

Tales of Symphonia[®]: The Swordsman and the Summoner

A fanfiction based on the NAMCO RPG Tales of Symphonia

Written by

Koinekid
(fanfiction.net/~koinekid)

Disclaimer: NAMCO Tales Studio, Ltd. holds the exclusive rights to all characters and story elements appearing in the video game Tales of Symphonia. The following story has been created for entertainment purposes only, and no profit has been made by the author.

Many character and place names in the game are drawn from mythological sources. These names, originally appearing in ancient stories and oral traditions, are under no copyright restrictions. However, the manner in which they are presented is under copyright to the aforementioned NAMCO.

The characters of Hikari and Suzumbachi have been created by the author specifically for this story. Anyone wishing to use these characters, please be so kind as to e-mail the author at koinekid@hotmail.com with the subject line: Tales of Symphonia question.

The text of this story may not be reproduced in any manner, print or electronic, without prior permission from the author, save for short passages for comment or review.

Setting: Based on the Sheena ending of ToS, this story chronicles the sometimes awkward, sometimes frustrating, but always endearing romance of Lloyd and Sheena. Eleven months into their Exsphere hunting journey, they're headed for some well-deserved downtime in Iselia, where Zelos shortly arrives with grave news. The trouble the two worlds have had adjusting to their new unified state has reached a crisis point. A clash of ideals has arisen based on Tethe'alla's having been a monarchical society with all political power vested in the king of Meltokio and Sylvarant's surface having been dotted with generally unaffiliated city-states. As Genis puts it, "Freedom or fealty. Eventually one will win out." Frightened that freedom will win that struggle, the king decides on a course of action: conquer all of Sylvarant at any cost. Obviously, Lloyd and his friends won't take this lying down. Friendships are tested, alliances broken, and, in the middle of it all, two people come to terms with their responsibilities as heroes and their devotion to one another, learning that love is never as simple as "happily ever after."

Pairings: Mutual Sheloyd; one-sided Colloyd; one-sided Sheena x Orochi; a skosh of Gesea

Storylines: Lloyd and Sheena's romantic troubles; the king of Meltokio's empire dreams; genetically engineered super soldiers; Mithos's menace from beyond the grave; Lloyd vs. Orochi; Colette and Presea's quest to find Martel; Kratos's dramatic return; startling revelations about Dirk and Altessa; a new summoner; Sheena's lessons on leadership

A Note on Geography: Rejoining the worlds, that is, restoring them to their original state,

sentenced them to destruction. Only the timely suggestion of the summon spirit Origin and Lloyd's use of the Eternal Sword saved the world. We can speculate that, 4,000 years earlier when Mithos used the Sword to split the world, much the same thing could have happened. Both new worlds were shifted out of their normal plane of existence and into what could be termed pocket dimensions. Had action not been taken, they may have continued to drift and eventually been destroyed. Origin may have had a hand in saving the worlds this time as well, by suggesting the creation of an anchoring point that would prevent the worlds from slipping completely away. Thus was created the Tower of Salvation at a common geographical point in all three dimensions (the original and the pockets of Sylvarant and Tethe'alla). When the worlds were rejoined by Lloyd, it may be that the geographical features of the two worlds were superimposed upon one another with the Tower as the center. Villages would have been destroyed, climates changed, islands become part of continents.

If one could overlay grid-lined maps of both worlds (like the ones in the Brady Games Official Strategy guide), he could discover how the rejoined world might look. Mizuho would be in the mountains between Hima and Asgard and south of Luin (Note: Sheena did spend much of her time on Sylvarant before meeting the Chosen in this region). Meltokio would be in the vicinity of the Linkite tree not that far southeast of Iselia (Note: Zelos did suggest sending a peace delegation to Iselia). The Church of Martel's Hot Springs would be just east of Iselia. Altamira would no longer be an island paradise, but part of the western edge of the continent on which Palmacosta was located. Katz village would still be the only village on its island.

This fanfic, when it touches upon issues of geography, will assume that the model just outlined is correct.

Last Modified: 31 December 2006

The Swordsman and the Summoner

Book 1: Gathering the Troops

Chapter 1: A short vignette about a sickly Colette

"Is that it? I was just getting started."

Sheena Fujibayashi cast an over-the-shoulder glance at the bodies of her fallen opponents, a pair of archers and an armored swordsman who had managed to join up with a witch. Bandits most likely, they probably thought the witch made them invincible. She was the first to go down. One of the first rules of warfare Sheena learned on her journeys—always take out the magic user first.

Hers was a false bravado, however. In truth, she was exhausted. Had the battle lasted much longer, she just might have lost. She sighed, at last tucking the spell card she had been absently twirling into the inner pocket of her gi. The fights were more difficult now that she had only one traveling companion. The enemies nowadays were less powerful than those of the past, but four against two were difficult odds no matter how lackluster the opponent. And, with so many criminals roaming the fields, there were plenty of opponents to be had. Not surprising. The times were confusing.

Scarcely a year ago, Sylvarant and Tethe'alla, two worlds that had existed simultaneously on slightly different planes of existence, were fused into one. Or rather, refused. No that doesn't work. Re-fused? Fused again? Restored—yes, that will do nicely. In the beginning, the worlds had been one. But to bring an end to the Kharlan war, Mithos, the Hero of Legend, wielding the Eternal Sword, had split the world in twain. He had hoped this would bring peace. The four thousand years of cycling between war and famine then prosperity since the splitting proved Mithos's a false hope. Lloyd Irving, the second Mithos, Mithos as he should have been, had restored the world. But just

as Mithos's designs did not come to pass, neither did Lloyd's. At least they hadn't yet. Conflict and war still raged, and the people were still frightened.

Fear of the Desians, the half-elven oppressors of humanity, had formerly kept some would-be bandits on guard. But the Desians were mostly gone now. Scattered groups remained, and she and her companion periodically ran across them on their journey. Those battles were usually fierce but decisive. Her ninja skills and his swordsmanship complemented one another perfectly—she smiled at this thought—though, admittedly, they could have used a healer. Miracle gels had eaten up most of their gald reserve. On one memorable occasion they stumbled upon a group of Desians enslaving humans. Her companion had feared this was the beginning of a new human ranch: a factory that transformed humans into devices known as Exspheres that enhanced a person's natural offensive and defensive capabilities. They never discovered whether this were the case. They slaughtered the Desians without questioning them and freed the captives.

The power vacuum created by the sweeping defeat of the Desians had given rise to roving bands of raiders. It took most of the king's soldiers to maintain peace. Smaller groups, like the one she had just fought, had free reign.

Add to that the rumors circulating that the goddess Martel was a fraud. The religion that had pervaded both worlds had split. Some denied Martel altogether. No deity meant no judgment and the freedom to do as they pleased. Others clung to the goddess more fiercely. One particularly radical sect of militant Martel devotees had convinced themselves that the Chosen's group, the group of eight that had set out to regenerate the two worlds, were Martel's enemies. They had put out a hit on the group a few months back—put out a hit? More like started a war. Sheena recalled the events with a sigh. *Barely escaped that one*, she thought.

The sect had preached that the appearance of Derris-Kharlan, the third world, a year before had signaled the final awakening of Martel and her triumph over the Chosen's group. In a way they had been right. Martel was back. Sheena had not seen Martel with her own eyes, but Lloyd had. And she trusted Lloyd.

"I thought the regeneration of the world was supposed to make people treat others with respect," her companion said, gesturing to the fallen archers. "But they're still hurting each other."

Sheena smiled. "Patience, Lloyd. Altamira wasn't built in a day."

"What's Altamira have to do with this?"

She sighed. "It's an expression."

"Oh. You think they have any new rides?"

"New rides?"

"Yeah," Lloyd scratched his chin thoughtfully. "We haven't been there in months. Maybe they have some new rides."

Sheena shook her head. "Regal's been directing all his company's resources to rebuilding the world. I doubt there's been time to create any new rides."

"Too bad," Lloyd said. "Hey, remember the time you threw up on the cups ride?"

"No, that—"

"It flew everywhere."

"That wasn't—"

"Then Genis threw up."

"But, Lloyd, that—"

"Then I threw up."

"Lloyd!"

"What is it, Sheena?"

"That wasn't me. That was Colette."

"Are you sure? I was pretty sure it was you."

Sheena sighed. She reached into her bag and produced a small flask, which she tossed to Lloyd.

"Mmm. Apple gel. Thanks, Sheena. You're a great friend."

"She blushed. "You looked like you needed it."

Lloyd settled onto the ground as he worked at removing the cork stopper from the flask. He pulled at it with his teeth and only succeeded in biting off a chunk of bitter-tasting cork. He groaned.

Sheena laughed, walked over and sat down beside him. She took the flask, turned it over, tapped the bottom, and mumbled a short incantation. The cork began to slide out, and she righted the flask before it could spill.

"Thanks," he said and wolfed down the healing contents.

Sheena rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. Had she kept them open, she would have seen a brief smile play across his features.

Resting her head on Lloyd's shoulder was one of the little things Sheena did to convey her true feelings. She couldn't come right out and tell him. The man was supposed to initiate these relationships. That's the way it had always been done in Mizuho. True, she wasn't in Mizuho now, nor had she been to the village in some months. But she would someday return, perhaps permanently, especially if things didn't work out with Lloyd. *Mustn't think like that!* And as successor to the village's chief she would be the caretaker of its traditions. If anyone should behave according to these traditions, it was she.

This was, of course, simply an excuse. The real reason she left only those hints—plausible deniability. She was afraid of rejection. Suppose Lloyd didn't return her feelings. *What did I say about this line of thought?* Should he confront her about them, these little hints could easily be brushed off. "Ha ha ha. Love you? Lloyd, I rested my head on your shoulder because I was tired! Honestly, you're so funny." or "We're friends, Lloyd. Friends can touch one another like this. Doesn't mean a thing." She could frame these words in her mind, but it would be harder than forging a new pact solo to say them without tears.

In the elven village of Heimdall she had come closest to telling him how she felt. "I want to be with you," she said. He thought she meant this journey. Even as she spoke, she knew that had been how he would interpret her words. The next day he would have to fight a very personal battle. It wouldn't have been fair to burden him with her feelings. She hadn't wanted him to understand. It had been enough that she had understood the true impact of her words. Managing to say them had been a personal victory.

Lloyd began to speak, but was cut off by a sharp bark. He stood. "Now that the monsters are gone, Noishe's finally decided to show his face again. Let's get going."

"Already," Sheena moaned. "But I'm exhausted."

Lloyd laughed. "I thought you were 'just getting started.'"

"Obviously," she quipped, "I was joking."

Chapter 2: What's for breakfast?

"Get out!" Sheena tried to scream, but her voice came out as a whisper so quiet she could barely hear it.

She could see the boy Mithos. Though he had been shorter than she in life, he now towered over her. The giant's eyes were closed and his face showed strain. But he paid her no heed, just mumbled, "Insignificant bug," and continued to concentrate.

She could feel herself slipping away. "Please. I-I b—" No! She would not beg. This was still her mind, her body. She would demand. But it was so difficult. She tried screaming again, but could not make a sound.

Soon two figures stood before her. One, with silken black hair tied back and deep rich brown eyes, was her mirror image. The other resembled her in face and figure. But its hair was blonde and flowed freely. And the eyes were blue and piercing—beautiful eyes that said, "You can trust me. I'm your friend." The longer she stared at the second figure, the more she believed this was how she really looked. And the more she believed this, the more the figure changed. Its chest flattened and its hips lost their roundness. It shrank. She glanced back at the black-haired figure. Who was that again? No matter. It was fading. Soon it would be gone. She looked back at the blonde figure—he was a little boy, she realized—and smiled. She reached out a hand.

"Sheena, I'm here. Listen to me. I'll help you." A bell rang, and she felt a weight in her hand. It took several moments for her to realize it was Corrine's bell. *Corrine!* She wanted to call out to him, but could not remember how to talk. She began to panic.

"It's all right, Sheena. You don't have to talk. Just remember."

Remember, she did. Corrine's face, and then other faces. The villagers from...Mizuho! Those who had trained her and those who had feared her, even those who had hated her. Other faces flashed in her mind. A sweet blonde girl who epitomized self-sacrifice. A silver-haired healer. Traitors and friends. And...a man in red.

"Lloyd!" She could speak again.

Lloyd was counting on her. He (her heart soared as she realized), he needed her.

"Thanks, Corrine," she said, "for everything." She locked eyes on her mirror image, her true mirror image as she spoke. It had regained its solid shape. "I know who I am now."

