

## **Starfall Cruise**

Derek Ebersviller

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Smashwords Edition

# The Polliwog Saga

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POLLIWOG

BOOK ONE:

STARFALL CRUISE

By Derek Ebersviller

# Chapter 1

## The Fish and the Frog

“Welcome to Frontier City. If you are exiting, please remember your luggage and exit to the right side of the coach. We will be departing again in ten minutes.”

A young girl yawned indifferently. She couldn't decide whether or not to get off. It didn't look like there was anything of particular interest in this city. Then again, she couldn't fairly make that call, considering she'd seen little more than the train station. Since her train credits were based on distance, it wouldn't hurt her to look around a bit. If the city bored her, she could come straight back and board another train.

She stood up and stretched for a moment. Fortunately, nobody else had sat in the same set of four seats as she had, so it was easy for her to retrieve her small bag from overhead. As she meandered to the front of the coach, she fished her train card out of her bag and prepared to hand it to the railroad employee stationed on the platform.

“Good day to you, ma'am,” greeted the employee.

“Likewise,” she replied politely, handing off her card so that he could write down her number. It irritated her greatly to be referred to as “ma'am,” even as a formality. After a moment he handed the card back to her. “Thank you,” she added.

The girl, Tuna Macalister, was eighteen years old and had a face that immediately grew cuter when she became excited. She had gentle brown eyes, light skin, and solid gray hair that was short in front and ran down to the her neck in back. Her attire was suited for the sunny weather, and her most defining apparel was a pair of round-lens goggles strapped across her forehead.

As she passed through the quaint station, she glanced around at the various advertisements local shops and businesses had posted. One of them caught her attention and drew her to a halt.

“Frontier Spa: Pedicures, Manicures, Massage, and More,” she whispered quietly to herself.

Her interest did not go unnoticed. A woman walking toward the train stopped and leaned in near her. “You should definitely

go. I spent just a night there and feel like a brand new woman!" she exclaimed.

Tuna turned toward her with a happy smile. "Is that so? I'll be sure to give it a look." She quickly resumed walking and, once the other woman was out of earshot, moaned quietly to herself. "And that's all I'll do. I'm practically broke. Why am I looking at spa treatments when I need to find a way to make some money?" she pondered. Then again, the thought of looking for work made her cringe with distaste.

She emerged from the station and continued into the street. It was lined with all sorts of shops, but, for her, they were nothing more than forbidden temptations. Although there were quite a few people walking about, she apparently didn't mind talking to herself in front of them. "It's not really my fault. How am I supposed to get a job when I don't even have a place to live? And how am I supposed to afford a place to live if I don't have a job? It's an endless conundrum!"

It was true that she had barely any money left. Since leaving home two years ago, she'd been lucky to scrape by. In that time span, she had held five different jobs in five different towns, none of them for more than six months. She left each and every one on the grounds that the work had become too mundane to endure. Unfortunately, Tuna's lust for change frequently left her struggling to get back on her feet. She cast aside her unenthusiastic expression and strode eagerly along. "I suppose I might as well check the city out. Something new and exciting could be just around the corner."

Turning the corner, Tuna was dumbstruck to see an unconscious man sprawled across the ground on his stomach. It was the most pathetic sight she'd seen in quite some time. What could have happened to him? Moreover, why had nobody done anything to remedy the situation? He was sprawled over half of the street! Once she resolved to investigate him, she quickly noticed the large mound of bushy black hair that seemed to completely obscure his face from sight. She crouched down and lightly poked at it. "Is this an afro?" she asked rhetorically. Of course, she thought to herself, it'd be too reasonable for the hoodlum passed out on the street to *not* have an afro.

She suddenly heard a mumbling sound below and soon deduced that the cobblestones were muffling the creature's cries. She pulled back carefully on his head until his face became free and his chin rested on the street. His gruesome expression just about petrified her.

"Hungry..." he groaned in agony.

What was she supposed to do? He wasn't her responsibility. Then again, it wasn't likely that anybody else was going to save him, and it would rake at her conscience if she left him to rot. "Sometimes I really hate that I'm such a good person," she sighed.

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"Wow, this was really nice of you," the afro-bearing boy beamed. He had light skin, simplistic green eyes and a wide smile. He was seventeen and his head seemed fairly large, but the considerable afro may have augmented its apparent size. He had unusually thick clothing on as well. "You wouldn't believe it, but you were the first person to actually stop and help me!"

"Of course I'd believe it. If anybody had helped you before I did then you wouldn't have still been lying there," she pointed out. After prying him off the street, Tuna dragged the boy into a small food shop and ordered them both hamburgers. Despite his apparent lack of energy just moments ago, he miraculously managed to eat with ease.

"I guess you're right," he agreed. "I hope you don't mind if I owe you. I'm actually pretty short on money at the moment."

This came as no surprise to her. "Don't worry about it. How'd you end up in such a desperate situation, anyway?" she inquired curiously.

He took another bite of the hamburger before answering. "Well, my boss sent me to Frontier City to find somebody, but I've been having a lot of trouble with it. I ran out of money and eventually just collapsed."

She found his explanation to be a bit too brief to be the whole story. "What kind of an employer lets his worker go on a trip when he doesn't even have enough money to feed himself? And did you honestly just wander around as your money ran out without figuring out a way to survive?" she posed, suspicious of his explanation.



He seemed shocked at her questions. “You don’t believe me?”

“Not entirely,” she admitted.

“But why would I lie?” he asked.

“To cover up for something,” she suggested.

Again, he seemed stricken with disbelief. “That’s a stupid reason to lie. I just got really hungry,” he assured her.

Tuna was still skeptical, and was beginning to feel that he might have just scammed a meal out of her.

As she took a bite of her own hamburger, she noticed that the boy was wearing thick gloves, which struck her as odd. It was far too hot out for them to be practical. Furthermore, he kept them on as he ate. “Why are you wearing gloves?” she asked.

“Why are you wearing goggles?” he returned. She decided to drop the matter. Once this became apparent, the boy changed the subject. “So, what do you do?”

“Not much,” she answered warily. “I just got into town and am between jobs at the moment. If you happen to know anybody that’s hiring, some direction would be appreciated.” How pitiful did she sound? She had just asked someone who couldn’t feed himself to point her toward work. An irritable buzzing disrupted her thoughts and drove her attention to the ceiling. A disoriented fly was dancing around the light bulb over their table. Some sort of electrical force must have affected it, because it suddenly stopped buzzing and started to plummet down. Tuna realized too late what was happening, and the remaining half of her hamburger received the fly’s corpse as an additional condiment.

“Great,” she mumbled, “there goes my hamburger.”

The stranger stared at her. “You’re not going to eat that?” he inquired.

Why did all of her perfectly normal behavior strike this person as so peculiar? When the boy realized that her response was not going to exceed a bewildered gaze, he eagerly reached across the table, scooped the burger up in his gloved hand, and bit down into it.

Tuna watched in horror as he chewed. “What kind of freak are you?” she shrieked.

“Wasting food is bad,” he rationalized. Did he not understand *why* she was throwing a fit?

Oddly enough, he finished his tainted portion faster than he had the previous one. With nothing left to consume, he stood up and prepared to depart.

“Well, it was a pleasure meeting you...”

“Tuna,” she filled in as she shook his outstretched hand. “Tuna Macalister.”

“Tuna,” he repeated. “Well, if you ever need a favor, Tuna, just look up Gero Keckus. I’m in your debt.”

“Will do,” she assured him, convinced she never would. He had an innocent air about him, but had provided her with plenty of reasons to hesitate. “See you around.” Gero turned and walked away, leaving Tuna to contemplate her job search.

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Frontier City received its name for being located on the shoreline of Perenos, the human kingdom. It was only one of four, each comprising a different race. Like any port city, it marked the end of land and the beginning of a vast ocean. Tuna didn’t care about the significance of the city’s name, though. What she wanted to know was whether it had anything to offer her.

“I didn’t realize it back there, but I spent almost all of my money on those hamburgers. And there I was lecturing Gero about how to behave when you’re broke,” she mumbled to herself.

While drifting aimlessly through the streets, she found a solution. A conveniently located bulletin board stood beside the street and had all listings of local happenings. Among these were a few temporary job offerings, which was just what she needed. She spotted one that looked simple: “Help wanted loading lightweight cargo onto ship. One day only. Paying e5 per hour. Please come to warehouse 9 if interested.”

“Well, it’s nothing long term, but that’s not a bad wage for some light lifting,” she admitted. Tuna pulled off a tab from the paper with a copy of the address on it.

She strode eagerly toward the pier, relieved to have found a means to sustain herself. Unfortunately, her destination was across the city, so it took her a full thirty minutes to arrive. At last, though, the collection of boats and storage buildings came

into sight. Oddly, the first building had a giant white “9” plastered on the side.

“Sweet, I lucked out. I expected there would be people already loading the boat,” she noted to herself. “I guess they haven’t started yet, which means more work, and more money for me!” Tuna dashed happily toward the small door on the front end of the warehouse. An oceanic breeze swept by the side of the building, fluttering a nearby tree just enough to show the edge of the white “3” painted to the left of the “9.” Tuna failed to notice this before heading inside.

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“How long do we have to stay here?” grumbled a chubby man. He was sitting on top of a wooden crate on the inside of a warehouse. There were a dozen other men situated nearby as well.

A snide looking fellow leaned against the crate next to him. “The boss said we were shoving off tonight. We’re going to use the dark to mask our activity. Until then, we’re supposed to wait here and make sure everything’s ready,” he explained.

“I don’t see why we need to wait until it’s dark. All of the junk is in these crates, anyway. Who’d know the difference?” the large man argued.

“You can’t be too cautious in our line of work,” his fellow worker explained. “You’ll learn after a few weeks that a little prudence will save your ass.”

“Well, I’m tired of waiting. There’s nothing to do in this damned warehouse,” the chubby man complained.

“Why don’t you play cards with the rest of us?” another one called over. “We promise we won’t clean you *all* the way out.”

“Piss off,” he shot back, clearly not interested in their offer. Suddenly, an idea struck him. “Say, didn’t we get some extra?”

The snide man scoffed at his coworker’s notion. “Don’t even think about it. Just because we filled our quota doesn’t mean we can use the extra for ourselves. The boss will want to sell it to another customer.”

“And keep all of the profit for himself,” the large man jeered. He slid off of the crate and slid the unsecured lid off, then reached in and pulled out a bag of fine white powder.

“Put that back,” one of the others warned. It was obvious they weren’t joking around, but the large man didn’t appear to care as he ripped into the bag and held it up to his nose. The others stared at him, wanting to see if he’d go through with it. He inhaled sharply, spreading the white powder throughout his nostrils. It burned at first, but then began to feel better. It’d been a long time since he’d indulged.

The moment he had inhaled, everybody else in the warehouse sprung into action. They didn’t see the logic in stopping him from doing it, but there were plenty of reasons to punish him once he had. The lumbering oaf swung viciously at his assailants, confident he could ward them off. Contrary to his expectations, though, he soon found himself pinned to the ground. Beyond that though, they had also stabbed in several spots, though only impaled his limbs so he would live at least until their boss returned. He giggled in pleasure, despite his defeat.

“What an idiot,” one of his attackers scoffed. “At least we know why he got into the business to begin with.”

“What kind of a glaze trafficker snorts the stuff himself? That crap will mess up your mind and devastate your profit margin,” another added.

A loud thud directed everyone’s attention to the door. Someone had just entered the warehouse. After a moment, they all started to grin. It was their boss, returned from his trip into town.

“Well, well, well. Looks like something interesting happened while I was gone,” he chuckled. He was a fairly muscular man of average height. His stride was filled with a confidence that only came from having numerous underlings.

“The new guy thought it’d be fun to ‘test the wares,’” jested one of the workers.

“Did he now? I trust you all informed him of my views on snorting glaze,” he spoke calmly.

“Of course, Dalvus,” another assured him.

“And yet you still chose to try it,” Dalvus sighed, crouching down next to his newest employee. “You don’t understand, do you? If one little worker starts using the organization’s drugs for himself, then their entire crew’s quota security goes out the

window. If even a single crew becomes unreliable, then the entire cartel suffers and loses business to the others. Illegal or not, this is a business with protocol. Since you're more concerned with getting the glaze, though, than making a living, I'll be happy to indulge you." He picked up the torn bag and held his victim's head still, then pried the man's mouth open and began to drain the contents in. Before long, his employee was coughing for air, but Dalvus simply closed the man's mouth and let him writhe.

"Excellent work, men. Good help is so hard to find lately." He stood up, pulled out one of the swords impaling the large man's arms, and plunged it into his heart before walking over to close up the crate.

The sound of a door swinging open echoed throughout the warehouse. The entire crew was already present, though, and so everyone turned questioningly toward the door to see a frail teenage girl with gray hair step inside.

"Hi, I'm here because of the fly- " Tuna began, cutting herself off as she caught sight of the bloody body on the floor. "Never mind, wrong building, bye," she added in a panic as she hastily made to exit. She wasn't sure what was going on, but she knew that it wasn't a good idea to stick around.

Had she only seen the closed crates, she may have been allowed to leave, but, as it was, the men spared no time in racing to the door, capturing her, and dragging her back inside the building. To the traffickers' relief, they didn't spot a single witness to their actions.

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Gero was once again wandering through the streets. He didn't know how to go about finding the person he was looking for. His boss had failed to give him any direction beyond the name of the city that the individual was likely in. All Gero could think about at the moment, though, were his gloves. Contrary to the impression he must have given Tuna, he detested wearing them. It made everything easier if he did, though.

He caught sight of a bulletin board ahead of him and figured it was as good a place as any to get ideas for how to find his target. One in particular caught his attention quickly: "Free elephant rides today! Only at the fairgrounds on the east side of town." His face lit up with childish excitement. Sure, he had a job

to do, but he couldn't resist the opportunity to cruise around on an elephant. He turned around and bolted for the fairgrounds.

Almost a half hour passed and Gero still hadn't come across any elephants. Impatient, he jumped onto a nearby statue and gazed around. "I thought that the east side of town was a lot closer. I guess this city is bigger than I thought. Hopefully I'm almost there, though. Elephants are so awesome," he cheered. Peculiarly, the ocean was only a short distance away. The ocean should have been getting further away from him as he headed east. His thoughts were interrupted when he spotted a familiar head of gray hair down by the pier. He called out excitedly to his recent acquaintance.

"Hey, Tuna! What're you doing?" When she didn't respond he frowned. "Guess she's too far away."

He set about closing the gap and jumped down to the ground before sprinting after her. After a moment, she had made her way into a large warehouse, but only seconds later dashed back out. As a swarm of men spilled out in pursuit, Gero gripped his fists angrily and increased his speed. Unfortunately, his boots collided with a small groove in the street and he toppled onto his stomach. "Damn boots," he spat. Like his gloves, he hated wearing them, but deemed it easier to do so than to not. He began to pull himself up, pausing a moment to see the door closing behind the men. After spotting a glass window on the roof, he resumed rushing toward the building. A few moments later, he arrived beside it and began to examine the height of the warehouse. If he was to pull this off, he had to remove his limitations. Crouching over, he began to pull off his footwear.

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"Do you have any idea who I am?" Dalvus questioned Tuna. She was gagged and tied to a wooden chair. The girl mumbled something in response, but it was completely indecipherable. "I'm one of the most wanted glaze traffickers in all of Perenos. In our entire organization, nobody has a more notorious record than I do. I've never been caught, and I never disappoint my customers. Perhaps you've heard of the legendary Dalvus?"

Not even an iota of understanding of his identity was visible on her face.

“Insolent brat,” he spat. “You’ve put me in quite a predicament. I can’t just let you go after what you’ve seen, but for all I know your absence might lead to the authorities crawling over this place. I’d say I’ve got some time before that happens, though.” He turned to face his workers. “You hear that, men? We’re loading up right now. Let’s get those last crates secured and ready to go.”

“What are we going to do about her?” one of his employees asked.

“I say we take her along. It’d be kind of nice having a girl on the way for some fun,” another added.

Dalvus shook his head. “It’s not worth the risk. Harmless as she may seem, she’d cause nothing but trouble if we brought her along. She’s seen too much to leave her here alive, though.”

Some of the crew’s younger members were unsettled by his implication. The older ones, however, had grown used to his brutality. Acting mercifully had been the downfall of many others in his position, and not one of the men spoke out against their leader. Dalvus unlatched a strap on his pants and pulled out a short blade. Tuna began to squirm frantically as he lined it up horizontal with her neck. Without showing a shred of pity, he took a step toward her.

The sound of shattering glass turned everyone’s attention to the ceiling. Dalvus reacted instinctively to eliminate whatever threat had just arrived. As he did so, though, a large boot left its imprint on his face and knocked him to the ground, allowing the blade to skid out of his hand and across the floor.

The entire crew gaped at their boss’ humiliation. Turning their attention back to the ceiling, they watched the intruder drop down just outside of the shattered glass. He turned to face them and they froze in shock. The boot-hurler had a distinctive afro and, even more shockingly, a pair of red webbed feet.

Tuna’s initial response to Gero’s arrival was one of elation but, like everyone else, she was numbed at the sight of his feet. Could her day possibly become any weirder?

“I don’t know what’s going on here, but it definitely looks like you were about to hurt Tuna. I can’t let you guys do that because I owe her one. She bought me lunch,” he announced.

The girl just about kicked her chair backward. Was that seriously Gero's reason for crashing into the place and risking his life? A cheap hamburger?

"I can't believe he took the boss out just like that," one of the workers quivered.

"Don't overreact. Boss had no way of knowing that he was about to be attacked. We can handle this little freak by ourselves," another replied.

Gero snickered almost evilly as he bent his knees. When the crowd of traffickers charged toward him, he kicked off and instantly planted his fists into two of their stomachs. The others quickly spun around to face Gero, who had plunged straight past them in his attack. He delivered a kick to one on his right and prepared to backhand another to his left, but found both of his hands bound by two others. The remaining crew members moved toward him, but Gero didn't flinch. He turned to his right and opened his mouth, flinging a long, slimy, pink missile into the face of one of his captors.

Tuna couldn't believe her eyes. That missile wasn't actually a missile at all. It was his tongue. How could it be that long, though? How come his feet were so weird? How come this person who couldn't feed himself was such an excellent fighter?

With one of his captor's temporarily disabled, Gero decided to slip his hand out of its glove and follow into a punch at the closest attacker. As his hand came free, everyone saw that his arms were red, as well.

Whipping his left leg around, Gero managed to trip up the man holding his left hand captive. Liberated, he promptly resumed obliterating the competition. It didn't matter if they came at him with fists, blades, or other weapons. He swiftly dismantled them all.

At last he made his way over to Tuna and removed the gag from her mouth. "Hey there, Tuna. Long time no see."

She was relieved but trembling. "Those feet...those hands...that tongue...are you some sort of amphibian?" she sputtered awkwardly.

He grinned cheerfully. "Yup! A frog, to be precise. Well, actually I'm human, but not entirely. It's a long story," he laughed.



It was amazing that such a person existed, she thought to herself. If she had doubted it before, she was certain now: Frontier City had proven exciting enough for her taste.

“So, you’re a frog and you have an afro,” Dalvus spat furiously. He had recovered from the boot that Gero had cast at his face. “Well, Afro Frog, let me just say that you’ve done quite a bit of damage here. Now that I’m prepared, let’s see just how well you handle defeat.”

The vagrant had picked up two of his minions’ swords and charged toward Gero. His movement was obviously more tactical and precise than that of his crew members.

Gero ducked down and thrust both of his hands out to catch Dalvus’ arms. As he pulled them apart, he lifted his feet off of the ground and plunged them into the trafficker’s chest. Dalvus hurdled backward and crashed through the side of a wooden crate, causing dozens of bags to tear open and spill glaze out on top of him.

“That was amazing. You just took out a dozen armed men all by yourself, and then, on top of that, defeated Dalvus,” Tuna gasped in wonderment.

“Dalvus?” Gero repeated anxiously as he untied her.

“Yeah. At least, I think that’s what he said his name was. I’ve never heard of him, but he acted like he was some sort of big shot,” she explained.

Another massive grin emerged on Gero’s face. “I think this is the guy that I’ve been looking for!” he cheered.

“What? Why would you be looking for a criminal like him?”

“Because the job my boss gave me was to take him out. I’m a mercenary,” he elaborated.

“Oh, okay.” After a moment, it sunk in. “You’re a *what?!?*” Tuna shrieked.

He ignored her reaction. “That other guy over there is dead, though, and the officials might pin that on me. We should get going before anybody else shows up.”

“*We?!?*” she sputtered.

He turned back and stared forcefully into her eyes. “Well, yeah, you kind of deserve half of the reward for this guy since you helped me find him.”

Tuna felt that this frog-man was being oddly generous. She silently weighed the consequences of following him against not following him. On the one hand, he seemed to be a good person, and she could definitely use the money. On the other hand, he was extremely dangerous, and was some mysterious freak of nature.

Unfortunately for her, she had no time to think it over further because Gero scooped her up with his right arm and began heading for the door. Perhaps more terrifying than that was the fact that Dalvus was secured within Gero's other arm.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "We can just find some sturdy rope and mail him to my boss. It'll be easier than lugging him all the way."

"O-okay," she sputtered. We might as well mail him, Tuna thought to herself. It made about as much sense as anything else she had experienced today. She conceded and let Gero haphazardly whisk her along to wherever he might be heading.

## Chapter 2

### The Handsome Donkey

Tuna gazed through the window as Frontier City slowly crawled behind them. Gero hadn't been bluffing when he suggested mailing Dalvus to his boss. Tuna had just enough money left to pay the express shipping price, which they felt was the wisest option. Before departing, they stopped by a military post and put on an excellent show about "those troublesome-looking ruffians snooping around warehouse 39" so that somebody would check it out. Then they got on a train heading north toward Ocarina, the city Gero was based in.

"Alright," Tuna began, "now that we're on our way, I want some answers out of you."

"About what?" Gero asked, obviously confused.

"What do you mean 'about what?'" she gasped. "Why are you part frog? How does that even work?"

"Oh, that. Well, you see, my mom was a human and my father was a frog. An evil witch turned my dad into a human, but when I came out I'd inherited some of his frog genes," he explained.

Tuna glared at him, unconvinced. "Are you serious?"

"Nope," he laughed. "Actually, it's not something that I like to tell people I don't know very well. And, to be honest, my frog components cut off just above my elbows and knees."

"I see. Is that why you dress so heavily, even on hot days like this one?" she inquired.

"Basically. Most people freak out when they see me."

Suddenly Tuna felt ashamed. She, too, had been wary of him because of his unusual anatomy. It was difficult to imagine the treatment he probably received for his differences.

"By the way, you don't mind if I take care of another mission on our way back to Ocarina, do you?" Gero inquired.

She had nearly forgotten that Gero was also a mercenary. How could she have become so sympathetic toward such a nefarious person? "I-I guess not. Who do you need to take out this time?"

“I don’t need to take out anybody. I need to get somebody’s signature,” he summarized.

“Signature? How is that a job for a mercenary?” she pondered.

He shrugged innocently. “That’s what the client wants. Not every mission is about eliminating threats.”

“Oh, I suppose that makes sense. I’ve never really thought of mercenaries doing non-violent jobs before. Whose signature do you need?” she asked.

“Some guy named Balthazar.”

“Balthazar Vallasin?” she cried. “The world’s most handsome man?!” She could picture him now, dreamy and magnificent, perhaps on a white steed.

“That’s what the client said in the description, too,” Gero noted. “Is he really that amazing?”

She snapped out of her fantasy. “Actually, I’ve never seen him before. Everybody says he is, though, so he must be.”

Gero didn’t seem at all impressed. “We’ll see. Wake me up when we get to Beint.” Tuna had been about to ask him something, but was instantly interrupted by a loud snore.

“How can he fall asleep so quickly?” she wondered. “It always takes me an hour to manage that.” It wasn’t worth waking him up, though, so Tuna instead grabbed one of the train’s route maps. “Frontier City to Beint takes four hours,” she calculated. “I don’t even have anything to do...”

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“Wow,” Tuna gaped. “There’s not much to this place.” She was accurate in her observation. Beint was a quaint little town with a population of less than five hundred people.

“Good, that’ll make this Balthazar person easy to find,” Gero reasoned. As he began to walk, his stomach lurched. “Food,” he stated simply.

“We don’t have any money,” Tuna reminded him. Although Dalvus would bring them quite a price, none of that money was available to them until they made it to Ocarina. The last thing either of them had eaten were the hamburgers in Frontier City so it was about time for another meal. By now it was fairly dark out.

“Then we’ll find food on our own,” Gero suggested. “There has to be something edible growing on those trees on the other side of town,” he reasoned while sprinting off in hunger.

“Wait for me!” Tuna exclaimed as she chased after the ravenous beast. When she drew near to the swathe of trees that she had previously assumed was a forest, she realized it was actually an orchard. A stone fence stood around it and stretched a distance in either direction. She saw succulent peaches hanging plentifully from the branches. After a moment, she realized that Gero had already leaped over the fence and was making for the fruit. “Are you crazy?” she called after him. “Where did you get the idea that it was wise to jump fences?”

“It’s not a fence,” Gero debated. “There’s nothing in here but trees and trees can’t run away.”

“I’m pretty sure that it’s meant to keep things *out*, not in,” she protested. He was already peeling the skin of a peach off with his teeth. She had no choice but to go in after him and get him out before he got into trouble. After her first failure, she clumsily made her way over the fence to reprimand her accomplice. “Come on, we need to get out of here before somebody sees us.”

A blinding light flashed, rendering both of them temporarily stunned.

“Just what do the two of you think you’re doing in *my* orchard? Stealing is a crime. Servants, capture these trespassers!” someone ordered.

Tuna knew what was about to happen. Even if Gero admitted he had been stealing, there was little chance that he would just lie down and let himself be captured. She silently prayed that he wouldn’t retaliate, but his clenched fist dashed her hopes.

Two servants began to rush at them obediently. “Understood, Master Balthazar,” they chorused.

She hadn’t realized it before, but in a town this size, Balthazar Vallasin was likely the only person that *could* afford an orchard this large. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she caught a glimpse of the man. He rode astride a majestic white horse and had the chiseled face of a noble knight. Her heart pounded and she froze up. This made it particularly easy for one of the servants to tackle her to the ground. Although Gero had been

prepared to fight them off, he was distracted by how suddenly she had been taken down.

“Tuna?” he cried. His distraction enabled the other servant to run him down and wrap cuffs around his wrists.

“Master Balthazar, he appears to have some unusual deformity affecting his hands,” the servant reported after forcibly removing Gero’s gloves, much to the boy’s ire.

“Oh?” Balthazar replied. “He’s probably been stricken with some horrid disease. Throw him in the abandoned cellar and call the army over in the morning. They can deal with him.”

“Hey, you’re Balthazar Vallasin, aren’t you?” Gero shouted.

“Yes, the most handsome man in the world. Why do you care?” he inquired.

“I need you to autograph something for me!” the frogman shouted.

Balthazar chuckled arrogantly. “I don’t give my signature to just *anybody*. There’s no way I’d give it to someone who tried to rob me. To the cellar,” he reiterated.

“And the girl?” asked the servant who had captured Tuna.

The handsome proprietor smirked devilishly. “The usual.”

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Tuna was befuddled as to why she had been given such forgiving accommodations compared to Gero’s. She had been brought to a large guest bedroom with all sorts of amenities, including a five course dinner. The only visible reminder that she had been captured was the metal chain secured to a ring around her ankle. Although she had tried, it proved futile to attempt to pick the lock. Still, she could hardly complain about the conditions, considering she had been trespassing on his property.

After an hour or so, Tuna heard a knock on the other side of the double bedroom doors. “Uh, come in,” she coughed nervously.

Balthazar strode in, trailed by a gorgeous woman on either side. “Have you been enjoying your stay thus far?” he asked politely.

She could hardly look him in the eyes without fainting from excitement. “Yes, it’s been quite pleasant,” she assured him.

“Excellent,” he smiled. “I absolutely must have all of my girls comfortable. May I ask your name?”

“Tuna. And what do you mean by your girls?” she repeated in confusion.

“Yes. I know the braggart with the bad skin coerced you into committing that crime. That’s why I’ve decided to have mercy on you and offer you a spot by my side. In addition to all of the perks you’ve seen thus far, I’ll even grant you a monthly allowance of e25,000. You also get to accompany me on my tours around the world,” he proposed.

She was utterly speechless. Balthazar Vallasin, the most handsome man in the world, wanted to offer her an amazing life and a wage that she could retire off of in less than two years. It couldn’t get any better than this.

Balthazar perceived her excitement easily. “Of course, I’ll have to have my stylist fix you up a bit, but that can wait until tomorrow.”

“Stylist?” she repeated.

“Yes, my dear. Don’t get me wrong. You have potential, but I can’t have you making appearances as you are now. Nothing less than perfection will uphold the standard my fans have come to expect from me,” he elaborated.

Tuna was less than thrilled that he thought so little of her current appearance, but tried not to show it. She had a wonderful opportunity and didn’t want to blow it. “Sounds great,” she replied cheerfully.

“Wonderful. I’ll have him work on you as soon as we dispose of that monstrosity downstairs. Ally, Sally, why don’t the two of you stick around for a bit and show Tally some of the ropes,” he requested.

“Actually, it’s Tuna,” she called after him.

He looked back from the doorway and smiled so angelically that her heart almost burst. “Good night, Tally. Have beautiful dreams.”

After the door clicked shut, the two girls sat down on either side of Tuna. “Should I be alarmed that he doesn’t know my name?” she inquired.

Ally giggled amusedly. “Oh, dear, you don’t understand what this job is, do you?” she posed.

“My real name’s Christina, honey,” the other one chimed in. “When he hired me, though, he decided that it sounded better if our names rhymed, and so I became Sally.”

“Oh, well, I guess I can tolerate that. After all, the conditions are so nice here and the money is really good,” Tuna added.

“They’d better be,” Ally jumped in. “The only reason I endure this job is for the payoff. Let me lay it out for you, dear. Balthazar may have the face of an angel, but he has the personality of an inbred donkey. Half the words that come out of his mouth are about how handsome he is. He constantly pesters us to fawn over him, and advises us as to how we can ‘improve’ our own appearances. He likes to have us around when he’s touring because having a consistent entourage of good-looking women gives the impression that he’s a catch, and makes all the women who’ve never met him even more fanatical. He’s dated with dozens of women, but not one of them agrees to a second one. Most say that he spends the entire time talking about how honored they should be to get to have dinner with him.”

“And when he tries to dance, my eyes start bleeding,” Christina butted in.

“He can’t really be *that* bad,” Tuna argued.

“Oh really?” Ally challenged her. She tilted her head upward to direct Tuna’s gaze. A solid gold statue of Balthazar on his horse was fastened to a ledge in the upper reaches of the room.

“Okay, maybe you’re right about him,” she gagged. “Can you two help me loosen this chain, then?” She was already chastising herself for being so tempted by money.

“Balthazar will let you go once he’s convinced that you have no intention of leaving,” Christina explained.

“I can’t wait that long. I need to rescue Gero before the army gets here tomorrow,” she insisted. Balthazar’s gorgeous face and generous proposition had distracted her from her real goals. She couldn’t let her rescuer be taken away by the army.

“Sure thing,” Ally agreed. “Just don’t pin it on us if you get caught.” She took out a solid gold key which, not surprisingly, had Balthazar’s head carved out of the handle. “Balthazar forgot a long time ago that had a spare one of these made.”

“Thank you! Can you tell me how to get down to the cellar?” Tuna begged.



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“Damn this metal door!” Gero cried out in frustration. If he hadn’t gotten distracted before, he could have easily handled both of those servants. Now he was imprisoned on all sides by solid stone walls and a thick metal door.

After a useless struggle, he lay down in frustration. As bad as he had it, there was no telling what kind of punishment Tuna was enduring. He couldn’t help but feel worried about her and made a mental note to adhere to the next warning she gave him. She seemed a lot smarter than him.

The sound of rushing footsteps caught his attention and drove him to stand up. Although it was somewhat muffled, he could hear Tuna’s voice. “Gero?” she called.

“Tuna!” he exclaimed. To make sure that she could find him, he lifted up his right foot and drove it forward into the door, creating a considerable boom that she could follow.

She rushed over to the door and grabbed the wheel that controlled the lock. “Hold on, Gero. I’ll get this thing open in just a second,” she assured him. Unfortunately, even with all her strength she couldn’t get the door to budge. “I’m too weak,” she moaned. She decided to cast off her bag so that she could move a bit more freely, but was suddenly struck with an idea. She carefully wrapped the strap of her bag around one of the bottom pegs of the wheel and started to pull on the straps instead. After several moments of strenuous grunting, the strap snapped free of the bag, causing her to fall backward onto the stone floor. “Great, I didn’t need that or anything,” she sighed. To her delight, though, the effort had turned the wheel, if only slightly. She tried once again to turn it herself and found that it had loosened enough for her to pull it off. Once the lock had been drawn open, she heaved back on the door until it opened.

Gero immediately rushed out of the cellar and started spinning Tuna around in delighted gratitude. “Alright, Tuna! You’re the best!” he roared.

“Don’t mention it,” she panted dizzily. “Now, let’s get out of here.”

“I still need to get Balthazar’s signature, though,” Gero insisted.

“Are you crazy? The guy locked you in a cellar and you still think you can get him to sign something for you?” she argued.

“I don’t have a choice. The mission requires me to get it!” Gero countered.

“Who cares about the mission? You’re going to make plenty of money when you get back, anyway. There’s no point in trying to get the impossible out of this guy,” she reasoned.

“The hell there isn’t,” he disagreed. “I’ll force this guy to sign if that’s what it takes.”

Tuna let out a frustrated sigh. “Why are you so adamant about this mission?” she queried.

“Because if I don’t complete it, then the little girl that wanted his signature is going to be really disappointed,” he replied.

She was utterly dumbfounded by his response. She hadn’t even considered the possibility of a little girl submitting a request to a mercenary. Moreover, Gero was willing to go through all of this trouble not because of the money or the pride of completing a mission, but because a little girl wanted something so badly. Maybe he was a nicer guy than his brutish methods let on. “Fine,” she agreed. “But if you force him to sign, it’s not going to be legible. I’ve got a better idea.”

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After filling Gero in on her plan, Tuna led him back up to the main level of the house. Fortunately, they quickly ran into Ally and Christina, and informed them of the plan.

“We might as well help you out,” Ally yawned.

“Really?” Tuna cheered. “Thanks!”

“I want to try something else, too, just in case your idea doesn’t work,” Christina added.

“As do I,” Ally supplemented.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Tuna wondered. “I’m pretty sure he’d get suspicious if we try to get the signature multiple times.”

Ally grinned confidently. “You haven’t worked for him. You’d be surprised just how dense he really is,” she snickered.

“We just saw him drinking his warm glass of milk, so he’ll be in his bed by now,” Christina deduced.

“Let’s try it out, then,” Gero insisted. The four of them prepared and gathered just outside of Balthazar’s room.

Christina offered to go first while the others hid nearby. “Master Balthazar,” she called out as she knocked gently on the wooden door.

“Is that you, Sally?” he shouted back. “Please come in.” She strode in casually, holding a stack of papers, and flipped on the lights. “What is it, Sally?”

“I hate to bother you this late at night, but your tour manager realized that he forgot to have you sign some papers. I told him that I would take care of it,” she lied.

“I see. That’s very helpful of you. Now, then, where do I need to sign?” he asked.

“He’s already marked it all down. Just sign here, and here, and date here...” she instructed.

“How’d she find realistic looking documents for him to sign?” Tuna whispered to Ally.

“It’s just a spare copy from last year. It doesn’t matter, though; Balthazar never reads anything his manager sends him,” Ally explained.

“...and initial here, and then sign here,” Christina concluded with the last, blank, piece of paper that she intended to have him autograph.

Balthazar made the last initial and was about to sign when he suddenly stopped. His expression quickly turned sour. “Something isn’t right about this,” he deduced. Christina began to worry. Had he caught on to her scheme? He crawled out of bed and walked over to a window, grabbing the curtains and pulling them over it. “These curtains shouldn’t be open. And these ones over here shouldn’t be closed,” he added as he passed another window. “Now then, I must be getting to bed. Pleasant dreams, Sally.”

“There’s just one more signature, though, Balthazar,” she reminded him.

“I’ll take care of it in the morning. I’m sure he can wait until tomorrow,” he yawned.

“Yes, I suppose so,” Christina reluctantly agreed. It was just like Balthazar to be that lazy about something so simple. She

made her way out of the bedroom in defeat. “Sorry,” she apologized to the others once the door was closed behind her.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ally replied. “Time for me to take my shot.” She knocked on the door and called out, “Master Balthazar.”

“Ally? You’re still up, as well? Very well, come in.”

She slipped into the room and gently closed the door behind her. “I know it’s late, Balthazar, but I just had to see you,” she explained.

“Oh, about what?” he asked curiously.

Ally crawled onto the empty side of his bed and lay temptingly on her side. “I’ve been feeling strange lately, Balthazar. I didn’t understand it at first, but now I do. I believe I’ve become quite smitten with you,” she whispered. She played the part well, despite her urge to gag with the last sentence.

“Yes, I’m not surprised. It’s only natural that you would. I would be lying if I said I had never thought of you in the same way,” he admitted.

She reached out and affectionately ran her hand down his shoulder. “I want to be with you,” she whispered seductively.

“It’s not a bad strategy,” Christina admitted to the others out in the hallway. “His personality always repels potential consorts long before anything could actually come of it. She’s preying on his weakness.”

“Yeah, but don’t you think it’s a bit creepy to go this far just for him to sign his name?” Tuna quietly squirmed.

“I’m bored,” Gero alerted the others from his sprawled position on the floor.

Balthazar smiled in a way that Ally had to assume was meant to be sexual, but fell short of being so. “Shall we?” he invited her.

“There’s just one little favor I need to ask of you first,” she beseeched him.

“Anything,” he assured her.

“Could you please sign this piece of paper? It would mean the world to me,” she assured him.

“Anything except that,” he shot. She was flabbergasted that he still refused to autograph anything. “You know that I absolutely cannot bend on this matter.”

She decided to up her game and released her hairpiece so that her locks cascaded around her. “Not even if *I* bend for *you*?” she asked suggestively.

“Ally,” he began, “You really look much better when your hair is up. Please don’t let it loose like that while you’re around me.”

Tuna only narrowly dodged the door as it burst open to Ally’s wrath. She slammed it shut furiously and clutched the nearby wooden railing. “That pompous ass!” she cried, struggling to restrain her volume.

“I’m kind of scared to go in there after that,” Tuna groveled. Nevertheless, she pulled herself together and went through with it. “Master Balthazar.”

“Tally? How did you get free of your chain?” he cried back, recognizing her voice.

Christina pointed toward the door and toward Balthazar beyond it. Tuna caught the message. “You let me loose earlier, don’t you remember?”

“Ah, yes, of course. Please enter, then,” he invited.

Once she was in, she pulled a letter out from her pocket. “First of all, I just want to reiterate how honored I am for this tremendous opportunity,” she began.

“It’s my honor. You’re a beautiful flower that just needs some watering before you bloom,” he responded poetically.

“To be honest, the only reason I tagged along with that vile trespasser was because he told me that he could get your signature. You see, this is a letter from my four-year old niece, and she’s your biggest fan,” she continued.

“I doubt it,” he slipped in.

“The problem is she was recently diagnosed with a horrid, terminal disease. The doctors estimate she only has a month to live and she’s almost given up on enjoying the little time she has left. She sent me this letter asking me if I could grant her this one final wish. Could you please give me your signature? It would mean everything to a poor, sick, little girl.”

“I didn’t know that the girl was her niece, or even sick,” Christina whispered to Gero.

“She’s not. Tuna thought it’d make the story more compelling,” Gero explained.

“Nice touch,” Christina noted.

Back in the bedroom, Balthazar was looking at the most pity-generating face that Tuna could muster. “I’m sorry, Tally. I’m afraid that I simply cannot help you out on this matter,” he answered.

Tuna was beside herself. “Why not?”

“I would love to give that little niece of yours something to brighten her day. The problem is that my signature is sacred. Each time I create one for a non-business reason, it diminishes the value of every signature I’ve made thus far. It would be an affront to all of my past signatures if I was to lessen their value. And there wouldn’t be much point in doing it for this girl, anyway. She would only have a month to enjoy it,” he rationalized.

What kind of a soulless fiend was she dealing with? Before she could think of a response, the doors were pulled open. Gero lunged through the doorway and landed on the foot of Balthazar’s bed. “What is the meaning of this?” the rich man demanded.

“Just sign the damn paper already!” Gero shouted.

“Gero! Do you really think this is going to help?” Tuna exclaimed.

“I don’t care. If he doesn’t want to give it to us willingly, then we might as well make him,” Gero snarled.

“How did you get out of the cellar?” Balthazar demanded. Ally and Christina had been right about him. Even now he couldn’t put two and two together.

“I’m sick of waiting. Sign the paper now!” Gero roared, punching one glove into the other menacingly.

Balthazar quivered for a moment before making his decision. “I like your passion. I do believe that you’ve earned *one* signature.”

“Finally!” Gero cheered. Balthazar scribbled off his name onto the paper that Tuna was holding.

“Now then, if that is all, would you please let me get to sleep?” Balthazar demanded.

“Gladly. Thank you!” Tuna shouted back as she and Gero raced out of the house.

Christina and Ally stepped back into Balthazar’s room. “What is it now?” he moaned.

“I’m just shocked,” Christina explained. “I’ve never seen you give in to someone’s request.”

“Believe me, it wasn’t my first choice. No doubt I could have easily trounced the braggart in combat had it come to that. If he had managed even a single blow to my face, would it have been worth it? If he had even just managed to scratch it, would it have been worth it? No. It was my civic responsibility to the world to concede and protect my beauty,” he explained. “By the way, Ally, I’m afraid I can’t keep you under my employ. You’ve gone and made everything awkward with this sexual tension and stress is bad for my skin. You’re fired.”

“Who cares?” she snapped. “I’ve put up with your shit for eighteen months. I’ll never have to work another day in my life.”

Christina watched as Ally exited the room and then turned to her boss. “There’s no way I’m going to stick it out alone. I quit,” she announced.

“No matter. You were starting to blemish, anyway,” he retorted. Before storming out, she left the red outline of her hand on his face. “How dare you! That’s my career you just attacked. I’m going to sue you for all you’re worth!”

“Good luck trying. You don’t even remember my real name,” she reminded him.

“You mean it’s not Sally?” he gasped. She rolled her eyes and walked out on him. “Well, I’m not going to get to sleep after that. I’m going to need another glass of milk.”

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“I can’t believe that worked,” Tuna laughed from her seat in the train.

“It was a pretty good day. We got two jobs done,” Gero grinned.

“It’ll be about eight hours until we get to Ocarina,” Tuna noted. “I’m going to try to get some sleep.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Gero agreed.

“I have to admit, though. Despite how much trouble we’ve gotten into, it’s been pretty fun,” she conceded. Gero burst into a wide smile. Tuna adjusted her seat into a reclined position and lay down on it. “Good night, Gero.”

“Good night, Tuna.”

## Chapter 3

### Commencement of a New Age

The next morning, Tuna and Gero arrived in Ocarina and began to make their way across the city. Ocarina had a population of roughly 50,000 and was located a ways north of Perenos' capitol city, Morrilux. "So where exactly is this boss of yours?" Tuna asked Gero as they walked along.

"Our headquarters are located near the center of the city," Gero explained.

"Our?" she repeated.

"Well, yeah, it's not like I'm the only one who works underneath him. You don't know much about mercenary syndicates, do you?" he asked her.

"Apparently not," she sighed.

"Before we get there, though, I think I should warn you about my boss," he added.

"What about him?" she asked.

"Sometimes he can be a bit insane," Gero informed her.

If someone as unorthodox as Gero considered this person crazy, then did she really even want to meet him?

"He's a good person, though," he added.

"What do you mean by that?" Tuna inquired.

"Well, most mercenary syndicate bosses will accept any job request that's worth its time and effort, no matter the consequences. Our boss will refuse any job that he sees as harmful. That way our organization isn't blemished with the dirty jobs that others take on," Gero summarized.

Although she had gradually been learning that Gero wasn't a money-grubbing delinquent, Tuna still hadn't expected Gero to be such a benevolent mercenary. It made her quite happy to know. "I'm still confused about something. Isn't most mercenary work illegal? How can you guys have your own headquarters without being busted?"

"Our boss actually thought of that and had a genius idea for how to keep ourselves safe," Gero grinned.

"How is that?" she pondered.



“You’ll see when we get there,” he assured her.

After awhile they came to their destination. Gero stood proudly in front of it while Tuna simply stared in disbelief. It was a fairly large building, at least three stories tall. What was most striking about it, though, was the sign hanging on the front. “Ocarina Pie Palace,” it read.

“That’s it? You put up false advertising?” Tuna gasped in disbelief.

“It’s not false advertising,” Gero corrected her. “Here, come inside.” She followed him inside and was amazed to find what appeared to be a genuine pie shop. “Hey there, Jamal.”

A large man with dark brown skin waved at Gero from behind the counter. “Welcome back, Gero. How was your trip to Frontier City?” he asked.

“Great. I beat up a drug baron,” Gero summed up.

“Excellent. And who is this cute little thing?” Jamal asked.

“This is Tuna. She helped me find the baron, so I brought her back to give her half of the cut,” Gero explained.

“Pleased to meet you,” Tuna chimed in politely.

“The pleasure’s all mine,” Jamal replied. “Since you’re a friend of Gero’s, I’ll give you my two-for-one special if you ever need some pie.”

“Jamal’s pies are the best,” Gero added. “And if you need to know where someone is, he always knows, guaranteed.”

“You give me too much credit,” Jamal insisted. “But since you’re here, I want you to try out a new flavor.” He pulled out two plates with triangular pie pieces already on them as he continued. “I call it triple b-berry pie. It’s got blueberry, blackberry, and boysenberry all mixed together.” The two of them gratefully accepted the food and quickly devoured it, with Gero shoveling it down especially fast.

“Amazing as always!” Gero cheered. “Honestly, I forgot how hungry I was. I’ll have to buy some more later.”

Tuna almost felt guilty for the luxurious supper she had enjoyed the night before, and deemed it best not to mention it to Gero. “It really is fantastic. So, are you a mercenary too?” she asked.

Jamal and Gero both burst into laughter. “No, no. I actually own this building. I let Ziggy and the others rent out the

basement and second floor for their business. I keep the ground floor for myself.”

“Ziggy?” Tuna repeated.

“Oh yeah, that’s my boss: Ziggy Von Pondswagger,” Gero elaborated.

“That’s his real name?” she wondered.

“Is he in now?” Gero inquired from Jamal.

“Sure is,” the chef replied.

“Alright. I’m going to head on down. Let’s go, Tuna,” Gero instructed.

The two of them tromped down the steps and into the basement. Tuna was impressed by how well furnished it was. The spiral staircase went down right into the center of the room. To one side was a large game table. Several attachments leaning against the wall indicated that the table was easily converted into a wide variety of different games. Attached to another wall was a bulletin board filled with a large assortment of papers. Three couches were arranged in triangular fashion to the other side, with a small table between them. A refrigerator and several bins filled with snack food were tucked into one of the room’s corners. She found it unusually temperate for a basement. Nobody was in the room, though.

“Guess he’s on the second floor. I might as well show you around while we’re here, then,” Gero offered.

He flung off his boots and gloves, nonchalant as to where he cast them “There’s the lounge and pantry, and there’s the game table and mission board,” he summarized.

“Why is it designed so casually? I thought this was a business,” Tuna observed.

“So? Nobody would ever hang out here if it wasn’t comfortable,” he retorted as he lay back on one of the couches.

“I suppose not. I just imagined it differently. How many mercenaries work here, anyway?” she wondered.

“I currently have eleven under my employ,” a voice answered. Tuna glanced up to see a stout man with short black hair walking down the spiral staircase. He couldn’t have been more than a meter tall, though he appeared to be in late twenties.

“Hey, boss, I just got back,” Gero informed him.

“I gathered that much. More importantly...” he began as he leaped straight over the railing and onto Gero’s stomach, “why the hell did you mail that drug lord to me?”

The frog man convulsed from the impact and tried to swat Ziggy off. The short man was too quick for that, though, and evaded the attack.

“Aren’t you overreacting a little? I just didn’t want to have to drag him with me all the way back to Ocarina,” Gero rationalized.

“And you thought this was the better alternative? I nearly wet myself when I opened that box,” Ziggy chastised.

“It’s not my problem if you have a weak bladder,” Gero shot back.

“That doesn’t even make sense. I ought to kick you out for such disrespect,” Ziggy retaliated.

“Quit bluffing. We both know that you’d be nothing without me,” Gero snickered.

“Um, hi,” Tuna whimpered from the sidelines.

Both of the men had forgotten about her presence in the room. “Who’re you?” Ziggy asked, apparently not remembering that he had answered her question a moment ago.

“That’s Tuna. I want you to give half of my reward for the Dalvus case to her,” Gero explained.

“Fine with me. But who is she?” Ziggy insisted.

“What do you mean? I’m Tuna Macalister,” she stated again.

“That’s your name, but that’s not who you are. What do you like, what do others like about you, and what is it you want?” Ziggy insisted.

She didn’t understand why he cared so much about someone he was just giving some money to, but began to conjure up answers to appease him. “Well, I like sightseeing, I’ve heard that others think I’m pretty considerate, and I want...”

“Why are you bothering her with those questions?” Gero interrupted. “She’s not here to apply for a job.”

Ziggy went red with embarrassment but quickly channeled his frustration onto Gero. “Why didn’t you tell me that right away?” he yelled.

“Why don’t you stop making assumptions?” Gero shot back.

“Actually,” Tuna jumped in, “I-uh, I was thinking about it last night, and now that I’ve seen more about your organization, I...I actually would like to join you. I’ve spent the past two years of my life not knowing where to go or what to do, but there’s something about you guys that feels right.” She could hardly believe that she had spoken up about her thoughts. It was a reckless desire, especially given her lack of experience, but she had a good feeling about it. All the other jobs she’d had became boring quickly, but, as a mercenary, she would always have something new to keep her entertained. Yesterday had been so exciting.

Gero didn’t say a word. Ziggy was prepared for this, though. “Well then, answer the third question. What do you want?”

“What do I want?” she repeated nervously, a bad habit she had fallen into. “A job, I suppose.”

“That’s not what I meant. What do you *really* want? What is your goal, your dream? What do you want to accomplish most of all?” he elaborated.

Tuna suddenly felt dizzy under the pressure. She looked toward Gero in desperation. “What was your dream, Gero?”

He was reluctant to answer. “My dream? I’m trying to save someone.” It was a vague answer, but Ziggy’s eyes made it obvious that he knew more details.

She felt their attention return to her. If she didn’t give him an answer, she wouldn’t get in and she would miss out on all of the adventure that came with the job. She stilled herself and gave her response. “I have a dream. I just don’t feel like sharing it...not quite yet, anyway,” she muttered.

“Then I’m afraid you cannot join,” Ziggy concluded solemnly.

“Just let her join,” Gero butt in.

“You know my stance on the matter,” Ziggy argued. “I don’t ask for much from those who want to join, but they *have* to answer those three questions. No exceptions.”

“What’s important is that she *has* a dream, right? Well, she does, so that should be good enough. She can tell you what it is when she’s ready. Besides, I can tell that she’ll fit in well with us,” he vouched.

Ziggy was visibly struggling between adhering to his standards and listening to his seasoned employee's plea. "Fine. I'll compromise. She will be given a one month trial period. If she hasn't given me an answer by that point, or if I find that she isn't suited for the Pondswagger Syndicate, then I may remove her from our ranks, no questions asked," he stipulated.

"I'm okay with that," Tuna agreed.

"Very well. Tuna Macalister, welcome to the syndicate. Gero, since you two know each other so well, I'll let you show her the ropes. By the way, here's your reward for capturing Dalvus. Divided two ways, you each get e5000," Ziggy calculated. Despite already being excited about her new position, Tuna's eyes lit up even more with the significant payment she'd just earned.

"We also took care of the Vallasin case," Gero mentioned.

"Did you deliver it yet?"

"I was going to do that after breakfast," Gero added.

"Then you can get paid after breakfast, too," Ziggy teased him.

"Cheap dwarf," Gero spat. "By the way, where is everyone?"

"Nowhere in particular. They're either away on missions or home. By the way, Raede took off on a pretty interesting case about twenty minutes before you got here," their boss replied.

"Raede! I hate that bastard!" Gero steamed.

"I'll be in my office if you need me," Ziggy laughed as he scurried up the stairs.

Tuna turned curiously toward her coworker. "Who's Raede?" she asked.

"He's only the lowest of the low. I don't even know why Ziggy tolerates his selfish behavior. It's just cruel!" Gero raged.

"What is it about him that you're so angry about?" she pushed.

"He always stops in a half-hour earlier than me every morning and takes all the cool new jobs that Ziggy posts!" he roared.

Tuna rolled her eyes and began to lecture him. "That's all? Why don't you just stop in earlier yourself?" she posed.

"Because then he wins!" Against Gero's ludicrous logic, Tuna couldn't help but giggle happily. "What's so funny?"

“Nothing,” she replied as she leaned against the stairs. “I’m just excited, is all.”

