Chillin' in Another World with Lv 2 Super Cheat Powers

10



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri


Chillin' in Another World
With Lv 2
Super Cheat Powers
10
Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

Chillin’ in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers: Volume 10 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10


Chillin' in Another World
With LV 2
Super Cheat Powers
10
Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

Chapter 1: The Enchanted Frigate Station

The world of Klyrode is a world of sword and sorcery, of magic beasts and demihumans, where humans and demons had waged war since time immemorial. However, that long war had finally been brought to an end when the Maiden Queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, the greatest of human kingdoms, and the Dark One Dawkson agreed to sign a peace treaty with each other. Their lands have remained at peace with each other ever since.

The Dark One Dawkson's diplomatic approach to the former demon rebels has been bearing fruit—more and more demons are voluntarily signing up with his new Dark Army. Some demons, however, still cling to the creed of might makes right. Between the friction among different demon factions and every problem you could imagine demanding his attention, the Dark One Dawkson has been keeping very busy indeed.

The Maiden Queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, meanwhile, has been busy engaging in foreign diplomacy assisting the neighboring kingdoms with raids on the one hand with her sister the Second Princess, while undergoing a series of extensive reforms with the help of her sister the Third Princess. She's had her hands absolutely full dealing with all sorts of problems from other lands.

And so, the stage is set. The curtains rise...

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

The Magical Kingdom Klyrode was the greatest human kingdom in the world. The capital, Klyrode Castle, stood at the very center of its vast domain. And far to the west lay a city known as Houghtow. Houghtow was by all accounts in the middle of nowhere, but it had been comfortably removed from the front lines of the war between the Magical Kingdom and the Dark Army, and it was well situated along trade routes leading to the western kingdoms. With all of those advantages, Houghtow had become a thriving hub of activity in recent years despite its remoteness.

Flio's household had taken up residence in an estate outside the walls of

Houghtow City, and in the city proper was the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, an establishment Flio had set up in the empty building of a shop that had recently closed its doors that now served as their base of operations.

On this particular day, a great crowd of people had gathered outside the store. Flio's fleet of Enchanted Frigates had gone through test flight after test flight, and today they were officially beginning service. The ceremony was just about to start.

"And here I was hoping we could keep the first flight simple," Flio said, wincing slightly as he looked out the shop window to see the crowd outside. "I really didn't expect it to turn into such a huge event..."

Flio, a former merchant from another world, had originally been summoned to the world of Klyrode as one of the candidates for the role of Hero. Upon his arrival, he received a powerful blessing—one that granted him mastery of every spell and every skill to exist within the world. Now he worked as general manager of Fli-o'-Rys alongside his wife, Rys, a former demon soldier in the Dark Army. He was the proud father of four.

As Flio watched the crowd, the djinn Hiya stepped up from behind. Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, held magic powerful enough to destroy the entire world, yet they had been defeated by Flio nonetheless. Since then, they came to revere Flio as the Exalted One. Now they were part of the group living in his house.

"Exalted One..." Hiya began. "Forgive your humble servant for speaking out of turn, but to me it seems only natural that we should draw such a crowd."

"Only natural?" Flio parroted.

"Certainly! Not only have you resurrected a lost technology from the ancient past, you have achieved mass production of Enchanted Frigates, which you would offer for the benefit of the common folk of the land. It is a feat unprecedented in history, one worthy of the ovation of humankind!" Hiya rhapsodized breathlessly.

Even someone as cool-headed as Hiya is all worked up about this... Flio thought as he looked back out the window at the newly constructed Enchanted Frigate station next to the shop. *Is it really that big a deal?*

The station was two stories tall, with a central tower that shot up nearly three times the height of the rest of the building. At the edge of the tower, the Enchanted Frigate was floating, docked in midair. The surrounding buildings were decorated with festive red and white rope, done up in rows of wreaths and garlands. Carriages kept arriving at the scene, full of eager guests. The line of traffic stretched out of sight down the main road, snaking its way through the city streets.

"But," Flio started, pursing up his lips in a strained smile, "I only wanted to invite a few people to the launch ceremony, the ones who've been helping us out since we arrived in Houghtow City..."

At that point, the door to the back of the shop opened, and Flio's wife Rys stepped out. Rys was a lupine demon and a former soldier of the Dark Army. She had once fought Flio, only to be utterly defeated. After that, she'd made the decision to walk alongside him as his wife. She was positively excessive in her love of Flio, and she was seen as something of a mother figure for everyone in the house.

"My lord husband, you're still over here?" Rys asked. "The ceremony is about to begin! We really need to get everything ready."

"Huh?" Flio sputtered. "E-Everything should already be ready to go, right?"

"But that won't do!" Rys's eyes went wide at her husband's words. "You're not planning to conduct the ceremony dressed like *that*, are you?" Rys herself was wearing a gorgeous and elaborate white dress for the occasion in place of her usual outfit. "I gave you the outfit to wear for the ceremony last night, didn't I? Why haven't you changed into it?"

"A-Ah, well, you see..." Flio stammered, retreating a step or two in the face of Rys's exuberance. *I know Rys worked hard making the ceremonial outfit,* he thought to himself, *but it's mostly going to be humans attending today's ceremony. I don't know how I feel about going out in...that.* Wincing, he glanced over at the outfit Rys made, all hung up and ready to wear. The collar was abnormally large, and it was fitted with two bulky pauldrons on the shoulders, shaped like a pair of skulls. A jet-black cape completed the look. All in all, the whole thing looked thoroughly demonic.



