Chillin' in Another World with Lv 2 Super Cheat Powers

3



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

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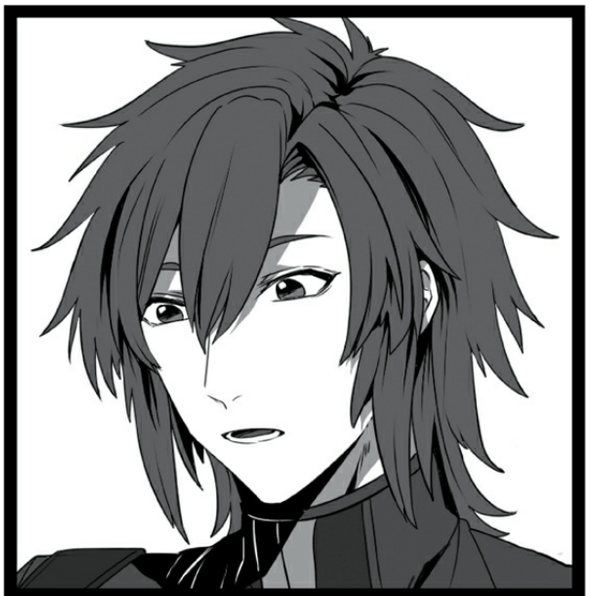
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Characters

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Flio

Former hero candidate with super cheat powers. Proprietor of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.



Rys (Fenrys)

Flio's wife, a lupine demon. Does not permit others to flirt with her husband.



Balirossa

A former knight of Klyrode. A young woman learning the ways of love.



Byleri

A former archer of Klyrode. Growing ever more passionate about horses and sex.



Blossom

A former sword fighter of Klyrode. Works hard on the farm.



Belano

A former witch of Klyrode. A quiet, shy, and skittish teacher.



Hiya

The Djinn who Commands the Origin of Light and Darkness. In training with Damalynas.



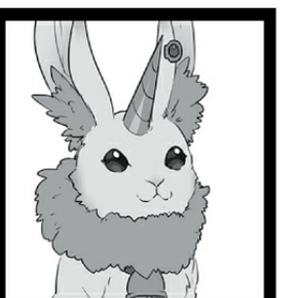
Damalynas

The Grand Magus of Midnight. In training in Hiya's mindscape.



Sybe (Psychobear Form)

Flio's pet. Helps Blossom with farm work.



Sybe (Unicorn Rabbit Form)

How Sybe spends most of its time. The adorable mascot of Flio's house.

Chill
Level 2
Super Cheat Powers

Characters

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Gholl (Ghozal)

Once known as the mightiest Dark One in history. A good guy, but insensitive.



Uliminas

Served as the Dark One Gholl's confederate. Freeloading with Ghozal at Flio's house.



Hero Gold-Hair

The "hero." A wanted man. Flees to the coast after failing to fence his stolen goods.



Tsuya

Hero Gold-Hair's fellow fugitive. An attractive and busty young woman.



Yuigarde

Gholl's younger brother, the current Dark One. Short-tempered and unpopular.



Phufun

Yuigarde's minion, a succubus, and an extreme masochist.



The Maiden Queen

Deposed her father and took the throne. A hard worker with a strong sense of justice.



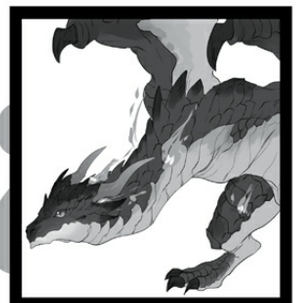
Greanyl

Shadow demon girl. Former member of the Dark Army's Silent Listeners.



Wyne

Newest member of Flio's house. Powerful, but a big eater.



Wyne (Wyvern Form)

Wyne in her Wyvern form. Her destructive power is top-class among demons.

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Chapter 1: The Fli-o'-Rys General Store

The world of Klyrode is a world of swords and sorcery, of magic beasts and demihumans. It is a world where humans and demons have been at war since time immemorial.

The latest chapter in that war arrived when the new Dark One Yuigarde ordered the entire Dark Army, the ruling power among demonkind, to launch a full invasion against the greatest kingdom of humanity: the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. The Dark One's goal was nothing short of world conquest.

Opposing him was the new commander of Klyrode's forces: the Maiden Queen. She used traps, ambushes, misdirection, and any other trick she could think of to fight back against the invasion. The Dark Army, which had attacked recklessly and with very little in the way of strategy, was thoroughly stymied by Klyrode's tactics and lost scores of soldiers to no effect. In the end, the Dark Army was forced to retreat without ever coming within sight of Klyrode Castle's walls.

After such a crushing defeat in which so many demons lost their lives, the Dark Army began drafting demons from the lands under its control to urgently rebuild its fighting strength. Klyrode too had suffered many casualties in stopping the Dark Army's assault and devoted itself to strengthening its defenses at key strategic locations while also seeking aid from neighboring kingdoms. Once again the armies were at a standstill, any action confined to frequent small skirmishes.

◇In a Forest◇

Flio and Rys rode a wagon down a small road that ran through the middle of a forest. Pulling the wagon was Sybe the psychobear, currently wearing armor that covered its entire body. It pulled the cart with astonishing speed despite its lumbering size. Behind them followed a fleet of wagons led by Greanyl.

"My lord husband," said Rys, "our destination is just a little further north along this road." Rys sat next to where Flio was piloting the wagon, checking

the map she held open and giving directions.

“Thank you, Rys... That means we’re about to reach the dangerous part of this trip.” Flio glanced around until he caught sight of something in a corner of the forest.

“I believe you are correct...” Rys stood up, her body transforming into the great wolf form she could assume as a lupine demon.

“Klyrode Castle’s own caravan wasn’t able to make the delivery through here. It sounds like the ambushers are quite good at hiding their presence...and quite fast.” As he spoke, Flio pulled a blue wolf mask over his head.

◇ ◇ ◇

In the middle of the forest lay a point identified by the armies of Klyrode as one of their key tactical locations: a great fortress of stone built into the sheer cliffs. It was a strong defensive position with many small nests up in the cliffside where archers could sit and rain arrows down from above. The defenders of the fortress were led by the most storied commander in all Klyrode, MacTaulo.

MacTaulo was skilled with the sword and had much experience facing the Dark Army time and time again—experience that formed the basis of his many stratagems. To the armies of Klyrode, who had endured loss after loss at the hands of the Dark Army, he was a godsend. His fortress was located just east of the Dark Citadel, where its presence was perhaps the greatest source of aggravation to the Dark Army. Time and time again they had launched attacks against MacTaulo’s fortress, and time and time again he would crush their forces.

Finally out of patience, the lichsteed Sleip—one of the Infernal Four—led his own army to attack MacTaulo’s fortress, intending to overwhelm the position. Being the eldest of the Infernals, Sleip was canny enough not to seek victory through brute force, but used a specific strategy to oppose his enemies.

◇ ◇ ◇

In a tent in the center of the fortifications, MacTaulo was losing his temper. “Are the supplies still not here?!” He scowled as he snapped in irritation, slamming both fists down onto his desk. Soldiers were standing by all around,

yet none of them had any answer for their commander. MacTaulo glared at them and clicked his tongue.

MacTaulo had good reason to be angry. Although he had sent his army to oppose Sleip, the lichsteed had not once allowed their armies to clash. Instead he would send small teams of elite fighters behind MacTaulo's position to target the supply lines.

Sleip's strategy was to starve out MacTaulo. Whenever a supply caravan would come upon the area, the Dark Army's top fighters would appear from all directions, crushing them utterly.

MacTaulo had tightened security in the surrounding area in an attempt to counteract this, but Sleip's elite forces were focused around a solid core of horse-type magic beasts. They excelled in speed, so much so that the knights of Klyrode's army could not so much as give chase. They were sitting ducks.

There had been few attacks on the fortification itself—the defenses were undamaged, at least—but thanks to the continual attacks on their supply line, it had been almost a month since any supplies had reached them. Food was growing scarcer by the day. Just as Sleip had calculated, they were starving.

"It won't be long before the whole army deserts," MacTaulo spat. But just then, the sound of an explosion rang out. "What was that?!" Alarmed, he flew out of his tent. He hurried through the tunnel dug in the cliff up to the watchtower.

"What was that sound?!" he demanded.

"Sir, it's the enemy! It appears that one of Sleip's elite units has joined battle behind our position."

"Again?! Show me! Where have you been watching?!" MacTaulo growled as he looked out towards the forest. He could see tongues of flames rising from the trees. "Damnation. It's another supply caravan under attack. They need help, immediately!"

He turned in an evident hurry back towards the tunnel he had come from, when something caught his eye. It was running through the area marked by the flickering flames at breakneck speeds. "The Dark Army? No, it can't be..."

MacTaulo's eyes opened wide as he took another look.

◇Meanwhile, in the Forest Nearby◇

The nightmare Dalc Horst was one of the Infernal Sleip's direct subordinates, and captain of the strike team. Right now, he was running at full speed through the forest, dismay and disbelief written on his face. "How?!" he shouted. "What?! Why?!"

His horseman soldiers pelted through the trees in horse form. It was unthinkable for them to have been driven off like this by the Klyrode army, and yet the white thing chasing him was unbelievably fast—even faster than he was.

"Aaaah!" Behind him, someone screamed. Dalc Horst turned his head to look over his shoulder and saw a great white wolf atop one of his soldiers, forcing them to the ground.

"Curses! Another one down!" Dalc Horst clicked his tongue and took a good look at the wolf. He took in her supple limbs, her powerful body, and her speed which easily outclassed any horse. "I've heard of you, lupine..." he said.

It's her—the lupine demon who fights alongside humans... Dalc Horst swallowed at the memory of the rumors. He kept watching her as he ran forward, his head turned over his shoulder.

He could see the cart coming up behind the lupine demon; it was pulled not by a horse, but by a magic beast that looked to be a psychobear. It was running after the lupine with ferocious speed. He could see a human man wearing a blue wolf mask driving the cart as well.

Dalc Horst's eyes went wide. "Everyone scatter!" he shouted. "They're the ones who've been wrecking our strike forces!" He bolted for the trees, running in a zigzag pattern.

"Harumph!" one of the firesteed soldiers running nearby shot back. "Don't tell me you believe in rumors like that. I'll burn them to ashes!" He turned around, whinnying fiercely and charging straight at the lupine. "Prepare yourself! That wagon's as good as burnt!" As he spoke, the flames that made up his mane rose into the sky like a pillar of fire. It made a thunderous roar as he descended upon the wolf.

The man driving the wagon raised his hand and the flames suddenly vanished. “Wh-What?!” The firesteed couldn’t believe his eyes, and for a second he hesitated.

A second was all it took for the wolf to plow into his solar plexus, kicking his large body up into the air. “Gwaaaah!” he shouted as he sailed high through the sky. Quite some time passed before he finally hit the ground.

He pulled himself to his feet and once more launched an attack on the wagon, but all he got for his efforts was a trampling by the psychobear. This was enough for him to lose consciousness entirely.

Dalc Horst clicked his tongue. “Scatter!” he shouted again. “Everyone scatter! Retreat to the camp!” After seeing what had happened to the firesteed, the other soldiers didn’t hesitate. They ran every which way into the woods.

“Hmm...” said the man in the wolf mask. “It might be troublesome if they get away.” He raised his arm again and uttered a short incantation. A magic circle appeared around his hand.

“Wh-What now?!” Distressed cries came from every direction as the horseman soldiers found their bodies suddenly unnaturally heavy. They tried as hard as they could to run even as their limbs turned to lead, but due to the magic of the man in the wolf mask, one after another collapsed until finally Dalc Horst himself crumbled under the weight. They were utterly overwhelmed.

After making sure that every last one of the horsemen was pinned to the ground, the lupine demon made her leisurely way back to the wagon. “My lord husband, what shall we do with them?” As she spoke, she slowly returned to her human form.

“Well, let’s see,” said the man as he took off his wolf mask. “Would you gather them together in one place, Rys? Once we’re done with our business here, we’ll circle back and have a chat.” The psychobear rubbed affectionately up against the man. That man was Flio.

Psychobears are known for their singularly violent natures. Ordinarily they would see a human as nothing but prey. For a psychobear to act like this would normally be beyond belief, and yet this psychobear was rubbing its head up against Flio’s cheeks like a large friendly dog. Flio petted it gently on the head.

“Good job today, Sybe,” he said. “Thank you.”

Sybe was Flio’s household pet. It rumbled happily at the attention.

◇Inside the Fortification◇

“My apologies for the delay. We’re here to deliver the supplies requested by the Klyrode army.” Flio smiled in a businessy way and handed a sheet of paper to MacTaulo. On it was written an inventory of the supplies Flio had brought with him.

“You... You brought us our supplies?” MacTaulo was shocked, to say nothing of the rest of the soldiers milling about the command tent who stood wide-eyed in disbelief. After all, every supply caravan up until this point had been obliterated by the Dark Army’s strike teams. Furthermore, the destroyed caravans had been supply-transport teams from the Klyrode army accompanied by soldiers for defense. But the man who had succeeded where they failed looked like no soldier MacTaulo had ever seen.

“I-I’m sorry,” said MacTaulo. “Who are you, exactly?”

“Of course, sir,” said Flio, his calm demeanor unwavering. “I am the proprietor of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store in the city of Houghtow. You may call me Flio. We’re a new establishment, but if there is anything you need delivered, I would encourage you to contact us at any time.”

MacTaulo frowned. “That’s not... I mean, I’m grateful for the delivery, but... Well, this is the front line in the war against the Dark Army. I could never ask a group of civilian merchants to come *here*.”

“Oh, there’s no need to worry on that front.” Still wearing his calm smile, Flio pointed forward. A magic circle appeared around his hand, and a larger circle began to form where he was pointing. Very quickly, the circle manifested a large door.

“If you would come this way,” said Flio as he made his way to the door to open it. On the other side was the inside of a shop.

A woman poked her head out. She looked like one of the catfolk. Her tail waved in curiosity. “Meow? Flio?”

“Hello Uliminas,” said Flio. “I’m sorry to interrupt your work. This is our client, Captain MacTaulo.”

The catfolk woman gave MacTaulo a big friendly smile. “Nice to meet mew! I’m Uliminas, treasurer of the Fli-o’-Rys Company!”

The door and Uliminas had appeared so suddenly that neither MacTaulo nor any of the other soldiers in the fortification knew how to respond. For a second they just stood there silently watching. Flio looked around at the assembled soldiers, still maintaining his pleasantly businesslike demeanor.

“I’m a fair hand at magic, you see,” he said. “If I’ve been to a place before, I can create a portal leading back. This way, if there is anything you need, we will be able to deliver it without any hassle. Oh, and I’ll give you this in case you want to make an order.” Flio retrieved a crystal about the size of a fist from his Bottomless Bag and handed it to MacTaulo.

“What’s this?”

“That is a Speaking Crystal. I have one as well. If you speak into it, we will be able to converse from a long distance.”

“Call us any time!” said Uliminas. “We’re more than happy to let you purruse our wares!” She smiled politely and bowed.

MacTaulo was speechless. *A p-portal?* he thought. *Even the castle’s best magic users can’t create a portal alone... And a* Speaking Crystal*? I’ve never even* seen *one of those before...*

While the commander’s mind raced furiously, Flio and Uliminas continued to smile like nothing at all was odd.

◇Some Time Later, in the Forest Nearby◇

The elite strike team under the command of Sleip had tried to attack Flio, and for their efforts they had been captured to the very last demon. They were in their human forms, bound and gathered together in a corner of the forest. Rys, Sybe, Hiya, and Damalynas stood in a circle around them. To hide their identities, everyone except Rys (who was in her wolf form) and Sybe (who looked like any psychobear) wore wolf masks. They were shaped like Flio’s mask, but while his was blue, Hiya’s was yellow and Damalynas’s was violet.

Hiya even went to the trouble of changing the golden halo that shone behind their head to a shape based on a wolf.

Finally, Flio made his appearance. “My lord husband!” Rys cried. She ran up to him and nuzzled her head against his body, rumbling as he scritched her.

The horsemen couldn’t believe their eyes. They began whispering to each other as they stared. “He has that ferocious beast acting like a tame puppy...” muttered one.

“Who *is* he?” said another.

Flio glanced at their captives for a moment and then turned back to Rys. “How are things over here?”

“Well, Hiya and Damal—” She stopped herself. “No, sorry, I mean *Djinn Justice* and *Wizard Justice* healed everyone who was injured, as you asked.” Hiya gave a deep bow, while Damalynas puffed her chest out proudly.

Flio nodded, satisfied, and stepped towards the strike team. “Which of you is the captain?” he asked.

Dalc Horst was seething, but he saw no option but to cooperate. “I am.”

Flio approached him and squatted down, bringing his eyes to Dalc Horst’s level. Dalc Horst determinedly refused to break eye contact. “So?” he said, his voice brusque. “What are you lot gonna do with us? Kill us on the spot? Send us to Klyrode Castle?”

Flio’s smile was calm and pleasant as always. “Actually, there’s something I’d like to ask you to do. As long as you agree, I don’t see any reason you can’t go back to the Dark Army’s camp.”

“What?” Dalc Horst had not been expecting this. Behind him, his subordinates started to murmur in surprise. “We’re free to go if we do what you say?”

“Yes, I promise,” said Flio, still smiling. “If you prefer, I can send you somewhere else with Teleportation magic.”

Dalc Horst looked over at Rys, and the others surrounding them. *This man... He’s gotta be the one smashing all our guerrilla teams...and I’ve heard that the lupine is his Summon. I might be able to take on the psychobear—that’s just a*

magic beast—but the djinn and the wizard might give us trouble... I didn't see them in the fighting earlier, but they seem like they have some pretty serious magic. We really don't have any other options.

Dalc Horst sighed deeply and looked back at Flio. "Well, I'll at least hear what you want from us..."

Flio smiled and opened his mouth to speak.

◇A Bit Later, in the Dark Army Encampment◇

To the north of the Klyrode army's position was the fortified encampment of the lichsteed Sleip, defended by wooden palisades placed in the gaps between trees. Inside, Dalc Horst's strike team was standing at attention. They had just returned and now were before Sleip himself.

Sleip sat in his chair and regarded Dalc Horst's group. "Well? What did the man in the wolf mask ask you to do?"

At those words, Dalc Horst stepped forward and handed Sleip a letter. "Just to give this to the commander of the Dark Army forces stationed here..."

"That's it?"

"Yes, sir. He really didn't want anything but that. We said yes and he sent us back here, good as his word. I guess it's not as simple as them wanting us wiped out..." Dalc Horst shook his head in disbelief at his own story.

Sleip opened the letter. "We wish for peace" was all it said. Sleip read it a number of times, puzzled. He turned it over to see if there was something written on the back, but there wasn't.

"Preposterous." Sleip clicked his tongue. "How long have we been at war with the humans? And he expects us to just *forget* all that history of bloodshed?"

◇Meanwhile, in the Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

After seeing off Dalc Horst and his team and double-checking to make sure they had finished all their business with the Klyrode army, Flio cast Teleportation to return to his store in Houghtow City.

"Hm." Hiya followed after Flio into the store and shook their head. "I cannot help but feel we mishandled that. Exalted One, I question the wisdom of

sending members of the Dark Army back as you did. I am certain they will attempt again to attack the human position."

Damalynas, who was standing next to Hiya, nodded. "I was thinking the same thing. They're gonna go right back to crushing the fortress, right?"

"Well, maybe." Flio forced a smile, holding out both hands in front of him in a gesture of pacification. "But at least they know what we want now. I think we should wait and see."

"But—" Damalynas stepped towards Flio, her disagreement written on her face, but whatever she was going to say was interrupted by Rys's snickering laughter.

"Well, I suppose I can't fault you two for being so pent-up after missing the battle entirely! You know, we *called* you when they attacked but you wouldn't come out of your *mindscape.*"

Damalynas's cheeks flushed bright red. "Well! You see! I... We were... I was in the middle of training with Their Divinity Hiya! I couldn't help it!" She turned away in a huff.

Rys only snickered harder. "*Training*, is it? And here I thought you two were just *enjoying each other's company*."

Damalynas sputtered. "I... B-B-But!"

Hiya rested their jaw on their closed fist. "Hm. I cannot deny that the two of us became so engrossed in our training that we were late to reach the scene. I acknowledge the error." Then, they turned to look at Damalynas. "So, Damalynas, shall we continue where we left off?"

"Oh! Ah... Y-Yes..." Damalynas stumbled over her words but nodded eagerly. Hiya wrapped their arms around her shoulders and cast Teleportation. The two vanished.

Rys kept looking at the spot the two had been standing at and grinned. "Those two really are quite the couple."



Byleri, too, had been staring as she restocked the shelves back in the shop. “Mx. Hiya and Miss Damalynas... Like, I wonder what they’re getting up to in their mindscape?” she mumbled to herself, her face red. “I bet they’re totally doing *that*...or maybe even *that*. Or... No, they couldn’t possibly be doing *that*, could they?! But, like, Mx. Hiya can have any anatomy they want, right? ...Maybe they’re doing *that*...” She giggled as she imagined it, a big goofy grin on her face.

Byleri had once been a member of a knightly company, serving as an archer and a stablehand, but started staying indefinitely at Flio’s house along with the rest of her company after Flio had saved them from monsters. Now she helped out with the Fli-o’-Rys Company and raised horses to rent out. She had also secretly amassed a collection of books concerning (rather, depicting) the act of sexual intercourse, a subject with which she was becoming increasingly fascinated.

◇ ◇ ◇

As Flio and his companions carried on their conversation, the shop around them was busy with customers as always. Among them, a company of knights from Klyrode Castle was checking out the equipment on display with wide eyes.

“I can’t believe it,” one said. “I would never have imagined you’d find equipment like this in some backwater city. Look.” He gestured at a shield. “This shield is made out of dragon scales.”

“Really?! But I heard almost all of the dragon clans were with the Dark Army...” said another.

“I’m serious! Look! There’s no *way* this is fake. Do those look like giant lizard scales to you?”

“N-No... The sheen is different...and the texture too.”

The knights kept browsing, raving about the quality of the weapons. After all, the weapons for sale were all made with exacting skill by Flio himself out of materials like dragonscale that were almost impossible to obtain through normal channels and enchanted (also by Flio) with all kinds of magical effects. They were far, far better than the equipment available at the castle. Flio was

practically mass-producing legendary items.

As the knights were enraptured, a group of women stepped into the shop. “Lord Flio! We have returned!”

“Ah, Balirossa! Good work today.” Flio greeted the woman at the head of the group with his typical smile. “Did you run into any trouble?”

“None especially,” said Balirossa. “We came under attack by brigands on some occasions, but Ser Greanyl’s supply team routed them with no difficulty.” Greanyl, who was standing behind Balirossa, nodded.

Led by Greanyl, the Fli-o’-Rys Company Supply Team had once been known as the Silent Listeners: Uliminas’s minions and the Dark Army’s one and only spy corps. When Gholl—the previous Dark One—abdicated his throne to freeload at Flio’s house, Uliminas and her Silent Listeners followed him, abandoning the Dark Army. Now they had found employment at the Fli-o’-Rys Company.

“Thank you, Greanyl,” said Flio. “That was a big help.”

“Such words are not necessary to one such as I,” she responded, bowing deeply. “But I thank you.”

The knights from the castle were watching Balirossa and whispering noisily to each other. “Hey... Isn’t that Balirossa?”

“It is. I’m certain. That’s Balirossa, our former comrade...”

Balirossa—along with Blossom, Byleri, and Belano—had once served Klyrode Castle as a knightly company. They came to live with Flio after he saved their lives, and eventually abandoned their station as knights of Klyrode. Now they worked for the Fli-o’-Rys Company. There were few women among the knightly companies and even fewer all-female companies, and Balirossa in particular had become an object of admiration for many of the male knights. She bore herself with the dignity befitting the daughter of a family of famous knights, after all, and her face was classically beautiful to the highest degree.

Balirossa, of course, had no idea. As a knight, she devoted herself single-mindedly to her swordsmanship, refused every one of the many dinner invitations she received. Eventually she left Klyrode Castle, quitting without

ceremony. Many were the knights who would fall into dark brooding at the mention of her name. And now here she was—right in front of their eyes.

"I-I'm going to talk to her," said one, stepping away from the group. He smoothed his hair down with the palm of his hand and cleared his throat a few times before walking up to Balirossa. "Um... Um, eexcuse me..." he said, raising his arm in an attempt to get her attention. Suddenly, a man standing to his side seized his arm in a strong grip. "Huh?!"

"Hrm," said the man. "What do you want?" This was Ghozal. He wore a brown apron that didn't at all suit him. He was much taller than the knight, his body rippling with muscles.

"Ah? N-No, I..." Staring up at Ghozal, the man faltered.

Ghozal looked back down at him, surly-faced. "I repeat," he said. "What. Do. You. Want." He was glaring daggers. A dark aura seemed to well up behind him.

"You *mewdiot!*" A catfolk woman leapt into the air, smashing a paper fan against the back of his head.

"H-Hrm? What's the matter, Uliminas?" said Ghozal, startled.

"What do mew *mean* what's the meowter?! Stop harassing the customers!"

"Hrm? I did no such thing. I asked him a sincere question."

"Oh yeah?! Than I suppose I was *imagining* mew releasing your meowra?!"

"Hrm? I did *not* release my aura!"

"Mew did! It wasn't even subtle!" Uliminas leapt up again, landing a blow with her fan that would have sent any man flying. In Ghozal's case, however, it did about as much damage as a mosquito bite. Ghozal's muscles were unreasonably tough.

Uliminas and Ghozal continued to argue as Balirossa, her report finished, vanished into the backroom. "A-Ahh..." the knight stared after her with pleading eyes, but he was stuck, his arm still held tight in Ghozal's grasp. His fellows decided she had left for good, so they made some purchases and left.

Blossom saw them off with a "Y'all have a great day!" but the men looked like

their hearts were in turmoil.

“That...” said one. “That was Blossom, wasn’t it?”

Blossom was one of the former knights staying at Flio’s house. She had been a heavy fighter, and now she spent her time tending to the farm outside their residence and helping with the company.

“Like, what was with them?” said Byleri. “It’s like they weren’t even looking at us, y’know?”

“Yeah. They just kept staring at the back room...” Blossom grimaced. “I guess everyone loves our Balirossa!”

“Right? And, like, she still has no idea?”

Something bumped up against the girls’ feet as they spoke.

“Oh?” said Blossom.

“Huh?” said Byleri.

They looked down to see Sybe in unicorn rabbit form walking around on two legs and nudging them to get their attention. It seemed like it was trying to tell them that they were just as cute.

“Honestly, Sybe,” said Blossom, scooping the rabbit up in her arms, “you’re one to talk about cuties, you cutie!”

As Blossom held it, Byleri patted it on the head. “Aha ha, like, thank you, Sybe!”

Sybe looked between the two and snuffled happily.

◇Days Later, Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

The Maiden Queen looked down from her throne at her knight captain Boralis as she stepped into the throne room. “Tell me, Boralis,” she said. “How fares the war?”

“The enemy has yet to make a significant move, Your Majesty,” answered the knight. “I have received reports as well, saying that our problem with the Infernal Sleip cutting off supply caravans to the east has been resolved with the

aid of a civilian general store.” The Queen’s vassals who had gathered in the throne room began to stir.

“They were able to resupply the fortress?” said a vassal.

“I would think they’d have more problems with the horsemen...” added another.

“They were able to destroy our caravans, after all...with knights defending them, no less,” said a third.

The Maiden Queen, for her part, gave a satisfied nod as she listened. *The Fli-o’-Rys General Store, was it?* she thought. *Lord Flio’s company was able to bring our goods safely, it seems. I owe him my thanks.*

She raised her head and looked around the room at the noisy crowd. “The Dark Army has yet to recover its full strength. Their defeat has been a telling blow, it seems. We must take this opportunity to strengthen our position. We cannot allow a single gap in our defenses.”

The retainers lowered their heads as one at the Queen’s words. The Maiden Queen’s victory over the Dark One Yuigarde’s invasion force had become legendary in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the surrounding lands. Even the vassals who had once expressed uncertainty in her abilities due to the newness of her ascension to the throne now placed their complete trust in her words.

Boralis’s report was followed by the Queen’s vassals giving theirs. At present there were no particularly important matters to report, which came as another relief to the Maiden Queen.

One of her vassals stepped forward. “Your Majesty,” he said, hesitating, “there is something I wish to say.”

“Yes?” said the Queen. “Speak your mind.”

The man stepped to the front of the throne. “We have seen that Klyrode is well equipped to handle the Dark Army...” he said. “But I fear that we know less than we should of the other lands.”

“Other lands... You speak of the bandits to the west and the pirates to the

south?”

“Precisely, Your Majesty.” The vassal nodded.

The queen touched her hand to her chin as she thought. “Let me see... I believe the west is not so pressing a concern. Our knights patrol those lands regularly. The south, however, we have left entirely in the hands of the nobility...”

“Yes... I was thinking in particular of the Calgosi Coast. The ruling noble family there has been late with their regular reports. I worry...”

“Indeed. We should not neglect this.” The Maiden Queen looked to Boralis, who was now standing at her side. “Boralis, have an emissary sent to the Calgosi Coast at once.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I am afraid, however, that even on a fast horse, it will take an emissary two months to make the trip and return.”

“Consult with the mages to see if they can spare anyone who can cast Teleportation. Have it known that I deem this a high-priority mission.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, at once.” Boralis bowed deeply and took her leave.

◇Klyrode Castle—The Maiden Queen’s Chambers◇

The meeting concluded, and the Maiden Queen returned to her chambers and flopped onto her bed, sighing loudly. “It’s enough that we must contend with the Dark Army, but bandits and pirates as well? Am I allowed no time at all to rest?” She sighed again and closed her eyes, taking deep, calming breaths.

A few breaths in, she stopped and shot up in bed. “No, I mustn’t... This is not the time to lose heart.” Squeezing her eyes shut tight, she clapped her hands against her cheeks as if to rouse herself. “I chose this path... I will not complain of my decision.” She squeezed her fist tight. “But...” She glanced at her dresser where on top, next to her mirror, sat a single ring.

There was a magic gem set in the ring with an enchantment of communication magic. Flio had its matching pair. If she was ever in trouble, she could use this ring to contact him directly. It was this ring that she had used to speak with Flio and develop the plan of supporting the fortress earlier with

supplies from the Fli-o'-Rys Company.

She clutched the ring tight in her hand and held it against her chest. "If only there was someone among my suitors like Lord Flio... How much could I accomplish with his support as my husband..." She began to breathe heavily as she thought of it.

Suddenly, she caught sight of the mirror in front of her. Inside there was a woman, fearsome-looking and clearly not human.

"Eek!" cried the Maiden Queen. She jumped in the air, her eyes wide. But as suddenly as she had appeared, the woman in the mirror vanished. "What... What in the world...?"

She stared, shocked into silence, her body feeling suddenly cold.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

"Rys, what's wrong?" Flio looked over at his wife, disconcerted. She had frozen in place, transfixed in front of the mirror she had been using to do her hair.

Rys was startled at Flio's voice before relaxing once more. "O-Oh! It's nothing, my lord husband," she said. *What was that feeling...?* she thought. *Like there was a woman on the other side of the mirror... A woman whom I must kill...*

Rys put on a fake smile and did her best to act natural as she continued to gaze into the mirror.

◇Days Later, In a Forest◇

Deep in a forest far away from any official roads, a number of wagons made their way down a small path, barely more than an animal trail.

"Hey, you sure this is the right way?" said one of the men driving the wagons.

"Positive!" said another. "Trust me, I know this area."

"All right. Lead the way, then."

Two figures watched the wagon train from the underbrush.

"Hero Gold-Haaair...is this gonna be okaaay?"

"Of course it'll be okay! Hero Gold-Hair here doesn't know the *word* failure!"

“You dooon’t? But I thought...” Tsuya touched her finger to her cheek and tilted her head in confusion. Her head and body were covered in a green cloth, while Hero Gold-Hair had a branch tied to his head.