Gero seemed to change his mood along with hers. It made him happy to have Tuna in the same syndicate. “Well, I’m hungry. Let’s eat and then go give that stupid signature to the client.”

“Alright,” she smiled.

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“She should live around here,” Gero thought aloud.

“Well, according to the address we’re looking for house #2270,” Tuna informed him. She looked up to see that Gero had already leaped far ahead of her. His amazing jumping capacity continually left her trailing behind.

“I think I found it,” he shouted back. He stood in front of a small house with a poorly maintained lawn. Admittedly, they were in Ocarina’s slums, and this property made no effort to disguise that. Tuna wondered how this family had even managed to put together the money for the job.

“I guess so. I’ll just wait here, then,” she offered.

“You aren’t coming along?” he asked.

“You were the one that insisted on staying to get the signature, so you deserve all of the recognition,” she pointed out.

“You’re being stupid. You helped out, too, so come on,” he insisted bluntly. She was a bit taken aback by how rudely he accredited her, but gave in to his request.

Gero eagerly knocked on the door while Tuna caught up with him. After a moment, a small girl opened the door. “Hello?” she said.

“Hey,” Gero smiled. “Is your mom or dad home?”

“Maybe. Who are you?” she asked shrewdly.

“We’re from the Ocarina Pie Palace,” he answered.

“Dad! Some people are here with pie,” she cried out.

A thin and sickly looking man hurried to the door. “I thought I told you not to answer the door for strangers. You’re supposed to come get me if you don’t know them,” he berated.

“But you were sleeping,” she complained.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “You’re from the Pie Palace, I presume.”

“Yup, we’ve got your delivery,” Tuna explained as she handed over the signature they had procured from Balthazar.

“That’s not a pie,” the little girl pointed out.

“No dear, it’s even better. I got you a present,” he explained as he passed it down to her. Her eyes lit up with joy upon seeing the illustriously written name. “Thank you so much. You have no idea how much of a fan my daughter is of Balthazar Vallasin. She believes that one day she’ll grow up and marry him. I’m afraid it isn’t much use telling her that there’s an age gap,” he laughed.

“Did you two meet Balthazar?” the girl asked feverishly.

“Yup. He was a real gentleman,” Tuna lied.

“He even let us in his house,” Gero added.

“I would have just requested a signature via mail but I’ve heard that never works. He must receive so much mail that most of it doesn’t even reach him personally,” the father wagered.

“Yup, that’s pretty much it,” Tuna smiled.

“Dear, it’s time for breakfast. Why don’t you get out the plates?” He turned back to Gero and Tuna. “Again, thank you so much.”

Tuna tossed the encounter over in her head on the way back to the street. “He seemed malnourished and exhausted. It’s pretty admirable that he would spend that much on his daughter’s enjoyment when he’s in such bad shape himself.”

“Yeah, it just pisses me off that we couldn’t tell them the truth about that jerk Balthazar,” Gero moped. “So, what should we do now?”

“You can help me figure out my living arrangements,” she suggested.

“Why don’t you just live with me?” Gero suggested.

She tried to imagine what his place must be like. Some disgusting apartment-turned-swamp image entered her mind and made her shiver with unease. “I’m not sure that’d be the best idea,” she coughed. “Maybe I should just go apartment shopping.”

“Suit yourself. There are a couple different complexes near headquarters we can try,” he informed her.

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They started with the one closest to the Pie Palace and worked their way outward. Tuna shot the first one down because

it was too cramped, the second one because of the price, and the third one because there was a massive hole in the floor. “You’re so picky,” Gero grumbled as they moved onto the fourth building.

“How is not wanting to fall into my neighbor’s apartment in the middle of the night picky?” she countered. “Besides, I’ve got a good feeling about this next place. ‘Sunnyvale Apartments’ sounds so inviting.”

“Welcome,” the guide greeted them. As they walked to a sample room, she detailed the specifics of the complex. “Sunnyvale Apartments just opened up two months ago, so there are still quite a few units still available. There are five floors to choose from, with most services being on the first floor, including a pool, workout center, mailboxes, laundry rooms, and the front desk of course. Ah, here we go,” she said as she unlocked the door to the sample room.

“I’m in love,” Tuna gaped as she laid eyes on the apartment before her. It was spacious, with a roomy kitchen that flowed openly into the living room, which featured several large windows overlooking Ocarina’s main park. There were doorways located on either side of the living room.

“Each of our apartments is suited with two considerably sized bedrooms, as well, each with their own bathrooms attached. With heating, electricity, and other services included, the rent comes to e500 per month,” the guide continued.

“There are only two bedroom apartments?” Tuna asked, to which she received a confirming nod. It wasn’t a bad price for such a nice apartment, if split among two people. Although she had enough to pay for ten months at the moment, she couldn’t guarantee that she’d be able to continuously make that much money. After all, she hardly anticipated jobs as dangerous as taking down drug lords to be common for her. “I really like it, but I don’t have anybody to split the rent with,” she sighed. “Though I suppose I could pay one month by myself and hope to find a roommate by next month.”

“That’s perfectly acceptable,” the guide mentioned.

“Is there any way I could get this apartment specifically? It’s such a nice view!” Tuna squealed.



“If you have your heart set on it, then that’s fine. Shall I draw up the papers?” the guide offered.

“Yes, please!” Tuna cried. “What do you think of it, Gero?”

“I still think mine’s better,” he answered.

“I’ll have to stop over and compare sometime, then,” she smiled. She glanced joyfully up at the black “506” hanging on her door. It felt like she was finally getting back on her feet.

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After signing for her apartment, Tuna agreed to meet up with Gero in an hour back at their headquarters, once she was somewhat situated. Admittedly, she didn’t have many possessions with her. She unloaded the few she had from her bag, took her first shower in days, and changed into a fresh pair of clothes. She glanced around at her desolate apartment and made several notes about what to buy, not the least of which included food and another change of clothes. She also wanted to get a new bag on her way to meet Gero, since the strap had been torn from hers. After gazing cheerfully down at the luscious green park, she situated her goggles around her head, grabbed everything she needed, and headed out.

Sunnyvale was about a fifteen minute walk from the Pie Palace, which was enough to let her enjoy the scenery without getting bored. Along the way, she was fortunate to find a small shop at which she replaced her bag. Upon entering the Pie Palace, she greeted Jamal and descended into the basement. Gero was already there waiting for her. “Hey, there,” he greeted her while tossing her a wad of cash. “Here’s your cut of the Vallasin case.”

“Hey. So what’s our next big mission?” she asked excitedly, catching the payment

“Well, since it’s your first official, one I thought I’d let you choose,” he replied, motioning toward the bulletin board. “Each one of those sheets is an available job. The description and payoff are all written on there. When someone wants a job done, they talk to Ziggy upstairs and he decides whether or not to take it, and he always demands payment up front. If he does accept it, he’ll remove ten percent as his management cut and then create the description poster with the actual payoff on it.”

Tuna glanced in fascination at the posters. “What’s this section on the left for?”

“Those are the old jobs,” he explained. “Ziggy puts a time quota on every job for the clients, and if any job falls into the last quarter of that timeframe, it gets moved over there. As long as there are any jobs in that section, you can’t accept any others. He updates the board before Jamal opens shop each morning. Once you decide to take on a job, you have to let him know so he can keep track.”

“That’s a smart system. Since there are two posters in this left section, I suppose that means I have to choose between them, huh?” Tuna asked for confirmation.

“Yup, but between those two it’s your choice,” he verified.

She swiftly glanced over both of them. The first one was a mission to assist in the transportation of some valuable goods, which didn’t particularly spike her interest. The second one was much more tantalizing. She pulled it off of the wall and read it out to Gero.

“Location: Umberstone Park. Estimated Time: 3-7 Days. Assistance is needed in driving off a band of poachers, estimated to number around five, targeting the endangered great river otter species. Contact the main office for detailed assistance. Reward: e750,” she read off.

“Great river otter? Never heard of it,” he admitted. “I’m sure that we can finish it in two days, though!”

“I think you’re being overly optimistic,” she laughed. “Umberstone is all the way up at the north end of Perenos, so we probably won’t even get there until sometime tomorrow night.”

Gero pointed at the staircase. “Well, then, let’s go tell Ziggy.” Tuna nodded and followed after him.

“What is it?” they heard Ziggy ask from beyond his office door after they knocked.

“We’re claiming a new mission,” Gero replied.

“Fine, fine. Come in,” Ziggy called out. Gero thrust the door open to reveal their boss’ office. Tuna was mildly shocked that it actually looked like a professional office. “So you’re taking her along, too, huh? Good. It’s best that she learns more about how things work before trying anything on her own. Which mission are you two taking?”

“The great river otter case,” Tuna informed him.

He recalled the case in his head quickly. “Very well, go ahead. This works out well for you. I’m going to be out of town the next few days, so no missions will be claimable.”

“Out of town?” Gero repeated.

“Some high-end client is interested in us but refuses to meet in Ocarina. That’s all I can say about it for now,” Ziggy summarized.

“Stop trying to make yourself sound important,” Gero shot.

“What’s that?” Ziggy challenged him. Tuna managed to drag Gero out before the two men fell into another round of insults. She purchased a piece of triple b-berry pie to eat later on the train.

As they walked toward the station, Gero calmed down about not getting in the last word against Ziggy. He actually found it kind of hard to keep up with Tuna simply by walking. There was an unusual spring in her step. In truth, she was just excited. She had helped Gero out on two missions before, but this one felt special. This was her first *official* mission, and she was eager to do her best on it. She glanced back for a moment to catch site of her new home, but it was too far away. Instead she saw Gero racing contentedly after her.

## Chapter 4

# Of Otters and Poachers

Umberstone Park was located near the northern shore of Perenos and was the kingdom's largest nature preserve. As per Tuna's expectations, they didn't arrive until the following night, by which point it seemed rather pointless to get started. Instead, they spent the night at the train station. To her annoyance, Gero fell asleep almost immediately.

"How does he keep doing that?" she grumbled, trying to get comfortable on the station's wooden bench. She had gotten a feel for Gero's character during the two day train trip. He was a rude and obnoxious simpleton. Despite this, he had a good heart. Although she would have really liked to know, she chose not to inquire about the person that he wanted to save. If he didn't want to tell her, then it wasn't her place to ask. She calmly rolled off of the bench and onto the floor, hoping that it might be less uncomfortable. It wasn't.

The next day they headed straight for the entrance to Umberstone Park. "I've been here once before," she recalled. "It's fairly large, but the main office isn't far beyond the entrance."

"Good. The sooner we get to knock those poachers around, the better," he grinned.

"Not everything has to be settled so aggressively," she insisted. "We could just set up a trap or something."

"That sounds like a lot of work," he moaned.

"Why don't we wait until they give us the details?" she suggested. He grunted in agreement, but was obviously in favor of his own plan. After a half hour or so of walking, they came to the main gate, which was shut tight. "What's this about?"

"This sign says that they're closed on Sundays," Gero noted from several meters ahead. She turned to read it but instead caught Gero leaping onto the top of the post.

"Why do you have an obsession with trespassing?" she shrieked.

“Relax, Tuna. They invited us, remember? Besides, it’ll be easier to work if no pedestrians are in the park,” he pointed out.

“I suppose you’re right,” she agreed hesitantly, trying to devise how she would get over the gate. A yelp from Gero heralded his tumble to the ground beside her. She jumped back instinctively and spotted a small rock land next to him.

“I thought you blasted poachers were at least smart enough not to sneak through the main entrance,” someone shouted. Tuna turned to see the one who had thrown the rock at Gero. He was a xylian, one of the four sentient races of Kalanoi, along with humans. The xylian were generally a shrewder and less violent race than humans. This, unfortunately, led to the stereotype that xylians were arrogant due to their apparent superiority. Any human that spent prolonged time with them could easily tell that was not the case.

Physically, xylians were structurally similar to humans, but they looked quite different. They possessed four limbs and had bipedal function. Their average adult height was only slightly more than a meter, and adult width tended to be a bit more than the average human’s. The most striking difference, though, was that xylians had exoskeletons. Almost all of their functional tissue ran inside of their bones. Their rib structure was particularly complex, as it had to protect the vital organs hidden within it. Toward the top of the chest, the bones extended and wrapped around their shoulders, often giving the illusion that a xylian bore shoulder armor. Their heads were also carefully sculpted to provide special protection to the brain and other vital components. As long as a xylian’s mouth was closed, only the eyes peaked through the skull. These were tucked particularly far back, though, giving the appearance that their eyes were smaller. Their exoskeletons made it especially hard to injure them with weapons, but they were at an elevated risk of disease and infection. This made it quite understandable that their society emphasized cleanliness as much as it did.

There was almost no use of clothing among them, some were occasionally donned for vanity purposes. Most xylians lived in their own land, Zentarak, but there was an ample supply of emigrants around the world, especially in Perenos.

Gero sprung to his feet and rushed over to the gate. “Want to try that while I’m looking?” he challenged.

“What my associate *means*,” Tuna interjected, “is that we’re not poachers. We were actually hired to get rid of them.”

The xylian seemed skeptical. “The two of you are really from the Pondswagger Syndicate? I have trouble believing they would send a little boy with an afro and a girl in shorts for a job like this.” Tuna hadn’t thought shorts were unrealistic for the mission at hand, but suddenly found herself ashamed, despite the fact that Gero was also wearing shorts.

“What does it matter if I have an afro?” Gero thundered. “Just let us in!”

“Prove to me that you’re really the agents we’re expecting, then,” the xylian insisted. Tuna dug through her new bag and pulled out the mission poster, presenting it to him. “Alright, those details match the request we gave to Pondswagger. Come on in and I’ll brief you in the office. By the way, my name is Nyros.” They gave their introductions and followed him inside.

“So, what’s the deal with these poachers?” Gero asked impatiently once they were inside.

Nyros walked over to a chair and sat down, gesturing for his guests to do likewise. “They started showing up about two months ago and are only interested in the great river otter. I assume that it’s because the otter’s tail is highly valued amongst collectors. Unfortunately, it’s an endangered species, and three-fourths of their remaining population is in this park. The poachers have been spotted a couple of times in the act by park visitors, whose reports suggest that there are about five of them. They typically tranquilize the otters and then move them onto a raft so that they can more easily carry them away. So far I can confirm that seven of our otters have gone missing since the poachers arrived,” he explained.

“Why would they bother hauling the otters away?” Tuna pondered. “If they want the tails, then they could just cut them off right there and save themselves a lot of trouble.”

“I’m not sure, to be quite honest. At any rate, they need to be stopped,” Nyros replied.

“Alright, let’s go scare them off,” Gero cheered as he prepared to rush out the door.

“Hold on a minute, Gero,” she ordered. “Nyros, do you have a map of where the otter nests are, or of where the sighted poaching occurred?”

“Sure do,” he confirmed as he unfolded a map. “I’ve been marking down each one as the reports have come in. They’re called holts, by the way.”

“What are?” she asked.

“Otter dens are called holts. There are two main holts in the park. One is over here to the east, in a rocky area, and the other is near the center of the park, where it’s grassier. All of the observed poaching has occurred around the eastern holt. Makes sense, considering it’s closer to the edge of the park and easier for them to get to,” Nyros explained.

“Then it’s a fair bet that they’ll strike there again,” Tuna surmised. “Okay, here’s what I think we should do. Gero and I will head over to that eastern holt and hide behind some rocks a ways upstream so that whenever they show up they won’t see us. Then, after they’ve captured an otter, we’ll trail them back to their base. It wouldn’t necessarily end the problem if we just beat up these few guys and then left. We need to find out the full extent of their operation. I only hope they don’t keep us waiting too long.”

Gero was impressed. It was a simple plan, but one that he had overlooked the need for. “Good thinking, Tuna.”

“You don’t require any help, then?” Nyros asked.

“If it wouldn’t be any trouble, you could lead us out there,” Tuna requested.

“Of course. Let me just gather up some basic supplies first,” he agreed.

It took them about a half hour ride on Nyros’ rover before they had to switch to hiking. After another half hour, they spotted the eastern holt. “I don’t see any of these great otters around,” Gero complained.

“One of them is surfacing now,” Nyros pointed out. Gero and Tuna gazed forward attentively as a massive brown creature slid out of the water and scrambled onto the nearby rocks. It was a solid three meters in length, and a third of that was its tail. The body itself was slender. It looked as though a regular river otter had simply been scaled up.

“Amazing,” Tuna gaped. “They’re so big!”

“Indeed. A fully matured male can weigh up to ninety kilograms,” Nyros informed them. “This is far enough for now. I’d prefer if you avoid disturbing the otters as much as possible. We don’t want them becoming too friendly with civilians. I brought along two sleeping bags and plenty of trail mix that you’re free to use. It could be any number of days before they strike again. I’ll have to leave and attend to my other duties, but you’re free to stay as long as the job requires. Please remember that during the rest of the week, the park is open to visitors.”

“Got it. Thanks for bringing us out here,” Gero bid him.

“Of course. I trust you can find your way back should you need further assistance,” he added as he started off.

Once he was gone, Gero stretched out and began to take off his gloves and boots. “Finally! Now I can get comfortable. My feet get so agitated tromping around in those things all day.”

Tuna kept her eyes on Gero’s feet as he dipped them into the cool, flowing water. As he had told her before, the red pigmentation denoting his frog limbs stopped somewhat abruptly above his knees and elbows, where the peach color of his regular skin began. Sometimes she forgot that he was different simply because he usually had his appendages covered up. “Hey, Gero, how do your hands and feet work exactly? Do they function entirely like a frog’s would?”

“Well, kind of. The skin and shape are definitely the same, but it’s not like my hands and feet are cold-blooded. They also start to feel dry quite a bit faster than the rest of my body, but I can go at least a day before it really starts to bother me,” he summarized.

“How interesting,” she noted. “Then how about your tongue? If it’s as big as it was when you shot it out back in Frontier City, then how does it even fit in your mouth? And how can you talk clearly?”

He shot it out of his mouth and grabbed it with one of his hands. “It actually folds up really well in my mouth. Why wouldn’t I be able to talk clearly?” he posed dimly.

She tried not to look at him holding his own tongue. It wasn’t that she was judging him, but rather that she couldn’t help being a bit nauseous about certain aspects of it. She felt ashamed



for not being able to look past his amphibious traits yet. It didn't help that despite, her inquiry, he had refused to divulge anything of his past other than that he had worked for Ziggy for several years. She couldn't really be mad about him over that, though, when she hadn't been willing to talk about her past, either. He had at least been kind enough not to bother her about it.

Suddenly a massive beast breached the water surface before them and landed on top of Gero. Tuna realized that it was one of the great river otters attempting to play with him. The otter sitting victoriously over Gero created a sight that was just too awkward for her not to laugh. Suddenly, Gero's feet rocketed forward into the otter's stomach and propelled it back into the river. "Get off of me, you stinky bastard!" he thundered.

Tuna went pale with horror. "What are you doing? We're supposed to be saving these otters, not beating them up!"

"He's the one who started it," he reasoned as he sprung aggressively into the water. A chaotic spray of water blanketed the shore as the two of them fought. From the shoreline, Tuna trembled nervously, praying that Gero didn't do any serious harm to the creature. To her relief, he was soon fired out of the water by the mammal's shocking strength. It then crawled ashore once again to joyously pin him down. "Stupid beaver," he moped. "I would have won if we'd been on land." She fought back the urge to correct him about the species. He was already suffering enough defeat.

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"It sure was brilliant of you to figure out that we should hit the far holt today, Gilbert."

Five men were carefully riding the current of Umberstone's river, gradually moving eastward. They were positioned around the large raft that was keeping afloat the great river otter they had caught earlier. The ringleader, Gilbert, had decided that today would be a great opportunity to strike. "Since the park closes on Sundays, I figured that the rangers might try to keep watch over the eastern holt, so it would be silly to strike there. All of our attacks have been there thus far, so there's no way that they'd be expecting us to go after the other holt. Now even if they are there, they won't be able to stop us, considering we're already making

our escape. And if they aren't there, then all the better," he detailed.

"If we're lucky, we may even be able to nab a second otter today," another one spoke up.

"It looks like we're coming up on the eastern holt," yet another announced.

"Excellent, we're moving along more quickly than I anticipated," Gilbert grinned.

"That's odd, it appears that there's something else up ahead," the first one added.

Gilbert scanned the shore ahead of them very carefully. "So there is. This'll be easier if we take the person out right away."

"I'll handle it," one of them agreed, pulling out a blow dart gun. He held one end of it to his mouth as he awaited the command to shoot.

"Ready. Aim. Fire!"

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Tuna was huddled up between two large rocks, snacking away at the trail mix. Gero was lying on his stomach closer to the river, bored out of his mind. It had been several hours since Nyros had left, and the two of them had run out of conversation topics. Instead, Gero watched for the occasional fish. "I hate waiting," he groaned at last.

"So do I, but there's nothing we can do about it," she pointed out. "At least it's a beautiful day."

A swooshing sound washed into her ears and led her to look up. An odd, needle-tipped device was sticking out of Gero's arm. "What the..." he began to scream. It was too late, though; he was out cold. Tuna pulled herself together and peeked nervously around the edge of one of the nearby rocks. Gero's positioning should have kept him safe from the east, so the dart had to have come from the west. Sure enough, she saw a large raft coasting down the river with about five men around it. She trembled anxiously as they drew near. Why had the tranquilizer dart worked so quickly? More importantly, these men now knew their location, and there was no way that Tuna could handle all five of them by herself. She wasn't even confident that she could handle one. In her panic, she pushed all of their supplies over and crept

slowly around the rock to remain hidden from their view. If she was lucky, they might not have noticed her.

“Excellent shot!” Gilbert cheered as they drew up to shore. “Doesn’t look like a forest ranger to me, though.”

“Disgusting! Something’s turned his arms and legs red, black, and sticky,” another gasped.

“He must have come in contact with some harmful chemicals that altered his body. No matter, we can’t just leave him here. Tie him up and throw him on with the otter,” Gilbert directed.

This wasn’t good. Not only were they going to come ashore, but they wanted to take Gero with them, too. Tuna stilled her trembling as much as she could. Even a slight scraping sound could tip them off to her presence. Fortunately, they finished up without noticing her or the supplies. “Okay, now let’s get going. The sooner we get out of the park lands, the better,” Gilbert concluded.

Tuna sighed in relief. She felt bad for not doing anything to stop them, but she wasn’t a fighter like Gero. After a few moments, she realized that she had to make a decision fast. With Gero out of commission, the safe decision would be to ask Nyros for assistance. If she did that then she’d forfeit the ability to follow them to their base, potentially making matters much worse. It wasn’t like she could do much against them by herself, though. She looked nervously at the rapidly shrinking raft and then back toward the direction of the main office. Finally, she threw on her bag and hurried off.

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Tuna couldn’t believe what she was doing. It went against her every instinct, but there was no going back now. She was already at the poacher’s base. Fortunately, she had not, to her knowledge, been spotted, and was hiding on a small ridge overlooking their large tent. There was a small slit through which she could see some of what was transpiring. Unfortunately, it also offered her adversaries a way to see her should they happen to look up.

“Now then, let’s have a better look at this poor guy,” Gilbert announced.

“There’s unusual webbing between his fingers and toes,” one of the others noted.

“Hmm, a peculiar case if I ever saw one. Clearly he’s the victim of some dangerous pollutants. Let’s start by trying to scrub it off,” Gilbert directed.

“And if that doesn’t work?” the subordinate pondered.

“Then scrub harder, at least until I think of something else,” Gilbert ordered.

From her position overhead, Tuna rubbed her forehead. At the very least her adversaries were foolish enough to believe mere pollution had caused Gero’s abnormalities. Hopefully that was a reflection of their overall competence. Why they were bothering to try to clean Gero up was beyond her, but it was probably in her best interest to stop them before they could do any permanent damage.

She quietly reached into her bag and withdrew her secret weapon, which she had bought at the same place as the bag itself. It was a sling shot, and there was, fortunately, an abundance of small rocks all around her. After witnessing how dangerous some of the missions were, she had decided it would be best to make some preparations for combat. Unfortunately, she wasn’t skilled in any sort of fighting, so she defaulted to something that she could at least aim from a range. When one of her opponents was opportunely positioned, she would take them out through the slit. That would alert the other four to investigate. She could then hopefully take out a few more of them as they tried to locate and reach her so that she wouldn’t have too much to contend with face-to-face.

As she assembled her small pile of rocks, she berated herself the flaws in such a plan. It was quite unlikely that it would actually work. By any logic, she was going to get herself captured. She gulped nervously and lined up her shot. At the very least, she would take one of them out.

Finally one idled in her line of sight. After a few moments ensuring that her aim was good, she released the sling and watched the projectile soar forward. It came crashing straight onto the tent, a good meter from the slit. Unfortunately, this still created a noticeable sound, and all five men quickly rushed out. They instantly spotted her and began to ascend the small ridge. In a flurried panic, she scooped up the remaining ammunition and cast it down upon them, inflicting almost no damage whatsoever.

“Seize her,” Gilbert shouted, as if they weren’t already trying to do that. She turned to flee, but they caught up to her easily. Within a minute, she was being tied to a chair in their tent next to Gero.

“Now then, speak up, what are you doing here?”

She hadn’t really expected to succeed, but she also hadn’t expected to fail so miserably. “I was trying to rescue this guy and stop your operations,” she choked reluctantly.

“So the two of you know each other, huh? Why the deuce would you want to stop us, though?” Gilbert posed.

“Are you serious? You don’t see why we’d want to stop you from poaching an already endangered species?” she retorted.

“Poaching? Where on earth did you get that impression?” he coughed.

As he refuted her claim, she noticed that all eight captured otters were in a large tank to the side. It wouldn’t make sense for poachers to hold onto all of them like that. Even if they intended to sell them live to collectors, it would be safer to rid themselves of the merchandise as quickly as possible. “What *is* going on here?” she wondered.

One of the others answered her. “We’re cleaning them up.”

“You’re *what*?” she gasped.

“It all started about two months ago. The five of us decided to go on a group vacation in Umberstone Park. We’re all huge nature enthusiasts, so it was a wonderful experience. Unfortunately, while camping we accidentally spilled a large container of ultra-strength shampoo into the river. Most species of plant and animal aren’t affected heavily by this particular variety of shampoo, but it quickly became obvious that it did have negative effects on otter fur. We were going to report it to the authorities, but we knew that we would get into trouble, so instead we crafted a plan to kidnap the otters, run them through a two-month program of repeated otter-friendly shampooing, and then return them to their holts. Unfortunately, our scheme did not go entirely unnoticed. I hadn’t actually expected anybody to come after us, though,” Gilbert summarized.

“I think you take your ecological responsibility too seriously,” Tuna exhaled as she took in the full scope of their operation.

“The otter-friendly shampoo really brings out their fur’s volume too,” one of the others chimed in.

“So, tell me, did your friend here come into contact with any dangerous chemicals lately?” Gilbert inquired.

“Not exactly. His condition is a bit more long-standing than that. You don’t need to worry about it, though. What do you plan on doing with the two of us?” she wondered.

“Our goals really aren’t contradictory, so I don’t see why we can’t let you go. That’s assuming that you desist from interfering with our cleanup, of course,” Gilbert stipulated.

“If you’re not actually harming the otters, then there’s not any real reason to stop you. You can’t just keep kidnapping them like this, though. The park rangers are really troubled over their disappearances. You need to tell them what you’re doing. It’ll be easier to clean them up if they know about it, anyway,” she argued.

“What if they yell at us, though?” one of his companions cowered.

“Suck it up,” she insisted. “If you’re real nature lovers, then you’ll do what it takes to clean the otters as quickly as possible.”

“You have a lot of guts telling us what we need to do when you’re completely incapacitated and at our mercy,” Gilbert observed. Tuna realized she had let that slip her mind as she spoke to him. What was she thinking? “You’re right, though. Let’s untie them, everyone. Then we’ll start making preparations to relocate to the park.”

Tuna breathed a sigh of relief as she and Gero were freed. She spent the next hour or so helping the others prepare to leave. “We’ll only be capable of moving two of the otters at a time,” one of Gilbert’s associates observed. “We’ll have to make at least four trips.”

“No matter,” Gilbert proclaimed. “It’ll save us time in the long run if we don’t have to transport the other otters all the way out here.”

“What’s going on?” Gero moaned, finally stirring awake. The first thing he saw was the large tank filled with the eight captured otters. “Otters? Oh, we must be at the poachers’ base.” He turned towards Gilbert with a scowl. “Too bad you didn’t count on us finding you out!”

“Relax, Gero. I’ll explain everything to you on the way,” Tuna offered.

“On the way?” he repeated.

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“...and so I convinced them that they need to come clean,” Tuna concluded. They were following Gilbert’s crew alongside the river as they headed back into Umberstone Park.

“You actually got them to turn themselves in?” Gero asked in amazement.

“It was actually surprisingly easy. So easy, in fact, that it makes me wonder why they didn’t do it from the start and save themselves a lot of trouble,” she laughed.

“Anyway, thanks for saving me,” Gero smiled.

“I don’t really deserve your thanks,” Tuna corrected him. “I didn’t do a thing to stop them from capturing you in the first place.”

“No, but who cares? You came after me in the end, and that’s all that matters. You’re a good friend, Tuna,” he insisted.

She blushed awkwardly at the praise. It was satisfying to hear him refer to her as a friend. Eager to hide her embarrassment, she changed the subject. “I don’t really think I’ll use a sling shot again, though. There’s ‘needs practice’ and then there’s ‘completely inept.’”

“You’ll find something,” Gero assured her.

“I hope so,” she wished. When they finally arrived back at the main office, Nyros decided that since the matter of poaching was technically resolved, their job was complete. Tuna insisted that they stay for at least three more days to help set up the station for Gilbert’s crew so that Nyros could focus on his other duties. Although he was willing to let them clean the otters up, he was still wary of that being Gilbert and the others’ actual motive. Nyros offered to sign the mission poster or to give other proof that the mission was complete, but Gero assured him that they operated on the honor system. The two mercenaries then departed back to Ocarina, where they would arrive two days later. Tuna was able to say that she anticipated enjoying this new career of hers.

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A mess of twenty battered men lay scrambled across the floor. One loomed over them, holding a key ring in his hands. "This is it, alright. It matches the client's description perfectly," he assessed. He turned his attention back to the last conscious man remaining. "I hope it isn't necessary for me to warn you about doing this again."

"No, no, of course not!" the miserable wretch cowered. "We'll never commit a crime again."

"Good. I wouldn't want to be called back here," the first man warned.

The defeated man barely managed to ask the one question haunting his mind. "Who...who are you anyway?"

The victor of the little brawl turned around and started walking away. "The name's Raede Junka. Remember it well." After exiting the building, he glanced toward the town's train station. "No reason to stay here after I turn the keys in. Looks like I'll be heading back to Ocarina."



## Chapter 5

### A Mission Without Gero

“So, how did it go?” Ziggy asked from behind his desk.

“Well, it turns out that there wasn’t any actual poaching, but we did at least resolve the situation,” Tuna reported.

“Is that so? Alright then, how many charms did that mission pay?” he posed.

“e750,” Gero answered. “So, how did your all-important meeting go?”

“It could have been better. The client outlined the basics and promised a hefty reward, but he couldn’t supply me with a location yet. We’re keeping in touch, but aside from that, the matter’s on hold,” Ziggy relayed. “Anyway, here you go. e375 for each of you. Are you going to be taking up another job right away? There aren’t any old jobs right now, so you’d have your pick of the litter.”

“I’m ready if Tuna wants to,” Gero replied.

“Actually, Gero, I was thinking that I should do my next job alone,” she mentioned cautiously.

“Huh? Why’s that?” he asked.

“Well, I know that I’ve only officially done one mission so far, but I did tag along for two beforehand and in all three cases I had you to help me out. Wouldn’t it be good for me to get some solo experience, too?” she reasoned.

“Yes, it would,” Ziggy interjected. “You should definitely get at least one or two missions done by yourself during your trial period, which only lasts for another three weeks. You won’t be able to guarantee having Gero or someone else to work with, after all. Why don’t you help her pick out one that she’ll be able to handle on her own, Gero?”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s go, Tuna,” Gero led.

Down in the basement, Tuna began perusing through the mission board. There was a much wider variety now that she wasn’t restricted to old missions. She was eager to prove herself,

but also wanted to be careful not to overestimate her abilities. Finally, she spotted one that seemed fairly easy.

“Location: 418 Cherrywood Loop, Ocarina. Estimated Time: 1 Day. Help is required in watching customer’s father between the hours of 1:00 P.M. and 9:00 P.M. Any weekday is acceptable without prior notice. Reward: e75,” she read. “That’s a lot of money just to take care of an old man for eight hours. I don’t understand why they don’t care what day it is, though. Wouldn’t they be planning around something if they were making this request?” she reasoned.

“Who knows?” Gero yawned from the couches. “You should be fully capable of handling that job, though, if you want it.”

“I might as well. It’s right here in the city and I can still make it there in time,” she calculated. “Are you going to pick a mission?”

“Maybe later,” he called back. “I’m just going to catch a nap for now, though. I’m really tired for some reason.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll see you later, then,” she bid him as she hurried on up the stairs. She found it quite odd that, despite having eleven other coworkers, she still hadn’t seen one of them. Then again, she had yet to spend more than ten minutes in their basement headquarters at once.

Ziggy readily approved of her taking the job and, after a few passing words to Jamal, she was off to find her client’s home. As she passed by the Sunnyvale Apartments, she made a note to buy groceries the next time she had the chance. It was funny to her that she had technically been renting her apartment for the past week and had spent all of one hour in it. There was so much to keep her occupied, though, that she hadn’t had time for it. She would also have to begin looking for a roommate soon. Come to think of it, she really could use a change of clothes, but she didn’t think she should waste the time when she was in such a hurry. Maybe she should have just taken the rest of the day off...

“Too late for that now,” she whispered to herself. Fortunately, Jamal had been gracious enough to give her general directions to Cherrywood Loop and she managed to arrive a bit early. “I smell horrible. Why didn’t I stop to change or take a shower? Oh, well. I suppose it’s more polite that I’m actually here a little early.” She strode up and knocked on the door.

A horrid beast opened the door, and Tuna quickly realized it was actually a middle-aged woman with her hair in total disarray. After taking one whiff of her, Tuna became much less concerned about her own hygiene. “Yes?” the woman grunted.

“Uh, hello. Are you the one who made a request at the Pie Palace?”

“Pondswagger sent you? Thank you! Thank the heavens!” the woman exclaimed. “Please come in.” She directed Tuna into the living room, where they both took their seats. “I’m sorry I look like such a mess. I’ve barely had a moment to myself these past few weeks. You see, my father was recently kicked out of the nursing home.”

Tuna was bewildered by such a notion. “The nursing home kicked him out?”

“Yes, I’m afraid that he was becoming too much of a threat to the other residents. My father, Humphrey, is an old war veteran and he suffers quite frequently from episodes where he believes he’s still in the war. He simply becomes too dangerous to be left unattended. That’s why, when he moved in with us, I had to take off of work. Fortunately I work for my husband, so it wasn’t too difficult, but it’s simply wearing me down to watch him every waking hour. All I need is one day to unwind a bit and try to find another facility that can take care of him. I’m simply not equipped to do this every day,” she admitted.

“I see. Where is he now?” Tuna inquired.

“He’s still sleeping upstairs. He wakes up every day at 1:15 exactly and falls asleep between 8:00 and 9:00,” she explained.

“That’s not long,” Tuna noted. “He’s asleep fourteen hours a day.”

“I’m afraid that re-living his war memories tires him out quite quickly. Now then, there’s plenty of food in the kitchen that you can help yourself to. If you manage to catch him while he’s lucid, try to feed him, as well. Otherwise, just keep the house standing and I’ll clean everything up when I get home. Thank you so much for doing this,” she stated once again. It was slightly unsettling how grateful she was. There was still awhile until the actual job hours began, but the woman decided to take off early. “Well, then, I’ll leave the rest to you, good luck.”

“Alright, I’ll do my best,” Tuna guaranteed as the door clicked shut. She found a magazine lying around and picked it up as she sat back down. If Humphrey was a veteran, then it would have to be from the Bloody Skirmish, a one-year war that occurred almost sixty years ago. It was blight on the records of both Perenos and Zentarak, which had otherwise been peaceful for the past century. She had heard that it was one of the worst experiences somebody could go through.

After awhile she glanced at the clock and noticed that it was 1:16. She decided that she should go check to see if Humphrey was up. It didn’t seem likely to her that he actually got up at such a precise time every day. As she passed under the arch that separated the living room and the entryway, she didn’t notice the figure positioned agilely on the woodwork. Once she was in position, the figure dropped down and drove her straight to the floor. “Ow! What the-”

“Nice try, xylian, but I’m too smart for such a straightforward assault. Looks like I’ve caught myself a prisoner of war,” Humphrey laughed evilly. If her back hadn’t been in so much pain from the impact, she would have thrown him off. Unfortunately, there was little she could do but grovel until he had her hands completely tied up with a rope, a task that he completed with surprising speed. He then tied her feet together and to the banister so that she could hardly move at all, let alone escape.

“Listen, Humphrey, I’m not a xylian. I’m here to babysit you,” she tried to reason.

“That’s the best excuse you can come up with? You’ll have to try better than that,” he laughed. He reached into his army clothing and pulled out a knife. “Now, how can we get you to talk?”

Tuna writhed in a frenzy. Why would his daughter not have taken a knife away from him? More importantly, how was she going to get out of this? “I’m already talking, though,” she argued.

“I meant about logistics. I want to know everything there is to know about your side’s tactics and strategies.” Suddenly he froze in place, and then a second later began to run up the stairs. “You lucked out. I need to ‘empty the canteen’ back at base

camp. I'll be back in no time at all, though, so don't try anything clever," he warned.

"You've got to be kidding me," she panted. Fortunately, she was able to reach the knot around her feet with her hands. He had tied it surprisingly well, and she had only barely managed to free her feet by the time he reemerged. He threw himself over the railing to reprimand her while she began to race through the house away from him. Her eyes flashed around for something that she could use to cut the rope binding her hands. Finally she spotted pair of scissors and made a mad dash for them. Humphrey quickly noticed this, though, and pulled back on the rug to trip her up.

"That's what you get for wearing a flashy cape, you silly xylan. Now then, let's get you tied up again," he announced. As he tried to seize her, she kicked him away and managed to scramble to her feet. She turned around so that she could pick the scissors up in her hands, but was quickly smothered by the same rug that she had just slipped on. Humphrey knocked her to the ground and rolled the rug up around her, completely immobilizing her. "You're a scrappy one, alright. I've got you now, though."

It wasn't long before Humphrey had sealed the rug shut with duct tape and locked her in the closet. "It's okay," she told herself. "In a few hours he'll fall asleep and his daughter will free me and this whole nightmare will be over."

"Looks like a cold front is coming in. I'd best get a fire started for warmth," Humphrey told himself. His prattling was suddenly much more frightening. Tuna mustered her strength and heaved herself forward, forcing the closet door open. Upon breaking through, she heard Humphrey's footsteps race toward her. If she hadn't been quite so tightly bound, perhaps she could have freed herself, but as it was, this was the best she could do. As he arrived upon the scene, he crouched down beside her. "Oh dear, what's happened to you? You poor thing!" he gasped in concern.

"You've got to be kidding me. You honestly don't remember?" He was probably free of his hallucination by now, but she didn't expect him to not remember any of it. "Could you help me out?"

“Of course. I hope I wasn’t the one who did this to you. I know that I can get a tad zany at times,” he chuckled.

“No, don’t be silly. I tripped and fell into a rug and duct taped myself up and hid in a closet,” she replied hollowly while she let her out. “Why don’t we just have some lunch?”

“That sounds lovely.” Tuna set to work making them sandwiches as he told her a bit about his life.

“...and then they asked me to leave. Apparently I had convinced half of the other residents to join my army and was just about to launch an attack on the entire east wing. Fortunately, I snapped out of it just in time.”

“I didn’t realize that war visions could be so severe,” Tuna admitted. “How often do these episodes usually occur?”

“I’m told that it’s usually two or three times per day. This sandwich is positively delicious,” he complimented. “Thank you so much for making it.”

“Don’t mention it. Do you want another?” she inquired.

“No thank you, but if it isn’t too much trouble could you pour me some orange juice?” he requested.

“Sure thing,” she agreed. She stood up and peered into the depths of the refrigerator, spotting it all the way in the back. She fished it out and turned to get some glasses, but was met by a smokescreen of flour.

“Take that, dangerous adversary!” he shouted before speeding out of the room. She hastily cleaned her face off so that she could chase the senile old coot. As she emerged from the kitchen, she discovered that the front door had been left wide open. It would be very problematic for her if he got loose in the city. She blazed through the doorway and heard the clicking sound of the lock as the door closed behind her.

“That cunning old man fooled me,” she observed as she began to run around the house to the back. Unfortunately, by the time she made it there, it was already locked. There were only two doors to the house and she really wanted to avoid having breaking any windows. Ideally, she could coax Humphrey into letting her back in, but if he did it would likely be a trap. She leaned against a tree thoughtfully and then saw the solution. There was one open window on the second floor that she could enter through. She hastily scaled the tree and crossed the one

large branch that hung over the house. Then she eased her way onto the roof and began to back silently through the window. When she was about halfway through, Humphrey, whom she had not noticed, walloped her behind with a broom and sent her skidding down the roof. She just barely managed to stop herself before she rolled right off the edge.

“We’ll have none of that,” he laughed as he slammed the window shut. As Tuna pulled herself together, she spotted the trash can sitting outside, which gave her one last idea of how to get back in.

A knocking at the door drew Humphrey’s attention away from the battle plans he was devising. “Someone’s at the gate,” he gasped. He peered through the glass window to the side of the door to see the plastic horse that his enemies had left. “So, the Zentarak military has decided to present a gift to me as an offer of good will. Well, I’m certainly not one to spit at their attempts at peace.” He opened the gate and dragged the plastic horse into his fortress. Tuna was elated that her simple tactic had actually fooled him. As soon as he was out of the room, she would sneak out and devise a way to stop his war games.

A sharp knife pierced through the trash can and stopped mere centimeters from Tuna’s head. She didn’t know whether to attempt to take him down or to maintain the ruse. In her indecision, she ended up doing nothing and, fortunately, it worked out for her.

“Truthfully, I was expecting this to be a trap. It looks like those xylians have finally turned over a new leaf. I suppose the general will want to know about his,” he mumbled. From inside the small canister, Tuna could hear Humphrey’s footsteps calmly ascending the stairs. Once she was certain that he was gone, she climbed out, closed the can back up, and slipped into the same closet that she had been stored in before. This time, though, she intended to use it to her advantage.

Upstairs, Humphrey was finishing his conversation with his general, a teddy bear. “Yes, I see now how the gift may merely have been an attempt to lull us into a false sense of security,” he grunted.

“Now, then, soldier. I want you put that horse into storage,” the general instructed Humphrey in his mind. “Put it into the

storeroom with the food. After that I want you to fortify all the entrances. Get to it, maggot!”

“Yes, General, sir.” He raced down to the first floor and pushed the trash can into the kitchen before erecting barricades in front of each window and door. After protecting the kitchen, he raced toward the front door and gave Tuna just the opportunity she was waiting for. As he stepped in front of the closet door, she thrust it open and beamed him right in the face. She leaped out of the closet to secure her victory but was mortified to find Humphrey completely stationary.

“Don’t tell me that I actually knocked him out,” she squealed as she bent over to check on him. Aside from feeling terrible, Tuna could only imagine the consequences that she would suffer for causing serious harm to the client’s father.

A hand jetted past her face and gripped her shoulder before it cast her onto her side. Within a few seconds she was pinned beneath her crafty opponent. “You walked right into that one,” he gloated. Tuna sulked miserably beneath him, trying to devise yet another escape strategy before his antics became deadly again. It was going to be a long day.

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It was 8:45 P.M. She had roughly fifteen minutes to turn the situation around before Humphrey’s daughter returned. Tuna was bound tightly by a long length of rope and hung upside down from a pipe in the basement. Potentially, she could just wait it out and let the client free her, but by this point she refused to accept defeat. Humphrey had to be conquered. He was currently located on the main floor of the house, so she was free to work without him taking note. Unfortunately, all of the blood was rushing to her head making it difficult to think clearly. At long last, though, she devised a plan.

Her left arm was able to partially escape the rope constricting her, though she was far enough up that she still couldn’t reach anything. She had one way of extending her reach, though, and it was all she would need. She pulled her goggles off and swung them toward a nearby hook. It just barely reached, but she could now pull herself back far enough so that she could swing over the dryer, on top of which was a conveniently located box cutter. She initiated the swing and extended her hand toward



the device. Luckily, it worked out perfectly, and she was now armed with the sharp edge she needed. After several minutes cutting through key points, she tumbled to the ground, liberated.

Tuna left the box cutter behind and threw her goggles back on. After stealthily ascending the stairs, she carefully inspected the door. By now she fully expected it to be booby trapped, so she couldn't be overly cautious. She gazed upward to see a brick positioned on top of the door. It was usually an effective strategy, but was easily dismantled if the victim knew about it. She simply reached up, grabbed the brick by its base and pulled it off of the door. She was about to slip through the door, but narrowly noticed that something else was falling. As the heavy dumbbell that Humphrey had subtly attached to the brick crashed into the floor, Tuna shrieked in terror and slammed the door shut. That could have easily killed her had she moved more quickly. At any rate, Humphrey now knew that she was loose. She charged forward through the door to make sure that he didn't get the jump on her.

It was too late, though; he was waiting for her, armed with two kitchen knives. "Prepare to be vanquished, my arch-rival!" he roared.

Tuna hastily searched the room for anything that she could use as a shield and managed to locate a chair. "Bring it," she challenged him, hiding her actual apprehensiveness.

"Stand down if you know what's good for you, you dastardly xylan," Humphrey warned.

She stood her ground determinedly. Humphrey shrugged and charged at her aggressively. Tuna stepped forward and used the legs of her chair to swat at Humphrey's hands, hoping to disarm him. He stabbed forward with one knife, sticking it in the underside of the seat. Using this as a handle, he directed the chair to the side so that he could continue after her. She leaped to the side, but it looked as though that would not be enough to protect her. Instinctually, she pulled her arms in front of her to swat against the remaining knife. Suddenly Humphrey dropped to the ground with a thud. Tuna stepped to the far side of him, suspecting another ruse. She then poked him lightly without him giving any response. Finally, he burst into snoring and she

breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, it’s not necessarily a victory, but I’ll take it,” she sighed.

The front door opened and she turned to see Humphrey’s daughter and her husband walk in. “We’re back. How did everything go?” she asked.

Tuna looked around herself to see the two knives, one of which was lodged into the chair, the bowling ball and the large dent beneath it, as well as the multitude of other damages that the house had accrued over the course of the day. “Well,” she lied.

“Oh dear, he got quite out of hand, didn’t he? Well, as long as you’re both alright. It’s such a relief that we’ve finally found a new nursing home for Dad,” the client uttered clumsily.

Tuna was just relieved that the client was not upset about the property damage. “Does that mean I can go home?” she moaned miserably.

“Sure, go right ahead,” the client approved.

“Thank you!” Tuna squealed in glee as she gathered up her possessions, raced out of the house, and away from Cherrywood Loop. Once she was a good distance away she slowed down to a walk. She assumed that it was an exception, but it had certainly deterred her from accepting another solo mission for quite awhile. Gero would have actually been very useful to have on hand for this one. “Actually, he probably would have lost his cool and made matters worse,” she laughed. At any rate, he would have made the whole ordeal a lot less stressful.

Ocarina was quite a peaceful city at night. Even with the sun down, the air was still cozy warm. There were a few lights around, especially in the business sector, but overall there was a nice fog of blackness. Despite how arduous her day had been, she was content to take her time walking home. She would wait until tomorrow to turn in her mission. She would also have to start furnishing her apartment soon.

Soon enough, she arrived at Sunnyvale Apartments and drugged up the steps. There were two nice things about being on the fifth floor. The first was the beautiful view. The second was that she didn’t have to pay attention to how many flights she had ascended. Once she ran out of stairs, she was there. She started digging for her keys as she walked toward the door marked 506. “Home, sweet home,” she mumbled as she opened it up.

“Welcome back, Tuna!”

“Hey there, Gero,” she replied mindlessly. After she had stepped into her room she came to her senses and leaped back out into the hall. Her associate was standing down the corridor to the left, dressed casually and without any boots or gloves. Was he stalking her or something?

“Wha-what are you doing here, Gero?” she sputtered.

“I live here,” he replied curtly, as if it should have been obvious to her.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit creepy to move in next to someone you know without telling them about it first?!” she chastised him.

“What are you talking about? I’ve lived here for months,” he explained.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit creepy to let someone you know move in next to you without telling them about it first?” she corrected herself.

“It’s not like you ever asked,” he pointed out.

“I shouldn’t have to!” she wailed.

He stretched indifferently. “Well, did you want to come over and hang out for awhile?” he offered.

“Thanks for the invite, but that job left me exhausted. I’m going to go to bed. I’ll come over another time, though,” she promised.

“Okay. Are you going in to work tomorrow?” he inquired.

She contemplated how long it would take her to manage everything in the morning. “Yeah. Probably around noon.”

“Alright, I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Good night, Tuna,” he signed off as he turned back to his own domicile, room 508.

“Good night, Gero.” As she walked around her fairly vacant apartment, she made several mental notes about what she needed to buy, not the least of which were some groceries. Finally, she sat down next to her living room window. In the large pond located in the park she could vividly see the reflection of Tyrilus, the blue moon. It was only one of Kalanoi’s three moons and only a sliver of it was visible. The other two, Saralus the yellow moon and Nelus the green moon, were also out, but not in positions to be reflected. Both of them were over half full, though. Tyrilus seemed so pristine in the water, so tangible. She

was tired and bruised and sweaty, but she couldn't have been happier.

## Chapter 6

### The Cannon

“Why was I expecting to get mail, anyway?” Tuna asked herself as she began to ascend the stairs once again. It was morning, but she had already gotten a lot done. She had taken her long overdue shower and gone shopping for clothes, sheets, and food. Sometime when Gero was available she’d have to coax him into helping her carry up some furniture. As it was, she had nothing to sit on but the floor. After she finished putting everything away and enjoying a light snack, she decided to go over to headquarters. Before taking off, she meandered over to Gero’s door and gave it a firm knock. Nobody answered. “I guess he already went out.”

Sure enough, Gero had decided to go in earlier and, since nobody but Ziggy was in, was making small chat with Jamal. “You know what kind of pie you should make next?” he led.

“I’m not putting flies into my pies,” he adamantly denied Gero.

“That wasn’t what I was going to say,” Gero shot back.

“Oh, really? What were you going to say then?” Jamal posed.

“I think that you should use a fly-flavored fruit in your pies,” Gero answered.

“If you can ever find a fruit that tastes like a fly then I’ll make exactly one pie with it for you. Don’t expect me to try selling that garbage to customers, though,” the chef retorted.

“Fine, your loss,” Gero sighed. “What time is it anyway?”

“About a quarter past noon. Why?” Jamal asked.

“Tuna said that she was going to come in around twelve,” Gero explained.

“Have you taken a single mission without her since she joined?” Jamal asked curiously.

“No, I’ve only done one quest since she joined, though. Why does that matter?” he wondered.

“It doesn’t really. You just seem to have grown quite attached to her pretty quickly. You don’t *like* her, do you?” he suggested.

“Of course I like her. She’s a really cool person,” Gero pointed out, completely missing the meaning behind Jamal’s words.

“You’re completely oblivious, aren’t you?” Jamal sighed.

“What?” Gero groaned.

“Never mind. So have you looked into any missions?” the chef asked.

“Yeah, there’s one at Mount Moumantai that I’m going to claim if Tuna’s interested,” Gero answered.

The door to the Pie Palace swung open to reveal a woman in her late sixties. She wasted no time in making her way over to Gero and Jamal. It was evident that her old age and short gray hair weren’t accurate indicators of her vivacity. “I haven’t seen you around in awhile, Gero.”

“I had some long, out-of-town missions,” Gero summarized. “What about you, Matilda?”

“Oh, nothing too spectacular. I just got back from a job to cull some rambunctious bears that were giving this village some trouble,” Matilda replied. “I’m going to talk to Ziggy and then head downstairs, maybe look for my next job.”

“Just don’t take the Mount Moumantai job, I have dibs on that,” Gero declared.

“If you want dibs then claim it, you silly lout. Don’t worry, though, it doesn’t sound like my cup of tea,” she chuckled as she moved past them and up the stairs.

“I wish she’d slow down a bit,” Jamal moaned. “It’s not like she needs the money. She just does these jobs so that she doesn’t get bored.”

“She’s fine,” Gero guaranteed him. “I bet she’ll still be doing jobs twenty years from now.”

“Probably,” Jamal laughed. “Looks like someone else is here, too.”

As the door opened, a skinny boy with short black hair made his way into the shop. He had large square glasses that made his eyes appear big, but otherwise he looked like an average teenager. “Hey there, Gero, Jamal,” he waved.

“And here I thought I might actually have a customer. I suppose I can settle for you, though,” Jamal jested.

“Where have you been, Cyrus?” Gero inquired. “I haven’t seen you in over a month.”

“I spent most of it doing research back at my place. When the power was cut, I realized that it was probably time to go get some money,” Cyrus awkwardly explained.

“Bummer,” Gero replied curtly.

