

Chapter 4: The Queen is Gone

Crono and Lucca rushed down the short, meandering path through Guardia Forest, desperate to get to the cathedral known as Manoria Abbey in hopes of reversing the inevitable damage of Marle's arrival in this time. Once they had reached the path's end, they turned towards the west to an opening in the barrier of trees.

"Hey, Crono! Hold on a minute!" Lucca stopped midway between two forest paths that forked in opposite directions and pointed southward. Crono halted and followed her indication, seeing the remains of the shattered Zenan Bridge in the distance. "What's happened to the bridge?"

Crono squinted as he examined the demolished bridge from the distance. The bridge seemed like little more than a toothpick whose entire midsection had just been removed, leaving only the two severed ends. The damage was fresh enough for smoke and the occasional glowing embers of flame to be glimpsed, even from afar, completing what was a considerably disturbing sight to both Lucca and Crono. Truly, the southern continent was completely inaccessible on foot.

"I heard that someone, um...", he replied, pausing to recall the name. "...Magus! Magus and his army destroyed it."

Lucca shot an incredulous glare in his direction, adjusting her glasses as she looked him over. "Magus?! Don't you know who Magus is?" He returned a blank stare. "Do you not know any of our kingdom's history, Crono?"

"Of course I do!"

She sighed hopelessly. "Magus was the ruler of the Mystics. Little was, or is, known about the details of his life, but shortly before the end of the war he vanished. No one ever heard from him again." Again, she shifted her glasses smartly.

"...I knew that."

He turned back around, looking at the hole in the forest that would lead them to the cathedral, whose vibrant red rooftop and brown brick bell towers peeked over the treetops like the heads of gophers out of their secret domain. "Come on! The cathedral's just through this path."

"Right. Lead on," she replied after one last reflective glance at the bridge.

From there, they made their way to the cathedral and approached the ornate entranceway, complete with intricate designs of wood, filigree trim, and vibrant stained glass windows. Slowly and reverently, they entered, Lucca making sure to remove her helmet before going through the large doors.

Inside, the sanctuary was gallant and demanding of respect, with a ceiling so high that it felt as though there was no ceiling at all. As they stepped onto the soft red velvet carpet and jogged down the aisle, four nuns, each standing isolated at their own pews, turned, almost with excitement, at the sight of them. Their heads were mostly concealed by the traditional headdress of the nuns, and each smiled shortly as though putting on a

forceful act of kindness. Then they looked at each other, only for a moment, with a certain hungry flare in their eyes, and waited for the two strangers to approach. Crono and Lucca slowed their pace out of respect for the nuns, passing by each as they made their way down the aisle.

“Excuse us, ladies.” Crono dared to risk breaking what may have been their meditative silence. “We are looking for the Chancellor of Guardia. We heard that he might be here. Would you happen to know of his whereabouts?” Crono waited patiently for an answer, feeling a slight tightness in his stomach over the nuns’ odd expressions.

The nuns peered back and forth at each other with such enthusiastic, jittery, and wide-eyed exhilaration that it was almost comical, yet anomalous. They began speaking *accelerando* and in no particular sequence, spasmodically turning to each other between words.

“The chancellor? Yes, the chancellor is a very peaceful and kind man...”

“Yes! We want nothing but world peace...or a piece of the world, tee, hee...” She giggled, adding to the strangeness, and looked at the others.

“Oh dear! It looks like you could use some food and a place to...rest!”

“You might like to stick around for the organ recital. It’s a real killer!”

“People wouldn’t know what to do with themselves in a truly peaceful world! My, what delicious, er...I mean delightful looking people!”

Crono and Lucca began to wonder if the nuns had made personal use of the communal wine and decided to politely acknowledge their responses with affable smiles before sidestepping away.

“Surely you wouldn’t mind if we had a look around,” Lucca said, already moving out of the area. She slipped through a row of pews, making her way around and towards the pulpit. Crono stayed relatively near, fascinated by a small pipe organ sitting in the northwest corner of the sanctuary. The nuns’ eyes followed them around, worsening an already discomforting situation.

Crono approached Lucca, who was standing around the sermon stage, aware of their invading eyes. She had her back to them, facing towards a large, stained glass window of a golden-robed seraph beyond the pulpit. “I don’t trust these nuns at all,” she whispered. “I know that may be disrespectful, but they’re watching us like hungry wolves!”

“I don’t like it either, but what should we do? The chancellor doesn’t seem to be here, and these crazy nuns aren’t helping.”

As he finished his sentence he suddenly became distracted by something on the floor and stooped to pick it up. Embellished with tiny pink coral flowers, the object gleamed with a silver rod which tapered through a sinuous dragon of elegant filigree to a blunt tip.

Lucca watched as he examined the object with fascination. “What did you find?”

“A hairpin. A really nice hairpin, at that.”

Lucca cocked her head to view the dragon up-close, suddenly snatching the pin from his hand. “That’s Guardia’s royal crest!”

“What...?” Crono stopped as he noticed the nuns coming out of their pews to surround them. They formed a semicircle around Crono and Lucca, their expressions

now morphing from childishly giddy to vicious and savage, with foam forming at the edges of their mouths.

“Uh...Lucca...”

“Yeah, I see,” she breathed in reply.

Unsure of the situation, they backed several paces away. Bursts of eerie blue flames ignited at the nuns’ feet, surrounding and enveloping them in a writhing column of cold fire. Instinctively, Crono’s hand went for his sword, ready to draw it from its sheath at any moment. Stealing a glance at Lucca, he saw that her hand was ready next to her gun, as well.

Suddenly the flames receded to reveal the reformed creatures standing before them, drooling with insanity. The new forms were taller half-snakes with pale, yellow skin, ominous claws on their four-fingered hands, pointy ears, and large, blood-thirsty eyes. Vestiges of femininity remained in the form of lurid, purple-colored bras that Crono and Lucca hoped, for multiple reasons, had not belonged to any real nuns. They supported their weight on rubicund tails that transitioned to yellow midriff at the waist, appearing almost as though they could be slipped off like a pair of pants. Beneath garish pink hair, their hideous faces were contorted with the effort of unleashing ear-piercing screams that were far more unbearable than long nails fiercely scraping down a chalkboard.

