "Judgin' by your expression, you know something, don't you?"

"Yeah, kinda," I responded listlessly. It wasn't just the moonlight that had Gourry and Lantz looking green in the gills. "That thing is... Well, it *used* to be Daymia the Blue. A demon's curse condemned him to that form."

"You're saying... that was... a person?" Lantz eked out, his voice growing higher with each dramatic pause. "You're tellin' me... we're facin' a demon... that can turn people into *that*?!"

It seemed Lantz had only just realized the true nature of what we were up against, and it sent him into abject panic.

"W-Wait a minute!" he cried. "And you guys wanna tangle with the damn thing?!"

I wasn't going to deny it.

"That's right. The reason we got involved in this whole mess in the first place is because two demons spurred us into it."

"T-T-Two?!" Lantz's eyes went wide. "You gotta be kiddin' me! They'll freakin' kill you! Are you guys crazy?!"

"Of course not."

"You sure about that?" Gourry muttered, unconvinced by my ready reply.

Lantz simply looked at us, aghast.

"Just... who are you people?" he asked. "I mean, I figured you were more than just some ordinary mercenary and sorcerer, but..."

Truth be told, that's exactly what we were. A mercenary and a sorcerer, anyway. You can forget the "ordinary" part.

I was about to say as much, but Lantz stopped me.

"No, don't tell me! I don't care! I'm out!" he cried, backing away quickly. "Don't say another word, 'cause I don't wanna hear it! Call me a coward if you want; that's fine and dandy! But you should take my example! No one'll blame

you for backin' down now. Gettin' yourselves killed won't help no one! Okay? So just drop it! I'm out!"

And off he ran. Just once, he turned back to shout, "You hear me?! Don't do this!" before disappearing into the night.

Gourry and I stood there in silence as we watched him go. I wasn't about to criticize the guy. Really, I'd have been more put out if he'd stood his ground and insisted on fighting with us.

I mean, he was a decent fighter, but we were going up against demons. Neither he nor Gourry could use magic, and there was only one Sword of Light to go around. In other words, no matter how good the guy might be, there was literally no way for him to help out in the battle to come.

"Say, Lina..." Gourry whispered as he gazed into the darkness where Lantz had fled. "Exactly how are the demons involved in this, again?"

"Huh?" I stared at him for a solid minute before I found myself shouting, "Oh!"

I'd assumed this whole time that the demons were working for Daymia, but...

Talim the Purple!

I looked back in the direction Lantz had gone running: toward Talim's place.

"We gotta stop Lantz!" I cried.

"Huh?" Gourry stared at me, clearly confused.

"He's in trouble!" I responded, then took off running.

"Hey! Why are you saying he's in trouble?" Gourry asked as he ran alongside me.

"Why do you think? I bet Talim the Purple is the one behind everything!"

"What?!" Gourry stopped for a second, baffled, and then quickly resumed running. "What are you talking about?"

"The guy's way more ruthless than I pegged him for. I think he got Daymia to seal Master Halciform away, planning to finish his rival off at his leisure. But as long as Daymia was holed up within the rune breaker, not even those two

demons could reach him... so Talim decided to use human mercenaries to finish him off instead,” I explained as I ran.

Talking and running at the same time was kind of rough, but if I didn’t get Gourry up to speed now, he might end up in a fight without fully understanding the situation—and ignorance can slow you down in a crucial moment. So I pressed onward... just hoping that he was really listening.

“First he hired Rod, who then found us. But we weren’t interested in taking the job, so Talim sent his demons to provoke us. He probably figured anyone the demons could intimidate into withdrawing wouldn’t be of much use anyway...”

“And we played right into his hands, right?”

“That’s right!” I cursed internally. “He created those homunculi and chimeras in secret, then sicced them on his own house to test us. Then he sent White-Mask—the demon Gio called Seigram the Faceless—to lure us to Daymia’s place. He wanted to make it look like Daymia set things up... all so that we would snip his loose end for him.”

“But then Daymia sprung his pit trap on us.”

“Yeah, that *wasn’t* part of his plan. That allowed us to find the chairman and release him. Talim must have figured out what happened somehow and, fearing that his scheme might be exposed, decided to ‘take care of’ the witnesses—you and me, plus Daymia—now that the rune breaker is gone.”

“But then Halciform’s in trouble, too!”

“No... Talim must’ve had a reason for sealing him away instead of killing him. So even if the situation has changed, the chairman’s probably not in any immediate danger. Lantz, however, is a different story,” I explained. We still hadn’t caught up to the guy. He knew the city better than we did, after all, and was probably using shortcuts and back routes. “He hasn’t realized that Talim’s the real mastermind here. So what happens when he runs back and explains the situation to him? Talim doesn’t need Lantz anymore, and now he knows too much. He’s totally gonna kill him on the spot!”

“I gotta say, Lina...”

“What?”

“These ‘insightful deductions’ of yours seem to change on a whim.”

Urk!

My feet caught each other, and I toppled over dramatically. Then...

Wham!

“Urgggh...”

Dammit, Gourry! Don’t trample me!

I looked up to see he was slightly ahead of me now, scratching his head as he jogged in place.

“Look, sorry. I couldn’t stop in time...”

“You couldn’t, huh?!” I picked myself up and launched back into a run.

“Listen, you! When circumstances change, the conclusions you draw can also change! These aren’t even deductions yet; they’re just inferences!”

Gourry cocked his head as he ran.

“I don’t really get the difference, but... I guess we’ll know more when we get to Talim’s place, right?”

“That’s right! Let’s hurry!”

With an uneasy feeling swirling in my chest, I dashed down the dark road.

The night was still young in Atlas City.

“Hey...”

I stopped in place, falling silent. Gourry followed suit.

The front door to Talim’s mansion stood open, and behind it...

The house felt like a tomb. The suffocating smell of blood permeated the air around us. Mercenaries were lying in what could only be called an ocean of the stuff. I clapped a hand over my mouth to suppress more rising bile. I’d seen my fair share of battle, but I would never get used to the overpowering stench of fresh blood.

Granted, it'd be more worrisome if I ever *did* get used to it... or worse, came to enjoy it.

The mercenaries on the ground were Talim's hired bodyguards. Here and there among them lay the hulking homunculi we'd fought the night before. Had he... killed them all now that they were of no use to him?

"Where's Lantz?!" Gourry called, bringing me back to reality.

"Let's keep going!" I called back, stepping inside. My boots squished unnervingly underfoot, making it sound like I was walking through mud.

We turned a corner in the hall, passing through the wide-open door to the lobby... And there, I came to a stop.

Lantz was on the ground, lying among all the overturned furniture and mercenary corpses. He was clutching his stomach and moaning, but at least that meant he was still breathing. And towering over him...

It was Rod, covered in blood. He turned his night-black eyes our way.

"Looks like we finally get to fight."

I knew exactly what he meant. He was talking to Gourry.

"What happened here?" I breathed.

"I couldn't fight you as your ally," Rod answered, flicking his sword and sending droplets of blood scattering across the floor. His blade shone a faint purple in the dim radiance of the Lighting spells cast upon the sconces lining the wall.

"I see. And so..." Gourry said. There was a quiet anger in his voice.

"So I left Talim and joined Halciform."

What?!

My eyes went wide. That meant the one behind all of this was...

Why?!

"I see. What a fine way to live. No morals, just honing your skill with a blade by any means necessary..." Gourry said, sliding in front of me. He hadn't yet drawn his own sword.

Rod's gaze fell on me.

"If you need more reason to fight me, I could cut down the girl," he offered.

"No need for that," Gourry declined.

I found myself taking a step back, intimidated by the aura radiating from Gourry.

"Lina, cast a healing spell on Lantz. And—"

"Got it. I won't interfere, no matter what," I replied with a firm nod.

I quickly ran over to Lantz. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little worried that Rod might whip around and cut me down, though he seemed entirely focused on Gourry right now.

Lantz was hurt pretty badly, but he wasn't beyond salvation. I put a hand on his wound and began chanting a Recovery spell.

"You want to fight here?" Gourry asked.

"Anywhere," Rod answered simply.

Gourry reached for the hilt of his sword. A powerful tension suddenly flooded the lobby, overpowering even the thick stench of blood.

I gulped audibly, then resumed my incantation.

Gourry drew! Rod charged! Two silver streaks of light crossed each other.

Gourry, deflecting Rod's blade, stepped in close. Rod drew back and redirected his blade for another strike. His sword had the advantage in terms of reach, but Gourry cut his own attack short to move in for a parry. Rod's sword then changed direction mid-slash. Gourry blocked the unexpected blow, locking their blades together. He followed by sliding his blade up along Rod's, channeling the momentum into a new strike—he just wasn't fast enough. Rod leaned backward to dodge.

The two swordsmen took their distance again.

My eyes could only just barely follow their back-and-forth. I'd told Gourry earlier that I wouldn't interfere... but the hard truth was that I couldn't, even if I wanted to. Anything I did would only slow him down.

The two fighters clashed again. Gourry blocked a high slash from Rod, and Rod immediately withdrew the blow and shifted into a thrust instead. He totally had Gourry on the defensive. His attacks came like a whirlwind, and Gourry was just barely managing to block and deflect them all.

And yet... Rod appeared to be the more desperate of the two fighters. Despite being on the defensive, Gourry seemed like he was saving his strength to retaliate. Rod seemed to realize that much himself, which was why he couldn't afford to let up for even a second.



And finally...

“Ha!”

Gourry unleashed all the energy he'd been storing up! But it left him vulnerable for a moment. Rod wouldn't fail to take advantage of it... and that was just what Gourry was waiting for!

He swept his blade upward as Rod's came down on him with the intent to kill. Neither swordsman was in a position to block.

They'll kill each other!

I was dead sure of it, but...

Clink! There was a distinct metallic clatter. Rod's sword suddenly changed trajectory, and Gourry jumped to the left. The two men silently stared each other down.

Rod's sword, however, was now shorter. It was broken... no, cut in half. *That* was what Gourry had been aiming for. He must have realized that if he'd aimed for Rod himself, he might have been willing to die to take Gourry out with him.

The second Rod realized what had happened, however, he stepped in even further, changing his stance. Gourry jumped back immediately, though his opponent's blade just caught him. The bloodstain beginning to spread from the hole cut into his sword arm sleeve told the story.

“...Looks like I got the worse of that deal,” Gourry said with an indomitable grin.

“I've never met an opponent I could fight my heart out against...” Rod said with a grin of his own.

I'd never seen the man smile before. It was a smile of contentment that seemed utterly inappropriate under the circumstances.

“Let's go.”

Gourry gripped his sword in both hands and squared off with his opponent again. Rod hunched forward and readied his single-edged sword against one shoulder.

Gourry ran. Rod dashed. Blade clashed with blade, spirit with spirit... and a mere moment later, the swordsmen broke away from each other again.

But... Gourry lost his balance! Perhaps the wound on his sword arm had left him too weak for a proper parry, or maybe he'd slipped in a puddle of blood. Either way, Rod leaped at him.

Gourry was in no position to block or dodge, however. And so he simply fell forward, kicking off the floor as he did. He was throwing himself at Rod head-first.

Rod brought his sword down, digging it deep into Gourry's left shoulder... Or, rather, he would have if it were still in one piece. But the broken blade, which he'd instinctively swung like normal, merely scratched Gourry's scale pauldrons.

Meanwhile, Gourry's charging thrust sliced straight through Rod's side.

"You're... good..." Rod flashed a satisfied smile, looking at Gourry—at the warrior who had slain him—with a gaze not unlike adoration.