“Yeah. I’m going to check out what’s available then,” Cyrus mumbled as he made his way downstairs.

“Hey, I’ve got dibs on the Mount Moumantai job,” Gero called after him.

“We don’t have ‘dibs’ here,” Cyrus argued.

“It’s common courtesy!” Gero yelled as he raced after Cyrus. In all honesty, he didn’t anticipate Cyrus actually taking the job, but he still felt obliged to guard it.

Jamal chuckled as he watched them slip out of sight. “If that kid weren’t such a genius, I’d be real worried about him,” he snickered. The door opened again and he slowly turned to greet his customer. “Welcome to the Ocarina Pie Palace! What can I- ” He stopped as he realized that it was Tuna. “Oh, it’s just you.”

“Nice to see you, too,” she replied, partially offended by his disappointment.

“Sorry, sorry. It’s just that you’re the fourth person to come in during the past half hour, and not one of you has been a customer,” Jamal explained.

“Fourth? Does that mean that I’ll finally get to see some of my other coworkers?” she asked excitedly.

“Oh, that’s right! You haven’t met anybody else yet. Well, Gero’s downstairs with one of them and the other is talking to Ziggy,” he detailed.

“Cool. I’m going to head on down, then. Talk to you later, Jamal,” she bid him as she vanished.

“Nobody eats pie anymore,” he lamented, finally alone.

“Tuna!” Gero exclaimed as she appeared on the spiral staircase. “You need to come and look at this mission before someone else steals it from us.”

“That can wait a few minutes,” she told him. “I want to meet these other mercenaries.”

He reluctantly obeyed her. "Fine. This is Cyrus Gunders, the unofficial nerd of our syndicate."

Cyrus looked away from the mission board, obviously irritated by the introduction that Gero had provided. "If you insist on labeling me with such terms, then you could at least have the decency of calling me a geek," he insisted.

"Who cares? You're the smart one. She gets the idea."

"Pleased to meet you," Cyrus added as he shook Tuna's hand.

"You, too. I'm Tuna Macalister," she replied in turn.

"So you're the new girl that Ziggy was talking about," Matilda butted in, suddenly appearing on the stairs above them.

"Yeah," Tuna confirmed. "Who are you?"

"I'm Matilda Pickin. Nice to meet you," she answered.

"She's the old one," Gero announced.

"Why do you always describe us so simply?" she scolded Gero.

Rude as Gero's outburst was, it summed up Tuna's thoughts pretty well. She hadn't expected someone of Matilda's age to be in this line of business. Then again, nothing about the Pondswagger Syndicate had struck her as orthodox yet. Ziggy had said earlier that he had eleven employees. Counting Gero, Cyrus, and Matilda, she had met three of them so far. She'd also heard mention of that Raede character that Gero seemed to hate.

"No good. None of these jobs pay enough to cover my bills," Cyrus lamented.

"That's why you don't wait until you have to pay all of them at once," Matilda berated him. "You always do this, Cyrus. Maybe you should work *ahead* for once."

"Hey, come to think of it, you have plenty of money you don't need. What do you say, Matilda? I'll pay you back, of course," Cyrus begged.

She chortled at the very gesture and began to put together the arrangements for a game on the table. "I know better than to loan money out to you. I'd make a fortune on the interest if I believed that you'd ever get around to paying me back," she jeered.

"Oh, come on. You know that I'm not a moocher," Cyrus retorted.



“Of course you aren’t. You’re just a chronic procrastinator. Besides, I see at least two jobs there that would cover two months’ worth of bills. Just take one of those,” she advised.

“He’s too scared to take those jobs,” Gero jumped in. “Just because they involve a small potential for death or serious injury.”

“Pfft, that’s a pitiful excuse,” Matilda stated.

“I’m sorry that I’m normal and don’t like risking my life unnecessarily,” Cyrus retaliated.

“Tell you what, Cyrus. If you’re so desperate for money then I’ll play you for it. e1000 wager, that should be enough to cover you for a month,” Matilda proposed.

“Yeah, right. I’m not an idiot. You’ll clean me out, you shark. Shame on you for trying to profit off of my hardships,” Cyrus shot back. “I suppose I’ll just do a few easy ones. That’ll let me get electricity back by tomorrow and then be able to afford food by Monday.”

“I think your priorities are a bit out of whack,” Tuna pointed out. “Though I suppose you could always eat here.”

Tuna’s contribution reminded Gero of his primary concern. “Tuna! Will you look at this mission now?” he beseeched her.

“Alright, already. What exactly is it?” she asked.

He jumped over to the mission board and began to read the job description aloud. “Location: Mount Moumantai. Estimated Time: 1-2 Days. An escort is required for the elderly client “Fennin Garr” who may be found in the small hut located on the west side of the mountain at the base. Reward: e200.”

“Sounds fine to me. Mount Moumantai was up north if I remember, probably one day by train. Why were you so psyched about this mission, though?” Tuna asked of her companion.

“You don’t know the legend?!” he gasped.

“What legend?” she asked.

Matilda answered before Gero could. “There’s an old story about a mysterious spirit that inhabits the peak of the mountain. It supposedly drains anyone who enters its domain of all their energy. One instance includes a prison escapee who tried to hide up there a few years ago. By the time the army found him, he didn’t even try to put up a fight,” she informed her.

“So there’s allegedly a debilitating spirit up there and that makes you *want* to do this mission?” Tuna questioned Gero, confounded by his logic.

“Yeah! I’m going to challenge the spirit to defeat me and then laugh in its face when I’m completely unaffected by it,” he fantasized.

“Its incorporeal face, that is,” Cyrus interjected.

“Well, I think you’re crazy, but I’m fine with the mission,” Tuna announced.

“Alright! Let’s go claim it,” Gero cheered.

“I call dibs on it,” someone jumped in. They all turned to see another figure descending the stairs. It was a large man, not only tall but well built.

Excessively well built, Tuna thought, as she noticed that his arms and chest actually seemed to exceed what seemed natural compared to the rest of his body. He had blue eyes and short, green hair, the bangs of which curved up into three wavy spikes. His attire was somewhat odd. It consisted of pants and a heavy jacket that had holes near the shoulders, which was left unzipped to expose his bare chest. His entire presence seemed to exude power.

“When the hell did you get back?” Gero shouted angrily.

“Just now. I was going to talk to Ziggy first, but I heard all of the commotion down here and had to see what was up,” the large man explained.

“Good for you. You can’t have our mission, though. I already called dibs on it,” Gero argued.

“I didn’t hear you say it,” the newcomer argued.

“That doesn’t matter. Matilda and Cyrus can vouch for me calling it,” Gero shouted.

“We don’t obey any sort of dibs here,” Cyrus reminded them both.

“Just let me have the mission,” the large man insisted. “You’d probably just mess it up, anyway.”

“Uh, excuse me,” Tuna butted in, “but who are you?”

“He’s our syndicate’s unofficial bastard!” Gero raged. He seemed to become angrier every second of the newcomer’s presence.

“Raede Junka, at your service,” he verified, though Tuna had understood whom Gero meant. “Why are you so bent out of shape, Gero?”

“Because I’m sick and tired of you taking all of the good missions. Why should I give you one that I’m already holding?” Gero asked.

“Because I’m your senior and you’re supposed to obey your seniors,” Raede answered.

“You’re only twenty-seven, you stupid airbag! Why do you want my mission anyway?” Gero shouted.

“The same reason that you just stated. I want to defeat the spirit of the mountain,” Raede answered.

Although he looked tough and stern at first glance, Tuna quickly realized that Raede was little more mature than Gero was. It was the unfortunate coexistence of their similar stubbornness that likely drove them to dislike each other so much.

“What’s all of this racket about?” Ziggy interrupted, suddenly appearing on the stairs.

“Gero and Raede are fighting again,” Matilda summed up, playing a game against herself since Cyrus had refused to.

“He’s trying to lay claim to my mission!” Gero grumbled.

“It’s not *your* mission until you claim it. We don’t enforce dibs here, remember?” Raede smugly replied.

“Says the person who one minute ago tried to call dibs,” Tuna whispered to herself.

“Clearly, I deserve it. I have an epithet. Do you have an epithet, Gero? I didn’t think so,” Raede added, sticking his tongue out childishly at his rival.

“Why would I want to have a seizure?” Gero shot back.

“Not epilepsy, you moron. I mean a title. I’ve firmly established myself as ‘The Cannon.’ That proves my superiority,” Raede figured.

“Boloney! Besides, I have a title, too. Some guy called me Afro Frog the other day,” Gero recalled.

“How does that strike fear into your enemies?” his rival retaliated.

“Enough!” Ziggy thundered. “You’re giving me a bloody migraine! I’m assigning it to both of you. If one of you wants to

drop out, that's fine by me, but as it is you're both charged with the mission." It was a smart move. Ziggy knew that neither of them would concede and so they'd both get out of his hair for a few days.

"And me," Tuna chimed in.

"Sure, whatever," Ziggy sighed.

"Lame, that's not even worth my time if we split it three ways," Raede determined.

"Does that mean you're dropping out?" Gero inquired.

"Keep dreaming. I'll finish the mission in half the time you do."

"That doesn't even make sense," Tuna noted. "This is going to be a long job, isn't it?"

"By the way, Ziggy, I finished my mission," Raede remembered.

"Oh yeah, so did I," Tuna tacked on.

"Don't bother me with it down here. That's what my office is for," he announced, disregarding the fact that he occasionally did pay out rewards in the basement.

"Actually, your office is for deluding clients into believing that they're dealing with a professional. We all know that most of those filing cabinets are empty," Cyrus threw in.

"Nobody asked you," Ziggy shot back defiantly before storming off upstairs.

Tuna, Gero, and Raede agreed to meet at the train station in two hours and went their separate ways until then.

"So what do you think of the new girl?" Matilda asked Cyrus, who had become her only companion in the basement.

"She's kind of normal, which is weird, but she also has a high tolerance for weird, so I think that she'll fit in just fine," he reasoned.

"You speak very bizarrely," she laughed. "But it's a good thing that she has a lot of tolerance. She's going to need it to keep those two fools from bashing each others' brains in. Ah, here we go. This looks like a fun job. You want to tag along? I'll split the reward with you."

"No thanks. I'm going to take a nap and think over some schematics that I've been working on. I'll do a job tonight or

something,” he decided, fulfilling his role as the eternal procrastinator.

“You’re hopeless,” she observed. “See you later, then.”

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“I was expecting it to be dirty, but this is overkill,” Tuna observed. She was standing in Gero’s apartment, waiting for him to get ready. It was barely an exaggeration to say that there wasn’t enough room to walk in there. It was as if Gero thought putting something away would only mean that he’d have to trouble himself with getting it out again later. “What’s taking you so long, anyway?”

Gero darted across the living room from one of the bedrooms to the other. “I’m looking for something that I want to bring with us.”

“Wait a second, is that second bedroom filled with junk too? This isn’t healthy, Gero,” she lectured him.

“I think it’s in here,” he called back, ignoring Tuna’s ranting.

She carefully stepped through the filthy piles and made her way over to the room. “You think what’s in here?”

“My frisbee!” he exclaimed, proudly holding it up before her.

“What do you want to bring that along for?” she inquired.

“To see how far it’ll go if I throw it off of the top of Mount Moumantai,” he grinned.

“That’s littering,” she reminded him, not that she really cared that much.

“Not if I go and pick it up afterward,” he reasoned.

She leaped over the last mound of junk on her way to the door. “How do you expect to find it if you’re throwing it off of the mountain?” she posed.

“Okay, maybe I won’t,” he conceded. “It’s a good frisbee, though, somebody will pick it up.”

“I’m sure. Are you ready to go, then? We should set out soon,” she insisted.

He rushed to the door and locked it behind him. “Ready.”

As they made their way down the stairs and out toward the train station, Tuna decided to confront Gero about his dislike of their coworker. “So you’re not going to be fighting with Raede the entire trip, are you?” she checked.

“Probably,” he admitted.

“At least you’re honest,” she sighed. “Could you at least try to maintain a little air of peace? It’s not like he’s *that* bad of a person.”

“Yeah, I’ll try. No promises, though,” he stipulated.

“I wasn’t expecting one,” she laughed. He may be excessively aggressive, but at least he was willing to restrain himself for her sake.

After a short while they arrived at the train station, where Raede was already waiting for them. Gero’s skin began to crawl as soon as he saw him. Even his pose seemed arrogant. He remained strong, though. If he wasn’t hostile toward Raede, then perhaps Raede wouldn’t be hostile toward him. Upon seeing them, Raede picked up his supply bag and walked over to them. “Took you long enough to get here,” he baited Gero.

“There was something we had to do,” Gero muttered between clenched teeth.

“I guess so. The next train that goes to our destination is scheduled to arrive at any minute. We should arrive around eight o’clock tomorrow morning,” Raede summarized. Almost as if he had summoned it himself, the train appeared off in the distance. “Well, looks like it’s already here.”

“Let’s hurry and get some good seats, then,” Tuna suggested, already heading toward the platform.

The station announcer’s voice boomed forth from the speakers. “The train to Wailing Falls has arrived. Please wait in line to have your train card or ticket processed. The train will depart again in approximately ten minutes.”

Tuna was first in line and raced to find the best seats. Raede asserted his way in front of Gero, who was still trying not to get upset. The station employee wrote down the number on Raede’s card and handed it back, preparing to take Gero’s. After a few steps, Raede briefly turned back to Gero. “Don’t dawdle now, toad,” he laughed.

A switch went off in Gero’s head and he lunged furiously at his rival. “What did you call me?!” he shrieked, completely oblivious to the three station workers that immediately moved to stop him as he jumped the gate prematurely. He hadn’t let the processing on his train card finish before he had lunged, so the

workers assumed that he was trying to catch a free ride. They struggled to keep Gero from writhing free. “Let me go! I want to punch that bastard in the face.”

Raede was still laughing when he sat down across from Tuna to watch the chaos unfold from inside the coach. “Why did that comment get him so upset?” she asked him.

“I used the one word that is absolutely taboo for that guy. There’s nothing he loathes more than being called a toad. I don’t understand why he hates it as much as he does, but it sure does come in handy,” he chuckled.

Tuna rolled her eyes. Her plan to keep them halfway civil wasn’t going to work if Raede was just as troublesome. She stuck her head through the open window and called out to her friend. “Gero, stop struggling and just let them write down your number,” she instructed.

After a few minutes everything was straightened out and Gero was allowed to board the train. He plopped down next to Tuna and stretched his legs out onto the seat next to Raede. “I hate you,” he seethed, glaring at his adversary.

“I was just having a little fun,” Raede snickered.

“Tuna, can I punch him?” Gero asked hopefully.

“No,” she replied flatly.

“So, your name’s Tuna?” Raede added, diverting the conversation away from his spat with Gero.

“Yeah, Tuna Macalister,” she clarified. “I’m the new girl.”

“So, tell me a bit about yourself. What are your hobbies and such?” he asked.

She was slightly taken aback. With all of the chaos he had been causing, she hadn’t expected him to actually inquire about someone else’s interests. Maybe it was just Gero that he was rude to. “Well, I’m eighteen years old and I just moved to Ocarina about a week ago when Gero got me interested in being a mercenary. I haven’t exactly had a stable budget the past few years, so my hobbies lately have been pretty simple. I like sightseeing, running, dancing, and those sorts of things.”

“That’s pretty jive,” Raede replied.

“Jive?” Tuna asked. It wasn’t that she didn’t understand so much as it was she was shocked to hear someone use that word.

“As for me, I’m twenty-seven and have lived in Ocarina for about fifteen years now, though I’ve only been in the syndicate for ten. I like tinkering on automobiles and such. It really gets the noggin thumping,” he presented in turn.

She was impressed. Personal automobiles were only a recent technology and far too expensive for most people to own, so it was quite a feat that Raede would know how to work on them. “Do you own your own vehicles or work on others?” she asked curiously.

“I own them. To be more precise, though, I own all of the various parts. I buy them as my payoffs allow and slowly put it all together with my own mental prowess to erect a mechanical being of blood, sweat, and tears. It’s really quite romantic,” he explained.

“And boring,” Gero chimed in.

“Nobody asked you,” Raede shot back.

“Can we please try to avoid arguing as much as possible?” she begged them both. Perhaps if she spoke in terms they could more easily relate to, she would have more success. “We’re going to be together for at least a few days so we should try to bury our frustrations with one another. Then we can grow like a tadpole grows into a frog, or like the individual pieces of a vehicle come together to form something even greater.”

Raede leered at Tuna oddly. “What are you talking about?” he asked.

“I don’t get it either,” Gero added. “Why would a tadpole be driving a car?”

“You’re weird,” Raede decided abruptly.

Tuna was about to protest, but by sacrificing her own appearance, she had actually managed to unite the two of them together on something, and that was a start. “Never mind,” she sighed.

Amazingly, the two managed to remain somewhat peaceful for most of the journey. It probably would have worn them both out if they had kept on fighting with one another. Admittedly, the majority of the outbreaks occurred when Tuna had gotten up so she had to give a lot of credit to the factor of a third party. After awhile she didn’t even think about their fighting. It had either



diminished sufficiently or she had simply become desensitized to it.

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Tuna was the first one to wake the following morning. The sun wasn't yet up, but its light had begun to illuminate the sky.

"Looks like it's dawn," she yawned. Gero was sprawled out across the other three seats in their subsection, blissfully asleep. Raede had migrated to the floor, with his body crossing the aisle and his legs elevated onto the opposite seats. Fortunately, the floor appeared clean. Together, the two boys created quite an amusing sight.

As Tuna leaned forward, her back tingled with pain. Their train was not well suited for sleeping, hence their peculiar arrangements and subsequent soreness.

She glanced out the window to see that they were moving across a bridge. The water beneath them looked magical. With the sun in its current position, she could clearly see into it without being bombarded by an annoying glare. Ahead, on the other side of the lake, she could make out a town. This must be Wailing Falls, she thought. More noteworthy, though, was the large, dark shape looming in the northeast.

"Wow," she gasped. "That must be Mount Moumantai." Although she hadn't minded the idea before, thinking of ascending it now made her queasy. Hopefully it had some sort of trail blazed up it already, or this could become nightmarish. For now, however, it was a majestic and humbling sight.

Tuna turned to make sure that all of her possessions were in her bag before they arrived. Too late she realized that Gero had unconsciously shifted positions, decimating the support that he had erected and causing him to plop down between the seats and onto Raede's head.

The collision jolted Raede awake and led to him thrashing about in a panic, waking Gero up as well and throwing the frogman off. Raede scrambled to his feet and pointed accusingly at Gero.

"What kind of sick prank are you trying to pull on me?" he demanded.

"What are you going on about?" Gero yawned, still not fully awake.

“You just planted your backside over my face, you jerk,” Raede shouted.

“You’re the jerk. My arm’s sore from you throwing me off like that,” Gero retaliated.

“Your arm’s sore because you slept suspended between the seats like that,” Raede pointed out.

“At least I didn’t sleep on the hard floor, you moron,” he shot back.

“Amphibian brain!” Raede fired.

“Hey!” a stranger shouted from across the coach. “Some of us are still trying to sleep back here.”

Tuna began to sweat. She may not have been the one causing the ruckus, but she felt guilty by association.

The train intercom flipped on and announced their arrival. “Welcome to Wailing Falls. If this is your stop, please don’t forget your luggage. Once we come to a stop you may exit to the left side of the coach. We will depart again in ten minutes.”

“Thank goodness,” she exhaled. “Come on, you two, let’s get out of here.”

## Chapter 7

### Spirit of the Mountain

Wailing Falls was named after the many streams that flowed down through the town and into the lake that it was located next to. Anyone near the lake would be greeted by the constant wail of the water pouring in from above. It was a simple town with a population of less than five hundred, and it was the closest settlement to Mount Moumantai.

“Thanks again for the pancakes,” Gero smiled. The three had stopped for breakfast before they began to make their way toward the mountain.

Tuna was stuffed and having trouble keeping up with her companions. “Why are you thanking me? You made me order them just so that you could have them as my leftovers,” she reminded him.

“Oh, right. Thanks for paying for them, then,” he laughed.

“You’re such a moocher, Gero,” Raede mocked.

“What’s that?” Gero growled aggressively.

“Do either of you know how far it is to the foot of the mountain?” Tuna inquired in an attempt to evade further fighting.

“I saw a sign in town that said it was a two hour walk,” Raede answered.

“Two hours, huh? I wonder if we’ll be able to make it to the top today,” she pondered.

“Most likely. It’s a frequently explored mountain, so it’s a safe bet that some sort of path has been carved out. Judging by the size of it, though, we won’t be coming back down today,” Raede wagered.

“Well, it’s a good thing we brought sleeping bags,” she concluded.

“We did?” Gero questioned.

Tuna turned despairingly toward her friend. “You forgot to bring them even after I told you to?” she gasped.

“Huh. I guess so,” he realized.

“Fantastic,” she lamented.

“Once again, my amphibious associate, I have proven infinitely more reliable than you. I expected this, and so I had the foresight to pack three sleeping bags,” Raede proudly proclaimed.

“Really?! You’re a lifesaver, Raede!” Tuna cheered.

“Just doing my job. Gero, you’re going to have to grovel for yours,” Raede stipulated.

“I’d rather sleep on the dirt!” Gero declared vehemently.

“Suit yourself,” Raede agreed.

Tuna grinned in amusement. She assumed that Raede wouldn’t actually require such action on Gero’s part. The shame of accepting his help would likely be humiliating enough.

Eventually they arrived at the western foot of the mountain and, after a few minutes of searching, located the hut that the mission poster described. It was small but stably built. Tuna cautiously knocked on the door.

After a few seconds, the door swung open to reveal a male brockan.

Brockans were another of the four sentient races. Their homeland was on the other side of the world, so it was rare to encounter one in Perenos. It didn’t come as a complete surprise, though, as the client’s surname had the bluntness common amongst brockan names.

Physically, brockans were often referred to as bipedal badgers, though there was no hard evidence to confirm that the two species were related. At maturity, they stood about one and two-thirds meters tall. They were mostly covered in fur, had a full set of claws on their hands and feet, and had thick furry tails. Their heads, unlike humans’, were positioned in front of their body, only slightly above their shoulders and with a more slender but shorter neck. Similar to humans, though, and unlike xylians, they generally wore clothes.

The brockan who answered the door was middle-aged and most likely not the “elderly” client described in the poster. “Is this the residence of Fennin Garr?” Tuna asked politely.

“Yes, it is. May I ask who you are?” the brockan requested.

“We’re from the Pondswagger Syndicate,” Raede answered.

“Who?” the brockan asked.

“They’re the people I hired to escort me up the mountain,” another brockan answered from inside.

“Dad, I told you not to bother. You’re too old to be doing that kind of thing,” the younger one reasoned.

“That’s exactly why I’m doing it. When you moved us to Perenos, I made a promise to myself that I’d make it to that peak before I passed on,” Fennin insisted.

“You’re going to get yourself killed up there,” the younger brockan warned. “If you want to go, though, I’m not going to try to stop you. I’m too busy to bother talking sense into you.”

“That’s what I was counting on,” Fennin laughed, switching his attention to the three new arrivals. “Hold on one minute. I’ve got everything ready. I just need to change into my adventure clothes.”

“Adventure clothes?” Tuna repeated.

While Fennin changed, his son turned to the three of them suspiciously. “Don’t do anything stupid out there,” he requested, and then walked away.

Fennin soon emerged in his new attire, which made him look comically over-prepared for the journey. He also bore a backpack. “Let’s hit the trail!” he cheered as he scrambled out the door. After about fifty meters, he collapsed on the road.

“Don’t overdo it, ancient one. After all, you hired us for a reason,” Raede reminded him as he helped the brockan up and took the backpack to carry himself.

“Ancient? I suppose I am getting old, but that’s a bit over the top, isn’t it?” Fennin pouted.

“Why are you so interested in climbing Moumantai, anyway?” Gero inquired.

“Who wouldn’t want to climb this beauty? Though, aside from that, it also reminds me of home. Before we moved, I lived next to a similar mountain that I used to climb when I was younger. Sometimes I really miss it back there,” he answered.

“Why did you move?” Tuna asked.

“Oh, my silly son got a job out here and I didn’t want him to move so far on his own. He’s too focused on his career, if you ask me, but it’s not like he listens to my opinion,” Fennin grumbled.

“I’m sure he means well,” Tuna assured him, though she had no basis for her statement.

They came to a fork in the road. “Which way do we go from here?” she inquired.

“To the beginning of the trail,” the brockan replied.

“Which we can get to by turning which direction?” she asked irritably.

“South,” he answered.

Gero started off right away. “Understood,” he stated as he turned left and began walking north.

“Gero, where are you going?” Tuna called after him.

“I’m surprised you haven’t realized it yet. As a rule, Gero fails at cardinal directions. He goes east when he means to go west, north when he wants to go south, and vice versa,” Raede explained.

“Really? If he always goes the wrong way, then why doesn’t he just go the opposite of what his head tells him?” she asked.

“It doesn’t work. He just ends up tangling everything up in his mind,” Raede elaborated. “It’s hilarious watching him waste all of his time going the wrong direction.”

“Stop making me sound like an idiot!” Gero called as he turned around.

“Then stop acting like an idiot!” Raede retaliated.

“Gero, why don’t you just use the sun as a reference point? Then it doesn’t matter if you get disoriented,” Tuna suggested.

“I do that, too, but it never works! I know that the sun rises in the west and sets in the east, but it doesn’t matter with me. It’s like there’s some cosmic force keeping me from getting it right,” he rationalized.

“Actually, the sun rises in the east and sets in the west,” Tuna corrected him.

“That’s what I said!” he cried in frustration.

“Sure it is. You’re fine with regular directions, though, aren’t you?” she checked.

“As good as anybody else is. It makes this weakness all the more hilarious,” Raede guffawed.

“Fine, you lead the way, if you’re so smart,” Gero challenged. Raede gladly did just that and soon brought them to the start of the trail.

A small barricade had been erected at the start prohibiting entry to anyone. A sign read: “This trail is no longer safe for public use. Civilians are under no circumstance allowed to go beyond this point.”

“Balderdash,” Fennin laughed. “That sign’s been up for a year now. They must have fixed it by now.”

“Well, let’s get going, then,” Raede decided.

“Seriously? You guys want to just go up like this barrier wasn’t telling us it’s not safe?” Tuna moaned.

“Why does that matter?” Gero asked. “We break the law all the time.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about. Just don’t do anything reckless,” she begged her comrades, knowing that they’d be as reckless as usual, despite her pleas.

“Yeah, yeah,” Gero replied inattentively as he scrambled up the trail. Sometimes he wondered why she worried so much. Nothing was going to go wrong.

The first half of the day was fairly easy. Their trail wasn’t especially steep, and it was well established. As they made it further, though, it became gradually less safe. The slope increased, the path narrowed, and increasing amounts of obstructions inhibited their movement.

Though they snacked throughout the day, they decided to stop for a break in the early afternoon, allowing them to eat a more sustaining lunch. Gero noticed that Fennin’s breath rate had increased significantly since they had started out. Everyone else’s had, too, but not so significantly as his. Exhaustion and altitude were working alongside his old age and taking their toll on him. He didn’t bring it up, though, and Gero didn’t think it was his place to do so and upset the client.

The spot they had stopped at was a particularly large section of flattened trail with several rocks that served as seats.

“We’re over halfway there, but we won’t be able to move as quickly as we get higher up. At any rate, we’ll hit the peak late tonight and have to spend tomorrow getting back down,” Raede calculated.

Gero grabbed a sandwich from his bag and threw himself onto a rock. The force of his landing loosened the soil beneath

the rock just enough to cause it to roll away. He fell backwards as it did so, and began to skid down the side of the mountain.

“Gero!” Tuna shrieked, scurrying toward him while the others followed quickly behind. She peered over to see something shooting up toward her. Instinctively, she reached out, only to realize that Gero’s tongue was wrapping around her arm.

“Eww!” she wailed.

Gero had managed to stabilize himself enough to launch his tongue upward.

“Hol onu i ung, Una,” he gagged.

“But I don’t want to hold onto it,” she whined, mortified by the saliva touching her arm.

Below them, Gero pulled off both of his boots and swiftly leaped up the mountainside and back onto the ledge. Once he was secure, Tuna threw his tongue back at him and began to run around in disgust. “Thanks, Tuna!” he cheered.

“That’s quite a peculiar body you have there,” Fennin observed, probably less concerned than he ought to have been.

“Thanks,” Gero smiled. “Did anybody see where my sandwich landed?”

“Aren’t you the least bit freaked out by what just happened?” Tuna shrieked.

“Of course I am,” Gero reassured her. “That’s exactly why we have to keep going, though.”

“What are you talking about?” she wailed.

He punched his palm menacingly. “If the spirit of the mountain wants to fight, then I’m not going to let it win,” he declared.

“You think the spirit of the mountain did that?” she moaned.

“The spirit of the mountain, eh?” Fennin repeated. “I’ve heard about that. Maybe we’ll see it yet.”

Raede walked over to Gero and presented the dirt-ridden remains of his sandwich. “Here.”

“What the hell did you do to my food?!” Gero exclaimed.

“How is it my fault that you can’t keep from falling down?” Raede countered.

“Just take the sandwich, Gero,” Tuna pleaded, hoping to avert further conflict.



“Fine,” he complied, accepting the sandwich. He wasn’t the type to let food, dirty or not, go uneaten.

They hastily finished lunch and resumed the trek. Looking down upon Wailing Falls, Gero wondered if his frisbee could make it that far. They were high enough up now that patches of snow were starting to decorate the mountainside. Occasionally he would scoop up a handful and happily consume it.

After a few more hours they were nearly at the top. “I’d wager we’re less than an hour from the summit,” Raede announced.

“Thank goodness,” Tuna cheered.

“It’s exciting to be this close,” Fennin added. “Only a handful of people ever commit to going all the way to the top. It’s a magical feeling knowing that you’re one of them.”

“It sure is,” Tuna concurred. Despite her concerns, she was as eager as anyone else to make it all the way to the peak, for the mission and for her own desire.

As they rounded the mountain, they saw that something was ahead of them on the trail.

“What is that?” Fennin pondered.

Raede was still leading the way and was thus the first to realize what the object was. “It’s a huge boulder, and it’s on the trail.”

“Oh, dear,” Fennin fretted. “I hope this doesn’t mean we can’t advance.”

“Like I’m going to let a boulder stop me! Good try, Spirit, but not good enough,” Gero shouted.

Once they reached it, Raede assessed the situation. “This actually might be a bit tricky. It’s so big that it completely blocks the trail. If we went around the outside, then there’s a good chance we’d skid off and down the mountain. It’s too troublesome to safely climb over it on the inside, though, especially for Fennin.”

“Then we can’t get around it?” Fennin moaned despairingly.

“I didn’t say that. If we can get rid of the boulder, then we should be able to continue on fairly easily,” Raede reasoned.

“How are we supposed to get rid of the boulder?” Tuna queried. “It looks like it’s really lodged in there.”

“Leave that to me,” Raede grinned. “Gero, I’m going to need to borrow your gloves for this.”

Gero reluctantly handed them over to Raede. “Fine,” he grunted.

“Everybody stand back,” Raede directed as he put them on.

“What are you going to do?” Tuna inquired.

“He’s going to punch the boulder out of the way,” Gero explained.

Tuna couldn’t even respond. Did he really intend to pull off such a ludicrous feat? It didn’t matter how strong Raede was; that boulder wasn’t going anywhere.

Raede opened his mouth and began to take in air. Tuna quickly realized that he wasn’t inhaling it. Instead, he was actually sucking it up like a vacuum. How this was possible was beyond her. After he had done this for a brief while, he positioned both of his arms a short distance from the boulder. She noticed that something gray and metallic was protruding from the holes in Raede’s jacket at either elbow.

Finally, Raede executed his maneuver. “Double Barrel!” he roared.

Both of his bulky arms rocketed forward, propelled by a massive expulsion of air from his elbows. The boulder instantly heaved forward, though not enough to be knocked free. Once the air streams from his elbows ceased, he quickly shifted to grab the boulder and continued to push forward. As impressive as the technique was, it had only managed to loosen the massive obstruction few centimeters.

Gero rushed forward and crouched down before the boulder. He lunged ahead, pushing on it to supplement Raede’s efforts. Tuna and Fennin watched nervously from a safe distance away. Finally, with their combined strength, the two men pushed the boulder free. It rolled over and off of the trail, and then made its way down the mountainside.

“I hope nobody’s in its way,” Tuna said, her voice trembling. If anyone was hit by its size and speed, he or she would be doomed. Fortunately, it was very unlikely that anybody else would be climbing it.

“There’s a good chance the boulder will split up before it hits the bottom,” Raede explained. “At the rate it’s falling, any impact could shatter it and reduce its capacity to roll.”

“You’re welcome,” Gero interrupted, clearly talking toward Raede.

“What’s that?” the larger man asked irritably.

“You wouldn’t have pulled that off if I hadn’t stepped in,” Gero insisted.

“Preposterous,” Raede spat. “I had it completely under control. You just had to jump in there and steal my thunder.”

“Maybe you could’ve pulled it off if you weren’t busy calling out your attack like an amateur,” Gero argued.

“Shouting the name of my move adds potency to the attack,” Raede shot back.

“Oh, my,” Fennin gasped. “They certainly argue a lot. It makes you wonder why they’re even here together.”

“Tell me about it,” Tuna sighed. Gero and Raede were obviously capable of amazing feats when they worked together. It was a shame they couldn’t keep it up for very long.

“I am curious, though. What is that strange sound I hear?” Fennin inquired.

“Strange sound?” she repeated. After a moment, she, too, noticed a rumbling. They all looked up to see that a landslide was about to pour down on them. Somehow, removing the boulder had caused enough of a disturbance to loosen more debris further up the mountain.

Although Tuna and Fennin were frozen in shock, the boys wasted no time. They raced over and took hold of their companions. Gero threw Fennin onto his back and bounded across the trail, rushing to make it clear of the landslide before it swept over them. Raede seized Tuna and began to suck in air again, this time both through his mouth and his elbows. Moments before the rubble overtook them, they were blown off of the ground and further up the mountain. Raede quickly guided them down to safety as the last of the debris passed by. “Amazing,” she gasped.

Raede ignored her praise and glanced back toward Gero and Fennin. “You both alive back there?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Gero shouted back.

The trail ahead of Gero and Fennin had been marred too much for it to be safely navigated. Raede analyzed their situation. Finally, he called back to his companions. "You two stay there. Tuna and I will move ahead and then lower a rope down," he explained.

"Don't tell me what to do!" Gero yelled back, though he didn't exactly have a lot of options.

Tuna was impressed by Raede's dependability. Not only had he brought sleeping bags, but he had had the sense to bring a rope.

"You're sure a lot more reliable than Gero," she mentioned as they started walking. "Well, at least when it comes to supplies."

"Of course I am," he confirmed. "You make that sound like an accomplishment."

"He's not all that bad," she defended. "I don't understand why you two hate each other so much."

"I don't hate Gero," he corrected her.

"You don't?" she asked.

"He's loud and obnoxious, no doubt about that. I don't hate anybody in the syndicate, though. As much as Gero pisses me off sometimes, I know that he's a good guy," Raede explained.

"Yeah, he is," she agreed. "But you know, the two of you have a lot in common."

"What?" he shouted, surprised.

"Yeah. You've both got strong personalities and act a little bit crazy. Also, you both have...unusual features," she rationalized.

"Gero's abilities and mine are nothing alike," he insisted.

"Well, how am I supposed to know that? I just now realized that there was anything abnormal about your body," she pointed out.

"In that case, allow me to explain the mechanics behind the Cannon's advanced attack system," he began proudly, shedding his jacket. She was shocked to see that, in addition to the short metal tubes sticking out of his elbows, he had six vents coming out of his lower back. They were divided into two columns of three and were each rectangular.

“Integrated into my body is an elaborate set-up powered by my own heartbeat. It consists of several key points: my elbows, my lower back, and my mouth. Using any number of these three points, I’m able to suck air into my body. This air is stored in the tubing between those points, as well as small containers located inside my arms. As long as there’s air in this system, I can release it from any of those points. I can even release it while I’m sucking it in, though from different points, of course,” he explained.

“That’s unbelievable,” Tuna gawked. “How do you control it?”

Raede pointed to his own head. “All of it is managed right here. My attack system taps into my spinal cord, as well, so using it is as simple to me as jumping up and down.”

As they rounded the mountain, Gero and Fennin came back into view. Raede threw his jacket back on and continued. “I’m not sure why Gero’s body is the way it is, but it’s definitely that way for a different reason than mine.”

Tuna had to agree. Raede’s abilities, though amazing, were ultimately an advanced technology. Gero’s couldn’t be explained that way. His had to have a more mysterious cause.

Raede slid his backpack off and pulled out the rope. He tied it around a small outcropping and tossed it down to the others. “Tie it firmly around Fennin,” he ordered. Fortunately, the rope was long enough to reach them and still have plenty of length left over to tie him up. The slope was also quite forgiving. Even an old man like Fennin was able to scale it easily with a little help. Once he was up, Tuna helped him free of the rope. Raede turned back toward Gero and yelled down to him again. “Alright, have fun down there. We’ll be up at the top.”

Gero began to leap up the slope furiously. “You worthless balloon!” he raged. To his dismay, he lost his traction and tumbled back down to where he had started.

Raede roared in amusement and tossed the rope down to his rival, who reluctantly accepted it.

“All of these setbacks are making me even more excited to make it to the top,” Fennin spoke cheerily.

“Let’s just pray that’s the last of the setbacks,” Tuna groaned.

They traversed the final stretch of the trail and, fortunately, did not have any more incidents. As they took their final steps onto the summit, Gero cheered out victoriously. "Take that, spirit of the mountain!"

Tuna immediately sat down in exhaustion. "I thought you wanted to prove that it couldn't weaken you," Tuna reminded him. "How could you have beaten it if you just got to the top?"

"Besides, you never could have gotten up here without me," Raede pointed out. He was opening up his backpack and removed the sleeping bags. The trail had been designed to culminate in a flat clearing near the top, making it an ideal place to camp for the night.

"Of course I could," Gero retorted. "Oh yeah, I almost forgot about my frisbee!"

"It's too dark out," Tuna observed. "You wouldn't even be able to see where it goes. It'd be better to save it for morning."

"Aw, you're right," he moped, setting his bag back down. He noticed Fennin sitting near the ledge. "Hey, what are you up to over there?" he asked.

The brockan looked back at them and smiled. "Why don't you come over here and see for yourself?" he invited. The three of them gathered next to him. "Take a look out there."

They gazed out and soaked up the view. The four of them were at the top of the world. They could see forest extending in all directions, occasionally broken up by a river or a lake or another mountain. Even Wailing Falls had gone dark from their angle. All of it was so tranquil, so distant. "It's beautiful," Tuna gasped.

Fennin smiled contentedly. "It certainly does remind me of home. I know all about the spirit of the mountain. There is indeed a great force that drives away the hostilities of those that come up here. This view, right here, is the real spirit of the mountain. This is why I wanted to climb to the summit."

Tuna glanced at her two companions. Both of them were gazing with wonder at the sight below. This place must be pretty magical to make even those two forget about their arguing.

## Chapter 8

### Gero Versus Raede

Gero rolled around in his sleeping bag colliding with Raede. It was dawn and nobody was yet awake. Raede unconsciously shoved his coworker back and Gero continued to roll over in the other direction until he came to a halt just shy of the ledge.

A flock of birds landed nearby and started chirping loudly, drawing Tuna awake. She wearily sat up and started to rub her eyes. As she glanced over, she spotted Gero on the precipice of oblivion. Once her mind woke up enough to process this, she hastily crawled out of her sleeping bag and to his rescue.

She firmly grasped the far edge of Gero's sleeping bag and pulled him back to safety, breathing a sigh of relief. In the process, she awoke her companion, who now blinked at her in confusion.

"Tuna?" he asked before glancing to his right and noticing their proximity to the ledge.. "What?! Don't tell me you were about to roll me off of the mountain!" he yelped in a frenzy.

"That's the exact opposite of what I was trying to do!" she cried back. "How did you get all the way over here, anyway?"

"What's all of the yelling about?" Raede groaned.

"Tuna was trying to kill me," Gero summarized

"I'll take that as a thank you," she off-handedly replied. "We might as well get breakfast ready since the three of us are up."

Gero rushed over to his backpack and extracted his frisbee. "I'd better do this before I forget," he announced.

Raede stared curiously at Gero's experiment. Tuna found herself somewhat anxious. Their companion took his pose and launched the frisbee off the mountain in an arching path. Gero gawked at how far it traveled. Eventually it faltered and plummeted toward the earth. "I don't get it," Raede commented. "Why didn't it come back?"

"It's not a boomerang," Tuna groaned.

"Is something happening?" Fennin asked, now awake, as well.

“Nothing worth worrying about,” Tuna assured him. “We can start down after we eat and pack up, if you’re ready.”

“Certainly,” he agreed. Throughout the meal, Fennin gazed out toward the horizon. Once they finished, they set off the way they had come. When they came to the part of the trail that had been destroyed last night, they carefully scaled down using the rope as a safety measure.

Upon making it to the lower reaches of the mountain, Tuna’s mind eased. With all of the close calls that they had experienced on this mountain, she had had plenty to be apprehensive about. The closer they made it to the foot of the mountain, the better she felt. It also helped that Gero and Raede weren’t being nearly as antagonistic toward one another as they had been yesterday.

“Ouch!” Fennin suddenly yelped.

They all turned toward him. “Are you alright?” Tuna asked.

“Yes, nothing serious. My paws have just gotten quite sore from all of this hiking,” he explained.

Raede cast off his backpack and handed it to Gero. “I can carry you the rest of the way,” he offered, facing the old brockan.

“Oh, well thank you very much,” Fennin smiled as he climbed onto Raede’s back.

“I bet your son will be relieved to see you back,” Tuna wagered.

“I suppose so. It would have been nice if he’d been willing to come along, too, though,” Fennin replied.

“Why didn’t he want to?” she asked.

“The same reason he moved us out here: work. I understand that he’s busy. When you don’t have a moment of free time in the day, though, you must be overdoing it,” Fennin decided.

She felt bad for him. From what she’d heard, his son seemed to be source of a lot of frustration for Fennin. A part of her wanted to address him about it, but it was hardly her place to do so. At the very least, she could be happy that they had allowed Fennin to reach the peak.

“I wonder if we’ll run into my frisbee on the way back to Wailing Falls,” Gero thought aloud.

“I think you threw it in the other direction,” she mentioned. “Not that you’d be likely to come across it, anyway.”



Finally, they reached the end of the trail and, a short while later, Fennin's house.

"Are your feet feeling alright?" Raede asked as he set the brockan back down.

"Yes, they feel much better now. Thank you all again for the wonderful trip," he bid them.

"It was our pleasure," Tuna smiled.

Once the brockan had closed the door behind him, the three of them began their return to town. "That was a nice mission," Tuna observed.

"Yeah," Gero agreed. "I thought that with Raede tagging along it'd be annoying, but it turned out pretty well."

"Tagging along? I think you got your facts messed up," Raede chastised him. "You joined in on my mission."

"You're both wrong," Tuna reminded them, though they paid her words no heed.

"Yeah, right. Like the syndicate's strongest member would join in on your mission," Gero scoffed.

"Strongest? Don't make me laugh, Afro Frog," Raede shot back. "Everybody knows that I'm the syndicate's star player."

"You want to put that to the test, then?" Gero challenged.

"Yeah, I do," Raede accepted. "You and me, right here until somebody forfeits."

"Bring it on," Gero grinned.

Tuna couldn't believe what she was witnessing. They had had such a calm day thus far, and now they wanted to have a grudge match. "What happened to the two of you? Have you already forgotten about the spirit of the mountain and the serenity and the happiness? What happened to the happiness?" she questioned them.

"Don't worry about me, Tuna. I can handle this loser without breaking a sweat," Gero assured her.

"I wasn't worried about your chances of winning," Tuna groaned. As if having a fight weren't bad enough, Tuna knew that neither of them would ever concede to the other. It would be much easier if she could stop them from starting at all. "Do you really need to do this?"

"It's time that I finally taught this brat which of us is greater," Raede insisted.

“You’re going down, vacuum cleaner,” Gero warned. It was obvious that her logic would have no effect on either of them, so Tuna walked off to the side before she could get caught in the middle.

“Bring it on, toad,” Raede taunted.

Gero went into a blind fury and lunged at Raede. “What was that?!” he growled.

Raede exploited his adversary’s rage and fired off a punch with his right hand. Evidently, he already had a decent amount of air inside of his attack system.

Gero took the full force of the punch and recoiled. He gritted his teeth at having been fooled, and then slipped off his boots and gloves, prepared to defend.

Raede stormed his opponent. Gero literally sprung into action and leaped right over Raede’s head. Raede spun around, taking in more air through his back vents. Once he was lined up with Gero, he fired off his left fist.

Gero kicked off beneath the path of the fist and planted his hands on the ground, giving him the leverage that he needed to thrust both of his feet into Raede’s stomach. The larger man skidded backward and quickly regrouped, sucking in more air through his mouth.

Raede charged forth with both arms poised to launch. Gero noticed this and jumped over his adversary. Unfortunately for him, Raede was smarter than that. Gero had fallen for his opponent’s feint. Once Gero made his move, Raede released all of his stored air through his back vents to thrust himself into an upward headbutt.

Gero crashed to the ground and was immediately targeted by Raede. The frog-man kicked himself out of the way of his opponent’s fist and onto the side of a tree, which he immediately used as a launching pad to jump forward. Raede successfully clasped Gero between his hands as he came flying in. Before he could exploit this, Gero released his tongue right into Raede’s face. The larger man stumbled backward in disgust and tossed Gero free. Before it was out of reach, though, he grabbed onto Gero’s tongue with his hands.

Raede whirled around and pulled Gero’s tongue after him, forcing the frogman to stumble forward. He then immediately

followed up with a powerful punch into Gero's face. Gero refused to go down without retaliating, though, and managed to get a punch in on Raede's face, as well. As he crashed into the dirt, Gero rolled over and kicked himself a safe distance away.

"Okay, then, I'm leaving," Tuna bid them. She had hoped that her tease would entice them to cease the fighting. Unfortunately, both of them were too focused on the fight to note her departure. When she realized this, she returned to her former spot and plopped down in frustration. Why did they have to be so childish and stubborn?

Raede charged forward and swung a fist, seemingly randomly, at his opponent, who easily dodged the swipe. In the first foray of their battle, Raede had quickly determined the difference in their fighting strengths. They were similar, as both used a lot of punches. Gero seemed to be much more agile, though. He was able to quickly recuperate after taking an attack and could dodge more easily. Raede's fighting style was not as quick as Gero's, but generally hit harder. Fortunately, he was able to use his abilities and his resourcefulness to mitigate some of the speed difference, but the contrast was still evident.

The best way for Raede to win this fight was to somehow render Gero unable to evade, and then to hit him with full power. That was the true purpose of this frontal attack. Although he could collect enough air for basic maneuvers very quickly, his maximum storage took about ten seconds to reach. He now had the power he needed to hit Gero. What he still needed to figure out was how to disable him.

Gero saw his opening and dropped down below Raede's swings. In no time at all, he pulled his legs in front of him and fired them into Raede's left leg. With so much force hitting it, Raede had to buckle, which allowed Gero to cause even more damage. The frogman threw a left hook into Raede's face and knocked the teetering man to the ground.

Raede had no choice but to use some of his air supply to lift himself up with his back vents before Gero could deal further damage. Gero sprang back up and prepared to take another swing at Raede. Before he could do so, Raede leaned forward and let forth a colossal belch, consuming the remainder of his current air.

Gero was blown back by the sheer force of it and almost lost his footing. Even so, Tuna seemed to be the most visibly affected by the attack. It made sense given how Raede's attack system worked, but she hadn't actually expected an attack of that nature.

Back in the battle, Gero had quite swiftly recuperated from the attack and was charging forward at Raede. He'd known Raede for a long time, so he had a decent gauge of how quickly his technology worked. Since Raede had just released so much air, he had to be near empty. If Gero reacted right away, then Raede would only have his physical strength to rely on. As soon as he had firm footing, he bounded forward to land right in front of Raede. Raede swung down at him but was too slow. Gero had jumped over Raede and, as he flew past his head, fired both legs down into Raede's back. The latter fell to the ground, but recovered by transforming his fall into a roll.

Both combatants whirled around until they were facing each other once again. By taking in air with all three inlets, Raede had already reached his maximum capacity. Once an opportunity presented itself, he'd be able to hit Gero with a devastating attack. Gero realized that Raede would be nearly full, so he held back.

"Is that all there is to you?" Gero baited his opponent.

"I've got more tricks than you do," Raede argued.

"Not that any of them do you any good," Gero taunted.

Raede was no fool, though. Gero's tactic was obvious, which meant it was easy for him to exploit. He began to rush forward in order to give the impression that he was attempting a basic attack. As he neared his opponent, he threw his right hand forward, only to be easily dodged. Gero then leaped forward, having expected Raede to be following through with an air-powered punch, which would have rendered Raede unable to stop him. Raede had only thrown a regular punch, though, and thus was able to reach across with his left hand and successfully snare his opponent.

Gero was too dazed by his sudden capture to escape in time. Raede pulled him right into the path of his right arm and expelled his entire air supply. His fist burst forward and knocked Gero's bloodied face to the ground. Although Raede instantly moved to continue his assault, Gero proved nimble enough to escape in time.

“Still think I’m weak?” Raede questioned his adversary.

“You got lucky,” Gero shot back. He had fallen for a simple trap, but he was determined not to do so again. Raede was proving a much more difficult opponent than Gero had at first imagined. In the end, it didn’t matter, though, because there was no way that he was going to lose this. Once and for all, he would prove that Raede was one.

He leaped up and landed on the branch of a nearby tree. Raede didn’t know what exactly Gero was attempting to do, but he deemed it best not to give him the opportunity. He raced over to the base of Gero’s tree and released a moderate amount of air from his right elbow to punch the tree. The force wasn’t enough to cause permanent damage it, but it was sufficient to shake Gero out of it.

Gero managed to grab onto the branch as he fell, allowing him to swing forward right into Raede. He released the branch and drove both of his feet toward his opponent, but Raede managed to mitigate the damage by blocking with his left arm.

They both backed away from one another momentarily, but Raede quickly moved into another attack. He bent over and released a lot of air through his back vents, thrusting him forward. Gero moved to jump over his charging opponent, but could not clear him in time. Raede clasped Gero’s legs, causing the frogman to snap onto his back. He quickly came to a stop and whipped Gero forward, releasing him into a mess of foliage ahead of them.

Gero immediately sprung back up and into his opponent’s range. Raede aimed both of his fists at Gero and attempted to release the remaining air from his two elbow outlets. For some reason, almost nothing came out, allowing Gero to move past Raede’s swings and into range to deliver his own attack. He crouched down to grant himself further spring and kicked forward, delivering both of his fists into Raede’s abdomen.

The larger man lurched backward but quickly stabilized himself. He glanced down at his elbow outlets to see a large pinecone stuffed into each. Their presence had blocked almost all of the air when he had tried to release it a moment ago, though they had almost been blown out in the process.

“What the-” he started.

“I got them when I went up into that tree and plugged them in your arms when you charged me,” Gero summarized. Evidently when it came to combat, Gero wasn’t a complete idiot.

“You dumb amphibian,” Raede cried. “Do you know how sticky these things get? This is going to take forever to clean out.” He crossed his arms and seized the pinecones, ripping them out and casting them aside. After such humiliation, he would need to trounce Gero instead of simply defeating him.

By now he had a full supply of air again. His elbow outlets were completely cleared, as well. This time Gero took the initiative and erratically closed in on him. The frogman unloaded a blitz of swings, but he was able to deflect virtually all of them. Raede attempted to throw a few of his own swings, but Gero was far too elusive to land a solid hit against.

Gero saw an opening and jumped forward to his opponent’s right side. He wrapped his right arm across Raede’s stomach and poured his weight into the charge. Unfortunately for him, Raede had been waiting for such an opportunity to execute his own maneuver. He drove his feet backward and pushed forward to halt Gero’s advance. Then he continued forward, lifting his adversary off of the ground. He then released most of his stored air through his back vents, shuttling them both forward. Since Gero’s body was leading the way, he took the majority of the damage when they slammed into a large tree.

Although the impact was ringing throughout his body, Gero knew that he had to react quickly or risk further damage by Raede. He pushed forward and forced Raede back several steps. His opponent swung at him, but he managed to duck beneath and stumble forward. Their battle was starting to take its toll on him. There was no time to think about it, though, as Raede had already turned around and begun swinging at him with his left arm.

Gero ducked again, almost instinctively. He could feel Raede’s fist brushing against the top of his afro. Before he could escape further, though, Raede struck his right shoulder with his right arm. He crashed to the ground, but managed to kick his feet into Raede’s face as he did so, causing the latter to also find himself tumbling to the soil.

From the sidelines, Tuna was still watching them knock each other around. She could hardly believe that after all the progress

this mission had apparently done for them, they had devolved into this immature fighting.

Almost simultaneously, Gero and Raede stood back up and began throwing punches at one another. Their fists collided into each other, stalling them both. The two combatants naturally followed through with their other fists. This time Raede used up the small amount of air that was still in his system. Both fists scraped past each other and landed in the faces of their opponents. The two of them collapsed, panting heavily.

