

# Tales of Symphonia®: The Swordsman and the Summoner

A fanfiction based on the NAMCO RPG Tales of Symphonia

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**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

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# The Swordsman and the Summoner

## Book 2: Mizuho Mishap

### Part 1 (Chapter 12)

"Orochi, I'm warning you—get your damn hands off her."

Lloyd could see disgust and deep hatred etched into the ninja's unmasked face, its usual coverings bunched around his neck, having been cast off in his romantic fervor.

The ninja snarled, "You are unworthy to be near her, Irving. You have shamed—"

"I won't say it again."

"YOU HAVE SHAMED and disgraced our Next Chief."

Lloyd unsheathed his right-handed sword slowly, allowing the blade to scrape along its sheath, eliciting an unpleasant grating sound he hoped would serve as a rallying cry. The ninjas of Mizuho surely could not ignore a sound that nearly always presaged battle. And they would not stand idly by and watch their Next Chief be manhandled, even if the offender was one of their own most trusted warriors. He unsheathed his left-handed sword more slowly still, both to draw out the duration of the blade scrape, and because, in all honesty, moving his left arm caused him great pain. He knew he was in no condition to fight the elite ninja, but if that son of a bitch hurt Sheena, Lloyd would fight till his last breath to make him pay.

"Sheena, are you all right?"

"Do not talk to her, you unworthy whelp!" Orochi punctuated his words by brief, possibly unconscious, squeezes of Sheena's arm, which he had been holding in a fierce grip. She winced at the pain but did not cry out.

"Orochi, stop! You're hurting her!"

The ninja noticed what he had done and readjusted his grip so as to apply less pressure on the now tender flesh, but he did not let go.

"I invoke the chal—"

"Orochi, no!"

"Quiet, woman."

"I am not speaking as a *woman*. I am speaking as your *Next Chief*."

"As such," came a voice from behind Lloyd, "you should know better than to interfere in the issuance of a challenge."

Only when he saw Chief Igaguri and Vice Chief Tiga at his side, did Lloyd allow himself a glance backwards. What he saw gave him a new appreciation for his girlfriend's people. He'd

been snuck up on by individual ninjas and small groups before. Hell, getting the drop on him seemed to be one of Sheena's favorite pastimes. But he'd just been surrounded by what appeared to be Mizuho's entire adult population, and he hadn't heard a sound.

He sighed in relief. Now that they were here, Sheena would be okay. He smiled until he noticed the look in Sheena's eyes: panic.

"Grandpa, please—" she said.

"You know the tradition, little one. Once a challenge is made, it is up to the one challenged to accept or decline. With *no* outside interference."

Lloyd scowled. Why weren't they helping her?

"Did you think the villagers would aid you?" Orochi asked. "*I* have challenged you. To interfere would bring dishonor on the entire village."

*Dishonor! Is that all you people care about? What about right and wrong? What about love? Honor is not life.* Lloyd told Sheena he respected her culture, but...sheesh! There were limits.

"Lloyd Irving, do you accept this challenge?" Orochi said.

Lloyd sighed again, not in relief. "Yeah," he said, "I'll fight you."



### Earlier that day

"Lloyd is my koibito.<sup>1</sup> I can hardly believe it!" Sheena had not been able to stop grinning last night, even after Lloyd kissed her good night, and the two engaged in a series of—heh, engaged—blush-inspiring whispered endearments before retiring to their rooms. The group had wisely shuffled around the sleeping arrangements, no one believing it a particularly good idea for either of the new couple to remain in Colette's house. The prospect of being "accidentally" smothered in her sleep by the embittered blonde held little appeal for Sheena. Still, she had considered staying if only to avoid the perception of rudeness toward her hostess. Lloyd, however, insisted. "Staying there will only make you feel bad, Sheena. And I don't want anything to ruin your memory of today." Deliverance came in the form of the Sages. Raine, though she had yet to sleep in her own rebuilt house, forewent the privilege, and took Sheena's place as Colette's bedmate. This house, unlike her old, had separate rooms for the half-elven siblings. A good thing for them since Genis was rapidly approaching the age when sleeping in the same room as his sister would feel awkward, and a good thing for Sheena, since it let her have her own room. Lloyd, meanwhile, had bunked with Genis. Only in the morning did Sheena stop to wonder where Dirk had slept, though she thought it likely he'd remain in the Brunel's guestroom. Colette had no reason to be angry with him.

Raine. The summoner treasured her friendship with the half-elf. She'd never told her, but Raine was the first real female friend she'd ever had. After the tragedy with Volt, most of the girls in Mizuho had avoided her. And the boys were no better. "Stay away from Sheena! She'll kill you like she killed my daddy!" "She's not really Mizuhoan! The chief found her in the forest and felt sorry for her! Her real parents didn't want her! She's an OUTSIDER!" Even after her acceptance and elevation to the position of Successor, she still found it difficult to open up to most of the villagers. That only made her value Raine's friendship all the more. Gaining it had not been easy, Raine not being one to warm up to a former enemy no matter how seemingly

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese for "boyfriend" or "girlfriend;" signifies more than a casual relationship

repentant. But soon, what started as a mutual dislike had bloomed into, first, a grudging respect and, finally, the deep friendship they shared today. When it came time for her to pick a daihyo, she hoped Raine would consent. Sheena sighed when she realized Raine's acceptance was not assured.

She had known Raine for not quite eighteen months, and that first month they had spent exchanging cracked ribs and busted lips. By mutual accord, those injuries were left forgotten in the past. But something else could not be forgotten. Raine had known and cared for Colette far longer than a year and a half. Sheena wasn't certain exactly how long it was since Raine first came to Iselia. Ten years? Genis was thirteen. And he remembered living other places, places where he had been discriminated against. He would have had to have been at least five to remember much. Eight years then, maybe less. However long it had been, it amounted to far longer than she had known Sheena. In a contest—no, she didn't want it to be a contest. She wanted Raine to care for both of them. Hell, *she* wanted to still be Colette's friend. *Friends, no matter what, eh, Colette? Don't worry, though. I won't hold it against you if you never want to see me again.*

Sensing the onset of despair, Sheena redirected her thoughts. Lloyd was right. Today, she would be happy. She visualized Mithos clearing his ethereal throat to mock her only to be surprised and thwarted by her sudden ebullience.

A knocking on her door ended her early morning ruminations. Seized by self-consciousness, she checked her appearance in the mirror over the dresser. *Hope you like what you see, koibito.* She opened the door to find Lloyd's smiling face.

"Breakfast?" he asked, offering his arm.

She took it. "Love to."

After a quick meal of waffles—thanks for the recipe, Wonder Chef, but why are you disguised as salad tongs?—during which there was a bevy of glances, gazes, and stolen touches exchanged between Lloyd and Sheena (along with the occasional feigned gagging by Genis), the three temporary housemates joined Dirk at the village entrance. Much to Sheena's amazement, Lloyd had neglected to wear his swords. She recalled Dirk's words the night before. "Won't need those blades for a day of hard labor, lad" But she had expected him to bring them along anyway if only to have them nearby just in case. He even wore them to that dinner party so long ago, and the way his hand strayed to his side every so often in search of a sword hilt to rest upon served to highlight the unusualness of their absence.

Seeing him thus unarmed gave her a surreal feeling, perhaps a vision of a future in which she and her koibito would no longer walk the path of the warrior. Would there, could there be such a day? After the Exsphere journey? *I'll work for that day, my love, but I'll stick by you even if it never comes.*



Tossing his heavy red shirt to the side, Lloyd wondered why he'd even bothered wearing it. He had known he would discard it by the end of his first hour's work anyway. Timbering and stone-craft, it was said, were bare-chested labors, and, despite the last vestiges of the morning chill, his dad's shirt was nowhere to be seen. Lloyd pulled his suspenders back over his arms and his short-sleeved white shirt. The pits and collar were already stained with sweat, but he decided against going topless. He hadn't the build to do so off the beach. Plus, he didn't want to distract Sheena. Heh.

Damn if he hadn't been hanging around Zelos too much.

Or maybe not enough.

He used the break afforded by removing his shirt to take a look at the woman he loved, remembering the tiff she had with Dirk earlier in the morning when he tried assigning her lighter duties. Her brief flash of anger made Lloyd remember how she'd treated him when she first joined the party. Back then, she'd seen him as a boy trying to live in a man's world. He couldn't fault her for it. Not too long before he met her, he'd still been using wooden swords. Actually, her injunctions of "Be a man!" helped him do just that. At first, he was frightened he had another Kratos on his hands, someone whose only goal in life seemed to be putting him down, whose compliments were back-handed insults. But Sheena's corrections had soon petered out, and Lloyd came to realize it was just her way of feeling out a frightening situation.

"Hey, Dad, tell me again why we're doing this."

Building these fortifications, you mean?"

"Right. The evacuations will be finished tomorrow, meaning we'll be the only ones left in the village."

"Aye."

"We should try and save the village if we can. I understand its symbolic importance, but how can anything we build in under a week stand against an army as big as Meltokio's?"

"Oh, I've got a few tricks up my sleeve, lad. You can trust your old dad."

"And I do, really, but—"

"And if our aim were to save the village single-handedly, we'd be fighting a losing cause. No, lad. The only hope for Iselia is your friend Zelos bringing his reinforcements in time. Our real aim is to provide enough of a distraction to keep the king's troops away from the evacuation site."

Lloyd nodded. "And that's another thing."

"Are you going to complain about the evacuation site again?" Genis asked, setting down his pickaxe. He actually shared Lloyd's misgivings, but didn't mind the break an intellectual discussion would justify.

"Keep working, lad," Dirk admonished.

Genis grumbled something off-color and resumed his work.

"The ruins of the human ranch *are* a bad idea." Lloyd said.

"The fortress is the most secure place in the area—"

"It *was* the most secure *before* it began to be dismantled. A process observed by the delegate from Meltokio."

"That's true."

"And has anyone seen him lately? I'd bet my swords," he reached for a missing sword handle, then dropped his hand awkwardly, "that he's already back there, spilling his guts. The king's forces will know everything about that place. I'll bet he was the one who suggested dismantling it in the first place."

"That's...also true."

"He said it was a symbolic way to show the Desians were no longer in control," Genis added, "that Iselia is its own free town."

"And no one felt it odd that the representative of a repressive monarchy was saying this."

"From what I understand," Dirk said, "they figured he was just speaking diplomatically, acknowledging Iselia's freedom officially even if Meltokio didn't support it in principle. A few of the more hopeful civic leaders thought it might represent a new attitude toward freedom for his people as well as theirs."

Sheena smirked. "That's pretty naïve for a village that had been this close to a human

ranch."

Lloyd shrugged. "Iselia was used to oppression from half-elves—no offense, Genis. Being oppressed by other humans wasn't a concept they easily grasped."

## Part 2 (Chapter 13)

To the gathered villagers, Chief Igaguri said, "Then it is agreed the challenge will be answered at noon tomorrow on the Isle of Decision. Lloyd, as the challenged party, will choose the observer." To Lloyd, he said, "Please make your decision by mid-morning." To Sheena, he said, "Come, Granddaughter, we must talk."

Sheena jerked her arm free from Orochi's grasp and shot the ninja a dirty look, noting with a mixture of puzzlement and satisfaction that he seemed genuinely hurt. Unbidden, a Mizuhoan word came to mind, a word she had no right to know. Damn him! The intimacy its knowledge implied she didn't want from Orochi. That he had forced it on her—he had actually pulled her hands away from her ears when she had attempted to cover them—galled her. She needed to talk to Lloyd if only to be reminded of the true intimacy she shared with him. But when she started his way—

"Granddaughter, if you please."

Lloyd smiled confidently, as if to assure her everything would be all right. She dearly wished she could believe him. She tried to return his smile but failed. Nodding obediently, she assented to her grandfather's, *her chief's*, demand.

When Sheena was out of sight, Lloyd turned toward Orochi, determined to...well, not to fight him. He'd take care of that tomorrow, but his blood was boiling due to the ninja's rough treatment of Sheena, and there was no rule against cursing an opponent before a challenge. Was there? All he really knew about the challenge he had picked up while serving as Sheena's observer during her duel with Kuchinawa. No matter, someone else was already laying into Orochi.

"Cover your face," Tiga demanded, "You shame yourself."

"I apologize, Vice-chief, but what I told the Next Chief could not be said while masked." The smug grin he directed Lloyd's way disappeared a moment later beneath his expressionless blue mask.

"You didn't." Tiga said.

"I regard *all* Mizuho's traditions as law, even those that have fallen out of general favor."

"The people," Tiga said, "will not stand for this."

"The people love me."

"But she is our Next Chief."

"And what a Next Chief she is, always absent, gallivanting around the world while our crops fail, while our agents die, while she is most needed," Orochi said. "How much longer will Chief Igaguri live? Sheena should be here, learning to lead. Our people need a real leader, someone who is with them, someone who has faced their hardships, someone—"

"Like you?" Tiga said.

"Or you, Vice-chief, but you already have a wife. I do not. If I marry the Next Chief, I will be in a position to help our people."

Tiga exhaled. "So that's why you told her."

"Yes. You have long known the love I have for our people. I would do anything for them, and they know it."

"And Sheena would not do the same?"

"Of course she would," Orochi said sternly, "unless Lloyd asked her not to. He is her top priority. Can you disagree? The villagers sense this too and have lost confidence in her. Many have long believed she, being an outsider, would eventually abandon us. Now that she has been dishonored by Lloyd, this belief is stronger than ever."

"And you're *so honorable*, Orochi," Lloyd interjected, seething. "It takes a real man to do what you did, manhandle a woman and then badmouth her when she's not here to defend herself. Well, I'm here."

Tiga grasped Lloyd's shoulder. "My friend, now is not the time."

Lloyd unfastened his sword belts and dropped them to the ground, letting the ninjas know he wouldn't employ the blades in his anger. He spoke tersely and quietly, so that they had to strain to hear.

"You're talking about Sheena as if she did something wrong, as if loving me has defiled her. I don't care who you are," he pointed to Tiga, "or who you think you are," he pointed to Orochi, "I won't stand for it. What we have or haven't done is between us. If Sheena wants to tell you, she can. But none of it has defiled her, dishonored her, or soiled her. She is the strongest, most honorable, purest person I have ever known, and if you can't see that, you don't know what honor is."

Orochi closed his eyes, and, when he opened them again, his look of fierce, almost demented fanaticism was gone, replaced by a more subtle determination, akin to the look of the man Lloyd had once called friend. He said, "I would have been proud to stand by you both on your wedding day, but that cannot be. You love her; that is plain to see. But there are bigger concerns in this world than love."

"Are you trying to confuse me?" Lloyd said. "Pretending to be my friend won't work."

The ninja shook his head. "No. Sheena is one of us. Unlike my brother, I never considered her an outsider. She is my friend."

"Nice try, but I heard you call her an outsider a few moments ago."

"I am my people's mouthpiece, an instrument of their will. A good leader does not dictate what his people should believe but guides them, and, if he is overruled, he must bend himself to their will."

"That's foolish!" Lloyd said, "You have to fight for what you believe in, even if you fight alone!"

Orochi shook his head. "If you truly believe this, you will never understand leadership. Mizuho needs stability, Lloyd, and it is up to our next leader to see they get it. Sheena must put aside her own happiness if her people's welfare demands it. That is the burden of leadership."

"Sheena will be the best chief you've ever had," Lloyd insisted.

"And just where will you be?"

"By her side."

"You're not going back to Iselia, then?" Orochi said.

"Of course we are," Lloyd said, perplexed. "We have to. Our friends are counting on us."

"So then, you will take our Next Chief to certain death. How does this benefit Mizuho?"

Suppose you do survive this conflict. What of the ones to follow? To Iselia she is but another soldier; she is far more valuable to us."

"She's the most important person in my life."

"But not the most important thing," Orochi said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only this: you are with Sheena as long as being with her does not interfere with your quest. If you had to choose between hunting Exspheres and being with her, you'd choose the Exspheres. I will prove that to her, and she will willingly leave you."

"You're wrong."

"About you or about Sheena? Don't bother answering. We both know what you'd say. Besides, if I cannot break her heart, I'll get her through guilt. I'm sure the chief is attempting to do that as we speak. Or rather, as *they* speak." Orochi walked away, leaving behind a dumbstruck Lloyd. Before he disappeared into the night, the ninja turned and said,

"Rest well, for tomorrow we fight. And I will not hold back."



### Earlier that day

"Freedom or fealty," Lloyd said echoing Genis's words from the council, "one will eventually win out. I wonder if freedom has ever won that battle."

"It has, Lloyd," Sheena said. "We beat Mithos, right? We won freedom for our land."

"Yeah, and the king is nothing compared to Mithos," Genis said.

*...You can say that, again...*

*Not now, blondie,* Sheena thought.

"I suppose you're right," Lloyd said, forcing himself to grin. "It wouldn't be very heroic to win a war then die in a skirmish."

"That's the spirit," Sheena said, squeezing his hand.

As his cheeks reddened, his cares were forgotten.

"They've been doing this *all morning*," Genis whined.

Dirk wiped a tear from his eye, or was it a speck of sawdust? "My little boy is growing up."

"Dad!"

Attempting to cheer up Lloyd (and getting back at Genis in the process), Sheena said, "Hey, Genis, since Presea's here, you could be doing the same."

His head shot up. "Presea! Where? Here in Iselia! Why didn't anybody tell me? How's my hair? Are these clothes too sweaty?...I mean, that was simply a childish crush. I'm far more mature now." *That's it, Sage, play it cool. She might be watching.*

Lloyd burst into peals of laughter, which prompted a bevy of rebukes from Genis. Lloyd tried, but failed, at mumbling a "sorry, sorry" between his guffaws. When his need for breath ended his laughing fit, he did manage an apology. "Things have been so tense lately, I guess I just needed that." His sides ached a good ache.

"I forgive you, Lloyd," Genis said, "but seriously, Presea didn't see my outburst, did she?"

Lloyd experienced a brief aftershock of his laughing fit, and then was about to answer when another voice interposed itself.

"No, Genis, she didn't," Raine said, coming from the direction of Colette's house. "She isn't here anymore. And neither is Colette." She held up a note. "She's run away." She held up

another note. "And Presea's followed her."

"We have to go after them. They could be in trouble!" Genis shouted.

Lloyd nodded. "Right. If they took Presea's rheiard they could be anywhere by now. We should split up—"

"Not so fast, Bud," another voice said. "You have a bigger problem." Zelos jogged top speed through the village gates, followed by a haggard-looking Frank Brunel. Lloyd looked away, unable to meet the gaze of Colette's father.

"Or to be more precise," Zelos continued, "Sheena has a problem. She's needed in Mizuho, and I'm sure you'll be tagging along."

Lloyd shook his head. "Whatever the problem is, it'll have to wait. Colette and Presea—"

Sheena interrupted. "What's happened?"

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news twice in so few days, but a friend of yours has been killed."

"Who?"

"Suzumebachi Hidagawa."

"Suzu!"

Zelos nodded grimly. "Sorry. On the bright side, if there is one, he managed to send an important piece of intel to the village before he died. And trust me, it's big. The chief wants to see you right away."

"Thank you, Zelos," Sheena said. "Lloyd, we have to go now."

He shook his head, "But Colette—"

"Lloyd, I don't have time to argue. Either come with me, or don't." When he didn't move for several seconds, she stalked out of the village, rummaging in her bag for the wing pack.