Hero Gold-Hair glanced at Tsuya from the corner of his eye. “Don’t *think*!” he snapped, scowling as he brought his face close to hers. “Focus on the plan!”

“Eeeek, sooorry! I won’t think! Prooomise!” Tsuya flailed her arms in a flustered panic before she turned her eyes back to the wagons. The two watched as they drew close to a large tree. Then, there was a sickening *crunch*. The wheels of the front cart were stuck in a hole.

“What?!” cried the driver. “A pitfall?!”

“Yes! Got ’em!” Gold-Hair reached into his Bottomless Bag and took out a shovel. This was the Drilldozer Shovel—a legendary item that was once among the treasures hidden in the sanctuary of Klyrode Castle. Gold-Hair had taken it with him when he fled the castle sanctuary. “All right, Tsuya,” he said. “You’re up. You remember the plan, right?”

“Y-Yes, Hero Gold-Haaair!” Tsuya gave Gold-Hair a sharp salute. Satisfied, he struck the earth with the Drilldozer Shovel and began to dig. A normal shovel would take a bit of time to dig even a small hole, but with the legendary Drilldozer Shovel in hand, Hero Gold-Hair dug faster than the eye could see. In no time at all, he had vanished underground, out of sight.

A few seconds later, the train of wagons one after the other found their wheels stuck, just like the front wagon’s were. Holes had seemingly appeared from nowhere, swallowing up their wheels. Voices rang out:

“Wha—”

“What’s going on?!”

Hero Gold-Hair had dug along under their feet, transferring the earth he displaced into his Bottomless Bag as he went. With the wagons stuck in place, he was able to dig holes to trap them in from directly underneath. This stunt was, of course, possible due to the superspeed digging ability of the Drilldozer Shovel.

From her position hidden in the underbrush, Tsuya watched as cart after cart

dropped into the holes. “All riiight...” she muttered to herself. “Time to gooo...” She took a number of magic gems out of her own Bottomless Bag, holding them in both hands. The crews of the wagons were milling around, checking on their stuck wagon wheels. “Heeeave...hooo!” Tsuya shouted as she threw the magic gems at the carts.

When they caught a glimpse of the magic gems flying out of the underbrush, the wagon crew started looking in that direction. Before their eyes was Tsuya dressed in a green cloth, taking to her feet and writhing strangely. A second later, the magic gems all began emitting a black smoke. These magic gems were made for self-defense to facilitate running away if their owners were to come under attack by bandits. The smoke had a nauseous quality that made its victims’ eyes tear up and stung their throats, inducing painful coughs.

“Ahh! What *now*?!” cried one.

“This is awful!” complained another.

Tears streaming down their faces and coughing in fits, the wagon crews began to scatter. And amongst the chaotic scene was Tsuya. “W-We’re the Daaark Aaarmy!” she shouted as loud as she could, still writhing and wriggling her body. “We’re scaaary mooonsters! Roooar! Grooowl!”

That being said, Tsuya had a voice that could only be described as adorable, and no particular skill at mimicry. It sounded more like she was a child playing a game. Moreover, draping a green cloth over herself and squirming was not nearly enough to instill anything resembling fear in her victims. The noxious smoke from the magic gems Tsuya had thrown, however, was quite effective, and the crews continued to panic, seemingly oblivious to Tsuya’s presence.

“I can’t take this... Let’s get out of here!”

“Somebody save uuus!”

“They’re not paying me enough for this!” The crewman coughed.

Wailing and screaming, they ran off every which way.

When it seemed like everyone had left, and just as the magic gems stopped emitting smoke, Hero Gold-Hair popped out of a hole near one of the wagons, almost as if he had planned it. He took a good look around. “Hm, hm. Looks like

they've all run away." Still keeping a sharp eye out, he stepped up to the wagon.

Suddenly, Tsuya popped out from behind him, still draped in her cloth. "I-It's the Daaark Aaarmy! Run awaaay! We're gonna eeeat yooou!" She was shouting as loud as she could, still twisting and turning unnaturally. Hero Gold-Hair turned to face her and walked over. He seized the cloth she was wearing in his hand and pulled it off. "Fweeeh?!" she shrieked. She had mistaken him for one of the wagon crewmen. She curled up into a ball and grabbed her head, trembling and begging for forgiveness. "I'm sooorry! It's not my faaault! I'm doing this for Hero Gooold-Haaair! I'm sooo sooorryyy!"

Gold-Hair regarded Tsuya with a look of sheer exasperation. "Look, you idiot. It's me."

"Fweh...? H-Hero Gold-Haaair?" When she realized who it was, Tsuya clung to him tight, tears in her eyes. "D-Don't surpriiise me like thaaat! I thought my heeeart was going to explooode!"

"All right, all right! But we have to hurry! Who knows when that lot will return."

"O-Okaaay..."

Tsuya grabbed her Bottomless Bag and turned towards the wagons. Hero Gold-Hair, likewise, took up his own bag and faced the wagons as well. The two systematically stuffed every last crate in the wagon train into their Bottomless Bags. Although the bags were no bigger than an adult's fist, the inside could fit a volume of items equivalent to an average treasury. Not only that, but no matter how much was inside, the bag never got any heavier. It was an immensely useful magic item. Bottomless Bags were hard to come by even in a store that specialized in magic items, and if you were to happen upon one, its price would be commensurately high. Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya had been given their bags back when Gold-Hair was still being pampered by Klyrode Castle, exploiting his status as Hero.

"Are you done, Tsuya?"

"I aaam! Eeeverything's packed awaaay!"

“Good! Now let’s get out of here before they come back!”

“Okaaay!”

Hero Gold-Hair began to make his hasty way deeper into the forest with Tsuya jogging after.

While they were moving, Tsuya spoke up. “Um... Hero Gold-Haaair?”

“Yes, Tsuya, what is it?”

“Um... Maaaybe I’m being silly but...if we dooo things like that, won’t Klyrode Caaastle say we’re even wooorse criminals or something?” Tsuya pressed her finger against her lips as she cocked her head.

“Don’t be stupid!”

“Eeexcuse me?! Looook, I know I’m not as smart as yooou, buuut...”

“Look. Yes, attacking wagons, pillaging... It’s true that those would be considered crimes. But think about it!”

“Huuuh?”

“Why do you think those wagons were going down such a middle-of-nowhere little nothing road like this?!”

“Uuum...” Tsuya folded her arms, thinking as hard as she could about Gold-Hair’s question. But nothing came to her. Hero Gold-Hair, seeing that she was stumped, cleared his throat and began to speak.

“See, the *reason* someone would use a road like this is because they want to avoid being seen. In other words, they’re carrying *stolen goods*, or some other kind of shady items. Either way, it’ll be something they can’t carry openly. Do you think someone like that is going to file a criminal complaint?”

“Oooh, I seeee! They wooon’t, will theeey?!” Tsuya nodded eagerly, happy to finally understand.

Hero Gold-Hair nodded like a satisfied teacher. He wagged his finger as he continued. “For the most part, bandits are just out for themselves. So there’s no harm in helping ourselves to their spoils!”

“I seeee! You’re amaaazing, Hero Gold-Haaair!”

“Now, let’s head back to town to sell this haul!”

“And when we’re dooone, we can reeest and then find mooore people to ambush!”

“Precisely!” So he said, but Hero Gold-Hair somehow seemed unsatisfied about something. “By the way, Tsuya...”

“Yeees? What iiis it, Hero Gold-Haaair?”

“Don’t you think your intimidation was a little...weak?”

“Whaaat? I tried reaaaally haaard, though! I went aaall-out on my roooars! And saying, ‘We’re the Daaark Aaarmy!’ and stuuuff...” Tsuya shook her head, and began once again waving her arms and wriggling her body. It really looked like it couldn’t be anything other than someone playing pretend.

Hero Gold-Hair kneaded his forehead. “You need more training once we get back to the inn...”

“You don’t think this is gooood enoooough?”

“Imbecile! It’s nowhere *near* good enough! Not even close!”

“Whaaat?! Why are you being so meeean?!”

“Well, why are you so convinced that pitiful performance is good enough?!”

“Buuut!”

“No buts!”

“Waaah... I’m sooorry!”

The pair vanished deep into the forest as they kept on arguing.

◇A Building Somewhere—A Room◇

Deep in the backstreets of a certain city, in a room on the second story of a certain building, a man sitting in an extravagant chair was grumbling in irritation. This man was the Shadow King. He had once reigned as King Klyrode, but he had been driven from the throne when his wrongdoings were brought to light by his own daughter, who was then the first princess. Even as the reigning king, he had been involved in shady underworld business behind the scenes, and after being deposed he redoubled his efforts, taking on a new name.

To the right of the Shadow King's seat stood the fox demon Kintsuno the Gold wearing a gold cheongsam dress with deep slits, and to the left stood her sister, Gintsuno the Silver in a matching silver cheongsam.

"Well?" yipped Kintsuno. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Surely it can't take *this* long to deliver some goods, can it?" added Gintsuno. She and her sister seized the Shadow King's head from either side.

The Shadow King, his head caught between two fox demons, clicked his tongue. "Stolen goods, you understand, can't be transported openly. It takes *time* to move them along the back roads unseen."

"Oh?" said Kintsuno.

"Well, that's all well and good..." added Gintsuno with a yip. "But if *anything* doesn't show up, we're making it *your* problem."

Just then, a loud rumbling sound came from Kintsuno the Gold's and Gintsuno the Silver's stomachs simultaneously, reverberating throughout the room. Both foxes flushed red and quickly pressed their hands against their stomachs.

The Shadow King looked between the two. "Well, well... I had a *feeling* you were in a terrible hurry. Don't tell me you aren't eating properly?"

"No!" yipped Kintsuno. "Nothing like that!"

"We-We were a bit busy today...we must have forgotten to eat!" added Gintsuno. The two folded their arms and laughed.

Not long before, the demon fox sisters had hatched a plot to recover the three hidden treasures of the fox clan and use their power to defeat Yuigarde, the new Dark One, and take his place. In the end, however, the Eastern Wind had been stolen by Flio's group, the Scouring Gourd crushed by Ghozal, and the Devil Fox Sword—which they had left behind—was lost when their stronghold was destroyed. In the aftermath, the other demon clans of the west had banded together, ousting them from their position as chiefs. The only option left to them was to work with the Shadow King to rebuild their lost strength.

Even under these circumstances, the pair affected confident laughter.

The Shadow King again clicked his tongue. "Well, there's nothing I can do to

make your goods arrive faster anyway."

The Shadow King, too, was struggling through some harsh times. He had indulged in theft, in disguising inferior items as high quality to sell for an inflated price, and in all kinds of usury—but recently nothing had been going particularly well. He would have a merchant caravan attacked only for his men to be wiped out by the defenders. He would sell fake items only for the scheme to be immediately exposed and his underlings arrested. He was prepared to throw in the towel on his current scheme and have all of the stolen goods and forgeries collected together, but even those were taking a long time to arrive.

"Even so," he mumbled, "how much time can it possibly take..."

Suddenly, the door flew open. "Your Majesty, I have terrible news!" One of his henchmen burst into the room.

"You're in a hurry. What happened?"

"Y-Yes, well...the men who were transporting our goods from the north have returned..."

"Ooh!" the King's eyes lit up, and he leaned forward in his chair. "They've finally arrived!"

The fox sisters smiled genuinely when they heard the words and embraced each other.

"We're getting our money!" yipped Kintsuno.

"We're going to *eat!*" yipped Gintsuno. "We can start building our resources again!"

The henchman stood still, his face pale as he watched the celebratory scene. "Oh, um... This is...hard to say..."

"Hm?" said the Shadow King. "Don't worry about how we plan to sell it, I have other people working on that."

"No, it's... Well, they say they came under attack on the road and had to abandon the wagons..."

The Shadow King blanched. "*What?!*"

The sisters, who had been joyfully embracing a second ago, did as well. “What did you say?!” said Kintsuno.

“Then... Then *none* of it is coming?!” cried Gintsuno. Once again their stomachs rang out, and the two collapsed onto the floor.

The Shadow King rose from his chair. “Mercenaries!” he bellowed furiously. “Get me mercenaries! Have them recover the goods at once!”

“Y-Yes! Yes, Your Majesty!” The henchman hurried out of the room as fast as he could.

“*Honestly*,” the Shadow King spat, “if it’s not one thing, it’s another...” He clicked his tongue again as the sound of the foxes’ empty bellies filled the room.

Later, mercenaries were sent to the scene under orders from the Shadow King, but all they found were empty, abandoned wagons.

◇A City Street, Somewhere◇

Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya ran for their lives down the street. Chasing behind them was the ever-persistent town guard.

“How did this happen?!” Gold-Hair lamented as he ran.

“Halt!” shouted a guard. “You’re under arrest for the attempted sale of stolen goods!”

“Stop resisting!” shouted another.

“H-Hero Gold-Haaair! Wh-What do we dooo?” Tsuya whined plaintively.

“How should I know?! Just keep running!” Hero Gold-Hair turned a sharp corner and ran off into the backstreets. Tsuya followed him as fast as she could. “I just don’t get it! I had a *feeling* that stuff was kind of a big deal, but how could they tell it was stolen? It’s like they already knew what it was!”

“M-Maaaybe it has to do with the weeeird tooool the shopkeeper had...”

“What weird tool?!”

“It was shaped like some kind of hooook... They touched our stuuuff with it! I wonder what it waaas...”

“It doesn’t matter!” Gold-Hair shot back. “Right now we have to *run!*”

“Okaaay!”

The pair sped up as they ran down the backstreets. Neither one of them had any idea that the pilfered goods had come from the Shadow King’s wagon train. Naturally, these were a mix of stolen items and magically-disguised counterfeits. When they had brought them into the store to sell, they were immediately revealed to be stolen goods. The duo ended up being chased away by the guards.

You might be wondering how the clerk had been able to tell so easily that Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya’s goods were illegitimate. At their rope’s end with the stolen items and forgeries flooding their markets, officials and merchants in cities all over had begun to use an item known as a “Magic Sensor.” This was a hook-shaped tool with a magic gem set near its tip. The magic gems contained a record of stolen items curated by the Merchants’ Guild of Klyrode Castle Town. It was automatically updated as the guild received information about stolen items in any region. Moreover, the sensors were equipped with the capability to detect inferior-quality items. Overnight, these sensors had become one of the biggest forces restricting the Shadow King’s illicit activities. The shop Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya had chosen to fence their ill-gotten gains had also been equipped with a Magic Sensor.

Blissfully ignorant of all this, Gold-Hair and Tsuya continued to run. “H-Hero Gold-Haaair,” Tsuya whined, “I don’t think I can gooo any fartheeer...” Gasping for air, she collapsed in on herself.

“Useless woman!” snapped Gold-Hair as he hurried to Tsuya’s side and swept her effortlessly into his arms, carrying her princess-style.

“Huh? Wha— Huuuh?!” Tsuya hadn’t been expecting this. Her face turned red.

“Hold on tight!” Gold-Hair said. “I’m not going to tell you again!” Once more he took off, running full tilt. Tsuya wrapped her arms around his shoulders, clinging tight.

Th-This is pretty niiice... she thought.

“Tsuya!” Gold-Hair barked. “You weren’t thinking that this was nice, were you?!”

“Wh-Whaaat? N-Nooo, I would neveeer...”

“Whatever! Tell me when you’re rested enough to run! I’m not going to carry you forever!”

“O-Okaaay!”

The two fled into the back alleys of the city.

◇Houghtow City—Fli-o’-Rys General Store◇

Belano, who had stopped by the Fli-o’-Rys General Store on her way home from her teaching job at the College of Magic, stared intensely at the Magic Sensor. “...Lord Flio made this?” she said, eyes full of wonder. “Amazing...”

Standing next to her, Hiya nodded in agreement. “I can only agree. None but the Exalted One could have created a device with so sophisticated a functionality. And to produce so many in such a short time...” They gave the Magic Sensor a look of approval.

Damalynas stood to their side, nodding fervently in clear awe. “A device that lets commoners detect stolen goods, even though they can’t wield magic like myself or Her Divinity...or Lord Flio, of course. You know, if he keeps making things even humans with no magic power can use... Well, it *would* be a pretty big deal.”

As the three had said, the Magic Sensors were in fact created by Flio himself. He had heard a lot about the troubles caused by the Shadow King’s schemes and, characteristically, created a magic item to address the problem.

Belano looked around the store, still holding the Magic Sensor. “...Where *is* Lord Flio?” she asked.

“The Exalted One received an urgent request. He and her ladyship his wife have both left to make a delivery.”

“...I see.” Belano looked disappointed. Still, without further comment, she handed the Magic Sensor back to Uliminas, who was working the counter.

“So tell me, Belano,” Uliminas asked suddenly. “How about your

mewniversity?”

“How about it...?”

“Yeah! Is there a school store? Is there anywhere for the Fli-o’-Rys Company to dig our claws in?”

Belano touched her finger to her cheek, tilting her head in thought. Belano had originally enrolled in the College of Magic as a member of the general public to study offensive spells, but when the College learned of her genius with defensive magic, they offered her a position as a teacher. Indeed, she was on her way home from just that job.

“Well, we have a cafeteria...” Belano said slowly. “But almost everyone brings their own lunch...I think.”

“So no school store, then.” Uliminas confirmed.

“No...” said Belano. “The water’s all-you-can-drink, though...”

“Hmm!” Uliminas made a note in her handbook. “Sounds purromising,” she said. “I’ll see if there’s any way fur us to get in on it...”

Belano stared mutely at Uliminas. *I miss Lord Flio*, she thought, and sighed. Flio was something of a surrogate to her for her dearly departed father and elder brother.

◇The Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

The Dark One Yuigarde sat on his throne, grinding his teeth and tapping his foot. “Hey Phufun,” he said.

“What is your wish, Master?” Phufun pressed her false glasses up on the ridge of her nose and moved around to the front of the throne.

“When are we gonna be done restructuring the Dark Army? Are we *still* not ready to attack Klyrode Castle?”

Phufun could see plainly that her master was in a bad mood. “No... I’m terribly sorry, Master...” She hung her head, fidgeting awkwardly with her glasses. “W-We’ve been demanding cooperation from the nearby demons, but very few of them have actually come to the Dark Citadel...”

Phufun's words only served to further aggravate Yuigarde. Immediately after he had seized the throne from Gholl—the former Dark One—Yuigarde had led the entire army to Klyrode Castle as a show of his strength. With no plan or strategy, however, Yuigarde was dealt a crushing defeat by the Klyrode army which didn't hesitate to use traps or ambushes or any means at their disposal to rout his forces. In the end, he had been forced to retreat.

Yuigarde was eager to launch another attack on Klyrode Castle to redeem himself from the stigma of failure, but the Dark Army's losses had been so great that its numbers were not enough to constitute another attack force.

Yuigarde's minion Phufun had been seeking the aid of the surrounding demons, but as Yuigarde had been reviled from the start for his arrogance, and with his defeat provoking doubts as to his ability as a commander, nobody was terribly eager to follow his banner. Indeed, some had even risen up against the Dark Army, declaring themselves to be the *true* Dark One.

Yuigarde grumbled as he glared down at Phufun from his throne. He was fully aware of the rumors that he had alienated the local demons. All the more reason, in his mind, not to talk about the matter any further. "Let's leave the local demons out of this for now," he said. "What are the Infernal Four up to?"

"Master, the Serpent Princess Yorminyt and Hugi-Mugi the doppeladler are both occupied with suppressing any demon who declares their independence from the Dark Army. Sleip the lichsteed is engaged holding back the Klyrode army at its most important key location. Each and every one of them is busy with indispensable tasks."

Yuigarde screwed up his face. "The dragons, then! Call the dragons!" he shouted in rage, rising from his throne. "Why haven't *they* been doing anything? Send the dragons to attack Klyrode Castle!"

"M-Master," said Phufun, "I'm afraid you're confused. Most of our warriors in the legion of dragons were killed when they were sent after that ridiculous human."

"What?! But there are *some* dragons left, right?! Send *them* to attack! They're our strongest fighters!"

"But...many of the survivors were grievously injured... They're still

recovering...”

“Who *cares* if they’re hurt?!” Yuigarde slammed his fist into Phufun, sending her flying straight into the wall. “Call the dragons!” he shouted. “Someone! Now!” The demons who had been on standby behind his throne rushed out of the room.

Meanwhile, stuck in the wall of the throne room, nose bloody and cheeks red, Phufun was muttering to herself between passionate sighs. “Aaah... Master Yuigarde... Such power... Such devastation... I could ask for no higher reward...”

Perhaps it should also be said that Yuigarde’s minion Phufun was a masochist of the highest degree.

◇The Dark Citadel—The Dragons’ Den◇

If the strongest soldiers in the Dark Army were the Infernal Four, the strongest unit was the legion of dragons. The legion of Dark One Gholl’s time had been the mightiest in history. The mere mention of their name was enough to overwhelm the humans of the Klyrode army with sheer terror.

Right now, the massive underground hall built for the legion of dragons was nearly empty. Just a year ago this place had been filled with hot-blooded dragons clamoring and sparring and making a constant uproar, but half their number had been lost near the end of Gholl’s reign when the legion of dragons set out with Uliminas to attack Flio and were instead obliterated. Even the survivors of that expedition had returned with grievous injuries that would take a long time to heal.

The demons Yuigarde had sent looked around the cavernous Dragons’ Den with an air of unease. “Hey,” one of them said, “what do we do now?”

“There has to be *someone* here...”

“I remember Phufun saying that she had recruited an independent dragon...”

They were at a loss, looking around aimlessly, when a girl appeared behind them.

“And you are?” she said. It looked like she had just returned from somewhere. She was wearing an oversized cloth draped over her body, with

nothing underneath except a simple pair of shoes. Whenever she moved, she revealed a flash of bare skin. She looked young except for her chest which was quite developed. The demons had a hard time tearing their eyes away from her exposed body.

“W-We need to talk to the dragons... Are they not here?”

“Mmhmm?” said the girl as she made her way into the Dragons’ Den. “You’re talkin’ to one. Whaddaya want?”

“What?!” said one of the demons.

“You—” said another.

All three of them looked bewildered, but as the girl walked past them, they could see a large tail sticking out the back of her cloth, marking her as some sort of dragonewt—partial dragons who could take humanoid form. Her tail trailing on the ground as she walked, the girl made her way to a giant cushion in one corner of the den and plopped herself down. When she did, her cloth flew up around her head for a second, giving the demons an eyeful of her naked body, including her oversized breasts. They turned red in unison.

“It’s Wyne,” the girl said. “I’m a wyvern.” She took a chunk of meat out of the bag she was carrying and began to chew greedily. It looked like she had obtained this chunk of meat from the Dark Army’s mess hall. Right now, the whole of her attention was on her meal. There was something charming about how she sat there, stuffing the meat into her cheeks like a squirrel and straining herself to chew. At least, it put the demons at ease enough for them to remember why they were here.

“O-Oh, right! We come with orders from Dark One Yuigarde!”

“He wishes for you to attack Klyrode Castle at once,” pitched in another.

Meanwhile, Wyne had already devoured her hunk of meat. She looked miserable, like the world was ending. “Hey...” she said, seemingly ignoring the demons’ orders. “Is this really all I get?”

“Huh?”

“That succubus lady told me I’d eat my fill every day if I joined the Dark

Army...” Wyne looked mournfully into her empty sack as her stomach rumbled loudly, announcing her hunger.

Aiming to reconstitute the destroyed legion of dragons as fast as possible, Phufun had expended every effort in scouting likely dragons from everywhere she could. However, thanks to her master’s famous military defeat and his legendarily bad personality, she couldn’t find a single dragon who would agree. Not a single one, that is, except for Wyne.

“I’m hungry,” she had said. “I’ll do it if you feed me.” Phufun agreed and welcomed Wyne into the Dark Army—her sole success. Wyne, however, had a monstrous appetite. She wouldn’t be satisfied unless she ate portions equivalent to a meal for twenty or thirty humans. Not only that, but she was constantly demanding snacks: “a light meal before breakfast,” or “a light meal after breakfast.” Basically, she preferred to be eating in perpetuity.

Phufun was flooded with complaints from the food staff over the sheer volume of food Wyne ate on a regular basis. Once, the Dark Army procured most of its foodstuffs through pillaging human communities, but with Flio and his companions stopping their raids left and right their food situation was growing more dire by the day. Faced with this reality, Phufun had no choice but to restrict Wyne’s rations.

“Fooooood...” moaned Wyne, teary-eyed. The three demons were at a loss, until one of them struck his fist to his hand.

“I know!” he said. “If you can destroy Klyrode Castle, *surely* the Dark One Yuigarde will give you all the food you could ever want!”

Wyne shot to her feet. “You mean it?!” she said.

“Y-Yeah! Probably!”

“Right. Gimme just a second.” Without missing a beat, Wyne hurried towards the middle of the room. As she walked, her body transformed, growing larger and larger until she became an enormous wyvern. Both her body and her great wings were a dark crimson, and in places red and black flames flickered to the surface from somewhere deep beneath—she was awesome to behold.

The demons stared up at her glorious visage with wide eyes full of terror and

wonder. “I-Incredible...”

“Really is... I never could have imagined...”

“*Fooooood!”* the dragon bellowed. She took flight, breaking a hole in the Citadel’s ceiling as she shot out through the roof.

The demons stared after her in shock. “W-Well, she *looks* incredible...”

“Wait...did she say...?”

“C-Come on! Don’t lose your nerve over something like that!”

◇In a Forest◇

Wyne was in a forest, lying facedown on the ground and not moving an inch. “So hungry...” she muttered. Her stomach growled in agony.

Wyne had set out from the Dark Citadel in high spirits, but after days and days of (to her) meager rations, her strength gave out and she plummeted to the earth, landing in a forest. Without the energy to maintain her wyvern form, she had reverted to her humanoid shape and lay there, unable to move. If only some carnivore might come, attracted by her scent, she might devour it and regain her strength—but the beasts stayed clear of her, fearful of her lingering draconic miasma. She had been prohibited from leaving to hunt while in the service of the Dark Army, and her hunger now had never been greater.

“If only I could have eaten my fill one more time before I died...” she murmured softly to herself, and closed her eyes.

◇ ◇ ◇

Sniff sniff...

Sniff sniff sniff...

A delicious scent drifted through the air and into Wyne’s nose. Still unconscious, she began to sniff. The scent stimulated her brain, which began to reboot. She opened her eyes. Before them was an enormous chunk of meat.

“F-Food!” she cried, reflexively sinking her teeth in.

“Hey!” Flio cried, startled. “I mean...are you awake?” Flio was holding on to the end of the skewer of meat Wyne had latched herself on to. Wyne seized the

meat from Flio’s hands and took it into her own, chewing noisily as she launched herself fully into stuffing her cheeks.



Flio and Rys smirked as they watched the wyvern go at it. “You were collapsed on the ground, mumbling about food,” Flio said. “We got that ready in case you were hungry...”

“It seems she was quite hungry indeed,” added Rys in an aside to Flio. She glanced over at him, a wry expression on her face. She had been the one who hunted a magic beast for its meat and cooked it in a simple oven made of piled rocks.

The couple were on the road that day fulfilling an urgent order from Klyrode Castle. It would have been a simple matter for Flio to teleport to the castle directly, but Flio preferred for only the Maiden Queen and a few others in Klyrode Castle to know that he was Banaza the failed Hero Candidate. He wanted to take every precaution against arousing suspicion, and so he teleported a believable distance away from Klyrode Castle—out of anyone and everyone’s sight—and began moving towards the castle in a less dramatic manner.

While they were walking through the forest, Flio detected the faint lingering miasma of a dragon and followed it to find Wyne and nurse her back to health.

“I was so hungry I thought I was going to *die*,” said Wyne as she started on her fourth enormous chunk of meat. Flio watched with a patient tight-lipped smile as she ate and ate and ate.

Flio gently placed a hand on Wyne’s shoulder and conjured a small magic circle which vanished into her back. *She isn’t injured*, Flio thought as he checked her status, *and she doesn’t seem to be particularly ill... I guess she really was just starving*. Flio patted the small slender girl on her head.

Wyne seemed to enjoy the touch. She rubbed the back of her head into Flio’s hand as she ate. “Thanks, dada.” She smiled brightly up at him.

Rys heard. Still holding a skewer with a hunk of meat on the end, she marched over to Wyne. In her rage she had lost control of her transformation, her wolf tail and fangs visible as she spoke. She brandished the skewer like a sword. “*Excuse me*, young dragon, that man is *my husband*. *Dada* is not an appropriate __”

“Thank you...mama,” said Wyne, smiling up at her happily.

“*M-Mama?!*” Rys’s face turned bright red.

“W-Well, if dada’s your husband...that makes you my mama...” It didn’t seem possible, but Rys’s face turned redder still.

“Oh, I can’t understand this child...” she said, clearly flustered. “Well, do you want more meat? I’ll cook it up for— Oh! You ate it all already!” Rys turned back into a great wolf. “My lord husband,” she said, “I shall hunt us another magic beast.” She ran off into the forest without waiting for a response.

Flio watched Rys go and then turned his attention back to Wyne. “Hey dada,” she said, “are you gonna keep on giving me food?”

“Food, huh...?” The word called Flio’s mind back to the pitiful state Wyne had been in when he found her, starving and on the brink of death. *It doesn’t look like she has anywhere to go...* he thought. *I get the sense she’s been mistreated too...*

“Well,” said Flio, “how about this: you help out with our shop, and we’ll give you food. Food *and* a salary. How does that sound?”

Wyne spasmed with excitement. She looked up at him with earnest eyes. “Really?” she said.

“Yes, really,” said Flio.

“Really really?” asked Wyne.

“Yes,” said Flio. “Really really.”

“Really really *really?*” Wyne rejoined.

“Y-Yes, I promise, okay?” Flio said with his usual calm smile.

Wyne looked deep into Flio’s eyes. “Hm... Okay.” She shoved the last bit of meat into her mouth and stood up. “Gimme a second.” She sprouted a pair of dragon wings from her back and took to the sky. Airborne, she completed her transformation into a wyvern and flew off north.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

The Dark One Yuigarde knit his brows. “Huh?” he said. Before him was the

wyvern Wyne who had just returned, back in her humanoid form but still with her wings out. “Didn’t you say you were going to attack Klyrode Castle? Well?!” He was shouting. He seemed to be in a terrible mood.

Wyne seemed to give the matter a moment’s thought. “I did,” she said, “but I changed my mind.”

“You *‘changed your mind’*?! Who told you you could decide whether or not to attack?!” Yuigarde stood up from his throne.

Wyne shook her head. “I changed my mind...about the Dark Army.”

“What?!”

“You never give me food. I hate you!” Wyne stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry at Yuigarde, then flapped her wings mightily and took to the sky. She transformed into a wyvern, smashed through a window, and flew away.

Yuigarde ran after her, coming as far as the broken window. “W-Wait, you rat!” he shouted. “Who said you’re allowed to quit?! You’re not! I don’t allow it! Heeey!”

But Wyne was already gone.

Phufun, incidentally, had lost consciousness, was still stuck in the wall, and had nothing to contribute to this conversation.

◇In a Forest◇

“Oh, there she is!” Rys was in the middle of cooking the fresh meat she had hunted in her stone oven when she saw Wyne flying high in the sky at top speed towards them. She turned to face her and waved. The meat inside the oven had just reached its perfect doneness, and Wyne descended on it as if she were pulled in by the smell, turning back into her humanoid dragonewt form in midair.

As she did, the cloth covering her fluttered up in the wind, exposing her naked body completely.

“Excuse me, young lady!” Rys cried, blushing. “Are you not wearing anything under that cloth?!”

“Nope,” said Wyne, sticking her hand into the oven to retrieve a piece of

meat. “It gets in the way.”

Rys hurried behind her. “That won’t do! That is not proper attire for a young lady!” She took one of her spare sets of clothes out of her Bottomless Bag and tried to force Wyne into them.

At first Wyne had refused. “No!” she said, “clothes are all stuffy!” But Rys had insisted in the strongest possible terms.

“If you won’t wear this, I will give you no more food!”

Reluctantly, Wyne put on the clothing. She came back wearing shorts and a thin-strapped tank top, squirming uncomfortably. “Is this enough?” she said.

