

Worlds Beyond Infinity

By Astri

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The story where I got my penname from. A certain boy finds a way to travel to and between anime worlds, and makes valiant if misguided attempts to help people in different anime who need helping. Currently crosses: Demon Diary, Tales of Symphonia, and Kiddy Grade. Currently on hiatus, as nobody seems able to read it... TT.TT

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/Astri/25745/Worlds-Beyond-Infinity>

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Part One: Sylvarant

Disclaimers: Because this fanfiction is purposely an amalgamation of more anime concepts than you could shake a stick at, trying to list where every single reference comes from would take as much room as this entire fanfic (and this fanfic's pretty big). Therefore, for the disclaimers, I will simply list the series I used for that particular chapter. I.e., for this chapter, Demon Diary and Tales of Symphonia.

Astri, however, is MINE.

Part One, Act One

The house was a beautiful work of architecture beneath the moonlit sky. Set on the outskirts of the richest part of town, it combined geometric latticework and ornate pillars into a building that a visitor from Earth might recognize as part ancient Greek, part traditional Japanese. It was a style all this world's own.

Normally at this time, the windows would be awash with light as rowdy parties just got into their flow, as though the night air intoxicated them to reach ever greater heights of merriment. But tonight there were no lights, and no party, because not one of the owners of the house remained alive.

The noises from the surrounding houses covered the sounds of his footsteps as he ran towards the house. It must have been, what, at least a few hours since the killing spree of the seemingly innocent young girl named Lilith. She was long gone, for sure. But for now, she was not his concern.

He tried to open the door, but it was locked, probably locked behind Monika when he had entered. The lord of the house had had no intention of letting him leave alive that day. Now the lord himself lay dead. But Monika? There was only one way to find out. He kicked the door off its hinges.

This noise could not be masked by the surrounding houses. Curious exclamations came from all sides, quickly turning to astonishment, then horror. Somebody shouted for guards. He ignored the voices. One way or another, he'd be gone before anybody could do anything.

The stench of death rolled out of the open door. Blood was splashed over the door, the walls, the floor, some of it dried, but some still wet and shiny in the faint moonlight. The sight of it, to say nothing of the smell, caused his gorge to rise. He'd never actually seen death before, particularly not as brutal as this. The lord's guards lay murdered on the floor, the hearts of each ripped from their chests and thrown back carelessly into their laps. The idea that a single girl, any girl, could have done something this horrible was mindboggling.

But the guards were beyond help, and even if they weren't, he would have left them to die anyways. Their deaths were cruel, but at least they were just, considering what they and their lord had done. He tried to ignore them, running through the room as quickly as he could with his eyes fixed on the door ahead.

This one was also locked. He kicked it, but it was sturdier than the front door (oddly enough) and did not break. The noises from outside were getting louder. Time was short.

He closed his eyes and thought of what had just transpired in the last—how long must it have been?—day or two. Monika, an ordinary, good-hearted kid, had seen Lilith being sold to the lord of this house. He had followed her here and tried to get her released, knowing the reputation of the lord. He was ridiculed, beaten, and finally offered a deal—her freedom for a Crystal Heart.

Enough narration. His blood started to boil. Monika'd gone home and told the boy he shared his house with, Mano, about the deal. Mano had made the *ultimate* sacrifice, giving Monika the Crystal Heart—*his* heart, crystallized by his love for Monika. Monika had *brought* it here. And Lilith had seized it, showed her true colors as the demon she really was, and abandoned the house and the city to search for more hearts, leaving everyone in the house for dead.

The double betrayal of Monika—and of Mano, who was *definitely* beyond help—sent adrenaline blasting into his veins. He kicked the door with all the fury he had, and its hinges shattered, sending it weewawing crazily from its lock. The lock snapped, and the door crashed to the floor.

“Monika!!” he shouted, more to reassure himself than in hopes of an answer.

There were no lights, but the latticework topping the walls let in a few beams of moonlight. The barest glow illuminated the body of the lord, a dark shape off to the side. There were two footprints in the blood that had sprayed from his chest when Lilith had ripped out his heart—a girl's shoes, small and delicate.

But over to the side, leaning against the wall, was a boy, tall and very skinny from lack of food due to the famine. Black hair fell over a delicate, blood-streaked face. His chest...

Whole.

The bloodstreaks on the wall told the story. Lilith had grabbed Monika and thrown him against the wall with literally demonic strength. For some reason—either she had thought he was dead, or perhaps she was feeling maganimous after taking the Heart, or perhaps she was just feeling lazy—she hadn't finished the job.

In the faint light, it was impossible to tell if Monika was still breathing. He ran over to him, practically collapsed onto the floor next to him, and put his head over his heart. It was as faint as the moonlight, but his heart was still beating.

He was alive.

The noises from outside were growing louder. Time was up—it was time to leave. But where? And could

he take Monika with him?

He'd be able to. Where to go was the more urgent question. Where were there doctors who could rescue Monika from the brink of death? Doctors he would trust?

Then the answer came to him. He dug into his pocket, wrapping his other arm firmly around Monika's thin shoulders, and pulled out an ordinary penny. He flipped it into the air.

"Sylvarant," he said.

The penny hit the ground, and sank through it as though through water. He and Monika followed it.

The sand in front of the Triet inn suddenly rippled like water. Genis, running over it towards the inn, tripped and fell.

"What did I tell you?!" his sister Raine demanded, running after him. "You're—huh?"

The sand parted like waves. Colette screamed.

He and Monika were spat out onto the hot golden sands of the Sylvarant town of Triet.

He looked around for Raine. She was frozen where she stood, her mouth agape, unable to speak.

"Raine, Colette! Please, we need help!"

~~*~*~*

"He'll live," Raine said a few hours later. A few frantic, medic-filled hours later, in which Raine, Kratos, and Genis had done everything they could to ensure that Monika would eventually regain consciousness. Colette had been fluttering around, literally, thanks to her brand-new angel wings, trying to help and just getting in everyone's way, but nobody had the heart or the time to tell her to stop it.

The boy who had brought Monika here was sitting in a chair between Raine and Genis, while Colette fluttered and Lloyd and Kratos stood, watching. He was tall, though not as tall as Kratos and perhaps not quite as tall as Monika, and skinny, though again not as skinny as Monika. His brown hair was longer than Raine's, but shorter than Colette's, and his eyes, though tired and concerned, were sharp behind his glasses. He was wearing a light grey shirt with an otter holding a sea urchin on the front, black jeans, and worn black shoes. There was a forest-green sweatshirt tied around his shoulders, and a silver ring on a chain around his neck.

Raine leaned back in her chair and yawned. Spellcasting could take it out of you. She ran a hand through her shoulder-length, sky-blue hair and fixed a stern glance on the boy next to her. She was good at stern glances. She was a teacher. "All right. Now that that urgent matter's out of the way, who are you and who is *he*?"

"My name's..." He paused. "Astri. I'm a...literally, I'm a traveler. From another world." He looked at Monika. "His name's Monika. He's from another world too, but he was left for dead by a girl who stole something...very important from him. I saved—well, I found him, and I brought him here, because I knew you could help him."

"I'm flattered you think so much of my skills," Raine said. "But how do you know of me? Have you traveled here before? I *know* I've never seen you. I'd remember."

"No, you've never seen me." This was a difficult question to answer. "Um...where I come from, the world where I come from, there are...like, stories about all of you. There's a huge story about the Chosen's journey, called Tales of Symphonia, and I pl...from that, I know about you."

"There's a story about us?" Lloyd blinked. "Cool."

"Hold on." Kratos fixed Astri with a stare. Combined with Raine's glance, it felt like being stuck on pins. "You say there's a story about our journey."

"Yeah."

"But we have only just started our journey. How can there be a story about it if it is not completed?"

"Well..." Astri hedged. "There are these people in my world. They're kind of like...you know what seers are?"

Raine, Genis, and Kratos nodded. Lloyd and Colette shook their heads.

"They see the future. And you see, there are people in my world who can see the futures of other worlds, and they make stories out of them."

"So you know our *future?!?*" Lloyd jumped forward. "That's *awesome!!* Tell us what's going to happen!"

"Actually...I can't. I only got to this part in the story before I came here. I know everything that's happened from when you first left Iselia to go to Martel's Temple, to now, but I don't really know what happens next." A white lie. A very small white lie. At least, that's what he told himself. "Oh, and only what happened to Lloyd. The story follows Lloyd. So when Colette, Raine, and Kratos left without Lloyd, I know what happened to Lloyd, but not what happened to them."

Raine frowned, but it was a curious frown, not a suspicious one. "You say you travel between worlds. How do you do this?"

"With this." Astri dug the penny out of his pocket again and held it out to Raine. Raine looked at it.

"You can take it. You can flip it, throw it, do whatever you want. I don't think it works for anybody except me."

Raine took it gingerly and turned it over. "Very interesting!" Her eyes began to glow. "It seems to be a primarily zinc-copper alloy, pressed into this shape. This man on the front—who is it? Is this some kind of amulet?"

"No, it's not an amulet. It's a penny. It's the smallest unit of currency my world has."

"Marvelous! Here we use Gald." Raine continued to turn the penny over. "What is this building? These

words—United States of America? E Pluribus Unum? One Cent? Is this a spell?”

“No,” Astri said, fighting back the urge to laugh. “The United States of America is where I come from. Not my world. My world's called Earth. The United States is the country I live in.”

“You come from another world?” Colette clasped her hands together. “How exciting!” Raine, Genis, Lloyd, and Astri all face-faulted.

“He already said that, Colette,” Genis said.

“Oh.” She paused. “Well, it still sounds very exciting! What's it like there?”

“I want to know how this works!” Raine tapped the penny. “Does everyone in the United States have one of these?”

“Well, everybody probably has a penny, but I think I'm...er...probably the only one with one that lets me world-travel,” Astri admitted. “And I'm not entirely sure how it works. I flip it into the air and say the name of the world I want to go to, and I go.”

“These are not common?” Raine held it up to her eye. “Your people do not often world-travel?”

“Not at all.” Astri reflected for a moment. “I guess I did it myself, but not really myself. I...it's kind of weird. There's a tradition in our world, that if you throw a penny into a fountain, then make a wish, your wish will come true.”

“So you threw the penny into a fountain and wished to go to other worlds?” Genis demanded.

“Yeah, but that wasn't all. I made a huge production out of this. I wrote out this huge long spell, asking for power from Hecate, Selene, and Artemis—three goddesses in our world,” Astri added, because everyone except for Kratos was looking blank. “Then I translated the *whole* thing into Greek, because I didn't think they'd understand English. So I recited the spell in front of the fountain at the mall, threw in the penny, and wished for magic. And the penny hit the water and floated down to the bottom—and nothing happened. I was really depressed, and all ready to leave, and suddenly something wet plunked into my pocket, and there was the penny, back in my pocket again.”

“So it always comes back to you?” Genis shook his head. “Cool. Weird, but cool.”

“Now I just flip it, and it makes the ground ripple and I fall through into somewhere else,” Astri said. “I think the rippling thing has to do with the fact that I threw it into a fountain.”

“*Marvelous*,” Raine breathed. “I wonder if I could make one as well...what was the spell you cast?”

“I'm sorry, I don't remember it. It was really long and flowery, and the Greek was just plain weird.”

“Oh,” Raine said, visibly deflating. “Well...maybe I could substitute a supplication to Martel instead...”

“This is fascinating,” Kratos broke in. “However, I have to ask—why are you here?”

"I told you. Monika was going to die, and I needed help, so—"

"No. Why did you go to Monika's world in the first place?"

Astri looked blank. "Why?"

"Yes, why. Worlds have their own fate. Their own destiny. It is not for you to interfere in the lives of others from other worlds."

He touched a nerve. Astri stood up so fast he knocked his chair over and almost hit Lloyd.

"I *hate* people who say that! I don't care what kind of destiny he's supposed to have! His best friend gave him his heart, to save a girl who turned out to be a demon who stole the heart and left him for dead! I'm not letting him die with something like that! And after he recovers, I'm going after Lilith and I'm going to *kill* her, and take back the heart she stole!"

Kratos shook his head. "Even with our healing, he might still die. If that is his fate, you won't be able to change it."

"That doesn't mean I can't try!"

"Kratos," Colette said quietly. "Maybe...maybe his destiny is to be saved by Mr. Astri. Maybe this *is* his destiny, and we're actually not changing anything."

"Or maybe all this destiny talk is baloney," Lloyd said. "I know / don't believe in destiny."

"You have no idea what you're talking about, boy."

"Oh, like *you* do?!" Astri snapped.

"You don't even understand the source of your power, let alone what you can and can't do with it."

"At least I *got* it! Unlike *you*! You abandoned—"

"ENOUGH!!!" Genis roared, cutting everybody off. "You're all acting like idiots! Get out and let Raine and me take care of this guy!"

"Can I stay and help?" Colette asked hopefully.

"Uh..." Raine and Genis exchanged looks.

"No," Raine said. "He's out of danger for now, Colette. Although I...appreciate your help, he just needs to be watched for now. Go out, explore Triet, have some fun. Maybe we can switch later."

"Okay," Colette said. She turned to Astri, Lloyd, and Kratos, her smile as bright as her wings. "Let's go look around!"

“Uh, Colette?” Lloyd asked.

“Yes, Lloyd?”

“Your wings...”

“Oh.” Colette craned her head over her shoulder to look at them. “I guess I'd better put them away, huh?”

“Yeah...”

“Okay.”

* * *

“What a huge place!” Colette exclaimed, staring around Triet with the wide-eyed innocence of a newborn puppy. “It's so much bigger than Iselia!”

“That's not a surprise,” Kratos said. “Triet is the largest city on this continent.”

“It's so beautiful!” Colette sighed.

“It's so hot,” Lloyd muttered.

Being a desert town, Triet was indeed very hot. And Lloyd, dressed in full-length red and brown, was probably the hottest of them all.

“I'm assuming you will be staying here in Sylvarant for a little while,” Kratos said.

“Yes, I will,” Astri said acidly.

“I'd suggest buying less...noticeable clothes. What you are wearing now will draw far too much attention.”

Astri looked around and counted seven people who were staring at him, then hastily turned their attention somewhere else when he looked their way. Marginally less acidly, he said, “I guess that would be a good idea.”

“Do you have any money?” Colette asked.

“Not Gald. Just some dollars and change.”

“Dollars and...?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, we do,” Colette said proudly.

“That's...great.”

“We'll lend you some!”

“Oh.” Astri smiled and flushed. “You don't have to...”

“No! You need new clothes, Mr. Astri, and we get lots of money as we go anyways.”

“Okay. Thank you, *very* much. And...Colette, *p/lease* don't call me Mr. Astri. It sounds weird. Astri works fine.”

“All right, Astri!” Colette smiled in that special way she had. “Mr. Kratos, where can we get clothes?”

Kratos sighed. “That building you fell through the first time we visited Triet sold clothes, Colette.”

Astri let out a shout of laughter that made people jump. “Oh, God! That's right! You fell through that wall!”

Colette went brick red. “It...was an accident...”

“It was brilliant! I almost died laughing when I saw that hole!” Astri looked around. “Oh my God! There it is!!!” He was laughing so hard he fell onto the ground, paralyzed by hysterics.

Colette covered her face. “Oh, stop it!”

Astri's laughter was infectious. Lloyd started laughing as well, and Colette's giggle soon joined them both. Even Kratos allowed himself a smile.

“Did you know they're going to make it Triet's tourist spot?” Astri gasped.

“They're *what?!*” Colette squeaked. “No...no they're not!”

“Yeah, they are, actually,” Lloyd admitted through his laughter.

“But I *fell* through it!”

“Exactly. They said...they said...” Astri couldn't breathe for laughing, “they said that it was the most perfect shape of the Chosen they could possibly get...BWAHAHAHA!!!”

“Enough,” Kratos said, although he was still smiling. “We're beginning to scare people. Let's move on.”

“All right...”

* * *

“No armor,” Astri said flatly. “I'm too skinny. It'll overwhelm me.”

Kratos shrugged irritably. "Make up your own mind, then."

"I was *doing that* when *you* put your two cents in. Why don't you and Lloyd go away and look at swords or something? Colette and I will handle this ourselves."

Colette pulled out a pair of bunny ears. "Oh, look at these! They're so cute!"

"Well, okay. *I'll* handle this by *myself*."

"Works for me." Lloyd suppressed a yawn. "Clothes...is there anything more boring in the world?"

"Cars."

"What?"

"Wretched invention in my world. Some people will stare at them for hours. But trust me, they're about as interesting as a grain of sand in the desert."

"And people *stare* at them?" Lloyd shook his head. "There are *weird* people in your world, Astri."

"You have *no* idea."

* * *

"Lloyd! Mr. Kratos! We're done!" Colette came running out of the store, bubbling all over with excitement, swinging the bag with Astri's old clothes in it so enthusiastically that she almost concussed an old man who had the misfortune to be within range.

Lloyd held up two wooden rings wrapped in leather. "Look, Colette! This guy customized this out of your old chakrams!"

"Oh, wonderful!" Colette didn't even look at the rings. "Look! This is better, right?"

Astri was with her, the slightest red in his cheeks. He was wearing a zipped-up black shirt with a design of hanging blue crystals across the front, a forest-green jacket with a multitude of pockets, and belted black pants with three belts around his upper left leg, and three others around his lower right leg. He had low black belted boots with one-third-inch heels, protective silver wrist bracers, and his necklace with the ring on it. Perhaps most noticeably, Colette had tied his hair back at the nape of his neck, leaving his bangs and a few side-locks artfully free. It was obviously Colette who had done it, because the tie holding his hair back was purple. A definite Colette-touch.

Lloyd gave Astri a cursory look. "Yeah, I guess."

Astri, noticing Kratos giving him a once-over, glared defiantly at him. "The glasses and the necklace stay."

"The glasses I don't care about. The necklace, however, is obviously foreign."

"I want to try something out with this necklace. It's not going anywhere."

Kratos groaned. The sun was giving him a headache. "Do what you want. At least you no longer stand out so much."

"It's kinda weird that this is *less* bizarre than what I was wearing before," Astri muttered.

"You look great!" Colette praised. "Doesn't he, Lloyd?"

Lloyd swallowed back his first response, since it was Colette he was talking to, and settled for muttering again, "Yeah, I guess."

Lloyd's lack of enthusiasm didn't even penetrate Colette's happy pride in having done something right. She led the way back to the inn, chattering happily about color and fabric and bunny ears and real bunnies and didn't that cloud look like a bunny and there was a mean bunny she and Raine had run into going to Triet and speaking of mean wasn't that guy Botta just so mean and that reminded her...

* * *

Genis met them at the door. "He's recovered consciousness."

Astri lunged forward. "*Really?!*"

Genis paused. "Who are you?"

Astri ran up the stairs to Raine's room and slammed inside.

"Wow, he looks different," Genis said.

Colette beamed. "I put his hair up."

* * *

"You're conscious!" Astri expostulated, then winced and covered his mouth. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have shouted."

"Wha...wha..." Monika's voice was dry and faint. "Wha....happnt?"

"He's only just become conscious," Raine said quietly. "I sent Genis to find you and tell you. But he's still very disoriented. Not a surprise, considering he's in another world now."

Monika just managed to turn his head to see Raine. "Wha...?"

"Monika," Raine said, softly but clearly. "You can hear me? You can understand me?"

The barest nod in reply.

“You are in another world, called Sylvarant, in a desert city called Triet. My name is Raine.” She pulled Astri forward. “This is Astri. He brought you here from your world to save your life.”

Astri flushed.

“World?” Monika coughed. “What—”

“Water,” Raine said. “I’ll go get some water. Explain it to him. You know what’s going on better than I do.”

She got up and left the room.

