

Tales of Symphonia®: The People v. Zelos Wilder

A fanfiction based on the NAMCO RPG Tales of Symphonia

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The People v. Zelos Wilder

Act One: Pre-trial

1

Subpoena: Lloyd and Sheena

"Hey, slow down, will ya!"

"No way, Sheena. Speed up if you want to catch me!"

"Lloyd!" she growled, "when I catch you—"

"If you catch me."

Though seething on the outside, inwardly Sheena was having the time of her life. There had never been much time for fun and games while the young summoner was growing up. But here she was at twenty-one years old, legally an adult by even the strictest of standards, playing an impromptu game of tag with the man she loved. Or was it keep-away?

They had been having lunch when Lloyd ran off with the last apple after he'd already had three. A big grin lit up his face. Whenever he cast her a backwards glance, he held the apple up to his mouth, threatening to take a bite.

She forced herself to suppress her grin. *Serious face, girl. Eye of the ogre!* Lloyd had matured a lot in the two years since their Exsphere-hunting journey began, but he still knew how to cut lose and have fun. They were finding Exspheres only occasionally now—just three in the last month. They could both sense their journey nearing its end, and were purposefully stretching it out, making every day count, because once it ended, their relationship would never be the same. The pressure on Sheena to return home and assume the chieftom had increased sharply these past months. Grandpa wasn't long for this world, and she couldn't properly govern her village from the back of a protozoan.

Sheena stretched out her hand. Lloyd was allllmmmost within reach. She took a flying leap, but he dodged and took a true flying leap, unveiling his wings and hovering just out of her reach.

"No fair using wings," she said.

He tossed the apple back and forth between his hands. "All's fair in love and war, Sheena."

"Oh really?" Not bothering to dust herself off, she closed her eyes and began to chant. A glowing circle of black and violet beneath her feet signaled the coalescing of energies. "I summon thee—"

Lloyd panicked, dropping to the ground immediately. "No, wait, wait. You can have the apple. I was only teasing."

She ceased her chanting, saucily sauntered over to him, and took the proffered fruit. She kept her eyes locked on his as she took a bite. "Wise decision, Irving."

"Heh. Zelos is right. You can be really scary sometimes."

Sheena cocked an eyebrow. "Thanks for bringing up that pervert. I just lost my appetite." She dropped the apple in his gloved hand.

Lloyd found himself unconsciously tracing the impressions her teeth had made on the fruit while watching her walk away. "Sorry."

"S'okay. You can make it up to me later."

Lloyd shrugged, and took a bite out of the apple, tasting a hint of kirima. *Sheena's lip gloss*. He smiled.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Just looking forward to making it up to you."

Sheena blushed. "Lloyd—"

"Lloyd Irving!"

Lloyd dropped the apple, and before it struck the ground his swords were in his hands. Before it had rolled more than five inches, he was wheeled around, both swords pointing at the source of the voice. Before it came to a stop, Sheena was at his side, the afternoon sun glinting off her spell card.

"Ah, and Sheena Fujibayashi. This will make my job easier."

"Tell me your name, and I will tell you mine."

The stranger consulted the scroll he held. "Yes, definitely Lloyd Irving."

Lloyd turned his head toward Sheena, keeping his eyes on the stranger. "So, is this guy an enemy or what?"

"I don't think so," she said.

"Right you are," the stranger said. He rolled up the scroll, pulled another from a bag at his side, and started forward, hands in the air. "I am no enemy, but a simple server."

"You mean servant?" Lloyd asked, lowering his weapons. It was tiring holding them up like that.

"No, I mean server." He handed them each a scroll. "You've been served."

Lloyd sheathed one of his swords to accept it. "Served what?"

"Subpoenas," Sheena said, surprised. "We've been summoned to the royal court in Meltokio."

"Why?"

"It's Zelos," she said. "He's been arrested."

2

Press Conference: Lloyd and Sheena

"This just in: it appears the Chosen of Mana, Zelos Wilder, has been arrested. We now go live to just outside the Meltokio Castle, where the king's press secretary is about to speak..."

The tremendous screen was the first thing Lloyd and Sheena noticed upon entering Tethe'alla's capital. Its prominent placement all but guaranteed this. Currently, it showed a young man and a pretty young girl delivering with plastered-on smiles all the gossip and official pronouncements of the day. The screen itself was nothing new to the travelers. They'd seen such technology at both the human ranches and the Renegades bases, but never on this large a scale. What the Desians used for two-way chats, the king had appropriated for mass communication. They were impressed.

Not only big, the screen was also loud. The voices blaring from its speakers could be heard over the hustle and bustle of the market without their having to strain too hard.

The male announcer continued, "No, I'm sorry. I've been informed there has been a slight delay. We'll check in on the press secretary in just a moment. I'm told, Mary," he spoke to his fellow announcer, "The Chosen is quite the ladies man. I'm sure many of the ladies in our audience could attest to this.

"Oh, yes," the female agreed.

"Have you ever been out with the Chosen?"

"Oh, no, I've never been that lucky."

"Well, as a special treat, our producer has put together a retrospective of some of the Chosen's past loves." As he spoke, a cycle of images appeared on the screen, each apparently a past "love" of Zelos's. "And here's a face you'll all recognize!"

The color drained from Sheena's face. On the screen was a picture of her in her signature outfit of black, blue, and lavender. She lectured a group of girls, the flighty young things that always followed that idiot pervert around. She had gotten sick and tired of the inconvenience they presented, and had just started really laying into them. She remembered that day. It was right before he started wearing that stupid bird mask.

"Awfully possessive of her man isn't she, folks?"

"WHAT! That wasn't a date! I wasn't even alone with him! There are other people in the photo, idiot. Look, Lloyd's right there. See?"

You realize they can't hear you, right?

Shut up, brain!

"That's right, Bob. It's Sheena Fudgy...Foojiboo..."

"The little minx from Mizuho. You remember her, don't you, Mary?"

"Sure do, Bob. She came to our fair city illiterate and barely able to speak the language."

"Barely able to..." Sheena fumed. "I'll kill that little..."

Bob spoke again, "And look at what she's become: fluent, well-spoken, a bit rough around the edges maybe, but the Chosen must have seen something in her."

"Now I have to kill Bob as well," Sheena grumbled.

"And," he continued, "here's a shot of the two just after she arrived in our city." The picture showed Sheena and Zelos in what was then Meltokio's finest restaurant. They were dressed appropriately, she in a tight red dress and he in a flattering dark suit.

"That's not a date...th-that...oh boy..." Her mouth dropped, and she couldn't quite seem to shut it. Zelos had a photographer there that night! She didn't know whether to burst into tears or call down the curses of the gods, including the ones she didn't believe in, on his head. Feeling she might do either any minute, she directed all her willpower toward choosing anger over tears.

Lloyd gulped nervously. By now, Sheena's outburst had attracted a lot of attention.

"Uh...Sheena, perhaps we should—"

"Not now, Lloyd."

"But everyone is staring."

"Can you believe the nerve of this guy? Claiming me, ME, as one of his floozies." Never mind the picture made it look like she was exactly that. "I'm going to kill him—no, you're going to kill him. Come on, defend my honor."

Lloyd stammered out a response.

Sheena suddenly gasped. "Oh...everyone is staring, aren't they?" Grasping his shirt, she ducked her head behind Lloyd's shoulder. "I'm so embarrassed."

Lloyd allowed her to remain hidden. "Don't worry about it, Sheena. C'mon, let's go check in at the castle." He took her hand and led her up the stairs.

As soon as his hand touched hers, she smiled, beginning to feel just a little better.

3

Interrogation: Zelos and Sheena

Locked in the king's dungeon, Zelos had a problem. He was about to fall asleep from the gramophone's soft music, and he still hadn't found his chair's sweet spot. "Hey, Sebastian," he called to his butler. "Hurry up with the latte, will ya? And make sure it's decaf. I hear a certain curvaceous cutie is headed my way, and I'll need my beauty sleep."