She retrieved a spell card from her gi, took a step toward the blonde, and smiled. Words were no longer necessary.



Sheena awoke with a start. She'd been having this same dream every few weeks since the worlds were rejoined. On good days it ended as the events it recalled had played out. She'd force Mithos from her mind, and sink to the ground, exhausted. A moment later she would feel arms surrounding her—Lloyd's arms, cradling her. Her head in the crook of his arm, she would open her eyes and see relief wash over his. She would be vaguely aware of the others around them, the Chosen's group, her friends, but in that eternal moment, she and Lloyd seemed to be the only two creatures in the universe.

On bad days she'd awaken before the dream had played itself out, still in thrall to Mithos. She'd feel a heavy weight on her chest for the rest of the day, periodically questioning whether a small

part of him might still dwell inside her.

She giggled. Today was a good day. She ran a hand through her mussed-up hair, wondering if she had time for a short bath before Lloyd came knocking. Three sharp raps upon her door answered her question.

"Give me ten minutes," she called.

Upon receiving agreement, she quickly washed using water from a basin in the corner. They'd arrived late at the inn last night, and Sheena had almost gotten into a shouting match with the matron for insisting the basin be brought up. Lloyd had teased her about wanting to look good for him. She'd tripped over her words trying to deny it, but he'd spared her from too much embarrassment by apologizing and volunteering to lug the heavy basin up the stairs to her room.

Having laid out her clothes on the bed, she paused to survey them for any tears that needed repairing or thinning, worn out fabric that needed reinforcing. Satisfied at the state of her attire, she dressed and tied back her hair. She allowed her fingers to linger on the blue ribbon. Lloyd had purchased it for her during their first journey together. Coming from anyone else, it could have been considered a romantic gesture. But Lloyd, she knew, had been concerned for her protection. The spell weaved into it, the merchant had proudly declared, provided extra defense. So Lloyd had purchased them for all the women: herself, Colette, and Raine (Presea had not yet joined their group). Raine and Colette didn't wear ribbons, and so tied theirs around wrists or tucked them into pockets. Sheena, though, untied the ribbon she wore, let her hair flow freely for a moment, and then immediately tied it back with the new one. She had thought she caught a sparkle in Lloyd's eye when her hair was down, and held his gaze, perhaps a bit too long. Colette had been peeved. Sheena grinned wickedly then as she did now.

She briefly considered taking the ribbon out and wearing her hair down today. But the blonde figure from her dream flashing in front of her eyes made her reconsider. Besides, who knew what the day might bring forth? Wearing her hair up was the more practical choice. That's why she wore it that way in the first place.

Tap tap tap.

"Hey, Sheena, are you ready?"

She hefted her bag over her shoulder and met him at the door. "Ready."

"Great," Lloyd said, "Breakfast is ready downstairs—curry, I think, along with omelets."

"What kind of curry?"

"Kirima, but I saw a fruit stand in town. I could pick up a pineapple if you'd like."

Sheena shook her head. "Don't trouble yourself. Kirima sounds fine."

Lloyd nodded and walked a few paces ahead before turning around. "Hey, Sheena?"

She noticed he seemed nervous and asked, "What is it?"

"The uh, the water must have worked. You look great." Not waiting for her response, Lloyd moved quickly as he could to the stairs. "I'll save you a seat," he called.

Sheena waited until she could wipe the stupid grin off her face before joining him.

Chapter 3: A Cup of Java and Some Friendly Conversation

"Dad, are you sure about this?"

The dwarf Dirk took a final look around his bare, old wooden cottage. All the keepsakes of the years spent raising his foster son had been cleared out. The most precious were carefully wrapped and stowed in his luggage, while the others were distributed to friends, neighbors, and the occasional pilgrim. Items associated with the village's favorite son, one of the saviors who had reunited the world, were as revered as religious relics. Thrice in the past half year the cottage had been broken into by local relic seekers. Dirk wondered whether the Brunels had this problem. Probably not. Their house was secured with finely crafted locks—his work—and Phaidra could be fierce when protecting her granddaughter. He laughed. He didn't have to worry about protecting Lloyd. As for locks—until lately, he'd had nothing worth stealing.

"Dad?"

"Aye, I'm sure, lad. I've been above ground too long. The caves are calling me home." He ran a hand through his red hair. The sides, usually shaved, were growing back. To his dismay, they were growing back speckled with gray. "I can't wait to construct a proper forge."

Lloyd looked at the pot-bellied stove in the corner. "What's wrong with the stove?"

Dirk shook his head. "Nothing's wrong with it. It's just the dwarven way to live underground, and I've been missing it sorely." He scrutinized his son, all grown up, a good head and a half taller than he. "Besides, you're old enough to be on your own. You don't need an old dwarf like me to take care of you."

"I'm only eighteen."

"And you've done more than many twice your age. Speaking of which, shouldn't you be thinking about settling down?"

Lloyd shook his head. "I have a lot more Exspheres to round up."

"Aye, but perhaps you need a 'companion' on that journey."

"I've got a companion."

"Perhaps a *close* companion."

"Sheena's the best friend I've ever had."

"I heard that!" came a high-pitched voice from outside, its owner having left the cottage a few moments before to allow father and son a moment alone.

"Sorry, Genis," Lloyd said, and then mumbled, "Isn't there a dwarven vow about eavesdropping?"

"I'm surprised you know the meaning of that word," Genis called.

"Shut it."

Dirk ignored the friendly banter. "But what about after your journey? Will you two stay together?"

"I don't know. Sheena is next in line to be Mizuho's chief. I wouldn't want to stand in her way."

"But what does she want?"

"Whoa, this conversation is becoming way too serious."

"Deny it all you want," Dirk said. "You've never been able to hide your feelings from me."

"If you want to be gone by nightfall," Lloyd spluttered, "we'd better hurry."

"All right, lad, we'll go. You're obviously anxious to get back to your lady in Iselia."

"Dad!"



Colette Brunel watched the steam slowly rise from her coffee cup, grow thin, and disperse as it drifted toward the ceiling. She inhaled the sweet aroma, noting absently the effect her sniffing had on the path of the steam. She had not been prepared for the serious turn the conversation had taken. When Sheena Fujibayashi first appeared at her door, Colette had been pleasantly surprised, thinking Lloyd had arrived earlier than expected. Lloyd had not been at the door, however. He'd arrive later, Sheena explained, after helping his dad to finish packing. Doing her best to mask her disappointment, Colette embraced the girl and tried to sound disinterested. "Oh, will he? That'll be nice. I'm kinda glad he's not here yet. It'll give you and me time to catch up."

And they had caught up. Colette told Sheena of the goings-on in the Iselia region: the dismantling of the human ranch, the letters she'd received from Zelos—"Looks like you've taken him off my hands, Colette. Thanks," Sheena said, with a wink—and the arrival of the new delegate from Meltokio. Sheena seemed particularly interested in who had filled the post she'd vacated. When Colette described the committee meetings the delegate had to attend, Sheena stuck out her tongue and whined, "Boring. I'd hate that. Glad I'm with Lloyd. I mean...you know what I mean." In turn, Sheena told Colette of her journey with Lloyd. Places seen, enemies defeated, innocents saved. Lloyd estimated they'd destroyed at least a fifth of the Exspheres left in the world—where he'd gotten the estimate, she wasn't sure—and would have destroyed more had they not been repeatedly sidetracked by people in need. But that's just the kind of person Lloyd was, and she wouldn't have it any other way. Colette had received a funny look from her guest when she said, "So that means you could be together for years." Perhaps it was due to the way her voice faltered on "together."

But that hadn't been what had turned the conversation serious. Somewhere along the way one or the other of them had broached the topic of last year's attack. The religious extremists had planned to attack them all separately, but Mizuho's information network proved as reliable as ever. Thus warned, the group of eight drew together again. Lloyd and Sheena, Genis, Raine, Colette, Regal, Presea, and Zelos. Aided by Mizuhoan ninjas, Sybackian magic students, and whatever troops Zelos could persuade the king of Meltokio to spare, they made a stand on the plains outside Iselia. But the enemy force was larger. In addition to swordsmen and magic users, there were rangers, captured monsters, and—Lloyd despaired over this—leftover victims of Cruxis, humans whose crestless Exspheres had turned them into monsters. By no means were they a professional army. Clearly they were unused to working together, and this caused them to make several strategic blunders. But their sheer numbers threatened to overwhelm the group.

The fighting lasted for three days, with heavy casualties on both sides. Lloyd, acting as general by default, had assigned Sheena to help Raine in her mission to use Boltzman's healing techniques on any transformed humans. Sheena seemed reluctant to leave his side but obeyed, selecting a half dozen Mizuhoans to go with her. Genis, leading a frightened group of magic students, had successfully blocked most of the magic attacks from the opposing force, and even managed to inflict a bit of damage on them—an amazing feat since most of the students had never used magic outside of the classroom. Regal found his managerial skills easily transferable to the battlefield as he led the main attack force. He'd used the title of "Duke Bryant" to cement his authority. Zelos concentrated on keeping morale high. "The Chosen fights with you," he was heard to shout on numerous occasions. Presea stayed on the front lines, always the first to charge in and the last to retreat. A Meltokio captain declared her the "Tenchu Axewoman."

As for Colette, she didn't stray from Lloyd's side. He wouldn't let her. She was, after all, the enemies' main target. She and Lloyd fought together, attacking in tandem to inflict devastating damage. She hadn't felt that close to him in a long time. By the end of the second day Zelos had joined them, determined to protect his fellow Chosen. Lloyd argued that having them both in the same place would be dangerous, but Zelos dismissed him, saying, "I can protect her, buddy. You do what you have to do." Lloyd nodded, quite relieved, thanked Zelos, and ran off at top speed. He cautioned Zelos to reinforce his position with whatever magic users Genis could spare.

Lloyd's ready departure confused Colette. He had been distracted most of the day, always

casting quick glances toward the horizon whenever he could spare an eye. Colette thought nothing of it. They were in a battle, after all. Zelos, noting her confusion, explained: No one had heard from Sheena since the fighting began.

"So he's abandoned me for her."

"Oh, Colette, I'm sure he's just worried. He'd do the same for you."

"No, it's okay. I'm happy for Lloyd. I just hope Sheena's okay."

Zelos did not get the chance to respond. For at that very moment, the event occurred that cast a dark shadow on Colette's soul to this day. A surprise attack. An arrow pierced Zelos's chest and he slumped to the ground. Colette dropped to her knees, crying out his name. He was alive! Thank heaven, he was alive! He would recover quickly, momentarily actually, when he came to his senses and cast a healing spell, but the arrow took him out of the battle long enough for the small strike force to inflict on Colette a grievous injury.

She stood and quickly cast a defensive spell, just in time for the arrow speeding toward her to bounce harmlessly off her forcefield. Her wings flared to life as she took in her surroundings and prepared her chakrams. Two rangers and a sorcerer made up the strike force. And the sorcerer was mumbling a spell. *Time to silence him.* She readied her arm to throw her chakram but had to defend against another arrow. The delay allowed the sorcerer to finish his spell and the other ranger to let loose a nocked arrow. The arrow flew over her head, so she paid it no heed, instead preparing an angelic spell. But the sorcerer's magic did not strike her. It struck—

"Colette, look out!"

—it struck the arrow. A combo attack. Responding to the sorcerer's hand gesture, the arrow reversed in mid-air and struck her in the back at the base of one of her wings. Not during her worst bout with Angel Toxicosis had she known such pain. Her body shook violently and, losing control of her limbs, she dropped her weapons. A bright light flashed in front of her eyes, and her mouth slammed shut hard. Had her tongue been in the way, she would have lost it. She did lose consciousness and did not regain it until nearly a week later.

She then learned of the battle's outcome. Zelos had fried the strike force, and when Regal found him hours later the "unholy light was still in his eyes." Meanwhile, Lloyd had found Sheena's force pinned down under enemy fire and rescued them. Sheena herself had been separated from the group. He found her just outside a cave dueling with an angry egg bear. They rendezvoused with Raine and headed back to Zelos's position, arriving just as Colette was being carried back to Iselia.

Lloyd had blamed himself but not as severely as Colette thought he would. Sheena, he explained, had been working the entire week to convince him to forgive himself:

"It would make Colette upset to hear you berating yourself. Besides, if you hadn't arrived when you did, that egg bear would have eaten me."

"But I'm the one that sent you off in the first place."

"Are we starting this again?" she asked, punching him in the arm.

Everyone shared a laugh, even though it wasn't particularly funny. Anything to alleviate the tension, Colette supposed.

