



SLAYERS

5 *THE SILVER BEAST*

BY HAJIME KANZAKA

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RUI ARAIZUMI



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1: Okay, So This Is All Pretty Sudden...

It all started with a cliché...

“Your money or your life! Heh heh heh.”

And as if that bit of cringe from the masked bandits wasn't enough, one of them flashed a glimpse of his longsword.

Hahh... The sound came from all three of us in unison.

“Wh-What? Why are you sighing?!”

“We're just sick of this,” I said with a groan. “I mean, damn... I thought taking a deserted back road might earn us a break—but even here, it's bandits, bandits, bandits! If you don't have the guts to do your highwayman act on the freakin' highway, what's the point? You're the... I don't even know how many of you we've run into since we hit this area, but you're at least the second group today!”

“You... Hey, you're not gonna try to say, ‘We're already cleaned out, so don't bother,’ are ya?”

“Actually, I'm trying to say, ‘I'm sick of having to beat up every single one of you.’”

“What the—” My words stunned the bandit to silence.

“You don't *look* sick of this, Lina. You look like you're totally raring to take them on,” came a quiet rebuke from one of my two traveling companions, Gourry. He was tall, blond, handsome, and an incredible swordsman... Too bad about his jellyfish brains.

“Shut up already! This is the best part!” I hissed back at him.

Bandit bullying... Ah, those words were like music to my ears! See, letting bandits swagger about before pounding them into the dirt was something of a pastime for me. If I could track down their home base and nab their treasure afterward, all the better. Taking out the trash while padding my own stores?

Good for the world, good for me. Talk about a win-win hobby!

Moreover, who was gonna complain? You know what I always say—no rights for the wicked!

However, if you're thinking of taking up the hobby yourself, hold that thought, buddy. I can only do it because I'm the mighty Lina Inverse, warrior-slash-sorcerer extraordinaire. Your average adventurer attempting to follow in my footsteps would be a goner within ten days for sure. Don't try this at home, kids. Got that?

Now, out of all the myriad appeals that lie in the sport of bandit bullying, my very favorite was counting up their treasure. But my second favorite was this banter before the real show began. Most brigands fell back on the same corny old lines, but you'd get your regional variations. You'd occasionally run into someone with some really off-the-wall material, too. And they frequently reacted in different ways to my zingers.

Granted... things always ended the same way, regardless.

Now, what's this guy gonna serve up for me?

"The point is that we don't have a single copper for you jerks."

"Wh-What?! I offer you mercy and you slap it away?"

Offer me mercy? When?

"Argh, fine! Then we'll be taking it by force!"

"Gimme a break," I whispered, throwing back my cape as Gourry reached for the hilt of his sword.

"Uh..." one of the masked bandits said in a rather dumb-sounding voice.

"What in the world is that girl doing?"

"Huh?" I looked in the direction the man was pointing to see my other traveling companion, Amelia. I then responded calmly, "Just what it looks like."

"It looks like... she's climbing a tree?"

"Sure is."

"Why?"

“You’ll see soon enough. But never you mind her; let’s get back to it.”

“Well... if you insist. A-As I was saying, we’ll be taking it by force!”

Just then...

“Your evil deeds end today, villains!” Amelia’s voice thundered around us.

“Whaaat?!”

“Where’d that come from?!” the bandits clamored, looking around in panic.

Boy, what a bunch of suckers! Or maybe they just knew how to stick to a script?

“Up there!” one of them exclaimed.

Of course, he was pointing at Amelia, who was standing atop a branch of the tree she’d just climbed. And right on cue, she began her speech...

“Wherever life dwells, just as there is shadow and evil... so too is there light and goodness! You’ve let darkness into your hearts, and you’ve let it lead you astray!” There, she pointed dramatically at the bandits. “The heavens have anointed me judge, and judge you I shall! Prepare to be punished!”

She was couching it in a lot of florid language, but the gist of it was, “I’m gonna kick your asses in the name of justice!”

“Now, have at you! Hup!”

With that bold cry, Amelia leaped from the tree and—*Splat!*—landed in the bushes below. Jeez, that one sounded like it hurt...

“Hey, you okay?” Gourry asked, concerned.

“Fear not!” she declared as she popped up out of the brush.

“Wait, Amelia, why is your neck bent like that?!” I asked, equally concerned.

“Oh, don’t worry! It’ll take more than this to break my spirit!” she reassured me with a cheery wave.

Yeah... It’s not really your spirit I’m worried about.

“I’m starting to think we shouldn’t have messed with these guys,” another masked bandit muttered. He was entirely correct, but the realization came far

too late to save them.

“Prepare for justice, servants of evil!” Amelia declared before moving into a chant.

And so the battle began...

And ended just as quickly.

If I may be so blunt, there was no way these punks were gonna last even ten seconds against a one-two combo from me and Amelia.

“Um...” Gourry whispered pitifully behind us as we struck our victory pose. “Do I not get a turn this time?”

“Nope,” I responded casually but firmly.

Look, I didn’t have time to coddle Gourry right now! I had an important task to take care of: bullying the twitching bandits on the ground into revealing the location of their loot stash!

“Now, let’s see...”

I grabbed a guy lying nearby and removed his mask, which was really just a bag with eyeholes torn into it. The face underneath was... well, I wouldn’t exactly call it handsome, but he looked pretty normal. Not especially bandity. Like any old dude you might run into on a village street.

“Hey, hey! Wake up already!” I called, shaking him a few times before he blearily opened his eyes.

“Huh...? Wagh!” He desperately tried to scramble away, but my spell had done a real number on him. All the poor guy could really do was moan and flail. “W-Wait! Wait! Spare me!”

“Heh heh heh... your money or your life!” I demanded, echoing his earlier line in a brilliant show of irony.

“You... You can’t do this! You’re a monster!”

Wait, you’re gonna pull that line *now*? Of course, nonchalance toward one’s own hypocrisy was part and parcel of being a bad guy, so...

“I don’t have to take that from you! Now, spill! Where’s your hideout?”

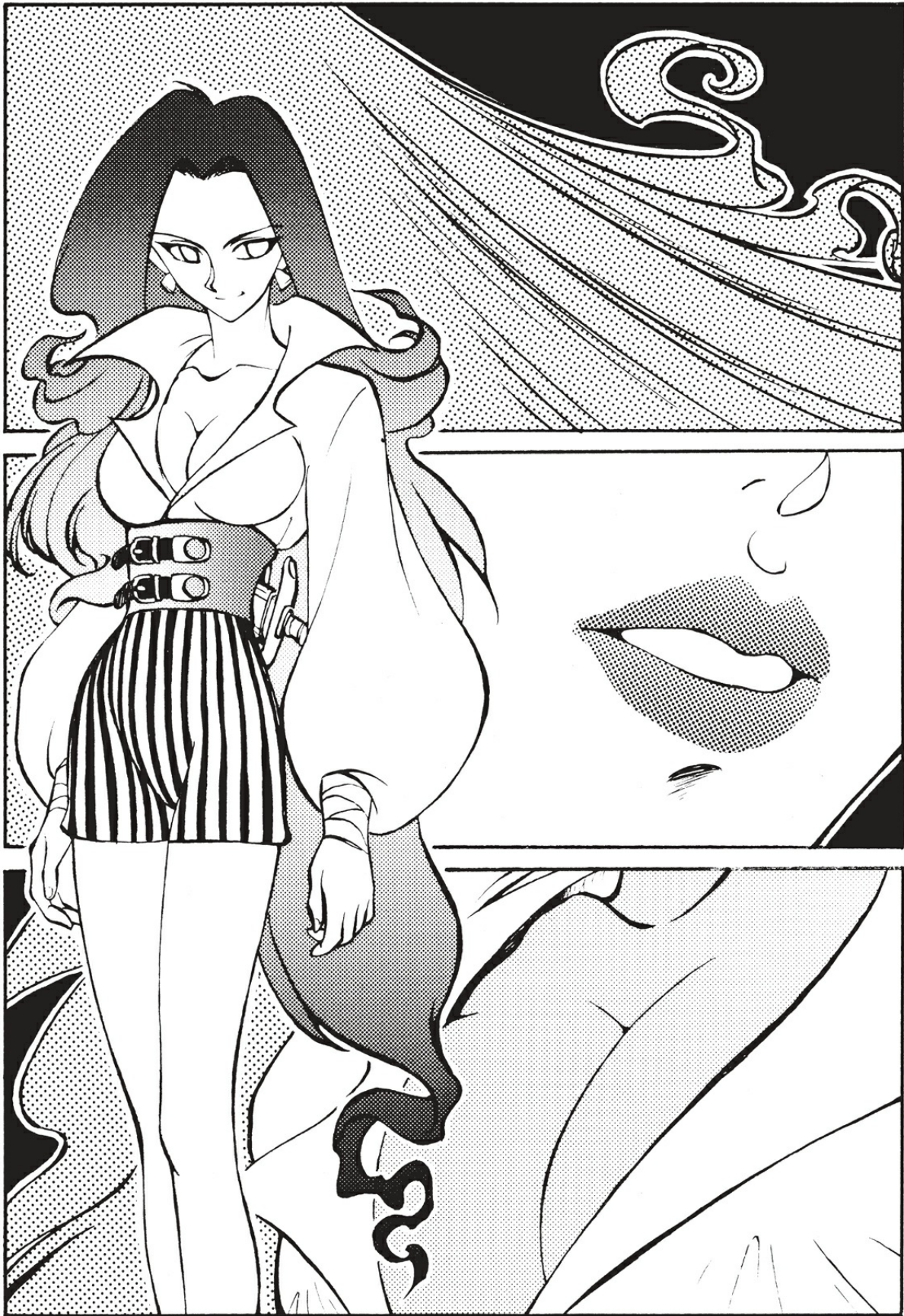
“Could you kindly unhand him?” came a sudden voice from another direction.

“Who’s there?!” Amelia said before I could.

We both whipped around to see a woman standing quietly in the grove.

“L-Lady Mazenda!” groaned the man whose collar I’d seized.

She looked about twenty years old, give or take, dressed in loose-fitting white clothing with skin so pale it was almost translucent. Long, shining hair and lustrous lips, both a bright crimson... Some might have said she was a striking beauty, but the primary impression I got was those sherbet dishes they serve at snowy mountain retreats.



“I told them not to do anything too reckless... Though it seems they didn’t listen to me,” she sighed.

“I-It’s just... Bey said...” the bandit groaned.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Mazenda calmly interrupted, then looked to me before continuing. “I know these men are quite hopeless, but they’re still my comrades. I ask that you let them off with a warning.”

“You really think I’ll agree to that?”

“No,” she responded readily. “So... how about this? I’ll perform a little trick for you, and if it amuses you, you let them go.”

With that, she took a small step forward. *Whoosh!* Amelia jumped way back, and Gourry put his hand on his sword. I even found myself letting go of the guy I was holding to start an incantation.

Who is this woman? I wondered, but just as I was thinking that...

Rustle!

The leaves in the trees overhead shook in a violent cacophony, then rained down on us en masse, obscuring our vision.

“Bwuh?!”

Sensing a presence behind me, I spun around... And there was Mazenda. I saw her crimson lips curled into a slight smile, then something streak from her right hand. Projectiles? She threw some small objects not at me, but around me. A *barrier spell*?! I immediately jumped to the side, but...

Crack!

“Ngh!” A numbness ran through me like a mild electric shock. It only lasted a fraction of a second. I had no idea what this trick was, but I wasn’t gonna let it stop me from doing my thing! “Elemekia Lance!”

I unleashed my spell, and for a moment—*Huh?*—my mind went blank.

“You do appear to be the leader, so... that should cover it,” Mazenda said in a teasing tone before vanishing back into the dancing leaves. “I’m a bit bored, so I’ll play a little game with you. You have to kill me in order to return to normal.

If you care to try your hand, come to the village of Mayin.”

The second she was done, there was another massive rustle as all the leaves dropped to the ground at once... leaving me, Amelia, and Gourry standing there dumbfounded. I wasn't sure how she'd done it, but she'd apparently taken the collapsed bandits with her.

But more importantly... Ahhh! She actually managed to rattle me! I couldn't believe it!

“They're gone,” Amelia whispered.

“Are you all right, Lina?!” Gourry called, sheathing his sword before running toward me. His foot hit something on the way. “What's this?”

He leaned over, staring at whatever-it-was sticking out of the ground. It looked like a red needle, about as long and fine as a piece of thread. He artlessly grabbed it between his fingers and plucked it up. When he did... the stiff needle suddenly turned pliant, indeed, just like thread.

“It's hair. Probably from that Mazenda lady,” Amelia said.

I looked around again and found four more “needles” staked nearby. That meant, including the one Gourry had just pulled up, she'd planted five of them all told—a pentagram with me at the center.

Damn. Whatever she'd actually thrown had just been a feint. In dodging those, I let my guard down for a split second, allowing her to create the real barrier with her hair... which left me with an important question now.

“What's wrong, Lina?” Gourry asked.

But I didn't respond. I simply started chanting a spell. And then...

“Lighting!”

...

“H-Hey! Lina!” Amelia cried, turning completely pale.

“Wha-Wha-What?” Gourry stammered, clearly unsure of what was going on.

Creeeak... I slowly craned my neck toward him and guilelessly confessed the truth.

“I can’t... use magic anymore...”

Aaaaaaaaaaah... In the moment, that was the only sound my mind could produce.

We were now at a small restaurant in some village nearby. We’d dropped in after the whole mess on the road earlier so we could talk things out over a meal, but I was more confused now than ever. I was so beside myself that I only managed to down two dinner specials.

“So... you really can’t use magic?” Gourry asked.

“Seems that way,” Amelia responded on my behalf (I was still too rattled). “Nothing we can do about it now, I guess. The question is what we do next.”

“Well, true... Lina without her magic is...”

“Just a pain in the rear.”

Grr!

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far, but she is pretty bossy for being so useless now...”

Grr, grr!

“Yeah, she’s got maximum attitude with minimal bustline...”

“Flatline sex appeal, too.”

“Shut up!” I exploded. “How can you say all that crap while I’m suffering over here?!”

“Well... c’mon,” Gourry said, scratching at his head while he exchanged looks with Amelia.

“Don’t get mad, Lina. Master Gourry and I were just trying to cheer you up a little.”

“...Really?” I asked with a sidelong glance at the two of them.

Amelia then waved her hand placatingly and laughed, “Nah!”

“Rrragh!”

“W-Wait! Hold on, Lina! Strangling Amelia won’t solve anything! More importantly, is there a way to get you your magic back?”

“Taking out that Mazenda woman will probably do it... at least, that’s what she implied,” I explained, removing my hands from Amelia’s throat and calmly taking my seat again.

“Then that settles it,” Amelia said, rubbing her neck. “We just go kill her like she said, right? I mean, no need to hold back. She clearly works with bad guys, which makes her a bad guy too.”

Well... at the very least, Mazenda certainly didn’t look like one of the “good guys.”

“But how do we know where she is?” Gourry asked.

“She said it herself: the village of Mayin,” I said with a sigh. “Of course, knowing you, I’m sure you weren’t listening...”

“I was too listening. I just forgot.”

Oh, yeah, because that’s so much better...

“Anyway, it’s not like we have much of a choice,” Amelia interjected. “We’re headed in that direction anyway.”

Gourry and I nodded in unison in response.

“Whaaaaaaaat?!” Amelia shouted, silencing the whole tavern.

We were currently off an old back road that went from Saillune to the Kingdom of Dills by way of Kalmart. We were only two villages away from Mayin now, but the hardest stretch of the journey still lay ahead. Mayin was Mazenda and her gang’s home turf, so we were likely in for a beatdown if we charged in unprepared. We decided, then, to spend the night in this village and gather what information we could about Mayin here at the tavern.

That was when what looked like an old peddler had whispered to us, “You’d better avoid that place.” Amelia had gone over to ask for details, leading to her exclamatory cry when she heard them.

“Hey, watch it! Keep your voice down!” the old man hissed, looking around

hurriedly.

“I most certainly shall not! You know that evildoers abound two towns over, yet you haven’t even tried to inform your local lord... Have you no love of justice in your heart?!”

“J-Justice has nothing to do with it! They’re just rumors! If I took baseless hearsay to the authorities, *I’d* be the one in hot water!”

That was a perfectly rational stance to take, but Amelia wasn’t the type to be swayed by rationality.

“Make no mistake!” she declared as she planted one foot atop a chair, her right hand clenched into a fist. “There’s a mighty evil festering out there!”

“She’s on that tear again, huh?” Gourry muttered coldly as he poked at his roast chicken.

“But I guess some really nutty stuff’s going down in Mayin, huh?”

“I’d put money on it, yeah.”

“Mazenda did invite us there, after all...”

“Hmm, that’s not really what I was thinking.”

“What were you thinking, then?”

“Well...” Gourry paused, scratching his head. “Just that nothing you’ve ever been involved in has been anything less than nutty.”

“Oh, put a sock in it!”

It was just then that Amelia returned with an unusually grim expression on her face.

“How’d it go?” I asked.

“Not here... I’ll explain once we get back to the room,” she replied before silently shoveling down the rest of her meal.

“Okay, Amelia, here we are. Start talking.”

It was now after dinner. Amelia, Gourry, and I had gotten three adjoining

rooms at the inn, and we'd gathered in the center one for our tête-à-tête. Here, we could be reasonably assured that no one could listen in, even if we got to talking in our outdoor voices.

"He said it was all just rumors, but..." It was rare to see Amelia falter like this. "The village of Mayin has supposedly become home to... a certain organization."

"That woman's bandit gang, right?" Gourry asked, offering up the obvious conclusion.

A mere bandit hideout, however, wouldn't have Amelia so shaken.

Thus she shook her head and said, "No, a cult... One that Mazenda woman and the bandits are probably members of."

"A cult?" I whispered, narrowing my eyes.

Amelia groaned a little. "Yeah. According to that guy at the tavern... they worship Shabranigdu."

"Sh-Shabranigdu?!" I found myself crying out.

Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu, the king of demons said to control all the darkness in our world... and...

"Hush! Keep it down!" Amelia scolded me.

"R-Right, sorry. But are you super sure that's what he said?"

"Well, like I said, it's all just rumor. But I dunno who'd come up with a story about a Shabranigdu cult out of whole cloth."

She had a point there...

"What else you got?"

"That's it," she said, simply enough. "All he knew was that word on the street is that Mayin has become a base for worshipers of Shabranigdu, who are up to all kinds of secret, wicked things. He said he didn't know any more than that. That he didn't *want* to."

"Hmm..." Seemed like we were up to our necks in it again.

"Say, Lina," Gourry, who had been quiet thus far, finally said. "There's

something I've been wondering."

"What is it?"

"Who's this 'Shabrigoo' guy?"

Hey...

"Shabranigdu, Master Gourry," Amelia corrected him.

"I mean, it sounds familiar," he said, abashedly rubbing the back of his head. "But I have a really hard time with long names like that."

"Gourryyy..."

"Wh-What, Lina? You look unhappy about something..."

"You bet I am! Are you seriously telling me you don't remember Shabranigdu?!"

"Well, uh..."

"Well what?! Remember? The Ruby-Eye? The Dark Lord? Shabranigdu, man!"

After a long pause, Gourry clapped his hands together and exclaimed, "Oh, oh. Yeah, yeah. I totally remember him."

Liar!

I ignored him and turned back to Amelia.

"What does Shabranigdu-worship actually entail, though? It's not like they can call up the Dark Lord and have a symposium with him as a guest or anything..."

"Nobody knows," she replied. "People are just saying it's your standard evil cult that promises the Dark Lord will fulfill your deepest desires in exchange for your service. There's sacrifices, violence, the whole deal."

"Hmm... That checks out, I guess. Explains why we've got otherwise normal villagers dressing up as masked bandits: they're trying to scrape up funds for their cult. If that's what's really going on here though, it means we're up against an entire organization."

"Bring it on!" Amelia said, clenching her fists. "Fiends who sell their souls to

darkness and forsake the ways of light... I do not fear the hundreds or thousands their legions may number! So long as we carry goodness in our hearts, victory shall be ours!”

“Except... Lina can’t use magic right now, which is a problem.”

“Oh, speaking of,” I said and began chanting a spell. “Lighting!”

I held up my palm, in which a faint ball of light appeared... then abruptly went out.

“Was that...?” Amelia whispered.

I nodded in response: “It seems like the seal on my magic is weakening over time. But that’s the best I can manage for now, even for a Lighting spell. I couldn’t even conjure a breeze as far as attack magic goes.”

“But doesn’t that mean it’ll just come back on its own?” Gourry asked, earning a sigh from me.

“Come on... You know how many years that’d take? Besides, there’s no guarantee it’d ever completely get back to normal.”

“Oh. So, basically, you still can’t do squat.”

Yeah, “basically,” but jeez...

“A-Anyway, we need to do some recon. We’ll set up a home base in the next village or somewhere else nearby and gather as much intel as we can in the area around Mayin. Thanks in advance, Gourry. Boy, you’re really taking one for the team this time.”

“Wait, why am I the one doing it?!”

“Silly. They already know what we look like, so we’ll have to work under the cover of night.”

“And?”

“Everyone knows lovely ladies need their beauty rest,” I explained as Amelia nodded emphatically.

“...Hey...”

“So thanks for being our designated scout!”

“Wait a minute! You want me to scour the mountains alone, at night, for who-knows-how-long?!”

“Oho! How astute of you, Gourry.”

“Don’t ‘oho’ me! I’d be dead within a week! You can’t stick this on me without my say-so! It’s not fair!” Gourry continued to complain.

“All right, all right,” I said, scratching my head thoughtfully. “If you insist, we’ll give you a say. No objections to that, right?”

“No... I guess not,” he said with a reluctant shake of his head.

Heh. Sucker.

“Okay, let’s vote! Who thinks it’s a good idea to send Gourry? Raise your hand!” My hand shot up, quickly followed by Amelia’s. “Then it’s decided! Good luck, my man!”

“You guyyys!”

“C’mon, no whining. We voted on it fair and square.”

“But...”

“Master Gourry.” Amelia, with a solemn expression, patted him on the shoulder. “I’m sorry, but that’s how democracy works.”

In fact, this was just the tyranny of the majority. Gourry tearfully swallowed back his objections, but then suddenly...

“Ha... bwaha... hahahahaha!” He snapped out of his despair into a mad fit of laughter. “Lina, you fool! You’ve overlooked a fatal flaw in your plan!”

“Wh-What?!”

“If you send me alone, I won’t be able to tell what’s suspicious from what isn’t! You think I can do a proper recon job on my own?!”

“C-Curses! T-To think you were so self-aware... You’re a fearsome foe indeed, Gourry! You’ve grown since I met you!”

“Too bad your chest hasn’t!”

“You little...”

I was about to put up a fight when—*Bam!*—our door burst open.

“Excuse me, ladies and gentleman... could you please keep it down?” the rather exasperated innkeeper asked.

After apologizing, we ended up deciding a scouting rotation via rock, paper, scissors.

Torches flickered in the dark, illuminating several hundred masked figures in assembly.

“This is a little more than I was expecting...” I observed in a whisper.

We were currently in the mountains not too far from Mayin. The ruins here were secreted away amongst the trees. The place was dilapidated with age, but it had probably been quite a venue in its heyday. A round building lined with spectator seats fanned out around a central arena. The upper rows were mostly caved in, so the masked group was sticking to the lower sections.

Gourry, Amelia, and I were perched high in the crumbling cheap seats along the structure’s outer edge. It would’ve been impossible to get up to them without a Levitation spell, which explained why there were no lookouts in this section. No one would ever spot us over here in the dark, hidden amid the rubble.

Amelia had found this place last night, and we’d all come back together to find this mysterious assembly gathering.

“It doesn’t look like that many to me...” Gourry whispered from next to me.