He stood there, blood pouring from his wound. His hand, still clinging to his sword, dangled limply at his side.

"I'd like to fight you again someday..." he said, his expression bright with a childlike innocence despite the shadow of death hanging over him.

"I'll pass," Gourry replied bluntly, his face soaked with sweat.

"What a shame..."

There, the strength seemed to leave Rod's body all at once. He fell hard onto one knee, but moved no more.

And so the swordsman in black expired, still propped up on his longsword.

5: For Serious! A Final Battle for Survival

Hmm... I wasn't sure what to do. It was clear we'd reached a turning point, but the exact shape of things still eluded me.

After Gourry and Rod's fight to the death, we managed to save Lantz's life and deliver him to a nearby magical doctor. I treated the wound on Gourry's arm myself with a spell, and we'd now returned to Talim's mansion...

It was turning out to be a heck of a night.

I didn't have much proof backing my "Talim is the ringleader" theory, and what Rod said about teaming up with Halciform was really bugging me. I'd marched back to Talim's place hoping we might find some real evidence... and find it we did.

"What does it mean, Lina?" Gourry whispered.

I just shook my head. Not even I could explain this one.

For among the scattered and broken furniture lay a corpulent dead body clad in purple robes. I could only assume it was Talim the Purple.

Why did I have to assume, you ask? Simple, really... The corpse didn't have a head.

"What the heck is going on here?"

"I wish I knew."

As we walked down the night road together, Gourry kept asking the same question and I kept giving the same answer.

Of course, I had theories for days.

Maybe, in spite of his reassurances, Master Halciform really had lost his temper and sent assassins after Talim. Or perhaps the corpse on the floor had been beheaded to hide the fact that it was a body double, and the real Talim was still out there somewhere. Or perchance Rod mentioning an alliance with

Halciform was just a ploy to throw us off.

This was all nothing more than speculation, however, which was why we were currently on our way to Halciform's place.

"Is going to Halciform's house going to solve things?" Gourry inquired.

"Dunno," I responded vaguely.

"You don't?"

"We might not learn anything, or we might learn everything. Won't know until we go, though."

"That doesn't really clear things up."

"We're going to Halciform's *to* clear things up. Assuming we can sneak in successfully..."

"We're sneaking in? Wait, why?!" Gourry asked, shocked.

I found myself rubbing my temples.

"Look... if Rod was telling the truth and Halciform was the one who sent assassins after Talim, do you really think we can just waltz in his front door, ask if he did it, and expect him to own up?"

"Well, he *did* seem like a pretty amiable guy..."

Oh, please! I decided to drop the argument. Partly because talking to Gourry was exhausting, but more importantly... we'd arrived at Halciform's estate.

There was no security in the yard. We made our way behind the house and looked around for a way to get inside. The grounds were well-tended. Nocturnal birds called softly from the trees.

"How about here?" I whispered, pointing out a basement window.

It wasn't very big. It seemed just large enough for me to slip through, though Gourry would be a different story.

"Okay, I'm gonna go in and check things out. I won't do anything stupid, and I'll be back lickety-split. So just wait here, okay?" I said breezily as I shot him a wink.

“H-Hang on!” Gourry protested in alarm. “You’re going without me?”

“What? Scared of being left alone?”

“No, it’s just... I should be there just in case...”

“Oh, don’t be a worrywart. I’m not gonna bust out a Dragon Slave or anything,” I assured him, waving my hand dismissively.

“That’s not what I meant...” Gourry mumbled.

Wait, was he...?

“Say, are you worried about me?” I asked.

“So what if I am?” he asked in turn, looking away as he bashfully scratched his nose.

“Gourry... are you in love with me?” I asked seriously.

“Yeah, right!” he declared in a sudden fluster. “I’m your guardian, that’s all... Why shouldn’t I be worried?”

“Yeah, go on! I can see you blushing, you big lug!” I ribbed him, nudging him with my elbow.

“Hey, cut it out! But seriously... why do you have to go without me?”

“Well, there’s no way you can fit through the window, right?”

“Not true.”

There, he drew his sword from his belt. There was a flash of silver in the dark, and...

Ching!

Then he silently sheathed it again.

“What did you just do?” I asked.

In lieu of an answer, he placed a hand on the window frame with a grin and pulled lightly. The entire window, frame and all, popped cleanly out.

“Wow...”

If he’d just cut through the window normally, the whole thing would’ve fallen

into the basement with a crash. I've heard that when beheading criminals, the best executioners sever all but a small strip of flesh in order to keep the head from flying away. What Gourry had just done took equally as much skill... But, yeah, sorry for the gross analogy.

"If I take off my armor, I can probably fit now, right?" he asked with a little smile.

Our only source of light inside was a narrow patch of moonlight streaming through the window. We stayed still awhile, letting our eyes adjust to the dark. I knew I probably couldn't bust out a Lighting spell without getting us caught.

Most of the house should be in bed at this hour, but if Halciform was the one who'd sent Rod to Talim's estate... there was no way he was sleeping soundly knowing that his assassin hadn't returned.

Granted, there wasn't much I could do while effectively blind. Although my eyes were slowly adjusting, the best I could make out was "this is probably a table" or "that's probably a shelf." No way in hell could I seriously search for clues like this.

"This is rough," I whispered in a low voice. "How about you, Gourry? You've got good eyesight. See anything that fits the bill?"

"Anything that fits the bill, she asks..." he said with a wince. "I can see plenty of stuff that looks like magic tools... but I have no idea what 'fits the bill.'"

Yeah, that tracked. Gourry had basically no knowledge of magic whatsoever. Hmm... Now that I thought about it, it was silly of me to have asked him in the first place.

I took another look around for myself. Furniture and small objects were crammed together, crowding the room with vague black shapes.

What's that?

A seemingly open area caught my eye. I approached, careful to watch my step.

Things were randomly strewn about everywhere else—on every surface and

all over the floor—but not here. A large tapestry hung on the wall over a wooden table... with nothing on top of or underneath it. Funnily enough, if the lights were on, it might have escaped my notice entirely amid all the clutter. “Hiding in plain sight,” as they say.

Why was this the only clean place in the room? There were two possible answers: either it had been tidied up very recently, or it was frequently used.

I moved the table aside as quietly as I could, then pulled back the tapestry behind it. I ran my hand along the wall until my fingertips caught something. I traced its shape and discovered the outline of a door.

Jackpot on the first try! Another case of my good karma at work.

Still, there was no way of knowing that whatever was beyond this door had anything to do with the mystery at hand. There was honestly nothing unusual about a sorcerer having hidden rooms and the like in their house, after all, and I wasn't keen on the idea of raiding a fellow sorcerer's secret lair without cause.

See, most sorcerers engaged in some kind of project. Talim was studying magic language, for instance (according to him), while Halciform was researching life. And in keeping with the rule that every barrel has its rotten apples, some sorcerers like to steal others' research for themselves.

To prevent this, then, sorcerers frequently built hidden rooms within their houses and holed up there to do their research. (It wasn't exactly a healthy lifestyle, though I couldn't blame them.) What lay behind this door might just be one such research facility... But I'd never know until I had a look for myself.

“Gourry! This way!” I called.

He strode over to me as confidently as he would stroll down a street in broad daylight. It seemed he could see pretty well, even in darkness like this.

“It looks like there's a hidden door in the wall. There's probably a switch to open it somewhere, but it'll take forever to find it in the dark. Think you could just cut through the thing like you did the window earlier?”

“Are you kidding me?!”

“Shh! Keep your voice down!”

“Jeez, sorry... That just seems a little extreme! We don’t even know for sure it was Halciform who sent Rod to Talim’s place yet.”

“True, but... that’s what we’re here to find out, and this door is standing between us and answers. If it turns out to be nothing, we can just apologize later. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“Even so...”

“Listen, sitting around twiddling our thumbs isn’t gonna get us anywhere.”

“I can’t argue there, but... good grief,” he sighed, drawing the sword on his hip. “Stand back.”

“Hey, wait a sec!” I called to stop him before chanting a spell that caused the air around us to stir.

It was a slightly enhanced version of the wind barrier used in spells like Lei Wing, and it would prevent any noise generated within from getting out. We could knock over a whole table full of dinnerware and the most someone upstairs might say would be, “Hey, did you hear something?”

“Okay, let ’er rip.”

Gourry nodded. His sword flashed. A second later, the sliced-through wall fell inward.

Crashabang!

It was quite a commotion, but anyone outside the wind barrier shouldn’t be able to hear a thing. Besides, we were all the way in the basement. As long as there wasn’t anyone directly behind the door we’d just cut down, no one in the house should be any the wiser.

“Wow...” I said.

“Jeez...” Gourry said in the same breath.

Beyond the wall stretched a long corridor. Dim light radiated from the ceiling and floor. I thought it might be some kind of luminescent moss of the sort that grew in caves, but when I looked closer, I could see that the unfamiliar rock composing the structure was itself glowing. It was like he’d mixed luminescent moss in with some kind of mud, then shaped that into the ceiling and floor.

I covered the exit with the tapestry again before we proceeded. The hallway turned out to be a lot longer than I'd expected, and we walked down it with hushed steps. There was no guarantee Halciform wasn't around somewhere down here.

There were no branches in the long hall. We just walked, turned a corner, and walked some more. After a second corner and some more walking, the path finally came to an abrupt halt with a double-door just to the right of the otherwise dead end. It didn't seem to be locked, and there was no sign of anyone inside.

"Let's go in," Gourry said, putting his hand on the knob. I nodded in quiet agreement.

Without hesitation, he threw the doors open wide...

"What the..."

We both froze in place.

The room was big—you might even call it cavernous. The ritual chamber at Daymia's place had been large, but this room easily dwarfed that. It was also piled high, almost to the ceiling, with crystal aquariums and magic tools for experiments large and small. But the shocking sight before us wasn't the facility or its size... It was what floated inside the aquariums.

Wolves covered in purple scales and spikes. Bald men with identical faces. They were all sleeping peacefully, suspended in the "water of life"—a kind of nutrient-rich culture fluid. These were unmistakably the soldiers of the homunculus army that Seigram had led to raid Talim's estate.

"Wh-What are these things doing here?"

"That's what I'd like to know..."

Our eyes remained fixed hard on the tanks as we walked deeper into the room, as if drawn there.

There were more chimera exhibits on the way. Winged poisonous snakes, carnivorous fish with insectoid legs, troll-dragon fusions, and other dangerous creatures. They all had one thing in common: they were clearly designed for

battle. The bizarre creatures we'd seen in Daymia's house had been creepy, but these beasts had a far more brutal air to them.

And... the very fact that they were here suggested Halciform was their creator. Surely no one else had brought them all here. That meant Halciform was the one who'd sicced the homunculi on Talim's place both times. And that meant...

The plot was thickening yet again. Just what was going on here?

"Oh, there you are, my dear," a muffled voice suddenly called from behind us.

I whipped around, but didn't see anyone.

"What brings you here now?" the voice asked.

It was muffled, but familiar... And while it didn't take me long to find its source, it took me a minute to comprehend what exactly I was looking at. When it hit me, my legs gave out and I slumped to the floor.

"What's wrong, Li—" Gourry too fell silent when he realized what I was looking at.