Colette allowed everyone to believe she had made a full recovery. Raine had figured out easily enough that she had not. But Colette had never told anyone what she now told Sheena as the two women sat at her table, sipping coffee.

"I don't bring them out anymore," she said.

"Your wings? But you loved flying."

"I know. It hurts too much. Raine's been working with me, healing me whenever she visits, but I'm not sure if I'll ever..."

Sheena nodded. She knew as well as anyone that old wounds, even ones healed with magic, still throbbed every now and again. Grandpa said it was to remind you to stop doing the stupid thing that got you hurt in the first place. But this...

She placed her hand on Colette's. "You've suffered far too much for someone your age." She wanted to say something else, anything else, to make this gentle girl feel better. All she could

manage was, "Lloyd doesn't bring his out either." She knew how lame it sounded even as she spoke.

Colette looked up. "You and Lloyd—you two have become close."

"Does that bother you?"

"N-no. I'm happy Lloyd has found such a good...friend."

"Friend."

Chapter 4: Shall I contact Sir Bud?

Zelos Wilder sighed in self-pity as he lay sprawled on a Meltokio street corner, a crushed trashcan beneath him and a rotten banana peel on his head.

"Chosen of Mana, stop!"

Zelos used his flaming red spectral wings to pull himself to his feet. Running for your life, he realized, may not be the best time for self pity, but, damn it, he cream rinsed his hair this morning. Of all the days for the king to declare him a criminal and sign his death warrant! He sniffed his hair. "Aww, it was kirima scented."

He had dropped the banana peel and put away his wings by the time the armored soldiers surrounded him. And not a moment too soon. None in Meltokio knew the Chosen had angel wings, and, were he to reveal them today, he would do so strategically. Any secret, after all, has potential to be a secret weapon.

The clanking of the soldiers jogging in their heavy, green armor died down just in time for Zelos to hear the city gates shut with a resounding clang.

Their captain, resplendent in his golden armor, unrolled a scroll. The royal seal stamped at the bottom front, was evident on the back as a circular shadow as the morning light passed through the paper. The hard time he was having balancing his pike against his chest, then his shoulder, then the crook of his arm as both hands were busy keeping the scroll open caused Zelos to chuckle.

"Chosen," the captain said, "you have been declared an enemy of the State. We hereby place you under arrest in the name of our Sovereign King—"

"Oh, come on, guys. Can't you let me off with a warning?"

"Chosen, please," another soldier said, "this is serious."

"Heh heh. My mistake."

"Our Sovereign..." The captain's attempt to continue his reading halted as the pike slipped from his arm and hit the paved street with a thud. He bent to retrieve it, and when he righted himself the scroll was gone from his hand.

"Almost." Zelos rubbed at his head with the crinkled scroll. "There. I think I got it all." Then a look of mock apprehension crossed his face. "Oh, this is yours. And I got banana slime all over it. Sorry, Cap."

The captain spluttered, and then seethed.

"Too far?"

The sound of weapons being readied provided the only answer. *Here goes*, Zelos decided. With a flash, he deployed his wings in all their brilliance. He rose, pirouetting through the air, making bright arcs of light as he swung his sword, as if slicing the air itself. He intended to simply wow the soldiers before flying over the gates and retreating toward Iselia. Instead, playing off one of the soldiers' reactions, he had a little fun.

"It's Spiritua reborn...again...as a man!" the soldier cried.

"What a weird title," Zelos mumbled, then at full volume spoke, "Yes, I the mighty Zelos, Chosen of Mana, come to you in the spirit and power of Spiritua to...uh, wreak havoc and destruction upon my enemies."

Before he completed the sentence, the soldiers in green fled, leaving their captain the lone pikeman to face a dismal fate. But he, to his credit, stood his ground.

Zelos, though, flew above the ground, just out of the pike's reach.

"I know you're not Spiritua, Chosen."

Zelos grinned, pointing his sword at the man. "You're right. I'm not, but I am stronger than you. Tell you what, Cap. Makes no difference to me whether your lovely armor gets rusty from all your blood, but, if you deliver a message for me, I'll let you live."

"What message do you wish to give His Majesty? I'll deliver it along with your head."

"I got nothing to say to the king. Tell the lovely Princess Hilda I bear her no ill will for her father's stubbornness. I still consider her one of my top hunnies."

The captain lunged at his opponent, but Zelos easily dodged. And a quick slash of his sword sent the pike spiraling to the ground. With a final wink, Zelos disappeared over the gates and out of the captain's sight.

When he was certain the Chosen was gone, the captain sank to his knees and exhaled deeply. He just managed by the time backup arrived to stop his hands from shaking.



"I'm happy Lloyd has found such a good...friend," Colette said as three raps drew her attention to the door. She stood, dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief (She was determined to allow no one else to see her cry), smoothed her blouse, and walked to the door.

"Friend," Sheena whispered.

"Lloyd," Colette called out, "I'm so happy to see you." She hugged him, burying her face in his chest as they stood in the doorway.

"Colette." Lloyd placed an arm around her shoulder.

Her hand on his chest, she turned in the embrace to face Sheena.

...They look so natural together, don't they?...

Sheena gasped.

Lloyd heard the gasp and started forward to voice his concern, but Colette, pushing off from his chest, beat him there. Her hand stroked the other woman's. "What is it? Are you sick?"

"It, it's nothing. I thought I heard something. It's nothing."

Lloyd was now at the table, his hand holding Sheena's other. Their eyes locked, and she blushed.

...He's touching your hand. You think that means he cares for you? Then why's he also touching Colette?...

His hand is on her back. Big deal. It's probably there for balance or...something.

...Looks like they're consoling you as a couple....

Sh-shut up, Mithos. Sheena shut her eyes tight. These were side effects of her being bonded with Mithos's Cruxis Crystal. They would pass with time. Who was she kidding? They were getting worse.

"Lloyd, I—"

Both his hands were on hers now. That made her smile. When she opened her eyes, she discovered she had a table full of concerned friends. Dirk and Genis had let themselves in. She resolved, "*Lloyd if I have to have the voice of Mithos in my mind the rest of my life I'll endure it for you. I've never regretted sacrificing myself for you, not for a moment! I lo—*"

"You have Mithos's voice inside your head. Sheena, why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I said all that out loud!" Sheena's face lost color.

"You didn't mean to?" Lloyd said.

"I...I...oh, boy."

"You never have to hide anything from me, Sheena. I'll always be here for you, no matter what."

Dirk poked Genis in the side and whispered, "Isn't this generally the kind of confession one makes in private?"

Genis shrugged. "Lloyd doesn't really do things in the conventional manner."

"Too true, laddie. Too true."

No one seemed to notice when Colette slipped quietly away from the table and headed for the door. Grandmother would surely scold her for being a bad host, but she needed to be alone.

Lloyd's attentiveness to Sheena hurt her, yes. But it was the darkness in her heart that frightened her. *You've got him all year, and you can't let me have him one week when he's in my house. You...you...* She had never before used the word she wanted to call Sheena, not even in her thoughts.

I can't be here right now, she decided. Fate, however, in the form of a tall dashing redhead whose hair smelled of bananas, conspired against her plans to abscond.

"Hello, my little angel. Wish I were here to swap pleasantries, but we've got trouble." He addressed the entire group, "Big trouble."

Chapter 5: A Dwarven Digression

In the morning, Altessa woke early, feeling depressed and uneasy. More time than intended, he spent brooding in his corner chair where he didn't have to look at the door and the baggage piled beside it. He'd designed this area with its high ceiling to simulate inasmuch as possible the underground caverns of his youth. Whenever he questioned the morality of working for Cruxis, he'd lean back in the chair, eyes shut, head resting against the cold stone of the mountainside wall and be transported back home. Here alone with his thoughts, Tabatha dealing with any unwanted visitors, he'd meditate on his people, kept safe underground away from the wrath of Yggdrasill.

Today the dwarf brooded for a different reason. Over the years what had been conceived as a substitute for home replaced home in his heart. Now that it came down to it, he wasn't sure he wanted to leave. He was afraid, unsure. He hadn't been underground for more than a visit (passed off as an inspection to Lord Yggdrasill) in decades. And now he intended to live down there? Was he hearty enough to survive?

You'll not survive long anyway, you old fool, above ground or below. Delay and you'll not reach the halls of your fathers in time to atone for your sins.

He stood too quickly and felt a sharp pain in his chest. His breath came in short gasps and specks of black swirled in front of his eyes. He leaned over the nearby table, tightly gripping the sides. He forced himself to breathe slowly—*In and out. In and out, that's good*—until the worst of it passed. He had never properly recovered from the wound Yggdrasill gave him. He smiled. The wound had been gained defending an innocent from harm. It was not strictly a battle wound, but still his father would have been proud. He might even have lowered his axe in acknowledgment.

Altessa thought of Presea Combatir, the girl he'd saved. Throwing himself between her and the oncoming mana blast had not been a purely selfless act. Rather, it had been an attempt to make amends as best he could for stealing sixteen years of her life. His motives in working for Cruxis, if not his actions, had been noble. The sacrifice of one human girl so his people might be left alone had seemed right. Even now if given a second chance, he couldn't be sure he wouldn't make the same decision. Lloyd Irving may have found a way to save everyone, but Altessa was not Lloyd Irving. Truly he did not believe himself capable of Lloyd's way of thinking. Whereas Lloyd was a gentle idealist, Altessa was a cold logician. If he could not save everyone, he'd save those most important to him. But meeting Presea again had cracked that cold exterior and thrown into doubt every choice he'd made since meeting Yggdrasill. Perhaps he hadn't sought hard enough. Perhaps he hadn't cared enough. But the past was the past. Though he could not undo, he could atone.

He had been willing to die for Presea and nearly had. The doctor had helped as best he could, considering how little he knew of dwarf physiology. Only the boldest of dwarves ventured above ground; consequently, few outsiders had any great experience treating the species. But even the most skilled dwarf healer could not have worked a miracle. Old age had been creeping up on him for many years, and the wound had slowed him down just enough for old age to catch up. Altessa was dying. But he would not die above ground. He had not lived like a dwarf, but, damn it, he would die like one.

After a few more deep breaths, he stood, slowly this time, and moved for the door. He did not open it right away, fearful that he would find Tabatha here to see him off. He had not told her he was leaving, but he did not doubt that she would somehow sense it. The artificial human had been like a daughter to him, more so than any natural born daughter could have been. What other father could say he had assembled his child piece-by-piece? Most take only a few minutes to "assemble" their children. Altessa had taken hundreds of hours.

She had visited him since her transformation or possession or whatever. She had fulfilled her life's purpose, becoming Martel's vessel, and was no longer the same Tabatha he knew. He had not even been sure what to call her. Tabatha? Martel? Or something else entirely?

"You may call me whatever you wish," she had said.

"But what do *you* want to be called?"

"Whatever makes you most comfortable."

He opened the door at last. No Tabatha. Good. He took a last glance at the world above and shut and bolted the door for the last time. He gathered up the baggage and hauled it to the cordoned-off area in the back of his home. He unfastened the chain. Beyond it lay his file room, and beyond that the passage that would lead him below. The files were far too numerous to take with him, his luggage being spacious enough only for essentials for the journey. He had briefly considered destroying the files, but could not bring himself to do it. They could be dangerous in the wrong hands, but Cruxis was gone. Altessa planned to send dwarves to the surface to retrieve the files. In the interim, they should be safe. The traps were in place. Nothing so sophisticated as the Toize Valley Mine. If anyone attempted to open the files without the correct procedure, they would simply catch fire—the files, that is, not the thieves.

He allowed his hand to linger on the side of the tunnel entrance. He turned around, with making sure the files were secure as his pretense, and gave his home one more final glance. "Goodbye," he whispered, unsure whether he was speaking to his daughter, his past, his life, this world, or all of them at once. Then Altessa disappeared into the darkness.

In the main room, a green-haired woman appeared. She knelt to retrieve the end of the chain and re-affixed it to the end of the doorway, cordoning off the area once more. "Goodbye, Father," she whispered. And then she was gone.

Chapter 6: The Council of Zelos

Zelos Wilder sat at the table, a grin on his face despite the gravity of the news he bore. All eyes were glued on him, and he reveled in being the center of attention. Both his little angel and she of the bodacious body seemed at rapt attention. Of course, the guys were looking at him too. There were too many guys in here. Ah, well.