“Damn, you’re not as pathetic as I’d expected,” Raede coughed.

Gero struggled to sit himself up. “I guess you’re kind of a decent fighter,” he conceded. “I’ve almost beat you into submission, though.”

“Look who’s talking,” Raede jeered. “You don’t even look like you can stand up.”

“Yeah, right,” Gero denied. “I’m doing just fine.”

Raede grinned in amusement. “Either way you look at it, though, we’re both about out of energy.”

“Then stop this stupid fighting,” Tuna exclaimed. She was severely disappointed with her coworkers. “You aren’t proving anything.”

Both of them tuned her out. They wanted to see this through to the end.

“Well, then,” Gero began as he rose to his feet, “we should finish this the way Ziggy said we should.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Raede concurred, standing up, as well.

“If you’re going to finish-” Gero started.

“Then finish with fireworks!” Raede concluded.

They charged each other once more. Gero swung with his right fist, but was blocked by Raede’s left palm. Raede threw his right fist at Gero’s stomach, but Gero bent to the side. Gero slipped past his opponent and landed on his hands. He then used this positioning to deliver a two-legged kick. Raede reached out and grabbed both of his ankles. He spun around and flung Gero at the nearest tree. The frogman adjusted himself, however, and, like before, kicked off from the tree. He attempted to swing at Raede’s head, but his opponent grabbed him by the wrists.

Raede then flipped Gero over in midair and started to throw him into the ground. Gero planted his feet on the soil first and kicked off to deliver a headbutt into Raede's chest. As Gero rotated himself around, Raede delivered another punch with his right fist. Although Gero noticed and moved to evade the attack, Raede managed to hit his left shoulder quite hard.

Gero jumped up and out of the path of Raede's left arm, landing on his opponent's shoulders. Raede attempted to swat him off, but Gero had already kicked himself into the air. Now at quite a considerable height, Gero turned his body around so that he would fall head first. Although Raede could have cleared the scene and leave Gero to deal with the fall, he didn't actually expect his opponent to mess up like that.

Instead, he positioned himself and swung upward with his right fist. Gero followed suit, taking advantage of being able to strike down on a lower opponent. Raede unloaded the entirety of his air supply to accelerate his own attack. This last clash would determine their battle. Their fists crashed together and sent a painful wave rippling through both of their bodies. They both pressed their teeth together to suppress that pain as best they could. The impact was great enough that Raede's boots sunk into the firm soil a little bit.

Gero fell forward and, sapped of all of his energy, landed flat on his back. Raede's knees buckled and he came crashing down onto his chest. The two of them tried to move their bodies in some way, but neither could. Both had been defeated.

"Damn," Raede cursed, "I can't believe that you actually managed to tie with me."

"A draw, huh? I don't know how you pulled that off," Gero coughed.

Tuna came running over, consumed by a mixture of concern for their well-being and rage at their brutish conduct. "You idiots!" she cried. "Why did you have to beat each other up like this? Neither of you can even move anymore. Did you really think throwing a few punches would solve anything?"

Gero could tell that behind her anger there was genuine concern. He smiled innocently as he looked up at her. "Sorry about that, Tuna. To be honest, though, I feel a lot better now."



“What are you talking about?” she exclaimed. “You and Raede just beat the crap out of each other and you feel better? Why do you two detest each other so much?”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Tuna,” Gero grinned. “Raede’s actually a pretty cool guy.”

She was absolutely befuddled by his statement, and her confusion was evident. “What are you talking about, Gero? Did you get hit in the head too hard or something?”

“Nope. At least, I don’t think so. Raede’s not that bad. We should do some more missions with him,” Gero suggested.

“Sounds good to me,” Raede chimed in.

“You, too?” Tuna gasped. What had happened to make them change their opinions of each other so suddenly?

“What can I say? I always wanted to test my mettle against his. It turns out he’s a really good fighter,” Raede reasoned.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Tuna asked. Impossible. They had spent years in the same organization and annoyed each other the whole time. They had been shoved into the same mission and forced to work together, but only grew to tolerate each other better. Ultimately, though, what made them accept one another as equals was throwing their fists at one another.

The lack of logic confounded her. Somehow these two men wound up respecting each other after their conflict, instead of growing to hate each other more. It didn’t add up to her, but if that’s what it took to make them cooperate, then so be it. At least they wouldn’t be as antagonistic toward each other now.

“Honestly, I don’t think I’ll ever understand how you think. It must be a guy thing,” she sighed.

“So, what do we do now?” Gero asked.

“What do you mean? We go back to Wailing Falls, grab some real food, and take the next train back to Ocarina,” Tuna listed off.

“No, I mean what do we do to get Raede and me moving again?” Gero clarified. “Neither of us can get up.”

“Figure it out yourselves. It’s not like I got into a senseless fight in the middle of nowhere,” she pointed out. Nevertheless, she made her way over to help Gero to his feet.

Across from them, Raede arduously pulled himself together and slowly stood back up. As Tuna extended her hand to Gero, he turned his head away from her. “I don’t need your help,” he insisted.

“Don’t act like such a jerk!” she berated him.

“He just doesn’t want to appear weaker than me,” Raede explained to her.

“Are you serious?” she asked.

Gero glared intently at Raede. “I’m not going to let that bastard show me up!”

Tuna rolled her eyes and started walking back to Wailing Falls much faster than either of her injured coworkers could.

“Fine, go ahead and get yourself up, then,” she instructed. Maybe things wouldn’t change as much as she had hoped for, after all.

## Chapter 9

### The Halford Incident

After Gero pulled himself up, he and Raede hurried to catch up with Tuna. Once they arrived back in Wailing Falls, they immediately checked on the departure time for the next train to Ocarina. It happened to be in about an hour, so they had plenty of time to enjoy a genuine meal beforehand.

“This food is delicious,” Gero cheered as he devoured it.

“You think all food is delicious,” Tuna pointed out. “It is pretty good, though.”

Raede had barely touched his food yet. He was preoccupied with cleaning the pinecone sap out of his elbow outlets. “I’m going to need some soap and water for this,” he grumbled. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Can I eat your food, then?” Gero asked hopefully.

Raede glared at him with icy eyes. “Don’t even think about it.” Once he had begun to walk away, Gero gestured rudely at him.

“Anyway,” Tuna began, “the two of you said something during your fight. You said that Ziggy told you to ‘finish with fireworks.’ What’s that all about?”

“Oh, yeah. I suppose you haven’t heard it before. It’s just this little motto that Ziggy will mention from time to time. He believes that when you do something important, you should do it with as much gusto as you can. Sort of as if you were finishing with a display of fireworks,” he explained.

“Interesting,” she noted.

“I guess so,” Gero added. Having cleared his own plate, his hands were starting to drift dangerously close to Raede’s.

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot. When we get back to Ocarina, can you help me buy and move furniture for my apartment?” she requested of him.

“Sure thing,” he agreed as his fingers crawled onto the plate. She reached over and pulled his hand away from it. “I wasn’t going to do anything.”

“I’m sure,” she replied disbelievingly.

Raede soon emerged from the bathroom with his metallic outlets clean once again. “That’s better. Now I can have dinner without that distracting me,” he announced. Just before he was about to stuff the food into his mouth, he paused and stared at it concernedly. “What did you do to it?”

Gero was irate that Raede would assume the worst out of him. “I didn’t do anything!” he claimed.

“Tuna?” Raede asked, not trusting Gero whatsoever.

“He didn’t do anything,” she assured him. “He wanted to, though.”

“Traitor!” Gero exclaimed, though she didn’t appear to care about his accusation.

“You’re lucky that I’m in a good mood,” Raede informed Gero, “or else you would have experienced my unrestrained wrath.”

“Whatever,” Gero replied dismissively. “So when will we get back to Ocarina?”

“It’s not that hard to figure out,” Raede lectured him. “It took us slightly less than a day to get here, so it’ll take us slightly less than a day to get back.”

Gero looked away grumpily. Soon their train arrived and they boarded. It was early dusk, so they were set to arrive back in Ocarina late in the afternoon the next day. As luck would have it, the end coach of the train was completely vacant, so they took their seats there.

Just before the train started moving, though, two men hurried in and sat down at the opposite end of the coach. They sat across from one another, one facing away from the three mercenaries and the other toward them. The former whispered discreetly to the latter, “Is that our target?”

The other one took a good look at the mercenaries, and then looked back to avert suspicion. “No doubt about it.”

“Good. Behave casually. We can’t execute the plan for several hours, anyway,” the first advised. “In a little while, I’ll go inform the boss.”

“Understood.” The train began to crawl into motion and was soon crossing the bridge south of town, starting its journey back to Ocarina.

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About an hour later, one of the men exited and silently made his way up to the front coach, immediately behind the engine. There were three men lounging about erratically. Any passengers that might have wandered into this front coach would likely have made their way out and into another due to their intimidating presence. Despite their ruffian appearance, they were technically not doing anything prohibited. As such, the train staff could do nothing to stop them.

Upon stepping into the coach, the shady character from the back was quickly greeted by another man. This man had long greasy hair that hid random strips of his face. He was also bearing a broadsword beneath a trench coat that he wore.

“Well, Thorton, has our quarry indeed boarded the train?” he asked.

“It’s him alright. He’s situated in the very last coach,” Thorton answered.

“The very last one, you say? That makes things easier for us. I trust you all remember your respective roles, do you not?” the swordsman asked.

“Aye, sir,” Thorton confirmed.

“Of course,” the other two added.

“Good. We’ll arrive at the target destination late in the night when everyone is asleep. We’ll have no trouble whatsoever killing that bastard Junka. He’s a fool for doing so much damage to twenty of my subordinates and not expecting me to get my revenge,” the leader continued.

“What will we do with the other two?” one of his minions asked.

“What do you think we’ll do? Once all three are incapacitated, we’ll make Junka suffer by killing his friends in front of him first. After we’ve done that, we’ll end his miserable life,” the leader explained.

Thorton was uncertain as to how practical the plan was. “Are you sure that this will be enough to subdue them? We already know that Junka’s quite powerful, and this other guy he’s with looks pretty strong, as well,” he mumbled.

“So what if they are?” the leader hissed. “With my plan, that’s irrelevant. Besides, it matters not if Junka was able to

throw around some irrelevant henchman. I'm leagues above them."

"I know that, Halford, sir, but even so..." Thorton trailed off.

"Oh?" Halford pushed. "I see. You don't think that I'm strong enough to handle the 'Cannon' and his little friends. You're entitled to your opinion, but I didn't know you had such low expectations of me, Thorton."

"No, sir, that's not it," Thorton insisted, trying to keep his boss from becoming too angry with him.

"It's quite alright, Thorton. We all have our doubts from time to time. If it will put your mind at ease, though, allow me to reassure you of how capable I really am," Halford with a grin that disturbed Thorton.

"Honestly, boss, I have complete confidence in you," Thorton squeaked.

"I insist," Halford snarled as he drew out his broadsword and advanced upon his minion. Thorton turned and attempted to open the back door to the coach, but to no avail. Halford had already pierced his heart. The other two minions winced in disgust as Thorton slid against the back door and onto the floor of the coach.

Halford didn't stop there, though. He pulled his blade out and stabbed it into Thorton's leg, and then his stomach. It seemed to bring him great joy.

"There's just something positively delicious about cutting into human flesh, don't you agree?" he chuckled. Blood was gushing all over the floor of the coach. He seemed completely unconcerned by the possibility of being discovered. "Still, no matter where or how many times I cut someone, nothing can compare to that first slice into their skin," he added, licking his lips.

The others were wary of how to respond. They felt that they had to say something or he would get upset. At the same time, though, they had to be cautious not to say anything that would anger him further. He was particularly dangerous while in this state of mind.

"Absolutely, boss. So who do you want to take on Thorton's job?" one of them asked.

“Hmm, you look an awful lot like Thorton. Why don’t we have you take over his role? Huh, Ryan? That’s why I brought extra people in the first case. You remember his role, don’t you?” Halford posed.

Ryan, one of the remaining lackeys, began to sweat anxiously. “To deploy the gas, right?” he coughed.

“Good, you remembered. Now, make yourself look as much like Thorton as you can, and then get back there,” Halford ordered.

“Y-yes, sir!” Ryan replied.

Halford returned his attention to Thorton’s mangled corpse and, once again, cut into it maniacally. “Soon, Junka. Soon, this will be you!”

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Raede jolted awake and blinked in confusion. It took him several moments to establish where he was. It was nighttime now, and he’d been asleep for several hours. Gero and Tuna were sleeping on the other side of the coach.

It had been a long time since he had actually gone on a mission with someone else. Usually he found it simpler if he could work at his own pace and using his own methods. Knowing that there were others there that were helping him created a cozy feeling, though.

Finally he realized why he had awoken: he needed to go to the bathroom. He walked to the front of the coach, past the other two sleeping men, and slipped the door open as quietly as he could as he made his way into the next coach. The coach they had selected didn’t have a bathroom in it so he had to move ahead one. He quietly stepped into the small room and flipped on its small light.

Up in the front coach, Halford and his one remaining subordinate quietly conferred. “Jump off several seconds before we pass by it and hurry over. Don’t hit the switch until after the entire train has passed. Understood?” Halford reminded his minion.

“Yes, sir,” he replied.

“Good, then I’m going to make my way to the back. We’ve almost arrived at our destination,” Halford bid him. He stepped into the next coach quietly. It didn’t really matter if random

passengers woke up, but it would make matters simpler if they did not.

Finally, he emerged between the last two coaches. The cool night air rushing past made him all the more excited for the sweet vengeance he was about to exact. He reached into his trench coat and pulled out a small gas mask. Once he had put it on, he leaned over and watched for his landmark. He would take action as soon as they passed under a particular bridge.

Inside the rear coach, Ryan stirred awake. After a moment, he realized that he shouldn't have been sleeping. "Shit," he cursed as he shook his partner awake. "Wayne, we should get ready. We're getting close to our destination."

Wayne nodded, relieved that they had woken up in time. If Halford had discovered the two of them sleeping, the consequences would have been dire. They pulled out their gas masks and Wayne extracted two canisters. Now they had to wait for their boss to make his entrance.

Outside, Halford had been waiting for several minutes. Finally, though, he spotted the bridge. He drew out his broadsword and cut through the walking platform. Located below was the apparatus that kept the coaches connected together. By working very carefully, he was able to loosen it just enough to allow the rear coach to slip free from the rest of the train. It was lucky for them that Junka had chosen this coach. This way they didn't have to bother with other passengers. Once he saw the distance between the two coaches visibly increase, he slid the door open and slipped inside.

Wayne and Ryan nodded at him and he returned the acknowledgement. His two minions tossed the canisters over at their targets and then moved in. "Keep the three of them separated," Halford ordered. "Move the girl to the middle, the other guy to the back, and Junka to the front."

Wayne pulled out a pair of handcuffs and picked up Tuna. She was still unconscious, and if she woke up the gas would sedate her enough to prevent retaliation for several minutes. Ryan did the same to Gero, who was also asleep. Halford moved in to secure Junka himself. He reached the center of the coach, but couldn't see his target anywhere. "Where is Junka?" he demanded.



Ryan and Wayne glanced at each other nervously. “Well...” Ryan trailed off.

“Turn the lights on and search the coach!” he demanded.

Outside, Halford’s last subordinate had already leaped from the train where the tracks forked into two directions. As soon as the front train had passed by entirely, he grabbed the lever and pulled it back, changing the rails to turn off from the main line and onto an unused one. After a few seconds, the last coach came rolling past him, still carried by the momentum generated while the engine had been pulling it. Once it was safely past him, he pushed the lever forward again. If any trains came by, they would continue on the normal route, leaving them alone. They wouldn’t have to worry about any collisions while performing their task. He began to walk after his boss and associates.

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“That was a workout,” Raede chuckled quietly after finishing up in the bathroom. After washing his hands, he stepped out and slid open the back door of the coach. As his first foot passed through the vacant space where the walking platform should have been, he came to the shocking realization that the rear coach was missing. He hastily pulled his foot back and thought over the situation.

He wondered whether he had gotten disoriented, but quickly dismissed that possibility. Something deviant was afoot, and he had to act quickly. As cautiously as he could, he hung onto the backside of the coach and slid the door closed. He then jumped free and expelled some air from his back vents to ease his landing.

“Looks like it’s up to me to save the day,” he told himself as he began sprinting down the tracks in the direction the train had come from.

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Back in the rear coach, Halford was steaming with rage. They had gone through all of this effort only to fail, and he was not happy about it. They had searched the coach completely, but there was no trace of their target to be found.

“Can one of you imbeciles explain to me why Junka is nowhere to be found?” he shouted at his underlings.

Both of them knew it was their fault, but admitting that could be deadly. Wayne was the first to generate an excuse, albeit a vague one. "He must have silently escaped while we were preparing ourselves," he hypothesized.

"Yes, I'm sure that he's a master of stealth, especially given his size. He also decided to just leave his two friends behind for shits and giggles," Halford sarcastically agreed.

Ryan shifted nervously and unwittingly yawned. Halford took note of this and deduced the cause of their failure. "Don't tell me you imbeciles were sleeping," he grumbled.

His minion quickly realized his mistake and tried to deny it. "No, sir. I was just yawning because we've been up all night," Ryan lied.

"Don't give me that load of crap," Halford spat. "I'm not dumb enough to be fooled by your excuses. You two fell asleep and didn't notice Raede exiting the coach."

Wayne knew that denying it would only enrage him more. "You're right, sir. We fell asleep when we were supposed to stay alert. Our humblest apologies," he offered.

Halford glared at him, deep in thought. "Hmm, I'm in a particularly forgiving mood for some reason. Since you came clean, I'll let you live - for now." He then turned to Ryan. "But if you want to keep on breathing, I'd suggest you come up with a plan to catch Junka in the next ten seconds," he warned.

Ryan scratched his brain for any inkling of an idea. Maybe it would be better to just make a run for it. No, Halford would catch him in an instant. He had to concoct something. "Ma-maybe we could use these two as bait to lure Junka to us," he squeaked.

"As bait?" Halford repeated. "That's actually not a terrible idea. I guess you won't die today. Of course, we wouldn't need to do this at all if you two hadn't made such a horrendous blunder, so don't relax just yet."

"What...what's going on?" Gero coughed, finally overcoming the effects of the sedative mist.

Halford walked over to Gero, amused. "Well, it seems one of our catches is awake." He noticed Gero's limbs and was clearly perplexed. "Now, that's unexpected. What's with the frog parts?"

Gero was having difficulty staying conscious. "What's it to you?" he slurred.

The swordsman bent over so his face was near Gero's. "Of course, how rude of me to not introduce myself. The name's Halford. Your friend, the 'Cannon,' has made an enemy out of me, so we decided to pay him back. You see, I'm the leader of a particular band of thieves, and he thought it would be fun to toss around some of my men."

Gero seemed to snap back into consciousness upon realizing the severity of the situation. His hands were bound to the seats on either side of the aisle, which were themselves bolted into the floor. Ahead of him, Tuna was in the same situation, though unconscious. "Where's Raede?" he asked.

"What a good question," Halford replied. "One would think that he'd be here in this coach, but, as it turns out, he escaped from us. It's these buffoons' fault. Good henchmen are hard to come by."

"If Raede's your target, then why are you still here? Leave the two of us alone and go kill him," Gero suggested.

"I didn't know that that Junka had such cold-blooded associates," Ryan whispered to Wayne.

Gero's suggestion had really just been an attempt to get the three of them to leave. If Raede was awake, then he could easily handle the likes of these guys. Furthermore, he and Tuna couldn't exactly figure out a way to escape with these captors hanging around.

"In due time," Halford assured him. "For me to get to Junka, though, I need the two of you. As soon as he realizes that you've gone missing, he'll come to rescue you. Unfortunately for him, he's no match for the likes of me."

If he weren't in such a predicament, Gero would have laughed at his captor's hubris. "You're going to be waiting a long time, then," he informed Halford.

"Oh? Why is that?" the swordsman inquired.

"Raede hates our guts. The only reason he was working with us was because he had to. He won't give a hoot that we've been captured," Gero informed him.

"That's true, Boss," Wayne added. "They were fighting all evening long."

"How do you know that?" Gero gasped.

"I was in the same coach, you oblivious twit," Wayne spat.

“Nevertheless, I think it’s worth trying. If Junka doesn’t arrive within two hours, we’ll change our plans,” Halford decided.

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Ahead of him, Raede spotted the second set of tracks and deduced that Gero and Tuna must have gone that way. Once he saw the fork in the tracks, he became certain of it. After several more minutes of running, he spotted one of Halford’s subordinates.

Raede made no effort at being discreet as he neared the man. The minion noticed his presence and began to sprint away, but Raede quickly bridged the gap. As he caught up, he tackled the man into submission.

“Don’t be in such a hurry. Now, what’s the lowdown with this locomotive madness?” he demanded. “If you’re going to lie, I suggest you do it well. I don’t like having my time wasted.”

“We were trying to get to you,” the minion confessed. “The last coach was disconnected and redirected onto this track. They’re up ahead.”

The mercenary pulled his victim off of the ground and continued. “And just who do you mean by ‘we?’” he asked.

“I work for Halford. He’s here, too, along with two of his men. They’re all up in the coach,” the minion answered.

“Halford?” Raede gasped. “Talk about an overreaction. It’s not like I did any permanent harm to his guys. Then again, criminals tend to be cantankerous. Either way, I should get up there and make sure the others are alright. First, I need to take care of you, though.”

After quickly knocking Halford’s subordinate unconscious with a firm punch to the face, Raede continued down the tracks toward the coach.

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“Anything yet?” Halford asked.

“Nope. Still no sign of Junka,” Wayne replied. It had been almost half an hour already.

“I wish he’d hurry up, already. I’m dreadfully bored,” Halford whined.

“You should go after him,” Gero advised. “Every minute you waste here, he gets a minute further away.”

“As if we could catch up to a moving train,” Halford scoffed. “And I’m not about to start listening to advice from a hostage.”

“Suit yourself. You’re going to get real bored, though,” Gero insisted.

Across from him, Tuna finally began to wake up. “Why’s it so bright?” she complained, not yet grasping the situation. As soon as she felt the metal against her wrists, though, the situation sunk in. “Huh? What’s going on, Gero?” she asked, terrified.

Gero would have preferred if Tuna hadn’t woken up until after Halford had left. It did them no good for her to be awake for this. “Raede got us captured, that bastard, and he’s not even here to enjoy the fun with us,” Gero answered, trying to make the situation sound as carefree as he could.

“Um, alright. What are we doing now, then?” she wondered. Clearly she was more frightened than Gero, despite her feeble effort to hide it.

“Waiting to see if the two of you are able to lure Junka to us,” Halford answered her.

“And I keep telling them that Raede wouldn’t bother spending his time saving us but they refuse to listen to reason,” Gero added.

Tuna was reluctant to say anything further. She didn’t fully understand the situation yet, but fear overrode that curiosity. Gero seemed calm, at least, and Raede was still out there. All she could do for now was avoiding making their captors angrier.

“Anything yet?” Halford asked again.

“Nothing,” Wayne reported.

Halford was clearly not pleased. “How long has it been now?” he posed.

“Thirty-two minutes, sir,” Ryan answered.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Halford moaned. “That’s all? Who would have thought that waiting for Junka to come get his two colleagues would be so mind-numbingly dull?” He stared up at the ceiling, and then back down. “His two colleagues,” he realized.

“What’s that, sir?” Ryan asked.

Halford’s face became more sinister. “Think about it. If Junka cares enough to come save his associates, then it doesn’t

even matter how many of them we have. One alone will get the job done,” he machinated.

“And?” Wayne pushed.

Gero and Tuna both understood what Halford was getting at, even if his subordinate didn't. Their hearts sank as the suggestion was made. “And so there are no consequences to killing one of them,” he concluded vilely. “It would certainly alleviate the boredom for a while, would it not?”

Eager not to invoke Halford's wrath, Ryan hastily agreed. “Yeah, it certainly would.”

“Absolutely,” Wayne chipped in. “Which one will you do in, though, boss?”

Gero's expression had become tense. He hadn't anticipated matters heating up like this, especially so soon. Tuna's eyes shook as if she were still trying to grasp what Halford was doing.

“Let's see, now. The boy would be very interesting to dissect. With his limbs the way they are, who knows what curious things we could find by cutting into him?” Halford analyzed. “Then again, if Raede doesn't decide to come, we could probably catch quite a price selling him. People pay ridiculous prices to get their hands on the unusual.”

Gero gritted his teeth as Halford continued. “That being the case, it would be far wiser to off the girl instead,” he announced.

Tuna's head began to ring and she broke out into a cold sweat. Halford walked over and crouched down next to her. He reached out and ran his fingers across her skin.

“There's just something about cutting into a young girl's flesh that trumps anything else.”

“Don't touch her,” Gero ordered firmly.

The swordsman looked over at Gero amusedly. “I'm sorry. I didn't realize you wouldn't want me to. In that case, I'll refrain,” he laughingly offered. Gero did not respond. Halford turned back to Tuna and unsheathed his broadsword. He lowered it so that the dull side was touching Tuna's skin, and then slowly dragged it across her arm. He wanted to get a taste of what was to come.

Gero's tongue shot out to knock the sword from Halford's hand. Unfortunately, he was too far away and the effort was in vain. All it did was catch Halford's attention. “Disgusting. You've got a deployable tongue, as well? I suppose that will only

augment your selling price, though, so it works in our favor. Now, where was I?" he asked.

"Don't touch her!" Gero growled. This time he was visibly angry. The situation was intensifying, and Halford's subordinates found themselves unable to look away.

Halford paid the order no heed. "Since we've so much time to kill, I'm going to do this slowly. I wonder where I should start. The arms?" he wondered aloud, pressing the blade against her skin. "Or perhaps the neck?" he added as he turned the sword over.

Tuna had ceased trembling. She was petrified in horror. She couldn't even cry out; her body wouldn't let her. Dalvus had threatened her life but hadn't taken it nearly as far; Halford was different. He took such sadistic pleasure in doing this. He actually had a blade pressing up against her throat. She was really going to die.

Gero lunged forward at Halford but was held back by the handcuffs. His hands were clenched and his face was crimson. His eyes were burning passionately, locked on Halford.

"I'm not kidding," he warned. "Leave her the hell alone!" His face had become flushed with a new level of rage. As Tuna's terrified gaze turned to him, she felt a fury that she had never seen in him before. This wasn't the kind of anger he had expressed toward Raede. No, this was a thousand times worse. She got the feeling that if he weren't locked down, he would kill Halford. It was almost as chilling as the villain himself.

Halford was intrigued by Gero's rage. "No. I don't think I will. I think I'll cut the skin from her arms first, so that she can see the progress. Then I'll move my way in and keep going until she bleeds to death. But I'll keep cutting. I'll keep cutting until nothing of this girl remains," he decided. He licked the side of the blade and lowered it back down to her arm.

Gero hurled himself forward once more, consumed with anger. He pressed so hard that the metal handcuffs began to bore through his skin, causing blood to seep out. This didn't faze him, though. He simply continued pushing forward. That was the only thing that mattered. Push forward and stop Halford.

Finally the handcuffs burst open, submitting to Gero's will and releasing him. Having already been leaning forward, he was

able to soar all the way across the coach once he broke free. His right hand reached out and grabbed Halford by the throat as his body landed in the aisle, having cleared the jump over Tuna's body. The broadsword fell harmlessly to the ground next to her. Gero paid no attention to that, though. He continued forward, driving Halford to the front of the coach, where his head thudded against the wall. Blood trickled down behind him and Gero's left fist came flying at his face. With his head pinned, the punch could be deadly if it landed.

"Thank you," Tuna cried.

Gero's mind snapped free of its bloodlust. His punch slowed enough that it wasn't fatal, but it was still sufficient to knock Halford out cold. The fiend toppled over, defeated. Gero stood, frozen, for several seconds.

As he began to move again, Raede's hands burst through two windows near the back of the coach and pummeled Ryan and Wayne to the floor. With his attention drawn to the scene before him, Wayne hadn't noticed Raede nearing the coach.

"Sorry I'm late," he called.

"P-p-please don't kill us," Ryan cowered.

Gero didn't even look at them. "You two get out of here," he ordered. They were a bit dazed by their light sentence, and had trouble processing it at first. "Now!"

"Right!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

"Here's the key," Wayne added as he set it on the floor, and then the two men fled the scene.

Tuna bent over, her arms still bound, and started bawling. Her hair served as veil to hide her face from the others, but her emotions were no less palpable as a result. Raede bent over and picked up the key to her handcuffs.

Gero stared uneasily at Halford's unconscious body. The hellfire had left Gero's eyes. The only thing real to him was the sound of Tuna crying. "Let's go home," he suggested.



## Chapter 10

### Her Trial

The first order of business that the mercenaries took care of was turning Halford over to the military. Then they returned to Ocarina, arriving late in the next day. Tuna barely spoke the entire trip, causing her companions much concern. The somber air discouraged them from fighting, resulting in a drab atmosphere.

It was dark enough when they arrived that they didn't bother stopping at headquarters. Raede parted from them and returned to his own place. Gero walked with Tuna to their apartment complex.

"Are you going to be alright by yourself?" he asked once they reached her door.

She continued gazing at the floor. "Yeah, I'll be fine," she mumbled.

"Okay. Stop by if you need anything. Good night, Tuna," he concluded. He turned toward his apartment.

"Gero," she said quietly, stopping him. "I probably won't come in to work tomorrow."

"Oh, okay," he replied glumly. He continued walking away until he heard her door close and then stopped. Nothing felt right with Tuna like this, but she had expressed no desire to be comforted by either him or Raede. With nothing else to do, he stepped into his own apartment and went about his nightly rituals.

Tuna was still standing on the other side of her door, not having turned the lights on. She had been pausing like this frequently since the incident. It was as if her body just didn't care enough to do what her mind wanted it to. Finally, she mustered the will power to take off her shoes. Then she trudged to her bedroom, changed into pajamas, and curled up in a ball beneath her sheets. She had no desire to mull over the previous night's events. Instead she put them out of her mind and tried desperately to fall asleep. As usual, though, it took her a long while to do so.

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The next day, Gero rushed through breakfast and hurried out the door. He stopped for a moment by Tuna's apartment, but then kept going. If she didn't want to talk to him, it was best to leave her alone.

He had gotten an idea the previous night and he wanted to have as much time as possible to work on it today. First, though, he would stop by headquarters. When he stepped into the Pie Palace, Jamal was tending to a customer, so he casually slipped by and into the basement. There he encountered Ziggy and Matilda, who were playing a game to pass the time.

"You're back," Matilda noted. "Where was your mission at, again?"

"Mount Moumantai," Gero responded, making his way over to the refrigerator.

"So did you and Raede survive each others' presence?" Ziggy chuckled.

"Yeah," Gero answered vaguely. "Has he stopped in yet today?"

"Not yet. If you actually beat him here, though, then I have to assume he won't be coming in at all," Ziggy reasoned. "Should I fetch your cut of the payment for the mission?"

"No hurry. Actually there's something that I wanted to talk to you about," Gero mentioned as he opened a beverage.

"Go ahead," Ziggy insisted, dividing his attention between listening to Gero and defeating Matilda.

"On the way back from Wailing Falls, we were captured by this thief named Halford that was after Raede. Everything worked out in the end, but he also got pretty close to killing Tuna. She's pretty shaken up about it, and might not be in for awhile. Make sure you don't do anything to upset her when she does come back, though," Gero insisted.

Matilda joined in without looking up from her game with Ziggy. "How uncharacteristic of you, Gero. You've never struck me as the type to take that much care for someone else's feelings," she observed.

"That's because she's more than just shaken up," Raede interrupted, appearing at the top of the staircase and moving down into the room. "She's barely functional. The whole affair seems to have devastated her ambition for anything."

“I see,” Ziggy replied. After processing for a moment, he continued. “Anytime something like this occurs, it’s unfortunate. Even so, if it had to happen, then I’m glad it happened now.”

“What do you mean?” Gero inquired.

“I’m not sure what Tuna was expecting when she requested employment here, but I don’t think this was it. Belonging to this syndicate invariably means putting yourself at increased risk for death. Even if one takes no dangerous jobs, like Cyrus, everyone must be willing to accept the risk that comes from associating with those that do, like you,” Ziggy explained.

There’s no way around that, and it’s better that Tuna realized this during this trial period than after committing to being a full member. She will need to decide for herself whether or not this is the line of work she really wants to do. If she succumbs to fear, then so be it. If she can make it past this hurdle, then she’ll know what she’s getting into. Only she can determine this, though,” he finished.

It was frustrating to think of it that way, but Gero and Raede knew that Ziggy was right. If Tuna couldn’t learn to live with these kinds of situations, then perhaps it would be best for her to leave the syndicate altogether.

“Anyway, if Tuna’s not going to be back in for awhile, then I’m going to take a break and work on my tinkering. It’s not like the three of us can do a mission until Tuna gets her mojo back, after all,” Raede reasoned.

Matilda was clearly amused. “The three of you? Don’t tell me that you plan on going on a mission with Gero *voluntarily*,” she laughed.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Raede asked.

“Kids these days are so fickle,” she moaned, returning her attention to the game.

Ziggy looked up at Raede sternly. If he was shocked by Raede and Gero’s new amity, he wasn’t showing it. “The two of you cannot wait for Tuna to do your next mission,” he decreed.

“What are you talking about?” Gero asked.

“As I said before, only Tuna can decide whether or not to continue as a mercenary. If she had any reason to believe that the two of you weren’t willing to do missions without her, then that would surely influence her decision,” Ziggy explained.

“We can’t just take off somewhere,” Gero protested. “What if she needs help?”

“You have until noon tomorrow to request a mission,” Ziggy announced, ignoring Gero’s outburst.

Gero finished his drink and tossed it in the trash. He didn’t like the idea of resuming work with Tuna in this condition. Ziggy’s logic may have been correct, but it didn’t sit well with him. He stood up then stormed past Raede and up the stairs.

“Where are you off to?” Raede queried.

“There’s something I wanted to do today,” Gero vaguely responded. He then paused and turned back. “You want to help?”

“I might as well. You’d just screw it up without me,” Raede replied as they exited the room.

“You’re so cold sometimes, Ziggy,” Matilda informed her boss.

He shrugged innocently. “Sometimes you have to be cold to do what’s best.”

Matilda smiled dryly and took her turn. “I win,” she announced.

His face went pale, as if he had just remembered that he was playing a game with her. “Wait, when did you move that piece there?” he gasped.

She snickered victoriously. “Quite a while ago. You really shouldn’t split your attention while playing against me,” she suggested.

“And you wonder why I hardly ever play you,” Ziggy groaned. “I’m going upstairs.”

“Suit yourself,” she bid him. She cleaned up the game pieces and walked over to the mission board. “Well, if nobody’s going to keep me company, I might as well clear up the old jobs.”

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Beneath her closed blinds, Tuna shifted about in her bed. She had been lying there all morning, only getting up once to use the bathroom. The sheets felt comforting. More importantly, she had no energy. It would probably help if she ate something, but she had no appetite.

She closed her eyes and tried to go to sleep once again. If she had no desire to get up, then she might as well rest some more. It was a fruitless endeavor, however. She wasn’t tired in the least.

Instead, she opened her eyes and glanced around the room. There was hardly anything there. She'd had this apartment for almost two weeks and still hardly had anything inside it. Everything was empty and bland.

What was she even doing here? She had made Ocarina her new home so quickly. Why was she working for the syndicate? She wasn't a mercenary. An uninteresting girl who couldn't commit and couldn't defend herself: that was all she had ever been.

Her goggles were resting on a short stand next to her bed. She had been facing them these past few minutes, but now she turned away and gazed emptily at the blank wall.

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"I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then," Gero concluded. It hadn't taken long for him and Raede to locate what they were looking for. After stopping back at headquarters briefly, they had decided to go their separate ways for the remainder of the day.

"Yeah, I'll probably be in around eight o'clock," Raede informed him.

"Why so early?" Gero cried.

"Stop whining," Raede ordered as he took off for his place. Helping Gero had not taken long, so he still had all afternoon to work on his own projects.

His home was about a half hour walk south from the Pie Palace, placing it southwest of Sunnyvale Apartments and southeast of the train station. It was on a small plot of land that he owned himself. The house was fairly small, but it was connected to a work garage where Raede spent much of his free time. There was actually only room for a kitchen, bathroom, and a small entryway in the main house section. His bedroom was located over his garage, which he accessed via a ladder. One corner of his property was empty and devoid of grass. He had used it to work on so many projects that it had devolved into a square of dirt.

Upon returning home, the first thing he did was check his mailbox. Inside were a few bills and an offer for a magazine subscription. "Garbage," he sighed.

"Well, I haven't seen you around for awhile," another voice spoke up.

Raede turned to see his neighbor, Lance Winkleman, a married businessman in his early thirties.

“Yeah, I was away on a vacation,” Raede explained. Lance nodded in acknowledgement. “Anyway, I was on my way-”

“You know,” Lance interrupted, “I bet that if you stopped taking so many vacations, then, in no time at all, you could fix up your little hovel of yours.”

“Yeah,” Raede agreed hollowly. Lance always found a way to belittle him, but always wound up doing so in a subtle way. For that reason, Raede tried to avoid talking to the man. When it was necessary to do so, though, he explained his frequent absences as being either vacations or business trips for his fictional career as an automobile engineer. “I’m actually content with my little hovel though.”

“So, where did you take your little vacation to?” Lance inquired.

“Mount Moumantai,” Raede answered. It didn’t seem like Lance was going to let him escape this conversation quickly. To bring his languishing to an end as quickly as possible, he kept his answers brief and devoid of details.

“Is that so? I’ve been there before. Cute little mountain, isn’t it? I believe it took me five hours in all to reach the top,” Lance recalled. It was only natural for Lance to have done something that Raede had done, and more quickly. Raede took solace in the fact that he had been escorting an elderly brockan up, limiting his speed.

“Yeah, I wasn’t timing myself,” Raede commented.

“If you’re a fan of mountains, let me tell you about this wonderful one to the south. Perhaps you’ve heard of Mita Mountain? It’s about twice the size of Mount Moumantai and takes several days to climb. Vanessa and I went there last year. There’s a nice skiing lodge at the bottom. A bit pricey, but, if you can afford it, completely worth it,” Lance advertised. Vanessa was Lance’s wife and consistently proved herself just as irritating as he was.

“Right. Well, I ought to head inside. See you later,” Raede hastily slipped in. He had to act quickly if he were to successfully escape from a conversation with this guy. Though he was

somewhat dazed by Raede's abruptness, Lance shrugged it off and retrieved his own mail.

Raede had a snack while going through his bills. Then he grabbed an energy drink and went out to his garage. Once he started to fidget with his incomplete car, he was able to drown out all other distractions. Tinkering with this stuff put his mind at ease. Nothing could cramp his groove.

"Thank you so much for having us over, Lance. We've been dying to see Vanessa's garden," a muffled voice explained. Raede turned in annoyance to the wall, which, unfortunately, was not thick enough to stifle outside conversation.

"It's always a delight to have you visit. Vanessa won't be back for ten minutes or so, but, in the meantime, let me show you around," Lance replied.

"If you don't mind us asking, who lives next to you? Their yard is in terrible condition," the first voice observed.

"Oh, that's my neighbor, Raede. He tries, but I'm afraid that he's just not that adept at lawn care. I hope that he can figure it out soon. A verdant grass would really help alleviate that depressed mood he's always in," Lance theorized. "Now, then, here we have our azaleas..."

Raede glared angrily at the wall, behind which lurked his enemy. "Winkleman..." he seethed.

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Night arrived, and it was cooler than usual. Tuna had finally pulled herself out of bed and eaten a little. At last she convinced herself that a walk outside would help clear her mind. She had sat down on a bench in the middle of the park with nobody else in sight. All three moons were visible tonight, though to differing extents.

She was still processing the incident with Halford. It struck her as odd that she was so affected by this experience in particular. Even when Dalvus had threatened her life, she hadn't become petrified by the fear. Had it simply been because Gero had burst in before the threat of death set it?

Halford's sadistic face kept entering her mind. Even with him captured and, in all likelihood, jailed, she couldn't help but fear him. What if he came back? What if there were others like him? She wasn't cut out for such a stressful profession. A chill

ran down her spine and she huddled up inside her jacket. She was regretting coming out on such a cool night.

Tuna stood up and began to walk back toward Sunnyvale. Even though she wanted to escape, she was also tired of running. She missed having a place she could call home. For two years now she hadn't felt content. All of those cities and all of those boring jobs had felt so empty. Ocarina was the first city that excited her this much. Then there was the syndicate. In some perplexing, magical way she had grown quite attached to it.

She stepped into the warm building and began to ascend the stairs. Halford's face kept haunting her. Halfway up, she had to stop and lean against the railing. It felt like that man was climbing the stairs behind her. At the same time, it felt like he was waiting for her at the top. All she could do was linger there, breathing heavily. She needed to alleviate the fear somehow.

After the terror spell subsided, she trudged up the remaining stairs and started toward her door. As she came to 508, she stopped. It had only been a day, but she already missed Gero. She missed Raede, too. She even missed Ziggy, Matilda, and Cyrus, to an extent.

She was sick of facing this matter alone. If she couldn't be free of the agony, then she at least wanted someone else to help hold her up. Gero could do that for her. She slowly elevated her hand and knocked on Gero's door. Upon hearing the knock, Gero sprang to his feet and hurried to the door. For whatever reason, his instincts were telling him exactly who it was. He swung the door open to greet her.

Nobody was there. "Tuna?" he called out, hoping that it had been her and that she would answer him. He lowered his head in defeat. "I'm going to leave the door unlocked," he added, just in case she was still there.

Tuna had rounded the corner at the end of the hall. It would have taken too long to fish out her key and escape into her room, so she had fled here instead. She was sitting against the wall with her arms wrapped around her knees, biting her lower lip nervously as tears formed at the edges of her eyes. Why? Why was she so weak?

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As expected, Raede was already at headquarters by the time Gero finally arrived the following morning. They hastily selected one of the old jobs that were posted and brought it up to Ziggy.

“Location: 1983 South Side Boulevard, Ocarina. Estimated Time: 2 Days. Client desires assistance erecting a barricade around property. Reward: e150,” Ziggy read off. “Alright, then, you can have it. Is there a reason you went with such a short, local mission?” he eyed them knowingly.

“Not really,” Raede replied indifferently.

Ziggy stared intently, seeing right through them. “Have you seen Tuna at all since you came back?”

Gero averted his eyes. “No. Is that everything?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Ziggy replied. Once he was alone, he took out a small book and began reading. “They’re only making it harder on themselves by sticking so close to home.”

The two of them arrived at their destination a short while later. Their client was home and quickly provided them with the details. He was a somewhat elderly gentleman and seemed rather laid back about their mission.

“As you can see, I live right next to a sports field. Every day, I get a handful of balls and other things flying onto my lawn. I wouldn’t mind if it only happened occasionally, but I’ve got people climbing onto my lawn every time I turn around. What I want the two of you to do is design some sort of barrier that keeps most of it out. If you can figure out how to do it without blocking the sun, then that’d be wonderful, but I’m willing to make that sacrifice if necessary,” the client elaborated. “I have some supplies in that shed, but if you need more go ahead and buy them. I’ll pay for any additional costs.”

“Understood,” Raede replied. “We’ll do the best we can.” The client returned to his house while the two of them surveyed their work supplies. “There’s not a whole lot to work with in here.”

“Why’s Ziggy accepting such boring requests?” Gero complained. “I can’t get excited about building a stupid wall.”

“That’s not exactly something he tries to filter out,” Raede pointed out. “Besides, you should be grateful that there was a mission in Ocarina amongst the old jobs.”

“I guess so,” Gero agreed.

“Don’t worry about her so much,” Raede suggested. “I may not know her as well as you do, but she seems pretty resilient to me. She’ll bounce back.”

“I know that,” he replied, slightly annoyed that Raede had to point it out. “So if we need a wall that lets sun through, shouldn’t we just build it out of glass?”

“Oh yeah, that’s a *fantastic* idea,” Raede snidely answered. “Glass is great for stopping incoming projectiles.”

“Nothing’s ever good enough for you,” Gero grumbled.

Raede stared at him, bewildered. “How does that even come close to being a good idea?”

“Well, it took care of all the other concerns,” Gero argued.

“And completely ignored the reason that he wants a barricade in the first place,” Raede reminded him. “You obviously aren’t good at anything that requires brain power.”

“Are you calling me stupid?” Gero exclaimed.

“Well, at least you’re smart enough to know I’m insulting you. Anyway, I’ve got an idea. Start digging a base to set the barrier in while I run to a hardware store,” Raede instructed.

“Whatever,” the frogman grumbled as he picked up a shovel and walked over to the side of the property. Raede rolled his eyes at his simple-minded companion and took off for the store.

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A narrow shaft of sunlight blazed through the side of Tuna’s curtains and onto her eyelids. She instinctively turned away from it and bumped her knee into the wall.

“Ouch,” she groaned feebly, forcing her eyes open. The light was already quite bright, so she figured it must be early afternoon. She had been sleeping for quite a while. Reluctantly, she dragged herself out of bed and into the kitchen.

The fact that she was at least able to drag herself out like this meant she was progressing. Still, she was far from excellent. She slumped around the kitchen, slowly assembling all of the elements to a bowl of cereal. She had no aspiration to try something more complex. However, she took one spoonful of it before realizing she still had no appetite.

Logically, she should be quite hungry. But she would only become weaker if she didn’t consume something, so she kept chewing away at it. With no real ambition to eat, though, it took

her a while to actually empty the bowl. “Delicious,” she commented sourly as she washed the bowl and spoon.

As she put them away, she caught a whiff of herself and winced. She desperately needed a shower.

“I should clean up,” she noted to herself. “I suppose I’m not doing anything else today, anyway.”

Once she was done, she sat down next to her large window, contemplating what she wanted to do. Well, what she *wanted* to do was crawl back into bed, but she knew that wasn’t going to help her defeat the funk she was in. She still wanted to see her coworkers though, even if she was uneasy about continuing on as a mercenary.

Raede and Gero were probably fighting at this very moment. Gero would say something stupid and Raede would taunt him, even though he was really no more mature. It would still be fun, though. The two of them seemed to have gotten past the incident completely unhindered. Unlike her, they had been strong enough to move past it.

Then again, these were beasts she was thinking of. It’s not like she was capable of anything they were. She couldn’t jump far, punch hard, or really fight effectively at all. She couldn’t do anything impressive like that to stave off death; she couldn’t finish with fireworks.

Tuna froze, those last words lingering behind in her mind. She recalled Gero explaining them to her. “When you do something important, you should do it with as much gusto as you can,” he had told her.

This was important, wasn’t it? She had finally found a place she wanted to call home, so why was she considering abandoning it all? This event couldn’t deter her from what she wanted. Even if there was some danger involved, it had to be worth the risk. This was the life she desired: one with Gero and Raede and the rest of the Pondswagger Syndicate.

“Alright,” she announced to herself, “There’s no way I’m going to come out weakly like this. I’m going to do this the way I want to.”

Tuna stared around her empty, sun-deprived apartment. What had she been doing these past few days? She knew what made her happy and she already had it. She hurriedly threw her

shoes on, grabbed her bag, and rushed out the door. A few moments later, the door came bursting open once again and she flew back into her room. She emerged once more a few moments later, once more donning her goggles. "I'll have to thank Ziggy," she mentioned to herself as she locked her door and hurried down the stairs.

As she dashed down the sidewalk toward the Ocarina Pie Palace, she grew more and more excited. She was happy with her life. All she wanted right now was to join Gero and Raede on another mission.

Upon bursting into the shop, she was greeted by Jamal. "Tuna!" he cried. "It's great to see you. Where have you been?"

She stopped and smiled joyfully at him. "I was feeling a bit under the weather. I'm doing much better now, though," she guaranteed him.

"Well, that's good news. Have some pie before you leave today, on the house. It'll keep you healthy," he laughed.

"Will do," she agreed as she continued to the stairs.

Jamal grinned contentedly after her. He had been told that Tuna had endured a rough experience, though he hadn't inquired about the details. It was a relief to see that it was no longer bogging her down.

Tuna was slightly disappointed to see that neither Gero nor Raede was present, though it shouldn't have come as a surprise to her. It would have been smart to check Gero's apartment before taking off, but she had simply been too eager. One thing did catch her attention, though, and that was the small present wrapped up on the game table.

"You must be Tuna," an unfamiliar voice said.

Tuna looked around and spotted the speaker, whom she hadn't noticed sitting on one of the couches. She was around Tuna's age, had long, wavy blonde hair, and wore a cheerful expression.

"Yeah, that's me," Tuna confirmed.

The blonde girl stood up and walked toward the stairs. "I was hoping to meet you soon. I'm one of your coworkers. The name's Piper Nyara," she introduced herself with a wide smile. Already she seemed more normal than any of her other

coworkers. “They left that present behind for you so that you could open it when you were well enough to come in,” she added.

“*They?*” Tuna repeated.

“Gero and Raede,” Piper clarified. “They seemed really concerned about you, but they had to take off for a two-day mission.”

“I see,” Tuna nodded.

“Well, don’t just stand there,” Piper laughed. “Open it.”

Tuna picked up the present and carefully ripped the wrapping paper off. Underneath was a picture frame, and sealed within that was a mission poster. It was for the job to stop poaching in Umberstone Park and printed on the frame were the words “Tuna’s First Official Mission.” She blushed happily at the token from her first job. It was touching that the two of them would think to do such a thing for her, and a little shocking that Gero had thought to keep the poster. It made her happy, though.

Piper stood by, pleased that the present had such an effect on Tuna. Gero and Raede would certainly be relieved, as well.

# Chapter 11

## Tyrant of Amberpass

The next morning, Gero received a knock on his door. He had just been about to dive into his breakfast and found the interruption quite unwelcome. His mood was instantly lifted, however, upon discovering his visitor. “Tuna!” he exclaimed.

“Good morning, Gero,” she beamed. “How’s everything going?”

“What?” he gasped. Considering her condition when they’d last seen each other, he wasn’t expecting her to be quite so chipper. “You’re feeling better?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “I actually came into work yesterday, but you had already started another mission,” she informed him.

“Sweet. So did you want to come in for a few minutes? I was about to eat breakfast,” he explained.

“Sure,” she replied as she stepped into the wasteland. Instantly she noticed the stack of pancakes on the counter, eleven high and drenched in about three different types of topping. She burst out giggling.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he shoved the top two into his mouth.

“I’m fine,” she coughed. “Really, I am. By the way, thanks for the present. It means a lot to me that you did that.”

“No pwobwem,” Gero said back, his mouth still stuffed. He chewed frantically and swallowed. “Raede made me put his name on it, too, but it was mostly my idea.”

“Uh huh. So I hear the two of you took a two-day job. Does that mean you still need to work on it today?” she inquired.

“Yeah, we’re almost done, though. We’ll probably be done after a few hours,” he determined. “You want to go on a new mission after that?”

She nodded once again. After a few days, she was already craving a new adventure. “How about I meet the two of you at headquarters around three this afternoon?” she offered.

“That should work,” Gero agreed. He impaled another three pancakes and lifted them to his mouth. His mixture of sauces that he had combined began to spew all over his face. The result was less than flattering. “I’m gwad you’re feewing better.”

She winced at the sight, but realized she didn’t mind it so much as she normally would have. “Yeah, so am I. I’ll see you later, then, Gero. I’m going to take care of a few errands,” she concluded.

Gero grunted his farewell as she made her exit. He wiped the sauce from his chin as he continued to chew. It was a tremendous relief that Tuna had gotten past her slump, and an even greater relief, that she had every intention to stay with them. As if to punctuate his joy, he swallowed the last of his mouthful and let out a burp. “All of these pancakes are making me thirsty,” he noted as he leaped over the counter and to the fridge. He unscrewed the top to a jug of orange juice and began to chug it as he walked back to his mountain of pancakes.

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“Gero, just the man I was hoping to see,” Jamal cheered as the frogman strode into the Pie Palace, followed shortly by Raede. “I need you to test a prototype of mine.”

A wide smile emerged on Gero’s face. “A new flavor? What kind is it?” he asked.

Jamal grinned almost nefariously. “Cow pie.”

“You put that stuff into your oven?” Gero leered suspiciously.

“He means that he used beef as the filling,” Raede corrected him, but then he paused. “That *is* what you mean, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Jamal guffawed. “Though it is a rather convenient pun, wouldn’t you agree? If the customer sees it, they’re bound to ask about it, and if they ask about it, then they’re more likely to buy some.”

“That’s a sound business stratagem,” Raede complimented him.

“Unless the idea of eating crap scares them away,” Gero noted. “But I do like the idea of a beef pie.”

“Of course you do. It’s pie with meat in it. What’s not to love?” Raede asked rhetorically.

“Exactly,” Jamal grinned. “It’s guaranteed to succeed. Anyway, here’s a slice for both of you to try while you’re back there.”

“You don’t want us to stay and chat some more?” Raede asked.

“Not really. You scare away real customers,” he bluntly explained.

“We love you, too, Jamal,” Gero shot back sarcastically as he began descending the stairs.

“Hey, you guys,” Tuna called up once they came into view. She had been talking to Piper in the basement before their appearance. “How was your job?”

“Boring,” Gero moaned. “And Raede kept bossing me around.”