“Yes, that’s enough,” said Rys. “Now come and eat.” Permission granted, Wyne took more meat and began to cheerfully stuff her cheeks. “I hunted lots of magic beasts,” Rys continued, smiling fondly at the girl, “so feel free to pick out your favorites.” True to her word, there was a veritable mountain of magic beast carcasses behind her. Wyne’s eyes lit up and she nodded eagerly.

Seeming to suddenly remember something, Wyne stopped eating and walked up to Flio. “I quit my job,” she said. “Lookin’ forward to workin’ with ya!” She bowed politely.

Flio gave her his business smile and held out his hand. “I’m certain you’ll be excellent,” he said. Wyne, however, had already gone back to eating. Her head was lowered, her focus on nothing but the meat she was devouring. Flio’s proffered hand went completely unnoticed. He smirked.

“My lord husband,” Rys said, “do you know where this child worked?”

“No clue. I haven’t gotten around to asking that yet. But it seems like she wasn’t being fed.”

“What?! That’s absolutely terrible! I would like to have some *words* with whoever is responsible.”

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

“Wa-ker-choo!” The Dark One Yuigarde sat on his throne and let out the most undignified possible sneeze. “Hey!” he shouted, sniffling as he spoke. “What the devil was that?! Someone talking about me? Huh?!”

“Still, that dragon punk really did quit out of nowhere, didn’t she...” he grumbled. “Not ready to attack the castle, putting down uprisings everywhere... Why can’t something just go *right* for a change?”

Chapter 2: An Ordinary Day for the House of Flio

◇Houghtow City—The Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

One day, it just so happened that Flio and Greanyl were out on delivery, Rys was occupied with housework, Hiya and Damalynas were away dealing with some business, Blossom was doing farmwork, Byleri was tending to the horses, and Belano was teaching at the Houghtow College of Magic. And so it was left to Uliminas, Balirossa, and Ghozal to tend to the shop.

Uliminas, who had once served as treasurer for the Dark Army, continued to focus on financial work, working the shop's register and handling its records. Today was no exception—she was sitting behind the counter, dealing with customers.

A man who looked to be an adventurer was gazing at the dragonscale shield decorating the counter with an expression of wonder. "This shop's equipment is all so well made!" he said. "This is dragonscale, right? That stuff's hard to work with. To craft it into a masterpiece like this... I don't know what to say!"

Uliminas smiled cheerfully at the adventurer. "Our artisans are the best around! We have lots of purrpawsterously powerful magic items too. Why don't mew take a look around?" The magic items in this shop were made by the likes of Flio, Hiya, and Damalynas: three of the greatest magic users in the land of Klyrode. They were phenomenal items that were casually displayed like any old magic staff or what have you. The prices were an absolute bargain too. As you can imagine, more and more customers came to the shop every day.

As she dealt with today's customers, Uliminas kept turning to steal a glance in the direction of the shop's door. Ghozal stood there, looming over the shop with crossed arms and an imposing stance. He was working as the shop's guard. His presence was hidden from the customers with magic so as to not frighten them. The majority of customers never so much as glanced in his direction.

Ghozal, for his part, was staring fixedly at the area of the shop where Balirossa was hard at work restocking the shelves. Dressed in an apron, she

hurried in and out of the shop, replenishing the supplies of magic gems or equipment as they ran out. Every now and then a customer would ask her a question about the merchandise, and she would smile and do her best to explain. Ghozal was engrossed by her every movement. *Hrm... Balirossa is beautiful, even at work*, he thought, and nodded his head once.

"Don't tell me," Uliminas muttered to herself, "that man's going, 'Hrm... Balirossa is beautiful, even at work.' Mew could spare a glance at *me* for a change!" She puffed out her cheeks.

"Um, is there something wrong, miss?"

"Bweh!" Uliminas's face flushed bright red. "No! Meowthing at all! Meowt a thing! Aha ha..." She put on her best friendly smile.

The customer looked uncertain. "No? Well, all right... Say, is that fire sword for sale?"

"Y-Yes! Thank you! For your business!" Uliminas smiled again and took the weapon down from the wall. At some point, Ghozal had started looking her way. *Hrm...* he thought. *Uliminas is beautiful, even disguised as a human...* But with his presence magically concealed, Uliminas never noticed him checking her out.

Balirossa saw Ghozal nod in Uliminas's direction. *Oh,* she thought, sighing softly, *I am certain Sir Ghozal is thinking, "Hrm... Uliminas is beautiful, even disguised as a human." If only he would look at* me *like that, even a little...* She shook her head vigorously. "What am I thinking? Don't be ridiculous, Balirossa," she whispered to herself, then got back to stocking goods.

Not Ghozal, Uliminas, nor Balirossa had any awareness of how convoluted their relationship had become.

◇Meanwhile, in Front of Flio's House—Part 1◇

In front of Flio's house was a ranch managed by Byleri and a farm managed by Blossom. Byleri was in the ranch's office, getting some paperwork in order. Byleri, who had a real gift for working with horses, used this space to raise horse-type magic beasts. Sometimes she would lend her horses to merchants to use to pull their wagons. The papers she was handling right now were records

of those transactions.

Hiya stepped into the office. “Ser Byleri, may I have a moment?”

“Oh?” Byleri said, greeting Hiya with her usual big smile. “Hi, Mx. Hiya! Like, what’s up?”

Hiya gave a shallow bow. “I would like to express my gratitude for your assistance the other day.”

“The other day?” Byleri pressed her finger to her cheek and tilted her head. “Like, I’m not sure what you mean?”

Hiya gave a genuinely cheerful smile. “I speak of you lending us your precious book, Ser Byleri.” Byleri’s face went red.

Byleri was a healthy young adult in her early twenties. Ever since her time with the castle’s knights, she had been fascinated with the idea of trysts between men and women. By now, she had built up a secret collection of literature on the subject, which she would often quietly enjoy. The other day, Hiya had found one of her books and helped themself to it.

“And the book in question...” The book magically materialized in Hiya’s hand. Byleri, still blushing furiously, snatched it away from them and hid it behind her back.

“Um!” she said, her voice suddenly squeaky. “I didn’t actually, like, lend it to you, y’know? You just came in and took it...”

Hiya smiled at the girl. “Now, now, there’s no need for that,” they said as if they were trying to mollify a child. “That book was very intriguing. Of course, everything in your collection is excellent. I hope that you will lend me more.”

Byleri moved from her chair to sit on top of a nearby box. She seemed like she wasn’t going to budge. She shook her head urgently. “Well, like, there aren’t any more! None! That book was totally the only one, y’know? A-And there *definitely* aren’t any in this box, so, like, don’t even think about it!” She couldn’t have possibly made it more obvious that the books were hidden in the box she was now sitting on.

Hiya, of course, realized immediately. They glanced down at the box

underneath Byleri's butt and smiled again. "Is that so?" they began, and then seemed to change course. "No. I do not wish to take your books by force." They waved their hand and another book appeared in their grasp. "I happened upon this specimen when I was visiting another world," they said. "If it suits your interests, Ser Byleri, I would like to propose a trade."

"It doesn't, it doesn't, it doesn't!" Byleri shouted as she pushed Hiya out through the office door. "It totally doesn't suit my interests! Like, please just go home!" She slammed the door shut and pressed her back against it, holding it closed with her body. "Oh my *gods*," she whined. "Like, that Mx. Hiya is just...y'know?" Still blushing, she raised her head. *If they find any more of my books, I'm totally gonna die of humiliation!*

Then she noticed the book Hiya had called a *specimen*, left behind on top of her desk. "H-Huh?!" she exclaimed. "M-Mx. Hiya! You, like, forgot your book!" She picked it up and began to hurry after the djinn. But then she stopped in her tracks. Her eyes fell upon the book's title—it was called *The Princess and the Horsemen*.

Byleri had loved horses since she was a little girl. She had always excelled at their care, so much so that she was given the great honor of tending to the warhorses of Klyrode Castle. In fact, she took such good care of them that when she left the army the horses under her care became severely depressed. That was the extent to which Byleri loved and understood horses. She took a closer look at the book.

Horsemen? Huh? What? Huh? Like, I didn't know there were demihumans like that! I-I mean, it would be totally cool if there were, but...huh?

◇ ◇ ◇

Hiya watched Byleri from the other side of the door, using magic to observe her as she picked up the book and began to stare, spellbound. *Hah. I believe I will have new research materials sooner than I expected*, they thought, a satisfied smile on their face.

◇Meanwhile, in Front of Flio's House—Part 2◇

In front of Flio's house was a ranch managed by Byleri and a farm managed by Blossom. Right now, Blossom was standing with one hand on her hip and

scratching her head with the other. “Is this for real...?” she asked, not fully aware that she had spoken out loud.

Next to her the goblin Hokh’hokton stood in a near-identical posture, one hand on his hip and the other running through his hair. “W-Well, I certainly never expected *this*...” he said.

They were staring at Maunty, the other goblin farmworker.

◇Several Days Earlier◇

Blossom and the two goblins had finished their work for the morning and had been enjoying lunch together when Maunty said something that made Blossom’s eyes go wide. “A wife?!” she exclaimed. Maunty blushed and scratched his cheek.

“Y-Yes,” he said. “The truth is, I have a wife and kids... Might I have your permission to bring them here, Lady Blossom?”

“What? Of course!” Blossom grinned and gave Maunty a friendly smack on the shoulder. “But I had no idea you were married, Maunty! Gave me a bit of a shock!”

“I-I may?”

“Hey, if having her here helps you settle in, I’m all for it! I’ll talk to Lord Flio for you, all right?”

“Oh, Lady Blossom, I thank you from the bottom of my heart!” Maunty took a deep bow again and again. Blossom just smiled.

“Oh!” she said, turning to Hokh’hokton. “By the by, Hokh’hokton... If *you* have a wife or kids or something, you’re welcome to... Huh?” Blossom cut herself off, her mouth wide in surprise. Hokh’hokton had cast his eyes down, staring miserably at the ground.

“Some goblins have all the luck...” he muttered darkly. “A wife and children? Bollocks. Strike me down right now, why don’t you...” He continued on in that vein, almost as if he were performing an incantation for a curse. Blossom was at a loss for words.

◇And Back in the Present...◇

After all that was over, Maunty had headed out to fetch the rest of his family. Upon his return, Blossom and Hokh'hokton went out to meet them. What they found was a veritable horde of goblins.

"This is my wife, and these are my children," Maunty said. "We have fifteen in total, starting with Cynthia, our eldest." He bowed, and the other sixteen members of his family followed suit.

"Nice to meet you!" the goblin family said in unison.

Blossom nudged Hokh'hokton with her elbow as she stared. "Hey, Hokh'hokton... Did you know Maunty had such a big family?"

"N-No... I didn't even know he was *married* until the other day..." he said in disbelief. Blossom made a strained smile.

Maunty, by contrast, was grinning jubilantly. "Oh, I was so worried about the family I left behind in the old country... I had resolved myself that there was nothing I could do about it! It is such a relief to have them here. I promise you, I will work the fields harder than ever before!" He laughed heartily.

While he was celebrating, Maunty's wife pulled him aside. She looked worried. "Are... Are you sure this is safe? That woman...she's a *human*, isn't she?"

It was only natural that she be concerned. The world was embroiled in a war between the human armies of Klyrode and the demons of the Dark Army, and goblins were one of the weaker demons to exist. Even a human with no experience in fighting could easily dispatch a goblin if they came to blows.

Blossom, who had overheard, grinned brightly. "Now, there's no need to worry about that, madam," she said. "The master of this house treats everyone the same, human and demon alike. Anyway, look!" Blossom pointed at something behind the goblins. They followed her finger to see a magic circle taking shape. Not long after, a door appeared from the middle of the circle. It opened, and out poked Ghozal's head.

Ghozal turned to look at Blossom. "Hey, Ser Blossom!" he said. "We're running out of vegetables at the shop. We're gonna need some more." He held out a stack of empty baskets.

“Well, that’s good to hear!” said Blossom, smiling as she walked over to the door. “It means they’re selling well!” She took the baskets.

“Hrm. Your vegetables are very well-regarded. Uliminas said a restaurant in town wanted to sign an exclusive contract for them.”

“You serious? Well, that’s just incredible!”

Maunty’s wife watched Blossom and Ghozal chat amiably, tilting her head like she was puzzled by something. “Excuse me...Lady Blossom?” she asked. “Who is that man...?”

“Ah, of course! You can’t tell who it is ’cause he’s in disguise as a human!” Blossom turned back to look at Ghozal. “Well, what do you say? Nothing wrong with showing the goblins your demon form, is there?”

“Oh, would you mind, Mister Ghozal?” said the wife.

“Hrm,” said Ghozal. “Very well.” He turned just his upper body back into its original demonic form.

“Whaaa?” The wife’s eyes shot open wide. “No, it can’t be... Lord Gholl?!”

“Hrm.” Ghozal turned back into his human form. “I was Gholl, once. Now I am Ghozal, a freeloader at Mister Flio’s house.”

Blossom walked up to Maunty’s wife, who was now staring at Ghozal and trembling, and nudged her with her elbow. “See? Our master Lord Flio’s the kind of guy who’s perfectly happy living with the former Dark One. Me too, of course.” She flashed the goblin a cheerful grin. “Well? That good enough for ya?”

“Y-Yes,” she said. “*More* than enough.” Gradually, she calmed down, and seemed to be more relaxed than before.

“Hey, Ser Blossom!” Ghozal interjected. “Would you mind getting the vegetables?”

“Oh! Sorry, sorry! I’ll do it straightaway!” Blossom ran off into the fields.

“I’m going to help,” said Maunty, and he set off after Blossom.

Behind him, his wife and their troupe of children followed along. “I’ll help

too!” said his wife.

Hokh’hokton trailed behind, dragging his feet. “I-I’m not jealous...” he sobbed. “I’m not jealous at all!”

Ghozal watched Hokh’hokton trudge towards the fields. “Hey!” he called after him. “Uh... Good luck?”

◇Meanwhile, on the Highway to the Calgosi Coast◇

A fast horse-drawn coach thundered along the highway, under orders from their Queen to investigate the conditions of the Calgosi Coast. Mages from the Magic Corps were seated in the front, repeatedly casting spells like Reinforce Speed and Recover Stamina on the horses to strengthen them. Thanks to their efforts, the coach was moving at nearly ten times its usual speed.

The atmosphere inside the coach was somewhat odd. A company of knights sat on the left side, and a man and a woman sat on the right. The man wore an extravagant red outfit. The woman, who was pressed up close against him, wore hardly any clothing at all. The two—well, you’ve probably already guessed by now that they were Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya.

The knights, who were all men, kept stealing glances at Tsuya’s exposed body, each and every one of them flustered. From time to time the silence would be broken by somebody or other clearing their throat, but nothing more.

One of the knights smiled and turned to look at the pair. “Um...” he said. “You’ve had a hard time, haven’t you? Getting attacked by bandits in the mountains and everything...”

Tsuya smiled cheerfully. “We haaave,” she said. “They wouldn’t leave us alooone!”

“They kept chasing after you?”

“They diiid! It was sooo unfair! Even *if* our stuff was stooolen or fooorgeries, they didn’t need to chase us aaallllll the way from the ciiity to the mountains! It’s prooobably because we stole it from those shaaady traders, but— Ow!” Hero Gold-Hair thumped her on the head, interrupting her careless ramble. It was a hard blow. Tsuya bent forward, clutching her head and giving the knights a clear view of her ample cleavage. They couldn’t help themselves from staring.



Hero Gold-Hair grinned and laughed, speaking loudly in an attempt to take advantage of the knights' confusion. "Yeah, that really was a shock!" he said. "I could handle two or three bandits on my own, but we were attacked on our way to the city by a dozen men from every direction! They stole every last bit of our merchandise!" He spoke as civilly as he could manage, gesticulating wildly as the knights stared at Tsuya's bosom.

Tsuya had said all sorts of things in her rant—things about stolen goods and shady traders—that were probable cause for arrest, or at least an investigation, but the knights were so engrossed by her chest that her words went in one ear and out the other. The only explanation they would remember later would be Hero Gold-Hair's. They nodded their heads as he spoke, stealing glances at Tsuya's cleavage.

One of the knights, who looked to be the leader of the company, seemed to finally notice that he had been drooling over Tsuya's breasts. He loudly cleared his throat. "W-Well!" he said. "If there were that many bandits, you might still be in danger here. Would you like us to take you to a town on the other side of the mountains?"

"Ohhh, nooo!" Tsuya started. "Thaaat city's no gooood! We tried the same thing theeere, so they alreadyyy think we're criminals! They might send mooore guards after us—or mercenaries! *Ow*!" Gold-Hair gave her another thump, and she doubled back over, again clutching her head. Once again the knights found themselves staring straight into her cleavage.

Hero Gold-Hair stood up in front of the knights, raising his voice and waving his arms. He was trying to draw their attention to himself. "Y-Yes, well!" he said. "You never know if the bandits have allies waiting to ambush us in the nearby towns! We'd appreciate it if you took us a little further away, if you can!"

The knights still seemed too captivated by Tsuya's breasts to register what she had said. They nodded along to Gold-Hair's story. "Well...I suppose I can't deny the possibility..." the leader said. "Tell you what. We're headed to the Calgosi Coast. We could drop you off there, if that's acceptable."

Hero Gold-Hair nodded. "Thank you!" he said with a boisterous laugh. "Glad to travel with you!"

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It was standard practice that if a team of knights were to rescue someone from bandits or the Dark Army during their mission, they were to deliver that person to where they needed to go. It would be an exception if the mission was secret, of course, but these knights' only orders were to reach the Calgosi Coast quickly and ascertain conditions there. They were quite willing to take Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya where they asked. They had no idea that the ones attacking them had been mercenaries and guards sent by the cities where the two had tried to sell their ill-gotten gains to arrest and interrogate them.

Taken in by Hero Gold-Hair's story, the knights held a quick meeting to discuss their plans. In order to prevent the two civilians from overhearing their discussion of military matters, they spoke quietly and screened their faces from view with their hands.

As they did, Gold-Hair leaned in to whisper in Tsuya's ear. "What is *wrong* with you?!" he hissed. "Going on and on, saying *steal* this and *criminal* that... Are you *trying* to get us arrested?!"

"Fweh! S-Sooorrrry!"

"Look, we're in danger here. We need to hold on until we reach Calgosi Coast. Until then... *Not*. *Another*. *Word*. Do you understand?"

"Y-Yeeess...I understaaand..."

"And another thing...don't lean forward like that!"

"Fweh?"

"Those...knights...were staring *right* at those ridiculous tits of yours. I'm telling you to be careful!"

"O-Okaaay! I wiiill!" Tsuya bowed sharply.

This woman... Hero Gold-Hair thought, *I wish she'd stop showing men other than me so much of her body...* He took his cape and wrapped it around her shoulders as the coach sped up, hurrying along towards the Calgosi Coast.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

The Dark One Yuigarde sunk heavily into his throne, grumbling in irritation.

“Hmph. The dragon brat quit out of nowhere, and our fighting force isn’t anywhere near ready... This is *absurd*,” he spat.

He was interrupted from his brooding self-pity by his minion Phufun. She stepped up to his throne. “Master Yuigarde, do you have a moment?”

Yuigarde glanced at Phufun, his miserable expression not changing in the slightest. “Well? Out with it. If it’s boring, I’ll smash your face in.”

Phufun, ever the masochist, seemed a bit overly affected by those words. She flushed. “I would be quite happy if you did, you know...” she said, and then, mastering herself, she cleared her throat and pushed her fake glasses up the ridge of her nose. “P-Pardon me,” she continued. “I mean, I spoke with the southern demons. It seems that there is a group of human pirates that employs some demons among their number. They have a fleet of over a hundred ships, and a fighting force of over a thousand pirates.” She pushed her glasses up the ridge of her nose again. “What do you say? Shall we arrest these demons the pirates hired and conscript them into the Dark Army?”

“Well.” Yuigarde stopped moping. An evil smile spread over his face. “That’s pretty interesting after all. So? You have a plan?”

“Yes, Master,” said Phufun. “The south is within the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode’s sphere of influence, so we will have to do this without attracting attention. I propose we form an elite task force with the Infernal Four at its core, and—”

Suddenly, Yuigarde stood up. “Good thinking, Phufun. And I’ll take the command of this task force!”

“Wh-What?! Y-You’re going *yourself*, Master?”

“Yeah! I’ve been so *agitated,* you know. This’ll be a good way to relieve stress! I’ll head over there and tear things up a little!”

Yuigarde laughed and laughed. He seemed to be having a grand old time. *We’re all going to get in trouble if you keep deciding to attack on a whim!* Phufun thought, but she couldn’t bring herself to say it and ruin Yuigarde’s spirits. “Th-Then,” she said, “I will make preparations.” She bowed and left the throne room.

Yuigarde stretched his arms, warming himself up. “Mwa ha ha ha ha!” he laughed. “Finally, some violence! This is what I live for!”

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High up near the ceiling of the throne room, eyes shone in the darkness, watching the Dark One Yuigarde from the shadows of the grand reliefs carved into the walls. “It looks like he took the bait...” said a voice.

Another voice spoke in response. “Your plan was brilliant as ever, Master.”

The first voice laughed. “I knew that amoeba-brained idiot would insist on going himself if he heard there was an opportunity to strengthen his army somewhere only a small team could reach, but that was even easier than I thought!”

“Master,” said the second voice, “please allow me to handle the next stage of our plan.”

“Very well. I’m counting on you.”

“C-Counting on...me? Such kind words... Then I won’t let you down. I will carry out our plan if it costs me my life.”

Their conversation finished, the eyes vanished, along with their owners. Far below, the Dark One Yuigarde was swinging his arms, completely oblivious to their presence.

◇Houghtow College of Magic◇

The Houghtow College of Magic wasn’t far from the Fli-o’-Rys Company. It was there that Belano, one of the members of Flio’s household, taught classes in defensive magic for adult students. Today she was on her way to the classroom to do just that.

As soon as she opened the classroom door, though, Belano’s eyes shot open. The class was so full that there wasn’t enough room for everyone to sit down, leaving a pack of students standing up in the back of the room.

Students at the Houghtow College of Magic were free to register for whichever classes they liked. Normally, students would avoid registering for overcrowded courses and find another that was less packed, but Belano’s class

was an exception. The classroom she was supposed to start lecturing in was absolutely jam-packed.

Belano froze stiff in the doorway. She was beginning to have second thoughts about this. But then the students noticed her. They stood as one—even the ones with seats—and turned to greet their teacher.

“Good morning, Miss Belano!” said a torrent of voices.

“*Eeek!*” Belano shrieked and jumped in the air.

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Belano taught her class, internally panicking until the very end, and then ran as fast as she could to the administrative office. She burst inside and darted up to Taclyde the clerk’s desk, face red and breathing hard. “M-M-Mister Taclyde!” she cried.

Taclyde smiled at the frantic young teacher. “Miss Belano!” he said. “What seems to be the trouble?”

Belano flapped both arms in a panic, trying to calm herself. “Th-Th-The students! In my class!”

“Oh, is this about your class earlier? We were absolutely swamped with applications, you know. When we ran out of desks, we started telling people they should try again next semester, but everyone said they were fine standing!” Taclyde produced a stack of application forms and showed them to Belano. Taclyde, as the only clerk at the College of Magic, had collected these himself. There had been so many applications for Belano’s class that it had left him shocked.

There was a reason for all that, of course. Belano, who had an *extremely* high degree of social anxiety, would get flustered and embarrassed as she taught. She would oftentimes deliver her lectures blushing and staring determinedly at the floor. She was so small, she had to stand on a footstool to write on the chalkboard. She would drag her stool from place to place, making cute little noises of exertion as she did. If she needed to reach the top of the chalkboard, she would stand on her tiptoes, straining herself and stretching her arm up as high as it would go, her legs trembling.

Something in her mannerisms touched something deep within the students' hearts—something that said: "How can a teacher possibly be this cute?!" An ever-increasing number of the student body had become fans of Miss Belano, and more and more people applied for her class until there wasn't enough room in the classroom for them all.

"S-Some of the students don't have chairs or desks," Belano stammered. "Isn't that a problem for them?"

"Oh, is that what's bothering you?" asked Taclyde. Belano nodded fervently. "Let's see..." Taclyde said as he folded his arms and thought. "Well, why don't we move your class to the main hall? There's more than enough room there for the entire student body to—"

"Oh no, I can't do that! I can't, I can't, I can't!" Belano shook her head. "B-B-But! Please don't put so many students in the class that they have to stand! Please?"

"Should I not? The students said that they didn't mind...and the more students who take your class, the higher your bonus!"

"I mind, even if they don't!"

"Are you sure?"

"I am!"

Taclyde sighed. "All right," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

"Th-Thank you... You're such a big help..." Belano bowed again and again.

From then on, students in her classes were limited to the number of desks in the classroom. It would get to the point that prospective students would line up all the way out of the hallway on the first day of registration to try and score a seat in Miss Belano's class, but that's a story for another time.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

"Hmm..." Rys stood in the kitchen, deep in thought with her arms folded. She was looking at a great pile of wooden crates. Inside those crates was only one thing: the fruit known as the *lembon*. Lembons were a singularly sour fruit, not

suitable to eat in large quantities. Rys had heard somewhere that pregnant women crave sour foods, and had become obsessed with stocking up on lembons just to be safe.

But to her despair, Rys still showed no signs of becoming pregnant. “My lord husband is certainly doing his part. I’m sure I’ll have a child sooner or later...but I really do need to do *something* about these lembons. I bought these with my husband’s hard-earned money. I can’t *waste* them...”

Even so, she thought, *what was I thinking? Why did I order this many?!* Things had gotten to the point where even she, after some serious soul searching, had to admit that she had bought too many lembons.

As Rys was thinking, Wyne popped up beside her. “What’s that?” she said. “Fruit?” The wyvern picked up a lembon and bit into it. As soon as it touched her tongue, her cheerful smile vanished. “Bleh! Sour! Bleeeh!” she cried, running over to grab a drink of water and guzzling it down.

Rys was starting to panic. “Even Wyne can’t handle them...” She stood there for a while longer, racking her brain, until she suddenly remembered something. “Of course! There might be something in one of the cookbooks I bought in Sojieya!”

Sojieya was a rural town to the north of Houghtow. Not long ago, the whole house had gone on a trip there. Rys had stopped by a general store called Miyan Walkey that had an impressive variety of books. She bought a number of them, all related to cooking. She had been hoping to increase her repertoire of dishes to serve the household, especially Flio.

Rys went upstairs to the bedroom she shared with her husband Flio, and went up to the bookshelf attached to the wall. There, next to Flio’s books on magic theory and practice, were Rys’s cookbooks.

“Maybe something in one of these...” she said, taking a number of books off the shelf. She sat down on the dresser and started leafing through the pages. Her hair swayed in the breeze that blew in through the window as she read attentively, not taking her eyes off the pages.

“This might work!” she said finally. “I’m going to try it.”

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Rys returned to the kitchen, where she covered her long hair with a cloth and tied on an apron. She began picking out all sorts of ingredients: sugar, eggs, flour, and butter... She placed them all on the kitchen counter. Wyne and Sybe, who had been playing together in the living room, noticed something was happening in the kitchen and poked their heads through the door to see.

“Wait just a minute, please,” said Rys, turning to look at them and smiling happily. “I’m going to do my best to make this good!” Wyne and Sybe smiled and nodded.

Rys mixed the sugar and eggs into the butter. Then she washed a lembon and removed its skin with her sharp wolf claws. She grabbed the flesh of the fruit in her fist, and with a little “mmf!” of exertion, squeezed the juice into the bowl with the sugar, eggs, and butter. She mixed the grated peel with the flour and added the dry mixture in with the rest. She then poured it into a mold and switched on the magic oven. When it was finished baking, she took her first attempt out of its mold and arranged it on a large plate, which she placed on the kitchen counter to cool.

She began to start on a second, while Wyne and Sybe sneaked their way into the kitchen. Sybe, who had been in its psychobear form, transformed into a unicorn rabbit. It was much less visible that way. They crept along on their tiptoes, moving silently while Rys’s back was turned. Before long they had reached their target. The two looked each other in the eyes, and nodded in unison. Then they looked up to where the cake was sitting and slowly reached up to grab it, when...*thwack!* Rys’s monstrous wolf claw stabbed into the counter, right before their eyes. The pair froze.

Rys had been a ways away busying herself with cooking a second ago, but somehow, at some point, she had come up behind them. She brought her face close to the would-be thieves. “Wyne? Sybe? If you will not wait when you are told to... You won’t get off so easily next time.”

Wyne and Sybe nodded wordlessly again and again, before slowly making their way out of the kitchen.

“M-Mama’s scary...” said Wyne.

Sybe snuffled in agreement.

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It didn't take too long. Rys dissolved sugar in boiling water to make a syrup, added lembon juice, and used the mixture to glaze the cake. "So this is what it looks like," she said, turning her head to get a good look at the fresh-baked cake from all angles. She had succeeded in making the lembon cake from the cookbook.

Rys cut the cake into slices and took it out of the kitchen to where Wyne and Sybe were patiently waiting on their knees. Sybe, who wanted to eat more than it could as a unicorn rabbit, transformed back into a psychobear.

"Thank you for waiting! Now, are you ready to try it?" she said, holding out the plate with the cake on it. Wyne and Sybe grinned and reached out to take a slice of cake each.

"This is great!" Wyne exclaimed. "Mama, this is so good!"

"Waoorh!" cried Sybe. The two kept on stuffing themselves with cake.

Rys took a slice of her own to taste. "Oh! This really *is* good!" she said. Before long, the rest of her slice had disappeared into her mouth. "I'm sure my husband will be thrilled!" she said. Beaming, she went back into the kitchen to make more.

"Although," she said, looking over at the crates of lembons as she grabbed the ingredients from the shelves, "with this many lembons, perhaps we should sell these cakes at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store..."

As she was thinking, Wyne and Sybe came up behind her holding the now-empty plate, eagerly demanding seconds.

Chapter 3: Flio Goes to the Calgosi Coast, Part 1

◇In a Forest Near Klyrode Castle◇

His delivery to Klyrode Castle concluded, Flio took his seat at the front of the wagon pulled by a reinless Sybe in psychobear form. There was no need for reins, a leash, or anything like that, as Sybe would follow verbal instructions. It would pull the wagon along until they were some distance from the castle, where Flio planned to cast Teleportation to take them back to Houghtow.

Wyne, sitting to Flio's side, was busy devouring a chunk of meat. Since agreeing to work for the Fli-o'-Rys Company, Wyne had been living in Flio's house and helping the company load and unload goods. Wyne was a hard worker. After all, she was being fed three full meals a day. And, of course, she got along well with everyone at Flio's house.

Well, there *was* her habit of taking off her clothes the minute no one was watching, waltzing around dressed in nothing but a cloth. That always gave them all a bit of a headache.

She was here today, like always, to help Flio handle the goods meant for Klyrode Castle.

Flio glanced to his side, smirking at the dragonewt stuffing her face next to him. "I swear, Wyne, you spend every second you're not at work eating, don't you?"

Balirossa looked up from where she was organizing the goods in the wagon. "She deserves at least this much for her excellent work, does she not?" she said. "She is a very helpful girl."

Every time Flio made deliveries to Klyrode Castle, the castle's knights would make a point of requesting Balirossa by name. So, every time, he would bring Balirossa along with him. And every time, she would be surrounded by male knights calling out to her one after another, saying things like "Ser Balirossa, you look lovely today!" or "Ser Balirossa, shall we get lunch together after this?"

Everywhere she went it was “Ser Balirossa!” this, “Ser Balirossa!” that.

◇Houghtow City—The Fli-o’-Rys Company◇

Uliminas turned to Ghozal, who was watching the shop with her. “What’s the matter, Ghozal? Something got you purrturbed?” Ghozal had been glancing around the store, clearly agitated.

“Hrm...” he said. “It’s nothing. I just had a feeling that Balirossa was being bothered by those suitors of hers again.”