When he'd first entered Colette's eyes had been brimming with tears. No doubt Lloyd was to blame. When would he realize how much this girl cared for him? It wasn't that Zelos necessarily wanted Lloyd to abandon Sheena for Colette. Then they'd have the same problem, roles reversed. It's just that he wanted Lloyd to mature enough to realize the situation he was in. Then at least he could stop unintentionally keeping Colette's hopes up. Decisive action needed to be taken. He honestly believed, if Lloyd had begun an official relationship with Sheena after last year's attack, Colette would have moved on. She would have been crushed, but she would have moved on. But that was Lloyd for you: brilliant swordsman, expert tactician, clueless romantic.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, every female in the group seemed to have some level of affection for Lloyd. Colette's and Sheena's feelings were romantic. Raine's was maternal, of course, and Presea's only bordered on the romantic. Any notions of affection would have soon passed away. Hers was a love of saved for savior. Lloyd gave her back her humanity. It was easy to confuse gratitude for attraction. He once overheard Presea asking Lloyd whether he liked anyone. That time he'd called Sheena a pal. But he had bonded with the summoner quite a bit since then. Zelos wondered how Lloyd would answer the question now. If they managed to live through this, he'd be sure to ask him.

He set down his coffee cup about to continue his narrative but waited while Colette went to get more coffee. He watched her walk away, and, as she passed an end table, he noticed for the first time the golden spider statue he and Colette received at Derris-Kharlan. *So that's where she keeps it.* Colette had suggested they share the statue, keeping it half the year at his house, half the year at hers. As far as he was concerned, she could have kept it outright. He had enough trinkets and baubles in his mansion for two lifetimes. Boxes of unopened gifts still covered tables and filled corners. But who was he to deny a beautiful girl? "Great idea, my little angel," he'd said. "This way we'll get to see each other at least twice a year!" Had Sheena been there he would have put on his best lecherous grin and asked, "Anything you want to give me?"

"Hey, pervert, eyes up."

"Heh heh. Sorry, Sheena."

His eyes must have wandered while he'd been thinking. *Wow. Busted the one time I wasn't looking at her.*

"Thanks, Colette," he said when she placed the full coffee cup in front of him. "Now, where was I?"

"The king overheard you flirting with Princess Hilda and signed your death warrant," Sheena offered.

He sighed. "I told you that was purely incidental."

"Right..." Sheena said.

"It was," Zelos said, "Besides if I were going to be killed for flirting I'd have died long ago."

"He's got a point there," Genis said.

"Hey!" Zelos whimpered.

Lloyd rapped on the table. "Guys, Iselia could be in danger. We have to focus. Zelos, please continue."

Sheena's cheeks turned a shade of crimson. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

Lloyd brushed his fingers over hers and smiled. His message: Don't worry about it.

Zelos continued, "Like I was telling you, I've been pressuring the king to keep the peace ever since the world was reunited."

"Weary work, lad," Dirk commented.

"Yes, long and weary," Zelos said, "but not without profit. Anyway, up until recently he listened to me. I genuinely thought I'd gotten through to him. But now it seems he was only feeling out the situation, preaching the peace while preparing for war. I noticed he had been building up the army, and sending it out on advanced training missions. That's why he could only 'spare' a few token troops when we were attacked last year. I asked him why. 'Why build up the army when there's no one left to fight?' He blew me off with some line about always being prepared. I didn't believe him. Finally I confronted him and demanded the truth."

"And he told you?" Lloyd said.

"No, he tried to have me killed. But I pretty much had everything figured out before I confronted him."

"Then why did you? Confront him, I mean?"

"I wanted to give him a chance to reconsider." *Like you gave me, Lloyd.*

Genis spoke up, "Since my sister's not here to say this, I will. Perhaps that wasn't the best idea, Zelos. If you hadn't said anything, you could have slipped away quietly and made preparations to stop him."

Lloyd shook his head. "Genis is right, but I think I understand why you did it."

Zelos smiled. "Thanks." There was silence. At last Zelos spoke again. "Since his father's death, the king has ruled over everything in Tethe'alla. Everything. When the worlds were reunited his kingdom became a patchwork of competing ideals, his area of influence full of holes like a moth-eaten blanket. Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if the worlds were connected side by side. But they weren't. They were laid on top of one another. Suddenly in the middle of his kingdom were cities that paid him no allegiance."

"He's concerned the desire for freedom might spread to his people," Sheena said.

"And he'd lose everything," Genis concluded.

"I don't know," Lloyd said, "Most Tethe'allans view us as bumpkins."

Genis rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "That's true. But that attitude can't last forever. Freedom or fealty, eventually one would win out. It's actually quite intelligent of the king to consolidate his power while he can."

"It may be intelligent, but it's not right. And I won't let it happen!" Lloyd stood up, pumping his fist into the air to emphasize his point.

"Easy, Lloyd," Zelos said, "I'm with you on this."

Lloyd sat down again, a little embarrassed. "Thanks, Zelos. So what do you think we should do?"

"Why are you asking me? You're the brilliant strategist. We'll follow your lead."

Sheena smiled. "Wow, Zelos. That sounded like a genuine compliment."

"Or maybe he's just lazy," Genis said.

"I'm just tired. I practically walked all the way here."

"You could have flown," Genis replied.

Zelos shook his head. "Wings aren't really practical for long distance traveling. Flying really takes it out of you. I'm sure Colette would agree. Am I right?"

Colette said nothing, just gave a little nod. Beneath the table, she felt Sheena's hand wrap around hers. Colette squeezed back in appreciation.

Before Zelos could ask what was wrong, Lloyd spoke up. "We have to fortify Iselia. We've repelled an attack before. We can do it again."

"Last time we had an army," Genis said. "Now we don't even have our group of eight here. And last time they weren't attacking Iselia, *per se*. Only us. But this time, the village is the king's primary

target."

Lloyd reached into his bag, and produced a rolled map. He untied the leather thong binding it, and spread it out on the table. Consulting a map always helped him plan his next move. This one, newly completed by the Katz expedition team, bore the superscription "The Reunited Worlds of Tethe'alla and Sylvarant" in a flowing script at the top and "Commissioned by the Lezareno Company" at the bottom. It had been delivered to Lloyd by special courier when he'd been staying in a hotel a few nights before. How Regal knew where to send the map when Lloyd had not been certain where he'd be staying that night, Lloyd couldn't guess. He studied the map before speaking. "Iselia is a small village, hardly worth the trouble since the Chosen isn't...well, chosen here anymore. Why wouldn't the king go after Luin? Or Palmacosta? Regal has almost finished rebuilding it. Both are better targets."

"The king has specific intentions, Lloyd," Zelos said. "Capturing Iselia would be a symbolic victory too good to pass up. And he'll want to preserve the wealthy cities if he can for the taxes they'll generate." He punctuated his response by tapping each city's location on the map in turn.

Lloyd sighed. "Maybe we overdid the rebuilding of Luin. We all but gave them golden streets."

"The statues of Sheena and Raine were a nice addition, though," Zelos said. "I hear Sheena's is a make-out spot."

"Zelos! You...I...Oh, I can't even talk to you!"

"Anyway," Zelos continued, "the king is probably counting on their fear of being destroyed again to keep them compliant."

Sheena, having recovered from being flustered, mumbled, "Fear is a powerful motivator." / *should know.*

"Do we have time to gather an army?" Lloyd asked.

Zelos shook his head. "Meltokio is only a few days march from here. Any support we could get would be farther away, and likely have to be mustered from scratch. Back to Genis's point, I'd feel a lot better if we had all the big eight here."

Lloyd nodded. "Me too."

Genis made a suggestion. "We could gather them with rheiards. And call in reinforcements at the same time. They'd be late, but maybe we could hold off the king's forces."

"Mizuho will help," Sheena said, "I know they will."

"Do we even *have* the rheiards?" Zelos asked.

"Lloyd and I have one," Sheena said, patting the wing pack that contained the miniaturized flying machine.

"Raine and I have another," Genis said. "The others we left with Regal, but he may have returned them to Yuan by now."

Zelos nodded. "We have two. Good. We can manage."

"One, actually," Genis said. "Raine has ours."

"And where is my glamorous beauty?"

"On Exire."

"The floating city?" Zelos asked.

"Yeah. She wanted to see Mom. I had her drop me off first."

Sheena asked, "You didn't want to see your mother?"

"No, I didn't," Genis said. "I was very small when she sent us away, and, maybe there's something wrong with me, but I feel rather ambivalent about seeing her."

"Ambi—?" Lloyd questioned.

"I don't care about seeing her."

"Oh, why didn't you say so?"

Genis sighed. "Lloyd, I did."

"We'll need to bring Raine back," Zelos said. "We'll need her healing powers before all this is over. I just hope we'll be able to find Exire."

"That's no problem," Genis said. "Raine placed a tracking device in one of the buildings. And I've got a tracker. She gave it to me when she dropped me off."

"Good thinking, Professor!" Lloyd said.

Sheena shook her head. "Is it really? What if the tracker fell into the wrong hands? There's still a lot of prejudice against half-elves among Tethe'allans."

"And in people from Sylvarant too," Genis said. "Now that the Desians are gone, they don't even fear us."

Zelos recalled an old axiom. "Fear leads to anger; anger leads to hate; hate leads..." He scratched his chin. "What was the rest of that line?"

Lloyd pointed to the southeastern continent on his map. Altamira, the island paradise, in the reunited world was a peninsula, still more or less a paradise, but with a lot less beach front property. "Regal is most likely in Altamira, and he'll probably know where to find Presea. I'll head there first. If we're lucky he'll still have the other rheiards."

"Is Regal still to be trusted, do you think?" Zelos said to Lloyd, "cause his sense of loyalty has me concerned."

"What do you mean?"

"The guy respects the law. He's a duke and a loyal subject of the king. He opposed the pope when he fought with us, but if it comes down to war with the king, I'm not certain where he'll stand."

Lloyd shrugged. "It never occurred to me to doubt him, but I guess what you say is possible. It's a risk I'll have to take. I trust him enough to think that if he does remain loyal to the king he at least won't take me captive." He turned from Zelos, and placed a hand on his closest companion's shoulder. "I'd like you to remain here, Sheena."

"No way. I can hold my own, and you don't have to worry about protecting me."

Lloyd laughed.

Sheena frowned. "What's so funny?"

"Sorry. Sorry. I know you can take care of yourself. I want you to remain here so that, if Regal does arrest me, you can break me out of jail."

She blushed furiously, silently calling herself an idiot. She'd recalled a time when Lloyd asked Colette to remain behind while the rest of the group stormed Mithos's stronghold, and had thought he'd done the same here. She wasn't sure whether to be disappointed he hadn't been as concerned as she believed, or thrilled her fighting skills impressed him so. She decided on the latter. "Sheena of Mizuho accepts this mission from Lloyd."

"Thanks. I'm certain I can count on you."

The group talked for some time after that, Lloyd and Zelos nearly getting into an argument as they discussed strategy over the map. Sheena took Colette aside, offering her comfort as best she could (and tactfully avoiding the mention of anything related to Lloyd). Genis fiddled with the tracker, and made a list of supplies they'd need, occasionally peeking at the map to remind himself of item shop locations. Dirk, who had kept silent and observed during the council offering only the occasional comment, settled into the corner and sketched out new weapons designs.

As nightfall neared and the sleeping arrangements were decided upon, Lloyd asked Sheena to walk with him outside. They traversed the length of Iselia twice while Lloyd shared various childhood memories associated with the village. "Those grape vines are a prime hide and seek spot," and "here's where Colette crashed through the item shop wall. She was just five. The pastors treated it like a religious landmark and wouldn't let the owner cover it for months. All his gels went bad and his tools rusted." Lloyd had given her a similar tour of the area surrounding Dirk's house before he and Sheena left on their journey. The dead tree, chipped and scarred from the first time he was allowed to practice with a real blade, recalled a favorite memory.

As they neared Colette's house, Lloyd halted. "I want you to know," he said, "in all the excitement I haven't forgotten about what's happening to you. I promise you I'll find a way to stop this. You shouldn't have to suffer because of me."

"Lloyd, I meant what I said. I don't regret sacrificing myself for you. I care about you. I'd die for you."

"I care about you, too. You're the best friend I've ever had."

"Friend." A sigh was about to escape her lips. A sigh of resignation, but at the last moment, a

fierce determination arose in her heart. *No! I will not accept this again! Now or never.* "Llo—"

"No, that's not right," Lloyd continued. "Friend is the wrong word. Something Dad said today made me realize that. Genis and Colette are my friends. Heh. Even Zelos is my friend. You are something else entirely."

He brushed a strand of hair away from her eye, and she caught his hand, holding it fast, before he could move it away. He leaned closer. She leaned closer, and licked her lips. They both closed their eyes.