As Flio regarded Rys's outfit with a very forced smile, the hellcat Uliminas entered the room. Uliminas was known as Ghozal's confederate back when he

held the seat of Dark One. When Ghozal abdicated his throne, Uliminas left the Dark Army alongside him and came to work at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store disguised as a common demihuman. She was Ghozal's wife and the mother of his daughter Folmina.

"Is there a purroblem, Meowster Flio?" she asked. "It's just about time fur the ceremeowny to...to..." Her eyes, however, went wide when she saw the ceremonial outfit hanging on the wall. "What is that *meowtfit?!*"

"Excuse *you*, Uliminas!" Rys huffed, puffing out her cheeks in indignation. "Do you have some sort of complaint about the ceremonial attire I worked so hard to prepare for my lord husband?!"

"M-Meowt exactly..." Uliminas muttered. "But...mew know the attendants are going to be *human*, right? If he comes meowt wearing *that*, the guests are going to run screaming in meowrtal terror! I mean, is that *real bone* on the pawldrons?!"

"I made those pauldrons out of the skull of a mantilion my lord husband and I hunted together on one of our dates..." Rys sighed. "But...well...perhaps you're right. This really isn't suited for today's ceremony at all, is it?" Persuaded by Uliminas's argument, Rys headed for the door to go pick up a new, more appropriate outfit for her husband, only to bump into Ghozal coming the other way.

Ghozal had once gone by the name Gholl, back when he had reigned as the Dark One of demonkind. He abdicated his throne when challenged by his younger brother Yuigarde, however, and now lived as a freeloader at Flio's house as a human. He and Flio were something akin to best friends. Since then, he had taken two wives—Uliminas, his former confederate in the Dark Army, and Balirossa, who was originally a swordswoman in service to the Magical Kingdom. He had two children with them, Folmina and Ghoro.

"Hrm," Ghozal grunted. "Rys, is something wrong? I was just coming to call Mister Flio, since the ceremony's about to start."

"I prepared a set of ceremonial attire for today," Rys explained, "but it seems the outfit I created is not suitable for the occasion after all. I thought I had best go and find some other set of clothes."

“Hrm?” Ghozal cocked his head curiously. “That’s the outfit you say isn’t suitable?” he asked, pointing towards the hellish garb hanging from the wall. “Hrm,” he repeated. “But that collar! That jet-black cape! I can just imagine it fluttering in a maelstrom of demonic malicium! And the mantilion skull on the shoulders is the perfect touch! What exactly is wrong with this outfit?!”

Rys’s expression lit up. “I know!” she said. “What *is* wrong with it?!”

Flio and Uliminas went stiff.

O-Oh, no! Flio thought. *W-With Mister Ghozal in this conversation...*

Rys is going to be a lot harder to purrsuade! thought Uliminas.

Things went just as Flio and Uliminas expected. “My lord husband!” chimed Rys, a great big smile on her face as she went right back to insisting on the ceremonial attire she made. “I knew it! The outfit is perfect! Now, let’s get you changed!” Beside her, Ghozal gave a single satisfied nod.

“I-I don’t know...” Flio protested. “I really don’t think it matches today’s ceremony...”

“Meow way, meow how!” Uliminas added in a desperate attempt to convince Rys and Ghozal.

In the end, with Uliminas’s help, Flio was saved from having to appear in the demonic ceremonial garb, but only after losing fifteen minutes to arguments.

◇Some Time Later◇

Tanya wiped her brow, standing in the shadow of the extravagant stage they had set up by the entrance to the Enchanted Frigate station next to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. “Phew...” she sighed. “I confess I worked myself into something of a panic when I saw how many more guests there were than we had expected, but we somehow managed to finish everything with time to spare.”

Tanya’s full name was Tanyalite. She had once been an angelic disciple of the Celestial Plane famous for her magic power, which was immense even by angelic standards. Her superiors on the Celestial Plane had sent her to observe Flio, but she lost her memory in a freak midair collision with Wyne, and now she

lived and worked as Flio's full-time maid.

As the proud maid of the house of Flio, Tanya had gone to great lengths to prepare things for the throng of guests attending the ceremony. She cut logs into sections to prepare chairs for everyone to sit on and set up the empty lot nearby as an event venue, even hurrying to get extra food and drink to accommodate the number of guests. She had done all this at lightning speed, faster than the human eye could even follow.

As Tanya surveyed her handiwork with a satisfied smile on her face, Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, and Belano watched on in sheer amazement.

The four of them had once served Castle Klyrode as a knightly company, but they quit the knighthood to live together at Flio's house. Balirossa now spent her days working for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. She found a husband in Ghozal, becoming one of his two wives. Together they had a son, named Ghoro.

Byleri, the company's archer, was gifted with tremendous talent for handling horses, and now worked on the stables outside Flio's house looking after the equine magic beasts. While not officially married, she lived openly with her lover Sleip and their daughter Rislei. Every day she spent with her family was a delight—she smiled all the time these days.

Blossom was the heavy knight of the company, and Balirossa's best friend. When Balirossa quit the knighthood, Blossom didn't hesitate for a moment to follow suit. Blossom had come from a family of farmers, and she excelled at farm work. Since moving in, she had developed a patch of land outside the house into a vast, sprawling farm.