Uliminas’s expression went sullen. “Oh, I *see,*” she said brusquely. “Well, if you’re *that worried,* why don’t mew go check on her?” She turned her back in a huff.

“What’s wrong, Uliminas?” asked Ghozal. He took a few steps closer.

“Meowthing at all,” Uliminas spat, her back still turned. “Just hurry up and go to *her* meowlready!”

Suddenly, Ghozal grabbed her by the shoulders. He pulled her into a hug and kissed her deeply. “Mmmh?!” Uliminas’s eyes went wide and her pupils contracted.

“I don’t know what I did to make you angry,” Ghozal said as their lips parted, “but I love you and Balirossa just as much as each other. Are you unhappy with that?” He held her close. Uliminas, her face red, pressed up against his body, wrapping her arms tightly around him.

Then Uliminas remembered that they were inside the Fli-o’-Rys Company building, where any number of her subordinates—the former Silent Listeners—might be watching. “M-Meowt are you doing?!” she shouted, flustered, and ran into the back room.

Ghozal watched her go, cocking his head in confusion. “Did I do something wrong?”

◇Back in the Forest Near Klyrode Castle◇

“I must say,” said Rys, “they’re all hot and bothered for you at that castle, aren’t they?” She gave Balirossa a teasing grin.

Balirossa’s cheeks flushed pink. She shook her head. “Oh, no, it’s nothing of

the sort," she said. "I am certain they are simply concerned for the well-being of their former comrade in arms. It has nothing to do with any sort of amorous feelings. Besides..."

"Besides?" Rys repeated, beckoning her to continue, but Balirossa cut her off.

"Ah, no, excuse me! It's nothing!" Balirossa waved her arms, flustered. *Why did Sir Ghozal's face pop into my mind just now? It's peculiar...* She shook her head vigorously as if trying to dispel the thought.



Just then, Wyne, who was sitting between Flio and Rys and busy chowing down on her meat, suddenly looked up at the sky. “A birdie?” she said.

Flio and Rys followed Wyne’s gaze upward. It was hard to make out, but they could see a small black dot in the sky. It was fluttering unsteadily to the left and right, and sometimes it would drop suddenly, but it was gradually making its way towards them.

Rys watched the spot with suspicion. “My lord husband,” she asked, “what is that?” Flio was staring just as intently. Balirossa poked her upper body out of the wagon from behind them to look up at the sky. Even Sybe stopped pulling the wagon to take a look.

Suddenly the bird-like speck cried out. “I-I-I can’t go ooooooooooon!” Its voice echoed through the forest as it plummeted straight down to earth.

“Watch out!” Without missing a beat, Flio extended his arm towards the plummeting dot. A magic circle appeared, and another larger magic circle materialized in the air right beneath it. It stopped in midair.

“It spoke, so it’s gonna be one of the avian people,” said Flio. “Anyway, we should go help. Sybe, can you take us right beneath those magic circles?”

“Gwoor!” Sybe exclaimed. It rushed ahead as it was told, pulling the wagon at top speed even as they left the cobblestone road to dart between the gaps in the trees. The wagon was shaking violently. Flio wrapped one arm around Rys to stabilize himself as he focused on sustaining the circles.

“Thanks for lending me your shoulder, Rys,” said Flio.

“For my lord husband, such a small favor is nothing!”

The wagon sped along with tremendous force.

◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

Flio and his companions stood in the throne room of Klyrode Castle. The avian man they had rescued had almost immediately fainted, only managing to get out the words: “Urgent message... Klyrode Castle...” They took him into the wagon to tend to his wounds before turning right around back towards the castle they had come from.

“Oh, well... Um... You see... *Chirp*...” The avian man—or perhaps, judging by his slight build it would be better to say *boy*—stood before the Maiden Queen in his short-sleeved shirt and short pants. His wonderment was perhaps to be expected. The trip from the Calgosi Coast to Klyrode Castle took one or two months even as the crow flies, but the boy had flown day and night and, after just a week, collapsed in a forest just a hair’s breadth away from the castle. He should have been in a state of exhaustion, but somehow his fatigue was completely gone. Flio, of course, had healed him with the high-level spell Super Heal, but the avian boy had yet to learn that. He was simply astonished.

The Maiden Queen looked down from her throne and spoke with a kindly voice. “Are you well enough to speak?” she asked.

The boy stood up sharply, snapping to attention. “I-I-I beg your forgiveness, Your Majesty!”

“Please, relax. You have done nothing wrong,” said the Queen. “I am told you are from the Calgosi Coast?”

“Ah, oh, yes!” he stammered. “I’m called—no,” he cut himself off. “I, uh, I doth serveth undereth the noble Junia Van Biel, the noble head of the Noble House Van Biel, who nobly govern the Calgosi Coast...eth. Your Majesty. My name is Loplanz.” Loplanz bowed very deeply. Then he looked up and took a step forward towards the Maiden Queen. “Look, Your Majesty...my wonderful master Junia Van Biel is in trouble! I came to get help!”

The Queen shot to her feet. “What did you say?!” she started. “The House Van Biel... The noble family that governs the Calgosi Coast in the south... Tell me, what has happened?”

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty... See, the pirates have been getting worse and worse for a while, and now they’ve all come to attack at once! Countess Van Biel and her other familiars were gonna do something to hold them off, but I think it’s a bit too much for them to handle...”

The Maiden Queen bit her lip. It hadn’t been long since she dispatched teams to every region in her domain to investigate the movements of bandits and pirates. *It was some days prior that I sent the fast coach to the Calgosi Coast...* she thought. *It will still take them some time to arrive. I suppose we must count*

it as a blessing that young Mister Loplanz came to us seeking aid.

It would have taken the coach she sent two more weeks at the very least to reach the Coast, learn what they needed about conditions there, and return. The Queen was very grateful that Loplanz had come directly to them.

She looked to her side where Boralis was waiting. “Boralis, dispatch a company to assist them at once.”

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty,” Boralis started, “but...even if we were to assemble a company now, it would take a month for them to arrive.”

Loplanz’s eyes went wide. “Th-That won’t do at all! The pirates have almost a hundred ships, and they’ve been attacking day after day after day... We don’t have that kind of time!” He leaned forward and bit his lip. The Queen and Boralis both lowered their heads in thought.

“Um, excuse me?” Flio raised his hand. He had come here with Loplanz and brought the boy to the throne room. It seemed he was still in the room. The Maiden Queen looked his way, and he put on the calm smile he used for doing business. “If it would help, perhaps we could offer you the services of the mercenaries in the employ of the Fli-o’-Rys Company? The people I’m thinking of have a very fast means of transportation. They could reach the Calgosi Coast in a matter of days.”

The advisors and vassals in the throne room started to rumble. “That man is the owner of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, isn’t he...?”

“Yeah,” someone replied. “The general store that can make deliveries even our own supply teams can’t manage. Been a lot of talk about them lately...”

“Mercenaries under their employ... Would that be the wolf mask team?”

“Oh, them!” another piped in. “I heard they crushed one of the Infernal Four’s elite divisions...”

The mercenaries Flio spoke of were himself, of course, and his friends—especially Ghozal, Hiya, and Damalynas—who formed the “wolf mask team” the vassals had mentioned.

Flio had been summoned to this world as a Hero Candidate, but at Level 1 his

abilities were no higher than an average human's, so he was deemed a failure. But the instant he hit Level 2, he awakened to powers far greater than those of the strongest Heroes in history. But despite the Maiden Queen's frequent requests, he continued to refuse an official appointment as Hero. He had no desire for that kind of attention. As a compromise, however, he agreed to help her behind the scenes if there was ever something she needed.

He and his companions would wear wolf masks when they fought to prevent both the human armies and the Dark Army from learning their identities. So far, it had worked. The truth was not widely known. That was why, in front of the Queen's vassals, he felt obligated to phrase his offer like that. The Queen, of course, understood.

"I am most sorry to trouble you with this, but may I request your assistance?" asked the Maiden Queen.

Flio nodded his head. "Of course," he said, still smiling calmly. "Leave it to us."

"Thank you!" Loplanz chirped. He had been listening to their conversation. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" He bowed again and again and again, thanking them over and over.

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Flio and Loplanz left Klyrode Castle in Sybe's wagon. Next to them sat Rys and Wyne, who was stuffing her face like always. Now that Loplanz had succeeded in his task, the conviction that had been keeping him strung tight was gone, and he fell fast asleep with his head in Balirossa's lap.

Balirossa gently stroked Loplanz's hair. "For a boy of his years to come seeking aid... The Calgosi region must have truly fallen into chaos."

Flio nodded. "Yeah," he said. "We'll get there as fast as we can...but I've never been to Calgosi before, so I can't use Teleportation. I was thinking of casting Fly and going ahead of everyone."

Rys suddenly leaned forward to speak, bringing her face inches away from Flio's. "That won't do, my lord husband!" she said. "As your wife, I cannot allow you to go into danger alone. I am coming along, even if I must cling on to you!"

"R-Rys," said Flio, "I get how you feel, but we're in a bit of a hurry this time."

“And that’s why I will come with you!”

“I just feel like something bad might happen if you’re holding on to someone using Fly...”

“This is my decision,” said Rys, “please do not worry over me.”

Flio and Rys were in the middle of talking when Wyne, who was sitting at their feet, looked up from her meal. “Dada, mama... Can I go to Calgosi too?”

“Hm?” said Rys.

“Well, sure, I guess,” said Flio.

“Do you want me to fly us there? You can ride on my back.” Wyne spread her wings. She was so eager to help, she was practically bouncing. “I can fit lots of people if I turn into a wyvern!”

◇Houghtow City—Fli-o’-Rys General Store◇

Flio put Klyrode Castle behind him and left the town. He headed into the forest where he cast Teleportation, instantly arriving at the wagon station behind the Fli-o’-Rys Company. Greanyl, who had been working in the area, ran up to them as Flio stepped down from the wagon. “Lord Flio! Welcome back!”

“Thank you, Greanyl,” Flio responded. “Are the rest inside?”

“Yes sir. We closed up shop just a minute ago. Everyone else should be inside, cleaning up.”

“I see. Thanks.” Flio left the wagon in Greanyl’s care and headed inside. Sybe, who had been pulling the wagon, turned into a unicorn rabbit and followed behind him, along with Rys, Balirossa, Wyne, and Loplanz. Wyne was carrying her meal with her, munching as she walked.

Rys smirked at the sight. “Honestly, Wyne,” she said, “you spend every waking moment eating, don’t you?” Wyne, whose bulging cheeks were far too full to be able to speak, nodded her head.

Balirossa was staring at the wyvern from behind, thinking, *Ah... I want to see what happens if I poke her cheeks now...* Her hand started to shake. Part of her wanted to poke Wyne’s stuffed cheeks at any cost. She kept her desires in check with pure willpower. *N-No! A human must not do such things! R-Restrain*

yourself, Balirossa!

◇ ◇ ◇

Just as Greanyl had said, Flio's permanent houseguests (who were also his employees) were inside the shop, tidying up after the day's work. The first person to notice them come in was Byleri. She stopped polishing the counter and greeted them with a smile on her face. "Oh, like, hey! Welcome back, Lord Flio!"

As if on cue, the rest of them stopped working and gathered around Flio. This included Uliminas, who was tallying the day's sales, and Hiya and Damalynas, who had been replenishing their stock of magic items.

"Belano's still at work, I believe..." said Flio. "Where's Blossom? Mister Ghozal?"

"Oh, I'm right here!" came Blossom's voice. Flio saw her hand waving in the doorway outside the shop. Sybe snuffled with excitement when it saw her and ran over, jumping up into her truly excellent bosom—Blossom's chest was top tier among the women lodging at Flio's house.

"Aha ha, good to see ya back, Sybe!" Blossom laughed. "And energetic as always, I see!" Sybe snuffled happily and nuzzled its bunny face in between her breasts.

Flio watched with that calm smile of his. "They're quite a pair, Blossom and Sybe," he said.

Hiya nodded, giving the matter some thought. "Blossom and Sybe..." they muttered to themself. "Hm. They have decent potential as a combination."

Damalynas blinked. "I'm sorry... What was that, Your Divinity?"

Hiya leaned over to whisper something in Damalynas's ear. "*Psst psst...*and therefore...*psst psst*...with Blossom...*psst psst psst*...and together they...*psst*..." Whatever they said, it made Damalynas turn a brilliant shade of red.

"Wha—?! Y-Your Divinity?! I admit she is in excellent shape, but you are aware that Blossom is a *human*, aren't you? There's no way..."

"Indeed," said Hiya. "But imagine if it could be done."

“A-Ah...” Damalynas gulped. “That would be...quite something...” She and Hiya stared fixedly at Blossom with Sybe in her arms.

Balirossa, meanwhile, was glancing around the shop. “Then...what of Sir Ghozal?” she said.

A second later, Ghozal appeared directly behind her. It was like he had come out of nowhere. “Did you need something?” he said.

“Aaah!” Balirossa, caught completely off guard, jumped into the air. She whipped around to face him.

“Hrm...” Ghozal marveled, nodding approvingly at Balirossa’s movements. “Even caught from behind unawares, you reflexively get on guard. And all while seeming to shake with fear to throw your enemy off. Excellent, Ser Balirossa.”

“Have mew ever considered that maybe it *is* just fear, you meowron?” Uliminas walked up beside him.

“Hm? Unlikely. I am confident in my ability to read a fighter.”

“I think Balirossa might be the meownly fighter mew can’t get a read on.” Ghozal and Uliminas had suddenly started arguing.

Balirossa was frozen in place as the two fought in front of her, but as stressed as she was, she managed to force some words out. “Oh, I... Would you please not fight over me?” she said. “I can’t take this...” Ghozal and Uliminas, however, seemed to not notice. They kept right on arguing.

Flio glanced wryly at the ongoing drama. “There’s something I’d like to talk about,” he said, “if you don’t mind...”

“Excuse me, my lord husband,” said Rys. “I will put a stop to this directly.” Rys began to walk towards Ghozal and Uliminas, her body changing into a great wolf’s. Flio was in enough of a hurry that he didn’t stop her.

Loplanz watched the proceedings with wide eyes, clutching his chest, sick with unspoken anxiety. “Can we really trust these people to help us?” he muttered to himself.

◇ ◇ ◇

It didn’t take too long to convince Ghozal and Uliminas to tone it down a

notch. Flio gathered everyone together and explained the situation.

Ghozal folded his arms and nodded his head. “Hrm... Then the coast you call Calgosi is under attack, and you would have us come to their rescue?”

Flio nodded, “Exactly. And it sounds like the pirates are out in force. They have the region’s protectors—the Van Biels—outnumbered, so we should move fast.”

Loplanz stepped forward. “U-Um... Please, we really need your help...” He bowed deeply. Ghozal gave the boy a steady, appraising look.

“Well,” Ghozal said, “not often you see one of the rukh avians.” He seemed impressed.

Loplanz started in shock. “Chirp?!” he exclaimed. “S-Sorry, that surprised me... I didn’t think you could tell what I was from a single glance.”

Uliminas, who was standing to Ghozal’s side, snickered. “Well, no doubt an average human or demeown would have no idea,” she said. “Rukh avians are some of the strongest folk out there, but there just aren’t that meowny of them. Well, mew’re still a kid, though. It looks like you haven’t come into your full power yet.” She reached out to pat Loplanz’s head, but he swiped her hand away.

“Y-Yes, it’s true that I am a child,” he said, as boldly as he could. “And I can’t do as much for Countess Van Biel as her other three familiars... But... But...one day, I’ll become an adult, and then I’ll protect her from anything!”

Uliminas recovered from her disorientation at having her headpats rejected and laughed. “Quite the spirited young lad, aren’t mew?” she said. “If I was still with the Dark Army, I’d have to do something with mew.” She gave him a wicked, seductive smile. With her face at point-blank range, Loplanz was overwhelmed by Uliminas’s beauty and flushed bright red.

It took Loplanz a second to parse what Uliminas had said. “Wait,” he said. “Hold on... Did you say the Dark Army?”

“Purrcisely,” answered Uliminas. “I am Uliminas the hellcat. And as for the Dark Meown Gholl I served, or purrhaps I should say the *ex*-Dark Meown... Well, these days he’s going by Ghozal.” She thumped Ghozal demonstratively

on the belly.

Ghozal openly scowled at Uliminas's words. "Hey, Uliminas. I told you to stop tossing that name around."

"Oh, what's the big deal?" Uliminas gave Ghozal's belly a few more thumps, giving him a mischievous look as he scowled in displeasure. "After all our bickering, this boy's been wondering if he can rely on our purrformance. I'm letting him know he can relax."

Loplanz, meanwhile, was staring at the two with big round eyes. "Then you're...the former Dark One, and his servant..." He seemed utterly baffled.

"It's going to be okay, Loplanz," said Flio, smiling with the same calm smile as before. "We have the former Dark One and his confederate, along with a really amazing djinn, the incredible Grand Magus of Midnight, a stellar magic beast, and four knights who used to work for Klyrode Castle. And the greatest of all, of course, is my strong and beautiful wife!"

"Exalted One..." said Hiya. "To hear you call me an amazing djinn... I hardly deserve such praise. I am overjoyed."

Damalynas laughed. "Of course Lord Flio recognizes my power!"

Sybe snuffled and puffed out its chest as well as its unicorn rabbit body would allow.

"I, Balirossa, swear here and now that you shall not find my prowess wanting!"

"And I, Blossom, promise to do whatever you need me to!"

"Um..." said Byleri. "Me and Belano will, like, do our best to back you up? Like, from the back."

Everyone said their piece to Loplanz. At one point, Rys walked up beside the boy. "You see?" she said. "Our party members are all very dependable. And, hm... Let me see..." she cleared her throat. "And!" she shouted, projecting her voice as loud as she could and holding up her fist. "I, Rys! Am very strong! And very beautiful! I am very strong and beautiful! I am Rys! The wife of my lord husband! I will destroy every pirate! Single-handedly!" She was raring to go, her

wolf ears and tail popping out inadvertently.

Loplanz seemed overwhelmed by Rys's inexplicable intensity. "Th-Th-Thank you very much..." he stammered.

◇ ◇ ◇

The plan was for Flio, Rys, Ghozal, Hiya, and Damalynas, along with Loplanz, to set out ahead of the rest of the group. They would ride Wyne in her wyvern form and head off towards the Calgosi Coast. When they got there, either Flio, Ghozal, or Hiya—all who could create portals—would conjure one leading back to Houghtow City for the rest to follow.

They were standing in the area behind the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, making preparations when Loplanz said, "Uh... I-I can fly myself. I'm not tired at all anymore."

"Oh, don't worry," said Flio. "Wyne is a wyvern. She won't even notice the weight of one Loplanz, more or less." Wyne nodded.

Loplanz looked between the two and said, "Ah, no, that's not what I mean..." He thumped his chest. "I thought maybe I'd fly ahead and tell Countess Van Biel that you're coming!"

"Are you sure?" asked Flio. "Wyne is pretty fast, you know."

"I'm sure!" Loplanz puffed out his chest. "I may be a child, but I'm still a rukh avian. I'm not about to lose to a wyvern!" Wyne shot him an offended look.

Flio pat Wyne gently on the head. "All right. Then you go ahead and fly to Calgosi before us. Wyne, the rest of us are in your hands."

While Flio was trying to soothe her, Wyne made an obscene gesture with her middle claw and fixed Loplanz with a defiant glare.

Loplanz looked back at her and blew a raspberry. "Oh whatever," he said. "Like a girl could ever beat me."

Flio continued to pet Wyne's head for everything he was worth, as if he thought that would stop the childish squabble.

◇In the Sky—Half an Hour Later◇

Loplanz flew high in the sky in his rukh form, his eyes wide in disbelief. “N-No way...”

Half an hour prior, he had taken to the sky along with Wyne, who was carrying the rest on her back. Her body was bigger than his, but Loplanz was confident in his victory. Even a young rukh was capable of flying through the air with incredible speed. *When I flew to the castle, I was already exhausted before I set out... Plus, I was flying without food or water,* he thought. *As long as I mind my pace, I can’t lose.* He took flight full of confidence, but Wyne overtook him within seconds and vanished between the clouds ahead. “Wha—?” All Loplanz could do was stare.

He was pushing himself as fast as he could. He beat his wings furiously, any notion of pacing himself long abandoned. But no matter how hard he flew, he couldn’t catch any sight of Wyne up ahead of him.

“N-No... I really *am* going to lose to a girl!” He flew on desperately, a look of utter bafflement on his face. He could see nothing ahead of him but blue sky and white clouds.

◇The Following Morning◇

It was the very break of dawn. Wyne flew on through the vast dark sky as the first rays of sunlight peeked through the clouds. Time and time again she would say, “Dada, I’m hungry...” and each time Flio, Ghozal, or Hiya would use the spell Fly and descend to the ground, where they would capture some magic beast, roast its meat with fire magic, and bring it up for Wyne to eat in midair. Thanks to this arrangement, she could fly on and on without needing to rest.

Right now, Wyne was feasting on one of those fresh-cooked magic beasts that Flio had brought her from the surface. He was keeping the huge chunk of meat floating in midair with magic. Wyne took big bites and chewed happily with her mouth open.

“Quite the eater, isn’t she?” said Damalynas as she watched the huge roast beast vanish before her eyes. She sounded almost impressed. “I wish I could help, but there’s no way I could fly fast enough to keep up with Wyne. Sorry ’bout that.” She lowered her head apologetically.

Hiya, however, smiled. “There is nothing to apologize for, Damalynas. You

understood the limits of your abilities and acted in such a way as to avoid causing difficulties for your companions. You did well, my beloved training partner."

"I-I did?" Damalynas suddenly grew shy. "That's v-very kind of you, Your Divinity."

"On the other hand," Hiya said, their warm, kind smile suddenly gone. They fixed Loplanz with an icy stare. "What punishment would be suitable for a fool who misjudges their abilities and, in their foolishness, causes trouble for the Exalted One?" Loplanz pulled his knees in close to his chest.

Loplanz had no hope whatsoever of keeping up with Wyne's speed. He had flown on desperately, but the difference was like night and day. The gap between the two only widened, and Loplanz's hopes for a comeback became slimmer and slimmer. In the end, he exhausted himself again. He fainted in midair and fell at an alarming velocity towards a forest. It was a life-threatening drop, even for a rukh.

Fortunately for Loplanz, Flio had been keeping an eye out with his magic, and cast Teleportation, appearing directly beneath Loplanz and catching him in midair. Since then, Hiya had been regarding him with an icy glare of barely concealed malice for "causing trouble for the Exalted One."

Loplanz spoke in a faltering voice. "I-I-I'm so, so, SO sorry. P-P-Please forgive me..." He was shaking as he curled up into an ever smaller ball. But Hiya kept on glaring.

It was Rys who stepped between the two, a bright smile on her face. "Now, now, Hiya," she said. "Loplanz is very sorry, and it won't happen again. Perhaps we can leave it at that?"

"If such is the will of the wife of the Exalted One, I can only obey." Hiya bowed deep and stood down.

Rys looked to make sure Hiya had stopped menacing the rukh avian boy and turned to face him with a kindly smile. "And Loplanz," she said, "as long as we're here, there is no need to put yourself in danger like that."

Loplanz smiled back at her. There were tears in his eyes. "Y-Yes, ma'am! I'll be

careful!”

Rys put an arm on his shoulder. “Understand,” she said. “If you pull a stunt like that again and cause more trouble for my lord husband, you won’t hear the end of it.” She was smiling, but was surrounded by an undeniable aura of almost corporeal anger. She gripped Loplanz’s shoulder with frightening force.

“Yes!” Loplanz said, bowing unnaturally fast despite the smile on his face. “I understand very well, thank you! I won’t do it again!”

◇◇◇

“Should I do something about that?” Flio mused as he flew along, keeping an eye on the conversation while feeding Wyne her meat in midair.

“It might be a good lesson for the boy,” said Ghozal, sitting cross-legged on his perch atop Wyne’s head. “Teach him to be careful about misjudging his strength. But Mister Flio,” he added, squinting at the ground ahead, “we’ve almost reached Calgosi.”

Flio turned to look as well. “And not a moment too soon. Looks like a fight.” The two nodded, and began to scout ahead with their detection magic.

◇The Calgosi Coast◇

The Calgosi Coast was the long shoreline that ran along the Calgosi Bay in the Calgosi region, past the region’s capital, Calgosi City. The beach outside the capital was in tumult. There were countless ships in the bay that belonged to pirates. Day after day, they had been launching coordinated attacks at the city.

By the shoreline, a giant man stood strong, wielding a spear to swat cannonballs out of the sky. He refused to let them hit the city. Near his head was a girl dressed in the outfit of an aristocratic boy. She was flying in the air with magic, helping the giant blast away cannonballs. As strong as they were, however, these two had been fending off attacks like this alone for days. They heaved heavily for breath, their movements progressively growing more and more exhausted.

“Countess Van Biel,” said the giant, heroically brandishing his spear. “You must draw back to rest. I, Polseidon, shall hold them off while you are gone.” Polseidon’s long hair and beard were both white, but his body was built up to a

point that would be utterly impossible for a normal old man. His exposed upper body looked like it was encased in a breastplate made of muscles. Polseidon was an elder sea dweller who had the power to take on the form of a giant. While he was in this form, he had tremendous strength and the ability to walk on the surface of the water.

"But... But Polseidon!" said Junia Van Biel, the woman wearing men's clothes flying around near Polseidon's head. "You're tired too, aren't you?!" Despite her words, Junia was growing paler by the moment. It was clear that her magic and stamina were both nearing their limits.

Countess Junia Van Biel, a human woman, was the current head of the Van Biel family, who governed the Calgosi region. She was known to many as the Sorceress in Her Tower as she had an exceptional talent for magic, with both boundless power and a keen aptitude for the art.

A man stepped out to the prow of the largest, most important looking of the pirate ships. He was a large and stout man with a big stomach, scruffy black hair, and a scruffy black beard. His sunburnt face was dark and ruddy. He laughed uproariously and fixed Junia with a keen glare.

"Well met, Junia Van Biel. Say...isn't it time you surrendered? All you need to do is hand Calgosi over to us: the Blackbeard Corsairs! Let ol' Captain Eddsarch come check in, and your people will have peace!" The big man—Captain Eddsarch—cast his head back and laughed a second time. "Gah ha ha ha ha!"

His men, too, started roaring with vulgar laughter, cheering on their captain. "Hooray for Captain Eddsarch!" said one.

"Let's rob them blind!" shouted another.

"I hope the *girls* will let us *check in,* if ya know what I mean," opined a third.

"Long live the captain!" The shouts spread like wildfire to the surrounding ships. Soon the whole bay was full of the raucous laughter of pirates.

Junia Van Biel knit her brow and glared back at Captain Eddsarch. Her shoulder-length red hair seemed to bristle up, blowing in the wind. "I hate you!" she cried, raising her voice so loudly that her face turned red as well. "I hate you *so much*! This city is under my protection, and I will *never* let you

check in!” She bent over forwards, her hands pressed together at her hip level. With all the talk of *checking in*, she had unconsciously done some kind of half-bow. The pirates thought it was adorable.

“Bwah ha ha!” a pirate laughed. “Little Juni’s the best!”

“Lookit ’er! She’s adorable!” said another.

Suddenly the pirates were all joining in, calling out to Junia with mocking voices. “G-Ghh...” she sputtered. More than just her face, but her whole upper body went red.

Polseidon was every bit as red as his master. “You lowlife pirates! How dare you ridicule my master?! I’ll turn the lot of you into fish food!” He raised his spear and began to charge towards the amassed pirates.

Captain Eddsarch raised his hand. “The idiot is coming at us!” he bellowed. “Assume Formation C!”

“Roger!” the pirates responded as one. Their ships began to fall back—except for the left and right flanks, which kept their distance—and pointed their cannons at Polseidon as he ran into the gap in the middle. Polseidon was surrounded from three sides.

Junia noticed what was happening. “P-Polseidon!” she shouted, flying forward as fast as she could. “Watch out!”

“Gah ha ha!” laughed Captain Eddsarch. “Yer too late! Fill the geezer with lead, boys!”

“Aye aye, Captain!” The ships on the left and right opened fire on their captain’s signal as Captain Eddsarch’s own flagship fired with the cannon mounted on its bow.

“N-Ngh!” Polseidon realized he had been drawn into a trap and tried to beat a hasty retreat, but the storm of cannonballs was coming fast, all aimed directly at him. This was it. Or so they all thought.

“Honestly, you musclehead,” said Polseidon’s spear. “You don’t make yourself easy to look after, do you?” Just as the pirates were wondering if they really heard the spear *speak*, it transformed from a spear into an enormous shield and

moved to cover Polseidon and Junia. The cannonballs impacted at once with a terrible, reverberating clamor, but they all bounced off the shield, leaving Polseidon and Junia unharmed.

"R-Rolindeim..." said Polseidon. "You saved me..."

The enormous shield, whom Polseidon had called Rolindeim, began to crumble, its essence coalescing atop one of Polseidon's shoulders. Before long, it took the form of a young girl. She was small, had unkempt hair, and right now her whole body was covered in wounds. She giggled cheerfully despite her injuries.

"*Honestly!* If I wasn't here, that attack woulda been the end of you, you old meat-brained dingbat." Rolindeim was a black panther demihuman with the ability to transform her body into any shape she liked. She may have *looked* like a young girl, but the truth was that she was quite old. She was putting on a brave face, but was having evident difficulty staying on her feet. It was clear that stopping the cannonballs had caused her severe injuries.

Junia Van Biel looked at the pair. "You two stand back," she said. "And I'll—" She flew up high into the air, extending both her arms forward at the pirate armada. She began to chant, and a magic circle appeared around her hands. Suddenly there was a *whoosh*, and the circle began emitting smoke. It vanished, and Junia plummeted, her power exhausted.

"Countess Van Biel!" Polseidon rushed to catch her as she fell from the sky. Her small body collapsed on the palm of his hand.

Captain Eddsarch, who was watching the scene play out from the prow of his ship, let out another "gah ha ha!" He raised his voice and said, "And with that, they're out of tricks! Get 'em!" The ships moved to carry out his instructions, surrounding Polseidon and once again opening fire.

"Hee hee," said Rolindeim from her perch on Polseidon's shoulder. "Looks like *someone's* taking me lightly!" She took a deep breath and curled in on herself. As she did, her body began to transform back into the giant shield. She had taken too much damage stopping the last volley of cannonballs, however, and her transformation stopped halfway through.

The cannonballs were coming fast. "N-No..." gasped Rolindeim. "I... I failed..."

The pirates' attack tore through her half-transformed form, which crumbled again, turning back to her original form. Her tattered body fell towards the ocean.

"Rolindeim!" shouted Polseidon. He caught her in his hand, and pulled her in close. Then he curled up into a ball, clutching Junia Van Biel and Rolindeim tight and protecting them with his body. Another round of cannon fire was coming. "Damnation!" Polseidon closed his eyes tight.

Suddenly, he heard a man's voice, one he didn't recognize. "Hrm. Should I handle this?"

"I-I don't know who you are, but *yes*!" Polseidon shouted, keeping his body rigid. He looked out of the corner of his eye in the direction the voice had come from. There was a man flying in the sky. He was a great muscular man wearing a black wolf mask, and he regarded the incoming cannonballs with a contemptuous glare.

"Hrm," the man said. "Not enough for a proper warm-up..." He swung his arm, and a massive shock wave knocked every last cannonball aside.

"Wh-Whaaat?!" Captain Eddsarch's eyes went wide. The cannonballs his ships had fired were being deflected right back at them. "D-Dodge!" he shouted. "Dooodge!" At their captain's orders, the pirates began to pull back, but the cannonballs were faster. They rained down on their ships, smashing almost half of the Blackbeard Corsairs to splinters.

Captain Eddsarch looked every which way at the disastrous scene unfolding around him, then turned his gaze to the man in the black wolf mask floating in the sky. "Who are you?!"

"Hrm," the man said. "Me?" He struck a pose, his right hand pointed skyward. "I am Ghozal Justice! This is just business. Nothing personal." He struck another pose, and then another. He might have been getting a bit carried away with it.