A mere inch away from contact, however, they stopped. Or rather, they were stopped. A bright shaft of light pierced the night as the front door of the house opened. Lloyd blinked and shielded his eyes.

Colette stood in the doorway, her face pale and drawn. "I was just coming to look for you. I was worried." She suddenly stumbled forward, fainting. Lloyd called out her name and made it to the girl just in time to stop her from striking the ground. Sheena's hand still held his, and when he ran forward he wrenched her arm quite painfully. While she was massaging her aching shoulder, she wondered if Colette's faint was really a feint. Through the doorway she could see Zelos watching, regarding Colette with pity. At last he met Sheena's gaze, shrugged, and mouthed, "Sorry. I tried to stop her."

Sheena nodded, mouthing back "Thanks for trying." She traced the outline of the spell card poking against the outside of her gi. I'm beginning, she thought, to regret sparing this girl.

Chapter 7: The goose down accord

Sheena awoke on soft sheets and a down pillow. This bed was the most comfortable she'd slept in since she stayed at the Altamira Hotel. She was getting way too used to soft mattresses. The bedding in Mizuho, by contrast, was firm, comfortable after a fashion, and better for your back, but not nearly as luxurious. There was something about sinking into bed and feeling like you're floating on a cloud.

She turned over, staring into the eyes of her bedmate. Last night's events left her confused. What should she say? How could she make it all better? She wanted to help the girl, but she couldn't sacrifice her own happiness. That thought, though, smote her conscience. Colette had been willing to sacrifice her own happiness for world regeneration. Still, Sheena assured herself, even if she wanted to, she couldn't command Lloyd to love Colette. If he felt for Sheena what she felt for him, it wouldn't be fair to deny him her love either. And Sheena was beginning to think perhaps he did feel the same. Before they had been interrupted last night, he had nearly kissed her.

There had been a lot of tension as she slipped into bed with Colette. Part of her wanted to throttle the girl, the other part to hold her as she cried herself to sleep. She settled on, "G'night, Colette. Sweet dreams," and was greeted with a stiff "Night," in return. Whenever they had shared a room before, Colette always gave the full "Good night. Sweet dreams," and she usually spoke first, leaving Sheena to reply. Thus, it had been in sadness that she had drifted off to sleep, certain that her dreams would be plagued with visions of Mithos, or perhaps Volt. She sometimes had that dream too. It seemed that Mithos chose to leave her to her present torment. This morning she couldn't remember what she had dreamt.

She hoped Lloyd wouldn't leave for Altamira right away. She wanted to see him off. She perked up her ears, straining to hear anything in the next room. Lloyd wasn't in there, or he was still asleep. After last night's incident, the group had quickly gone off to bed. As Iselia had no inn to speak of, only a few citizens who occasionally took in boarders for pocket money, the group had split in two. Genis and Zelos went to Genis's old home, which had been rebuilt by the villagers as thanks after the world regeneration journey. Zelos had been thrilled at the prospect of sleeping in Raine's bed. Even when it was pointed out that the bed was new, and Raine had yet to use it, Zelos didn't mind. "I'm sleeping in her bed in spirit!" he proudly declared. It had already been settled that Lloyd and Sheena would stay with the Brunels during their one week vacation—Sheena in Colette's room and Lloyd in the guest room—and there was no reason to change those plans. Dirk had intended to be far from Iselia by nightfall, but being caught up in the Council, he'd stayed with Lloyd in the guest room.

Sheena at last spoke, asking Colette, "So, when do you expect your father home?"

"In just a few days. He's had this trip planned for months." Colette smiled. "When he heard you and Lloyd were coming, he almost rescheduled. He thought you might need to be healed. But Grandmother insisted he go."

"He's a good man, your father."

"Uh-huh."

"And your grandmother is at the Martel Temple, right?"

"Yes. She's overseeing the renovation. They'll be honoring Verius there, as well, you know."

"Really? That's wonderful! I'd love to see it!"

"You should. It'll be finished in a month."

Sheena hesitated for a moment. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Wh-why wouldn't I be?"

"If you don't want to talk about it, that's okay, but I wanted to give you the chance." At an impulse, she took the girl's hand. "You're my friend. I care a lot about you. And I feel really awful about hurting you."

"I know," Colette said. "And you're my friend. This is about Lloyd, isn't it?"

Sheena nodded, "Yes."

"You care about him."

"I love him."

"So do I."

"I know that," Sheena said. "When I tried to assassinate you, it was because I believed only one of our worlds could be saved. You proved me wrong. Together, we found a way for everyone to be happy, for both of *us* to be happy. Not this time. One of us will be heartbroken. We can't both have him.

Colette became very quiet. "I'm not just going to give him to you."

"I wouldn't expect you to. But I'm not giving him up either," Sheena said.

"So what are we saying? May the best woman win?"

"It's clichéd, but, yes."

"So friends no matter what?"

Sheena's smile faded. "I hope so."



Lloyd awoke before dawn, a feat most unusual for the young man whose fits of brooding often kept him up until first light weighing the progress of his quest or wondering if he were doing enough to honor those who died because of him. He had slept well last night, considering the impending doom of his home village, feelings for Sheena that needed sorting out, and concern for Colette's fainting spell. He hoped it wasn't a relapse of AT. He didn't have time to gather the ingredients for another cure. He could always gather them later, after Iselia had been saved and assuming they both lived through it.

"Sheena," he whispered her name and cursed his own. Why did he have to ruin their friendship by nearly kissing her? The thought of her suffering because of him had been unbearable, and every fiber of his being cried out to comfort her. The moment had overwhelmed his good sense. *Good sense. What a joke!* She must be furious. He wouldn't be surprised if she never wanted to see him again. She'd stay through the present conflict. She wasn't one to abandon her friends. But afterwards, she'd probably retreat back to Mizuho and never talk to him again. It felt like he'd just been punched. He wanted to cry and throw up at the same time.

He thought back to their last visit to Mizuho. With a wave and a smile, Sheena had disappeared into Chief Igaguri's house, leaving Lloyd to amuse himself for what he knew would be several hours. That was okay. He knew the village well enough to be comfortable and decided to find Vice-chief Tiga and Orochi. The two men had helped immensely on the world regeneration journey, and he was in the early stages of developing a friendship with them both. (Friendships, like everything else here, took a long time to develop.) He saw them in the southwestern corner of the village, examining the crops. There hadn't been much rain the past year, and he knew they were concerned. Before he could reach them, however, he ran into Hikari. He knew the six-year-old from previous visits as a ball of energy who was well on her way to becoming official keeper of Mizuho's Secret Book of gossip.

"Name yourself!" she demanded, assuming a fighting stance and drawing twin wooden sai.

"Tell me your name," Lloyd answered, "and I'll tell you mine." He also assumed a fighting stance, but did not touch his swords.

She dropped her stance, laughing. "Hiya, Lloydie."

"Hey, Kari. What's new?" He mentally kicked himself. If you gave this girl too much of an

opening, she could regale you with all the embarrassing gossip from Hima to Asgard. He quickly added, "How's your training?"

Ignoring his question, she said, "I got a secret. Wanna hear it? Huh? Do ya?"

Lloyd played along. "I dunno. Is it about someone else? It's not very nice to talk behind people's backs."

She shook her head. "No, no, no. It's about you."

"About me?"

"Uh-huh."

His curiosity was actually piqued. "Okay, sure."

"Umm, I dunno. Maybe I shouldn't."

"Come on, that's not fair. You have to tell me."

"No, not going to." She started to walk away, and then turned around, bursting into laughter. "You should have seen the look on your face."

"All right, Kari. You got me. Is there a secret or not?"

"Uh-huh. Come here. I'll whisper it to you."

Lloyd acquiesced.

She yelled into his ear, "Next Chief Sheena really wants to tell you her real name."

"Ow! Hey!" Hikari had pulled the same trick before, so he had prepared himself. Still, it kind of hurt. Then he realized what she had said. "Wait, Hikari, Sheena can't tell me that. She can only tell her husband."

"Uh-huh."

"Wait, are you saying..?"

She leaned forward again. "When Sheena tells you her name, you can't tell me, okay? It's not 'lowed."

He had barely begun to mull that over when Hikari ran off to play and the two men he had come this way to see noticed him sitting there rubbing his ear and came over. If they took notice of the girl's loud pronouncement they made no mention.

"Hello, Lloyd," Tiga said. Orochi merely nodded. Lloyd pushed himself to his feet, and returned their greetings.

"I hope the young lady did not cause any permanent damage," Tiga said.

"Huh? What?" Lloyd joked.

After they had exchanged pleasantries, filled one another in on all relevant news—mostly real news with the barest hint of gossip added for spice—and discussed the crops, Lloyd found Hikari's suggestion still niggling at the back of his mind. He broached the topic as subtly as he could.

"How," he asked, "would a Mizuhoan man tell a Mizuhoan woman he liked her?"

"Liked?" Orochi asked.

"Yeah, you know, that he was interested in her, ro-romantically?"

Orochi said nothing, but Tiga laughed with eyes sparkling. "Ah. Are we speaking of anyone in particular?"

"No. The situation is hippo..hypo..."

"Well, Lloyd," Tiga responded, "in our *hypothetical* situation, the man himself would do nothing."

That was confusing. "Then how would she know?"

"Patience, my young friend. I was just getting to that. He would send a representative, called a *daihyo*, in his place. If the woman is interested, she will appoint her own *daihyo* to begin negotiations."

"Negotiations?"

"Yes. All communications must be conducted through the *daihyo* for one year."

"All communications? Can't we—I mean, the man and woman talk?"

Tiga nodded. "Certainly they can talk, but only in the presence of the *daihyo*."

"That sounds pretty inconvenient for the *daihyo*," Lloyd said.

"It is a high honor to be chosen as a *daihyo*. It implies a great level of trust and friendship."

"I guess so, but this all sounds pretty complicated."

Tiga nodded. "Matters of the heart are often complicated."

Orochi added sternly, "It is not a process to be entered into lightly. Therefore, it must be complicated."

"That's certainly different from what I've heard before," Lloyd said. "Zelos said I should—I mean, he, that is, the hyponautical guy, should just kiss her."

"No!" Orochi said, "No, he should not. It would be dishonoring to her family."

"What my exuberant friend means, Lloyd, is that in our culture matters of the heart are sacred. As sacred as martial arts. As sacred as life itself. They should not be entered into lightly, nor without a person's *explicit* consent."

"So kissing her would be an insult," Lloyd said.

In the present, Lloyd was finding it very difficult not to be sick. He thought the fresh air might settle his stomach, but the fear of losing Sheena couldn't be cured with fresh air. He disappeared around the back of Colette's house in search of a place he could vomit without attracting too much attention. He hopped the back fence and disappeared into the woods

Minutes later, he heard Sheena's voice at the fence. "Lloyd, are you all right? Are you sick?"

He couldn't answer over the retching.

Sheena hopped the fence and took up a position a few feet behind him, helping him to his feet when he was finished.

She slipped his arm over her shoulder. "Hey, you feel better now?" When he nodded, she said, "Let's go get you some water."

"Sheena, wait. About last night."

"Yes?" she said. *Yes! I thought it would take him a year to mention this. I just hope he washes his mouth before he tries to kiss me again.*

"It was a mistake."

"Wh-What?"

"I promise, it'll never happen again."

He felt her stiffen noticeably. *Oh, no. She's not going to forgive me.* "I'm sorry, Sheena. I wish I could take it back. Could we maybe forget it ever happened?"

"Sure, Lloyd. Let's forget it."

"Thanks, Sheena," he said, relieved, "You're the best."

Chapter 8: Yawa og, Enair, Enair

Raine Sage dusted the shelves in her mother's house for the third time that day. Housework had never been her strong suit, but these last two weeks posing as a maid in her mother's house had seen her adroitness steadily increase until she could boast a rudimentary understanding of the principles of home economics. A *very* rudimentary understanding. She had tried viewing it as a science to be studied, but, no matter how she dressed it up, housework couldn't compare to archaeology. At least, she supposed, she could give Genis a hand when she got home.

Why don't you do the wash today, Raine, now that you know how?

I'll be glad to, Genis, as long as I can also cook.

I'll do the wash.

Ha! On second thought, it might be best to keep her newfound ability to herself. It would serve as his punishment for not coming with her. Besides, she wouldn't want him losing his touch.

"You're getting better, Enair."

Raine lowered her feather duster, careful to keep it away from her nose so as to avoid another sneezing fit. That much, at least, she'd mastered. She turned toward the source of the voice, a silver-haired elf holding a doll to her chest as tenderly as if it were an infant. In her stress-addled mind, it was.