Belano was a witch. She was also, however, a small and shy girl who could only use defensive magic. Having quit the knighthood together with her company, she now lived at Flio's house and taught classes at the Houghtow College of Magic. She was married to Minilio and had a child with him named Belalio.

"W-We came here to offer our assistance," Balirossa said. "But perhaps that wasn't necessary..."

"Yeah..." agreed Byleri. "Like, Tanya just started zooming around all over the place?"

“She finished everything in the blink of an eye!” added Blossom.

Belano said nothing. She was too stunned to move.

“There is no need for you to trouble yourself over such trifling tasks,” stated Tanya, approaching the four ex-knights. “This is merely one of the duties I must perform as maid of the house of Flio. Now, if you will excuse me, I must be off to direct the guests.” She bowed deeply and sped away, leaving the four humans blinking in her wake.

As Tanya left, Sleip and Rislei came up to approach Balirossa’s company. Sleip had once been a member of the Dark Army’s Infernal Four. When he left the army, he moved into Flio’s house, where he took responsibility for looking after the stable of equine magic beasts. He loved to dote on his daughter Rislei, who he’d had with Byleri, his unofficial wife.

As Sleip and Byleri’s daughter, Rislei was half lichsteed and half human. She was a serious-minded young girl and something of a leader for the younger children of the Flio household.

“Mama?” Rislei called. “Also, Gho’s and Bela’s mama, and Miss Blossom? The ceremony’s about to start. Our seats are over there.”

“That’s right!” said Sleip. “If we don’t get to our seats quickly, that djinn Hiya is going to lord it over us. They’ll say something like, ‘*Is it your intention to delay the Exalted One from ascending the stage?*’ Gah ha ha ha ha!” he laughed mirthfully.

Suddenly, a hand appeared from thin air and grabbed hold of Sleip’s shoulder. Sleip turned his head to look behind him and saw a hand stretching out of a dark magic circle floating in the middle of the air. Gradually, the hand was followed by an arm, then a shoulder, then the rest of the body, revealing Damalynas, dressed in a scandalously revealing outfit and grinning fiendishly down at the lichsteed Sleip.

“Well! So understanding, aren’t we?” Damalynas quipped. “In that case, why don’t you hurry along to your seats?! I’m sure we’d all hate to trouble Their Divinity Hiya with such a trifling matter...”

Damalynas was known as the Grand Magus of Midnight—a magician who had

achieved the highest level of mastery of the dark arts. Her magic, however, was not enough to prevent her from losing to Hiya, who had absorbed her into the mindscape of their own mental world, where Damalynas now lived as Hiya's beloved training partner.

"Yes, well, let's be off, then!" Sleip amiably agreed.

"Like, totally!" said Byleri, a smile on her face. She ran up to her lover Sleip, taking his arm in hers.

"Why must papa and mama be so lovey-dovey all the time...?" Rislei grumbled, making a face.

"What are you talking about?" Sleip replied, effortlessly lifting Rislei up in his free arm. "I'm not just lovey-dovey for Byleri, you know—I've got plenty of love for you too!"

"W-Wait! P-Papa!" Rislei protested, turning red in the face."S-Stop! You're embarrassing me!" That was understandable enough. There was a huge crowd of onlookers today, here to witness the launch ceremony, and quite a number of them had stopped to gawp at the family's antics.

"Ha ha ha!" Sleip laughed, holding his daughter high in the air for all to see without a care in the world. "Your old man loves you, Rislei!"

"I-I'm telling you—put me down!" Rislei complained as she grew redder and redder still. "This is humiliating! Everyone's watching!"

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" a human man wearing the armor of a knight of Klyrode laughed as he walked up. "Ever the doting parent, eh, Sleip?" This man's armor was clearly a step above the kingdom's run-of-the-mill soldiers, engraved with ornate decorations. The man himself had a deeply scarred face that spoke to his long history of battle. He gave the group a grizzled smile.

"Well, I was wondering who it was!" Sleip said with a grin, not putting Rislei down for a second. "MacTaulo, you old devil!"

Knight Captain MacTaulo was a storied hero of Klyrode. In the war between the Magical Kingdom and the Dark Army, he had never been far from the front lines, where he and Sleip had clashed swords time and time again. Now that the war was over, the two had formed a friendship out of their fierce rivalry.

“Are you here for the ceremony as well?” Sleip asked.

“I’m not here on personal business, I’m afraid,” said MacTaulo. “Her Majesty the Queen will be in attendance today. I am here to provide security.”

“I see...” said Sleip. “In that case, I suppose you’ll be free after the ceremony? Perhaps we could catch up over drinks once it’s over. It’s been an age and a half. You won’t believe some of the stories I have to tell!”

“It has been too long indeed,” MacTaulo agreed. “I have something I wish to ask of you myself, as it happens. I believe I’ll take you up on your offer.”

As the two old enemies chatted cheerfully, Rislei kept on protesting. “Let me down! You two can talk once I’m on the ground, can’t you? Uncle MacTaulo, tell papa to put me down! Please!” Sleip had been holding her in the air the entire time, as a red-faced Rislei kicked her legs in a futile effort to escape.