“It’s not my fault that you know nothing of proper carpentry,” Raede reasoned.

“Hey, how come we didn’t get any pie?” Tuna whined.

“Go ask Jamal for some,” Raede suggested. “He’s looking for testers. It’s beef flavored!”

“Ugh. I think I’ll pass,” Tuna replied, her stomach lurching at the thought.

“Yeah, I try to keep my meats and pastries separate,” Piper added.

“Oh, hey there, Piper,” Gero jumped in. “Tuna, this is Piper. She’s the nice one.”

“You don’t need to introduce me; I’ve met her already,” Tuna explained.

“You have?” he sputtered.

“Obviously,” she sighed. “We were kind of both already here before you two arrived.”

“Actually, we met yesterday afternoon,” Piper clarified.

“We really hit it off,” Tuna elaborated. “As it turns out, Piper’s currently renting a one-person apartment, but it’s a bit expensive for her taste so she’s agreed to room up with me starting next month.”

“It’s going to be fun having a roommate,” Piper cheered.

“Cool,” Gero grinned. “Raede, go tell Ziggy we’re done with our mission.”

“What’s with the orders?” Raede spat defensively.



“You’re closer to his office,” Gero argued.

“By five stupid steps,” Raede shot back.

“Before you do that,” Tuna interrupted, “I wanted to see what you guys thought about this mission.”

“You’ve got one picked out already?” Raede asked.

Tuna nodded as she ran over to the mission board and unpinned one she had been looking at earlier. She rushed back and handed the poster to Gero. “It looks a bit challenging, but I’m sure that the three of us can handle it,” she said.

Gero read off the poster, mainly for Raede’s benefit. “Location: Amberpass. Estimated Time: Unknown. The client is a representative of the town of Amberpass, which requests the removal of a tyrant that has been ruling over them for several months. Please speak with Ruri Swanton for further details. Reward: e7500,” he read off.

“That’s a pretty substantial payoff,” Piper noted.

Raede was a bit shocked that Tuna had selected a mission that was obviously dangerous in nature, especially given the recent events. He decided not to speak up about it, though.

“Where’s Amberpass?” Gero queried.

“It’s a pretty small town in southeastern Perenos,” Tuna explained. “It’ll take us a full three days to reach it by train.”

“Works for me,” Gero announced.

“Me, too,” Raede jumped in.

Tuna turned around and looked at Piper. “I suppose I shouldn’t have presumed. Were you interested in coming along?” she checked.

“Thanks for the offer,” Piper beamed. “I actually have a prior engagement, though. I promised Cyrus that I’d help him do a mission tomorrow so he can pay some bills.”

“You’re too considerate for your own good, Piper,” Gero deemed.

She glowed at the compliment. “I couldn’t just leave him high and dry,” she reasoned. “Anyway, I hope the three of you have fun in Amberpass.”

“We will. See you when we get back,” Tuna said in parting.

Up in his office, Ziggy was carefully mulling over a particular file. It happened to be to the mission that had required him to travel.

“I’m just not sure if it’s wise to accept such a case,” he mumbled. “The payoff is certainly sufficient, but it would require at least four of them to do it. Most importantly, though, I’m not sure that I can ignore the risks involved.” He slammed the folder shut and tossed it back into a drawer. “What am I worrying about? I still have two weeks to decide whether or not to accept it.” A knocking on the door startled him, enough for him to fly out of his chair. He scrambled back into it and pretended that nothing had happened. “Come in.”

“Ziggy! We want to claim a new job,” Gero announced.

“I’m assuming that you finished the previous one, then,” Ziggy hinted.

“Yeah, no thanks to Gero,” Raede replied.

“What?” Gero gasped.

Their boss drew out their payment and tossed it over to them. “So the three of you are doing this one together, I take it?” he presumed.

“Yup,” Gero cheered. “I knew that Tuna would come back.”

Ziggy had already been aware of Tuna’s return. Nevertheless, he was happy to see her back in action. For the time being, he wouldn’t push her about revealing her dream. She ought to have time to readjust to her working life. “Well, then, what mission was it?” he asked.

“The Amberpass one,” Tuna announced as Gero handed him the poster.

“That’s quite a big one. You’re sure you’re up for it?” Ziggy questioned. Tuna nodded confidently. “Very well, the three of you can have it.”

“Great, let’s get going,” Raede added anxiously. They made their exit and emerged back into the shop. “Jamal, this pie is delicious.”

“As usual,” Gero tossed in.

“Excellent. I think I’ll add it to the menu, then. Where are the lot of you off to?” the chef asked them.

“We’re starting another job and need to go to Amberpass,” Tuna summed up. “We should be gone for at least a week.”

“Is that so? Well, then, good luck to you all,” Jamal called after them.

They agreed to meet at the train station in two hours. With this mission slated to take so long, they wanted to bring ample supplies along with them. Tuna finished packing early, so she decided to make herself some lunch, after which she affixed her gift to the wall of her bedroom. She happily grinned at it before turning to run over to Gero's place.

"It's me," she announced after knocking.

"Come in," he invited.

She opened up the unlocked door to see him sitting at his counter with a stack of pancakes. Though only five were there now, she had to assume that he'd started with quite a few more. "How can you eat that many pancakes?" she squirmed.

"I still had batter left over from breakfast," Gero answered.

"That's not a good enough reason to eat so many," she reasoned.

"You can have some if it's that important to you," he offered.

"I just ate," she declined.

"Suit yourself," he added as he stuffed the top two into his mouth.

"My best friend is a complete freak," she laughed to herself.

"I'm your best friend? Woool!" he cheered through the mesh of pancakes.

She hadn't even thought about it. Now that she did, though, she supposed that it was true. He was the first person that she thought of when she needed help or wanted to hang out. "Yeah, I guess so," she confirmed, acting as indifferently as she could.

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As per Tuna's calculations, the trip to Amberpass took about three days. With the limited space of a train coach, it was all Tuna could do to keep the irritated Gero and Raede away from one another's throats. Before long, the two boys were jumping onto the platform at every stop to get ten minutes of running out of their systems.

"They're like children," Tuna scoffed in amusement. Fortunately, since their battle, Gero and Raede were able to tolerate each other much more easily.

The journey took a lot out of them, but it was nonetheless enjoyable.

“I’ve never been this far east,” Tuna admitted.

“I have, for a few jobs,” Raede recalled. “Never been to this particular town, though.”

“I want to know what this ‘tyrant’ is like,” Gero jumped in. “If he’s arrogant, then, it’ll be that much more fun punching in his face.”

“You don’t have to make it sound so sadistic,” Tuna chided him. “It must be a pretty small town, though. According to the poster the tyrant has been there for months, and on top of all that, the reward is fairly small considering the problem.”

“That makes sense,” Raede agreed. “There really can’t be that many people if that’s all they managed to scrounge up for a reward. At least it’s still a great payoff to us.”

“You don’t have to sound so greedy,” Tuna berated him. “At any rate, we’ll arrive there early tomorrow night. I’m going to go grab some supper from the meal coach.”

“Sounds good to me,” Raede added as they stood up.

“Yeah, I heard that they’re serving pancakes tonight,” Gero celebrated.

“No,” Tuna declared. “I forbid it.”

“But- ” he began to protest.

“I don’t care,” she insisted. The mere thought of him stuffing more pancakes into his mouth made her grimace.

“Maybe they have waffles...” the frogman hoped.

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They arrived at Amberpass the following evening, just as a tinge of red began to color the sky. More accurately, they arrived at a nearby town and then walked to Amberpass. Upon sighting it, they understood why no one had bothered to build train tracks to the town. There couldn’t have been more than twenty buildings. They almost felt as if they were intruding upon private property as they reached the main street. Not a single person was outside, which made it significantly harder to determine where they needed to go.

“Who are we supposed to talk to?” Gero asked.

“Someone named Ruri Swanton,” Tuna reminded him. “I suppose we’ll have to knock on someone’s door. All the shops are closed up.”

“Maybe this tyrant has a tighter grip on the town than we assumed,” Raede hypothesized.

“Hey! Anybody in there? We need some directions,” Gero yelled. He had already made his way over to one of the houses and was knocking vigorously on the door. He stepped over to peer through the windows.

“Are you sure that you’re being rude enough about it?” Raede snipped.

“Or invasive enough? Honestly, Gero, we don’t want to scare people into not answering us,” Tuna supplemented.

“I’m not scaring anyone,” Gero insisted as he turned away from the window. The blinds suddenly snapped shut, blocking off any sight of what was inside.

“You were saying?” she snidely added.

“Try to be a little more polite about it,” Raede suggested as he walked up to another house where the blinds were already shut. He knocked three times and then simply waited, but there was no reply. He knocked three more times, but there was still no response. He decided to take a more vocal approach. “Anybody home?”

“We don’t have any money,” a voice called back.

Raede scratched his head curiously. “I don’t want any money,” he clarified.

“Please, just go away,” the voice added.

“Yeah, *we’re* the rude ones,” Gero grumbled sarcastically. “They ask for our help and then won’t even let us in.”

“They’re probably just scared,” Tuna insisted.

“Maybe so, but we still need to find a way to get in touch with this Swanton character,” Raede noted.

Gero ran to the center of town and roared out, “Ruri Swanton! We need to talk to you!”

“What did we just say about yelling?!” Tuna shrieked.

“It’s faster than knocking on houses one by one,” Gero argued.

“I am she.” They turned to see a tough-looking woman in her early thirties staring down at them from atop one of the roofs. “What is that you want?” she demanded.

“We’re the people you hired. We came to get rid of this tyrant of yours,” Raede summed up.

“Prove it,” Ruri demanded.

Tuna pulled out the mission poster and held it up toward Ruri. “This is the official poster for the job, provided to us by our boss,” she explained.

Ruri was clearly still skeptical. “How are we supposed to know if that slip holds any authenticity? Sundancer could have just forged that to test us,” she suspected.

“Sundancer?” Tuna repeated.

“Damn it, we’re the real deal!” Gero thundered. “Just let us talk to you already!”

“I think not. Men, now!” Ruri cried.

Several large, weighted nets came flying from the rooftop down upon the three mercenaries. They couldn’t elude it in time, but they hastily began to free themselves. A few more men burst from the door of the same building and hurried to secure their catch.

“Stop this, right now!” a newcomer demanded. It was another woman of the same age, though she appeared less ragged. With her order, the men halted. “Shiv, what do you think you’re doing?” she called up to the other woman.

“Shiv?” Raede asked to no one in particular.

The woman who they had thought was Ruri, and who they now realized was named Shiv, called back down to the new woman. “These people claim to be here to liberate us. I figured they were one of Sundancer’s ploys, so I decided to capture them,” she explained.

“They aren’t working for her,” the lady on the ground shouted up. “I hired them to help us out.”

“What?” Shiv gasped. “Why didn’t you tell me about this, Ruri?”

“Because I knew you’d get upset,” the real Ruri reasoned.

“Excuse me,” Tuna interrupted. “What’s going on?”

After they were free of the netting, Ruri invited them inside to explain the situation. Shiv also sat down, though she was in a much more sour mood.

“You see, Shiv is my twin sister. Even so, she was always a lot more aggressive than me. That’s why when Sundancer’s reign started, she started to assemble the citizens of Amberpass to fight her off,” Ruri began.

“That’s because we can handle it on our own. We don’t need a bunch of outsiders to fight our battles,” Shiv interjected.

“So Sundancer is the tyrant, then?” Tuna asked for clarification.

“Yes,” Ruri nodded. “I suppose we should start at the beginning. It all happened a little over a month ago. Everything was peaceful and normal, but then she came into town.”

“Nobody thought anything of her at first,” Shiv continued. “Before long, though, she made her way down to the nearby stream and followed it the short distance up to where our lake is.”

Ruri took up the story. “Back when Amberpass was first settled, the only available water was from that small stream. It’s too tiny to act as a reliable source though,” she mentioned. “To make matters more consistent, they created a dam and dug up the land so that a lake would form. Since then we’ve gotten plumbing, so we don’t actually need the lake for survival. Even so, it had become a popular recreational spot among our residents.”

“And that beast just decided to tear down the dam,” Shiv spat. “In a matter of hours, almost all of the water flowed out. The lake was left almost barren and the area beyond it became flooded. That was how she announced her presence.”

“Matters only turned worse from there,” Ruri lamented. “Our mayor tried to reprimand her, but she eluded him. We began to repair the damage she had caused, but while we were out there, another incident occurred. Several young boys were playing catch when Sundancer decided to return. She walked up to one of them and struck him on the head. She did it so casually, too, as if it didn’t faze her to hit a child!” Although Ruri had been fairly calm while recounting the trouble at the dam, she couldn’t maintain her composure now. She was obviously more upset about this tyrant’s actions that had affected the children.

“She didn’t even try to deny it when we arrived upon the scene,” Shiv seethed. “And then she had the gall to declare that the kid deserved it.”

“It was at that point that we, as a town, decided that we needed to be rid of her,” Ruri resumed. “We wanted to avoid violence if at all possible, so we decided to pay her to leave. We offered her e25 to leave right away.”

“We should have just forced her out of town right then, if you ask me,” Shiv interrupted. The situation clearly frustrated her more than it did her pacifist sister.

Ruri pressed her lips together anxiously, but continued. “When we presented the money to her, though, she began acting strangely. She seized the e25 and became angry with us. She then demanded that we hand over all of the money we had,” she recalled.

“Apparently our humble little offering wasn’t enough for her,” Shiv growled.

“We refused, naturally, but then she forced us to give it all to her. Some of our more aggressive residents, like Shiv here, retaliated with violence, but to no avail. I’d never seen anyone so adept in combat as Sundancer. She quickly defeated anyone who became aggressive toward her, and stated that she would return to take away any additional money we made. Against such a threat we had no choice but to comply. All we really know about her is her name: Sundancer,” Ruri added.

Even with their small town size, it was hard to believe that someone could, all alone, defeat them. Sundancer’s strength had to be comparable to Gero or Raede’s.

“I can’t believe that,” Tuna gasped.

“Well, it happened, alright,” Shiv shot back. “And she did return, two days later. She discovered that we still had money and cleaned us out as best she could. Every other day she repeated this procedure. Eventually her name became so feared amongst our town that some of our residents actually deemed it best to team up with her, to stay on her good side. At least ten of them have pledged themselves to her service, making it harder to fight back. Right now she’s staying in an old shrine built on that large hill east of town, across the river. Usually some of the traitors can be found guarding the shrine,” she detailed.

“Why didn’t you try getting the army involved?” Raede pondered.

“We don’t need the assistance of that scum,” Shiv grumbled.

“We would have, but the army in these parts is quite corrupted and requires bribery to function properly. Unfortunately, we couldn’t even afford their services, as the only money we had was that which we managed to keep hidden,” Ruri



continued. “We were barely able to put the money together for me to travel to Ocarina and pay for your assistance. We’d heard that the Pondswagger Syndicate was very reliable in situations like this.”

“You bet we are,” Gero grinned proudly. “We’ll take care of this Sundancer character, no problem.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Ruri smiled gratefully. “We’re willing to accommodate you for as long as it takes.”

“Don’t worry about that. We’ll take care of her right now,” Gero declared as he made for the door.

“Hold on just a minute, Gero,” Tuna insisted. “It’s worth planning this out a bit first.” She turned toward the sisters and asked, “Are there any routines or habits that Sundancer and her guards engage in?”

“Who cares? Raede can take out the guards and I’ll head straight for Sundancer,” Gero suggested.

“Raede?” Ruri repeated. “Raede Junka, the Cannon? I didn’t expect the syndicate to send such a skilled and powerful agent to assist our humble little town. It is truly an honor to meet you,” she ogled.

“In that case, allow me to give you my personal guarantee. I shall vanquish this oppressor and drive her from your lands, permanently,” Raede said as heroically as he could.

Ruri looked as though she were about to pass out from sheer admiration. “Oh, thank you!” she wailed.

“Who cares about that stupid rotating fan?” Gero shouted jealously. “I’m the one who’ll kick Sundancer’s ass!”

Tuna tried to abate his rage. “But Gero, the noblest heroes are those that remain humble,” she reasoned.

“I don’t care!” he cried in frustration.

“You clowns are the ones that are supposed to liberate us?” Shiv asked irritably. “Don’t make me laugh. Why don’t you just go home and leave this matter to us?” She stood up and started to leave the room.

“Hey,” Gero called after her. “We’ll get the job done. I guarantee you that.”

His boasts were irrelevant to her. This whole ordeal was nothing but a joke to these people. They refused to take the situation seriously like she and her militia did. That being the

case, there was no reason for them to be here. This was an issue for the people of Amberpass and they would be the ones to solve it.

“Listen, you mercenaries,” she began as she turned back toward them, “I don’t care how amazing you think you are. This isn’t something to be joking- ”

Gero was staring directly at her with a stern face. He was absolutely serious about the guarantee he had just made. Did this face really belong to the same person who had just been whining about how much more recognition his associate was getting? She glared into his eyes and eventually gave in. “Are you really certain that you’ll be able to drive her off?” she pushed. “If you try and fail, she’ll only become more furious with the town and *we’ll* be the ones to suffer.”

Gero nodded firmly. “We can handle this,” Tuna threw in.

“Fine then,” Shiv replied as she made her way out of the room. Ruri was glad to see that her sister had become willing to work with these outsiders.

“So then,” Gero began as he turned to face Ruri, “Tuna made a good point. When would *you* suggest we take action?”

Ruri thought the matter over for a moment. “The only predictable behavior that I can think of is the inquisition she performs every other day to drain us of any money we have. She’ll do that tomorrow morning with all of her guards. It usually takes her about an hour to go through all the buildings, after which she goes back to the shrine,” she informed them.

“Excellent,” Raede grinned. “That one hour window is just the opportunity we need.”

## Chapter 12

### Exploit the One Hour

Dawn was reaching the small town of Amberpass. The mercenaries had determined their plan the previous night and discussed it with both Ruri and Shiv. After spending the night, they were now slipping out of town, far enough away so that they could circle around through the foliage without being sighted and close in on the shrine where Sundancer resided. They now waited patiently for the tyrant to begin her journey into Amberpass.

“Can we go over the plan one more time?” Gero asked while they waited. “It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

Raede rolled his eyes, but repeated his strategy once more. “We’re pretty confident that we can handle either the guards or Sundancer herself, but without having firsthand experience of her, we can’t be confident that we can handle them all together. That’s what we’ll be using this one hour opening for. We’re fortunate in that the path leading up to the shrine spirals around the hill, so we can work without being seen,” he explained.

“Using the nets that Shiv provided us with, we can erect a network of traps by laying them beneath trees that overlook the path. Tuna and I both know how to prepare them properly, so the two of us will take care of that. In the meantime, you’re going to dig a large hole right in front of the shrine. Once Tuna and I finish, we’ll come and help you,” he continued.

“What’s the big hole for?” Gero inquired.

“It’s a pitfall,” Raede answered.

“What do we need a pitfall for?” Gero pushed.

“Every good trap needs at least one pitfall,” Raede insisted. “Anyway, Ruri and Shiv, as well as the rest of the townsfolk, will do everything they can to delay Sundancer. Once time starts winding down, one of us will start to keep watch for their return, at which point we’ll hide. As Sundancer’s forces make their way up to the shrine, some of them will be sure to trigger the net traps. We’ll then begin firing projectiles down upon them to stir up a panic so that they keep running around and into more traps. Once their numbers are thinned, we’ll move in and clean up, with the

advantage of knowing where all the traps are. Shiv's militia will also come to provide backup afterward. If all goes according to plan, this whole conflict will be settled with almost no bloodshed."

"That's way too complex," Gero grumbled. "Complicated plans never work."

"It's not complicated," Tuna insisted. "We're basically just reducing their numbers with traps and then finishing them off."

"Why didn't we just build the traps in town?" Gero pondered. "We'd have way more to work with there."

"Yeah, and we'd put all of the residents' safety and property in danger," Tuna pointed out. "Just listen to what we say and you'll keep up."

"If you say so," the frogman sighed.

About a half hour passed before they spotted Sundancer's forces. "Hey," Raede whispered to the two of them, "It looks like they're about to head out."

The ten men guarding the shrine had been positioned outside of it so the only person to emerge from within was Sundancer herself. Sundancer strode confidently out of the shrine where her ten followers were waiting. Then she appeared to say something, though, from their distance, they couldn't hear what it was. She had light brown skin and dark brown hair that reached over halfway down her back. Her eyes were colored a deep blue. Raede found it particularly interesting that she wore some sort of straps attached to her lower arms and legs.

"That's odd. She doesn't look at all like I expected," Tuna mentioned.

"What do you mean?" Gero asked.

"Well, this person is supposed to be a despot. It was just expecting someone more haggard and less pretty," she replied.

"Keep it down," Raede insisted. "They're starting to move down toward the town."

The three of them sat quietly, waiting for Sundancer and her troops to pass. Interestingly, her followers seemed far livelier than she was. It was almost as if she were staring off into another world. The sound of their footsteps came to a halt just past their position. Sundancer turned around and stared straight at the

shrubs concealing the mercenaries. Tuna tensed up from her hiding spot. Had she noticed them?

“Is something wrong?” one of the guards inquired.

Sundancer continued staring right at the bushes. “No,” she answered curtly before turning back and continuing their march.

About a minute after the troupe went round the hill, Raede stepped forth from the shrubbery. “Okay, let’s get to work,” he decided.

“Right,” Tuna nodded.

Gero scratched his afro nervously. “Wait, what was my job?” he inquired.

Raede thrust his hand over to the shovel they had brought and handed it to Gero in annoyance. “Dig,” he ordered.

Gero scrunched his face up defiantly. Even if the plan had already been established, he detested being told what to do by Raede. Tuna smiled at the little exchange and grabbed her share of nets. Between her and Raede, they had twelve nets they could set up, which they would be lucky to complete in their allotted time. Making sure that they were sufficiently disguised would probably take the most time of all. In any case, they had no time to spare.

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“They’re coming, Shiv,” Ruri stuttered, gazing through one of their windows.

Her twin sister didn’t bother to look with her. She instead walked straight to the door. “We might as well get going, then,” she responded.

Ruri nodded nervously and followed her sister out the front door. After sending Shiv’s militia home the previous night it was just the two of them. They walked out into the middle of town and sat down. It was part of the procedure that they had to go through during Sundancer’s visits. All of the townsfolk would be herded into the center of town and searched one at a time. After that, Sundancer and some of the troops would go around and inspect the town, buildings and all, for any traces of money.

They had prepared three separate measures to keep Sundancer occupied longer than usual. The first would come into play shortly. After a few minutes, Sundancer and her men arrived upon the scene. One of her followers yelled out so that everyone

in town would hear him, “The inspection will begin in five minutes. Everyone to the center of town.”

Shiv watched anxiously as the doors of each building began to open and the denizens of Amberpass started to congregate together. There were thirty-one of them in all. Including the ten residents that had joined Sundancer, the quaint town had a population of forty-two. One person had not shown up, just as Shiv and the others had decided.

“One man is not present,” reported one of the traitors. “He can most likely be found in that building to your left.”

Sundancer turned toward the indicated building and started walking over. “I’ll handle this matter. Continue with the body searches,” she instructed them.

“Understood,” the same man replied. Shiv watched the tyrant as she entered the house. Although it was decided that one of her men would fulfill this role of delaying her, it made Shiv anxious that Sundancer herself was going to resolve the issue. There was no telling what kind of consequences there would be for this disobedience. Ruri was also nervous, and to a far greater extent. She was too terrified to even focus on the individual inside the building.

The traitors began to frisk and inspect each resident in turn. There was quite a variety of reasons for why they obeyed her. Some of them were clearly doing so to keep on Sundancer’s good side. Others were eagerly awaiting any finds that would increase the wealth of their little band. It seemed a bit odd that Sundancer was still targeting this town at all. With so few outsiders to bring money into Amberpass, it was hardly an efficient place to rob. Far more money could be secured by moving somewhere else.

Inside the building, Sundancer found the militiaman lying in bed upstairs with a vomiting bucket lying next to him. As part of the plan, he was feigning illness and forced himself to throw up to make the ruse more realistic.

“What is this?” Sundancer demanded as she stepped into the room. Her face had hardly changed at all since stepping out of the shrine earlier.

The militiaman groaned the best artificial groan he could. “Bluuuuuuugggghhh,” he cried. “I think I caught the flu or something. I’ve been throwing up all morning. If this keeps up

much longer, I'm sure I'm done for!" His performance was a bit theatrical, but he felt it was still believable. Sundancer's eyes, however, narrowed, sending a chill down his spine.

No more than two minutes after going in, Sundancer emerged from the building. Shiv's stomach lurched anxiously. The delay had been minimal, especially since the searches had continued without her presence. More importantly, Sundancer emerging so quickly indicated that she hadn't even tried to investigate the militiaman's condition.

Ruri desperately tried to calm her twin down. Fighting would only get more people hurt, and could potentially thwart the entire plan. Even if this first distraction had proven largely ineffective, they still had two more.

After a few minutes, the individual searches were complete. Now began the property searches, and the second distraction. Ultimately, it wasn't particularly difficult to hide money in obscure nooks or under random floorboards, but most residents had already turned everything in out of sheer fear of the consequences. Before even stepping into the buildings, each searcher surveyed the ground for any traces of recent digging. During the searches, six of Sundancer's followers stayed behind to monitor the residents while she and four others inspected four buildings each.

They had prepared the bait within another militiaman's home. Jutting just slightly out of the side of a book was e10. Better yet, it ended up being one of the last houses searched, so there was nothing left to continue searching while the matter was resolved. The money was discovered by one of the followers, who brought it to Sundancer's attention as soon as he finished that particular building's search. "e10 was hidden in between the pages of a book," he reported.

"From whose home?" she asked.

The follower pointed right at the guilty militiaman. Sundancer walked over to him and promptly demanded, "Bow down."

The militiaman held firm. Every second that he made her wait would help their cause a little bit.

"Bow down," she repeated.

Again, he remained motionless. Shiv had given him no such orders, but he knew that it would elongate the encounter. Finally, Sundancer's patience wore thin and she clamped her hand onto his shoulder. She then thrust him down into a bowed position and punched the back of his head. He tumbled to the ground and she continued. Somehow he had lucked out, though. Sundancer must have misgauged her punch, because, although it hurt quite badly, that was the extent of the damage. Still, he didn't dare stand up and show it. Making her look weak would surely have worse consequences than mere resistance.

Ruri glanced toward the shrine, quickly correcting her mistake. Sundancer had proven far more efficient than they had anticipated. Neither of their first two delay tactics had done much to slow her. Worse yet, the third one they had concocted was the most risky of them all. Hopefully the mercenaries would at least have enough time to properly prepare their traps.

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"That's the last of them," Tuna announced as she completed the covering over her last trap.

Raede had just completed his final one a few moments earlier. "Alright, let's check on Gero and make sure that Sundancer is still busy in town," he decided.

They hastily but carefully made their way up to the shrine, where they found Gero digging away. Raede shook his head in disappointment upon examining the results of his associate's labor. "That's no good at all. You don't even need to work to get out of it," he observed.

"It's not my fault," Gero protested. "You only gave me an hour! How deep did you think I could actually make it?"

"Deeper than a pothole, at least," Raede spat. "It would be a disgrace if we actually called this a pitfall."

"There's other stuff that's a little more pressing at the moment," Tuna interrupted. "You two cover it up and I'll go keep watch."

Raede pulled out a light, brown tarp and unfurled it over the pitiful hole. "Cover this completely with a light covering of dirt so that you can't see it," he instructed. "Then again, you couldn't really see the hole before."



Gero made a face at Raede but proceeded to spread dirt over the tarp.

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“We’re finished,” Sundancer announced. “Return to what you were doing.”

This was the moment that Shiv had been waiting for. It was her role to execute the third delay. As Sundancer took her first steps back toward the shrine, Shiv stood up and called after her. “Go away!” she shouted.

Sundancer turned back with a curious expression on her face. “I am,” she replied before turning away again.

Shiv was actually quite dazed by her enemy’s response. Had Sundancer really misinterpreted her so badly, or was she merely messing with her?

“Permanently,” she clarified furiously. “You aren’t benefitting anybody by staying here and we certainly don’t want you around, so just go away.”

The tyrant came to a halt, as if she were thinking over what to do about Shiv’s outburst. Then she resumed walking toward the shrine.

By this point, Shiv was clearly flustered. Was Sundancer just going to return to her abode and forget about the incident, or was she contemplating how to punish her? To make matters worse, they had failed on every front to slow Sundancer down. She had very swiftly resolved any problem that they had thrown at her.

Ruri suddenly stood up and began to charge after the tyrant. Perhaps if she could divert some of Sundancer’s wrath, Shiv’s punishment would be less dire. Before she could make it ten steps, she was intercepted by Shiv. The more aggressive sister silently coerced her twin to the ground.

“Don’t,” she ordered. Ruri putting herself at risk wouldn’t help matters at all. Within a few minutes, they would incur Sundancer’s temper like never before.

The moment that Sundancer’s entourage was out of sight, she signaled for her militia to assemble. When the attack began, they would make sure that Sundancer fell.

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“Here they come,” Tuna whispered as Sundancer’s troupe appeared at the base of the hill. Unless someone deviated from

the path, there would be no activity until they were halfway up the hill. That was the first point at which they had placed a trap overlapping the path. This way, they wouldn't be alerted to any danger until they were already in the center of the trap field. Firing rock projectiles down onto them would hopefully deter their enemies from taking the open, winding path to reach them. The more that abandoned the path, the better the net traps would work.

Raede mentally calculated how long it would take for Sundancer's forces to reach their position, or to reach the relative sanctuary of the shrine. He became petrified upon realizing that the shovel Gero had used to dig his hole was still leaning against one of the shrine's walls. He nudged the frogman and pointed it out.

"Nice going, you moron. Now they'll realize that something's up," he chastised his associate.

"How is it my fault? You didn't remember to grab it ,either," Gero retaliated.

"I wasn't the one assigned to digging duty. You were the one responsible for cleaning up," Raede argued.

"So what?" Gero shot back. "This whole thing was your overly complex plan in the first place."

Raede was about to blow. "It isn't complex for anyone with a half-functioning brain," he cried.

Tuna tried to calm her comrades. If their fight continued to escalate, they would surely be discovered. "Cut it out, you two. We need to keep things quiet," she whispered.

"He started it," Gero defended himself.

"What are you, four?" Tuna moaned.

Raede snickered amusedly at Tuna's quip, perhaps a bit too loudly for their own good.

"What's so funny?" Gero challenged.

"Nothing that I would expect a toddler to understand," Raede teased.

"Shut your face, you worthless air pocket," Gero fired back.

This time they had proven too loud, alerting their targets to their presence. All eleven of them turned anxiously toward their location and jumped into action. A moment later, though, one of

them was hoisted up by a net. “Hey, those things worked!” Gero exclaimed victoriously.

“Shut up and start attacking,” Raede directed him.

Down below, the troupe scrambled to free their comrade and take cover. Sundancer suddenly collapsed to the ground, clutching her chest as she burst out in laughter. All ten of her followers stared in awe at her peculiar behavior. Was she really so sadistic as to laugh when one of her faithful followers fell victim to a trap?

A small rock came whizzing in and knocked another troop to the ground.

“Onward,” a third one cried. They all began to scramble up the hill, mindlessly forsaking the man who had already been caught.

Everything worked according to the mercenaries’ expectations. Before long, three more men had been snared by traps, and the others had taken cover behind trees as a precaution. While they hesitated, Sundancer expertly maneuvered her way up the slope. She had either a trained eye or a great deal of luck, because she sidestepped every single trap. Furthermore, their barrage of rocks was completely useless, as she nimbly dodged them all.

Raede picked up a particularly large rock that, under normal circumstances could not be thrown very effectively. “Hold this still, would you, Tuna?” he requested.

“Uh, sure,” she agreed hesitantly. It was quite difficult to hold it still without getting in Raede’s way. He hastily slung off the jacket he was wearing and wrapped it over his fist for protection. After lining up his shot, he released all of the air in his system and fired the rock down. It brushed against a tree and stripped off a considerable chunk of bark before being knocked away. It missed Sundancer entirely but did force some of her followers to leap away as it continued down.

“Horsefeathers,” Raede cursed. Sundancer had almost reached them now, and she still had most of her followers to back her up.

The followers continued upward, inspired by their leader’s flawless ascent. Two of them were suddenly pinned down. The others glanced back to see that Shiv and her militia had arrived

upon the scene. With so many behind them, Sundancer's followers had to turn back and trust their master to handle the three up top.

"Time for some real fighting," Gero decided now that their opponent was so close. He lunged forward and swung at her, but she leaned to the side. She then grabbed onto his left arm and swung him to the ground before continuing on to the next one.

Tuna had pulled out her latest weapon from her bag and was prepared to use it against her. Her last attempt at fighting had proven that she had horrible aim. That being the case, her new choice was a melee weapon. She swung her mace right at Sundancer's side. To her great dismay, the tyrant managed to clasp the mace with her left hand and use it to throw Tuna away. The mercenary toppled to the ground in defeat. Apparently she wasn't all that great with melee weapons, either.

Raede took his turn at it and made the appearance of a double punch. Since she didn't know the extent of his capabilities, he would easily be able to fool her. She ducked down below his arms, at which point he released air through his back vents, driving his entire body forward. Sundancer grasped at the ground and pulled herself down so that she slipped right through Raede's legs as he soared past.

Gero was back in action and started to close in on her. She unlatched the case around her right arm and let a kunai slip out, which she caught and tossed toward the shrine. It was attached to a wire that wound up inside the case so that it remained connected to her. She leapt out of Gero's swing and pulled on the wire which was, amazingly, strong enough to support her weight. The kunai had lodged itself in a tree branch, so she was able to swing away and out of Gero's range. He didn't relent, though, and continued to charge forward at her.

She pulled her kunai free and grabbed hold of it, prepared to fend him off. As he neared her, he was swept up by a net and left dangling helpless from a tree. "What the hell?" he cried.

Tuna and Raede were both scrambling back into the fray. "Gero, you knew that that was there!" Tuna chided him along the way.

Sundancer was already prepared to face them, and began to move to a more strategic position. She had outmaneuvered them

on every front and proven to be just as aloof and cunning as the townspeople had claimed. “Nyaaaaa!”

They all stared at Sundancer, completely dumbstruck by seeing her actually stumble into Gero’s shallow hole and fall to the ground with a cute cry. Raede shook himself back to his senses and charged forward while she was vulnerable, pinning her to the ground. Tuna followed immediately after and helped restrain her more firmly.

“We got you,” Raede declared proudly, ignoring the fact that Gero’s hole had proven effective.

Tuna turned around to see Shiv and her men cleaning up the last remnants of resistance. It had been a very one-sided encounter.

“Can you get me down?” Gero grumbled once the hectic atmosphere had subsided.

“You’re hopeless,” Raede sighed. He picked up the kunai that Sundancer had dropped and used it to cut Gero free.

“Hey, it’s thanks to me that we caught her,” Gero pointed out, to his associate’s ire.

Raede chose not to respond and instead turned his attention to Sundancer. “Well, what do you have to say?” he demanded.

She smiled up at the lot of them. “Congratulations. You won the game,” she conceded.

“Game?” Shiv shouted as she ran up to the captive. “Is that all this was to you?”

“Oh,” Sundancer frowned dismally, “I didn’t realize that you were here, too.”

“Of course I’m here,” Shiv shouted. “Did you think I wouldn’t help to overthrow you?”

Sundancer seemed quite confused by Shiv’s words. “Overthrow me? You just asked me to leave, though,” she reminded the militia leader.

“What?” Shiv gasped. “Like that matters! Why are you still here, anyway?”

“Because everyone was still using money,” Sundancer replied. “I didn’t want to leave until you stopped.”

“What are you blathering on about?” Shiv demanded angrily.

“My grandpa always said that money turns people evil,” Sundancer explained.

“You’re kidding, right?” Tuna moaned.

“All of the money’s in the shrine,” Sundancer added. “I was still trying to figure out how to get rid of it.”

“You mean you didn’t spend any of it?” one of the militiamen asked.

“Don’t trust a word she says,” Shiv insisted. “She’s just trying to weasel her way out of this.”

“Shiv’s probably right,” Raede noted. “That doesn’t explain her destroying the dam. She’s obviously a criminal.”

“I destroyed the dam because it was stopping the river from flowing the way it was supposed to,” Sundancer reasoned. “My grandpa said that man-made dams destroy ecosystems.”

“You can’t be serious,” Shiv laughed. “And what was your reasoning for striking an innocent child? And for hitting another man today?”

“I was disciplining them. That boy was throwing an object at other kids and children aren’t supposed to fight like that, and the man was still using money,” Sundancer defended.

“If you think playing catch is fighting and wrong then why did you think this skirmish here was just a game?” Shiv demanded.

“I don’t know; it seemed fun to me. There were nets and rocks and lots of running,” Sundancer smiled innocently.

“That’s not how you discipline people, though,” Tuna argued.

Again, Sundancer seemed shocked by their logic. “Really? That’s how my grandpa always disciplined me,” she explained.

“I’m sure,” Shiv agreed sarcastically. “And what about the sick man in town today? How do you excuse what you did to him?”

“Is it not normal to leave people to rest when they are sick?” Sundancer asked.

“Actually, you’ve got that right,” Tuna admitted.

Clearly, Shiv did not believe Sundancer’s claim as Tuna did.

“If I’ve done something wrong, then I sincerely apologize. I will accept whatever punishment is suitable for my transgressions,” she offered.

“You’d better believe you will,” Shiv threatened her.

“How could you not realize that you were doing something bad?” Raede queried. “Everyone in town was afraid of you.”

“It was my understanding that when others assist you in fulfilling goals, they are considered your friends. I assumed that was why they joined me,” Sundancer reasoned.

“What do you plan on doing with her?” Gero asked Shiv.

One of the militiamen leaped forward and seized Shiv’s arms, lifting a knife up to her throat. “What’s the meaning of this, Quinn?” Shiv demanded.

“With Sundancer out of the way, we can finally claim the town’s money for ourselves,” Quinn announced.

“We?” Shiv inquired.

One of Sundancer’s followers walked forward, toward the shrine entrance. “If anybody tries anything to stop us, that knife might just slip into Shiv’s throat,” he warned.

Sundancer was just as shocked by the betrayal. “I thought you were my friend, Zane,” she muttered pitifully.

“How messed up are you?” Zane laughed as he collected the money from within the shrine. “How did our relationship even remotely resemble friendship?”

Sundancer looked depressingly toward the ground. The mercenaries trembled in anticipation. It was utterly frustrating for them to be unable to act.

“Alright, Quinn. Let’s get out of here,” Zane directed.

Quinn began to walk down the hill, forcing Shiv ahead of him. “Not that it needs saying, but don’t follow us,” he added.

“It’s been a pleasure doing business with you,” Zane laughed as he strode down the hill, being sure to watch out for any net traps that had not already been triggered.

“What do we do now?” asked one of the militiamen once Zane and Quinn were out of sight.

“We go after them,” Gero decided.

“You can’t!” the militiaman protested. “If they know you’re going after them, then they’ll kill Shiv!”

“They won’t kill her so quickly,” Raede analyzed. “Once they kill her, they have no leverage to use against us. Besides, they never said that they were going to let her go. We at least need to make sure that she’s okay.”

Gero turned toward the militiaman that had spoken out. “You guys watch Sundancer. Leave this to the three of us,” he insisted.

“We’ll follow them as discreetly as we can, and then rescue her when they give us an opening. They can’t travel like that indefinitely,” Tuna observed.

“Let’s get going, then,” Gero suggested.

Raede grabbed the back of Gero’s shirt just as he was rocketing off. “Easy there, young tadpole,” he suggested. “We kind of wanted to be discreet about this.”

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Ruri glanced at the hill anxiously from her window. Only the backside was visible from town, so she saw very little of what was going on. Regardless, she couldn’t help but worry. She knew how aggressive her sister could get. “She’ll be fine,” she assured herself. “They’ll all be fine.”



## Chapter 13

### Kunai Lady

“How long do you think that you can keep this up?” Shiv asked her captors as they hurriedly shuffled through the foliage. They refused to answer her. “Answer me, Quinn!”

“As long as we need to. It’s not like we have to keep you around forever. Once it’s safe enough to go without a hostage, we can get rid of you,” he replied.

She curled her hand up into a fist, but did nothing with it. It was difficult to discern exactly what he meant by that. Although she was fairly certain that some sort of rescue force would be assembled, she couldn’t help but feel apprehensive. After all, she still had a knife to her throat. Hopefully nobody would tell Ruri about this little incident.

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Sundancer sat uncomfortably under the eyes of the scornful militia. Many of them wanted to dole out justice but others managed to deter them from doing so in Shiv’s absence. Nevertheless, plenty of them still bombarded her with insults. If she really had erred as they claimed, though, then she figured it was probably for the best.

“What’s the matter? Feeling a little down now that your tirade is over?” one of the militiamen mocked.

She looked toward the ground glumly. Honestly, she didn’t know how to react to. She knew that she was supposed to feel guilty, but it was hard to do so without knowing exactly what to feel guilty *about*.

“Hey, we’re talking to you,” the man added. He clearly didn’t like being ignored.

“I’m sorry,” she sputtered.

“You’re sorry, huh? Yeah, I bet,” he laughed.

“Hey, let’s start transporting the traitors and Sundancer into town,” another man called out.

She hadn’t actually thought about what would happen to her followers, but it didn’t sit right with her that they should be

punished. They had been following orders, so any misdoings were therefore her fault.

“Please don’t punish them,” she requested humbly.

“Shut up,” the first man barked. “We’ll do whatever we see fit. Don’t worry, though, you’re retribution won’t be at all forgiving.”

It seemed that her words had no effect on these people. That being the case, there was no reason for her to remain with them.

“I see,” she replied quietly. Using her left heel, she popped open the case attached to her right leg, allowing the kunai to slip out. She then whipped her leg around so that the kunai flew up and behind her, landing in her hands. Almost seamlessly, she cut through the ropes tied around her wrists, completely liberating herself. She then leaped backward and flicked a switch on her leg case that caused the kunai to automatically retract. Once it was safely inside, she closed the case up.

Most of the militiamen had already moved to stop her, but none of them were quick enough. She released the kunai from both of her arm cases and charged forward. With relative ease, she eluded all of them. As she sprinted down the hillside, she cast out her kunai and severed each of the nets still inhibiting her followers. Once they were free, she continued into the forest.

“Damn it,” the first militiaman spat. “How could we let her get away?”

“It’s too late now,” another reasoned with him. “Let’s focus on getting these guys back under control.”

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“This is annoying,” Gero complained quietly. “It’d be better if we could at least follow right behind them.”

“If we did that, then they’d spot us in no time,” Raede reminded his comrade. “We need to keep our distance by following their tracks. If we manage to catch sight of them at the rate we’re going, then that means they’ve stopped and we’ll have an opening to get Shiv.”

“I’m sure Shiv is devising some way to keep them occupied. She seems quite resourceful,” Tuna noted.

“Yeah, and I’ve already noticed several clues so far that she must have left behind,” Raede added.

“How come you didn’t say anything before?” Gero posed.

“I’m leading the way. It’s completely irrelevant whether or not I tell you,” Raede argued.

“What if I could come up with a bright idea about what we can do based on one of those clues, though?” Gero pointed out.

“I’ll start telling you when any of your ideas start being worthwhile,” Raede assured him jokingly.

“What was that?” Gero fired back.

“Will you two chill out?” Tuna requested. “Even if we are a safe distance away, we shouldn’t make this much noise.”

“Does Tuna seem kind of ornery to you?” Raede whispered to Gero.

“She’s just upset because her hammer didn’t work,” Gero deduced.

“It’s a mace!” she insisted.

“No, Otto uses a mace,” Raede disagreed. “What you’ve got is just a hammer.”

“Who’s Otto?” Tuna asked.

“Oh, right, you haven’t met him yet,” Raede remembered. “Don’t worry about it, then.”

“Whatever,” she sighed. “Let’s just stay quiet.”

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Zane signaled for his associate to come to a halt. “What is it?” Quinn asked.

“The river’s nearby. Doesn’t your family keep its canoe hidden around here, too?” Zane inquired.

“Yeah,” Quinn confirmed. “Are you thinking we should escape in it?”

“We’re far enough away now that it’s a viable option. With the water pushing us, it’ll be far easier to get away,” Zane hypothesized.

“What should we do with Shiv?” Quinn pondered.

“We won’t have any need for her anymore. Let’s just push her off a cliff,” Zane suggested.

“Are you insane?” Shiv burst. “You could just as easily tie me to a tree or something.”

Zane shrugged indifferently. “I’m not carrying any rope, are you?” he posed. She wasn’t. “I didn’t think so. Besides, it’s not like it affects us at all whether you live or die. This way’s just easier.”

She grated her teeth furiously. "I can't believe that worthless scum like you actually came out of our peaceful town," she spat. "You'd really kill just for convenience?"

"Don't get all high and mighty on us," Quinn warned her. "We have no interest in listening to your moralistic prattling. Zane, you scout ahead for a good spot. I'll come after you."

"Right," Zane nodded.

Within minutes, they came to a steep cliff overlooking a number of jagged rocks. It was almost as if this spot had been designed for murder. Quinn was holding the knife to the back of Shiv's neck.

"You always were the most aggressive person in town, Shiv. I suppose that it's only natural for your death to be a bloody one," he snickered. "Now walk forward."

"You want me to do it?" she scoffed. "What difference does it matter if I walk forward off the cliff or backward into your knife?"

"With the cliff, you have very small chance of survival. We're being merciful," Zane laughed.

Shiv contemplated. The likelihood of surviving the fall wasn't even worth considering. She would be better off trying to outmaneuver her captors. The odds were bleak, but at least she would have a shot at success. She whirled around to assault Quinn.

"Stop this," Sundancer ordered. She stood between the captors and the line of trees overlooking the river. In each of her hands was a kunai.

"I should have known you'd escape somehow," Zane observed. "I suppose you've come to get your money back?"

She shook her head. "I already told everyone that I have no interest in money."

Zane let out a wail of amusement. "You're telling me that that drivel you were blathering was the truth? Alright, if that's really the case, then why the hell are you here?" he demanded.

"I want you to let the woman free. Should anything happen to her, you two will pay the consequences. You know as well as I do that you cannot handle me in a fair fight," she pointed out.

"That's why we keep things unfair," Quinn heckled as he moved to reposition the knife around Shiv's neck. If Sundancer

really did care about Shiv's wellbeing, then she would be forced to back off. Shiv had prepared, though, and took the momentary shift as a chance to duck down and sprint toward the trees. It pissed Quinn off, but her back was completely exposed as she moved. "You stupid bit- "

Sundancer's foot swept into his and knocked him onto his back before he could continue. Zane pulled out his own knife and charged at her, but was easily parried by her right arm's kunai. She then spun around, flipping her left kunai so that the blade was pointed down. With her left fist, she punched Zane square in the face, turning the kunai to graze his right shoulder and draw blood. Just as she had warned, she outmatched the two of them.

Shiv panted heavily from behind the cover of several trees. The whole event left her quite unsure about Sundancer. It could be a ruse to acquire the money, but there was no reason to lie, considering she could easily take it from them. Her previous explanations felt more believable now. Even so, she had committed far too many misdeeds to be forgiven so easily. Despite that, Shiv was too proud to run from a fight and leave someone else to handle it for her.

She turned around and leaped onto Quinn before he could take another stab at Sundancer, and succeeded in pinning him down. The two of them struggled briefly and Quinn managed to muster enough strength to throw her to the side. She braced herself against the rock and struggled to stand back up. The brawl had moved her too close to the edge, though, and her foot skidded against the slanted rock. She threw her weight forward, but it was too late; the cold river air began to rush past her as she plummeted.

"Not good," Sundancer cried as she leaped to the edge of the cliff, dropping her kunai and unlatching her leg cases in the process. By the time her kunai slipped into her hands she had already thrown herself over the edge. She chucked them into the stone cliff walls, all while flying down toward Shiv. It was not enough, though. Shiv had begun falling too long before Sundancer had leaped down. Sundancer unlatched her right arm's case and quickly threw the kunai down at Shiv. It was a dangerous tactic, but it was more likely to save her life than hurt it at this point. "Catch it!" she ordered.

Shiv flailed wildly to grasp at the tool as it neared her, ignoring any worries she might have had about grabbing a bladed object. She missed, but felt the wire slip between her fingers. She clamped onto it tightly as she slid down the length of it to the kunai. The brief descent left her hand bloodied, but she safely came to a halt.

Barely before Shiv had grabbed the on, the wires attached to Sundancer's legs reached their limit, bringing her to a stop. Miraculously enough, everything held, leaving the two of them stuck but alive.

"What a predicament," Quinn laughed. "I sure hope that nothing happens to those kunai holding you up."

"Lucky us," Zane snickered as he grabbed a nearby branch. It was sturdy enough that with enough whacks, they could likely loosen the kunai so that they would come out. He bent over and gave it a good swing.

"Give it a few more swipes," Quinn roared evilly.

Zane readied the branch for another swing, but was suddenly swept up into the air. Raede had arrived upon the scene and pinned Zane between his arms. He didn't stop running, though, and went clear off the cliff ledge. A horrible terror ran through Zane as they began to move downward. This crazy oaf was going to kill both of them. Raede's vents kicked in and thrust both of them safely onto the other side of the chasm.

Quinn didn't have any time to process what was happening before Gero punched him to the ground.

"You inept piece of dirt," the frogman insulted him as he slammed into the rock.

The mercenaries had just arrived. Immediately, the guys went for the traitors, knowing almost instinctively which target the other was going to take out. Tuna, on the other hand, set about rescuing Shiv. She *had* brought rope, and quickly attached it to a sturdy tree near the ledge before tossing it down to Shiv.

"Shiv," she called out, "try to swing over to me."

Shiv nodded and began to throw her weight forward and backward until she was within range of Tuna, who reached out to grab her hand.

"Thank you," Shiv panted as she gripped the rope.

“Don’t worry about it. See if you can climb to the top,” Tuna instructed. By the time she reached the ledge, Gero had finished his brief fight with Quinn and made his way over to help. Shiv accepted his helpful hand, only afterward realizing that it was amphibious.

Below, Sundancer had begun to free herself. She retracted the kunai to her arm and picked the best location to throw it. Being upside down was taxing her with blood flowing to her head, and left her legs strained. It would be difficult to loosen the kunai from the cliff sides, given her orientation. Nevertheless, she managed to yank them free in perfect unison, and cast one arm-bound kunai to a spot near the top of the cliff. She used this as an impromptu rope to scale the cliff side. She jolted as the wire length ran out and she automatically swung to the wall. Once she had recovered, she began to pull herself up. About halfway, she felt the slack in the wire loosen abruptly. She glanced up to see that her kunai had come loose. The impaired blood flow to her arm must have weakened her throw.

“Crap,” she whispered as she began falling. She unlatched her other arm case and hastily threw it at the wall, but it collided with a partially exposed rock and bounced off. There was no time to reach for any other kunai; her only option was to claw desperately at the wall. This proved futile, doing little more than cutting up her hands. In moments, she would collide with the rocks below.

Tuna had been watching to make sure that Shiv made it to the top and breathed a sigh of relief to see that she had. She was about to calculate how to rescue Sundancer but then noticed that the woman was falling. With no time to think, she pushed herself away from the wall and swung over toward the woman. In a dodgy attempt to save her, she reached out for her with the hand not holding the rope.

Sundancer felt the hand come in contact with her and flailed her arms about in an instinctive frenzy to find a handhold. Amazingly, she managed to grab onto Tuna’s hand. Both jerked as Sundancer came to a halt.

“Just hold on,” Tuna gasped to her. “Gero! Raede!”

By now, Raede had returned to the other side and tossed the unconscious Zane to the ground. After realizing what was going

on below, he immediately assisted Gero in towing the women up. After a moment, Shiv joined, as well. It was hectic, but they managed to pull both of them to safety.

“Glad that’s over,” Raede sighed as he rested.

She was a bit opposed to behaving so gratefully to others, as it went against her usual nature, but Shiv decided to speak up anyway. “Thank you for coming to my rescue,” she piped.

“Don’t worry about it,” Gero laughed.

“Let’s clean up here and head back to Amberpass,” Tuna suggested. “I’m sure everyone is really anxious to see that you’re okay, Shiv.”

“Thank you for saving my life!” Sundancer proclaimed with her head bowed before Tuna and the others.

“It’s nothing, really. We just obeyed our instincts, you know?” she replied humbly.

Sundancer refused to pass it off so easily. “No, you engaged in extremely reckless behavior in order to salvage my life, even though you had no obligation to do so. According to my grandpa, that variety of behavior is how close friends act,” she explained.

They didn’t know how to interpret her words. She kept mentioning what her grandfather had told her. It was as if that was the only premise she was using for how to behave. It made Tuna consider her far more innocent than they had first believed.

“Well, Shiv, what do you and the townspeople plan to do with her?” Raede asked.

“This woman has done terrible things to our town and attempted to pass it off as childish ignorance. Even so, she came to rescue me, and even leaped off a cliff for my sake. I cannot see why someone evil would do such things. She could just as easily have escaped with the money. Personally, I have no choice but to believe the excuses she gave, no matter how outlandish they might be. Furthermore, I owe her my life,” Shiv summarized. Although Sundancer had been vindicated in Shiv’s eyes, the proud woman clearly had difficulty admitting it. She couldn’t deny what had happened, though.