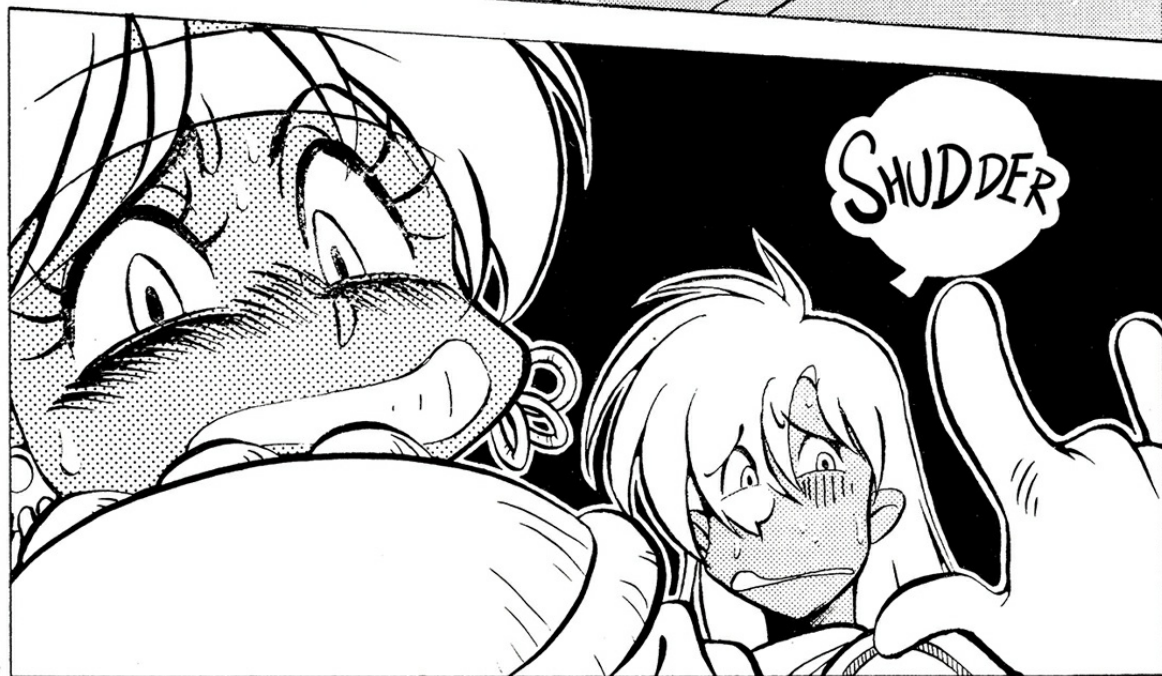
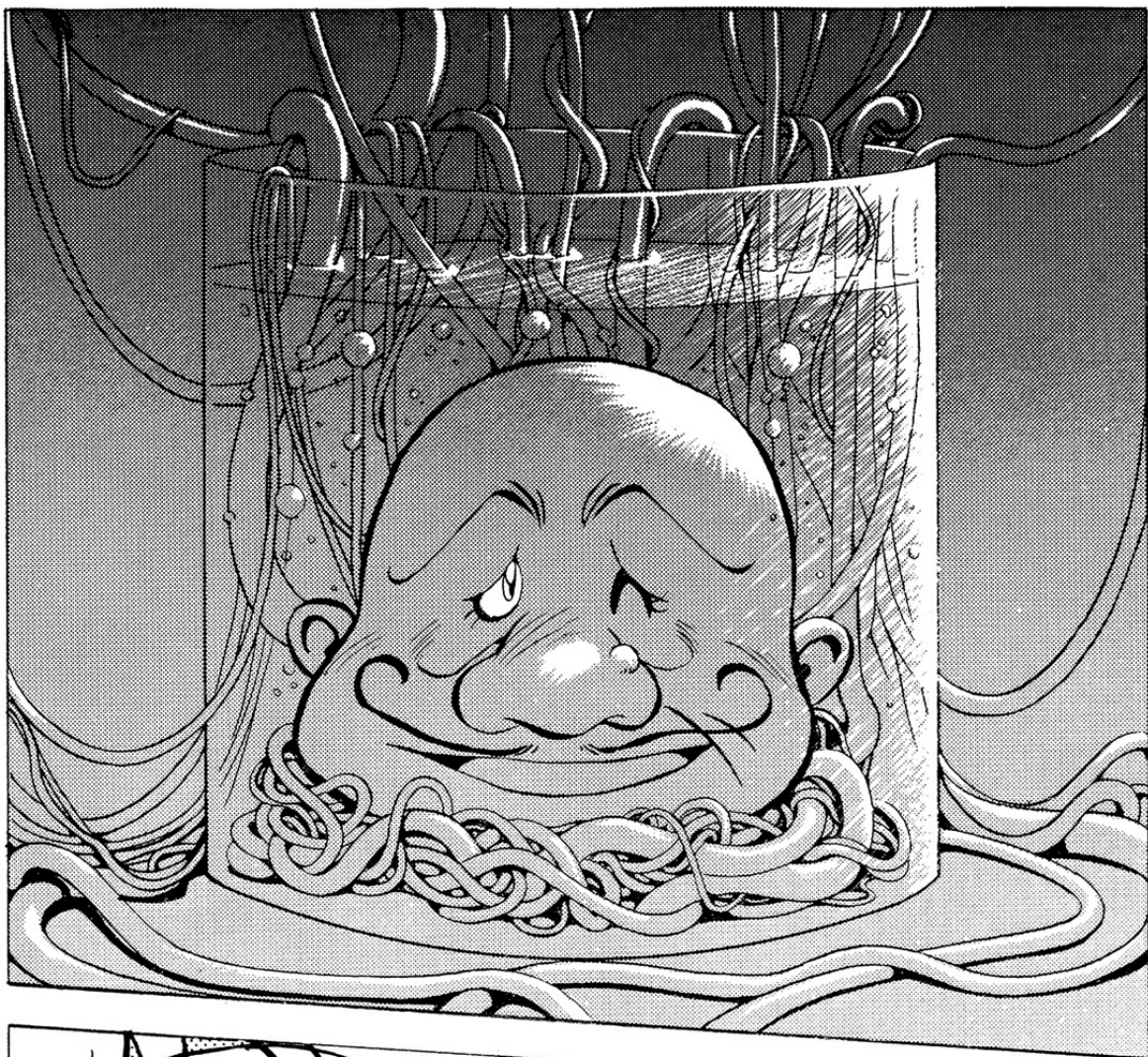
"Well, I can't blame you for being shocked," said the voice.

It was coming from an aquarium a little larger than the kind you'd use for goldfish. It was filled to the brim with the water of life, with countless tubes streaming out of it.

And inside... was the living head of Talim the Purple.

"T... Ta..." I eked out, still collapsed on the floor. I couldn't quite form the word.

His severed head winked at me, somehow with more charm than he'd ever managed pre-decapitation.



“That’s right, it’s me. Though I may look quite different now, I’m still yours truly—Talim the Purple.”

“But... But...” Gourry stammered, fighting his own battle for words.

“But what? Ah, yes, of course. ‘But how did this happen to you?’ So you haven’t figured it out yourselves yet, hmm?”

Gourry nodded emphatically.

B-But... Okay, yeah. I didn’t know how Talim had ended up this way, but how could he talk so calmly about it as if nothing were wrong?

“Let me see... Where should I start?” His head gazed out of the aquarium, into the distance. “I now realize that my biggest mistake was not trusting you two enough to give you the full story. I’m sure he told you when you released him from Daymia’s barrier that Daymia and I worked together to seal him away.”

“You mean... Chairman Halciform?” I managed to recover enough of my wits to ask. My voice was still hoarse.

Gourry remained frozen. Silence reigned for a moment. Talim’s head was probably trying to nod.

“Yes... And while I can’t deny Daymia and I did conspire, surely you’ve wondered why we didn’t simply kill the chairman if we wanted him out of our way.”

“Yeah, it crossed my mind... but I couldn’t exactly ask him about it.”

“That would indeed be an awkward thing to ask someone. But, you see, the truth is... it’s not that we didn’t *want* to kill him. It’s that we *couldn’t*.”

What in the world...?

Seemingly reading the question on my face, Talim continued, “You asked me once before about the subject of Halciform’s research... I replied in the vaguest of terms and said that he was studying life. But more specifically, it was immortality.”

“Ahh...” I let out a small groan. “So that was really Halciform’s field, not Daymia’s?”

“No, Daymia has similar interests. It was Halciform who promoted Daymia to his position on the council, you see. Probably some kind of under-the-table deal. ‘Help me with my research and I’ll make you vice chairman.’ Daymia’s powerful magic, his unconventional thinking... Halciform probably thought he could lead him to a breakthrough. But lo, how wrong he was. Daymia was too focused on his bizarre, unsightly chimeras to yield any useful results. My understanding is that they had something of a falling out, which was about when I learned the true nature of Halciform’s research.”

“The true nature of his research?”

“Yes. He’d told us that he was looking into extending the human lifespan, preserving good health... That kind of thing. But one day, a sorcerer came to my door who said he’d infiltrated Halciform’s mansion to steal his work. He said he’d discovered something great and terrible in the process: that Halciform wasn’t researching natural life, but *eternal* life. Apparently the chairman managed to get his hands on scrolls from centuries back when immortality research was all the rage, and thus began experimenting with the various methods recorded therein.”

“Experimenting? You mean...”

Talim closed his eyes and said, “This was right around the time a plague of mysterious disappearances befell the city.”

No!

“You can imagine what went through my mind when I heard the sorcerer’s tale.”

I nodded with a gulp.

“What’s he talking about?” Gourry asked.

“He’s saying...” I said, my eyes still glued to the head floating in the aquarium. “Halciform was kidnapping locals to use in his immortality research.”

“Whaaat?!”

“Hush! Keep your voice down! We’re still in the dude’s basement...”

“R-Right...”

“So? You investigated?” I prompted Talim.

“But of course. Halciform admitted that he’d used a number of guinea pigs, though he said not a word on the subject of whether they were the missing townsfolk or simply homunculi he had created for the purpose. So I sent someone to infiltrate his house...”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about the implication that using townspeople was bad, but using homunculi wasn’t a big deal... But now wasn’t the time for a moral debate. I decided to keep my trap shut and hear out the rest of his story.

“In the end...” Talim kept his eyes closed inside the tank for some time before mustering the courage to finish his sentence: “It was just as I feared.”

I unwittingly gulped again.

“In fact, it was far worse... He’d already acquired a sort of makeshift immortality.”

“‘Makeshift immortality’?” Cold sweat trickled down my back as the image of Seigram’s white mask flashed through my mind. “Do you mean... a contract with a demon?”

Talim’s grim expression confirmed my suspicion.

In the old days, quite a few sorcerers made “immortality” pacts with demons. Decrepit records from that time made it impossible to discern the exact details, but it seemed what they acquired was a mere stopgap rather than true immortality.

Apparently, those who made immortality pacts sealed their souls into something called a pledge stone. Recipients of this quasi-immortality would stop aging when they made the pledge and could no longer die from physical injury. If the pledge stone was destroyed, however, that was all she wrote. Same if the demon you made the pact with was annihilated... which explained why Seigram had avoided fighting us.

“When I learned of this... I looked into documents from the heyday of immortality research, searching for a way to defeat him. Obviously, I thought about consulting with the council and Duke Litocharn... but they were no better equipped to stop Halciform than I. There are a limited number of ways to deal

with him, after all.”

“Either kill the demon or destroy the pledge stone, right?”

“Ooh...” he hummed, his eyes open wide. “I’m impressed by your knowledge. But there’s one other way...”

What? That’s impossible.

“Interference from a higher-ranking demon than the pact-maker. A spell calling on the power of Ruby-Eye, the sovereign of this world’s darkness—in other words, a Dragon Slave—could destroy Halciform.”