“Rislei?” came a girl’s voice. “What are you doing?” Suddenly, Rislei’s body was enveloped in light. The next second, she had vanished from Sleip’s hand and reappeared safe and sound on the ground. Rislei turned to see Elinàsze walking towards her.

Elinàsze was one of Flio and Rys’s children, part of a twin set with her brother Garyl. She also had a younger sister, Rylnàsze, and an adoptive older sister, Wyne. She was a serious girl who loved her papa Flio more than anything in the world and had a serious talent for magic.

“We need to hurry!” Elinàsze urged. “Papa’s ceremony could start any second!” There was a magic circle lingering by her outstretched hand—no doubt the Teleportation spell she had used to rescue Rislei from her father’s grasp.

“Th-Thank you, Eli...” said Rislei.

“Of course!” said Elinàsze. “Don’t mention it! Now, Uncle Sleip, everyone, let’s get to our seats.” Elinàsze had come to the ceremony today in a fashionable dress decorated with frills. She had a delighted smile on her face as she surveyed the crowd.

“Yes, I suppose we should,” said Sleip. “Well, MacTaulo, we’d best find our seats. I’ll see you after!”

“Very well,” said MacTaulo. “Then I shall return to my duties as guard.” They shook hands and parted ways for the time being. Sleip made his way to the seats, with Balirossa and her gang of former knights following along behind.

“Big sister Elinàsze!” chirped a girl waving her hand ahead of them. “This way!”

“Oh, Rylnàsze!” said Elinàsze, waving back to her little sister with a smile. “There you are!”

Rylnàsze was Rys’s thirdborn child and her second daughter. She was growing up quickly thanks to the influence of Rys’s demonic blood. She had already reached about the same height as Elinàsze.

“I was so worried when I lost sight of you!” Elinàsze began, when she got a proper look at how Rylnàsze was sitting. Her eyes shot open wide. “I... Erm, that’s certainly...”

Sitting on Rylnàsze’s lap was Sybe in his unicorn rabbit form as well as the female unicorn rabbit the house had picked up lately.

Sybe was originally a wild psychobear Flio had met in a random encounter. Realizing at once that he had no hope of victory, Sybe surrendered and from then on lived in Flio’s house as a family pet. Flio eventually used his magic to grant Sybe the ability to transform between his natural psychobear form and a new unicorn rabbit form in order to be less frightening to innocent citizens. The female unicorn rabbit was a magic beast Flio had saved from the Divine Beast Leonorna. She and Sybe had taken a liking to each other, and Flio decided to adopt her as another housepet, giving her the name Shebe.

“I know Sybe and Shebe are very fond of you, Rylnàsze...” Elinàsze observed. “But where in Klyrode did those other magic beasts come from?” She pointed behind Rylnàsze, where a veritable assembly of all kinds of magic beasts seemed to have gathered. There were bearlike beasts, wolflike beasts, avian beasts, and many, many others, all seemingly here to accompany Rylnàsze. The other guests in the area looked like they couldn’t believe their eyes any more than Rylnàsze’s big sister.

It was quite understandable that they’d be surprised, of course. Some of the magic beasts that had gathered around Rylnàsze were highly dangerous, said to

harbor no kindness for humanity in their hearts. And yet, even they seemed as docile as lambs beside Rylnàsze.

“Oh!” said Rylnàsze, smiling brightly. “These are some friends I made when I was going for a walk earlier this morning, big sister! They are all very kind creatures—very fun to play with too!” The beasts began to nuzzle and lick Rylnàsze in response, as though they could understand her words. “A-Ah! That tickles!” Rylnàsze giggled as the magic beasts kept up their affections. “Ah ha ha! You’re such sweeties! Thank you!” Her face was getting sticky with magic beast saliva, but Rylnàsze didn’t seem to mind in the slightest.

All around, onlookers watched the scene with bemused smiles on their faces. “H-Huh. And here I was scared to see all those dangerous magic beasts around...” said one.

“They’re all being so well behaved!” agreed another.

“It looks like they’re fond of that girl, don’t you think?”

“Oh, Rylnàsze...” Elinàsze sighed. “Magic beasts really do love you, don’t they? But I suppose that’s a wonderful blessing, after a sort.” She held out her hand to conjure a magic circle and quickly cast a spell to dry off Rylnàsze’s face.

“By the way,” Rylnàsze started, “big brother Garyl said he was going to help protect the guests!”

◇ ◇ ◇

Inside a room in the Enchanted Frigate station were the guests who had been invited to attend the day’s ceremony, including even the Maiden Queen of Klyrode herself. The Maiden Queen was the current reigning monarch of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Her name was Elizabeth, but her friends tended to call her Ellie.

Her father, the former king, had been banished from the castle when his many misdeeds came to light, leaving her in control of the kingdom. Fortunately for Klyrode, the Maiden Queen was a woman utterly devoted with politics—so devoted, in fact, that despite being in her early thirties, she had never taken a lover in her life.

She stood in one corner of the room, surrounded by her royal guard—a

company of exclusively female knights charged with protecting the Queen herself—led by their captain Boralis. Garyl was there as well, standing nearby.