“Still, I can’t foresee everyone in town viewing the situation the same way as I do, and I don’t believe that this woman has anything to atone for. Our money has been returned to us, no



serious injuries were suffered, and we can repair the dam with relative ease,” she analyzed. “She needs to leave.”

It was the merciful thing to do. If Sundancer returned, she would very likely be punished by the townspeople.

“That should be easy enough,” Sundancer replied. “They all saw me escape and have no reason to believe I would have come here.”

They gathered their materials together and split up. The others hurried back to Amberpass, the unconscious villains in tow. Tuna found that she couldn’t get Sundancer out of her mind. Her personality and behavior were so enigmatic. She wanted to know more about this person.

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“Shiv!” Ruri cried ecstatically as her sister walked into their house. She embraced her in a tight hug, significantly relieved.

“Sheesh,” Shiv sighed, “What are you doing that for? It’s not like I was in that much danger.”

“I know,” Ruri blushed. “I just got a bad feeling that something was going to happen to you. Your men came back quite awhile ago with the traitors tied up, but they said you were staying back to speak to Sundancer.”

Although several of the militiamen were walking nearby and heard the comment, none of them mentioned that Sundancer had temporarily freed most of the traitors. They were all hastily recaptured, so there was no need to worry Ruri with such details. Additionally, they had lied about what had happened to Shiv in the hope that she would be rescued by the mercenaries.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Ruri jumped. “What *did* you do with Sundancer? I haven’t seen her at all.”

“Well,” Shiv began awkwardly, “she slipped away from us. Don’t worry about it, though. She didn’t get the money, and it’s very unlikely that she’ll ever come back here.”

“That’s a relief,” Ruri exhaled cheerily.

“These two defectors, though, shall face severe punishment for their greed and cowardice!” Shiv announced fiendishly.

Zane and Quinn had both woken up by now, and were utterly petrified by Shiv’s words. They knew what a hellion she could be when angered, and they had done plenty to incur her rage.

“We’re tremendously sorry, Miss Shiv!” they cried in unison.

“Shut your traps!” she ordered. “You’ll get what’s coming to you and I won’t tolerate any complaining about it.”

“Anyway,” Ruri interrupted, turning to the mercenaries “thank you so much for ridding our town of this terrible burden.”

Gero downplayed the whole matter to appear more heroic. “Don’t mention it. Overthrowing tyrants is just the kind of thing we do,” he responded.

“If that’s everything, then we should be on our way,” Raede hinted.

“You’re leaving already? Why don’t you at least let me prepare a small meal for you? You deserve that much,” Ruri insisted.

“That’s really not necessary,” Tuna protested. “You’ve already provided us with reward money, after all. Don’t waste your food.”

“Screw that!” Gero burst. “I’m not going to turn down free food.”

“Indeed,” Raede agreed, completely ignoring his intention to get moving. “It would be impolite to do so.”

Tuna rolled her eyes at her comrades. “The two of you are relentless gluttons,” she sighed. “I suppose it’s no use arguing with you about it, though.”

“Alright!” Gero cheered.

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“Ugh! I can barely walk,” Gero complained. The three of them were en route to the station.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have been so voracious with Ruri’s food. There was barely any for the rest of us to eat,” Tuna pointed out.

“Verily,” Raede concurred.

“You ate just as much as he did!” Tuna cried.

All Gero could think about was his overly cramped stomach. Raede, on the other hand, was feeling better, and was pleased with how the mission had turned out. Even with a few hiccups it had been successful. Furthermore, Tuna was back to the same happy person she was before.

It was midday, and their path wasn't heavily shaded, so the sun was beating down on them hard. Raede looked forward to being able to unwind in a cool train coach. "Does anybody know how far have to go yet?" he asked.

Ahead of him, Gero shrugged and Tuna replied, "I'm not sure." Raede sighed and kept trudging along.

"The next town is about forty minutes away from here," someone else added.

"I see. Thanks for the help, Sundancer," Raede replied.

Raede came to a stop, followed immediately by Gero and Tuna. They looked back on the path to see Sundancer about thirty steps behind them.

"Uh..." Tuna started hesitantly, "what are you doing?"

Sundancer likewise came to a halt. "It was my understanding that friends typically travel with one another," she explained.

Tuna was dumbstruck by how plainly Sundancer answered her. "What?!" she yelled.

"I'm sorry," Sundancer apologized. "Have I done something wrong?"

"Sort of," Raede replied. "It's a bit early to label yourself one of our friends. We didn't even meet you until today."

"Yeah," Gero agreed. "We can't be friends until we spend at least three days together. You'll be good by the time we get back to Ocarina."

Tuna whirled around to face her amphibious companion. "Why are you accepting her just like that?" she gasped.

Gero shrugged innocently. "There's no reason for her not to come with us," he noted.

"We hardly know anything about her," Tuna protested. Despite her interest in the woman, she hardly thought it was smart to let a virtual stranger tag along.

Tuna's comment seemed to jog Sundancer's memory. "Oh, that's right. Divulging personal information is supposed to strengthen a friendship," she recalled. "Allow me to share my full name. I am Lynnari Sundancer. My grandpa often called me Lynn."

"Well, I have no problem with her joining us," Raede spoke up.

Gero, Raede, and Lynn all stared at Tuna anxiously. “Fine,” she sighed. “I suppose she can come along, at least to Ocarina.”

For the first time since they had met her, Lynn’s face lit up with a smile. Something about its appearance was especially sincere. It made Tuna instantly content with her decision to let the woman join them. “Right, let’s get going, then,” Tuna decreed.

Gero grinned and led the way to town, followed by the others. He had no qualms about Lynn coming along. She seemed to be a nice person at heart, and had an interesting fighting style. That was all the convincing he needed.

Raede was slightly suspicious of her intentions, but not enough to say anything against her. At the very least, if she was scheming something, it was better for her to target them than someone else.

Tuna was genuinely intrigued by the strange woman. Somehow she was fully capable of taking care of herself, despite lacking common sense. She looked back curiously at the mysterious woman. “Uh, why are walking so far behind us?” she pondered.

“As a friendship grows, friends become gradually more open to occupying one another’s personal space. Heretofore, a new friendship should be expressed by considerable distance,” Lynn explained.

Tuna squinted curiously at Lynn and then resumed walking. “Do whatever you want, but you’re free to come up by the rest of us,” she offered.

Embarrassed, Lynn remained silent. Nevertheless, she slowly bridged the gap between herself and her new companions. It was an unusual but comforting sensation, and she found herself smiling once again.

## Chapter 14

### Words of the Past and Present

Raede stretched his arms out as he awoke. He was lying in one of the coach's built-in beds. It was the first morning of their ride back to Ocarina, so they had at least two more days of travel ahead of them. His head rolled to the side and he met Lynn's blinking eyes.

"Why are you watching me?" he asked awkwardly.

She shrugged, unable to provide an answer. "Is it wrong to watch someone else sleep?" she inquired.

He scratched the back of his head as he thought over her question. "It's not wrong, per say. It is kind of unusual, though," he answered.

"Oh. Should I not do it?" she pondered.

"Well, I wouldn't make a habit of it," he advised. He laid his head back down on the pillow and looked away from her. After a few moments, she went away, and he closed his eyes. He figured that he would catch a few more hours of rest before getting up.

"Where are we going?" Lynn suddenly posed.

Raede flashed his eyes open irritably. "We told you already: Ocarina," he replied.

"What's in Ocarina?" she pushed.

"Our headquarters and our homes," he answered.

"Headquarters for what?" she asked.

"For our mercenary work. Why did you ask to come with us if you didn't know any of this yet?" he retorted.

She shrugged her shoulders in a childish manner. "I didn't know where else to go," she responded.

"Really?" he yawned. "Where were you going before you came to Amberpass?"

"I was looking for a place, but I have no idea where it is, so I'm not even sure if I was going the right direction," she explained.

"That's enlightening," he scoffed. "Let me flip the question around, then. Where did you come from?"

"Tentari," she replied concisely.

“Never heard of it,” Raede noted.

“It’s located on a small island less than a kilometer from the mainland shore. Nobody else lives there,” she elaborated.

“That may explain why I’ve never heard of it,” he observed. “So where did you go after you left?”

“Amberpass,” she stated.

“Wait, you’re saying that you lived alone on an island until only a few months ago?” he gasped.

“Of course not. For the first ten years of my life, my grandpa was there, too,” she added.

“Oh right, your infamous grandpa,” he replied, recalling how many times she had mentioned him. “So what happened to him? Is-?”

“He died,” she announced.

He felt bad for her. That meant that she had spent a considerable amount of time living completely on her own. “I’m sorry,” he offered.

“For what?” she asked. “Did you do something wrong?”

It was quite peculiar dealing with someone so naïve. “Never mind. So how old are you, Lynn?” he inquired.

“I’m twenty-one,” she answered.

“I see,” he nodded. An uncomfortable silence ensued. He had expected her to ask the same question back, but she clearly had no interest in his age.

“Should I be a mercenary, too?” she queried at last.

“How should I know?” he laughed. “Is it something you want to do?”

“The three of you do it and you will be my friends in two days. Friends are supposed to engage in shared activities, so I should be a mercenary as well. At least, that is how I view the situation,” she reasoned.

“If that’s a good enough reason for you, then go for it,” he suggested wearily.

“How do I become a mercenary?” she inquired.

Her constant, simple questions were starting to become quite irritating. “We’ll show you when we get to Ocarina,” he assured her. “I’m going to go back to bed now. If you have more questions, you can ask me later.”

“Oh, okay,” she mumbled. Without Raede available for discussion, she moved over to Gero. She stood next to his bed for a few moments, but then remembered that she was not supposed to do that. Instead, she looked out the window and marveled at the unusual scenery whisking by them.

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“I don’t understand,” Lynn muttered in disgust. “Why would anyone eat this stuff?” Attached to her fork was a solid stick of butter with one bite taken out of it.

“You’ve never eaten butter before?” Gero gasped.

“No,” she replied. “It tastes horrible.”

Tuna guided Lynn’s fork down and returned the butter to its dish before cutting off a slice and spreading it over Lynn’s toast. “You’re not supposed to eat it on its own. You use it to add flavor to other food,” she explained.

Lynn hesitantly took a bite into the toast, but quickly pulled it away repugnantly. “I cannot see how this is an improvement,” she noted.

“Well, it’s not for everyone,” Raede admitted.

“Is there some sort of high nutritional value in this butter?” Lynn checked.

“Not really,” Tuna replied. “It’s actually got a lot of fat in it.”

“I see,” Lynn said. She took a few more bites of her butter-free food and washed it down with a glass of iced tea. “I’m going back to our coach.”

Once Lynn had exited the meal coach, Tuna looked back to her associates. “So, what do you guys think of Lynn?” she asked.

“She’s interesting, if nothing else,” Raede observed.

“I don’t like her,” Gero decided. “What kind of a person doesn’t like butter?”

“What kind of a criterion is that?” Tuna yelped. “Besides, you were the one who let her come with us.”

“I don’t care,” he insisted as he took a bite out of the butter stick.

“Anyway,” she interjected, “I kind of like her. She’s unusual, but she’s growing on me.”

“Good, because she might be joining the syndicate,” Raede mentioned.

“What?” Tuna gagged.

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“I can’t believe that there won’t be any trains until five o’clock,” Gero grumbled.

“It can’t be helped,” Raede reasoned. “There aren’t as many riders in these outlying towns. If they can funnel them into fewer trains, then they can still make a profit.”

“Yeah, but what are we supposed to do until then?” Gero asked. The four of them were standing just outside the train station. Unfortunately, the town they had to stop at was small, with no attractions whatsoever.

“Well...” Tuna trailed off. She had thought she could conjure up an activity, but found absolutely nothing.

A young man seemed to take interest in their conversation and stepped over to offer a suggestion. “I see the four of you are out-of-towners. Might I suggest that you go see Gage McAwesome? He’s a wonderful guy who lives just two kilometers outside of town. I know that he’d love some company,” he proposed.

“McAwesome?” Tuna repeated.

“That’s right,” the young man confirmed.

“Why not? We’ve got nothing else to do,” Raede noted. “If we can find it, that is.”

“Splendid,” their informant cheered. “There’s only one road out of town, and it’s impossible to miss his house.”

“Thanks for the advice,” Tuna added as the four of them started walking.

“It was my pleasure,” he assured them.

“Something tells me that we’re going to regret doing this,” Tuna stated once they were a ways out of town.

“Why is that?” Raede inquired.

“Well, the guy’s called ‘Gage McAwesome.’ Chances are, there’s something a bit off with his head,” she theorized.

Gero shrugged his shoulders. “I think he sounds kind of awesome. I can’t quite put my finger on why, though,” he countered.

“Yeah, it’s a real mystery,” Tuna replied sardonically.



“Just remember that we can’t spend all day here. We’ve got to be back in town in five hours,” Raede reminded them. They all agreed to keep track of time and continued to trudge along.

“Well, we definitely didn’t miss it,” Tuna observed. They had just come to the edge of Gage’s property, where a massive sign with his name on it was firmly entrenched in the ground. It did far more than inform passerby of whom the proprietor was. More accurately, it seemed to be geared for advertisement purposes. The four of them meandered over to the house and cautiously knocked on the door.

Moments later, the door ripped open to reveal the same young man that had directed them to this location in the first place. “Oh, my, guests! What an unexpected surprise!” he exclaimed.

“Whoa!” Gero gasped. “Mr. McAwesome, did you know that there’s some guy in town that looks just like you?” Tuna was utterly dazed by Gero’s gullibility.

“You don’t say! Perhaps that’s my evil twin brother who sent you here to keep me distracted,” Gage hypothesized.

“Why would he need to distract you?” Gero wondered.

“Why? Well, to get to the rubies, of course!” Gage answered.

“What a dastardly crook,” Lynn noted.

“Don’t tell me that you believe him, too!” Tuna cried. “Besides, how would this guy know that his ‘evil twin brother’ sent us here?”

“Curses! You’ve discovered a plot hole,” Gage wailed.

“Plot hole?” Raede asked.

“Yes, even if it were my evil twin had directed you to me, I had no premise to assume that he had done so. Thus, I formed a hole in my own story. I have failed all of you greatly,” their host apologized.

“So wait, there isn’t an evil twin brother?” Gero checked.

“I’m afraid not, my afro-bearing friend. He was nothing more than an artificial construct of my mind,” Gage explained. “But I’m being rude. Please come in, and welcome to my humble abode.”

“If you say so,” Tuna moaned. “By the way, I’m Tuna. This is Gero, Raede, and Lynn.” They stepped into his house and were

immediately met by a large sheet of white paper with a mysterious symbol drawn onto it. “What’s this?”

“Life,” Lynn spoke.

Everyone glanced over at her. “Very good,” Gage smiled. “This is indeed the Oldspeak character for life.”

“Oldspeak?” Tuna repeated. “How do you know how to read that?”

“Oldspeak was inscribed into the walls of my home. I’ve been studying it since I was ten,” she answered. Gage was clearly intrigued by this.

Gero glanced confusedly between Lynn and Gage. “What’s Oldspeak?”

“Oldspeak was the ancient language employed by humans before the four sentient races agreed to replace their separate languages with one. The transition from Oldspeak to the common tongue occurred very quickly to ensure that the new language came into widespread usage,” Gage explained. “By now, every human alive during the time Oldspeak was spoken has passed away, so it is now a dead language. Nowadays, people can only trace back what the characters meant.”

Lynn walked up to the sheet and glanced over the bottom of it, where some more, smaller, Oldspeak was written down. “The sun has not returned to us for many days. Despair is beginning to overtake the colony and talk has begun of increasing the size of our tributes,” she read.

Gage was completely speechless. Tuna asked the question that was on his mind, though. “Lynn, can you read entire Oldspeak sentences?” she inquired.

She turned back and nodded at her companion. “Yes. Did I not state that before?” she checked.

“Well, yes,” Gage stuttered. “We thought you meant that you could read the individual characters. It’s entirely different to be able to make sense of complete phrases like this. You may very well be the only person in the world capable of doing so!”

She didn’t seem to care. “Based on the nature of the text, this must be an excerpt from a very old source,” she stated.

Tuna couldn’t believe what she was witnessing. Thus far, everything that Lynn had done indicated that she was like a child, with the exception of her combat prowess. This completely

revamped her image of the woman, though. Lynn was able to fluently read a dead language, and moreover, had apparently learned how to do so by no other means than reading it. “Amazing,” she whispered to herself.

“Why do you have that up there, anyway?” Raede inquired, referring to the sheet with the Oldspeak writing.

“Well, it sort of serves as a symbol for me. This particular sheet is obviously just a recreation of the original text, but the message is the same. I didn’t know that message until just now, but I still thought it was worth holding onto,” Gage replied. “On principle, I disagree with how hastily Oldspeak and the other old languages were ushered out.”

“What do you mean?” Tuna pushed.

“Creating a unified world was the goal of forming a common tongue. This in and of itself was a good thing. Can you imagine being unable to communicate with the other races as well as we can today? Being able to speak with one another unhindered is a great thing and allows us to appreciate the stories of other races,” Gage elaborated. “I only wish that the language replacement hadn’t been performed so hastily and forcefully. So many of these ancient words are now a mystery to us, and we have only a limited capability to understand them. It would be great if you could utilize your talents for such a recovery,” he inadvertently requested. Lynn seemed a bit offset by this. “Oh, excuse me. I didn’t mean to sound so insistent. I didn’t mean to tell you what to do. It was merely an observation.”

“I do want to recover certain Oldspeak writing,” she confessed. “I am only interested in certain areas of it, though.”

“I see,” Gage smiled. “Well, I’m glad that you have such an aspiration.”

“Are the words of people in the past really that important to us today?” Gero asked. It seemed irrelevant to him if these words were lost forever. Nothing was wrong with the way the world was now.

Gage reached over and picked up a book which he stared at while answering Gero. “I suppose that really depends on what you consider important. Anything pertinent to survival was carried over into the common tongue; society didn’t degrade at

all by the transition. A lot of what we left behind was actually flavor,” he explained.

“Flavor?” Lynn repeated.

“You don’t need flavor to survive, but it’s a more sad existence without it. What I’m referring to are the stories. As a fiction author, there’s little that I hold more precious than a good story. Many stories were flushed away with the transition. I suppose I shouldn’t have beat around the bush like that. My apologies,” Gage offered.

“You’re a fiction author?” Tuna asked. “I’ve never heard of you before.”

“It’s not surprising,” Gage laughed. “It’s a highly saturated market. Everyone wants to tell their story but only a few will rise to prominence. Really, it’s a fool’s game to try doing it professionally.”

“Then why do you do it?” Gero posed.

“Simply put, I have stories that need to be told. It isn’t even because I enjoy writing. Stories enter my mind and it wouldn’t feel right to not put them into words,” Gage answered.

“Really?” Gero gasped. “Why?”

“Let me put it like this. Have any of you ever read a story that literally brought you to tears?” Gage surveyed.

“Yeah,” Tuna confirmed.

“Not really. I’m not interested enough in reading to get through a whole book,” Gero admitted.

“Well, then, what about a joke? Have you ever heard a joke that made you laugh so hard that you found yourself on the floor, barely able to breathe?” Gage asked.

“Oh yeah, lots of times!” Gero beamed.

Gage smiled at his guest’s enthusiasm. “It’s an amazing feeling to actually hurt from laughter, or to be moved to tears for fictional reasons. To know that you’re the person who moved people to feel that way is an amazing thing,” he elaborated.

“I remember the first time I read the ending of *A Rift in Logic*, I bawled my eyes out,” Tuna recalled. “What I wouldn’t give to have another story hit me so hard...”

“It’s bewildering that we can have such a desire to feel sadness like that,” Gage noted. “To desire pain goes completely against common sense, yet we do so because we want to feel. To

be sentient is to desire to experience emotion. At least, that's what I believe."

"That's pretty insightful," Raede observed.

"Thanks. I should actually write that down. I'm sure I could use it somewhere in one of my stories," Gage grinned as he scribbled down his own words. "Now then, I ought to grab some lunch. It wouldn't be right to invite you all here without doing at least that. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Alright," Tuna replied as he stepped out.

"Say, Tuna," Gero whispered mysteriously.

She didn't understand why he was whispering. Raede and Lynn could easily hear him, and Gage was in a different room. "What?" she asked.

"Why did this Gage person invite us over, anyway?" he pondered. "It's not that I don't find him interesting or anything, but I don't see the point."

"Who cares? He's a nice guy, so just enjoy the fact that you're getting free food," she chided him.

"Are these the books that he wrote?" Lynn interrupted. She had been perusing the bookshelf while Tuna and Gero were talking. "His name is on most of the spines."

The other three rushed over to have a look at Lynn's find. "That'd be a fairly safe assumption to make," Raede agreed. "What kind of stories does he write?"

Tuna casually read off several of the titles. "*The Shelled Complex, City of Lost Souls, Fire Tears*. All of these books are..." she began.

"Here's some chips and dip to get you started. I'll make sandwiches, too. That's about the scope of what I know how to make, to be honest," Gage announced as he reemerged in the room.

"Gage," Tuna called out. "Why is your name on all of these books? These stories are all infamous, but it was Cain Searn that wrote them all."

Gage's smile turned to a frown. "Yes, I know all about Cain Searn. Let me ask you, though. Why are you convinced that *I* was the one who stole *Cain's* story?" he pressed.

"Well, he's a world-renowned author, so I..." she trailed off.

“You assumed that I was trying to make a living by ripping his name off the cover and using my own,” Gage concluded for her. “Don’t worry; I’m not mad at you for thinking that way. It certainly adds up. The truth is quite the opposite, though. Cain took the ideas from me.”

“He did?” Raede gasped. “But, why? He was a famous author before any of these books were released.”

“Who knows? I wonder if his other works are his own writing, either,” Gage laughed. “Now *that’d* be an amusing revelation. I can already see the media ripping him apart.”

Gero was clearly flustered by Gage’s lighthearted take on the matter. He slammed his fist against the wall angrily. “If you really wrote those books, then why are you letting that deceitful bastard take all of the credit for them?” he screamed.

The author was clearly touched by Gero’s concern, but did not change his composure. “It’d be pointless. Cain’s rich, which means he can hire all the lawyers he needs to work past any charges I filed,” he smiled. “Besides, I’m quite content with the way things are.”

“You’re what?!” Gero growled.

“I’m not going to lie and say that it doesn’t irk me at times. Nobody likes having someone else claim their ideas. At the end of the day, though, I still make enough to get by. On top of everything else, countless people are enjoying my stories. As I said before, I write because my stories need to be told,” Gage reminded them. He paused for a moment before continuing. “Though, in these circumstances, it would be better to say that I write because my stories need to be heard. I can go to sleep happy just knowing that so many people are enjoying my words.”

“I can’t accept that,” Gero shouted. “Maybe *you’ve* made peace with it, but that doesn’t make what this Cain Searn did alright. He shouldn’t be allowed to get away with this.”

“Perhaps not, but there’s nothing to be done about it. Even if by some miracle I was able to prove that Cain’s works were my own, what would change? I’d have more money and recognition. I already have enough of both, though. Conversely, I could end up losing quite a bit by going against him. Some battles aren’t worth fighting. There’s a difference between giving up and being complacent,” Gage insisted.

“Well, then, I’ll go make this guy tell the truth myself,” Gero decided, punching one glove-clad hand into the other.

“He doesn’t want you to, though, Gero,” Tuna argued.

“Yeah. You’re too easily aggravated,” Raede berated his associate.

“So what?” Gero protested.

Lynn looked up from the pages of *The Shelled Complex*. “Excuse me, Mr. McAwesome. Would it be possible for me to obtain a copy of this book? I think I would like to read more of it,” she explained.

Once again, Gage grinned contentedly. “Sure thing. I’ll bring out another copy with the sandwiches,” he informed her as he stepped out.

“I don’t like this,” Gero seethed.

“Like it or not, it’s none of your business. He doesn’t want you to help him,” Raede argued.

Gero seemed to calm down. He was still tense, but the blind rage had subsided. In fact, he seemed far more concerned over Raede’s last words. Nonetheless, he didn’t protest the matter any further.

“Of course, now that Lynn’s bought a book, the rest of us will have to do it or look like jerks,” Raede sighed.

“Don’t make it sound like such a chore,” Tuna lectured him. “Does it seem like a good book, Lynn?”

“Based off of the first two pages, yes, it is,” Lynn assured her.

“See? It’s not like we’ll be throwing money away on some shoddy product,” Tuna stated.

“That reminds me,” Lynn interjected, “I don’t have any money. Could I borrow some?”

“Oh, yeah, I suppose you wouldn’t have any, considering you thought it turned people evil,” Tuna noted.

“Yes, thank you for clarifying what my grandpa meant by that,” Lynn added graciously.

Gage stepped back into the room with the sandwiches and a copy of *The Shelled Complex*. “Here you go,” he announced.

“So Gage, is McAwesome your real last name, or just a pen name?” Raede queried.

“It’s my real name, alright,” Gage smiled. “I was born a McAwesome and I’ll die a McAwesome. Hopefully not for awhile, though.”

“You certainly lucked out to be born with a name like that,” Tuna noted.

“Well, I wouldn’t really chalk it up to luck. My father changed his name to McAwesome as a technique to pick up women. It’s a good thing it worked or I might not be here right now,” Gage laughed.

“Is he being serious or just making up a story?” Raede whispered to Tuna. Neither of them could be certain.

Gage handed the book over to Lynn. “I hope you don’t mind, but I signed the last page,” he informed her.

“That’s fine,” she assured him as she placed her sandwich, one bite missing from it, back on the tray. “I can’t eat your sandwich, though.”

“Oh?” he asked.

“It has butter in it,” she explained to him.

Tuna felt it her responsibility to teach Lynn the impoliteness of her ways, but Gage spoke up before she had the chance to. “Ha! I appreciate the honesty. If you’re not willing to eat free food that you don’t like, then you must have genuinely enjoyed what you read. I’m flattered,” he smiled.

“We’d like to read your books, as well,” Tuna chimed in. “We’ll each take a book, whichever you suggest.”

“Splendid!” Gage celebrated. “I know just the ones.”

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“That Gage was a pretty nice guy,” Raede commented once they were back on the train.

“Yeah, though I’m not sure he picked the best book for me,” Tuna moaned. In her hands was a signed copy of *Burrito Armageddon*. “It sounds like it could be funny, but then he should have given it to Gero. Oh, well, I suppose we can trade. Where did he get off to, anyway?”

“Not sure. He didn’t say,” Raede responded.

“So Lynn, Raede told me that you’re considering becoming a mercenary,” Tuna nudged. “Do you think you will?”

“It would be a promising avenue to have increased exposure to the three of you. Furthermore, I will inevitably be in need of a



source of funds. Becoming a mercenary would serve both of those roles, and so it seems to be an appropriate course of action,” Lynn assessed, having been informed a while back by them that money was actually a necessity.

“You sure are an interesting one, Lynn. For what it’s worth, I think you’d be a good mercenary,” Tuna offered.

Lynn blushed at the compliment. Like many things, she hadn’t felt that aspect of social interaction in many years. “Thank you for the support,” she said.

Gero sat on the back end of the final coach. This whole experience with Gage had put him in a rare gloomy mood. He had managed to look past the fact that Gage had been exploited, since the author himself was okay with it. The encounter had led him to think about something else, though.

He gazed back at the tracks, rushing out from the underside of the train and slowly disappearing onto the horizon. He stuck his left arm through the bars of the railing and grabbed at something that wasn’t there. “Hayden...”

## Chapter 15

### Important Business

An unusually picky customer was deep in thought, staring at the multitude of pies available on Jamal's menu.

"Hmm..." he mumbled.

Jamal glared, irritated, at the customer. It had been ten minutes and he had yet to decide what he wanted. "How about a suggestion?" Jamal offered.

The customer shook his head. "No," he answered bluntly.

"Alright, then just let me know when you're ready to order," Jamal instructed the man.

"Right," the customer replied.

It was driving Jamal crazy having to wait for this man. If sales had been at all decent then he could at least bake something, but as it was his stock was full. He sat down and waited as patiently as he could. The second hand on the clock kept ticking. He felt he would snap from the silence.

"I think..."

"Yeah?!" Jamal burst out excitedly.

The customer stuck his finger against his chin as if he was still mulling the matter over. "I think I'm not hungry yet. I'll be back in an hour, possibly," he decided.

"Great, I'll see you then," Jamal retorted. As soon as the man was out the door, he slumped over the edge of his counter. "That was an ordeal."

"Hey, Jamal!" Gero greeted him as he sprung into the shop, followed by the other three.

"Hey," Jamal replied droopily. "Ziggy's upstairs."

"Cool. You doing alright?" Raede asked as they made their way past him.

"Yeah," the chef grumbled. "Just a slow day."

"Right. We'll talk to you later, then," Tuna bid him.

"Okay," he replied unenthusiastically. Once they had passed, he looked up confusedly. "Were there four of them?"

"Come in," Ziggy called out after they knocked. "What is it?" he asked without looking up from his book.

“We’re done with the Amberpass mission,” Raede explained.

“Alright. That’s e2500 each, right? Let me just dig out the char-” he paused. “Who’s that?”

“This is Lynn,” Tuna explained. “We met her down in Amberpass and she’s interested in joining the syndicate.”

“Is that so?” he asked.

Lynn leaned over and whispered to Tuna, “I thought your boss would be of a more impressive stature.”

Ziggy clearly heard the comment and crossed his arms authoritatively. “You’re not making a great first impression,” he grunted. “What’s your full name?”

“Lynnari Sundancer,” she answered.

“Sundancer...” he thought aloud. “Why does that name sound so familiar?”

“She was the tyrant we were supposed to overthrow,” Gero reminded him.

“Oh, right,” he nodded. After a moment he jumped out of his chair with his arms flailing. “What’s wrong with the three of you? You don’t invite people like that into the syndicate!”

“Relax. It was all just a big misunderstanding,” Raede assured his boss.

“Bah, that doesn’t mean that it’s a good idea to bring her back,” Ziggy chided them. “I assume that you satisfied the client, though, right?”

“Yeah, of course we did,” Gero guaranteed him.

The short man shook his head in annoyance as he retrieved their payment for the Amberpass case. “Well then, are you ready for your interview?” he asked Lynn. The others brightened up, seeing that he was at least willing to consider her.

“Interview?” she repeated.

“Anyone who wants to join the syndicate has to answer three questions. Are you ready to answer them?” Ziggy asked again.

She nodded in confirmation. The others had neglected to inform her that there would be an interview. Nevertheless, if she needed to do it to work with them, then there was no reason to hesitate.

Ziggy posed the first question to her. “What do you like?”

She thought it over for a second and then confidently answered, “Milkshakes and kunai knives.” Raede was a bit

shocked that someone who grew up on an island had such an affinity for milkshakes, while Tuna was stupefied that she had included a weapon.

“Very well. What do others like about you?” Ziggy continued.

Lynn contemplated for a few moments before calmly replying, “I’m good at listening to others’ problems.”

Tuna and Raede just about collapsed from her answer. Had her statement been true, the conflict in Amberpass shouldn’t have escalated like it had. Gero took note of their odd expressions and quietly asked what was wrong. “Nothing,” Tuna lied calmly.

“Alright. Lastly, what is your dream?” Ziggy posed.

Tuna was reminded that she still needed to tell Ziggy her own goal. She had about a week left to do so, and it wasn’t something she was looking forward to.

“I wish to locate and explore the tomb of Darter,” Lynn reported calmly.

Everyone else in the room was startled by the proclamation.

“Darter’s final resting place, huh?” Ziggy chuckled. “Nobody’s been able to find it since he died over a century ago. Plenty of people have tried, though. After all, there are plenty of reasons to want to discover what became of that mystical man after his passing. In fact, the general consensus by this point is that his remains were lost long ago to the elements.”

Everything that Ziggy spoke of was correct. Darter was an infamous figure, even more so than Perenos’ entire lineage of kings. Some would even argue that he was the most well known figure in the entire world. Nobody knew what became of him after he died, but there had been plenty of attempts to find out. Just when they thought they had Lynn halfway figured out, she dropped a bombshell like that on them.

“Your ambition may very well be impossible,” Ziggy noted. “Then again, if you’re going to have a dream, it might as well be a big one! Welcome to the Pondswagger Syndicate, Lynnari Sundancer.”

“Thank you, squat man,” Lynn bowed.

Ziggy’s upbeat attitude vanished as he flew across the desk and in one fluid motion fired a kick at Lynn. “The name’s Ziggy Von Pondswagger, you uncouth shrew,” he roared.

Lynn grabbed his leg and swung him to the ground, smiling all the while. “Understood, Boss Ziggy,” she saluted.

“That’s better,” Ziggy coughed as he pulled himself off the floor. “One more thing before you all go. There’s a sign about it downstairs, but there’s a meeting tonight at six o’clock for all mercenaries currently in town. I expect all of you to be there. That being the case, don’t try to take any new jobs for the rest of the day; just enjoy yourselves.”

“A meeting? We haven’t had one for months,” Gero grumbled. It wasn’t that much trouble but he hated obligations.

“Stop complaining,” Ziggy shot back. “It’s part of your contract.”

“We don’t have contracts,” Raede pointed out.

“That’s irrelevant,” Ziggy countered.

“If that’s all, I’m going grocery shopping,” Tuna announced.

“Yeah, I’m going to head home for awhile, too,” Raede added, cueing the others to make their exits, as well.

“Just don’t forget the meeting,” Ziggy insisted as they ushered themselves out. “Hold on a minute, Tuna,” he requested once the other three were already heading downstairs.

“Yeah?” she asked.

“I just want to remind you that it’s been roughly three weeks and you still need to tell me what your dream is,” he explained.

“Yeah, I know. Don’t worry, I’ll tell you soon,” she assured him before rushing out with the others.

He gazed curiously at her as she disappeared from sight. If she had a dream, he didn’t understand why she was so hesitant to tell him about it. “I’m *not* squat,” he insisted as he crawled back to his desk. “I’m just small-boned.”

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Tuna’s arm grasped excitedly at the papers stuffed in her mailbox. At long last she would have something to look through. It was as if this place had officially become her home! She rifled through them and then tossed the entire lot into the recycling bin, disappointed.

“It’s *all* junk?” she despaired. She picked her shopping bags back up and headed over to the stairwell. On the way, she passed the workout center and contemplated whether she should use it tonight. “I get enough exercise on the job,” she reasoned.

After making it to the third floor, she was already regretting having purchased so much. It was difficult shopping for groceries considering how often she went out of town. The majority of her food needed to have a long shelf life and to be purchased in small quantities.

As she stepped onto the fifth floor, she exhaled in relief, although she still had to drag her bags down the hallway to her own apartment. Once the door slammed shut behind her, she let all of her bags topple to the floor as she leaned, exhausted, on the counter. After several moments, she found herself squinting at the door to what would soon be Piper's room. It struck her as peculiar that the door was closed, as she had rarely bothered stepping foot on that side of the apartment.

She shrugged it off and bent over to pull out some of her groceries. While she was fishing them out, she heard the sound of a door opening. From her angle she could tell that it wasn't the apartment door, so someone else must already be inside. Had someone broken in? Very cautiously, she raised her head and glanced over the counter.

"Welcome home, Tuna," Lynn grinned from the doorway of the opposite room. For whatever reason, the woman said it as if there was nothing abnormal going on.

"Hey, there...Lynn. How did you get in here?" Tuna asked slowly.

"With my keys," Lynn replied, presenting them.

"You have keys?" Tuna gasped. "How?"

"They gave them to me when I signed the apartment contract," Lynn explained.

"Why don't you start from the beginning?" Tuna requested.

"After you took off, I realized that I didn't have anywhere to live in Ocarina, so I asked Raede. He informed me that you were living alone," Lynn began. It was becoming increasingly clear that certain things had to be spelled out in great detail with this woman to avoid misunderstandings. "Since friends help resolve each others' dilemmas, I deduced that it would improve our friendship if I became your roommate. I also didn't want to bother you with any of the paperwork, so I just forged your signature on the forms they gave me."

Tuna was mortified. She had been right on track to have Piper as the perfect roommate. Instead, this wildcard had forcibly imposed herself. It was true that Tuna had wanted to learn more about Lynn, but she had wanted to do so from a safe distance. Honestly, she was a bit terrified at the prospect of telling Lynn to leave, even if she had her prior agreement with Piper as an excuse. “Thanks, Lynn. You see, though, I already, uh...” she began clumsily.

“Already what?” Lynn asked eagerly.

The woman’s face was filled with a hope Tuna couldn’t possibly destroy, especially if doing so replaced it with a more dangerous emotion. “I already have all my stuff in the right room, so I hope you don’t mind taking the left,” she replied.

“Not at all,” Lynn assured her.

“Great,” Tuna smiled. She was already irate at herself for not speaking the truth. Now she had to deal with Lynn and cancel her deal with Piper. Alternatively she could risk an even worse reaction out of Lynn in order to get Piper back, but that terrified her even more. What had she done?

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Once it neared the meeting time, Tuna and Lynn set out for the Pie Palace. Tuna hadn’t been conjure up an easy solution to her problem so it looked as though she would have to accept Lynn as a roommate. At least Piper was likely to understand the situation. Tuna just hoped that Piper hadn’t already cancelled her current apartment contract, or the whole mess would become even stickier.

“I’ve never actually been out this late in the evening,” Tuna admitted.

“Gero and Raede tell me that, aside from myself, you are the newest member of the syndicate. Therefore, you and I should have an innate connection between us as the new members of this organization,” Lynn analyzed.

“I suppose you could say that. You don’t have to point it out every time something improves a relationship, though,” Tuna informed her companion. As amusing as the habit was, it made for some awkward moments.

“As your friend, I will take note of your advice and attempt to better my behavior accordingly,” Lynn nodded.

Soon they arrived at the Pie Palace, where they saw Jamal shutting the shop down for the night. “Hey, Jamal,” Tuna greeted him. “Are you going to stay for the meeting?”

The chef chuckled in amusement. “It’s tempting, but I prefer not to get too involved with that aspect of the business. Besides, I’ve got to get home to my wife and kids,” he explained.

Tuna’s face lit up excitedly. “I didn’t know that you were married!” she cheered.

“You never asked,” he laughed as he locked up the cash register. “It’ll be fifteen years in a few months.”

“Congratulations,” Tuna beamed. “How many kids do you have?”

“Three,” he smiled. “My oldest is-”

“Tuna!” Gero panted as he burst into the shop. “Why did you leave without me? I was knocking on your door for five minutes before I realized that you had already left.”

She squinted at him disappointingly. “It took you five minutes to come to that conclusion?” she gasped.

Jamal slumped over to the door without really being noticed. It was obvious that he wasn’t going to be allowed a single moment of pride. “Well, I’m heading out. Remind Ziggy to lock up before he takes off tonight,” he beseeched them.

“Oh, wait!” Tuna exclaimed. “What were you going to say about your kids?”

The humble cook’s eyes glimmered with gratitude. Tuna, in her benevolence, cared enough to follow up on the matter. “Well, just a few weeks ago my oldest son started-”

“Hey, everybody!” Raede cheered as he burst through the door. “How have the last several hours transpired for the lot of you?”

“They’ve been up and down,” Tuna admitted. Jamal silently slipped his way outside and walked home. Sometimes chance was a cruel mistress.

“We might as well head on down,” Raede suggested.

Tuna was a bit taken aback by how many people were present for this meeting. Not counting herself, Lynn, Gero, or Raede, there were five others in the room. Among them were Cyrus and Piper, but Ziggy wasn’t there yet.



“Tuna!” Piper cried excitedly as the four of them entered the scene. “I need to ask you about what I should bring for our—” Before she could continue, Tuna seized her and frantically pulled her over to a far corner of the room.

“About that...I’m really, really sorry, but there’s a problem. Lynn is new to town and the syndicate, and she kind of imposed herself as my roommate, and I don’t really want to tell her that she can’t even though you’re totally awesome and I would love to have you as a roommate so would you mind if we undid our agreement?” Tuna rambled. She hadn’t meant to spill her words so fast, but it was hard to keep her cool given the circumstances.

She hadn’t expected Piper to be too upset, but it shocked her *how* little she minded. “That’s so nice of you! You’re a good friend to take her in like that even though you didn’t plan to,” she observed.

“I’m not sure I’d say that. It’s more like I’m scared of her,” Tuna confessed.

“Don’t be so modest,” Piper insisted as she made her way back to the others. Tuna genuinely envied Piper for having such a positive view of the world.

As she spun around to join the group, she was caught off guard by a large man standing directly in front of her. He appeared to be in his early forties and had short black hair. He also had a moustache and a short beard. Most noteworthy, though, was the massive mace hanging from his back. This had to be the man that Gero and Raede had mentioned back in Amberpass.

“You must be Tuna,” he deduced.

“Y-yeah,” she confirmed, intimidated by his imposing presence.

“Welcome to the syndicate!” he roared. “The name’s Otto Buruga.” He extended his hand invitingly and she hesitantly offered her own.

“Hi,” she piped up as he vigorously shook her hand, practically flinging her across the room with his great strength.

“Say, this little meeting that Ziggy wanted to have doesn’t have anything to do with you, does it?” he inquired.

“Not that I know of,” she replied. “Do you carry that mace around all the time?”

“This little thing? Yeah, I bring her just about everywhere. You never know when trouble might pop up, and it’s best to be ready to strike it down,” he declared. As he said this, he unlatched his mace and held it up using both hands.

“You’re going to scare her if you keep acting like that,” Cyrus chastised him.

“Tuna wouldn’t get scared of someone like Otto,” Gero laughed. “She’s not as chicken as you are, Cyrus.”

“I’m prudent, not a chicken,” Cyrus insisted. “Anyway, is someone going to introduce us to the new girl?”

“I am Lynn Sundancer,” she announced with a respectful bow. It struck Tuna as odd that she had been succeeded as the new member so quickly. Oddly enough, she felt at ease, even though she was still a stranger to some of these people. Lynn didn’t seem worried about meeting them, either.

“I’m Cyrus,” he replied curtly.

“She already knew that,” Gero pointed out. “I just said your name a few seconds ago.”

“It’s still polite to tell her,” Cyrus argued.

“You know nothing of manners,” Raede agreed.

“You’re just taking his side to be contrary to me,” Gero shouted.

One of the remaining unknown individuals took her turn introducing herself to Lynn, though it was clearly for Tuna’s benefit, as well. She appeared to be about twenty five and had long hair, most of which was tied into a spiky ponytail, that was such a light shade of red it bordered on pink. She wore peculiar layered attire, the point of which Tuna didn’t quite understand, but the latter opted not to question her about it.

“I’m Ivy Sellis,” the woman announced.

“She’s the strange one,” Gero summarized.

“How am I stranger than the rest of you?” Ivy snapped.

“You dress like a clown,” Gero reasoned.

Ivy was instantly infuriated by her associate’s remark. “A clown? Have you ever even looked at a clown?” she challenged.

“Well, you look just as weird,” Gero pointed out.

“It’s fashion!” Ivy insisted.

“Ah, you must be in the rebellious stage where you dress and behave in a fashion contrary to societal norms,” Lynn concluded.

“What? No, you’ve got it all wrong. This is just my style,” Ivy whined.

“It’s a weird style,” Gero whispered, to her irritation.

“You’ll only make enemies in this world if you try to sum people up in one word,” Otto lectured him.

“Otto’s the big one,” Gero informed Lynn, clearly frustrating the older fellow.

“Wait, so are you going to simplify me like that, too?” Tuna pondered.

“I already figured you out,” Gero assured her. “You’re the *normal* one.”

“Why’d you say ‘normal’ like it was an insult?” she cried.

Their banter was interrupted by a loud snoring, the source was quickly traced to the only other entity in the room. The person had fallen asleep, and the two new girls were slightly startled to see that he was an entian.

Entians were the fourth sentient race of Kalanoi. Generally speaking, they greatly resembled humans, but they still had some stark differences. The most obvious of these was their light blue skin. Their hands were essentially the same, but their feet contained two large frontal toes and one backward toe each. Extending back from their elbows and protruding up from their knees were chitin extensions that served both as protection and natural weapons.

From each of their shoulder plates, male entians had fleshy, tubal growths, extending up to twenty centimeters or so. These roughly resembled tails and, though they could be controlled similarly, their functionality was quite limited. In the same place, females possessed silvery wings that were often compared to those of insects. These grew about a meter long, but were not effective for flight, being limited in much the same way as the males’ protrusions. Many theories existed as to why this was, but nothing concrete had been discovered. Like humans, entians possessed hair, which could be brown, black, green, blue or white. A mature adult male stood, on average, about one and two-thirds meters tall. Females, on the other hand, tended to grow to almost a full two meters.

Entian society was tribally structured, though all tribes were subservient to a lone chieftain. They had long been a civilized

race and were fully capable of developing complex technologies, but generally avoided doing because of their set of values. Despite their comparable intellect, entians had little presence in Perenos. Along with the brockans, their homeland was in the eastern hemisphere, while xylians and humans came from the west.

This particular entian was quite old, evidenced in his skin, which had darkened to a navy blue. He was bundled up in modern robes and had his hood up over his head. Everyone was certain that he hadn't been sleeping when Gero and the others had first made their entrance, and it seemed quite a feat that he could doze off amidst all their arguing. "Hey! Wake up, Wokki!" Gero barked.

Ivy gave Gero a disciplinary smack on the head. "Don't be a jerk. Can't you just leave an old guy to sleep?" she berated him.

"What if he misses the meeting, though?" Gero exclaimed.

"We can catch him up on it later!" Ivy yelled.

"He's surprisingly light," Lynn noted. She had plucked him right off of the sofa and was gauging his weight and other characteristics rather carelessly.

"Are you insane?" Ivy gasped as she rushed over to recover the entian. "You don't just pick people up while they're sleeping."

"My apologies. Next time I shall wait until he has awoken," Lynn promised.

"That's not much better," Ivy sighed. "I have to admit that he's a very heavy sleeper, though."

He most certainly was, leaving Tuna completely perplexed as to why he would be working in the syndicate. Matilda was of a comparable age, but she seemed physically fit. This old codger probably couldn't even stand up without suffering from aches. "What's his name? Wokki?" she asked.

"Yeah, Wokki Blackbog. He came to Perenos from Thousand Tears over thirty years ago," Otto explained. "Even so, none of us know that much about him. He's evidently fully capable of completing missions without assistance, though. It's a mystery to me."

Thousand Tears was the entian country. It received its name from the plentiful lakes present in every reach of their territory,

though there were certainly more than a thousand. It was located south of the brockan nation of Skar and shared a considerable continental border.

“So are we expecting more company, or are the rest out of town?” Raede inquired. With the addition of Lynn and excluding Ziggy, there were thirteen members of the syndicate. That meant that four were still not present, three of whom were still unknown to Tuna.

“As far as I know, they’re all away on missions right now,” Piper recalled. “We’re just waiting on Ziggy at this point.”

“I wish he’d hurry up already, then,” Gero grumbled. “I lead a very busy life.”

“No you don’t,” Cyrus snipped. “You’re always hanging out here or doing missions.”

“Really?” Gero gasped. “It doesn’t *feel* like I’m here that often.”

“You’re here more than any other member of the syndicate, Gero,” Cyrus informed his colleague.

“More than Ziggy?!” Gero exclaimed.

Cyrus rubbed his forehead in frustration. “Well, obviously not more than *him*. Amongst all of his employees, though, you’re here most often,” he elaborated.

“Congratulations, Gero!” Otto cheered. “You ought to receive some sort of recognition for this. Perhaps we should initiate some sort of employee-of-the-month system.”

“That’d never work,” Raede countered. “Gero would get depressed from seeing my beautiful mug displayed as the winner all the time.”

“Yeah, right! I’d wipe the floor with you,” Gero proclaimed.

“Why bother? You could just absorb all the dirt with that ridiculous afro of yours,” Raede retaliated.

“Seriously, you two are starting to give me a headache,” Ivy groaned.

Wokki suddenly shook himself awake and chewed on his saliva for a few moments, pulling down the hood to his robe at the same time and revealing his light gray hair. “Time to start already, huh?” he coughed.

They stared up at the steps for several seconds, but Ziggy was nowhere in sight. They hadn’t heard any noise that might

have tipped Wokki off to something, either. He had apparently just awoken and guessed at random when the meeting might begin.

“I think it’ll still be a few minutes, Wokki,” Otto finally replied.

“No, I’m ready to get started now,” Ziggy announced as he appeared at the top of the spiral stairs. Several of them glanced at Wokki, astonished at his accuracy. “Can a couple of you put a flat cover on the game table?”

Otto and Raede quickly set about doing so. “We going to play something?” Gero asked hopefully.

“You can after this meeting, if you want, but I really just need a flat surface to lay these papers out on,” Ziggy replied. “We’ve got some important business to attend to first.”

## Chapter 16

### The Young Brockan

“You actually seem half serious for once, Ziggy,” Ivy laughed.

He shrugged and set his supplies down on the table, then began to spread out some papers. “What can I say? I like to act officious when we’re sitting on a real gold mine.”

“You mean-” Otto started.

“That’s right. I finally accepted the mission that that ‘mysterious client’ wanted us to take. That’s what this meeting is all about,” Ziggy answered.

“So how much money are we talking here?” Cyrus inquired.

“e50,000,” Ziggy replied.

“Are you serious?” Ivy gasped. “That’s the biggest hit we’ve gotten in years.”

Ziggy nodded and propped himself up on the table. “Of course, the reward wouldn’t be so high if it weren’t so risky. This is by no means a one-man job either,” he pointed out.

“Well, then, what is the job?” Raede pushed. “And who exactly is this rich client, anyway?”

“He’s a representative of the Perenos army,” Ziggy announced. Most of them were completely dazed by the revelation. “Of course, it’s quite unorthodox for a government institution to seek the aid of an illegal organization. That’s why matters have been kept so quiet thus far. To be perfectly honest, the government has known for quite awhile exactly where our base of operations is. It shouldn’t surprise you, really; if clients are able to find us, then the government certainly can, too.

“They’ve been letting us operate unhindered, however,” he continued. “Our reputation as a mercenary syndicate that rejects immoral jobs really saved us on this one. Because of that, and because the army thought we might be of future use to them, they didn’t bust us up. As it turns out, they made the correct decision. This particular job is one that official members of the army cannot get involved in.”

“What? Why would that be?” Tuna queried.

“It involves taking down one of their own. A general by the name of Merrick Sylph has secretly been redirecting resources off the army’s grid. If the army attempts to remove Sylph on their own, they would be admitting a serious blunder. That’s why they came to us. If a bunch of renegade civilians take him down, they can sweep everything under the rug much more easily,” Ziggy elaborated.

“It’s that big of a deal? What kind of resources has he been allocating?” Raede pushed.

“I’m not entirely sure of the technical names, but they’re mostly extremely volatile chemicals that really shouldn’t be mixed together. In other words...” Ziggy began.

“Explosives,” Cyrus concluded.

“That’s right. Not just any explosives, either. Supposedly Sylph already has everything he needs to create ‘angel breath,’” Ziggy specified.

“Angel breath?” Piper repeated.

“It’s a weapon of mass annihilation. A single kilogram of the stuff could kill everyone in a five-block radius. The name sounds sweet, but it actually refers to the results,” Cyrus detailed. “The components necessary to create it are rare, to say the least. At any rate, the government tries to keep it away from public eyes and ears, largely because *they’re* the ones that developed it. It would be a public relations nightmare if the media found solid evidence of its existence.”

“Why would the government need to create something like that?” Piper cried.

“As a precaution,” Raede answered. “Should the peace between the four nations ever erode, it’s to Perenos’ advantage to have the leverage of such a destructive weapon. This is especially true if any of the other nations have gone to the same lengths.”

“That hardly seems like a good enough reason,” Piper sighed.

“Regardless,” Ziggy interrupted, “it is something that exists and, for whatever reason, Sylph has secured the means to produce a lot of it. Our mission is twofold: we are to take out Sylph and return all of the missing materials to government hands.”

“And by ‘take out’ you mean what, exactly?” Otto posed.



“By their definition, we can either kill him or capture him to hand over with the bomb materials,” Ziggy clarified. “So if we do this properly, nobody has to die.”

“Well, then, what are the specifics of the job?” Gero inquired.

Ziggy slid off the table so that they could more clearly see the papers he had placed there. Most prominent among them was a map of Perenos and the nearby lands. “Here’s the situation as we know it. Five days from now, Sylph will be making an annual inspection of the military post in Frontier City. As a general, Sylph is far above having to perform such a mundane task; he could simply assign to one of his subordinates. Because he has not, however, the higher-ups believe that he may be making this trip for other reasons. The fact that Frontier City is a port reinforces this theory.

“Those that I send on this mission will need to keep watch on the train station and wait for Sylph’s arrival. Surveillance will be maintained until suspicious behavior is detected. You will not need to worry about his actions within the military post, since he will be closely watched by the soldiers stationed there. Hopefully you will be able to determine the location or nature of his plans. Once you have, you will do whatever you need to in order to satisfy the two objectives,” Ziggy explained.

“In other words, it’s quite open-ended. We’ll have to determine what to do and then execute it, likely in a very short time frame,” Cyrus observed.