Astri hesitated, then sat down where Raine had been and swallowed. “You’re okay. I’m...so glad. I thought she—Lilith—had killed you.”

“Li...lith?”

“Lilith. The girl who stole Mano’s Crystal Heart from you?”

Monika shook his head vaguely. “What?”

“Lilith? Mano? Crystal Hea—” Astri stopped, and his hands flew to his mouth. “Oh my God. No.”

“What?” Monika looked up at Astri, true, pure confusion in his eyes. “Who’s Mano?”

The blow to the head.

You can’t change destiny.

Who’s Mano?

Oh God, no.

Astri burst into tears.

* * *

“He has *amnesia*?” Genis demanded.

Astri nodded miserably, the front of his new shirt stained with tears. “He...doesn’t remember anything about his world. About Mano—his friend, who died for him. Or about Lilith, the girl who almost...*killed* him...”

With sudden, terrifying violence, Astri whirled around and kicked the wall with all his strength. Genis and Colette jumped.

"Whoa! Calm down!" Lloyd entreated. "Don't break down the wall!"

"It's not *fair!!*" Astri yelled, ignoring the stares other inn guests were giving him. "Why do the bad guys *always* get the breaks like this?! The good guys lose *everything* trying to do the right thing! I hate this! I wish she was *dead!!* Her, and him *too!!*"

"What, Monika?" Genis asked, surprised.

"No, somebody *else*," Astri gritted out between his teeth. "This...it...it's not *fair!!* All this time...all the people trying to do good...and these...those...that..."

Vocabulary inadequate to finish his sentence, Astri settled for kicking the wall again. The whole inn shook.

"I—" Kratos began, but Astri whirled on him.

"Say I told you so and I will rip out your vocal cords and *force feed* them to you! Even if destiny *is* against me, I *will* get her for this! She stole Mano's heart and then she stole the memory of him from Monika! She needs to *die!!*"

"I don't think that was destiny," Kratos said quietly. "I think Monika's amnesia is a result of your trying to mess around with his world."

Astri stared at Kratos open-mouthed for a full fifteen seconds.

"*WHAT?*"

"I suppose in a way you could call it destiny," Kratos corrected himself. "But it's not destiny, as in what's supposed to happen. It's Destiny, stopping you from changing it."

"You...I...*what?!*"

"You're screwing other people up with your crusading," Kratos said bluntly. "You should stop before somebody dies because of it."

Astri stared at Kratos in furious disbelief. "I can't believe what you're telling me. You're saying I should *let* her get away?!"

"This Lilith is under the authority of whatever world she's in," Kratos said. "Just the way Colette is under the authority of this world, and you're under the authority of your own world. You're trying to interfere in things that don't concern you, and the more you mess around, the more you're going to hurt people."

Astri grabbed Colette's chakram and threw it at Kratos as hard as he could. Colette screamed, and Lloyd leapt forward, but Kratos moved just out of the way, and the chakram slammed into the wall behind him.

"You can attack me as much as you want," Kratos said. "It doesn't change the fact that you're—"

“SHUT UP!!!”

Astri ran out of the inn, slamming the door behind him.

“Smooth, Kratos!” Lloyd said sarcastically.

“Yeah, you're a real mediator,” Genis snapped.

“The more he tries to change things, the worse they're going to become,” Kratos said, unruffled despite the chakram embedded behind him. “If he tries to interfere here, he will have to go back to his own world, either by choice or by force.”

“Mr. Kratos—” Colette began, but Kratos cut her off.

“The journey of regeneration is far more important than his fantasies of heroism. I admire that he saved the other boy from death, but he can't continue to do this. It's none of his business.”

“But, Mr. Kratos—” Colette began.

“You couldn't have told him that?” Genis shook his head in disgust. “Maybe then you wouldn't have set him off like that! You made it sound like it was bad that he did what he did!”

“It was,” Kratos said.

“**NO!!!**” Colette shouted.

Everybody, even Kratos, jumped. Colette had her hands balled into fists up by her collar, and her shining, sparkling wings had come out on their own, causing the innkeeper to stare. Her long blonde hair practically crackled with electricity—her blue eyes were burning with determination.

“No!” Colette repeated. “He saved Monika's life! That was a good thing! I know it was! The amnesia, it's the bad girl's fault! She did this to him! Astri *is* doing good! I know he is, and it's *not* his fault!”

“C—Colette—” Lloyd began, but this time Colette cut him off.

“I know you're more experienced than we are, Mr. Kratos, but you're wrong this time! You have to be! Otherwise I shouldn't be trying to regenerate the world, I should just be leaving it alone to do as it will! And that's not right—so, so, neither is Astri letting Lilith kill people!”

It was impossible to argue with Colette. Even if you tried, she just wouldn't listen to anything that went against her mindset. Despite the short amount of time Kratos had known her, he had already figured out how stubborn she was.

He ran his hand through his unruly red hair. “...Maybe.”

Colette smiled and clasped her hands, righteous anger turned to joyous optimism. “Dwarven Vow

#7—Justice and Love Will Always Win.”

Lloyd groaned. “Please, Colette...stop saying that...”

“It's true! And I'm sure it's just as true for Mr. Astri as it is for us!”

This time Kratos joined in with Lloyd's sigh. “Maybe so...”

* * *

Night fell, and Astri still did not return to the inn. By the time the moon was visible from Lloyd's window, he and Colette were getting seriously worried.

“There might still be Desians in the area,” Lloyd muttered.

“I'm worried for him,” Colette said.

“You've been worried for the last hour,” Genis said, lounging on Lloyd's bed with one of Raine's books—Raine had kicked everybody out of her room while she saw to Monika. “If you're *really* so worried, why don't you go look for him?”

“Okay,” Colette said, heading purposefully for the door.

“Wait!” Lloyd grabbed Colette by the arm. “I'll go with you. It's dangerous for you to wander around alone.”

“She's turning into an *angel*, Lloyd,” Genis said. “I feel sorrier for anything that tries to attack *her*.”

“It's still not safe,” Lloyd said. “Besides, Kratos and the Professor'll jump down our throats if they know we let her go alone.”

Genis sighed. “Yeah, I guess...go ahead. Have fun.”

“Aren't *you* coming?”

“I'm busy.”

Lloyd rolled his eyes and led the way out of the room. Colette followed.

* * *

Astri wasn't outside the inn. He wasn't by the equipment shops, he wasn't near Noishe's paddock, and he wasn't around the Katz Exploration Team Booth.

All they found around the oasis was a dog.

“Oh!” Colette clapped her hands together. “Look Lloyd! A puppy-dog!”

Lloyd looked at it. "Yes, Colette, that *is* a dog."

"This little cutie feels like Cammy! His tail is so cute!"

"His tail?"

"Aww...!" Colette scratched the dog behind the ears. "Look at his tail! Heeheehee! It's so *cute!*"

"Colette, I thought we were looking for Astri?"

"Oh yeah..."

* * *

After they searched the food store Desert Rose and the fortune-teller's tent, Lloyd was ready to give up. Astri had probably gone to another world and wasn't here anymore anyway. But Colette kept searching, and Lloyd couldn't just leave her to look on her own.

"Colette..." Lloyd finally said, somewhere around midnight.

"Yes, Lloyd?"

"I know you want to find him, but if we spend too much more time looking for him, then you won't get any sleep at all tonight."

"Yes I will. It'll be okay, Lloyd. There's still about six hours of night left."

"But Colette, it's important that you rest! Remember what Remiel said about the angel transformation you're going through? You have to take it easy for a while, eat more, rest more, you know...that kind of stuff!"

Colette reflected on this for a minute.

"Besides, he's not anywhere here in Triet. We've searched everywhere. Maybe he went back to his own world...or maybe he went back to the inn while we were searching over here."

"That's true," Colette conceded. "Maybe he did..."

She pondered for a moment more.

"You're right, Lloyd. We should probably go back...but let me just take one last look around."

"Okay, but—"

Lloyd jumped back. Colette's wings had flashed back into existence, glowing like beautiful magenta flames in the moonlit shadows of the buildings. She flapped them once, experimentally, and accidentally

blew up a cloud of dust into Lloyd's eyes. By the time he could see again, Colette was up in the air, conducting an aerial scan of Triet.

“Colette...” Lloyd muttered. “What are we going to do with you...”

Then Colette yelled, “LLOYD! I CAN SEE HIM!”

Lloyd jumped. “What?! Where?!”

“WHAT?”

“WHERE IS HE?!”

“OH. OUT THERE, ON A SAND DUNE!” Colette pointed.

Lloyd looked in the direction she was pointing, and now that he was looking, he could indeed see a vague silhouette on one of the sand dunes not far from Triet.

“That idiot!” Lloyd grumbled, racing towards the dune. Overhead, Colette flew ahead, then fluttered down for a landing.

* * *

Astri was staring out over the undulating sand dunes, thinking about everything and nothing, when Colette fell out of the sky and hit the sand next to him like a bomb. Sand exploded everywhere like shrapnel, clearing to reveal Colette stuck head-first in the dune.

“Mmph,” Colette said intelligently.

“Good God! Colette?!” Astri grabbed her by the arms and yanked, popping her out like a cork from a winebottle. “Are you okay?!”

Colette was covered in sand, and the force of her landing had driven grains across her face with enough force to break the skin, but despite her sandied, bloodied state, she still smiled as brightly as ever.

“Sorry. I'm still working on landings.” She brushed sand off her shoulders, then looked at Astri, her smile fading into seriousness. “This is kind of sudden, but Astri, I need to ask you something.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you know about the journey of regeneration? Do you know what's going to happen?”

“To the world? Or to you?”

“To me.”

Astri nodded. “Yeah.”

Colette sighed, then grabbed Astri's hand in both of hers. "Don't tell Lloyd or Genis. Please don't, okay? I don't want them to worry. It's okay. I'm okay with it."

Astri grabbed Colette's hands with his other one. "No, *I'm* telling you it's okay. I won't tell Lloyd or Genis. But it's gonna be okay. The world'll be fine, and you *won't* have to die."

Colette smiled, but it wasn't her usual smile. "Thanks, Astri, but..."

"No, really, I mean it." Astri coughed. "I, um, wasn't totally honest with you about the story about you. I *have* gotten further than this. And I know it's gonna be okay." He smiled. "Dwarven Vow #7, right?" "Justice and Love Will Always Win," Colette replied.

"Despite what pessimists like Kratos say."

Colette's eyes began to burn with their determined fire again. "That's right. I think you're right too. I *know* you're doing good things, no matter what Kratos says. But..." The fire died down again, "I do think he is right, that you need to be careful with what you do. It's important that you make sure that you *don't* accidentally mess things up."

Astri sighed. "I know he was trying to be helpful, but..."

"Hey!" Lloyd had finally made it to the sand dune. "What've you been *doing* out here this whole time?!"

Astri and Colette dropped each other's hands and turned to face him.

"Thinking," Astri said.

"About what?" Then Lloyd noticed Colette's face. "Colette!!"

Colette jumped. "What?"

"Your face!"

Colette touched her face, and felt the blood seeping from a multitude of tiny sand-inflicted cuts. "Oops. It's because of my landing..."

"As soon as we get back, get Raine or Genis to look at those! You can't *do* things like that! If you get hurt, what'll the rest of us do?"

Colette giggled. "Okay. Thanks, Lloyd, for being concerned about me."

"Yeah, well...somebody has to be." He turned his attention back to Astri. "Thinking? All this time?"

"Pretty much," Astri said.

"About *what*?"

Although Astri looked at first like he might not answer, he sighed and did. "About what I'm going to do now. I need to make a plan. Maybe Kratos is right and maybe he isn't, but I'm still going to try to correct some of the things that go wrong and never get fixed in other worlds. I have to. I don't know if Hecate, Selene, and Artemis actually gave me the power for this..."

Astri took the penny out of his new, black pocket and held it up.

"...but *something* did, and I think it *wants* me to fix things like Lilith and...other people. Otherwise, why give *me* this thing? I'm not the kind of person who can let things like Lilith slide. I can't go to worlds to sightsee and have fun while terrible things happen. So why would they give an interfering person this thing unless they *wanted* interference?"

"Yes! That's true!" Colette exclaimed.

Lloyd didn't look so convinced. "I guess, but..."

"Either way, though, I definitely need to figure out what I'm doing next *before* I start doing things," Astri said. "Otherwise I'll be proving Kratos right. Which I'm not going to do."

"So you've been out here on this sand dune for hours, thinking up a plan of action?"

Astri shrugged. "Kind of. I've been thinking about the things I *really* want to change, you know? And what I can do about them. Monika and Lilith are one of them. But there are other things, too. I haven't really figured out what to do, though. And besides...I'd like to go with you guys for a little while."

Lloyd did a double-take. "What? With us?"

"Yeah. Change of scenery's always been the best way for me to get ideas. I'd say world-jumping is a pretty definite change of scenery. So, if it's okay with you and Colette, then I'd like to go a little ways with you."

Colette clapped her hands. "Of course! We'd love to have you. Right, Lloyd?"

About this, Lloyd *definitely* wasn't convinced, but Colette was. Who was he to override her?

"Yeah," he muttered. "I guess."

* * *

"I don't like him," Lloyd informed Genis when they came back to the inn.

Because Raine still refused to let anyone else in the room while she was making sure Monika didn't have some kind of relapse, the rooming arrangements had been rearranged. So Colette, Kratos, and Astri were sleeping in one room, and Genis and Lloyd were sleeping in another one.

"He's acting all heroic and everything," Lloyd said, pacing the floor. "With his whole crusade with other worlds. And he's got Colette totally caught up in it. She totally believes everything he says."

Genis sighed. He was almost done with Raine's book, and didn't really want to listen to Lloyd complain. "Isn't it possible that *he* actually believes everything he's saying?"

"What are you talking about? Nobody wants to spend their life fixing other people's."
"Colette does."

"Colette's special. She's the Chosen. She's an angel. She's...she's...well, she's Colette!"

"Don't you think that being given special powers by the gods of his world makes him kind of a Chosen as well?" Genis turned the page. "Except instead of a Chosen to save his world, a Chosen to save other people's worlds?"

"He's not saving worlds! He's trying to save...*people!*"

Genis groaned and threw aside the book. "You don't like him because he acts just like you do, and because Colette likes him. Admit it, Lloyd, you're *jealous*."

"I am NOT!"

"You try to save people too," Genis pointed out. "What about Marble?"

At this, Lloyd became very quiet.

"I only helped her for you," he said finally.

"To you, she was just a person." Genis felt a lump in his throat thinking about Marble, the old woman who had been transformed into a monster by the Desians and forced to attack the village of Iselia, but he swallowed it and pursued his advantage. "You just felt bad for her, because she was in trouble. You helped her because she was a good person who needed help. Is it really so hard for you to accept that Astri might be doing the same thing?"

Lloyd turned away. "Then why's he here now, instead of with Marble, when he could have helped *us*?"

"I don't think he controls when he goes, just where. He said he says where he wants to go, and he goes. He doesn't get to choose when."

"He saved Monika."

"I don't know, Lloyd!" Genis snapped, his patience at an end. "Go ask him!"

He snatched up his book and disappeared into the pages again. Lloyd stayed where he was, fighting to untangle his feelings about Astri's motives...but what Genis had said was sending streams of doubt through his idea that Astri was hero-mongering.

"Night, Genis," Lloyd said at last.

“Good night, Lloyd.”

* * *

Ready to bolt in case Raine was as violent as she had been when Genis had tried to go into the room, Astri knocked lightly on Raine's door.

“Come in.”

No shouts, screams, death-threats, or objects traveling at high velocity. So far, so good. Astri opened the door and sidled in.

Raine was sitting in the same chair she'd been sitting in since yesterday, looking tired and wan but happy. The reason for her happiness was obvious. Monika was sitting up, the blood cleaned off his face, eating a bowl of soup with a speed never seen outside of anime.

Astri let out a long sigh of shaky relief. “He's okay?”

“He's fine,” Raine said. “It was pretty touch-and-go yesterday, and he almost had a relapse last night, but thanks to a little rest and a whole lot of magic, he's pretty much recovered.” She paused. “Well...”

“Except for his memory,” Astri murmured.

“Yes.”

Monika looked up from the soup bowl, which was now empty. “Hey, you're the kid who I saw yesterday when I woke up.”

“Yeah,” Astri said. “My name's...Astri.”

“Astri. Raine says you saved me from somewhere.” Raine took the empty bowl from him. “She also says I have amnesia because somebody threw me into a wall.”

Astri's insides clenched. “Yes. A girl named Lilith. She also stole your friend's heart from you.”

Monika paused. “What?”

“You had a friend...named Mano, who gave you his heart. Literally, took it out and gave it to you. It was crystallized—it was something called the Crystal Heart—and he died to give it to you—and Lilith *stole* it and left you for dead.”

This hurt. That he had to *explain* to Monika the sacrifice that had been made for him...things like dying for your friend's happiness shouldn't be forgotten. Astri took a deep breath and pushed his bangs out of his eyes.

“Damn,” Monika muttered. “She stole this thing from me?”

“Yeah.”

“Where is she?”

“She's still in your world,” Astri said, digging his nails into his palm to stop himself from crying again. “Somewhere. I couldn't go after her. I had to save you first.”

“What's my world?”

“I...” Astri stared at him. “You can't remember your *world*?”

“I didn't even remember my name until she told me,” Monika said, indicating Raine.

“He has complete amnesia,” Raine said. “I think it's partially concussion-related, and partially traumatic. He can't remember anything, about himself or anything about his life before coming here.”

Astri gaped. “You're kidding. Please tell me you're kidding.”

Raine shook her head. “No. But he *is* alive, and likely to remain that way.”

“Which I guess I have you to thank for,” Monika said. Then, somewhat awkwardly, “Thanks.”

“No,” Astri said. “Don't thank me yet.” His hands were coiling into fists. “I'm going to get your memory back. I'm going to get Lilith. And I'm going to get you back Mano's heart. Just wait. I'll fix this for you. Promise.”

* * *

“I wanted to ask all of you if Monika and I could travel with you for a little ways.”

Colette, Astri, and Kratos' room being the largest, they had all met in there, even Raine, after a little nagging. Monika was still in Raine's room, by himself, decimating a mountain of food that Genis and the innkeeper had prepared for him. He would be fine on his own for a little while, as Genis had to constantly remind Raine.

“I know I'm not part of the Chosen's guardians,” Astri continued. “I know I'm not even from this world. I know you definitely weren't expecting to have to deal with me and Monika after today. But I would like to try and help Colette a little, to pay you all back for helping us. Also, Monika doesn't remember anything about anything, and I'd like to be with strong people I can trust for now until Monika remembers basic things like the color of the sky. So, please. Let me—us—come with you, just to Palmacosta.”

“I'm not sure if Monika should be journeying just yet,” Raine said, her eyes flickering to the wall between this room and hers. “In fact, I'm not really sure if he should be—”

“He's fine, Raine,” Genis said.

“I think it's a good idea!” said, to nobody's surprise, Colette. “The more people we have with us, the

safer we'll be, right?"

"Not necessarily," Kratos said. "Having two otherworlders who know nothing about our world is far more likely to be a disadvantage than a protection. Can you fight?"

"Not really," Astri admitted. "We don't much, on my world."

"Can Monika?"

"He definitely shouldn't be fighting!" Raine exploded. "Not until he's recovered a great deal more!"

"He's *fine*, Raine," Genis said.

"He used to be able to," Astri said. "He used to be really good at martial arts. But...er...now that he has amnesia...I don't know."

Kratos groaned. "Two helpless otherworlders tagging along on the journey of regeneration. You are the last thing we need. Why don't you go back to your own world until Monika recovers, where it's obviously safer for you?"