"Don't look at me like that, Zelos," Lloyd growled. "The last time I left Colette in a dangerous situation she was shot with a magic arrow and went into a coma for a week." Then he shook his head. "What am I saying? It's a simple search mission. You guys can handle it, right?" He ran out of the village, smacking himself on the head, mumbling, "Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

"Hey, Sheena, wait up."

By the time he found her, she was already in the air. She forgave him easily enough, but refused to land, forcing him to fly using his wings for the duration of the trip. Long before they reached the village hours later, he was exhausted. It depleted a great deal of his mana reserve, but he wasn't concerned. He was headed for an intelligence briefing, after all, not a fight to the death.



"Go back to the village, Presea. I don't need you here."

Presea gave one last tug to free her axe from the tangle of intestines and fur that had been a wolf. She sprinkled sand on the heavy blade to remove the blood, bile, and bone fragments that remained attached. "Incorrect, Colette," she said. "You were nearly killed."

Colette watched Presea's cleaning ritual curiously. Once the wolf's body fluids had absorbed enough of the sand, they congealed into patches of mud, which Presea calmly scrubbed off with a hard-bristled brush. Some of the more persistently ground-in bits of gore received the mud treatment two or three times. Sand, mud, scrub. Sand, mud, scrub. The sight and smell made Colette a touch queasy, and she was standing upwind yards away. Yet, Presea managed to complete her cleaning without the slightest wrinkle of her nose. Sadly,

Colette noted, this was quite in character for the girl who once lived several days in a cottage with the moldering corpse of her father.

"How long have you been following me?" Colette asked.

"Since you left the village," Presea said. After a pause, she added, "Long enough to see you shouldn't be out here on your own."

"I have to do this alone."

"Then we have a problem, because I have to follow you."

"Why?"

"To discover whether friendship is worth anything."

"Fine," she groaned. She didn't really understand what Presea meant, but something about the way the girl phrased it touched her. "But only as far as the House of Salvation. That's my first stop. Afterwards, you're heading back to the village."

Hesitantly, Presea nodded. "That is acceptable. May I ask why you are going?"

She exhaled. "I...want to speak with Martel."

Presea nodded. "Will you seek her blessing for the battle?"

"No, it has nothing to do with the battle."

"What could be important enough for you to abandon your friends?"

*Abandon? Am I abandoning them?*

***So he's abandoned me for her.***

Unsolicited, the memories came rushing in.

***He's just worried. I'm sure he'd do the same for you.***

*Liar.*

***I won't let anything happen to you, Colette. You're my friend. I'll protect you.***

*Liar. You're the one who hurt me!*

*Abandon them? Why not? They've already abandoned me.*

"Do you want to come with me or not?" Colette snapped.

Presea said nothing, just packed her cleaning supplies and followed her retreating friend.

### Part 3 (Chapter 14)

Deep within Gaoracchia Forest, at the border of Mizuho, Lloyd touched down and waited for Sheena to do the same. Putting his wings away reintegrated the mana they used into his body's overall mana reserve, and gave him a brief feeling of euphoria. It ended when the physical exertion of flying caught up with him. He hunched over, panting, while Sheena called her rheiard back into the wing pack.

"I don't have a lot of experience with this sort of relationship," he said, "so I'm not sure how many other ways I can apologize."

Sheena frowned. "I'm not mad at you, Lloyd. It's just that Suzumebachi was my friend. I recommended him for this mission, and now he's dead."

Lloyd wanted to hug her, but they were near enough to Mizuho, where *even love must be conducted in secret*, that he kept a discreet distance. "It's not your fault," he said. "Suzumebachi knew what he was getting into."

"Did he?"

Lloyd nodded. "Yes. But that's not all that's bothering you, is it?"

Sheena bit her lip and shook her head slowly. "Mizuho is both a family and an army. I'm supposed to mourn for family, but, if I get this broken up over one death, how can I lead an army?"

Lloyd moved as close to her as he dared, close enough to take her by the hand. "Do you remember what you told me after you powered the mana cannon, how your village sent you to Meltokio as a peace offering? It sounded like slavery to me. Still does. But you said you were happy to go because it meant you were being useful to your people."

She nodded.

"Would Suzumebachi have felt any differently?" Lloyd said. "You accepted your mission willingly. So did he, and, if he's anything like you, he died with a smile on his face, knowing he'd served the village well." He paused before adding, "Your grandfather is a good leader. The villagers follow him because they know he loves them. When they hurt, he hurts. He takes no death lightly but manages to go on living because they depend on him."

"You've never really talked with Grandpa," Sheena said. "How do you know so much about him?"

Lloyd shrugged. "A guess. He'd have to be pretty great to raise a wonderful person like you."

Sheena smiled. Lloyd hadn't seen one of those in hours.

She said, "Here's a relationship lesson, koibito: If I had been angry with you, a remark like that would've pacified me completely."

"What does it get me when you're not angry?"

Sheena giggled, closing the distance between them and threading an arm around his waist. "Why don't I show you?"

When their lips parted moments later, Lloyd said, "You are going to be a great leader *because* you care for your people, not in spite of it."

She gazed into his eyes. "And you'll be by my side, won't you?"

"You don't need my help to be a great leader, Sheena." At her look of dismay, Lloyd added, "But I'm not going anywhere."

She nodded. "Thank you, koibito."

He squeezed her hand. "Let's go inside."

"All right." She turned, intent on keeping her hand linked with his until the last practical moment, and saw—

"Orochi?"

The ninja stood, regarding the pair pensively. Just how much he had seen or heard they could not know. He bowed stiffly to each. "Next Chief, and her ever-present escort, Lloyd Irving, it is a solemn day. Come, the chief wishes to see you."

Sheena nodded and released Lloyd's hand. Saying no more, she followed Orochi into the village.

Lloyd trailed behind, uneasy at the cold look he was sure he'd spotted in the ninja's eyes.



Presea crept as quietly through the underbrush as a young girl dragging a fifty-pound axe could creep. Thanks to the raucous carryings-on of the soldiers she was trying to slip past, it was quiet enough. Ahead, Colette motioned frantically for her to hurry. Presea flashed a hand signal telling her to stop. The last thing they needed was for a soldier to notice Colette's frenzied waving.

Most of the morning had been spent in a silent march steadily southward, interrupted occasionally by attacking monsters, typically, hares, night raids, and killer bees. Colette's temper seemed to get shorter each time Presea stopped to perform her cleaning ritual. At last, Presea had settled for quick wipe downs with a gore-encrusted cloth. A few days' treatment like this would ruin the axe, but she supposed her friend was more important than her weapon. It was well past time for an upgrade anyway, but she'd always liked this axe, her Gaia Clever. She'd carried it into the final battle against Mithos Yggdrasill that had ended the world regeneration journey.

Her attempts to stimulate conversation failed miserably, so she'd secretly been relieved when Colette hushed her suddenly at the edge of a large thicket. The relief soon evaporated when she found out why. Through the break in the thicket Colette indicated, Presea saw six soldiers. Advanced scouts for the king's army, no doubt, and they were way too close to Iselia. What bothered her more, though, was their unusual number. Her knowledge of Meltokio's military told her scouting squads usually consisted of four men. This was a squad plus two, meaning two more soldiers could be nearby. She and Colette needed to get away fast.

Too late.

"Well, what have we here? You're a pretty little thing." A large man held Colette suspended in the air by the front of her blouse. In his other hand he held a menacing-looking knife. Its blade, black-lacquered and jagged with embellished serration designed as much to frighten as to rend flesh from bone, was wet with blood from a fresh kill. He said, "You wouldn't

happen to be Sylvarant's Chosen, would you?"

"N-no," Colette said, "you're mistaken."

He shook his head. "You're a horrible liar, cutie pie. We've been briefed. We know exactly who you are. Where's your protector with the two swords? I want a crack at him."

Fear fled from Colette's eyes, and she gripped the man's wrist. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she recognized the sound of snapping bone, but externally she paid it no heed. "I have no protector," she said. "I'm alone."

No longer concerned with secrecy, Presea hefted her axe to her shoulder. Her plan—take down the one holding Colette, and then escape on the rheiard. The smart choice would be to usher Colette onto the rheiard while she stayed behind to fight in case the scouts had archers or long range magicians, but she knew the girl too well to believe she would, even in her current funk, accept the sacrifice.

As soon as her axe touched her shoulder, she was pushed forward, and the axe ripped violently from her grasp. She stumbled and fell face first into the dirt. Ignoring the pain from abrasions on her face and hands, she wheeled around, intent on fighting her attacker, barehanded if necessary. Instead, she lunged desperately to the side as her own axe struck the ground where she had stood, tossing up stone and chunks of earth.

Her attacker was a soldier, the eighth man (as Colette's attacker was the seventh) she'd been hoping to avoid. He raised the axe above his head and brought it down executioner-style again and again, just missing her each time. He had strapped at his side an axe as big as Presea's, suggesting he was no novice with the weapon. But the way he swung *her* axe suggested his weapon of choice had once been the sword. He'd soon tire himself out if he couldn't appreciate the difference between swordsmanship and axe-play. Then again, perhaps not. She dodged another swipe. Sufficient endurance, particularly if it were Exsphere-enhanced, could compensate for bad technique.

The soldier tangling with Colette cried out. He could no longer control the fingers below his broken wrist, but Colette held him in a tight grip. He swung his arm, frantically whipping the girl to and fro, but could not dislodge her. "Let go," he begged. In a moment, he came to his senses, reared back his knife, and thrust it forward. Colette gave his hand one last vicious twist before letting go and pushing away, barely avoiding the stab. She cried out as she bruised her rear on the ground. Her blouse was ripped open in the front and the pieces draped over her arms so that it impeded her movement. Without hesitation, she ripped it off, revealing the black t-shirt beneath she'd taken to wearing for warmth.

The soldier cradled his broken arm, and bellowed for his companions to help.

Through the thicket burst the other six. They surrounded the fighters, closing in on Colette, but providing a wide perimeter for Presea and the wild axeman who still showed no signs of slowing down.

From the corner of her eye, Presea noticed a soldier drawing two swords. No shield. His defense would be low. Positioning herself directly in front of him, she waited just a moment longer than usual to dodge the axeman, then rolled under his legs. The faux-Lloyd tried to catch the ill-placed swing with both swords, but the momentum was so great it sent the swords crashing to the ground and left him with a fatal gash in his chest. He spent his last moments cursing and gurgling blood. And, as Presea hoped, his swords were left unattended on the ground. When the axeman turned to resume his fight, she whipped past, snatched up one of the swords, and sliced into his knee. After training with a heavy axe, she found a sword almost too easy to swing. She kept at her cat-and-mouse game with the axeman. As her sword's former owner had demonstrably proven, blocking wouldn't work. After a particularly

forceful swing left the axe embedded in the ground, Presea dashed behind the axeman. Once there, she sliced the tendon that connected his foot and calf, laming him. For good measure, she did the same to his other foot. He fell to the ground; he wouldn't walk again.

Out of eight, three down. No, four. Colette's chakram dripped with blood. Four down. Four to go. How many more could they kill before the crew wised up and stopped fighting one-on-one?

She surveyed the remaining soldiers and noticed something. There were two magicians, and—and one mumbling a—she recognized that spell. She threw the sword, impaling the magician's forehead and preventing him from raising his dead allies. She picked up the faux-Lloyd's second sword and prepared to charge the remaining magician, but the chain of fireballs he sent her way left her staggering in pain.

She resumed her previous observation: Healer. Kendama-wielding magician. Axeman. Knife-wielder. Double swordsman. Man with greaves (on arms and legs). Did one of them...? Yes, one of Colette's chakrams split as it connected with an enemy's chakram. And—no, that was impossible. Other than Kuchinawa, no Mizuhoan had ever worked for the village's enemies, at least as far as Sheena could recall. Would Kuchinawa teach the village's secret card arts to an outsider? No, his twisted code of honor wouldn't allow him. But here was a card fighter; nowhere near Sheena's level of power, but still brutal. The rapid-fire cyclone seals sending Colette into an unplanned retreat proved as much.

These eight were a cruel mockery of the Chosen's group.

Three dead. Two incapacitated. Three to go.

Regaining her bearings, Presea charged the Genis-wannabe. He rushed the completion of his current spell, and all but one of the ice spikes it created missed her. The one that connected, however, pierced her leg, and sent her face first into the dirt. She tasted blood.

He swung his kendama, and the ball on a string slammed into her skull. Presea groaned. As she'd so often done with the real Genis, she underestimated this man. He moved toward her, tucked the kendama into his belt, and drew a sword.

She raised her own to mount a defense. He slashed at it, purposefully connecting with the blade, causing it to vibrate and loosen her grasp. Damn it! She wasn't used to one-handed weapons! A final slash sent the sword flying. The condition of her leg meant she couldn't run. Probability of escape—three percent. Trying would be pointless. The soldier raised his sword. Instinctively she closed her eyes but a moment later opened them. If death came, she would meet it eyes open, unafraid.



Chief Igaguri bowed to Lloyd, his aging posture deepening the degree and duration of the honorific. "Your presence honors us, Lloyd Irving," he said.

Lloyd returned the bow, and repeated the formal greeting Sheena had taught him. "I am honored to be in your presence, Chief Igaguri."

Once the customaries were out of the way, the war briefing began in earnest. It was far more formal an affair than Zelos's council two days prior, and far more informative. Whereas Zelos had approached the group with suppositions and half-formed theories, Mizuho's spy network had solid proof of the king's schemes in the form of a dispatch from the late Suzumebachi Hidagawa—God grant his soul rest—but, unfortunately, no definite plan of action. Upon learning the truth, Lloyd almost wished he could forget it.

"Og...do...ad?" Lloyd sounded out the word.

"Yes," the chief said, "Ogdoad. The term pre-dates Mithos by perhaps thousands of years."

Lloyd scratched his head. "That far back, huh? I thought everything from that time was long forgotten, except for maybe by Dad or Yuan. Would Yuan know anything about it? He wasn't there, but maybe he's heard of the story."

"We will dispatch an agent to seek his counsel immediately," the chief said. He snapped his fingers and pointed at a ninja in black standing near the door. The ninja bowed and exited.

"Everything from that period *is* long-forgotten, Lloyd," Tiga said. "Indeed, Mizuho's memory stretches back to before the worlds were separated, and the name was a mystery to us."

"Then, how do you know where it comes from?" Lloyd said.

"Suzumebachi's letter," said Tiga, "came with several leafs from a translation of an ancient text. The text wasn't in his handwriting. We assume that, instead of copying the leafs down as he should have, he stole them, was caught, exposed, and—"

"That's why he died." Sheena concluded.

"Yes," Tiga said. "The leafs tell of an ancient religion whose followers held that the world was created by four pairs of deities representing the concepts of water, air, darkness, and eternity."

"Us," Sheena said, "That is, the Chosen's group." At Lloyd's quizzical look, she explained. "We're the group of eight that *remade* this world. That's where the reference comes in, right Grandpa?"

"Yes, Granddaughter, we believe so."

Sheena continued. "Raine and Genis are eternity because half-elves live a long time. Lloyd and I have dark pasts. Zelos and Colette received the gift of flight as Chosens. That's air. But how do Regal and Presea represent water?"

The chief smiled. "Perhaps you're overanalyzing the reference."

"Perhaps," Sheena acknowledged with a blush.

"So let me get this straight," Lloyd said. "The pope and the king have teamed up. To regain the pope's love, his daughter Kate has outfitted a group of eight with powers and weapons similar to our friends, essentially creating a—what did you call it?"

"A Dark Ogdoad," Tiga answered.

"A Dark Ogdoad."

"That is what Suzumebachi's letter indicates, yes."

Lloyd groaned. "We gotta work on that name."

"Are they Desians?" Sheena said.

Tiga shook his head. "The pope's seething hatred of half-elves makes this unlikely."

Sheena acknowledged the point and added, "I bet even using Kate is galling him."

"Kate." Lloyd frowned. "Why would she agree to help her father after all he did to her?"

"He's the only family she has, Lloyd," Sheena said. After a quick survey of those gathered in the hut, she continued. "I wouldn't trade my time in Mizuho for anything, but I'd give an awful lot to know my real family."

There it was again, Lloyd's desire to comfort her. And in the one place on the reunited world he couldn't. *Is she doing this on purpose?* One look in her eyes told him she wasn't. One look into Igaguri's eyes told him it was time to continue the briefing. "Anything else we should know about them?" he asked the chief. "They don't have any angels, right?"

"No, assuredly not," the chief said.

"Or summoners," Lloyd laughed. Sheena was the first known summoner since the Kharlan War four thousand years ago. "Why aren't you guys laughing? Tell me they don't have a summoner."

Beside Tiga sat a female ninja, whose hair was weaved into a complicated bun. At that moment, the bun came undone, and the pin that held it up fell to the straw mat floor; everyone in the room heard it drop.



With all his strength, Dirk pulled at the rope. He'd started off with gentle tugs, and worked his way gradually to his current any-harder-and-I'll-throw-my-back-out yanks. Satisfied the binding would hold he descended from his perch atop one of the two newly-erected wooden towers, and once on solid ground, stood back to admire his work.

A tremendous log hung suspended from ropes between four towers—the two new and the two old that had served the village as lookout towers. When the back ropes were cut, the log would swing forward, slamming into whoever stood in the village gateway. Since no fortifications capable of withstanding an army could be built in so few days, he'd dedicated a substantial portion of his build time to constructing and strategically placing traps to keep the invaders busy once they breached the gates. The one he'd just finished, though lacking in style, would pack a wallop if deployed at the right time.

"It's incredible, Dirk!"

"Oh, I don't know, Genis. I suppose it'll do the job, but it's a bit crude for my taste."

"Crude? Are you kidding? You constructed the towers at precisely the right distance for the ram to strike here—" Genis stood in the center of the gates "—and thus deliver the maximum force possible. And you calculated the angle without using advanced instruments. Incredible!"

After Raine, Zelos, and an insistent Frank Brunel had left in search of the runaway girls, Genis had been depressed. Finding out about Presea's unique age problem had done little to dissuade the thirteen-year-old half-elf from still regarding himself on some level as her knight. He'd wanted to help search for her, but one look from his sister shot down any hopes he had of displaying his gallantry to his crush that day. Sitting here, unable to do anything, stifled the sparks of his emerging manhood. So Dirk had done what he could to focus the boy's thoughts elsewhere, involving him in putting the finishing touches on the few remaining uncompleted traps. He puffed up his chest. All those years raising Lloyd had made him an expert in child-rearing if ever there was one.

Once Genis had somewhat calmed himself, Dirk said, "You seem to be inheriting your sister's bent for excitement. We'll call it 'Scientific Mania.' What do you think?"

Genis's face went as ashen as his hair. "Dirk, I'm begging you, do not repeat that to anyone. Raine would never let me live it down."

He laughed. "All right, lad. My lips are sealed." He settled on the ground near one of the towers, and stretched out with his head resting in his hands. Soon, Genis joined him.

"Can I ask you something," he said, "about Lloyd?"

"All right."

"Remember at the council how Lloyd was so adamant about defending Iselia? And today, he suggested we should abandon it," Genis said. "Is that just Lloyd losing interest like always, or is there a deeper meaning?"

Dirk considered the question carefully before answering. "I think it signals a shift in his priorities."

"That's what I was afraid of," Genis groaned. "Now that he has Sheena, losing the village won't be such a blow."