Garyl was the younger of the two twins—Elinàsze's little brother—which also made him the older brother to Rylnàsze. He was a friendly boy whose ready smile had made him a miniature celebrity in the Houghtow College of Magic lower grade classes, which were taught for the benefit of the children of Houghtow. He excelled at physical activity. Ordinarily he would be on his way to school, but today he was standing guard over the Queen, dressed in a suit of armor he had purchased from the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

"E-Excuse me. Garyl? Thank you ever so much for going out of your way to help protect me today," the Queen said, favoring him with a smile. "Or rather, I should call you Mister Garyl, shouldn't I?"

"There's no need for thanks!" Garyl said, grinning back cheerfully. "Dad asked me to, after all! Just leave it to me!"

Suddenly, the gazes of the room seemed to turn at once in Garyl's direction. He could hear a whispered conversation from nearby.

"Who is that man?" someone asked. "He seems rather close to Her Majesty the Queen, doesn't he?"

"But the Maiden Queen has to marry our kingdom's second prince!" the person's companion whispered back.

"We must bring her to visit our kingdom, using any means necessary..." agreed a third.

The group seemed to be some sort of dignitaries sent from a neighboring kingdom. Right now they were watching Garyl and the Maiden Queen like hawks.

I-I really didn't think they would take it this far... the Maiden Queen thought. She took care not to let her diplomatic smile falter, but she felt like she might break out in a nervous sweat at any moment.

◇Several Days Ago—Klyrode Castle, Maiden Queen's Chambers◇

The Maiden Queen heaved a heavy sigh as she returned from the conference

room to her own private chambers. “Haah... It looks like I managed to make it through that conference in one piece...” she said to herself. She didn’t look to be in her best shape, though. There were beads of sweat running down her forehead, and her skin had turned a sickly pale white.

“My sister the Queen...” said the Third Princess, who had accompanied her back to her room. “Are you unwell?” She looked at her older sister with an expression of concern.

“I am quite all right,” the Queen responded. “Thank you for your concern, Third Princess. And thank you even more for your help in that conference just now. Thanks to the documents you collected, we were able to get an answer from the ministers without needing to suffer through too much of their endless questions.”

“I thank you for your kind words,” the Third Princess said. “But it was you who anticipated the ministers’ every question and sent me to investigate the matters they would ask on even before they posed the question, was it not?”

The two sisters were sharing a moment of satisfaction for a job well done, when the middle sister, the Second Princess, came butting into their conversation. “Hey!” she shouted. “Excuse me for interrupting your sisterly bonding time, but now that we’ve overcome the big meeting with the ministers about internal affairs, do you think we could do something about our diplomatic issues?” She took the folder she had been carrying and set it down in front of the Maiden Queen with an emphatic thud. A crease formed in the Maiden Queen’s brow at the sight of yet more paperwork.

“My sister the Second Princess,” the Third Princess began, tilting her head as she glanced at the folder, a puzzled expression on her face. “What exactly is in this folder?”

“Tell me, Third Princess...” the Second Princess started. “Do you know what they say about our sister the Queen in lands abroad?”

“But of course!” the Third Princess replied, puffing out her chest with sisterly pride. “Our sister the Queen is the first woman to ever rule this land—the benevolent monarch who brought an end to our long war with the Dark Army by signing a treaty with the Dark One! They call her the Savior of the Kingdom!

She has the full support of the people both in and outside our lands!" No matter how you looked at it, her speech sounded more like the Third Princess's own sentiments than any sort of accurate report.

"Yes, indeed, the Savior of the Kingdom..." the Second Princess repeated. "And yet, the great Savior herself has yet to take a groom! I'm sure you can imagine there's all sorts of people out there thinking about what they might stand to gain if Her Saviorliness were to marry a man of their own kingdom..."

"Hwuh?" the Third Princess started, taking the file in her hands. "Th-Then, you mean...is this...?" Inside, she found portrait after portrait of blandly smiling young men, each appended with a brief outline of their titles and accomplishments. Many of them were accompanied with letters of introduction from their father, the king of some land or other, as well. "Are these...?"

"Yes." The Second Princess smirked. "These are requests for a formal meeting with the Maiden Queen. All of them." She smacked the back of the folder. "You put me in charge of diplomacy, you know, and no matter where I go, this is all anyone wants to talk about. Frankly, I'm getting a little sick of it."

The Maiden Queen let out a long breath. "Yes," she agreed. "This topic comes up whenever I am speaking with a foreign delegation as well. I'm getting a little sick of it myself, to be quite honest..." She took a sip of black tea as she tried to put her thoughts in order. *I once expected that I would marry some royal or other, who would become the next king of Klyrode while I supported him from behind like a good wife should...* she thought. *But when I learned how badly my father had been misusing the throne, I devoted myself to politics in an attempt to fix his mistakes. Before I knew it, I had already passed thirty years of age! But...I suppose, if it were the right partner...* An image of Garyl popped unbidden into her head.

"Speaking of," said the Second Princess. "Any progress with that Garyl boy of yours?"

"Pfffffffff?!" The Maiden Queen spat out her tea with alarming force.

"M-My sister the Queen!" the Third Princess exclaimed, rushing over to rub her sister on the back. "Are you all right?"

"I-I am fine, Third Princess..." the Queen managed. "B-But Second

Princess...wh-why in the world would you bring up Garyl's name at a time like this?!"

"What do you mean *why*?" the Second Princess asked. "He's the boy you like, isn't he?"

"Th-The boy I—" the Maiden Queen shook her head. "I-I am an the Queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode! I-I would never allow my private emotions to take precedence over my duty!"