“A... A Dragon Slave? Uh, easier said than done...”

Dragon Slave was the most powerful spell in all of black magic—basically in the world. But...

Talim looked me straight in the eye and asked, “You can use it, can’t you, Lina Inverse? I believe you can...”

“Sure, but if I do that in the middle of the city...”

“Yes, I know,” he said with a sigh (or, rather the best sigh he could manage as a head submerged in water). “It’ll do more than just blow up this mansion. I’ve seen it used once myself, and it’s simply too powerful... It could level close to half of the city. However, little miss, I don’t think eternal life is the limit of his schemes. Whatever he’s planning, we have to stop him.”

Gulp... I choked down a small breath of air.

“B-But... if I can just find and destroy the pledge stone, we can skip the more dangerous stuff, yeah?”

“Yes, that much is true. It is indeed, but... you’d need to find it first and we don’t even know what it looks like. That’s precisely why I tempted Daymia—whose relationship with Halciform had chilled significantly by that point—with the offer of the chairmanship... and together we sealed Halciform away.”

“Except then Halciform manipulated us into letting him back out...”

I bit my lip. The shape of things was finally becoming clear to me. Halciform had used some method—most likely his telepathy—to ask Seigram to find a

human with the power and knowledge to free him from the barrier. I just so happened to be the lucky girl.

Then, when they found out we had no plans to get involved in the situation, the demons came to us to warn us not to get involved, which conversely piqued my unique brand of ornery curiosity. So, once again with Seigram's help, Halciform lured us to Daymia's house...

He probably intended for us to kill Daymia, after which he'd call to us via telepathy and get us to destroy the barrier. While things hadn't exactly gone according to plan, Halciform still managed to trick us into releasing him.

"The moment he was freed, he took Rod into his employ and attacked my house with his horde of homunculus assassins. He approached me with a smile and said, 'As thanks for all your service, I'll allow you to help with a little experiment of mine.' He then took my head, and the next thing I knew, I was here... suspended in this limbo. I suspect Daymia's ended up in a similar predicament."

The image of Daymia, cursed to live as a writhing mass of flesh, flickered through my mind.

"Don't beat yourself up over it, little miss," Talim encouraged. (Talk about an absurd request.) "He played us all like fiddles. Neither Daymia nor I realized that it was the sealed Halciform spurring on our quarrel. And despite recognizing your ability, I hid the truth from you for fear of damaging the council's reputation. That was my one true error. But I believe you can do what I couldn't—you can defeat him."

"I will," I said with a firm nod. "I swear."

"Good. Now, I can't do much for you in this state. Not even give you any proper advice... But I wish you the best of luck. Oh, and one more thing. Before you leave here, would you do me one favor?"

"Sure. Whatever you need."

"Could you remove those pesky-looking tubes coming out of the aquarium?"

My jaw dropped. I didn't know what to say. That bundle of colored wires was the only thing keeping him alive. Surely he knew that...

Which meant he was asking us to kill him.

“I...” I started, my voice barely a whisper. “I can’t do that.”

“Please, my dear...” urged Master Talim.

“But... But I...”

“It’s true that I can still talk and think. But every time I breathe, I breathe in water, and the terrible vibrations are torture when I speak. I’m stuck here without my beloved cigars or even a good meal. What meaning is there in a life like this? Talim the Purple is already dead, my dear.”

“But... But still...”

I wanted to argue, to tell him that he was still alive and that that alone was worth something... But just then, I felt a hostile presence well up behind me.

“Move, little miss!” Master Talim exclaimed, his eyes wide.

Gourry yanked me to the side as a destructive gust of wind blasted through where I’d just been standing. It shredded my cape flapping behind me and obliterated the aquarium holding Master Talim.

I let out a wordless scream.

“Ah, I missed. Hahaha... Had he not warned you, I’m certain I would have found my target,” said a voice far too cheery for the violence it emanated.

I slowly turned around to identify its source.

Council Chairman Halciform the White stood there silently, his smile as bright as ever. Rage and madness roiled in his eyes.

“Now, now... don’t look at me like that. I merely wished to grant you a quick death... though it seems I’ve lost a valuable guinea pig for my trouble.”

“Guinea pig?!” I shouted hoarsely, taking a step towards him. Gourry, beside me, had already drawn the Sword of Light.

“Oh? You don’t like me calling that talking head a guinea pig?”

“No... I don’t like it one bit.”

“I see. But...” Halciform’s eyes narrowed as the corners of his mouth curled

into a twisted grin. “What can you possibly do about it?”

Why, you...!

I leaped forward, swiftly incanting and unleashing a spell: “Flare Arrow!”

A dozen red-hot arrows flew straight at Halciform, who didn’t move a muscle. They each hit him head-on, tearing into his body.

I ran past him on one side, and Gourry ran past him on the other with a flash of his sword—which cut right through Halciform’s torso. We then tore down the hallway without looking back. We could feel him right on our heels.

“Dammit! He really can’t be killed, huh?!” Gourry screamed.

I’d known, rationally speaking, that Halciform couldn’t die until the pledge stone was destroyed... but it was one thing to know it and another entirely to see it for yourself.

I could hear faint chanting behind me. Given the rhythm of the incantation...

I quickly began working a counterspell, then cast a glance behind me. Aha, I knew it! He was going for a Flare Arrow—tit for tat, just like I thought! I thrust my left hand out behind me...

“Moth Valim!”

The flashing white ball of light I unleashed traced an erratic arc through the air as it intercepted Halciform’s Flare Arrows.

“What?!” Halciform shouted, stopping in his tracks.

A certain someone had taught me that spell. It was originally designed to extinguish flames, but mine had a few upgrades. And since fire-type spells like Fireball and Flare Arrow were so popular as attack magic, it was especially handy.

Gourry and I didn’t waste a second charging down the hallway.

The instant we arrived back in the main basement, I fired off a pair of Dam Blas spells to close off the hallway behind us. That should buy us some time—more than enough time to escape, though not nearly enough to find the pledge stone.

For starters, I didn't know what the thing even looked like. It was a magical object, so it must have magical properties... but that wasn't enough to go off of. Finding it with so little information would be close to impossible.

Nevertheless, retreat was hardly an option here. Leaving Halciform at large now would spell certain doom for us later.

"For now, let's get out of the basement!" I declared.

"Don't we need to search here?!" Gourry questioned.

"It isn't here!" I shouted back, fleeing up the stairs.

It would make perfect sense to hide something important amid all this mess, but at the same time, Halciform's life depended on that stone. Who could sleep soundly at night knowing that one casual misstep could be the end of them? That said, Halciform didn't seem the kind of guy to keep it locked tightly away in a safe somewhere.

Where could it be, then? We'd have to search as we went...

Our cover was way beyond blown now, so I tossed a Lighting spell at the ceiling as I ascended the stairs. Gourry followed shortly behind me.

The door at the top stood open. A red-haired woman was on the other side.

"Lucky break!" I cried, catching Rubia by the neck before she could protest. I shoved her up against the wall. "Okay, time to talk."

A slightly fearful expression overtook her face. I'd bet I looked pretty bloodthirsty in the heat of the moment. Poor girl had probably come to check out all the ruckus we just caused in the basement.

"Where is the chairman's precious little pledge stone?" I asked.

"Jeez, Lina, chill..."

I ignored Gourry's attempts to pacify me and stared straight into Rubia's eyes... but all I saw there was profound sadness.

Huh?

I reflexively loosened my grip.

"If..." Rubia said quietly. "If you had that stone... could you stop Sir

Halciform?”

“What? What do you mean by ‘stop him’?” I asked, releasing her neck.

“I...” she began. “I know what he’s been doing. I tried time and again to convince him to stop. But... I just...”

She bit her lip and cast her eyes downward. She too had been helpless to stop him... That was why she’d asked me not to get involved. So that Halciform, sealed away by Master Talim and Daymia, would never be released.

“Did you try talking to someone? Like Duke Litocharn, maybe?” Gourry asked.

“Oh, come on...” I said with a sigh. “She obviously couldn’t tell anyone. I mean, yeah, she *coulda* spilled the beans and had the duke formally censure Halciform... But who’s to say Halciform would just sit by and abide that? Who was gonna stop him if he decided to take revenge? Nobody.”

Rubia nodded firmly. I put a hand on her shoulder and gazed deep into her eyes.

“But listen carefully. Stopping Halciform means we have to kill him.”

“I think...” she said, nodding again. “I’m prepared for that.”

Guh, she looked so sad... She even had me feeling depressed about it!

“Okay, then it’s a done deal. Now, about that pledge stone...”

“I don’t know if it’s what you’re looking for, but Sir Halciform used to have a crystal ball like the ones fortune tellers use...”

Crash!

Rubia was interrupted by a muffled commotion in the distance. Wait... that came from the basement. Had he broken through already?!

“Just take us to it!”

“As you wish!” she said, taking off running.

As we raced down the corridor, we felt a strange sort of hostility at our backs—several instances of it, in fact.

I cast a glance over my shoulder, and... *Yeeeeek!* We were being chased by a

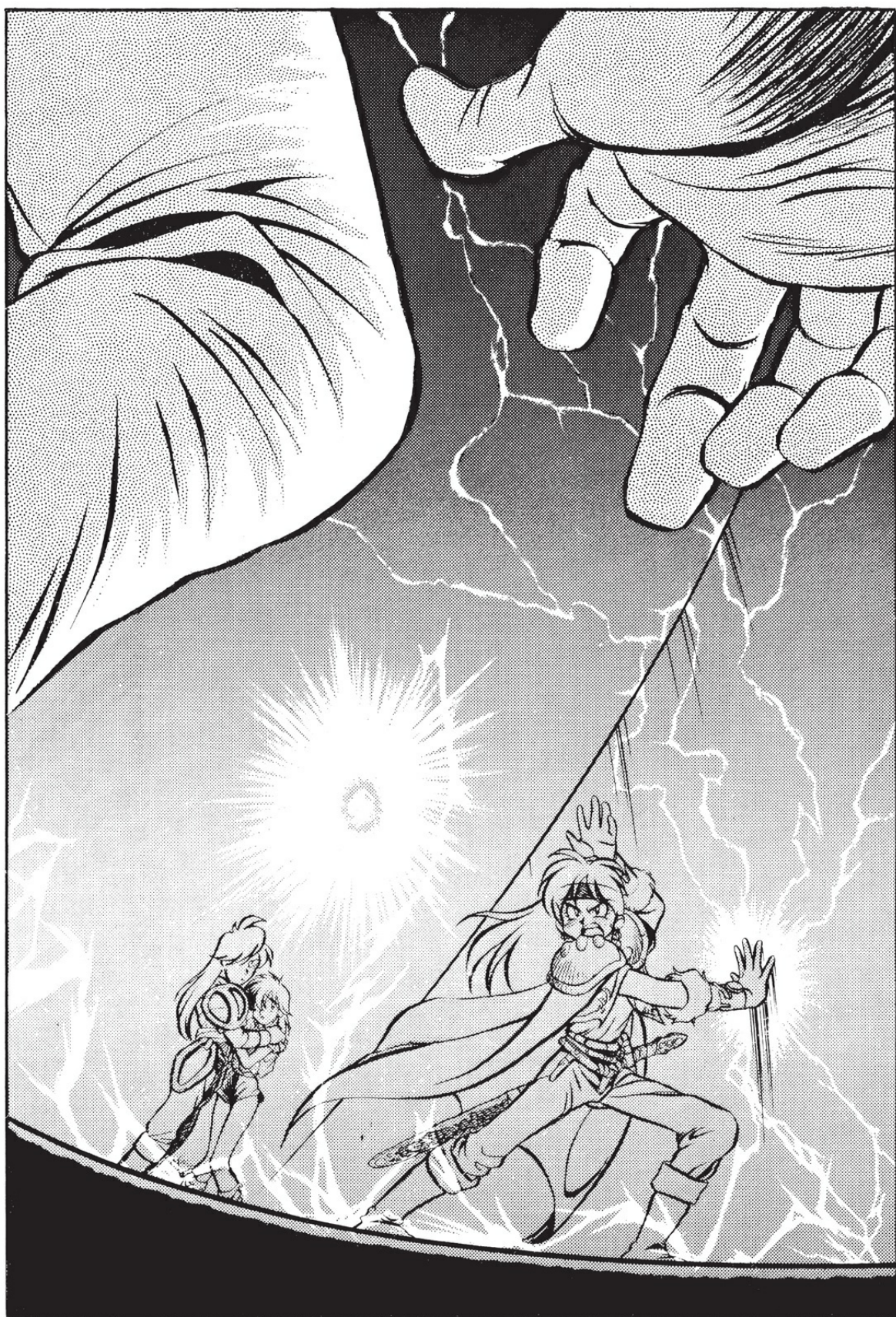
variety of chimeras, led by the hulking homunculi that had attacked us the other night. They matched the inventory of the laboratory we'd seen in the basement. The minute Halciform realized we'd trapped him inside, he must have doubled back, unleashed his chimeras from their tanks, and set them to the task of reopening the sealed corridor.