Sheena entered the dungeon without a sound. "You'd have to sleep a very long time to have an effect on me," she said.

"How long?"

"You'd get bedsores."

"Ah, I've missed you, hunny."

In spite of herself, Sheena smiled. "You too, idiot."

"And what's this? You're alone. A summoner with no swordsman is a tragedy."

"My last swordsman broke. Know where I can get a replacement?"

"Ho, ho, ho. Will a gleaming knight suffice?"

With every escalation of the banter, Zelos inched closer to the bars. He was delighted to note that Sheena did the same. Soon, she'd be close enough to touch, and, if he played his cards right (the ace of sympathy and the king of charms), she just might let him.

"I think he might."

"Glad to hear it."

Sebastian interposed. "Your double tall nonfat decaf mocha latte, sir."

Zelos grimaced. "Go away. You're fired."

"Mmm. That smells delightful," Sheena said.

"Sebastian, you're rehired. Make my hunny a latte. Chop, chop!" Turning back to the unusually ebullient summoner, he gave her a seductive smile. "So, where were we? Ah, yes, you were about to tell me why you left that lamebrain and came crawling back to...I mean, graced me with your presence."

"Nice save, Chosen," she grinned, finally reaching the bars and threading a set of delicate fingers around one. "Guess that's what I like about you. You always know just what to say. Knowing how to properly comfort a lady is the mark of a real man." Sheena was close enough to smell his scent, kirima from his shampoo and a piquant musky aftershave. *Pretty strong; he must've splashed it on right before I arrived.* She reached out tentatively to stroke his chest. Seeing his pleased expression, she dropped her gaze to hide her blush.

He tickled the exposed flesh beneath her right sleeve. "It's about time you dumped him," he said.

Her hand was behind his head now, threaded almost possessively through his red locks, and pulling him forward. She pursed her lips and tilted her head upward. She said, "It's about

time, all right."

Then he saw the gleam in her eye.

"Oh sh—!"

Once, twice, three times, she pulled forward slamming his forehead into the cold metal bars. "Idiot!" she screamed, "Stupid pervert! This is for implying I was *ever* your girlfriend!"

"Violent Demon Banshe—ow!"

Zelos wrenched his head away from her grasp, losing a clump of hair, but managing to escape the flurry of punches she threw at his gut. For several seconds she irrationally kept reaching for him through the bars.

"Sebastian, do something!" he said.

The butler nodded. "Of course, Master Zelos. Miss Sheena, your latte."

She smiled sweetly. "Thank you, Sebastian."

Zelos rubbed his head gingerly. "Feel better?" he asked the summoner.

She shrugged. "A little." She took a sip of her latte, and then called out, "Lloyd, you can come in now."

A moment later, a sheepish-looking Lloyd Irving entered, casting Zelos an apologetic look. Immediately, Sheena handed Lloyd her cup, positioning it so that, when he drank, his lips would touch the spot hers had. "This is delicious. You have to try it."

She locked her eyes on Zelos's as Lloyd drank. Soon after, the Chosen began grinding his teeth, and Sheena was rewarded with the sound of one of his fillings cracking.

4

Indictment: Zelos and Sheena

Finishing her latte, Sheena asked, "Have you even read the indictment?"

"I skimmed it," Zelos replied. Receiving a dirty look, he snorted. "What? It was *twelve* pages!"

"Twelve pages on which your future hinges," she insisted.

"Come on, my apprehensive hunny. I know what happened. I'll explain everything to the king, make a few bribes here and there, arrange a nice settlement with the family, and everything will be fine."

Sheena shook her head, incensed by both his brazenness in thinking money could smooth over his sexual indiscretions and because, "You didn't even *look* at it!"

"Why would you say that?"

She held up a commemorative copy of the indictment, laminated and embossed with the royal seal (available at all item shops and hotels for the low, low price of only 1,000 gald—act now, while supplies last!), and read, "Count One: The Grand Jury of the City of Meltokio, Kingdom of Tethe'alla, by this Indictment, hereby accuses ZELOS WILDER of a felony, to wit: a violation of Penal Code section 261.5, (UNLAWFUL SEXUAL INTERCOURSE)¹, in that on the night of February 23, in the city of Meltokio, he did forcibly obtain sexual favors from her royal highness, princess Hilda—"

"Hold on, this is about Hilda!" Zelos gulped audibly. "I am so screwed."

"You can say that again," Sheena agreed. "The king's not going to help you weasel your way out when the victim is his daughter."

"Wait a second. Did you say 'forcibly?'"

She nodded.

He relaxed into his chair. "Well, that's a relief."

"What?" Sheena screeched.

"That's my out. No one will think the great Zelos Wilder had to force himself on a woman. Don't worry your pretty little head, little Miss Voluptuous. I'm in the clear."

"Stupid perverted son of a..."

"Please watch your language. There are children present." Zelos indicated Lloyd, who sat on a chair in the corner looking forlorn without his confiscated swords.

"They're practically accusing you of rape, Zelos." Sheena said.

¹ 261.5 is the penal code listing for unlawful sexual intercourse in Sacramento County, California. Therein, it is defined as sexual intercourse with a minor. To be labeled a felony, the minor must be more than three years younger than the perpetrator. He may be punished by up to three years in state prison and a fine of up to \$10,000. Source: AroundTheCapital.com. For purposes of this fiction, unlawful sexual intercourse refers to any sex crime that Meltokio, in hopes of not embarrassing the victim or perpetrator, does not wish to call "rape," regardless of the age of the victim, and may be punished by far stiffer penalties.

"So," he shrugged. "I didn't do it."

"So, you and Princess Hilda never—"

"I didn't say that, but whatever Princess Hilda and I did *or didn't do*, but probably did, was entirely consensual and none of the king's business. Or anyone else's."

"Unfortunately," Sheena said, "the king and the Grand Jury both disagree."

He shrugged.

"Can I assume you also haven't read the second count?"

"There's more?"

"Yeah, and it's a biggie: Treason."

Zelos looked at her quizzically. "How do they figure?"

"As I understand it," she said, perusing the document with amazing speed, "your 'relationship' with Princess Hilda has made any political marriage impossible, and, since any child born to you two would have become the king's heir, they're viewing it as an attempted coup."

"Heh. They're giving me an awful lot of credit."

"You're a smart guy, Zelos, though it pains me to admit it," Sheena said, "but I doubt you have the initiative to stage a political rebellion."

"I am pretty laid back," he agreed.

"There's one thing I don't get," Lloyd said, rising from his chair. "If the king is out to get you, why did he let you have all these amenities? Comfy chair? Soft music? Coffee maker?"

Noticing shock on everyone's faces, even the butler's, Lloyd asked, "Why's everyone staring at me like that?"

Zelos cracked a grin. "That's a pretty big word for you, Lloyd. Have you been studying?"

Lloyd glared at him. "I know my fair share of vocabulary, Zelos. For instance: jerk, bastard, assho—"

"No, seriously, have you been studying?"

Lloyd exhaled. "Genis got me a Word-A-Day Calendar for my birthday."

"Bravo, Sir Bud!" Sebastian clapped his hands.

"My name is—ah, forget it," Lloyd moaned. "And what about my question? Why does the king let you have all these—?"

"He's going to say it," Zelos whispered.

"...things," Lloyd concluded.

"Ah, you're no fun," Zelos whined.

"Zelos, could you please quit making fun of my boyfriend and answer his very valid question?"

"Your what?" three voices called out simultaneously.