Immediately the creatures began lashing out. Lucca loaded her little gun with several sleek pebbles she had brought along. “We’re going to have to fight them off!” Crono acknowledged, setting himself into a battle-ready stance with sword in hand.

Two of the monsters began to approach Crono, while the others set their sights on Lucca. Crono leapt onto a second-row pew as his foes crept closer, shifting his eyes rapidly between the two of them. Lucca was standing rigid by the east wall, ready to shoot whichever creature came near to her first.

As Crono’s pursuers began to surround him, he jumped onto the front row bench, slashing smoothly at the nearest monster as he landed. Blue blood broke free from its arm as it backed down momentarily. Filled with adrenaline, he turned to the other. “You want some of this, too, eh?!”

“I wouldn’t come any closer if I were you,” Lucca chanted to the other two as she pointed her gun in their direction. “You don’t know what I’ve got here, do you?” In an instant, she shot a pebble straight into one of the venomous eyes. The monster reared back with shock, shrieking as the other watched it cradle its torn eye. “Told ya.”

The remaining nuisance near Crono was now many times angrier than before as it wildly slashed out towards him with its claws. Dodging back from the attacks, he finally lunged out with his blade, but fell to the ground as his sword was swiped from his hand.

Mumbling curses under his breath, he got up as the monster closed in, kicking it in the stomach and rolling around to reclaim his sword. When he did, he pounded the monster’s head with the blunt end, knocking it flat. He looked up in time to see his first victim sneaking out of the entrance and released a triumphant grunt in response.

Lucca’s second monster dodged the pebbles well, ignoring the pain of any that happened to connect. Soon, her supply of rock ammunition was gone, and she had no way of escaping from the wall. Her left hand went towards her satchel and, in her haste, her fingers fumbled over the flap. With a frightening hiss, the half-snake monster

slithered closer, and Lucca quickly gave up on the contents of her bag. Improvising, she pulled her double-headed hammer from her belt and prepared to fight hand-to-hand. As the monster shrieked and closed in, she readied herself, grinding her teeth in anticipation of the sure pain to come.

Much to her surprise, the monster stopped and screamed with pain as Crono drew a long slash down its back. Turning, the monster faced its new hindrance with multiplied rage and foam dripping from its mouth.

Before it attacked, it looked around the room, seeing the state of its comrades. Crono authoritatively said, "You'd probably better leave...now."

The other conscious monster continued to hold its eye, shrieking in a screeching, raspy voice, "Let's get out of here!" Crono stepped aside and stretched his arm towards the exit as the monster dashed away from the pews, followed by Lucca's first and only victim.

Lucca met with Crono in front of the first row of pews by the east wall, holstering her gun near a doorway leading to some other administrative rooms.

"Phew! That was close!"

"I'll say!"

Unexpectedly, the door flung open and, like a monstrous brigand on the prowl, another monster ran in, grabbing Lucca around the waist and carrying her with it.

"Aack!" she shrieked.

Before anyone could react, a different figure emerged from the door in a green blur, moving more in leaps than in strides, and stabbed a double-edged broadsword into the monster's back. The creature reared back in pain, dropping Lucca roughly to the floor. The lethal blow from the green-skinned rescuer stopped the monster in its tracks as it winced and crumbled to the floor, never to move again.

Crono and Lucca could now see their rescuer in full detail as he turned to address them. There, smiling dutifully with colorless lips stood none other than a humanoid frog.

Good thing Frederick isn't here, Crono thought of his friend, Fritz's father from Truce. He knew all too well the man's love for fried frog legs.

He was fully clad in the garb of a traveling warrior, complete with a golden breastplate, a dark green cape, black swordsman gloves, and white breeches held together with large cross-stitches. A large black sheath hung from his brown belt for his broadsword opposite the side of a blue pouch for knickknacks. Crono deduced that the frog was left-handed, for he carried a round, golden buckler on his right arm. His black topboots had an overturned top of golden yellow and made little noise as he approached them silently.

He meticulously fit the broadsword back into its place by his side, turning to meet his bulging eyes with their unstirred stares. Finally, he spoke, "Lower thine guard and ye shalt alloweth the enemy in." The voice was like that of a young adult Human male.

"Huh?" snapped Crono.

"'Tis when thee art drunk with victory that thine guard's wide open."

"Oh, right," he replied, still slightly confused. He glanced at Lucca, who was on the verge of panic.

"Thou'rt here to save the queen?"

"Yes, that's the plan. We know that the soldiers have called off their search."

The frog overlooked them both, croaking, “The lair is deep within; however, one soul can do naught compared to three. Wilt ye accompany me?”

Lucca finally snapped from her shock. “A...a *frog!*? Crono, it’s a talking *frog!* I hate frogs!”

Crono raised an eyebrow to her, wanting to remind her that this frog had just saved her life. The frog simply croaked again, speaking in his archaic, somewhat unnatural form of dialect. “My guise doth not incur thy trust...” Turning away, he sighed, saying, “Very well, doest as ye please...but I shall save the queen.”

As he began to walk away, Crono widened his eyes and chided her, urgently whispering, “Lucca! What’s the matter with you?! We just fought off four screaming snake monsters and now you’re freaking out over a frog that just saved your life!”

Realizing her rudeness, Lucca turned away from Crono and shouted to the frog, who was halfway to the exit. “W-wait!” He turned back around. “You don’t seem like a bad...uh, person-frog-thing. I mean...”

“What she’s saying is that we’ll join you,” added Crono. Lucca shot him a glance filled with shock at his decision.

“...I’ll just have to handle it! I mean...deal with...him! What’s your name?”

The frog seemed to smile as he approached them. “Frog will do.”

“Alright. Nice to meet you, Frog. I’m Lucca, and this is Crono.”

“Thanks for saving our tails!” added Crono. “And, this is off the subject, but why exactly do you speak like a delusional poet from the seventh century?”