"Thank you, Virginia," Raine said.

"But you've still got a ways to go," Virginia continued. "I've half a mind to cut your pay."

Raine grimaced. *I thought I was doing well.*

"When my husband Kloitz gets home, I'll talk to him about it."

Father. Raine had been quite young when her parents had abandoned her. She'd found her mother, unbalanced as she was, but her father was long dead. She wished she could remember him better. She had hoped to find a picture of him among her mother's possessions. Thus far, no such luck.

"Oh, don't be sad," Virginia said, "I was only joking. You *are* improving, and I'm very proud of you."

After three sharp raps, the front door opened. There were no locks on Virginia's door. That would be dangerous. The half-elf brunette that peeked in through the doorway was all smiles.

"Sorry to intrude. Raine, there's a visitor for you, and a cute one at that."

Cute? Is it Zelos? Raine wondered. She began to respond, but was interrupted by her mother.

"Silly, Raine is only a child. She's too young for visitors."

"Of course, Virginia. My mistake," the half-elf said, "I meant to speak to Enair."

"Oh, all right then."

"I'll be back to do the wash later, Virginia," Raine said.

"Good-bye, dear."

Raine took a final look at her rag doll stand-in before she shut the door. *Someday I'll get through to you, Mother. But until then, this is enough.*



"Lloyd, I'm pleasantly surprised."

"Professor Sage," Lloyd said, standing as she entered. Etiquette hadn't been one of the subjects

taught in the Iselia school. He'd had to rely on Zelos's (mostly unwanted) lessons on courtly manners for that. "Stand when a lady enters the room!" "Don't use the salad fork for the entrée!" "Place the *folded* napkin in your lap. Don't tuck it in your collar." After the dinner party in Meltokio, he hadn't shut up about it for weeks. But the standing when a lady entered, that stuck with him. It seemed right somehow. He wondered if Dad stood when Mom entered a room. His memories of that period were pretty hazy. He was suddenly conscious of the weight of Kratos's locket and chain around his neck, a comforting weight.

He set down his coffee cup—the half-elf elder made a great cup of coffee—and grasped her hand firmly. "It's good to see you," he said.

"You could have written, you know."

"Not really."

"Oh no. You do know how to write, don't you? Please tell me I taught you *that* much!"

Lloyd shrunk back. The intensity in her eyes made him uneasy. "Of course you did. I only meant I didn't know where to send the letters."

"Lloyd, I do still have a house in Iselia."

"Sorry, Professor, I never thought about that. Hey, what did you mean by 'that much?'"

"Oh, never mind. How did you find Exire?"

"Genis lent me his tracker."

"I guess that means the little jerk didn't come with you."

"No, just me. I'm alone." He looked away as he spoke, realizing the full impact of his words.

"Lloyd, is something wrong? You have a sad look in your eyes."

"Yeah, Professor," Lloyd said. *Two things*, he thought, *but I'll focus on the one we can do something about.* "There's trouble in Iselia."

Chapter 9: Tag, you're it!

"Loople-do."

Most of the children in the plaza outside the Altamira hotel stared blank-facedly at the girl wearing the Klonoa costume. Her appearance fit the part perfectly. Pink haired with clear blue eyes, she was very cute. Her voice, though, could not have been more unsuitable. Her "Wahoo! Wahoo!" was dull and listless.

"Mommy, she's not as good as the Klonoa yesterday."

"Hush, Jo. You're being rude."

One child watched her as if in a trance, and as the crowd began to disperse, children tugging parents toward the railway—"C'mon, we gotta go to the 'musement park!"—he walked forward, hugged the girl and said, "I love you, Klonoa," before getting red in the face and running away.

Lloyd smiled broadly as he watched the scene from across the plaza. When the last child was out of eyesight and her duties as mascot were ostensibly over, Presea turned toward him, and returned his smile.

When he had closed the gap between them, she, with the barest hint of a blush, said, "Hello, Lloyd. How are you?"

"Hey, Presea. I didn't know you were still Altamira's mascot."

"I don't do it all the time. The usual mascot is sick, and I still have the costume."

"Not for long," Lloyd said. "Looks like you're already growing out of it."

"That is incorrect. I have grown only three centimeters since we last met."

"Oh, well, still..."

"But," she said, "I appreciate the sentiment."

Lloyd related to her an abbreviated form of yesterday's war council, leaving out Zelos's concerns about Regal, and speaking in a hushed tone. The plaza was not the best location for the transmittal of sensitive information. Her costume, too, was a problem, encouraging sporadic interruptions by children, arms outstretched, seeking hugs or parents gushing over her cuteness (But, woe unto the cheek-pinchers!).

To avoid further interruptions, Presea slipped into the hotel to change into her regular clothes. While she was gone, Lloyd realized that this was the first time he'd ever been alone with her. He'd talked with her privately on occasion and about fairly intimate subjects, his feelings about the women in the group, for example. But there had always been another party member (usually Genis) not more than twenty paces off. There were others in the plaza now, such as the aforementioned Klonoa fans, but they were strangers. Come to think of it, he'd never been alone with other members of the group as well: Zelos, Regal, the Professor until today. He'd been alone with Genis and Colette, but he'd grown up with them. So that didn't count. He'd been alone, truly alone, with Sheena a lot in the past year. The rheiards allowed them to journey from place to place quickly, so they could almost always reach an inn before nightfall. Sometimes, though, they camped to save money. It was nice. He liked it. Before he could think any more about it, Presea exited the hotel.

"The only assuredly private place in Altamira is Regal's Office."

"Good idea, Presea. Let's head there as quickly as possible."

As quickly as possible, it turned out, was nearly twenty minutes. Presea explained that the rail car was always packed after a mascot appearance. But the delay was time well spent. By the time

he made it to Lezarenos main lobby, he had learned two interesting pieces of intel. First, the rebuilt Palmacosta, taking a nod from Luin, had placed in its center square three magnificent statues. The subject of one was Colette, the Chosen of Sylvarant having become a symbol of civic pride and ammunition for the heretofore friendly rivalry between Tethe'allans and the inhabitants of Sylvarant. Another statue was of Genis, who was an honorary student of Palmacosta Academy, a political advocate, and renowned for his conduct in resisting Desian Grand Cardinal Magnius's attempt to execute Cacao. A plaque at the base of this statue dedicated it to him and to the young man Magnius had murdered with his bare hands. Stanley had been his name. The final statue portrayed Regal sans shackles and Presea standing amid the rubble of old Palmacosta, tools in hand, helping to rebuild. The statue, she told him, was not symbolic. Every weekend for the better part of six months, Regal and Presea had worked hand-in-hand with common laborers to rebuild the city a brick at a time.

This led to the second piece of intel. "Altamira to Palmacosta is a long journey by foot. Does that mean," Lloyd asked, "that you still have rheiards?"

"Yes," Presea said, "two of them."

As the elevator gate clicked open on the President's office, Presea noticed Regal's appearance. His hair was matted down and sweat-slicked. It had been tied back earlier when she had found him praying at Alicia's grave. Now it flowed freely, having been taken down, if his expression were any indication, in frustration. Papers were thrown about haphazardly on the desk and piled in crates on the floor. He was staring intently at one paper and tapping it with his pen, while mumbling to himself, "If I balance it with last quarter's expenditures, then our profit margin...Yes, that's the key."

Presea entered cautiously so as to avoid interrupting his concentration. She was about to advise Lloyd to do likewise when he called out, "Hey, Regal!"

Regal's pen and mouth dropped. "I...just forgot everything."



After seeing Lloyd off, Sheena had not returned to the village. She didn't want to speak to anyone, especially Colette after their little "arrangement" that morning. Instead, she walked along the path toward the Martel Temple. She made no noise as she walked, more out of habit than any concern for safety. Monsters were now rare on this path, but she had brought a holy bottle just in case. So far, there had been no need to open it. She thought about seeing if Verius would appear to her in the temple. When he was Corrine, Verius had been the one person with whom she could talk about anything. He was the one person she could talk to about the conflict presently in her heart. But she passed by the temple steps without hesitation. With the renovations in full swing, she'd have to converse with a handful of people before she reached the seal room. She might go in on her way back, but for now she had another purpose in mind. She was going to make a wish tag.

Like most Mizuhoan traditions, the wish tag dated back thousands of years. Whenever a member of the village had a very important wish, he could inscribe it upon a small wooden tag, which he would pray over, and then carry until the wish came true or was denied. Afterwards, he would break the tag and cast its halves into a stream or creek, whose running water symbolically carried his thanks to Mizuho's god. If he kept the tag with him, he would be visited with bad luck.

When she reached the small grove of trees a quarter mile past the temple stairway, she drew a hatchet from her bag and set to work removing a chunk of the wood. She then used a pocket knife to fashion it into a wooden tag. The short sword she received as village successor was not meant for hatchet work. "Better to save swords for flesh and bone than dull them on wood," someone once told her. Had it been Kratos? It didn't sound like something Lloyd would say. Lloyd. She supposed she could have gotten him to create the tag when he got back. But he might be too curious. Plus, she didn't want him going through the trouble of crafting something she'd someday break. He had been practically heartbroken when Presea had broken the wish tag he made for her.

She had struggled long and hard with what to put on the tag. She thought about variations on, "Give Lloyd to me," or "Help me win his heart," but they all seemed too selfish. Besides, she didn't want to force Lloyd to love her. At last she settled upon the appropriate prayer, one that expressed

the true intentions of her heart. She began carving on the tag's face. M-A-K-E L-L-O-Y-D H-A-P-P

As she was tracing the "Y" the knife slipped and sliced into her forefinger. The cut wasn't deep, but she tasted a fair amount of blood when she put the finger in her mouth. No matter. It was nothing to waste a gel over. Anyway, she needed to finish the tag if she expected it to be effective. As she took up the knife to finish the carving, she noticed some of her blood had seeped into the lettering. She recalled an old superstition. When one was especially earnest about a wish, he could take a blood oath by smearing his blood upon the wish tag. Once he did so, he was bound to work for the completion of the oath no matter the personal cost. It appeared she had unintentionally made this oath.

But, wait. No, she hadn't. The "Y" was unfinished, and she had yet to recite her prayer. If she wanted, she could still cancel the oath.

...What if Colette can make him happy? You'd be bound—...

I know. I'd be bound not to stand in their way.

...You'd be bound to help them get together....

It would tear my heart out.

...Don't do it. Think about yourself for once....

Love does not seek its own. The thought reverberated in her mind, stronger than the voice of Mithos, stronger even than her own uncertainties. *I love Lloyd. And no matter what, I want him to be happy. Dying for him would be easy. Then I'd always have a place in his heart, a place no one could supplant. But could I live without him?*

She finished the "Y," smeared blood across the rest of the letters, and prayed. "I want Lloyd to be happy, no matter what the cost. And I will do everything I can to see it happen." She held the tag close to her heart. "And if it's not too much to ask, let me have some measure of happiness, too."

Mithos had fallen silent again, and a warmth filled Sheena's heart. She wrapped the tag in a cloth and tucked it into her bag. She had been walking back toward the village for some time, taking it rather slowly, when a barely audible whirring came from overhead. She looked up to find Raine headed toward Iselia. When the half-elf noticed Sheena, she landed, putting her rheiard away. The women embraced, and walked the final quarter mile back to the village together, conversing the whole way. Sheena would see Verius another day. She didn't mind. Her need to talk to him was no longer so pressing.



Besides the pleasant surprise of seeing Lloyd again, Regal was glad for an excuse to put aside his work for an afternoon. The upcoming reunification festival was costing more than he had anticipated. And his company's resources were stretched dangerously thin due to the controversy surrounding his very public refusal to deal in Exsphere-related ventures and the massive expense of rebuilding cities damaged during reunification. Business partnerships had been made in these cities, but they were long-term investments which had yet to yield returns equal to the expenditures. The merchant fees from the festival would help the company just about break even. Next year would be better. He was certain.

"I'm sorry, Lloyd," Regal said after the swordsman had explained the situation. "I have been too occupied with company business to pay much attention to court politics. I have failed in my vigilance."

"I didn't come here to blame you, Regal."

"Ah, of course not. What would you like me to do?"

"All right," Lloyd said, "I knew you could be trusted."

"My trust was in doubt?"

"No, well, not by me anyway. Zelos just mentioned, since you were a duke and all..."

"Zelos...hmm. Did you remind him he was of a higher nobility than me?"

"I think I did." Lloyd scratched his head.

"And did you question *his* loyalty?"

"I don't...he, that is...the king signed his death warrant..."