It was clear they'd catch up to us pretty soon, and this passageway was wide enough that they'd be able to surround us once they overtook us.

Dammit!

I spun around and slapped my right palm against the wall: "Van Layl!"

Veins of ice spread out from my hand, tracing spirals along the wall, floor, and ceiling that wound their way toward the chimera army approaching from down the hall. The second the ice touched them, it began spiraling up their legs and bodies, instantly freezing several of them into statues of ice. That would do a nice job holding off the ones behind them as well.



Gourry and Rubia, after faithfully waiting for me, set off running again.

“But...” I said to no one in particular. “What was Halciform thinking, creating such bizarre things?”

“He said they were experiments,” Rubia replied. “He was trying to combine creatures with strong life energies...”

Great. And the result just *happened* to be chimeras that were perfect for battle. What a blatant pain in the rump...

“This way!” Rubia called, pointing to a staircase leading to the second floor.

I bounded up a few steps before I heard the flapping sound of massive wings. I ducked down without even looking back as I felt the threat looming behind me. A low roar passed overhead. I thought I’d dodged whatever it was, but a second later, something slammed into my back.

Guh!

I fell forward, the momentum sending my face smack into the stairs.

That smarts...

No time for tears, though! I quickly picked myself up and stared down my attacker, which had landed at the top of the staircase. Its face was even more terrifying than a lesser demon’s. It had sickly white skin and leathery wings on its back.

It looked like one of the troll-dragon fusions we’d seen in the laboratory. It must have flown over the monsters frozen by my Van Layl. Another tricky opponent...

“You okay, Lina?!” Gourry called.

It had most likely used its tail to knock me over after I evaded its claws. The blow had come as quite a shock, but I wasn’t much worse for wear.

“I’m okay. But do something about that thing!” I shouted.

If we dawdled here too long, our pursuers would catch up—Halciform included.

“It doesn’t breathe fire, does it?” Gourry asked, shielding Rubia behind him.

“You’re probably fine,” I replied, doubtful that Halciform would unleash anything apt to burn his own house to the ground.

The hybrid abomination took off again. Gourry drew his sword as I began chanting a spell. He cut through its thick hide, burying his blade deep in its chest—but that didn’t stop the draconic creature, which lashed out with its claws.

“Tch!”

Gourry didn’t have time to pull out his sword. He simply left it sticking out of the creature’s chest as he jumped backward down the stairs. He almost ran into Rubia, but she quickly moved out of the way.

“Bam Rod!”

As the creature tried to pursue, I unleashed a spell that conjured a flaming whip in my hand. I was aiming for the thing’s head, but...

Wham!

It opened its maw and bit right through my whip! It was so freaking insane, I could hardly believe my eyes! I guess even if it *was* generated by magic, fire was still fire. And a dragon’s insides are usually flame-resistant, so it was a totally valid move... Dang it!

The creature then shifted its gaze to me. I drew the sword on my hip, but I knew I didn’t have the strength to deal a fatal blow against dragonflesh.

“Gourry!” I called, tossing my blade to him without hesitation.

“Got it!”

Gourry caught my sword and dashed toward the creature. With its attention focused on him, I began to chant a new spell.

Gourry lopped off one of the creature’s wings, causing it to lose its balance and topple over, but he took a gash to his left shoulder in the process. Exploiting his moment of vulnerability, the creature whipped at him with its tail.

“Ngh!”

Unable to dodge the swipe, Gourry went flying into the railing. The dragon took the chance to get back up.

“Dam Blas!”

Nailed him! This time, my spell exploded the dragon’s head. But even as its body tumbled down the stairs, it continued to struggle.

“That thing’s pretty stubborn,” Gourry whispered.

“Just like you, Gourry. Granted, you seem like the kind of guy who’d survive having your head ripped off. I’d have to pour on boiling water to get rid of you.”

“Are you suggesting I’m a cockroa—” Gourry muttered, turning to argue with me but suddenly bursting into laughter.

“...Huh?”

“There’s a line across your face.”

“What?!” Oh, of course. From when I faceplanted on the stairs earlier. “Ugh, forget that! Let’s get going!”

After confirming that the draconic creature was really dead, Gourry retrieved his sword from its chest.

“The second floor!” Rubia directed us.

A long corridor stretched out in both directions. It was flanked by countless doors with gargoyle statues in front of each one. They were of uniform design, each with a stone sphere grasped in its open mouth.

Talk about suspicious! In case you aren’t familiar with them, allow me to explain. Gargoyles are magical beasts that look just like stone statues. They wait for an unsuspecting victim to come close, then attack. Of course, they probably wouldn’t stand a chance in a real fight against me and Gourry... But right now, we didn’t exactly have time to play an extended game of is-it-a-statue-or-is-it-a-gargoyle.

I cast a glance at Rubia and asked, “There wouldn’t happen to be real gargoyles mixed in with these statues, would there?”

“I... don’t think so,” she responded. “I’ve cleaned this hallway many times and they’ve always just been statues. Sir Halciform once showed me a red crystal ball, however, and said that it was very important. He then covered it to appear as though it were normal stone and put it in one of the gargoyles’ mouths. I

think that might be the stone you're looking for."

"Yeah, that sounds like it could be it. Which statue is it in?"

"I'm sorry..." she said hesitantly. "But all he told me was that it was in this hall, so I should be careful when cleaning here."

"Hmm... Guess that means we'll have to check 'em one-by-one."

"If only you had the time," came a cold voice from nowhere.

I gasped. We all turned back to see who it was.

A shadow began to well out from behind one of the statues in the hallway. It wore a white devil's mask beneath a low-drawn hood.

"Seigram..."

Cold sweat ran down my back. Halciform must have used his telepathy to summon him.

"He called me here to buy time. Said he was concerned about his house being ransacked... Humans can be such selfish creatures."

"So you came right to us, did you?" I said with false bravado. "Doesn't Halciform lose his immortality if we beat you?"

"Only *if* you can..."

Ngh... I fell silent.

Once the quasi-immortal Halciform arrived on the scene, we'd be screwed. The absence of Gio Gaia was nagging at me too. We needed to finish off Seigram or find the pledge stone before either one of them showed up... That was the only way I could see for us to win.

Alternatively, I could pop off a Dragon Slave and finish him easily. But we weren't out in the middle of nowhere right now. Unleashing that spell here would decimate the city.

So even if our odds of success were slim with plan A, if I had to pick between those two options... I was gonna take my chances!

"Oh, we'll beat you," I said confidently. "And we'll do it before he gets here, too."

“Ah... there’s just one small problem with that.”

Grk! I froze up upon hearing that voice. I turned around, slowly and uncertainly...

And there he was, his white cape fluttering behind him.

“I’m already here,” said Halciform the White, the same implacable smile on his face. He then turned and called gently, “Come to me, Rubia.”

But she sadly shook her head.

“Please, Sir Halciform, I beg of you... Stop this.”

“How can you say that, Rubia? You know I’m doing this all for you—so that I’ll never lose you again.”

“No!” she shouted in a fit. “You’re chasing the ghost of a dead woman! I... I will never be the Rubia you loved! Even... Even if you made me in her image, I... I’m still just a homunculus you created!”

What the...

“Rubia, you’re not...” Hesitation and sorrow rose on Halciform’s face. “You *are* Rubia. My one and only... precious...”

“Master Halciform,” Seigram’s somber voice interrupted. “Could we perhaps deal with this nonsense la—”

“Nonsense?!” Halciform turned a harsh glare on Seigram. A moment of silence followed before he let out a quiet sigh. “Yes, I suppose. The reckoning must take priority. Seigram, stay where you are and observe.”

“Yes, sir,” White-Mask responded with a hint of scorn.

“Sir Halciform!”

“Stay back, Rubia,” I urged as she tried to insert herself between me and Halciform.

“What?” she asked, staring at me in bafflement.

“One way or another, this has to end here and now.”

“Yes, I believe it does,” Halciform agreed.

Gourry simply nodded as he drew the Sword of Light.

“Master Talim feared you were after something more than just immortality, but...” I said, eyeing Halciform.

He took an unceremonious step closer and replied, “Eternity was all I wanted... so that I would never again lose what was important to me.”

A thought flickered through my mind: *I might not be able to beat this guy.*

If we could destroy Seigram, Halciform would become mortal again. I would have to be extra careful how I targeted the demon, however. If we didn’t annihilate him in one hit, he’d flee and we’d lose our chance. Still, a direct hit from an Elemekia Lance had failed to take out Gio Gaia—and Seigram seemed to be his superior by far. Finishing him in one blow might be impossible.

That left me with only one option. It wasn’t the most nuanced plan... but it would have to do.

Halciform quietly raised his right hand, signaling the beginning of our battle. A low chant began to sound from his lips. Gourry and I both broke into a run. I drew my sword and began an incantation of my own. And the moment Halciform finished his spell...

I jumped right and Gourry leaped left. It was a simple feint—we were merely swapping positions—but it was enough to make Halciform hesitate for a split second. Even if he was immortal, he was a clear amateur when it came to live combat.

I finished my spell: “Flare Bid!”

Tiny balls of light struck the floor around Halciform, surrounding him with dozens of small explosions.

“Ngh!”

For a minute, he was concealed in the flames.

“The stone!” I cried.

“Right!” Gourry replied, knowing exactly what I meant.

He swung the Sword of Light at the nearest gargoyle statue, obliterating the

stone in its mouth. A few dozen Flare Arrows suddenly shot out of the dwindling flames around Halciform. Fortunately, it was easy enough to evade the imprecise barrage.

One stray arrow happened to fly toward Seigram, who was watching us from the rear line. It would've been pretty funny if it'd hit him, I thought, but White-Mask dodged it effortlessly. Shucks!

Thinking about it, though, Flare Arrow was an elemental spell. Even if it had connected, it wouldn't have even singed the demon. I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up.

Before the flames encircling Halciform went out entirely, I incanted another spell: "Bulse Rod!"