Lucca cracked a small smile, both at Crono’s intended statement and the mistake contained therein. “By ‘seventh’ century, he of course means the fifth century, being that we’re now *starting* the seventh century. And as for his knowledge of poetry...”

“Yes, fine, whatever,” he interrupted. “Really, though, why all the old words?”

Frog was eyeing them curiously throughout their discourse and for several moments before finally responding, “I have found it simpler with mine tongue to converse using the more archaic dialect. It has otherwise become habit.”

“Okay, fair enough. Dare I ask, though, how a frog comes to talk?”

“’Twould take more of an explanation than we’ve the time for,” Frog replied, shifting back to the task at hand. “Surely there must needs be a secret path to their lair. Mayhap a hidden door lurks nigh? Let us search the environs.”

He broke from them, and Crono turned back to Lucca. “Thanks for going along with me. Staying with him might be our best hope.”

“Well, it’s not just that,” she replied, checking to be sure Frog wasn’t listening. “Think about it. He won’t succeed in finding her by himself.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because, as far as we know, we did nothing to bring him here and Princess Nadia still disappeared. If he can’t save the queen, I bet we can’t either. Together, though, we might just stand a chance.”

“So what you’re saying is that I made the right decision.”

She returned him a half-smile. “Though you had no idea, yeah, you made the right decision. I know it must have been hard for you, so well done, Crono!” He rolled his eyes following her sarcastic praise.

Immediately they spread themselves around the sanctuary in search for any possible entrance to the hidden lair. Lucca stooped over and began scanning through the several aisles of pews. Frog crouched along the walls, trying to find any indication of a concealed passageway. Crono began his search around the backside of the altar by the golden rays of light beaming down through the stained glass window.

“I don’t see anything in the aisles!” reported Lucca after scanning all the way down one side of the sanctuary. “See anything, Crono?”

“I haven’t found anything unusual,” he replied after searching the altar.

Frog turned from the north wall, not far from Crono. “Nor have I.”

After a few moments, Crono began investigating the small pipe organ, checking every key and pedal. Then he stood back and eyed it from slightly farther away, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. He looked back at Lucca, who was busy checking the other section of seats, and then looked back at the organ, cocking his head sideways just a bit.

Squinting, he suddenly realized that it was wrongly positioned by only a very slight amount from the north wall behind it. Its right side was almost indistinguishably pulled from the wall more than the left, but it caught Crono’s interest regardless.

In light of this observation, he approached the organ and reached his hand around the right side, moving it slowly up and down the back edge. As his hand moved towards the bottom, he felt a small object protruding from the wooden frame. He peered around the edge to see the object, and noticed that it was nothing more than a small obscure lever. Without delay, he turned to the others. “I’ve found a lever back here!”

Lucca’s head sprouted up from behind the second row pew. “Well, flip it, then!”

He followed her command and moved the small lever. As a result, three chords sounded out, triggering a rumble as a portion of the wall suddenly flipped open on the opposite side of the room from the organ.

“That was simple enough,” he said when the commotion had ended.

Frog grunted in response. “Afore entering yon lair, listen well whilst I explain the creatures within.”

Crono looked at Lucca, still unaccustomed to his form of dialogue. “How would you know what’s in there?”

Frog responsively raised the fold of skin above his right eye serving as an eyebrow before answering. “Why, the creatures inside be Mystics, all living to defile the kingdom. Manifolds of Mystics come hither as a station for spying upon the castle actions. Fortunately, most hath gone into Magus’s military service, leaving nay as many vermin herein. I, personally, have had many encounters with these beasts.

“Those that lurketh include naga, such as the females or ‘naga-ettes’ we just vanquished, large venomous snakes deemed gnashers, the gargoyle-like diablo, and bulky creatures of obesity called henches. None possess special abilities, and they be mortal, like ourselves.”

“We understand,” said Lucca. “Let’s go.”

Crono, who was nearest to the door, opened it to reveal a dark stairwell heading down a fair distance. A scarce amount of blazing torches lit the downward corridor, allowing them to see their way down. The passage was straight and narrow, but fortunately short. It came to an abrupt end at an old wooden door, where they crowded together and prepared to enter.

Crono looked back at the others, saw that they were waiting, and then nodded as he turned to open the door, entering rather heedlessly. The surroundings inside were similar to that of the sanctuary, with a much lower ceiling and red carpet on the floor of a hall stretching to the left. Several blazing candles in the gray brick walls illuminated the area well.

As a result of their casual entrance, three diablos quickly met them.

“Hey!” bellowed one in a croaky voice. “How’d you Humans get in here?! Let’s get ‘em!” As Frog had indicated, they were like gargoyles in their shape, possessing dull silver skin, small horns, a pair of undersized wings, and nimble bodies.

Though quite acrobatic in their movements, performing twists and somersaults, the creatures did not prove to be much of a threat. The invading trio drew their weapons and made quick waste of the opposing efforts. Soon, the diablos lay immobile on the floor.

“They weren’t very tough,” commented Crono.

“Aye, but a nuisance,” Frog replied. “I advise an apt use of stealth henceforth.”

“I agree,” added Lucca. “We don’t want the whole place alerted that we’re here. Got that, Crono?”

“Yes, ma’am!” he replied rather derisively.

Frog began scanning the small hall. There were two double doors at each end of the wall, one across from the entrance and the other in the same place at the opposite end. Subsequently, he knelt at the nearest one and bent to look underneath. Then, pointing at Crono, he ordered, “Look ‘neath yonder door. We shall devise our strategy according to our sightings.”

Crono did as he was bid, walking to the hall’s other end and flooring himself to see through the crack. Lucca stood nearest to Frog, watching them both. “Well...what do you see?”

Fortunately, the doors were separated enough from the floor to provide a decent view. “It’s a really big room with a balcony on each side that I think leads to other rooms,” reported Crono. “And also a main hall between them.”

“Aye, and few patrolling Mystics.... Ah, wait! One cometh! Stay quiet....”

Frog leapt up and waited by the door’s side for a diablo guard to bust through. Lucca looked at Crono with a twinge of worry, but he showed no sign of sharing in her apprehension. He was already beginning to trust Frog’s seemingly professional and well-trained judgments.