"Because if something happens and Monika relapses, then I don't know if I could find you guys again! It was the sheerest luck I came out in Triet right in front of you! That's why I want to go with you—if something happens, I know where you are!"

"Monika needs to be with somebody who knows how to heal!" Raine said. "Otherwise, who knows what could happen?! He could be suffering a relapse right now, and—"

"*He's fine, Raine.*"

"It's my duty as the Chosen to help all people," Colette said. "That's why I'm trying to regenerate Sylvarant—to help people. Shouldn't I help them as well?"

Kratos rubbed his temple with his left hand and sighed. "If you want to help them, I suppose I can't dissuade you."

"What do you think, Lloyd?" Colette asked, turning to him. "You agree with me, right?"

Lloyd groaned. "Yeah...I guess..."

"See? Lloyd thinks it's a good idea, too!"

"I second the notion," Raine said. "And now, if that's decided, I'd better go check on—"

"HE'S FINE, RA—"

Raine smacked Genis and swept out of the room.

* * *

"It's okay with you, right? If we go with them for a while?"

Monika nodded. "Sure. They seem nice enough."

Astri thought of Kratos. "Well...most of them are."

"Hey, um..." Monika hesitated. "...This is trouble for you, isn't it?"

"What, you?" Astri shook his head. "Uh-uh. I hate Lilith. I was going to go after her anyways."

"Why? Did she steal something from you?"

"No..." Astri started to flush. "It's just because of what she did to you."

"So it is because of me."

"Well, yeah...but don't worry about it. It's not like you're forcing me or anything. I want to help get people like Lilith. I hate them."

Raine, having summarily vanquished poor, interfering Genis and left him comatose on the inn floor, suddenly slammed the door open. "HEY! Get outta here! I'm doing my last-minute checkup before we leave! Out! OUT!!"

Astri fled.

* * *

Colette was beside herself with joy. "Astri! Hey! Look what we found for Monika! Look! Look!"

Lloyd, the unwilling carthorse, was holding metal arm- and leg-bracers.

"You said Monika always fought with his fists before, so we got these for him, and also *these!*" Colette proudly held up a pair of brass knuckles. "I have no idea what they are, but the customizer said they were good for fist-fighters!"

"They're brass knuckles, Colette," Lloyd said.

"Yeah, that's it!"

Astri bowed his head. "Thank you so much for buying all of this stuff for us. I'll make it up to you somehow. Promise."

Lloyd rolled his eyes.

* * *

And so, with much fuss and ado (mostly from Raine,) the group moved out into the Triet Desert, heading east towards Ossa Trail. Although Monika had put on the arm- and leg-bracers, he had no memory of ever fighting anything, and the expression on his face when Colette gave him the brass knuckles could only be described as blank.

“That's okay,” Colette said, impossible to bring down for long. “You'll figure out what to do with them sooner or later.”

It turned out to be sooner. When the group accidentally ran into a pack of Bandits, one managed to sneak through the fighting barrier of Lloyd, Colette, Genis, Raine, and Kratos to lunge at Monika. Before anybody had any idea what was going on—including Monika—he had landed a crippling kick to the side of the man's head, and slammed another under his chin that sent him flying fifteen feet.

Everybody watched the Bandit's trajectory open-mouthed.

“I think it's coming back to you,” Astri said.

2 - Sylvarant, Act Two

Part One: Sylvarant

Disclaimers: Demon Diary, Tales of Symphonia, Growlanser, xxxHolic, and Kiddy Grade all contributed to this chapter, though not to the characters of Astri, Hecate, Selene, or Artemis, who are all MINE.

Part One, Act Two

"Ossa Trail," Kratos said succinctly.

The trail, the main route between Triet and the port town of Izoold, wound up into the mountains at a steep, but constant, incline. Just lately it had been closed to the public due to a sudden influx of monsters, but it still retained the look of a well-kept trail for civilian use.

Except for the monsters swarming all over it.

"So this is Ossa Trail," Astri said, feeling somewhat giddy. To think that he would actually be here, standing on the real Ossa Trail... "It's pretty cool."

Lloyd slanted a glance at him. "Cool? It's a *trail*."

"But a cool trail."

Lloyd and Kratos both rolled their eyes, united for once by common disdain.

"STOP!!" came a sudden shout.

Kratos sighed. "Trouble."

Out of nowhere leapt a young woman with pale skin, black hair, and slanted brown eyes. She was clad in periwinkle blue ninja garb with black tights and a huge pink *obi* sash; her hair was tied up with a small pink ribbon; and her name was...

"Sheena!" Astri shouted.

Sheena, who indeed she was, jumped. "What?! Do I know you?"

"No, but I know you! I've seen you!" Astri smacked himself in the head. "Duh! Ossa Trail...of course!"

“Of course what?” Lloyd demanded.

“Well, that Sheena would be here.”

“Who is she?”

“Ask her. I just said I've seen her.”

“What are you talking about?” Sheena looked totally lost.

“Who *are* you?” Genis asked.

“I am...an assassin! I am war and battle and everlasting torment!”

Astri almost choked on laughter. “Really? Well, as a handle, that's pretty unwieldy. What do your friends call you?”

Sheena looked blank, then, unwillingly, she said, “Sheena Fujibayashi.”

Colette clapped her hands. “What a pretty name!”

Sheena blushed brick red. “S...shut up! It's not a pretty name!”

“Fascinating!” Raine muttered. “It sounds rather like the names of Hima...but your accent, it is completely different. And those clothes! I've never seen such a design!” Her eyes began to glow. “Where *do* you come from? It can't be any of the places I know about. You must be from a far-distant land!”

“Well, kind of, but—” Sheena shook her head furiously. “*That's not the point—*”

“Let's be friends, Sheena!” Colette said eagerly.

Sheena crashed over backwards. “*What?!*”

Colette winced. “Ooh, Sheena, you really shouldn't fall on your head like that. Last time I did that, I had a bump on my head for weeks.”

Lloyd snorted. “And we used the table you fell *on* for *matchwood*.”

Colette blushed. “Yes, that's true.”

“*ENOUGH!!*” Sheena squawked. “I am an *assassin*! I'm here to *kill* you!!”

Everybody face-faulted except for Astri, who nodded. “Oh yeah. I forgot that minor detail.”

“*MINOR?!?!!*” Lloyd squawked, sounding like Sheena.

“Yeah...Sheena wants to kill Colette for some reason...”

“THAT'S NOT MINOR!!!”

“Die, Chosen!” Sheena shouted, charging Colette.

Lloyd grabbed for his swords. Genis flipped out his kendama. Astri made a grab for Colette, to yank her out of the way, and missed. Sheena pulled out a long, thin ninja sword. Colette screamed and fell over backwards.

Her flailing arm hit a switch.

Suddenly the ground underneath Sheena opened up. With a scream, she plummeted into darkness.

There was a resounding *crash*.

“Ow,” Monika said.

Everybody ran to the edge of the pit Colette had accidentally dropped Sheena into.

“OW!” came Sheena's voice from the pit.

Colette sighed with relief. “Oh good! She's alive!”

Lloyd face-faulted. “I don't think that's a good thing if she's trying to kill you, Colette...”

“Why on earth would she try to kill the Chosen?” Raine demanded. “Doesn't she know that her life depends on the journey of regeneration?”

“I suggest we ask the person who first knew her,” Kratos said.

All eyes turned to Astri.

Astri waved his hands in the anime-gesture of absolving guilt. “Don't look at me! I have *no* idea why she *wants* to kill Colette! I just know she does!”

“You knew she was going to be here,” Kratos said. “But you didn't tell us.”

“I *did* know, but I forgot!”

“You said you only knew what happened up until we returned to Triet.”

Oops. But... “Yeah. Know what *happens*. I know about some of the people that come later, though. Before the actual story, there are all of these little bio-like things on you guys, and she's there. So I read about her.”

Kratos' eyes bored into Astri. "I think you know more than you're telling."

That was it. Astri snapped. "*You* have secrets too, *Kratos*. Like that one that you *really* ought to tell *Lloyd*?"

Kratos' eyes widened, almost imperceptively. But it was enough. Astri saw it, and knew he had scored.

"What?" Lloyd asked, thrown. "Me?"

"Something about Lloyd's *father*, maybe?"

"My—what?" Lloyd looked at Kratos. "What about my dad?"

Kratos looked at Astri, then turned away.

"Hey! Wait! Kratos, what about my dad?"

"That assassin will probably be back soon," Kratos said. "There might be an exit from the mineshaft Colette dropped her into."

"I dropped her into a mineshaft?" Colette asked, astonished.

"I would assume so. Ossa Trail was built over a mine to enable easy transportation of the ore to both Triet and Izoold. However, the mine was likely abandoned when the trail was closed off."

"Oh dear." Colette leaned as far over the mineshaft as she dared and cupped her hands around her mouth. "I'M SORRY, SHEENA!!!"

A reply drifted up on the darkness of the hole. The politest it could have been was, "*Get lost!*"

"If there is an exit, she is sure to find it sooner or later," Kratos said. "I would suggest that we split up into two groups. Raine and I will go after the assassin, take care of her before she can find Colette again, and exit the mineshaft on the other side. Lloyd, Genis, take Colette, Astri, and Monika to the other side and wait for us there."

"Kratos!" Lloyd yelled.

Kratos ignored him. "Raine, are you coming?"

"I suppose, but..." Raine cast a worried glance at the others.

"They'll be fine," Kratos said.

"No! Wait! Kratos—"

Kratos jumped into the hole and vanished.

“Dammit!” Lloyd groaned.

Raine laid a cautioning hand on Lloyd's shoulder. This was so unlike her that Lloyd stopped and stared up at her, confused.

“Lloyd, don't bother Kratos too much,” Raine murmured. “You know there are secrets everyone must keep from others. Leave it.”

Before Lloyd could force out an answer—he wasn't sure whether it would be, “I understand,” or “Keep your nose out of it”—Raine jumped into the mineshaft and disappeared from view.

Lloyd stared at the hole for a moment, then swung around at Astri.

“No,” Astri said, blushing furiously. “I shouldn't...I hate saying this, but I shouldn't have brought that up.”

“Well, you did! So what are you talking about?!”

“I'm sorry. Kratos was just...” Astri swallowed. “Sorry, Lloyd, but you have to wait. He'll tell you eventually. But that's his business, not mine. So...just wait, okay? He'll tell you, I know he tells you sometime.”

Lloyd stared at Astri for a disbelieving moment, then stormed away from the hole, biting his tongue to hold back the oaths he longed to throw at Astri, Kratos, and the whole rest of the uncooperative world.

“I'm sorry,” Colette said to Astri, looking worried and apologetic. “It'll be okay. He'll be okay. He just doesn't like not knowing what's going on.”

“Yeah, but this' my fault,” Astri muttered. “I...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get him mad...”

“That's all very well and good,” Genis said. “But I can think of one way to get him madder. Making him come back for us.”

The four of them looked up and saw Lloyd tramping up the hill of Ossa Trail, sullen anger in every line of him.

“Good point,” Astri said hurriedly, and they ran after him.

* * *

“Hey Genis,” Astri said after Lloyd, Colette, Genis, and Monika had managed to bring down a very large Bear that didn't look anything like an Earthian conception of a bear except for its size.

“Yeah?”

“Can you teach me magic?”

“Magic?”

“Yeah. I *think* I can get this ring—” he shook the one on his necklace “—to turn into a weapon, if I work at it, but in case that doesn't work...can you teach me some magic?”

Genis shrugged. “Maybe. Do you have any magical talent? Lloyd doesn't.”

“I heard that!”

“I don't know. On my world, nobody uses magic.”

“Nobody?!” Lloyd, Colette, and Genis all exclaimed at once.

“I know. It sucks.”

“Well, that's not very good news for your magical career,” Genis said. “Although, you did manage to enchant that penny...but that was with help from your goddesses...”

The small blue-haired boy fell into quiet reflection, while Lloyd and Colette chopped busily away at an attacking Mandragora.

“I've got an idea,” Genis said suddenly. “Ask Colette to help you.”

“Colette?”

“Me?” Colette stopped attacking the Mandragora and got walloped by a tree root.

“If your world doesn't use magic, you probably can't either,” Genis said while Colette flew. “But you were able to call on your goddesses, right? Colette does something like that with her Angel Feathers spell. She can probably help you.”

“If she didn't just get a concussion from that fall of hers.”

* * *

Mandragora disposed of and Apple Gel medicine administered to Colette's bruise, it didn't take long for the blonde Chosen to understand what Astri was asking her to do.

“Let's try on this rock,” Colette suggested, moving a safe distance away from it. “Come over here and stand next to me...and you three should stand back. The first time I called on angel power, I had *no* idea what was going to happen.”

“And you ended up clobbering that Fake with it,” Genis said.

“Yes. It might be dangerous.”

Genis, Lloyd, and Monika moved a safe distance away from Colette and Astri, although from Lloyd's face, it was obvious that leaving Colette and Astri next to each other was the last thing he wanted to do.

“Okay. Concentrate *really really* hard on your heart,” Colette instructed. Unconsciously, her wings shimmered into reality behind her. “Think about love, and spirit, and friendship, and protection. Think about right, and light, and holy power. Think about how you want to protect the people you love.”

Astri faced the rock, closed his eyes, and focused all his being on one goal. *Hecate, Selene, Artemis...I'm begging you, please help me KILL Lilith and Muraki and the other people who play with the lives of innocents...please...*

He continued to focus. Nothing happened.

“Hmm,” Colette said. “That worked for me. What are you thinking about?”

“I'm asking Hecate, Selene, and Artemis to help me *kill* Lilith.”

“Oh,” Colette murmured. “That might be the problem.”

Astri opened his eyes. “How?”

“Don't think about it *that* way. Think about it in the positive light.” Colette fluttered her wings and glided around behind Astri. One light sweep, and she rose into the air slightly, until she was hovering just above and behind him. Leaning down, she wrapped her arms around his neck and put her chin on his head. “Think about how much you want to *help* Monika. Think about how much you want to *rescue* his friend's heart. Think about your *love*, not your *hate*, and ask the goddesses for strength to protect it.”

Astri closed his eyes again, feeling the soft sparkling of stardust from Colette's wings breeze over his face and shoulders. Love, not hate. Monika, not Lilith. Focus...focus...focus...

Unbidden, words rose on his breath.

“Hecate, goddess of witchcraft and sorcery, lend me your power...Defy the laws of physics, and deliver unto me a Miracle of Magic...”

The air tensed with energy, and Astri raised his hands towards the rock Colette had indicated as their target. Two last words rolled out of his mouth, bringing with them a sudden blazing warmth, as though Astri were speaking hot coals instead of words.

“Release Gravity.”

The rock suddenly inversed color—a startling transformation that made Genis and Monika yelp—and exploded up into the sky like a rocket. Its sudden vacuum sucked air past Colette and Astri's clothes, making them whip as though in a gale. Astri opened his eyes, looked around, and lowered his hands.

“What just happened?”

The rock came plummeting back down to earth and slammed into the ground directly in front of Astri's feet with so much force that it shattered into the traditional thousand pieces. Astri and Colette both

screamed and fell over backwards as gravel ricocheted up and off them.

“*Colette!!!*” Lloyd shouted, running towards her.

Astri and Colette were both sprawled over the ground, their eyes dancing in wild spirals, covered in a thin coat of fine gravel.

“That was...pretty impressive,” Genis managed.

“That was just plain damn weird,” Monika said.

* * *

“*Release Gravity!*” Astri shouted.

A huge rock flew right into a Axe Beak's...well...beak, smashing it down to the ground. Astri did a victory dance. “Yes! One-hit K.O.! All right!”

Monika watched Astri with mixed feelings, but he didn't have time to think them through at the moment. The Axe Beak had not been alone, and the rest of its flock was becoming angrier with each fowl that fell.

It was weird, though, Monika took time to note as he blocked an Axe Beak's beak with his arm-bracers, how his mind was working. He couldn't remember anything about anything before he woke up and first vaguely saw Raine. And Astri. But his mind was snapping out orders—like now, as he kicked out into the Axe Beak's feathers. His mind *knew* what it was doing. It had not forgotten anything. It was just choosing not to inform him.

“Look out!” Lloyd yelled, blocking another Axe Beak with his sabers.

Monika whirled around, but Lloyd had this one well in control. Leaving one saber to hold the Axe Beak where it stood, struggling to break the blade, he swept the other around underneath and hit the bird's feathery chest. The Axe Beak broke away, and Lloyd brought both his swords down.

“*Beast!*”

A huge, ephemeral wolf's-head of dancing, translucent energy came together out of nowhere—seemingly from Lloyd's sword—and lunged at the Axe Beak. The Axe Beak squawked, but the wolf's-head went for its throat, and went right through it, snarling and snapping at the air. Its very passage seemed to harm the Axe Beak in some way, for it recoiled, clearly in pain.

Lloyd brought his swords around in a powerful, slicing sweep, and slew the Axe Beak where it stood.

“What?” Lloyd snapped, looking back at Monika. “This isn't a good time to stare like an idiot.”

Monika glared. “Who's an idiot? I was just curious about that wolf thing you just did.”

“What, Beast?” Lloyd almost looked surprised, but remembered he didn't like Astri and therefore

Monika by association. "It's just a Tech attack."

"A what?"

The only thing Lloyd liked more than food was battle. So, clearly called upon to talk about the major love of his life, even by someone he considered just above an enemy and even in the middle of a fight, he couldn't resist showing off his knowledge. "Tech Attacks. Technique Attacks. They're special abilities we *Sylvarant* people use by tapping into mana."

Monika just held back a *Well, excuse me for not being from Sylvarant*. "So what's Beast?"

"Release of fighting spirit through the channel of mana. Well, that's what Raine says."

"Fighting spirit." Monika considered, and hit out reflexively at a charging Axe Beak. "Could I do it?"

Lloyd blinked, then actually thought about it and shrugged. "I dunno. Guess you could try. Colette got *him* to do stuff, so..."

Monika looked over at Astri, and saw him and Colette casting spells back-to-back. Looking at their faces, it was obvious neither of them were at all aware of the other. Looking at Lloyd's face, it was obvious he didn't care. Astri was too close to Colette, and that was all he noticed.

"So," Monika said. "What do you do with it?"

"With it? Hit things." Lloyd *did* notice Monika's expression. "Oh, to do it? Nothin` much. Just focus, basically. What's your favorite animal?"

Monika hesitated, and answered unwillingly. "I...don't...remember."

Goddammit, not being able to remember irked him more than having lost the memories. If that made any sense *at all*.

"Oh, duh." Lloyd considered. "Do you even remember what animals are?"

"Yes," Monika gritted between his teeth.

"Like what?"

Monika opened his mouth, then paused. "Um..."

"Do you know what a dog is?"

A picture of a dog popped into Monika's mind. "Yes."

"A cat?"

"Yeah..."

"Name another one."

Monika tried. "Umm..."

"Huh," Lloyd muttered. "You don't know them until I say `em. Weird."

Monika flushed, and took refuge in pounding another Axe Beak.

"Okay. I guess it'd work anyway. Just...what was it Colette said?"

"Right and light and holy power?"

"Ugh. No. Er...oh yeah. Just focus on your heart. Think about...hey, I got it. Think about yourself as a predator, and the enemy as your prey. Then just..."

Lloyd roared, "*Beast!!*" and threw his spiritual wolf at another Axe Beak.

Monika stared at him, then shook his head. "Maybe I'll work on that later..."

* * *

"This' the end of Ossa Trail," Lloyd said. "Where're Raine and Kratos?"