Sheena turned beet red. "I...said...boru-pen.² The vice-chief gave it to me when I finished mid-level ninja training." She held up a cheap plastic pen, clicking it a few times for emphasis. "Zelos always used to make fun of it when we lived in Meltokio together, didn't you, Zelos? It always bothered me, but this is the first time I mentioned it. Heh, heh. Pretty stupid, huh, me bringing it up after all these years?"

"You're rambling," Zelos said in a sing-song voice.

"Shut up," she hissed.

Lloyd regarded the pen warily. "That looks pretty cheap for a graduation present."

"Are you calling my village poor?" Sheena narrowed her eyes accusingly.

² Japanese for "ballpoint pen."

"N-no, sorry."

Sheena sighed. *Disaster averted.*

Zelos began singing again, "Somebody's got a cruuussh—oof!"

Sheena smiled smugly, retracting her hand from between the cell bars. "And somebody's got a crushed windpipe."

Lloyd rubbed his own throat and watched Sheena warily. *Wonder if Colette's busy this weekend,* he thought. *Maybe I should give her a call.*

The sound of a clearing throat brought them all back to reality. "Excuse me for interrupting, Master Zelos," Sebastian said, "but you have company."

The butler spoke truth. Three guards entered through the dungeon doorway and wasted no time heading for Zelos's cell.

"Against the wall, Chosen, and spread 'em," came the gruff command of the largest guard.

"What are you guys doing?" Lloyd demanded, reaching for his missing swords.

Zelos, though, simply complied. "Relax, Bud, the guards are only doing their jobs." To the big guard, Zelos said, "Good afternoon, Klaus. How are the kids?"

He may have smiled. With his visor down, no one could tell. He said, "Good, good. Joey really loves the autographed picture."

"Tell her, 'hi,' for me."

"Sure will." Unlocking the door, he hesitated. "Sorry about this."

"Don't sweat it," Zelos said. "The blessings of the Chosen go with you."

With a nod, Klaus ordered his men to remove the chair, the potted plants, and the gramophone from inside the cell, and the espresso machine from outside. One of the guards picked up Sebastian and threw him over his shoulder.

"Master Zelos, help me!" he cried.

"Klaus, come on, the butler too?"

"Fraid so."

"But I brought him from home."

"I'm sorry, but—"

"...those are the rules," Zelos intoned. "Fine, fine. Sebastian, you're fired. Now, you can put him down. He's a friend visiting, not an employee."

This seemed to satisfy the big guard, who ordered his underling to drop the butler.

"Oh thank you, Master..." Receiving a dirty look from the guard, he corrected himself, "Right, thanks, Zelly, ol' pal."

"Zelly?" the Chosen questioned after the guards had filed out. "If you still worked for me, I'd fire you for saying that."

"Sorry, sir, I was put on the spot."

Turning to his friend, Zelos said, "To answer your question, Lloyd, I finished an interview with Mary, that scrumptious little hottie from the news, not five minutes before you two arrived. The king let me have those precious little tidbits of comfort for use on camera. It would be very bad PR to let the public see the Chosen being treated like a common criminal."

"And you went along with it?" Lloyd asked.

"Sure, why not?" he grinned, "I got a few cappuccinos out of it and the use of a comfy chair for a quick nap. It's a fair trade, I'd say."

Lloyd shook his head. "I just don't understand you."

Zelos shrugged, "Sometimes I don't understand myself. Well, guess it's back to scratchy mattresses and cold concrete for me. How about a little comfort for all my hardships, Sheena? The Chosen needs a hug."

But Sheena was already gone.

5

Affidavit: Sheena and Hilda

The princess's room would be heavily guarded, but that wouldn't stop Sheena. Ducking into an alcove at the rear of the castle, she removed a costume and a pair of smoke caplets from her bag. Being a quick-change artist thanks to her ninja training, she didn't fear being seen changing by a person. In the blink of an eye, she could shed the many layers of her lavender garb and slip into even her most complicated attire, her leave-little-to-the-imagination evening dress—complete with hair and make-up, no less. No, it wasn't the people she feared, but the photographers who infested the city like cockroaches. One properly-timed click of the shutter could gain her a lifetime of humiliation. A picture of her unclothed would no doubt fetch a hefty sum on the black market. Hell, Zelos would probably pay half his fortune for it. But she had the smoke caplets. They would obscure everything long enough for her to properly change. And that was good. She didn't want to have to add any more names to her only half-serious hit list. Why didn't these idiots ever remember she was a trained assassin? True, she'd never actually assassinated anyone, but her in-battle body count was gargantuan; she should be feared.

She unrolled the costume and dropped the caplets. Half a blink later, she was violating every public decency law on Meltokio's books, and half a blink after that, she was pulling up the final zipper and stuffing her normal costume into her bag. *That's a new record*, she grinned.

Tagged "Covert Op," the costume was a recent addition to her wardrobe; it was reversible, one side all white and the other all black, and capable of covering her from head to toe. The green lenses on the headpiece helped her see better in the dark, the amber lenses during the day. Since it was mid-morning, Sheena now wore the all-white side, enabling her to blend in with the castle walls.

She located Princess Hilda's room with ease, scaled the wall with her ninja climbing equipment, and slipped inside.

She lingered at the window a moment listening to the sound of soft moaning from further within. The best approach, she supposed, was to face the girl head-on: introduce herself and hope the girl's sense of decency would prompt her to tell the truth. She removed her headpiece and started forward, but halted when she became aware Princess Hilda had company. She could not see the girl's visitor, or the girl herself for that matter, through the wispy canopy curtains surrounding the bed.

But she could hear them. And she could hear moans and the creak of the mattress from the shifting of weight.

Oh my.

"Who's your daddy?"

"You are." Another earth-shattering moan.
Then louder, more insistent, "Who's your daddy?"
"YOU ARE!"

This girl was a female version of Zelos! Gross! And Sheena would have to listen to all of it! Gross!

She could see something now. A hand cupped Hilda's chin, caressing it. Then a mouth placed a soft kiss on her cheek. "That's right, and, as your daddy, I won't let this stain to your honor go unpunished."

"Stain to your honor?" A lover wouldn't say that!

"But, daddy, I love—" the princess said.

Oh daddy, that daddy. Whew.

"Hush, my dear. I love you too, and I'll take care of everything. No one, be he a vestige of a dying religion or the lowliest street beggar, will besmirch the honor of a royal scion and get away with it." He stood resolutely and started for the door. "I'll send a nurse to check on you in a bit."

"But he didn't rape me. I love him," she whispered. She collapsed onto the bed and covered her head with a pillow.

Sheena sighed inwardly. The best chance Zelos had at acquittal was a wash. Sure, the girl said the Idiot Chosen didn't rape her, but she also said she loved him, which meant only one thing: she was stark raving mad.

Still, she supposed she should at least try talking with her.

"Would you," Sheena said, emerging from the shadows, "testify to that in court?"

The girl opened her mouth as if to scream, and Sheena rushed forward to clamp a hand over her mouth. "I'm not going to hurt you," she hissed. "I just need a little information, and then I'm gone. Okay?"

The princess nodded, and Sheena lowered her hand.

"Why would a nurse hurt me?" Hilda asked.

"A nurse?"

"You're the nurse daddy sent, right? You're wearing white."

"Sure am," Sheena smiled brightly. "I'm here to help."

"Please, no more examinations."

"All right," Sheena said, grateful not to have to carry the deception too far. Her knowledge of medicine was proficient, but by no means impressive enough to fool someone used to top-notch medical care. "We can just talk."

A few moments later, they arrived at the heart of the problem.

Hilda said, "When we were, you know, making..."

"Love." Sheena cringed at having to use the word in reference to Zelos.

"You're like all the others," Hilda groaned. "No one understands Zelos. They think he's just a playboy, sleeping with every girl who winks at him, but he's not. In fact, he's slept with only one girl before me."

"I'm sure that's what he told you," Sheena mumbled.