"No, I dinnae think that's it, lad. Lloyd cares deeply for the people of this village. He'd risk

his life for any of them." Dirk paused. "But there was a time when his love for people was exceeded by another emotion—his hatred for the Desians. Before the regeneration journey, he would have fought tooth and nail to defend an empty village just to keep them from having it. He's growing up, putting personal grudges behind him. I couldn't be more proud. He's been changing for a long time, and I think receiving Sheena's love made that change permanent."

Genis rolled over, placing his back to the old dwarf.

Dirk said, "Does it bother you that Lloyd is with Sheena now?"

"Lloyd was my best friend," Genis said. "He isn't anymore. We're all different people since the journey ended. I've got my studies and my political activism. But when I'm not keeping busy, I start thinking, and I realize everyone is leaving me behind. It scares me.

Dirk placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You're the youngest member of your group," he said. "Many of your friends are adults already, while others, Lloyd, Sheena, and Colette, are becoming adults. They're striking out on their own, leaving behind the lives people have constructed *for* them, and creating lives of their own. It's a difficult transition. If you were their age, you'd be going through the same thing."

"But I'm not their age. I'm a part of the lives that others constructed for them."

"They don't mean to hurt you, and this doesn't mean you're not still their friend," Dirk said.

"But they will hurt me," Genis concluded.

"Ah, lad."

"No, it's okay," Genis said. "I'll just make sure to enjoy the time we have left."

Before Dirk could reply further, Genis changed the subject. "Do you intend to stay for the fight, Dirk? You're not really a fighter, and you've done more than enough to help."

Dirk reflected grimly that he'd just borne witness to the truth of one of the primary vows: *Pride precedes a fall. Great parenting skills, indeed. What a fall!*

"I'm not sure, lad," he said. "Yesterday, I would have stayed for sure, but since I woke up this morning, and especially since Lloyd left, the desire to get to the mountains and underground is stirring up in me. It's taking all the willpower I have to not go running off right now. But I can wait until Lloyd returns."

"Any mountains in particular?" Genis said.

"Aye." He pulled a crinkled map out of his back pocket, unfolded it, and smoothed it out on the ground. It was a rough outline of how the reunited world might appear, having been made by superimposing maps of Sylvarant and Tethe'alla on top of one another. It was wrong in a few of the particulars. He knew this from the brief glance he'd taken at Lloyd's map some nights before. But the region wherein his interest lay was represented perfectly. "There," he said, pointing to a spot in the map's center.

"That's near Mizuho," Genis observed. "You know, if you wanted, when the search group returns, one of us could take you on a rheiard. You could stop by Mizuho and say goodbye to Lloyd while you're at it. You could even meet Altessa. He's a dwarf too, and he helped us out a lot on the journey."

"You don't know how tempting that is, lad," Dirk said, "but...no. I can't really explain why, but this is a journey I feel I have to make on foot."

"Okay." Genis shrugged, "But that offer is open-ended, right up until we see the king's troops poking their pitiful heads over the horizon."

"You've got a way with words, lad."

"Heh, I got straight A's in Creative Writing."

They passed the time after that boast in relative silence. Occasionally, Genis would ask about one of the theories underlying a trap, but Dirk had little aptitude for technical

explanation, preferring instead to show how a device worked. And since springing a trap for a demonstration was out of the question, Genis soon stopped asking.

After twenty minutes of silence Dirk had slipped into a light doze, leaving Genis to ponder his place in his friend's new lives. *I'm happy for Lloyd*, he decided, *but I don't want to lose his friendship. Maybe it's time I made a life for myself. I could sign up for a semester at Sybak or Palmacosta Academies.*

"Hey, Short Stuff, stop daydreaming!"

Genis shot straight up. "Zelos, did you find the girls? Where are they?"

Zelos ushered his search party into the village. When they had entered, he tossed a bundle in front of the half-elf, and slammed shut the newly constructed gates.

"That won't stop them," Raine said.

Genis unwrapped the bundle, and dropped it in horror. Inside were pieces of a broken axe—he'd recognize Presea's Gaia Clever anywhere—and a broken chakram. The wrapping itself was Colette's blouse, her blood-soaked blouse. Genis charged the gate, but Zelos pulled him back.

"They're not dead. Tell me they're not dead!" he screamed.

"Genis, there's no time—" Raine said.

Zelos grasped his shoulder. "We found clothing and broken weapons, but no bodies. Do you hear me, Genis? No bodies."

"Then they're still alive! Why aren't you out there looking for them?"

Zelos pointed to the sky. "That's why," he said.

Genis gulped. In the skies above Iselia flew a veritable army. Some were mounted on dragons or similar monsters. Some were monsters, horrid winged creatures, the likes of which had given the Chosen's group no end of trouble on their journey. And some—No!

"How did they get rheiards?"

"No time for questions, lad." By this time Dirk had awakened. He grasped the boy by his shoulders. "Lloyd's swords. He left them in your house this morning. Find them. The material blades cannot fall into enemy hands."

"What about you?"

Dirk lifted his heavy sledge hammer onto his shoulder. "Same as the others. I'm going to fight."



Sheena burst out of the door, cursing herself for her tears as she ran. Her behavior was that of a child, not the future chief of Mizuho. Despite this realization, she did not stop running until she reached the crops at the edge of the village. It was bad enough the opposing side had a summoner. She'd half-expected that. The king had access to records from her time at the Elemental Research Lab. Hell, the Lab had taught her to summon. Being the best candidate for summoning did not mean she was the only candidate. But to learn they had someone who could perform card arts, Mizuho's *secret* card arts—*Oh God. Tell me they didn't find my diary. Please don't let this be my fault.*

"Next Chief."

"Orochi! You startled me."

The ninja emerged from the early evening shadows that concealed him. "What troubles you, Next Chief? We have long been friends, have we not? Please confide in me so that I might help."

"Thank you, Orochi, but—"

He moved closer. "But I am not Lloyd. Is that what you intended to say?"

She shook her head. "No, my friend, no."

"It is unhealthy for you to confide everything in an outsider."

"Outsider?"

"Please, Next Chief. I mean no disrespect, yet my words are true. It is obvious from the way you fled at the mention of card users among the king's troops that your troubles are related to Mizuho. Lloyd understands little of our ways. Perhaps if he were to marry one of the young girls he would—"

"Marry? What did you say?"

The ninja shook his head. "Did I misspeak? I was not *suggesting* he marry. I was only making the observation that, were he to do so, he would become aware enough of our ways to offer you comfort." Orochi moved closer.

Sheena stepped back. "Orochi..."

"Perhaps I am making a suggestion." He nodded, a quick up-and-down motion. "Permit me to make a list of all the girls who are of age. He may choose from them. I will act as his daihyo if he so wishes."

"Lloyd is spoken for."

"The Chosen?" he asked. "Yes, that is appropriate, don't you think?"

"No."

"Then his teacher. Or the young one, perhaps. Both options are available to him."

She shook her head.

"Ah, then it is someone I do not know." He stepped closer.

"N-no, it..."

He was close enough now that she could see the impressions of his nose and mouth through his facial covering. "Who then? It cannot be you. Your responsibilities as chief would make that impossible."

"Why would you say that?" *And why am I so afraid of you right now?*

"Once you are chief, you will need to remain in Mizuho. And he would not be content to stay here with you. Yet there is someone who would."

She tried to run away, but he seized her arm. He peeled the layers of fine blue silk from his face and head, revealing to her the true form of his face for the first time. "Does my face please you, Sheena? Am I not handsome? No woman had seen my face since my mother died. She told me I was handsome, but I want another opinion. I want yours."

"Please, Orochi, don't—what are you doing?"

He kneaded the flesh of her arm, and hooked an arm around her waist, drawing her to him. Leaning forward, he brushed his lips over hers, exerting only the barest hint of pressure.

*Oh God! Where was her voice? Why couldn't she scream! Lloyd! Lloyd, my true and only love, please help me!*

Orochi pulled back and slid his mouth along her face toward her ear.

"O...ro...chi," she wheezed

"No," he whispered. "Taisuke."

"What?"

"Call me Taisuke. It is my true name. Come, love, tell me yours."

"No...no..." *Lloyd, where are you?*

"Orochi, get your damn hands off her!"

Out of the darkness of evening he emerged like a gallant knight, the one man on whom

she could always depend. He was here, and everything would be all right.

*...So naïve... Mithos observed from his perch within her mind. ...You should know better than anyone what comes next...*

*Oh, God, please no.*

*...Yes, my child?...*

*You're not God, Mithos.*

*...I'm the closest thing to a god you'll ever see, mortal...*

"I invoke the ch—"

"Orochi, no!" At last she regained her voice.

"Quiet, woman!" he snapped.

"I am not speaking as a *woman*. I am speaking as your *Next Chief!*"

"As such..." came a voice from behind Lloyd.

*Grandpa! When did he get here?*

*...Terribly sorry. I guess I distracted you. If you'd like to withdraw from reality and rest for a while, I'll gladly take over. And I'll return control to you as soon as you ask. I swear...*

*Can you even still do that?*

*...You know, I'm not really sure. Let's find out...*

*Go to hell.*

*...I'm much too comfortable here...*

"...you should know better than anyone not to interfere in the issuance of a challenge." Her grandfather looked at her disapprovingly. Why? Couldn't he see what this man had done to her? She sighed. She could already tell this night wasn't going to end well.



Presea stared unafraid into the eyes of the sword-wielding magician. She'd beaten men and monsters far more powerful than this peon. She'd faced Mithos Yggdrasill in combat and lived to tell the tale. If this man killed her, it would negate none of those accomplishments. *If you're mean to kill me, come on! I will not cower in fear! I will not close my eyes!* She realized she was having an emotional response. Pride she felt, and defiance. And self-confidence on a level she had never experienced. If death came for her now, it would find her in top form.

But death did not come. It was prevented by a chakram crushing the magician's throat.

Presea wasted only a moment watching him breathe his last. Then she turned to face her savior. Colette, dressed all in black, her blonde hair streaked with someone else's blood, strode forward, with a confident swagger to her hips, her chest swollen either with pride, or, more likely, labored breathing brought on by the ferocity of battle. Zelos had a word for that sort of look. What was it? Ah, yes. Bad-ass.

In Colette's eyes, though, was no confidence, just exhaustion and hollowness. She knelt by Presea, and without a word, set about healing her injuries.

In a moment, the pink-haired girl was as good as new. She bent her leg a few times to work out the kinks and surveyed the battlefield. Not a soldier was left standing. Out of the eight, only two were even left alive—their initial combatants, the knife-wielder with the broken arm and the crippled axeman.

Colette retrieved the black knife and pressed it against its owner's throat. He tried batting it away, but, as the blood pooling at his side and staining his shirt attested, he was in no condition to resist her.

"Wait!" Presea called. "We need to interrogate them."

Colette acquiesced, but kept the knife in place.

Presea approached and asked, "Who are you?"

He spat at the ground, showering Presea's shoes with blood.

Colette twisted the knife, and he groaned. "My friend," she said, "asked you a question."

"We...we're your worst nightmare, little girl. We're you, or at least the king's answer to you.

We're the Ogdoad. Unbeatable..."

"We beat you," Colette insisted.

"Unstoppable..."

"We stopped you!"

"We're going to kill the Chosen's group..."

"You failed—"

"He's not listening, Colette," Presea said, "He's not even aware of our presence." The look in his eyes told her, through shock and blood loss, he'd already checked out. Lucidity had abandoned him. He'd die in madness.

"The king's Ogdoad is pretty pathetic if it was beaten by two little girls," Colette said, before she slid the knife across his throat. At Presea's look of horror, she shrugged and mumbled, "Mercy killing."

"Colette..."

Laughter drew their attention back to the axeman.

"Pathetic?" he said. "Maybe we are, but we're not the king's Ogdoad. They're the best of the best. Compared to them, we're worthless." He pointed toward the knife-wielder's corpse. "He knew that too, though his pride wouldn't let him admit it."

Presea made a face. The axeman hadn't been nearly as talkative during the fight. Now that she thought about it, he hadn't uttered a single word.

"We're rejects," he continued, "failed experiments. The king's Ogdoad is on a *real* special mission right now. But there's whole battalions of us rejects itching for a fight. You, with the super hearing, can you hear that buzzing? They're coming, and they'll reduce your village to rubble. As for you, you'll be dead long before they get here."

He unfastened the gauntlet covering his left hand and forearm and held up his Exsphere, his crestless Exsphere. He ripped it from his hand and threw it to the ground.

Before their eyes, his form changed. Already tall, he grew taller. The hue of his skin darkened; his eyes receded, and his nose caved into his skull, leaving a blood red orb as his only prominent facial feature. Bones cracked and splintered, spilling their marrow inside his body and out through tears in his skin. The same bones made new connections, fusing themselves back together.

He knew to expect the pain, and the rage with its accompanying loss of mental sharpness and reversion to basic instincts. But he had also expected to be able to walk again. His transformation was complete, but his tendons had not been reformed. When he shook his leg, his foot flopped like a dying fish.

"Why?" he bellowed.

It was the last thing he bellowed before he felt a jagged blade pierce his throat. Then he felt no more.

"Presea, we have to go," Colette said, withdrawing the blade and sheathing it at her side. She seemed panicked.

"What is it?"

"I hear something. Rheiards. Dozens, maybe. He was right. A large force is moving this way."

"Back to Iselia, then?"

"No. We can't help them."

"Our friends are there. Lloyd is there."

"He doesn't need my help." Colette stamped her foot. "He has Sheena. Come on, they'll be here soon."

Presea exhaled and nodded. "All right, I'm coming. Just let me get my weapon." But her weapon was shattered; pieces of the blade lay scattered upon the ground. She cast dust upon them, one last cleaning ritual as symbolic thanks for all its service to her.

She thought perhaps she would take one of the swords she'd used earlier as a surrogate weapon. Instead, she found a greater prize. There was still an axe strapped at the axeman's side. Her earlier evaluation of its worth had been wrong. The axe wasn't as good as hers. It was better. She read the name emblazoned on its handle: Kauket Clever. Interesting.

"Hurry!"

"Coming, Colette."



Lloyd moved his left arm in slow deliberate circles, concentrating on keeping his breathing steady. Now was not a good time for the old injury to flare up.

## **Derris-Kharlan**

### **One year ago**

#### **The final battle with Mithos Yggdrasil**

"There's still time, Mithos. Help us restore the world!"

"You understand nothing, Lloyd! You're pathetic!"

Lloyd growled in frustration. Mithos was being as dense as the armored-plating on his magitech behemoth. Why couldn't he see—? No time for brooding in battle. Mithos was charging Colette, who, in the midst of casting an angelic spell, lay defenseless at his mercy. And Lloyd knew he wouldn't show any.

"Colette, look out!"

Lloyd sent twin shockwaves of energy hurtling at Mithos, hoping to delay the leader of Cruxis long enough to reach Colette. Not pausing to see whether the double demon fang had been effective—As Kratos told him, the fool follows his attack with his eyes; the wise follows it with his feet. Translation: Don't wait to see if your attack has been effective. Instead, keep attacking—he rose through the air, feeling as if he had wings, and dove for his friend's position. But instead of attacking at the end of his rising falcon, he used the momentum to push Colette out of the way. He heard her land with a surprised grunt several yards away. He flashed her a smile, and then felt a searing pain in his left shoulder.

## **After the Battle**

The gel Sheena had sent his way suppressed the pain, but the physical stress of finishing the battle had undone the effects of its healing. He'd been a little annoyed with her then, helping him when she should have been summoning. But then, he would have done the same had she been the one hurt. And after the battle, in all the excitement of becoming an angel himself and awakening the Great Seed as an anchoring point for the reunited world, he'd

forgotten about the injury.

He'd assumed it had simply healed itself in the same way that all the other minor cuts and bruises had disappeared with the emergence of his great blue wings. Not until a few weeks later when his arm began to tingle and on occasion stiffen did he think much about it. By then, it was too late to heal with magic or medicine. He'd just have to bear it. He didn't mind. It was a small price to pay for the regeneration of the world. Besides, it only seemed to hurt when he used his angelic powers.

### Present

He withdrew one of his blades, and inspected it in the firelight. Shiden blades. Of Mizuho make, they were good swords, sturdy, strong, and well-balanced. He'd used a pair briefly on the world regeneration journey. But they weren't nearly as powerful as the material blades he'd, like an idiot, left behind in Iselia. He took a few practice swings, reacquainting himself with their strengths and weaknesses.

Having the Next Chief of the village as your girlfriend, despite its catching you up in duels to the death, did have a few perks. With only a little cajoling, it had gotten the shop owner to open up for business just long enough for him to purchase the swords and a few gels right before the council had started. He couldn't use the gels during the fight, of course, but he'd probably need them afterward.

A knock on the door brought him out of his reflective state. He once again mentally thanked Tiga for securing these quarters for him. With at least thirty percent of Mizuho's adult population off on a mission at any given time, there had been no scarcity of available housing, but still he appreciated the effort. "Come in," Lloyd said.

Sheena stood in the doorway, her gaze full of uncertainty. She whispered his name and, a moment later, flung herself into his arms, burying her face in his chest to hide her tears. After a time neither of them could measure, she kissed him, first tentatively, and then fiercely. At last pulling back, she said, "Thank you. I needed that."

When he had caught his breath, he told her, "You're the most important thing in my life. You know that, don't you?"

"It feels good to hear you say it."

"I would never leave you, not for any reason. If you asked me to give up hunting Exspheres today, I'd do it. It'd be hard, but I'd do it."

"Thank you for saying so, but I would never ask that of you. I couldn't. We both promised to finish this journey. Remember the lying penalty? That's on both our heads."

"I love you," he said.

"I love you."

They talked for a while after that about nothing of substance, preferring to leave the questions of summoners and the leak of card fighting secrets for another day and just enjoy one another's company. There was no daihyo yet. There didn't need to be until there were formal declarations. And at present, there were only Orochi's accusations. Lloyd did ask once about the conversation she'd had with her grandfather, but, when she'd told him she preferred not to talk about it just yet, he didn't press the issue. Another time, he tried consulting her about whom he should choose as daihyo.

"Oh no, mister," she laughed. "Whom a man selects as his daihyo is one of the factors the woman considers when deciding if he's worthy. You're not getting any help from me."

"Haven't you already decided that I'm worthy?" he teased back.

"Maybe, but that doesn't mean you can relax. I'm expecting some serious romancing from my man."

"Sounds like I've got my work cut out for me."

"Yep."

"But I guess you're worth it."

"You guess?" She feigned anger.

"Nah. I know."

She kissed him again, and, on a whim, kissed the tip of his nose. "I'd best be going," she said, "if I'm to be back with your observer on time."

She stood and walked to the door.

"Hey Sheena," he called, "You think Regal's a good choice for my observer, right?"

"Sure," she nodded. "He's fair, level-headed, and won't be prejudiced by your friendship."

"Would he also be a good daihyo?" He grinned.

"You dork! I told you—"

"How about Zelos?"

"Zelos!" she growled. "Stop trying to involve me—ha ha ha."

"Genis? Or Dad? We can get Origin to bring him back from Derris-Kharlan."

"Lloyd!" She was laughing uncontrollably now.

"I wonder if Yuan's busy."

"Yuan? Lloyd, I'm leaving now, and I don't want to be laughing like an idiot in front of my people."

He placed both hands over his mouth, silently promising not to say another word.