"I see." Regal had closed his eyes, and was rubbing his chin. That was much better than the piercing gaze he was directing Lloyd's way only moments ago.

"And I never doubted you, Regal, not for a second."

"That is good to hear." Regal sighed, "Zelos is right, though."

"You're not going to try to capture me, are you?" Lloyd asked. He eyed Presea warily.

"What?"

"Uh, never mind."

"I cannot help you openly. Any visible support would jeopardize the safety of the cities the Lezareno Company has helped rebuild. Unless..."

Lloyd nodded. "I'm disappointed you won't be joining us, but I understand your reasons." He shook Regal's hand before turning toward the elevator.

"Wait, Lloyd," Regal called out. "You didn't let me finish. While I cannot help you directly in a confrontation with the king, I can provide support and whatever supplies you need for your resistance."

Presea said little during the meeting, preferring to listen. Quietness was her nature, after all, and offering her opinion would have been pointless. Her course had been decided when she heard Lloyd's brief explanation on the way to Lezareno. She would not abandon her friends in their time of need. She owed them her life and would gladly give it should the debt be called due.

While she was absorbed in her thoughts, Lloyd and Regal finished talking. Lloyd offered his thanks, and strode past her to the elevator. She called out to him, but he didn't notice. That was just like Lloyd. Once he determined a course of action, he immediately set out to do it, ignoring everything else. Zelos would call that thickheaded. Presea called it dedicated.

She heard the elevator go up to the roof, Lloyd curse, "Damn, wrong button," and the elevator go back down to the lobby. She watched Regal closely, trying to determine what he was feeling and how he would react when she told him she was leaving. It was no good. How could she detect another's feelings, even a friend's, when she was just learning to detect her own. And, make no mistake, Regal *was* her friend. And the best connection she had to Alicia. She had learned so much about the final years of her sister's life during the previous months. There was much more she wanted to know, but she had to go.

"Regal I—," Presea said.

"I know, Presea. Go after him. Take one of the rheiards."

"Thank you, Regal."

"You'd better hurry."

As he watched Presea go, he smiled. Alicia always looked up to you, Presea. She would be proud. Good luck, and good luck to you, Lloyd.

Chapter 10: A punch in the right direction

The plan had been formulating in Zelos's mind and his fingers periodically wiggling in anticipation since he'd first seen Raine and Sheena enter the room hand-in-hand. It had been the first thought to pop into his head—okay, the second. The first, a fantasy involving him, the half-elf, the ninja, the hot springs, and a slippery bar of soap, had been quickly filed away for later usage when he'd seen the tears in Sheena's eyes. "I'm just happy to see Raine, is all," had been her explanation. Zelos didn't buy it for a second. Well, okay, maybe for the second that his mind had been transitioning from his sudsy fantasy back to harsh, fully-clothed reality. But only that second.

His eyes stole quick, furtive glances at his quarry, located in the vicinity of Raine's midsection. Thoughts, pleasant but distracting, assailed him when his gaze lingered there too long. *Focus*, he reminded himself. He had hoped she would relieve herself of her bags when she entered. What kind of person kept her bags with her when she entered a *friend's* house? It's not as if anything would get stolen. He realized the absurdity of that thought almost immediately. Here he was planning to pilfer something from Raine's bag while mentally berating her for being overly cautious. She was probably following suit with Sheena, though. He had noticed Sheena's reluctance to part with her bag right away. It was still with her as she sat at the table, clutched protectively to her chest as if something important were inside. Part of him wanted to see what it was. Did curiosity compel him? In part. But there was more. He longed for her confidence. He would give anything for her to share something with him, something close to her heart. Damn, he was getting sappy. He massaged his temples. *Think philandering thoughts. Think philandering thoughts. Sheena naked. Raine naked. Colette naked. Sheena, Raine, and Colette naked together. Ah, much better.* He let out an audible sigh.

With that, he decided to let Sheena have her privacy, for the time being. Besides, it would be difficult enough to part one of the ladies from her bag, let alone both of them. He looked through the window at the position of the sun. Already shadows were beginning to fall. If Raine didn't drop the bag soon... He regarded her for a moment, taking note of her ever present coat. No matter how hot the temperature became, she was never without a coat of some sort. Only when she took part in that weird Asgardian ceremony or when she was on the beach (and not always then) did she remove it. Raine was the type of person who wanted to be ready to leave at a moment's notice off on another archaeological adventure. He had a sudden image of her wearing a wide-brimmed fedora and brown leather jacket, swinging a bull whip. Genis was beside her, wearing a blue and white baseball cap and shouting, "You cheated, Dr. Raine!" Zelos shook his head, not really sure where that image came from.

Zelos decided to force the issue. "Ladies," he said, rising from the table, "Please allow me to take your luggage."

Sheena flinched. "Th-that's okay, Zelos."

He shrugged. "And what about you, my glamorous beauty? It will be my pleasure, and hospitality demands it."

"Hospitality, eh?" Raine muttered. She began to acquiesce, but reconsidered. "This isn't your home, Zelos."

He didn't pause for an instant. "That is but a triviality. A good host is a good host no matter whose house he is in."

She seemed to accept this, or was too tired to argue the point further. Zelos took the bag,

turned, and, with a quick movement, slipped his hand inside, found what he was hunting for, and withdrew. Hiding it quickly, he laid the bag by the door.

"I'm going to go see how Colette's doing," he called out, and exited the building. The last thing he saw as the door shut was Sheena biting her lip in an attempt to stop her tears.



The first thing he saw as he emerged into the light of early evening was Colette smiling and singing a little song to herself. Zelos frowned grimly. Sheena's tears were giving Colette the wrong message. That happiness, which thrilled Zelos to no end, would soon dissipate once Lloyd got his feelings straight, his act together, and finally told Sheena he loved her. Once Colette was close enough to discern his features clearly, he smiled, and engaged her in brief conversation, both to gauge the truth of his suspicions—he was right, her happiness came from the misunderstanding between Lloyd and Sheena—and to make his statement to the ladies inside true. After a few moments, with a wave and a smile and a fabricated excuse, he took his leave of her.

Outside the village, he removed the item of Raine's he had lifted, a small square packet, with magic spells sewn within and without, clasped together with obsidian inhibitor ore. It was a wing pack, a special case that could carry any number of large vehicles. He held it in front of him, opened the clasp, and allowed the violet-colored rheiard to take shape.

Now, he thought, to find that idiot Lloyd.



Back at Colette's house, Raine was busy comforting Sheena, listening to her "I don't know why I'm blubbering like this. I already decided to do what's best for Lloyd." Raine mentally chided herself at her inability to fully sympathize with her friend's plight. But her thoughts were on Zelos. She took a quick glance at her bag and frowned. *If the idiot wanted to borrow my rheiard, he could've simply asked.*



The concept of your life flashing before your eyes right before you die was a part dwarven lore, but that's not where Lloyd learned it. In point of fact, it wasn't one of the primary vows, nor was its veracity as hotly defended as those vows. He was pretty sure, actually, that his dad Dirk considered it mere superstition. So it was no surprise that Lloyd's first exposure to the idea came from the same place that most young boys learned those pithy axioms that define their lives well into adulthood: the schoolyard. Specifically, he learned it from Jerry, a boy several years older who once related the eerie tale of his grandfather's death. In the last hour before the man's passing, he, according to Jerry, had spoken about the events of his life, his eyes vacant focusing on something that wasn't there, as if he were watching the events play out in front of him. When Lloyd had remarked that one hour before death isn't really *right before*, Jerry shrugged. "He was old. It took him longer to do everything. It practically took him a whole hour to use the bathroom."

Lloyd missed Jerry. He was always good for a spooky story or an old folk saying. But there was one thing, pertinent to what was going on at that exact moment, that Lloyd never learned from him—what flashes before your eyes right before a good friend punches you in the jaw. As luck would have it, Lloyd was about to find out firsthand.

"What the hell's wrong with you?"

Lloyd picked himself up off the ground, and dusted off his shirt. "Zelos, what are you doing?"

Zelos pushed him back down into the dirt. "You've hurt two women very badly today!"

"What?"

"You've been jerking Colette around for two years, and now whatever you said to Sheena's given Colette false hope."

"False hope for what?" He shook his head. Zelos wasn't making any sense.

"That you love her."

"I do love her."

"Romantically, idiot!"

"No way. Colette's like a sister to me."

"She doesn't seem to think so."

Lloyd tried to rise, and Zelos pushed him down again. "And now Sheena's crying her eyes out over whatever you said to her. I swear if you don't go back there right now—"

"Aw, I knew it. She hates me."

"No, Lloyd. She loves you. What did you say to her, anyway?"

"I apologized."

"For what?"

"Last night at Colette's I was about to kiss her."

"You kissed Colette?" Zelos curled his hand into a fist.

"No!" Lloyd said, "Sheena! And I didn't kiss her. I only *almost* kissed her. I didn't mean to dishonor her."

"Dishonor?"

"Yeah. Tiga and Orochi said—"

"Forget Tiga and Orochi. One's an old prude, and the other's a brainwashed good little soldier who's probably in love with Sheena himself."

"That's kind of harsh."

"What exactly did you say to her?"

"I said, 'Forget it ever happened.'"

"You idiot," Zelos said, fuming, "Do you realize how that sounds? It's like you think kissing her was a mistake."

"I didn't kiss her, and it was a mistake! It would have dishonored her."

"It sounds like you didn't *want* to kiss her, like you don't care about her."

"That's not what I meant."

"So tell her."

Lloyd sighed. "I...will."

"Go. Now."

"But I have to call in backup. I have to go to Sybak and—"

"And Mizuho and Palmacosta, I know. I'll go in your place."

"Zelos—"

"Do you love her?"

Lloyd paused, gathering his thoughts and emotions. He knew the answer almost immediately, but he had to be sure before saying it. What was being asked for was not a simple declaration of affection. It wasn't Genis asking him to tell Colette, "I love you," to snap her out of her living lifelessness. Zelos was asking Lloyd to say he loved Sheena like Kratos had loved his mother. He wanted to know if Lloyd loved Sheena more than life itself. Lloyd found he could honestly give only one answer.

"Yes."

Zelos smiled. "That's what I was waiting to hear." He held out a hand to Lloyd, and helped him to his feet. "Go to her," he said. "We may have a few days to live. You don't want Sheena to die feeling like this. Life isn't worth it if you don't have the ones you love."

"Zelos," Lloyd said, "thank you. It seems you're always helping me go after Sheena."

"She's a wonderful woman. I want her to be happy." He broke into a wide grin. "Now get out of here, ya slacker. Go!"

Chapter 11: Sheena, I love you

As Suzumebachi lay dying, he could only hope his message reached Mizuho. For three months he had posed as a jailer in the king of Meltokio's dungeon, and for one month he had guarded its most important prisoner—His Majesty's half-brother, the pope, deposed head of Tethe'alla's Church of Martel. It had been a dream assignment, something the young Mizuhoan spy could only credit to his family status. He certainly didn't have the experience or, he now reflected grimly, the skill for such a high-level task. But it seemed that all the top level ninjas, like the Hebi brothers, had their covers blown. Orochi was becoming as well known as Sheena, and Kuchinawa had betrayed them all. *Sorry, Next Chief Sheena. Despite your wishes, I can't seem to forgive him.* He thought about her for a moment. She had been present when he was given this assignment.

"I don't know if I can do this, Next Chief."

"You'll do fine." She took on a slightly pompous tone, as if imitating a long-winded elder, when she said, "Keep your head down, and your wits up." Then she laughed, a lively sound full of vigor.

Careful, Suzumebachi, or you'll find yourself falling in love with her.

"Sorry," she blushed, "that's what the vice chief told me when I was sent to assassinate the Chosen. And I'm still not sure what it means." She scrunched up her nose. "Don't tell him I made fun of him, okay?"

"N-no, of course not, Next Chief. I would never—"

"Oh, don't be hurt. I was just joking with you. You know, I was your age when I was sent on that mission. I had much less experience and was far less qualified."

"I'm sure that's not true, Next Chief. You could summon and—"

"I told you, call me Sheena, and it *is* true. You'll do fine. Just be sure and come back safely, okay? I'll need a lot of brave men like you to help me when I become chief, Suzumebachi."

He had been thankful his face mask was in place when he heard her say his name. That way she couldn't see the tremendous smile that covered his face. *Sigh.* He was such a fanboy.