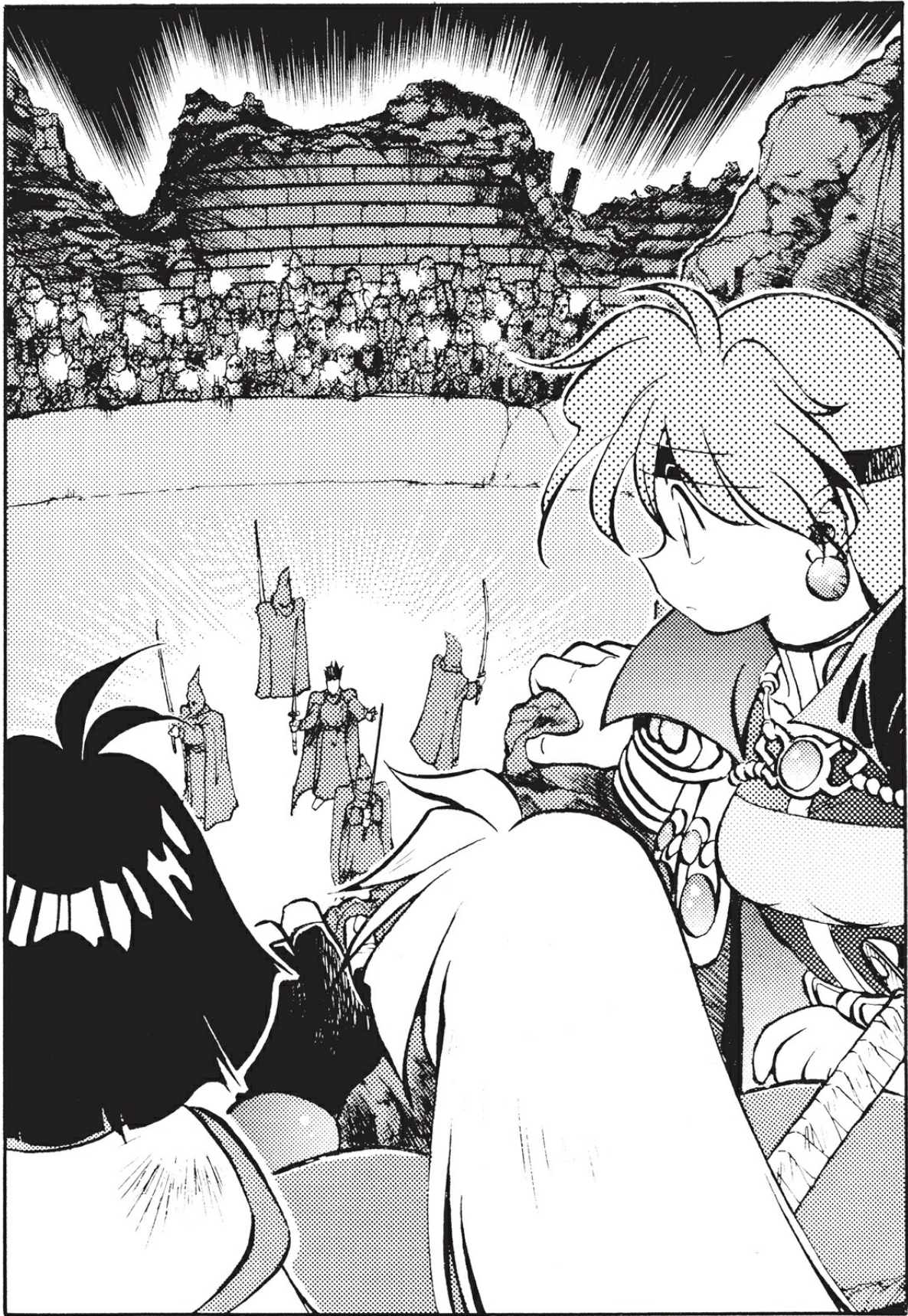
“In terms of sheer numbers, no. But as far as population density is concerned, it’s a pretty serious gathering for a remote area like this.”

“It flies in the face of goodness!” Amelia whispered on Gourry’s other side. “To think an evil cult has drawn so many followers... Is there no justice in these lands?!”

While she was rambling on, the energy among the masked attendees changed. A cheer rose up among them.

“Someone’s come out!” Gourry said, reporting the obvious.

Five figures had appeared in the arena from what was probably the fighters' entrance. They were dressed in vermillion capes and robes, carrying ceremonial longswords with crimson-stained blades. Only one of them had their face visible. The remaining four wore masks the same color as their robes, which looked professionally made rather than the makeshift ones their followers were wearing.



The bare-faced man walked out into the center of the arena, while the others stayed five or six paces away. Each one took up a position at the four cardinal directions around him—north, south, east, and west.

“The five lieutenants,” Amelia whispered like the words left a bad taste in her mouth.

Ah, of course...

“The five whats?” Gourry asked me, for some reason.

“The five high-rank demons that Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu created.” *Granted, I don’t know if that’s fact or fiction*, I added internally.

“Okay, so, the four in a circle correspond to the directions associated with Chaos Dragon, Deep Sea, Dynast, and Greater Beast. That makes the one at the center Hellmaster,” Amelia explained helpfully.

Hellmaster Fibrizo, who could freely manipulate the astral plane, was the strongest of the five. So... did that mean that man was the cult leader? He looked like a pretty scrawny third-rate evil sorcerer to me. Not an ounce of charisma.

“Gentlemen!” he bellowed with a fairly deep, surprisingly penetrating voice. “We’ve received good tidings this day. Lord Klotz shall soon return!”

Another cheer rang out through the arena. This “Klotz” figure was probably the cult leader, and the guy giving the speech was just his stand-in.

“I’ve also received word that he’s found what he was looking for!” the man continued with passion as the buzz in the crowd increased. “No one can stop us now! Be warned, hypocrites who worship Flare Dragon Ceipheed! True power—true human desire—lies with us!”

Hey, hey, hey now! I found myself peering at Amelia. Thankfully, she was hanging her head sulkily. She hadn’t lost her temper.

The man continued still, “The natural state of existence is chaos! In other words, evil! Those fools who refuse to acknowledge this—”

There, Amelia suddenly stood up.

Wait a minute...

“Burst Rondo!” she incanted, sending a dozen or so balls of light raining down on the gathering all at once.

Bwoom!

“Gwaaah!”

“Hyeeeeee!”

“Yaaaaaargh!”

Tongues of flame rose into the air with the screams. I cradled my head in my hands. Darn it! Amelia hadn’t been sulking... she’d been quietly reciting an attack spell! Jeez, girl! If you’re gonna go all rampage-y, at least gimme a warning!

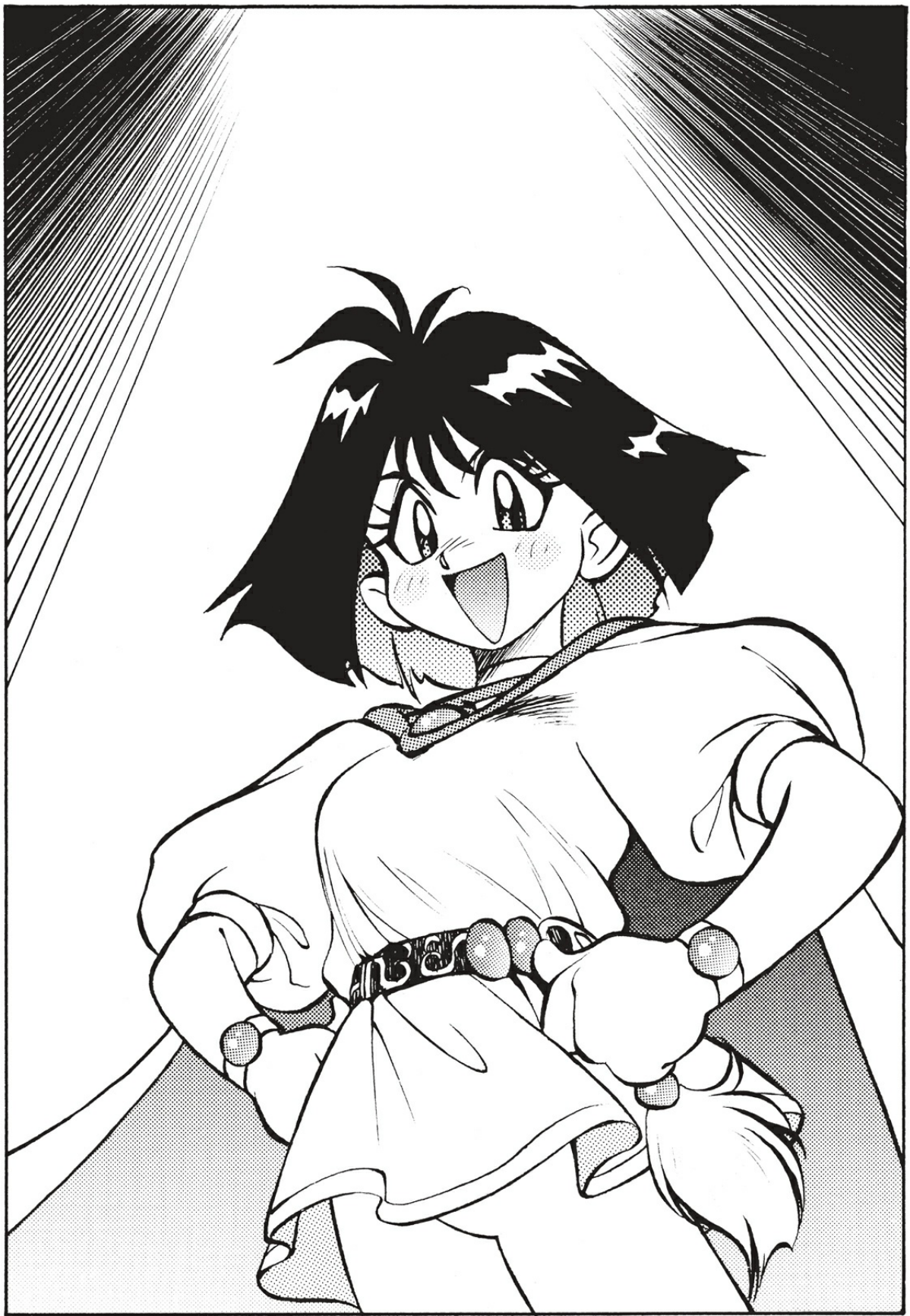
Nevertheless, while the spell she’d used had the appearance of multiple Fireballs going off at once, each one was relatively weak. (I mean, if one hit you dead-on, you could still expect a full-body fry, I’m sure.) This impressive-looking but low-powered spell was Amelia’s open declaration of war.

“Ah... over there!”

“Someone’s here! What were the lookouts doing?!”

When the cultists noticed us—“Lighting!”—Amelia tossed a magical light up over her head.

“Heed me, servants of darkness!” Amelia began as if reciting poetry. “No matter what falsehoods you string together, there is but one truth! If even a shred of light remains in your heart, you must reconsider the path you tread! Choose righteousness, and choose it of your own free will!”



Noble words, but they weren't gonna work on anyone here...

"Get her!"

See?

On the sickly-looking ringleader's orders, his disciples charged us. They'd never make it up here on their own, but there was still no point in standing around waiting for them to come.

"Amelia, Gourry! It's time to split!"

"Why? We should take them on—"

"Terrain disadvantage," I said, interrupting her. "If just one of them can use attack magic, they could knock this structure out from under us! While you're chanting a spell of your own, no less!"

"But, but... to turn my back on evil..."

"Retreat, regroup, and retaliate when we're ready! That's how heroes roll, right?"

"Yes, you're quite right!" Amelia replied before quickly beginning a chant. "Levitation!"

Good thing she was easy to manipulate! Her spell carried the three of us up into the air.

"Magic?!"

"Curses! Don't let them escape! Outside!" the masked men rabbled.

"Hurry, Amelia!"

"I'm trying!"

Gourry rushing her wasn't helping. Levitation had good mobility, but it was fairly slow. It wasn't exactly sluggish, but its top speed wasn't much faster than a brisk walk. By the time we landed, our pursuers were already in view some distance behind us.

"Get into the forest!" Amelia shouted.

She then made a break for it without waiting for a response. Gourry and I

followed after her. The masked men pursued, shouting such classics as “There they are!” and “Get them!” (Not that they were obligated to come up with fresh new lines in a situation like this.) Amelia left the path, darting between trees.

“Hands, guys!” she called.

Gourry and I willingly took her outstretched hands. She then launched into an incantation. Wait, I knew this one— “Dark Mist!” she cried.

As the name suggested, the spell shrouded us in a shadowy haze. Visibility was virtually zero. You couldn’t see outside from within it, nor inside from without. It was the signature move of a certain assassin who’d targeted me once...

“When did you learn that, Amelia?!”

“It seemed pretty useful, so I’ve been working on it in secret.”

“D’aww... You make me wanna cry. What initiative! Gourry, you could learn from her.”

“Oh, c’mon. That’s—”

“Thataway! I can hear them!” came the voice of a pursuer, interrupting whatever Gourry was going to say. That shut us all up.

“Over here! I’m sure I heard voices from this direction!”

“What’s going on? What’s that giant black thing?!”

All the Dark Mist spell did was create a zone of darkness... but from the outside, in torchlight, I bet it did look like a massive black monster. It was frankly pretty suspicious!

“Inside... No, it’s too dark to see! It’s some kind of spell!”

“Ugh! Someone call Lady Mazenda!”

“She should be at the temple...”

Thus, while our pursuers fretted over the Dark Mist decoy, we made our escape in earnest.

“Hey, Lina, just how far do we have to flee?” Gourry asked about the time we

passed the second village after Mayin.

“Yeah, it’s almost noon... We’d better take a break somewhere...” Amelia whimpered, sounding exhausted. There were huge bags under her eyes.

“All right... we’ll take a load off in the next town.”

Of course, I was pretty tired myself. We’d walked through the night and then some to make our escape. Gourry was the only one of us who still looked alive on his feet. I wanted to put as much distance between us and the enemy as we could. Obviously, hiding out in the forest would have made it the hardest for our enemy to track us. But neither me or Amelia wanted to camp, so that was off the table.

“All that aside, Lina. Retreating and regrouping is fine, but how exactly are we supposed to retaliate now?” the spent Amelia asked.

“Wouldn’t it have been better to just plow on through and finish ’em off there?” Gourry offered.

Amelia nodded in agreement. The lack of sleep was clearly affecting her judgment.

“What good would crushing one little cultist gathering do? Their leader wasn’t even there.”

“That wasn’t their main base?!”

“Oh, please... Gourry, what kind of secret organization would make an obvious place like that their hideout? Even if it was secreted away in the trees, anyone who took a casual stroll through the mountains would’ve stumbled across that thing. Besides, someone even said Mazenda was ‘at the temple,’ remember?”

“D-Did someone say that?”

“Yes! And Mazenda didn’t come after us when Amelia attacked, meaning she wasn’t there at the time. Meaning their so-called temple is somewhere else. Meaning...”

“That wasn’t their home base after all...”

“Bingo. Now, as for our plans moving forward, step one is defeating Mazenda

and getting my magic back. You listening, Gourry?”

“Er...”

Yep, totally not listening.

“Come on, dude.”

“Wait, Lina, Amelia’s...”

“Amelia’s what?”

I turned to look, and... she was staggered some way behind us at a dead stop. Gourry ran back for her quickly.

“She’s okay!” he called. “She just fell asleep on her feet.”

Hey, now...

“Seems like she was really beat. Let’s just leave her be for a bit.”

“Hold your horses! We can’t ‘leave her be’ in a place like this! C’mon! Amelia! Wake up, Amelia!”

I walked over and shook her a few times before she finally opened her eyes.

“Ah... Lina?”

“Not good at all-nighters, huh, Amelia?”

“Yeah... I just can’t... really take the... zzz...”

I figured.

“Welp, looks like you’re carrying her, Gourry.”

“Zzz... Zzz...”

“Hey! Don’t you pretend to be asleep on me, big guy! Darn it... we don’t have time for this now!”

“No... we really don’t,” Gourry said, suddenly snapping into serious mode. He’d even drawn his sword.

I sensed the presence a moment after he did... I must have been more tired than I thought.

“An enemy?” Amelia asked, waking as she noticed it too.

Then came a rustling from amongst the trees nearby.

“Lina, listen closely,” Gourry said in a quiet voice. “Take Amelia and get out of here. I’ll hold them off.”

“Wait! Hang on, Gourry! Where’s this coming from?”

“They seem to be an exceptional opponent. You can’t use magic and Amelia is exhausted. I can probably make it out alive on my own, at least, but...”

“My, what fine instincts you have,” called a reedy male voice from between the trees. I looked in that direction, but saw nothing.

“A good villain would show himself!” Amelia shouted, but the voice ignored her.

“Picking a fight with our organization, even while we were away, was indeed rather bold... Too bad for you we returned shortly after you ruined the rally. Of course, you’d have died either way... Heh heh heh.”

“Gilfa, don’t tell them all that,” said another voice, its speaker stepping forward.

It was a werebeast. He looked a little like a lizardman, but there were some subtle differences. There was a rather large hump on his back, suggesting he was a fusion of human and black whorl snake. He stood about a head taller than Gourry and was carrying a naked greatsword in one hand.

“Heh heh heh. Don’t be rude, Vedul. I want them to know who it is that’s about to kill them,” the still unseen voice of Gilfa chuckled.

“Why bother? We were merely ordered to track down and kill them. That’s all we need to do,” Vedul replied as he slowly approached.

At that, Gourry swiftly sheathed his sword and withdrew a pin from his pocket.

He’s going straight for the Sword of Light?!

The Sword of Light was the legendary weapon that had slain Zanaaffar, the beast that had destroyed Sairaag, once known as the City of Magic. The sword magically formed a blade by channeling the will of its wielder—a blade powerful enough to cut down even demons. Unbelievable as it might seem, Gourry was

the proud heir to this fabled weapon. The fact that he was resorting to it right off the bat suggested these two foes weren't to be trifled with.

"Be careful, Lina! Amelia!" Gourry called without taking his eyes off Vedul. "There's three of them! Don't let your guard down!"

Huh?!

"Oho! Incredible. You hear that, Vedul? He was able to sense Grouz in hiding there," Gilfa said, his voice calm as could be...

Except it sounded like it was coming from where Vedul was standing. I squinted in the midday sun, but all I could see was the lizardman there. It didn't look like ventriloquism either, so where in the world was Gilfa?

Vedul's body pulsed, filling with power. Just then...

"Flare Arrow!" Amelia suddenly struck, apparently having been chanting a spell all this time.

Vrrroosh! Seemingly caught off guard, Vedul took several of the arrows. But the moment he did, he charged straight for Gourry!

"Light, come forth!" the blond swordsman roared, drawing his brilliant blade in one smooth motion.

He then slashed through both Vedul's greatsword and Vedul himself... or... he *should* have.

"Tch!" Instead, he drew back with a large gash across his iron serpent scale breastplate.

"Hah! Look, Vedul! The Sword of Light! I don't know how skilled he is with it, but it's superior to any sword you might carry. It could even cut through my shadows!" Gilfa's voice rang out, so cheerfully it was uncanny.

It seemed the moment Gourry drew the Sword of Light, multiple blades of darkness had lashed out from Vedul's shadow on the ground. As he drew back, Gourry had used the Sword of Light to bat them away... and Vedul's greatsword had grazed him in the process.

"They seemed to be surprised too, however... I'm sorry to say you'll need better spells than that to harm Vedul here. He's just built that tough."

Did he have natural magic resistance on par with a lesser demon? I'd fought a werebeast like that before...

"Shut up," the lizardman said, scolding Gilfa again for his loquaciousness.

"Oh, don't be like that, Vedul. If I hadn't used my shadows just now, you'd be missing your sword. It may not have been the only casualty, either..."

Wait... Was Gilfa a shadowmaster?!

"Even if you're right, I have no way to repay the favor."

"Well, that much is true..."

As the two bickered, Vedul again rushed Gourry. But Gilfa... even if he was a shadowmaster, was it really possible to talk through someone's shadow like that?

"His shadow, Master Gourry!" Amelia called out.

"Got it!" Gourry responded without missing a beat.

He then charged forward, thrusting the Sword of Light at Vedul's shadow on the ground. *No, Gourry!* He had it back up a second later, catching a descending strike from Vedul on the backswing. He sliced the greatsword right in half, but the second he did... the werebeast buried his left fist in Gourry's gut!

"Gah!"

"Gourry!"

Gourry flew back with Vedul in hot pursuit. He managed to right himself and ready the Sword of Light almost instantly. This time, he was the one driving Vedul back. Dude's sword was useless now, after all.

"Goodness... Watch yourself, Vedul. We'll have to ask Grouz for help at this rate."

"I think we must," the werebeast said with a grim nod.

"Was I wrong?!" Amelia gasped. She'd apparently thought that Gilfa was literally hiding in Vedul's shadow...

"Lina! Amelia! Get going already! I can sort this out on my own!" Gourry shouted, blood trickling from his mouth.

“But—”

“It’s just a cut on my lip! I’m fine! Now go!”

“All right...” I managed to eke out.

“Lina?!” Amelia shouted.

“We’re not doing any good here! Your support spells aren’t working, and I... I’m just a burden!”

That was the cold truth. With my magic sealed away, I was dead weight.

“Lina...” she echoed.

“Gourry! We’re going!”

“Good! Be safe and I’ll see you soon! Amelia, watch out for Lina!” Gourry said, then smiled confidently at Vedul. “Now, let’s continue. And you might as well call him out... this third member of your team.”

“Very well! Come out, Grouz!”

At Vedul’s cry, something came flying out of the forest... but Amelia and I never saw what.

“Lina...”

“...”

Amelia and I were making our way through the woods. We’d left Gourry behind and followed the main road for a while before entering this forest along the way.

“Lina?”

“Oh... sorry, I’m just feeling kind of muddled,” I responded, my voice hushed. “I just... need to figure out what to do.”

I needed to find a way to beat Mazenda and get my magic back. She seemed too tough for me to beat in any mundane fashion. And if I sent Amelia after her, she’d just end up like me. We needed Gourry for any plausible anti-Mazenda strategies.

“Anyway... Anyway, let’s hide out awhile and wait for our chance to find Gourry. I’m sure he’s fine. We just need to regroup.”

“Sorry, but I won’t give you the time,” called a familiar voice from in front of us.

“Ugh!” I bit my lip.

A red robe and matching cape... It was the guy who’d led the assembly last night. His face was unassuming, but I couldn’t get a read on his skill.

“Despite how I look, I, Balgumon, am the organization’s number two... You humiliated me by pulling that stunt on my watch, so I’ll prove myself by destroying you personally.”

“The organization’s number two,” huh? So they didn’t think of themselves as a cult...

“Thanks but no thanks,” I said, drawing my shortsword.

Despite appearances, I’m pretty decent with a blade. I could take four or five normal guys without even busting out the old spellbook. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but if this guy was just your average sorcerer, I figured I stood a pretty good chance against him.

Okay! Let’s make it happen!

“Amelia! Support me!” I shouted as I ran at the guy. I could hear her chanting behind me—chanting a spell I knew quite well.

Ah, so that’s what she’s up to...

“Heh! Try me!” Balgumon cried, beginning a chant of his own.

Amelia finished first, releasing her spell at my back.

“Die!” I screamed as I jumped at Balgumon.

An instant later, the area was swallowed in a searing flash of light.

“Ugh!” Balgumon wailed as his retinas were scorched.

Amelia had let loose a maximum-brightness, zero-duration Lighting spell behind me. I’d anticipated her move, and ducked to the side just as I reached Balgumon. *Nice one!* The moment the light receded, I closed the rest of the

distance. *Got him!* I swung my shortsword with perfect timing (if I do say so myself)... but only caught air.

“What?!” Balgumon, despite the fact that he should’ve been blinded, dodged me effortlessly.

Flustered, I moved to pursue. He pulled back, as if he really could see me, and began another chant. Maybe he was just pretending to have lost his sight? But if that were the case, why didn’t he take advantage of it and fight back?

“Lina!”

The moment I heard Amelia’s voice, I felt an approaching threat overhead...

“Ngh!”

I jumped to the side just as a flash of something silver whizzed straight down to the right of my face. If I’d been a single second later, my head would’ve been split like a watermelon.

“There’s another one of you?!” I shouted, getting some distance in a panic.

“Tch. Didn’t finish her.”

My attacker was a werebeast brandishing a longsword. He resembled a werewolf, but there were some slight differences. Probably a mix of a few different species.

“Feltis, eh? Don’t interfere,” Balgumon boasted, interrupting his own spell again.

“Are your eyes all right?”

“Yeah. I can make out shapes now.”

As they spoke, the werebeast gradually closed in on me while Balgumon drew back.

“Ugh! Amelia! Now’s not the time to be shy!” I called.

“Understood!” she called back, starting another chant.

All right, it was time to bring out the big guns! But now... Balgumon was dashing full-speed at Amelia. Was he really only pretending to be blinded?!

“Amelia!”

The werebeast had me checked, so I couldn’t move to help her. She was just gonna have to tough this one out on her own! She aborted the spell she was chanting, struck a fighting pose...

“Don’t worry, Lina! I can handle a common villain or two! I’ll show him the power of justice— Urgh!”

...And promptly lost consciousness as she took a knee to the gut from Balgumon. So much for toughing it out! Damn!

“Don’t move!” Balgumon threatened, grabbing her from behind.

Okay, what now? C’mon, Lina, think...

“How naive,” I said, opting for the bluff. “I know, even if I listen to you, you’re still gonna kill me in the end anyway... so do you really think I’m just gonna do what you say?”

At my words, a smile appeared on Balgumon’s face. “Hold on, now. I have another option for you. But first, let me ask you this. Are you the sorcerer whose magic Mazenda sealed?”

“That’s right,” I answered, still keeping my sword up.

“One other thing, then. This girl called you Lina... Would you be Lina Inverse?”

“Most likely,” I said casually enough.

Not to brag, but my reputation precedes me. I get this kind of thing all the time. As a beautiful first-rate swordsman and virtuoso sorcerer who crushes evil and saves the weak, you bet I’m famous! (Whoops! I ended up bragging!) “In that case... I’ll spare your life. I’ll also talk to Mazenda and have the seal removed. In exchange, you’re going to help us out.”

Ah. I knew this was coming...

“Hmm...” I mumbled.