"It's true, and he was in love with her too. In fact, she's the reason we're fighting. Last week when we were making love, he called out her name. You don't know what it's like whispering your lover's name and hearing, 'Oh, Sheena, your silky black hair drives me wild,' in return. I forgive him now, but daddy won't let me see him."

Sheena sat still for a moment, and then,

"What! We NEVER...I mean, she would never...I happen to know a thing or two about

Mizuhoan romantic rituals. They're not nearly as strict as some would presume, but there's no way any Mizuhoan woman would just *do* that with a man. And Sheena, so I've heard, is one of the most virtuous, honorable women—"

who would boink Lloyd in a second if he made the vaguest intimation.

This is the last time I'm going to tell you, brain, shut it! And is that your honest evaluation of me, that I'd jump into bed with a man just like that, even if I loved him? I'm a good girl.

You'd need a ring first, right?

Well, naturally I wou—shut it!

"—who would never—"

"His manly charms paved the way for a cultural exchange," Hilda said.

"Huh?"

"That's what he told me."

Sheena massaged the bulging vein in her forehead. *Stick to the task at hand—get the idiot acquitted so Lloyd and I can enjoy our last months together before facing the real world.*

"If you were called to the witness stand," she said, "would you testify that your lovemaking was consensual?"

"Of course."

"Good," Sheena said, standing to leave.

"But daddy would never let me testify."

"Just leave that to me."

Hilda mumbled, "What could a nurse do?"

Sheena was about to retort, when another thought struck her. "Would you write down your account of the day?"

"That's sick." She started to call for the guards, but Sheena's hand clamped over her mouth stopped her.

"It's not like that," Sheena said. "Leave out all the lurid details. Just mention that it was consensual. If you write it down on royal parchment, seal it, and sign it while I witness it, the king will have to choose but to let it into evidence."

Hilda clapped her hands. "That's a wonderful idea."

In a few minutes, the affidavit was prepared, and Sheena signed her name on the witness line.

"Sheena?" Hilda questioned. "Wait. You're—"

"No, of course not. We just share the same name." Thinking quickly, she added, "That's why I know so much about Mizuho's culture. I share a name with a famous woman, so I studied about her. Guess you could say she's my hero."

"Humph. You choose a hero like her when my Zelos is available to be worshiped. I'll never understand commoners."

Purposefully ignoring the comment, Sheena left the room as she entered, leaving a confused princess to wonder why her nurse just threw herself from the window.

"Must have been all the passionate details of our lovemaking," she concluded. "Poor thing must have realized she'll never have a man like my Zelos and ended it all. Truly tragic." Then she giggled, "But, it's cool Zelly's so hot."



On the street below, a man with a camera elbowed his way through the crowd, making a beeline for his home darkroom. He knew a man who'd pay big money for the picture he'd

been fortunate enough to snap. *Thanks, ninja lady. The money I make off this will put my kid through Sybak Academy!*

But, alas, it was not to be. An event he couldn't see caused the crowd to surge backward. He thought he heard someone shout, "Don't talk about her that way, you bastard!" but he was paying more attention to the slow-motion way his camera, knocked from his hands, fell to the ground, shattered, and spilled out its film. The negatives, exposed to sunlight, were ruined.

"Sorry, Merlin," he groaned, "No magic school for you. It's just as well. What kind of name is Merlin for a magician?"³

3 Note: Merlin means "by the sea." Source: BabyNames.com

6

Confession: Lloyd and Zelos

Zelos lay dazed and unmoving in a heap of concrete rubble between Meltokio castle and the banquet hall, trying to remember how he'd gotten there. Soon, a series of brutal punches to his gut jogged his memory.



The two swordsmen said little to one another after Sheena slipped away. Not until Sebastian excused himself to prepare guest rooms for his master's friends, did Zelos break the silence.

"Hey, Lloyd," he said, "Now that I have you alone, I've got to ask you something."

"Sure, Zelos. What is it?"

"Tell me, how serious is it between you and Sheena?"

Lloyd smiled. "We're great friends."

"Just friends?"

He blushed. "What else would we be?"

"So you two aren't knocking boots yet?" Zelos asked.

"Knocking...boots?"

"Yeah, you know, the horizontal mambo, the chinchilla cha-cha. Do I still have a chance?"

Lloyd shook his head. "I'm not following you."

Zelos sighed in exasperation. "Are you guys *having sex*?"

"What? No!" Lloyd said, his blush deepening.

"If the jury—Ha! *When* the jury convicts me, they're going to put me away for a long time," Zelos said. "I'll be cut off from everything that makes life bearable: good food, comfortable bedding, and, worst of all, my hunnies!"

"What does that have to do with me and Sheena s-sleeping together?"

"Sheena's a ninja, so she'd have no problem picking these locks, right?" Zelos said, tapping his cell door.

"You want her to bust you out?" Lloyd said. "I'm sure she could, but what does that have to do with me and her—?"

Zelos waved a hand through the air. "Nah, if I broke out while you two were here, the king would know you had helped me escape. I wouldn't want her to become a fugitive because of me. But I was thinking late one night she might like to sneak in here and give me a 'going away present.'"

Lloyd clenched his fists. "You jerk, Sheena is not that kind of girl. She wouldn't just do that."

"Yeah, sure she's not," Zelos said glumly. Slumping onto his bunk, he mumbled, "Poor naïve Lloyd, blind to the ways of the world."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Zelos looked up suddenly, as if shocked that he'd been heard. After a moment, he shrugged. *Time for a lesson in reality.* "News flash, Bud," he said. "Girls who dress like our Sheena aren't pure little debutants. If she's not doing the deed with you, she's doing it with someone. All girls her age do."

"Sheena is not 'all girls her age!'" Lloyd grasped the bars, his preternatural strength etching his white-knuckled grip into the iron.

"I know her type." Zelos shot up from his bunk, throwing himself against the bars and planting his face inches from Lloyd's. "She sees you as a fresh start, a way to put all that wild living behind her. And she doesn't even have the decency to tell you what she did. Bet she thinks she's doing you a favor! Ha! More like, doing herself a favor! Thinks if you learned the truth, you'd go running back to your spotless little lamb Colette. Well, Lloyd, is she right?" He poked Lloyd in the chest. "Would you?"

Anger surged through Lloyd like adrenaline, and he squeezed his fists shut hard around the prison bars. They splintered, and slivers of iron and powder poured from his palms as he shot a hand forward, grabbing Zelos's arm. Twisting it, he pulled the redhead close and spoke very plainly a word at a time. "Don't ever talk about her that way." He pushed forward, sending Zelos tripping toward the back of the cell where his head struck the cold metal bunk. Zelos struggled to his feet and smirked, "Which one?"

With a growl of rage, Lloyd ripped prison bars from their mountings until he had created a hole big enough to walk through. He surged forward, grabbing Zelos by his lapels. "Sheena is not a type! And she's not 'all girls her age.' She's an individual I'm proud to know."

"You know her *now*," Zelos countered, too angry to be afraid. "She was *very* different three years ago."

"What are you saying?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you?"

"I'm a naïve little boy," Lloyd said through clenched teeth. "I guess you do."

"The Sheena I knew was a sexual dynamo. I know because I was *with* her. We had sex, Lloyd, and she couldn't get enough."

Lloyd's grip loosened, and his hands fell limply to his sides.

Zelos smirked. "You've had your tantrum. Now go sit in a corner and brood."

Zelos howled in pain, blinded by a flash of light. His hands shot to his eyes as if contact with them could alleviate the white hot agony in his head; his head met his hands halfway. It was pure instinct, and it saved his life by spreading the impact of Lloyd plowing forward and slamming him through the concrete wall evenly over his neck and shoulders rather than centralizing it on his head and snapping his neck.