But she didn't see him, was purposefully avoiding looking at him. If he were trying not to make her laugh, whatever he did to avoid it would have the opposite effect. She took slow, deep breaths and opened the door. She made it to her fifth step before bursting into a fit of giggles.



On a field south of Iselia, two young girls continued their pilgrimage toward the House of Salvation. One felt acute guilt for having abandoned her friends and apprehension at not knowing if they were all right. The other wondered why she was not feeling the same.



In the village of Iselia two warriors, a gentle healer, and a dwarven smith prepared for the fight of their lives, while another warrior stuck to the shadows, weaving from house to house, desperate to reach his home and the prize therein without attracting attention.



In a borrowed house in Mizuho, a lone swordsman, already missing his departed love, massaged a sore shoulder, before settling into a restless sleep.



A few houses over Taisuke, known to most as Orochi, sat cross-legged on his tatami floor

mat inhaling the fumes of a bitter incense. When the door opened, and another man entered, Taisuke did not look up, simply said, "Hello, brother. It has been a while."

"Indeed, it has," came the reply, "Is all going according to plan?"

## Part 4 (Chapter 15)

Lloyd gripped his Shiden blades. *Arrgh! I can barely move my left arm!*  
Sheena withdrew twin spell cards from her gi. *I don't have time for this!*  
Orochi held his kunai in front of his face. *Am I doing the right thing?*  
Regal tightened the straps on his greaves. *Never thought I'd be fighting her.*  
Dirk raised his hammer. *Be safe, my son, if I don't see you again.*  
Genis whipped out his kendama and fired off a spell. *I can't let them get Lloyd's swords!*  
Zelos readied his sword. *At least I'll leave a pretty corpse!*  
Raine brought her staff to bear. *Wish I could've gotten to know you better, Mother.*

■□■□■

*Well, it all comes down to this!*

■□■□■

"Keep that up you'll tire yourself out."

Orochi walked the Isle of Decision battlefield, getting used to the feel of the soil on his thin-soled boots and testing for trouble spots. He leapt into the air, landed, and smoothly transitioned into a roundhouse kick, following up with a flurry of strikes to the pressure points of an imagined opponent. He frowned. "Little brother, did you notice anything about the soil when you fought here?"

"At last, he speaks!" Kuchinawa hopped from his perch atop a tree limb and bowed low in mock approbation. From that angle, the black costume he wore in place of his usual red one gave the impression that he was one of the king's foppish courtiers. "Not really. It sticks to your boots a little, but that's the river water seeping into the soil. It's no real problem."

"It could slow me down."

"By half a step at most, and Lloyd will share the same handicap. Just stay in the air as much as possible."

"If he uses his wings, he'll be in the air too."

"So? If he's in the air, use the ground to your advantage. If he's on the ground, use the air to your advantage." Kuchinawa shook his head. "You always did overanalyze everything. Besides, you're faster than Lloyd. If you both end up on the ground, half a step won't make a difference."

"Are you admitting I can defeat him?"

"There's always a chance. Sheena beat me, so we know superior talent doesn't guarantee

victory. Give Lloyd a good fight. The master doesn't need you to win, just to be a distraction."

Orochi launched himself at his brother, pinning him against a tree. "I've told you, I'm not doing this for your master."

"Are you challenging me as well? Patience, Brother. Survive your lunchtime challenge before you schedule one for supper."

"Quoting Dad to soothe my anger, eh, Kuchinawa? You always were sneaky."

"As a snake," he said.

Orochi shoved him hard against the tree, then walked away to resume his battle prep.

"Why *are* you doing this, then? Or do I not want to know the answer?"

"To bring Sheena back. Our people need their leader."

"The politics are just an excuse, and you know it. You actually care for her, don't you? She killed our parents, and you are in love with her."

"I'm ignoring you," Orochi said.

"No, you're not."

"She did not kill anyone. For God's sake, Kuchinawa, she was nine! The village forced its hopes and dreams onto a lonely little girl. We killed her childhood that day and caused those other deaths too. We're the murderers. You want to blame someone? Blame the entire village!"

Kuchinawa shrugged. "I can't kill the entire village."

"And you *won't* kill her."

"Beneath his mask, Kuchinawa smiled. "I can't very well kill her if she becomes my sister-in-law, can I? Tell you what, Brother, here's a little incentive. If you manage to win, I will forever abandon my feud with her, and return to this village as your right hand man."

"What will your master say?"

"Leave him to me. Do we have a deal? Will you fight for the life of the woman you love?"

"Gladly."

Kuchinawa laughed. "Aren't we quite the pair? You want to marry the woman I want to kill. I wonder what Dad would think."

Orochi sighed heavily, nudging a stone away from the battlefield with his foot. "It's nearly midday. What's keeping them?"

"Do you like this color on me?"

Orochi narrowed his eyes. That question came out of nowhere. "I suppose. Why the change?"

"It's only temporary. I can't have Lloyd knowing who I really am if I want him to accept me as observer."

"I challenged Lloyd," Orochi said, "The choice of observer is his, or have you been away long enough to forget our traditions?"

"If his observer does not arrive in time, the choice will fall to you."

"Sheena went to retrieve him. She will not fail."

"Such faith." Kuchinawa shook his head. "She will fail this time."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me." Before Orochi could respond, Kuchinawa continued, "Now, let me tell you how you're going to win this."



"Why is it," Sheena groaned, "that I forget my diving equipment every time I come to

Altamira?"

Finding Regal should have been much easier and far less time-consuming than it was shaping up to be. And it would have been, had not the peninsula paradise wherein he lived been crawling with royal soldiers. It could be worse. None of them fit the mental image she had of Ogdoad troops.

Of civilians, the beach was deserted, the vendors' market was deserted—hell, the city was deserted; its inhabitants either fled or holed up in the hotel. The rich who frequented this paradise were by and large Tethe'allans used to the presence of the king's soldiers, but this time even they sensed something amiss. And, unfortunately for her, this lack of civilians up and about severely inhibited her freedom of movement.

Since she couldn't make it to the tram without being spotted, Sheena found herself with the unenviable task of swimming the half-mile from the beach to Lezareno headquarters. At least she had remembered to bring her bathing suit, and her bag was theoretically waterproofed. It should keep everything safe.

*Time to test that theory!*

*Brr!* The absence of a clearly visible sun had left the water chilly, and the chill nearly took her breath away. *No matter. Keep going. For Lloyd.* So she swam, her joints stiffening and her extremities numbing with each smooth stroke, resting only occasionally on chanced-upon wedges of land barely big enough to stand upon jutting out from the coastline.

Emerging from the surf with a shiver, she peeled off her skin-tight bathing suit, and put on her Successor garb, both for its warmth and because it would soak up any excess water. Wasting no more time, she tramped toward the massive office building, and puzzled over how to get inside. She could toss a grappling hook onto the tramway tracks that fed into the building. Assuming no one used the tram before she could get up there and the tracks weren't electrified, that could work. But there was no way to be sure, so remembrances of charred corpses in the Temple of Lightning quickly derailed that plan. Surely, the tramway wasn't the only entrance. There had to be another, didn't there? A service entrance, at least?

Or maybe an exit. They didn't transport their trash out via the tram. If she could find the garbage chute, and follow it up...

So quickly it seemed like divine intervention, a black plastic missile fired out of a chute in the side of the building and into a bin that had been out of her eyesight.

*Good.* She made her way to the side of the bin, and sniffed. *Not so good.* She gritted her teeth. *For Lloyd.* She scrambled onto the bin, pried the chute open, and was promptly hit in the face with another bag of garbage. In the back of her mind she heard Mithos laugh.

Taking a deep breath she immediately regretted, she set about prying open the chute again. She entered, and, twenty exhausting minutes of shimmying later, emerged into Lezareno's record room a floor below the President's Office. She wasted no time considering the ethical ramifications of keeping the garbage chute in the record room, immediately changing into her normal clothes to rid herself of the garbage odor.

Not until she began adjusting her undershirt against her cleavage did she realize she hadn't been alone when she changed. Her face became flushed. "Regal?"

He placed a finger over his lips. "Shh. They're coming."



Over Iselia's gates the invaders poured, their rheiards buzzing the tops of houses and zipping past the new wooden towers. The four defenders scattered as the invaders cut the

ropes securing the giant log suspended overhead and sent it crashing to the ground. So much for Dirk's best trap.

"Stick together!" Zelos shouted. "Raine, you and I concentrate on bringing them down. Dirk, once they're down, pound them into the dust. Frank, stay back and heal, heal, heal!"

"Zelos, I'm a healer!" Raine protested.

"We've got a healer," he indicated Frank, "and I need offensive help. If it doesn't work, we'll change tactics." *Damn it, Dirk. You shouldn't have sent Genis off. We need a strong offensive mage! I'm good. He's better.*

Raine scowled but began casting Ray. Her only multi-target offensive spell, it was powerful, but took far too long to cast. And there were no frontline physical fighters to cover her while spell-casting left her defenseless. An arrow whizzed past her head, impaling itself with a twang in the doorjamb of a house behind her. Too close. As she spoke the last words of her incantation, a glowing orb appeared in the sky. Spears of light energy burst from it and pierced the bodies of several nearby invaders. A smile curled Raine's lip. She could say this about offensive magic: it was more fun.

At Zelos's command, a sharp crack of lightning shot from the heavens and slammed into the ground. Its energy intersected with the earth's like a great sword, a blade of thunder, before erupting upward, unseating several invaders, sending their rheiards spinning out of control and crashing into houses or the ground. Those that survived the fall were unceremoniously sent to their graves by blows from Dirk's hammer. A minute into the battle and the hammer was already slick with blood. *I wonder if he's ever killed before*, Zelos thought.

Moving to a different area, he tried the attack again. When arrows pierced his gut and arm, he didn't stop his chanting, only grunted and spoke louder.

Raine paused in the middle of casting a photon, but Zelos shook his head. With a worried look, she resumed her offensive.

In a moment, Frank was by his side. His touch brought instant comfort, enabling Zelos to endure the pain long enough to finish his spell. He heard Frank grunt with the effort. Just how far did his capacity for healing extend? It couldn't be limitless. Maybe Raine *should* be focused on defense.

"Ah!"

"Frank, help Raine!" Zelos shouted.

"I'll heal myself," Raine called.

"No, Raine. Keep up the offense. Frank, go!"

The blonde man nodded and rushed to obey but tripped, his momentum sending him hurtling to the ground. In a moment an invader was over him, sword raised to deliver a killing blow.

*No!* "Victory Li—" Zelos called out, knowing his attack wouldn't make it in time.

Panic and pleading filled Frank's eyes. "Colette," he whispered.

Zelos shook his head. *I'm sorry.*

The sword descended, and with a sickening crunch—

—the invader fell into a heap on the ground, his skull crushed, the latest victim of Dirk the dwarf's mighty hammer.

With one hand, Dirk hauled the healer to his feet, patted him on the back, and said, "Go!" To Zelos he said, "Lad, let me lead a few of them away."

"No, we stay together!"

"This is suicide!" Dirk growled. "There's too many. We've got to spread out."

Before Zelos could retort, a gray-skinned gargoyle swooped low, latched onto the dwarf's shoulders with its powerful talons and lifted him high into the air. Dirk slammed his hammer into the beast's knee, breaking both the knee and the beast's hold. The gargoyle went into a tailspin, and Dirk plummeted to the ground. Dirk had no Exsphere; the fall could be fatal.

Zelos could do nothing, but scream, "Frank, Raine!" They couldn't stop the fall, but once Dirk hit the ground they could heal him. "Raine, forget offense! Heal Dirk!" But Raine was already down, unconscious or dead, with her staff far out of reach. And Frank sat, hands hugging knees tightly, surrounded by dismounted invaders.

Zelos shook his head. *I'm not a general. I can't—I can't do this. I can't.*

He sank to his knees as another arrow pierced his side.



"Shh," Regal said. "They're coming."

"The soldiers?" Sheena asked.

He nodded.

Sheena drew cards from her gi and edged closer to the door. But Regal seized her from behind, clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle her cries, and dragged her behind a file cabinet. She could feel her own chest heaving with the shock of it all, but Regal's, pressed against her back, moved barely at all. He remained calm, while she freaked out. She blushed at the closeness of the touch so intimate she hadn't even shared it with Lloyd until a few days ago.

She could hear voices in the hall steadily approaching. Laughs were exchanged when one of them told a joke about a girl from Nantucket (must be a small village—she'd never heard of it), whose...something was big as a bucket. She didn't catch that part.

One of the speakers poked his head into the room. At her present vantage point, Sheena could barely see him. When he stepped into her line of sight, Sheena became irrational with anger and struggled against Regal's hold. Just above the speaker's hand, a card twirled in mid-air. It was an Asura! The same card she'd gotten for beating Kuchinawa! Was that bastard responsible for leaking the village secrets?

*...I thought you'd forgiven him...*

"Yo, Bryant, you in there?" Getting no response, the card user said, "Guess he's still in his office."

When they had passed by, and Sheena had calmed down, Regal released her.

She massaged her neck, and glared at him. She could appreciate stealth, but a simple tap on the shoulder and a mouthed "Let's hide" would have sufficed. Up until she saw the card user, anyway.

"I apologize," he said. "But I couldn't let them see you."

"Me?"

"Yes. You have to go now."

"But I can't. Lloyd sent me. He needs you."

"Sheena, I have gone to great lengths to assure the king of my loyalty. I cannot risk that."

"This has nothing to do with the king!"

"Keep your voice down."

"Lloyd is going to duel Oro—a ninja in my village," she said. "He needs an observer."

"I see," he said, massaging his chin. "That is quite an honor. So, he does still trust me. But why was the honor not given to you?"

"I'm...not qualified."

He cocked an eyebrow.

"I'm sort of the unofficial prize." She sighed and launched into an explanation. "Lloyd and I are...together now. But we haven't followed all the Mizuhoan traditions. At least not exactly. Not yet. And one of the villagers resents me for it." She left out the part about that villager being in love with her as well. "And Lloyd is defending my honor."

"Love is worth fighting for. I would relish the opportunity to help Lloyd this way—"

"Then you'll come!" She smiled.

"But this could not have happened at a worse time. Those soldiers we narrowly missed were guarding a royal envoy sent to meet me here and begin a thorough examination of company records. I have to think of the cities that depend on Lezareno. I cannot put them at risk, not even for Lloyd."

"Ah, Mr. Bryant. These ruffians seemed to think you weren't in here." Regal's vice president entered with the cadre of soldiers who'd been looking for him.

"George," Regal said in shock. He tried to stand in front of Sheena, but it was no use.

The card user shouted excitedly. "That's her! That's the card user from Mizuho! We heard she might be coming this way! I knew you couldn't be trusted, Bryant!"

George clapped his hands. "Oh, good work, Mr. Bryant. You've captured her!"

"Huh?" said the card user.

"Huh?" squeaked Sheena.

"Mr. Bryant will now demonstrate his loyalty to the king by subduing the Mizuho girl. Isn't that right, Mr. Bryant?"

Sheena shot a panicked look into Regal's eyes, but they were closed in weariness and sorrow.

He said, "Yes, George, that is right."

"Regal, no."

"Didn't Llo—didn't that traitor tell you that as long as I'm President of Lezareno I cannot defy the king."



"Will you be my big brother, Lloyd? I lost mine."

Lloyd paced back and forth in his borrowed house, applying to his shoulder a foul-smelling ointment the vice-chief had given him, and mulling over a little girl's words. Hikari's words. Hikari Hidagawa. Suzumebachi's sister. Last night after Sheena left, the little gossipmonger entered. "I won't tell anyone what you and the Next Chief were doing. I promise. Can we talk?"

He'd wanted to usher her out. "Sorry, Hikari. I'm tired. Can it wait until tomorrow?" But he'd seen the look on her face, the lack of her usual cheerfulness, and decided he didn't need her implied threat of "I won't tell anyone what you two were doing *if* we can talk" to convince him. The threat helped, though.

So he'd stayed awake long into the night talking with her, letting her cry and laugh and remember, and sharing his first (highly informal) tea ceremony. At last her aunt came looking for her, and allowed Lloyd to slip into a fitful six hours' sleep. Before Hikari left, she hugged him and promised she'd see him off in the morning.

As he scooped the last of the ointment from the jar, there was a knock at the door.

"It is time," the vice chief called. "Midday. Your challenger waits."

Lloyd answered the door, and the vice-chief staggered back.

"What's that smell?"

"The ointment," Lloyd said.

The vice chief wrinkled his nose. "You didn't have to use it all at once."



"Stand back," Regal said, halting the over-eager card user. "I will handle this." To Sheena, he whispered, "Forgive me."

She shook her head. "Not likely."

He attacked, slamming a foot into her gut. It took her by surprise as he knew it would. Until the last moment, she would hold out hope that he was pulling a ruse, that he planned to turn around and fight the king's troops alongside her, like the old days. But things weren't that simple anymore.

The attack would have left a normal person panting for air, but Sheena kept herself in peak physical condition. So he followed his kick with another, catching her in the forehead. Every kick was like a knife to his own heart.

"Please give up, make this easy on yourself."

"That's my line." She snapped a finger and a bright light flashed from the card she held, blinding Regal and everyone else in the room. Well, not everyone...

She had time to shout in triumph, "Flash cards. You like them?" before the Ogdoad card user tackled her. If he could anticipate flash cards, a fairly recent innovation, and cover his eyes, he was well informed indeed.

He affixed a card to her forehead. "Sure, babe, love 'em. You like these?" He shouted, "Flare!" and a fireball exploded from the card, burning her flesh and scorching her hair. She screamed, clawing at the card, but it was stuck, melted into her flesh. Water cards brought no relief, nor did gels, and the fire continued to burn.

"Sheena," Regal cried. He too clawed at the card, but could barely see her through half-blinded eyes. And what he saw did not look good.

"You *are* a traitor!" the card user said, advancing on the President of Lezareno.

Regal could see again. Dark blobs mostly, against a field of light. "George, hit the ground!" he commanded. No sense letting the old man get hit in the crossfire. He launched himself at the nearest blob, his kick connecting with deadly force with what he thought to be its head. The unmistakable sound of whiplash-induced neck-snapping confirmed it.

There were more soldiers, and, if they, like Regal, were regaining their sight, he had to kill them fast. But first, he sent a healing spell Sheena's way. He didn't pause to check whether it had worked.

It hadn't.



Iron mesh net in the vineyard?

Genis ran through the list of Dirk's traps, trying to remember which ones he had set off. Iron mesh net? Check. The rheiard rider who followed him into the tunnel of grape vines hadn't followed him out. Exploding flower pots in front of Colette's house? Check. They'd taken out two more. Spikes behind the schoolhouse? Check. The four he'd managed to trick into dismounting and following him had died messily there. Which meant...what, one trap left?

Two? At least one.

After dispatching the four behind the schoolhouse, he'd climbed through an open window and fallen into a heap on the classroom floor, gasping for breath and cursing his pitifully low endurance. He'd give himself another half-minute; then he'd make a mad dash to lead his pursuers into the final trap, which he'd just remembered was a water cannon in the pond near his house.

"I think he's inside."

*They've found me! Damn!*

When the invader ran into the classroom swinging an axe, Genis's first instinct had been to flee back through the window. But the axe reminded him of Presea, and anger surged through him. He should be out there looking for her, and this bastard was preventing him from doing that. He'd pay. Genis actually grinned when three others burst in. Fire raged in his veins, and a door began opening in his mind. Behind it was a new spell. The invaders were across the room, separated from him by rows of desks. By his calculations, he had just enough time and just enough magic power to cast the spell.