Soon, the diablo came through the door without caution: his only mistake. Before processing the scene, he turned dumbly to Frog, but only for an instant. Frog’s dark green cape flew as he cupped his amphibious hand over the vermin’s mouth, neatly spinning him around and clouting him hard with his shield. As he released the form, it crumpled to the ground loosely.

“Ready thyselfes,” he said, turning to them. “We shall advance swiftly.” He pulled out his broadsword and glanced around. “I shall take this end. You two strike from thither.” He motioned to the other set of doors, and they wordlessly complied with weapons drawn.

They watched as Frog listened carefully for a sign of suspicion from the fallen diablo’s comrades. Lucca began loading her gun with some agile-looking darts from her

satchel, Crono eyeing her with interest. “These should pack quite a sting,” she whispered with a cunning smile.

Suddenly, Frog gave the signal, and they kicked through the door like soldiers on a raid. As they came through, three diablo sentries watched the trio with expressions of undutiful dumbness. Two of the giant, snake-like gnashers slithered down the steps from the balcony on Frog’s side, hissing menacingly and wiggling their slender bodies. They balanced like cobras, reaching heights comparable to that of Humans with their blue skin, red underbellies, and horrifying fangs.

As Crono took an offensive stance several feet from the diablos, he caught a clear glimpse of the entire room and the main hall, which led up some steps to a set of double doors between the two balconies. Much to his dismay, two more gnashers and two heavysset, yellow-skinned henchmen started approaching them. Their large beak-shaped mouths revealed rotted teeth and aggressive intent.

Frog, too, noticed the unanticipated force of vermin. Incorporating agility and skill, he winded a diablo with a kick in the gut and then whacked it with his shield. He spun neatly around to watch the two gnashers on the steps above, holding forth his buckler to defend against their fangs.

Crono shouted urgently to Lucca, “Go up this balcony and try to get a shot at the others! Hurry!”

With a nod, she dashed up the steps, nimbly turning to the right and running towards the center of the balcony. She looked down at her gun and then watched as Crono swiftly dodged a front kick from the diablo, while Frog held off the other two gnashers with desperation. Her hands shaking with adrenaline, she raised her dart gun and pointed it towards the head of one of the giant snakes.

Crono turned as he heard the broken hiss of a creature fall in extreme pain. The gnasher whom Lucca had targeted lay twitching on the floor, a small dart protruding from its head. As Crono turned back, the diablo lunged out with great speed, throwing Crono down by the neck. In this second, Crono and the diablo began rolling on the floor; Frog tensely waited for the gnashers to lunge from the stairs; and the comrades of Lucca’s victim eyed her with confused anger.

Lucca was temporarily taken-aback by the gnasher’s fall, but felt obliged to answer to its mates. “You’ll get yours if you keep looking at me like that!” She then loaded another dart.

When the two gnashers pursuing Frog were finally at his level, he charged at one with the front of his shield held before him. It did not expect this abrupt attack and fell victim to the hard hit, toppling roughly on its side.

Crono rolled with the diablo on the floor wildly, his blade several feet away. However, the creature was considerably lighter, so Crono threw it off within seconds. It was soon back to its feet like a resilient acrobat, prancing over to Crono and kicking with mild force before he could get up.

Lucca prepared to lift her gun, but stopped at a faint sound coming from a small hallway behind her. She turned cautiously, finally recognizing it as pounding and muffled shouts.

“Help! We’re trapped in here!” It all came from behind a door on the right.

“Who’s there?!” returned Lucca.

“Oh, thank God! Quick, trigger the switch and get us out of here!”

“Wait...” She turned her head spasmodically between the battle scene and the wooden door. “You’re not going anywhere until I know who you are!”

There was a slight pause from the young man’s voice. “We’re soldiers from the castle. There’re two of us.”

“Lucca! Where are you?!” interrupted the intense shout from Crono.

She turned to go. “I’ll be right back!” Going to the rail, she peered over just in time to see Crono nail the diablo in the face with two hard jabs. “I’ve found someone!”

“What?! Hurry up—we could use some help!” He downed the foe with a smooth uppercut and reclaimed his sword.

Frog had no choice but to kill the fallen gnasher for fear of its fangs at ground level. The remaining monster made for a quick retreat, so Frog was free to join Crono, after wiping down his blade on the crimson carpet. The duo stared at the two fat henchmen and the lone gnasher lined up behind them, none of them moving. They were clearly outnumbered in the showdown. “Whither is Lucca?”

“She found someone upstairs.” The two remained ready to attack.

“Stand down, Mystics! We come for th’ queen!”

A henchman smiled shrewdly, speaking in a gruff voice. “You fools! You’ll never get past Yakra!”

Crono and Frog glared back at them with battle hungry eyes, their fingers clenched firmly around the grips of their swords. “You’re so sure?” spoke Crono, a wide smile of confidence stretched across his face as they prepared for yet another face-off.



“Y-you’re Human?” said a nervous yet relieved soldier after Lucca pushed through the door, nearly falling herself. There were two soldiers in the room, one middle-aged with a full brown mustache and another slightly younger with thick blonde hair. Both were still fully clad in battle armor minus their helmets.

“Of course I’m Human!” she replied, looking back at the youngest soldier as she regained her composure. “You were expecting a fluffy pink bunny?”

They stared back at her, the older man standing as he spoke. “Well, can’t say we expected...,” he stopped, scanning Lucca’s garb before continuing, “...anything, really.”

“I’m Lucca,” she replied with a nod. “How’d you two end up in here?”

“We were part of a larger platoon on a mission to find the queen,” answered the younger man. “When we received word from the castle that she had been found, our group broke off and everyone else returned to base. Jonas and me here were still suspicious of this place, however, so we stayed to investigate. That’s when we found this secret Mystic hideout. I’m Ian, by the way.”

“Next thing we know,” started Jonas, “we’re surrounded by a band of these monstrous blokes and locked in here! We heard ‘em talking, though, and they made mention of Yakra and Queen Leene!”