Ossa Trail, after wending its way up and down the mountains onto the Izoold side, petered out into a little plateau cut out of the side of the mountain, probably by whoever had first begun to dig the Ossa mines. A last gasp of the trail led off the plateau, down onto the grass of the fields of Sylvarant, but if Raine and Kratos had found their way out, this was surely where they would be. In the side of the mountain, at the edge of the plateau, was a boarded-up mine entrance.

Genis pondered. "I suppose it's possible there's another way out of the mines and they came out there by accident, but that's not so likely. Probably they went off the beaten track going after that girl Sheena, and are trying to find their way here now."

"Are they lost?" Colette asked.

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"Not really," Astri said. "I mean, that was the general meaning, but I can see why you might have confused people."

Lloyd gritted his teeth. Self-confident patronizing jerk.

"Well, what should I have said?"

"That they're lost?" Monika suggested.

"They're lost?" Colette asked.

"Yeah, Colette, they're lost," Genis said.

"Oh no! We have to go find them!" Colette strode purposefully back the way she had come.

"No, Colette!" Genis shouted. "They're lost *in there!* And Kratos told us to wait here!"

"I know, but..." Colette hesitated. "If they got lost..."

"I said they *probably* got lost, not that they were *definitely*—"

The huge barrier of boards blocking the mine entrance crashed forward onto the ground. Behind them was none other than Sheena.

"Miss Sheena!" Colette exclaimed.

"You again!" Genis looked almost impressed. "Did you evade Kratos and my sister?"

But Monika was noticing something strange about Sheena this time around. Her eyes were downcast, and she seemed strangely listless—yet at the same time, tense. He paused a moment to log a question to his brain about how he could tell, but his brain ignored him.

"Is something wrong, Sheena?" Astri asked, worried. He was picking up the same signs Monika was.

"You're...you look...odd."

"...off."

"What?" Lloyd asked.

Suddenly Sheena's head snapped up, her eyes narrowed in fury.

"*I said, you're pissing me off!!*" she screamed. "All your idiotic little condescending worries! I don't give a damn about you...and none of you do about me!! You're selfish bastards!! And *you!!*" Sheena whirled on Colette, who had her hands to her mouth. "You...I can't *stand* you! Trying to be friendly...trying to be so good, so *nice*...did you *think* I couldn't see right through you?!"

"Sheena, I—" Colette stuttered.

"SHUT UP!!" Sheena shrieked. "I'm going to kill you—NOW!!"

Lloyd whirled on Astri like Sheena had on Colette. "*What happened to her?!*"

"I don't know!" Astri shook his head, his face torn by shock. "She's...not supposed to be like this!"

Then Sheena moved out into the light, and Astri gasped.

On her back, fluttering gently, were two feathery, shoulder-length angel's wings.

"OH MY GOD!!" Astri screamed.

"What are those?" Lloyd stared at them, then whirled on Astri again, then on Genis, then, helplessly, Colette. "They look like Remiel's wings...except smaller..."

"They're not wings!" Astri yelled. "Well...they are...but they don't have anything to do with Remiel! They're evil! They're from xxxHolic! They're...they're...they're *ko*!"

"DON'T CALL ME NAMES!!" Sheena roared, pulling out a handful of ofudas from her sash. "Corrine, Guardians of the Elements, come forth!!"

She flung the ofudas down onto the ground. Smoke exploded up from them, hiding Sheena from view—then, out of the smoke, loomed four huge figures. Four huge Guardians—one earth, one wind, one fire, one water—levitated out of the cloud and stared at the group with expressionless, pupilless eyes.

Then a little voice demanded from inside the smoke, "Sheena, what do you think you're doing? You didn't sound at all like yourse—what are those things on your ba—*KO?!?!'*"

The smoke cleared somewhat, enough to reveal a small, brilliantly-colored, fox-like creature with three aquamarine tails and paws wrapped in pale lilac flame, backing away from Sheena, its hackles raised.

"You've been possessed by a *ko*!" the fox snarled.

"What the heck are *ko*?" Lloyd and Genis both demanded.

"*Ko* are evil spirits—servants—I don't really know exactly what they are!" Astri snapped. "But they steal people's souls!"

"They do *what*?" Colette gasped. "Then—Miss Sheena—her—?"

"She's still *got* her soul. For now. *Ko* paralyze a person's ability to...to moderate, to brush things off. Now if you even *look* at her, she'll think you're insulting her!"

"STOP TALKING ABOUT ME!!" Sheena snarled.

"See?!"

The wings twitched, then suddenly grew. Now they were about as large as Colette's, although there the resemblance ended. Colette's wings were beautiful, colorful veils of light which shone from her back like a light from her heart. These wings were plain, white, feathery—the perfect symbol of angel wings in every way—yet somehow there was something ominous about them, their plainness, their stillness, the way they stirred just barely in the breeze, like a seedpod containing a demonic sprout.

"We have to destroy them," Astri said. "Once they grow to full size, they'll leave her body, and take her soul with it. There's no way to get it back once that happens."

“Even if we kill it?” Lloyd demanded.

“We have to kill it *while* it's still in her body! Otherwise her soul will vanish!”

“Sheena, snap out of it!” the little fox-thing shouted. “You know *ko* are evil! Don't let it—”

Sheena's foot shot out and caught the little fox in the side. “SHUT UP!! You're *my* summon spirit, Corrine! Now get *out* there and help me KILL HER!!”

Her wrath-filled brown eyes fixed on Colette with a malice that made the smaller blonde girl physically recoil.

“Sheena...” the little fox, which was obviously Corrine, panted. “You...”

Sheena brandished a handful of ofudas, and with a wordless shriek of rage, lunged for Colette.

* * *

Lloyd and Astri both jumped into her way. Lloyd slashed his swords at the ofuda cards, trying to destroy them and perhaps weaken Sheena's power, but his metal blades clanged off the ofudas as though off rocks. Disoriented, Lloyd stumbled, and Sheena slammed a card into the side of his head, sending him flying to the side.

Astri grabbed the ring on his necklace.

In less time than it takes to tell it, the ring shimmered and warped, lengthening into a long, slender shape in Astri's hand. Light flashed, crystallized, glittered suddenly as metal in the sun. Sheena slammed her ofudas down, and found them slamming against a long, slender sword with a silvery blade, the hilt wrapped in brown leather and crisscrossed with ivy.

Astri's eyes widened. “I did it!”

“No time for congratulations!” Genis yelled, flipping out his kendama. “*Hold* her!”

But Sheena had the strength of fury on her side. She grabbed the sword with her bare hand, ignoring as the blade bit into her palm and ran strawberry droplets down to the hilt, and used her other hand to backhand Astri across the face. Astri fell to the ground with a yelp, and the sword flashed across Sheena's hand, slashing deep to her bones. Sheena didn't so much as blink.

Colette, still in shock from the hatred in Sheena's eyes, fumbled for her chakrams. Too late. Sheena had out another ofuda in her slashed hand. Blood stained the white paper red as she swung it high.

“*Fire Ball!*”

Three blazing spheres of flame rocketed into Sheena's back, right into the wings. Sheena was sent reeling sideways, and her ofudas, slippery in her bloodied hand, fluttered out into the air. This brought

Colette back to herself. She jumped into the air, and her wings blossomed from her back, flapping quickly to give her the altitude to land into relative safety next to Genis.

“Nice landing,” Genis said.

“Thanks. I've been practicing.”

“GUARDIANS!!” Sheena shouted, whirling to see Colette and Genis. “Attack the kid and the girl!!”

Astri grabbed Sheena's leg and yanked her off her feet. She hit the ground facefirst and rose spitting dirt.

The wings swelled in size.

“YOU BASTARD!!” Sheena screamed, rounding on Astri.

“Colette!” Astri screamed. “Use Angel Feathers on the wings! Lloyd, Monika, protect her!”

“DIE!!” Sheena shrieked, pulling out the ninja sword she had had before and lunging down.

Astri rolled, trying to evade the slashing edge of the knife. Sheena hit the ground, and much faster than anybody should be able to move, slid forward across the soil. The blade caught the edge of Astri's arm and ripped down, opening a cut all the way down his forearm.

Astri screamed. That *hurt*. Somehow, no matter how much you tried to imagine how much it could hurt being attacked by a crazy ninja with a knife, you couldn't even come *close* to the reality.

At Astri's scream, Monika stopped his run to Colette and spun around so fast he hadn't even put his other foot down yet. Colette, ready to begin casting, screamed and wrenched up her chakrams. Even Lloyd paused, even on his way to protect Colette.

“NO!” Astri yelled, even as Sheena slashed at him again. “PROTECT COLETTE!! I'LL HOLD SHEENA—YOU STOP THE GUARDIANS!!”

“Lloyd!” Genis shouted, his voice trembling.

Lloyd turned again and realized that he had forgotten about the Guardians. They had advanced upon Genis and Colette and had them cornered against the edge of the plateau. It was a long way down from there. Genis had his kendama ready, but it was a feeble defense—Colette still had her rings, but she wasn't capable of taking on four monsters by herself.

“Sorry about this,” Corrine said. “But if Sheena commands, I have to obey.”

Five monsters by herself.

“PROTECT COLETTE!” Astri shouted again, then gasped in pain as Sheena's dagger sliced into his side.

Lloyd made up his mind in a moment. If he left Colette and Genis, there was no way they'd survive. Astri at least only had one opponent to worry about. He ran to save his fellow Iselians.

Monika, on the other hand, didn't.

Just as Sheena managed to slash diagonally all the way across Astri's chest, Monika landed a flying kick into her side. Sheena fell and hit hard, again, and the angel wings—the *ko*—swelled to an even larger size.

“DAMN YOU ALL!” Sheena screamed, rising.

“COLETTE, START CASTING!!” Lloyd yelled, slamming into the Guardians from behind like a tidal wave. “GENIS, PROTECT HER!”

Colette was white to the lips, but she nodded and raised her arms in supplication. Holy light blossomed from the ground underneath her, as Genis and Lloyd went against the four Guardians and Corrine with only two swords and a kendama between them.

Astri grabbed Monika around the chest as he started to lunge at Sheena again. “*No!* Attacking her will make the *ko* grow even more!”

“Then what do you expect me to do?!”

“Wait for Colette! Angel Feathers is a holy spell! It should purify Sheena and get rid of the *ko*!”

“And until then?!”

“I have to stop her from going over *there*!” Astri indicated the Guardians and the Sylvarantians. “She's too mad to think about strategy, she'll attack whoever's closest! I'll hold her here until Colette casts!”

“You're just going to *let* her attack you?!”

“*Get over there and help Colette! Please!*”

Monika and Astri stared at each other in a silent battle of wills for a moment, then Astri shoved Monika away from him.

“The faster Colette casts, the less I have to take! If she gets interrupted, she'll have to start all over again!”

“Oh holy wings...” Colette murmured.

“*Go!!*”

“*All right!!*” Monika raced off towards Lloyd, Colette, and Genis.

Astri adjusted his hold on his sword—part of the reason he had been unable to dodge Sheena was that he was unwilling to let it go—and turned to face her. “All right. Come and get me!”

Sheena was more than happy to oblige. She raced at Astri at her inhuman speed, yanked out a new handful of ofudas, and threw them into his face. Astri yelled and snapped his sword up to his face, to guard himself, but the cards were just cards, plain pieces of inscribed paper. It wasn't until the knife plunged into his right shoulder that Astri realized the cards had been a diversion.

Reflexively Astri clapped his hand to the wound, and as Sheena ripped the knife out again the blade sliced the skin between his thumb and his first finger. The pain from that and the shoulder-stab was too much. Astri fell over backwards and dropped his sword. As soon as it left his hand, it transformed back into a ring again.

Stupid Ring Weapons, Astri thought as he hit the ground, shoulder throbbing too badly to think of much else. *Maybe they only work well in Growlanser...*

“...reveal thy glory...” Colette murmured.

“YOU DIE!!” Sheena snarled, raising the dagger high for the final stab.

“*ANGEL FEATHERS!!*” Colette cried.

Time seemed to freeze as the words left her lips. Her wings blazed suddenly with intense holy light, and three rings of pinkish-purplish light, the same exact shade as her wings, trailing light and stardust in their magical flight, materialized out of nowhere and flew towards Sheena's exposed back.

The rings slammed into the *ko* one after another, each exploding into shimmering sparkles as they touched such evil. Sheena jerked upright and screamed, a long, high, piercing scream. The wings thrust up and outright, as though trying to scream also, then exploded, blasting feathers everywhere.

Astri's mind pulled him through his pain like a vice. As quickly as he could, he stood up, sprinkling blood, and grabbed his ring. As soon as it touched his skin, feeling his spirit, it transformed back into the slender sword.

From Sheena's back, ironic mask of angel wings gone, burst a writhing black mass of tentacles, the true body of the *ko*. It chittered and keened, and despite its lack of wings now it flew, levitated into the air and tried to escape.

Astri swung the sword through the air, and it snapped apart. The pieces flew through the air in a long, graceful arc, connected by the thinnest silver chain, and slashed the *ko* right down the middle. The *ko* screamed as Sheena had screamed, with her voice and all, and fell apart into two writhing, wriggling, tentacled halves. It melted into nothingness before it touched the ground.

Astri looked down at the sword-turned-whip, smiled vaguely, and muttered, “Snake Sword,” before collapsing into an unconscious heap next to Sheena.

* * *

A cool, biting warmth (?) spread throughout Astri's body, leaving pins and needles in its wake. He

flinched at the awakening pain, which brought a new wave of needles. He groaned.

"I think he's...yeah, he's alive!"

That sounded like Genis.

"Oh, thank goodness!"

Definitely Colette.

"Good thing I got that Life Bottle out in time."

...Lloyd?

Astri opened his eyes.

Raine was bent over him, her spike-topped Battle Staff held over his face, emitting a healing green light. Astri squinted to look through it, and saw Colette, Monika, Genis, Lloyd, and even Kratos standing around him, with varying degrees of worry on their faces.

"Huh?" Astri said intelligently.

"You died," Raine said. "Well, at least, you *almost* died. Lloyd practically forcefed you the contents of a Life Bottle, which is the only reason you're still with us now. That was enough to make it so I could heal you."

"Lloyd?" Astri stared at him as best he could through the light of Raine's magic. Maybe it was just a trick of said light, but Lloyd looked...*embarrassed*?

"You helped us out with the *ko*," Lloyd said defensively. "I owed you one."

That's right.

"What—?"

"—happened to the *ko*?" Raine finished.

"You killed it," Monika said. "I think. You...your...that sword, from your ring, it...went all *long*. It broke apart all long and it cut it in half."

"An indelicate way to put it," Raine said. "Still, it does adequately describe the phenomenon. What was that blade? And how did you conjure it from that ring?"

"Ring?" Astri put his hand reflexively to the ring now hanging, once again, around his neck.

"Oh. Growlanser invention. Ring Weapon. Turns from ring to weapon."

"Self-explanatory," Raine muttered. "And the weapon itself? What was it?"

"A Snake Sword." Astri's brain rewound the footage of the battle. "Snake Saber. Too thin to be a Snake Sword."

"A Snake Saber," Raine repeated. "Marvelous! How does it—"

"Raine, let him breathe!" Genis cut in. "You're going to suffocate him with all your questions!"

Raine stood up and smacked Genis. "Don't tell *me* how to heal! I know what I'm doing!"

Colette breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, Astri...I'm so glad you're all right! I know you got hurt trying to stop Sheena from attacking me, and I promise to make it up to you as soon as I—"

"Sheena!" Astri didn't exactly lunge upright, but considering the pins and needles in all of his limbs, he did the best he could. "Is she okay?! The *ko* didn't take her soul?!"

"I don't think so," Monika said. "She fell down after the *ko* disappeared, but then we turned our backs on her for a minute watching over you, and she just...vanished."

"Oh." Astri considered laughing, but decided against it. "She's a ninja. She used a smoke bomb."

"A ninja?" Raine asked. "What—"

"Raine!" Genis interrupted.

Raine gave Genis the twitchy eye.

"So you're okay now?" Monika asked, because Lloyd, Colette, and Genis were all frightened into silence by Raine's twitching.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

Astri tried to stand up and collapsed.

"Astri!" Colette squeaked.

"Or...maybe not."

Colette reached down to give Astri a hand. At the same time, so did Lloyd.

Astri stared at Lloyd for a moment, then cautiously took both of their hands. Together, the Chosen and her friend heaved Astri to his feet.

"Thank you," Astri said.

"No problem," Lloyd answered.

"We'd better camp around here," Kratos said. "You won't be able to travel far for a while, I'm sure. We ought to rest, particularly you."

Astri let go of Lloyd's hand and wobbled a bit, but stayed standing. "Okay."

* * *

"So what happened to you and Kratos, Raine?" Astri asked once they had set up camp in the relative safety of the forest just off the Ossa Trail.

Raine sipped from her cup of the medicinal tea she had made for everyone. "After we made into into the mineshaft, we found a strange monster called the Sword Dancer, which asked us if we were strong. We told it we were busy, and it told us that a strange woman had just fallen in before us and told it the exact same thing. We promised to come back later and went in search of the woman, who was obviously Sheena. You're not drinking."

The tea was sour, bitter, and cavity-inducingly sweet all at once—enough to make you gag—but Astri, pinned by Raine's threatening-to-be-twitchy eye, took a gulp.

"Anyway," Raine said while Astri tried to figure out a way to spit it out without her noticing, "Sheena's trail wasn't hard to follow. But a little ways in, a huge pair of wings attached to a ball of tentacles attempted to attack us."

Astri went white, though whether this was due to the news of another *ko* or to the tea will never be known. "Another *ko*."

"Presumably. Sheena must have been seized by one shortly before we arrived. Although the creature held us up for quite a while, I eventually hit it with a Photon spell, and Kratos was able to slice it in half." Raine stared pointedly at Astri's cup until he took another drink. "Then we exited the mines with all speed, unsure of what had happened to all of you, and found Sheena unconscious, you dying, and Colette on the verge of a breakdown."

Colette blushed, but before she could say anything, Kratos interrupted, and Astri instinctively tensed. "You said these things are called *ko*."

"Yes," Astri said, ready for an argument.

"What are they, exactly?"

Oh. Reasonable question. "They're soul-stealers. They possess people and paralyze the part of their heart that enables them to control themselves. The angrier the person possessed becomes, the larger the *ko* becomes, and the larger the *ko* becomes, the harder it is for the person to hold back their anger. It's like a spiral. Eventually the *ko* becomes large and powerful enough to completely paralyze the heart and steal the soul from it. Then the *ko* detaches itself and flies back to its master with the soul."

"Its master?" Lloyd asked, getting interested despite himself.

“*Ko* are created by people. I don't know exactly how yet. But it's...I'm pretty sure it's some kind of dark magic. Why people would want souls, I have *no* idea. But souls seem to be important to several rituals and such. Maybe somebody in this world needs the souls to do something?”

“Soul-stealers,” Raine murmured. “*Ko*. Created by dark magic...”

“I think they are,” Astri reminded her. “I could be wrong.”

“What happens...” Colette paused. “What happens to somebody...who loses their soul?”

“They become an empty husk,” Astri said grimly. “The soul is...without it, you can't be yourself. When the *ko* detaches, its host becomes a vegetable. No thoughts, no will, no personality anymore. It's awful.”

“You speak from experience?” Kratos asked.

“Not personal, but yes, I've seen it happen.”

They sat in silence for a moment, alone with their thoughts and the crackling sparks from the campfire.

“I wonder if that's what happens to the Crystal Heart,” Astri mused aloud.

“Huh?” Colette asked.

“The soul. If it's in the heart...then maybe the Crystal Heart...is a crystallization of the *soul*, around the heart. Or even just of the soul. So then Mano...” Astri looked at Monika, then shook his head. “Never mind.”