I’d personally rather die than work with these jerks, but I couldn’t just let them kill Amelia. Moreover, getting myself killed here with her wouldn’t benefit anyone... That left me no other option. I took a breath, opened my mouth, and

— “Ah, I finally caught you. I’ve been looking everywhere, Master Feltis,” called a lilting voice from behind me.

“It’s you! That damned monk! I can’t believe you chased me down this far!” Feltis roared.

Whoa, he sounded *big* mad. Just who was he talking to?

2: Life Is a Series of Meetings and Partings

I turned around to see a priest of modest height and build standing there. He looked about twenty years old, give or take, with dark hair. He was wearing a rather typical set of black vestments and carrying the kind of pewter staff you could buy anywhere. I suppose he was good-looking enough, but there was a very out-of-place smile on his otherwise unremarkable face.

“Who is he?” Balgumon asked Feltis, which told me the new arrival wasn’t part of their gang.

“Someone I met earlier, as it happens... someone I’ve been wanting to cut to pieces,” Feltis hissed as he loped forward, his eyes alight with hatred.

I wasn’t sure what was going on here, but I didn’t like the idea of getting dragged into it. I decided I’d back off and give the boys some room to play.

“I didn’t come here to kill you, Master Feltis. Why don’t we both endeavor to keep it that way?” petitioned the priest.

“No deal. I wanna kill you so bad I can taste it. Let me warn you, you wretched monk... it’s going to take a damned powerful spell to work on *me*!”

“Ah, then I suppose you leave me no choice. In that case...” His bright smile unflinching, the priest began chanting.

Huh? That spell...

“Not a chance!” Feltis cried as he took off in a dash.

He closed the gap in an instant, bringing his longsword down on the priest! *Whoom!* There was a howl, but... it was the werebeast who was sent flying back!

“What?!” I shouted in surprise.

What had knocked the guy back was a barrier—the kind of magical forcefield that protected a caster during their chant. Generally, the more powerful a spell was, the more powerful the barrier it produced... but even the strongest known

attack spell, Dragon Slave, only created a field that could just barely block a Fireball from a third-rate sorcerer or slow the attack of a first-rate warrior. I'd never seen one that could completely repel someone rushing you like that.

Yet the barrier from this spell had utterly blown the werebeast back. And when I listened closely to the words the priest was chanting... *No way!* I quickly took my distance from Feltis.

"Wh... What was that?!" the werebeast howled as he managed to sit up.

But by then, the priest was already pointing at him. Next, he incanted the words of power...

"Blast Bomb!"

Vreeeeeeeee! The air itself seemed to shriek as several dozen balls of light appeared around the priest, then tore through the air in the direction he was pointing. Two things happened simultaneously: I threw myself to the ground, and the light of the Blast Bomb rained down on the werebeast.

Pfwosssssh! An audible shockwave rang out, followed by a blast of heat. If I hadn't covered my ears, it would have obliterated my eardrums.

"Ngh..."

After a moment, I slowly picked myself up. Feltis was nowhere to be seen now—just a molten crater in the ground where he'd been standing. Dude must've been vaporized instantly. Jeez, man, overkill much?

Hey, wait a minute!

As soon as I recalled Balgumon and Amelia, I quickly looked around for them too. They were nowhere in sight. Since the spell hadn't been aimed at them, however, I doubted they were harmed. Probably blown away, at worst.

"Dear, oh dear... It seems the other one escaped," piped up a scatterbrained sort of voice.

I turned and saw the priest standing there, scratching his head and looking mildly distressed.

"Oh well..." he whispered indifferently, then turned his gaze on me. "Ah, pardon the imposition, but might you happen to know the dwelling place of the

gang those men belonged to?”

His manner was entirely unguarded and totally free of malice... which somehow made it creepier.

“You...” I said, staring straight at him. “You’re Lei Magnus, aren’t you?!”

The priest faceplanted.

“What on earth would make you say that?!” he said as he propped himself back up on his staff.

“Hah! It’s simple. There’s only one person I know of who can use the Blast Bomb, and that’s Lei Magnus!”

“I beg your pardon! The sorcerer Lei Magnus lived over a thousand years ago!”

“Oh, please! What’s a millennia or two between friends? You could power through that, easy!”

“Power through *how*, praytell?! Moreover, I do have a name of my own. It’s Xellos.”

“Okay, fine... So, who are you, exactly?”

“A mysterious priest,” he responded simply.

Well... I had to give him that one. The nerve it takes to straight-up call yourself mysterious was indeed a mystery to me.

“And... who were those other guys?” I asked next.

“Enemies,” he answered casually. When I said nothing in response this time, he prompted, “You don’t believe me?”

“The enemy of my enemy isn’t necessarily my friend, y’know?”

“Ah, too true!”

“More importantly, I decided a while back never to trust priests or the overly-polite type.”

“I see... What an aberrant life you must have lived.”

Shut up, you!

“Now, all joking aside,” I offered, “why don’t you tell me all about those amulets—or rather, those talismans you’ve got there?”

“To what are you referring, exactly?” Xellos said, gazing innocently into the distance.

“Those talismans! Right there! The ones attached to the pendant dangling from your neck, your belt buckle, and the bracelets on both of your wrists! The ones you’re using to enhance your magic capacity!”

“Oh? You could tell that, could you?” he conceded readily enough this time.

Enhancing one’s magic capacity was a field of research that many a sorcerer had tackled throughout the ages, though I’d never heard of anyone actually succeeding. I’d dabbled in it myself once, but I’d come to the conclusion that it was impossible to accomplish with spells and gestures alone. This priest, however, had apparently managed to do it somehow with ease.

“I scrutinized the gestures and the short chant you performed before unleashing that Blast Bomb. The chant sounded like it was for enhancement... But if that was all it took to increase one’s capacity, researchers would’ve discovered it ages ago. There must be something else at play here.”

“And you believe it to be the talismans?”

“You betcha! So what are they, exactly? They can’t be ordinary gemstones.”

“Really, I wish I knew...” he said, scratching his head awkwardly. “They were a gift, you see.”

It didn’t seem he’d given it any thought beyond that. (Speaking of airheads, I found myself hoping Gourry was okay.) “All I know is that they’re called Demon’s Blood, and they represent, respectively, Ruby-Eye, Dark Star, Chaotic Blue, and Death Fog—our own Dark Lord, and three from other worlds.”

“Dark Lords of other worlds?!” I parroted in shock. “H-Hang on! That’s, like, a *lot*! Are you serious?”

“Well, that’s what I was told.”

“By... whom?”

“Obviously, that’s a secret,” he said with a coy waggle of his finger.

Boy, it's creepy when grown men do that...

"Whoever it was, they must be pretty impressive... Oh, I know! Sell those puppies to me, will ya?!"

"What?! Why would I do that?!" Xellos shouted in response to my stroke of genius.

"Because I want them, duh! I'll give you five-fifty. Isn't that generous of me? You could buy a nice rapier with money like that!"

But my boy Xellos replied with a little grin, "Multiply that by ten thousand and we have a deal."

"Okay, sold!"

"Excuse me...?" he stammered, seemingly stunned by my eager acceptance.

"Five-fifty times ten thousand is five and half million, right?" With that, I dropped my bag and began rifling through it, pulling out magical items as I went. "Let's see. One bundle of claura root, one pack of meltia herbs, a ladeline ring, and a lemtite rock... five bags of mustal powder... Oh, and it's your lucky day! I'll throw in a bonus of three kulfa medicine balls! Head to the nearest large city and sell these off. Even if you get lowballed all to hell, you should net five and a half million—easy. Now, I believe we have ourselves a deal!"

"Ah... er... well..."

"You can't set the price and then say you don't want to sell! C'mon!" I declared after catching the hesitant look in Xellos's eye.

"But... well..." He continued to falter, but I wasn't going to let him off the hook.

"I said you *can't*."

...

"Very well..."

Good boy!

"I did say we'd have a deal, so... here you are..." With an expression of resignation, he removed the four talismans and begrudged them to me. "You

must arrange them in a cross formation on your body and recite the amplification chant before the spell you wish to use. It goes like this—

“Don’t worry. I memorized it when you recited it before.”

“Aha,” Xellos said with appreciation. “That’s quite impressive. It is a short chant, but difficult to memorize with just one recitation.”

“No big deal. I studied this kind of stuff myself long ago,” I explained as I put on the talismans. They weren’t exactly my style, but hey.

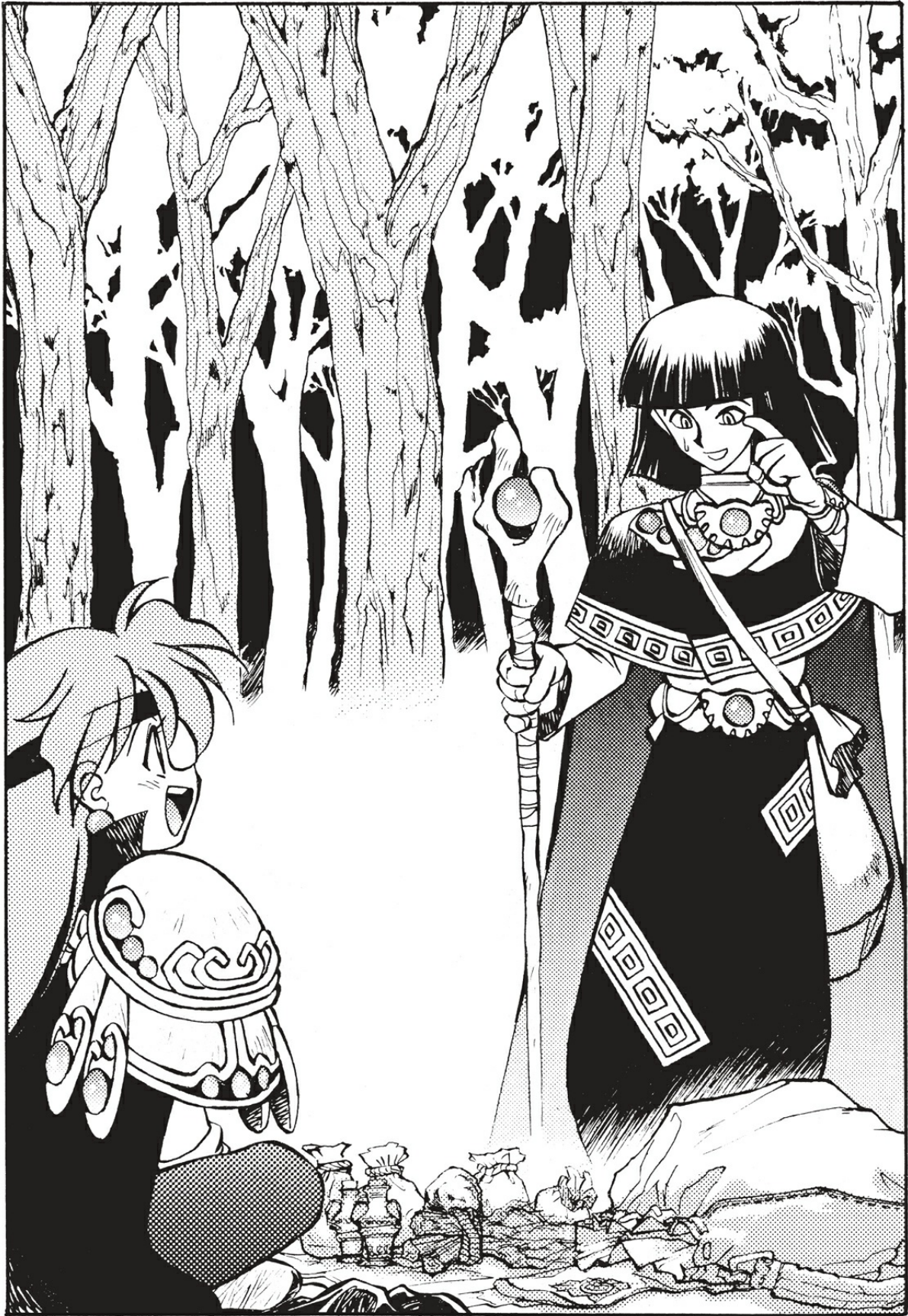
“You studied it yourself, did you? I see. Are you a sorcerer, then?”

“What did you think I was?!”

“A wandering eccentric.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Pardon, but if you *are* a sorcerer... then why spare the use of magic in that fight before?”



“Geh!” Damn, going right for the jugular? I wrestled for a minute over whether or not to tell him, but ultimately decided that hiding my lack of magic wouldn’t change anything. “You see, my magic’s been... sealed.”

“Oho. Is there someone truly capable of doing such things?”

“Yeah. A member of their gang. A lady by the name of Mazenda—”

“Whaaaaat?!” he shouted suddenly. “Miss Mazenda? She’s working with them?!”

“Wait, what?!” I shouted in turn, leaning forward. “Y-You mean you know her?!”

“Well, you could say that,” he confessed, scratching his head. “Though I fear we’re enemies at present.”

“Hmm... this all seems pretty complicated.”

“Indeed. We really mustn’t stand around here talking all day. Would you accompany me to the nearest village before we continue this little discussion?”

“Good idea. I am pretty hungry,” I said, agreeing readily enough.

“I see... what a terrible predicament,” Xellos said, nodding as he sipped his hot soup—visibly less concerned than I would have cared for.

I’d explained how I ended up in this situation while we took a late lunch at a small eatery in a nearby village. The establishment was practically deserted, perhaps given the off hour.

“But now I’m forced to wonder...” Xellos continued. “If your magic is sealed, why did you bother to buy my talismans?”

“Well, I’ve been testing my magic every day since this started and it seems like, slowly but surely, the seal is weakening. I tried casting a Lighting spell the day it happened and got nothing. But I tried again yesterday and got a candle’s worth of light. Of course, it went out right away, which meant attack magic was still off the table, but... With these talismans, I might be able to swing some novice spells.”

"I see. Still, I wonder why the seal is weakening. Could it be that Miss Mazenda's spell was shoddy, or is your magic capacity simply that remarkable?"

"Either way, I need every trick I can get my hands on. Until I can reunite with Gourry, at least," I whispered, my eyes focused on the empty bowl before me. "I mean, knowing him, he's probably getting along just fine... I'm more worried about Amelia."

"I'm sure she's all right."

"And what makes you say that?"

"Let's see... How should I put this?" he pondered, now taking a sip of his hot milk. "Given the situation as I happened to stumble upon it, it certainly seemed they could have killed her on the spot with ease. That man had a knife to her throat, did he not? The fact that he took her with him despite the burden she represented suggests he has bigger plans for her."

"You mean as bait?"

"Precisely," he replied with a firm nod.

I sighed.

"Look, I'd figured that much out already. What I'm really concerned about is... even if she's alive, she might not be *okay*, if you catch my drift," I said, reaching for the after-meal tea the server had finally brought us.

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about in that regard," he said airily enough. "Miss Mazenda can simply seal the girl's magic, so they're unlikely to feel obliged to crush her voice box or anything along those lines. Now, if I were the enemy, I wouldn't dispose of her until *after* I used her as bait to get rid of the rest of you... And if their end goal is to kill her, the best way to do so would be as part of a ritual."

"A ritual?!" I exclaimed with my teacup halfway to my mouth.

"Yes. They are a cult, after all, and cultists really are so very fond of rituals. More importantly, this cult is one of the Dark Lord, meaning their ritual of choice is..."

"Human sacrifice?!" I found myself shouting.

“Precisely. Typically, one wants their human sacrifice to be as pure and unsullied as possible. That means they’re unlikely to harm your friend unnecessarily. But, you know...” he said, the smile on his face taking a troubled tinge. “I have to wonder if they really think demons do the bidding of humans just because they worship them.”

“Well, a lot of people just want freedom from restraints and consequences, and they need a higher power to get them there,” I said with another sigh. “God-worship tends to frown on the whole ‘do whatever you want’ ethos, so I’m sure they figure, why *not* try the Dark Lord?”

“Ah, I suppose...” Xellos said with a sober expression.

“But... what if they haven’t thought about using her as a hostage *before* the sacrifice?”

“Unlikely. Klotz is a thoroughly scrupulous type.”

“Klotz?”

Where had I heard that name before?

“He’s the head of their organization... the cult leader, if you will.”

Aha, of course. The guy Balgumon had mentioned at the rally.

“So, how are you involved with these people again?” I asked.

“Well, I had a minor scuffle with them over a certain item back in Lyzeille. It’s much too long a story to recount here, but in brief, Klotz and the others managed to make off with said item and have since hidden it away in their base.”

“I don’t think you had to be *that* brief... but okay. What was the thing you were fighting over?”

“Ahahaha, well... let’s just say it’s nothing serious,” he claimed, averting his eyes while he took another sip of hot milk.

“Okay, look. For someone like *you* to get into it with people like *them*, it’s gonna be something pretty dang serious. Just spill the beans already.”

“Er, well, it was, you see...” Xellos mumbled before eventually whispering to

me, “A certain manuscript.”

“A *manuscript*?”

Wait a minute—

“Hold it right there!” I said, bolting to my feet.

“Miss Lina, please! Keep your voice down!” Xellos urged, quickly trying to calm me.

I took my seat once more. I could see the old man who ran the eatery staring at us suspiciously, so I lowered my voice before saying anything else.

“You don’t just mean any manuscript, do you?” I asked quietly.

“It is indeed... a *certain* manuscript, yes.”

“The Claire Bible...” I whispered. He nodded firmly in response.

The Claire Bible was a legend among sorcerers. It was said to be a tome from another world that held the secrets of magic and demons. The original was somewhere out there, as were multiple “manuscripts,” each a partial, incomplete copy.

So when sorcerers spoke of “certain manuscripts,” that was usually what they were referring to—copies of parts of the Claire Bible. But while it was generally believed that the Claire Bible was real, there was no concrete proof it existed. Some people still alleged it was merely a legend.

I personally knew, however... that the Claire Bible was quite real.

I’d once visited the Kingdom of Dils with my older sister. The courtiers in the palace there told an interesting tale. They said they’d had a manuscript in their possession at one point, but that it was burned long ago. Nevertheless, they said, the contents of the manuscript were passed down from generation to generation among the royal sages... And guess who was lucky enough to hear a recitation?

I found the whole story pretty fishy though, so for kicks, I decided to cobble together two spells based on what I’d heard, and... one of them actually worked. That was Giga Slave, which called upon the greatest of all dark lords, the Lord of Nightmares, to bring forth the void into this world. It was even more

powerful than Dragon Slave, which itself was said to be the most destructive spell known to humanity.

If what I'd heard in Dils—and consequently, the existence of the Claire Bible itself—was pure fabrication, then my Giga Slave never should have worked. The fact that it *had* proved the book was real. That said, I never reported this to the sorcerers' council. A spell that could potentially destroy the world felt far too powerful to be known.

Still, just because the Claire Bible was real didn't mean any and every alleged manuscript was. The document Xellos and the others were fighting over could easily be a fraud.

"So... is this manuscript of yours the real deal?" I asked Xellos, my gaze performatively skeptical. "Maybe it's just a ploy by the village to drum up tourism."

"Ah, yes, that kind of ploy *is* rather common," he responded, seemingly unfazed. "Write down a few made-up spells, call it a legendary grimoire, and sell it to a collector for a high price... However, I assure you that's not what this is. Part of my certainty comes from... let's call it a sort of instinct. But most importantly, Master Klotz diverted a great number of his cultists to its theft. He even went so far as to attend the matter himself... which suggests a high degree of confidence on his part. Thus, I find it very likely that that article is genuine."

That all sounded pretty circumstantial to me... But there was more at play here than just the book's authenticity.

"So," I said, staring straight into Xellos's eyes, "just what's in this manuscript? And more importantly, what do you intend to do with it?"

"Hmm..." Xellos seemed to think hard for a minute. "My situation is... complicated, so I'm afraid I cannot disclose everything. But I can promise you this much: I will not use the manuscript for evil."

Yeah, I know. I'd have to be a real dum-dum to take a promise like that at face value. That said, Xellos and Klotz's gang did seem pretty dead set against each other... And without Gourry or my magic, I needed as many allies I could get right now.

“Okay. I won’t pry any more, then. Now... what do *they* intend to do with the manuscript?” I asked.

There, the smile on Xellos’s face weakened.

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I doubt it’s their goal to bring joy to all of humanity.”

“Probably not. Say... I’ve got a proposal.”

“You’d like to partner up?”

“Bingo. I don’t know where the enemies’ hideout is, but I can take you to a meeting place of theirs nearby. And in the meantime, I’d feel better having someone on my side.”

“Very well. Knowing that Miss Mazenda is working with them, I really must get involved.”

“What makes you say that, exactly?”

“That’s a secret,” Xellos said, pressing a finger over his lips.

And that’s how Xellos and I teamed up.

What the...?! I bolted upright in bed.

It was later that night. I’d reserved a room on the second floor of the inn under a fake name, and was fast asleep... until I was rudely awakened by a powerful sense of rage directed my way. I snatched up the sword I’d stashed under my pillow and reached for my cape hanging off the edge of the bed. Just then...

Bwooom! A powerful explosion shook the place.

“What?!” I threw on my cape and opened the door. The smell of burning wood and heat assaulted my face. “Ngh!”

Another explosion rocked the building. The heat intensified in a flash, and the stairway was awash in orange light. *Someone’s attacking the inn!* I realized. Long story short... they were probably after me and Xellos.

I ran back to my room, chanting a Levitation spell as I opened the window and

jumped out—

Crash!

“Ow, ow, ow...”

Oh, right... In my haste to get away, I’d forgotten that I couldn’t use my magic like usual. The Levitation I’d cast had given me a momentary floating sensation as I jumped, but that was all she wrote. Fortunately the bushes below cushioned my fall. I might’ve broken a leg otherwise.

Damn. I should’ve used those talismans, I lamented as I excavated myself from the brush.

And when I looked up... there she was, right in front of me.

“It’s been quite a while,” she said, her red lips curled into a slight smile. “Balgumon told me everything. You are *the* Lina Inverse, aren’t you?”

A hungry sort of light appeared in her eyes, and she took a quiet step closer to me.

“Amelia... Are Amelia and Gourry okay?” I asked, taking an uncertain step back.

I was a little intimidated by the pressure she was giving off. Let’s say it wasn’t just the tongues of fire licking their way up the inn that put sweat on my brow.

“The girl is fine,” she replied. “I assume she is, at least... I don’t know about the other.”

“Those werebeasts, Vedul and his buddies... They didn’t say anything?”

“Not that I’ve heard.” Mazenda took another step closer, her hair streaming behind her in the blazing wind. “I haven’t spoken to them... only Balgumon. But I was surprised when he mentioned your name. If I’d known that you were *that* Lina Inverse... rather than toying with you, I would have killed you on the spot.”

“Even so... setting the inn on fire isn’t exactly the most subtle MO,” I said, stopping in place.

At that comment, a puzzled expression crossed Mazenda’s face.

“That’s right...” she murmured. “Balgumon mentioned that there was a

strange priest with you. Did he perish in the fire?"

"No," I said with a slow shake of my head. "He's right there behind you."

"Heh," she scoffed with a low laugh. "What a ridiculous trick..."

"I fear it's no trick, Miss Mazenda."

"I-It can't be..." she muttered in disbelief.

She slowly turned around, her face nearly frozen, until her eyes fell upon the priest clad in a black robe.

"Xellos!" she exclaimed in a voice close to a shriek. "What... What are you doing here?!"

"Oh dear, shouldn't I be the one asking that? Heading up a Dark Lord cult, of all things... Honestly," Xellos said with an abashed smile. "You should have at least tried to learn what that cult leader of yours was trying to accomplish..."

"You mean, what Klotz brought back with him was—?!" she exclaimed... apparently having lost her cool so badly that she'd forgotten to speak politely of her own boss.

Xellos nodded firmly, then pronounced with his chipper smile, "A Claire Bible manuscript, yes. Which puts the two of us on opposing sides. But even if that weren't the case, I can think of other reasons I can't allow you to remain on the loose."

"What are you going to do?" Mazenda asked hoarsely, staggering backward. The absolute confidence she'd projected with me was completely absent with Xellos.

He smiled at the obviously terrified woman and said, "I think we both know the answer to that."

There, Mazenda let out a quiet yelp... then whipped around and hurled herself into the blaze that had swallowed the inn!

"Wait!" I cried out, but Xellos gently put a hand on my shoulder. "H-Hey, Xellos! What's going on here?!"

Rather than answer my question, he simply replied, "I'll take care of her."

“Huh?” I said, feeling very dumb in that moment.

“I mean to pursue Miss Mazenda.”

“Pursue her? Are you nuts?! She’s inside that inferno!”

“It will take more than that to kill me. Don’t worry.”

How am I not supposed to worry, exactly?!

“What matters is that I will pursue her and work something out.”

“For... what?”

“Reenabling your magic,” he said unflappably. “I’m sorry to be going so soon after our partnership agreement, but never fear. I will find her. Can you tell me where their meeting spot was?”

“Near... Near Mayin,” I found myself answering honestly.

“Very well. Now, I really must be going. I’m sure we’ll meet again quite soon.”

And with that, just as promised, Xellos plunged into the flames after Mazenda. Once both were out of sight, I was left standing alone in front of the blazing inn.

