

Gems Are Bad, Mmkay?

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Zidane and his fellow adventurers trudged through the Popos Heights forest overlooking Gizamaluke's Grotto. Garnet walked close behind him, staff at the ready, while Vivi and Steiner went over the contents of the knight's backpack. Suddenly, rustling in the treetops above them alerted them to the presence of something unknown. As the sound grew louder and closer, the rogue drew his daggers and dropped into a fighting stance. "Something's coming!" he shouted to the others. "Quick, get ready to—"

Before Zidane could finish, a bizarre-looking creature with rainbow-colored feathers, floppy green legs and a gigantic beak and mouth floated down in front of him. It hovered in the air unsteadily, wobbling around as if it had lost its sense of balance, but did not attack. "Hey man, spare some gems?" it begged with a low, dreamy tone. "I gotta get my lapis lazuli on!"

Taken aback by the request and the weirdness of the situation, Zidane searched his brain for an appropriate response. "I don't know, pal," he said after a moment's hesitation. "I think you've had one too many already."

"Is it high?" Vivi whispered to the others.

Garnet looked confused. "High? It's not floating that far off the ground."

Steiner and Vivi glanced at each other incredulously. "No no, Princess," the knight explained, "Master Vivi was merely asking if the creature was stoned." He eyed the colorful bird-thing disdainfully. "And yes, it does appear to be well and truly baked."

Garnet's brow furrowed as she struggled to comprehend what her guardian was saying. "Stoned? Baked?"

Zidane looked over his shoulder at the young princess. "You know, blitzed, wasted, tripping?" Garnet's confusion only deepened, and she shook her head. "Indulging in illegal narcotics?" he stated dryly.

"Oh!" Finally understanding, Garnet's eyes widened. "Yes, I see what you mean now."

Zidane slapped his forehead. "Good God, you have led a sheltered life!" he exclaimed. "How did those crackhead jesters not tip you off?"

Pondering this, Garnet tilted her head and blinked. "I just thought they were...odd," she replied absentmindedly.

"Yeah, odd with a side of LSD!" Zidane snorted in amusement.

The princess opened her mouth to ask what LSD was, but the avian creature flew in between them and interrupted her. "Come on, man, hook a bro up!" it whined at Zidane impatiently. "I'm losing my buzz over here!"

"Sorry buddy, can't help you," the thief stated simply, turning out his empty pockets. "We're fresh out."

Vivi flipped through his pad of paper and ran a finger down the list. "Actually, Zidane, I think we do have a couple—"

"Shut up, Vivi!" Zidane hissed.

Flapping its way over to Steiner, the critter pleaded with the man holding the bag. "Come oooooon," it drawled, "gimme the geeeeeems!"

Steiner took a resolute stance, holding out his palm to stop the beast while resting his other hand on his hip. "You'll get no assistance from me, miscreant," he declared firmly.

The creature's demeanor instantly changed. "Then...DIE!" it bellowed, unexpectedly morphing into a hideous monstrosity. The rainbow feathers melted away to reveal leathery blue hide and spiked bone protrusions, and its head twisted and warped until its once lazy smile became a ghastly orifice of gluttonous perversions. Growing with unfathomable speed, it soon towered over the heroes, scraping its head on the tree branches. The abomination's eyes blazed with depraved fury as it swept its gaze over the stunned adventurers.

"Run away! Run away!" screamed a terrified Zidane as the heroes broke and ran.

"I'LL GET HIGH OFF YOUR SOULS!" the fiend roared, chasing the group through the forest. The four barely managed to keep ahead of it, staying out of its reach only because of the dense undergrowth.

"Why didn't you just give it the gems?!" Vivi shrieked at Steiner as they barreled through the woods.

"I didn't want to enable it!" the knight yelled back, struggling to keep from losing the backpack or its contents.

Hit with a brilliant idea, Garnet stopped in her tracks at the far edge of a clearing. Turning to face the behemoth, she leveled her staff at it with an expression of grim determination. "Stand back, everyone! I'll handle this!" she shouted at the top of her lungs. The three men assisted her by courageously jumping behind a large rock and cowering. As the monster drew closer, she gathered her willpower and called forth an eidolon. "Atomos, heed my summons!"

The titanic spirit creature appeared before her in a flash of blinding light just as the fiend entered the clearing. Opening its enormous mouth, the eidolon took a deep breath and inhaled, tearing the monster from the trees with gale-force winds. The behemoth could not withstand the pressure, and flew screaming into Atomos's gaping maw. The eidolon swallowed its prey, but not long after burped queasily and took on a glassy-eyed look.

Zidane and the others peeked out from behind the rock. "Okay, I'm officially impressed," he exclaimed, emerging with Vivi and Steiner in tow.

Garnet beamed triumphantly. "I may not be streetwise, but I know how to take care of a monster." She patted the tipsy eidolon affectionately, who swayed unsteadily. "I release thee, Atomos." The summoned creature hiccupped, then faded away in a spiral of shimmering lights. Spotting something on the ground, she knelt down to pick it up. "Say, it dropped a...what is this?"

Zidane snatched it out of her hands excitedly. "Oh, hell yes! Feast your eyes on a world-class Qu blunt, boys!" He ran it under his nose appreciatively, taking in its delicate fragrance. "Ah, it doesn't get any better than this!" Vivi rubbed his hands together in anticipation, while Steiner all but drooled at the sight of the stogie.

The princess eyed the cylindrical object suspiciously. "Is that a drug?" she asked, her tone as cold as ice.

The men froze in fear, the fate of their prize suddenly in question. "Um...yes?" Zidane responded with some trepidation.

Holding up her staff, Garnet gave the stogie her best kill-it-with-fire glare. "Aren't drugs bad?"

In desperation, Steiner put himself between Garnet and the blunt, holding up his hands in a placating gesture. "Well, Princess," he elaborated hastily, "you see, MOST drugs are terrible, horrible things no one should partake of—"

"But not all!" Zidane quickly interjected.

"—but certainly not all of them are! This handcrafted marvel, in fact, is a rare opportunity to sample the world's finest!" Realizing what he'd just revealed, Steiner coughed and tried to act nonchalant. "Er, so I've heard."

"Oh." Garnet considered this for an excruciatingly tense moment. "Okay!" she said at last, smiling brightly. The danger past, the men let out huge sighs of relief. "What do you do with it, anyway?" she inquired curiously.

Zidane chuckled wryly and wrapped an arm around Garnet's waist, pulling her close. "My dear," he replied, gesturing grandly with their newfound treasure, "I promise to explain everything in *exquisite* detail when we light this baby up tonight."

"You'd better, buster!" Garnet laughed playfully, poking the rogue in the ribs. Plucking the blunt from Zidane's fingers, she gave it a quick sniff before passing it back to Steiner for safekeeping. The knight packed it away for convenient access later as Vivi noted it in his inventory, marking the entry with a joyful flourish of penmanship. The party then continued on their journey, eagerly anticipating the night's festivities. "You know," Garnet mused after a long silence, "it smells a lot like Mother's relaxation pipe."