As Genis chanted, a seal of blue and brown formed beneath him. He barely took notice. The seal might be blue, but he was seeing red: a bloodied blouse and broken bits of a Gaia Clever. His friend and a girl he liked were injured, dying maybe. Were these men personally responsible? Probably not, but he wanted to blame them. His instincts told him that to blame them would fuel his power. His instincts and a tiny voice in the back of his mind.

*...You lost them, Genis, like you lost me...*

*Mithos?*

As soon as he finished his chanting, the door opened completely. He now knew the spell's name, as would his opponents before they died.

"Frigid Meteor Storm!" he screamed.

And nothing happened.

The axe-wielder laughed and offered an insult.

Genis, his strength sapped, sank to his knees. Something was very wrong.

*...Patience, my friend...*

The invaders advanced.

Then all hell broke loose.

Moments later, Genis emerged from the wreckage of the newly destroyed schoolhouse. He barely had time to heave up his lunch and struggle to his feet before a new wave of invaders began pursuing him.



Hikari hadn't come to see him off. Sheena and Regal hadn't arrived. The smell of the ointment was getting to him. His left arm and shoulder still hurt. And he was using inferior blades. It was good to know his luck was holding up.

Things could be worse. At least he wasn't about to fight a pointless battle while his hometown faced the threat of annihilation...again. Oh, wait...

"Welcome to the Isle of Destruction—I mean, Decision—Lloyd Irving. Are you ready to begin?" The speaker was a ninja dressed in black, whom Lloyd assumed to be the substitute observer.

Lloyd staggered as the boat grounded itself. It was against tradition for anyone other than the two fighters and the observer to be present on the island during the fight. Since Orochi

and his observer were already there, Lloyd had been forced to pilot the boat himself. The problem—despite his brief stint as a pirate in the service of the guileful Aifread, Lloyd was no boatman.

"Give me a minute to get my land legs back," Lloyd said. He stepped onto shore, but tripped over the boat's prow and ended up facedown in the sand. "Heh, heh. Oops."

"Take your time," Orochi said.

Lloyd got used to walking on the shore, and took a look at the substitute observer. He didn't recognize the man, but there was something familiar about him. Ah, no matter. All Mizuhoan ninjas could be trusted to take a challenge seriously. He'd be treated fairly, no matter who the observer.

When Lloyd walked forward to study the battlefield proper, the observer snapped, "It isn't permissible to examine the battlefield before the fight."

"Observer," Orochi said, "I do not mind. I too—"

"It's all right, Orochi. I'm ready."

"Then take your positions," the observer said. When they did, he nodded, once to Lloyd, twice to Orochi, and said, "And...fight!"

Orochi wasted no time, hurling a small dagger at Lloyd. The swordsman rolled to the side, barely avoiding the projectile. When he looked up, the ninja was nowhere in sight.

Behind him. That's where he had to be. Lloyd turned, swinging his sword in a wide arc, imagining he'd open up the ninja's belly with the blade. End it quick.

Orochi wasn't behind him.

"Gahhh!" Lloyd cried out as he felt another dagger enter his shoulder—his left shoulder. Orochi had been above him, and he'd picked his target well.

On the bright side, with the dagger embedded in Lloyd's shoulder, the ninja had one less weapon to attack him with. Lloyd ripped out the dagger and threw it from the battlefield, disqualifying it as a usable weapon.

*Time to get serious about this.* Ground-based attacks would be no good on an opponent with that much airtime. That ruled out anything of the demon fang variety. Rising falcons, too. And any other attack that required a stationary target. Orochi was too damn fast. What options were left? He'd been working on a few flight-based attacks, but wings would eat up his mana. He'd leave them as options of last resort.

Two throwing stars came at him. Lloyd batted them away with a sword. He dashed forward, knowing Orochi would dodge, rolling to the side or leaping. He intended to catch the ninja in mid-leap, and slash at his legs. But Orochi was too fast even for that, and was far out of Lloyd's reach by the time the latter traversed the battlefield. Lloyd whipped around in time to take a throwing star to the chest. Hurt like hell.

*I'm not very good at combining elements with my attacks. I can't use earth-based attacks like Genis's Grave, but wouldn't a ground-level wind attack work just as well? Worth a try.*

As soon as Orochi landed, Lloyd sent a hurricane blast, a variation of his only wind-based attack the hurricane thrust, hurtling at the ninja. As predicted, Orochi leapt into the air to avoid it. But Lloyd was ready for him, and sent another hurricane blast to intercept him in mid-air. It struck the ninja, and left him gasping on the ground. Lloyd was there to meet him. "Beast Sword Rain!" he shouted, thrusting his sword into the ninja's mostly unprotected flesh eight times quick, before finishing off with a leonine blast of energy.

*That's the key! Control his movements. Force him to fight close-quarters.*

His triumph was short-lived, however. Orochi shot up from the ground, slower than before, but quick enough. He slashed at Lloyd with a dagger—bloodied and caked with sand—and

shoved his palm against Lloyd's chest. Lloyd had neglected to remove the throwing star, and Orochi's jab pushed it deeper. Lloyd gasped, feeling sand enter the new wound the dagger had opened in his gut and blood flowing out of his chest in torrents. He threw up Guardian as the ninja slashed at him once more.

Lloyd retreated to catch his breath and attempt to pry the star from his chest. No good. It was deep. If Orochi hit it again, the star might puncture his heart. This was bad. Orochi had turned Lloyd's best shot at victory—close-quarters combat—into his best shot at an early grave.

"Come, Swordsman," Orochi said, drawing his sword from the sheath on his back. "I am finished with cheap trickery. We shall fight blade-to-blade as befits men."

Lloyd could only nod, wondering if Orochi's meant this genuinely, or if he were only moving from cheap trickery to the expensive stuff.

It might be time to bring out those flight-based attacks after all.



Zelos sank to his knees as another arrow pierced his side. Dirk was down. Raine was down. Frank was surrounded by invaders. The Chosen considered giving up then, taking the easy way out. Surrendering to the invaders or to death. But, no! Never give up! Never surrender! Where had he heard that before? No matter. Whatever its origin, its message was clear. He was Zelos Wilder, eternal optimist and all around cheerful guy. He had no reason to change now.

He dug into his bag, and pulled out a life bottle. If he could revive Raine, all would not be lost. He rushed forward, spread his wings, and closed half the distance separating them in mere moments. Raine was his objective, but Frank was on the way.

"Air Thrust!" he called out. Performing the technique mid-flight and without warming up depleted half his mana, but it did the trick, driving the invaders into the ground with its powerful air currents and freeing Frank Brunel. "Help Dirk!" he tried to shout as he passed, but it came out as more of a wheeze. Frank, however, got the message, and rushed to the dwarf.

Zelos's wings lost their cohesion almost immediately, petering out and causing him to hit the ground, rolling. He skidded to a stop well short of his mark. He scrambled to his feet and plowed forward, slamming into the torso of a gargoyle that swooped into his way. The beast bashed its trident into the Chosen's face and he momentarily lost his bearings. But the life bottle in his hands reminded him of his goal. He slashed at the gargoyle, more to shoo it away than to wound it, but the beast was persistent. It tried the same move its comrade had with Dirk, but Zelos drove his sword upward into the base of one of the beast's legs. This disrupted its grasp, and Zelos tumbled to the ground. His Exsphere prevented him from feeling a thing. He stumble-crawled to Raine, and, cradling her head in his arms, poured the liquid from the life bottle down her throat.

Her cough signaled she was back in the land of the living.

"You had me worried, my alluring academic."

"Zelos," she cried.

He was puzzling over her fearful expression when a whack to the back of his head sent him sprawling. He watched Raine dispatch the soldier that had attacked him, and he smiled. She was really sexy when she fought so ferociously. She had nice legs. Had he ever told her that? Hers was the last image he saw before he succumbed to unconsciousness. Not a bad

image to fall asleep to, all things considered.

In the distance he thought he heard an explosion. *Izzat you, Genis? Go get 'em, kid.*



Sheena fought to retain her consciousness. To pass out meant death. As it stood, not much was keeping her from death. Flare cards! Could her people devise something so intentionally cruel? She knew a magically-fueled fire still burned her head. She no longer felt it, though, her nerve connections having been destroyed roughly thirty seconds ago.

There was only one being who could help her, a being she had lost the right to call. But she had to try. Foregoing the usual fanfare of summoning, she cried, "Undine, help me!"

The spirit appeared. "We are no longer bound, Pact-ma—" With a wave of Undine's hand, the fire on Sheena's forehead was gone. "Dear one," she whispered in an unusual display of affection. She sank to her knees and drew the trembling ninja into her arms. "What have you gotten yourself into?"

Sheena tried to smile. "Lloyd needed me," she choked out.

"That boy will be the death of you."

"He's worth it."

"I haven't long. Another is seeking my power as we speak. I have this gift alone to give you." She kissed Sheena's forehead, and the blistered, scarring flesh smoothed and regained its pinkish hue. Her brilliant raven-black hair was restored. And all traces of the attack were gone. The card that had caused the misery the summon spirit picked up, and, with a contained blast of water, reduced to a pulpy mess. "Yours?" she asked.

"Not mine. I'll *never* use anything like that."

The spirit nodded. "Stay safe, dear one."

"Thank you, Undine."

"The call is becoming more insistent," the spirit said, her face showing strain. "I must go. The next time I see you, I hope we will not be enemies."

"Me too." Sheena pushed herself to her feet as the spirit disappeared. She watched as Regal fought valiantly against the soldiers. The compulsion to run away was strong since he might very well resume his attack on her once he'd finished with them. But she couldn't bring herself to abandon him. He might not need her help, but she'd give it no matter the consequences.

"There ain't going to be a next time!"

Sheena felt a sharp crack to the back of her head and fell into a heap on the floor.

The card user stood over her, holding the remnants of a ceramic vase. "Your friend shouldn't a' wasted her time. I'm just going to do the same thing to ya again." He reached into his pocket to get another card, but came up holding a handful of slimy pulp. "That aquatic bitch wasted all my cards. All right, I'll just do this the old fashioned way."

He dragged Sheena to the picture window at the end of the room, and threw open the curtains. Reaching into her shirt, he found her stash of cards. He flipped through the stack muttering, "Got it, got it, want it, don't want it, ah, that's the one." He tossed a few on the floor, and tucked the rest into his pocket. Setting a bench seat in front of the window, and Sheena on the bench, he stood back, held up one of the pilfered cards, and said in a loud voice, "Cyclone Seal!"

A rush of air shot toward Sheena, just as she began to stir. She screamed as she and the bench were hurled first against, and then through, the window.

"Sheena!" came Regal's animalistic scream. He disentangled himself from the last of his opponents and dashed across the room. He shoved the card user aside and dove through the hole in the wall where the window had been.

Regal made himself as streamlined as possible, increasing the speed of his fall as Sheena's desperate flailing decreased hers. In no time at all, he had reached her and wrapped his arms around her. Terrified, she did the same. He tried to speak, but the wind whipping against his face made it difficult. "Can...summ...Aska?"

All he could make out of her response was "can't" and "weak."

"Hold onto my back," he said. When she didn't comply, he forcibly moved her into that position.

His hands still burned from their contact with the flare card, but that didn't matter. He'd save his friend. He pointed his palms toward the rapidly approaching water, and, with a grunt, let loose a blue-white shockwave of mana. Immediately, their descent slowed. He was soon sweating with the effort, but kept the mana flowing long enough to set them safely in the shallow water near the beach. When he opened his mouth to take a breath, he swallowed water. He blinked, and, when he opened his eyes, he saw *her* sitting over him, gently massaging his forehead.

"Alicia."

"Hello, Master," she said. She had let her hair down and wore a brilliant white gown. It matched the curtains of the canopy bed they were sharing.

"You don't have to call me that anymore."

She giggled. "Okay, *Regal*."

Oh, her voice was music.

"Is this how you imagined it," she asked, "our wedding night?"

He nodded. "Just like this." Her hand rested on his stomach, and he could feel it. He reached out to caress her face. He could feel her. Oh, he could feel her.

"I wish it could have happened," Alicia said.

"So do I."

"Would you do something for me?"

"Anything, Beloved," Regal said.

"Find love again."

"I cannot."

"Your heart is so big. Don't waste it all on a memory."

"It's not wasting."

"But it is wasting away."

To that, he had no response.

Alicia leaned forward, "Think on my words?" At his nod, she smiled again, whispered, "It's time to wake up, Regal," and kissed him.

"Mmm," he moaned, and felt her lips depart suddenly. When he opened his eyes, he saw an abashed Sheena wide-eyed with a hand over her lips. He wondered why until he started coughing. He rolled over and spewed water from his lungs. *Ah, CPR*. "Thank you for saving my life, Sheena," he said. "I apologize for the...way I regained consciousness."

"It-it's kinda flattering, I guess," she shrugged.

He shook his head. "No, it wasn't you."

"What!" she said, a cross look on her face.

He put up his hands. "No disrespect is intended. You're a very attractive young lady, but my...excitement came from a different source."

"Oh, well, anyway, don't tell Lloyd about it. Wouldn't want him getting jealous."

"Of course." Regal stood, shakily at first. "Shall we be off?"

"You don't have to worry about that anymore," Sheena said glumly. "It's past noon. The fight will be over by the time we get there."

He shrugged. "I'm certain he'll want to be greeted by the woman he's fighting for at the end of battle."

She rose, smiling. "You're right, Regal." She cocked her head to the side. "But you don't have to come. What about your company?"

"Too long have I neglected what really matters." Regal shrugged. "Lezarena can consider this my resignation."



Genis slammed the door, ran forward, and then doubled back to lock it. Dirk's water cannon had been more of a distraction than a trap, so he didn't have long. He ran to the curio in the middle of the front room, broke the glass—*Sorry, sis, but you should've given me a key*—and retrieved the miracle gel that lay inside. Downing it on an empty stomach reinvigorated him but made him queasy. No matter.

In the bedroom, Genis found Lloyd's swords stashed under the bed. He shook his head. *The most powerful weapons in the universe and he treats them like an old pair of shoes.* Drawing them out, he strapped them around his waist. In a way it felt sacrilegious, but it would make running with them far easier. Unconsciously, his hands went to the blade hilts. He had always been of too slight a build to use a sword. That might change as he grew. He hoped so. After all, he couldn't be Presea's knight without a sword.

He fell to the ground as a blast shook the house. "Come out, little half-elf. We won't bite."

"Ignoramuses," he growled.

*...Inferior beings...*

"Inferior—No!"

*...You know it's true...*

He opened the bedroom door, and fell again as a second blast shook the house. The miracle gel meant he could toss a few spells their way, but it wouldn't be enough.

*...There's always Frigid Meteor Storm...*

"I'm not using that again."

*...Suit yourself. Then how about using the swords?...*

"I can't. They're Lloyd's. He and Sheena have the pact, not me."

*...You're a half-elf and you have my help. There is nothing you can't do...*

"How are you even in my head?"

*...Please, Genis. Such a stupid question is beneath you...*

A scream pierced the night.

"That was Raine!" Genis cried.

*...I amplified your hearing. Help her if you can...*

Genis's decision was made. He drew the swords and slammed them together. And, miracle of miracles, gone were the material blades. In their place hovered a single sword that shone brightly. But the sword's brilliance was outshone by the magnificent being that answered its call.

The four-armed king of summon spirits Origin looked with gravity on the half elf who bade him appear. "You are not the Pact-maker," he said, "And you are not the Eternal Swordsman."

You have dared assume a right that is not yours."

Tears flowed from Genis's eyes. "I...I...I...help, please, help me."

"I recognize you as a friend of the faithful ones, Lloyd and Sheena. Therefore, I will not strike you down, but neither will I help you."

Genis dropped to his knees, more from sheer fright than to offer obeisance. "Please, Origin, my sister is in trouble. She's going to die unless you help her."

"Long ago, the Pact-maker Mithos came to me on behalf of his sister—"

Genis interrupted. "Martel was dead. Raine is alive. You can help her. And it's not just Raine. Lloyd's hometown is being destroyed. And Lloyd's father is out there."

"Kratos Aurion?"

"No, his other father. Please, can't you help me?"

Origin shook his head. "You are not a summoner, half-elf. I cannot directly intervene on your behalf."

"But Lloyd and Sheena would approve. Please, can't you..."

*...He said, directly intervene, Genis. Take the hint...*

"...can't you bring back Lloyd's father? You can't directly intervene, but if you brought back Kratos, that would be indirect intervention, right?"

Origin actually smiled. "It would be, but I cannot bring him back against his will."

"Bring him back, and if he wants to leave, let him. And go ask Sheena."

Origin closed his eyes, and, when he opened them, said, "I have communed with the Pact-maker's mind. She would indeed approve of this. All right, half-elf...Genis, it will be as you have asked."

With a flash, Origin disappeared, and in his place stood a man Genis hadn't seen in nearly a year.

"Genis, what?—"

Genis was thrown to the ground as another blast hit the house, shattering windows and showering the floors with glass. He looked up to see Kratos kneeling in front of him, his armored arm stretched out to guard Genis from the flying debris.

Kratos said, "What has happened? Where is my son?"



An hour past noon, Sheena arrived in Mizuho to find the village seemingly deserted save for the usual complement of guards stationed near the gates (hidden so well that only another ninja could see them) and one or two others milling about. Forgetting Regal, she took off toward the river. When a hand shot out to grasp her shoulder, she almost broke it, only managing to stop her chop at the last moment. "Vice-chief," she said, "I have to see Lloyd."

"You must listen to me," he said.

"No time." She shrugged off his grasp and resumed her run to the river.

"Sheena!"

But she was gone.

Regal jogged to the vice-chief's side. "What is it?" he said.

The vice-chief shook his head.

Sheena was about to push her way through the crowd she found at the river's edge, when a little girl pushing her way out bumped into her. She was furiously wiping tears from her eyes and not paying attention to where she was going.

Sheena kneeled down. "Hikari?"

"I'm sorry, Next Chief. It's all my fault. I'm so sorry."

"What is it Hikari? What's your fault?"

"Lloyd, he's..." She choked on another sob and couldn't continue.

"Hikari, what about Lloyd?"

A booming voice answered her. Orochi. "People of Mizuho," he began.

Sheena pushed her way through the crowd. *Oh God, no!* Over the prow of the docked boat, Orochi tossed a battered and bloodied Lloyd Irving. *That bastard hasn't even healed him yet!* She rushed forward and took her lover in her arms.

Orochi continued. "I have defeated Lloyd Irving and restored the honor of our Next Chief, Sheena Fujibayashi!"

At this, a cheer went up from younger members of the normally stoic crowd.

Noticing Sheena with Lloyd, Orochi ground his teeth, but, at his observer's whispered counsel, he said, "Let us rejoice that our Next Chief is merciful, even to her defeated foes."

Sheena paid him no heed, focusing all her attention on Lloyd.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Shh, love. It'll be all right. I *promise* you, everything will be all right." *I hope.*

"And Lloyd is as much a defeated enemy of hers as mine," Orochi said. "For, last night, I revealed to the Next Chief my secret name."

Collectively, the crowd gasped.

"Please, my people, I know what you are thinking," Orochi said. "I cannot do that until she is my wife, but there is a tradition among the greater families dating back many, many years. It holds that when a member of such a family reveals his name to another, he or she must agree to the marriage or be exiled. I know this tradition was abandoned long ago, and rightly so, for it impedes personal freedom..."