“What in the world is going on here?” I asked myself.

All I could do was gaze blankly up at the burning building. I hate to admit that the main thought on my mind was how funny it would be if I found their charred corpses pulled out of the ash the next day.

I set out the following morning after spending the night under the stars. It was a little after noon now, and I was casually walking down the road on my way to Mayin...

In disguise, of course. Taking a cue from one I’d used before, I’d improvised something simple. I changed into an ordinary village girl’s outfit and braided my hair behind me. Obviously the werebeasts or Balgumon would peg me instantly, but the vast majority of my pursuers had never seen me before. All they had to go on was “a sorcerer about fifteen or sixteen years old with chestnut hair.” This should be plenty to throw them off.

Still, I wasn't really a skirt sort of gal, and this getup left me feeling kinda naked...

Ideally from here, I'd meet up with Gourry, get my magic back thanks to Xellos's behind-the-scenes operations, then catch up with him again in Mayin... all while staying off the enemy's radar. I knew good and well, however, that things were never that easy. I'd cautiously tested out my new talismans after the hubbub last night and discovered I could manage a Fireball with their help. It was only as powerful as what a third-rate amateur could pull off, but still!

"You there!" a voice suddenly called from behind, interrupting my thoughts.

"Okay, here we go..." I sighed.

"What do you mean, 'here we go?'"

I turned and, just as I expected, found a group of five or so masked men staring me down. Even without my magic, I could probably take 'em... but if I brought the pain on these jokers, the werebeasts wouldn't be far behind, and they'd be a much tougher fight. I was hoping I could just talk my way out of this one instead.

"Identify yourself. Where are you going and why?" one of them asked, flashing a glimpse of his longsword.

"M-My name is Lily," I answered with a frightened look. "I'm delivering a package to Saillune..."

"That so?" the man hummed, looking me up and down with interest.

"Wait a minute. This girl looks familiar..." one of the other guys behind him piped up.

Urk! My stomach did a somersault. Could this be one of the bandits I'd beaten up before?

"Maybe I should give her a pat-down to be sure," he continued with a lecherous grin.

Oh, okay, he didn't recognize me. He was just some pervert who wanted an excuse to feel me up. Not that that was a promising turn of events... I had my usual outfit and cape, plus various magical items, stowed away in my backpack.

My shortsword, in its scabbard, was strapped to my person underneath. Removing my backpack would make it plain as day that I was hiding something under my clothes.

Ugh, in that case...

I snorted with laughter.

“What’s with her? Why the attitude?” the man said aggressively.

I replied curtly, my manner now icy, “Really... if you’re the best she has serving her, I can see why Mazenda called for my help.”

“Wh-What?!” the masked men panicked upon hearing that name. “What are you talking about?”

“We’re old friends, you see... She said she was in a bit of trouble and wanted my help.”

The men warily exchanged glances.

“Is... Is that true?”

“I guess I can’t make you believe me,” I said, then turned around and started striding back the way I came. As I passed by the masked men, I added, “I’ll be going home, then. That’s all right with you, I presume. Just be sure to let Mazenda know you sent me back.”

“W-Wait a minute, please!” the man begged, quickly stopping me. Seeing him and his goons flip instantly into deferential little toadies was pretty hilarious. “If you’re telling the truth, she’ll kill us! But you could just be bluffing, so...”

“Let’s go ask Mazenda herself, then. Where is she?”

“Well... we don’t really...” the masked man stammered.

I let out a big sigh. “Quite a conundrum. Listen, here’s what we’ll do. I’ll go to Mayin and get a room at an inn. And the next time you see Mazenda, you tell her Melty’s waiting for her there.”

“Wait a minute,” one of the men said, eyeing me suspiciously. “You just said your name was Lily...”

Erk!

“And that you had a package...”

“You idiot. You bought such an obvious lie?” I blustered, keeping my voice even despite my internal mortification. “I was just trying to take your measure.”

“I... I see...”

The men seemed to accept that explanation easily enough. Gotta love third-rate goons!

“Shall we escort you to Mayin, then?” one of the masked men offered.

“I’m really kind of a loner,” I said with a dismissive wave of my hand. “Now stop wasting my time and get back to patrolling. And don’t forget to pass my message to Mazenda.”

And so, I resumed my journey.

Finally, I made it to Mayin. I was glad to be back in enemy territory, but I still didn’t have anything I needed for a proper counterstrike. I never did run into Gourry, and not only had I not met back up with Xellos, I hadn’t recovered any of my magic. That meant Mazenda was still alive, and possibly worse, that Xellos was a dead man for his troubles...

Granted, the great Lina Inverse wasn’t about to sit around doing nothing in the face of hardship! Nuh-uh! Instead...

“Welcome, my comrades!” a man’s voice resonated in the darkness.

I’d once again infiltrated the cultists’ meeting place in the mountains near town. It was now five days after I’d first arrived in Mayin. I’d come here every night, hoping to catch another meeting, and I’d at last struck paydirt. I’d snuck into the place the same way I had with Gourry and Amelia. Thankfully, with the talismans’ amplification, I was able to get a Levitation spell working.

And my reason for doing all this, you ask? To find the enemies’ real base of operations.

A new man was standing where Balgumon had been last time. He was on the young side, slender, and raven-haired. I guess he was more handsome than

not... but the glint in his eyes was what really set him apart. I couldn't deny the dude had charisma. His sonorous voice, his smooth gestures, and his graceful mannerisms... All of it seemed calculated to win hearts and minds. Definitely an upgrade, cult-leader-wise, from Balgumon.

Clad in a black robe, he spread his arms out with a flourish and thundered, "Rejoice, my friends! I have found what we were seeking!"

"Raaaaah!" A joyous cry from the crowd echoed into the night.

"Yes! I have at last acquired a means to wield true power, true fear! We can now show those who serve the foolish gods, those who dismiss us as an evil cult, that *we* are the true masters of this world!"

"Raaaaah!" An even louder cheer rang out through the arena.

"We'll begin with Saillune!"

Huh? My brow unwittingly furrowed at the mention of that name.

"They fancy themselves 'the holy city,' those white-magic-using Ceipheed-worshippers! Destroying them shall be our first show of power to the world!"

Hey, hey, hey, man! I think you're biting off more than you can chew here! I know evil cults basically run on empty promises, but if you have to backpedal on that one later, it's gonna royally piss some people off! Wait...

Crap. *That's* what they wanted the manuscript for. Good grief... Not that it needed saying, but trying to destroy Saillune was some pretty serious big baddery. Not like their antics had all been family-friendly before now, of course.

As I processed all of this, Klotz moved to another subject.

"Several days ago, a group of heretics interrupted our meeting. Fear not! My dear friend Bishop Balgumon has apprehended one of the interlopers, and the other two will fall into our hands soon enough!"

It sounded like Gourry was still at large, safe and sound. That was a relief.

Klotz's speech then went on to cover the meaninglessness of the labels good and evil, human potential, and all kinds of other stuff I didn't give a damn about. He eventually wound down, however, and the congregation moved into a hymn beseeching protection from Ruby-Eye. After that, the meeting

adjourned. Klotz and his retainers left the central arena. As the torches began to go out, one by one, the followers meandered toward the exit.

Now!

I quickly cast another Levitation spell and, under cover of darkness, seamlessly joined the swarm of cultists. Of course, I'd come disguised for the occasion. I was dressed like a male villager, complete with a sack-mask over my head. There wasn't much I could do about my voice, but if someone stopped to question me, my plan was to play the role of "boy who came with his parents and got separated."

Hah! Who says being short and flat-chested doesn't pay? Okay, yeah, not really worth celebrating...

Anyhoo, I mingled with the mob and made my way toward the exit in hopes of finding Klotz's crew outside.

I was basically unarmed right now. I would've stood out too much with my sword on my hip, so I'd stashed it in town with the rest of my stuff. I'd kept the talismans on, though, mostly hidden under my other clothing. As for the bracelets on both wrists, I'd wrapped those with bandages. It wasn't the most convincing outfit in the world, but it was the best I could manage.

Given all that, I couldn't exactly try anything reckless. The plan was just to shadow Klotz and company back to their hideout and confirm its location.

Once I slipped into the arena, I realized they didn't have much in the way of security, but... I was stymied once we got outside. It seemed the cultists had a specific route they used to return to the village, and everyone started to walk off en masse. The road branched here and there, but there were guards in red masks keeping watch along the way.

I didn't have much choice but to follow the herd. Several of the cultists were holding torches as they headed for the village. I walked along with them until I had the chance to steal away in some nearby bushes. Then I slowly made my way back to the arena.

I found a good place to hide in the brush and watched things for a time before I saw movement. A number of shadows emerged from a small exit, different

from the ones the other cultists had used. There were about ten figures all told. Several carried lights, essentially just staffs with a low-powered Lighting cast upon them. I recognized one of them as Klotz.

After a while, the group slowly began heading deeper into the mountains, in the opposite direction from the village.

Okay! I psyched myself up, waited for them to get a bit ahead, then followed their lights.

I couldn't use a light myself, which meant I only had the moonlight see by. It was slow going, but there was a narrow path, at least, so I stuck to that. Cutting through the underbrush would make it way harder to explain myself if they happened to notice me, after all.

After a good bit of walking, I noticed someone had stopped on the path up ahead of me. I'd been spotted for sure, but turning back now would be like shouting, "Yup! I'm a spy!" So I kept on walking as if I hadn't noticed the guy. Naturally, I was still wearing my baghead mask.

And eventually...

"Hey! You, there!"

When I heard him call out to me, I flinched as if surprised.

"Y-Yes?" I asked, turning to face the guy.

It was one of the men in red. He was quite tall, standing maybe a head taller than Gourry. Since I didn't recognize his voice, I assumed he hadn't recognized me either.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

"I... I got separated from my father... and then I saw the light, so I just..." I said haltingly.

"Just a lost kid, huh?" he replied with a sigh. Sounded like he bought it. "This is the wrong way, though. The village is back there. But I can't send a kid down a dark mountain road alone... Hey, whose kid are you, anyway?"

"Huh?!" was all I could say in response to the unexpected question.

“Don’t squeal like that, son. I’m asking you where you live. I’ll walk you home.”

Wait, what? Since when did evil cultists walk lost little kids home?! Your compassion is touching, buddy, but really inconvenient for me right now! I shouted internally.

“Please, sir... If you can just give me a torch or something, I can make it back on my own... I’m not a kid anymore, you know?”

“Anyone who claims to ‘not be a kid anymore’ is definitely still a kid. Your voice hasn’t even changed yet, boy. It’d be one thing any other night... but you heard what he said at the rally. I can’t let you go back on your own. There’ve been suspicious characters roaming around lately.”

Suspicious characters, huh?! This kettle has a few things to call you, Mr. Pot!

While we were talking, the lights from Klotz’s cohort moved down the road and out of sight.

Not good... I have to get out of this somehow... A plan along the lines of “screw it, bowl the guy over, steal his outfit, and follow after Klotz & Co.,” crossed my mind, but I didn’t have a good read on how tough this dude was. Moreover, even if I did manage to find the enemy base that way, I’d be making things harder for myself in the long run. Conclusion: just keep playing along for now.

“Sure thing, sir. Just to the village gate, then. I’m sure you’ve got lots to do anyway.”

“Hah. I guess you’re not such a kid after all,” the man said, then quietly began casting a spell. A small light appeared at the tip of his staff, dimly illuminating the mountain road.

“Wow... You can use magic?” I asked with a tone of overt awe.

“Sure can,” he responded, puffing out his chest with pride. “Okay, then let’s go. Oh, wait... You should probably take off your mask first.”

“Huh?” I froze up unconsciously.

“You heard me. Take off your mask. Even if we do have a light, that thing’s got

to make it hard to see. You'll end up tripping over a tree root or something."

"Y-You're not gonna take off *your* mask, sir?" I said, trying to change the subject.

"Oh... me?" he said rather forlornly. "You don't wanna see my face."

A werebeast, perhaps? Now that I got a good look at him, the shape of the face behind his mask did seem a little unusual...

"All right. Come on now. Take it off," he said, and reached toward me.

Okay, Lina, what's the plan? But just as I was thinking that...

Bwooom! A far-off explosion shook the night sky.

"What was that?!" the man shouted, whipping around.

Off in the distance—in the direction I assumed Klotz's cohort had gone—came a flash of fire. I had no idea what was happening, but that had to be their base!

"Sorry, kid!" the man said, pressing the lighted staff into my hand. "No time to walk you back now! Just follow the path back to the village! There'll be a few forks in the road, but don't take them! Got it?"

"Wait!" I found myself calling out to the man as he turned to run.

"What?"

"Er... what's your name?"

"Duclis. See you again!" he said, then disappeared into the night.

He was my enemy, for sure... but not one I was especially eager to fight. Still, I couldn't just sit around here! I hid the staff he'd given me in the nearby underbrush, then took off running in the direction of the fiery flash.

At last, I arrived. I could make out what looked like bits of a structure dotting the slope here and there... I wasn't sure if it was built into the mountain, or a building buried by a mudslide that had been found and repurposed.

Come to think of it... this was old Principality of Letidius territory. The country had collapsed five hundred years ago, but you could still find its remains here and there from time to time.

There was one proper entrance to this place, and I didn't see much in the way of lookouts. Some distance away from it was a gaping hole in the wall, from which poured magical light. It seemed like this was a residence for the cult's higher-ups, meaning there probably weren't all that many people here—especially relative to the buried building's size.

Now's my chance to get inside... Of course, a reckless charge into an enemy stronghold wasn't gonna be a cakewalk... but that explosion earlier told me they already had an enemy in their midst. Xellos, maybe? Had he chased Mazenda here? There was also a chance Gourry had infiltrated their fortress, been discovered, and was now under magical fire.

Ugh! This is no time to be measuring out probabilities! I scolded myself. Still, if whoever caused that explosion was one of my people, I couldn't afford to just sit back and see what happened next.

I leaped out of the brush I'd been hiding in and made a beeline for the entrance. I avoided the hole in the wall with the magical light coming from it... That whole setup had "trap" written all over it. And from what I could tell, there wasn't anyone stationed around the entrance proper.

Masking my footsteps, I headed inside. The entryway seemed designed to welcome visitors with marble pillars on either side, now half buried in the dirt. Beyond them was an open square portal, which had probably held a door back before the building's fall.

I passed through it and entered a large, round hall. On either side of me stood frames with no doors. There was a faint light streaming from the one to my right. Was that the way, then? Just as I took a step forward—*Bwoosh!*—I heard another explosion from deep within the building.

There's definitely a fight going on! I thought, dashing straight for the lit entrance. I couldn't sense anyone inside, but the path ahead split in two, branching out in a fashion that suggested it surrounded the main hall. One way followed a bend after a short distance, and the other way led to a staircase. There was light coming from both, but... *Ugh! Just follow your gut, Lina!* In the end, I headed for the bend.

When I rounded it, I saw a straight hallway ahead. Doors flanked the corridor,

with another corridor jutting out to my right. Aesthetically speaking, the building's interior was quite old and worn, but finely crafted. Made to house some all-too-rich noble, perhaps.

While keeping an ear out for any sign of life in the rooms I approached, I headed down the new hall. It was perfectly quiet. The scenery was repetitious too, with doors lining it the entire way until...

"Hmm... Is this the place?"

I arrived at the last room in the corridor. This door alone was broken in, and still had wisps of smoke streaming out of it—a clear sign fire magic had been used. There wasn't anyone inside, but someone had blasted through the exterior wall, revealing the outdoor scenery beyond. This was probably the site of the first explosion I'd seen. A flash of fire magic here, and it would be plenty visible from afar.

I wanted to search all the other rooms personally, but I didn't have time for that kind of thoroughness. I decided instead to check out the other hallway. But as I was doubling back... I ran right into someone turning the corner!

"What are you doing?" he asked.

I knew this guy—it was the werebeast Vedul.

"Wh-What am I doing...?" I stammered.

The greatsword hanging at his side glinted in the light. I was still wearing my mask, but I was worried he might recognize my voice.

I switched into little boy mode and said, "I... I went to the meeting and got separated from my dad... I... I was wandering around when I heard a big boom... so I got curious and came to investigate..."

It was a pretty forced excuse, but...

"Take off your mask," Vedul said quietly.

Not good... *Really* not good! I was gonna have to test my luck against him... The corridor was rather wide, but not wide enough for him to swing that greatsword freely. My best bet was probably feinting to get him to swing at me, then making a break for it! I didn't know who else was running wild in the

building, but maybe I could at least take a little heat off of them by diverting some of the enemy's forces.

"But... my mask is..." I fidgeted nervously while muttering under my breath. Obviously, I was reciting the amplification chant.

"Take it off already."

Vedul took a step forward, and I took a step back. I finished the amplification chant and moved into chanting a Fireball. Almost there...

"If you won't take it off yourself—" Vedul's hand tensed on the hilt of his sword. Just then...

"Careful, Vedul! That's—" came Gilfa's voice, suddenly, out of nowhere.

"What?!"

In the werebeast's moment of distraction, I finished my spell.

"Fireball!"

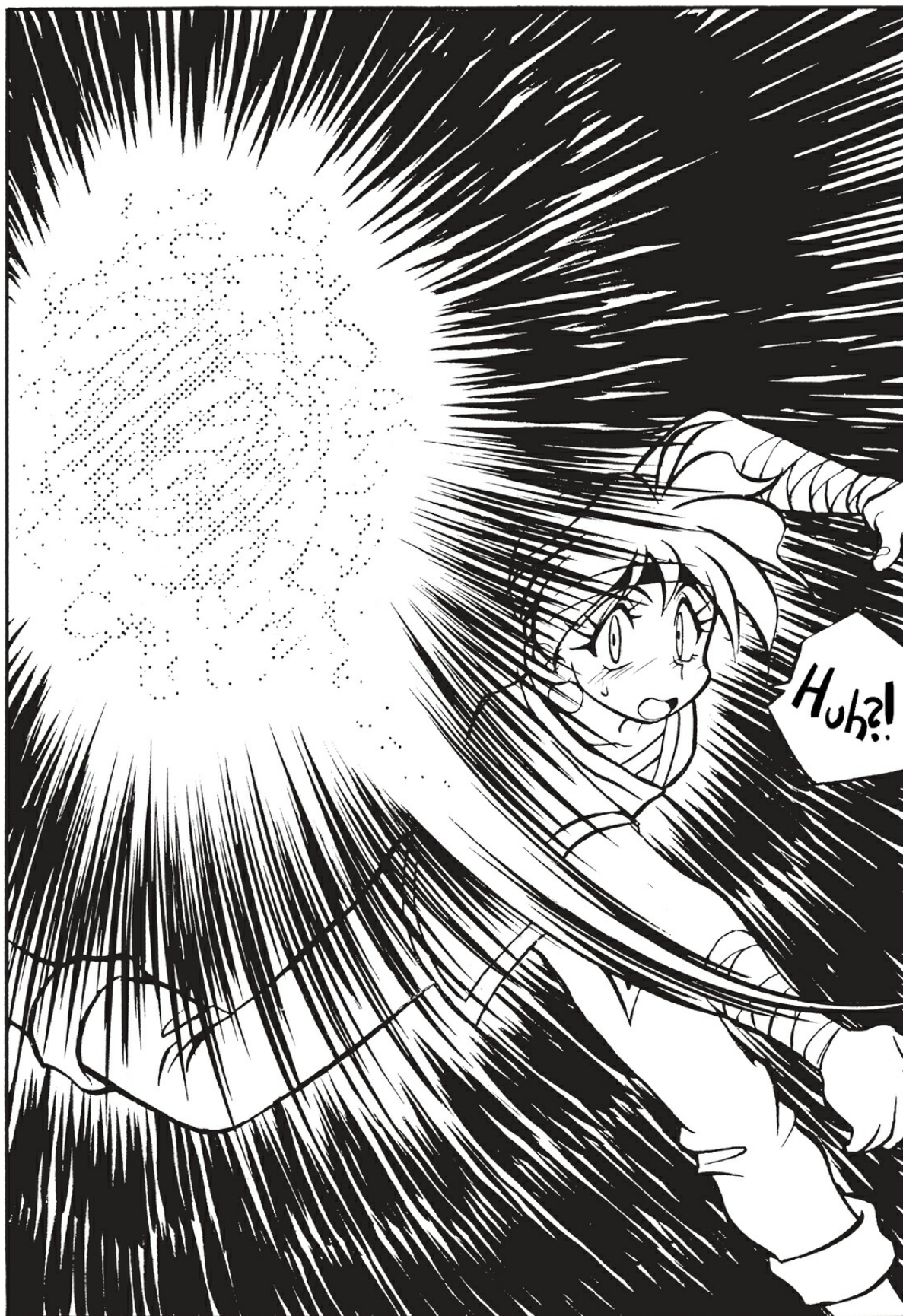
Normally, I wouldn't ever use something like that indoors. But with my spells currently downsized, it was probably safe.

A strange sense of power surged in the space between my hands.

Huh?! I didn't know what to make of it, but I didn't have time to hesitate!

"Get back, Vedul!"

As Gilfa tried to warn his friend, I released the ball of light at the werebeast! *Roarrrr!* The resulting explosion was far greater than I'd expected.



“What the—?!”

The blast shook the whole building and threw me against the floor. When I finally opened my eyes again, Vedul was gone. I wasn't sure if the explosion had gotten him, or if he'd escaped in the nick of time. Cracks ran up the walls and along the floor. The hallway ahead had collapsed, rendering it impassable.

Wait, that explosion... Could it be?!

I quickly incanted another spell: “Lighting!”

And sure enough, a dazzling magical light appeared above my head. I hadn't even used the amplification chant that time.

All right, my magic's back!

“Yes!” I cheered, stripping off my mask in one clean motion.

It seemed Xellos had come through in fine form. Now that I had my magic back, I was unstoppable!

Still, I figured I should probably hold off on any more amplification until I knew exactly how powerful it was... The huge explosion from that Fireball just now was likely the amplified result of my already superlative magic. I was glad that the strength of the casting barrier increased in proportion to the strength of the spell, since it otherwise probably would have baked me alive the second I released it. The air around us was still pretty toasty, even.

But all that aside, I was ready to let loose! My overpowered spell had sealed the passage, but I could just go out through the hole in the other room and come back in through the entrance. Yet... now that I'd finally recovered my magic and all, it was only natural that I'd want to test what the amplification talismans could do to it, right?

In other words...

I could use an amplified Dam Blas to bust through the wall, simultaneously confirming the power of the talismans and opening a path for myself. Two birds with one stone! Just so you know, this was purely in the interest of science. Not one inkling of “I haven't been able to use attack magic lately, so I need to blow off some steam.” I mean it! Trust me!

I picked a random room and opened the door.

“The corridor is this way, so...” I whispered, then used the amplification chant before moving into my spell. “Dam Blas!”

With that—*Bwoom!*—a hole the size of a person opened up in the wall.

“And away we go!”

I dashed for the hole in the wall... then thought better of it. I grabbed a nearby chair and tossed it at the hole instead. There was a flash of silver—*Crack!*—and the chair clattered to the ground, sliced in twain.

Ah. I knew it.

“You sensed us, did you?” Gilfa’s voice said teasingly from the other side of the hole.

“You survived after all, eh, Vedul and Gilfa?” I called.

As if in answer, the werebeast Vedul stepped up to the hole I’d opened. As usual, Gilfa was nowhere in sight.

“Where should we fight?” Vedul asked casually enough.

“Good question... Somewhere wide open would be best. Let’s go to the great hall,” I replied.

The werebeast drew back to make way for me, but not so far that I lost sight of him. I kept my eyes locked on him as I passed through the hole in the wall. I might have my magic back, but it was still two on one... and I had no idea where one of them even was.

I was confident I could blow them both away simultaneously with an amplified spell, but the amplification chant lengthened my casting time and I still wasn’t quite sure exactly how powerful it was. One errant spell here could bring the whole building down around me. I’d chosen the great hall as our battleground because it would be easy to run around there and it should give me some clearance with bigger spells.

Soon, Vedul and I arrived there.

“Lighting!” Gilfa incanted, conjuring a sparkling magical light at the apex of

the room.

“Let’s do this,” Vedul said, taking off in a dash.

He was coming straight at me, his greatsword low at his side. He was fast, too! If I ran right or left, he’d just catch me on the backswing.

While drawing back, I started chanting. I heard Gilfa doing the same.

“Elemekia Lance!”

I unleashed a spell that dealt direct damage to an opponent’s spirit. Even if they had the endurance of a lesser demon, it should have a pronounced effect... Assuming it hit, of course.

Vedul slipped nimbly around it, but that extra effort to dodge reduced the speed of his incoming attack. I shrugged it off and kept moving backward while chanting my next spell. I’d use this one to blind him and then rush outside. If he decided to give chase, I’d nail him with a big spell and finish him off.

But just then... Gilfa finished casting his spell!

“Shadow Web!”

Vedul’s shadow distorted. Spear-like tentacles whipped from it, heading straight for me!

No!

I took a big leap backward. One of the shadow spears grazed my ankle. Vedul continued to pursue, and I... I couldn’t move?! I looked and saw the shadow spear Gilfa caught me with was sticking into my shadow on the floor.