* * *

Long after all the others, even Kratos, had gone to sleep, Monika lay awake on the forest floor. He wanted to sleep—he was exhausted after the struggle against Sheena and her five sidekicks—but he couldn't. There were qualms snapping at his mind.

Mano. They all revolved around the name Mano. Astri always spoke it with a kind of furious care. The name clearly meant a lot to him, as had the person it had belonged to, and now that...whatever it was, exactly, that had happened to him had happened, Astri was furious about it. Cue his vendetta against this Lilith. But every time Astri said Mano's name, he always glanced at Monika, hoping that this time some sort of recognition would dawn, his eyes always clouding in disappointment that this didn't happen.

Mano. Supposedly Monika had lived with him for three years, after saving his life. Three years between them. Three years erased in a split second. By what? This Lilith? It wasn't enough she had to steal the life of the kid Monika had saved, but she stole his memories of him as well?

If Astri was disappointed every time he saw that Monika still couldn't remember Mano, Monika was just outright furious. But it wasn't about Mano, and that made him guilty. Astri was obviously set on finding the Crystal Heart. But all Monika really wanted was his memories. He *hated* not knowing who he was. He *hated* having no conception of the world around him until he saw it.

But he also hated that he couldn't see—or even sympathize with—Astri's reason for helping him. That made him feel guilty. It was like...like...

Like he was *using* Astri, or something.

* * *

They reached Izoold early the next evening. The sun was dripping down into the ocean, sending crystal sprinkles of shattering golden light off the water, as they made it into the boundaries of the town, again exhausted after a long day of traveling.

“Gods!” Astri groaned, collapsing onto a bed in the inn. “I'm hot, I'm tired, and I seriously need a shower. That much walking after that near-death experience was *not* a good idea!”

“Wimp,” Lloyd said. “I've had to walk much farther than that.”

Astri kicked off his shoes at Lloyd as best he could, but missed on both direction and distance. “So sue me. I'm not used to cross-country trekking for hours on end.”

Lloyd opened his mouth.

“Don't say a word if you value your life!”

“...Wimp.”

Astri turned his glare to his bedside table and said at about ninety miles an hour,
“

*Hecate-goddess-of-witchcraft-and-sorcery-lend-me-your-power-defy-the-laws-of-physics-and-deliver-unt
o-me-a-Miracle-of-Magic—Release-Gravity!”*

The table inversed in color and flew at Lloyd. Before Lloyd even knew what was going on, the table clobbered him right into the wall.

“Enough!” Raine exploded.

“You break it, you buy it,” the innkeeper said, not without some modicum of hope.

“No, that's *enough!*” Raine wrenched the table back to its original position, then smacked Astri. “That's for using magic recklessly!” She marched up to Lloyd and smacked him as well. “That's for provoking him!”

“But—!” Astri and Lloyd both protested, rubbing their heads.

Raine smacked them both again. “*Don't backtalk me!!*”

Genis, Colette, Monika, and Kratos wisely pretended to have fallen asleep.

* * *

Astri slept the sleep of the utterly exhausted, meaning that a bomb could have gone off next to his head and he wouldn't have twitched. Trekking across plains, climbing over mountains, and fighting off hordes of dangerous monsters was definitely much easier in video games than in real life.

He only woke up because Lloyd smacked his leg with his (thankfully still scabbarded) sword.

“OW! What was—?!”

“We got a ride to Palmacosta,” Lloyd said. “You're coming with us, right? Wake up or we'll leave without you!”

“Shut it,” Astri yawned, reaching for his shoes. “Thank God I walked a lot at home, or else my legs would be blinking falling *off* right now.”

“Your home, huh?” Lloyd considered. “What's it like there? Is it anything like here in Sylvarant?”

“Not at all, and except for the hordes of rampaging monsters, I'd say the change is all to your advantage. Where I'm from, cities are *sprawled* everywhere like dropped pancake batter. Everything's industrialized and metal and boring, there's no magic anywhere, and the air's so polluted that in some areas it's hard to breathe.” Astri took a deep breath. “You have no idea how *clean* this air feels.”

“That bad, huh?” Lloyd whistled. “What do the Desians do there?”

“There are no Desians on my world.” Astri stood up. “We have Hitlers instead.”

“What are Hitlers?”

“Ah...not a race of people, sorry. A single person. Named Adolf Hitler. He was a genocidal killer—he killed off Jewi—um, people who were too *different* for him.”

“There were lots of him?”

“No, thank God, but there are other people who have done similar things. Way too *many* people who have done similar things.” Astri walked purposefully towards the door. “Where's the boat?”

* * *

“Professor, are you okay?” Lloyd asked.

Lloyd and the others had managed to obtain passage on a small boat owned by a guy named Max. The boat clearly wasn't made to hold eight people, but with a little cramming, everybody fit fairly well. It helped that it was a pleasant day for sailing. The sky was the clear, burnished blue that almost looks hard enough to walk on, and brass sunlight glittered off the flowing silken waves. As they pushed off from the dock, the clear water assumed a deep emerald tinge.

Nor was it the only thing to do so.

"You don't look so good," Lloyd continued.

Raine was clinging to the side of the boat so tightly her knuckles were turning white, but she made a brave attempt to hide it behind her back. "Me? No! Oh, no. I'm fine. No, fine."

Lloyd shrugged. "Okay..."

Astri looked overboard, and shivered.

"Are *you* okay, Astri?" Colette asked.

"More or less. I get seasick easily."

"You do?!" Raine asked, so eagerly that Lloyd and Colette jumped and rocked the boat. Astri and Raine both dove for the sides.

"Yeah, I do," Astri said, surfacing cautiously. "But, usually only when it's choppy. Today looks pretty safe."

"So you don't like water, Astri?" Colette asked.

"Oh, water's...pretty much fine. But I don't like sailing, and I don't like rain."

"You're like a cat." Colette smiled. "Do you like cats, Astri?"

Astri snorted. " 'Like' is an understatement. I am such a cat-person that *dogs* don't like me."

"Oh really?" Colette's smile dropped. "How sad."

"No, I don't really like dogs either."

"Oh, but that's sad too! Dogs are so sweet!"

Astri and Lloyd exchanged exasperated looks. Then the fact that he had exchanged a thought with Astri hit Lloyd, and he jumped.

Raine and the boat both lurched. "Oh Goddessssss..."

Max, the owner of the boat, suddenly leaned forward, causing the boat to rock even more. "Hey..."

Raine squinched her eyes shut. "Oh, please, stop rocking this thing!"

"Why, Raine?" Genis asked slyly. "You getting sick?"

"No! I'm...just worried you'll capsize us!"

“Capsize,” Max repeated, frowning. “That's funny. I thought...” He rubbed his eyes and looked again. “But I guess...no, wait! Look out there!”

Even Raine turned her green face to look over the waves. It took them all a moment to see it. Then Colette suddenly yelped, and everybody else realized what was out there.

There was a woman swimming with all her strength towards them. Her long green hair was floating around her in the water and dragging at her long white arms—she flailed wildly, obviously having seen them and desperate to try and reach them.

“She's drowning!” Colette screamed.

“Max!” Lloyd yelled. “Can't this thing go any faster?!”

“Not unless the wind picks up!” Max snapped back.

Lloyd whirled. “Genis!”

“Way ahead of you.” The small sorcerer whipped out his kendama and flipped it around once. “Wind Blade!”

A gust of wind slammed into the sail, propelling the small boat forward so quickly it rose out of the water. Raine moaned and put her sick head on the boat's rail, but nobody noticed, all eyes fixed on the struggling woman just ahead.

“Hold on!” Colette shouted, lunging forward and reaching out over the front of the boat. “Here! Grab my hand!”

The woman did. She suddenly burst out of the water, shedding water everywhere, and rose up into the air, revealing her full, pale bosom, a pillar of marble-like torso, and her long, seaweed-like hair dripping down into the ocean. The expression of panic slid off her face like water from her bare breasts as she crested the side of the boat and seized Colette's hand in an iron grip. Face to face with the Chosen, she smiled, showing fangs.

Colette screamed, and the woman dragged her down into the water.

A silvery fish tail slapped the surface, sending a sheet of water up over the occupants of the boat.

* * *

“*COLETTE!!!!*!” Astri, Lloyd, and Genis all screamed.

“Colette!!!” Raine and Monika expostulated.

“Stop the boat!!” Lloyd shrieked. “We have to go down and rescue her!”

“How?!” Kratos demanded, more emotional than any of them had seen him yet. “Unless you can breathe water?!”

“Genis! Do something!!”

“*What?!*” Genis demanded. “I can't drag them out or wrap you in air, Lloyd! I'm a sorcerer, not an elemental!”

“If only we had Undine!” Astri moaned.

“What?!” Lloyd yelled. “I don't even know what that is!”

“It's—she's—*never mind!!* We have to—” Then Astri jolted. “I GOT IT!!
*Hecate-goddess-of-witchcraft-and-sorcery-lend-me-your-power-defy-the-laws-of-physics-and-deliver-unt
o-me-a-Miracle-of-Magic—Release-Gravity!*”

Astri raised his arms into the air, and a huge sheet of water inversed color and exploded upwards into a solid wall. Kneading the air like bread dough, Astri somehow twisted the water into a roughly semi-circular shape.

“What *is* that?!” Lloyd, Genis, and Monika all exploded.

“Sorry, I can't make it big enough for two!” Astri clambered up onto the side of the boat and balanced there, teetering, for a moment. “Wish me luck!”

He jumped into the semi-circle, and it wrapped all the way around, forming a ball of reddish-brownish-yellowish water. Then the ball plunged down into the waves, and was gone.

“ASTRI!!!” Lloyd and Monika shouted.

* * *

“*Hecate, goddess of witchcraft and sorcery, lend me your power...defy the laws of physics and deliver unto me a Miracle of Magic—Release Gravity!*”

Astri chanted the spell over and over, like a litany, as his magically-made bubble of air-holding water plunged down into the ocean, in search of Colette. There was a lot to hold. The bubble itself was only held together because it—and only it—had its gravity eased up. However, had that been all, the bubble would have floated. So on top of keeping the bubble together, Astri had to keep it going, by weakening the gravity of the water in front of it to allow the bubble to sink.

It was while he was chanting that he had a sudden moment of utter, icy panic. MP. In all video games, characters had MP. When their MP was used up, they couldn't cast spells anymore. Did he count as a character? Did he have MP? If so, how much? And if he did, then how much was he using up with each casting of his Release Gravity spell?

That led to a second moment of utter, icy panic. If he *did* find Colette, how would he get her back up? If

he ran out of MP on the way down, how could he hold the bubble for the way back up?

And this, in turn, led to yet a third moment of utter, icy panic. Even if he did find Colette, and could get her back up, *how was he going to get her back?*

Fortunately (maybe), there was no time for a fourth moment of utter, icy panic. Ahead was a flashing silver tail, bedecked with trailing strands of long, seaweed-green hair.

“HEY!!!” Astri roared, although he wasn't sure if his voice could reach through the no-gravity bubble to the water. “YOU!! GIVE COLETTE BACK!!!”

The mermaid stopped and whirled around, revealing Colette unconscious, pressed against the mermaid's bare bosom. Mermaids are thought by most Westerners to be beautiful, mischievous ladies of the ocean. This mermaid was beautiful, yes, but just as plainly evil as the *ko* that had possessed Sheena. Her long green hair swirled in the eddies of the sea as though it were alive; the gills lining her ribs flared in the water like ripples of cloth; and there was something inexplicably menacing about the strength of her long, fishy tail, which gave the impression of a snake coiled to strike. But it was her eyes, black without pupil, iris, or white, which truly conveyed her menace. Those were the eyes of a monster, no matter how beautiful it might appear.

She bared her teeth at Astri in his bubble, showing a mouthful of long, vampire-worthy fangs and a whipping black tongue like a snake's. Astri recoiled, lost his footing on the bubble, and fell backwards.

The mermaid cackled, the grating shriek penetrating even Astri's magical bubble, and turned on her heel—er, tail—to swim away.

“*Come back here!!*” Astri shouted, grabbing for the ring around his neck. “*Eii-yaaaaah!!!*”

The ring glowed, slid through the links of the necklace easily, and morphed into the slender silver of Astri's Snake Saber. Astri whipped it back and shot it forward—reacting to his thoughts, it broke apart into the whip at once, shot through the side of the bubble, and arrowed through the water like a harpoon. It struck the mermaid's tail and impaled her through her right fluke.

The mermaid screamed, a terrible scream that shook the molecules of the ocean. She whirled around, releasing Colette with one hand, to stare in mute shock at her tail, where dark blood was dissolving away into the water. She wrenched her tail away from the point of the saber/ whip and screamed again at the pain—then she pumped her muscles and flew forward at Astri.

Understandably, Astri panicked, and tried to jump backwards. He hit the side of the bubble. But his attempted escape had another effect. He accidentally jolted the hilt of the saber, sending a rolling wave through the whip. It snapped up, even slowed by the water, and slashed the mermaid diagonally across the stomach.

The mermaid wailed like a banshee and changed direction, sheering around the bubble to the rear. Astri took a deep breath, shored up his shaking knees, and gave a silent order. The Snake Saber came back together, streaking back like a tape measurer until it reassembled itself with a snap upon the hilt.

The mermaid, streaming blood from her tail and stomach, pressed Colette against her front with one arm and plunged at the bubble with the other. Astri just realized what she was trying to do as she did it, and as the upper half of her body exploded into the bubble, spraying water everywhere, Astri threw himself away from her and her grasping fingernails.

Unfortunately, there wasn't enough room for Astri to dodge effectively. A cold, clammy hand seized him around the ankle and gave an inhumanly strong yank. She was trying to pull him out of the bubble, and leave him to drown.

Astri reacted before he thought it through. He swept the Snake Saber backwards towards his ankle.

The most horrendous scream yet pierced his head, sending his skull reverberating with the echoes. The mermaid backpedaled so fast that Colette's feet whiplashed in-and-out of the bubble in the space of a few moments. A cloud of blood filled the water.

But something clammy was still clutching his ankle.

Again, before he thought, Astri looked down at his ankle and saw the mermaid's severed hand, clinging, twitching, like the severed tentacle of an octopus, to his ankle.

Astri screamed and smashed the hand away from him with the Snake Saber. It skidded across the bubble and lay there for a moment, then suddenly spasmed, as though with one last gasp of life.

That spasm was the last straw—Astri vomited, retched, then vomited again. It had never occurred to him that he might actually have to do something like that in another world. And why not? It was perfectly logical that when you slashed something with a sword, there would be blood and...other things. But still...that hand...

Astri fought down his gorge with difficulty and stood up, carefully not looking at the hand again. As soon as this was over, he was going to scrub the *skin* off his ankle where that...*thing* had touched him. But first, he had to get Colette. She was way more important than his cleanliness.

The mermaid circled the bubble, and Astri turned with her, both watching the other, clearly planning their next move. Astri was desperately running through his list of options. He had the Snake Saber still. But to use it, he'd have to actually slash the mermaid again, which he didn't think he could do, especially if it came down to stabbing her through the heart—which it most likely would. So, ixnay on the Snake Saber.

That left him with magic. But they were in the water. There was nothing to levitate. Well, except for Colette's clothes, or his own. But if he levitated Colette into the bubble, the mermaid would come too. Could he loft the mermaid away? Maybe...but she would just come back and attack them as they rose.

Speaking of magic...he'd better reinforce the bubble. It was getting hard to breathe.

"Hecate, goddess of witchcraft and sorcery, lend me your power...defy the laws of physics and deliver unto me a Miracle of Magic—Release Gravity!"

The bubble, which was beginning to fade away, firmed up again. But it wasn't any easier to breathe. It

was becoming hot, and the air was tasting...stale.

Oh God. He was running out of air.

* * *

The mermaid soared at the bubble again. Astri slashed the Snake Saber at her, hoping desperately that she would sheer away. She did, not stupid enough to tangle with the object which had taken her hand. But her tail broke through the bubble, sending a cannonblast of bloody water splashing all over Astri. It was disgusting, but Astri didn't have much time to think about that. The air in the bubble was running out. It was becoming harder to breathe with every breath.

"Idiot, idiot, idiot!" Astri berated himself, then stopped. He was wasting air.

Wasting air?! There's barely any left! You moron, you didn't even take enough to get Colette back! Even if I do beat the mermaid now, there's no way I can get us back to the surface!

Panic was thumping in Astri's ears now. Although he wasn't claustrophobic, the walls of the bubble seemed to close in on him as the air drained away into his lungs. Every breath was one less for—

A scream of triumph—he had thought too long. The mermaid was back. Reflexively he tried to slash at her, but the thought of the hand screamed in his mind—just as he stepped backwards and tripped over it anyways.

The mermaid plunged down towards him, fangs bared. Astri screamed and lurched the saber up. The mermaid's black eyes widened as she realized she was heading straight for it. She tried to change direction, but there was no time—so she shoved Colette towards the saberpoint.

Now Astri tried to change the *saber's* direction, but things were happening too fast for all three of them—Astri, the mermaid, and Colette. Astri couldn't move the saber much at all, and it stabbed for Colette. But the mermaid couldn't move Colette much either, and only managed to get the Chosen's arm between herself and the blade. The Snake Saber went right through Colette's arm, just below the shoulder, and stabbed into the mermaid's right breast.

Screams. Shrieks. Blood spraying over everyone. The mermaid jerked away with Colette hanging limply in front of her and plunged through the bottom of the bubble, which was possible with a bit of effort. The only reason Astri didn't go through it was because he was *trying* not to.

"*Yâflan dâdvari!*" the mermaid spat.

"Yeah? Right back at you, you crazy bleep. *Hecate, goddess of witchcraft and sorce—*"

It was here that Astri tried to take a breath, and almost choked. There was barely any air left. He was in a bubble filled with carbon dioxide. He wasn't going to drown. He was going to asphyxiate underwater.

Good work.

The voice, female, soft, insinuous, rich with power, was so faint in Astri's mind that he barely heard it. But with the voice came words, rising to his throat, just like the first time he had used Release Gravity. Yet, these were different words, and as he spoke them, they slid over his tongue like the softest whispering silk.

"Selene, pearl of the sky, sister of the dawn, grant me your shining light to protect me, to heal me, to guide me...oh Lady of the Moon, be my guide and savior...Luna Lumina!"

* * *

For a moment, nothing happened. Astri waited, breathless, spots dancing in front of his eyes. The mermaid waited, not sure what was going on, but pretty sure her target was trying some new kind of trick. Colette snored, oblivious to her surroundings due to her unconsciousness.

Then a brilliant light flared from Astri's heart. Like a lantern in his chest, the light grew, flooding his skin until it burst forth, causing him to glow like a star. The mermaid shrieked. The magical bubble, which had been losing cohesion as Astri lost magic and concentration, fell apart for good.

Astri took a deep, gasping breath. Although he was now floating in the water, surrounded by nothing except for this magical light, the sea wasn't touching him. What's more, he could *breathe*. Breathe as easily as he had been able to in the warm, hot deserts of Triet. It was such a relief that for several seconds all he did was breathe—breathe, and swear never to underestimate the value of air ever again.

Don't relax yet!

Another voice-that-was-too-quiet-to-be-a-voice in his mind, but a different voice, softer but lighter, warm, friendly, filled with urgency. Astri looked, and despite the light all around him he could see perfectly well the mermaid swimming at him, Colette held like a shield in front of her, her stump of a wrist streaming blood, her fangs bared in a bloodthirsty snarl. There was no question of her action now—the mermaid was trying to kill him.

More words. Different words. Words not rising but shooting to Astri's mouth like arrows, cold on his lips but jolting his teeth like sparks.

"Artemis, master Huntress, be my eyes and arms...shoot forth from Olympus the shining Arrows of the Moon...Energy Arrow!"