“That’s right,” Ziggy nodded. “I’ve also assembled a map of Frontier City, and the written request in the words of the military. For this mission, I’m going to need about four of you. We’ll start with volunteers, but I do retain the right to deny you if I don’t believe you are capable of handling this mission. A lot is at stake, after all. No hard feelings. So, who’s up for it?”

An uncomfortable silence ensued as soon as Ziggy concluded. It was a difficult call to make. The pay, even split four ways, was tremendous. On the other hand, they would be tracking and facing an established military official and dealing with highly explosive materials. It wasn’t a mission to accept without thinking it over first.

“Graaaaaaaaaagggggghhhhh.”

Wokki had dozed off once again, and alerted everyone with a booming snore. "I guess Wokki's not interested in this one," Otto deduced.

"Well, he is the wise one," Gero noted. Tuna had to wonder why Gero referred to him as wise and Matilda as old when it was quite likely that Wokki was the more elderly of the two.

"I'm going to have to decline, too," Cyrus announced. "You guys know how awkward I am with high pressure jobs like this."

"I'll go," Lynn offered.

"Are you sure about that, Lynn?" Tuna immediately asked. "You've never performed a mission before. It might not be a good idea to jump on such a dangerous one right away."

"Volunteering to a difficult task is another way that comrades provide assistance to one another," Lynn recalled. "I believe that this mission qualifies as being adequately difficult."

"I'll go, too," Gero declared. "With that kind of money, I could get myself out of debt."

"You're in debt?" Tuna gasped. "You never told me that."

He nodded somewhat shamefully. "I owe Otto e20," he admitted.

"I think this mission's a little overkill for a loan that trivial!" Tuna shrieked.

"Gero's sure to ruin everything, so I'll have to go as well," Raede decided. "Somebody's got to keep him in check."

"I'll ruin your face," Gero retaliated.

Tuna shrugged in defeat. "I guess that there's no real choice. The four of us it is," she agreed.

"You don't have to go if you don't want to," Gero assured her.

"No, I really don't mind," she smiled. "So is it okay with you, Ziggy?"

"I see no problem. The three of you have worked together before, which will undoubtedly be useful. I was wary of sending Lynn, but since you're all going I suppose it'll be alright," he analyzed.

"Great, let's get going, then," Gero decided as he headed toward the stairs.

"Hold on, Gero. We don't need to be in Frontier City until five days from now, and it only takes about half a day via train.

We should get there a bit early, but there's no point in setting out tonight," Tuna reasoned.

"Besides, I'll want you to look over the written request and make sure that you don't have any questions about it before you take off," Ziggy pointed out.

Otto stood up, walked over to the pantry and plucked out a bag of chips. "All of that can wait until later though, right? I feel like catching up with everybody. How about we kick off the games?" he proposed.

Ziggy rolled up the papers and handed them over to Raede. "Otto's right. I'll give the four of you time to look these over. If you have any questions, make sure you ask by tomorrow. I expect you to be on your way out no later than two days from now," he announced. "Otto, count me in for the games. With Matilda out of town, maybe they'll actually be fair."

"You can't deem a game unfair just because someone can always beats you at it," Cyrus argued.

"I don't care," Ziggy grumbled. "There's no way that old hag can be as good as she is."

"What do we do about Wokki?" Piper asked. "I'd feel bad waking him up, but what if he needs to get home?"

"Does anybody here actually know where he lives?" Ivy posed. Nobody answered. "We can just leave him be. When he wakes up, we'll see if he needs any help."

Tuna quickly made her way over to the game table. She had every intention of staying up as late as the festivities lasted. It would be nice learning more about her various associates. Besides, she was still somewhat intimidated by being alone with Lynn.

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"This is boring!" Gero complained. They were en route to Frontier City, two days having passed. Everybody except for the frogman was deeply engrossed in the books they had purchased from Gage.

"Read a book, then," Tuna suggested.

Gero didn't feel like doing that. In actuality, the books were making him more bored since they meant nobody was talking to him. And he himself wasn't a fan of reading. "I don't want to," he sulked.

“Or you can’t,” Raede snipped.

“I can read just fine,” Gero spat. “It just isn’t interesting to me.”

“Is that so?” Tuna replied off-handedly. Neither she nor the others followed up.

“You weren’t even listening to me, were you?!” Gero shouted.

“If it’s bugging you that much, we can stop in the next town,” Raede offered. “We’ve certainly got time.”

“Alright,” Gero cheered. “What can I do in the meantime, though?”

“Read a book,” Tuna repeated inattentively.

Gero frowned and glanced at the book that Tuna had traded him, *Burrito Armageddon*. It sounded interesting, but he couldn’t find the drive to start it. “Maybe later,” he mumbled.

The frogman literally jumped out of his seat when they reached the next town, a small one known as Gizan. “Let’s go,” he cheered excitedly.

“It’s about noon,” Raede observed. “We might as well get some lunch while we’re here, too.”

“Alright!” Gero celebrated as he excitedly motioned for the others to get going.

Since the town was so little, it took no time at all to get past the platform. “Excuse me,” Tuna called to a local. “Could you tell us about any good places to eat?”

The local needed no time to think it over. “The only sort of restaurant in town is Grilly’s Place. Just follow the main path through the park,” he informed them.

“Thanks,” Tuna replied. She led the way out of the station and into the park.

“I’m impressed,” Raede admitted. “This is a really nice park.”

“Who cares? I want food in my stomach as soon as possible,” Gero stated.

“It is quite cozy,” Tuna agreed.

Gero yawned disinterestedly. He was no more concerned over a well-kept park than he was about reading. He glanced toward Lynn, who had thus far remained silent on the matter.

Oddly enough though, she had disappeared. “Lynn?” he called out.

“I’m over here,” she responded. They traced her to a tree several meters off the main path.

“What are you doing over there?” Tuna queried.

“There’s an unusual creature resting here,” she answered. The others wasted no time in joining her.

“What is it?” Tuna pondered.

“I’m not sure,” Gero admitted.

It was a fuzzy little animal that had curled up into a ball and fallen asleep. There appeared to be a small bag lying next to it, as well as some unusual device. “It’s a young brockan,” Raede deduced.

“Really?” Tuna gasped. “I suppose I’ve never seen one that wasn’t already an adult. I wonder why he’s all on his own.”

“Maybe he was abandoned,” Raede hypothesized.

“Oh!” Tuna squealed. She petted the creature’s smooth fur. “Who would abandon someone like him? He’s so adorable.”

The brockan unconsciously turned its head toward Tuna’s invasive arm and clamped down. With the creature’s teeth sinking into her arm, Tuna went pale and then leaped up in pain. “Ouch!” she shrieked. In her panic, she began to swing her arm into the nearby tree in an attempt to knock the brockan off. “Get it off! Get it off! Get it off!” she squealed.

Not surprisingly, being beaten against a tree managed to wake up the brockan, who quickly released his teeth and thudded to the ground. He stared at the four humans in front of him, quaking in fright. Suddenly he scooped up his supplies and raced behind a nearby tree.

“Nice going, Tuna,” Gero berated her. “Now you scared him away!”

“What was I supposed to do? He was gnawing on my arm!” she yelled back.

“Making a scene about it won’t make him come out,” Raede interjected. They nodded in agreement and stood silently, waiting in hopes that the brockan would show himself. Sure enough, the quiet lulled him enough to peek his head out from behind the tree.

“Maybe we could cook him,” Lynn plotted.

Wasting no time at all, the brockan began to sprint away from them. “What was that about?” Tuna cried at Lynn. Gero hastily shed his gloves and boots and left them sitting on the sidewalk. “What are you doing?” Tuna gasped.

“I’m going to catch him,” Gero announced.

“Do you really think you should be taking those off in the middle of town?” Tuna wailed.

“Well, I doubt I could catch him with them on,” Gero replied as he took off after the brockan.

“Right, let’s go,” Raede decided as he took off in the same direction. Lynn followed behind him, leaving Tuna standing by herself, dazed.

Tuna felt a great deal of pity for the poor brockan. “Why can’t we just leave him be?” she asked herself.

Although the brockan had gotten a head start, Gero was quickly closing in on him. It helped greatly to be rid of his inhibiting boots. The two of them attracted quite a few curious eyes. The brockan glanced back repeatedly to gauge the distance between them. A straight run was clearly to his disadvantage, so he began to weave in between buildings. Hopefully his small body would allow him to easily move through areas that would give the enemy trouble. It was indeed quite effective, and it seemed as if he might get away.

Emerging from an alley, the brockan was quickly spotted by Raede, who had circled around in an attempt to corner him. The brockan turned in the other direction with Raede hot on his feet. By now he had shifted to using all four of his feet to run, which gave him greater speed in open stretches like this.

To his dismay, another figure appeared in front of him. Lynn used her kunai to swing onto the branch of a tree directly in his path. By now, Gero had made his way onto the street, as well, and was fast approaching. The brockan turned in the only unblocked direction, which took him across a short bridge. Lynn and Raede continued to pursue him, but by now Gero had again taken the lead.

The brockan assessed the situation in his head. He was clearly faster than the big man and the woman. If he could stop the frog creature from chasing him, then his chances of survival would go up sharply. He switched to running on his hind legs and

pulled out the device that had been lying next to his bag. This consisted of three balls tied together by a rope. The brockan swung the device around for a few seconds before casting the entire apparatus back at the frog person.

Gero was caught completely off guard and left with little time to react. The weapon swung around his legs and managed to instantly trip him up. He immediately set about unwinding the ropes from around his legs, but it was relatively pointless considering how fast the brockan was fleeing. Raede and Lynn rushed past him. By the time he managed to get himself free, he noticed that he was sitting right in front of Grilly's Place, though it was evidently the back side of it. He shrugged and stepped inside. The chase had rendered him even hungrier than before.

The pursuit had weaved them through much of the town. Fortunately for the brockan, he had secured quite a gap on his remaining foes. He was almost to the edge of town. Once back in the wilderness, a brockan could outpace a human without breaking a sweat. The line of trees before him was the sanctuary that he needed to reach. Another factor worked to his advantage: a train was approaching and the tracks were right before the forest. He could easily make it past in time, but the humans would have to be complete fools to attempt it. This would give him a very effective wall to keep them at bay.

He jumped onto the dirt and then onto the tracks. As he leaped forward, he discovered that one of his hind paws had gotten wedged beneath the tracks. The brockan tugged on his leg in desperation, but couldn't free his paw. The train was quickly approaching.

Shockingly enough, the large man was now descending upon him. What was wrong with this human? What good would catching him do if he was taken out by the train, as well?

Raede firmly grabbed onto the brockan's arms, interrupting the creature from trying to free himself. He then fired off his entire air supply through his back vents. Fortunately, the force this provided was enough to yank the brockan's paw free and blow them both the short distance they needed to get clear of the train. It rushed by mere moments after they skidded to the soil.

The two of them were still panting heavily by the time the train came to a halt and Lynn was able to safely slip between the

coaches. The brockan was staring at Raede with a combined sense of befuddlement and awe. Although the large man had been chasing him all over town, he had taken a fantastic risk to save his life.

“Are you both alright?” Lynn inquired. She obviously hoped they were, but was perhaps a tad less concerned about the close call than she should have been.

“I’m fine. What about you?” Raede panted, facing the brockan.

He was still terrified, both from the train and his two pursuers, but he managed to sputter out a reply. “Y-yeah,” he nodded.

“That’s a relief,” Raede grinned. “So, how do you feel about some dinner, our treat?”

“D-dinner? I thought that you wanted to eat *me*,” the brockan quivered.

“I sort of still do,” Lynn confessed.

Tuna emerged upon the scene and promptly gave Lynn a light, disciplinary tap on the head. “No. Bad Lynn,” she chided.

“I didn’t know that you were chasing him, too,” Raede admitted.

“I wasn’t. I managed to catch a few glimpses of you, though, and got a bit worried when you all began to run in front of a train. What’s wrong with you?!” Tuna cried.

“Sorry about that,” Raede laughed. “This little guy got stuck, though, so I had to get in there and save his hide.” Tuna became much more understanding with this revelation. “We were just about to head back into town and get some dinner for this guy, right?”

The brockan clearly was terrified by the idea. His fear of disobeying these clearly dangerous humans superseded that though. He still didn’t understand what exactly they were thinking, so the safest thing would be to not disagree with them. “R-right,” he wheezed.

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“Why are you already here?” Tuna questioned Gero.

He was seated in a booth, gnawing away at a large plate of ribs.



“Hey, guys! I wound up next to the restaurant so I thought I’d grab some food. Come sit down, there’s plenty of room,” he invited.

“You have a horrible attention span,” she sighed as she took her seat. The brockan was hiding nervously behind a nearby chair. “Come on over,” she encouraged him.

He stepped forward slowly, as if he expected them to attack at any moment. Finally, he spotted his weapon lying down by Gero’s feet. “Aw! My bolas!” he cried as he dashed to retrieve it.

Raede waited until the little guy had a hold of his weapon and then heaved him up into the booth. “Bolas? What exactly is that?” he inquired.

“Um, well...it’s what I use when I need to hunt or fight something,” the brockan anxiously replied. “You throw it at your enemy and the balls cause it to wrap around whatever they hit.”

“That’s pretty nifty,” Raede noted. “Wouldn’t you end up having to replace it quite often, though?”

The brockan seemed to be inadvertently curling back into a ball as he spoke. “Th-that happens, sometimes. I can use the balls to whack people, too, so I can hold onto it,” he sputtered.

A waiter came by and Tuna whispered for him to bring four additional plates over. “So then, I suppose we should apologize for pestering you like we did,” she decided.

“Yeah, I suppose I shouldn’t have raced after you like that,” Gero admitted. “It just seemed fun, considering how fast you were bolting away.”

“By the way,” Tuna interjected, “I brought your boots and gloves in. How did you manage to get in here and served without anybody noticing your limbs?”

“I don’t know. Maybe everybody’s just focused on eating,” he theorized.

“Either that or they’re too scared to ask,” Tuna contemplated.

“I’m sorry, too, just so you know,” Raede added.

“As am I,” Lynn supplemented. “I’d never met a brockan before, so I was unaware that it was inappropriate to try and eat one. Thank you for explaining that to me, Tuna.”

“No problem,” Tuna awkwardly smiled. Even with Lynn’s unusual past, it seemed a bit crude for Lynn to have considered

such a course of action. As long as she knew better now, though, there was no reason to worry.

“O-okay,” the brockan trembled. He didn’t dare turn down any of their apologies.

“Anyway, I’m Tuna. This is Gero, that’s Lynn, and he’s Raede,” Tuna introduced in turn. “What’s your name?”

“Sony,” he answered. “Sony Embaar.”

“Pleased to meet you, Sony,” Tuna grinned, offering up her hand. He cautiously accepted it, but pulled away quickly. “So what were you doing here all by yourself? Aren’t you really young to be on your own?”

“Well, uh, I’m eleven years old,” he informed them.

“Only eleven?” Tuna cried.

“Brockans mature faster than humans do in most regards,” Raede reminded her. “In terms of maturation, that’d put him around the same age as a fifteen-year old human. He just seems younger because he’s so terrified of us.”

“I’m not scared of you,” Sony protested.

“Then stop quaking and start eating something,” Raede suggested.

“Fine,” Sony huffed as he grabbed a rib and started gnawing on it. As he was still growing, he was only about a meter tall. He had a rich brown coat and green eyes. He was dressed quite lightly compared to everyone else, though this was common among brockans. Since they already had the warmth of fur, there wasn’t much need for heavy clothing.

“You never said why you were here,” Tuna said after a short while. Since brockan culture was clan-oriented, it wasn’t common for them to venture out on their own, especially at Sony’s age. Of course, they were also very far from Skar, so it was quite possible that Sony had actually grown up in Perenos, unusual as it would be.

“I left Skar a few months ago,” Sony finally replied. “I’m searching for a very rare variety of plant.”

“A plant?” Lynn repeated.

Sony nodded in confirmation. “There’s an illness that afflicts us brockans, and I want to cure it. As far as we know, the only way to do so is with this really rare plant, but nobody knows where it is. I figured since nobody had ever found it in Skar, I’d

look in Perenos. Since coming here, though, I haven't been able to find anything."

"That's quite courageous of you to venture out on your own at such an age," Raede observed.

"And for such a noble cause," Tuna added.

Sony's face scrunched up in embarrassment. Despite his general fear of these people, he couldn't help but feel appreciative of the compliments. "I don't really know where I'm looking, though. There aren't any solid leads on where the plant might be, or if it even exists," he admitted. "I don't really know where to look next."

Gero finished chugging his soda down and let out a loud belch. "That was a good meal," he cheered.

"Evidently," Tuna responded. She would have chastised him for his poor manners, but had learned that it was a pointless endeavor.

"Alright then, I've decided," Gero added as he wiped the barbeque sauce off of his face. "Sony, you should join us."

## Chapter 17

### The Fifth One

“What are you talking about?” Tuna exclaimed.

“Join you?” Sony repeated confusedly.

“Why not?” Gero posed. “He doesn’t know where he should be looking, and he’d get to cover a lot of area if he joined the syndicate. Besides, he seems like he’d be fun to have around.”

“Fun?” Sony gasped. “I’ve been trembling in fear ever since I met the four of you. Why do you think it’d be fun?”

“I just think you’re a fun guy,” Gero shrugged.

“You could at least tell him what we do before asking him to join,” Raede reasoned.

Sony glared at them in anticipation. “Well, what do you do?” he insisted.

“We’re mercenaries for the Pondswagger Syndicate,” Raede answered.

“So what do you say?” Gero added. “Do you think you’re interested at all?”

Sony set down the rib and wiped his paws. These people woke him up, chased him all over town, and now wanted him to join their criminal organization? It was obvious to him what kind of people they were. They were dangerous; he had seen that. In all likelihood, they had merely treated him to dinner for the purpose of recruiting him. He had no intention of falling into such a rough crowd, though.

“Y-you’re all mean and dangerous people!” he cried. “Especially you, with the freaky frog parts. Thanks for saving me.” He turned around and sprinted toward the door. The more distance he could put between himself and them, the better off he’d be.

“What a peculiar little brockan. He accuses us of being bad people, and then thanks us before he storms off,” Raede laughed to himself.

Tuna wasn’t content leaving it at that. “Excuse me,” she whispered as she slipped out after Sony. The others continued their meal.

She quickly located the brockan inside the park, where he was curled up on a tree branch, hiding. It was easy enough for her to get directly under the branch. “Are you up there, Sony?” she called out.

The brockan poked his eyes down at her and then pulled back defensively. He was prepared to flee at the slightest provocation. “What do you want now?” he demanded.

“Just to talk,” she replied. Since Sony had not scrambled away, she sat down as a sign that she had no intention of pursuing him. Even so, he made no effort to respond to her.

“First of all, I know that because we’re mercenaries, you believe that we’re a bad crowd. I don’t think we are, though. We aren’t the type of people that would accept a job we didn’t believe in. Second, none of us are going to force you to join the syndicate. Gero gets ahead of himself sometimes. That’s part of the reason he took after you earlier. He can be a real bonehead,” she said.

“All three of them can get like that, actually. It’s troublesome, but that’s just who they are. Really, though, it was my fault about what happened earlier. I shouldn’t have disturbed you while you were sleeping, and I definitely shouldn’t have hit you against the tree like that,” she added. “I’m really sorry.”

“You already apologized,” Sony reminded her from the safety of his branch.

“Yeah, I guess I did,” she realized. “It’s nice here in the park. Is this what it’s like back where you came from?”

He didn’t answer.

“Listen, I don’t blame you for being scared of us. You’re in a foreign land, all alone, and we certainly weren’t gentle with you. You can do whatever you want and I won’t mind, but there is one thing that I have a gripe about,” she declared. “You said that Gero had ‘freaky frog parts.’ I know Gero doesn’t mind it himself, but I’ve got a real problem with people thinking less of him because of that. He’s a good person, and he doesn’t deserve the flak he gets over his limbs.

“I want you to apologize to Gero for what you said. After that, you can do whatever you want,” she announced. Although she wasn’t looking up at him, she could hear Sony shuffling about on the branch.

“None of them will try anything?” he asked. He didn’t consider the possibility that she was lying to him. Perhaps he could tell that she was being sincere. Ultimately, Tuna didn’t really care why he was choosing to trust her.

“If they do, I’ll give them all a good thwacking,” she promised.

“Alright,” he conceded. He slowly made his way back the ground and walked over to her.

She smiled contentedly and stood up. “Right, let’s head back, then.”

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“How many of these ribs do we get?” Lynn asked her two remaining associates.

“As many as we can eat. They’re endless,” Raede answered.

“I don’t understand. How can they be endless?” she demanded. “Surely there is a limit to how many they can produce.”

“They aren’t being completely literal,” Raede explained. “It’s called ‘endless’ because there’s no fixed number to how many someone is allowed to consume. There’s obviously a limit to how much our bodies can take in, though. It’s just a food service term.”

Lynn continued to stare at him as she finished off her latest rib. Everything he had said was complete nonsense to her. “That seems foolish to me,” she proclaimed.

“Who cares whether it’s foolish or not? It’s delicious and filling,” Gero wished. “Oh, Tuna’s back.”

Tuna planted herself in the booth and let Sony step forward. “Sony has something he’d like to say to you, Gero,” she announced.

The brockan shifted clumsily, but finally spit it out. “I’m sorry that I insulted your arms and legs earlier,” he apologized, bowing humbly.

Gero was clearly startled by the repentant gesture. “Huh? What are you worrying about that for? Hurry up and finish your ribs,” he insisted.

“Right,” Sony nodded, climbing into his seat to continue his meal.

“Hey, how come we don’t get an apology?” Raede wondered. “He called us mean, too.”

He clearly wasn’t being serious but Tuna didn’t want him to muddy up a matter that was finally closed. “Don’t be such a baby,” she chided him.

“Sorry,” Sony offered as he chomped down into his meat.

“Tuna, would you mind informing me as to why they call it ‘endless’ ribs? Raede tried to explain it to me, but was quite ineffectual,” Lynn told her.

“Um, okay...” Tuna hesitantly agreed.

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“Is he still following us?” Raede wondered.

Tuna glanced behind them to catch a glimpse of Sony before he ducked behind a sign. Upon finishing lunch, they had allegedly gone their separate ways. Before too long, though, the four mercenaries noticed that Sony was following them from a distance.

“Yeah,” she confirmed. “I wonder why he’s trying to be so secretive about it, though.”

“Maybe he wants to join us, after all,” Gero theorized.

“Well, he’d better figure that out soon, then,” Raede pointed out. They had decided their rest was sufficient and that they would take the next train south.

Sony stepped out from behind the sign and resumed his careful tracking of the four mercenaries. They were a peculiar bunch and, despite their terrifying behavior, had actually been quite entertaining. He wanted to see what they were going to do next. Suddenly, the large man began to turn around. Sony leaped to the only available cover he could locate, which happened to be a small crate. “That was close,” he whispered to himself.

“It appears that the train is already here,” Lynn noted as they stepped into the station.

“We’d better hurry,” Raede decided as he raced toward the line.

“You guys don’t even want to give him a few minutes?” Tuna gasped.

“If he doesn’t come, then he doesn’t come,” Gero shrugged. Tuna languidly followed after them. She felt that they were being

a little too indifferent on the matter, but there was nothing she could do about that.

From behind one of the station's benches, Sony observed the mercenaries' actions. "They're leaving," he noted. This was a good thing, he supposed. If they weren't in the same town as him, then there was no way that they could torment him further. Admittedly, though, they had been nice tormentors.

He shook his head until his senses came back to him. His entire reason for coming to Perenos was to help his people. It was foolish to get distracted by such silly thoughts. Unfortunately, he had no idea where to look. Perhaps the plant he sought wasn't actually in Perenos. It could be located in Thousand Tears or Zentarak. Maybe he was wasting his time here.

A tall man stopped behind Sony and bent over. It seemed curious that this young brockan would be gazing so intently at the trains from behind a bench.

Sony placed his paw on his chin, still deep in thought. He hadn't been in Perenos very long, and the plant surely wouldn't be easy to find. It would be childish to give up on it so quickly. That didn't change the fact that he had no leads, though. Perhaps they had a point. Following them would certainly bring him into locations he wouldn't otherwise think to explore. Eventually he'd need a source of income, as well. He would eventually need a new source of income, after all. It was irrational to consider joining these people, though. They were a dangerous group.

The tall man finally had to inquire. "What are you staring at?" he asked.

The brockan leaped up, startled by the stranger's voice. "Wuuuaaa!" he yelped as he sprinted across the platform to where the station worker was letting passengers on. He didn't care to look back; he just knew that he'd be safe if he could get on the train. He threw his train card at the man and leaped into the nearest coach.

"Hold up, sir! You'll be needing this back," the worker called after the brockan.

Back by the bench, the tall man scratched his head in confusion. "Did I say something wrong?" he pondered.

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The train was already bustling down the tracks toward Frontier City. Sony was stumbling through the coaches, trying to decide what to do. He hadn't planned on leaving Gizan yet, but he had to get away from that belligerent stranger. Now he had to determine what stop he would get off at, but he was completely clueless as to where he should go.

As he stepped into the next coach, he spotted the mercenaries sitting around the middle. He immediately plunged into the nearest empty group of seats, masterfully avoiding being seen. Once he was out of sight, he took a seat with his back facing the mercenaries and picked up a newspaper that had been left on another seat. By cleverly keeping his face buried in the paper, he could evade being noticed by any of them should they pass by him. It was an ingenious plan, and he commended himself for having devised it.

Truthfully, he had forgotten all about the mercenaries in his overruling fear of the monster at the train station. Perhaps if he listened carefully enough, he would be able to make out their words and determine what they were planning to do next. Unfortunately, it seemed that they weren't close enough for that to be possible.

Suddenly he heard footsteps. Somebody was approaching. If he could remain calm, they wouldn't notice him. He forced himself to think about peaceful things.

Raede came to a halt right next to Sony and stared down at the brockan. His entry into the coach had immediately caught their attention, and he was easily distinguishable from behind the newspaper. Raede could make out that it was an issue of *The Limber Gazelle*, but the stories themselves were illegible because the paper, like Sony, was shaking far too violently. Finally, Raede simply continued along his way and exited the coach.

Sony exhaled in relief and managed to steady himself once again. His camouflage strategy had proven successful. He could easily keep this up until they got off the train. Come to think of it, though, he had no idea where that would be. What had he gotten himself into?

"I can't wait to be back in Frontier City," Tuna smiled.

"You've been there before?" Lynn inquired, not bothering to look up from her book.

“Yup. It was where I first met Gero,” Tuna recalled.

The frogman glanced at her curiously. Even he found it hard to believe how much Tuna had evolved since their first meeting. Her personality hadn't really changed, but she was stronger now. She wasn't overwhelmed by risky missions and hectic situations. On top of that, their current mission had a lot of potential danger involved. Tuna didn't seem concerned by it, though. She had grown. “Yeah, she got caught up with a bunch of glaze traffickers,” he laughed.

Tuna nodded in agreement. “I had it completely under control,” she insisted.

“Yeah right,” he disagreed. “Why am I suddenly hungry for donuts?”

“Glazed donuts?” she queried.

His face lit up, impressed at her powers of divination. “That's right. How did you know?” he demanded.

“Lucky guess,” she scoffed. “I wish Sony would just come over and say hello.”

“I'm sure that he'll get around to it,” Gero grinned.

“I can bring him over here if you want,” Lynn offered. She said it gently, but Tuna had a subtle suspicion that her companion would be as forceful as necessary.

“No, we really ought to let him do it on his own,” Tuna noted. She observed as Raede made his return into their coach, promptly followed by the sound of a shaking newspaper. Again, he stopped quite close to Sony, but then continued on his way to the others.

“He'll come around soon,” Raede informed them.

“What makes you say that?” Tuna asked.

Raede pulled his arm out from behind his back to reveal the brockan's bolas. “I swiped it just now. He's surprisingly oblivious when he's frightened,” he chuckled.

“Robbing him is obviously the best way to get him to trust us,” she stated sarcastically.

“It was an accident,” Raede insisted as he lay the bolas down in the aisle next to them.

“I don't see why we always have to do things so boorishly,” she sighed.

Despite Raede's intention to speed things along, it took Sony several minutes to even notice that his bolas was missing. He tossed the newspaper down and flashed his eyes over the surrounding seats. His backpack was still lying beside him, and his bolas had been right next to it.

"Where'd it go?" he questioned himself. He hopped out of his seat and checked below to see if they had rolled away and, sure enough, succeeded in finding it. They were right next to the mercenaries. "How unlucky," he lamented.

He couldn't very well leave it lying there. Someone could end up stealing it, after all. At the same time, he didn't want to reveal himself to the mercenaries. Clearly there was only one solution to this problem, and that was to race by them and out of the coach before they knew what was going on. He threw on his backpack and thrust himself down the aisle. As he whizzed by, he grabbed hold of the bolas with his left paw. All he had to do now was make it outside.

Raede lifted up his arm, from which was the brockan was hanging. Sony nervously turned his gaze toward his captor.

"Don't be a stranger," Raede laughed.

"Please don't eat me!" Sony wailed.

"We already told you that we have no intention of eating you," Tuna reminded him.

"Oh, Tuna, I have a question," Lynn suddenly remembered.

"Yeah?" Tuna asked.

"Is it alright if we skin brockans for clothing?" Lynn posed. Sony's face turned pale and his jaw drooped.

"No! Nothing that involves killing him is okay, for that matter," Tuna clarified. "Just treat brockans and everything else that talks like you would treat humans."

"So did you decide to join us yet, Sony?" Gero asked cheerfully.

"I'll answer if you put me down," Sony offered.

"Are you going to run away if I put you down?" Raede checked.

"Yes," Sony sobbed.

Gero was clearly confounded that Sony didn't want to join them. "Why are you still scared of us?" he queried. "I thought we

had a lot of fun back in Gizan, especially once you calmed down and ate lunch with us.”

“I’m scared of you because you’re scary people. That’s all,” Sony reasoned.

The frogman squinted at the brockan curiously. “That’s dumb. Friends shouldn’t be scared of one another,” he announced.

For whatever reason, Sony was paralyzed by what Gero had just muttered. “What did you say?” he blubbered.

Gero beamed amusedly and stood up between the seats. “I said that you’re our friend!” he shouted so that it could be heard throughout the entire coach.

Raede lowered Sony down to the floor, giving him an opportunity to finally flee. He didn’t do that, though. Instead, he stared at Gero intently. Using his right paw, he wiped the tears off his face so that he could see again. “Right,” he said as firmly as he could. “Where are we off to, then?”

“You’re joining us?!” Tuna cried happily. Sony nodded confidently; he was done crying, for now.

“Alright!” Gero yelled as he jumped excitedly into the aisle. “I knew you’d come around.”

“We’re heading to Frontier City at the moment. There’s a pretty big job that we need to take care of there,” Raede informed him.

“Oh, okay,” Sony acknowledged.

Lynn bowed down from her seat apologetically. “I’m sorry that I threatened to cut apart your flesh,” she offered.

Both Tuna and Sony cringed at the apology. It was nice that Lynn was remorseful, but she didn’t have to be so grotesque about it.

“D-don’t worry about it,” Sony laughed timidly.

It seemed a tad odd to Tuna how suddenly Sony had been swayed by Gero’s words. Had the pronouncement of a friendship really meant so much to the brockan that he was willing to look past his immense fear? Now wasn’t the time to ask him about it, though. The atmosphere had grown too cheerful for that.

Sony was chattering with Gero and Raede, while Lynn listened in on their conversation. It had been quite an easy transformation once he decided that he wasn’t afraid of them

anymore. He didn't tell any of them so, but he'd never really had real friends before. His youth hadn't exactly been a rosy one. Talking with his new companions created a snug feeling.

"So...what exactly does a mercenary do?" he asked. "I don't think we had any back in Skar."

"We eat pie and climb mountains and beat up bad guys and all sorts of fun stuff," Gero cheered.

"Wow!" Sony gasped, instantly infatuated with the prospect. Tuna considered chiding Gero for sugar-coating his description of their line of work, but decided to let it slide.

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Several hours passed and almost everyone had zonked out. It was only nine o'clock or so, but sitting in a train coach all day was quite draining. They had set out in the late morning and spent an hour in Gizan, so they were about three hours from Frontier City, according to Tuna's calculations.

Sure enough, she had been the only one unable to teeter off. It was a rare blessing for her to actually fall asleep quickly, as she was well aware. As she gazed through the windows and up at the sky, she noticed that all three moons were visible. Tyrilus and Nelus were both nearly full. The green moon's cycle didn't take as long as its blue sister's did. Lastly, just a sliver of Saralus was remaining. It had the slowest cycle of the three. It wasn't rare to see all three of them at once, but it was still a nice sight. Then again, her happiness was more likely attributable to other matters.

She turned her gaze back to her four companions. Lynn had laid herself out on the opposite seats, but the three guys were sprawled indiscriminately about the coach. Even in the mess they had generated, Sony was curled up into a fuzzy ball. Tuna could vaguely make out a smile on his mostly hidden face. She found herself smiling as well. As much trouble as they were, she was glad to have them with her.

She and Gero had been through so much together in such a brief period of time that she felt as if their friendship was already a long-standing one. Raede had been just as amazing since they'd met. Even Lynn's blaring pragmatism was starting to grow on her. Hopefully Sony would prove to be a worthwhile companion, as well.

Her back suddenly felt stiff, and she decided to step out for a while. She agilely slipped out of the coach. The click of the door closing caused Gero to snap awake. He glanced about drowsily and realized that Tuna wasn't with the rest of them. Curious, he pulled himself up and went searching for her.

The connection between the coaches was well covered with high railings, so she was perfectly safe sitting outside. The cool night air against her skin worked wonders at making her feel awake. She would never get to sleep now. There were simply too many butterflies in her stomach.

"What are you doing out here?" Gero asked sleepily as he peeled open the door.

"Not much," she assured him. "Just getting some fresh air."

He leaned against the door and yawned into his hand. Even as sleepy as he was, he could discern that Tuna was in a particularly good mood. "Why have you been acting so weirdly lately?" he inquired.

"Have I?" she wondered. "Sorry, I didn't mean to."

"No, it's not a bad kind of weird. You just seem unusually happy," he clarified.

Tuna shrugged, not entirely sure how to explain. "I am really happy," she confirmed. "Life's just really good right now."

He didn't quite follow what she meant. Since she was obviously okay, though, he figured he'd try to go back to sleep. "Okay then, if you're alright then I'm going to head back in," he told her.

"Hold on a moment, Gero," she requested.

"Hmm?" he grunted.

"There's a story I want to tell you, while everybody else is still asleep," she explained. "Are you up for that?"

He hardly thought that now was a fitting storytelling time, but he was willing to stay. "Yeah, sure," he agreed.

She motioned for him to sit down. "The story goes back quite a few years," she smiled, "to when I was still living at home."

## Chapter 18

### Tuna's Past: Star Showers

A woman in her early thirties stood patiently at the end of a driveway. She came out there almost every day in the mid-afternoon to wait for someone. Some saw the ritual as tedious, but it was the highlight of her day. Finally she heard the footsteps indicating the other person's arrival from a nearby row of trees.

Tuna trudged unenthusiastically along the road, not bothering to look up. She was thirteen years old and enrolled in a nearby public school, which she was making her way back from. Her backpack felt heavy, as it usually did, but that wasn't what irritated her.

As she turned the corner, she cast her gaze upward toward the woman waiting for her.

"Mom!" she cheered as she galloped gleefully into her mother's arms.

The woman bent over so that she could embrace her daughter, who in turn clutched her long, black hair affectionately.

"How was school today, Tuna?" she asked. Tuna pulled back, letting her face answer for her. "That bad, huh?"

"I hate school," Tuna spat grumpily.

Her mom stood back up led the way into their house. They lived on a large, flat estate with a well-groomed lawn. Their house was actually a three-story mansion, and the envy of everyone who saw it. They lived a short distance outside of Salacia, a moderately sized town located near the western coast of Perenos.

"You shouldn't think that way," Tuna's mom advised. "How are you supposed to enjoy something if you keep telling yourself that you hate it?"

"I don't care. It's too hard and everybody's a jerk," Tuna complained.

Her mother's concern was written all over her face. "I know that it's tough, but have you even tried to make friends with any of the other students?" she inquired.

“Why should I?” Tuna challenged. “They’re all a bunch of jerks. Well, all of them except Bradley.”

“Bradley?” her mom repeated playfully. “Who’s that, your boyfriend?”

Tuna scrunched her face up defiantly. “Mom! He’s just a boy,” she insisted.

“My daughter’s finally gotten her first crush,” Tuna’s mom cheered, much to the little girl’s ire.

“Can we talk about something else?” Tuna requested.

“Like what?” her mother asked.

Tuna’s smile returned as the subject changed. “I want to go visit Sea’s End,” she declared.

“Sea’s End? That’s a really dangerous place, Tuna. Why do you want to go there?” Tuna’s mother queried.

“It looks really, really cool!” Tuna explained. “We saw pictures of it in class today, but I want to see it for real. My teacher said that there’s one safe place to look at it. It’s called Newgate.”

“Newgate?” her mother repeated. “You mean the one point where travel between the east and west hemispheres is safe?”

“Yeah! Can we go see it?” Tuna beseeched her mother.

“Sure thing, but not until you finish school,” she stipulated. “You really like sightseeing, don’t you?”

“Yup!” Tuna confirmed proudly.

They came to the main entrance of the mansion. Its grandiose shadow left them completely in the shade as they made their way inside. They were immediately met by a distinguished, bearded man in his late forties. The gentleman appeared quite upset.

“Chelsea, where in blazes have you been?” he demanded.

“I went out to wait for Tuna. I always do that at this time of day,” Tuna’s mother reminded him.

“Oh, very well. Listen, I have important guests coming over in an hour and I need you to assist in keeping them entertained. Hurry and clean yourself up before they arrive,” he directed.

Chelsea made for the central banister that led up to her room on the second floor. “Yes, Reginald,” she nodded.



Reginald turned his attention toward his daughter. “Well, Tuna, I trust you did well in school today. How did that history exam turn out?” he queried.

She nervously averted her eyes before answering him. “I got an eighty-five on it,” she responded.

Her father was clearly frustrated by her performance; she could feel the weight of his eyes bearing down on her. He couldn’t be bothered to lecture her about it now, though. “I see. Well, then you’d best get to your homework. Please refrain from using the main floor until my guests leave,” he instructed her.

“Yes, Father,” she agreed as she hurried to the banister. She made her way out of his sight as quickly as she could. As much as she detested homework, it was better than enduring her father’s constant air of disappointment.

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“Finally done!” Tuna cheered. She slammed the textbook shut and glanced at the clock. It was almost time for bed already. Why did homework always take her so long? The teacher always said that it shouldn’t take more than two hours on any given night, but she consistently spent at least four. Even so, she could still only manage average grades.

She shook her head and pulled out some spare paper, on which she began to doodle. The images of Sea’s End were still fresh in her mind, so she felt as if she could replicate them. Then she could use them to remind herself of what she had to look forward to. After a few minutes, she finished one and examined the results of her labor. It wasn’t anything spectacular, but it would serve its purpose. She left it on her desk and started toward her bookshelf. There was one story in particular that she had been reading fervently over the past week. Before she made it to the bookshelf, though, there was a knock on the door. “Come in,” she hesitantly called out.

Her heart sank a little as Reginald swung the door open. “Tuna, we need to talk about your grades,” he began. “Sit down.” How many times had they had this discussion? It was as if he thought lecturing her about it one more time would actually cause her to do better in school. “Why don’t you take your education seriously?”

“I do,” she insisted.

“Clearly you don’t,” he countered, picking up the drawing of Sea’s End she had just made. “Is stuff like this what you keep wasting your time on?”

“I finished all of my homework first,” she explained.

“You could still be studying,” he replied dryly. He crumpled up the drawing and tossed it into the trash. “I don’t know what you expect to do with mediocre grades. If you aren’t at the top of your class, then you’ll never get into business school and you won’t have any idea what to do with our assets.”

She was sick of listening to these words time and time again. It was no use arguing with him, though; she had learned that much.

“I don’t know where you got it in your head that being an heiress is a free ride, because it isn’t,” he insisted. He walked back to the door and cast her one final glance. “I expect you to shape up.”

Tuna flipped off the lights and burrowed under her sheets. She didn’t bother to change into her pajamas or brush her teeth. Right now she was too tired to bother with such trivial things. She was tired of spending all night on homework. She was tired of being treated poorly all day at school. She was tired of his condescending voice. She was tired of it all. She was just very, very tired.

“Tuna, are you in there?” Chelsea called from the other side of the door. After several seconds passed with no response, she cracked the door open. She couldn’t make out the lump on the bed, but took note that the lights were already off. “I guess she’s asleep,” she whispered to herself before closing the door once again.

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Tuna glanced up at the clock. It was still ten minutes until lunch. Then it was another several hours until school was out for the day. Then it was another several hours before she completed her homework and went back to bed. She wished that she had something to look forward to, something better than a boring lunch period.

“Alright, can anybody tell me the name of our local magistrate?” the teacher asked. All of the students shuffled about in an awkward silence. Finally, Tuna raised her hand. She hated

answering questions and avoided doing so when possible, but if nobody answered the teacher, she would start lecturing the entire class about not doing their assignments. “Yes, Tuna?”

“Eldritch Larius,” she answered.

“Correct. Good job, Tuna. Now, then...” the teacher continued.

The boy sitting to Tuna’s right leaned in and bluntly whispered, “Nerd.”

“She’s not a nerd,” intervened a girl sitting behind the boy. “I’m sure that her dad’s best friends with the magistrate. She probably talks with him all the time.”

“I do not,” Tuna protested. “That question was on the homework.” There were few things, within the confines of school, which irritated her more than being defined by her father.

“You were right,” the girl admitted. “She is a nerd.”

“Is there a problem?” the teacher asked. The three of them fell silent and the teacher resumed her lesson. So long as the distraction came to a halt, she wouldn’t investigate further. Tuna didn’t dare attempt blaming the classmates irritating her, either. It wasn’t worth the verbal abuse that they’d dole out for her doing so.

For her, school was always like this. She had to try hard to excel and appease her father while not appearing too hard-working in front of the peers who chastised her for it, and for her relation to him. It was cruelly poetic that she was working hard to satisfy the person that was causing her to be teased. Soon she could at least enjoy lunch, eating a safe distance away from everyone else.

The girl leaned in and snuck another whisper to the boy. “I don’t know why she doesn’t go to private school. She’s obviously too good for our dumb-dumb school, and I’m sure she has the money to go,” she whispered.

Tuna cast yet another glance at the clock. Only eight minutes until lunch.

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Amazingly enough, Tuna finished her homework in less than three hours. Even so, she couldn’t run around and do as she pleased. Reginald would immediately send her back to studying. If he was busy, though, she could enjoy a little liberty. Her

mother would know what her father's plans for the night were, so Tuna decided to ask her.

She poked her head out and then slipped down the hall to her mother's room. Before she made it there, she was able to make out both her parents' voices coming from within. She leaned against the wall to eavesdrop. Practice had taught her that from this position she could easily hide herself once she knew a conversation was drawing to a close.

"I don't know why you won't let me help her. How often do I have anything else to do here?" Chelsea argued.

"And what would you do but distract her even more?" Reginald challenged. "If she's to grow into a proper scholar, then she must be able to function on her own."

"She's only thirteen," Chelsea protested.

"Which means that in another four years she'll be applying to business school," he concluded. "Four years is not much time at all."

"I beg to differ," Chelsea scoffed.

"This is your fault more than anyone else's. It was only due to your constant behest that I yielded and let her go to public school. Had she gone to a private one, she would have risen to the difficulty level and her grades would be a bit more acceptable. To be doing this poorly in a public school is just pitiful," Reginald reasoned.

"If she'd gone to a private school, then I would never see her," Chelsea countered. "And I'd appreciate if you didn't talk about her like that."

Reginald clearly couldn't care less about what his wife would and wouldn't appreciate. "I'll stop talking about her when she rises to a level that isn't beneath my name. She's got a long way to go for that, though, and you only exacerbate that deficiency. Sometimes I wonder why I keep you around," he seethed. "You're an even bigger piece of garbage than she's turning out to be."

He stormed out of the room and immediately caught sight of Tuna leaning against the wall. She had been too dazed by his commentary to notice that the conversation was over. All he did was stare at her, for it was obvious that she had heard what he'd said about her. After a moment, he continued past her.

Tuna slipped quietly into her mother's room. Chelsea was more furious over her encounter with her husband than anything else. Upon seeing her daughter though, she quickly calmed down. "Tuna," she gasped. "I suppose you heard that."

She nodded to confirm. "I'm sorry that I made Father yell at you," she apologized.

Chelsea swelled with sadness over her daughter's words. To think that Tuna would place the blame for this on herself was unbearable.

"No, honey, don't say that. I'm the one who made a mistake," she insisted. It was an odd thing to say, so Tuna had to assume that she meant sending her to public school. Her mother endearingly pulled her daughter in and patted her head. "Did you finish your homework yet?"

Tuna nodded. It was not as easy for her to put on a casual face in light of what had just happened.

"Good. I've got an idea for what we can do tonight, then," Chelsea smiled.

After a few minutes of preparation, the two of them were reclining in chairs on a small veranda outside of Chelsea's room. She had prepared root beer floats and they were happily sucking away at them. "Why are we outside?" Tuna asked impatiently.

"You'll see soon enough," Chelsea assured her.

Tuna sucked away at her root beer, eagerly awaiting what would happen next. Suddenly a streak of white light appeared across the black sky, then disappeared.

"What was that?" she cried.

"Tonight is one of very few in which you can see this happening. It's called a star shower," Chelsea explained. "Dozens, sometimes even hundreds, of stars fly across the sky."

"They're beautiful," Tuna smiled. She had heard about this before, but had never actually seen it.

Chelsea was content to see Tuna appreciating the sight. It felt so rare that she was able to show her daughter things like this. "You know, whenever a star falls down, it'll grant the wish of one person who is watching it," she explained.

"I'm sure, Mom," Tuna snickered.

"I'm serious! It worked the last time I wished on a star," Chelsea added.

“What did you wish for?” Tuna asked.

Chelsea glanced over at her daughter happily. “I wished for *you*,” she proclaimed.

Tuna found herself blushing, honored to have been the object of her mother’s wish. “I don’t know what to wish for, though,” she lamented.

“You don’t? Well, then, that means it’s more likely my wish will come true,” Chelsea jeered.

“What’s your wish this time?” Tuna inquired.

“I can’t tell you that. If you share your wish, then it won’t come true,” Chelsea laughed. Tuna seemed a bit disappointed with herself for wasting this opportunity by not knowing what to wish for. “Let me tell you what you need to do. Keep thinking about you most want in the world, and don’t stop thinking until you know for certain. Then, the next time you see a star fall, you’ll be sure to make your wish come true.”

The girl nodded and kept her eyes focused on the sky above. She was certainly a bewildering child. Chelsea knew very well how much her daughter wished her life were different. It struck her as odd that Tuna didn’t think to use her wish on that. No matter, Chelsea thought to herself. *Her* wish was for Tuna’s life to change for the better.

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She was finally going to do it. Watching the star shower with her mother the previous night had made her feel much better, and she felt like she could do this. Today she would finally talk to Bradley, the one kid in class that didn’t disrespect her. It was lunchtime now, and he usually sat with one close friend of his. That friend wasn’t here today, though, so it was the perfect opportunity to speak to him.

He was already sitting down as she was still going through the lunch line. She glanced down at the packages of pudding that they had been given. All that was left was butterscotch, which she didn’t care for. She was about to pass it by when she remembered that Bradley usually took butterscotch. It would help break the ice if she had something to offer him, so she set a package of it on her tray before moving along.

Once she got through the line, she slowly made her way to Bradley's table. She came to a stop just before him, and he glanced up to see what she was doing.

"Hi, Bradley," she sputtered anxiously. "They only had butterscotch pudding and I don't like it, so I was wondering if you wanted an extra one."

He mulled the matter over for a second. "N-no," he replied. "I've got enough already."

Tuna frowned in disappointment, but decided to ignore the failure. He could actually not have wanted any more pudding. "Oh, alright," she responded. "Would...would it be alright if I sat with you today?"

Bradley was obviously uncomfortable with the situation and tried not to look at her as they spoke. "I don't think that'd be a good idea," he answered.

Her heart sank a little and her palms started to sweat. "Oh. It's just that I thought you might want to be friends or something. You're the only one in class that doesn't poke fun at me," she explained.

"I know," he whispered awkwardly.

"Well why not?" she demanded. "If you don't want to talk to me, then why don't you join in, too?"

"I just don't want to hang out with rich snobs like you!" he shouted, hoping that he could ward her off.

His bluntness caused her to start trembling. She thought that this one person would be different than all everyone else. If just one person at school accepted her, then maybe she wouldn't hate it so much. He was just like all of the others, though. They all hated her. They all wished that she wasn't there.

Her tray slipped out of her hands and fell against the side of the table, causing much of her food to spill onto her before the rest cascaded to the floor. Everyone in the cafeteria was staring at her now. Their judgmental eyes were too much for her. She had to get away from them.

She whirled around and dashed straight for the nearest restroom. Once inside, she collapsed onto one of the sinks. She used her arm to wipe some of the food off of her face, but then tumbled to the floor. What was she supposed to do now? At this

point, all she could do was pray that nobody else would come into the restroom. She didn't want anyone to see her in this state.

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Several weeks passed and Tuna's life continued to devolve. With the crushing realization that she was all alone in school, her grades started to slip into the seventies. Her mother said that it was fine, that she was still doing as well as most of her classmates, but she still got a lot of heat for it from her father. Her peers all made jeers about it and her father's lectures grew worse.

Although she kept trying, she hardly cared about her grades at this point. She saw no point in doing well in school anymore. Everyone hated her no matter how well she did, so why should she bother to impress them? It was all just so pointless.

Her mother hadn't made it out to wait for her this afternoon, so she walked to the house on her own. She froze as her hand grabbed onto the door handle. Did she really want to go inside? All that awaited her was more suffering. Reginald would become more irate if she dawdled, though, so she forced herself inside. Sure enough, he was sitting there with a cross expression.

"Your grades came in the mail today, Tuna. Do you mind telling me why you're slacking off?" he demanded. Despite throwing out a question, he gave her no time to answer. "Just because something is average for the rest of the world doesn't mean it's acceptable for you. If you're going to be so difficult about everything, then I might as well write you out of my will right now. I don't intend to leave anything to such a worthless child."

Tuna made no effort to retaliate. He was correct, after all. She couldn't do anything right, no matter how hard she tried. Her classmates hated her, her father hated her, and she hated herself. She didn't deserve to live in such a nice house and to eat such nice food and to have such a nice mother. Her very existence was a blight upon the world.

At some point Reginald must have finished his rant, because when she actually drifted back into a mindful state, he had disappeared. Her backpack was heavy as ever, so she needed to get upstairs and begin her homework right away. If she didn't get started soon, she wouldn't finish it in time. She took her first step



up the banister and felt the weight of a punishing headache hit her. This wasn't good; the hours of work ahead of her would be pure torture with a headache.

Finally she forced herself up another step, and then another. About halfway up the banister, she felt her left leg go numb and she buckled under her own weight. For some reason, she was panting. Her chest hurt, too. She felt like she was breaking.

After a few arduous minutes, she made it to the second floor. She slung off her backpack and left it lying there. The weight was too much to bear anymore. Even her skin felt heavy. She didn't want to stay here anymore. This level was suffocating her.

Pushing herself forward, she managed to make her way up to the third floor, and then onto the roof. As she emerged outside, she took a deep breath. The free air was a relief, even if she still couldn't breathe properly. With nowhere else to go, she let herself collapse. Her chest kept heaving up and down. It felt as if it were about to burst.

What was she doing with her life? Everyone else seemed to know what they were doing but she couldn't come up with a single answer. She didn't want to succeed her father, even if she could, but what else was there to do? There was nothing she was good at. There was nothing she wanted to do. There was no reason to keep trying.

After lying down, her eyes wound up facing the end of the roof, and the distant treetops beyond. She gritted her teeth and forced herself back up. Her knees held out as she moved onward. As she neared the ledge, she drew to a halt. A shrill terror ran up her spine as she grasped how far from the ground she was.

How could she justify her existence when nobody wanted it, not even her? Her life was selfish. She winced and shifted her weight forward. The cold air began to rush past her and she closed her eyes.

A warm hand clapped onto hers and stopped her fall, leaving her upper body suspended over the precipice. Her eyes flashed open and she seemed to snap awake. She began to quake with fear. Despite everything, she didn't want to die. Not yet. She wanted to live. Her tears finally started to flow as she realized how close she had come.

Behind her, Chelsea was struggling to maintain her grip on both Tuna and the chimney that kept them anchored to the roof. Finally, she heaved backward and pulled the girl to safety, and then immediately into a protective hug. Chelsea's face was strewn with tears.

"You stupid idiot!" she cried. Having her daughter back in her arms was such a tremendous relief.

"I'm sorry," Tuna sobbed, burying herself in her mother's warm, black hair.

"Why would you try something like that?" Chelsea sobbed.

"I didn't know what I was living for," Tuna squeaked.

Chelsea pulled her head back so that she could look her daughter in the face. She was furious and happy at once. "Live for me!" she wailed.