"What is that bastard doing?!" Captain Eddsarch squinted up at the man who called himself Ghozal Justice, stamping his feet like a child throwing a tantrum. "Just throwing out those poses at random!"

A number of Captain Eddsarch's subordinates came running up to him. "C-

Captain Eddsarch!” said one. “What should we do?!”

“Our men are confused!” added another.

“What do you think?!” Captain Eddsarch bellowed. “That man! Aim at the man doing the cool poses!”

“A-Aye aye, captain!” His subordinates ran for the cannons, while others conveyed the captain’s orders to the surviving ships with flag signals. They moved to surround the man in the black wolf mask.

Just then, another man appeared, this one in a blue wolf mask. He flew up to the man posing in the sky and leaned in to whisper in his ear. “Mister Ghozal, I really don’t think you should call yourself ‘Ghozal Justice.’ Uliminas said so too, didn’t she?”

“Oh, that’s right.” The man in the black mask laughed. “It’s been so long since I’ve had an opportunity to go wild! I think I got a bit overexcited.”

The man in the black mask was Ghozal, and the man in the blue mask was Flio. The two of them sensed a battle in progress as they flew on Wyne’s back towards the Calgosi region, and had flown on ahead using the spell Super Acceleration. Super Acceleration took too much magic power to be useful for long distance travel, but with Wyne bringing them in close, it was well within range for the two of them.

They might not be fighting their usual opponents, but as these pirates were a significant force opposed to the army of Klyrode, Flio and his companions thought it would be best to hide their identities with the masks they wore when staving off the Dark Army.

Captain Eddsarch looked bitterly up at Ghozal and Flio. “And now there’s another of them! Well, no matter! Show them the full force of the Blackbeard Corsairs! Bombs away!” His deep voice carried all across the bay.

“Aye aye, Captain!” his men responded as the surviving ships fired at the two men.

“Oh,” said Flio, “would you hold on just a moment?” He extended one hand towards Eddsarch, and without even using an incantation conjured a magic circle. The cannonballs froze in midair.

“What?!” Captain Eddsarch was so surprised that he almost jumped. His men were shocked silent.

In the sudden calm, Flio floated gently down next to Polseidon. Polseidon stared blankly at the flying masked man. “Excuse me,” Flio said, his mask exposing his polite smile. “Am I correct in assuming that you represent House Van Biel, the governors of the Calgosi region?”

Polseidon was clearly taken aback by Flio’s words, but he answered properly. “I-Indeed! I am the sea dweller Polseidon, familiar of Countess Junia Van Biel, the current head of the house.”

Flio nodded, satisfied. *That’s a relief...* he thought, sighing. *I was a little worried that Mister Ghozal might have been attacking Junia Van Biel’s fleet!* Flio turned his attention back towards Polseidon and bowed. “We came here as fast as we could, at the request of your Mister Loplanz,” he said. “We are mercenaries in the employ of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, currently under orders from Klyrode Castle.”

“Oho!” Polseidon’s face lit up. “Reinforcements from the castle!” But as he looked around, his face grew more and more anxious. “Er... Sorry to ask, but are there more reinforcements than just you two?”

“Ah!” said Flio. “The main force is on its way. You can leave this to myself and Gh— I mean, to the man in the black wolf mask.”

As they were speaking, Ghozal flew up to the two of them. He hung in midair with his arms folded, facing Flio. “Mister Flio,” he said. “No, I mean, Mister Wolf of Justice. Isn’t it time to finish this up?” He seemed impatient.

Flio nodded. “Yes, I don’t see why not. But do your best not to kill anyone.”

“Hrrrm...” Ghozal muttered. “Why *not* kill them? They’re pirates.”

Flio smirked. “Yes, I understand,” he said. “But I don’t think they’re bad people deep down. One day, they might come to understand why what they’re doing is wrong.”

Ghozal smirked right back. “I should have known you would see it that way.” He raised his arm above his head.

Captain Eddsarch was watching with an expression of fear and anger. *Those two... One destroyed half my fleet with a single attack, and the other stopped our cannonballs in midair! What* are *they?!* He grumbled and turned behind him to address one of his crew. “Are those obnoxious beast girls still standing by? Send ’em to attack!”

“Y-Yes, Captain!” said the man. He unholstered his magic gun and ran to the stern of the boat, where he fired once into the air. The bullet hit the surface of the sea behind the flagship and exploded, filling the area with white smoke. Something began to swell up under the waves, like three enormous underwater mountains.

Three colossal demonic beasts broke the water’s surface, each every bit as large as Polseidon. They began to walk towards the pirate ship. Captain Eddsarch faced them and pointed behind him at Flio and Ghozal. “Gah ha ha ha! It’s about time! Now, show ’em what you can do! Send ’em flying!”

The three walked past Captain Eddsarch’s ship, psyching themselves up in their own ways. They each looked like giant women, but they had body parts clearly resembling various sea creatures. Specifically, a squid, a turtle, and a shrimp.

“All right!” shouted the squid. “Tent-Tentacle time!”

“Let’s go, turt turt!” said the turtle.

“Shrimpy-py-py-py-py!” added the shrimp.

◇Meanwhile, in the Sky Near Calgosi◇

Hugi-Mugi the doppeladler coursed fast through the air in their true form as a two-headed monster bird, their golden scales glittering in the sunlight. Their two long necks stretched out, each ending in a head so big it could be a dragon’s. On their back sat the Dark One Yuigarde. He was plopped down in a chair he’d had his minion Phufun make for him patterned off of his throne, looking quite pleased with himself.

“Hey Phufun,” Yuigarde said. “Tell me about those demons in that Calgosi place.”

Phufun pressed her fake glasses up against the ridge of her nose and took a

step forward. “Yes, Master. I have heard that there are three: the giant squid demon beast, Squidra; the giant turtle demon beast, Turtra; and the giant shrimp demon beast, Shrimpdra. It seems they can take human form as well as the forms of rampaging giants.”

Yuigarde nodded, satisfied, and laughed. “Rampaging giants... I like the sound of that! I think I like them!” A rare smile crossed his face. “But how come they’re taking orders from the likes of pirates?”

“Master, it seems that they joined the pirates for the promise of three square meals a day and a place to sleep.”

Yuigarde cackled evilly. “Well, that’s easy enough! If all they want is food, we’ll give them all they can eat! I’ll make sure they have their every whim catered to!”

“You have excellent judgment, Master.” Phufun gave a deep bow.

Yorminyt the Serpent Princess, one of the Infernal Four, was watching the two from some distance away. *Didn’t that dragon desssert usss becaussse we couldn’t keep her fed?* she thought and sighed deeply, sprawling out on Hugi-Mugi’s back. Yorminyt was a lamia, with the lower body of a snake, but right now she was using magic to take the form of a human. “Ever sssince we ssstarted working for *him*, there hasssn’t been enough of anything...” she muttered, and sighed again.

Yuigarde suddenly turned to look at her, his expression furious. “Hey Yorminyt!” he snapped. “What did you just say?! Huh?!”

Yorminyt turned her head to look at Yuigarde. “I sssimply sssaid, O Dark One, that I look forward to meeting thessse demons.”

“Oh? Well, that’s fine then.” Yuigarde sat back down in his seat.

Sharp earsss too... I believe I am ssstarting to hate that man. She sighed a third time.

They flew on, Hugi-Mugi carrying them closer and closer to the Calgosi Coast.

◇Back at the Calgosi Coast◇

The three demon beasts floated in the water in front of Captain Eddsarch’s

ship: the giant squid Squidra, the giant turtle Turtra, and the giant shrimp Shrimpdra, charred black and unmoving.

“Tent-Tent-Tentacle...”

“Tuuuurt...”

“Shrimpy-py...”

In front of them stood Ghozal, his right hand pointed still upwards. “What,” he said, dumbfounded. “That’s it?”

It was no surprise he felt that way. When the three had come forward, full of fighting spirit, Ghozal had been pleased. “Hrm...” he said. “You look like you have some backbone. It’s been too long since I’ve had a good fight. Let’s start with *this*!” He raised his hand into the air, casting the spell Lightning. He had only intended the attack to be a lead-in to a proper fight, but it struck the three directly.

“Tent-Tentacle?!”

“Turt?!”

“Shrimpy-py!”

The three cried out and collapsed in the water, unable to move.

Ghozal slumped his shoulders in disappointment and looked down on the three now floating on the waves. “Well, I suppose they’re at least good at playing dead,” he said.

Polseidon couldn’t believe his eyes. “A-All three demon beasts in a single attack...” he said, staring at the fallen enemies. “Impossible...” As the only one of Junia Van Biel’s familiars capable of taking a giant form, Polseidon had clashed with the three demon beasts many times. As strong as he was, with three against one the odds were stacked against him. He had found himself at a disadvantage and had been forced to retreat time and time again. And now Ghozal had defeated them with a single spell. As you can imagine, he was stunned speechless.

Flio glanced at Polseidon and smirked knowingly. *Well, it's not exactly a surprise that the former Dark One could finish them so easily, but I suppose he doesn't know that. Of course he'd be shocked. Those three weren't exactly weak.* He flew up next to Ghozal. "Well," he said, "with those three defeated, we're almost done here. Isn't that right, Gho— I mean, Black Wolf Mask."

"H-Hrm. I suppose." Ghozal looked profoundly disappointed.

Flio placed a hand on the former Dark One's shoulder. "We still need to take care of the rest of the pirates," he said. "Okay?"

Ghozal nodded. "You're right," he said, turning to face Captain Eddsarch. "Maybe *he'll* be at least a little fun." He cracked his knuckles.

"A-Ahh!" Captain Eddsarch screamed. "Do something! Shoot 'im! *Shoot 'im!*" His ships obliged, but Flio stretched out his hand, once more stopping the cannonballs in midair. Captain Eddsarch looked around frantically, his face breaking out in a cold sweat.

Ghozal flew towards the captain slowly, taking his sweet time to approach. "Hey," he said, "is that all you got?" His hands erupted into pale blue flames, ready to unleash some powerful magic. Captain Eddsarch's whole body was shaking. All he could do was watch as Ghozal drew closer and closer.

◇A Few Minutes Later◇

"I'll have my revenge!" Captain Eddsarch cried from his lifeboat. He was already far enough away that there was no way to be sure if Ghozal or Flio could even hear him. His ship of which he was so proud, the flagship of the Blackbeard Corsairs, had been scrapped in a second by Ghozal's spell. He had only barely managed to reach the lifeboat in time to escape into the open sea with his life.

Ghozal had aimed a spell at Captain Eddsarch's lifeboat, planning to end the menace for good, but Flio interposed himself, blocking the attack and purposefully letting Captain Eddsarch get away.

Ghozal cocked his head, watching as Captain Eddsarch's boat got smaller and smaller in the distance. "Mister Flio, aren't you being a bit too lenient? I understand not wanting to slaughter the pirates, but you mean to let them get

away?”

Flio’s smile was calm as ever. “Well, we destroyed their pirate ships and captured the demon beasts. They aren’t really in a position to make trouble. I just thought it would be better to spare them.”

“Hrm,” Ghozal said, giving the matter some thought. “But Mister Flio,” he continued after a beat, “if I were him, I would have kept a portion of my ships hidden in one of my strongholds. If he did that, he could attack again after we leave.”

“Oh,” said Flio, “good point...” A second later, he smiled again. “I sent a telepathic message to Rys. They should be on their way...”

◇An Island off Calgosi Coast—Later◇

In the waters near the Calgosi Coast, there was a crescent-shaped island. At a glance it seemed to be uninhabited and unremarkable, but truthfully this was Captain Eddsarch’s base. In the inner part of the crescent, hidden in a thick forest, the Blackbeard Corsairs made their home. There were harbors, dry docks, even residential quarters, and a great number of pirate ships waiting and ready. Eddsarch planned to return to his base and set out again to attack Calgosi with the remaining ships.

What in all the devils’ names...? Captain Eddsarch had rowed and rowed like his life depended on it, and finally returned to his pirate fortress, but what he saw made his jaw go slack.

The island was on fire.

Two people, one in a yellow wolf mask and one in a purple wolf mask, flew in the sky above the burning island, firing spell after spell with both hands. Each time one of their spells struck the island, the area would erupt into flames. And in the fortress itself was an enormous wyvern smashing the buildings to smithereens, while a giant lupine demon and a massive rukh rampaged around the surrounding area, chasing away the remaining pirates and destroying their facilities.



Flio had found the Blackbeard Corsairs' fortress to the north using a wide-range version of the spell Scan. He contacted Rys telepathically as she and the rest of the crew were on their way to Calgosi Coast and asked her to destroy the fortress. Captain Eddsarch had arrived just in time to see them do it. Hiya and Damalynas wore their masks to disguise their identities from the pirates, but Rys, Loplanz, and Wyne had taken the form of a wolf, rukh, and wyvern, and felt no need.

Captain Eddsarch could only watch from his tiny lifeboat as his fortress was totally and utterly obliterated. "My ships..." he moaned. "My island... My fortress! Ooohhh..." He started to laugh. Somehow, he couldn't help himself.

Meanwhile, Wyne had located the pirates' food stores. She thrust her head inside with surprising force. When she lifted her head out, she was holding an absurd amount of foodstuffs in her mouth. She crunched and crunched, eating the pirates' supplies, wooden crates and all. Then she went in for another bite. Loplanz took to the sky and opened his beak. A beam of uncanny light issued forth from his mouth, destroying everything it touched. Rys was tossing the pirates around like rag dolls, while Hiya and Damalynas kept up their merciless barrage of spells.

"C-Captain Eddsarch," said one of his crewmen who was with him on the lifeboat. "What... What do we do?" But Captain Eddsarch just laughed and laughed, unable to respond as his dreams went up in smoke.

◇Calgosi Coast◇

In the middle of the Calgosi Coast, where the curve of the bay reached furthest inland, was a small hill. On that hill was the mansion of the Van Biels, the seat of their government. Though called a mansion, it was actually a fairly plain and cozy two-story stone building. At a glance, it would be easy to mistake it for the headquarters of a private company.

Flio and Ghozal were in front of the mansion. Beside them was its current master, Countess Junia Van Biel. She was no longer wearing the boy's outfit she had worn to fight off Captain Eddsarch and his men, but an elaborate flowing dress. She had a flat chest and didn't seem to be wearing any make up—she almost looked like a boy wearing women's clothes. She kept staring at the

ground and fidgeting, evidently uncomfortable. Behind her were her familiars Polseidon and Rolindeim, both in human form. Flio had used magic to heal the injuries they had incurred in the fight. The three of them were in perfect condition, both physically and in terms of their magic power.

Junia opened and closed her mouth several times, trying in vain to find the words to say something like “I offer you my deepest gratitude for coming to our aid,” but she couldn’t. Ever since she was a small child, Junia had spent most of her time in her room reading books. Even after assuming the role of the family head, she stayed in her mansion and sent her familiars to handle any business that required her to go outside. Her life as an extreme shut-in had left her communication skills profoundly lacking, to the degree that now she found herself unable to say a single word.

Polseidon and Rolindeim knew their master’s difficulties too well. “You can do it, Countess!” they whispered, each holding one of her hands tight.

Polseidon had served House Van Biel as a familiar for generations, and had by now become quite old. He had long white hair and a long white beard, the same as his giant form, and his muscular chest was completely bare as well. Around his waist he wore a white cloth, and on his feet a simple pair of sandals.

Rolindeim, on the other hand, was small-bodied and looked young, but like Polseidon she had served the Van Biels for many long years and was actually quite old. Her skin was so dark it looked almost jet black, and she wore a tube top and denim pants, but her feet were bare.

With her familiars’ support, Junia forced herself to open her mouth, but before she could get a word in, Flio suddenly exclaimed, “Oh, they’re here!” He was looking into the sky above the sea, where Wyne was soaring towards them. It seemed like she spotted them—she sped up.

“Wh-What’s that?!” said Polseidon, his eyes going wide.

“A d-d-d-d-d-dragon!” said Rolindeim. “A big one!”

Junia, however, was still staring at the ground, trying to get herself to speak, and didn’t notice the wyvern at all.

Wyne reached them before long, flapping her wings and coming to land right

in front of Flio, still in her wyvern form. Flio reached out and placed a hand on her draconic head. “Good job, Wyne,” he said, and petted her gently. Wyne cried happily.

Rys, Hiya, and Damalynas jumped off from Wyne’s back, and finally Loplanz climbed down her neck, reaching his legs out towards the ground. “Here goes...” he said. But Wyne lifted her neck up and shook it from left to right. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-WHAAA?!” Loplanz shouted as he was sent flying, landing in the sea in front of the mansion with a tremendous splash.

Wyne turned back into her human form, making a big show of indifference to the rukh avian’s plight. “A bug got on my neck,” she said, scratching.

Loplanz came flying from the ocean where he had been tossed, furious and sopping wet. He landed next to Wyne. “What was *that?!*” he shouted, squaring up his shoulders. “That was *mean!*”

“Oh,” said Wyne, glaring reproachfully. “Is that the bug who was causing problems for dada?”

“I-I said I was sorry!” said Loplanz. “I won’t do it again!”

“Yeah?” rejoined Wyne. “Little brats lie all the time, though.”

“L-Little?! You’re not any bigger than I am!”

Wyne huffed. “I’m a *bit* bigger,” she said.

“As if!” shouted Loplanz. “Anyway, I’m still growing!”

“Hmph,” Wyne grumbled. “Brat’s getting on my nerves. You looking for a fight?”

The two were grinding their teeth, glaring daggers at each other. Flio walked up and placed a hand on each of their heads. “Okay you two, that’s enough,” he said. “Wyne, I know you threw Loplanz off on purpose. You shouldn’t do things like that.”

“But dada!”

“No excuses. Now tell Loplanz you’re sorry.”

Wyne puffed out her cheeks. “I’m sorry,” she said, plainly not meaning it. She

bowed.

“H-Hey,” said Loplanz, “you don’t gotta apologize...” He looked at Wyne. Leaned over like that, her chest was completely visible. As small as her body was, Wyne was blessed with a voluptuous bosom. Loplanz went red, unable to look away from Wyne’s cleavage.

Wyne noticed, and quickly covered her breasts with her hands. “Dada,” she said, “Loplanz is being a pervert.”

“Huh?!” said Loplanz. “I, uh... I—” he stammered incoherently.

The rest of the party was overcome by laughter.

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“I-I-I... I o-offer you my d-d-d-d-deep... My deepest g-gratitude for c-coming to our aid...” Junia Van Biel bowed, finally managing to choke out some appropriate words. It took her an entire minute to say that one sentence.

Flio just gave her his usual smile. “It was no trouble at all,” he said. “I’m just glad we made it in time.”

Rys and Ghozal, who were standing behind him, looked exhausted. Polseidon, sensing a need to move things along, leaned out in front of Junia (who had finally managed to speak) and grinned, saying, “W-Well then! Since you’ve come all this way, why don’t you spend some time at the mansion? You can even go for a swim!”

“Swim?” asked Rys. “Can you swim in the sea here?”

“Yes! Lots of people go to the beach to swim! We had to evacuate because of Eddsarch’s crew, but, well, look!” Polseidon pointed towards the beach. Flio and his companions looked, and saw that the formerly deserted shoreline was now crowded with people. In one spot, they could see a number of stalls lined up, selling some kind of food. Flio watched with fascination.

“My lord husband,” asked Rys, stepping beside him, “is this your first time at the beach?”

“It is,” Flio answered, not taking his eyes off the sea. “The place I lived in my home world was quite a ways inland. We only had lakes and rivers to swim in.”

Rys took his arm in hers, grinning. “In that case, we should go swimming! We’ve done as the Maiden Queen asked. There’s no harm in taking a little break!”

Behind them, Ghozal crossed his arms and nodded emphatically. “Well, why not? It’s been a long time for me too. Might as well enjoy it!” he said, and started doing stretches.

Next to him, Hiya and Damalynas were already in their swimsuits, completely ready to get in the water. Wyne, of course, was Wyne, and was already running for the beach, lured by the delicious smells that had started wafting in from the food stalls.

Flio watched them fondly, and then turned to Junia Van Biel, smiling. “Well, it seems everyone is of one mind,” he said. “Perhaps I should spread my wings a bit as well!”

Chapter 4: The Dark One, the Queen, and the Hero

◇Before the Dark Citadel◇

Hugi-Mugi, who should have been flying to Calgosi, landed on a mountaintop not far from the Dark Citadel. On his back, the Dark One Yuigarde regarded the building with plain irritation. His minion Phufun pressed the magic ring on her finger to her lips, her expression grim. “Calsi’im,” she said, “what is happening in the Citadel?”

“Y-Yes, missus!” came the skeleton’s voice through the magic gem on the ring. “As soon as you all left, the rebel demons came to storm the Dark Citadel! We, the Brave Remainder, have barricaded ourselves in the throne room, but we can’t keep them out forever!”

Phufun massaged the bridge of her nose. Calsi’im the skeleton was in charge of one of the Citadel’s defense teams. His team, the “Brave Remainder” they called themselves, was composed entirely of old demons who could no longer fight. Internally, Phufun was fuming that such a useless team would be their last holdouts.

We have to hurry, she thought. *They won’t last long...* Perspiration dripped down her face as she considered her options, when Yorminyt the Serpent Princess walked up next to her. She looked at the magic ring she had been using to communicate with Calsi’im.

“Oh?” she said. “What isss *that* fassscinating little thing?”

“Huh?!” Phufun started. “O-Oh! It’s something I picked up when I was infiltrating a human city. It’s a very helpful magic item that allows you to have conversations over long distances. Thanks to this, I can learn about the rebels’ movements as they happen.”

Just as she said, thanks to the magic ring, they were able to hear from the demons on watch that the rebels had attacked the castle as soon as it happened, and hastily turned the group right around. The ring, incidentally, was

something the Fli-o'-Rys General Store had sold as a test release and was still observing to see if it was ready for market.

"But what's with that?!" Yuigarde shouted. "Coming to attack right when I'm gone. Lucky sons of bitches, I suppose! Well, I won't let them have their run of the place! Gah ha ha!"

Yorminyt closed her eyes tight in exasperation, tilting her head to the side. "*Lucky sssons of bitchesss"?!* she thought. *How can that sssimpleton not realizzze that their plan wasss to attack when he wasss gone. Thisss isss exactly why he'sss a problem.* She turned to look at the Dark Citadel. *Which meansss it'sss sssafe to asssume that sssomeone hasss infiltrated the Dark Citadel.* She delivered a loud sigh. *An enemy demon would have never made it inssside back when Lord Gholl wasss ssstill with us. Hisss confederate Uliminasss and her Sssilent Lisssteners would find them right away and have them executed... Not that there were demonsss who would rebel againssst Lord Gholl in the firssst place.* She looked back at Yuigarde and sighed again, even more loudly. *None except usss... We truly made a terrible missssstake.*

The Infernal Four: the lamia Yorminyt the Serpent Princess, the doppeladler Hugi-Mugi, the lichsteed Sleip, and the lupine Fengaryl. Fengaryl had died, leaving only three seats filled. When Yuigarde had launched his ploy to usurp Gholl as Dark One, the Infernals took his side. But they did not do this out of a preference for Yuigarde. They thought it would serve as a wake-up call to Gholl, who was refusing to bring his army to attack the humans and was behaving in ways that made demons think that perhaps he was considering making peace. However, when he received Yuigarde's challenge, Gholl abdicated the throne without a fight. Yuigarde became Dark One before the three knew what was happening.

Yuigarde had launched an all-out attack on Klyrode Castle, the greatest bastion of humanity, and was utterly defeated. Afterward, demons everywhere began to yearn for the days of Gholl, and rebellions began to spring up. Yorminyt was in the process of realizing that she was one of the parties most responsible. She sighed.

"Huh?" Yuigarde glared over in Yorminyt's direction. "Why d'ya keep sighing, Yorminyt? Something up?"

“No, Dark One,” said Yorminyt. “It’sss nothing.” She kept her eyes fixed on the Dark Citadel. “But I mussst hurry, or elssse the Dark Citadel will fall completely under their control. I ssshall go ahead and ssstrike sssome terror into the rebelsss.” As she was speaking, Yorminyt’s lower body transformed back into its natural form as a lamia, and she raced into the forest at top speed. Yorminyt hissed. “He’sss going to realizzze sssooner or later...”

In no time at all, Yorminyt had reached the front gate of the Dark Citadel. It seemed to have already fallen—the gate was defended by demons who were not soldiers of the Dark Army. Yorminyt slithered straight up, revealing herself.

“Y-Yorminyt?!”

“It’s the Serpent Princess!”

“An Infernal is here!”

The demons all started shouting at once as they rushed in to attack. Yorminyt fixed them with a glare. “The Ssserpent Princesss will not fall to rabble like you.” She charged right back at the oncoming force.

As she charged, Yorminyt swung her tail at lightning speeds. “Gwaaah!” the rebels cried out as they flew through the air. Her tail was thick and sinuous, but it struck as fast as a whip, and sent every last one of her assailants flying.

“Who’sss next?” Yorminyt’s snake-like tongue flickered in and out of her mouth as she stared down the remaining demons standing in front of the gate. Her pupils were narrow and serpentine as she slithered along on her tail. She was every bit as majestic as befits the one deemed the Serpent Princess. As she slowly approached the gate, the guards shrunk away.

“H-Hey,” a demon said, “there’s no way we can take her, is there...?”

“We need to report to Master Zanzibar...” said another. “Tell him the Infernals are back...”

The guard demons fled back inside the Dark Citadel with great haste, and Yorminyt followed after them. She kept her distance, so as to not seem like she was tailing them. All she had to do was follow, and they would take her to their ringleader.

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“Gah ha ha!” Yuigarde the Dark One cackled as he watched Yorminyt from the forest. “Check out Yorminyt! The old viper’s already broken through the gate! We gotta get inside too!” He followed her in through the Citadel gate, deliberately stomping on the unconscious demons Yorminyt had left strewn about. “I’ll teach you to rebel against me!” he shouted. Some of them screamed in agony as he trod over them. Yuigarde looked down with a satisfied smile.

Seeing what was happening, Phufun hurried up to stop Yuigarde. “Master,” she said in an evident rush to get the words out, “I understand how you feel, but please restrain yourself! Once these demons are arrested, we are going to use the spell Subjugation and force them into the slave battalions. Please, try not to injure them...”



Yuigarde glanced back at her out of the corner of his eye. “Keh. Fine,” he spat. He gave a nearby rebel one last kick, sending the demon flying, and marched on into the castle.

Once he had gone inside, Phufun gave a sharp whistle. At that signal, a number of Dark Army loyalists assembled behind her. Phufun turned to face the man and woman at their head. “Coqueshtti. Doctor Mephisto. Take these rebels to the underground prison. I will see to their subjugation.”

The two mad scientists—Coqueshtti, who looked like a charming little girl, and Doctor Mephisto, who was a devil—bowed.

“Understood,” said Coqueshtti.

“Understood, madame,” said Doctor Mephisto.

They sent their minions to gather up the unconscious demons and drag them off to the prison. This was Phufun’s team. They were specialists who worked in an underground laboratory, where they tended to the wounded and researched ways to increase the power of the army’s demons. They were not fighters. When the rebels attacked, they had hidden themselves in the forest in order to set up a field hospital and protect the secret data from their experiments, and waited for Phufun’s return.

As Phufun was watching her team, she heard Yuigarde’s voice ring out. “You punks! Who do you think you’re messing with? Huh?!” A section of the Dark Citadel shattered with a terrible sound.

“M-Master! No!” she called, running into the citadel after Yuigarde. “Repairs to the Dark Citadel aren’t cheap! Think about what you’re—” She heard another violent smashing sound as her master, heedless of her warnings, broke another section of the building.

◇A Mountaintop near the Dark Citadel◇

“Master Zanzibar! Are you hurt?” Meiden the devil ran up to her fellow devil Zanzibar’s side. Zanzibar was clutching his shoulder in agony. His face was pale as he gazed up at the Dark Citadel.

“Not badly...” Zanzibar said. “Only...I didn’t expect the Dark Army to return so

soon...”

Zanzibar’s strategy had succeeded. He’d lured the Dark One Yuigarde to the Calgosi Coast and led his rebels to attack while he was away. Shortly before, he had used his agents inside the Dark Citadel to spread the misinformation that the Klyrode army was attacking from the south, sending off the main force of the Dark Army and giving him a clear path to take the citadel.

However, there were two things that he did not anticipate. First, he did not expect such dogged resistance from the Brave Remainder, who’d stayed behind when the main force was sent away under false pretenses and barricaded themselves in the throne room. Zanzibar was aware of another route which led into the throne room through a ventilation shaft that connected to the space above the ceiling, but the Brave Remainder destroyed that passage, preempting his attempt. The rebels tried all kinds of strategies to drag the Brave Remainder out of the throne room, but the holdouts kept the door shut tight, defending it for everything they were worth.

His second miscalculation was that while his rebels were wasting time dealing with the Brave Remainder, the Dark One Yuigarde returned faster than Zanzibar had anticipated. Yorminyt of the Infernal Four led the charge into the Dark Citadel and easily scattered the rebel forces. They were overwhelmed, sending them scrambling away in a desperate retreat.

Zanzibar exhaled sharply in frustration. “Master Zanzibar,” said Meiden, looking at him with concern written on her face, “you mustn’t do anything reckless. You still have the wound that lamia woman gave you.” True to her words, green blood was oozing out of a wound in Zanzibar’s stomach.

“Then it seems my pet strategy—my plan to take the citadel with only my hand-picked loyal fighters—has ended in failure.” He clicked his tongue. “Loath as I am to admit it, it would have been better to bring the whole rebel army to attack.”

Meiden shook her head. “No, Master. If we had brought those savage fools with us, they would have demanded a grand reward. It would have made them proud and arrogant. From the long-term perspective, I believe your strategy was best.” She knelt before her master.

Zanzibar glanced at Meiden before looking back to the Dark Citadel. “Well, be that as it may, the fact remains that we have lost. We must retreat for now, but one day I will defeat him and reign as the new Dark One! I promise you, Yuigarde, you *will* get what’s coming to you. Just you wait.”

Leaning on Meiden’s shoulder for support, Zanzibar, the lord of the devils, limped into the forest. The rebels who had managed to escape followed after him. His plot to seize the Dark Citadel had ended in failure, but word that the devils—the strongest single faction within the Dark Army—had risen up in rebellion against the Dark One Yuigarde spread like wildfire among demonkind.

◇The Calgosi Coast◇

Hero Gold-Hair gave the knights in the fast coach a big smile and a hearty wave. “Thank you for everything!” he said good-naturedly.

The knights grinned and waved back. “Of course!” said one. “We help each other out in times of trouble! The Klyrode army is always an ally to the people!” The other knights all crowded around to see Hero Gold-Hair off. Actually, they weren’t looking at Gold-Hair—their attention was fully focused on Tsuya who was standing beside him. During the trip, she had time and time again carelessly bent over, giving the knights eyeful after eyeful of her generous bosom. She really had ended up with them wrapped around her little finger. Even now, they were staring at her with slackened lovestruck faces as they waved.

“Let us know if you ever need anything, Tsuya!” said one of the knights.

“We’ll help you out any time!” said another.

Tsuya smiled back at them like she always did, bowed deeply, and called out, “Thank you so muuuch!” Naturally, when she did, she gave them another peek at her cleavage. The knights clattered in their armor as they leaned forward out of the carriage to get a better look.

Hero Gold-Hair interposed himself between Tsuya and the knights. He was clearly positioning himself deliberately to block Tsuya from their line of sight. “Well,” he said, “we had best be off!” They took their leave, Hero Gold-Hair pushing Tsuya along by the shoulders.

“Tsuya! I’ll see you later!” a knight called.

“Come visit us any time!” said another. They kept waving, grins plastered on their faces.

When they reached a turn in the road, Hero Gold-Hair let out a deep sigh. “Finally!” he said. “I thought we’d never get away from those vile louts.”

“Huuuh?” Tsuya asked, still smiling, “Looouts? But they seemed like such niiice peeeople!”