Furiously blinking away spots and desperately ordering his thoughts, Zelos soon recognized Lloyd, his blue spectral wings burning brighter than he'd ever seen them. His Exsphere too was glowing its iridescent yellow glow as he pounded his fists into the Chosen's stomach.

Lloyd was a swordsman. He knew how to throw a punch, but he had never trained as a street fighter. *Thank heaven for small blessings!*

Punches to the gut hurt, but, to really disorient a man, you go for his head!

Zelos's fist connected with Lloyd's temple. As the boy went slack, Zelos pushed him to the ground, rolled over, and gulped in huge breaths. *Correction: Punches to the gut hurt a lot!* He

staggered to his feet and felt bile rise in his throat. When he tried to speak a healing spell, he threw up.

He looked at Lloyd, lying on the ground dazed but not unconscious. His wings had lost some of their brilliance, but they were still out. That proved he was awake. Soon, he had rolled himself to a sitting position, massaging his temple, and moaning low in his throat. Zelos slammed his knee into Lloyd's face, observing with too much satisfaction the gash it opened along his cheek.

Sure that he wouldn't throw up again, Zelos spoke his healing spell. He was too weak to completely heal himself, but he'd live. Now to see about Lloyd.

"Oof!" Zelos felt the air forced from his lungs as Lloyd tackled him.

"I don't care if it's true," he screamed.

Over the railing that separated the noble quarter from the lower sections, they tumbled, taking part of the railing with them. They overshot the second level and plummeted to ground level. Instead of slowing their descent, Lloyd's wings added speed.

Want to bust my brain on the ground, huh? Zelos thought. Ain't happening! He brought out his own wings, angling them to modify the slant of their descent and coast to a less hazardous landing. It worked but still hurt like hell.

"You can't talk about her that way, you bastard," Lloyd said.

They hadn't hit anyone in the crowd. That was good. Lloyd was angry but still had sense enough to avoid purposefully hurting innocents. Zelos perked up his ears to be sure. He thought he heard someone wailing about a broken camera, and a few kids were crying, but they were scared, not hurt.

"Kick his ass, Chosen!" a young voice called. Several others assented.

"Watch your language, young man," another voice answered.

"Sorry, Mom."

Zelos smiled at the mother and son. "You don't know how lucky you are, kid, to be disciplined by such a lovely lady."

The boy made gagging sounds, while his mother blushed. "Oh, you."

"I'm just saying what's in my heart, ma'am. Say, if you're not busy later..." Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he was supposed to be doing something else. A vicious right cross reminded him what.

He rose unsteadily, groaning. "Way to warn me, lady. Date's off."

To Lloyd, he said, "What's the matter? Can't take it that your little flower's missing a few petals?"

That did it.

Lloyd launched himself forward, but Zelos shot into the air at the last moment and delivered a swift kick to Lloyd's head. Lloyd wasn't stunned. With a snap of his powerful wings, he turned around in mid-air, grabbed Zelos's leg, and slammed him into the ground.

His deft maneuver created a strong current that bowled over several pedestrians.

Got to get him out of here! Zelos realized.

It seemed Lloyd had the same idea, for, trapping the Chosen in a strong bear hug, he flew upward until Meltokio was a small dot on the landscape below.

Knowing he lacked the energy or the expertise to descend safely from such a height, Zelos let his wings fade away. "Are you going to kill me?" he asked

"No," Lloyd said, at last sounding reasonable again. "No, I'm not. But you have to tell me one thing: What the hell is your problem?"

"My problem? I'm not the one breaking holes in buildings and terrifying innocent citizens."

"You're right," Lloyd agreed. "I did those things, and, when I take you back to Meltokio, I'll turn myself in. But we're talking about *you*. Every time you see Sheena, you humiliate her. You call her those names."

"My voluptuous honey likes those names, Lloyd. She still wants me whether she realizes it or not."

A quick squeeze against the diaphragm silenced Zelos and left him panting

"No, she doesn't like them," Lloyd said, "and she isn't yours—not anymore."

"Whose is she then?" he asked, coughing. "Yours?"

"Maybe...I don't know. No, scratch that. She's her own person—"

"With her own hopes and aspirations and blah, blah, blah," Zelos interrupted. "Lloyd, some days I get really sick of all your 'everyone deserves a second chance' crap."

"I believe it." Lloyd said simply.

"I know *you* do. Why doesn't she? Sheena's been with you practically non-stop for two years now. Some of that forgiveness should've rubbed off on her. You give your worst enemies chance after chance. Why won't she? I'm not really all that bad, am I? Why won't she look in my heart and see that I'm different than I used to be? That I'm willing to change? That she's the one person I'm willing to change for?"

"Actions speak louder than words."

"But little Miss High-and-Mighty, Miss Never-Does-Anything-Wrong thinks no one but she deserves a second chance."

"High and Mighty?" Lloyd said, "Zelos, you know the guilt she has over what Volt did to her people, Not a day goes by when she doesn't torture herself over it."

"And you're the same because of what you did in Iselia, is that it? You know her pain so you can sympathize? Did you ever think maybe what she needs is someone who can take her mind off all that? That maybe being reminded of it all the time is bad for her?"

Lloyd shook his head. "And you think having sex with you will make her pain go away? Maybe I don't know who she used to be, but I know her now." Lloyd exhaled. "And she is not that kind of girl."

Zelos mumbled something.

"What was that?" Lloyd asked.

"I don't just want her body," Zelos shouted. "I want all of her. I love her. I can't sleep, can't eat. The only thing that kept me sane was my relationship with Hilda, and only because, when I closed my eyes, I pretended it was Sheena."

"That's disgusting," Lloyd said.

"Don't judge me. You don't know my pain."

Lloyd nodded. "I wouldn't want to."

No more words were exchanged as they descended slowly to the streets below and surrendered to the waiting soldiers, despite the soldiers' reluctance to take such powerful beings into custody. As the prisoners were led away in irons to their waiting cells, the crowd, confident the threat had been contained by their crackerjack city guard and everything was back to the status quo, cheered on whichever fighter they favored and booed the other. Lloyd received very few cheers.

A microphone was shoved in Lloyd's face, and What's-His-Name from the news show asked in a voice, livid with an outrage that, had he not been a television personality, one would have believed to be real, "What could have possessed you to attack the Chosen like that?"

Lloyd didn't hear him. His thoughts were on the selfsame Chosen, wondering whether he,

the eternal narcissist, truly believed his own story about wanting to heal Sheena's pain, or if deep down he realized that he cared only about his own.

7

Deposition: Zelos and Sheena**Meltokio****Three years ago**

Sheena crossed her arms self-consciously over her chest. She was not embarrassed by her body, never had been. But the way the Chosen of Mana made no attempt to hide his ogling bothered her.

"What's wrong, my rough-around-the-edges hunny?" he asked.

"It's this dress, Chosen," she answered. "It's a bit tight. I'm uncomfortable."

"No need to worry. You look great. Red is definitely your color. And I told you, call me 'Zelos.' Leave 'Chosen' to the royals and the teeming masses."

"Right, Zelos," she said. "I really don't want to wear this."

A goofy grin curled his lips, part of a look she would come to understand meant, "You'll be out of it by the end of the evening, if I have my way." For now, he simply said, "Oh, come now, hunny, I'm your personal escort and protector specially appointed by the king himself. If anyone stares too long, I'll cut him down." He gripped the sword at his side. Too encrusted with jewels to be practical, it was meant to impress. Sheena thought it was gaudy.

"It's not that," she said.

"Ah, ah, ah, no time to dawdle. Our reservation is in five minutes. We'll have to hurry if we want to be fashionably late. You can run if we have to, right?"

"I'm in heels."

"Perfect, let's go."

She took his proffered arm and mumbled, "Red is *not* my color."