"So you're not denying that you like him, then..."

"Gwah!" the Queen found herself at a loss for words. The Second Princess snickered in amusement at the sight of her dignified sister in such a state.

"Ah ha ha!" she laughed. "Sorry to tease. But think about it. There's a mountain of princes from lands all over seeking your hand in marriage, but if Her Majesty would rather marry the eldest son of a certain general store manager, I'm sure I could make them understand."

"I-I see. Well..." the Maiden Queen mumbled to herself, apparently not able to formulate a proper response.

The Second Princess sighed. *My older sister has always been like this...* she thought. *Prioritizing her kingdom above all else and putting her own needs last. Well, I suppose with our father being like he was, I can't exactly blame her for it. We'd have never gotten through that without that self-sacrificing streak of hers.* Suddenly, she remembered something. "Wait. Sister, didn't Fli-o'-Rys come to us the other day to obtain our permission for *that* project*?*"

"*That* project?" the Third Princess asked. "What do you mean?"

"You know," said the Second Princess, pointing her finger straight up. "*That* one."

The Maiden Queen and Third Princess both followed their sister's finger, looking up at the ceiling of the Queen's chambers.

"The...ceiling?" the Third Princess asked, tilting her head in bafflement.

"Is...Is something the matter with the ceiling?" echoed the Maiden Queen.

"No, no, come on you two," the Second Princess smirked. "Not the *ceiling...*"

◇ ◇ ◇

I came to participate in the launch ceremony for the new Magic Frigate, just like the Second Princess said... the Queen thought. *And it did seem as if a flood of attendees from the neighboring kingdoms came pouring in the minute I made the announcement...but I never would have imagined that more than half of them would turn out to be here to try and take my hand in marriage!*

The moment she had stepped foot inside the waiting room for the ceremony, she had found herself surrounded by a mob of representatives each from some kingdom or other.
“I am here today as a representative from the land of Germaniana.”

“I have been sent by the Azuntec Kingdom.”

“And I’m the second prince of Alzteca.”

Thankfully, Boralis had shown up to drive off the crowd of dignitaries. “My most sincere apologies,” she said, “but Her Majesty the Maiden Queen is here today to participate in the ceremony commemorating the launch of a new Enchanted Frigate route by the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. I am afraid I will have to ask you to please refrain from discussing unrelated matters until after the ceremony.”

If nothing else, the situation was proof of how high the Maiden Queen’s reputation had risen among the kingdoms of humanity. There was no shortage of rulers who were desperate to bring her into their own house as a bride or else send their princes to serve as her husband.

A group of them stood off to the side, whispering frantically to each other.

“Every time anyone asks for a meeting to discuss marriage, the Second Princess—the one in charge of diplomacy—gets in the way!” one of them griped.

“We’ve tried persuading the Second Princess herself, but everything she has to say on the matter is vague and noncommittal...” agreed another.

“We can’t miss this opportunity. We need to speak to the Maiden Queen directly and arrange a meeting!” added the third.

They kept waiting for an opportunity to get past the Maiden Queen's security and talk to her alone, but with Garyl helping out, they had no such luck.

"That Garyl boy... He doesn't let anything slip by, does he?"

"If it were just those lady knights, we might find some way past..."

"And he seems *quite* close to Her Majesty..."

Garyl took a long glance over the waiting room and sighed. *Miss Ellie is incredible, huh...?* he marveled. *She's so beautiful, no one can keep their eyes off her...* He then turned his gaze towards the Maiden Queen himself. For a second, their eyes met.

"A-Ah!" the Maiden Queen exclaimed, her face turning bright red as she hastily looked the other direction. "E-Excuse me!"

"Huh?" Surprised, Garyl came running up to the Queen. "Your Majesty, what's wrong? Do you have a fever? Your face looks red..." He placed one hand on his own forehead and the other on the Queen's, comparing their temperatures. He did it so naturally that none of the people nearby thought to stop him.

Gradually, it dawned on the Maiden Queen that Garyl's face was right in front of her own, looming large in her field of vision. "I...!" she squeaked, the redness spreading all the way to the tips of her eyes as she froze stiff on the spot, unable to move a muscle.

"Well, it doesn't *seem* like you have a fever..." Garyl said. "If you're not feeling well, though, my father would be happy to give you a place to rest, so don't hesitate to say so!" He gave her one of his cheerful grins and returned to his original position. The Maiden Queen, still blushing furiously, watched him go.

The dignitaries, who'd had a panoramic view of the whole exchange, began whispering even more than they had been before. It seemed Garyl's action had made quite a stir.

"Wh-Who is that youth? He seems completely at ease with the Queen!"

"It can't be... Is *he* the Maiden Queen's partner?!"

"Impossible. We would have heard something if the Maiden Queen was in a relationship."

“Besides which, that boy isn’t from any noble house I’ve ever heard of! I refuse to believe he’s a suitable partner for the Maiden Queen!”

As they carried on their whispered conversation, the Second Princess walked up beside Garyl. “Mister Garyl,” she said, “I wanted to thank you for inviting my sister the Maiden Queen and myself to the ceremony today. Please give your revered father, Mister Flio, my regards and congratulations as well.”

“All right,” Garyl agreed with a smile. “I’m sure my father will be overjoyed!”