Hero Gold-Hair gave Tsuya the side-eye. *Those knights were leering at her breasts and butt the whole time! How oblivious* is *that girl?!*

Tsuya noticed the look Gold-Hair was giving her. “Oh, nooo!” she cried. “Did I meeess something uuup again? I had no ideeea!” She frantically looked over her own body.

“Look, don’t worry about it. Just act like you always do.” Hero Gold-Hair patted Tsuya on the head. “More importantly, we need money! That’s what we should be focusing on.”

“We dooo... We weren’t able to seeell our stuff at aaall!”

“Oh, right!” said Hero Gold-Hair. “Those knights said that there’s some kind of tool—a *Magic Sensor*—that can tell right away if someone’s selling stolen goods!” he grumbled. “What a troublesome contraption. What bastard came up with something like that...”

The Magic Sensor was a device Flio had invented to do something about the recent flood of stolen goods and counterfeits that had store owners and merchants’ associations everywhere scratching their heads. Hero Gold-Hair had no idea that it was the invention of the former Hero Candidate who was summoned and deemed a failure that had him—who had fallen from his place as the so-called strongest Hero in history all the way to becoming a wanted criminal—even further in a bind.

“We have to find some kind of work...” Hero Gold-Hair sighed.

“I knooow...” said Tsuya, looking glumly at the remaining money in her Bottomless Bag. “We’re almost ooout of mooney...”

“Hey,” came a man’s voice from behind them, “are you two looking for work?” Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya turned around to see someone who looked to be a middle-aged man. His skin was deeply tanned, and he carried a steel plate slung over his shoulder.

“Hm?” said Hero Gold-Hair, folding his arms as he looked at the man. He stood in front of Tsuya with his chest puffed out, covering her. “It’s true that we’re looking for work, but...”

“Oh?” The man grinned at Gold-Hair’s behavior. “Not bad!” he said. “It’s good for a man to make a point of protecting women. I think I like you!” He pointed a finger at himself. “I’ll give you a good job! Come with me!”

“Hmph.” Hero Gold-Hair gave the matter a bit of thought. “Fine,” he said. “We’ll at least hear you out.” He followed after the man, with Tsuya clinging on to him. And the three made their way down the road.

◇The Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

The Dark One Yuigarde sat on his throne, looking down at his underling Calsi’im kneeling before him. “Good job keeping the throne room safe, Calsi’im!” he said. “Gah ha ha!” Yuigarde was in a good mood. Zanzibar, who had raised arms against him, was badly wounded and his forces had been driven away.

Calsi’im lowered his head. “No, no! Any one of your servants would do the same, Dark One!” Calsi’im was a veteran soldier, the oldest in the Dark Army. He was so old, his bones so dry, he looked as though he might crumble at a moment’s notice. The others in his company were like him, old enough to die at any given moment.

Yuigarde grinned. “Nah, it was huge! Holdin’ off those devils without any help. Well, the Infernal Four did, a *bit*. But Yorminyt couldn’t even capture that Zanzibar guy! And the rest were completely useless!” Yuigarde turned his gaze to the side of the room where the Infernals were standing. All three of them—Yorminyt the Serpent Princess, Hugi-Mugi, and Sleip—were scowling.

“Oh, *what*,” Yorminyt muttered under her breath. “The devilsss are the ssstrongest in the Dark Army! And I, a sssingle fighter, fought my way through and injured their commander. That should be a praisssworthy performance!”

“If we had flown inside, we would have broken the castle, yes! Yes, the castle broken!” Hugi-Mugi’s heads whispered to each other. “We are only suited to large-scale battles, yes! Yes, battles of large scale!”

Sleip’s shoulders were heaving, his face wet with perspiration. He had just come running back to the Dark Citadel from his encampment. *By the time I heard the news, Zanzibar was already gone!* he thought. *Don’t be ridiculous!*

Yuigarde looked away from the three and back at the skeleton. “Now. Calsi’im. I wanna give you a reward. Whaddaya want?”

Calsi’im raised his head at the Dark One’s words. “Can I ask for anything at all?”

“Yeah!” said Yuigarde. “Just name it!”

“Well, then...” said the skeleton. “Could I ask for a promotion?”

“A promotion?” Yuigarde rested his chin on his hand. “You’re a captain of the defensive reserve, right? Hrm... You want me to make you a commanding officer?”

Calsi’im shook his head. “No, no, not a commanding officer.” He looked to his side, where the very aggravated Infernals were standing. Calsi’im grinned brightly as he looked at them. “I know! Since Fengaryl died, his seat has been empty... Oh, I would very much like to be made one of the Infernal Four...”

“What?!” Yuigarde’s eyes shot open wide. His smile vanished and his face became a mask of pure rage. Calsi’im, however, was staring at the Infernals with a big grin on his face. For a while, Yuigarde just glared. And then, suddenly, he burst into an enormous bout of earnest laughter. “Pfft! Bwah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha hah!” Yorminyt, the rest of the Infernal Four, and everyone else in the throne room stared at him. “Hilarious!” Yuigarde roared, grinning wildly. “All right, fine! I’ll make you one of the Infernal Four!”

Yorminyt and the rest of her colleagues watched on in awe. The throne room was in an uproar. “Oh, splendid!” cried Calsi’im. “Well, then, excuse me!” He took to his feet with evident effort, went over to where the Infernal Four were waiting, and filed in behind the rest of them. “I’m quite old, so you’ll have to forgive me for sitting down!” He took a handkerchief out of his bag, dusted off

the floor a bit, and sat down with proper form.

“Wh-What are you trying to do, old man?” Sleip asked him, an expression of disbelief on his face.

“Oho ho!” Calsi’im laughed. “Just looking out for the Dark Army, young lad!”

And so, the skeleton elder Calsi’im shot up through the ranks, becoming one of the Infernal Four—the very top of the Dark Army. The rebel spies within the Dark Army transmitted the news promptly to their commanders, and soon it was known among all demonkind.

◇Klyrode Castle—The Maiden Queen’s Chambers, That Night◇

The Maiden Queen sat at her desk, silently writing, moving her pen at a feverish pace. There had not been any large-scale invasions from the Dark Army for some time, but Her Majesty still had hardly a moment to rest. There were negotiations with neighboring countries to attend to, requests for aid to answer, supplies that needed to be delivered, banquets to organize in the honor of the knights returning from the front... And on top of the military matters that consumed her time, there were her regular duties involved in governing the country. There were all sorts of regular meetings she had to prepare for and attend, conferences with merchants’ associations from all over the land...

Day after day she labored silently to govern the kingdom. In her father’s time, there had been aides to take care of all this, but they had been implicated in corruption after looking the other way when the former King appropriated the kingdom’s wealth for his own use. On top of that, he was discovered to have been diverting public funds to his own illegal businesses. Dissatisfaction with the royal family had never been higher. Moreover, he had mishandled the case of Flio, deeming him a failure and banishing him without looking into the matter while declaring the utterly useless Hero Gold-Hair to be the Hero, much to the cost of the crown’s prestige.

But fortunately for the Maiden Queen, right as these crimes were coming to light, the Dark Army launched a massive attack on the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Everybody had thought that it would be impossible for her, inexperienced ruler that she was, to repel the attack—but they were wrong.

With doubting voices on every side, the Maiden Queen crushed the Dark Army's attacking force marvelously. She perhaps had an easy fight of it, as the Dark One Yuigarde had charged in blindly with no plan whatsoever, but nonetheless her victory sent her popularity soaring through the roof.

The Maiden Queen hadn't rested on her laurels, but pursued every matter seriously and diligently, day after day. That was the Queen on whose desk, next to a cup of tea, rested a plate on which sat some manner of baked sweet.

"Well," said the Queen, "shall we stop there and take a bit of a break?" She set her pen down and stretched her arms high above her head. She assembled the papers into a neat and tidy stack, and set the plate with the sweet in front of her. For a while she just admired it. It was a yellow cake, glazed with a white icing. She took a small piece with her fork, and brought it to her mouth. "Mmm..." she murmured, a big smile filling her face as she chewed. "Delicious! Truly splendid!"

She could no longer stop herself. At first the Maiden Queen had used her fork in a properly refined manner, but as she ate she became more and more entranced until, after finishing off the last morsel of cake, she picked up the plate itself and brought it to her mouth to lick clean. She sighed, sinking into her chair, satisfied. "Oh, what a marvelous little treat..." She picked up the teacup and sipped her tea. "I have so many onerous tasks, but as fatigued as I am, the Fli-o'-Rys Company's new lembon cake always perks me back up. Thank goodness for them." She gazed at the empty plate as she drank her tea.

A few days ago, Rys had been making cakes with the rather excessive lembon stash she had unwisely accumulated. Flio and everyone else in the house had liked them very much, so she decided to make a day's worth of cakes to sell. Flio had offered one to the Maiden Queen, and she liked it so much that the next time she made an order from the Fli-o'-Rys Company, she privately requested for some of those cakes to be delivered as well.

The Maiden Queen put down her cup. "I would love to eat a little more," she mused, "but were I to do that, I would have no lembon cake for tomorrow. I shall have to restrain myself." She stood up. As she did, she felt a strange sensation around her stomach. "Hm?" She narrowed her eyes, fearfully stretching her right hand against her midsection. It didn't feel right.

“I-It can’t be...” Sweating nervously, the Maiden Queen rushed to the mirror on her dresser and stripped down to her waist. Covering her breasts with her hands, she looked in the mirror at different angles. She was undeniably plumper than she had been half a year ago. Her breasts, which she might have liked to be a *little* bigger, were the same as ever, but her hips and waist had definitely grown.



The Queen had many ideas as to what might be the cause. She spent every day from morning till night hard at work, while also attending banquets for foreign emissaries or feasts for returning knights where she ate a fair number of grand dishes and drank good liqueur. It seemed like there were more such occasions every day. And when she worked, she ate those lembon cakes... She was eating an unhealthy and unpredictable diet, and was far too busy to get proper exercise. The results were before her eyes. “How could I have let things become so dire...” she muttered, pressing her hand against her waist, a cold drop of fearful sweat running down her neck.

Suddenly, the Maiden Queen laughed—a single amused chuckle. “What do you know!” she said. “Not long ago I was too busy with governance and the threat of the Dark Army to even have the *time* to worry about my figure!” She gathered up the clothes she had cast off and put them back on. “It is because the Dark Army has been hamstrung by uprisings within its ranks. My elite forces and Lord Flio are more than capable of dealing with the small skirmishes that pop up here and there. And with the Conversation Gem Lord Flio made that allows me to contact him at any time and the Magic Sensors taking care of the issues with stolen goods and counterfeits, we are well enough secure. Secure enough for me to be bothered by my waistline.” She clasped her hands together and closed her eyes. “It can only have been the will of the heavens that sent Lord Flio to our world in our hour of need. Gods above, I offer you my most heartfelt gratitude.” She bowed her head in prayer.

After some time passed, she opened her eyes and looked up. “But that, of course, does nothing to address the situation. Now, what shall I do... I have heard it is quite difficult to lose weight in one’s late twenties...”

The Maiden Queen returned to her desk, vowing to herself to cut tomorrow’s portion of lembon cake in half.

Chapter 5: Flio Goes to the Calgosi Coast, Part 2

“And that’s how it went,” Flio said into his Conversation Gem. He had been using it to speak with the Maiden Queen in order to report on the situation. “So we’ve concluded our business with Calgosi. Our plan was to take a short break and then head back. Don’t hesitate to call if something comes up. You can use the magic gem I gave you to contact me, okay?”

“I see,” came the Queen’s voice in his head. “I thank you for your aid in this, truly. Enjoy your leisure—it is well earned.”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty,” said Flio, and he turned the Conversation Gem off. He looked up at Junia Van Biel. Junia was so fascinated by the gem Flio was using that she put aside her extreme social anxiety to come over and gaze at it.

Junia was a witch, with considerable skill in magic and knowledge of the arcane. She hoarded tomes and scrolls like a jealous dragon, spending every second she was not otherwise occupied immersed in her research. Since becoming the family head, though, she’d had trouble finding the time. Her duties took priority. But Flio’s Conversation Gem was more than enough to rekindle the fires of her inquisitive heart.

“Wh-What’s th-that?” she stammered. “I’ve never seen one before...”

“Oh, this?” Flio smiled. “It’s one of my creations. I call it a Conversation Gem. It’s enchanted with spells that let you project your thoughts to another person. Although right now it only works if both parties have one...”

“You?! Enchanted a magic gem?! To project your thoughts?!” Junia’s eyes went round. “I-I-I had never so much as *considered* that! I-Incredible! How does it work?” She peered closer at the gem.

Junia had worn a swimsuit to accompany Flio and his party to the beach. It was a white one-piece garb with frills around the chest area. On top, she wore a white hooded sweatshirt. At first she had been intensely shy, hiding behind

Polseidon's back, but when Flio began using the magic gem on his ring to converse with the Maiden Queen of Klyrode Castle, her eyes lit up. Now she was pressed up against Flio, trying to get a good look at the Conversation Gem.

"Hold on... Miss Van Biel, you're a little too close. Would you mind stepping back a bit?" Flio said, speaking quickly as Rys made her way towards them. Rys was wearing a layered bikini, and right now her shoulders were squared up in anger.

Junia's familiars—Polseidon, Rolindeim, and Loplanz—interposed themselves between Rys and their master. "Madam," said Polseidon, bending forward at the waist and looking quite small despite his immense musculature. "I understand your anger, and you are well within your rights, but we beg you to please restrain yourself, if only for a moment..."

Rolindeim likewise bent her very small, very dark-skinned body forward in a deep bow. "I don't think I've *ever* seen Countess Van Biel talk so much to someone other than us three."

Loplanz, the young boy, lowered his head. He looked like he was on the verge of falling to the ground and prostrating himself before Rys. "P-Please! F-For the sake of Countess Van Biel's communication skills! P-P-Please!"

"But... But!" sputtered Rys, puffing up her cheeks in a dramatic pout. "Argh!"

◇ ◇ ◇

Hiya stepped to the rear of Flio's group and invoked Teleportation magic, summoning a portal. This was a spell that enabled the user to return at any time to a place they had once visited. At present, everyone in Flio's house who could teleport was in the Calgosi region, having taken a super high-altitude super high-speed flight on Wyne's back in her wyvern form. Hiya was conjuring a portal for everyone who had stayed behind at Flio's house to come and join the party.

Hiya opened the portal, which looked like an ordinary door. On the other side was the living room of Flio's house in Houghtow City. "I thank you for your patience," they said as the rest of Flio's household filed out.

Sybe was the first to arrive. It made a cheerful "gwowr!" and set to exploring

this new environment with great interest in its natural psychobear form.

“Ohhh, that’s no good.” Flio winced when he saw. He turned to Junia Van Biel. “I’m sorry. You wouldn’t happen to have some very large clothing, by chance?”

“Oho!” said Polseidon, who was standing beside the countess. “Here, you can borrow some of mine!” He reached into his rucksack and pulled out some large articles of clothing.

“Thank you,” said Flio, holding out his arm. “We’ll give them back when we’re done.” A magic circle appeared around his hand, and the clothing Polseidon had been holding vanished. Polseidon and the rest cried out in surprise as the clothing appeared around Sybe, fitting itself around the psychobear’s body. Sybe was now wearing a colorful Hawaiian shirt and cropped linen pants. Mysteriously, its eyes were hidden behind a large pair of sunglasses, and it had a straw hat on its head. Dressed like this, it looked like it could only be some sort of large-bodied demihuman. There had been a stir when Sybe had first appeared as a bear, but once they got it dressed up like that, things quickly quieted down.

“Well, *that* was close.” Flio sighed. “Sorry for the trouble. I’ll have those clothes washed and returned to you.”

“Don’t worry about it! It’s quite all right,” said Polseidon, but his attention was on the portal. Blossom had come running after Sybe, who had darted out on its own; followed by Balirossa and Byleri, who were chatting like old friends; and Uliminas and Greanyl, who seemed to be in the middle of some serious conversation. One after another, everyone filed out. Polseidon watched them, slack-jawed. “Hey,” he said, putting an arm around Flio’s shoulder, “Mister Flio... Are those your lodgers?”

“Yes, they are,” said Flio. “Is something wrong?”

“Ah, to be young...” Polseidon mused. “But you know—work hard, play harder, they say. Hey Mister Flio, at the banquet tonight, who do you think I should—” As he was speaking, a large magic circle appeared above his head. It started to turn. “Hmh?! C-Countess Van Biel!” he shouted. “Wait! I was just—” But his pleas were in vain. A giant hammer appeared, and struck Polseidon on the head. “Gwbf!” The impact of the force drove Polseidon’s body halfway into

the ground.

“I-I told you!” said Junia, her face bright red as she extended her arm towards the magic circle. “S-Stop perving on girls!” Rolindeim glanced between Junia and Polseidon, giggling.

Junia dismissed the hammer and shuffled timidly up to Flio. She was wearing her hooded sweatshirt, but underneath, her one piece swimsuit was still visible —white, with yellow frills. It was Junia’s favorite swimwear. “U-U-Um...” she said, her face turning red as she mustered her courage, “L-Lord F-Flio?” Junia Van Biel was so bad at talking to people that this level of conversation was taking all of her strength. Flio could tell how much the countess was struggling, so he gave her an encouraging smile and let her speak.

“T-T-Tonight, there...there’s going to be a f-f-f-festival,” she choked out. “I was wondering if...if...if I could...” That seemed to be her limit. The redness had spread from her face to her whole upper body. She plopped down and curled up into a ball.

Rolindeim, who had stayed by Junia’s side for moral support, wrapped her arms tight around her master. “So, basically, what the countess is trying to say is that there’s going to be a festival tonight, and that we, House Van Biel, with herself at our head, would like to show you around, right?”

Flio smiled calmly as ever. “Thank you!” he said. “We appreciate it!”

As Flio spoke, Rys ran up to him, a smile on her face. She was wearing a light yellow bikini with a brown and blue pattern, with a matching cloth wrapped around her waist. In her hair she had stuck a red flower, one that only grew in the south. “Oh?” she said. “My lord husband, have you not changed into your swimsuit yet?”

“Ah, no, not yet,” said Flio. “I thought I’d have a look around the beach first.”

Rys grabbed Flio’s arm in hers and started to drag him off. “They’re selling swimsuits on the beach!” she said. “I bought one for you! Now, let’s get you changed!”

Flio smirked in amusement at Rys’s behavior as he was pulled away from the conversation. “Sorry,” he said. “It looks like I have to go get changed.”

Rolindeim giggled. “Okay!” She grinned. “We’ll show you to the beach when you’re done, right?”

Polseidon, who had regained consciousness, watched Rys drag Flio away. His cheeks flushed red. “Ahh, what a lovely couple.”

Junia crossed her arms and let out a “hmph!”

“That woman really has quite the body...” Polseidon swooned, a phenomenally lecherous grin on his face. “I bet at night they—” But that was as far as he got before Junia’s massive hammer came down on his head again. It hit him dead-on, knocking him unconscious and burying him up to his neck in the sand.

Junia Van Biel gave her familiar a sidelong glance and muttered, “I-I keep telling you not to be a p-pervert!”

◇ ◇ ◇

Greanyl the shadow demon was kneeling before Uliminas. She lowered her head. “Then, I will take my leave.”

“Sorry to put this on mew, Greanyl,” Uliminas said. “I leave the store in meowr hands.”

“Your will be done,” Greanyl said, and passed back through the portal. Once Greanyl was through, Hiya closed the door.

“Well, well...” Hiya said, seemingly deep in thought as they looked around the beach. “So this is the Calgosi Coast.” Only a few mere hours ago this beach had been the site of the battle against Captain Eddsarch and his Blackbeard Corsairs, but now it was full of people swimming and having a good time. In the distance, Hiya could see a number of boats patrolling the water. They presumed them to be the Van Biels’ forces, still on guard against another attack. Under their watchful protection, the Calgosi Coast was returning to normal.

Hiya nodded their head slightly. “Hm,” they mused. “There is something admirable about the sight of such frail beings exerting themselves to the extent of their abilities. It is making me quite emotional.”

For a swimsuit, Hiya wore a long thin cloth wrapped around their upper body

from the neck down. It was wrapped in such a way as to expose as much skin as possible—aside from their modest chest, Hiya was very proud of their supple, graceful body. They were attracting stares from not only the men, but the women too. Everywhere, people were watching transfixed, whispering in awe about their beauty.

Damalynas approached Hiya from behind. Her dark skin was adorned with a black and purple bikini, and on her head were large sunglasses and a witch-esque hat made of straw. Her breasts, in contrast to her master's, were quite large. "Your Divinity," she said, "is something the matter?"

"Not at all," said Hiya. "I was simply enjoying the sight of these weak humans living their lives to the fullest."

"Ahh, I see!" Damalynas laughed. "They are quite formidable, you know. I underestimated them once, and I ended up getting sealed away."

Hiya chuckled. "Myself as well, come to think of it," they said. "To think such lowly beings could seal the likes of us away. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined it."

The two stood there for a while, sharing a laugh. "Well," said Hiya, "it seems the Exalted One has left for the coast. Shall we follow, and experience this *beach party* of which those weak humans are so fond?"

Hiya made to leave, but Damalynas grabbed hold of them, holding them back. "Your Divinity..." she said, suddenly bashful. A blush crept into her cheeks. "I wouldn't mind if...if we did some more training, instead..." She was watching Hiya's expression closely.

Hiya pulled Damalynas into a gentle embrace and kissed her sweetly on the lips. The people around them seemed to take no notice, thanks to the shadow cast by Damalynas's hat. After some time, Hiya pulled away and moved in to whisper so that only Damalynas could hear. "There will be time enough for that tonight," they whispered. "Until then, just keep strutting around in that adorable outfit for me, would you?" They brought their lips up to Damalynas's ear and kissed it gently.

Damalynas's eyes seemed to suddenly light up. "O-Okay!" she said. "Yes, Your Divinity!" Damalynas nuzzled into Hiya's embrace, shamelessly rubbing her

voluptuous breasts against the djinn's arm.

Hiya smiled fondly. "Then let us be off," they said, and the two started walking towards the beach.

◇ ◇ ◇

In one corner of the busy beach, Flio and Polseidon carried an enormous mountain of luggage to a spot looking out over the shoreline. Flio was using Levitation, so the hefty bags felt like they weighed nothing at all. Polseidon was carrying his own load with pure muscle power. "This looks like a good spot!" Polseidon said. "All right, I'll spread out the cloth and set up a parasol for anyone who wants to take a break. You and the rest go enjoy the sea to your heart's content! Gah ha ha!" Polseidon wasted no time in removing a large cloth from their luggage.

"Oh, there's no need," Flio quickly added. "I'm happy to help." He was wearing the outfit Rys had picked out for him—a navy blue swimsuit under a light yellow sweatshirt. The sweatshirt matched the cloth Rys was wearing around her waist.

Rolindeim stepped between Polseidon and Flio. "We appreciate the offer, right?" she said. "But you're here as guests of House Van Biel. It's bad enough we made you carry luggage." She grinned playfully as she spoke, and pushed Flio physically towards the beach.

Rys, standing beside her husband, looked pitiably at Rolindeim and Polseidon. "Are you sure there's nothing I can do? My lord husband even carried my luggage... I would very much like to be useful somehow."

"No no no!" said Polseidon. "We'll be happiest if you just enjoy yourselves!"

"What he said, right?" said Rolindeim. The two smiled at Rys.

Flio and Rys bowed deeply. "Then we'll take you up on your offer," said Flio.

"We're headed to the beach!" said Rys, and the two walked off towards the shore.

Polseidon continued staring after them as they left. Far off, standing by a building near the mouth of the bay, stood Junia Van Biel. She had only intended

to accompany her guests to the beach and head back, but she had become so excited to talk with Flio about magic that she had ended up in high spirits. However, the instant she made it to the beach she was overwhelmed by the crowd of people and began to shake with fear.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!" she shrieked, and darted behind a building. Now she was hiding using the spell Concealment. Nobody except Rolindeim and Polseidon, who were keeping careful track of her, had noticed she was there. The pair smirked grimly.

"Well," said Polseidon, "just wearing a swimsuit and making it all the way to the beach is a big step for her."

"It would be nice if this led to her being just a *bit* less afraid of people, wouldn't it?" said Rolindeim.

"Hm?" Polseidon suddenly started looking all around. "Did you see where Loplanz went off to? He was here just a second ago..."

"Oh, Loplanz? I think he's with Lord Flio's crew, right?" said Rolindeim, joining Polseidon in scanning the area for the missing rukh avian.

◇Meanwhile, in Front of a Food Stall◇

Somewhere among the rows of food stalls, a parrot avian man with sunglasses and his hair done up in a mohawk angrily brought his face close to the small-bodied girl in front of him. "Hey, hey, hey, what's the big idea?!" He pointed to the skewer of meat she had in her hand, and then at the flashy shirt he wore over his muscular body. "Look! Ya got sauce on my shirt!"

"Yeah!" the skinny parrot avian next to him sneered. "That was Monshu's favorite shirt!"

"That's his favorite shirt!" added the man to his other side. "Oh, I guess Tian already said that." He wore a tattered swimsuit that looked like it might be old work clothes, revealing sword wounds covering his body. He squared up his shoulders in anger. "You'd better pay him back. Isn't that right, you two?!"

The parrot man whose shirt had been soiled—Monshu—leaned in even closer along with his companions Tian and Balto.

“Go away,” the girl snapped. In a sharp motion, she raised her right arm.

◇ ◇ ◇

Loplanz in his baggy swim trunks was running up to the stall when he saw Wyne come out from behind the side of one of the others. “Oh! There you are!” he said, and sighed in relief tinged with anger. Wyne, who was stuffing her face with a big skewer of meat, looked over at the sound of his voice. Loplanz ran over and took her hand. “You shouldn’t wander off like that! This place is shady at the best of times. There’s this guy, Monshu. He’s part of the Rama-Dhoka Conglomerate. He wanders around looking for girls to con out of their money!”

Loplanz followed after Wyne as she walked on, unconcerned. Still with her hand held tight in his, she began moving towards a nearby stall. “I’m not scared of loser punks,” she said as she led him on. “I’m hungry.”

The stall that was Wyne’s target had a sign labeled “Yackey Soba.” It seemed to be busy with customers. Loplanz clutched Wyne’s arm tight, but she dragged him along with surprising strength for her slight figure. They were getting closer and closer.

“Okay!” Loplanz shouted, giving up on holding Wyne back. “Okay, okay! I’ll buy you some yackey soba noodles! But once I do, we’re heading back to find the others!”

Wyne stopped dead in her tracks. “Jumbo size?” she asked.

“Sure, I’ll buy you the jumbo!”

Wyne hesitated. “All right then,” she said, and nodded. Then, skipping cheerfully, she made her way to the stall. Loplanz kneaded his temples.

“That girl...” Loplanz muttered. “How come I gotta be the one to look after her...?” He took his wallet out of his baggy trunks as he spoke. “Well,” he said, “it’s not like Countess Van Biel ordered me to do this or anything...”

Suddenly, Wyne smiled and pressed up close to him, nuzzling affectionately. “I love you,” she said. “You give me food and everything...”

As small as Wyne was, her chest was quite large. She was wearing a swimsuit meant for a child, so the top was straining to the point of absurdity to keep her

breasts in check. Loplanz looked over, noticing both Wyne's happy smile and her enormous breasts, and blushed scarlet. His head was spinning. He opened his mouth but no words came out. *N-No!* he chided himself. *I can't look at Wyne that way! I already have a special someone—Countess Van Biel!*

Wyne pulled Loplanz along by his arm. "Come on!" she said. "I want the jumbo noodles!" Her breasts—incongruously large on her childlike body—were pressing up against Loplanz's arm. The sensation seemed to make the young boy grow redder and redder.

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While Wyne and Loplanz were having their little tiff, the sound of men moaning in pain came from behind the side of the stall from which Wyne had emerged. "M-Monshu... A-Are you all right?"

"N-Not really, no." Monshu was lying next to Tian and Balto. They were sprawled out in a heap on the sand, their bodies contorted into unnatural positions. The girl they had tried to con had suddenly sent them flying. It was completely hopeless—there was nothing they could have done against her.

"She beat *me* of all people," Monshu muttered. "I can't believe how strong that girl is..." He tried to pull himself to his feet, but the sharp pain in his limbs had other ideas. Next to him, he could see Balto buried two-thirds of the way in the sand, not moving.

"A-Anyway," said Tian, "we should probably steer clear of that girl. Let's find someone weaker next time..."

"Y-Yeah..." Monshu and Tian gave each other a look and nodded. But the two showed no signs of getting up any time soon. They kept lying where they had fallen on the sand hill, their limbs twisted up in unbelievable shapes.

Those three had tried to run their scam on Wyne. Little did they know, that small girl was a dragonewt, the strongest demihuman type of all. Far from making a quick buck, the three had only managed to endanger their lives.

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"Thaaank yooou!" said the smiling woman who handed Loplanz and Wyne their two orders of jumbo yackey soba.

“How come we ended up getting two?!” Loplanz huffed.

“I love you, Loplanz...” Wyne said.

“Wh-What?! Stop saying that!”

The woman behind the stall watched the boy and girl go off together, deep in their conversation. She turned to smile happily at the man cooking noodles further back in the stall.

“Hero Gooold-Hair, those two were sooo cuuute! Do you thiiink they’re a coooouple?” The woman—who, of course, was Tsuya—was wearing an apron over her very high-cut one-piece swimsuit. It technically covered more of her skin than her usual outfits, but from the front it looked like she *might* be naked underneath. There was no end to the male customers who had really come to ogle her.

Moreover, every time she gave them her customary “thaaank yooou,’” she would bow deep, exposing her voluptuous cleavage for the world to see. The oglers ended up buying noodles again and again, hoping for another peek.

Hero Gold-Hair, who was on duty cooking the yackey soba, glanced over at her. “Never mind that!” he snapped. There’s another customer!”

“Oooh! There iiis!” Tsuya hurriedly turned back to the customer. “I’m sooorry for the waaait!” she said. She bowed before the procession of men in front of the stall.

“I swear, that girl couldn’t do *anything* without me,” Hero Gold-Hair muttered, glancing sidelong at her as he returned to his hot plate. “Well,” he said, “what she lacks in customer service, I more than make up for with my Hero Gold-Hair Special Yackey Soba! We’re making a killing with these!” He laughed loudly as he tossed a new handful of noodles onto the hot plate.

Why were Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya operating a food stall on the Calgosi Coast? Well, it turned out that the man who had approached them was Guchant, the president of the Calgosi Coast Vendors Association. He had entrusted them with one of the stalls managed by his conglomerate. That is to say, the man who was supposed to operate the stall had fled thanks to Captain

Eddsarch's Blackbeard Corsairs' most recent attack, leaving Guchant in a bit of a pickle. Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya had just so happened to be in the right place at the right time.

"Well!" said Guchant, who had come to inspect the stall. "Business certainly seems to be booming!" He looked at the long line of customers and then back to Hero Gold-Hair. "Not bad at all! Is this really your first time?"

Hero Gold-Hair laughed as he flipped the noodles on the hot plate with his metal spatula. "Ha ha ha! This is nothing! I'm the absolute best at absolutely everything!"

Guchant couldn't help but laugh himself. "Ha ha ha! Reliable young man, aren'tcha? Well, I made a promise, so I'll let you have all the proceeds except for the cost of the ingredients. It'll be a tidy sum!"

"Leave it to me!" Gold-Hair boasted. "I'll make this the best stall on the beach!" He kept on laughing as he worked the hot plate.

To think I just happened to run into these two! Guchant thought. *What a find!* He watched Hero Gold-Hair work with a proud smile on his face. "Well, just keep doing whatever you're doing!" he said.

"I won't let you down!" Hero Gold-Hair puffed his chest out proudly at Guchant's words, cheerfully wielding his spatula.

In the other part of the stall, Tsuya was handing the noodles off to the customers. "Tsuya!" Hero Gold-Hair shouted. "Make sure all the trash is together in one place! I'll deal with it later!"

"Okaaay!" Tsuya responded. "Gooot it!"