But Zelos was too busy checking out a gaggle of passing girls to pay her any heed.

Sheena sighed. This was going to be a long night.

**Meltokio****The Present**

"As you might guess, my pristine paramour," Zelos said, "Lloyd's stunt scored me some major PR points. What's it they're calling me? Ah, yes, the hero who brought in the renegade angel. Must be under the impression he's a leftover of Cruxis."

Tapping her foot in annoyance, Sheena said, "I wasn't aware the general public knew about the existence of Cruxis or their involvement with angels."

"Oh, you probably haven't seen the comics."

"Co-mics?" She sounded out the unfamiliar word.

"Yeah, they're great. I had some in my old cell before Klaus's squad deprived me of my 'amenities'—Ha, Lloyd cracks me up—I think I might have stashed one...oh never mind. I'll just tell you. They're these books of colored pictures with word captions..."

Zelos gestured wildly as he talked, diving with mad glee into his explanation.

Sheena's attention wandered. She wanted to wring Zelos's neck for getting her Lloyd thrown in jail *Ha! Jail! More like a dungeon*. The handful of jail cells beneath the castle were called a dungeon, but hardly deserved the name. Where they were keeping Lloyd, if the rumors were correct, *that* was a dungeon. The half-finished facility was on the outskirts of Meltokio, and, once completed, it would house the region's most violent offenders. Consequently, no visitors. Getting in there would be tough, getting out with Lloyd tougher. So, she visited Zelos. It would help her pass the time until nightfall, and, with the right plying, he might provide valuable intel. The very useful feature she'd just discovered came equipped with her Covert Op costume would ensure that intel was reliable.

She'd entered the king's "dungeon"—it was still surprisingly easy to gain access to Zelos's cell—already wearing the black side of the costume. She wouldn't give him the thrill of watching her change into it later. Trying out the night vision lenses, since the dungeon was dark enough to permit this, she discovered, with the press of a button hidden beneath her wrist guard, the lenses also allowed her to monitor the pulse and heart rhythm of anyone within range. And Zelos was well within range of this built-in lie detector. Now, she had only to steer the conversation in the right direction.

"...and," Zelos concluded, "naturally, I'm the hero in them. Zelos's journey to save the world is our most popular storyline. Don't worry, though, we left out the important secrets like the full extent of Cruxis's plans—"

"And the fact that you betrayed us," she offered, unable to resist.

He turned his nose up. "I thought you were over that."

"Fine, fine, I'm over your trying to kill us. Can we please talk about this afternoon?"

"I'd rather talk about tonight," he said.

"Huh?"

"I was thinking I'd call in a few favors, get released for the night, and you and me could hit a club. Do some bumping and grinding. Pick up where we left off all those years ago."

"No, Zelos, I do not want to go dancing with you."

He looked puzzled. "Who said anything about dancing?"

"Bumping, grinding, what else could you...oh, you sick pervert!" She would have slapped him, if she'd not been busy carefully monitoring his readings.

Zelos grinned. "Come on, don't tell me you've never thought about it."

With a serious face, she said, "I have."

"Really," he said, delighted.

She nodded. "Once, on a mission for my village, I was tricked into drinking poison. I thought about the prospect of being with you and vomited immediately. It saved my life."

Zelos frowned. "Wow. My ego has never been so thoroughly deflated so quickly. I congratulate you on a job well done. Now, what is it you wished to talk about?"

Finally. "I want to know," she said in as even a tone as the boiling lava of her emotions would allow, "what you said to Lloyd that made him so upset."

"Oh, that," he waved a hand dismissively. "I just told him about us, you know, three years ago."

"Damn it, Zelos. It was just one time, and I've had better."

"Better? But I used my best moves."

"Yeah, on the other girls there."

"Is that why you were so upset?"

"Noooo," Sheena said. "I wanted as many people as possible involved in our 'special night.' You should have invited everyone in your little black book." *His heart rhythm is unsteady*, she noted. *He's hiding something.* "Why did you tell him?"

"I shouldn't have, I know. The kid didn't deserve it."

"He's not a kid, Zelos. He's a man and a damn good one."

"Better than I'll ever be, is that what you mean?" Zelos said, slumping onto his bunk.

Sheena shrugged. "You said it." When he didn't respond, she continued, "I hated you for a long time, ever since that night, actually, and yet, for some reason, I almost considered you a friend on the world regeneration journey. Did you know I cried for you when you attacked us at the Tower of Salvation?"

"You did?" He brightened.

"A little, yes. Then you go and pull a stunt like this, hurting the man I love. And for what?"

"I had to," Zelos said. "It was my only shot. I just wanted to scare him away. I didn't think he'd actually fight me, and, when he did, I got angry."

His heart's thumping like crazy. He's not lying, but he's very emotional.

"Your only shot at what?" she asked.

"At getting you back, Sheena. I love you."

My God! His heart...he's not lying!

"You," she spoke unsteadily, "have no right to say that to me, not after—"

"But it's true."

"NOT AFTER all you've put me through!"

"I have to say it," Zelos said.

"It isn't fair to me. I'm with Lloyd now."

"Sheena, please."

"I went on *one* date with you."

"One date was all I needed to fall head over heels—"

"And it was a mistake—"

"I love you."

"You broke my heart, Zelos."

"Then you did love me!"

"No, you never gave me the chance," Sheena said. "On that *one* date, my first ever date, you flirted with every girl at the restaurant, and at the theatre, and on the walk to both places. Do you know how unimportant you made me feel, let alone how embarrassed?"

"That was your first?" Zelos hung his head. "I am truly sorry."

"That's not good enough," she said, then "When you look at me, what do you see?"

"A remarkably beautiful woman."

"And that's all you'll ever see."

"I don't mean just physically."

"You'll forgive me if I don't believe you. When you care about someone more than just physically, you don't try to peek at them in the shower. If I didn't look like this, you wouldn't have these 'feelings.'"

He growled, "Sorry I'm so attracted to you."

"Do you know where Lloyd looks when he talks to me? My eyes."

"Maybe he's an eye man," Zelos said. "You have very beautiful eyes."

"He's looking into my soul, Zelos, seeing me for who I am on the inside. You could never do that. You're not capable."

"Damn it, Sheena, give me a chance!"

"I did; you failed."

He pounded on the cell bars. "That was *three* years ago, you unforgiving...ah, I did like you. I was just nervous."

"And if I did give you a chance, what would I tell Lloyd?"

"You wouldn't have to tell him anything. It's not like you're dating. You haven't even slept together."

"Of course we haven't," she said, appalled. "Is that what you equate dating with—sex?"

He nodded almost imperceptibly.

Oh God!

"Where did the topic of sex come from? What exactly did you tell Lloyd? That you and I—?"

"

She didn't need the lie-detector to see the truth in his eyes.

"You bastard!" She slapped him then.

He didn't try to dodge.

"Get this through your thick skull, pervert! I. Love. Lloyd. And even if he doesn't love me, this isn't a game. I won't simply 'end up' with you because you chase away the man I love. I don't need another person to make me happy, and, if I did, it wouldn't be you. I'd rather date...Mithos...than you. He violated me, Zelos. Hell, he raped my mind. And yet, he hurt me less than you. You can rot in here for all I care." She stalked away.

"What are you...going to say in court?"

"I'll tell the truth, tell the jury all about your virtuous service on behalf of the world. I'm not going to lie to send you to jail. 'Lying is the first step down the path of thievery.' A great *man* taught me that." She threw something at his feet, the affidavit she'd gotten from the Princess. "Here, that ought to help your defense." With that, she left.

A single tear rolled down the Chosen of Mana's cheek. "What have I done?" he whispered. "This isn't me."



Meltokio

Three years ago

"You know," Zelos said, "my mansion is much nicer than the tiny apartment in the lab. You're welcome to spend the—" He paused to blow a kiss to a passing girl. "—the night if you want." He slung an arm around her shoulder.