A Shadow Snap... executed by a shadow?!

I realized it all too late. Vedul heaved his greatsword aloft, and...

Something silver flashed through the air! *Zing!* A cold, hard sound followed as a sword clattered to the ground, deflected. Someone had thrown their own sword at the werebeast in the nick of time to save me, and Vedul had knocked it aside.

“Gourry!” I cried.

“Sorry to disappoint,” replied a different familiar voice. “It’s just me.”

“Zelgadis!”

3: Where'd They Go?! A Chaotic Pursuit

"Lighting!" Zelgadis unleashed a ball of light that liberated my trapped shadow.

Now freed from Gilfa's spell, I ran over to Zelgadis, who, if you're wondering, I happened to know from a few previous adventures. A certain sorcerer had fused him with a rock golem and a brow daemon against his will. I'd assumed he was still off on his quest to regain his humanity, but here he was.

"Thanks, Zel. Long time no see. What're you doing here, anyway?"

"That's my line. And why are you dressed like that? Where's Gourry?"

"How about we save story time for later?"

"Probably for the best."

"Well, well... if it isn't Zelgadis," oozed Gilfa's voice.

"You two know each other?" I asked.

"We're acquainted," Zelgadis responded, his eyes still locked on the werebeast.

"I'm surprised you followed me this far. Is this one of those 'destined rivalries' one hears so much about? Oh, and I should warn you... Even if your body is made of rock, Vedul is still strong enough to kill you in one strike."

"I know," Zelgadis said, walking smoothly toward his sword on the other side of the room.

Vedul started to move, and I took the opportunity to unleash the spell I'd been chanting.

"Lighting!"

My intent was to blind him, obviously—magic resistance wouldn't do squat against a bright light to the face. And while Vedul was avoiding my blast of light, Zelgadis made a mad dash for his sword!

Not good! Vedul's gonna get him while he's picking it up!

The werebeast, of course, was keen on the opportunity. Without fanfare, he brought his sword down on the off-balance Zelgadis. But as he did...

"Lighting!" Zel twisted around and released another flash of light in the unsuspecting werebeast's face.

"Gwahh!"

That one got 'im good! Vedul continued to swing despite his scorched retinas, but he didn't stand a chance of hitting Zelgadis, who effortlessly dodged the blow, scooped up his sword, and leaped at Vedul!

"Watch out! Vedul—"

Gilfa tried to warn his friend, but before he could even finish—*Crrk!*—Zelgadis had slipped past Vedul's attack and pierced his sword right through the werebeast's throat!



His body slumped silently... and then he took another swing at Zel!

“What?!” Zelgadis gasped, forced to abandon his blade and retreat.

Vedul swiftly pulled the sword from his neck, tossed it aside, and leaped back.

What the... Zel’s eyes went wide. So did mine. I’d just watched Vedul get his throat run through. No matter how strong he was, that blow *had* to be fatal. I might’ve thought it was some last-ditch attack, but the force behind it...

While the two of us stood there in shock, the werebeast fled down one of the passageways.

“What in the world?” Zel muttered.

“He’s got guts—I’ll give him that,” I conceded.

“I’m going after him regardless. When an enemy is vulnerable, you finish them off. What about you?”

Vedul was headed deeper into the building. Wherever he was going, I might just find...

“I’ll join you,” I said. “These guys kidnapped a member of my team, a girl named Amelia.”

“You think she’s the one behind the explosion?” he asked.

“Yep,” I replied firmly.

I was betting she’d realized that Mazenda’s seal was broken, then used her magic to blow a hole in the wall and escape... but reversed course when she saw Klotz and his goons on their way back to the cult complex. Now she was essentially trapped inside trying to fight her way out. Zelgadis must have witnessed the explosion too, arriving on the scene not long after I did.

“Then we’re in agreement. Let’s go.”

I nodded, and we both took off after Vedul.

Tracking the werebeast proved easy enough, as a trail of blood painted across the floor led us straight to him. The trail spilled into the corridor next to a staircase, which led deeper into the facility... And at its entrance stood Vedul.

He slowly turned around as he sensed our arrival. He'd wrapped a rag around his neck to try to staunch the bleeding, but his eyes were clouded over and his mouth hung half-open. His was clearly the face of a dead man, and yet... he was still moving. It was sorta creeping me out, really.

With unsteady footsteps, he turned back to us, and with some effort, readied his sword. I was hoping we'd have a chance to ask about Amelia, but... yeah, probably no dice, huh?

"You appear to be struggling, Master Vedul," Zelgadis said, his sword at his side as he smoothly approached the werebeast. "Don't worry. I'll put you to rest soon."

As if in answer to his words, I heard the low chanting of a spell with no certain source—Gilfa!

"I won't let you stand in my way!" Zelgadis cried, dashing full-tilt at Vedul. But...

"Zel, be careful!"

The werebeast's shadow stiffened, then launched a dozen black blades at Zelgadis!

"Tch!"

Zel managed to deflect each one with his sword, but he was forced back nonetheless. I didn't know if the shadow swords were powerful enough to pierce Zel's stony skin, though I didn't really care to find out. We needed to stop Gilfa, but I still didn't know where he was!

"I get it..." Zel muttered. (I wasn't sure what he "got," exactly, but one corner of his mouth was quirked up into a smirk.) He then turned back to me and asked, "Can you do something about the shadows with your magic?"

"I don't have much to counter a shadowmaster," I replied with a slight shrug. "Lighting can beat a simple Shadow Snap, but what he's doing is way more powerful than that..."

"That's too bad... but we'll make do somehow."

With that, he charged the werebeast again. The werebeast's shadow

swelled... and this time turned into a grid pattern that rose up between Zel and his target. Was it trying to net him?!

“Hah!”

Zelgadis ignored it and pressed on with his charge. Yet suddenly, the shadow morphed from a mere net to spikes on the floor! And Zel was too close to stop in time! Luckily...

“Flow Break!”

Light flooded the area for an instant, and when it receded, the shadow that Gilfa was controlling was gone without a trace.

Zelgadis flew forward! Vedul met him with a flash of his sword! *Wham!* Both men fell to the ground as their silhouettes collided...

And it was Zel who rose victorious after the fact.

“I appreciate the save,” he said to the white-clad figure in the hall beyond us.

I waved as well and called out, “Hey, Amelia! How’s it going?”

“Heya! I figured that had to be you, Lina. And who’s this guy?”

“This is Zelgadis... But, bleh, introductions later! Gilfa’s probably still somewhere nearby!”

“Nah, he’s dead,” Zel said flatly.

“Exactly! So we need to— Huh?! W-Wait, what are you talking about?”

“Allow me to explain,” he began, rolling Vedul’s fallen corpse over with a kick. He then retrieved his broadsword, still impaled in the hump on its back. “This here is Gilfa.”

Was he saying that...

“He’s the hump?!”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Go figure. Whoever made Vedul—probably Klotz—had transplanted a second brain into the werebeast’s back; that was Gilfa. Vedul’s brain was the one controlling the body most of the time, but if something happened to him, Gilfa’s

could take over. That was how the werebeast kept moving even after Vedul took a sword to the neck.

I looked closer and saw a small but deep fissure running through the hump, hidden by wrinkles... Gilfa's mouth, presumably, which was how he'd incanted spells. He probably had eyes of some kind somewhere too, but I wasn't about to go looking for them. A girl only needs so much nightmare fuel in her life.

"Yeesh, what a creepy thing to make..." I shuddered.

"No time for that now, Lina! We may have more enemies on the way!" Amelia declared.

"Enemies? How many?"

"I'm not super sure... I've been too busy running to count. But there's really only one we need to watch out for..."

"And who might that be?"

"I don't know. I was hiding in the shadows and heard some guys say, 'There's another intruder in the building! We have no choice! Use *him!*' It... sorta gave me the willies, which is why I was booking it for the exit just now. I can only assume they were talking about—"

"Wait a minute," Zelgadis breathed, his voice hoarse. "They said to use *him?*"

"Yes," Amelia confirmed confidently.

Zel then said in a dry whisper, "Run."

"Huh?" I found myself gawking.

"We need to run! Hurry!" he repeated and, without waiting for any kind of reply, made a beeline for the exit.

"H-Hang on!"

"We should follow his lead!" Amelia said, darting after Zelgadis.

"Well, okay..." I whispered and quickly followed suit.

The girl had good instincts, after all. And Zel knew perfectly well what I was capable of, so if he said to run, it was probably the smart move.

And, more compellingly, the two of them were already halfway out of the building... No point in sticking around just to spite them!

The three of us made it out of the base and into the surrounding forest.

“I could use a Dragon Slave or something to blow the whole place up...” I offered.

“Just run! It’s no use without the main character here!” Zelgadis said nonsensically.

We continued to hurtle down the night-cloaked mountain road. Naturally, we had no light, which made it pretty dang dangerous...

Seeing no other recourse, I started chanting an amplified Lei Wing. It was a quick-flight spell, and its speed, carrying capacity, and max altitude were all based on the caster’s capacity. So with two people to lift, I’d need the amplification to get us going faster than a swift run.

I grabbed on hard to Amelia and Zel, incanted Lei Wing, and took to the air. A split second later...

Fwoosh!

A silver beam of light sliced through the area where we’d just been standing.

“What the—?!”

It looked like the laser breath of a dragon lord... It was too dark for me to see the full extent of the aftermath, but I could hear nearby trees crashing to the ground, suggesting that the flash of light wasn’t just pyrotechnics.

It had come from behind us, too... from their base. I cast a glance over my shoulder and saw something standing at the entrance, illuminated by the moonlight.

“Huh, yeah... that *would* give someone the willies,” I whispered, picking up our flight speed to get us the hell out of there.

“Now... who wants to share first?” I asked.

We didn't have time to catch our breath until we made it all the way to the village of Mayin. We were holed up in the same barn on the edge of town where I'd hid my stuff before, and as far as I was concerned, our top priority now was pooling our knowledge.

"My story's pretty short," Amelia responded. "They captured me and locked me up in a room after that Mazenda lady sealed my magic. I thought something might happen to restore it, so I decided to check from time to time... and tonight it really did come back. I blew out the wall and ran... right into those guys."

"So you went full guerrilla warfare inside their base?" I asked.

"Yup," she replied with a nod.

"Wait, you said your magic was sealed... Do they have someone who can do that?" Zel asked, slightly alarmed.

"Truth be told, I'm not sure," I answered.

"How can you not be sure?"

"Well, see... right after I lost Amelia, I met this priest named Xellos—"

"Xellos?!" Zelgadis cried out in shock. "He's here too?!"

"You... You know him?"

"Yeah, actually..."

"Hold it right there!" Amelia said, putting the brakes on our chaotic back-and-forth. "One thing at a time. Let's hear your story first, um... Master Zelvadis?"

"Zelvadis," Zel and I said in the same breath.

He was exhausted. He'd been traveling solo, trying to find a way to restore his human body from the rock golem-brow daemon fusion forced on him by a certain sorcerer. Unfortunately, his quest had so far proved utterly fruitless.

Isn't there any way I can become human again? he asked over and over again to no avail.

"You're drinking ale, while I'm drinking juice," a chimera researcher he'd once

met had said, draining some of the juice he was drinking into Zelgadis's tankard. "Just pouring one into the other mixes the two. But to separate them again... It might not be impossible, but it certainly wouldn't be easy.

"Every living thing has its defining features. Birds have wings, beaks, body heat, et cetera... It's too much to quantify if you break every being down in that much detail. But the creation of a chimera thus involves taking two or more distinct creatures and joining them together using their shared features as a sort of middle ground. Like using soap to blend oil and water.

"And if you wish to return it to normal, you need a way to break it back down into those defining features and reassemble them accordingly. If such a thing is even possible, though, you might have to wait hundreds of years for the methods to be developed... or resort to otherworldly or inhuman knowledge."

Despite this discouraging news, Zelgadis continued his travels until he one day came across some information. Allegedly there was a manuscript that detailed a method for making chimeras—one that was completely different from known methods in our world. It might only be a rumor... but it was all he had to go on.

In pursuing it, Zelgadis learned of a family that passed the manuscript in question down through the generations. But on his way to investigate, he'd run into Xellos, who was after the same thing. They then both discovered that Klotz's crew had killed the owner of the manuscript and taken it for themselves...

That more or less summed up Zelgadis's story.

"Klotz's ilk showing up forced me and Xellos into a truce. But once I've dealt with them, Xellos is my next opponent," Zel said quietly. Man, dude didn't seem happy about that thought...

"I'm sorry to say it... but even if you get your hands on the manuscript, there's no guarantee it'll solve your problem," I sighed.

His response was surprisingly calm: "It's true... I don't know if what's written in the manuscript will be of any use in restoring my humanity. I'm prepared for that possibility."

“No, that’s not what I meant. Despite whatever Xellos might claim, we have no way of knowing if this manuscript is the real deal or not.”

“He didn’t tell you?” Zelgadis turned to me, sounding surprised. “The girl who held the manuscript was a descendant of the high priest of Letidius.”

Letidius, huh? I think I’ve mentioned it before, but the nation fell into ruin five hundred years ago as a result of its sovereign’s ill-fated quest for immortality. The old capital was still a little further north, but the country had amassed a large number of magical materials during its fruitless search. Unfortunately, most of them had since been burned or lost.

“She said her ancestor took the manuscript with him when he fled the country.”

Huh, okay. If that was true, it *would* make it quite a priceless artifact, but...

“Just because it’s been handed down from the Letidius of yore still doesn’t mean it’s the real thing,” I reiterated.

Look, I wasn’t trying to insist that it was fake or anything. I was just advocating due skepticism. It’d kinda suck if we went through all this just to find out it was a dud.

But Zelgadis responded to my question with a scowl, saying, “Apparently, the manuscript’s caretaker of 120 years ago shared your doubts.”

“I’d believe it. Anyone would wanna know if the treasure they’d been guarding through the generations was legit or not.”

“It was easy enough to confirm. He tried to make something according to the manuscript’s instructions. He succeeded... But for some reason, the experiment went berserk. I think you’re familiar with the results...” With a melancholy sigh, he mumbled, “Zanaffar, the Beast of Sairaag.”

Uhh... Amelia and I were dumbstruck.

Zanaffar was the legendary magical beast that had destroyed the erstwhile City of Magic and home of the sorcerers’ council, Sairaag. There were no records of what exactly it was, and some sorcerers had theorized that it wasn’t a fabled creature so much as it was a magical experiment gone haywire, but...

“Is that true?” Amelia asked hoarsely.

“I don’t know,” Zel replied with a small shrug. “But I can’t see why she’d make something like that up.”

Yeah, valid. You’d have to be crazy or warped as hell to brag about your ancestor destroying a whole city.

“I-If the girl wasn’t bluffing... then given what we’ve seen, Klotz and his gang...”

“I think they’ve already finished their Zanaffar Mk. II,” Zelgadis said, almost indifferently. “I didn’t think they’d finish it that quickly, but...”

“Is that why you said what you did about ‘the main character’ earlier?”

“Yeah. According to legend, the only one capable of slaying Zanaffar is the hero with the Sword of Light. But he’s not here right now.”

“Let’s not give up yet!” I shouldn’t need to say who it was rising to her feet with clenched fists. “Even without Master Gourry, if the three of us work together—”

“‘It’ll all work out somehow’? You sure about that?”

My pointed question gave Amelia pause.

“No...” she eventually sighed—the only appropriate response.

“The real question is exactly what that monster is capable of,” Zel put forward.

“I have a few good guesses. It once destroyed the so-called City of Magic, so...” I said, counting off my fingers. “First option: Zanaffar was outright strong enough to totally torch a city before they could muster a counterattack. But if that was really the case, the Warrior of Light wouldn’t have been able to fight back. Legendary hero or not, he was a melee fighter. Zanaffar would’ve roasted him while he was doing the good old roar-and-charge.

“Second option: there was more than one Zanaffar. That, however, seems unlikely if it was really an experiment gone wild. I really doubt they created ten or twenty Zanaffars just to test if the manuscript was real, much less that they all lost control and attacked Sairaag. That brings us to our third option: magic

attacks don't work on Zanaffar."

My two compatriots listened quietly as I explained.

"Sairaag was home to the sorcerers' council and widely known as the City of Magic. It stands to reason, then, that they had at least a few guys who could sling some Dragon Slaves. Yet the city couldn't stand against one magical beast? That suggests Zanaffar had near-perfect magic resistance. I can't think of anything to contradict this theory."

"But what exactly keeps magic from working on it?" Amelia asked curiously.

"To dissect that, one must first consider an important question: what *is* magic?" came a new voice.

A sour expression appeared on Zel's face, while Amelia tensed up.

"How long have you been with us, Xellos?" I asked without turning around.

"Since that rousing 'if we all work together' speech," he said as he took a seat at my side.

"Aha... Oh, don't worry, Amelia. He's not our enemy—for now, anyway."

"What a painfully honest description," Xellos said, his usual smile showing an ounce of strain.

"Anyway, first things first. Thanks for getting my magic reactivated. What happened with Mazenda?"

"I killed her," he said simply, his vapid expression unchanged.

"How?!" Amelia asked.

"That's a secret," he responded, raising a finger to his lips.

"But... how did you know we were here?"

"How else?" He turned his gaze my way. "I traced the magical emissions from those talismans you bought off of me."

Ah, of course. It wasn't hard to trace specific magical emissions so long as you knew the unique waves you were looking for.

"Now, back to the subject... You asked what exactly keeps magic from

working on Zanaffar. Let me preface by asking you this: To what exactly does the term ‘magic’ refer?”

“Power that defies the natural order of our world,” Amelia answered without hesitation.

“Correct,” Xellos replied with a satisfied nod. “In other words, magic uses the art of incantation to twist the natural laws of cause and effect, producing power or rewriting those laws. Activating magic thus involves chants that influence the astral plane—the underside of our world, though the barrier between is paper thin—to draw out its power.

“Elemental shamanistic spells manifest said power as a physical force, which you smash into your target. But any power manifested on the material plane can consequently be defended against with material means. Astral spells and black magic spells therefore generally don’t manifest the majority of their attack power physically, but rather keep to the astral plane to strike their target’s astral form directly.”

“Question, teacher!” I called, raising my hand.

“Yes, Miss Lina?”

“The Gaav Flare creates a visible stream of fire to attack, and the Dragon Slave can directly target castles and mountains and stuff. I don’t think mountains and castles have astral forms! What gives?”

“Ah, a very astute observation. But even when you cast a Dragon Slave, you may see a faint red point of light heading for your target and coalescing there. The fire of a Gaav Flare, the thunder of a Ragna Blast, and the red light of a Dragon Slave all serve as a fuse.”

“A fuse?” I echoed.

“Yes. At the point where they coalesce or meet something that triggers contact, the attack power built up on the astral plane manifests in this world. If the target is not a living being, that’s all it does. But if it *is* a living being, the spell tears apart their astral form *before* the remaining energy spills out into this world. That said, there are also spells that keep their power strictly to the astral plane, like Elemekia Lance.”

“One more question,” Amelia said.

“Yes, my dear?”

“How do you know all that? Not even the sorcerers’ council knows this much about the nature of magic.”

“That’s—”

“A secret?”

“—because, shall we say, what’s considered common knowledge among the sorcerers’ council is not necessarily the cutting edge of magical theory.”

“I have a question too,” Zelgadis said, still looking sour.

“Go right ahead.”

“When exactly are you getting to the point?”

“Ah... about why attack magic doesn’t work on Zanaffar, you mean? That’s because Zanaffar’s spirit is segregated from the rest of the astral plane. Imagine a sort of barrier surrounding its astral form. That prevents black magic’s most damaging aspect—the astral attack—from ever reaching it. Meanwhile, standard elemental spells exclusively deal physical damage... So if Zanaffar’s hide is on par with that of a deimos dragon, a dragon lord, or an arch dragon, it could easily shrug off the piddly elemental power humans are capable of conjuring.”

“Hmm...” I didn’t know if he was talking facts or just theory, but it sounded pretty convincing. “That’s why we need a weapon like the Sword of Light to slay the beast...”

“So we really can’t fight back until we find Gourry, eh?” Zelgadis whispered, annoyed.

“Who is this Master Gourry, praytell, and what good will finding him do?” Xellos asked.

I responded without looking at him, “He has the Sword of Light.”

“Oh?” For once, Xellos looked taken aback. “Surely you jest.”

“You think we’re moping around here just to punk you?” I said, then sighed.

If only I'd known the magical wave pattern of the Sword of Light, I could track it down from the astral plane. Too bad I didn't have any idea what it was. And before you ask, no, that's not *my* fault. I'd begged Gourry to let me study the sword, but he turned me down every time. He said if he let me have it, I'd just run off with it or something.

I guess he had at least one insightful bone in his body.

"With something like that... Hmm, is it possible? If so, then..." Xellos muttered to himself for a while, and finally stood up. "Then I need to act quickly. I'm going to see what they're up to."

He then turned to leave, but Amelia grabbed his sleeve.

"Er... would you kindly unhand me?"

"No way," she said flatly. "I don't know who you are, but they've got an evil magical beast! You could die if you go! My every instinct is screaming at me, telling me it's dangerous to let you go alone!"

Xellos looked profoundly troubled for a moment, then turned my way.

"Could you convince her, perhaps?" he begged.

"Sorry," I responded simply. "She's a passionate believer in friendship, goodness, and all that stuff."

"What an odd one..."

"You're telling me."

"That explains much," he said, nodding. "You're proverbial birds of a feather..."

I didn't let that rattle me, though. I just pointed at him and said, "Bird."

"What? I'm perfectly normal!" he insisted unconvincingly.

I glanced over at Zelgadis to see him deep in thought, ignoring the chaos. But that distant gaze in his eyes said it all: *I'm normal, unlike the rest of you.*

"A-Anyway, I'll be off now!" Xellos said with unusual gusto, then made for the exit.

"Huh?" Amelia mumbled quietly.

“Hey, Amelia! Why’d you let him go?” I hollered.

“I... I didn’t!” she protested, looking down at her hand, which still looked like it was clasped around something.

“Ugh! Anyway, we can’t let him run off on his own... Hey, Xellos! Wait up!” I shouted as I scrambled after him.

I made my way outside to find the clouds over the eastern mountains blushing red against the predawn sky.

“Why are you all following me?” Xellos inquired, looking distinctly unhappy, even as he kept walking.

“You really need to ask? Two heads are better than one, and four are better than two. I don’t care who you are; there’s always safety in numbers.”

“That’s rather simple logic... But very well, if you insist. I won’t slow down or change destinations to accommodate you, however. If you wish to accompany me, you’ll have to keep up.”

“Got it,” I said with a nod. I didn’t ask Zel or Amelia for approval, but they both followed along without complaint, so I assumed it implicitly. “But if you were planning to go alone, why’d you come to us in the first place?”

“I promised that I’d meet you in this village,” he said just as...

Boom! Another explosion roared from the mountains.

“Goodness me...” Xellos whispered with his usual smile in place.

The explosion had originated from the cult’s base, so we quickly headed there... only to discover a barren wasteland where the building once had been. Probably the work of a Dragon Slave.

“But... who could have done this?” I whispered.

“The inevitable fall of evil!” Amelia responded resolutely—I guess it made sense to her?

“I believe Master Klotz was responsible,” Xellos put in.

“He blew up his own base? What makes you think that?”

“There’s no sign of a fight here. It would certainly be possible to catch them unawares with a Dragon Slave if they were oblivious to danger... but after your raid last night, they surely would have had security at its tightest. It’s more likely that they decided to move their headquarters elsewhere and then destroyed the old one to hide the evidence.”

“Wait a minute,” Zelgadis chimed in with a scowl. “How did you know we were here last night?”

“Simple inference,” he responded, raising his index finger knowingly. “Firstly, you’ve recovered your captured friend. Secondly, you were discussing Zanaffar, which suggests you’ve encountered it. Thirdly, when I arrived in town, I saw a flash from the mountains.”

“Hmm... But why bother ditching their base? If they have a Zanaffar, even if we came after them again, they could take us out easily.”

“Ah... I wonder,” I found myself saying. “Amelia made it sound like they were only grudgingly using their Zanaffar-alike. And then it gave up after that first attack. Plus, it hasn’t been that long since Klotz got his hands on the manuscript. If you add all that up...”

“Oh, do you think...” Amelia spoke up hopefully.

I nodded.

“I think their Zanaffar is still incomplete.”

“We have to track them down!” Amelia said heroically. “We must foil their evil ambitions before their servant of darkness, Zanaffar, is complete!”

“I’m on board with the beat-’em-up plan. But tell me, Little Miss Justice, exactly where did they go?” Zel asked sarcastically.

There, Amelia faltered.

“Um...” she muttered, casting a pleading glance in Xellos’s direction. “Do you know?”

“I’m afraid not. If, as Miss Lina says, Zanaffar is incomplete, they’re likely setting up shop elsewhere... If I’d known this would happen, I would have asked

Mazenda the location of their other base before I finished her off.”

“I don’t know where the base itself is, but...” I said with some hesitation, then pointed to the southeast. “I think they went that way.”

“What makes you think that?” Zelgadis asked.