*The gall, the unmitigated gall! How dare he!* Sheena shot him her dirtiest look.

"...but in times of crisis," Orochi continued, "Mizuhoans must put aside their own desires and serve the village. And we are—make no mistake—in a time of crisis. Our crops fail. Political unrest threatens the world. We must stand together, or we will fall apart. It is with a heavy heart, then, that I find it necessary to invoke this tradition." He locked eyes with her, glared, as if daring her to refuse him. "Sheena Fujibayashi, I, Orochi Hebi, whose true name you know, *demand* that you fulfill your responsibilities as Next Chief of Mizuho and become my bride."

Sheena met his gaze. *You think you've won, don't you? This isn't over, my former friend, not by a long shot!*



*Somewhere on the plains of Iselia, a blood red orb of an eye opened. Its owner tried to speak, but found he could not. His only thought: Well, shit!*

## Part 5 (Chapter 16)

The pitching and yawing of the boat as it was borne along by the river current intensified the pain of Lloyd's injuries. Yet it was not *his* pain that concerned him. "Please, Kari," he said, "don't cry."

"It's my fault, Lloyd. If I hadn't..." A sob made her words unintelligible. "...then you wouldn't have..."

Lloyd stroked the girl's back. "Hey, *hey*, I'm your big brother now, right?" When she nodded, he added, "I can't stay mad at my little sis."

This only made Hikari wail louder. She caught herself as she was about to jump into his arms. She wanted to help him, not hurt him again. A stolen glance told her the observer was wholly occupied with the task of rowing back to the village. Taking advantage of his inattention, she reached into Lloyd's bag for a gel. When she popped the cork, however, the observer heard and slapped it from her hand. It arced high into the air and landed with a plunk in the river.

"Please, Mr. Observer," Hikari said, "Big Brother needs help."

"No," he said. "The village must witness the totality of his defeat. Isn't that right, Orochi?"

Orochi said nothing. Just stood tall in the boat, puffing out his chest and trying to look the part of the hero the crowd would be expecting. He didn't feel like a hero.

"Mr. Orochi, please," Hikari begged.

His chest deflated, and he sunk down. "Perhaps another gel wouldn't hurt," he said. The observer, the disguised Kuchinawa, stopped rowing and shot his brother a stern look. Orochi sighed and resumed his stance. *For my people*, he repeated his mantra. *For my people*.

In a low voice, Hikari said, "I-I *will* tell them what you did."

"You'll do no such thing," Kuchinawa said. "Or we'll exile you for violating the sanctity of the Isle."

"I don't care! Big Brother is stronger than both of you dorks put together. He didn't deserve to lose. He—"

"Kari, stop."

"But, Big Brother—"

"I lost, Kari," Lloyd said, "and it doesn't matter why. I'll face the consequences. I won't let you sacrifice yourself for me."

"But you sacrificed yourself for *me*."

"That's different," Lloyd said.

"How?"

"It just is."

"That's not fair," Hikari whined. "Why are you the only one allowed to sacrifice yourself?"

Through Lloyd's mind flashed a series of memories: Colette admitting she knew the regeneration of the world meant her death, Sheena telling Kuchinawa she'd surrender to him if he let the others escape, Dad dropping his guard at the last instant when they fought at Origin's seal, and Zelos letting the group beat him senseless so he could steal Aionis to forge the pact ring. He didn't even want to begin thinking about the group's sacrificing themselves one by one to get him into the Hall of the Great Seed to rescue Colette.

Yet, hadn't he been willing to sacrifice himself for them on occasions too numerous to count? Yes, he supposed so. But he never thought of it as risking his life. On some level he had believed himself indestructible. Perhaps it was the idealism of youth, his inborn sense of destiny, or the protection of his Exsphere. It did allow him to survive injuries that should have killed him. And in Iselia his only foes had been ornery monsters, pitifully weak compared with those in the rest of the world. Such a poor frame of reference had convinced him, by the time he left the village, that he couldn't lose, no matter who the opponent. Add to that the spirit of protection he'd cultivated for his childhood friends Genis and Colette; it soon extended to the rest of the group even when it became apparent some of them matched or exceeded him for power. That's why anger, almost irrational, surged through him whenever his friends dared sacrifice themselves. They weren't indestructible. They could die. And he couldn't take that. Pretty stupid, huh?

Another memory—

***Sheena, you shouldn't have to suffer because of me.***

***Lloyd, I meant what I said. I've never regretted sacrificing myself for you. I care about you. I'd die for you.***

*Don't you dare, Sheena. If you do, I'll never forgive you!*

Yeah, pretty stupid, but he didn't plan on changing.

"Kari," he said, "I'm sorry, but that's just the way I am."



**Fifteen minutes ago**

**Isle of Decision Battlefield**

Rarely a blow struck flesh; more often each swing was blocked or parried and the unmistakable sound of metal-on-metal filled the air. Both fighters were accomplished swordsmen. Lloyd held the advantage in experience and versatility, but his shoulder stung from its dagger wound, and his pain-killing ointment was wearing off. Orochi was faster, but his attacks more basic. Still, he had mastered those basics. The decision to learn only a few moves had, in fact, been a conscious one. The more moves in his catalogue, he reasoned, the more time he wasted selecting one. While his opponent debated whether to use Omega Tempest or Sonic Thrust, Orochi had already chosen his attack and thrust home. Lloyd discerned, however, there were limitations in Orochi's kill 'em fast style and, thus, moves he would not be adept at blocking. All Lloyd had to do was to discover those limitations and exploit them.

Easier said than done.

Barely ten minutes into the sword fight and both of them were banged-up, bruised, and bleeding. Still, Lloyd's superiority with the blade meant he'd evened up the score from the thoroughly humiliating first round. The throwing star embedded in his chest had loosened from his physical exertions but was still too deep to pry out.

Orochi thrust at Lloyd's mid-section. Lloyd side-stepped and struck the blade with his right sword. With his left he slashed at the ninja's unprotected torso. But it was an awkward maneuver that ended with his arms crossed over his heart. The ninja dodged all but the tip of the blade, which sliced open his chest. A flesh wound. Inflicting it was not worth the vulnerable position it left Lloyd in. Fortunately, Orochi's dodge threw off his balance, and he could not take advantage of Lloyd's vulnerability in time.

Orochi followed up with a slash at Lloyd's face. A disfiguring wound had it connected, but Lloyd bent backwards. The blade came so close it passed out of his focus. Recovering, he slammed both swords together against Orochi's blade, trapping it in a metal grip. He tore the blade from the ninja's grasp and sent it flying into the air.

Bladeless but not defenseless, Orochi slammed his palm against the throwing star lodged in Lloyd's chest. A metal plate stitched into his glove protected Orochi's palm, but nothing protected Lloyd. The star sank deeper than before but did not puncture his heart. It had worked its way out too far for that.

Lloyd ignored the pain. Orochi was making a beeline for his sword. Now was his chance. For the first time since the fight began, he could predict with near certainty where Orochi would be in a few seconds. *An advantage. Use it or lose it!*

Bringing out his wings, he shot skyward, looped to build up speed, and shot toward Orochi. He held both swords in front of him like a living spear.

The ninja whirled around and brought up his sword, but it was too late.

Lloyd thrust both swords into the ninja; one into his thigh, one into his gut. Orochi managed to graze Lloyd's side, but the wound was superficial. Lloyd pulled the sword from the ninja's leg, but left the one in his gut. If it hadn't punctured a vital organ going in, it might very well come out. The fight was over. No sense killing his opponent.

Orochi thought differently. He bit down on the handle of his own sword as he pulled Lloyd's out. He threw it from the battlefield and growled, "Weapon out of play!"

Lloyd held his remaining sword to the ninja's throat. "Orochi, give it up. You could be seriously injured. I have gels. Let me heal you."

"You touch those gels, you're disqualified!"

"Orochi, please—"

With a roar, the ninja batted the sword away and surged forward. He didn't make it far on an injured leg before he was forced to the ground by Lloyd's wing.

"Yield," Lloyd demanded.

The ninja slashed furiously at the wing, but his blade could not harm a construction of pure energy.

At the edge of the battlefield, the observer slammed a fist into his palm. Wondering what that might signal, Lloyd glanced up.

With Lloyd's attention diverted, Orochi wriggled free. He swung at Lloyd, but was blocked.

Fighting with one sword felt unnatural to the akimbo-style fighter, but Lloyd adapted well and, after only a few swings, sent the ninja's sword sailing from the battlefield. If he thought that would deter the ninja, he thought wrong. Orochi sent a flurry of punches into Lloyd's gut and face.

The observer slammed a fist into his palm twice. Orochi nodded. He reached into his gi, produced a card, pointed it at Lloyd, and screamed, "Shock!" A blue-white bolt of lightning shot from the card. Lloyd held out his sword and the metal attracted the electricity. The rubber coating on the hilt prevented it from shocking him, but he felt the blade vibrate from the attack's intensity. Just his luck, none of his current equipment protected against lightning. He

hadn't foreseen Orochi employing elemental attacks. He cursed. *If that lightning had hit the star on my chest it would have fried my heart!*

"Shock!" Orochi called again.

And again the lightning hit the sword. This time the vibration shattered the hilt and the rubber coating flaked away. The sword was all metal now. *Too dangerous to hold!* Lloyd plunged it into the ground. If he could keep it between him and Orochi...

"Attach it to his skin!" the observer screamed.

Orochi growled, "I'll handle it!"

"Leave Big Brother alone!"

"Hikari! Stay back!" Lloyd called.

The observer jumped for the little girl, but missed her. She ran onto the battlefield and pulled the sword from the ground. "I won't let you hurt him!"

So focused was Orochi, he didn't see her. "Shock," he screamed.

Lloyd flew faster than he thought possible, and interposed himself between Hikari and the oncoming lightning blast just in time. Its full force, channeled through the star, struck his heart. He collapsed, unmoving, onto the ground.

Orochi threw up his arms in celebration, until he saw Hikari. *Oh, God, no!*

The observer strode onto the battlefield. "The fight goes to Orochi," he announced. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Congratulations, Next Chief."

Orochi shook his head. "No, the battlefield was violated. The fight is a draw. Honor demands it." He crouched at Lloyd's side, rolled him onto his back, and checked his breathing. "Hikari, There are gels in Lloyd's bag. Go!"

She seemed reluctant to take orders from Orochi but in a moment nodded and went to retrieve the bag.

"You will be all right, my friend," he said.

Orochi grunted as he was hauled to his feet and turned around. "Kuchinawa, what are you —?"

"Your honor or your people?"

"What?"

"Lloyd is defeated. The how doesn't matter."

"He lost defending one of *my people from me!*"

"Your people need you," Kuchinawa growled. "Declaring a draw is as good as admitting defeat. Sheena will be with Lloyd, and both she and the chieftom will be lost to you."

"I cannot accept a victory like this. It goes against everything I believe."

"Don't be selfish. Will you give up Mizuho's future to save yourself a little guilt? I repeat, your honor or your people? Decide!"

Orochi nodded. "Okay, okay."

"Now clean yourself up. Mizuho doesn't need a bloodied hero."

Hikari ran back. "I've got the gel, Mr. Orochi."

Kuchinawa snatched it from her hand. "Here," he told Orochi. "Drink this."

"But—"

"Trust me."

"Mr. Orochi," Hikari said, "Please help him."

"Soon, Hikari, soon," he said. "I won't let him die. I promise." He ruffled her hair and peeled down his mask to swallow the gel.

"Help him or I'll tell everyone what you did." She pointed to Kuchinawa. "I saw you enter Mr. Orochi's house last night after I talked with Big Brother. I knew something was wrong, so

this morning I hid in Big Brother's boat. You both cheated! I saw you. We don't make any cards like that. And Mr. Observer interfered. That's not 'lowed."

Kuchinawa crouched to her eye level and squeezed her shoulders. "Such an observant little girl," he said. "Make sure you tell them everything, including the part about Lloyd smuggling you onto the Isle."

"I was hiding. He didn't know I was there."

"Can you be sure? If he did, he was disqualified the moment he stepped foot on the Isle."

"He didn't."

"Let's see what the elders think, hmm?"

"He...but..."

Kuchinawa placed a finger in front of his mask where his mouth would be. "Shh," he said, and then, very slowly to emphasize the gesture, slid his finger across his neck and pointed to Lloyd. "Wouldn't want to lose two brothers in the same week."

She nodded.

He turned and snapped, "Orochi, what are you doing?"

Orochi sat the empty gel flask by Lloyd's head. "I gave him enough to keep him alive. That is all."



"Cast thy purifying light upon these corrupt souls! Judgment!"

The words of Kratos sent the quickest invaders scrambling for cover and the not so quick to their graves. He flew through the air on spectral wings slicing down gargoyles and rheiard riders, flames from the burning houses reflecting in the pools of his eyes. Below him ran Genis, material blades strapped at his sides, swinging his kendama and pausing every few moments to speed-cast a devastating spell. Within minutes, they worked their way to Zelos's last known position near the village gates, leaving behind a trail of bodies and substantial property damage.

Kratos withdrew his sword from an eviscerated gargoyle and shook the blade to rid it of the clinging chunks of gray intestine. He scowled. There were far too many invaders for his taste, that is to say, too many for him to beat. What also bothered him: no offensive spells were coming from Zelos's position.

Genis had briefed him on who was here. Zelos and Raine were accounted for. Zelos was down—injured but alive, Kratos's enhanced senses told him. Raine was too busy keeping everyone alive to attack. Ah, there was Frank. The moderately powerful healer had zero offensive capabilities. But Dirk was nowhere in sight.

*Come on. Come on. There!* Kratos spotted him disappearing over the gates held aloft by a gargoyle and looking to be in bad shape. Lloyd would never forgive him if he let the boy's foster father be taken. Nor would Kratos forgive himself. He thought very highly of the dwarf who had been such a comfort to his wife in her final moments and thereafter raised her son as his own.

Kratos flew toward the dwarf but halted at the sound of a scream. Raine went down, and she wasn't getting up. Frank rushed forward to heal her, but his powers were tapped out. As an armored swordsman strode toward Raine, Frank raised his fists and valiantly stood his ground. He barely managed a "Leave her alone" before the swordsman backhanded him and sent him sprawling, blood gushing from his broken nose.

Kratos cursed. Dirk would have to wait.

Kratos shouted a command to Genis and descended double-quick. Ten feet from the ground, he doffed his wings, allowing the momentum of his fall to augment the force of his attack. "Light Spear Cannon!" he screamed and thrust his blade at the junction of two of the swordsman's armor plates. Concurrently, Genis screamed "Earth Bite!" and sent an attack of earth and lightning against he who dared threaten his sister. At the end of it all, the swordsman screamed

In agony.

"Excellent combo, Genis," Kratos said, before casting a Healing Wind over the battlefield that revitalized Zelos, Raine, and Frank.

"Thanks," Genis said, "Let's call it Light Bite."

Kratos shook his head and sighed, "Fine," before taking to the skies again. Crouching atop one of the guard towers at the village gates, he adjusted his vision to search the distance for Dirk. A man with normal eyesight would have seen the dwarf as a dot on the horizon, but Kratos saw him clearly, struggling against his captor's hold. Good. There was fire in his spirit yet.

Kratos glanced back at the group. His last spell had restored a third of their health, but that was a stopgap measure that did nothing to stem the tide of the invaders pouring in and attacking them. He made a command decision and descended to the group's side. Scooping up Raine and Frank and instructing Genis to bring the still dazed Zelos in the rheiard he'd just commandeered, Kratos led the group in a strategic retreat.

Iselia had fallen, but he'd be damned if he let Lloyd's friends fall with it. Dirk was on his own until Kratos could get the group to a safe distance. If the invaders wanted to kill the dwarf, they would've done so here. They were taking him somewhere. For the time being, he'd stay alive. Then Kratos would find him. If he had to search all night, he'd find him. *For Anna and for Lloyd.*



"I, Orochi Hebi, whose true name you know, *demand* that you fulfill your responsibilities as Next Chief of Mizuho and become my bride."

Sheena regarded Orochi with a cool gaze. He'd leveled his challenge at her, and she wasn't afraid. She and Lloyd had been through too much to give up on one another now. *This is over, my former friend. You've lost. You just don't know it yet.*

When she'd reached into her bag a moment before, searching for a miracle gel, her hand brushed across something that just might provide the solution to her problem. Had she ever doubted Mizuho's God before, she believed now. This was too fortuitous to be a coincidence.

Ignoring Orochi for the moment, she withdrew the gel. She poured most of it down Lloyd's throat and applied the last few drops to the wound on his chest. The flesh around the shuriken popped and fizzled, and the star-shaped projectile loosened enough for her to pull it out. "Sorry," she whispered when he winced. "I wish I could do more, but I can't call Undine." At his surprised look, she added, "I'll explain later."

When she looked up, she noticed Orochi receiving advice from the black-clad observer. "Once Lloyd has been healed," Orochi said, "he should be banned from the village as befits a defeated foe."

Sheena laid Lloyd's head down gently and rose.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"For once," she said, "let *me* save *you*."

He nodded.

Sheena said, "I only see one foe here, Orochi, one who hasn't yet been defeated but soon will be."

"You will not challenge me, will you?" he croaked. "The traditions do not allow—"

"I don't have to," she said. "You've already lost."

She continued, "I've always admired how closely you studied our traditions. You had a head for it I never did. And I've never doubted your interpretations."

He nodded. "We would make a good team, my mind and your—"

"What do the traditions say about wish tags?"

Orochi exhaled. "Everyone knows about wish tags."

"Please," she said.

"All right. A Mizuhoan may inscribe any wish upon a small wooden tag, which he prays over and keeps nearby. When the wish comes true or is denied by God, he must break the tag and casts its halves into moving water to avoid bad luck."

"Exactly." Sheena circled him like a predator. "And what do you know about blood oath tags?"

He gasped. "Blood oath—"

"Tags, yes," she said. "Please enlighten us."

"It is a very old tradition—"

"It predates the marriage tradition you're trying to invoke, right?"

Orochi nodded. "Yes. And it is very sacred. If the maker of a wish tag is willing, he may spill his blood on the tag and swear to work toward the wish's fulfillment."

"No matter the personal cost."

He nodded again.

"God helps those who help themselves," she offered.

"That is the general idea."

The observer placed a hand on Orochi's arm, and whispered something into his ear.

Sheena snapped, "Quiet, Kuchinawa."

The crowd gasped.

Sheena continued. "The disguise isn't needed; you're always welcome in our village. But this is between Orochi and me."

Kuchinawa let his hand drop and walked away.

"So," she said, "you might say the blood tag trumps all other traditions."

"You might," Orochi said.

Sheena pulled a small bundle from her bag, untied a silken string, and let fall away the wrapping—a white handkerchief blotted with red. Inside was a small wooden tag inscribed with a prayer and stained with a dark substance.

"Read the prayer," Sheena demanded.

Orochi sighed. "It reads, 'Make Lloyd happy.'"

"And what's that staining the letters?"

"Blood," he said.

"Thank you, Orochi." She kneeled by Lloyd and took his hand. "I have sworn a sacred oath to do whatever I can to make you happy. What will make you happy?"

Lloyd smiled. "Being with you as long as we live."

"Then you will be." She moved forward and ever so gently, in the sight of all Mizuho, brushed her lips against his. Then she whispered, "Saved ya."