He closed his eye as tears formed. *I'm sorry I disappointed you, Next Chief. But if I've helped you out just a little bit, my life has been worthwhile.*



Lloyd rested a hand on Colette's door. Try as he might, he could not bring himself to knock. He had dismissed his fear that Zelos was wrong and Sheena didn't love him. Within a week, they could very well be dead, and, whatever her feelings, he had to know. But another fear assailed him. What if he saw Colette first? Lloyd had never been very good at hiding his emotions, and he really had no idea what to say to her. Sheena might claim to admire the earnest way he lived his life, but Lloyd knew all too well that his tendency to be guided by heart rather than head could be dangerous. He'd already hurt a lot of people that way, and he didn't want Colette to become one of them. He sighed. Things sure were simpler when he was oblivious.

He shut his eyes and took a long deep breath. He shouldn't put it off any longer. He curled his hand into a fist and prepared to knock.

"Lloyd, hi!"

Colette. Damn. Options? Pretend I didn't hear her and open the door? Maybe Sheena's inside. Or accept the inevitable and talk to her? But I can't just come out and say I don't like her. That would be rude. She'd run away crying, and I'd have to follow and comfort her. I don't have time for that.

"Are you finished rounding up support already? That was fast, Lloyd. You're pretty amazing."

She was beside him now, too close to pretend he hadn't heard. *Sheena, help!*

Lloyd turned to face her, forcing himself to smile. "No, sorry, I haven't finished yet. Zelos took my place. I had something to take care of here."

"Oh, did you want to help Dirk and Genis with the village fortifications? I can take you to them."

"No, that's not why I'm back. But I'll help later if I get the chance."

"Did you want to see me, Lloyd? That's why you were at my door, right?" She grabbed his hand and began pulling him inside. "Come on, I'll get you a glass of water, and we can talk."

Lloyd groaned. The look of expectation in her eyes wasn't making things any easier. "I'm always happy to see you, Colette..."

She was practically beaming, and for a moment he noticed the faint pink glow of her angelic wings. "Thank you, Lloyd. You're so sweet."

"But I have to..." he rubbed his head and chuckled nervously. "You haven't seen Sheena around, have you?"

"Sh-Sheena?"

"Yeah, I kinda need to tell her something."

Colette frowned. *Can't you see she's no good for you, Lloyd? Her responsibilities as chief will always take her attention away from you, but I'll give you all my heart!* It was then that she decided to tell him everything. The thought scared her, but the realization that she could, by the end of the day, have Lloyd for her very own overruled her fear and silenced her doubts. She was just about to speak when a flash of lavender caught her eye. Sheena had just walked past the school and was heading this way. Suddenly, Colette could not remember how to talk.



Sheena wiped at her sweaty forehead with the back of her hand, smudging the buildup of dust and soot from two hours of hard work. The physical labor hadn't taken her mind off her troubles as she'd hoped. To the contrary, working so closely with Dirk only served to remind her of Lloyd. Though the dwarf shared no blood with his foster son, his influence on the young man was considerable. Loyalty, perseverance, courage—these all he had learned from his dad. Even the way he moved evidenced him as the dwarf's son. While watching Dirk swing his hammer, Sheena had recognized the origins of some of Lloyd's basic sword moves. When she found herself paying more attention to Dirk than to her work and unconsciously beginning to size him up as a potential father-in-law, she knew it was time to get out of there.

So caught up was she in her thoughts that she had almost reached Colette's porch before she noticed Lloyd standing there. Merely seeing him caused her heart to skip a beat. Giving him up might be harder than she thought. Then she realized whom he was with—Colette. And he was laughing and rubbing the back of his head. *Embarrassed, maybe. Or happy.*

She noticed something else. *Colette, your wings!*

Sheena sighed. A single tear escaped her eye and left a trail down her dusty cheek. Where Raine's powerful healing techniques could not help this girl, Lloyd's love, or at least a love for him, could work miracles. Sheena knew the feeling.

Luckily, his back was to her, and she hadn't made any noise. She retreated a few steps to the trail leading north out of the village. Nodding grimly and being careful to attract no attention, she hurried down the trail. *If this is what you want, my love, then I'll help you.*



Colette eyed the unmoving girl with an unwavering glance. *Humph. Stand there if you want, Sheena. I'll still tell him.*

Curious at Colette's behavior, Lloyd turned his head in the direction of her gaze and caught a

brief flash of lavender moving rapidly up the trail toward the Martel Temple. *Sheena!* He called out her name and started after her.

"But Lloyd, I...wait!" Colette's lip trembled and tears fell from her eyes. This was going badly, very badly, not at all how she imagined. She had to stop him. If only she could confess her love, he would do the same—she was certain. Then they would lock eyes, hug, and maybe even kiss. What was happening? Why was everything going so wrong? "I...I love you."

Lloyd's heart tugged him in two directions. He had to follow Sheena, and quickly, before she outdistanced him. She could hide in the field for days if she wanted. But he loved Colette too, albeit with a different kind of love, and didn't want to leave her like this. Once she had been the most important person in his life. Love for her, though he hadn't called it love, was the reason he undertook the journey of regeneration. He had wanted to protect her, yes, but it was simpler than that—he just wanted to be near her. On that journey, however, something unexpected happened. He met the most beautiful, amazing person he'd ever known. Before Sheena, he had never been in love, nor known it was even possible to feel as deeply for a person as he felt for her. Reflecting on his life before the journey, he realized that, had he never met Sheena, he very well might have fallen in love with his childhood friend. But, having met Sheena, he knew no one could ever replace her in his heart.

Can't help them both, he realized. Have to choose.

Slowly, he shook his head. "I'm sorry, Colette," he said, and ran after the ninja at full speed. He cursed when he saw Colette fall to her knees and burst into tears, but never for an instant did he doubt he'd made the right decision.

By the time he reached the border of the village, he had lost sight of Sheena. In a flash of brilliant blue, he, for the first time in nearly a year, deployed his wings and took to the sky.



Since her deliverance from the bane of the Angelus Project, Presea had overcome hundreds of foes. For a decade and a half, her experimental Exsphere had left her a prisoner in her own perpetually prepubescent body. *Sixteen years* on the very cusp of adolescence, adulthood teasing her, enticing her, but always a hand's breadth out of reach, and the whole time, on some level, she was aware of it. The Exsphere dulled her senses; it did not erase them. By the time of her release, everyone she cared for had either died—Alicia and Daddy—or forgotten her. A lullaby half-remembered by a childhood acquaintance or two was all she left behind as the world had passed her by.

Worse yet, the Exsphere left her an emotional cripple, unable to feel for others, or to understand how they felt for her. Emotions were coming back to her slowly and intermittently, and whatever events triggered a particularly powerful emotional response, she treasured. Yesterday's visit from Lloyd had been one such event. Its significance diminished when she learned he had come only to seek her help, but it did not disappear. Fighting alongside him would show him she cared. And fighting was something she could do. One benefit of the Exsphere, the only benefit, it would seem, was the exceptional strength it gave her. It was this strength that enabled her to defeat the aforementioned hundreds of foes and made her a valuable ally to her friends. But the strength was not precious to her. She would trade it all for full access to her emotions. For, now, more than ever, she needed them.

She had entered Iselia only moments ago, and headed directly for Colette's home, the most logical gathering place for the Chosen's group. Immediately, she was confronted with a heart-broken, sobbing Colette. And she had no idea what to do.

Comforting her was the obvious choice, but how to go about that, other than imitating the manner she'd seen others offer comfort in the past, eluded her. She doubted a pat on the shoulder and a gentle, "There, there," would be sufficient. Still, it was better than doing nothing, so she stepped forward and extended an arm.

"Colette," she said.

The hands the blonde had been using to cover her eyes she dropped, revealing a look of

disappointment, bitterness, and a little bit of shock, as if she hadn't been aware she had company. The look unnerved Presea, but in a blink all traces of bitterness were gone from Colette's eyes, and Presea considered the bitterness may not have been there at all. A moment later, Colette launched herself into Presea's arms.

Good, she will accept my attempts to comfort her.

Presea held Colette for several minutes, listening to the girl's soft sobs and occasionally rubbing her back or stroking her hair. Unsure of what else to do, Presea fell back into habits. Extricating herself from the girl's arms, she gripped the handle of her axe. "Who did this to you?" she asked.

She wasn't expecting the answer, and the axe fell to the ground with a dull thud. How could Lloyd claim he cared about Colette and cause her this much grief? If this were the way of friendship, she wasn't sure she wanted any more to do with it.



Lloyd flew for a quarter mile past the temple—Sheena wouldn't want to be around all those people right now—until he reached the small grove where he thought he'd find her. If he knew her as well as he believed, she would hide herself atop one of the higher branches among the trees. He touched down softly, not bothering to retract his wings. He decided not to look for her. There were few trees, but if he ventured into the grove, she'd probably slip past him, and he'd never be able to find her.

"Sheena, please, I have to talk to you."

Sheena, perched on a tree branch, made herself as small as possible. She couldn't see him right now. She just couldn't. And she was a ninja. Her training ensured that if she didn't want to be found she wouldn't. *Go back to her, Lloyd, she silently begged. Be happy.*

"Please." Had she already slipped past him? Maybe she never even made it to the grove.

I know you don't mean to, but you're really hurting me right now by prolonging this, she thought.

"We said we'd see this trip through, Sheena; we *promised* one another. Remember the thousand needle lying penalty? I don't want you to go through that. I care too much about you."

Lloyd, please stop.

"Okay, if you won't come out, just listen. What I said yesterday morning, I didn't mean. Well, I meant it, but I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I wanted to kiss you. Oh boy, did I want to kiss you. But I know that in Mizuho you're not supposed to do that without a dee...a dai..."

"Daihyo," she whispered before she could stop herself. *You want a daihyo? Lloyd, does that mean—?*

"I forget the term, but you know what I'm talking about. I respect your traditions. They're a part of you, and I didn't want to treat them like they didn't matter, because they do matter. Everything about you matters to me, Sheena, because I love you." He paused for a moment; his pulse was pounding so hard he hadn't heard his own confession. Best say it again to be sure. "With all my heart and soul, I love you."

With barely a sound, she landed at the base of the tree. Her legs wobbled; whether it were from the shock of the landing or the raging of her emotions she couldn't be sure. She began walking but ended up running to him. "Lloyd, I..." She didn't finish her statement. Her lips found his; her kiss spoke for her.

A full minute later, she stopped to take a breath and found herself encircled in his arms. She fiercely returned the embrace and rested her head on his shoulder.

He began to speak, "I was so stupid. I—"

"Shh." She placed a finger on his lips. "That's in the past. It doesn't matter anymore." She smiled broadly. "Oh, Lloyd, I love you. I've loved you for so long. I will always love you." As soon as she finished speaking, she hid her face and the deep blush that colored it.

Lloyd didn't blush. His huge grin prevented him.



Zelos stood in Chief Igaguri's home rereading the translated message for what seemed like the hundredth time. Things in Meltokio were far worse than he'd imagined.



Lloyd and Sheena sat together beneath the tree she had taken refuge in. His wings along with his arms, encircled her, suffusing the area around them with a soft blue glow.

"Your wings are beautiful."

He blushed. "I'm a man, Sheena. You're supposed to say they're handsome."

She shook her head. "No, wings aren't handsome. They're beautiful. Like you."

"That's kind of embarrassing."

"Too bad. I think they're beautiful, and I think you're beautiful."

"All right, I guess it isn't so bad when it's you saying it."

"Good, and I promise in public I'll only refer to you as cute or handsome. 'Beautiful' will be between us."

"It's okay if I say *you're* beautiful in public, right?" he said with a grin.

Now, she blushed. "Of course. I expect you to."

"Good, because you are." He was rewarded with another happy smile and a deepening of her blush. He marveled at how gorgeous the simple reddening of her cheeks made her.

"About your wings," she said, "how long are you planning to keep them out?"

"I can't really put them away. I'm too happy."

"Oh," she smiled, "They kind of tickle."

"Heh. Sorry," He moved them away.

"No, don't. They tickle, but it's nice."

"You're weird, Sheena."

She frowned, and her brow creased. But finding Lloyd still smiling, she shrugged. "Maybe."

He peeled off his right glove and flexed his fingers, allowing them to breathe. They were damp with a thin coating of sweat, and, when he brought them to her face to trace the outline of her cheek, they left a clearly visible pathway in the dust. "What have you been doing?" he asked.

"Helping your dad prepare fortifications for the attack, of course. When my ...'s village is in trouble, no task is too mundane."

"Your what?"

She couldn't meet his gaze. "My boyfriend."



End Book 1: Gathering the Troops

To be continued in:

The Swordsman and the Summoner

Book 2: Mizuho Mishap

fanfiction.net/~koinekid