Out of nowhere, through the water came shooting dozens of arrows of whitest, shining moonlight, each one ethereal as a moonbeam, yet as sharp as a stilleto. The mermaid screamed, and lofted Colette to defend herself—but the arrows shot right through Colette and plunged into her body.

The mermaid let out a terrible, bloodcurdling scream. The arrows disappeared, leaving no visible wounds, but the mermaid continued to scream, louder and louder, until suddenly, without warning, her scream was cut off as though by a knife, and she let go of Colette, every muscle in her body going slack.

Eyes wide and staring, mouth frozen in her final scream, the mermaid sank backwards, motionless, into the dark depths of the ocean from which she had come.

* * *

“Astri!!” Lloyd yelled. “*Colette!!!*”

Despite the cooperation of everyone's brains, neither the Sylvarantians nor Monika could figure out a way to dive down into the ocean to rescue Colette—and possibly Astri, if he needed rescuing as well—without drowning before they got halfway down. Not even Kratos could come up with any ideas, and despite Genis' best effort, his attempts to part the seas with magic failed miserably. There was just too much water for his magical abilities to handle.

Which was why Lloyd, in an ecstasy of helplessness, was now reduced to calling his lost companions' names out over the brine, perhaps hoping that his voice could reach them since he obviously couldn't.

A bubble went up.

“*Bubble!!*” Genis shouted.

Everyone craned to look at the bubble. It rose to the surface, then popped.

There was a hopeful pause.

Nothing.

“Dammit!!” Lloyd shouted. “Isn't there *anything* we can do?! At *all*?!”

“Not unless you can turn into a fish and just never told us,” Genis said moodily. “*Bubble!!*”

Another stare. Another pop. Another pause.

Nothing.

“There's gotta be something,” Monika said. “What dragged her down, anyway?”

“Mermaid,” Raine said, still looking seasick but having her mind taken off of it by this unexpected kidnapping. “Half-woman, half-fish. They look beautiful, but they're actually carnivorous, and highly dangerous. Because they prefer live meat, they use their powers to enable their victims to breathe water until they return to their lair, where they eat them alive...”

“NO!” Lloyd roared.

“They've been known to impersonate drowning women to lure in prey...why I didn't think of that before Colette—”

“*Bubble!!*” Genis interrupted.

Stare. Pop. Pause.

Nothing.

“Dammitdammit*dammit!!!*” Lloyd expostulated. “That’s it! I’m just gonna swim for it!”

“Lloyd, *no!*” Genis grabbed him by the ribbons on his collar, almost choking him. “You’ll never make it!”

“*Bubble!!*” Monika shouted.

“Who cares?!” Lloyd roared. “Bubbles aren’t going to help Colette!”

“Whoa,” Monika said. “Lots of bubbles.”

“*Will you shut up about the damn bu—*”

“Uh, Lloyd?” Genis interrupted. “Take a look before you finish that sentence.”

Lloyd looked. There was a steady stream of bubbles rising to the surface from underneath the water. And what’s more, there was a steadily growing light glowing beneath the bubbles.

“What the—?”

The light grew brighter—and abruptly it surfaced, revealing itself to be Astri, suffused in light and clutching Colette tightly against his chest.

“Lloyd!” Astri yelled. “Genis! Raine! Moni—” Then he spotted the boat. “*Monika!!*”

“Astri!!” Lloyd yelled. “*Colette!!!*”

* * *

“Thank the Goddess you’re all right!” Raine moaned as Kratos, Lloyd, and Monika pulled Astri and Colette onboard. “Is Colette...” She hesitated.

“Alive,” Astri said tiredly. “Wounded, unconscious, but alive.”

“Martel be blessed.” Raine gingerly pulled out her staff, trying not to let go of the side of the boat, and gestured towards Colette with it. Light poured from the spikes tipping the end.

“So what *happened* down there?!” Genis demanded. “And what was that light?! You’re not even wet! Well, you are kind of...but...is that blood?”

“I learned new spells,” Astri said, giving a tired smile. “One of `em lets me breathe underwater...and who knows what else. I...killed the mermaid with the other one.”

“Not with your sword?” Lloyd asked.

Astri shuddered. "No."

"What spells were they?" Genis asked eagerly.

"One's called Luna Lumina," Astri said, yawning. "The other's Energy Arrow."

His yawn grew so wide that his jaw threatened to crack.

"You look exhausted," Lloyd observed.

"I had to use magic all the way down to get to Colette, and then I had to swim *all* the way back up, using *only* my legs, *dragging* Colette. I feel like dying right now." Then he shuddered again. "Or at least sleeping for a *very* long time."

"Well...er..." Lloyd looked uncomfortable. "The...ride to Palmacosta'll take a while. Why don't you take a nap?"

Astri looked around. "There's no room."

"I'll stand," Lloyd muttered.

Astri looked at Lloyd, then bowed his head. "Thanks. But there's still not enough room to..." He hesitated. "Monika...can I lean on you?"

Monika blinked. "Lean on me?"

"Just sit still." Astri tried to sit down, and ended up more capsizing next to Monika. He yawned again, pulled the tie Colette had gotten him out of his hair, and wrung it out. Thanks to the mermaid, it was dripping wet, hanging in long mahogany tails over his throat and shoulders. Astri yawned again, put the tie in his pocket, and leaned against Monika's shoulder.

"Eh?" Monika said intelligently.

"Uncomfortable?" Astri asked drowsily.

"Huh? Uh...nah, not really."

* * *

"Wake up, Astri!" Lloyd shouted, bouncing up and down in the middle of the boat. "Wake up! We're here! Look at it! It's *huge*!"

Astri groaned.

"Whoa...I've never seen anything like this! Even Triet wasn't this big!"

Astri turned over and clapped his hands over his ears.

“Look! Look at that *gigantic* building there! What is it?!”

“Lloyd,” Astri said, muffled, “shut up before I decide to cast my newest spell on you.”

“That's the church of Palmacosta,” Kratos said.

“The church?! Really?! It's huge! It looks almost as big as the Temple to Martel in Iselia!”

“Good for it,” Astri muttered.

“C`mon, Astri, look! You've gotta look! It's amazing!”

“Lloyd, you are waking me up, and that's not good for any of us,” Astri growled.

“You're not a morning person, are you?” Genis observed.

“Sure I am. But when I get *woken up*, I get a couple other things too, and none of them are conducive to the waking-uppers' lifespan.”

“Well, you might want to get up now,” Genis said. “You might not have realized it yet, but you're not on Monika's shoulder anymore.”

Astri groaned and finally looked up, his hair all over his face. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Move your hair and rub your eyes,” Genis suggested.

With very bad grace, Astri pushed his hair back, combed his fingers through it, and brought his fists around to dig at his eyes. Then he glared at Genis.

“Okay, so what—”

Then Astri realized exactly *what*. Not being the most motionless of sleepers, he had rolled somewhat in his sleep—down from Monika's shoulder into his lap. In which general area he had been trying to hide from Lloyd's wake-up calls.

“Oh, God.” Astri pulled himself up into a sitting position *next* to Monika, going red with embarrassment. “I am so sorry. I probably should have warned you...I roll. A lot. I—Gods, I am sooo sorry. If—I mean—I—you should have said something! I didn't...like...hurt you or anything, did I?”

Monika was blushing as well. “No...not...really...”

“It was pretty interesting to watch,” Genis needled unmercifully. “I'm not sure what was funnier—Astri rolling around like a cat on a pillow, or Monika's face *while*—”

“*Release Gravity!!*”

Genis' shoes inversed color. Astri threw his hands into the air, and Genis was sent flying about a hundred feet into the air with a startled squawk. Then Astri slammed his palms down onto his knees, and Genis dropped.

“*Shut up!!*” Astri shouted at Genis as he hit the water.

Genis surfaced, spluttering water, just in time to get cracked in the back of the head by another boat and driven under again.

“Please don't kill him,” Raine groaned. “I only have one brother.”

Astri shrugged, and raised his hands again. Genis flew back out of the water and landed headfirst on the Palmacosta pier with enough force for a concussion, just as Max's little boat drew up to dock.

Colette just now noticed that Genis was lying there on the pier, with spirals for eyes and a bump the size of a watermelon on top of his head.

“Wow, Genis, you beat us here! How'd you do that?”

* * *

It took a little while for things to calm down after that. Lloyd and Colette were overflowing with enthusiasm to go right out and explore Palmacosta. Raine, on the other hand, collapsed onto the wood of the pier and refused to move another step until the world stopped rocking. Genis, being unconscious, didn't seem to keen on moving yet either. Astri did nothing but yawn, and Monika was preoccupied with staring at all the things to be seen on the pier itself—which were old hat to the others, but not to someone who'd never seen a port even while he *had* his memory.

It was while Raine was attempting to move her pinkie finger and deciding that set the world rocking too much for her that Astri's brain, as though it had been thinking intensively the whole time he had been sleeping, suddenly flashed a glaring realization into Astri's face. It hit him midyawn.

This was when Kratos returned.

“Where did you come from?!” Lloyd demanded.

“I took the liberty of improving our weapons at Ultramarine Customization,” Kratos said. “I apologize,” he added to Astri. “The customizer said there was nothing he could do for a Snake Saber.”

This sidetracked Astri from his realization.

“Why did you even ask?”

Kratos shrugged. “A defender of the Chosen requires a powerful weapon.”

Astri opened his mouth, but for once couldn't think of anything to say. Kratos had just subtly given him probably the biggest compliment Astri could remember Kratos *ever* giving. He was classing Astri as one

of him. Them. Whatever.

As often happens in situations of such magnitude, Astri settled for the most banal sentence in the history of the world. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Kratos handed Masamune swords to Lloyd, Slicer Rings to Colette, and a Gem Rod to Raine.

"But..." Astri took a deep breath. "I'm not going to be traveling with you guys anymore."

Kratos stopped. Lloyd actually tore his eyes away from the Palmacosta church to stare at Astri. Raine actually looked up. And Colette looked like she had been slapped.

"What?! Why, Astri?"

"I think...it's time that I left you," Astri said. "The only *real* reason I stayed with you guys was because I wanted to fight alongside you. I really like you...all of you...even you two," he added to Lloyd and Kratos. "But I want to help Monika. And other people, too. You guys don't need my help. Everything will be all right for you guys. There are other people...who it's not all right for."

"But..." Lloyd began.

"I know it doesn't really seem all right, but believe me, it will be," Astri said, looking at Colette in particular. "Just remember, that even when it *seems* like it won't be, it'll work out. Trust me."

"But if you're not staying here, then...where are you going?" Lloyd demanded.

"I've been thinking about that," Astri said. "See...Sylvarant has been like a tutorial for me. Learning about fighting...weapons...magic...it's just been like the basics, so that I can move on and do more. But to learn more, I have to go somewhere where people can teach me. Somewhere with powerful people who I'd trust as much as you guys. And I think I finally figured out where they are."

"Where?" Lloyd asked.

"There's a story in my world called Kiddy Grade, about a group of interuniversal secret agents called ES Agents." Astri knew he was explaining this badly, but he plowed ahead anyway. "ES Agents have special powers and undergo rigorous training. And there are these two ES Agents named Éclair and Lumiere, who I would trust with just about anything."

"So that's where you're going?" Colette asked.

"That's where I'm going," Astri agreed.

Impulsively Colette flung her arms around Astri and hugged him. "Then good luck, Astri! I'll think of you while I regenerate the world."

Astri hugged Colette back, and whispered into her ear, "You're gonna live, Colette. I know it."

“Okay,” Colette whispered back. “I trust you.”

They let go, and Astri turned to Raine. “Raine, thank you so much for helping me and Monika all this time.”

“Sure,” Raine said, then moaned. “Ooooh, the sky is rocking...”

“Yeah...um...just a recommendation...you should probably get off of the dock,” Astri suggested. “If you get away from the salt air, you might feel better.” He paused, then added, “You know, there's an ancient ruin in the city of Asgard, to the north of here...”

Raine jolted upright as though she had suddenly received an electric shock. “RUIN?! WHERE?!”

Lloyd jumped. “Um, Professor...?”

“Let her,” Astri muttered. “It's better than having her seasick.” He cleared his throat. “So, goodbye, Raine. And...goodbye to you too, Lloyd.”

Lloyd extended his hand. Astri took it, then instead dragged Lloyd into a hug as well. Lloyd stiffened, but before he could do anything, Astri used it, like he had with Colette, as a whisper-opportunity.

“Colette's yours,” Astri murmured. “You know that, right?”

Lloyd went bright red. “*What?!*”

Astri let go and gave Lloyd an innocent smile. “Goodbye and good luck, Lloyd. And, er, the same to you, Genis, although I don't think you can hear me...so...I'm sorry for K.O.ing you...kind of, because you did deserve it.”

Finally, Astri turned to Kratos rather awkwardly. “Um...Kratos. I...was...a jerk to you a lot this whole time. And...I'm...sorry.”

“I apologize as well,” Kratos said, rather surprisingly. “You seem to have true dedication to your goals, and I respect that, even if I don't agree with them.”

“You're a pessimist. I'm an optimist. We don't mix.” Astri hesitated. “But Kratos, you should try looking on the other side for once. You might be very happily surprised.”

Kratos extended his hand. “Good luck, then.”

Astri shook Kratos' hand. “Thanks. I'll need it.”

“Goodbye,” Monika was saying, rather awkwardly, to Colette.

“Goodbye, Monika,” Colette said, clasping her hands at her collar. “May Martel bless you. And I hope you get your memories back soon.”

“Yeah,” Monika said. “Thanks.”

Astri left Kratos and came over to Monika. “So...are we ready?”

Monika took a deep breath. “I guess.”

“I'm sorry, but I have to touch you to take you with me,” Astri said, digging the magical, world-warping penny out of his pocket. “Just...lemme hold your sleeve, or something.”

“Okay,” Monika said uncomfortably.

Astri took hold of the edge of Monika's sleeve with one hand, and balanced the penny on the fingers of his other hand. Raine paid extremely close attention.

“Aeneas,” Astri said, and flipped the penny.

The small coin flipped straight up into the air, glittering in the sunlight. It soared up, slowed...fell back towards the pier...hit it...

Astri and Monika slid through the fabric of the world of Sylvarant and were gone.

End Part One: Sylvarant

3 - Aeneas, Act One

Part Two: Aeneas

Disclaimers: Demon Diary, Descendants of Darkness, and Kiddy Grade are all part of this chapter. In fact, a great deal of the events and dialogue in this chapter is straight from Kiddy Grade episodes 18 (Unmasked/ Face) and 19 (Take/ Revenge). But Astri is still MINE.

Part Two, Act One

Heat-tossed mirages flickered across the oceans of sand dunes that undulated across the cliffs of Noreina like a living thing, bedecking the golden mounds with whispered temptations of water, shelter, or palatial wealth. None of these, however, were of interest to the slim young girl trudging through the blazing heat of the desert noon.

She was tall, with long, pale-blond hair that cascaded almost to the ground, even in its upswept ponytail. Despite the heat of the desert day, she wore a long, ragged cloak that enveloped her gaunt frame, over an impractical silken outfit more suited to lazing around in a slave-filled harem than to desert travel. Despite the sun beating down on her unprotected face, her complexion was milky and smooth, so cool and perfect that it was obvious sunburn had never been a problem in her life, and would not begin to be now.

In one hand, the wrist of which was bedecked with the remains of a manacle she had not yet taken the trouble to tear away, she carried a small wooden box with no keyhole.

Suddenly a figure shimmered, a far distance away from her. Although it looked no different from the throngs of other mirages clamoring for attention all around, at the appearance of this one the girl stopped. Slowly her head lifted, showing eyes filled with a demonic cunning out of place on her young, delicate face.

Her fangs glittered in a smile.

“So,” she whispered to herself, less a word than the merest sliver of breath riding the pink line of her tongue.

She leaped, pushing off from the ground with inhuman strength, the cloud of dust exploding behind her like the takeoff from a rocket. She sailed a mile into the air, the wind whipping her eyes and long blonde hair, and then began to fall, until she slammed into the ground in front of the figure with a *whumph* of exploding sand that shook the ground. Without missing a beat, she lunged up through the encompassing

cloud of dust from her landing and seized the figure by what she knew was the throat.

Her fingers slid through air.

The cross-world illusion smiled into her face. “Hello, Lilith.”

~~*~*~*

A colossal explosion went off in the middle of the trees, sending a shockwave rippling through the rocky ground that caused the trees to tremble.

Astri almost lost his balance, and had to grab onto one of the trembling trees for support. “Whoa! Where are we?! *When* are we?! What’s going on?”

“I hoped you would know!” Monika grabbed at another tree, missed, and fell.

Astri reached out to help Monika up just as a tremendous roar caused the air to vibrate just like the trees.

“What the hell...?!” Monika demanded.

“Wait. Wait. I think...” Astri looked around at the forest, lips moving soundlessly as he thought. “I...this forest. Explosions...roars...OH!”

Astri slammed his fist into the palm of his other hand.

“I get it! We’re on Aeneas—right when Alv’s impersonating Éclair!”

Monika stared at Astri and said, quite politely, “*What?*”

“Alv—she—Éclair—but—oh, forget it, just follow me!” Astri continued his earlier action and hauled Monika to his feet, just as another earth-shaking blast shook the...well, earth. Astri and Monika fell onto each other, trying not to fall as the ground beneath their feet did the tango.

“Thanks,” Astri said.

“Uh, yeah.” Monika let go as soon as the ground stopped moving. “You said to follow you?”

“Yeah. This way!”

“Hold on!” Monika grabbed Astri’s arm. “You want to go *towards* that...that...whatever it is?!”

“Of course!” Astri said impatiently. “I brought us here to find Éclair and Lumiere! And they’re at the center of the action, they always are!”

“Who *are* they?” Monika demanded as Astri dragged him among the trees.

“GOTT ES Agents,” Astri declared, stepping up his pace. “If those...I think those explosions were the genetic beasts. So Éc—” Astri stopped dead. “Oh no!! The clones!!”

“The whats?”

Something else exploded, sending a blast of smoke at least a mile into the air. With this shockwave came the stench of burning metal and combusted circuitry, making both Astri and Monika cough.

“Never mind, there's no time to explain right now!” Astri coughed. “I was hoping we'd get here at a less frenetic time...I guess finding Raine and them was just luck, after all...”

The sound of gunfire clattered faintly through the aftermath of the explosions, growing louder by the second. Then there was a strange, hissing, *zzchuuu* kind of sound.

“Lasers!” Astri moaned, tugging Monika forward. “Not good!”

“What are—?!”

Then the trees suddenly, abruptly, ended directly in front of them, dropping away into the sheer sides of a ravine in the middle of the forest. Not even grass grew on the bottom of this ravine, and most especially not now.

In front of the two otherworldly travelers, lining the bottom of the ravine in a brave attempt at either a blockade or an assault team, was a small group of uniformed men, backed up by a handful of large, unmoving robots. Scattered across the ground in front of them was a veil of burning, twisted metal parts—a destroyed robot, or perhaps something else.

Advancing on this line of defense was a cavalcade of gigantic objects, plated in red metal, with a yellow V splashed across their face in place of eyes. They most resembled dragons, or perhaps some unwieldy dinosaur, with long spiked tails and arms ended in ferocious metal claws. However, most terrifying were the two circular openings near their shoulders, which were spewing forth beams of red light which were wreaking havoc on the bare ravine.

“*What...are...those?!*” Monika exploded.

“I don't remember what they're called,” Astri said distractedly. “They're machines...things made by men, out of metal. The rocks in this gorge are magnetic...they've caused the machines to go crazy and start attacking things...”

“*People* made those?!”

“Yes, they—ohgodlook, rightTHERE!!!”