I cast a sidelong glance at Amelia. Should I really say it? Well, I figured I couldn’t exactly keep it to myself...

“Last night, I infiltrated another of their rallies,” I admitted. “And that guy... Klotz, I think... said they were gonna destroy Saillune.”

“Whaaaaat?!” Amelia exclaimed in near a shriek. “Th-They’re gonna destroy Saillune?! They can’t do that! Unless they finish Zanaffar... We just gotta stop them! We gotta catch them as soon as we can!”

Without waiting for a response, she started to storm back in the direction of the village... and quickly froze in her tracks.

“What is it, Ameli—”

When I followed her gaze, I froze similarly. There were... close to a hundred villagers approaching, all steaming with murderous rage.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the cultists,” Xellos said with his usual cheery expression.

“You did this!” one of the villagers, a man of about forty, said accusingly. “Where’s Lord Klotz? What happened to him?!”

“It’s them! They’re the ones who ruined our rally!” shouted another voice from somewhere in the crowd, seething with hatred.

“Ah, of course. Agitation. A fully expected tactic from Master Klotz,” Xellos whispered, his trademark smile now somewhat strained.

Welp, that explained that. Klotz had blown up his base to destroy the evidence of Zanaffar’s creation, but it was also a handy way to rile up his followers. He’d probably sent some deliberate agitators into town to make sure the angry mob set their sights on us, too.

In other words, the cultists were here to waste our time.

“They leave us no choice. Let’s clear them out, then,” Xellos said, his

expression unchanging even with such a terrifying line.

“Hey! Hang on just a minute there, buddy!” I interrupted in a panic.

He responded with an air of confusion, “Whatever is the matter? You’re not about to try to tell me they’re all good people deep down, are you?”

“Such faith in humanity sadly eludes me. But still... you made it sound like you’re gonna kill them all.”

“I am,” he replied casually.

I was dumbstruck for a good moment there.

“That’s mass murder! They’re at least pretending to be innocent villagers most of the time... I’m not doing the whole ‘wanted criminal’ thing again.” Even as we argued, the villagers continued to talk amongst themselves and their air of hostility grew stronger. They didn’t seem to have the guts to attack us quite yet, but it was only a matter of time before we got there. “Just clear the way.”

Xellos closed his eyes for a moment, then said, “Very well. Let’s proceed as peacefully as possible.”

While chanting a spell, he walked swiftly toward the cultists.

“Wh-What the hell are you doing?!” one yelled.

Xellos’s right hand swept slowly through the air. A word of power drifted from his lips. I couldn’t make it out, but...

Whoosh! A strong wind whipped up, joined by countless screams. It was a more powerful version of a Diem Wind... Many times more powerful. The gale Xellos conjured scattered the cultists, sending some flying into trees and others slamming into the ground. Once it quieted down, I could hear them all groaning in pain.

“Now, everyone,” Xellos said gently to the fallen, writhing cultists. We couldn’t see his expression, but... I was pretty sure he was still smiling in the same chipper fashion as always. “Would you kindly let us through? If you don’t, I’m afraid we’ll have to cut a path open ourselves...”

The cultists immediately, with moans close to screams, dove into the underbrush on either side of the road.

So this was his version of proceeding peacefully, huh?

“How was that?” he asked, turning back to me with his unflinching smile.

We were now headed toward Saillune, but it was slow going. Four days out of Mayin, we still hadn’t picked up any trace of Klotz and his gang. But we couldn’t move much faster until we knew where their new base was, lest we accidentally pass it by.

We kept an ear out for relevant rumors in each town we came to, then scoured the surrounding areas the old-fashioned way. We covered about a village a day, though our investigations were far from thorough. We were kind of in a hurry since Zanaffar could be completed at any time.

In truth, there was a good chance it was already done. But it wasn’t like we could just call off our search. I thought it might be possible to locate the beast from the astral plane, given Xellos’s theory about its unique astral form, but that yielded bupkis.

Fortunately, however, there were other things I could do in the meantime... by which I mean study magic. I needed to test how well the talismans’ amplification worked, for one thing, but that wasn’t all. Certain spells depended on more than just getting the words right, see. Even if you recited the chant perfectly, some required a gesture, tool, or ritual to activate. Some could only be performed at certain times of day.

And some were purely dependent on your capacity.

Take the Blast Bomb that Xellos had used, for instance. I had a few spells in my repertoire that I’d mastered the incantations for, but couldn’t actually use. Would the amplification bring them into reach? I was dying to know. So while we were in the midst of pursuing Klotz and his gang, I did some quick research, and...

“Was that you yesterday?” Amelia asked me, the same as she had the past several mornings as we left our village du jour.

“Tee-hee! Busted!” I stuck out my tongue all cutesy-like.

Late last night, I’d sneaked out of the inn and tried a few experiments in the

forest at the edge of town...

“This is no giggling matter,” Zelgadis said, sounding understandably disgusted.

Xellos then chimed in as cheerfully as ever, “Ah, I thought I heard some kind of roar last night. It had the villagers in quite a panic. Was that you, then?”

“Well, I was tryin’ a lotta stuff out... an’ I decided to see what an amplified Dragon Slave could do!”

I honestly hadn’t expected it to wipe out an entire forest in one go... Who could blame me for fleeing the scene in a panic afterward?

“Just look the other way, okay? This stuff might come in handy later,” I said with a big grin.

“Well, I would hardly be one to object, but...” Xellos said as he suddenly came to a stop. “It doesn’t appear that Master Klotz and his ilk will oblige.”

“Two birds with one stone,” I said, coming to a stop myself.

Obviously, Zelgadis and Amelia both were holding their breath as well, glaring at the underbrush ahead.

“C’mon, guys. We know you’re there. Show yourselves already.”

Two werebeasts appeared in response to my summons.

“Oh... you sensed us, did you?”

One of them looked like an ordinary werewolf, while the other was some kind of brass demon chimera...

Jeez, was this stuff all that Klotz guy was good for? I’d never met them before, but since they were Klotz’s werebeasts, it felt safe to assume I’d need some serious attack magic to hurt them. However...

“You gotta be kidding me!” I said, registering overblown surprise.

“Hah... The girl’s startled,” the half-demon whispered.

“I seriously can’t believe you guys think the two of you can beat us!”

“Wh-What was that?!” the half-demon cried as he smoothly drew two swords from his back, brandishing a longsword in his right hand and a shortsword in his

left.

The werewolf didn't bother reaching for his own blade. He just silently watched our exchange with the half-demon.

"I'm saying there's no way you two can beat all of us. I'm sure you don't realize what total badasses we are, so I guess I can't blame you for trying... Maybe it was a bad order from a bum lieutenant, or maybe you took this extremely misguided initiative yourselves. But I'm telling you—take a hint and clear out before we kick your asses straight to the hereafter."

"Hah! Say whatever you want!" the half-demon clamored, casting a glance in Xellos's direction. "Lord Balgumon only said we should watch out for the damned monk! Right?"

He then looked to his comrade for confirmation, but the werewolf coldly replied, "That doesn't mean we can underestimate the others."

"Well... true enough..." the half-demon said, suddenly cowed. "It's true that I don't... really wanna fight that monk. And you're saying the others might be just as dangerous..."

Man, if you're gonna chicken out that quickly, don't mouth off to begin with!

"Still," the half-demon said with a sudden flash of a bright smile, "I guess we can't just leave and pretend we never saw you, now can we?"

"That's true. I still need you guys to tell us where your new base is."

"Heh... Come and try us if you dare!"

Before the half-demon could finish blustering, the werewolf was dashing straight for me! And instead of drawing his blade, he raked at me with the claws of his right hand!

"What?! Dammi—" Even if I jumped back now, I wouldn't be able to get out of the way in time. "Tch!"

Without hesitation, I charged the werebeast to body-check him.

Whump! No matter the weapon, if you can throw off the attack, you can greatly reduce its killing power. The werebeast's claws just caught my back and the top of my cape—but now I had the claws on his left hand to worry about!

Had I made a wrong move?! Just as I was debating that, the werebeast's foot found my solar plexus.

"Grkh!"

Oof. That one hurt. I barely managed to stay on my feet, but...

I looked and saw the werewolf and Zelgadis, broadsword drawn, staring each other down. That explained it. If the werebeast had clawed at me with his left hand, he might have killed me... but Zel would have slain him the next instant. That was why he'd kicked me away instead.

"Guh!" While drawing far back, the werewolf finally unsheathed his sword.

"Tch!" Forced into the fight now, the half-demon charged. And his target was... Amelia!

"Fireball!"

The ball of light she unleashed hit him head-on! *Fwooom!* The blast blew the half-demon back, slamming him into a nearby tree. But...

"Heh... heh heh heh..." He stood up slowly. "Fireballs... can't hurt me..."

"Fireball!"

Interrupting the half-demon's brag, she unleashed a second one! *Fwooom!* He was blasted back again, and slowly rose to his feet once more.

"I t-told you..."

"Have another! Fireball!"

Fwooom!

"Um... hey..." the half-demon said, precariously picking himself back up.

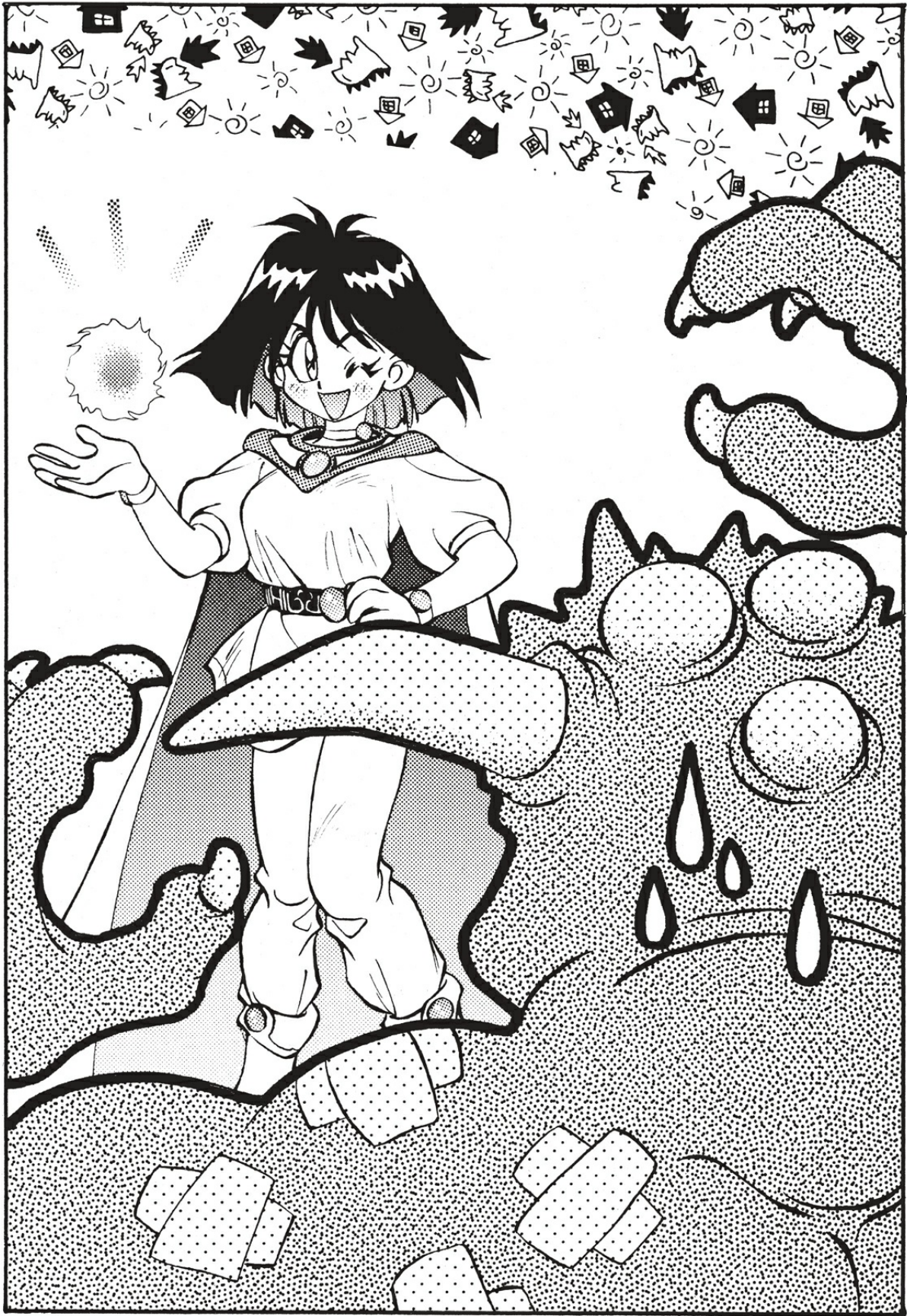
Attagirl! Even if the flames of the Fireball wouldn't hurt him, if Amelia could keep blowing the half-demon into things, the blunt trauma alone would take its toll.

"And another! Fireball!"

Fwooom!

Plus, chain-firing on him like that would keep him out of the battle. That left

the rest of us to go three-on-one against the werewolf. Easy street!



Said werewolf was currently clashing with Zelgadis, and obviously, I wasn't just going to stand around providing commentary. I finished chanting my spell, and the moment Zel and the werewolf got some distance from each other...

"Elemekia Lance!"

"Tch!" But the werewolf leaped back again.

"We definitely underestimated them!" he said, whipping around. He then ran into the trees shouting, "Withdraw! If we stay here, we're dead meat!"

"O-Okay!" the half-demon responded, shakily running after him.

"After them!" Zelgadis cried, plunging into the brush in pursuit of the werebeasts.

The rest of us followed his lead.

Obviously, all we had to go by were their tracks. The underbrush and tree branches made it difficult, but the half-demon must have been in a bad way, because their own progress was slow. If we hadn't been in the middle of the woods, we could have easily chased them down from the sky...

The chase dragged on and on. Aside from the ever-chipper Xellos, we were all visibly exhausted by the time we finally made it out of the forest.

"About time..." Zel muttered as he leaped out from the trees.

We'd arrived at a village. The werebeasts ran straight into it, drawing cries of fear and surprise from a man leading a cow and some kids playing tag.

Argh! This is even worse! Nobody here seemed to be in cahoots with the baddies, but a village offered lots of hiding places, and would force us to keep our spells on the small side. Bad guys also loved taking villagers hostage. I hoped we could catch them before they tried anything funny, but...

The two werebeasts ran straight down the village's central avenue with the four of us in hot pursuit. It wasn't exactly an ideal situation. We were likely to end up on a wild goose chase or lose them entirely...

Or so I thought, but the two werebeasts came to a halt all of a sudden, right at the center of the village. We stopped a little ways behind them. Were they

going to throw caution to the wind and put up a fight now?

“So you’re ready to turn yourselves in!” Amelia called out, pointing dramatically at the werebeasts. “Good triumphs over evil once again!”

“Ugh... It’s four against two and you act like you’re the good guys? You look like bullies to me,” the half-demon (rightly) snarked.

Amelia, however, was unperturbed.

“No, what you see here is the power of friendship! The power of teamwork!” she shot back shamelessly. The rest of us averted our eyes.

“Well... whatever. We’re sick of running. Why don’t we settle this already?”

I felt a chill rush up my back. *Don’t tell me...*

“Bring it on!” Amelia declared boldly.

There, the half-demon flashed a nasty grin.

“Well, well! You hear that, everyone?” he shouted, and right on cue...

What?! The three of us (sans Xellos) let out a groan.

They seemed to come out from everywhere, behind buildings and stalls and carts... Close to twenty werebeasts, by my reckoning, encircled us.

“A trap...” Zelgadis whispered bitterly.

“That’s right,” the half-demon responded. “Lord Klotz actually had a perfect read on your power. You defeated Vedul and Gilfa, two of our strongest, after all. We knew we could never beat you with just us.”

I knew it. They were decoys to lead us here...

Okay, I’d *like* to say I knew it, but it had only occurred to me when they came to a dead stop in the middle of the village. So, yeah... bit of an oversight on my part this time. My bad.

The street was now filled with werebeasts. Even if they weren’t as strong as Vedul and Gilfa, it would be tough to deal with this many at once.

If we hadn’t been in the middle of town or so close to them, I could’ve just launched a Dragon Slave into their ranks. It seemed they’d lured us here

specifically to throttle our magic usage. In a brawl, Zeldadis was a skilled swordsman and I could probably hold my own well enough... But Xellos only had his staff and Amelia was totally unarmed.

“Sorry, but you should realize you’re outclassed and just give up,” hailed a familiar voice. I recognized it and reflexively turned around.

It was another werebeast (natch), but this one seemed a head taller than the others. He was a fusion of a human and some breed of big cat with silver hair—a white tiger?! He was wearing platemail of a curious design that matched his fur, and he carried a large battleaxe in his hands.

“Are you... Duclis?”

When I said his name, a stunned expression crossed his face.

“Hey... I know that voice! You’re that kid!” He scratched his head lightly with his left hand, abashed. “Oh, so you were a girl... I see.”

“Master Duclis, we’re about to fight them,” the half-demon scolded.

But Duclis remained calm.

“Hey, it’s okay. It doesn’t hurt to talk. But this does make it harder to fight you... I’m kind of at a loss...” he said, scratching his head again.

“You know this guy, Lina?” Amelia asked.

“I’ll explain later,” I whispered in response.

“Can I ask you something?” I petitioned, turning to Duclis. “Why are you guys so devoted to Klotz? Even to the point of casting aside your humanity? He’s an awful person who believes in the Dark Lord, resurrects magical beasts, and wants to destroy the world!”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t understand,” Duclis whispered in sad tones. “We—most of us here—were on death’s door. I myself was a wandering mercenary abandoned by my team, left injured for dead... and the one who saved me was Master Klotz. He did it by turning me into a chimera.”

“I see. And in the process, he oh-so conveniently earned himself a new pawn,” Xellos said bluntly.

Duclis seemed to take no offense.

“Yeah, I know. I’m always a pawn. But still... I don’t have anywhere else to go. The other guys here are probably in a similar situation... even if they won’t admit it,” he said.

“So, to get down to brass tacks, there’s no way you’re not fighting us, is there?” Zelgadis asked, his broadsword already drawn.

“Xellos,” I whispered to the man standing next to me. “Don’t do anything too flashy.”

“Then I can do whatever I like, provided it’s drab?” he asked back.

I thought for a minute.

“I’d prefer if you just stayed out of this as long as possible, but...”

“Let’s get to it. Talking isn’t getting us anywhere...” Duclis said wearily.

“Let’s do this!” the half-demon cried, making the first move.

He charged right for Amelia, clearly eager for payback. Zelgadis moved to cover her while she started chanting a spell. It was... a Ra Tilt! That would only hit a single enemy, but it was strong enough to take out even a brass demon in one blast. And in our current situation, dealing with these guys one at a time was probably the only option...

Another group of werebeasts closed in on Amelia too. I began chanting as I drew my shortsword from my belt, repositioning to provide Amelia additional cover. Just then... Duclis made his move.

Fwish! A silver helmet clicked into place over his head, most likely snapping up from his back. He hefted his battleaxe like it weighed nothing, then charged smoothly forward. Meanwhile...

Clang! Sparks flew as the half-demon’s longsword clashed with Zelgadis’s broadsword.

“Gotcha!” Zel cried out as he caught the shortsword in the half-demon’s other hand with his open palm!

“What?!” the half-demon yelped in surprise.

Duclis and more werebeasts were still charging at us from separate directions. I’d have to hold some off with spells, and some with swordplay. Let’s see... Duclis had that huge battleaxe, which I was pretty sure I couldn’t block with a sword. I’d have to fire at him first.

“Elemekia Lance!”

Not even one of Klotz’s werebeasts could tank a hit like that. And while Duclis was busy dodging, I could use my blade to hold off the other werebeasts heading for Amelia— At least, that was the plan. But Duclis didn’t even try to evade! He took my Elemekia Lance head-on and kept charging unabated!

I beg your damned pardon!

“Amelia! Zel! Get outta the way!” I screamed, believing it was the best thing I could do in the moment.

“What?!” Zelgadis quickly withdrew and turned to look.

But Amelia was slower to respond...

“Amelia!” I shrieked.

“Die!” A group of werebeasts charging from the other direction swooped in on her!

And like the wind... Amelia leaped! With one light twist of her body, she was standing behind the mob. She then unleashed a back kick on them.

“Bwuh?!”

Her kick wasn’t especially powerful, but it rerouted the werebeasts’ momentum, sending them stumbling toward Duclis.

Huh... Amelia’s a pretty good martial artist.

“Guys! I said *don’t* let your guard down!” Duclis shouted, using his open hand to lightly catch the clamoring werebeasts.

Just then, Amelia finished her spell: “Ra Tilt!”

With those words of power, a blue pillar of light enveloped Duclis! She must’ve pegged him for the leader of the squad and decided to take him out

first. The blue light receded moments later, and poor Duclis... That one spell struck him down.

Or, it *should have*, but...

“I see... That’s pretty impressive,” he said, sounding unfazed.

“What?!” Amelia exclaimed, flabbergasted.

“Oh, it’s just this armor that Klotz gave me,” Duclis explained. “The anti-magic armor Zanaffar...”

4: The Silver Beast Reborn

“Za...” We were struck dumb again. D-Did he just say *the anti-magic armor Zanaffar*?! “Hey, Zel! This isn’t what you told us!”

“Like I’m some expert!”

Well, fair enough. But if, as Duclis was claiming, “Zanaffar” was simply armor that could repel magic attacks, then that was great news for us. There were plenty of tricks for getting around armor. But either way, for now, we had to do our best with the fight at hand! If we couldn’t beat Duclis, we could at least defeat the other werebeasts and bust our way outta here. Granted, that would be a heck of a lot easier if Xellos would pull his weight...

That’s not to say he wasn’t serving a purpose, however. Ever since the battle began, he’d been mockingly shouting things like “Whoops!” and “Almost got me!” and “Oh, you’re so strong!” while lithely dodging every blow the werebeasts could throw at him. He was doing it all with that same cheerful grin on his face, which had to be getting under a few of the werebeasts’ skin.

“Shut up! Quit messing around!” and “Stand still and let us kill you!” they jeered while chopping at Xellos in annoyance. There were probably over ten guys going at him, which meant he was keeping over half of our attackers occupied all by himself. That was nothing to sneeze at, of course, but I wished he’d do a little more. Still, it wasn’t like I could call out and say, “Just finish this, would you?” There was no telling what he’d get up to. He might blow the town away right along with the werebeasts.

Okay, man, just keep dodging for a while... The ease with which he was evading all their attacks was honestly impressive. Nevertheless, I didn’t have time to sit back and watch Xellos dance. I was in better shape than he was, but I was still contending with a three-on-one myself. And one of the three I was up against was Duclis in his apparently anti-magic armor...

“Hah!” a werebeast with a bug-like face clamored as he swung his sword down at me.

“What?!” I exclaimed, blocking his sword with mine.

These guys were indeed inferior to Vedul in terms of swordplay... They were each maybe as good as me in a one-on-one fight, but this buggy guy leaned into me *hard* when we locked swords. I wanted to duck away and leap back, but every time I tried, he kept pressing me. And then...

Whoosh! Another hand suddenly protruded from the werebeast’s torso—holding a small blade!

“Ack!”

I kicked a foot into his solar plexus and used the recoil to spring backward. As I did, though, the knife cut lightly into my right leg. It wasn’t a mortal wound or anything, but it sure did smart! While dodging a blow from another charging werebeast, I began chanting a spell.

“Not so fast!” shouted yet another, slashing at me.

These guys are so annoying! Someone gimme a break!

Just as I thought that—*Ker-wham!*—my assailant slammed into the ground with an oh-so satisfying thud. *Amelia!* She’d caught the werebeast in the head with a kick. I shot her a friendly thumbs-up, then managed to unleash the spell I’d been working on chanting...

“Vu Vrima!”

Vrumm! The ground rumbled, swelled, and formed a humanoid figure—a golem. The spell I’d cast called upon earth spirits to shape clay into a bipedal automaton that served my command. It stood about twice as tall as the werebeasts.

“Wugh?!” they gulped when they saw it.

“Go, go, golem!” I cried.

“Krrsh...”

With a sound like the scraping of rock, it brought a fist down on the nearest werebeast. *Slam!* Not even a werebeast could shake off a blow like that! Poor guy was out like a light.

One down!

“Hah! It’s powerful enough!” Duclis shouted, charging the golem at full speed.

“Get ’im, golem!”

“Krrsh...” Responding to my order(?), the golem raised its fist at Duclis.

“But,” he continued, “it’s too slow!”

Crash! One strike from his battleaxe shattered my makeshift fighter.

Jeez, just how strong is this guy?!

Zelgadis was now charging straight at Duclis. Talk about reckless! But instead of slashing at him, he leaped to the side, slipped past Duclis, and went for the half-demon behind him. Was the charge at Duclis just a feint, then?

“Saw you coming leagues away!” the half-demon cried with a cackle as he swung his sword at Zel. But...

“Ra Tilt!” Zel cried out, engulfing the half-demon in blue flame. He then ran right past the collapsing half-demon and took a swing at the werebeast behind him.