"My hero," he said.

She stood then, a new confidence welling up inside. "You are right about one thing, though," she said to Orochi. "Lloyd will leave the village. But he won't go alone. I'm going with him."

"Sheena?" Lloyd said.

She raised an eyebrow.

He nodded. He wasn't sure where she was going with this, but he'd trust her.

"Mizuho is going with him," she said. "The land is dying. It has been since the worlds were rejoined. If we're to survive, we must find new land...that is, if the chief approves."

Igaguri stepped forward. "This day," he said, "my granddaughter has proven her cunning, her mercy, and her loyalty. If she believes this is the right decision, I will trust her judgment."

"Thank you, Grandpa," Sheena said.

"But I will not be making the journey with you. I am too old for such a thing."

"Grandpa, you can't!"

"I was born here, little one. Here I buried my wife and my children. I raised you here." He stroked her cheek. "And I will die here."

She hugged him. "We can't just leave you."

"I will remain," Orochi said, "if he will allow me."

The chief nodded. "That is acceptable."

"Thank you, Orochi," Sheena said. "When it's over, come back to us."

He nodded. "What my chief commands I will obey."

"Chief?"

"Yes, little one," Igaguri said. "You are my successor, are you not?" To the crowd, he spoke in a booming but age-worn voice, "When you reach your new home, Vice-chief Tiga will perform the official ceremonies, but, from this day forward, Sheena Fujibayashi is Chief of Mizuho."

"I'm not ready," she whispered.

"Believe in yourself as I believe in you."

"I'll try."

"That is all anyone can do." Igaguri sank to his knees. Sheena was puzzled until she noticed everyone else in the crowd doing the same. Then her cheeks flushed crimson.

Lloyd too had bowed and smiled broadly at her.

When she saw him, she smiled.



At the edge of the crowd Regal stood alongside the Vice-chief. Regal nodded in approval. *Leadership is a great burden, Sheena. I know you'll bear it well.*



Orochi watched Sheena walk away and his dreams go with her. Even after what he'd done to her, she still offered her forgiveness. *Truly a remarkable woman.* Had he really expected her to love him after he'd gotten rid of Lloyd? Maybe, if she hadn't had that blood tag. No, he couldn't think that way. If he let it, second guessing past decisions could consume his life.

Time passed, the crowd dispersed, and Orochi remained alone at the riverside. It would be days before the village had readied itself for the move. Sheena had already left for Iselia, accompanied by Regal Bryant. A detachment of Mizuho's bravest warriors had departed at

the same time by boat to reinforce the village defenses. Lloyd had been anxious to return just in case the king's troops arrived ahead of schedule. But the Vice-chief had prevailed upon him to remain behind and take counsel, and at last he relented. Orochi had considered talking with Lloyd, but, realizing any apology would sound hollow, he said nothing.

Into view slinked Kuchinawa, now wearing his signature red costume.

"Feel better?" Orochi asked.

"Feels like I'm in my own skin again."

"Snakes shed their skin," Orochi said. "It's a sign of rebirth."

"Shed yours as often as you want, they'll never forget this one."

Orochi sighed. "What do you mean?"

"You're a traitor now—just like me—and they'll never trust you again. Never mind you did it all for them. Long after you're dead, you'll still be known as a traitor."

"So what do you want me to do?"

Kuchinawa shrugged. "Only what you've already decided."

"Self-imposed exile."

"Join the club."

Orochi reached for his brother's arm. Reflexively, Kuchinawa shrank back. This made Orochi smile. "Exile won't be as bad with you as my right-hand man."

Kuchinawa grinned. "No way. That was pre-requisitioned on you marrying Sheena."

Orochi shook his head. "No, brother. You said, and I quote, 'If you win, I will return to the village as your right-hand man.'"

Kuchinawa laughed. "Clearly my intent was—"

Orochi laughed. "You're talking to Mizuho's foremost expert on ancient traditions. Trust me when I say intent doesn't matter."

"Well, I didn't think you'd actually win."

The Hebi brothers, back together again, slipped quietly from the village and laughed long into the night. Afterwards, they didn't laugh for quite some time.



"Frigid Meteor Storm!"

In the Iselia schoolhouse, the axe-wielder chuckled. "Some spell. A lot of hype and no substance. Just like you guys."

"Yeah," another invader added. "You missed."

Genis sank to his knees. *No, that wasn't right.* Even if he'd missed, the spell should have produced some visible effect. So far, nothing. Something was very wrong.

*...Patience, my friend...*

*Mithos.*

The axe-wielder advanced. "See you on the other side," he said.

Genis couldn't move. The spell had exhausted him.

"Wait," an invader said. "What's that sound?"

Genis could hear it too. A rumbling coming from...the ground? No, the sky. Something was headed this way. The schoolhouse shook. Desks overturned. The axe-wielder and his cohorts fell to the ground. Before Genis's eyes, blue and brown X's appeared on their torsos. *Targets*, he realized.

The invaders noticed the targets too and clawed at them, but their fingers passed through ineffectually.

The rumbling was almost deafening now, and Genis had to cover his ears to keep from crying out. The roof cracked and splintered as an icy meteorite, nearly as large as the classroom crashed through. In sickeningly slow motion, that could be designed only to maximize the victims' terror, it descended. Genis imagined he could hear every bone cracking, every organ bursting, every curse, and every last minute prayer to Martel as piece after piece of the meteorite broke off and pounded into the invaders. This pelting continued long after they were dead.

"Make it stop," Genis cried. "Please make it stop!"

*...Why would you want that?...*

"It's too cruel!"

*...They're your enemies...*

"I never meant to cause this much suffering!"

*...What do you expect? Use this much power on this few people, and of course they'll feel this much pain...*

"The more people I kill at once, the less pain they'll feel?"

*...I like the way you think...*

"Genis," a voice called. "Genis are you all right?"

The half-elf shook his head to clear out the last remnants of the daydream.

"Genis?"

"Raine?"

"Yes. This wasn't our fault. You know that, don't you?"

*What was she—? Oh, Iselia.*

Kratos had led them to a location far enough from the village to be safe and hopefully in the right path to flag down Lloyd and Sheena as they returned from Mizuho. After that, he'd disappeared into the night to search for Dirk. Morning had come hours ago, and he still hadn't returned.

"Yeah," Genis said, "I know."

"You fought well, and I'm proud of you. I want you to know that."

"Thanks, Sis."

"You want to cook breakfast, or should I?"

In a blink, Genis had the pots in his hands and was slicing open a pouch of freeze-dried curry. *Freeze-dried.* He bit his lip. "Hey, Sis," he asked, "Why do you think Sheena had Mithos's voice in her head?"

Raine smoothed her shirt, settling in for a long discussion. "I would assume it's because she was bonded to his Cruxis Crystal."

"How much exposure do you think something like that would take?"

"Why do you ask?"

He gulped. "I was never bonded to Mithos's crystal, but I carried it for a while, longer than Sheena did actually. Is it possible I'd hear his voice?"

"If you haven't already, it probably won't happen." Raine said. "Still we shouldn't rule anything out." She wiped at a few smudges on her Exsphere. "When we wear Exspheres, we enter a symbiotic relationship with another's life force. Such a relationship may affect us in ways we couldn't understand without years of study. Mithos's life force was very strong, and a Cruxis crystal is much stronger than an ordinary Exsphere. In this case the symbiosis could conceivably be strong enough to make communication possible." She hesitated, then said, "Have you heard his voice, Genis?"

"N-no. I was just curious."

"You'd tell me if you did hear him, wouldn't you?"

Genis close his eyes. "Of course, Raine. I wouldn't hide something like that from you."



Midway between Meltokio and the camp he'd set up for Zelos's group, Kratos landed. In four millennia of fighting, he had mastered techniques for managing his mana usage and drawing out his body's fullest potential. And he had learned his limits. There were times to press on and times to rest. He'd had his wings out with only brief respite for the better part of eight hours, and his mana reserves were dangerously low. Now was a time for rest.

It had taken him nearly an hour to locate Dirk's trail, or, more precisely, the trail of the winged creatures transporting him. Giving up never crossed his mind. Logic told him everything leaves a trail. A flier's might be harder to follow, but it's there if you know where to look. Incidentally, he'd seen (and smelled) far more gargoyle excrement that day than he ever wished.

He'd finally tracked the dwarf to Tethe'alla's capital. Taking the secret sewer route Genis told him about to enter the city, Kratos had found its military out in full force. A strictly enforced curfew impeded his movements until he'd appropriated a suit of armor from a guard foolish enough to challenge him. Then he'd bluffed his way into the castle and found Dirk in the throne room being interrogated by none other than the king himself. And what a weird interrogation it had been. If the king were to be believed, securing Dirk had been one of the main objectives of the Iselia invasion. The reason why was so outrageous Kratos momentarily doubted the king's sanity.

Kratos had wanted to bust Dirk out then and there, but by that point his mana was already waning. There was no way he could fight through all those troops, get Dirk out, and make it somewhere safe before collapsing from exhaustion or mana depletion.

So he'd left Dirk in enemy hands and snuck out. He hated to do it, but, if the king believed half of what he told Dirk, then the dwarf was in no immediate danger. And if the accusations were true, locating Altessa had just become one of the Chosen's group's top priorities.



"Kratos?"

He'd dressed himself in tan and gray as a pauper so as not to be bothered should anyone pass his way while he slipped into a light doze.

"Is that you?"

"Sheena? Regal?"

"What are you doing here? And how?"

Kratos frowned. "We have much to discuss."

Some thirty minutes later, they had filled each other in on the pertinent information. Sheena was reluctant to disclose everything that had happened in Mizuho but felt she owed it to Lloyd's father. When he recounted the events in Iselia, Sheena became concerned for the Mizuhoan warriors who were on their way. Regal volunteered to take the rheiard to warn them and left her and Kratos alone.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Kratos ventured, "So you and my son?"

Sheena nodded. "Yes. Is...that all right?"

"What if it weren't? Would you stop?"

Sheena took a deep breath. "No. Nothing will stop us."

Kratos cast her a steady gaze. "Nothing?"

She matched his gaze. "Nothing."

A grin turned the corners of his mouth. "Good."

"So it *is* all right?"

"Yes. If you'll permit me to say so, my son has very good taste."

Sheena blushed. "Thank you, sir." After a moment, she added, "I wish he hadn't gotten hurt fighting for me, though."

Kratos nodded. "As do I. But I've learned that, of the few things in this world worth fighting for, love is foremost."

"Sir, something has me puzzled."

"Sir? Why so formal, Sheena? If you are with my son, you should be, if anything, less formal."

She shook her head. "I don't think I can. All the great people in my life I refer to by title: the Chief, the Vice-chief—people I really admire."

"Admire?"

"Don't get me wrong. When we were comrades, your opinion meant nothing to me."

"I see."

"I don't mean that as an insult," she continued, "though I don't suppose you could have taken it any other way. Heh. Sorry. But now that Lloyd and I are together, you're the father of the man I love. And your approval matters to me."

"You have it."

"Just like that?"

Kratos shook his head. "Of course not. It's been half a year in coming. I kept my eye on you while we traveled together, especially after I noticed those looks you were giving my son."

She blushed.

"My observation taught me that you are an honorable person, a strong fighter, and a worthy partner for Lloyd. So, don't call me 'sir.' When you're ready, call me 'Dad.'"

"Okay...Dad. Heh, that feels weird."

"What is it you wished to ask me?"

"Oh, right," she said. "You said Origin brought you back. How? When Lloyd sent you to Derris-Kharlan, it stretched Origin's powers to the max. There's no way he should've been able to reach you after the planet drifted for a year."

"Intelligent question, Sheena. He wasn't."

"I don't understand."

"How long has it been since I left? A year?"

"Just about."

"Not for me. The Eternal Sword controls time and space. I said good-bye to Lloyd only half a day ago. Then I saw a bright flash of light, and a moment later I was in Genis's house with Lloyd nowhere in sight. That's right, Sheena. Origin didn't transport me through space. He transported me through time."



The words of Martel echoed in Colette's mind: "You have become an unclean vessel."

After their battle with the Ogdoad troops, Colette and Presea pressed on toward their goal, traveling by night and staying as close as possible to whatever patches of forest growth they

could find, so that, at the end of three days, they reached the House of Salvation in time to bed down for the night. When Colette awoke the next morning, Martel was floating at the foot of her bed.

Colette called out her goddess's name in exhilaration, then immediately clamped hands over her mouth, looking sheepishly toward her companion's bed.

"Do not worry, Colette," Martel said. "Presea will not awaken. You wished to speak to me alone, and so you will."

"Thank you," Colette said. "I'm glad to see you here. I thought I'd have to travel all the way to the Great Tree."

To Colette, who rarely let a day pass without praying to Martel even after finding out the truth of her origin, speaking to her in person should have been easy, if a bit more intimidating. Surprisingly, it turned out to be quite difficult, though she thought it likely the gravity of the subject matter, rather than any reticence on her part, was the culprit.

She took a deep breath, and poured out her heart. "I was born to die, to sacrifice my life so you might live again and regenerate the world. As the Chosen of Mana, this was my only purpose, and I was thankful and humbled—to think, out of every family in Sylvarant, the goddess Martel chose mine!" Her face fell. "But it meant never having what I wanted most. Lloyd was the first boy to treat me as a real person and not a religious figure. I knew better, but I couldn't stop myself; I fell in love with him.

"He wouldn't let me sacrifice myself. He worked so hard to give me a normal life." Her brow crinkled. "Why would he do that if he didn't want to be with me? I meant to tell him, after the journey, that I loved him too. But things happened so fast, and before I knew it he was off on another journey. With *her*."

Colette squeezed her fists so tightly her knuckles lost their color. "It isn't fair! Lloyd is all I ever wanted. I would have given him up for the world—you know I would have. But now that I have a chance at a normal life, he is taken away from me! If he meant to abandon me, he shouldn't have saved me in the first place."

Martel listened patiently, never prodding, just allowing the girl to speak her peace.

"I don't understand, Martel. The only thing that ever made sense to me was being the Chosen. I had a purpose, and now nothing. Martel, please help me fulfill my purpose: Make me your vessel."

Martel's eyes widened. *Oh, Colette*. At last she spoke, "I have a vessel."

"A vessel of metal. I'm real, flesh and blood—feel my hands." She clutched at Martel's hands. "They're warm, not cold like Tabatha's."

"Colette..."

"I'm willing, and we're compatible. I was bred to be compatible."

"There are people who love you."

"Father and Grandmother gave me up before the Journey of Regeneration. Why should they want to keep me now? The only person who wanted me to live at the expense of everything else was Lloyd, and he doesn't need me anymore."

"I am sorry, Colette," Martel said, "but you are wrong."

"But—"

"Even if you weren't, you have become an unclean vessel. Your thirst for blood and your reckless disregard for your friends cannot be ignored."

Colette's eyes darted to the black-lacquered knife leaning against the wall. The knife, with its serrated teeth, grinned at her like a demon. Desiccated flecks of blood that only enhanced vision could see clung to the teeth despite her best efforts at cleaning. Surely, Martel saw

them too.

"Your Scriptures teach that if we confess, you'll forgive," Colette said. "I confess!"

"I'm no goddess, Colette, and I've never read those scriptures."

Colette pounded her fists on the bed. "There has to be a way."

"Why are you so eager to die?"

"Tell me why I should live!"

If emotions could be smelled, Martel reflected, Colette would reek of desperation. "What do the scriptures teach about suicide?"

"It's a sin," Colette said, "but sacrifice is a holy service."

"Needless sacrifice?"

Colette's lip trembled.

"All right, Colette." Martel let out a ragged sigh. "If you wish to become my vessel, I will allow it. But first, you must complete a task for me."

"Anything!"

"Bring me my father."

"Your father?"

"Tabatha's father, Altessa. If I'm to cast her off like a filthy cloak, the least I can do is let her see him one more time. Besides, I sense that he will play a great role in coming world events. Bring him to the Great Tree, and it will be as you wish." With that, Martel faded away.

And Presea began to stir.

By the time her pink-haired companion had fully awakened, Colette had transformed herself into the cheerful, smiling girl she had been. "Good morning, Presea. Hurry and get dressed if you want to see me off."

"See you off?"

"Uh-huh. This is where we part ways, remember? You agreed."

"Oh, of course."

The girls quickly cleaned, dressed, and had a cold meal. Colette considered slipping away while the other girl was occupied, but Presea stuck persistently close the entire morning. To Colette's annoyance, Presea packed and acted as if she planned to remain in her company. A few minutes later, while Presea waited just outside the House's only exit, Colette slipped a few extra gold pieces into the matron's hand.

Shutting the door, Colette said, "Good news! The matron has agreed to allow you to stay as long as you need. It isn't safe for you to go back to Iselia like we agreed, so, after you've rested, I want you to head home, okay."

"In which direction are you headed?" Presea said, adjusting the straps on her backpack.

Colette told her.

"Would it not make sense for us to travel together since we are headed in the same direction?"

"I told you I needed to do this alone."

"And I told you—"

"Yes, I know. You need to see if friendship is worth anything. But you agreed to stop traveling with me once we reached the House of Salvation, and we're here."

Presea shook her head. "No, I agreed to go back to the village. Now you're telling me not to. Thus, our agreement is annulled."

Colette meant to argue the point ("Circumstances change plans, but you've been planning this from the start, haven't you?"), but halted abruptly when Presea pulled a wing pack from her backpack.

"Besides, if I continue to travel with you, we can use this."

"Presea, please, let me borrow it!"

"If you wish to use the rheiard, I must accompany you."

"But—"

"That is my price."

"Fine," Colette harrumphed. "Wait a minute, you had a rheiard all this time and didn't mention it. We could have gotten here in hours instead of days."

Presea shook her head. "Walking allowed us to avoid the king's flying patrols."

"Not to mention it allowed you to travel with me longer," Colette said.

"That too."

"You little conniver."

## One Week Later (Chapter 17)

Lloyd yawned. He hated downtime, especially when there was so much to do. He had villagers to save (the Iselians in the human ranch captured during the invasion and those holed-up in the Martel Temple), a foster dad to rescue, and a master summoner to help re-forged expired pacts.

"Will you keep it down over there?"

As if his to-do list weren't motivation enough for him to recover, he had the tent-mate from hell, the man most injured during the Iselia invasion, Zelos Wilder.

Lloyd wanted to be furious with Zelos for getting the invasion's timing so wrong, but he couldn't. If Mizuho's information network hadn't seen it coming, how could he fault Zelos for missing it?

"Keep what down?" Lloyd said.

"Whatever noise you're making. I'm trying to get my beauty sleep."

"It's almost noon. Wake up already."

"And do what? Raine won't let us out of the medical tent until we're fully healed."

"Comb your hair again. You seem to enjoy that." *And you left the tent three times yesterday.*

"Look who's getting a backbone," Zelos said. "Careful, Lloyd. Upset me, and I won't give you any more relationship advice."

Lloyd cocked his head to the side. "Have you ever actually had a relationship?"

"That's cold."

"I'm serious. I know you've dated a lot—"

"Lloyd, don't go there."

"But—"

"Don't."

Lloyd threw up his hands. "Fine. Sorry."

The ensuing silence was abated only by the gentle scraping of Zelos filing his fingernails. At least Lloyd hoped it was his fingernails. Yesterday he'd caught the redhead filing his toenails. Nothing wrong with that, but watching it made Lloyd uneasy.