Astri's finger shot out, pointing to a figure on the other side of the gorge who was leaping at one of the metal monsters. It was a woman, a woman with long brown hair and glowing amber eyes, dressed in black with a cross across her chest. Her right boot was ankle-high—her left went halfway up her thigh.

“ÉCLAIR!!!” Astri screamed, just as she slammed into one of the machines—which crashed over backwards, plowing up solid rock in a great, splashing foam.

“Now, hurry! Get moving!” the woman shouted to the uniformed men as she landed, watching the cloud of pulverized rock thrown into the air by the thing's crash.

Out of the cloud of rock splintereens, the massive dragon-creature loomed up again.

“Come on,” the woman shouted. “It's just you and me now!”

The thing came, slamming its fist down with enough force to turn the woman into jelly. But she leapt straight up, inhumanly high, and slammed another mighty kick into the side of its head. The thing was sent sprawling again, and this time it did not get up.

Unfortunately, one of its fellows, perhaps sensing the danger, aimed a glowing fist at the woman, preparing to fire the red beams of light it had been spewing earlier. As it prepared to do so, however, one of the huge robots aimed two proturbences at this second thing and fired two massive beams of light at it. The beams streaked through the dragon, leaving empty holes in its body, and caused the entire thing to self-destruct.

“LUMIERE!!!” Astri screamed triumphantly, pointing wildly at a small girl with light blue hair twirled into a corkscrew on one side of her head. “It's Lumiere!! Oh my GOD, it's really Lumiere!!!”

The woman with long brown hair leapt up again, dodging a shower of red laser light, readying herself for a new assault on another of the beasts—

“STOP!” shouted another voice.

Another woman dressed in a black bodysuit and a white cape had appeared in the canyon. Her hair was slightly more reddish, her eyes slightly more golden, but aside from these two minor differences, both women looked exactly the same.

“What's going on here?!” Monika demanded as the two women began to argue.

“It's not...it's too...I don't have time to explain it right now!” Astri exploded.

Lasers struck the canyon floor, hiding the two women and the girl in clouds of smoke and debris.

“Tell me!” Monika yelled over the explosions.

Suddenly the first woman was visible again, charging out of the dust with her face set. One of the dragons fired more red light at her, but she deflected it with a black energy field. Again she leapt into the air, but this time she sent her fist into the dragon's face, just where its jaw should have been. The dragon ricocheted back onto the ground and exploded, temporarily blinding Astri and Monika in the blaze of light.

When Monika could see again, he was sure that the light had done something more severe to his vision.

The woman was kneeling on the ground, the little girl at her side, and surrounding them was a ring of—

“Astri,” Monika muttered, “why do they all look alike?”

Standing around the first woman and girl was a ring of women and girls, all whom looked exactly like either the woman or the girl except for one crucial fact—a mask obscured their features, making them look like featureless drones. Each of the masked girls had a wine bottle in their hand, holding it like a weapon.

The caped woman walked up to the first woman and girl. Beside her was another girl who looked just the same as all the other girls, although her hair was perhaps more vibrant a blue, and instead of a black bodysuit she wore an oddly cut blue dress and grey boots.

“All who oppose us must be eliminated,” the red-haired woman said.

“All who oppose us must be eliminated,” the girls standing in the ring all said together.

“All who oppose us must be eliminated,” the women standing in the ring all said together.

“What—” Monika tried again.

A black beam of energy shot down into the ring of females, sending up an explosion that drowned out the rest of his question.

“Ta-da!!” proclaimed a joyful voice.

Astri screamed.

Opposite the two boys, on the other lip of the canyon, two figures dressed all in black, with black helmets, were standing with arms akimbo. Abruptly their black outfits shimmered and exploded away into sparkling mist, revealing yet another woman and girl—but these two were quite different from the others.

This woman was just as tall and statuesque as the others. However, her hair was short and purple, with the left side drawn back into a tiny ponytail with a clip. Her eyes were bright magenta—she wore a bright red dress with a grey gun holster and a white shirt with holes cut into it. Fingerless red gloves covered her hands; red high heels shod her feet; black tights covered her legs to the thigh; and both her black necklace and single earring were bedecked with a tear-drop-shaped green stone.

The girl was petite and delicate, just like the others, but her hair was sea-green and down to her waist, falling in two large, whorled ringlets. Her eyes were emerald green, and she wore a loose cerulean dress with a periwinkle bow and accompanying cerulean sleeves, separate from her dress and held up with white ties. A sky-blue bow was jauntily displayed at the top of her dress; a white sash cinched it about her waist. White kid gloves gave her hands a cute, yet sophisticated, appearance.

“ÉCLAIR!!” Astri gasped. “LUMIERE!!”

"I thought you said *they* were Éclair and Lumiere?!"

"They are! They all are—well, except for those two, those are Alv and Dvergr—"

"*What are you talking about?! There can't be more than one of them!!*"

"They're *clones* of Éclair and—"

"Whats?"

"Exact copies! Of *them*!" Astri pointed at the woman with purple hair and the girl with sea-green hair just as the woman leapt down the side of the canyon, throwing a wave of black energy from her hand which struck all of the identical females, sending them reeling.

"Your turn now!" the purple-haired woman called back up to the little girl as she hit the bottom of the canyon.

"Yes, I can see that," the girl called down. From behind her back she withdrew a wine bottle, just like those held by all the other little girls, and threw it down into the canyon. As it hit the ground right-side up, its top burst off, and a rain of sparkling *something* exploded out of it into the air.

All of the masked women and girls screamed as the sparkling whatever came raining down on their heads. Although it did not seem to be physically hurting them, as one they all collapsed to the ground beneath its glittering assault.

There was a clattering as their masks fell off their faces and hit the ground, and Monika gave a yelp of surprise. Every one of them had the exact same face.

"C`mon!" Astri yelled. "We gotta get down there! *Hecate, goddess of witchcraft and sorcery—*"

"I hope you don't mind," the little girl with sea-green hair said, "I took the liberty of giving them a neural-net-deinhibitor."

"Or in other words," the purple-haired woman said, "you don't get to play with your dolls anymore, sorry!"

"*Release Gravity!*" Astri finished.

* * *

The group of Éclairs, Lumieres, and one Alv and Dvergr (if Astri was to be believed) were in the midst of a conversation that was a hair's length away from a battle when suddenly a slab of rock came flying out of nowhere and smashed right between the Alv and Dvergr pair, sending them both flying.

"What—?" somebody asked.

Out of the cloud of dust thrown up by the crash-landing of the rock, two young male figures suddenly

appeared, running for their lives as balls of black energy streaked around them, shot by the Alv/ Éclair, who was not at all happy about being attacked in this manner.

“What the hell was that?!” the boy with shorter hair yelled. *“Why'd you drop us ON them?!”*

“Shut up and keep running!!” the other one yelled back.

“What—?!”

“Éclair! Lumiere!” the second boy yelled. “Er...Éclairs and Lumieres! Start running!”

“Running?” somebody said blankly.

“Just trust me! I know you know it's Alv, and she's running out of time! She needs to Absorb somebody or she'll lose your Power, same with Dvergr and Puppet! *Just trust me!* Everybody get out of here!”

“Who are you?” the purple-haired woman asked, looking slightly wary and more than slightly confused.

“My name's Astri! This is Monika!” Astri narrowly missed a bolt of energy and yelped. “Move! Run! Come ON!”

He grabbed the purple-haired Éclair by the arm without missing a beat and dragged her around as he continued to run. Éclair stumbled, then put her foot down; literally. Thanks to her superhuman strength, this whipcracked Astri back so hard he nearly dislocated his arm.

“I don't understand!” Éclair flared. “What do you mean, she's running—”

The sea-green-haired Lumiere suddenly looked as though a lightbulb had gone off over her head, although from the look on her face, it wasn't one that gave her any happiness. “Wait! Do you mean—”

Two shining golden beams of light lashed out of the dust and snapped around an Éclair and Lumiere's wrists like shackles.

“NO!!!” Astri and the sea-green-haired Lumiere shouted.

Before the brown-haired Éclair or the blue-haired Lumiere could even scream, they were yanked into the dust.

“Too late!” Astri moaned. He whirled on the purple-haired Éclair. “Hurry! We can't let them take them!”

“Running out of—” That Éclair jolted. “Wait—you don't mean they—?!”

“Yes, and they just recharged, but it's okay, just—”

The dust, dying away now as it floated back to the ground, was suddenly cleaved by a massive black energy blast.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!” Monika, Astri, and two or three of the brown-haired Éclairs yelled.

Another male figure leapt in front of them—a man dressed in a grey suit, with long hair tied back in a ponytail. He hurled a suitcase into the energy blast.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!!!!!!!

Both the suitcase and the energy blast were utterly annihilated.

There was a stunned pause.

“That really does come in handy,” the primary (green-haired) Lumiere remarked.

The burst of power had blasted the dustcloud back down to the ground. With it gone, all present could clearly see the “bad” pair of Éclair and Lumiere—Alv and Dvergr—with the captured Éclair and Lumiere lying on the ground, shuddering with pain.

“Everyone, start climbing!” the man shouted.

“What about them?!” Astri and the primary (purple-haired) Éclair demanded.

The green Lumiere raised her gloved hand.

Iridescent sparkles of power rushed from her fingers, streaking across the open air to connect with a mechanical transport pod. The pod switched on of its own accord, lifted into the air, and took flight, streaking straight for Alv/ Éclair and Dvergr/ Lumiere.

Alv and Dvergr jumped reflexively out of the way—although they could have blasted the pod to bits with their stolen powers, they weren't used to them enough to think of it. The pod stooped against the ground, scooped up the fallen Éclair and Lumiere, and streaked up to the green Lumiere, where it stopped, motor purring like a proud cat.

“Hurry, everyone,” Lumiere commanded, stroking the pod gently. “Let's get out of here.”

* * *

“Are you going to tell me what's going on now, or not?” Monika muttered.

Astri screwed up his face. “Um...we're on a planet called Aeneas, on the run with Éclair and Lumiere and a bunch of their clones and Armblast—although he barely counts—from Alv and Dvergr, who are evil ES members who stole Éclair and Lumiere's old appearances and powers and are taking dictatorship over Aeneas and the GOTT to try and futher their plots for revenge. And...we're going up this hill through the forest right now so Alv and Dvergr can't fire at us easily and will be slowed down, and because there's an escape route at the top.”

Despite the fact that Alv and Dvergr were only feet behind him, Monika stopped and stared at Astri.

“What?!”

“Keep moving!!” Astri shoved at Monika. “We’re at the back of the line, here. We’re the most vulnerable.”

“Well *that’s* just spectacular news, isn’t it?!”

“It’s okay, if Alv and Dvergr try to absorb us, they won’t get anything out of it except our appearances. We neither of us have ES powers.”

“What about those energy blasts?!”

“Well, technically, we’re not any more vulnerable to those back here than we would be up there...”

“Real reassuring. I still don’t have *any* idea what’s going on here!!”

“Neither do I,” said the purple Éclair, practically materializing next to them. Astri and Monika both jumped. “Who *are* you two? Where did you come from, and what are you doing here?”

“Oh, well...” Astri stalled. “You see, Éclair...” He paused. “I can’t believe I’m actually talking to you, Éclair! You have no idea how incredible this is!”

“Thank you. I’m...glad you’re so pleased about it. But who are you?”

“My name is I—Astri. And this...is Monika. And we’re from another world.”

Monika winced, expecting total disbelief on Éclair’s part, but Éclair only nodded.

“I figured as much. Which one?”

“Different ones. Monika here is from Terra. I’m from...” Astri paused ever so briefly, “Sylvarant.”

Monika stared at him. No he wasn’t. Astri had come *to* Sylvarant to get help from Raine and Lloyd and the others. Unless he’d come from Sylvarant originally—except he’d told *them* that he had come from a different world than theirs. So...where—?

“Terra and Sylvarant?” Éclair frowned. “Those aren’t very technological planets, are they? How did you get here?”

“Magic!” Astri pulled out his penny. “I called on Hecate, Selene, and Artemis and used their powers to enchant this penny so I could go to other worlds.”

“Whoa, you what?” Éclair took the penny gingerly, much as Raine had at first. “Enchanted it? To go to other worlds? I don’t—”

“Magically,” Astri said helpfully.

Éclair looked at Astri, then shook her head and handed the penny back. “Sorry, this seems like

something that's going to take a great deal of explanation, and we don't have the leisure for that right now. Maybe after Witch One and Witch Two back there stop following us—”

“Well, don't you think it's about time we made our stand?” The ponytailed man—Armblast, Astri had called him—turned to look at Éclair. “As the old saying goes—”

“`Borrowed wisdom is a tenuous thing',” Astri said impatiently, making Éclair and Armblast both stare at him again. “NO! We can't stop here!”

“Why not?” Armblast and Éclair asked, although in very different tones of voice.

“We've been walking for a while. They didn't get much energy back there—they're still low on Absorb-time. When they run out we'll still be in trouble, but the sooner they do it the better for us.”

“Hold on,” Éclair interrupted. “Let me make sure I've got this straight. Alv and Dvergr back there, they've Absorbed our powers and appearances, right?”

Astri looked at Éclair, with her new purple hair and ruby eyes, as contrast to her old auburn locks and amber gaze. “Well, your *old* appearances, anyways.”

“And they can only hold that shape for a limited time, right?”

“Right.”

“And to hold it longer, they have to re-Absorb us, right?”

“They have to Absorb more power and looks from you or one of your clones, yes.”

“So if we stay out of their reach, they'll eventually revert to normal?”

“Eventually, yes—”

A shower of energy blasts tore the earth and shrubbery around them into bursts of dusty smoke.

“Too much talking, too little walking!!” Astri yelped, grabbing Monika and shoving him forward yet again. “They're catching—”

A whip of light lashed out of the dust and seized Astri's ankle.

“—uuuuoooWAAAAAP!!!”

Éclair lunged forward, but too slowly. Astri was yanked off his feet, hand still on Monika's arm, yanking the other boy over backwards and crashing them both to the ground in a heap. Then Astri suddenly zipped out of the tangle, dragged inexorably backwards facefirst over the earth downhill, into the cloud hiding Alv and Dvergr.

Monika spat out dirt and flipped to his feet without knowing how he did it. “Astri!!!”

"I'm really starting to hate these two!" Astri screamed back. "*Hecate, goddess of witchcraft and sorcery—*"

A hand, not the familiarly gloved hand of the fake Éclair and Lumiere, but a bare hand springing from a fuschia sleeve, reached out of the cloud and dug into Astri's leg, just below his knee.

"*LET GO OF ME, YOU TWO-TIMING REVENGE-MONGERING IDENTITY-STEALING—*"

Out of nowhere, two serpent-shaped blasts of energy—one red, one blue—reared, spraying plasmatic needles like swords. The blasts entwined briefly—then slammed forward.

A massive explosion shook the ether and knocked Monika, Éclair, Armblast, and a few of the closer clones off their feet. Astri was literally picked up off the ground by the force of the blast and thrown into the air before he could even scream—then a red streak snatched him out of the air, holding him very tightly against something warm.

The smoke stung his eyes, but even through it he could see the bright red sash trailing across the chest.

"Dextera!"

* * *

The word didn't mean anything to Monika (although his right hand twitched slightly,) but the way Astri said it did. It was exclaimed in surprise, relief, and ever-so-slightly guilty delight. Delight which made him feel oddly jealous.

Jealous of what? That someone else had rescued Astri?

Monika meant to dismiss that thought as ridiculous. But after he thought of it, he suddenly realized it was true. He was jealous that someone else had rescued Astri. Dammit, Astri had saved his life at least twice so far—once from Lilith, once from Sheena. And although he'd had plenty of opportunities to so far, he, Monika, hadn't managed to so much as help Astri in return.

But what the hell was he supposed to do, surrounded by super-powered women with weird "masheen" things he'd never seen before and figures more buxom than—

Then Astri appeared out of the smoke—held in the arms of a tall, muscular, utterly gorgeous man with skin tanned to the color of gold, amethyst eyes, and short hair like garnets. Beside him was another tall, gorgeous man, pale as the moon, with sky-blue eyes and waist-length aquamarine hair.

Astri coughed and rubbed dirt out of his eyes, then looked up and turned the same color as his rescuer's hair.

"Dextera!" Astri repeated faintly. "Um...thank you!"

"Anything to give our dear `acting-chief' a little more trouble," Dextera said. His voice was low and

smoother than honey. “And if you're a friend of that impulsive rebel over there...”

Éclair rolled her eyes. “Thanks a lot, Dextera. And yes, I'd say he is.”

“...that only sweetens the deal.”

“Yes...well...” Astri brushed dirt off his Sylvarant shirt, making the crystals clink musically, and settled for, “thanks, anyways. I was worried that she might—”

“Look,” the real Lumiere said, pointing a white-gloved hand into the obscuring dirt-fog. “I think time's run out for her.”

Everyone turned to look into the slowly-clearing haze of exploded soil with expressions varying from blank confusion (the many clones and Monika) to wary understanding (Armblast and the real Éclair) to tactical observation (the real Lumiere, the two new arrivals, and Astri).

A sudden gust of wind blew the air clear enough for sight again, and Monika and the clones gasped.

The fake Éclair and Lumiere were gone. In their place, covered in dirt and newly-opened cuts from the dual energy blast that had just hit them, were two new women—the true faces of Alv and Dvergr.

The blue-haired Lumiere had been replaced by a young woman with a cloud of softly-pooing rose hair. She wore a curiously cut yellow dress with baggy off-the-shoulder sleeves, lacy black gloves, and a choker around her neck. However, her presence faded into a vague colorful nothingness next to the woman beside her.

Where the auburn-haired Éclair had been standing, there was now a tall woman dressed in a buttoned fuschia waistcoat with puffed sleeves, a black-and-white striped top, and tight, low, black trousers with the left leg cut off. Hoops as wide in diameter as her crimson-painted thumbs were long hung from her ears, surrounded by wisps of short periwinkle hair. Beneath her periwinkle bangs, one could see a curious choker encircling her throat, lavender lipstick smeared across a mouth clenched tight in pain, and slanted aqua eyes burning with raw, uncontrollable fury.

Monika's fists reflexively clenched. This was a woman who would—who *wanted* to—fight to the death and then tear her opponents' corpses to shreds to appease the horrible anger inside of her. He knew that expression.

Wait. He *knew* that expression.

The eyes of a demon burned suddenly in his mind.

* * *

“No!” the taller woman spat. “We haven't lost this fight yet...and we're not going to lose it now. Not when I'm so close to my revenge.”

“*Your* revenge?” Éclair demanded.

“Everything I've done,” the woman snarled, staring at Éclair with eyes full of hatred. “Absorbing your G-class abilities, disposing of the Chief, assuming control of the GOTT...it was all part of my plan to take revenge against the Nobles! What is the `Global Union'? Or even the GOTT?! Empty names. In the end, it's still the Nobles who control the lives of *every single person in the galaxy*. You, of all people, should understand! You've seen the way the Nobles exploit the masses to serve their whim! You know the hardships we've been made to endure—and all the suffering we've caused in their name!”

“The GOTT you serve so proudly is a mockery,” the other woman said, her voice steady and emotionless. “It was only created as a tool for the Nobles. All these years, the only thing we've ever protected is their interests.”

“We have no choice but to act the part of pawns,” the first woman continued, her eyes locked on Éclair, anger breathing out from her like smoke. “We aren't even allowed to die. If there's a worse hell than this, then you tell me what it is!!”

Éclair was looking back at the woman with something like pity in her eyes, although the rest of her face betrayed no emotion. Yet even so small a gesture seemed to infuriate the woman still further. She took a deep breath, her eyes closing, and began to croon words blazing with her rage.