My target this time wasn't the chairman, but the gargoyle statues. A whip of light sprouted from my hand and lashed two of them, smashing their heads and the stones in their mouths right along with them. Like I said earlier, this tactic wasn't exactly subtle—but until we figured out which gargoyle had the pledge stone, our most efficient plan was simply to destroy them all.

"Ah!" Halciform went pale when he realized what we were up to. "Fireball!"

A ball of light came sailing our way, but...

"Tch!"

Gourry grabbed one of the pieces of smashed rock at his feet and threw it straight at the glowing ball—what a shot! It exploded on impact, sending crimson streaks of fire through the air.

Before the blast died down, however, another volley of flaming arrows descended on us. I managed to save myself by hiding behind a gargoyle statue. Gourry jumped back, but one of the Flare Arrows struck the ground at his feet! He lost his balance, and his left hand clawed through the air before finally grabbing a gargoyle's face.

He used it to catch himself. Or, at least, he tried. In actuality, he kept falling and landed square on his butt... with a stone sphere in his hand. It had readily popped out of the gargoyle's mouth, meaning...

“Gourry! That stone!” I screamed.

“No!” Halciform thundered.

I immediately began chanting a spell, and Gourry knew just what to do.

“This,” he said, raising the Sword of Light, “should do the trick!”

He swung it down and shattered the stone into jeweled crimson shards superficially covered in ordinary rock. Halciform let out a scream at the sight—now was my chance!

“Dam Blas!” I cried, unleashing my spell.

A red ball of light shot out from my hand, striking Halciform dead in the chest with a thunderous explosion!

“We did it!” Gourry shouted.

But the celebration was a bit premature. He quickly changed his tune when fire suddenly came raining down on him.

“Gwah!”

Gourry just barely managed to dodge the flames. No... He was dragging his left leg behind him. He must’ve been hit. Not good.

But how had he...

“It can’t be,” Gourry breathed, sweat beading on his forehead as he stared down Halciform... who stood before him without a single hair out of place, rage ablaze in his eyes. “I broke the pledge stone!”

Hearing those words, the sorcerer leered.

“Pledge stone?” he asked, a cold smile forming on his lips. “Ah... You mistakenly thought that was my pledge stone.”

“What?” I gasped, unwittingly looking to Rubia.

Halciform followed my gaze.

“I see... Rubia told you, then. Rubia, I cannot begin to fathom— No, we’ll discuss this later. My dear Master Gourry, what you just destroyed was simply a memory orb repository for my immortality research. As such, it was quite

important to me... but Rubia seems to have been under the wrong impression about its purpose.”

Ugh! This was a disaster, but there was no point in taking it out on her. More importantly... where was the real pledge stone? What options did we have left? I was coming up blank.

“Nevertheless, I do need to make you pay for destroying my memory orb...”

White light appeared in Halciform’s right hand—he was aiming for Gourry! I ran straight for him, chanting a spell as I went.

“Fireball!” Halciform incanted.

“Lei Wing!” I incanted in turn.

I grabbed Gourry and held on tight as we took off. Halciform’s fireball exploded behind us an instant later. The force of the blast caused us to accelerate faster than I expected, hurtling us toward the wall at the end of the corridor. For a second, out of the corner of my eye, I felt like I glimpsed a mocking smile on Seigram’s white mask.

In that moment, an idea came to me.

“Ngh...”

As I regained control of my Lei Wing spell, I drew my sword—scabbard and all. And just before Gourry and I hit the wall... I changed our flight course to send us right at Seigram.

“What?!” he cried out with no time to dodge.

“Flee, Seigram!” Halciform screamed.

But it was too late. With the butt of my sword, I shattered the white stone mask of “Seigram the Faceless.”

“Gaaaaah!” Halciform wailed.

Meanwhile...

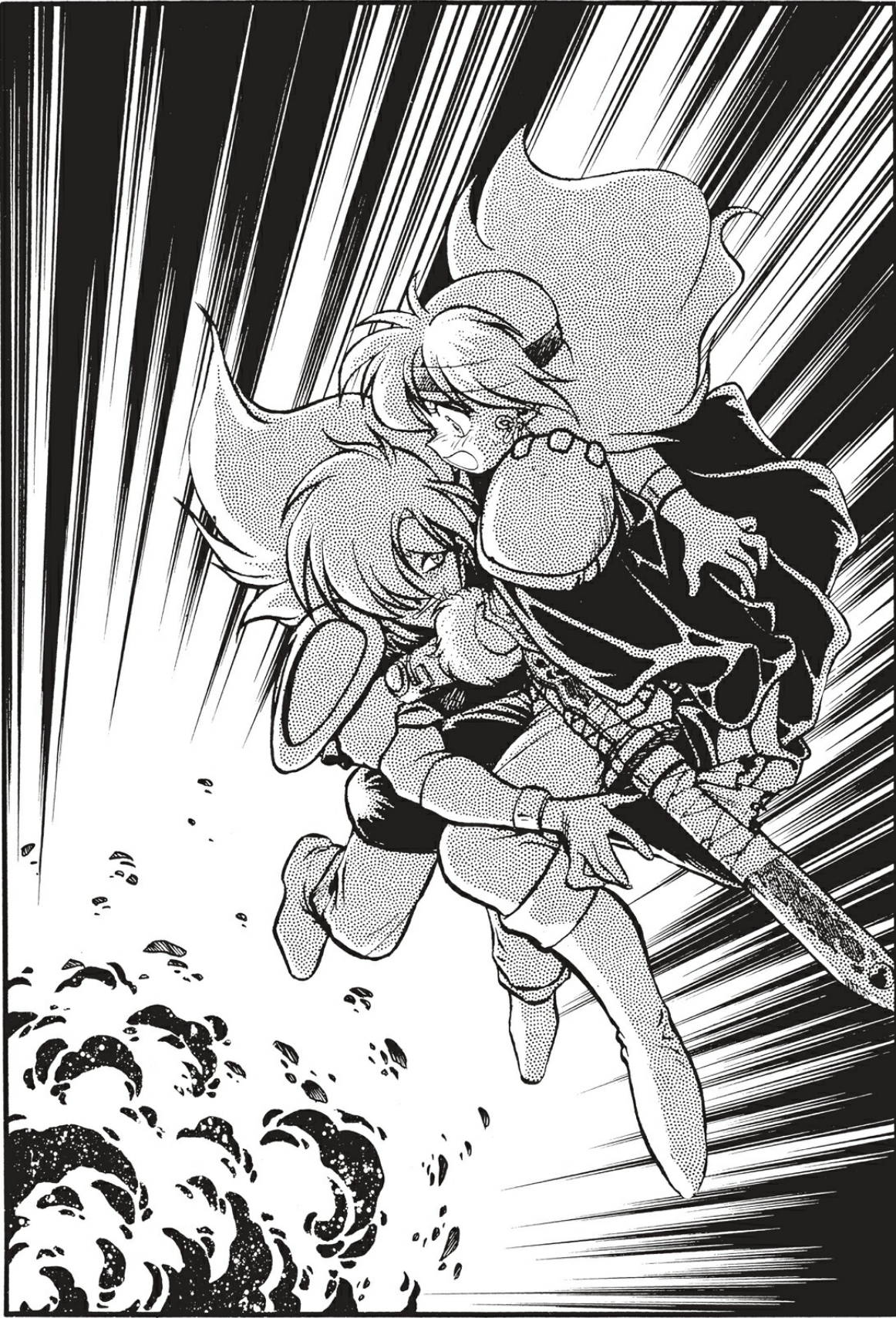
“Guh!”

I slammed into the wall with a thud. I’d tried desperately to slow down my Lei Wing, but just couldn’t hack it in time. Gourry came in after me, effectively

sandwiching me between him and the wall. The hard landing made my bones creak.

“Lina, you...” Gourry said as he quickly stooped to help me up. “Did you intentionally cushion me?”

“Not a chance,” I said with a grin to endure the pain.



“Oh...” Seigram picked up the pieces of his broken mask reverently, as if he’d lost something precious. “Ohh...” His faceless face—the darkness I’d revealed beneath his hood—looked down at the fragments in his hands. “My... My pledge stone...”

“What?!” Gourry exclaimed.

Yup. In the end, the pledge stone was the white mask that covered Seigram’s... face-not-face? Whatever you wanna call it.

See, I’d been wondering about a couple of things for a while. One: why was Seigram so averse to fighting us? And two: why had his comrade referred to him as “faceless”? Turned out this was the answer to both questions.

“S-Seigram!” Halciform cried in agony as he fell to his knees. Being sundered from immortality seemed to rack him with exhaustion and pain. “Kill them! Please!”

“Oh, shut up already!”

I launched a barrage of Flare Arrows that ran the wailing sorcerer through. Rubia averted her eyes as he crumpled to the ground, unmoving.

“Now then...” I turned my attention to Seigram. “You heard your master’s dying order. What are you gonna do now?”

He slowly turned his “face” towards us.

“Now that our pledge stone is broken, I need no longer obey him...”

Good answer! Very noble. It was nice to know demons weren’t all petty little jerks. Gourry and I were pretty exhausted ourselves, to tell the truth, and I was eager to avoid any more fighting.

“...However...”

Uh-oh.

“I must still have a reckoning with you. For the sake of my own pride.”

Yeah, forget what I just said. Demons *are* all petty jerks!

Seigram floated silently over to the collapsed Halciform.

“So let it begin!” he declared, blue flame bursting forth from his hand.

I jumped away, while Gourry... didn't?! He instead twisted on the spot, avoiding the ball of flame by a hair's breadth. It sailed past him, exploding when it hit the end of the corridor...

And *that's* when Gourry jumped! He was riding the shockwave!

“Take this!” he cried, bringing the Sword of Light down.

But Seigram was suddenly cloaked in darkness... Darkness that disappeared immediately, seemingly taking the demon right along with it.

“What?!” Gourry hit the ground caught off guard. His injured leg must have been worse than I thought, because he stumbled pretty badly on the landing.

“Run, Gourry!” I called.

He turned around—just in time to see a giant ball of plasma explode in his face!

“Gwah!”

Gourry was thrown hard into a gargoyle statue. The Sword of Light fell from his hand. I called out to him, but he didn't respond.

“Now...” The faceless demon slowly turned toward me again. “It's just the two of us.”

Seigram... He was using darkness to blink through space.

“Elemekia Lance!”

Darkness swallowed him up again, easily allowing him to avoid my spell. I could feel the darkness coalescing behind me. I whipped around in time to see a ball of light racing toward me.

“Bwuh!”

I managed to dodge it by bending backward, but the spell scorched the tip of my nose as it sailed over me.

Why, you...!

I tossed aside my sheathed sword and pulled a small knife from my tunic. It

glinted through the air and dug into Seigram's shadow when it hit the ground. This was Shadow Snap—a trick to bind an opponent from the astral plane. It wasn't meant to do any damage, but it was an effective trap that should work even on astral beings like demons.

"Oh... a human that can bind my shadow? You must have impressive magic capacity," Seigram said, unable to move.

I wanted to snark back at him, but this wasn't *that* kind of fight. Things were dicey enough that I went straight into chanting an Elemekia Lance. Not even a demon like Seigram could soak a direct hit from one unscathed.

"Perhaps your ability is why... you underestimate me."

I then heard a quiet scraping sound... and my eyes shot wide open. The knife holding Seigram's shadow in place—which I'd thought was firmly embedded in a crack in the floor—was slowly rising up. With a metallic clink, it came out of the ground completely. Seigram then rose back into the air himself.