“Then the queen *is* still here!” Lucca replied.

“They’re hiding the queen in the back. She must be rescued immediately!”

“That’s what we’re here for, but it would be great if we had your help. Please come with me quickly! My friends are in danger!”

“But our weapons—they were taken,” replied Ian. “I’m not sure we can be much help.”

“That doesn’t matter. The queen needs us!” shot Jonas. “Come on!”



Lucca and the soldiers darted out of the room in time to watch the final exchange of words between Frog and the hench. “I eat frogs like you for breakfast!”

“I’ve seen fawns more intimidating than thee! Stand down or fall. ‘Tis your choice.”

Ian turned to the balcony’s north end, noticing a chest nestled against the wall. Swiftly, he kicked it open to reveal two military issue broadswords and shields of dark gray steel. “Our weapons!”

The mustached soldier stood watching. “Do you *see* this?! Blimey! It’s a talking *frog*!” Just then, Crono and everyone below looked up to him as he bravely called, “Listen to the frog, lard-for-brains! There’s not a fly any smaller than your fat head tha’ c’stand against his tongue, let alone his sword! Stand down at once!” His comrade tossed him his sword and Lucca raised her gun.

“You know what happened to your snake buddy,” she called.

The henchmen looked at one another before turning back to Crono and Frog, who split ways to make a getaway path for their reluctant opponents. Crono motioned his arm towards the door politely, saying, “The exit’s that way. We’d hate to see anyone get hurt.”

Swiftly, noisily, but without words, the three fiends jogged or slithered out, meandering around the other fallen beasts until clear. Lucca and the two soldiers came down to greet them, meeting briefly at the bottom of the stairs.

Crono stood near, a slight gleam in his eyes in the presence of the soldiers. “So you’re from the castle?” They nodded cordially. “I’m Crono, and this is Frog. I see you’ve already had the misfortune of meeting Lucca,” he said with a grin. “Thank you for your help back there.”

Smiling beneath his mustache, Jonas replied, “No, thank you! We’ve been captive here for a short time, but we were antsy to get out. These Mystics are animals!”

“They were talking of eating us!” added the younger man.

“So we just sat in wait for a band of flesh-hungry Mystics to come barging in with plates and cutlery. It was a dreadful feeling!” he exclaimed. He then calmed himself, suddenly remembering his manners. “Forgive me. My name is Jonas, and this is Ian.” He scratched his mustache roughly.

“Nice to meet you,” Crono replied, clearly interested in what Jonas had just said. “They actually talked about *eating* you? Do you think they were serious?”

“Aye, lad. That’s the extent of these Mystics’ hate for Humans.”

Frog croaked in impatience. “‘Tis a pleasure to meet thee, sirs! However, we mustn’t forget the task at hand. There art many rooms to explore, and very little time in which to act!”

Crono decided to take on a small leadership role. “Tell you what. Why don’t we split up to cover more ground?” He looked around the area and finally motioned to a door just up the stairs of the right balcony. “I’ll check out that room up there.”

“Frog and I can search through the next door. The lair goes deeper through there,” said Jonas.

“Okay, then Ian can come with me, and Lucca can go with you guys,” concluded Crono.

“Fine, then we art agreed. Upon securing the area, converge back at this point,” said Frog resolutely. Everyone nodded in concurrence and started up the stairs to continue their search for the queen and her captors.

Crono and Ian waited for the others to pass before entering the first room. Once they had disappeared from the balcony, Crono cautiously laid a hand on the doorknob and cracked open the door, peeking inside.

“*Buuurrrrp!*” came a noise of relief from a smiling diablo as he leaned back from a large, food-laden table. His eyes turned to Crono as he sat upright. “Hey, what’s with the disguise? No need for it here!”

Crono stood hesitant for a moment until fully realizing his situation. Thinking quickly, he pulled the door open full swing and turned around to Ian, saying with a wink, “Okay, it’s clear.” After their encounter with the nuns, he knew well the ability of the Mystics to shape-shift into completely different forms.

With only half a second’s hesitation, Ian caught on. “Ah, great!” Comfortably, at least in appearance, they walked in and closed the door, taking two seats by the diablo. A particularly corpulent hench and a naga, this one male, were sitting on the opposite side.

“*Buuurrrrp!*” Crono turned his head to avoid exposure to the diablo’s breath.

“Good one!” shouted the fat hench. He then grabbed a flask and drank it with vicious greed.

“So why *are* you disguised?” asked the diablo, looking directly at Crono and Ian.

“Oh...didn’t you hear?” Ian replied, hesitantly at first. “There was a Human scare a little while ago, but it turned out to be nothing. And, wouldn’t you know it? The only form I could come up with was one of those stupid soldiers we caught!” Brief and hearty laughter followed.

“Yeah, I hate having to think fast for my disguises,” replied the hench. He then leaned forward as much as his bulging gut would allow and pointed at Crono. “But *you* must have had some time to get creative! I’ve *never* seen a Human look like that before! *Ha ha!*”

Crono glared back at him for a moment, quickly regaining his composure.

“Believe it or not, I actually saw one like this in a battle against the castle. He had just severed the head of a hench, as it turns out.”

Everyone in the room jumped at the sound of the hench slamming a fist on the table. “You sick man hugger! Why did you choose *that* disguise?!”

“Cool it, meathead. That was just before I killed and ate him.”

After several moments of increasingly uncomfortable silence, the hench's face suddenly widened with a grin. "Ha ha ha! Now you're talking!"

"Was that in the battle at the bridge?" asked the diablo.

"Yes, it was," Crono replied.

"Awesome! General Ozzie was involved in that battle. That's when he sent word to Yakra to make a move on the castle. Before we knew it, the bridge was toast and the queen was ours!"

"Yakra's so smart!" said the hench. "His plan to capture the chancellor and take his place worked perfectly! Now the queen's captive and the castle's in an uproar! This is rich!" The diablo and a naga joined in his indulgent laughter.

Crono and Ian immediately exchanged glances in light of what the hench had said. Crono, wanting to respond to keep the conversation alive, said the only thing he could think of. "I bet she'd be a tasty one!"