◇Meanwhile, on the Shore◇

"Incredible..." Balirossa stood in the shallows looking out towards the horizon, eyes wide in wonder. She was wearing a flower-patterned open-backed one-piece, standing between the two cliffs that stuck out over the water. Inside the bay it was calm, but near the cliffs it was full of tall, crashing waves. From time to time a spout of water would rise from the roiling sea. Balirossa watched on, captivated by the totality of the grandeur of nature.

Behind her, Uliminas was giving her a dirty look. Woman though she was, Uliminas couldn't tear her eyes away from Balirossa, standing tall with her elegant grace and gazing out at the open sea. She was unspeakably beautiful. Uliminas looked down at her own body, in her two-tone red and black bikini. She had a good chest and a slender figure—she was by every means a beauty herself. But it was Balirossa who had captured the eyes of the surrounding beachgoers. In the face of that reality, Uliminas found herself glaring spitefully. *Of course...* she thought. *Of course Ghozal would want her...*

Uliminas cast her mind back to what had happened the other day when she was keeping shop. Ghozal had suddenly held her and kissed her. "I don't know what I did to make you angry," he'd said, "but I love you and Balirossa just as much as each other. Are you unhappy with that?"

I don't buy for a meowment that he loves us just as much as each other... she thought, touching a finger to her lips as she recalled that day. *But...I was so happy to hear him say that...* She sighed.

"Are you happy about something, Uliminas?" Suddenly, Ghozal's voice came from behind her.

"Meow!" Caught off guard, the distinctive hellcat ears and tail Uliminas had hidden with magic sprouted back out from her body.

"Fool! What are you doing?!" Ghozal quickly draped his own parka over Uliminas's body to hide them. Demons under the banner of the Dark One were still at war with the humans, especially the people of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. If people found out that Uliminas was a demon, it was bound to cause a tremendous commotion. Uliminas's hellcat features stood out even among demons—it would be impossible to pass her off as a demihuman in her natural form.

Ghozal looked around after he placed the parka on Uliminas's shoulders. Nobody seemed to have noticed her transformation. Most of the beachgoers—men and women alike—had eyes only for Balirossa.

"Th-Thank mew..." Uliminas pulled the parka's hood up over her head and once again hid her ears and tail.

Ghozal placed a hand on her shoulder. "Hrm," he said. "Nothing came of it.

It’s no problem.” Then he swept her off her feet, holding her tight in his arms, bridal style.

“M-Mew?!” Uliminas was so shocked that her ears and tail almost popped out again, but this time she barely managed to suppress them. She clasped her hands over her mouth, blushing furiously.

Ghozal carried Uliminas and took her next to where Balirossa was standing. “Ser Balirossa,” he said, “what are you looking at?”

“Sir Ghozal!” Balirossa looked back at him. For a second, an ambiguously shocked expression crossed her face at the sight of Uliminas in Ghozal’s arms. “Oh,” she said, “I have only been admiring the waves.”

Ignoring the look on Balirossa’s face, Ghozal stepped to her side. “Hrm. The waves *are* incredible. Care to take a closer look?” He transferred Uliminas onto his left shoulder and picked Balirossa up, placing her on his right.

The sight caused quite a stir. It was only natural—Ghozal was carrying the two women on his shoulders as if it were nothing. And besides, everyone had already had their eyes fixed on Balirossa.

“Wha?!” a bystander exclaimed. “Holy—!”

“Is that man seriously carrying two girls at once?!” piped in another.

Ghozal noticed that he had become the center of attention. “Hrm...” he said. “That could be a problem...” He cast Concealment to suppress his presence, and the area suddenly quieted down. “Right,” he said. “Let’s go!” Casting another spell, he flew high up into the air.

“Waaah!” Balirossa exclaimed in surprise.

“Hey!” Uliminas protested. “Wait!”

“Ha ha ha ha ha! Hold on tight, you two!” Two horns sprouted from Ghozal’s head—the trait that marked him as demonic royalty, a member of the family of Dark Ones.

“What are you doing, you meworon?!” Uliminas shouted, grabbing tight to one of his horns. “I know meow’re using Concealment, but what if someown sees us! What if they realize meow’re part of the Dark Family!” *Gholl’s horns...*

she thought. *The Dark Meown's horns...* In recent days, Ghozal had been spending most of his time in human form. It wasn't that Uliminas *particularly* minded how that form looked, but she still had deep emotions attached to this body—the body of Gholl the Dark One, whom she had served for many, many years.

In the Dark Army, Ghozal and Uliminas had worked together as the Dark One and his confederate. Freeloading at Flio's house and living as humans had been their first taste of freedom.

"That Ghozal!" Uliminas sighed, turning to Balirossa. "He can be such a mewdiot, can't he, Balirossa?!"

"Ah?" Balirossa was briefly startled by Uliminas's voice, but then responded with a smile. "A-Ah! Y-Yes, you are quite right, Ser Uliminas." Uliminas smiled back. The two grinned happily at each other from their perches on Ghozal's shoulders.

"We're almost out of the bay, you two!" said Ghozal, flying on with his lovers perched on either shoulder.

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Blossom, who was wearing an orange bikini, cried out to the psychobear beside her. "Let's go, Sybe!"

"Gwowr!" Sybe, still wearing the well-used shorts he had borrowed from Polseidon, bellowed happily as the two dove into the water. The two were diving underwater by the cliff walls. It looked like they were searching for something.

Before long, they resurfaced together. Blossom was holding a number of clams in her right hand, while Sybe had an entire fish in its mouth. "Wow, Sybe!" said Blossom, grinning. "Not bad!" She turned to the psychobear and held out her arm. Sybe, the fish still in its mouth, linked his paw with her hand.

Byleri sat on the crags, watching the two with amazement. "Like, wow, you two!" she cried, giving them a one-woman round of applause. "There's totally no way I could ever catch something underwater like that, y'know?" Byleri was wearing a one-piece with a hoof-print pattern, over which she wore a parka and

a wide-brimmed white hat. She took the clams and fish Blossom and Sybe had caught and put them in her Bottomless Bag.

“Heh,” Blossom laughed, grinning brightly at Balirossa’s words and pridefully rubbing her finger under her nose. “It’s not so different from swimming in the river! Not hard at all!”

“Gwow! Gwow!” cried Sybe. It waved its right arm like it was saying, “I did good too!”

The two spent some time chatting with Byleri, before Blossom declared, “All right! Wanna go for another round?”

“Gworf!” Sybe answered, and the two dove back under the waves.

Rys was watching from the shallows a short distance away with an inner tube around her waist. Her cheeks were puffed out in a pout as Flio pulled her along with his hands. “They really are something, those two...” she muttered.

“Don’t worry, Rys,” said Flio, smirking in amusement. “You’ll learn how to swim in no time.”

Rys puffed her cheeks out even further. “I-I *know* how to swim!” she protested. “Just...not in *this* body...”

Rys was not lying. She had long been a champion swimmer, even able to swim under the waters of a lake. She had done battle with all sorts of aquatic magic beasts, more than she could properly count, and had never been outpaced in the water. However, that had all been achieved in her full-wolf form.

She had reached the beach full of enthusiasm. “My lord husband!” she had said. “Let’s go swimming!” And she had run straight for the sea, dragging her husband along, where she had sunk like a rock. “Gablubhblubhblub!” she had cried, floundering spectacularly.

Flio had rescued her, and now she was practicing with Flio so she could swim in her human form. “M-My lord husband...” she said, a mournfully apologetic look on her face. “I can practice swimming on my own... You should go enjoy the water with Blossom and the others...”

Flio gave Rys one of his typical easygoing smiles. “Don’t be silly, Rys!” he said, “I’m having a great time helping you practice!”

“My lord husband...” Rys looked up at him with tearful eyes, her cheeks turning a faint pink. “I am so...so happy to be your wife...” She sighed amorously before screwing her face back up in determination. “Then I must do my part! I shall repay your kindness and master the art of swimming within the hour!” She paddled on, kicking her legs with surprising force.

◇The Van Biels’ Rest Station◇

“Wh-What’s that?!” Polseidon stared wide-eyed in the direction of the cliffs where something had hit the water with an enormous splash. The water sprayed high up in the air, glittering in the sunlight.

“It’s beautiful...” Junia Van Biel’s eyes shone as she looked out at the sight. Junia, who was as frightened by crowds as ever, had hidden herself in a wooden crate and flown it over using the spell Levitation.

“Well!” said Rolindeim, grinning happily. “It’s a rare pleasure to see you out and about, Countess.” Rolindeim, despite her youthful appearance, had been passed from generation to generation of Van Biels along with Polseidon to serve as their familiars. Nothing gave them more joy than to see their master, who lived her life as a shut-in, enjoying the outdoors.

Rolindeim and Polseidon exchanged a look and cheerfully bumped their fists, while Junia continued to watch, enchanted, as the spray flew higher and higher into the air.

◇That Evening, on the Beach◇

It was beginning to get into the evening, but the Calgosi Coast was still full of people. A ways away, on a small hill, a group stood watching. At their head was a man with a black beard, lying low to stay out of the view of the people on the beach.

“Guh ha ha,” he laughed. “Look at those rats, having a good ol’ time down there...” His lips turned up in a wicked smirk. This was Captain Eddsarch, the head of the Blackbeard Corsairs. Behind him, his crew lay in wait. “Those reinforcements from Klyrode Castle may have destroyed our fortress and all our

ships," he said, "but even with nothing to our name, we'll attack and attack for as long as we live!"

"Um," said one of his crewmates, "C-Captain?"

"What?! What is it?!"

"Oh, um..." the man said. "I know you want us to attack, but...aren't those people from the morning still there? The ones from Klyrode Castle?" Behind him, every one of the crew was shaking with fear, reliving the trauma they had experienced just this morning. Just two of the fighters from Klyrode had crushed their trump card—the demon beasts—in the blink of an eye and destroyed over a hundred of their ships. When they'd returned to their fortress, they'd found it flattened by rampaging dragons, beasts, and wizards. None of them were eager to see a repeat of what had happened.

But Captain Eddsarch laughed again, and said, "That's *exactly* why we're going to attack!"

"What?!"

"Look!" Eddsarch explained. "They're having some kind of festival on the beach! We'll disguise ourselves as normal festivalgoers and go on a rampage! It's the perfect strategy! They'll have no way of telling friend from foe! We'll pilfer their money, and we'll kidnap the guest of honor: Junia Van Biel! Then we'll get out of there! Gah ha ha!"

"I... I see..." said the crewman who had approached him.

"Yeah!" said another. "That sounds like it might work!"

"Long live Captain Eddsarch!" The crew raised their voices in great cheer.

Captain Eddsarch grinned evilly at the adulation of his underlings. *Junia Van Biel...* he thought, a line of drool dribbling from the corner of his mouth, *this time I'll make off with you, and have you check in for good! Ohhh... I'll make you be a good girl for me...* He was staring at the tent they had set up in the middle of the beach where the festival's guest of honor was waiting. "Right!" he said. "Move out, you lot!"

"Aye, Captain!" The pirates waiting behind Captain Eddsarch sprung to their

feet at their captain’s orders.

Captain Eddsarch looked over his crew and drew his sword, pointing it ahead towards where the beachgoers made merry in their ignorance. “I’m coming, Calgosi!” he bellowed. “Wait for me, Junia! I’m coming to—” But that was as far as he got. Eddsarch hadn’t taken two steps before he fell into a pit trap someone had dug beneath his feet.

Cries of “Captain Eddsarch!” rang out, the others running up to the hole and shouting into it at the top of their lungs. But there was no response. Gradually, they grew silent. This was another unbelievable development.

Eventually, one of the crew spoke. “That... That must be them, right? Those crazy-strong folk from Klyrode Castle must have dug this trap...”

Silence fell again, even more total than the last time. Then... “I-I quit!” one of the pirates shrieked. He ran away, as fast as his legs could carry him.

As if on cue, the rest of the pirates started to flee as one. “Aaaaah!”

“Save us!”

“I’m so sorry!”

“I don’t want to be a pirate anymore!”

Shouting and panicking, the pirates ran away from the coast, into the forest.

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Some time later, a woman walked up the hill, alone. “I thooought I heard voooices...” she said. “Did I imaaagine it?” Trembling, she hid behind one of the trees, closely examining the hill. This was Tsuya, who was supposed to be helping operate the yackey soba stand. She sighed with relief once she was sure that there was nobody on the hill, and started to walk around, clearly looking for something.

“Leeet’s seee...” she said. “Where waaas it? I thooought it was around heeere. Oh! Here it iiis!” she walked up to a spot on the hill. “Theeere! The gaaarbage pit Hero Gooold-Hair made with his Drilldooozer Shovel!” She took out her Bottomless Bag and and retrieved the stockpile of trash she had accumulated. It was a huge quantity—not just the trash from their yackey soba

stall, but from all the surrounding stalls as well.

“With suuuch a biiig hole, we can fit aaaall the garbage we waaant!” Tsuya marveled. “Oooh, but if I’m not caaareful, I might fall iiin... That would be scaaary!” As she spoke, she tossed the trash into the pit. There was so much junk crammed in her Bottomless Bag that before long, the hole was completely full.

“Okaaay!” Tsuya said. “Baaack to wooork! Leeet’s sell looots and looots tonight!” She cheerfully raised an arm in the air, and skipped her way back to the row of stalls.

From the bottom of the hole came a voice. “Ohhh... J-Junia... You’re checking in...”

But nobody was there to hear.

◇The Shore◇

Today, on the beach, the people of Calgosi were celebrating the Calgosi Coast Festival, a once-a-year event. During the festival, shops from all over set up stalls all along the beach in tremendous numbers.

Flio and his companions walked along through the rows and rows of stalls. “Everyone at this festival is still in their swimsuits,” observed Rys.

“That’s right!” said Polseidon, who was at the head of the party. “Tonight, the sea will be lit up with magic lanterns. You can swim all through the night if you want! So everyone comes ready to swim.”

Belano was walking alongside them. She had finished her shift at the Houghtow College of Magic and joined up with the rest. Belano was wearing a sky-blue one-piece swimsuit that wrapped around her chest in an overlapping series of frills, but she had been squirming uncomfortably for a while now, embarrassed to be seen by the crowd of people they were walking past.

Flio noticed that Belano was squirming. “What’s wrong, Belano?” he asked. “Are you cold?”

Belano hurriedly shook her head and flailed her arms in evident distress. “N-

No! Th-That's not..."

Flio smirked wryly. "Are you embarrassed, then? Well, how about this..." As he spoke, he took off the hooded sweatshirt he had been wearing and put it on Belano.

Belano made a strange squeaking sound, her eyes going wide and her body freezing stiff. "F-Fweh?!"

Belano had come to see Flio as a surrogate for her father and brother, who had passed away. And mixed in with those feelings was a faint romantic attraction. When Flio himself draped a sweatshirt over her shoulders, her body temperature rose appreciably, and her face turned a brilliant red. "L-L-L-Lord Flio's sh-sh-sh-shirt..." she said in a strained falsetto, visibly shaking.

"Belano?" Flio looked at her with worried eyes. "Are you okay?"

"I-I-I-I-I'm o-o-o-okay..." she said, and hurried to the very tail of their procession at an all-out sprint.

Flio watched her go. "She doesn't *seem* okay..." he said, his voice full of concern.

"Oh," said Byleri, walking up to him. "I'll, like, check up on her? But like, whatever it is, it totally isn't your fault. You don't gotta worry, 'kay?" She gave him a salute.

"You think so?" Flio responded, smiling at her. "That's a relief, I guess. Thanks for looking out for her."

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At the back of the party, Belano put her arms through the sleeves of Flio's sweatshirt and walked on, clutching her arms, a satisfied look on her face. *Flio's shirt... I'm so happy...*

Rys, who had left the front to check on Belano, sighed deeply. *Well*, she told herself, *Belano's been having trouble with her work at the college, and she really is trying so hard. Perhaps I should let it slide*. Still, she was frowning discontentedly as she attached herself to Flio's arm.

"What's the matter, Rys?" Flio asked.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just want to walk like this for a while. Is that okay, my lord husband?”

“Of course!” said Flio. “It’s my pleasure!” He smiled indulgently at Rys’s childish behavior. Rys smiled happily and pressed herself even closer to his arm, which sank into the cleavage between her breasts. Flio blushed at the sensation. *It’s hardly my first time touching it*, he thought, *but Rys’s chest sure is something...*

Flio’s reaction did not escape Rys’s notice. She pressed herself up closer, rubbing her chest against him. “R-Rys?!” Flio exclaimed.

“May we not do such things from time to time, my lord husband?” Rys said, looking cheerfully up at her husband’s bashful expression. Flio found himself powerless to protest before Rys’s smile. *Hee hee,* Rys giggled to herself as she clutched Flio’s arm, *it makes me so happy that I can make him blush...*

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Blossom marveled at the spectacle of Wyne eating her indiscriminate way through the food stalls, apparently determined to consume every bit of food there was. “You really do eat *everything*, don’tcha!” she said.

Polseidon had planned on showing Blossom and Sybe through the food stalls so that all three of them could eat their fill, but Wyne, drawn by the delicious scent, had muscled her way into the party and took the lead. She was buying everything, as if there was something she was looking for.

“Ha ha ha! Well, nothin’ wrong with that! A big appetite is a sign of health, you know!” Polseidon laughed heartily, overjoyed at the sight of Wyne stuffing the skewered meat into her face. Polseidon himself was in very high spirits, with a skewer in one hand and a bottle of liquor in the other.

There was another reason Polseidon was so happy, beyond pure drunkenness. “Hey gramps!” said Blossom, laughing cheerfully with her arm wrapped around his. “You handle your liquor pretty well, don’tcha! I think I’m gonna have another drink myself!” Positioned as she was, Polseidon found himself pressed up close to her generous bosom.

Ahh, the chest of a young lady, Polseidon thought. *Bigger really is better!* He

worked his long white beard with his other hand, a lovestruck expression on his face.

“Bottoms up, gramps!” Blossom said.

“Ottoms bup!” Polseidon responded, and the two drained their glasses in one go, laughing loudly.

Rolindeim and Sybe were giving the pair the side-eye. “Oh, that lecherous old man really gets to me sometimes...right?” said Rolindeim.

“Gwow!” Sybe responded, nodding affirmatively.

“We aren’t *going out* or anything,” Rolindeim continued, rolling her eyes, “but I still hate seeing him ignoring me and putting the moves on other women. We’ve been together for so long, right?”

Sybe nodded and nodded. It seemed to be saying, “I can’t stand it either.”

Rolindeim and Sybe scornfully watched Polseidon and Blossom carry on laughing joyfully, Polseidon’s face as dopey as can be. Suddenly, Wyne popped up in front of them, blocking their field of vision. She held out her hand. “I’m out of money...” she said.

The House Van Biel had promised to pay the entire bill for today’s excursion. Flio, who knew full well the capacity of Wyne’s appetite, had tried to discourage them, but Junia had insisted. “A-A-A-A-At least... A-At least l-l-l-l-let me do th-this much...” In the end, Flio had relented before her dogged perseverance. Junia had given Rolindeim a great sum of money to pay for anything their guests wanted. Rolindeim served as the treasurer for House Van Biel, so that decision was only natural.

“Oh, okay! Money, right?” Rolindeim said, taking out the Bottomless Bag where the money was stored. “Gimme just a second,” she said, when suddenly she seemed to have an idea. She snickered fiendishly. “Heh heh... Actually, hold on.” Rolindeim’s body transformed into something like a shadow, and she moved under everyone’s feet until she came up behind Polseidon. Rolindeim was a demihuman—a black panther demihuman—with the ability to transform her body into anything she liked. She was skilled enough even to turn into something like a shadow.

When she reached Polseidon, her right hand—and just her right hand—materialized and swiped Polseidon's satchel. Polseidon and Blossom, who now had their arms draped over each other's shoulders, never even noticed.

Rolindeim reappeared in front of Wyne, in an evidently good mood. She took some money out of Polseidon's satchel. "Here you go," she snickered.

"Oh, Wyne!" Polseidon shouted, still blissfully ignorant of the theft. "Get me another one of those skewers, will you?"

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Later on, the sun had set, and everyone was beginning to feel a little chilly with their skin exposed. They changed back into their everyday clothes and reconvened at Rolindeim's location. "I suppose it's about time to head back to the mansion, right?" she said, and led them back.

"The festival isn't over, is it?" Flio asked, looking out at the rows of food stalls still on the beach.

"The festival goes until tomorrow morning, but the mansion roof is where you wanna be for the next event, right?" Rolindeim snickered.

"Then," said Ghozal, "when this event is over, we head back to the stalls?"

"Something like that, right?" She smiled deviously.

"Hrm," Ghozal said, glancing at Rolindeim. "Then let's see what this event is." He found a chair and plopped himself down. Uliminas and Balirossa sat in chairs to his left and right. After a moment passed, the two shared a look and took one of Ghozal's arms in near-perfect unison.

"Ser Uliminas," said Balirossa, "I believe that you and I have the makings of good friends."

"Yeah." Uliminas nodded. "I agree."

"However," Balirossa went on, "*that* is a separate matter entirely..."

"No, no," said Uliminas. "I agree about *that* too."

The two nodded to each other. "That being said," continued Balirossa, "for today, at least..."

Uliminas sighed. “So...a mewce?” The two held Ghozal’s arms tighter.

Ghozal looked between the two, confused. “Hey, Uliminas! Balirossa! What in the hells are you talking about? What do you agree on? What truce?”

Balirossa and Uliminas looked up at him, smiling rather darkly. “Sir Ghozal, I wish you would give it some thought yourself,” said Balirossa.

“Yeah!” Uliminas agreed. “Mew need to do *meowr* share of worrying!”

Rys smirked as she watched the three. “Poor Uliminas and Balirossa,” she said.

Beside her, Flio made a wry face. “They’ve been like this the whole time we were at the stalls,” he said. “No wonder Mister Ghozal didn’t get enough food. Well, I suppose he brought it on himself.”

Rys pressed herself up close. “I am truly grateful that you are my husband,” she said, pressing her face up against Flio’s chest.

Flio held her close. “Me too.”

One by one, Flio’s household filtered up onto the roof—Blossom, Belano, Byleri, Wyne, and Sybe. They were joined by Junia Van Biel’s two familiars, Polseidon and Rolindeim. Still devouring a roast skewer she had bought from one of the stalls, Wyne took a look around the area. “Where’s the bird brat?” she asked.

“Oh, Loplanz?” Rolindeim asked. “I guess he tired himself out. He’s been sleeping since the early evening, right?”

Wyne looked a little disappointed, but kept munching on her skewer. “He’s a pain in the butt,” she muttered, “but it’s boring without him around...”

Wyne made her way to the rest of the group. They were sitting with Blossom at the front on the seats in the middle of the roof, drinking the liquor Polseidon had bought for them.

“Oh, speaking of, where did Hiya and Damalynas get off to?” Blossom asked, draining her cup in one go.

Next to her, Byleri raised her hand. “Oh! They, like, went back home? They said they were gonna train and, like, look after the house.”

“Oh?” said Blossom. “Those two are always training, aren’t they? I wonder what kinda training they do. You got any idea, Byleri?”

“Huh?!” Byleri hadn’t been prepared for that question. She spilled her drink.

Hiya, who had mastered the magic of light and darkness to the utmost degree, had made up their mind to seek knowledge of the one area of which she knew nothing—sexual intercourse. Hiya could manifest whatever sex organs they pleased, so they were quite satisfied with Damalynas as a partner.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Who knows!” Byleri squeaked, her face beet red, “I-I-I, like, t-totally have no idea!”

Blossom cocked her neck. “Well, no helping it if ya don’t know, I guess. Anyway! Have a drink!”

“Y-Y-Y-Yeah!” Byleri stuttered, laughing unnaturally as Blossom poured her a glass. “Let’s totally have a drink!”

Behind those two, Sybe was lying on its back, fast asleep. Sybe often fell asleep early on in the night, and it appeared to have done so again. Belano was curled up in a ball on top of its belly.

Belano had almost no ability to hold her liquor. When they were wandering the stalls, Polseidon had pressured her into it, saying, “What, you’re not gonna drink?” She’d succumbed to his influence and took a single glass, which was enough to make her staggeringly drunk. Now she was passed out stone-cold.

Still, she looked happy and relaxed—a far cry from her usual painfully anxious self. She was all curled up, grasping at the sweatshirt she was wearing. It was the one Flio had given her. “Zzz... Lord Flio...” she murmured in her sleep.

Flio’s friends all passed the time in their own ways until Rolindeim suddenly raised her voice. “It looks like it’s about to start, right?” she said. As she spoke, Junia Van Biel emerged from the tent directly in front of the mansion. She wore a large hood, perhaps to block the sight of the crowds out of her peripheral vision. Either way, it meant that the people to her left and right couldn’t make out her face. In her hand was a crystal scepter.

She held her scepter up to the heavens, and a great array of lights shot into the night sky. More and more of the lights came. They grew larger and larger as

they soared up high. It looked like a meteor shower.

Rys's eyes were shining as she watched. "Beautiful..." she said, pressing her body up against Flio's and breathing passionately.

"This is Countess Van Biel's Magicworks," said Rolindeim, still smirking.

"Magicworks?" asked Rys.

"Yeah," said Rolindeim. "It's a spell that sends countless lights up into the sky. The countess specializes in light magic, right?"

Polseidon gave a single nod. "This yearly Magicworks show really gets everyone's spirits up," he said. "Everybody who sees it ends up wanting to see it the next year too." Rolindeim nodded in agreement.

As Rolindeim and Polseidon spoke, Flio looked up at the light-filled night sky. Junia's Magicworks were truly spectacular. Everyone down below had stopped moving to watch the display. It was a beautiful sight shared by everyone on the Calgosi Coast.

"My lord husband..." Rys said, her eyes still shining as she pressed closer against Flio's chest. "It's gorgeous..." Flio wrapped an arm gently around her shoulder. The two passed a tender moment close together, watching the Magicworks along with everyone else captivated by Junia's artistry.



◇Some Time Later, near the Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

It was late into the night. Even the bars in Houghtow City had closed for the day, and the whole town was sleeping quietly. In the silence, a group moved quickly down the end of a road, taking care not to make a sound with their footfalls.

Running at their head was the demon fox Kintsuno the Gold, her alluring figure hidden under a black cloak. "Are we certain the information is correct?"

"It is," yipped her sister Gintsuno the Silver. "One of our spies snuck inside while disguised as a customer. Those *pests* are away at the Calgosi Coast." Kintsuno nodded, and the foxes ran on, even faster than before. They were headed for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

Kintsuno grinned triumphantly as the building came into view. "Just wait!" she yipped. "We shall pay them back for all they have done to us!" To the demon fox sisters, the Fli-o'-Rys General Store was nothing short of their archnemesis.

They had teamed up with the Shadow King in his schemes—stealing goods from all over to resell, as well as disguising inferior items as high quality in an attempt to make a killing. However, ever since those Magic Sensors were introduced to stores everywhere, they had been unable to sell their ill-gotten goods. The Magic Sensor could identify stolen items on the spot, and would instantly see through any illusion. Whenever they tried to sell their items, they would be found out instantly and end up in a sticky situation, being chased around by the guards.

The demon fox sisters had learned that the Fli-o'-Rys General Store was the source of the Magic Sensors. They had planned to attack the store earlier, but when they saw Ghozal and Flio in the store itself, they called it off. After running afoul of the two of them in the past, they'd learned they were no match for them. All they could do was grit their teeth and wait for an opportunity.

Suddenly, they had received a report from one of their underlings who was casing out the store: "Flio, Ghozal, and the other major figures have left for the Calgosi Coast." The demon fox sisters wasted no time in putting their plan of

attack into motion. They hid in the shadows, scouting the area with the spell Remote Sensor.

“We’re in the clear,” Kintsuno said. “It’s empty.”

Gintsuno faced the underlings, signaling them with her right hand. They flooded into the building, careful not to make a sound, each carrying a magibomb held tight in their hands. These were magic weapons—round balls containing an explosive magic gem and a number of fire elemental gems. When the user uttered the proper incantation, the explosive gem would detonate, causing the fire gems to burst and engulf the area in a sea of flames.

The demon fox sisters hid from view and waited for their underlings to return, hardly even daring to breathe. It wasn’t long before they came back out, dressed in their black cloaks, and hurried to the sisters.

“Is everything ready?” Kintsuno asked. The figure at the head of the group nodded. Kintsuno began to snicker, relishing her cleverness. “Then this is the end of that detestable store. Oh, just *imagine* the idiotic faces they’ll make when they see what happened while they were out!”

“Our ancient grudge will be avenged!” Gintsuno yipped, nodding fervently.

Kintsuno pointed forward and began the incantation.

Thump. Just then, Kintsuno heard the sound of something landing at their feet. She quizzically yipped, then looked down to see a great pile of magibombs—the bombs her minions had carried into the store. “Y-Yip?!”

“Yip yip!” shrieked Gintsuno.

Kintsuno stopped the incantation as fast as she could, but some of the magibombs had already started to ignite, sparking and crackling. The sisters began to flee, but they only made it a few steps before they ran into some hard obstacle. They could go no further. Panicked, the sisters looked all around. Then they noticed the solid magic wall surrounding them. On the other side of the barrier were their underlings.

Kintsuno was frantic. “H-Hey! Get us out of here! Now!”

“I’ll kill you myself if you don’t stop messing around!” shouted Gintsuno.

In response, the figures took off their black cloaks. “I am not yours to command,” said one. “I am Greanyl, chief supply officer of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, and these are my subordinates. If you are looking for your minions, they are in our care.”

“What?!” cried Kintsuno.

“What did you say?!” cried Gintsuno.

The sisters were at a loss for words. Suddenly, they understood everything. The store had seen their attack coming. They had captured their minions, and they had imprisoned the fox sisters inside a magic barrier with no way to escape.

Kintsuno and Gintsuno turned their heads back to look at the pile of magibombs, which seemed to have gone into a chain reaction. They closed their eyes tight as the inside of the barrier exploded in a cataclysm of fire.

Greanyl watched as the space became a sea of crimson flame.

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Greanyl dispelled the barrier that had been erected to contain the explosion and went to check the area. *Lady Uliminas is incredible*, *though,* she mused. *How did she know they were going to attack?*

Before Uliminas left for Calgosi, she had given instructions to Greanyl. “Finally,” she had concluded, “it seems like some of the demon fox sisters’ mewnions have been skulking around the shop. There’s a high purrobability that they’ll attack when they learn Flio and Ghozal are out of town, so keep watch.” Greanyl followed her orders dutifully, setting up round-the-clock security around the perimeter of the general store. She and her subordinates left the shop empty, hiding on rooftops or in other stores nearby. It had been child’s play to apprehend the fox sisters’ minions when they came to attack, thinking the shop to be unguarded. And now the foxes had gotten a taste of their own magibombs.

Greanyl stopped in her tracks when she reached the area of the explosion. There was a long tunnel leading underground. She cast Search, and saw that the foxes, along with some magibombs, were deep within. She clicked her tongue.

“Tch. Some of you, come with me! The foxes survived! I’m in pursuit!”

“Ser!”

Greanyl and a number of her subordinates—the Silent Listeners, the former spy corps of the Dark Army—jumped down into the hole.



◇The Following Morning, in Front of the Van Biel Mansion◇

Flio's friends had stayed the night at Junia Van Biel's mansion, and had breakfast together with the household the next day before heading out. They gathered in front of the entrance, where Junia said a few words.

"Sincerely...from the...bottom of my...heart..." she started, "I...thank you...for...coming to our aid..." She was as awkward as ever, but she had finally succeeded in delivering a proper sentence. She bowed deeply. Behind her stood her three familiars—Loplanz, Rolindeim, and Polseidon—as well as three girls that Flio did not recognize.

Seeing the curious look Flio was giving the girls, Rolindeim smirked. "Oh! They're the demon beast girls who were working for the Blackbeard Corsairs, right?"

At those words, the girls stepped forward and bowed deeply. "I am the giant squid demon beast Squidra, tent tentacle!"

"I am the giant turtle demon beast Turtra, turt turt!"

"I am the giant shrimp demon beast Shrimpdra, shrimpy-py-py-py!"

"These girls said they had a change of heart after being defeated by the Wolf Warriors, right?" Rolindeim explained, smirking even wider. "They're gonna be working for House Van Biel from now on."