Tuna just stood there, trembling in her mother's arms. Chelsea's previously distressed face now seemed relaxed, and she smiled at her daughter. "Your life isn't yours to throw away. No matter how depressed you might feel, you have to remember that. There's always somebody else out there who needs you," she proclaimed. "You're the only reason that I'm able to get up every morning, Tuna. I couldn't keep going if it weren't for you. So please, don't ever think about doing this again."

The poor girl blathered out an answer amidst her tears. "I won't," she promised. "I won't."

"Good," Chelsea breathed. "There's something else I want to tell you, Tuna, but I think we should get down from here first." The two of them managed to pull themselves together long enough to make their way back inside and down to Chelsea's room.

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"I met your father eighteen years ago," Chelsea began after the two of them went back inside. "I fell in love almost immediately and, before we knew it, we were married. We had a magical four years together that I shall always cherish, but it couldn't go on forever. He was stricken with a crippling illness, and the doctors informed us that it was terminal."

Her words didn't add up to Tuna. How could her father have had a terminal disease fourteen years ago and yet still be walking around today? "I don't understand, Mom," she interrupted.

This hardly came as a surprise to Chelsea. “Reginald is not your biological father, Tuna,” she explained.

“What?” Tuna exclaimed. It was too startling to just blindly accept. As shocked as she was, though, she couldn’t help but feel a bit relieved at the revelation. “He’s not?”

Chelsea shook her head and slowly resumed her story. “I didn’t meet Reginald until several months later. Going back though, the doctors only gave your father a few months to live when he was diagnosed. I prayed so hard for him to get better, and I wished upon a star that he wouldn’t leave me. He succumbed to the illness, though, and my life was shattered. However, before long I noticed that my own body was behaving oddly, and then found out that I was pregnant with you. It was the best news that I could have received at that point. My wish had come true, and a small piece of your father was still with me,” she continued.

“As overjoyed as I was, I soon realized that I wasn’t at all prepared to raise a child. Among other things, I couldn’t afford to take care of you on my salary, especially if I had to stop working. I had nobody in the world to turn to and I became very frightened, but, as luck would have it, I found out about Reginald,” Chelsea carried on. “Reginald and his previous wife had been unable to bear children, much to his frustration. He desperately wanted an heir to succeed him, and he blamed his wife for their lack of children. She disappeared one day, almost without a trace.

“My priority was making sure that you were alright, and so I approached him and proposed a bargain. He would take me as his new wife and treat you as his own child. Reginald would benefit from finally having his heir, and I would benefit from the shelter and support for both of us. It was a tenuous proposal but, in time, he agreed to it. A few months later you were born,” she detailed.

“In retrospect, I wonder if I made a mistake by condemning you to this life, but, back then, I didn’t know what else I could do,” Chelsea lamented.

Tuna was speechless. Her entire understanding of the world had been turned upside down. She could suddenly understand the distance between Reginald and herself. More importantly, though, she wasn’t alone in her hatred of this lifestyle.

“Mom!” she cried. “Let’s run away. I hate it here, and I’m old enough for it to be viable. We can do it; he’d never find us!”

“We can’t do that, Tuna,” Chelsea announced. “As much as you hate it, you need an education. I’m not qualified to give that to you, and it wouldn’t be as easy as you think to start a new life. I have no intention of forcing you to go to business school, but you need at least grade school. Once you graduate, and once you are old enough to know what you want in life, I promise that we’ll run away from this place. So, please, just bear with it a few more years.”

The idea of spending another four years disgusted her and, at her age, seemed like eons away. Still, it didn’t seem impossible. Just knowing that somewhere down the line she and her mother could be free made it easier to endure. Eventually they would get out, and that was all she needed. “Alright, I can stick with it,” she guaranteed her mother.

Chelsea reached over and stroked her daughter’s hair affectionately. Silently, she was cursing Reginald for making her retrieve files for him at this time of day. Had she noticed Tuna’s abandoned backpack even a second later, then they wouldn’t be having this moment right now. “Tuna, I have one more favor that I need to ask you,” she added.

“Yes?” Tuna asked.

“I want you to find at least one friend in this world, and a good one,” Chelsea requested. “Everybody needs a friend, even if it’s just one. It’s just as much for the other person’s sake as it is for yours.”

“If you say so,” Tuna promised. “It doesn’t have to be somebody from school, though, does it?”

“No,” Chelsea laughed. “You can find one wherever you want.”

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Three years passed, and Tuna continued her life. With her newfound hope, she actually came to do quite well in school. She no longer let her peers’ insults faze her, and Reginald had less to complain about. Chelsea wasn’t always able to meet her at the end of the driveway, but Tuna knew that it was never her fault. In only one more year she would be free of this place.

Chelsea wasn't waiting for her today, but Tuna paid that no heed. She couldn't find her mother inside the house, either, so she assumed she must have had to go out for whatever reason. Reginald could be heard talking with other businessmen inside his office, so Tuna simply went to work on her homework. It didn't take her nearly as long anymore, even with the increased workload of her higher class level. She managed to finish it in about an hour, and then searched the house over once again to see that her mother was still gone. So she made herself a small meal and worked on her own projects. Reginald would disapprove of her wasting time instead of studying business, but she had learned how to stay off his radar.

As dusk approached, she gave the house one more sweep in search of Chelsea, but still found nothing. Reluctantly, she knocked on Reginald's office door. "Come in," he called out.

She stepped in and cut straight to the point. "Do you know where Mom is?" she inquired.

"About that," he began, "there's some news you need to hear. This morning Chelsea suffered a stroke and passed away."

Tuna was utterly frozen. She couldn't be gone. Was he serious? No, even a demon like him couldn't talk about it so coldly if her mother really were dead. Would he have let her go the entire night without telling her about it, too?

"You're lying," she decided. "You have to be lying!"

"Don't be preposterous," he scoffed. "Why would I lie about something like that?" His eyes were so rigid. What kind of a fiend was he?

Suddenly it hit her. Her mother had told her that Reginald's previous wife had just disappeared one day. Maybe he had gotten rid of her himself since he found her to be at fault for having no children. If he had been willing to do that, then what would he have done if he found about their plan to leave next year?

"You did this!" she wailed.

"What are you talking about?" he challenged. "I told you already. It was a stroke."

Her entire body quaked with a mixture of rage and sorrow. How could her mother just be gone like that? How could this bastard not show even the slightest concern? She lost control of

herself and charged forward, delivering a loud slap to his face. “You did this!” she insisted.

He didn’t even flinch as she swung at him. It was as if he had anticipated the outburst. “I think it’d be best for you to go back to your room now,” he instructed her.

Tuna rushed out of the office and down to her room. She wasn’t obeying Reginald’s order; she was racing to gather up what she would need to survive on her own. The only reason that she was enduring this place was because of her mother’s insistence. She had no intention of staying in the same household as the beast that had disposed of her mother.

She flung a random assortment of clothes into her suitcase and hurried around her room, looking for anything else she would need. Finally she teetered over onto her bed as the realization of her mother’s death sunk in. Anything else she could have borne, but not this.

She pulled herself together and finished packing. The sooner she could get away from this place and Reginald, the better. She grabbed her bag and gazed down into it. After a moment she dug out every last charm sitting in there, tossed them to the floor, and barged out of the room. She didn’t want to use a single charm of that bastard’s filthy money.

Quietly but quickly, she made her way downstairs and outside, then sprinted to the end of the driveway. If Reginald looked behind him, he would be able to see her fleeing, but she didn’t care. He was just a single person, after all, and there was nothing else that he could do to her.

As she reached the main road, she stopped for a moment. She didn’t glance back at the house but did take one last look at Salacia. “I’m sorry, Mom. I guess I’m dropping out of school a year early. I hope you understand,” she concluded. And with that, she took her first independent steps into the world and into her own life.

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Tuna managed to survive by moving from one job to another. After one year, Reginald still hadn’t found her, if he was even looking, and she was grateful to be rid of him. It had proven more difficult than she’d anticipated, but she didn’t regret leaving

in the least. She would keep moving along until she found her place in the world.

She sat down on a park bench and picked up a copy of the paper that someone else had left lying there. As she unfolded it, she was instantly met by her stepfather's detestable image. She was startled to say the least, and quickly set about reading the article. Apparently he had passed away just a few days ago after experiencing a stroke.

Tuna finished the article and lay the paper back down. She forced herself to shed at least one tear. Admittedly, she had no more pity left for the man, but she wasn't the heartless ghoul that he was, either.

Finally she stood up and started back to her dinky little apartment. Her mother had left her with two very important sets of instructions, and she remembered them vividly. First, she was to figure out what to wish for before the next time she saw a star falling. Second, she was to find one real friend. She hadn't yet accomplished either one, but she reminded herself of them every night.

## Chapter 19

### Confrontation in Frontier City

“As it turned out, Reginald didn’t leave a single charm to me in his will, not that I would have accepted it,” Tuna concluded. “Since I didn’t have to worry about him bothering me anymore, I went back on the grid and had my last name legally changed to Macalister, my mother’s maiden name.”

Across from her, Gero sat in awe. He had no idea that her past had been so tragic. “Are you okay?” he asked. She had already assured him that she was, but he couldn’t understand why she would share such a sad story with him if she wasn’t.

“Yeah, I’m doing just fine,” she laughed. “My mother left me with two sets of instructions, and I think it’s starting to sink in that I’ve completed one of them. That’s probably why you think I’m acting weird.”

He found himself smiling along with her. “Thanks for telling me this, Tuna,” he added. For her to have dredged all of this up and shared it with him couldn’t have been easy.

“Yeah,” she smiled.

The door behind Gero slid open, causing him to roll backward onto his head. Lynn stood above him, clearly confused. “Why are you out here?” she inquired.

Tuna stood back up and strode over Gero into the coach. “Just getting some air,” Tuna told her. From the floor, Gero watched her make her way back to their seating area and lie down. He found himself seeing her in a new light since hearing her story.

Lynn stepped past him and sat down where Tuna had been. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Just getting some air,” Lynn replied.

“You’re copying Tuna!” Gero shouted. From her makeshift bed on the seats, Tuna giggled to herself. It was good to hear her friends’ familiar voices.

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Raede walked across the rooftop and sat down next to Sony. “Anything yet?” he checked.



“Nope,” the brockan replied. Upon reaching Frontier City, the mercenaries swiftly established the optimal location for them to keep watch over the train station. From this rooftop, they had a clear view of everyone who stepped onto and off of a train. There was also an easily navigated path between this spot and the area just outside of the military base, primarily by moving across roofs. After establishing this base, they had spent the next two days relaxing and making light preparations. Ever since this morning, though, they had kept a tight shift to ensure they detected Sylph’s arrival.

“It’s starting to get late,” Raede observed. “He shouldn’t be too much longer.”

“What if we missed him, though, Raede?” Sony pondered.

“Don’t worry about it,” he advised. “We’ve had surveillance going since before the break of dawn, and the specific instructions the military gave us said there was essentially no chance of him coming before then. There’s no way we could have missed him.”

“What do they mean by *essentially* no chance?” Sony asked. “Is there a small possibility that he might have come earlier?”

Raede scratched his head in contemplation. “Well, yeah, I suppose so. I’m sure he didn’t, though. Why don’t you go relax with the others? I’ll keep watch for the next half hour,” he offered.

“Alright,” Sony agreed. He didn’t understand how Raede could be so relaxed about the matter. Truthfully, though, it was quite admirable. Maybe one day he could be as confident about these things as Raede was. He looked upon his new friend with great admiration as he descended into the household below. The five of them had gotten the proprietors, an old couple by the name Huffings, to allow them to occupy the roof for the duration of their task.

“Sony, you need to try some of this lemonade that Mrs. Huffings made,” Gero insisted.

“Yes, please do,” added the benign Mrs. Huffings. “It’s so nice to have volunteer mold inspectors like yourselves around.” Sony lamented the fact that they were only welcome under the premise of such a horrible lie, although it didn’t seem to bother the others

“Ah, thank you very much for the refreshments,” Sony beamed as he accepted one of the glasses.

“Indeed,” Tuna agreed. “Nothing helps us find mold like a rejuvenating glass of lemonade.”

“I’m so glad to hear that,” Mrs. Huffings grinned. “I’ve got a batch of cookies for you in the oven, as well.”

Sony tumbled to the ground pathetically, inducing Tuna to kneel over and investigate. “Are you alright, Sony?” she inquired.

“No,” he sobbed. “She’s being way too nice to a bunch of deceitful wretches like us. It’s too much to bear!”

Tuna chuckled quietly and patted him on the shoulder. “Think of it this way. We’re at least giving her some company while we’re here,” she defended.

“Tuna,” Lynn beckoned. “I believe that I have found some of this ‘mold’ that we are supposed to be looking for.”

“Really?!” Tuna cried as she raced over to inspect Lynn’s discovery. They hadn’t even planned to actually search for mold, being completely unqualified for the task, so this came as a particular shock. Lynn promptly directed her to a small hole near the floor that she had already carved out in her investigation. “Oh dear, they might actually need somebody to come and fix this.”

Lynn nodded in agreement. “Yes, the walls have obviously been weakened,” she explained. She then revealed one of her kunai and forced it deep into the wall. “They’re not even strong enough to stop a simple kunai.”

Tuna pulled the knife out and quickly directed Lynn back into the other room. “I’m pretty certain that mold isn’t to blame for that. Just make sure you don’t poke any more holes in it,” she instructed her friend. She secretly fished out some spare cash from her bag to pay for both the interior damage and the hospitality that they had received, and stuck it underneath some books to be discovered later.

Raede suddenly dropped down into the room with an eager expression on his face. “We’ve got activity,” he announced.

“Alright!” Gero cheered, not bothering to lower his drinking glass.

“Thanks for having us, Mrs. Huffings,” Tuna blathered as they raced to the roof. “We couldn’t find any mold.”

“Oh, well, that’s quite a relief,” the old lady noted, not entirely comprehensive of what was going on.

A small entourage was accompanying the military figure Raede had picked out. After comparing with the description that they had been provided, Tuna confirmed that this was indeed the man they were after. Fortunately, they were easily able to keep pace with his group without being noticed. As per their expectations, he went immediately to the military base. It would be suspicious to his escorts if he did not. Any non-military matters would be best handled after the inspection when he could slip out on his own.

Sure enough, they couldn’t see anything that transpired inside the base, and had to spend two tedious hours waiting for him to come back out. “Those cookies are probably done by now,” Gero mentioned.

“No,” Tuna instructed. “We have to be ready to follow him immediately. Besides, we’ve bothered them enough.”

“But she was already making them,” Gero protested. “It’d be rude *not* to eat them.”

“Look!” Sony interrupted. “He’s coming back out.” All of his behavior thus far had been quite predictable, but now he could be up to any number of things. It would be trickier to pursue him without being discovered from here on out.

“I wonder where he’s going,” Gero pondered quietly after they had been following him for a while.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Tuna whispered back. “Ziggy mentioned it when he described the mission to us. There’s a good possibility that Sylph wanted to come to Frontier City because of its port.”

“If he wants to use the port, then shouldn’t he be heading west?” Gero argued.

“He is,” Raede informed him, taking great joy in poking fun at Gero’s directional ineptitude.

It took quite awhile for Sylph to reach his destination, but their deduction proved accurate. He walked almost directly into a massive building that jutted out past the line of water. “That was surprisingly easy,” Raede noted. “For someone so high up in the military, he’s not all that difficult to follow.”

“How come every time I’m in Frontier City, I end up dealing with criminals handling illegal substances at the port?” Tuna pondered, recalling her experience with Dalvus.

To everyone else’s shock, Gero strode right out into plain sight. “Well, since this guy’s such a buffoon, we might as well cut straight to the chase and teach him a lesson,” he decided as he began to sprint for the building.

“Gero!” Tuna whined. “Don’t just charge right in through the front door. We need to be discreet about this if we don’t want to be caught.”

“How are we going to get caught?” he laughed. “The guy’s already inside and there aren’t any windows on the building.”

“Forget it,” Raede advised. “There’s no use trying to talk sense into him now. Just make sure to stay a safe distance behind him.” Tuna sighed and joined her remaining three companions in following Gero’s lead.

Gero blazed confidently through the front door, fully prepared to vanquish his opponent. Upon realizing that Sylph was nowhere in sight, he slowed to a stop and took a look around. Five large nets suddenly rained down upon him and rendered him completely unable to move. A dozen or so men dropped down to the floor, proud of their successful catch.

“Couldn’t have made it any easier for us, fool,” one of them laughed.

“Sylph told us that he was being followed and to expect company, but I never thought that he’d run right in like that,” another chortled.

“And then just stand there like a bumbling idiot,” one more added.

A wired kunai shot past the lackey and embedded itself in a crate behind him. He turned to see what it had hit, only to be met by the crate crashing down into his face. The kunai pulled free and retracted back Lynn’s left leg case. The mob of henchmen was already rushing at the four new assailants.

Raede led the way and fired a burst of air through his back vents. Not expecting such a sudden increase in his speed, the henchmen were left quite shocked and were easily defeated. Sony followed shortly behind and easily conked two of them out with a swing of his bolas. Another man then managed to hold back both

of Sony's arms, preventing him from swinging his weapon. The brockan simply clamped his teeth down onto his binder's arm, causing the man to recoil and release his grip. Lynn placed one of her free kunai into her teeth and unlatched both of her arm cases. As she rushed forward, she sliced through all five layers of the netting that had Gero pinned with her left kunai, while fighting off several henchman with the ones in her mouth and right hand.

Tuna stood back cautiously until she saw an opening, and then walloped one of the lackeys on the head from behind. She grinned victoriously, but became much less proud of her feat upon realizing that her three comrades had already obliterated all of the other men.

"Good work charging in before us," Raede told Gero. "It provided the perfect distraction to let us clean matters up."

"More importantly, we can now extract some information from one of these guys," Tuna noted. "We should do so quickly, too. Sylph is sure to have noticed the ruckus we caused."

While the others went about tying up the henchmen, Raede took command of the interrogation process by picking out one of the men. He forcefully picked the man up and began.

"Tell us what Sylph plans to do here!" he demanded.

"I'll never talk," the victim announced.

"Let us know or the consequences shall be dire!" Raede roared.

"My lips are sealed," the lackey protested adamantly.

Raede turned to Gero and held out his right hand. "Open your mouth," he requested.

"What? Why?" Gero gasped.

"Just trust me on this," Raede insisted.

Gero shrugged and opened up. Raede swiftly grabbed onto his tongue and ripped it out of his mouth, waving it in front of the lackey's face. "Squeal or I'll touch you with this!" he ordered.

Behind him, the frogman was dancing around furiously. "Et go uh my ung, you assard!" he yelled.

"In a minute," Raede shot back. "Now talk, fool!"

"Please, don't," the lackey begged. "It's so disgusting." Raede pulled the tongue even closer. "Alright, alright, I'll talk. Just please get that thing away from me." Once Raede released Gero's tongue, the lackey spilled what he knew. "Sylph plans to

take the ship docked inside this building to escape the country with his supply of angel breath. He's probably preparing to take off as we speak. I don't know what he plans to do once he escapes. He just paid most of us off to do what he told us to."

"Where is the angel breath being stored?" Raede pushed.

"It's all in one of the rooms on the ship. I'm not sure which one," the lackey answered.

Raede handed the man over to Lynn to be tied up. "Alright, then, here's how I see mat-" He skidded to the ground as the force of Gero's bare feet met the side of his face. "What the hell was that for?" he shouted.

"What do you think, you idiot? Don't abuse other people's tongues like that!" Gero rampaged.

"Can we please focus?" Tuna insisted. "What were you saying, Raede?"

The large man rubbed his bruised face and resumed his analysis. "The way I see it, we have three goals. As you all know, the first one is to capture Sylph himself. Secondly, we need to secure the supply of angel breath. However, in order to keep them from getting away, we also need to make sure that the ship can't take off. To my eyes, the easiest way to make sure that it can't is by making sure that the exit that ships use to get out of this building isn't opened. If we focus on any one of these three tasks, though, then we might fail at the other two. That's why we need to split into three different groups.

"One group will search for Sylph, who, in all likelihood, is getting the ship ready to depart. The second group will find the angel breath, which we've established to be somewhere on the ship as well. The third group will move to whatever apparatus opens the door and make sure that it isn't utilized," he continued.

"I want to face Sylph," Gero cried. "He told his lackeys to capture me and I need to get my revenge for that."

"I think you getting caught was more your fault than his," Tuna observed.

"What?" Gero snapped.

"Nothing," she laughed. "I'll look for the angel breath."

Raede nodded in acknowledgement and then announced his own role. "I'll look for the door apparatus. I'm probably the most technically inclined person here," he explained.

“I’ll go with Tuna, then,” Sony offered. Of all of his new friends, she was the least likely to do something inane to get him killed.

“In that case, I shall assist Raede,” Lynn decided.

“Good,” Gero grinned. “That leaves Sylph completely to me.”

“It goes without saying, but if anybody needs additional assistance, don’t hesitate to call out. We’ll try to be as quick to respond as possible,” Raede announced. “This is the biggest mission that any of us has faced for a long time now, and, for some of us, ever.”

“We can handle it, though,” Tuna declared. It was undeniable that she was nervous; she was even shaking a little. She wasn’t lying, though. It was her genuine belief that they were capable of doing this.

“You bet we can,” Gero cheered. “Let’s do this!” All five of them nodded and split off to complete their tasks.

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Gero sprinted through the corridor of the ship, glancing rapidly into each room that he passed. It was fortunate that the lights had been left on, but he was frustrated by the sheer size of the ship. It had several floors, and each one took him several minutes to traverse. Considering the vessel was essentially barren, there was a good chance that Sylph was at the helm. Unfortunately, he had no idea where to find that on a ship of this design.

He came up on the end of the corridor, where he saw a stairwell. If Sylph was actually in the control room, then he was likely on one of the upper levels. Gero bounded up several flights until he emerged on the deck. After glancing around for a few moments, he noticed that there was a tower-like structure behind him that would be an ideal location from which to operate the ship. The stairs he had come from didn’t go up any farther, though, and he knew that it would take awhile for him to find the proper way up.

He stretched both of his legs out and took a deep breath. Then he bent them and leaped up the wall. Although it wasn’t completely vertical, it was still steep and smooth enough to give him considerable trouble. If he had human hands and feet, then

he would have failed completely, but his amphibian appendages allowed him to maintain contact long enough for him to jump again. He repeated this process several times, slowly making his way upward.

“This isn’t so tough,” Gero panted as he crawled onto another small deck. From where he was, he had a pretty good view of the exposed areas on the front half of the ship. It appeared even more gargantuan from up here. If nothing else, it definitely outsized the purpose that Sylph was using it for. Then again, perhaps he went with an excessively grandiose ship simply because it didn’t match up with the rest of his plans and would detract suspicion.

After catching his breath, Gero made another large bound, which landed him on a small ledge in front of what appeared to be the room he was looking for. The first thing he noticed was that his quarry was staring him right in the face, evidently quite shocked by Gero’s arrival. Sylph was of average size and build and had the air of confidence one would expect from a general.

Sylph reacted to Gero’s unplanned presence and stormed forward, drawing out his weapon in the process. It was a sword of sorts, but had two short curved blades which joined near the hilt, almost giving the appearance of a horseshoe. He didn’t hesitate to thrust straight through the glass window separating them. Gero jumped above the jab and landed about two meters to the side.

The general bounded through the shattered window with great ease and took a preparatory stance against his opponent. “Who are you? Your appearance certainly doesn’t suggest military experience,” Sylph deduced.

“The name’s Gero Keckus and I’m here to kick your ass,” he laughed.

“No, you’re definitely not with the military,” Sylph confirmed. “That being the case, why are you here?”

“I told you already. I’m here to kick your ass!” Gero raged.

“Is that all you can say?” Sylph queried. “I suppose I shouldn’t have expected anything more from some part-toad creature like you.”

Gero lunged forward with a blind fury under the mad influence of his trigger word. “I’m not a stupid toad!” he shouted as he swung his arms around indiscriminately. Sylph easily took



advantage of his opponent's messy attack and pinned Gero's left arm between the blades of his sword. He then swung Gero around and released him toward the ledge. The frogman feebly attempted to catch himself, but ended up plummeting to the deck below.

As luck would have it, he flew right into a large exhaust pipe and out of Sylph's sight. His head and upper body crashed through a maintenance grate. He managed to minimize the damage by shielding himself with his arms, but was trapped by the process. Suspended upside down, half inside the pipe, Gero swung himself around as violently as he could. It was no use, though; even when he tried to push himself out, he couldn't do it. He was trapped in this vice.

Merrick Sylph had made a fool of him, and the increased blood flow to his head didn't make matters any better. He clutched his afro irritably and furiously called out, "Sylph!!!"

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Lynn and Raede rushed toward the large door itself, anticipating that whatever device operated it might be located close by.

"Do you see anything?" Raede asked while glancing about. He hadn't spotted any sort of station that could control the door, so this had been their best bet. It wasn't helping matters that the only illumination in this place was coming from inside the ship.

Next to him, Lynn was carefully surveying everything she could see. She knew very little about boats or their storage, and thus had little idea what she was looking for. That being the case, she decided it would be best to inform Raede of anything that could be remotely useful.

"Nothing over here, though there does appear to be a ladder on the other side of the door," she reported.

"Huh?" he grunted, glancing across the stretch of water to the far side of the building. Sure enough, he could vaguely make out a ladder. It would take several minutes to run all the way around the ship, but they would not have to do that. The ship door had been designed so that a large outcropping would catch on the cement on either side of the watery area, preventing the door from being lowered further and providing a convenient pathway across.

"Good eye," he complimented.

The two of them raced across it and proceeded up the ladder, which led almost all the way up to the top. There was a small platform which could just barely fit two people on it, and that was where they hoped the apparatus would be. Raede pulled himself onto the platform and snickered triumphantly. The control mechanism was right in front of him, and it appeared surprisingly simple to operate. He crawled forward to get a better look, but was suddenly swept off of the platform. As he began to fall, he instinctively released a small amount of air from his back vents, giving him just enough propulsion to grab onto some of the metal rafters. "What was that?" he gasped.

A shadowy figure swung around and came to a landing atop the platform, preventing Lynn from advancing toward the top. They could vaguely make out that it was a skinny man wielding two long hooks.

"Terribly sorry, ladies and gents, but I'm afraid that this area is off limits," he chuckled.

"Who are you?" Raede demanded.

"The name's Siegfried. General Sylph is paying me quite handsomely to assist him, and part of that agreement is that I not let interlopers impede on his operations," he answered. "Now, would you kindly cease and desist?"

"No can do," Raede replied. "We can't let this ship out, which means we can't let you open this door."

"I see," Siegfried noted. "In that case, we're in for a tussle." He moved toward Raede, using his hooks to swing nimbly amidst the rafters. The kunai wired to Lynn's right arm shot before him, just barely missing. He continued forward and swung at the essentially helpless man. Lynn's other arm-bound kunai appeared and intercepted his hook, forcing his arm back and giving Raede the opportunity he needed.

Quickly lining himself up, he released a blast of air from his right shoulder tube. Siegfried was in no position to parry and took the brunt of the attack. It wasn't enough to knock him loose, but he did opt to make a tactful retreat back to the platform. The male opponent wasn't much of a threat while he was stranded in the rafters. The female was proving far more troublesome, and was the logical choice to focus on first.

By now she had scaled the rest of the way to the top and retracted both of her kunai. She fired them both off at Siegfried again, but he was prepared and swatted them away. Immediately she activated their retraction devices, but found that her right kunai had gotten tangled on one of the rafters. She managed to deactivate the retraction before it wound up pulling on her arm, but she was still tethered in place. With the opponent swiftly approaching, she didn't have time to detach the case and had to rely on her free kunai to defend against his attack. Unfortunately, she could hardly defend herself with her left arm as exposed as it was, and he managed to make a narrow cut into it after a few swings.

“Bully!” he cheered.

He resumed his onslaught, using his right arm to hang and his left arm to strike. Before he could land another blow, however, he found his left hook intercepted by Lynn's right kunai. Somehow it had come free and she had retracted it amid his assault. Swiftly glancing behind him, he saw the culprit. Raede had swung his way over and untangled Lynn's kunai so that she could pull it back. “You rascal!” he bellowed.

After reconsidering his strategy, he deemed that the male enemy was actually the smarter target. Both of them were able to assist each other, but the man was ultimately less capable of defending himself, and thus the easiest to dispose of. Being mindful to defend against Lynn's attacks, he quickly moved toward Raede. He was far more accustomed to fighting in this poor illumination than his opponents, and so he could easily strike down Lynn's kunai. Furthermore, the man's reach was comparatively limited, so he could easily strike at him with minimal concern for a counterattack.

Siegfried swung to the beam that he would strike at Raede from. To his horror, a kunai flew in and diverted his hook's path. It stuck on the top of the rafter instead of looping all the way over. He hadn't been knocked down, but he would have to move the end of his hook forward. Before he could do so, Raede swung in and emptied out his air supply with a potent belch. The blast was strong enough to push Siegfried back and send him tumbling down. It was utterly undignified to be trounced by such a vulgar attack.

“Scoundrel!” he called out while plummeting.

He managed to catch his hooks on the ladder to interrupt his fall, but couldn’t hold onto them. His body crashed into the floor below, but he had prevented it from being deadly. At any rate, he wouldn’t be getting up to fight anymore. “Good show,” he conceded, though he was far too winded for them to hear it.

Raede swung over and back to platform. “Nice work,” he commended Lynn. “We’ve secured the door. This ship won’t be going anywhere.”

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Sony and Tuna hastily made their way onto the ship, Gero having quickly outpaced them and disappeared from sight. Tuna couldn’t logically determine why Sylph had prepared such a large vessel for his escape. The brockan noticed her confusion.

“Is something wrong, Tuna?” he inquired.

“I’m trying to figure out why they’re using a cruise ship,” she replied. “I would think that Sylph would rather be discreet about this matter.”

“Beats me,” he admitted. “We should focus on finding the angel breath, though.”

“Right,” she agreed. Based on the information that Sylph’s lackey had provided them with, it seemed likely that the substance would be stored away in some obscure location. Thus, their only direction was to check every bedroom and hall and gallery in the main body of the ship. For the sake of safety, they stayed in the same corridor, though they checked opposite sides. It didn’t take long for them both to become exhausted by the ordeal.

Finally, Sony discovered something peculiar. “Tuna, is this what we’re looking for?” he called out.

She hurried into his room and was immediately struck with awe. What he had found was definitely not angel breath, but it was an amazing find nonetheless. Locked up inside a glass case was a light blue pole arm, of sorts. A large icy crystal protruded from the front tip, acting as the blade. On the edge of the handle was an outcropping of smaller ice crystals. Attached to the pole arm from either side were three pieces of snow white parchment, making for six in total. “That’s no angel breath,” she gawked.

“Well, what is it, then?” he asked her.

She stepped up to the case and read the plaque attached to it. "I can't believe it. This is the Hail Bird!" she exclaimed.

"What's a Hail Bird?" Sony pushed.

It wasn't surprising that Sony wouldn't know. "The Hail Bird is one of the five mystical items forged by humanity's most legendary figure, Darter. Over the years, each of the items has been moved around by those who discovered them, and a few were thought to have been lost forever. We can't just leave this lying around," she decided. "Let's break it out."

Sony was dazzled by what she had said. "Darter created this?" he gasped.

She glanced down at her companion, clearly befuddled. "You know who Darter is?" she inquired.

"Of course I do! Everybody from Skar does. He's the savior of our people," he explained.

Tuna had not known her own race's hero had played such a prominent role in the brockans' history, as well. She was about to question him further about the matter, but was interrupted by a loud thud.

They turned to see an extremely large, muscular man standing in the doorway. Rather, he stood just on the other side of the doorway because he couldn't fit through it.

"You not work for Sylph," he grunted.

Based on his grammar, Tuna made the logical assumption that he wasn't exactly smart. Perhaps if she were clever about it, they could avoid any real confrontation at all.

"Well, you see..." she started.

"Me crush strangers!" he roared, pushing forward and crumbling the framework of the door to force his way in. They both leaped out of the way, which proved to be enough. He either was not very agile or the momentum of breaking through the door was too much, because he simply continued forward, smashing right through the case and shattering it before colliding with the far wall.

"Let's get out of here," Tuna wailed.

"Sounds good to me!" Sony cried, already halfway out of the room. Tuna hastily dug the Hail Bird out of the rubble and carried it with her into the corridor, where she rushed to catch up

with Sony. There were plenty of rooms around to hide in, but they had to be careful not to entrap themselves.

The large man pulled himself together and hurried back into the corridor. He glanced left and right, settling on left. "Me go this way," he announced to no one in particular. To his dismay, the two small enemies couldn't be seen anywhere. Frustrated, he turned toward the wall and randomly punched a hole through it. Tuna and Sony were on the other side, looking for a means of escape when he made his entrance.

"How can he be that lucky?" Sony cried.

"How can he be that strong?" Tuna supplemented.

There was no exit from the room besides the door and the new hole. They certainly couldn't use the latter, so they hastily made for the door and back out into the corridor. The oaf was right behind them, though, and was moving faster than them.

"Gumbo kill!" he thundered.

"His name is Gumbo?" Tuna gasped.

"Who cares what his name is? Just run," Sony howled.

"He's catching up to us too quickly," Tuna noted.

Sony knew what he had to do. A large, klutzy adversary like this would be an easy target for his bolas. He grabbed onto the rope and swung them around for several seconds before releasing them upon his target. They hit Gumbo's left leg and began to swing around but failed to wrap around his other leg.

"He's too big for my bolas to do anything!" Sony lamented.

Gumbo swung down at the brockan, causing both Sony and Tuna to leap away. The giant was clearly more irritated by Sony, so that's who he kept his attention on. He took another swing and narrowly missed.

"Sony!" Tuna called out, whirling to check on him. In doing so, the Hail Bird swung, as well. To everyone's shock, a small scattering of ice crystals formed and shot forward. Luckily, they embedded themselves in Gumbo's feet, drawing out some blood and pinning him to the floor.

"Tuna..." Sony gasped, clearly bewildered.

The girl was elated by the turn of events. "Sony, there's something magical about this weapon!" she cheered.

"I know!" he shouted in agreement.

"I managed to use it without failing horribly," she added.

Sony practically fell down in disbelief. "I don't think that's what's magical about it," he sighed.

"Girl hurt foot," Gumbo growled. He forced both of his legs forward, shattering the ice shards that had pinned him down. He kicked his left leg forward, sending the bolas flying.

Sony and Tuna ducked out of the way and began to flee from once again. Along the way, Sony managed to retrieve his weapon from where it had landed.

"That hardly did anything to him," the brockan panicked.

"Maybe not, but it does give me an idea," Tuna added. Without stopping, she swung the Hail Bird around behind them, generating a myriad of small crystals which littered the floor. "I'd like to see him get past that."

They glanced back to see how effective her minefield of ice would be. As it were, Gumbo didn't even take note of it and easily trampled every crystal down. "I wouldn't," Sony cried.

"I don't get it. How come all of these crystals were so much smaller than the first ones I made?" she pondered.

Gumbo's fist came crashing down about a meter behind them.

"Maybe you should just try doing what you did the first time," Sony blubbered.

"Good idea," she noted. With Gumbo closing in on them anyway, she decided to risk stopping in order to deliver a proper attack. She whirled back to face him and repeated her previous gesture as closely as possible. Sure enough, the crystals she produced were more or less the same size as her first round. These embedded themselves into Gumbo's legs and, although ineffective in stopping him, caused him stumble about in pain. Before long he managed to recuperate and began sprinting forward once again.

"Me kill girl first! Puppy second!" Gumbo roared quite inaccurately.

Tuna turned to her companion, having finally formulated a plan to take down their opponent. "Sony, we can take advantage of his simple-mindedness. Right now he's angry at me, so he'll probably ignore you. That means I can act as the decoy while you sneak around and attack him from behind," she explained.

"What do you mean by *probably* ignore me?" Sony wailed.

“Would you rather be the decoy?” she posed.

“Have fun,” Sony bid her as he began to circle around Gumbo. Tuna’s prediction was accurate, and the giant stormed right past Sony toward her. The brockan then made a mad dash and lunged onto his opponent’s back. Upon doing so, he instantly drew Gumbo’s attention to himself. Fortunately, he was in a hard position for the man to reach, and was able to use his claws to rapidly scale the length of Gumbo’s back.

With the oaf occupied in trying to swat off Sony, Tuna had an opportunity to deliver her own attack. She decided to test a hunch she had formulated and swung the Hail Bird more widely than before. Her suspicions had been correct. As the breadth of her swing increased, so did the size of the resulting icicles. An assortment of proportionally larger crystals were fired off and struck all over Gumbo’s lower body.

He instinctively tried to strike at the crystals and consequentially made it easier for Sony to climb up to his neck. The brockan swung his bolas over both of them so that a lone ball collided with Gumbo’s face. The giant began to teeter about, and Sony cleared the scene. He and Tuna watched from a safe distance while Gumbo collapsed forward. They both breathed a sigh of relief as he hit the ground.

“Nice!” Tuna celebrated.

“We did it!” Sony cheered triumphantly.

Gumbo began to grunt and the two smaller beings backed off cautiously. After a few moments he stopped and let his limbs fall back down. He was still capable of moving, but lacked the ability to pull himself back up.

“Should we attack him again, just to be safe?” Tuna pondered.

“I’d rather not risk making him angrier,” Sony admitted. “And beside, he looks like the kind of guy that would have trouble with stairs.”

Tuna nodded in agreement. “Let’s get back to finding the angel breath, then,” she decided.

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Inside the control room, Sylph glanced anxiously at the clock. He had instructed Siegfried to open up the cruiser door at precisely nine o’clock. It was now five minutes past.



Furthermore, he hadn't received any updates from his other minions. Being followed on the way to the ship gave him cause for concern. Additionally, the fact that this frogman had made it onto the ship led him to believe that other forces may yet be present. Their brief encounter told him that the frogman would not have been capable of defeating even those cronies by himself.

He had to make a careful decision. If he did nothing, then he risked potential intruders discovering the angel breath or thwarting his plans in some other way. At the same time, there was quite an obstruction sitting in front of him.

"I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place," he admitted.

Every second that he sat here contemplating worked against him. At last he came to a decision and activated all of the controls necessary to start up the cruise ship. Once he was certain that the ship was in proper cruising condition, he directed it forward with near-maximum speed.

"When that happens, you simply destroy the rock," he declared. The ship heaved forward and rammed the massive door with its full force. It took several seconds of painful screeching, but the ship managed to power onward. The entire vessel lurched violently as it burst through, but quickly stabilized.

A wicked grin appeared on his face as the ship emerged beneath the night sky.

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Gero tried once more to push himself out, but found it completely futile. "Damn it, I'm going to miss all of the action!" he grieved. In addition to becoming quite dizzy, his waist was starting to hurt from being pinned in the maintenance grate.

Suddenly, an overpowering hum could be heard all around him. Something had just been turned on. Based on how loud the noise was, he assumed that the ship was starting up. Considering he was in an exhaust pipe, the chances were quite slim that he could hang around here unharmed.

"Shit," he exclaimed. "I'd better get out of here fast." He began to wiggle about and push himself with renewed gusto, but it was still to no avail.

He could sense ship start to move forward and he felt the inner lining of the pipe start to heat up. This had the potential to end very badly. Not much later, though, the entire ship staggered

violently. It hurt horrendously, but the force of the collision proved to be just what Gero needed to be thrown forward and free of the pipe. He clumsily toppled onto the floor and caught his breath. After a moment, he stood back up and punched his fist into his opposite palm. “Time for round two!” he grinned.

## Chapter 20

# The Starfall Cruise

Inside the control room, Sylph was carefully directing the ship toward the open ocean. He didn't have to go far to make it to safety, but there were a few trivial obstacles before that point. Soon enough he'd be able to make the delivery and enjoy all the wealth he could ever want.

The night sky made it somewhat more difficult to navigate, but a man of his position had all of the qualifications to do so without any trouble. More importantly, the shroud of darkness made it more difficult for those on shore to discern what was going on. Once he was confident that the ship was aimed properly and that the tide's influence would be inconsequential, he locked the steering wheel and turned to retrieve the map from the cabinet behind him.

Gero's clenched fist embedded itself in Sylph's right cheek and sent the general reeling back into the control panel. The frogman leaped forward and switched to his right hand for his next punch. Sylph managed to grasp forward and divert the blunt of the attack to his shoulder, but not without affording Gero the opportunity to jump off the ground and deliver a double kick into his stomach.

Finally having a decent distance between them, Sylph drew out his unique sword and held it before him.

"How the hell did you get back here?" he gasped.

"I found the stairs," Gero answered, entirely misunderstanding why the general was confused. He leaped forward once again, but was forced to duck down to evade a forward thrust by Sylph. Using his right arm as leverage, he delivered another kick at his target using his left leg. Sylph managed to grab onto Gero's leg and moved to impale it with his sword. Gero tossed himself upward, spinning around so that he landed on his left arm, facing the other direction. In doing so he was able to swing his right leg around and kick the sword out of Sylph's hand.

Not willing to give up, Sylph pulled back on Gero's leg, which he still had a hold of, and swung his right fist at the frogman's face. Gero intercepted the punch with his right hand and released his tongue onto his enemy's face. Taken completely by surprise, Sylph stumbled backward and released Gero's leg. He reached at Gero's tongue, quickly realizing that it was a convenient way to bind his opponent, but couldn't grab it before his opponent had sucked it back into his mouth.

Proud as he was, Sylph could plainly see that while disarmed, he was not an even match for this opponent. He moved to retrieve his sword, racing across the control room. Gero fully exploited the move and leaped all the way over to his opponent, planting his feet into his back and pushing his face into the floor. Sylph let out an agonized groan, having taken the full force of the attack. From this position there was nothing more that he could do to win. Even if he did manage to escape, his back had taken too much damage to fight against this caliber of enemy. He had grossly underestimated Gero's abilities.

"That wasn't hard at all," Gero complained. "For a general you were pretty disappointing."

"Shut up," Sylph retaliated.

"So, where do you keep the rope around here?" Gero inquired. "It'll be a lot easier to turn you in if I can tie you up first."

"Turn me in?" Sylph spat. "I should have figured you were working for somebody else. Who sent you after me?"

"The government," Gero answered, not particularly caring whether or not he should be keeping that information secret or not.

Sylph instantly tensed up. He had suspected that the higher ups would catch wind of his operations, but he hadn't expected such an unorthodox assailant to be under their employ. This changed everything. There was no doubt in his mind what kind of a punishment he would receive for independently handling and transporting this much angel breath. He had no intention of enduring that, but he had no hope in a continued battle against this man.

He suddenly heaved himself upward with all his strength, managing to throw Gero off of his back in the process.

Immediately he made for the windows, as he didn't trust himself to cleanly take his own life with a sword. Gero scrambled to stop him, but couldn't get himself up in time.

Sylph crashed back down to the floor with a thud, his legs entwined by Sony's bolas.

"Sony! Tuna!" Gero cheered. His two companions quickly raced to assist him. In no time at all they had Sylph tied up into an immobilizing cocoon of rope. "Well, we pulled that off pretty easily."

"I just hope that Raede and Lynn are okay," Sony worried. "It could be bad if they were near the door when we drove through it."

"I'm sure they're just fine," Gero laughed.

Tuna was angrily staring the general down. "What?" he growled irritably.

"Why would you try that?" she demanded.

Sylph glared back as if it was the dumbest question he'd ever heard. "Do you really think that the government would let me live after the crimes I've committed? I'd rather end it on my own terms," he reasoned.

"That doesn't matter!" Tuna insisted. "Even if they sentence you to death, that doesn't give you any right to take your own life. You can't tell me that there isn't one person out there who would rather have you alive than dead. Suicide is nothing but selfish."

"Tuna..." Sony gasped. He hadn't expected her to have such a passionate view, and it was startling to see her act so serious.

Gero sat silently, understanding why his friend was so upset by what had happened. Suddenly, he noticed an envelope lying on the floor and picked it up. Sylph's name was printed on the outside.

"Hey, it's a letter! It must have fallen out while we were fighting," he deduced.

"What are you doing?" Sylph wheezed. "Don't open other people's letters! It's downright impolite."

"For someone who just tried to jump out of a window, you sure seem a little too concerned over a letter," Sony noted.

Gero opened the envelope and began to read the contents. "It says, 'Sylph, printed below is the date and location that you are to

depart. I have arranged a sizeable transport for your use, but I expect you to handle the personnel. You are to deliver the materials to the location we discussed earlier.’ Then it has today’s date and the address of the dock. That was boring,” he whined.

“You were working for somebody else? Who?” Tuna demanded.

“I don’t squeal on my associates. I may have been committing treason, but even I have a sense of honor,” Sylph upheld.

“And whoever he is, he’s very intelligent about how he handles business,” Tuna observed. “He didn’t mention the location that you were supposed to meet him at or his own name in the letter so that it couldn’t be traced back to him. I suppose we can leave that up to the government to investigate. What I want to know is why you were holding onto this,” she added as she held the Hail Bird out before her.

“Will you worthless louts stop taking other people’s property? That pole arm would have fetched me an additional e500,000 from Phoenix!” Sylph shouted.

“Phoenix?” Sony repeated.

“Shit!” Sylph cursed, realizing his blunder.

Gero burst out hysterically. “Ahahaha! You spill his name right after you give this spiel about not selling people out. That’s awesome,” he guffawed.

Sony turned his attention to Tuna and the Hail Bird. “So that pole arm is worth e500,000? Whoa,” he gawked.

“Frankly, I’m surprised that he wouldn’t appraise it even higher. It’s a magical ice-generating stick, after all,” she reasoned.

“Well, it was a conservative estimate,” Sylph admitted.

“So what do we do with it now?” Sony inquired. “If we turn it in to the government, I’m sure they’ll compensate you for it. You did say that it was a lost artifact, didn’t you?”

“Screw that!” Tuna protested. “I finally found a weapon that I can use. I’m not going to give that up for any amount of money in the world! This whole Hail Bird thing remains a secret,” she ordered. “Anyway,” she continued, “we should at least slow this

ship down. I'm not sure that I trust any of us to actually bring it back in to port, though." After a quick analysis of the controls, she determined how to stall it and shut it down. There was a considerable lurch as it came to a halt, though it was nothing compared to crashing through the door earlier.

The three mercenaries discussed what they should do now that they were stuck several kilometers from shore. After a few minutes, they were interrupted by the shrill sound of something shooting up into the air. All four of them glanced through the windows to see a white streak of light going up into the sky. It burst in a massive explosion that, for a brief moment, completely illuminated the sky. Several remnants of the explosion drizzled down into the water, leaving their own white trails. "What is that?" Gero wondered.

Sylph was petrified with horror. "It can't be," he sputtered. "That's the angel breath!"

They all started at him, slowly processing what he had just said. "What?!" they simultaneously cried.

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As the cruise ship powered through the large door, the resulting impact shook the entire ship, enough so that Gumbo actually rolled over the railing of the floor he was on and down to the one below. He was lucky enough not to fall on his back, but did destroy the wall of another room in the process. Upon standing up, he realized that the room he had crashed into contained the angel breath. Although Gumbo was not privy to such information beforehand, Sylph had packed all of it into several rockets to make it more practical for deployment. That had been part of his agreement with Phoenix.

Gumbo scratched his head nervously. Sylph would be upset if he knew about this, but perhaps he could still salvage the situation. He knew it wasn't good for the angel breath to be exposed like this, so it made sense to move it to another room that didn't have a broken wall.

"Gumbo smart. Me save day!" he cheered as he grabbed a few of the rockets.

Unfortunately, the level didn't have many rooms on it, and the closest one that fit his needs was located quite far away. Over the next several minutes, he transported as many rockets as he

could into the new room. He was carrying over the last load when the ship heaved once again, this time coming to a stop. He had left the door open, cleverly realizing that this way he wouldn't have to open it each time he delivered a load into the room. Now, however, all of the rockets that he had stored inside skidded out as the ship halted, sliding across the corridor and into another room. Gumbo nervously ran to retrieve the rockets that had rolled away.

He stopped just before the doorway and glanced at the signs next to it. Although he could only read the illustrations, the label indicated it was the engine room. After absorbing the general message of the various pictures, Gumbo scratched his chin nervously.

“This probably not good,” he decided.

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Gero, Sony, and Tuna were rapidly making their way toward the main deck, with Gero carrying the immobilized general along with him. Sylph had already explained to them that he had packaged the angel breath into rocket form, which explained how it was able to be fired through the ship's large smokestack and into the sky before detonating. How it got into a position to be fired like that was beyond him, but at this point it was irrelevant.

If any of it went off at sea level, then there was a very good chance they wouldn't survive. Even so, their best bet to do so would be to get as far away from the engine room as possible without taking the risk of leaping into the sea. Fortunately, the few rockets that had gone off so far had made it past the ship.

As they reached the bow of the ship, they spotted Raede and Lynn moving in the exact same direction. “How did you guys get on the ship?” Tuna queried as they met up.

“When the ship broke through the door, we decided that you guys might need our help, so we made our way on board. It was easy enough considering how high up we were and how our own abilities work,” Raede explained.

“Great, now we can all be together when we die a horrible, fiery death!” Sony lamented.

“Don't be such a pessimist, Sony,” Gero suggested. “We're not dead yet.”



“True,” Sony agreed. He couldn’t deny that, of the several rockets that had gone off so far, none of them had detonated within the confines of the ship.

“Besides, if we do die, it’s not like worrying about it would have prevented it,” Gero laughed, much to Sony’s dismay.

“The rockets greatly resemble a star shower,” Lynn noticed.

Upon hearing this, Tuna immediately stopped thinking about their current situation. It may not be a legitimate star shower, but to her, it was close enough. The time had come for her to fulfill her mother’s other instruction, and she knew exactly what to wish for. It was the same thing that she intended to tell Ziggy was her dream upon returning to Ocarina.

She looked around at her friends who, terrified or not, were all awestruck by the amazing spectacle around them. A great smile emerged on her face as the heavens rained stars down upon them.

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“Well, you certainly made a great mess of things,” Ziggy grunted. Several days had passed and they were back at syndicate headquarters, reporting their results. “I know that I’ve told you to finish with fireworks, but you didn’t have to take it so literally. Since our client, the Perenos government, doesn’t have any complaints, though, this mission has been a success.”

“It wasn’t that hard,” Gero insisted in an obvious attempt to appear more impressive.

“Since you’ve involved this young lad, I suppose you’ll want me to divide the payment five ways instead of four?” Ziggy asked.

“No, four ways will be fine,” Tuna corrected him. “I’m not going to accept payment on this one since I kept the Hail Bird for myself.”

“You’re so noble, Tuna!” Sony cheered.

“Yeah,” Raede laughed, “she’s only holding onto the item worth at least ten times the total payout of the mission.” Tuna gave him a light swat, knowing that he was only playing with her.

“Very well,” Ziggy agreed.

“The officials that we turned Sylph in to did not appear to have previous knowledge of this Phoenix person,” Lynn informed their boss.

Ziggy shrugged and leaned back in his chair. "I wouldn't worry about it too much. Even if this person has resources of that magnitude, I don't know how he could trace Sylph's failure back to us. Still, I'll keep an eye out for the name."

Now he turned to Sony in particular. "As for you, we have an interview to perform before you can become a full-fledged member of the Pondswagger Syndicate. Are you ready?" he posed. Sony nodded nervously. "Okay, then. First, what do you like?"

The brockan thought it over for a moment before answering, "I like napping in the sun and eating chocolate, but not at the same time."

"Second, what do others like about you?" Ziggy continued.

"I'm adorable!" Sony cheered with ease.

"At least he knows his strengths," Tuna whispered to the others, amused.

Ziggy moved onto the final question. "Lastly, what is your dream?" he posed.

"To find the Nirgilis plant believed to cure the illness that is affecting the brockan race," Sony replied.

"Good. Consider yourself a full member of the syndicate," Ziggy instructed him. Everybody congratulated Sony on his admission, but Ziggy had his attention focused on Tuna. "And you, Tuna," he added, "are you ready to give me your answer to the third question?"

All of their eyes focused on her, but she was able to answer confidently. "I am. I told you before that I had a dream and that I wasn't ready to share it yet. Since then I've accomplished that goal, and that was to find at least one true friend. I guess I was just embarrassed by how cheesy it was," she admitted. "I've decided on a new dream, though. No matter what, I want to do everything in my power to protect the friends I have." A long silence followed, and the embarrassment of the situation started to sink in. "I suppose that's just as cheesy as my original goal," she laughed awkwardly.

"Nah," Ziggy interrupted. "A dream doesn't have to be something original to be good. It just has to be something that you really believe in. Let me say this officially: Welcome to the syndicate."

Tuna grinned at his words. Even though she had effectively been a member of the syndicate the entire time, it still meant a great deal to be official. She really believed in the dream she had announced, too. Chelsea Macalister had meant everything to her, and had told her just how important it was to have at least one real friend. It only seemed right to want to protect her friends now that she had them.

“One more thing before you all go,” Ziggy added. “It seems that your little excursion on the sea caught the attention of the papers.”

He threw down the latest copy of *The Limber Gazelle*. The headline read “Starfall Cruise in Frontier City.” They all took pride in being the driving force behind the front page story.

“Since the five of you like doing missions together so much, why don’t we go ahead and make you an unofficial team within the syndicate for when big jobs like this come up in the future?” he suggested.

All five of them heartily expressed approval. “Then it’s settled. Henceforth, the five of you shall be the main team of the Pondswagger Syndicate!”