The conversation sent yet another stir through the crowd of gathered dignitaries.

“W-Wait just a minute... That youth is the son of Mister Flio, the head of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store?!”

“I-I had been told Mister Flio’s children were all much younger!”

“Could he be a candidate for the Maiden Queen’s hand after all?”

“But it can’t be! The Maiden Queen would never marry the son of a merchant!”

I knew they’d make a fuss about that! the Second Princess thought to herself. “And another thing,” she continued, “I would like to meet with your father at his earliest convenience. The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode has elected to grant Mister Flio peerage and noble standing in recognition of his achievement in reviving the lost technology of the Enchanted Frigate. Would you be so kind as to let him know?”

“What?! W-Wait a moment, Second Princess!” the Maiden Queen protested, apparently somewhat frazzled by her sister’s words. “W-We still don’t know if Lord Flio will—”

Before she could say any more, the Second Princess clapped her hand over the Queen’s mouth and leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Don’t worry; I am fully aware that Mister Flio already refused the offer of peerage when we were sounding him out earlier.”

“Th-Then you should know not to say things like that!” the Maiden Queen furtively whispered back.

“Now, now,” the Second Princes replied, the picture of ease compared to her visibly frantic sister. Fortunately, the two of them had been speaking too quietly for anyone else to hear. “Just leave everything to your sister dearest.”

All around them, the foreign delegates were abuzz with rumors, whispering with grim expressions about the latest developments.

“D-Did you hear that?! Mister Flio is going to be a noble!”

“Then that means...that youth is the scion of a noble house!”

“B-But...then there would be no reason he *couldn’t* marry the Maiden Queen!”

Garyl frowned as he looked around the room. “Erm...” he hesitated. “Well, I’ll tell him, Your Highness, but...is something wrong? Why is everyone acting so strange?”

“Oh, it’s nothing you need to worry yourself about,” the Second Princess replied, turning back to Garyl. “By the way, Mister Garyl, may I ask you a question myself?”

“Yes? What is it?” Garyl asked with a smile.

“What do you think of my sister the Queen?”

Garyl answered without a moment’s hesitation. “Why, I love her very much!” he said, beaming brightly.

Garyl really does love my sister the way any boy would love a girl... the Second Princess thought.

Behind her, the Maiden Queen froze stiff. It wasn’t just her face now—her exposed shoulders and upper chest had turned bright red as well. Her mouth was opening and closing wordlessly. At that moment, she didn’t look much like a queen at all but simply an innocent girl.

It hardly needs mentioning, of course, but Garyl’s comments raised a tremendous fuss among the dignitaries.

◇Later—Enchanted Frigate Station Front◇

An enormous crowd had gathered by the ceremony platform set up in front of the Enchanted Frigate Station, here to witness the historic event. Flio ascended the platform before everyone's watching eyes, wearing Rys's handmade "human" ceremonial garb. He had his usual easygoing smile on his face, but inside he was fighting back his panic. *I've always been good at business talks,* he thought, *but no matter how many times I do it, I never get used to speaking in front of crowds like this...*

Rys watched her husband from her seat in the VIP area. "My lord husband looks wonderful in anything he wears..." she swooned, gazing up at him with amorous eyes, her cheeks flushed as she sighed in admiration. "But I really do think my earlier outfit would have suited him better..."

Next to her, her daughter Elinàsze was gazing up at Flio with a nearly identical expression on her face. "It's true..." She sighed as she gazed at her father. "Papa looks wonderful in anything he wears..."

Elinàsze was a lovely young girl who turned many a head, but unfortunately for her classmates, she had eyes only for her father and studiously rejected every love confession she received. That, however, is a story for another time.

Sitting next to Rys and Elinàsze was a skeleton wearing a ceremonial black robe. This was Calsi'im, who had once served as Dark Reagent while the Dark One was away. He had died once already, but Flio brought him back to life. Now he lived with the rest of the crew at Flio's house.

"Well, well!" he said. "If he looks so wonderful, I would like to get a glimpse myself! Now, Rabbitz...would you kindly get down from my head please? Just for a little while?" Alas, his daughter Rabbitz was perched on top of his head, wrapping her entire body around his face and completely blocking his field of vision.

Rabbitz was the daughter of Calsi'im and Tia, a skeleton and a magic doll respectively, making her a very unusual life form. She loved perching on top of her father Calsi'im's head and always seemed to have a big grin on her face.

"Nah!" Rabbitz insisted. "Rabbitz like here!" Grinning, she clung even tighter to her father's skull.

"Well, what do I do now?" Calsi'im lamented. "My dear Rabbitz won't get off

my head for even a moment! What a conundrum!” Despite his complaints, something in his bony grin looked like he was actually enjoying himself.

“My, Rabbitz really does love you, doesn’t she, Calsi’im?” cooed Tia. She was in the seat next to Calsi’im, smiling gently in his direction.

Tia was a magic doll created by a mage who had once served in the Dark Army. As a doll, she originally lacked emotions altogether. However, after Calsi’im rescued and refurbished her from her broken-down state, she began spending time with him and eventually developed emotions of her own. She even had a child with Calsi’im, who they named Rabbitz.

“Yah!” said Rabbitz. “Love papa! Love mama!”

“But you know,” Tia gently offered, “your beloved father Calsi’im will have a hard time if he can’t see what’s happening in front of him. Perhaps you should take your hands off of his face?”