"*Burrrp!*" The naga's shrill and high-pitched voice made Crono somewhat uncomfortable. "The ones we ate recently weren't so bad. And those two soldiers we caught look rather plump and juicy. Just looking at you makes me hungry!" It sucked drool from its mouth as Crono forced himself to take a drink of some of the nearby, stomach-scarring liquid, wondering to himself just how long they could keep up this conversation undetected.



Frog, Lucca, and Jonas had entered into a small anteroom from the balcony, where they could hear the sound of deep yet melodious singing from behind another wooden door. "For what purpose would Mystics join in song?" inquired Frog, leaning towards the sound.

"Perhaps they're paying homage to someone," reasoned Lucca.

"I'm not sure, but I think you're right," replied Jonas. He approached the door and listened carefully, making out the words to a reverent song of praise to evil:

*"Oh...dearest Magus...
Your flashing eyes...like stars...
And flowing hair...
Like waves atop the sea...
No sad sunny day nor any frightful bright place
can get us down as long as you're near...
There's nothing to fear..."*

*Magus, oh Magus
Our Hero, Magus!"*

Frog drew back with disgust. "'Tis an odious ditty."

"It is, indeed. They're paying respects to that devil warlock," Jonas replied.

Frog's head shook repugnantly with a croak. "Are they so foolish as to *worship* this fiend?!"

"Aye, but this place may be of use to us yet...."

"How so?"

"Do you think the queen is in there?" asked Lucca.

He leaned in closely. "Doubtful, as the lair goes deeper than this. Still, put your mind to it, friends. 'Twould be a dreadful pity to diminish the morale of the Mystics by interrupting their veneration."

Frog smiled enthusiastically as he caught wind of Jonas's intent. "Ah! Not a second to waste, then!" He swiftly drew his sword and kicked through the door defiantly, Lucca and Jonas following close behind.

* * *

"It's almost my shift. I hate pretending to be Human. It's so repulsive!" The diablo lazily removed himself from his chair. "I'll look in on Magus's statue before my shift."

Crono also got up after setting down his cup. "I'm still on my shift. Humans are so disgusting. I'm just glad to be a Mystic!" He had heard all that he needed to hear.

"Here's to that!" cheered the hench.

"Oh! Yes, still on my shift, too," said Ian as he followed Crono's lead and stood from his chair.

Crono, comprising a fine sense of accomplishment, allowed the diablo to leave before walking out himself, Ian following close behind.

* * *

Two diablos were fallen to sword wounds as Frog and Jonas skillfully faced a small pack of Mystics, who had just finished singing their malevolent song. Now the two foes lay there in intense pain, holding their stinging cuts. Two more naga faced them in defense of their precious statue, which stood at the end of the long room.

Suddenly, the half-snake naga grew desperate, charging towards the invaders knowing their very lives were endangered. The two swordsmen held them off with their shields calmly, confident in their abilities to ward off the menacing creatures. Frog and Jonas had attacked the Mystics so fervently that Lucca had little more to do than to stand back and observe.

Frog and Jonas continued to deflect the nagas' attacks, pushing them back and skillfully stabbing with their swords when the opportunity came, a popular tactic used by many of the castle soldiers. Finally, Frog lunged out at his vermin, leaping at its head with his shield before him and stunning it momentarily. Then, grasping its neck, he swung his weight around the monster and slammed it to the floor. As it hit the floor, he delivered a quick and lethal downward slash and then spun around to sever the head of the other.

Jonas sheathed his sword with confidence. "Thanks."

Wordlessly, Frog approached the statue of Magus, visually noting its minute and vile details. The tall figure looked on beyond him with its sly, slivered eyes; long, straight hairs; and sinister looking scythe, all carved to the last dark detail. The carving depicted the form standing around a gallant flame with a cape flowing proudly as the eyes overlooked all that was evil.

In an abrupt fury, Frog cried out, hurling his buckler high into the statue's face. Amongst a small cloud of dust, the pointy nose and the shield fell to the floor noisily, the two decommissioned diablos watching with agony and mouths agape at the mutilation of the statue. Jonas and Lucca watched from the far end of the room, silent as Frog released his anger.

With the worst of timing, yet another confused diablo strolled into the room. Before he could even assess the situation at hand, Lucca fired a dart directly into his neck, forcing him to descend slowly to the floor with a series of gargling and gasping sounds. Frog, having grabbed his sword at the sight of the creature, relaxed his grip and strode expressionless towards his comrades, thinking again of the statue.

“‘Tis a wretched figure... Nary is its honoree worthy of the stone twas carved from nor the breath of life he breathes.” With that, Frog took his shield and stormed out, Jonas and Lucca following behind.



“It's true!” Jonas, Lucca, and Frog had arrived back to the main hall in time to hear Crono's discovery. “Well, mostly true. The chancellor *is* involved...!”

“I can't believe it,” sagged a disheartened Jonas.

“Thee art certain?” Frog inquired, himself disappointed with the news.

“We're sure,” Ian replied, “but there's more to it than that.”

Crono continued. “The real Chancellor was captured and their leader, a beast named Yakra, posed in his place! I don't know about Yakra himself, but the queen *is* here”

“Yakra...,” pondered Jonas. “That's a name the Knights have heard before, but no one knew that he was lurking about the Zenan Continent. This is quite serious!”

“We haven't any time to lose, then!” added Ian.

“Right, let's go!” motioned Lucca.

“Come—through the main hall to the queen's rescue!” Frog led them quickly through the doors ahead, their steps thumping into the red carpet rapidly.

Six naga guards stood at the end of a long hallway, screaming viciously at the pursuers. Behind them were two more doors.

Everyone quickly drew their weapons in preparation for battle. They stared down the naga from beneath lowered eyebrows. Jonas turned his head to Frog and Ian, breathing, “For the queen.”

“For th' queen,” returned Frog.

Without hesitance, the three natives of medieval Guardia ran into the group of naga, subduing them with their swords. Crono followed them, joining in the fight as Lucca kept a close watch from behind.