“Wuh?!”

This double-feint took the unsuspecting werebeast by complete surprise. He still managed to parry Zelgadis’s first swing, but his second strike cut the beast clean through.

Three down!

I’d already started chanting my next spell when the bugman came flying at me once more. *This frickin’ guy!* I blocked with my sword again, integrating a trip maneuver into my footwork and quickly retreating backward while the bugman tried to regain his balance.

Before he could, however, Amelia landed a Ra Tilt. *Vwoosh!* That made four of ’em down, but a few of the werebeasts Xellos was toying with had finally realized how badly the fight was going. They were now peeling off of him and heading our way.

Okay, yeah, this was gonna be rough. Meanwhile...

“Whew!” Amelia spryly dodged a roundhouse kick from Duclis. But then... *Crack!* She still went flying into the ground.

A tail?!

The same moment she’d dodged the kick, a tail—I don’t know if it belonged to Duclis or “Zanaffar”—had hit her square in the chest. She immediately sprang back to her feet, but the blow seemed to have done a number on her. Duclis raised his battleaxe high as Zelgadis silently approached from behind.

“Heh!” Duclis scoffed as his axe cut a smooth flash of an arc through the air.

Zing! A hard, metallic sound rang out... and Zel’s broadsword snapped in half.

This wasn’t good. The tide seemed to be turning against us.

Maybe... should I use that on Duclis while his guard’s down?!

The talismans’ power meant it was within my reach now, but it still came with a number of problems. Moreover, it wouldn’t do us any good if I couldn’t land the hit...

“Tch!”

While I was hesitating, Zel let out a short cry and took off in a dash toward the half-demon he’d taken out with Ra Tilt earlier. I imagined he was going for the guy’s sword, but...

“Not a chance!”

A lupine beastman leaped in his way with a flash of his blade. Zelgadis just barely managed to block it with what was left of his broken broadsword. Amelia and I wanted badly to help him, but we both had our hands full with other werebeasts.

Worse yet, Duclis was now charging Zel from behind!

“Zel!”

He seemed to realize the attack was coming, but he still couldn’t get out of the way. Not good! The battleaxe sliced through the air, and...

Zing!

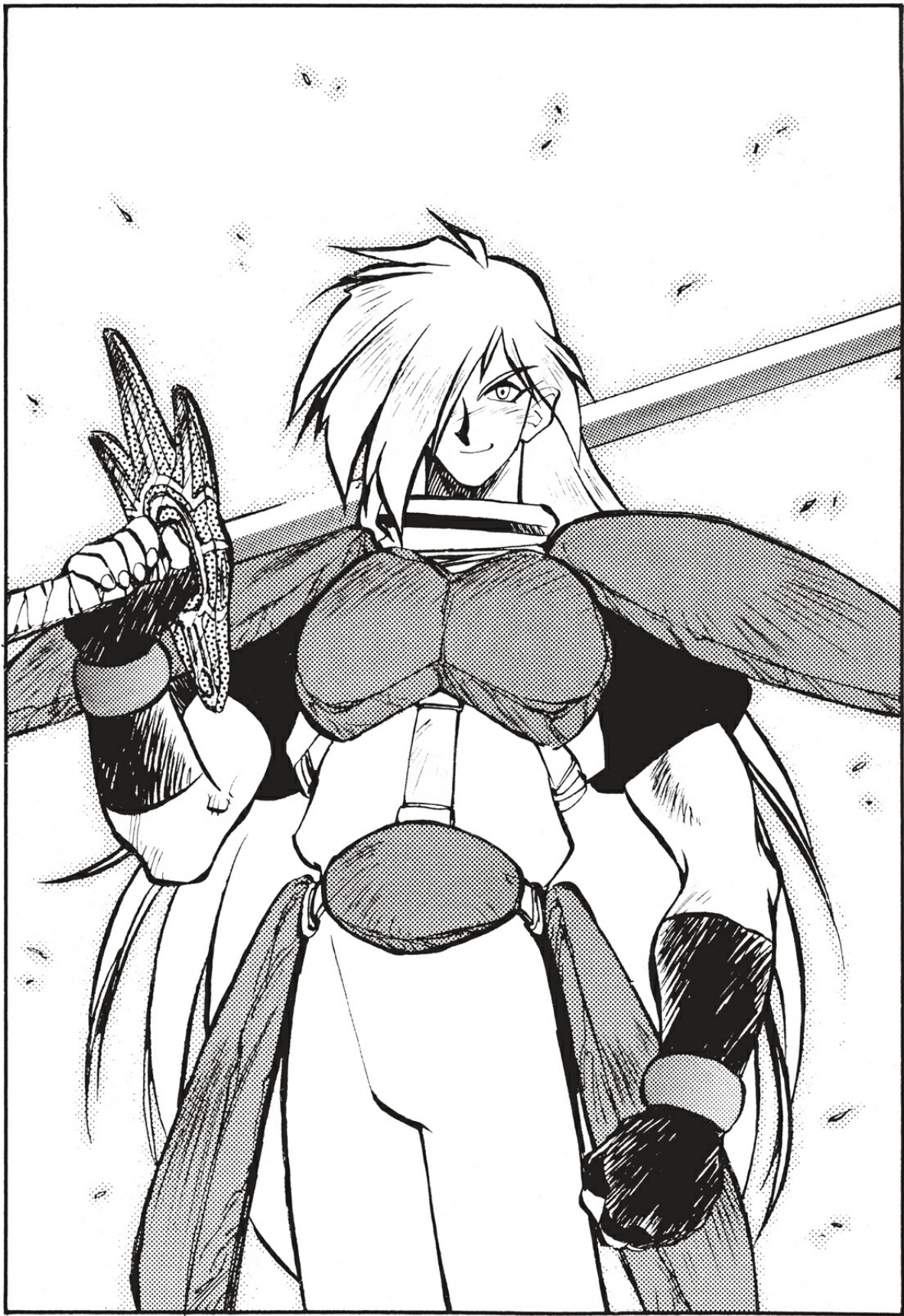
“Huh?! ”

For the first time, Duclis was the one forced to retreat. His battleaxe was now bisected just below the head, reducing the haft in his hands to nothing more than a staff.

“What—?!” he called out in surprise as the werewolf Zel was tangling with fell lifelessly to the ground, cut in two by a beam of light.

“You sure took your sweet time getting here, eh?” Zelgadis said with an awkward smile.

“I like to make a flashy entrance now and then,” responded Gourry with perfect confidence. “Let’s go!”



Gourry jumped straight at Duclis with the Sword of Light already drawn and glowing.

“Geh!” With a panicked cry, Duclis withdrew even further.

Gourry didn’t pursue. Instead, he changed course and began slicing his way toward a few other nearby werebeasts.

The situation turned on a dime. Gourry’s skill was nothing to sneeze at, but the biggest boon of all was the Sword of Light. Any sword that tried to parry it ended up in pieces. It was like he was tapping all his pent-up energy from being out of the fight for so long as he eagerly cut through one after another.

“You think you have this now, do you?!” Duclis howled, tossing aside his battleaxe-turned-staff.

He then raised his right hand high and—*Vrum!*—a streak of light exploded from his clenched fist! I-It couldn’t be! The Sword of Light?! That was certainly what it looked like as it manifested in Duclis’s hand...

“Think again!” he cried, taking off after Gourry.

The werebeast’s Sword of Light tore through the air, and their brilliant blades clashed! *Vwoosh!*

“What?!”

In the end... Duclis’s shattered and Gourry’s went on to slice through the werebeast’s arm and torso.

We really did have this clinched now. With Duclis off the board, the other werebeasts didn’t have much holding them together. We took out a few more, then the remaining handful fled for the hills. The only ones left were scattered about, and not many were still breathing.

One of them was Duclis. He’d lost his right arm and there was a gash halfway through his stomach, but he was—just barely—alive.

Understandably kneeling, he looked at me and asked, “What is... that weapon?”

“The legendary Sword of Light,” I answered.

The werebeast smiled faintly.

“I see... If Zanaffar is real... of course the Sword of Light is too. But what a weapon it is... It can even cut through light itself. That’s not really fair, is it?” With that, he coughed up a gob of blood. “You’re... after Master Klotz, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I nodded.

“You fell for their trap. The new base is to the south of Mayin... past the lake. There’s a shortcut... but we made you take the long way.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I don’t know... but I think... maybe I like you.” There, Duclis coughed up another gob of blood. The light was fading from his eyes. “Just... be careful. Grouz’s Zanaffar... is even more...”

He then fell to the ground with a heavy thud, and Duclis the werebeast was no more.

“So you knew that guy?” Amelia asked.

“Well...”

I wasn’t quite sure what to say. But Duclis’s final words troubled me. “Grouz’s Zanaffar”? Was he saying there was another Zanaffar out there?! And that it was even more *what*? While I was thinking all that over...

“I’m so glad you’re okay!” Gourry exclaimed, plopping a hand on my head.

Wham! I tossed an uppercut straight into his jaw.

“Wha... What was that for?!”

“What do you think?! Darn it... Where the heck have you been?!”

“Huh, where else? Looking for you and Amelia.”

“Ohhhhh reeeally... Then let me ask you a question.” I siidled up next to Gourry. “It would be one thing for you to show up where we got separated, or even in Mayin where the enemy base was... so what the heck are you doing showing up here in this total red herring of a place?!”

“Oh! That’s it!” Gourry clapped his hands in sudden realization.

“*What’s* it?”

“Mayin! See, after we got separated, I managed to give those werebeast guys the slip. Then I searched the area but couldn’t find anyone. I was gonna head back to the village where their base was... But, heck of a thing... I ended up forgetting what it was called and where it was! So after wandering awhile, I just sorta ended up here...”

Whap! I swatted Gourry in the head with a slipper.

“How’d you manage to get lost on a simple straight road?! Do you realize what your goo-for-brains antics have put me through?!”

“H-Hey! Wait a minute!”

“Don’t even try to make excuses!”

“No, not that! I just wanna know where you got the slipper!”

“My pocket!”

“Why do you have a slipper in your pocket?!”

“I thought something like this might happen, so I swiped it from an inn a while back!”

“You thought... *what* might happen?”

There was a moment’s silence, and then Amelia chimed in: “Hey, Lina! We don’t have time for couple’s therapy right now!”

“Couple’s therapy?!”

“Didn’t that werebeast say that their base was outside of Mayin?”

“Yeah... I think he said south, past the lake...”

“I see. So that’s where it was,” Xellos said, chiming in next. He then turned and gave us a short bow. “I suppose it’s time we went our separate ways.”

“What? Why?!” I asked.

With his trademark smile, he replied, “I pray you won’t get the wrong idea. You and Master Zelgadis may be comrades in arms, but the extent of my relationship with the two of you is no more than ‘not enemies.’ Before now,

Klotz had quite a force on his side and I didn't know where his new base was... But I'm afraid Master Zelgadis and I are ultimately after the same thing—the manuscript. I have no intention of letting him have it, and I do believe the feeling is mutual, no?"

"Depends on what's in it, actually," Zelgadis responded sulkily.

Hearing that, Xellos nodded as if in satisfaction.

"Which means that we are now in competition for it, and it would behoove us all to call off this pointless charade of pretending to be the dearest of friends." Perhaps taking our silence as passive assent, he added, "Now, I really must be going."

There, he turned and disappeared around a corner, indifferent to all our stares.

"H-Hey!" I ran after him and... came to a stop at the corner. The black-clad priest was already gone.

"Is it just me," Zel whispered from behind me, "or is he going to be the hardest part of all this?"

It was two more days before we made it back to Mayin after that, so six days total since Klotz and his gang started this wild goose chase. But we'd at least collected Gourry, who possessed the Sword of Light.

"The question now is how we go at this..."

We were currently having a strategy meeting in the underbrush in front of the enemy's new base. Duclis's dying confession had turned out to be spot on, as we found more partly-buried ruins beside a large lake to the south of Mayin. Probably also from Letidius's heyday.

There was no sign of lookouts outside. Was it a trap, or had they simply let their guard down?

"Surely Klotz's forces must be greatly diminished, but..." Zelgadis said in a low voice.

"All the more reason to expect a trap," I concluded. "I don't trust the fact that

there's no one standing watch."

"But we just gotta do it, right?" Gourry said bluntly.

"Well, true enough, but... Oh, I know! What about this?! We have Gourry charge his buns in there, and if he doesn't come right back out, I pound the place with Dragon Slaves!"

"Hey, sounds good to me."

"No objections."

"You guys... I'm crying here..."

Chill, man. I'm joking... mostly.

"Still, we can't use any of our big attack spells indoors..." I said, but stopped short. The next instant...

Roarr! A Fireball came ripping out of nowhere! Naturally, the four of us scattered.

I looked in the direction the Fireball had come from and saw five men in red robes standing there. Four of them were werebeasts, and the fifth...

"Sorry, but it's high time I be rid of you lot."

"He's finally here! The evil vice cult leader!" Amelia thundered.

"Humanity is beyond good and evil... All that matters is strength and weakness. Though simpletons like you wouldn't understand that!" Balgumon said, breaking into a run.

He was making a beeline for... Gourry?! Was this old guy crazy or something?!

Whoosh! The silver of blades glinted through the air—three of them at once. And incredibly...

"Huh?!" Gourry was the one who cried out and leaped away.

It seemed unbelievable. But in fact, Balgumon and his two swords had pushed Gourry back. Hang on... was this guy not a sorcerer?! Now that I thought about it, that made a lot of sense...

"I recently received word of Duclis's defeat!" he shouted, still slicing at

Gourry. “I was told all about how he revealed our location to you, and all about your annoying sword as well! But it won’t do you any good if you don’t live long enough to draw it!”

Balgumon’s skill was genuinely incredible. To be honest, I could barely follow the back-and-forth between the two fighters... Gourry’s swordsmanship was near superhuman, but this guy was hardly giving him any room to breathe.

I wanted to help out, but the rest of us were already engaged with the four werebeasts. And even if we weren’t, it would’ve been pretty awkward to cut in the kind of badass battle that had even Gourry struggling.

No, wait! I know!

“Zel! Amelia!” I called, repelling a strike from a charging werebeast with my shortsword. “Buy me some time! I’m gonna blow up their base with a Dragon Slave!”

“Wait, what?!” Balgumon was shaken by that one (understandably).

Gourry took the opportunity to leap back while he was distracted, and as he did—*Roarr!*—the unmistakable sound of an explosion resonated from deep inside the ruins.

“Wh-What’s going on here?!” Balgumon quickly got his distance from Gourry. He then took a good look around at all of us, perhaps for the first time. “Where is he? Where’s that monk?! Dammit... I knew it!”

Seeming to realize the identity of the culprit, he bolted back into the base.

“L-Lord Balgumon?!” the werebeasts clamored in hurried pursuit.

Cowards. Though, well, hooray for cowards in this case...

“Let’s go!”

At Zel’s call, we chased after Balgumon and his goons ourselves.

“Must be Xellos,” Zelgadis spat as we charged through the entrance to find a single werebeast corpse at our feet. Probably a lookout.

His head had been blown clean off his body. It would’ve taken something

pretty insane to put down one of Klotz's werebeasts that easily. If it really was Xellos's doing, then...

"Just how strong is that guy?" Amelia asked.

"I don't know. Never seen him in action myself," Zel responded lightly.

All I'd ever seen him use was an amplified Blast Bomb and that wind he'd blown the cultists away with.

"Well... no choice but to press on," I urged everyone.

We were in what looked like an antechamber with a single door leading deeper inside. We opened it to find a long hallway ahead. There were magical lights here and there, just bright enough to read by. At a glance, it seemed like a pretty extensive underground facility.

We kept our wits about us as we continued forward. It looked like Xellos—or whoever the intruder was—had had themselves quite a time in here. Every so often, we heard distant footsteps occasionally punctuated by an unceremonious explosion. Heat radiated from several of the rooms we passed by, their walls and ceilings scorched black. Clearly the aftermath of a few Fireballs.

"What in the world is he thinking?!" Zel clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Xellos might have been trying to panic Klotz and his men, but if the manuscript were in any of these rooms, it wasn't more than a pile of ash by now.

Roarr! Another explosion came from down the hall, but this one was close!

"That way!"

The four of us took off running. Someone suddenly cut past us—Balgumon?! We all stopped instinctively. Balgumon cast a glance our way, but...

"Tch," was all he said before he took off again.

No time to spare for little ol' us, huh?

"Get him!" I shouted, immediately giving chase.

We pursued to see Balgumon retreat through a door. We ran up to it... but it

wouldn't open.

"No use. It's locked," Gourry said, but Amelia was already chanting.

"Clear the way!" I shouted, pushing Gourry and Zel away from the door.

"Dam Blas!"

Crash! Amelia's spell blew the lock right off.

Through it was a small chapel, probably modified from something else. There was a miniature altar in the back with a statue of Shabranigdu (though I can't say much for the likeness). And opposite us... was another door, which Balgumon was currently reaching for.

Aha!

"Is this where you hid the manuscript?" I asked.

Balgumon turned back, a small smile on his lips. He then turned the knob and pulled... to reveal a figure standing just on the other side.

"You—?!"

Before he could even react... *Pop!* With an almost comical sound, Balgumon's head went flying from his trunk. The blood spray splattered red over the Dark Lord's statue. The rest of Balgumon's body slumped helplessly to the ground.

As for the person who stepped out of the door... Do I even need to say it? Yeah, it was Mr. Mysterious Priest himself, Xellos. I didn't know when he'd taken it from Balgumon, but he was holding a sheaf of papers in his hand.

"Hmm." He gazed at it intently, then nodded in satisfaction. "This is definitely a manuscript. Thank you ever so much for aiding me in my diversion."

Of course. He'd been chucking Fireballs around to send the cultists scrambling to retrieve the manuscript. That was a dangerous gamble, though... One wrong move and he'd have incinerated the thing.

"Give that to me," Zel said quietly.

Xellos, however, slowly shook his head.

"Now, now. I certainly couldn't give this incomplete little thing to anyone... Ah, Miss Lina. You were quite concerned about how I intended to use it,

correct?” he said to me, and I nodded in response.

No one attempted to approach Xellos. We’d all seen it with our own eyes, yet none of us were sure exactly how he’d killed Balgumon.

“I suppose I can show you now. I mean to do precisely *this*.”

With that, he balled up the papers in his hand, and... *Poof!* In an instant, it burned to ash. I suddenly recalled that the manuscript in the Kingdom of Dils had also been burned...

“Damn you!” Zelgadis shouted in a fluster.

But Xellos was unfazed.

“Knowledge above one’s station only brings misfortune,” he said, then turned around lightly and vanished back through the door.

“That bastard!” Zel took a step in pursuit, but stopped himself.

New figures came from the door Xellos had just disappeared through. This time, it was three of them, all clad in red—Klotz and two werebeast bodyguards. Their gazes were focused on the body on the ground.

“Ba...” Klotz fell to his knees. “Balgumon!”

Even with the head gone, he could apparently identify his cohort from his build and clothing. Klotz looked up at us, suddenly, hatred stewing in his eyes.

“You... You killed Balgumon...”

“Did not!” I said, shaking my head rapidly. “Didn’t you see a guy leave here just now? It was him!”

“Don’t you lie to me...” He rose swiftly to his feet and growled, “I didn’t see a soul leave this room. And where is the manuscript?!”

Here, I shrugged. I could tell him the same guy who killed his friend had burned it, but was he gonna believe me? Bet not!

“Very well...” he whispered, a strange smile creeping across his face.

Oh, this dude was mad. *Real* mad.

“Vaileus! Ludia!” he called to the werebeasts on either side of him.

“Sir!” they answered in unison, stepping to attention.

Are they gonna charge?!

“Wake up Grouz!”

Hearing that, the werebeasts froze up.

“W-We mustn’t, Lord Klotz!” one argued, suddenly defiant.

“That’s not Grouz anymore! If something goes wrong...” the other protested in kind.

What the...

Klotz cast a glance at them, the scorn obvious on his face, and said, “Then hold them off here! I’ll awaken Grouz myself!”

He turned away from us and exited back through the door. The werebeasts seemed genuinely uncertain.

“Lord Klotz!” they called.

“Hey, you guys! What the heck’s going on here?” I asked.

“Shut up! We don’t have to tell you—” one started yelling.

But the other interrupted him: “You’re the ones who slew Duclis, right?”

“Yeah,” Gourry nodded slightly.

“Come with us,” the second werebeast offered.

“H-Hey!” the first objected.

Ignoring him, Gourry turned back to us and asked, “What do we do? Go with them? Or not?”

“I’m in. Let’s go. They can explain on the way,” I said, heading over to the werebeasts.

“Hey! Lina!” Amelia called after me.

But I just kept walking.

“I’ll cut to the chase,” the werebeast said, his back to us as we went. “We

want you to put down Grouz... well, Zanaffar, I guess.”

“What the heck is going on here?” I asked the two werebeasts as we continued down the passage. My three companions were following along without much choice in the matter. “Isn’t Zanaffar just anti-magic armor?”

“I don’t know all the details,” the same one replied, moving at a good clip. “But Grouz has been acting strangely ever since he put that thing on.”

That must’ve been the night we infiltrated the headquarters.

“Lord Klotz said that armor fuses with whoever puts it on, and grows with them. He said their mind just becomes a little unstable in the process.”

“It grows?!” I found myself marveling. “Then... the Zanaffar armor is alive?!”

“Seems like it,” the werebeast nodded indifferently. “Lord Klotz said he would put Grouz to sleep until he stabilized, just to be safe... but I don’t think it’s really Grouz in there. Before all this, he sometimes said stuff about not being sure who he was anymore... and one time he lost control and killed a few guys.”

“But maybe, as Lord Klotz said, he was just a little unstable...” the other werebeast hedged.

The more talkative werebeast cast a glance at him and demanded, “Then let me ask you something. Yesterday, Lord Klotz said that Zanaffar was complete. If that’s true, why didn’t he wake Grouz up then?”

“W-Well...”

“And another thing. If Zanaffar is alive and growing, the question I keep wondering is... what exactly does it *eat*?”

“Huh?!” I abruptly stopped in place. “You think... Zanaffar consumes... its wearer?!”

“Ah!” Everyone (except Gourry) exclaimed in realization.

“Sorry to be the odd man out... but I’m not following,” Gourry said lightly.

You’d better be sorry. Seriously, man...

“In short, what we call ‘Zanaffar’ is a kind of parasite. It starts out as armor that protects its wearer, but eats away at them little by little without them even

noticing. And once the armor has devoured its host, body and mind, 'Zanaffar' is complete."

"I still don't get it..."

Arrrgh! What was wrong with this guy?!

"Like some big gigolo jerk who tells a girl he'll always protect her, but then gets what he wants out of her and abandons her after driving her into financial ruin!"

"Ooh, okay. I think I get it..."

Good.

"But all that aside, we just beat it and it's over, right?"

Jeez, if you're just gonna dismiss it, don't bother asking! Boy, if we'd had more time on our hands, I totally would've beaten the crap outta him with my slipper... (I'd held on to it, of course).

"I have a question," I said to the leading werebeast as it popped into my head. "Did Duclis know about this?"

"Yeah," he replied, nodding gravely. "I think so. They say he chose to don the second Zanaffar of his own volition... Though I don't know if that's actually true or not."

"I see..." I whispered.

"Also, while we want you to finish Zanaffar off, please don't hurt Lord Klotz," said the other werebeast.

"Oh, come on!" Amelia whined.

"What?!"

"It *is* a pretty unreasonable request. I doubt Klotz is gonna be cool with the whole Zanaffar-slaying plan," I interjected.

Just then...

Vrumm. The ground shook a little. The werebeasts stopped cold in their tracks.

“We’re too late...” they whispered in despair.

All was quiet at first. We’d escaped back outside as the werebeasts had asked, but...

“Nothing’s happening...” Amelia whispered after a few minutes, almost sounding bored.

If, as the werebeasts had said, Zanaffar really had awakened, there should have been *some* sign of *something* going on, but...

“Maybe it slept itself to death...” Gourry mused uselessly. Obviously, no one dignified that with a response.

“Hey, wait a minute...” Zelgadis said, pointing his sword at the werebeasts. “Was this all an act to give Klotz time to escape?!”

But the werebeasts kept staring straight at the entrance to the base.

“I wish it was, but...” one said. “Listen, don’t get cocky about the awakened version just because you beat Duclis.”

“Is he strong?”

“More like... he’s invincible.”

No sooner had those words left the werebeast’s mouth—*Vwoosh!*—a beam of light cut across my vision. That laser breath! This was the same thing they’d unleashed on me, Zel, and Amelia when we were fleeing their original headquarters that night... A stronger version of it, in fact.

The light burst out from below ground, tearing through the surface and into the lake. Massive quantities of water were vaporized, the steam roiling through the air.

Vrrrm... A low rumble rattled everything around us. The earth overtop the base bulged upward, and a gaping hole opened up. Soon, a bestial howl shook the very air over the lake.

“It’s coming,” someone whispered. Maybe it was me...

First came the claws: silver, like polished swords. Then, in one burst, it

appeared from the hole... the silver beast, Zanaffar. It stood there, calmly surveying its surroundings for a time.