"The power of my astral form supersedes your knife's influence on the astral plane. It's nothing special... though I'm sure it's not something your ilk sees very often."

"Urgh!" I resumed my interrupted spell. "Elemekia Lance!"

The demon disappeared into darkness again. *Tch!*

Suddenly, a burning sensation pierced my side. An arrow of flame had grazed me from behind. Seigram was standing a short way from where Gourry was lying. The Sword of Light was on the floor next to him. I thought fast, then charged.

Can I make this work?!

"Fireball!" I cried.

The ball of light I conjured exploded not far from Gourry, right at Seigram's feet. The force of the blast sent shattered pieces of the floor flying, as well as...

I thrust out my right hand!

"Fool!" the demon mocked, bursting out of the smoke. He'd brushed off my Fireball and meant to kill me before I could get off another one. "Do you mean

to kill your companion here? You know fire spells won't work on me!"

Seigram approached, his hand glowing red. He was going to slam his spell into me directly! I didn't have time for a chant, but...

"Light, come forth!" I shouted, the brilliant blade spearing Seigram's shadowy body.

"Gwaaaah!" The demon's scream echoed through the hall. With his right hand still raised high, his whole upper body pitched forward. "Wh-When did you...?"

His vacant hood turned toward my hands, seemingly looking at the Sword of Light that had impaled him.

My Fireball hadn't been an attack; it was just a clever way to get the Sword of Light up off the floor. Once it was in the air, I'd grabbed it. Of course, the whole trick was an easier-said-than-done kind of gamble... To be honest, I hadn't had much faith that it was going to pan out, but I figured it was the only way to get the drop on Seigram and his absurd blinking ability.

Fortunately, I'd won the bet.

"Damn... Damn you!" Seigram raged, pooling power in his right hand.

Not a chance!

"Begone!" I cried.

I ran the Sword of Light through him with all the strength I had, cutting a slash that bisected him vertically. Seigram made a sound that didn't quite rise to the level of a scream, stumbled back a few steps, and then fell to one knee.

It's finally... over...

"Make... no mistake..." the demon whispered.

What?!

"I am not... yet... destroyed..."

The Sword of Light's power varied based on its wielder's willpower. If a strike infused with *my* will wasn't enough to kill this guy... just how much magic capacity did he have?

“Some day... I swear to you...!” he hissed, darkness beginning to consume his body.

Not good! If he got away now, he might cause trouble for us later. I’d never get a proper night’s sleep knowing he was still after me.

“You won’t escape!” I cried, swinging the Sword of Light...

But all I managed to cut through was a fleeting shadow.

Seigram escaped in the end, but at least we’d won the day. I was actually still worried about the other demon—Gio Gaia—who’d yet to show himself... but if he hadn’t appeared by now, he probably wouldn’t.

Thus, at last, I turned my attention to Gourry, still collapsed on the floor. Hoping he wasn’t too badly hurt, I hesitantly crept toward him.

“Lina!” Rubia screamed.

I felt a hostile presence welling up behind me and whipped around in wordless shock. A ball of heat exploded at my back, sending me flying into the wall. I blacked out for a second, but pulled myself together as fast as I could. And then...

“Guh!”

Unspeakable pain shot through my body. It took all the strength I had just to turn my head and look down the hall. The Sword of Light had flown even farther than me, landing at the feet of Halciform the White.

But the hand stretching out from his robe... Was it just my imagination, or did it seem strangely elongated? Was his disheveled white hair merely the result of the violent battle? And... what about that green light glowing in his left eye?

“It can’t be...” I whispered. “Gio Gaia?”

“Gio Gaia is no more,” Halciform said with a lurid smile. “As punishment for losing to you... I ate him.”

Ate him?!

Halciform glanced down at the Sword of Light at his feet, then kicked it behind him with his heel.

“Take that, Rubia. It could be useful for my experiments later,” he said without even looking at her. “I read in an old scroll I acquired during my research on immortality... that by eating another, you can gain some of their power.”

“Then... you mean...”

“No,” the sorcerer in white said, shaking his head. “Those guinea pigs were merely attempts to lengthen my lifespan by absorbing their life force. That experiment was a failure, but then it occurred to me: What would happen if I consumed a being whose lifespan and power exceeded my own? Naturally, that led me to...”

“A demon.”

“Yes. Of course, they don’t agree to such things readily. And so when Gio asked to fight you... I told him that if he lost, the price would be his assistance with an experiment of mine.”

Things were coming together. That was why he didn’t tell Gio about the Sword of Light... Absorbing the vitality of a demon would also explain how Halciform had been able to survive my Flare Arrows even after his immortality pact was broken.

“Now... the time for talk is over,” Halciform pronounced as he stepped forward.

I was really on my heels now. I was in no condition to dodge anything. The only way for me to get one over on Halciform was to beat him to a spell and hit him right where it hurt. But... even a direct hit with an Elemekia Lance wouldn’t be a sure kill.

“Don’t worry,” Halciform said with a bright smile. “I won’t extinguish your existence entirely. I’ll create a homunculus with your tremendous magic capacity to experiment on. As for you yourself...”

No way... A chill ran up my spine.

“I shall consume you so that your power will live on forever.”

“That’s enough!” Rubia cried.

Halciform turned around to see her holding the Sword of Light with trembling hands. Her eyes glinted with mournful determination.

“Rubia?” the sorcerer in white whispered.

“Please... Please stop this! Please... no more...”

“What are you talking about? Cease this nonsense... Lower that sword and wait for me downstairs. Don’t worry. This will all be over soon.”

“No,” she refused, shaking her head fervently with tears in her eyes.

“Just do what I tell you, my darling Rubi—”

“No!” Rubia shouted and took off running... straight for Halciform!

“Rubia!” Halciform reached out with his right hand—light flashed in his palm.

Don’t do it, Rubia!

Their figures met.

“Ah—”

Words failed me. Halciform was... impaled on the Sword of Light in Rubia’s hands.

“Please stop this... Sir Halciform...” Rubia begged, burying her face in his chest.

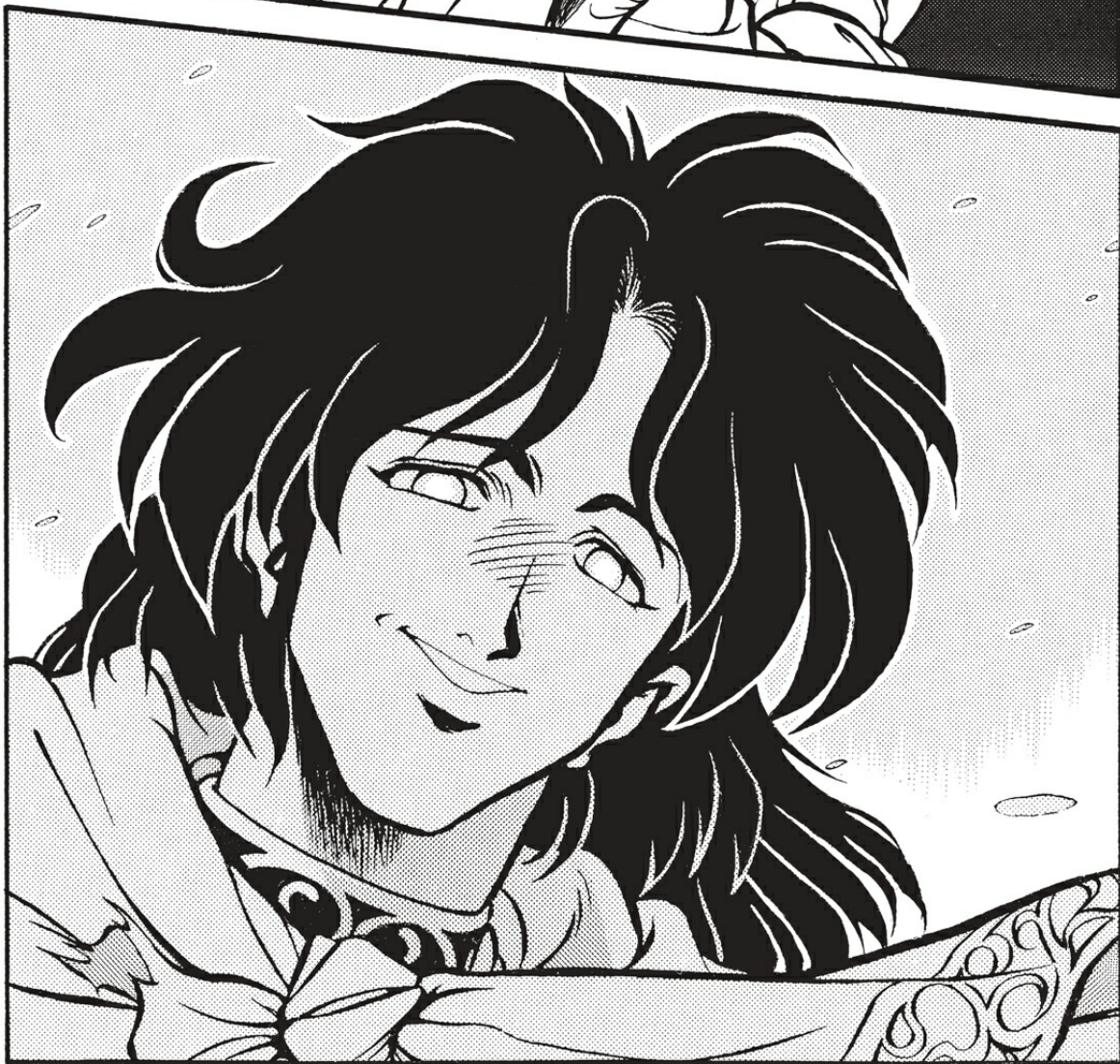
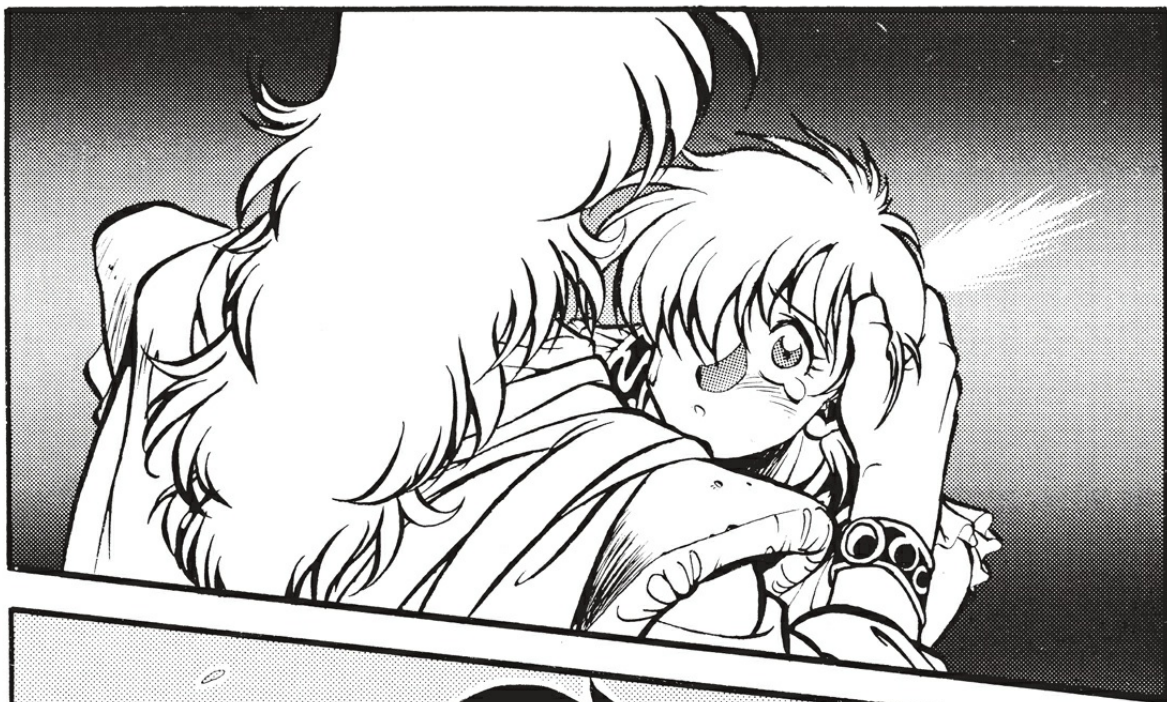
The light in the sorcerer’s hand went out. He dismissed his spell to instead gently stroke Rubia’s hair.