The scene was gruesome and without pity. The naga were no match for the skillful swordsmanship of the four fighters. With swords extended lengthways, Jonas and Ian slashed completely through one of the monsters and turned to handle two more. Frog used his buckler to thrust into them, keeping their claws out of harm's way and jabbing with his sword with all his strength to take the creatures down.

Crono fought a bit more conservatively, for he had no shield or armor for protection, though he helped by running his sword through one of the Mystics from behind as Jonas kept it at bay. Soon, all six naga were motionless on the floor, never to rebel against the Kingdom of Guardia again.

Crono kept his sword drawn, knowing that more was ahead. As they drew nearer to Leene, he found himself inescapably immersed in thoughts and memories, what few he had, of Marle—her joy when he stayed with her at the fair; the terror on her face as she disappeared; her relief and the glisten of those beautiful eyes when she knew he had come for her.

He could wait no longer. "C'mon, we're not finished yet!"

With confidence and authority, they burst through the doors.



"Prepare yourself, Queen Leene!" Stroking the beard of his dastardly guise, the supposed Chancellor Clarus addressed Queen Leene, who was lying bound to an altar, warm rays of sun shining in her face and golden curly hair from the window above. The real Chancellor stood helplessly in a tangle of ropes against the wall, wiggling anxiously with wide eyes and a red face of helpless fury.

Soon, a loud thump was heard, and all heads turned to the five people standing defiantly in the doorway. The queen's captor was visibly startled at the invaders' sudden entrance. "*You!* How did you get in here?" His eyes seemed mostly focused on Crono as they drew close to Leene. "I should have laid you to waste when I had the chance!"

"*Psff!* Yeah, you would have had a *real* easy time doing that in the *castle!*" Crono retorted in sarcasm.

"Frog!" Leene shouted. "You're just in time!"

Quickly, Frog hopped up two small sets of steps and threw his blade down towards the altar, severing the queen's bindings. "Majesty, stand back and allow us the honor!"

She slipped herself off of the altar before the fake Chancellor could react. "Be careful!" she said as she turned and hurried back to the room's entrance several yards away. The real Chancellor's eyes were now wide with interest and excitement.

"*Gyah ha ha!* It's useless to fight! No one will leave here alive!" bellowed the imposter as he came around to their side of the altar. Crono and the others came forward and stood a slight distance behind Frog, their weapons out and ready.

"Yakra!" shouted Jonas. "You won't escape justice *this* time!"

"Thou hast meddled in royal affairs for the last time, Yakra!" Frog declared.

"Stupid frog! It's time you jumped off this mortal coil!" Yakra responded, grinning.

The quintet jumped back as the top of the fake Chancellor's head split with a loud crack and continued to open down the length of his body, rays of energy emanating from within. Like a bird emerging from an egg, a hefty, yellow-skinned creature pushed out of the Chancellor disguise, hunched over like a giant turtle. He then stood erect and fully expanded his true body, the shell now completely split in two upon the floor. Both sides of his oval body were lined with four large appendages curved like claws but used as legs. Two large horns like those of a bull curved downward from his head towards his two silvery blue eyes. His mouth was not enormous in size, but contained rows of sharp, carnivorous teeth that made up the fear factor. The fake Chancellor had reverted into the troublesome beast known throughout the land as Yakra.

Immediately, the creature plopped down on his legs and scurried towards Ian, who was not anticipating such a swift move from the cumbersome-looking form. He attempted to dodge, but was knocked sideways into the wall, his armor clanging as he fell to the floor, momentarily stunned.

Crono managed a quick sword slash as he came around, wounding one of its legs. It roared angrily, charging towards him. Crono was barely able to feint sideways, escaping the sure injury that would have resulted from impact. He then ran to join Jonas and Frog.

Lucca shot a dart deep into its flesh, scrambling to load another. As the creature appeared stunned, Jonas, Crono, and Frog charged out with their swords held high, shouting wildly.

Instantly, two tiny pores opened in Yakra's belly as it stood erect and ejected several tiny needles into the charging trio. Crono and Jonas were stopped in their tracks, stooping in pain and yelling out. Frog, however, had been protected by his shield and breastplate. He jumped like a madman into Yakra, literally standing in its folds of flesh, pounding its carapace with his shield in hopes for a lethal sword jab.

Crono winced as he pulled the needle from his side and turned to Jonas, who had been stuck in the face. "Are you badly hurt?"

"*Aaah!*" he winced, pulling the needles away and holding blood. "My face!" Ian ran to his aid as Crono looked to Frog.

"Frog! Hang on!" At that moment, Yakra shot more needles towards Crono, who quickly deflected them on impulse with his sword, slashing them in midair.

Ian jumped up with Crono, ready to assist as Jonas crawled to the wall in intense pain. Leene hurried over to help him back towards the exit, tugging him by the arm.

Satisfied that Jonas was out of harm's way, Crono and Ian ran forward, an action that forced Yakra into a sudden surge of strength that allowed him to flip Frog from his body. The nimble amphibian was sent sprawling straight into the air as his sword left his grasp, and he bounced off of Yakra's back, falling with a roll towards Chancellor Clarus.

"Are you all right?" asked the chancellor helplessly.

"Aye," breathed Frog as he stood. Yakra now stood between him and his sword, which had fallen on the other side of the room.

Crono and Ian faced Yakra boldly as it fell to its legs and prepared to charge at them. Then, the two Humans began to back down as Yakra stampeded toward them.

Ian successfully dodged to the side this time, and Crono was forced to hop the opposite direction. He was, however, not quick enough to escape impact as he rebounded

off of Yakra as though leaping directly from its side. He landed with a somersault near Frog's fallen blade and waited for Yakra's next move.

Ian, however, approached Yakra to engage it as it stood back up on its hind legs. He clanged his sword against Yakra's claws, struggling to maintain his position. Frog came up from behind and leapt with full force back into Yakra's flesh, grappling the monster by the neck.

From the hall outside, a small blue-skinned imp, who had noticed the fallen bodies of Mystics scattered about the lair, crept up to the open doorway and peeked inside. His eyes widened at the sight of the battle, and he remained quietly outside, hoping that no one would see him.