"Hey, Lloyd," Zelos said, "Tell me something: Why Sheena?"

"What do you mean?"

"What about her made you fall in love?"

Lloyd couldn't answer right away. "Everything?" he ventured at last.

Zelos shook his head. "You're not getting off that easily. Be specific."

"Why are you asking me?"

"You wanted to do something. We're doing something."

Lloyd grunted. "Okay. Sheena's special. She understands me."

"You're not that hard to understand."

"You'd be surprised."

Zelos nodded. "Go on."

"We talk together. We laugh together. We think the same way. And every time we touch, I feel—get your mind out of the gutter—I feel happy. She makes me happy." His eyes widened, and his face lit up. "And I make her happy."

"Don't rub it in," Zelos mumbled.

"Huh?"

"Never mind," Zelos said. "Couldn't you say the same about Colette? You liked being with her, right?" *And you made her happy.*

"Yeah, but that was different."

"How?"

"Zelos, why are you asking these questions?"

"I'm just trying to figure out"—*if you're worthy of someone so amazing*—"why you chose one girl over another." Zelos grinned a fake grin, and then added, "So I'll know if I ever meet the one." *Yeah, you'll buy that.*

Lloyd nodded, "Okay, sure, I guess that makes sense."

*Whew.*

"Hey," Lloyd said suddenly, "you ever heard the term 'daihyo?'"



By hour three of the day's war council, Sheena's uncertainties had fled in the face of her responsibilities. She still felt them, likely would for weeks or months to come, but had no time to indulge them. Indeed, it seemed she had time for little these days that did not directly involve the chieftom. She hadn't even seen Lloyd since settling into the current camp. (The group had moved camp three times in the last week, the regular patrols in the skies between Meltokio and Iselia making this an unfortunate necessity.) The constant moving must be playing havoc on Lloyd's health.

At her grandfather's request, she'd retained most of his advisors. To their chagrin, she'd added one of her own. The benefits of having the counsel of a four-thousand-year-old angel should have been apparent, but the advisors couldn't see past the fact that he wasn't Mizuhoan. Realizing this made Sheena thankful for her years spent away from home, if for no other reason than it spared her from becoming—she hesitated to use the term—racist. Still, she wondered if she were relying too fully on Kratos; she didn't want to appear weak.

"Taka, report," she said.

From a cluster of ninjas standing at the entrance of the tent, a young woman stepped forward and bowed low. "Yes, Chief. I infiltrated the human ranch as ordered."

"And the Iselians?"

"They are in poor spirits but mostly uninjured. Many blame your...*ano...*"

Sheena sighed. "You may speak freely, Taka."

"Yes, Chief. Many blame Lloyd Irving for failing to defend them," she said, then quickly added, "But some hold out hope that the Chosen will save them."

"The Chosen who is nowhere to be found," Sheena mumbled. At full volume, she asked, "Guards?"

"Two and a half dozen."

Vice-chief Tiga, seated at Sheena's left, gasped. "That many to guard eighty people, most of whom are women and children! Surely, the king does not see them as that great of a threat."

Taka raised her hand and, when acknowledged, said, "I overheard guards bragging that the king has more troops than tasks for them to complete."

"Thirty to guard eighty because he has nothing better for them to do," Sheena said. "Then how many does he have hunting us?"

"Many more, I'd wager," Kratos said.

Taka bowed again. "Is there anything else, Chief?"

"Yes, you're favoring your arm. Were you injured?"

Washi, one of Sheena's advisors, a lithe man in his fifties with a protruding beak of a nose, flinched. Taka caught his eye, and shook her head almost imperceptibly.

"Not badly," she said.

Sheena smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. Thank you for your service. You may go." To another ninja, she said, "Karasu, how are the Iselians in the temple?"

Before he could answer a cheerful voice called out, "Hey, Sheena!"

A moment later, swords, cards, and kunai were in the hands of every junior ninja in the tent as they prepared to defend their ruling council to the death. The threat? A limping Zelos Wilder with a humongous grin plastered on his face.

"Stand down," Sheena commanded.

The ninjas backed off but did not sheathe their weapons.

"We're in council, Zelos," Sheena said. "This isn't a good time."

"That's what I told your boyfriend, but he wouldn't quit nagging."

"Lloyd sent you?"



Was a pimple too much to ask for? Or maybe a horn, grown up overnight, in the center of her forehead?

Sheena was as beautiful as ever, and nothing detracted from that, not even the dull brown clothing she wore. Rather, her Successor costume, clashing with her exposed face and hands, served only to highlight their perfection. Her skin was flawless, her hair messy, wild. Fatigue had painted dark semicircles beneath her eyes, but even they added to her loveliness by drawing attention to her soft coffee-colored eyes.

Zelos sighed. What had he gotten himself into?

### Five minutes ago

"I'm serious, Zelos. You've done more than anyone else to get me and Sheena together. I want you to be my daihyo."

Zelos snorted. Was he supposed to feel honored? He didn't. Giving Lloyd a little nudge was one thing, but actively, day in, day out helping him cultivate a relationship with a woman Zelos thought he himself might love—that was too much. Sheena would never love him, he accepted that. But that didn't mean he had to torture himself. There must be a way out. "Can't do it, Bud," he said.

"Why not?"

*Yeah, why not?* "Well, because...you didn't answer my question."

"I thought I did."

"What? 'She makes me happy.' Swords make *you* happy."

Lloyd frowned. "I see. If I answer your question, you'll do it."

"Right," Zelos nodded. *You'll never be able to answer me.*

Lloyd locked eyes with Zelos and said, "There are many reasons I love Sheena, but this is one: Colette needed my protection, but Sheena needs me."

Zelos growled, "Damn."

## Present

Zelos doubted Colette would agree with Lloyd's assessment, but it had been a step in the right direction. *Good answer, Bud.*

Kneeling before Sheena, Zelos said, "Sheena Fujibayashi, I, Zelos Wilder, come on behalf of Lloyd Irving to make known to you his esteem and his affection."

Sheena rose, tipped her head, and said, "I, Sheena Fujibayashi, am deeply honored by Lloyd Irving's interest. At the proper time, I shall send my own daihyo to begin negotiations."

Zelos nodded and excused himself. "I'll be waiting, my voluptu...my friend."

Sheena closed her eyes, and when she opened them, she was back in chief mode. "Karasu," she said, "please report."



A half hour later, bleary-eyed Sheena ended the council prematurely. After receiving Kratos's pointers gracefully ("You should not be so effusive in your praise-giving."), she practically ran to Raine's tent. When she entered, she found Raine's younger brother flipping through a book and greeted him with warmth. "Hi, Genis."

Steadily avoiding eye-contact, Genis mumbled something incomprehensible and left her alone with his sister. Sheena wasted no time puzzling over his avoidance, just chalked it up to the oddities of adolescence and turned her attention toward Raine.

"Sheena, or should I say, 'Chief?'" Raine teased.

"Please don't," Sheena laughed. "I barely hear my own name anymore. I'm sick of titles."

They hugged then, and few hugs in her life ever meant more. The brief contact told her that, however the events of the last week might have hurt Colette, Raine and Sheena's relationship would survive. What a relief. That would make what she was about to ask easier.

"Would you be my daihyo?" she blurted.

When Raine said nothing, just regarded Sheena with an odd look. Sheena bit her lip. Had she misjudged the meaning of the hug?

Then Raine grasped Sheena's hand. "Oh, yes, of course I will be."

"You had me worried," Sheena said.

"I'm sorry about that, but weren't you listening to me?"

"I guess I wasn't," Sheena said. "I've been sitting through reports all day, and my mind was wandering. Sorry."

"I understand, but I'm sure you'll want to hear this. It's about Lloyd, and it's not good."



Presea's axe demolished Altessa's front door in three smooth strokes. Before, the dwarf

had never locked his door. Losing Tabatha, though, cost him the best security system this side of Toize Valley. Perhaps more importantly, it cost him his only source of companionship. The Chosen's group had intended to look in on him from time to time, but as Colette's smitten conscience reminded her, they'd let that responsibility slide.

"Altessa, are you in here?" Colette called out. She turned toward Presea. "Maybe he's out."

"Unlikely," Presea said. "His door was locked from the inside."

"Then he's here," Colette concluded. "Altessa!"

"You check the bedroom, I'll check the workshop," Presea said. By "workshop," she meant the partially walled-off area to the far left. There were actually two workshops in the home. The second, beyond the cordon in the back, she hoped to avoid. Bad memories, worse nightmares.

"Not here," Colette called.

"Nor here," Presea returned. That left the second workshop. With a deep breath to steady her nerves, she led Colette past the cordon. The room was just as she remembered it: bank of file cabinets along one wall, Cruxis computer system and two man-sized, fluid-filled cylinders along another, and the entrance to a tunnel that led down to the heart of the mountain along the third.

"He's not here, either," Colette said. "Should we check the tunnel?" She peered into the darkness. "Ah, I can't see a thing."

Presea didn't respond. The file cabinets held fast her attention. How many of those files were about her? She could easily imagine Altessa keeping a detailed account of her torture to pass on to his Cruxis masters:

*Day Three: Subject cried two hours for Daddy; experiment not delayed.*

*Day Fifteen: Subject showed signs of great physical discomfort; experiment not delayed.*

*Day Twenty-two: Physical scars from last week's procedure fading away; experiment will proceed.*

*Day Forty-seven: Subject had discovered futility of crying; I am enjoying the quiet; experiment proceeding well.*

Those files should not exist. Without realizing she was doing it, she raised her axe.

An indicator light at the top of one of the cabinets began blinking.

"Oh, Presea," Colette said, "was this where..?"

Presea nodded and lowered her axe.

"These cylinders?"

"Just the one on the right. I spent plenty of time submerged in that one. The one on the left was off limits. I almost got into it once by mistake, and Altessa became very angry."

Colette brushed her hand over the smooth, cool surface of the forbidden cylinder. Its condition was pristine, as if it had been polished recently. She frowned at its color; she hated lavender.

"Well, let's check the tunnel," she said, unveiling her wings and flooding the dark entrance with a glowing pink light. "Look, no need for a torch."

Ten minutes and a half-mile later, they found Altessa at the tunnel's abrupt and unexpected end. The old dwarf sat hugging his knees and rocking amidst a haphazard scattering of luggage. At his feet lay a burnt-out torch. "It makes no sense," he muttered, "No sense at all. It makes no sense."

Colette sank down beside him against the rough gray stone wall. "Altessa, what's wrong?"

His eyes snapped open, and he groped her shoulders with such violence that she cried out. Presea grabbed for his hand, but Colette waved her off.

"This tunnel," he said, "leads to my ancestral home. I've been down there dozens of times. But it stops here."

"Maybe there was a cave-in."

"No, no, no. Don't you think I thought of that?" He scooped up the unlit torch and held it toward the wall, not noticing that it gave off no illumination. "Look here," he said, gesturing madly. "This is solid rock. The tunnel was dug this far and no farther. You can see the marks of the pick-axes. Dwarves live miles below ground, and this tunnel was dug no farther. And it was dug *from* the surface. From, from, from the surface." He struck the wall with his fist. "I can't possibly have come from down there. So why do I remember coming from down there? Why do I remember something that *could not* have happened?"

Presea eyed him with disgust. *The old dwarf finally snapped. Serves him right.*

"Don't look at me like that," he growled. "I may be old, but I'm not senile. I couldn't invent a lifetime of memories. I remember sitting at my father's knees hearing stories of brave, fierce dwarven warriors. That's not a lie. It can't be!"

"I remember my father as well," she snapped, "and my sister. They're dead because of you!"

"Presea!" Colette said.

"It can't be a lie, but it can't be the truth. This was the only entrance, the only entrance I ever used. The only entrance..."

Colette lowered Altessa's head onto her lap as he sank into unconsciousness. She used the opportunity to look him over. "He's burning up, dehydrated, and malnourished. I can heal him, but we have to get fluids into him. Hand me your water skin." After Colette cast her healing spell, a little smile appeared on Altessa's face, stretching his lips and cracking the brittle skin. "He must have been down here for days. Presea, the water?"

But Presea leaned, arms crossed, against the tunnel wall.

"Presea, please."

"Fine," she said, reaching into her backpack.

When Colette had poured a few drops of the precious liquid down the dwarf's parched throat, and he responded with a coughing fit, Presea apologized. "I'm sorry. This place brings out the worst in me."

"Yeah, that wasn't like you at all."

"How do you know what I'm like? I don't know."

"I'm your friend," Colette said, smiling, "and friends know things about us we don't know about ourselves. You're loyal, kind, and dependable. You have a good heart. So that outburst was definitely out of character."

"Thank you," Presea said. "If it's safe, I'll move Altessa to the surface now."

"Sure."



"You people are so stubborn," Raine said. "First, Colette didn't tell me about her chronic injury, and now I find out Lloyd's been hiding an injury since the end of the Regeneration Journey. I'm a healer, not a mind-reader. I need to be told these things if I'm to help."

"You're absolutely right," Sheena said.

"Are you hiding anything from me?" She gave Sheena's bicep a squeeze. "A strained muscle from your duel with Kuchinawa perhaps? Is your arm sore?"

"Ow! It is now."

After the lecture, Raine moved on to the issue at hand, Lloyd's condition, which, as it turned out, she explained with another lecture. "We've encountered two types of angels on our journeys—those with feathered wings and those with spectral wings. Those with spectral wings become angels because of their exposure to two things: advanced Exspheres, like Cruxis crystals or Angelus Exspheres, and the toxic substance Aionis.

"Colette's crystal combined with the effects of the seals facilitated her transformation. I theorize that the seals were Aionis chambers, infusing her with air-borne dosages, which soon triggered her Angel Toxicosis. Zelos ingested Aionis directly. He experienced a mild case of AT, but Cruxis gave him drugs to fight it."

"You think Lloyd's injury is from AT!" Sheena gasped.

"Not necessarily. Lloyd's is a special case. He never ingested Aionis, just wore the pact ring. Does he still wear it?"

Sheena shook her head. "No, he said he lost it during the last battle with Mithos."

"Lost it?"

"Yes, he took off his glove, and it was gone."

"Unlikely; you can't lose a ring you wear beneath your glove."

"Oh, yeah."

"It's more likely," Raine said, "that his body absorbed it, and then at the right time, combined it with the powers of his Angelus Exsphere and the energies of the Eternal Sword to complete his transformation."

"Will he be all right?"

"He could live a long, healthy life..."

Sheena sighed in relief.

"...Or he could be dead in a year. I just don't know." At Sheena's look of horror, Raine added, "I'm overly cautious by nature—you know that. I'm going to keep researching this. Sybak has an excellent library as does Melto—Sybak has the books I need."

"How toxic are we talking?"

"You saw what happened to Colette. Every time Lloyd uses his angel powers, it's like opening a floodgate. Aionis floods his system."

"If Lloyd is suffering from Angel Toxicosis, can't we use the cure we gave Colette?"

Raine shrugged. "It might work, but, as I told you, Lloyd's is a special case. Judging by his wingspan alone, he must have received a pretty hefty Aionis dosage. The cure might not work."

"It's worth a shot," Sheena said. "I'll send out a squad to gather the components immediately."

"I'd like to go with them. Frank and Kratos can handle healing duties while I'm gone."

"If this is about our not telling you our medical problems—"

"It isn't. Sybak is on the way. I need to get cracking on that research."

"All right." Sheena nodded. "I'll send Taka and Karasu with you. You'll be taking Genis, I assume."

"Hmm. No, I think not. He'd rather stay here."

"Then I'll send a fourth to round out your squad."

"Great. I'll get my things."



Sheena's breath caught in her throat when she found Lloyd stripped to the waist,

massaging his arm. Gray splotches marred the flesh of his shoulder, remnants of the deep bruising from last week's fight. That they hadn't healed completely yet despite numerous treatments was unsettling enough. Worse were the spider-web-thin lines of black in the center of the bruises that Raine told her were growing. Angel Toxicosis? Colette's flesh had borne similar marks during her bout with the disease. But hers had covered most of an arm, whereas Lloyd's were just getting started. A good sign, Sheena decided.

She forced herself to smile when Lloyd noticed her standing at the entrance of the tent.

"Hey, Sheena, what are you doing here?" he said.

Making a great show of looking him up and down, she said, "Enjoying the view."

He quickly pulled on a shirt.

"I haven't seen you in a while. I thought I'd spend the afternoon with you," Sheena said, "unless you don't want to."

"Of course I do."

She sat down at the edge of his cot. "How's the shoulder?"

"Gels aren't really helping, but it's all right as long as I don't strain it."

"Come here," she said, patting the cot. He complied. "Sit with your back to me." When he shifted into position, she gently massaged his collarbone and shoulders, then hooked an arm around his waist and under his shirt.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Taking off your shirt, love," she said and kissed his neck. "I want to help you relax."

His eyes widened. "What?"

From her pocket she pulled a jar. "We have this ointment in my village that works wonders."

"Oh," he said. "The Vice-chief gave me some. It smelled awful."

"It all depends on who makes it." She opened the top and held it under his nose. "See? I add a bit of lilac and hyacinth. What do you think, smells good, huh?" She draped her head over his shoulder—his good shoulder—to watch his reaction.

He sniffed. "Hey, it does. You made this?"

"Uh-huh. I'm multi-talented."

She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and then leaned back to massage in the ointment. He groaned when she squeezed too hard and moaned when she squeezed just right. Soon, he was nodding off.

"You know," she said, "it wasn't very appropriate for your daihyo to approach me in public."

"In Mizuho, love must be conducted in secret." Lloyd sucked air through his teeth. "Sorry, I didn't mean for that to happen."

"Considering our *very* public proclamation of everlasting love at the riverside, nothing about our romance will be secret." She giggled. "But it all worked out. Your dad suggested that who the Chief is *with* concerns the whole village. That made it council business."

"Maybe we need someone to control what gets out about us."

"Like a gossip wrangler? Any suggestions?"

"Hikari," they said together and burst into laughter.

The massage/cuddling session lasted for some time after that, Lloyd almost falling asleep more than once. One thought kept worrying him, though, and he decided to question her about it before sleep at last claimed him.

"Sheena, what did you mean when you said, 'let me save you for once?'"

She stopped the massage. "Lloyd..."

"I want to know."

"You save me all the time. I wasn't pleased that you were hurt, but it felt good being the hero, *your* hero." Her voice had nearly cracked on "hurt," but she forced herself to continue, praying he hadn't noticed.

He covered her hand with his. "You've saved me plenty. I've never thought of you as a damsel in distress. I may act like that on occasion—that's who I am—but you are my partner in every part of my life and in the truest sense of the word."

Sheena wrapped her arms around him and pulled him back against her chest. Long after Lloyd had fallen asleep, Sheena sat, holding him and thinking.



*I meant every word I said, Sheena. I believe in you. But I'm not sure I believe in myself anymore. Even if you don't need my protection, I have to be capable of providing it.*

Right before he fell asleep, Lloyd made a decision. The next time he saw Kratos, he would take him aside and say, "Dad, there's something wrong with me. Every time I bring out my wings—and I'm bringing them out all the time lately—my left arm gets more and more useless. I'm trying to find a way to combat that, but you taught me never to rely on only one option. I need to know how to fight with only one blade: I need you to train me."



End Book 2: Mizuho Mishap

To be continued in:

**The Swordsman and the Summoner**

**Book 3: The Ogdoad and the Earth Elemental**

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