She slapped him away. "Don't touch me."

"Was it something I said?"

She had intended to push ahead of him and head back to her new apartment, but the flippant comment cause her to wheel around. "Something you—yes, it was about twenty somethings. You spoke to every...floozy...that came to our table."

He shrugged. "I'm very popular."

"But you were with me."

"I have responsibilities. The Chosen is not just a religious role. I'm also a goodwill

ambassador."

"I thought," she said, "we were going to forget the Chosen thing tonight."

"Can't forget who I am, and I am not a one-woman kind of man. You know, you're being a real drag. I'm calling it a night, but the invitation to my mansion stays open. Drop by any time."

Zelos leaned in to give her a peck on the cheek, but she moved her head at the last moment. He shrugged and walked away, leaving Sheena standing on the street corner, tears stinging her eyes.

"Some first date," she said.

She went home and promptly discarded the dress.

8

Summation: Lloyd and Sheena

"How do I get this..?" Lloyd asked in frustration, fumbling with the pink sash around Sheena's waist.

"No, Lloyd, start with the front. Untie the obi-jime first, the little cord."

"Hey, this is suspiciously like learning."

"Don't you want to learn about me?" she pouted.

He smiled, enfolding her in his arms. "I want to know everything." He kissed her and then pulled back. "Are you sure about this? I don't want to pressure you."

"What conversation have you been listening to? If anything, *I'm* pressuring *you*."



A trainer of hers once told Sheena to rid herself of superfluous emotions before battle, so she now allowed the tears to flow freely. Neither choking sobs, nor any whimpering came. Instead a steady stream of salty liquid rolled down her face and soaked her collar. She had known she loved Lloyd but had been unaware of just how much his opinion meant to her. She would tell him tonight, and, if he let her, she would show him.

She changed into her familiar ninja garb, taking a little extra time for hair and the barest hint of make-up. She stashed her Covert Op costume into her bag and set about finding Lloyd's cell. Getting into the prison had been just as hard as she'd assumed. The guards were few but strategically located at the only entrance. After an hour of waiting for a shift change that never came, she'd scouted the building's perimeter and soon found what she sought: a small opening in one of the stone walls that, with a little digging, became just wide enough to shimmy through. Descending to the proper floor took another hour of slow deliberative sidling along ledges, desperately clinging to handholds, and finally, when she found a secure enough purchase, rappelling with her climbing equipment. It was less exhausting than annoying, but she took a gel to replenish her energy for good measure.

Lloyd's cell, she discovered, was far enough from the entrance that she wouldn't have to worry about the guards hearing them. And since he was the only prisoner in this half-completed facility, they would be, for all intents and purposes, alone. Good.

Approaching the cell, she demanded, "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

"Sheena, what are you doing here?"

"I'm asking the questions."

Lloyd said, "Zelos and I had a disagreement."

"A disagreement. Was it important enough to destroy half the city over?"

Grinning a lopsided grin, he said, "You're exaggerating...but yes, it was."

Sheena's heart beat a little faster. "I've already seen Zelos tonight. He told me what you 'discussed.'"

"Oh."

"So, I repeat, what did you think you were doing?"

"Defending your honor?" Lloyd shrugged. "Not that what you did was dishonorable. It's just that Zelos shouldn't go around talking about it like that. It isn't right."

"What," she asked, "do you think about it?"

"It's none of my business. I want you to know that nothing has changed between us. You're still my best friend and the most honorable person I know. That could never change." Noticing her glistening eyes, he said, "Sheena, you're crying," and reached out to wipe the tears away. Her eyes were puffy already. "You've *been* crying."

She caught his hand and held the palm to her face for a while, closed her eyes, and continued to cry, releasing the sobs that wouldn't come earlier.

Lloyd pulled her close until they shared an embrace through the prison bars. After a time, Sheena pulled away.

She said, "You're an amazing man, Lloyd Irving."

"Why were you crying?"

She paused. Words were difficult. Once she got going, though, they came rushing out. "I was so scared you wouldn't talk to me, that you wouldn't let me explain, that the idiot Chosen had ruined our relationship. You're really not upset about it?"

Lloyd said, "I'll be honest. It bothers me, a lot actually. But I refuse to lose you over it."

She smiled. "You were right earlier. It isn't your business..."

He looked away.

She guided his face back toward hers. "...unless I choose to make it your business. And I choose." She took a breath. "Zelos lied to you."

"About..."

"Everything, dummy."

"So you never?"

"Not with him!" She quickly added, "Or with anyone else." She grinned, "Scared ya, huh?"

"You're cruel," he said, smiling.

"Zelos and I went on a date when I officially joined the Elemental Research Lab. I didn't want to, but figured, since I was there on behalf of Mizuho, it was as much a diplomatic as a social thing. So I went."

"How was it?"

"It was the most humiliating night of my life. He made me wear this trashy red dress. Remember that picture we saw on the big screen?"

Lloyd nodded.

"That's the one."

"Ah," he said. "Not your best look."

She playfully slapped at him. Then she got serious. "Lloyd, I've dated other men: Philip from the Research Lab, and even Orochi once when he was in Meltokio on business. But I've never gone past holding hands, hugging, or a kiss on the cheek. The idea of sex, of giving myself that completely to someone, scares me. And I never met anyone I trusted enough to risk it...until I met you. Oh, this is so hard. I love you, Lloyd. I want to be with you."

"I love you, Sheena, and I want to be with you."

She took his hand. "I don't mean journey with you. I mean I want to *be* with you."

Lloyd heard a clink and a pop, and his cell door sprang open.

Sheena stuffed her lock-pick back into her pocket. "Do you want to come out of there?" she asked.

But Lloyd shook his head. "No, if you help me escape, we'll be fugitives. I don't want that for you."

"We've been fugitives before, Lloyd. It's a big world. As long as we're together—"

"No. I'll fight this the right way."

She saw the determination in his eyes and knew she wouldn't win this battle. She brightened as another idea struck her. "All right," she said, "If you're not coming out, I'm coming in." Before he could stop her, she rushed into the cell, slammed the door shut, and threw her arms around him.

"Sheena, this isn't funny. Pick the lock again and get out of here."

"Using these?" she asked, holding up her lock picks. She tossed them through the cell bars where they clattered onto the ground far out of reach. "Oops. I guess we're stuck now." She sat on his bunk, and patted the spot beside her. "Can you think of a way to pass the time?"

Lloyd quickly understood where this was headed. "Isn't this a little fast?"

She shook her head. "We've been together two years. I love you, and I want to prove it to you."

Lloyd sat beside her, took her hand. "Your saying it is proof enough."

"We don't have to go all the way tonight," she said. "We can, we might. Let's just see where the night takes up." She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him into a tentative, testing-the-waters kiss. "My first kiss," she said. "Wonderful."

Lloyd nodded, his mouth dry. "Yeah, wonderful."

"I've been saving it for you. I've been saving all my firsts for you."

"All right," Lloyd said. He took her mouth in a second kiss, this one less tentative, and then trailed kisses across her cheek. The moan she made when he nibbled her neck had to be the most satisfying and alluring sound he'd ever heard her make. "Let's see where the night takes us."



Morning came, and Lloyd awoke feeling more contented than he ever remembered. Excitement, rather than the sun, woke him. The absence of a window in the cell meant its two occupants wouldn't be disturbed by the morning rays.

When he moved, he moved slowly, not wanting to disturb his bunkmate, the woman who had given of herself so fully to him last night. She was beautiful, especially her heart.

"Kohana," she said, stirring.

"Hmm?"

"Kohana. It means 'little flower.' It's my true name."

"It's beautiful, but why'd you tell me?"