“Yes... of course...” he whispered.

Rubia looked up in shock. Halciform stood there watching her with a kind, genuine smile.

“I couldn’t afford to lose to anyone... but, Rubia... I suppose it’s understandable that you would be the one to kill me...”

An inscrutable expression appeared on his face as the last of his strength slipped from his body. And so fell the sorcerer who sought eternal life.



Epilogue

The sky was clear and blue, the streets busy and bustling. It was a day like any other.

“It’s almost like... nothing ever happened,” I muttered.

“Rare to see you so quiet,” Gourry said as he mussed my hair.

“Hey, don’t mess with my hair! And *excuse me* for being quiet.”

“Sorry! It’s just... seeing you like this feels like a bad omen somehow.”

“What am I, a flying pig?”

Gourry and I were currently headed down the main avenue toward the city’s east gate.

It had been ten days since that night. We’d both managed to heal up, and we finished all the remaining cleanup yesterday... Though, really, Rubia had already taken care of the worst of it.

Once Lantz was on his feet again, he took his leave of the city. Said something about sightseeing in Sairaag.

As for Daymia... I had no idea what happened to him. The legends said that those afflicted with Raugnut Rushavna couldn’t die until the caster—Seigram, in this case—was eradicated. The bigwigs in the sorcerers’ council were pretty evasive when I asked about it, though...

Then there was Rubia. She was subjected to a scathing inquiry at first for her role in abetting Halciform. I interceded with a threat-laced defense, however, and got them to realize that poor Rubia would’ve just become another victim if she’d snitched. Moreover, she was the one who ultimately stopped him. So, in the end, the council went easy on her and that was that.

I still don’t know the exact details of her relationship with Halciform. Maybe she would’ve been happy to talk about it, but for some reason, I couldn’t ever bring myself to ask.

Now, as for the two of us...

“Well, where shall we head next?” Gourry asked me.

We had no particular destination in mind. We were free to go wherever we wanted. I’d heard rumors about a kerfuffle going down in Saillune City, so I thought it could be fun to poke around there. It might also be nice to go visit my hometown in Zephilia for the first time in a while.

Hmm, that got me wondering where Gourry hailed from... Well, no matter.

“I dunno. Let’s figure it out on the way,” I said with a wink.

Thus we left Atlas City behind.

Afterword

Editorial department. Come in, editorial department. This is *Slayers* author Hajime Kanzaka. I've escaped the person plotting to hijack my afterwords, and am sending this via text message from inside a closet. Unclear how long I can proceed, but I'll do my best.

Why, hello there, gentle readers! This is Hajime Kanzaka, your humble author! What's that, you ask? Wasn't I acting all dire a minute ago? Well, I can't keep that up forever! When it's time for fun, you have fun! It's true that I spent the first afterword locked away in a warehouse, but as it just so happens, I am a master of one hundred and eight warehouse escape techniques, so don't you worry!

Now, allow me to say that it's your support that has enabled us to do these reprints, and I'm so, so very grateful for it. When you're a writer and you get fan letters or see people say things like, "I just started reading the series. My dad recommended it to me," and "I started reading this in elementary school, and now I have a child of my own," it really makes you feel blessed to have such a long-lived fandom.

Of course, I'm aging too! But... how should I put this? It seems like all of my readers have grown into proper adults while I haven't matured in the slightest. In fact, sometimes I get the terrifying feeling that I might have even *regressed* since writing this volume originally.

Thinking back on it, this volume was quite a challenge. I entered the first *Slayers* book as a one-shot in a contest and it won, so my supervisor asked me for a follow-up story. I was like, "Um, but they've already defeated the Dark Lord..." It feels weird to say it now, but at its inception, I honestly thought the project was impossible.

To keep Lina from resolving everything with one big spell, I had the idea to set this volume in a city. I think that was a lesson for me about how you can use circumstances and setting to change the flavor of a story. Of course, there are

limits to how much you can change—take it too far and it becomes a different story. In fact, I’ve heard people say that *The Sorcerers of Atlas* was heavier than volume 1. Obviously, that was intentional.

But I don’t think I would’ve learned any of that if I hadn’t been asked to write a second *Slayers* novel. I think it’s important to try things even when you think they’re impossible. It could be a learning experience! Or you might realize that they really *are* impossible...

Ah. Of course, I don’t want to hear anything’s “impossible” from a certain woman who takes over my afterwords.

Anyway... In that sense, *The Sorcerers of Atlas* was a sort of turning point for me. It was really hard to write at first. But after lots of racking my brain, I said, “I like yokai and kaiju! I wanna include those!” And the minute I put the spike-wolves and stuff in the story, the words just flew off the page. What’s wrong with me? Why do I like monsters so much? These are the kinds of things that get me questioning my lifestyle.

But at that time—as a debut writer who still didn’t know what he was doing and was trying to come up with a story on the fly—the one thing I couldn’t do was pen the plot. Editorial kept asking me to write out the plot and submit it before I did the actual writing, but back then... I didn’t really know the difference between an outline and a plot summary, so I didn’t know what to do. In architectural terms, an outline is like the design draft and the plot summary is like the blueprint.

When I submitted the plot (or whatever you’d call it) for the third volume, *The Ghosts of Sairaag*, my supervisor said, “Hmm... well, for something like *Slayers*, I guess this is okay.” Then when I sent him the final version, he was over the moon saying, “This is so fun, Kanzaka-san!” I felt like I’d won. I’m not sure *what* I won, exactly, but I guess the effort(?) paid off, because my supervisor seemed to realize that my finished products were going to diverge wildly from my plot summaries no matter what... And now I no longer get asked for them.

Now, for any aspiring novelists reading this: Please don’t try this at home. My example is not one to follow.

Either way— Wait, I just heard something. Oh, it was the front door! Does she

know I'm here?! Has she found me?!

She's coming! The lady trying to take over my afterwords! I can hear her footsteps now! Looks like this is all the afterword I get! Ack, my hand! It's caught in the door—

*

This is where the transmission from the author cut off. We have no way of knowing what's happened to him, but he sent an afterword of appropriate length, so we don't much care.

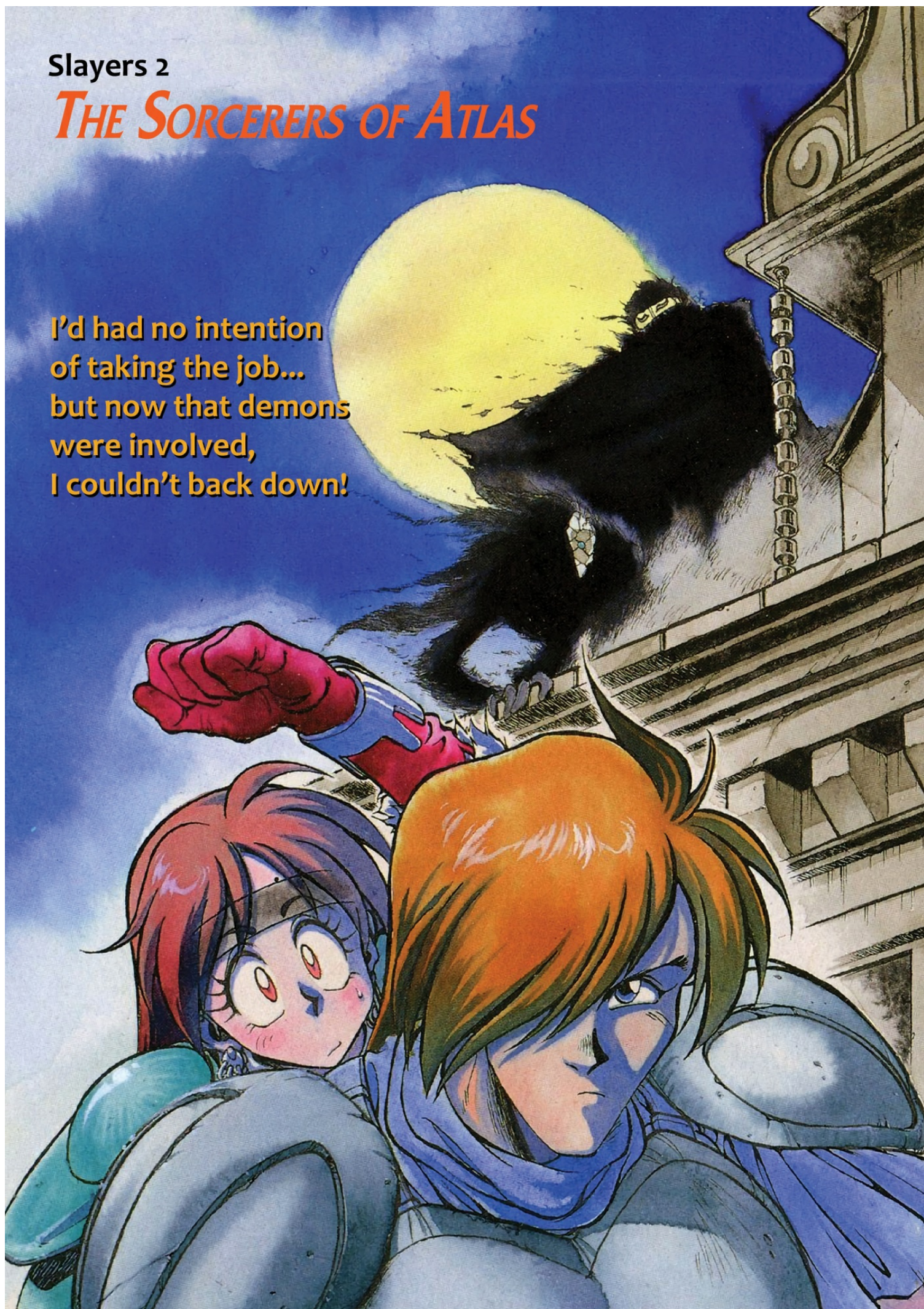
-The Editorial Department

Afterword: Over.

Slayers 2

THE SORCERERS OF ATLAS

I'd had no intention
of taking the job...
but now that demons
were involved,
I couldn't back down!

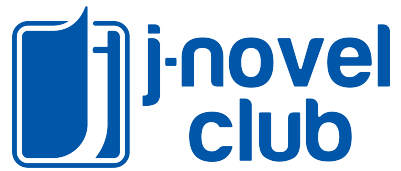


The wolf launched all
of its spikes right at me!
Yikes!



I used my wind bubble to draw close
to the giant underwater jewel.
What lay inside was unmistakably
a human figure...





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Slayers: Volume 2

by Hajime Kanzaka

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Megan Denton

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SLAYERS Vol. 2

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