Crono quickly glanced down at Frog's blade, stooping to snatch it by the hilt. He then ran closer to the action and prepared to join Ian in holding the creature at bay.

Lucca, who had been standing aside, took action just before Crono lunged out. An extremely well aimed dart penetrated Yakra's left eye and forced him to fall to his back, giving Frog the chance he needed to move more freely.

Crono positioned Frog's broadsword so that the blade faced downward, calling, "Frog!"

Apprehending the signal, Crono's able comrade hopped into the air, and Crono tossed the sword towards him with all his might, the blade still pointing downward.

Yakra roared, his vision impaired and his confidence shattered. To complete an amazing feat, Frog snatched the sword out of the air and, with it, surged down onto Yakra, penetrating the back of his neck. With this one swift leap slash, he placed the final blow and jumped away with his blade.

Yakra wiggled on his back with short, breathless roars. Soon, the action ceased and the melee was over. The imp who had been standing in the hall outside quickly turned and ran from the scene.

Frog wiped his sword on the red carpet and turned to face the others. "Art thou badly hurt?" Ian shook his head, an expression of admiration building as his eyes followed Frog's every move. Frog addressed the others, who were watching him with relief. "In times passed I could not have killed so easily...but with desperate times cometh forceful change." He sheathed his sword. "Yakra shall torment no more." Silently, he walked towards the queen.

Lucca turned to Crono. "My word, she does look a lot like Marle, doesn't she?"

Crono glanced towards the queen momentarily, responding, "Yeah, but I can definitely tell a difference." He turned and freed the chancellor from his ropes.

"Oh, thank you!" bellowed Clarus, shaking the ropes from his arms. "Excellent show! I've never seen such proficient, clean-cut fighting!"

Crono smiled as they all joined Frog and Queen Leene. Jonas was back up, but still in considerable pain. Ian accompanied him closely.

Crono couldn't help but stare into the queen's face, which so strongly reminded him of Marle. "Are you all right?"

She turned to him, glancing slightly at Lucca. Even her voice was much like Marle's, but with the effects of age pulling its tone. "Yes, I'm fine. You must forgive me, but I can't recall seeing you two before. Are you a soldier?"

“Oh, no, I’m sure you wouldn’t recognize us. We’re kind of...not from around here.” He motioned to Lucca, who waved wearily in greeting to the queen. “We came here to rescue you and joined with Frog along the way. We also rescued these two soldiers, and they offered their assistance.”

Frog stood before the queen, adding, “Yes, we all fought with our lives to ensure your safe return to th’ castle.”

The queen turned to them all. She didn’t appear to have been harmed or even disheveled from her captivity, as her golden, shiny hair was still neatly pulled up in the back. “You came to rescue me! Thank you, Frog! Thank you, all!” She looked back at Crono, who was still staring at her. “I’m truly touched that you strangers would risk so much to help rescue me.”

“Of course, Your Majesty!” Crono replied. Lucca raised an eyebrow at his strange behavior.

Leene noticed that Crono’s glare remained and finally asked, “Is something wrong, Crono?”

Just then, he snapped from his trance, trying to conceal his embarrassment. “Oh, Your Highness, I’m so sorry! It’s just...well, you look so much like someone I know—like a very dear friend of mine.”

“Oh, what a coincidence!” Leene answered, maintaining her gaiety. “She must be cute!”

Crono smiled faintly, his heart sinking as his last memory of Marle fading into nonexistence resurfaced. Though they had successfully secured the queen’s safety, he would not be satisfied until he could see Marle standing before him once again.

Frog bowed respectfully, but with little to say. “The king awaits. Let us return to the castle.” Rising, he croaked approvingly to Crono. “I thank thee, Crono and Lucca. Jonas and Ian, thank ye as well.” They all nodded with acknowledgement, but not a single soul there needed nor wanted the appraisal.

“Yes, thank you so much. Please join us,” the queen concurred.

Chancellor Clarus approached her quickly. “Oh! Your Highness! As you can see, I am undamaged!”

In response, Leene smiled in a dismissive though polite manner. “Let’s return to the castle!”

* * *

Deep within Guardia Forest and beyond Manoria Abbey, one lone Mystic dashed as fast as his little legs could move him through the thick vegetation, finally meeting up with a small band of fellow Mystics.

Struggling to catch his breath, the imp looked up at the largest Mystic in the bunch. “Young Yakra...! Humans...!”

Yakra II turned his bulky form around and stared down at the imp. “What are you rambling about?”

The imp caught his breath only slightly. “The Humans—they killed master Yakra! They have killed your father!”

At this, Yakra II bared his teeth and spat back, “Nonsense! Where did you hear that?!”

The imp hopped about excitedly. “Saw it, sir—witnessed it! The Humans, one of them *green*, came and rescued the ones from the castle! They will be leaving the lair at any moment!”

Yakra II looked away from the imp and glanced at the other Mystics standing with him. Then, he turned with a loud grunt and crawled with the imp towards the edge of the forest.

Hidden by the thick line of trees, they stopped and waited where they could plainly see the entrance to the abbey. Within a minute’s time, the Humans, accompanied by the humanoid frog, came through the doors and began walking away from the forest.

“Are they the ones who killed my father?” asked Yakra II.

The imp rapidly nodded his head in acknowledgement. “Yes, yes! The green one, the soldiers, the females—and the redhead—all of them! One is wounded, sir! Should we send attackers, yes?”

He glared at the group as they neared the outer edge of the forest, his eyes slanted with rage. After a few moments, he turned around and began heading back into the forest. “No....”

The imp hopped to catch up. “We’ll do nothing?!”

Yakra II quickly turned his body back to the imp, who was startled by the sudden movement. “They killed Yakra! We will not underestimate them. Remember the faces of those Humans. Sketch them if you have to!”

The imp nodded. Imps, though frantic and simple-minded, were renowned for their photographic memories. “Yessir,” he responded.

“My father, the great Yakra, will be avenged!” With that, Yakra II crawled back into the depths of the forest.