"I'm glad to hear it," Flio said, stepping forward to shake the demon beast girls' hands. "You girls do your best for the people of Calgosi, okay?"

As Flio was introducing himself to the girls, Polseidon came up to him, fidgeting nervously. He whispered in Flio's ear. "H-Hey, Mister Flio," he said, "sorry to bother you with something like this, but have you seen my satchel?"

"Your satchel?" Flio asked.

"Yeah... My cloth satchel. I was wearing it on my belt yesterday, but now I can't find it anywhere. Since we were together the whole time, I thought someone in your group might have seen something..." Polseidon's voice was filled with shame.

"I see..." said Flio. "I'm afraid I haven't heard anything about a satchel, but..."

Flio confidently raised his hand and cast the spell Search. As he did, Rolindeim, who stood behind Polseidon, moved her hand so that only Flio could see. In her hand, she held a satchel. *Hm?* Flio wondered. *Is that...?* He cleared his throat. “I’m sure it’ll turn up before long,” he said. “*Someone’s* bound to find it...”

“You think so?” Polseidon whispered. “That would be a relief...”

Polseidon headed back to where he was standing earlier, and Flio turned his attention to Rolindeim. *Make sure you give it back later*, he said telepathically. Rolindeim grimaced and nodded.

Before long, it was time for Flio and his companions to create a portal and head back to their house in Houghtow City. Right before it was Wyne’s turn to step through, however, Loplanz called out, “H-H-Hey, wait!”

Wyne stepped up to Loplanz, a curious expression on her face and a rice ball from today’s breakfast in her hand. “Whatcha want, sleepyhead?”

Loplanz turned red. “*Sleepy*— Look, I can’t help it, I’m a growing boy!” he retorted. He couldn’t really argue. It was true that he’d dozed off early and missed almost the entire festival yesterday.

“If you wanna talk, you should come visit again,” Wyne said. “Any time I don’t have work is fine...” She gently took his hand and shook it.

“Huh? Oh...” Loplanz was taken aback, too surprised to shake Wyne’s hand properly. By the time he recovered, Wyne was already through the door. Loplanz watched her go, dumbfounded.

“I believe Wyne is saying that she would like to play with you again sometime,” said Rys, smiling warmly as she walked up to Loplanz.

“Huh? I-I... Okay...” Loplanz said, hanging his head.

Flio, who had been watching the scene unfold, turned towards the hosts. He gave them an easygoing smile. “You are all very welcome too, if you ever have the chance to visit Houghtow City. I left you a Conversation Gem, so just give us a call and we’ll create a portal for you! I would love to show you around town.”

Junia stepped forward and bowed. “Um... I-I would l-like to...talk

about...magic again...sometime...”

“Of course!” said Flio, still smiling. “Our household has a lot of people who are into magic! There’s Hiya and Damalynas, and even Mister Ghozal. We’d all love to talk shop with you.”

Junia smiled happily and bowed again and again as Flio and his companions departed for home.

Epilogue

◇Flio’s House—Flio and Rys’s Bedroom◇

Rys sat in front of the table mirror on the dresser, doing her hair like always, when Flio entered the bedroom. “Rys,” he said, “do you have a moment?”

Rys put the brush down and turned to face her husband, smiling happily. “Yes, what is it?”

Flio stepped up and placed a single magic gem on top of the dresser. It was mounted firmly on a small pedestal and was about the size of a fist.

“My lord husband,” Rys said, regarding the gem with a curious expression. “What is—”

Flio raised his arm and a magic circle appeared. The gem began to shine, projecting lights which glinted and sparkled. “Oh?” said Rys, her eyes shining as well. “Could this be...?”

“Yeah!” said Flio, as chill and easygoing as ever. “I tried making my own version of Miss Junia’s Magicworks. What do you think?” This was the same magic Junia had used the other day at the climax of the Calgosi Coast Festival to send lights into the night sky. These lights were much smaller, but they were every bit as brilliant.

Rys hurried to turn off the magic lanterns that lit the room, leaving it illuminated only by the miniature Magicworks. “My lord husband,” she said, cuddling close, “this is splendid...” Her eyes were starting to mist up.

Flio gently wrapped his arms around her. “Rys... The demons and humans of this world are still at war, but I am sure the day is coming when we can learn to get along with one another. Just like you and I have gotten so close.”

Rys nodded. “Yes... If anyone can do it, it would be you...” But Flio shook his head. “My lord husband?” she asked, puzzled.

Flio held her in a kind embrace. “I can’t do it on my own,” he said. “I’m going

to need everyone's help to end the war. Rys, can I count on your support?"

"Of course!" she answered without a moment's hesitation. "If it were for you, my lord husband, I would offer my life its—" Flio cut her off, kissing her on the lips. Rys closed her eyes. The touch of Flio's lips was so gentle, so warm. Rys allowed herself to give in to the sensation.

Flio pulled back from the kiss and held Rys in his arms. "I wish you wouldn't talk about offering your life," he said. "I need you, Rys. I need you to stay with me."

"My lord husband..." Rys wrapped her own arms around Flio. "Don't worry," she said. "Wherever you go, I shall follow. I will always stay by your side."

"Rys... Thank you." Flio pulled Rys into another kiss, which he held for a long time, as Rys clung to him. The two lay back on the bed under the gentle light of the Magicworks.

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Flio awoke the next day to the rays of the morning sun peeking through the curtains. Next to him, Rys was sound asleep, a smile on her face. The room was unlit. It seemed that the Magicworks display had ended. As Flio was thinking, Rys noticed that her husband had awakened and roused herself.

"Good morning, my lord husband," she said, pressing her cheek close to Flio's chest. The two lay in each other's arms tangled in the blankets for some time.

"Oh," said Rys, "you have a delivery to Klyrode Castle to make today, don't you, my love?"

"That's right. I'd like you and Balirossa to come along... Wyne too."

Rys smiled mirthfully. "Of course," she said. "If we left Wyne alone in the house, we would return to find all of Blossom's vegetables devoured like a plague of locusts got to them."

Flio smirked knowingly and nodded his head. "Yes, exactly. Also, it seems like your lembon cakes are quite the hot item in the castle. They put in another big order for them."

Rys leaned over onto Flio's chest. "You know, my lord husband..." she said.

“Cakes aren’t exactly what I was hoping to make with those lembons...” She started blushing shyly as she spoke. “I await the day we can put them to their proper use...”

Rys had bought a vast quantity of lembons because she was worried that she might crave sour foods when she became pregnant. Flio, of course, was fully aware of what was on her mind. “Yeah,” he said, turning a little red himself. “I’ll do my best to make it happen.”

Wordlessly, Rys leaned in even closer. For a while, the two held each other quietly as the Magicworks gem on the dresser twinkled in the morning light. It was going to be another busy day.

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 3

◇The Gates of the Dark Citadel◇

"Excuse me, are you the damn gate guards?"

"Wha—" The golem soldiers standing guard at the gates turned to look at the woman who had addressed them. She looked young, and was wearing a black-and-white gothic lolita-style dress with a large matching ribbon in her hair. She was carrying a great scythe.

The girl thrust the blade of the scythe against one of the golem's necks. "Is this the damn Dark Citadel?" she asked. "You may address me as Lady Belianna, the devil. I've come to meet with the damn Dark One. Would you show me the damn way?"

The golems' tempers rose at this strange girl's behavior.

"A-A devil!" one cried.

"Are you with Zanzibar?!" demanded another.

It had not been long since the devils—the single strongest faction of demons—had publicly declared war on Yuigarde, the current head of the Dark Army. They had failed in their plot to take the Dark Citadel and were now encamped far to the west, where they were building their strength. It was only natural the golems would be on guard. More and more of them were gathering around to see what was happening.

"Yes, yes," Belianna said, "I understand. I shouldn't have shown off my weapon to damn weaklings like you. That was my bad. Here." Belianna thrust her scythe into the ground and held up her hands to show that she was now unarmed.

The golems began whispering to each other, uncertain what to do.

◇Later, in the Throne Room◇

Yuigarde looked down at the devil girl his golems had brought before him.

“You’re the devil who wanted to see me?” he asked.

Belianna curtsied formally. “I offer you my damn thanks for granting me this audience,” she said. She looked up to face Yuigarde, regarding him with brilliant red eyes that contrasted with her pale skin. She seemed to be appraising him. “Hmm,” she said. “You’re quite the damn figure.”

“And?” Yuigarde snapped. “Whaddaya want.” He kept his eyes on her, not letting his guard drop.

Belianna broke into a happy smile. “Hee hee hee,” she laughed. “As you are damn aware, most of us devils have joined forces with the damn rebel army of the damn aristocrat Zanzibar. However, my family and I have been considering a damn alliance with the Dark One Yuigarde. That is why I came to damn meet you.” Belianna held up her hand. “Might you grant me a damn Demon Ring?” she asked. “I am the head of a lesser noble family, with 108 fighters in my service.”

Demon Rings were granted to those who swore allegiance to the Dark One. It was deeply shameful to betray the Dark One while in possession of a Demon Ring. Under demonic law, such a traitor would be banished not just from the Dark Army, but from all of demon society. Furthermore, if one were to return a Demon Ring after it had been granted, they could never return to the Dark Army, and demons everywhere would regard them with scorn.

The Dark One Yuigarde raised an eyebrow. “What exactly are you trying to do here?”

“If you must know, I suppose I am here because of my damn ambition.”

“Your ambition?”

“Yes...” Belianna looked to her side, where the Infernal Four stood—except for Sleip, who was off fighting his war of attrition against the human forces. She gave Calsi’im, who was sitting on his knees atop his handkerchief, a searching glance. “My Lord Dark One,” she said, “I have heard that you are a damn generous man who will promote his underlings into the Infernal Four for their damn achievements, even if they’re old and falling apart. You judge solely on results—that is precisely the kind of damn lord I would like to serve.”

Belianna's lips curled up into a smile as she continued on. "Devils place an undue importance on damn seniority and social class. There is no way for someone from a lesser noble family like myself to advance. The rebellion is organized the same damn way. The underlings do all the damn work and the high-ranking nobles get all the damn merit. Is that any way to motivate an army?"

"Right, I get it." Yuigarde shot up from his throne. "Belianna! You and your family are welcome in the Dark Army! Phufun, prepare their Demon Rings immediately!"

"Yes, Master," Phufun said. "However, do you really think it is safe to trust them? We cannot deny the possibility that they may be Zanzibar's spies."

"Idiot!" Yuigarde bellowed. "Who cares?! I *told* you she's welcome already! Don't keep her waiting!"

"Y-Yes, Master!" Phufun, the subject of the Dark One's anger, rushed out of the throne room.

Belianna smiled as she watched. "I knew it," she said. "My Lord Dark One, you are exactly the sort of liege I wish to damn serve."

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As Yuigarde raised his voice in loud laughter, Yorminyt turned to look at the skeleton Calsi'im, sitting on the floor beside her. *Was thisss hisss plan?* she wondered. *Did he asssk to be made an Infernal to demonssstrate that in the current Dark Army, even a worn out ssskeleton like him can be promoted for hisss achievements? Did he ssset it up on purpossse to lure dissssatisssfied rebelsss to our ssside?*

"Oh!" Calsi'im exclaimed, showing no sign that he knew what Yorminyt was thinking. "What delicious tea!" He took another sip.

However, Belianna was the first of many. A great number of rebels began expressing their desire to serve the Dark Army. When asked why, they would say it was because of an old skeleton like Calsi'im being made an Infernal on the merit of his achievements alone. The difficulties the Dark Army'd had in finding recruits were over. More and more hopefuls came, entirely of their own

volition.

And all the while, Calsi'im—member of the Infernal Four—would sit on his handkerchief at the back of the room.

◇West of the Dark Citadel—Zanzibar Palace◇

On the hill where the demon fox sisters' fortress once stood, a grand palace was under construction. Zanzibar, the highest ranking of all devil nobility, had ordered it built to serve both as his own extravagant living quarters and a base for the rebellion. It was based on the blueprint of the Dark Citadel and even featured a replica of its throne room—a statement that Zanzibar was a figure of at least as much prestige as the Dark One, if not more.

Zanzibar sat in that very throne room, grumbling in irritation. "Why is this happening?" he said. "Why are the low-ranking devils all abandoning us for the Dark Army?"

Meiden, who was standing by his side, screwed up her face and stepped forward. "I-It pains me to say it, Master, but it is because of the news that an old skeleton was made an Infernal," she said. "Many have taken it to mean that the Dark Army will promote them based on their merit."

Zanzibar clicked his tongue. "Damn that Yuigarde," he said bitterly. "It *is* true that we devils organize ourselves by seniority. Lower-ranking devils and other races have little chance of promotion. Don't tell me that amoeba-brained Dark One had a good idea for once, promoting that skeleton..." He struck the armrest of his throne several times in anger. Cold sweat was running down his brow. W*e should start promoting our forces based on merit as well*, he thought. *But the higher-ranking devil nobles joined me in the first place in order to preserve their social positions. I'd risk losing their support entirely. But we can't keep letting the Dark Army take our ambitious low-ranking soldiers...*

Both he and Meiden sat there, thinking furiously over how to resolve the issue, but in the end it was nothing but a waste of time.

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The rebellion, which had once boasted a force capable of outmatching the Dark Army, dwindled in the blink of an eye as more and more of its members

deserted. Zanzibar, their leader, was left with no choice but to go on the defensive and shut himself away in his palace.

The Dark Army, on the other hand, had gained a great deal of military force from this incident, but was still not nearly strong enough to fight both the rebellion and the army of Klyrode. If they didn't handle the rebels properly, it would weaken their position against Klyrode—and if they *did* attack Klyrode, it would leave them open to the rebellion.

They set up an encampment outside of Zanzibar Palace and did their best to keep the situation in a deadlock. Demonkind was entering a cold war between the Dark Army of the Dark One Yuigarde and Zanzibar's rebellion. And while Yuigarde focused his attention on crushing the rebellion, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and all of humanity enjoyed a period of tranquility.

◇The Highway Near Calgosi Coast◇

A stagecoach made its way down the highway from Calgosi Coast leading to Klyrode Castle. Inside, among the other passengers, were Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya.

"Hero Gooold-Hair," Tsuya said. "Our festival staaall was a huuuge succeeess!"

"Indeed!" Gold-Hair agreed. "Thanks to that, we shouldn't have to worry about money for quite a while!" He laughed and patted the Bottomless Bag on his belt where he kept his money. Tsuya smiled and clapped her hands. "But you know," he continued, "I *could* have done a better job with that garbage pit."

"The one on top of the hiiill? You know, I diiid think it looked a little slapdash when I went to toooss the gaaarbage..."

"Exactly! I dug it in a hurry, but then I found I couldn't get out!" Hero Gold-Hair said, before adding, "Well, I was able to dig my way back up with my trusty Drilldozer Shovel, so I suppose nothing came of it..."

The Drilldozer Shovel was a legendary item once kept in the sanctuary of Klyrode Castle. With its power, you could dig deep holes in the blink of an eye. Hero Gold-Hair had taken it when he had fled the castle, and now he used it to

make pits for garbage and traps for hunting.

“Yeeeah!” Tsuya agreed. She had a big grin on her face as she clapped once again. Hero Gold-Hair puffed out his chest, happy to receive so much applause, as the stagecoach made its way down the road. It was still a long way to Klyrode Castle.

◇A Mountain Road◇

“How did *I* end up wrapped into this mess?!” Within his lavish coach, the Shadow King clicked his tongue. Before him were the demon fox sisters, singed black all over, their dark lustrous hair frizzy and burnt.

“W-We couldn’t help it!” protested Kintsuno the Gold.

“They’re just too stubborn!” added Gintsuno the Silver. Both of them were coughing rather badly.

The previous day, the sisters had launched an attack on the Fli-o’-Rys General Store only to be outmaneuvered and defeated by Greanyl, who was standing watch while Flio and his companions were away. Now they had the former Silent Listeners in relentless pursuit. At their wits end, and having exhausted all other options, they took refuge in the Shadow King’s underground base. All this did, however, was bring Greanyl’s team’s attention to the whereabouts of the Shadow King’s fortress, which they promptly and thoroughly wrecked.

“Hmph,” the Shadow King grumbled miserably. “We may be co-conspirators, but why would they come to me under those circumstances?! My base is in ruins thanks to you!”

Suddenly, the man driving the coach cried out. “Enemies incoming from the rear! It’s Greanyl and her team!”

“Eek!” yipped the sisters.

“Do something!” the Shadow King snapped.

“Target acquired.” Greanyl dashed through the forest, giving signals to her team with both hands as she came in sight of the coach. Her team, which had been running in formation behind her, split up at once and scattered into the surrounding area, moving to cut off the coach’s avenue of escape. “This time,

you won't get away." Greanyl withdrew two short blades, holding one in each hand. Weapons out, she ran ahead, fast as lightning. When the Shadow King and the demon fox sisters saw her through the window, they all blanched at the sight.

Some time later, Greanyl hissed as she picked through the wreckage of the carriage. "Gone again," she said. "How did they get away? Damn them..."

Once more, she took off running into the forest. The chase was on for a while longer, it seemed.

◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

"I see," the Maiden Queen said, breathing a sigh of relief. "Then the Fli-o'-Rys General Store is keeping your position well-supplied?"

MacTaulo, who had returned to the castle momentarily to report on the state of the war, smiled. "Yes, Your Majesty. Thanks to their regular shipments, I have no doubt that we will be able to defend our position indefinitely. However..."

"However?"

"For a civilian general store to employ multiple spellcasters capable of Teleportation magic, and those wolf-mask mercenaries... Honestly, I'd like to have them under my command if it were possible." MacTaulo laughed heartily, but his words were entirely serious.

MacTaulo had asked Flio many times when he came to make deliveries, "How about it? Care to come work for me? Name your price and you'll have it."

But Flio would always smile and gently refuse, saying, "We're nothing but merchants working for a normal general store."

"The Fli-o'-Rys General Store insists that they are assisting the Klyrode army as civilians," said the Maiden Queen, smiling. "It would not do to involve them in military affairs further than we already have."

The truth was, the Queen felt the same way MacTaulo did. She would like very much to make Flio the official Hero and work with him publicly. But Flio was stubborn. "My current lifestyle suits me better," he would say.

“MacTaulo,” the Maiden Queen continued, “I pray that you will continue in your efforts to protect our kingdom.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” MacTaulo said. “I am ever at your service.” He did an about-face and left the throne room.

I swear, the Queen thought, *I shall bring an end to this war as soon as I can*. She felt strangely irritable. She had been fingering something in her right pocket—the ring Flio had given her, set with the Conversation Gem. *Surely, with Lord Flio’s aid, it can be done*... She lowered her head in thought.

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

Today, as always, the goblins were up early in the morning, working diligently at the farm in front of Flio’s house. Once, there had been only two of them, but the goblin Maunty had brought his family here, bringing the number up to eighteen. Thanks to their efforts, the farm was getting bigger and bigger.

“Oh, you’re up bright and early!” Blossom arrived to find the goblins hard at work, Sybe following along.

Maunty’s family stopped working and ran up to her, all bowing their heads as one. “Good morning, Lady Blossom! Good morning, Esteemed Sybe! We are all happy to be of use to you!”

“Indeed,” said Hokh’hokton, the one goblin not related to Maunty. “Good morning, Lady Blossom.” He bowed as well.

Blossom gave the assembled goblins a big smile. “Hey, didn’t I tell you?” she said. “There’s no need to be so formal with me!”

“No, no, that would never do!” said Maunty.

“Maunty speaks true,” said Hokh’hokton. “It is by the grace of yourself, Lady Blossom—and Lord Flio—that we enjoy these days of peace.” The goblins bowed again.

Goblins were the weakest of all demons. In the Dark Army, they were rank-and-file foot soldiers whose job was to always charge straight into the enemy defenses. Their resulting deaths were a routine matter. That was why Hokh’hokton and Maunty were so incredibly grateful to Blossom and Flio, who

had given them jobs working on the farm and even helped them with food and housing.

“Hmm, well, I won’t twist your arm if that’s how you like it,” Blossom said, although it looked like it still bothered her. She went to take the goblins’ packed meals out from the cart Sybe was pulling. “Anyway, here you go! Can’t work on an empty stomach!” Maunty’s children cried out with joy and ran up to get their breakfast. “Aha ha,” Blossom laughed. “There’s no need to rush! There’s plenty for everyone!”

The goblin children hugged Blossom one by one as she smiled and handed them their meals. Next to her, Sybe was doing its part handing out meals as well. “Thank you!” the children said, big smiles on their faces as they rushed to dig in.

Hokh’hokton, Maunty, and Maunty’s wife looked on, smiling happily.

“Very well!” said Hokh’hokton. “I, too, shall take my meal, and then get to work!”

“Then I’ll fill my belly as well!” said Maunty.

Maunty’s wife laughed. “Let’s give it our all today!” All three nodded happily, and walked up to Blossom to get their breakfast.

Even as the war between humans and demons raged on, there were places where they lived together happily and in peace.

◇Houghtow College of Magic—Midday◇

Belano had left for her work at the College of Magic like usual, and headed to her usual classroom where she usually taught her defensive magic class. However, today there was a platform set up in the middle of the room. The students all had their art supplies.

I-I really don’t want to do this! Belano thought, frozen in place as she started to panic.

This whole thing started when Metálzobi, the fair-skinned projection arts teacher, had approached Belano in the staff office.

Belano blinked. “*Modeling*?”

“Yes, my students said they wanted to sketch you!”

Belano’s expression utterly failed to hide how much she hated that idea. “I-I don’t know about...” She trailed off, shaking her head.

But Metálzobi kept on. “Please?” he begged. “I really need your help.”

“My help?”

“Yes. My subject is a little unusual, so I’m afraid it doesn’t appeal to many students.” The projection arts was a magic discipline where students learned to give form to the images in their mind using projection magic as an artistic medium. It was once considered a prized discipline for its use in architecture and portraiture, but since the development of crystalgraph technology, its popularity had steadily declined.

“I’ve asked the other teachers to model for my class too,” he added.

“The other teachers?”

“Yes! Why, Miss Oryou over there did it just the other day!”

Oryou, the offensive magic teacher, happened to be passing by. She smiled and placed a hand on Belano’s shoulder.

“W-Well,” Belano said, after worrying it over for a while, “if everyone else is doing it...” She trailed off into a despairing moan, but she nodded her head.

And here she was standing on the platform in the middle of her classroom. She had been panicking for some time. All around her was a stupendously huge gathering of students. There weren’t anywhere near enough chairs or desks, so many of the students were standing in the back of the classroom. There were even students overflowing into the hallway.

“I couldn’t believe there were so many students who wanted to attend this lesson!” Metálzobi said, nodding happily as he wormed his way through the crowd. Belano was a small woman, and universally regarded as adorable for her nervous body language. Even though she was a new teacher, she had become something like the idol of the College of Magic. It was inevitable that this many students would show up for an opportunity to see her model.

Metálzobi, however, was more or less oblivious to what was happening with

the students, and had no idea this was the reason for her popularity. He began innocently taking attendance, going down the list of names in order. At one point during class, overjoyed for it to be such an unexpected success, he said, “Miss Belano, if you could, would you mind modeling for us one or two more times?”

“Please!” the students chimed in as one.

As you can imagine, Belano was shaking her head as hard as she was physically capable.

◇Flio’s House◇

In a hallway in Flio’s house, Byleri looked around to see that nobody else was in the area except herself and Hiya. When she was certain they were alone, she ran up to the djinn. “Um, Mx. Hiya... Do you, like, have a minute?”

“Oh?” said Hiya, giving Byleri one of their ambiguous smiles and bowing politely. “If it isn’t Ser Byleri. What do you wish of me?”

Byleri’s face grew red. “Um,” she said. “Like, h-here...” As she spoke, she produced a number of books and offered them to Hiya. The first was *The Princess and the Horsemen*, the “specimen” Hiya had deliberately “forgotten” in Byleri’s room. It was only a sample, with just the cover and the first few pages, but beneath it were a number of volumes Hiya had never seen.

“Ser Byleri, what is this?”

Byleri grew even redder. “I-I...” she stammered, unable to look at Hiya as she spoke. “I-It’s, like, my, y’know. My collection...” She pressed the books into Hiya’s upper body. “Y-You can, um, totally borrow them,” she said. “I-If you’ll let me borrow *The Princess and the Horsemen*—the actual book, I mean.”

Hiya grinned proudly. “I see! So you are finally ready to lend me your collection, my dear Byleri.” They waved their hand once, and Damalynas appeared beside them. In her hand was the full version of *The Princess and the Horsemen*.

Byleri’s face broke out in a grin, and she snatched it out of Damalynas’s hands. “O-Okay! Like, thanks!” she said, speaking quickly as she ran off. *The rest of the book!* she thought. *Hee hee... I, like, totally can’t wait to see what*

happens with the princess and the horseman knight... The sample had ended when things were getting pretty steamy. Byleri smiled gormlessly as all sorts of wild fantasies ran through her head about what might happen.

“Byleri keeps a tight lid on it, but she’s quite the little pervert, isn’t she?” Damalynas said as she watched her go, a wry grin on her face.

Hiya, however, smiled fondly. “Now, now,” they said. “You mustn’t speak ill of Ser Byleri. Thanks to her, we shall reach further and further heights in our training.” As they spoke, they opened one of the books Byleri had brought. “Oh? This seems promising,” they said.

“Wow...” said Damalynas. “Is that... Is that even *possible*?” She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the illustrations.

“To think the very first page would hold such a spectacle!” Hiya marveled. “Ser Byleri has exquisite taste.”



“Yeah... This is a bit more than I was expecting...” Damalynas began fidgeting nervously. “Y-Your Divinity,” she said, “someone might stumble in on us if we look at it here...”

“You are correct, of course,” said Hiya. “Then, shall we return to my mindscape?” They took Damalynas in their arms, kissing her on the lips. They were still kissing when they arrived in Hiya’s mental world. All three of them—Hiya, Damalynas, and Byleri—had nothing on their mind but *training*.

◇That Evening, in the Living Room◇

“Wyne *does* eat a lot, doesn’t she?” Flio observed, a wry smile on his face as he watched Wyne stuff her face with yet more meat.

“Hrm,” said Ghozal, who was sitting across from him. He regarded Wyne, his arms crossed. “Wyne is probably still growing. She needs a lot of food for her body to develop properly.”

Uliminas, who was sitting in the seat to the right of Ghozal, nodded. “Yeah,” she said. “Wyne’s tiny fur a dragonmewt. I bet her apurrtite will settle down once she’s grown a bit more. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Oh, really!” Rys, who had just returned to the living room, looked a little surprised at Uliminas’s words. “But I had only just finished hunting so that Wyne can eat all the magic beasts she likes!” Rys looked out the window, and the others followed her gaze. Outside, Blossom, Sybe, and the goblins were busy moving an enormous pile of magic beast carcasses.

Wyne’s eyes lit up when she saw. “Mama, I love you!” she said, diving to give Rys a big hug.

“Yes, yes, thank you, Wyne,” said Rys, catching Wyne and smiling kindly. Wyne rubbed her cheeks against Rys’s, grinning happily.

“Wyne,” said Flio, stepping up beside the two, “you’re a bit like our child, aren’t you?”

“Hee hee,” Rys chuckled. “She is! But...one day...”

“Yes, I know,” said Flio. He pressed his cheek up against Rys’s.

Wyne hugged both of them tight. “I love my dada and mama!” she said,

nuzzling both of them.

Ghozal watched the three, his arms still folded across his chest. “Hrm,” he said. “Children. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad.” Balirossa and Uliminas, who were sitting to either side, clattered in their chairs as they turned to face him.

“S-Sir Ghozal! What are you saying?!” said Balirossa.

“Meowt was that?!” Uliminas squeaked. “M-Mew wanna make babies?!” The two pressed close to their mutual love.

“Hrm?” said Ghozal. “I don’t know. I’m living a free life now. I was thinking it might be nice to have a family like Mister Flio... Maybe even have kids...”

Balirossa and Uliminas drew even closer. “B-But,” said Balirossa, “how do you plan on doing it? I feel like there’s a certain...implication you’re making...about your partners...”

“I-If Ghozal really wants a baby,” Uliminas said, “I-I suppose I’ll purrmit it...”

“Ser Uliminas, wait a moment!” Balirossa interjected. “Would you please not interrupt when I ask Sir Ghozal a question?”

“Meow? It’ll take a meowron like Ghozal three entire days to work his way around such a circuitous question.”

“Th-Then let me ask it like this!” Balirossa protested. “S-Sir Ghozal... I-If fortune should be so kind, do you truly wish to—”

“Meowt?!” Uliminas snapped. “Why do mew always start at the most purrplexing part?! That’s gonna be even harder fur him to puzzle out.”

“But!” Balirossa was flustered. “Th-There’s an order to such things! First, I believe, we should try to all become closer to each other, and...”

The conversation carried on with Ghozal stuck in the middle. Every now and then, he would speak up, saying, “Excuse me,” but each time he would be shut down.

“Sir Ghozal, be quiet for a moment!”

“This is between us women!”

“Ah. Fine,” Ghozal would say. He had no choice but to back down.

Rys watched them argue with Ghozal squeezed between them, a dry smile on her face. “I really do wonder what will become of those three,” she said.

“Yeah...” said Flio, his expression a perfect mirror of his wife’s. “I have no idea how they carry on like that. But,” he added, “there is one thing I know.”

“There is?” asked Rys. “What is that, my lord husband?”

Flio gave one of his easygoing smiles. “That whatever happens, our house will be a happy place.”

Rys pressed her cheek against Flio’s chest and closed her eyes. “Yes...” she said. “I think so too.”

They were enjoying each other’s company like that when Wyne came up, her stomach rumbling. “Dada, mama,” she said, “I’m hungry...”

“Oh!” said Rys, hurrying to the kitchen. “Of course! I’ll go roast you some meat right away!”

Flio picked Wyne up in his arms. “All right, Wyne,” he said, smiling. “While your mama’s cooking some meat for you, would you like to help me finish off the lembon cake?”

Wyne beamed. “Yes!” she said, wrapping her arms around Flio. “I love you, dada!” Flio sat down in his chair with Wyne in his lap. He withdrew a lembon cake from his Bottomless Bag and placed it on the table in front of Wyne. “Oooh!” she cooed, her eyes sparkling as she began to eat. Flio smiled as he watched.

The aroma of roasting meat began to drift into the room as Balirossa and Uliminas continued to argue. Between them, Ghozal sat silently, still unable to get a word in edgewise.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading this book! I am very glad to have been able to bring you the third volume of *Level 2 Cheat*. The content of this volume was entirely new, but much of the cast is the same as the web novel—I am very attached to many of them, especially Junia Van Biel and Captain Eddsarch of the Blackbeard Corsairs.

I feel like Junia's stage presence was a bit overshadowed in the web novel by her familiars, but this time I feel satisfied that I was able to convey her heroic communication efforts. There was also Wyne, whose personality has done a complete one-eighty compared to the web novel, but I think you can tell I had a lot of fun writing her. Maybe too much fun (lol). Hero Gold-Hair is in there too, still running around without a single clue in the world. We've even kept him and Tsuya in the background of the cover. As a creator, I'm very fond of that couple and their strange comedy routine.

Finally, as always, I would like to thank Katagiri-sama for the splendid illustrations, everyone at Overlap for their work on the publication, and all of my readers from the bottom of my heart.

Miya Kinojo, August 2017



Illustration Katagiri



Chillin' in Another World with Lv 2 Super Cheat Powers 3

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri


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Name Balirossa 8
Name Wyne 8
Name Uliminas 8


“Thaaank yooou!”
Name Hero Gold Hair 8
Name Tsuya 8
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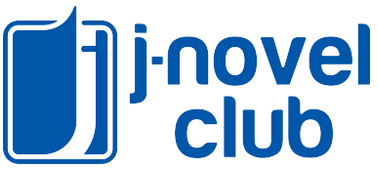
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Chillin’ in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers: Volume 3

by Miya Kinojo

Translated by Meteora Edited by Samantha J. Moore

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