“But now it's their turn to suffer just as I have. The Nobles and all of their puppets.” Her eyes snapped open again. “I'm going to pay you all back...ten times over—!!”

“Oh, please!”

Astri's voice cut through the woman's words like a knife. Her gaze snapped from Éclair to him with a nearly audible tearing sound—the woman beside her did the briefest of double-takes—and Éclair turned her head to face him, looking taken aback.

“Do you think you're the only one who's been wronged?” Astri demanded, the crystals on his shirt clinking gently. “Do you think you're the only one who's suffered? Do you think that in the decades and decades the GOTT has been in existence that nobody else has felt the same pain you feel? Do you think *they* haven't been hurt either?!”

His gesture included Éclair, Lumiere, Armblast, his rescuers, and all of the clones—but his glance shot through the air and focused solely on Monika.

“Do you have any idea how *stupid* you're being?! Do you understand at *all* that you're acting exactly like the Nobles, killing and manipulating other people just to suit yourself?! Did it ever occur to you that you had the choice to *not* do the things the Nobles told you to?!”

“*What else could I have done?!*” the woman screamed, spit flying from her lips.

“You had the option to become fugitives, just as we did!” Lumiere said suddenly, her silvery, childlike voice loud in the forest air.

The pink-haired woman's eyes widened.

“If it was what you truly wanted, with your abilities, I'm sure the two of you would have had little trouble escaping,” Lumiere said. “You say everything you've done has been in the name of revenge, but I suspect you're only trying to convince yourself of that to justify your true lust—for power.”

“You're just as cruel and selfish as the Nobles are!” Astri shouted. “Can't you see that if you win, you'll subject the galaxy in exactly the same way that the Nobles do now?!”

“Say what you want,” the woman snarled, “I don't care. In another five minutes, it won't matter.” And surprisingly, her lavender lips curled into a smile. “Like I said, we haven't lost this fight yet.”

The ground split.

* * *

The only warning was a rumbling like that of a snoring giant. Then the ground leapt up, trembling as though in fear—the hillside behind Alv and Dvergr cracked and erupted like a dirt-spewing volcano—trees, bushes, grass, mosses thrown through the air like dying confetti—and out of the earth as though born from it came a massive steel creation, the dark bluey-grey of a contaminated bruise, shaped in sharp angles and geometric polygons, larger than a blue whale and infinitely more dangerous.

Way up near the top of the metal monstrosity, a laser cannon unfolded and aimed straight down.

BOOOOOOOOOOM!!!!!!!!!!

If it hadn't been for the slightest angular miscalculation in the cannon's aim, probably due to the velocity at which the metal *thing* was rising into the air, Éclair, Lumiere, and the others standing with them would have been dead at that moment.

“Run!!!” Astri screamed, grabbing Dexter's arm and matching action to word.

They ran.

* * *

“You know,” Armblast panted as they ran, “it's really something of a shame things had to turn out this way.”

“How's that?” Éclair said acidly.

“Well, I mean, in the end, we all basically want the same thing. It's just that thin line that separates us from them.”

Astri paled.

“Perhaps,” Dexter contributed, no longer being towed by Astri, “except their goals included the destruction of GOTT headquarters. However noble their motives, that's a line that should never have

been crossed.”

“I guess,” Astri said—then tripped over a rock and nearly fell flat on his face.

Éclair, who was running in front of Astri, slammed her feet down into a stop, whirled on her high heels, and caught Astri before he hit the ground.

“Thanks,” Astri gasped, going red again. “That was *seriously* dumb of me.”

“You can worry about that later, when we're not being chased by the copycats anymore,” Éclair said, throwing Astri up onto his feet in front of her and pushing off again. “We're not out of the woods yet.”

Astri let out a breathless laugh as the irony of the statement sank in through quickly-congealing fear for his life. “Nor will we be anytime soon.”

“Shut up and keep running!”

They ran.

* * *

“Faster!” Alv exulted as she and her partner leapt into the seats of their mobile armor, Thor, while their massive battleship Svalt still hovered overhead.

“I've got them,” Dvergr said calmly, flicking switches and buttons across Thor's control panel.

“Funny, though,” Alv mused. “I recognize Armblast, and Dextera and Sinistra...but the other two. Who are they?”

“I don't know,” Dvergr said. “But it's not to matter much longer.”

“How true.” Alv snickered. “Where do they think they're going?”

“Nowhere. We're coming up on a dead end.”

“A dead end?” Alv's twisted smile widened. “How appropriate it will be for them, in more ways than one.”

* * *

“Can't keep this up,” Éclair panted, casting anxious looks back over the small army of clones, Lumiere, Astri, Monika, Dextera, and Sinistra running gamely behind her, and behind them, the crashing of falling trees that heralded Alv and Dvergr's approach.

“Oh, my, my,” Armblast said.

“What?!”

“Ah, you surprise me.” Armblast was the only one still able to keep up beside Éclair's high heels. “I didn't think the words ‘give up’ were in your vocabulary.”

Éclair wanted to sock him in the face. “This is not the time to start joking around!”

“Sorry,” Armblast smiled. “I was only making an observation—”

The pine-green hulk of Thor exploded out of the woods directly behind them, its cannons raised and ready.

Astri screamed. “*Hecate-goddess-of—*”

Dextera snapped his fingers back over his shoulder.

The entirety of space shifted ever so slightly, pushing all of them to one side, shunting Alv and Dvergr to another, sending their laser blasts streaming into the earth somewhere off to the right. Smoke and dirt enveloped them all in a great cloud, but nothing more damaging touched them.

“Oh my God!” Astri gasped. “That's your power, right? Anywhere?”

“That's it,” Dextera agreed, dust swirling around them in great eddies as they ran.

“That was...that was amazing!! What did you just do? It was like all of—”

“Hurry!” Éclair shouted, interrupting Astri with the voice of desperation. “Just keep moving!”

They ran.

* * *

And came out into open air on the edge of a cliff, some hundreds of feet above a tremendous lake like a sheet of green glass.

Monika pulled up short and yelped. “What the—?!”

Astri hove to a stop and stared. “Oh...”

Two of the clone Éclairs ran into each other and almost fell over the edge.

The real Éclair stared down—a long, LONG way down—into the lake, her gaze calculating.

“Should we swim for it?” Armblast inquired.

“Don't be ridiculous,” Éclair and Astri snapped at once.

“They're here,” the real Lumiere murmured.

Gliding forward like a huge malevolent bird, Thor came to a stop just feet away, Alv and Dvergr seated in its shoulders, the massive form of the battleship Svalt hanging above it like a second moon.

A dozen cannons on Svalt, and a dozen more on the arms of Thor, aimed straight for the edge of the cliff on which Éclair, Lumiere, and their companions teetered like baby birds unable to fly.

"It's over," Alv said, almost gently.

A soft breeze ruffled through Alv's hair, skipping down all the way down the cliffs to kiss the still green waters. Alv lifted her face to it, inhaling deeply.

"Such a nice breeze," she crooned softly. "They say that if you die in a gentle breeze like this, it will carry your soul to better fortunes in the next life."

"It'd be nice if that were true," Éclair said, meeting Alv's blue gaze with her own magenta one quite calmly. "But we both know better than that, don't we."

It was a statement, not a question.

"Well then, there's nothing left to say," Alv remarked, her voice losing every shred of softness. "Except the final goodbye."

Way hundreds of feet below, the surface of the lake moved threateningly.

"Hey, you," Monika hissed, poking Dexter's arm. "Do something! Do that space-moving thing again!"

"There's not enough space to shift," Dexter retorted tensely.

"What?! How can there not be—"

"All I can shift us to now is out over the lake!"

"Astri—"

"Don't worry, Monika," Astri said.

"Don't worry? `Don't worry'?!?!?"

"Nope," Astri said. "Everything's fine."

The lake turned gold and exploded.

* * *

A massive beam of golden light blasted forth from the lake and took the Svalt straight through its cannons, slicing through them like a knife cutting through peanut butter. The massive battleship seemed

almost to recoil from the blast, but it was far too late for it to save itself. The cannons exploded, sending fire through the whole rest of the battleship, sending it crashing down to the ground. A massive blast of flaming smoke shot straight up into the air, twisting greyly like a kind of living tombstone to the Svall's resting place.

Alv and Dvergr stared, mouths agape in shock.

"What the—?!" Alv gasped, whirling to look at the lake.

But something else was looming up out of the water—something huge and white and red, shimmering metal glistening with water, bright crimson paint cutting through the air like a laugh, wings spread in the appearance of a beautiful rising swan.

"Is that—?!" Alv couldn't believe her eyes.

"It's about time!" Éclair said, her features relaxing into a smile half of relief, half of triumph.

Lumiere's smile matched hers. "Well, a lady has to wait for the right moment to make a proper entrance."

Shedding droplets and rivulets of water like crystal through the air as it rose, the massive machine caught the sun and reflected it off as a blinding blaze of glory.

"It...can't be..." Alv gasped, her face a raw ruin of shock.

"Oh, yes it can!" Astri shouted gleefully.

"Yes, the high-speed cruiser La Muse, Prototype Zero," Lumiere said as the huge ship rose into full visibility above her head. "Or, as it was *formerly* known...Calliope."

"But how?!?!"

Something small, but very, very red, burst from the back of the La Muse Prototype Zero Calliope, soaring down on an unerring course towards the cliff where his owners were standing.

"Donner!!" Éclair shouted happily.

The crimson robot Donnerschlag beeped back at his mistress.

"This is the *upgraded* version of Donnerschlag," Lumiere explained. "But for the La Muse, we actually had to go back to the original production model."

Responding to some sort of command (or perhaps realizing that he wouldn't fit on a cliff already so overcrowded with people,) Donnerschlag made a smart about-face and zoomed back to the Calliope, to land above her bridge like a sort of honor guard. A hatch slid open in the top of the bridge, and out of it rose a platform on which two men and one woman were standing. One of the men was a brown-skinned behemoth with muscles like footballs—the other was sharp and slender as an arrow—but the woman in

between them, dressed all in blue with a shock of golden hair visible even from this distance, captivated the attention of every single person on the cliff.

“Impossible,” Alv breathed. *“Eclipse?!”*

Even Éclair and Lumiere looked surprised at this.

“Unou?” Lumiere whispered, more to herself than to anybody else.

“It’s like I told ya,” the arrow-like young man shrugged, shouting to be heard from the bridge of the floating Calliope. “We found a job with more *interesting* prospects.”

“HOW, ECLIPSE?!” Alv screamed. “YOU WERE DEAD! I WATCHED YOU FALL!!”

The golden-haired Eclipse inclined her head ironically. When she spoke, she did not raise her voice, and yet was perfectly audible to all, even with all the many yards of open wind between her and them.

“You know I was an ES Member myself at one time. My ability was known as Quant, or Quantum Jumping. Surely you’ve heard of it.”

Éclair and Lumiere turned back away from Calliope to face Alv and Dvergr again.

“The short version is, it’s what brought us back to life,” Éclair said. “Her ability is what encoded all of us as ES Members to begin with!”

Alv looked like she was going to erupt like a volcano.

“Do you have any idea what I’ve been through to get this far?! Do you?! The pain I’ve suffered?! The humiliations I’ve been forced to endure?! At long last, revenge is finally within my reach! It’s mine! *I won’t let it slip away!!*”

Completely forgetting about Éclair and Lumiere, completely forgetting that she was in a robot while Eclipse was on a fully-equipped ES ship, completely forgetting about everything except her all-devouring need for revenge, Alv slammed on Thor’s keyboard and shot it off the cliff, up towards Calliope and Eclipse.

Yet Eclipse appeared unruffled. She looked the approaching Alv straight in the eye, and said something that was drowned out in the roar of Thor’s engines. And Alv screamed, unleashed a long, horrible scream that resounded with all her pain, and back in the trees her battleship heard and gave out one last salvo of laser blasts which rocketed towards Calliope like a great scarlet sword. The effort of firing out this last blast was simply too much, though. The Svalt shuddered one last time, just before giving up the ghost and finally completely exploding.

Eclipse did not bat an eye.

The huge onslaught of laser power struck a barrier like a great cerulean sapphire, which materialized around Calliope in midair, and bent back as though reflected off a mirror.

Alv's own laser blast enveloped her and Dvergr and Thor and streaked away into the air, just above the heads of all those standing on the cliff. Everybody ducked down and covered their eyes as the searing light and heat streamed way too close for comfort—and when they could look up again, Alv and Dvergr were gone.

A few flecks of ash blew away on the gentle breeze.

* * *

It took a while, but with Donnerschlag to ferry them all down, all the persons still present at the scene eventually made it down to the shore of the lake. By the time the last of the clones had been safely carried down the multi-hundred foot drop to the sand of the shore, the sun was beginning to sink below the horizon and the forest was stained tangerine by its dying light.

Monika's mind felt like a sponge that had soaked up more water than it could hold. He had no idea what most of the things he was seeing were, he had no idea who any of these people were, and he had NO idea what was going on. There were more questions in his head than he knew how to ask. But he could tell that, were he to try asking any of them now, nobody would pay any attention to him. So, exasperating though it was, he held his tongue and waited.

Éclair and Eclipse were standing in the center of all the rest of everybody, staring at each other. Éclair looked like she wanted to say something, but wasn't sure how to phrase it politely—Eclipse looked inscrutable. Lumiere stood by Éclair, once again as serene as the lake beside her. Astri was watching everything, turning his head back and forth, trying to look at everything at once.

“Thank you.”

Éclair started, and turned to face one of her clones, with a clone Lumiere at her side. It was the Éclair and Lumiere that had been seized by Alv and Dvergr way back on the canyon floor all those hours ago (was it really hours? It felt more like days than hours).

“Thanks for...helping us,” the Éclair continued. “But I guess...this is goodbye.”

Eclipse closed her eyes, and inclined her head slightly.

“We're just shadows, really,” the Éclair said, smiling as she spoke, but smiling a smile filled with sadness. “Disposable puppets Alv created in your image, so she could continue to Absorb your powers.”

A bird began to sing, beautifully, obstreperously.

“You could say our lives were built on borrowed wisdom,” the Éclair said. “They were never meant to last.”

“But—” the real Éclair and Monika began.

“Understand,” Eclipse said, talking over the both of them, “the Global Union charger strictly prohibits the creation of clones such as these. The law is very clear in this matter. They cannot be allowed to exist.”

“Chief Eclipse!!” Éclair cried.

Eclipse looked straight at Éclair, her blue eyes very serious. “My advice to you now is to forget that they ever existed in the first place.”

Monika's jaw dropped. Kill them? *Kill* them? They'd gone through all this trouble to save them from Alv and Dvergr and their weird metal-monster-things, and now they were just going to *kill* them?! Like they weren't people, but property, something owned illegally?

“Lilith doesn't belong to you. She's her own person. She doesn't belong to anyone.”

The words sprang to mind without conscious effort, but Monika had no time to think about them. He whirled on Astri. “Astri, do something!”

“I don't need to do anything,” Astri said.

Monika reeled as though he had been punched in the stomach. “Don't need...? What do you mean, you don't need to?! Isn't this what you came here to do?! Isn't this why you said you made that—?!”

“It's okay,” Astri said soothingly. “Eclipse knows what she's doing.”

Monika was fully ready to punch Astri as hard as he could—how could he stand there and say things like that with the clones right there, listening to what sounded like their death sentence?!—when the earth began to shake.

“I do indeed,” Eclipse agreed, inclining her head again towards Astri, this time without sarcasm. “After all...”

Once again, the lake began to boil as though heated by a colossal underground flame. The waters stirred and heaved—Monika caught his balance and whirled back on the lake just in time to see something huge and fuschia emerge, streaming liquid turned gold by the setting sun, and behind it something pacific blue, and behind it leaf-green...

“...something that doesn't exist can't be judged, correct?” Eclipse concluded, as six magnificent spaceships lifted up to float delicately just over the surface of the sunstreaked lake waters, all precisely the same as the Calliope, differentiated only by their varying color schemes: fuschia, pacific blue, and leaf-green, but also tangerine, lemon, and yellow-green.

Éclair gasped, joy flooding her features.

“La Muse's prototypes,” Lumiere explained proudly. “Number One is Clio. Number Two, Terpsichore. Number Three, Erato. Then Euterpe, Thalia, and Polyhymnia.”

The Éclair and Lumiere clones all stared at the ships, hardly daring to believe their eyes.

“All of you must leave now,” Eclipse said gently. “But to help you on your way, I present you with these ships. I trust you will use them to make the most of what limited time you might have in this life.”

The Éclair and Lumiere who had come up to the original Éclair and Lumiere lit up like Christmas trees, nodding ecstatically.

“You see?” Astri said happily, beaming at the ships as proudly as though he had brought them himself. “It’s all okay! They’ll be fine. They’re going to—”

His expression didn’t change, but something about his manner did. Monika, floored and overwhelmed though he was, did not miss it.

“Going to what?”

“I don’t know,” Astri said, more to himself than to Monika. “Hmm...”

Whatever internal cogitation was taking place in Astri’s brain came to a sudden conclusion. He snapped his fingers and took a compulsive step forward. “Um, Éclair—Eclipse!”

Everybody who answered to the name Éclair or Eclipse—which was substantially more than two people—turned to look at him.

“I was wondering—hoping—that is—well, one of you,” Astri said, lifting his hand towards, not the purple-haired Éclair, as Monika had half-expected, but the brown-haired clones. “Could we—Monika and myself—come with you guys? One of you guys?”

The Éclair closest to the main Éclair (God, it was becoming impossible to keep them apart, even if they *did* look different) looked around, then raised her finger to point quizzically at herself. “Us?”

“Yes,” Astri said. “It’s just...you see, we kind of came here to get...to see things. Old things, new things. Monika has amnesia, and I’m a total loss when it comes to combat, so we came here to...temper ourselves, sort of. And although this wasn’t exactly the way I was thinking of doing it, I’d really like to come with you guys. If that’s all right.”

The Éclair looked down at her partner. The lilac-haired Lumiere looked back up at her, the two of them exchanging some kind of message almost psychically with their glances. Then they both looked back at Astri. And both of them smiled.

“Yeah, sure!” Éclair said warmly. “The more the merrier, after all!”

Astri’s smile matched theirs. “Thank you! Thank you so much for letting us come along!”

Monika wanted to scream. Was he the *only* one who didn’t understand what was going on *at all*? “Astri, what—”

"I promise, I'll explain everything," Astri said. "Soon. Really soon."

You've been saying that ever since we got here, Monika thought mutinously, but held his tongue.

"You can come with us," the Lumiere clone said generously. "I'm sure it will be nice to have you along."

"I'm sure it'll be fantastic to be along with you!" Astri said enthusiastically.

"Not to sound as though we're trying to get rid of you all," Eclipse remarked. "However, it is only a matter of time before GOTT officials arrive to investigate what has been going on here, and you really must be gone before that time."

"Yes, of course," the lilac Lumiere agreed. "We understand."

"Then let's get moving!" the brunette Éclair exclaimed.

* * *

A shower of brilliant sparks flew into the sky like kaleidoscopic fireworks.

Down on the ground, Eclipse looked up into the fading-to-night sky, and watched the colorful sparks disappear into the stars. "Good luck, ladies."

"And gentlemen," the aqua-haired Lumiere added.

"And gentlemen," Eclipse agreed. "Éclair..."

"It's okay," Éclair said, her own eyes drawn to the panorama of stars overhead. "I think I understand you now, Eclipse. You did what you had to do."

"Yes."

"I wonder if we'll see any of them again."

"For their own safety," Eclipse murmured, "it is probably better if we do not."

"Yeah." Éclair's eyes caught one last sparkle of tangerine light, then lost it in the darkness of the sky. "I suppose so."