"You wanted to know everything, didn't you? My name is a biggee. Mizuhoan tradition holds that when a woman gives herself to a man," she blushed, "*that* way, she tells him her name. True, I'm only supposed to tell my husband, but then technically I'm only supposed to do what we did last night with my husband."

He lay silently beside her, digesting everything,

"I'm not saying we should rush out and get married or anything. If we never get married, I won't regret a thing. I just had to tell you."

Lloyd's mind was on a dusty Meltokio street, trading blows with a battered Chosen of

Mana. His taunt echoed in Lloyd's head. "What's the matter? Can't take it that your *little flower's* missing a few petals?" Lloyd's heart beat madly, and an image of Sheena in bed with Zelos the same way she was in bed with him popped into his head. How did Zelos know her name? Did he know? Was it all a coincidence? There was a flower cart on the street that day. Was that where he'd gotten the reference?

Lloyd looked at her, saw the expectation in her eyes. He knew this girl—no, this woman. She would not lie to him.

"Thank you for telling me, Kohana. I want to spend my life with you."

He would have said more, but at that moment there came a tapping on the cell bars. "All right, Irving, you're free to—"

In front of the cell stood two armored guards. Lloyd didn't care to know what expressions were on their faces.

"Free to go," the guard continued. "The, uh...the..."

Sheena pulled her sheet tighter around her body. "Please say what you have to," she said.

"Sorry. The Chosen has taken responsibility for your actions and agreed to pay for the damages. All charges have been dropped, and you're free to go. I'll just unlock the cell, and you *two* can leave at your convenience."

The two guards left, one sniggering, the other whispering harshly, "Shut up. Don't you know what that guy's capable of?"

"Zelos?" Lloyd questioned. "Why?"

Sheena looked into his eyes. "He did it for me." *Thank you.*

"Well, let's go," Lloyd said.

"Where?"

"To find evidence, of course. We have to prove Zelos's innocence."

Sheena watched him with wonder, this man who never ceased to amaze her. Zelos had betrayed him and not for the first time, and yet here was Lloyd, half a day later, anxious to help him out. What an idealist! But he was her idealist.

"All right, love," she said, "Let's help him."

9 Deleted Scenes

Chapter three was originally planned as a straight-forward narrative told from Sheena's POV, rather than the humorously violent Zelos beat-down it turned into. Here are a few paragraphs.

Sheena recalled the press secretary's long reading of the indictment. She'd planned to skip the press conference and read a copy later at her leisure, but she and Lloyd had arrived at the top of the stairs just as he began reading, nosed their way to the front of the crowd of rubber-neckers, and been steadfastly barred from proceeding toward the castle. Seems the castle guards now had double duties—protect the lives of the royal family and prevent the citizenry from straying in front of the cameras. Can't ruin the perfect shot of what was simultaneously the most sensational story of the year and the most boring thing she'd ever seen. Why was the man with the most nasal voice in Tethe'allarant (or whatever they were calling the reunified world this week) hired as press secretary? She was beginning to miss Bob and Mary! Why'd they stage the conference in front of the castle entrance anyway? Boneheads!

Only after the cameras were off were they allowed to enter the castle, register at the front desk, receive a commemorative copy of the indictment printed on glossy paper and embossed with the royal seal for only 1,000 gald, and be led down to the jail to see the Idiot Chosen. If she had to hear one more person express their condolences for her losing the Chosen's heart, she was going to scream. Every time she heard such a comment, she wanted to grab Lloyd and scream, "This is my man, right here. See? He'd handsome, courageous, a fabulous kisser (at least I imagine him to be)..." but she doubted the young man was ready for that kind of a public display of affection. Then there was the pesky little fact that they'd never actually declared their feelings for one another nor been on anything that even vaguely resembled a date. Quibbling things, really, but they kept her from acting.



Here's a version of chapter three wherein Zelos had already read the indictment and honestly didn't know why the king was so upset Zelos had slept with his daughter.

Inside his cell, Zelos had been lounging in a plush leather chair while a gramophone doled out soft melodic music. But when he'd noticed his friends enter, he hopped from the chair and rushed to the bars.

Sheena stayed silent, allowing Lloyd to handle the small talk. Right now, Lloyd was asking

how he managed to get the king to allow him all these amenities. Sheena crossed her arms, closed her eyes, and leaned against the wall. The brief glance she caught of the redhead as she and Lloyd entered the dungeon fixed firmly in her mind a snapshot of all his faults. He was lazy, arrogant, a shirker of responsibilities, never took anything seriously...what the hell...

"...is wrong with you?" She bellowed the question at him, interrupting his and Lloyd's conversation. "You're facing charges of rape and attempting to overthrow the government and you're joking?"

Plus she was still fuming about being mistaken for his girlfriend.

Meanwhile Lloyd was thinking it pays to be the Chosen. The total worth of everything in the cell probably exceeded that of the entire contents of his foster father's house.

"Oh this stuff? I was just interviewed by those guys from that news show. They'll be taking it out soon. Then it's back to scratchy blankets and cold cement. The king seems to be really angry. I don't know why. He could have gotten a really handsome grandson out of all this."



An extended fight scene involving aerial combat was planned for chapter six. Here's a look into what might have been.

...trapping Zelos in a strong bear hug, Lloyd flew upward until Meltokio was a small dot on the landscape below.

Zelos focused his wings into fine, razor sharp points, and flapped, cutting through the thick padding of Lloyd's clothing and into his arms and chest, and slicing open his unprotected face. "She's mine," he screamed, as a stunned Lloyd lost the focus to maintain his wings and plummeted toward the ground.



Sometimes jokes just don't work; some do, but for one reason or another (pacing, dramatic tension), never make it into the final version. This exchange was originally intended for chapter four, then was bumped to chapter seven. The dancing bit was used in chapter seven since it followed a recurring theme in the story of using dancing as a metaphor for sex. But the Lloyd-is-cute shtick was dropped. Does the joke work?

"Hey I bet I can call in some favors and get released for a night," Zelos said. "You wanna hit a club, do some bumping and grinding? Pick up where we left off all those years ago?"

Damn you! It was just one date! "There's nothing—" Sheena started.

"What about me?" Lloyd said.

"You can hold our coats. Whaddaya say, Sheena?"

"No, Zelos. I don't want to go dancing with you."

"Dancing? Oh yeah, that's what I was talking about." He winked. "We'll shed the euphemisms once he's out of the room."

Sheena growled. "I can't believe you. You're in jail charged with TWO sex crimes, and you're still hitting on me." *Stay calm. Lure him close enough to strangle from through the bars.*

"Sure am. I haven't been in this lock-up long enough to start finding guys attractive." Zelos said. "Though with the right makeup Lloyd could be a stunner...you know, red is really his

color."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. It really accentuates his eyes."



Here's an author note I never got around to posting.

Do Sheena's little internal monologues remind anyone else of the "Inner Sakura" of Naruto fame? It seems I can't do a TOS fic without cramming one voice or another into our poor Summoner's mind. (And she's my favorite character too. Go fig.) In *Swordsman*, it's Mithos. Here, it seems to be a toned-down Jason Voorhees. Ah well. That's what's lovely about dark comedy. You can go as OOC as you want and it's cool 'cause it's funny.



Originally, Lloyd was going to turn down Sheena's offer of sex in chapter eight. Here's how he did it.

He said, "Tonight isn't the night. You'd always wonder if you did it because you wanted to or because you were angry at Zelos and had something to prove. When we do this, if we do this, it should be for the right reasons. Because we honestly and truly with no outside coercion love one another."

So much for that, huh? Lloyd and Sheena needed to sleep together to serve the story. The Kohana scene the next morning would've been unworkable if they hadn't.



End Act One

To be continued in:

Act Two – Trial Phase

The latest chapters can be found at: <http://fanfiction.net/~koinekid>