But... it really had grown, hadn't it? It was now the size of a dragon. It had the general shape of a quadruped, but there were all kinds of animals mixed in. If I had to liken it to one in particular...

It was a wolf made of steel, with a mane. But silver whips sprouted from its body here and there as well. Probably tentacles.

"Lord Klotz..." one of the werebeasts whispered. "Where's Lord Klotz? Is he all right?!"

Obviously, nobody had an answer for him. No one had the time to find out either, for the magical beast turned its head toward us—*Vwoosh!*—and fired more laser breath!

"Waaah!"

As we dove out of the way, the light tore through a swath of ground. The beast then charged straight at me with another blast of laser breath. But...

Shink!

Zanaffar simply stood there, stunned, upon seeing its killer move deflected. Now realizing it was faced with something dangerous, it let out a low warning growl as it fixed its eyes on Gourry, who was standing there between me and the beast with the Sword of Light hoisted.

Just then... Something moved to the beast's right. I wasn't sure when he'd gotten around it, but one of the werebeasts was slowly approaching Zanaffar from its flank.

Don't do it, man! I wanted to call to him, but that would make it all the more likely that Zanaffar would notice the guy. He took a bold swing of his sword, and... *Clink!* The blade bounced back with a peal, as if striking metal.

I thought I saw a thin smile appear on the monster's face. The werebeast quickly moved back ruefully. But...

Splurt! One of Zanaffar's tentacles, zooming in from a blind spot, speared the werebeast through the back! His body twitched a few times, and then his sword

fell from his hands.

Zanaffar's eyes were locked on Gourry the whole time. With one step, it now closed the distance between the two of them as it flicked the werebeast's body off its tentacle. As if in response, Gourry charged the creature!



“Stay back!” the surviving werebeast bellowed, but Gourry ignored him.

He used the Sword of Light to deflect an incoming blast of laser breath as he ran, closing the distance to Zanaffar in the blink of an eye.

“Hahh!”

He struck at a foreleg, but only caught air. Zanaffar had leaped straight up... And it was now descending on Gourry, firing a volley of laser breath as it fell.

Gourry was rooted to the spot, his hands full just deflecting the beams. The beast was gonna crush him!

“Fireball!”

Bwoosh! The explosion from Amelia’s spell changed the course of the magical beast’s fall. *Thwoom!* Despite the heavy sound, it landed neatly on the ground. As expected, the Fireball didn’t seem to have done any damage.

Zanaffar didn’t forget to shoot another blast of laser breath at Gourry the moment it landed to keep him at bay, however. But when it did...

“Blast Bomb!” I unleashed a spell of my own.

Vwsssh!

None of the sorcerers in the erstwhile Magic City of Sairaag could’ve pulled that one off. The heat it produced alone might be enough to overpower Zanaffar’s defensive hide.

But when the beast emerged from the swirling smoke of the blast, it was unharmed. There wasn’t a single scratch on its mirror-like coat.

Dang, that thing’s tough... If fire wouldn’t work on it, I assumed cold was out too. That tough hide complicated things. I wanted to try shooting a Fireball straight down its gullet, but its laser breath made that impossible...

The beast’s disdain for my attack was so great that it didn’t even spare me a glance.

“Tch!” Gourry tried to get beside it. But Zanaffar twisted, keeping itself locked head-on with Gourry.

Zel, standing next to me, clicked his tongue. “It won’t even look at us,” he

remarked.

“Yeah,” Amelia whispered. “It knows the sword is the only thing that can beat it...”

“No...” I whispered, shaking my head.

“What? What is it, Lina?” Zel asked, but I didn’t answer.

One of the spells that was now within my grasp thanks to the aid of the talismans could do the trick. A spell to summon darkness and channel it into a blade... I’d tested it a few days back, and its destructive power was truly incredible. Obviously I hadn’t pitted them against each other, but it seemed more than equal to the Sword of Light in terms of power.

There were, however, a few complications. The blade it produced was only about the length of a shortsword. It also seemed to actively drain magic while it was in use, so even with capacity like mine, it wouldn’t last long.

Needless to say, just using it tapped me pretty bad. The day I tried it out, I was exhausted before I could reach fifty practice swings. Incidentally, it was considered a forbidden spell too. Yup... it drew upon the same source of power as my ace-in-the-hole Giga Slave—the Lord of Nightmares.

I mean, this puppy was way easier to control than a Giga Slave, so there was (probably) no chance of things going totally haywire... But the bigger question here was if it would do what I needed it to against Zanaffar.

Not even Gourry could land a clean hit on the giant magical beast. I had no idea if I’d fare any better, particularly swinging around something the size of a shortsword. Maybe if I caught the beast off guard... But would one hit do it? That was probably all I’d be able to manage, but I had my doubts about whether that would be enough against the enormous beast.

I wished I could wait until Gourry lopped off a leg and slowed the thing down some, but...

“Urgh!” Gourry, seeming unusually impatient for him, charged straight at the monster.

Zanaffar responded by snapping its tentacles at him.

“Out of my way!” Gourry shouted, but as he swept his sword at the tentacles, light appeared from their tips—more laser breath!

“What?!” There was no way for him to dodge the blasts entirely. He managed to avoid a few and repel others with the Sword of Light, but one of them burned right through his thigh! “Geh!”

He quickly leaped away, but the damage must have been severe, because he ended up on his knees.

Wait, that’s right! We’d seen Duclis-Zanaffar produce a beam of light from his hand too! If that was an application of Zanaffar’s laser breath, then it was no wonder this one could shoot it from its tentacles...

“Heh heh heh...” Zanaffar laughed in a low growl. “You thought I was a mere beast and underestimated me... Warrior of Light...”

“What?!” I exclaimed, flabbergasted.

“You... You speak our language?!” the remaining werebeast shrieked.

“I devoured all the knowledge and experience of my host, Grouz... Why wouldn’t I be able to speak? But you believing I was a mere beast made things much easier, so I held my tongue.” Zanaffar’s eyes remained locked on the kneeling Gourry. “Now... lay down your sword and go. If you do, I’ll spare your life. I see little point in eating any of you... As an exchange for my defenses against magic, I have lost the ability to use it myself.”

Of course... If his astral form was segregated from the rest of the astral plane, then there was no way he could interact with it in order to cast spells. That was the price he paid for his defenses. But... how could he have known that? Was Grouz particularly knowledgeable on the subject or something? No, wait—“You... What are you after?” Zelgadis asked. “Just indiscriminate destruction?”

The beast seemed unfazed by the question, answering calmly, “No... I simply wish to live and create more of my kind. The sword that can damage my physical form threatens that goal.”

“You want to make more of your kind? How do you plan on doing that yourself?” I asked this time.

“When I demonstrate my power, humans will inevitably come to serve me. There are humans who worship the Dark Lord already, after all. I will order them to create more Zanaffars. It’s not difficult. I know how they’re made now.”

“What... in the world?” The remaining werebeast let out a moan. “D-Did you... did you kill Lord Klotz?!”

“Yes,” the beast said with a grin. “I ate him.”

Yeah, figured...

“Damn you!” the werebeast hollered, charging with his sword held high.

“Don’t be stupid! Get back here!” I yelled.

But it was too late. *Vwoosh!* One of the tentacles spat out light... and the werebeast’s body fell to the ground in two pieces.

“Let that be a warning... I don’t hesitate to kill those who defy me.”

You big jerk...

“Now drop the sword and leave this place alive... or die.”

Okay. I get it. I didn’t really want to do this, but you forced my hand...

“Amelia. Zel. Listen up...”

“Oh? Choosing to run, are you?” Zanaffar asked when he caught sight of Amelia Levitating me in his peripheral vision. “Good to hear it. Now, about the sword—”

“Gourry! Pass!” Zel shouted, interrupting the beast.

Gourry caught on immediately, and promptly tossed the Sword of Light at Zel!

“What?!” Zanaffar exclaimed in sudden panic. It was the Sword of Light he feared, after all. Not Gourry.

“Run!”

At Zel’s urging, Gourry dragged himself away as fast as he could.

“Pathetic humans!”

With a howl, Zanaffar fired a volley of laser breath at Zel. He managed to

dodge and deflect each incoming beam, and by then, Amelia and I were hovering over the beast. I'd just finished reciting my amplification chant...

Now... let's get this started!

Zel dodged another blast of laser breath, then slammed his right hand into the ground.

"Dug Haute!" he cried, causing the earth below to tremble.

"Fool! What do you think you—" Zanaffar began, but the ground gave way under it. "What?!"

Bwssh! Dust plumed up around the beast. Zel's spell had caved in the ground beneath its feet—right overtop Klotz's base. Obviously, that alone didn't harm it, but it was now struggling amid the rubble at the bottom of the hole, firing more laser breath up at Zel on the edge.

Blade forged of the freezing black void,

Be released under heaven's seal

Become mine, become part of me

Let us mete destruction as one

Smash even the souls of the gods...

"Ragna Blade!" I shouted, and an ebony blade of darkness manifested in my outstretched hands.

A feeling of exhaustion seized my body. As expected, I wouldn't be able to hold out for long.

I gave her a nod, and Amelia released me. Without her Levitation holding me up, I plummeted head first... straight toward the back of the beast Zanaffar!



Fwsh! My dark blade easily pierced its hide, digging deep into its body. My arms plunged into the wound all the way up to my elbows.

“Graaaaaaaah!” The beast’s howl shook the very air around me, but that wasn’t a death knell. The creature continued to writhe, as if it didn’t understand what had happened. Only then did it finally realize I was on its back. “What... What did you do?!”

But by that time, I’d already dismissed my Ragna Blade and was chanting my next spell. It was a race against time now! I didn’t have time to amplify it!

“You... a mere sorcerer... so dare...?!”

A tentacle lashed out at me. But it was too late! This is what you get for writing me off as a mere sorcerer, Zanaffar!

“Fireball!”

Fwoooooom! In that instant, flames exploded inside Zanaffar’s body.

“Hmmm...” I held out my hands in front of me, clenched them and opened them again.

Amelia’s Resurrection spell had sure done the trick. She was now casting Recovery on the wound in Gourry’s thigh, too.

“By the way, Lina...” he asked, legs splayed out on the floor. “How’d you beat that thing? I just don’t get it...”

“Oh, that? Simple. I had a spell that could open a hole in its hide, so I used that. Then I stuck my hands inside and cast a Fireball. Burned the beast up from the inside out.”

“Huh...” Gourry nodded along, not sounding particularly impressed. “Wait a minute. Wasn’t that kinda dangerous?”

“Oh, super,” responded Amelia as she finished up her Recovery spell. “Both of Lina’s hands were—”

“Ugh! Don’t say it! I don’t wanna remember!” I interrupted her, quickly.

The guts inside Zanaffar’s midsection provided a lot of cushioning, but I’d still

set off a Fireball between my hands. You can probably guess how that turned out. And, yeah, that was why I was averse to using that plan in the first place...

Incidentally, the talismans on my wrists came out completely unharmed. The magical beast at the bottom of the pit, however, took a big, black hole in the back and expired.

“Too bad we didn’t manage to get the manuscript,” I said to Zel, who was standing a little ways away. I knew he had to be pretty disappointed...

“Ah, that’s all right,” he said rather cheerily, to my surprise.

“You’re not just... telling yourself that?”

“No... Think about it. If manuscripts really exist, that means the original’s out there too.”

Ah!

“I’m going to find it. No matter what.”

“At least it seems we’ve wrapped up this case,” Amelia said, sounding relieved.

“For now, yeah... Though things have only gotten more complicated,” I added.

Hearing that, the group fell silent.

Xellos and the Claire Bible... We’d resolved the immediate situation, sure, but I had a feeling we’d yet to get into the thick of it.

Still, stressing out about it wouldn’t get us anywhere. Bring it on, I say! Yours truly, Lina Inverse, welcomes any challenge! Making that pledge in my heart, I flipped the bird to no one in particular.

Afterword

Scene: The Author and L

Au: It's volume 5!

L: One-third of the way through the novels!

Au: And a certain popular character appears in this book.

L: Xellos, you mean?

Au: Yes! He outstripped Lina, the protagonist, in the popularity polls we took while the series was running. The woman who edits the comics version even refers to him as "Xellos-sama"!

L: Oh, so she's a fan? I suppose he is a hit with the ladies. Did you intend for that?

Au: No. I suspected he might become rather popular, but not to this degree. In that respect, it was totally unplanned.

L: If everything went as you planned, I'd take the top ten spots in every poll.

Au: I'd never plan that! Besides, how can one person take all ten spots?!

L: Well, under the names L-sama, L, Beautiful Afterword Girl, L-rin, and such... See?

Au: Has anyone ever called you "L-rin"? And other characters would still get votes, you know.

L: Hmm... Then rather than a standard popularity poll, we'll make it a limited one! One where I'd monopolize the top ten for sure!

Au: Limited how?

L: For instance, "Top ten characters who dominate the afterwords!"

Au: What would the choices even be?! You can't vote for the author, so it would just be between you and S, who hasn't even appeared lately!

L: Ah, I'll need to include some fine print that forbids people from voting on S! Then I'll win for sure!

Au: Okay, fine! But why would the readers even bother voting, then? And would you really be happy having names like "L-rin" and "L-ran" in the top ten?!

L: Huh? Now that you mention it... I suppose not. But I would like to have some kind of reader poll! Just like old times!

Au: Hahaha. Yeah, right. The last time I did a popularity poll, a whole room in the house I'd just bought ended up filled with postcards. It was hell.

L: Then let's! Go back! To hell!

Au: Don't sound so excited about it! I'm not going to hell just for old time's sake! If we really want to do a reader poll, I'd prefer to drag editorial into it so I don't have to do all the counting myself.

L: As tactless as ever...

Au: Oh, I love being tactless! In interviews before this, people have asked me, "Where do you find your ideas?" And I simply respond, "Hahaha, if you could just find ideas, there wouldn't be writers fighting with deadlines or struggling authors still waiting to debut"—it always gets cut!

L: Of course such tactless, grim nonsense would be cut...

Au: Nevertheless, sometimes confronting reality is what helps you reach the next step. When people say "grow up," it doesn't mean "throw away your dreams." It usually means "whatever you decide to do in the end, face facts and search for what's best, or at least better."

L: Well, no matter how nice you make it sound, the fact remains that you don't like counting votes and you want to foist the duty on someone else.

Au: Erk! W-Well, if we do have to have a poll, I at least hope editorial will help...

L: I know! Let's do a poll for best afterword! Oh, but I already promised the volume 6 afterword to my subordinate S, and I don't want him getting biased votes there...

Au: Look, there's no need to force one.

L: But it's worth considering! Okay, everyone, whether it's in the volume 7 reprint or *Smash*, let's meet again soon!

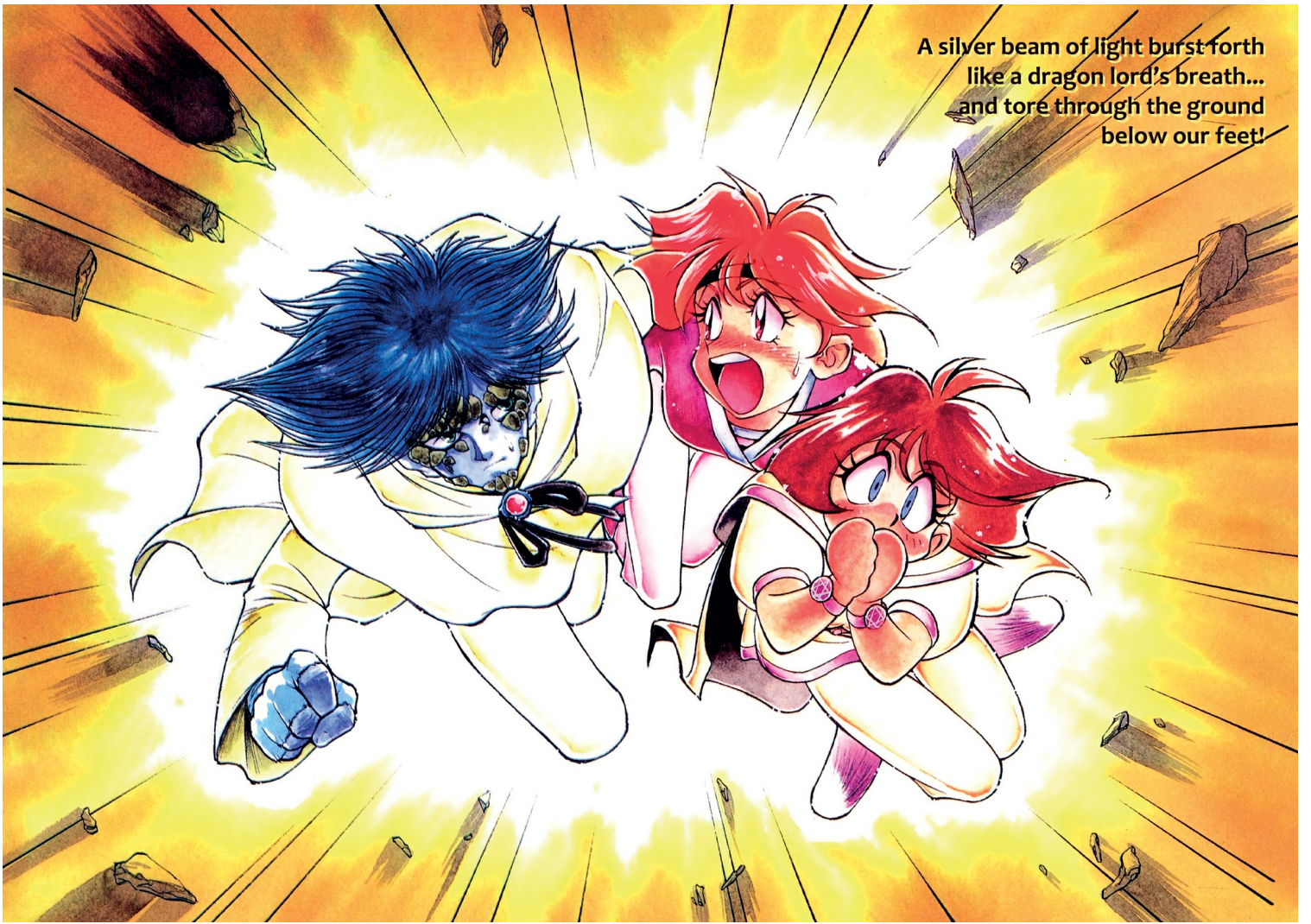
Afterword: Over.

Slayers 5

THE SILVER BEAST



A silver beam of light burst forth
like a dragon lord's breath...
and tore through the ground
below our feet!



The curious platemail
the werebeast wore
was really...



Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!

[Meg/ED]

So, we pick up virtually right where we left off last time: with our crew innocently heading toward Dils. Now, my question for you is this... do you think it's fair to say we ran into the plot along the way?

[Liz/TL]

There might've been a little bit of plot here and there. Hard to say. Too many demons!

[Meg/ED]

Our demon count has indeed increased dramatically!

[Liz/TL]

But yeah, we've had some foreshadowing to it beforehand but I think this is the volume that for sure puts us on the road to building up the big plot that will commence in volume 8. It helps that we officially form our team of four this volume, although is it really more like a team of four plus one?

[Meg/ED]

I recall the author promising in the volume 3 afterword that we'd be swept up in a much grander epic soon, and it's fun to see the pieces start to come together. Although I've been scratching my head for years (honestly) about how exactly our "plus one" fits into the equation...

[Liz/TL]

How do you mean?

[Meg/ED]

I've been debating with my friends for well over a decade now about whether Xellos should be considered part of the main party, so to speak. It certainly feels like it at times, but one of our big reveals this volume is that his ambitions... aren't necessarily in line with everyone else's, shall we say? Calling him a "plus one" is really a great way to put it, actually!

[Liz/TL]

I mean, he specifically tells them this volume that he's not a member of the team! Though I think the anime muddied those waters a little bit with *TRY*. I of course didn't realize that whole arc was anime-original at the time, but it basically seems designed to give Xellos more screentime and make him feel more like "part of the team," doesn't it?

[Meg/ED]

I was thinking the same thing. It's definitely easier to think of Xellos as part of the gang when he shows up at the beginning of *NEXT* (all the way back for the Halciform story) and then just sort of hangs out for a while.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, whereas in the novels his role is a bit more streamlined (for obvious reasons). Not that Teenage Me minded the extra Xellos content!

[Meg/ED]

Hard same! But perhaps I've jumped the gun here a bit. Xellos is, as I'm sure everyone knows by now, the mysterious "you-know-who" that I think I've managed to mention *somehow* in every chat session we've had thus far. And, for all the hubbub, our introduction to him this volume is actually pretty mild.

[Liz/TL]

He shows up, saves the de-powered Lina, gives her the talismans and then disappears for a while. What's interesting is that all those things happen in *NEXT*, too, but in a very different context.

[Meg/ED]

Indeed! And as a bit of a sidebar, I love the fact that we never find out what really happened to Mazenda, who's initially introduced like she's going to be our main villain for this volume.

[Liz/TL]

She is a real big bad with a big final battle in the anime, isn't she? Kanzaka talks in the afterwords about how the first-person perspective means there are some things that are mentioned that we just never see. I imagine some people might find that disappointing, but it definitely fits in with his philosophy of making sure the world feels bigger than our heroes. Sometimes you just never learn someone's motivation, or a battle takes place and you're not there. You couldn't get away with that in an anime (gotta put the money on the screen!) but for a novel, I like it. It makes me think of *The Hobbit* where Bilbo gets knocked out and misses the big battle, or how Gandalf just wanders off and fights the Necromancer. It gives you things to imagine in the moment, or rediscover later after you gain new knowledge.

[Meg/ED]

There are other authors who wouldn't hesitate to jump perspectives and let us get a taste of the story from someone else's point of view, but I do agree it's fun *not* to know sometimes. Especially when there's a bigger mystery involved, and there sure is here.

[Liz/TL]

If you don't know what's up with Xellos at this point there's a lot of mystery.

Maybe he didn't really kill Mazenda, and they're working together on a bigger intrigue? We already know Lina can leap to (very) wrong conclusions, so it's not like her monologue is any guide.

[Meg/ED]

Goodness knows there's a lot left to unravel about everyone's favorite mysterious priest. But as far as this volume is concerned, there's another pretty big player we should talk a bit about since we finally get to see the silver beast, or at least an incarnation thereof, in action!

[Liz/TL]

He's a good wolfy boy. Well okay, maybe not.

[Meg/ED]

I remember being quite struck at the end of the first season of the anime when it turned out that copy-Rezo was trying to use a manuscript to tap into Zanaaffar's power back in Sairaag. At first I felt like we were getting ahead of ourselves, but the anime isn't done with him there. *Revolution* has an interesting take on this particular installment of ol' Zanny's story, no?

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, *Revolution* sort of gives that plot another try, and does the shape of it if not the substance. There's no dark lord cult, but a wider plot about a kingdom that's been ravaged by a plague and received no aid. Saillune does end up the final target, and Duclis is there, but he's kind of the mastermind behind it instead of being saddest pawn in game of life.

In the anime, he's still treated as a tragic figure, but he's more the archetype who gets his life ruined and seeks a pyrrhic revenge, rather than the hapless but philosophical everyman we get in the novel.

[Meg/ED]

And what an interesting choice that is. I have to admit that I felt for the guy in the novel (especially after the wholly unsympathetic Vedul). It's fun because there's a lot we miss getting the story entirely from Lina's perspective, but her initial encounter with Duclis is a little something extra that the first-person actually *adds* for us.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah I really like the buildup of him just being the nice guy Lina meets along the road who thinks he's helping a lost kid. He's a bad guy in service to a horrific cause, but he's kind of given up on himself, deciding it's just his lot in life. But again, harder to do that kind of low-key tragedy on the screen.

I mentioned Lina getting the talismans from Xellos earlier, but she also uses the Ragna Blade for the first time, and loses her powers to Mazenda in the same arc in *NEXT*. The Ragna Blade isn't unlocked by the power of the talismans in the anime, but by a scrap of the Claire Bible manuscript that they find when trying to cure Lina. And it's all melded in with the Saillune royal family intrigue arc.

[Meg/ED]

Man, it was hard to talk about the anime adaptation of volume 4 without the discussion bleeding into this one because their plots are entirely crossed. (My notes look a bit like a murder board.) And, gosh, looking ahead... things are really just starting to kick off, aren't they?

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, we are definitely getting into the section where it's harder to talk about adaptations without accidentally spoiling future volumes. Though, I guess it's not a spoiler to say that the next volume will give us a return to Zuma, the assassin from volume 4 who was skipped over originally, but finally got his due in the 2009 *Slayers* revival.

[Meg/ED]

Ah, so you could say there's a shadow in Vezendi, huh?

[Liz/TL]

I guess that would be a literal description of events, yes!

[Meg/ED]

And the demon count is only going to go up from here...

[Liz/TL]

You never know where they'll show up next.

[Meg/ED]

Maybe we should all get a few talismans of our own for next time!



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Slayers: Volume 5

by Hajime Kanzaka

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Megan Denton

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