“’Kay!” Rabbitz agreed, grinning. Despite her words, however, she made no movement whatsoever to release her iron grip on Calsi’im’s face.

“Rabbitz...” Tia pressed. “Thank you for agreeing so readily, but you didn’t actually move your hands.”

“’Kay!” repeated Rabbitz.

“Again, you haven’t moved your hands...”

While Calsi’im’s family got up to their antics, other funny business was going on nearby as well. In the seat next to them sat the small witch Belano, with her husband Minilio on her lap, and their child Belalio on his. Minilio was a magic doll Flio created as an experiment. He was given the name Minilio because he looked like a child-sized version of Flio himself. He had grown close to Belano while assisting her throughout the day and eventually the two married and had a child named Belalio.

Belalio, being Minilio and Belano’s child, was the offspring of a magic doll and a human—at least as unusual a being as the magic doll and skeleton hybrid Rabbtiz. Like Minilio, they strongly resembled a younger version of Flio, but they presented themselves androgynously. Their gender was unknown.

H-Hm... Belano thought to herself. *W-Well, I-I do enjoy this arrangement...but it's a bit...embarrassing...or something...* She was blushing bright red in her seat, keeping her head studiously lowered.

"Ah ha!" a voice suddenly came from behind them. "So I'm behind Belalio today!" It was Folmina, the daughter of Ghozal and Uliminas, who was half demon royalty and half hellcat. She was attached both to her own mother and Ghozal's other wife Balirossa, and she absolutely adored Garyl.

Folmina, who was sitting in her mother Uliminas's lap, started to hop up and down in excitement.

"Folmina!" Uliminas scolded her. "Behave meowrself! The ceremony's starting!"

"Okay, I will!" Folmina said, smiling and nodding. However, she was so excited to be with Uliminas that she kept right on hopping.

"Pardon me... Ghoro?" Next to Uliminas, Balirossa was stiffly trying to beckon her own son Ghoro. "Y-You have permission to sit on my lap like Folmina, i-if you'd like..."

Ghoro, the child of Ghozal and Balirossa, was half demon royalty and half human. Like Folmina, he was attached to both of Ghozal's wives. He was a boy of few words, who loved his big sister Folmina dearly.

"I-I'm fine here..." Ghoro said.

Unfortunately, when Ghoro said *here*, he meant the top of Balirossa's head. He had crawled up there just like Rabbitz.

"O-Oh, but you know, Ghoro..." Balirossa said, straining with all her might to keep her neck upright as beads of sweat started to form on her brow. "I understand that you wished to c-crawl up on my head like you always do with S-Sir Ghozal...b-b-but I-I...I...I'm afraid my neck strength is somewhat lacking..."

Oh, no... Balirossa thought. *Th-The moment my neck gives out, Ghoro is going to go plummeting to the ground! S-Sir Ghozal, save me!* She glanced over to her husband in the seat next to her, pleading desperately with her eyes.

"Ha ha ha!" Ghozal laughed. "You look like you're having a good time up

there, Ghoro!”

“Yeah...” said Ghoro, giving the smallest of nods.

I c-can’t ask Sir Ghozal to take Ghoro after he was so happy to see him up there! Balirossa thought, gritting her teeth to keep from sobbing openly. *Oh g-goodness...*

Flio glanced over the assembled crowd.

When I first came to this world, he thought, *humans and demons were in the middle of a war with each other. So many things have happened since then, but seeing humans and demons gathered together like this... It’s getting me all emotional...*

Flio had been summoned to this world from a different one by a ritual performed by the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. In the world he had come from, demihumans were facing severe persecution at the hands of humanity. *In my old world, there wasn’t anything I could do about all the discrimination different species faced. But here, I feel like I was able to at least help bring an end to the conflict.*

In the VIP seats for the ceremony that day were the Maiden Queen of Klyrode, the former Dark One Ghozal, and the former Dark Reagent Calsi’im. There were Balirossa, Byleri, Blossom, and Belano, who were once knights of Klyrode, and both Ghozal’s former confederate Uliminas along with Calsi’im’s former minion Tia. Then there was Sleip, formerly a member of the Infernal Four. The djinn Hiya, Damalynas the Grand Magus of Midnight, and the former Celestial Plane disciple Tanya were there as well.

And beyond that, there were visitors from lands near and far come to celebrate the launch of the Enchanted Frigate. They were of all different species and came from all walks of life. If he had all that to show for his efforts, Flio felt like he could permit himself just the slightest bit of pride.

Flio looked around, smiling his usual easygoing smile. Then he whispered an incantation under his breath, conjuring a tiny magic circle in front of his mouth, set up to project his voice to every corner of the square.

“Erm...good afternoon!” he began. “To be honest, I’m not nearly as grand a person as many of our guests today. I truly am grateful from the bottom of my heart to see such an enormous crowd gathered for the launch ceremony of the new Enchanted Frigate operated by the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. This ship will fly a regular service route between here in Houghtow City, the Dark One’s domain, Calgosi Coast, and Indol, but we intend to put more ships into service soon and increase the number of routes. This will improve the flow of people and goods around the world, enabling our mutual development.”

In front of Flio’s eyes was a window set so that only he could see it, containing the words of the statement he had spent all evening writing the night before.

When he finished his speech, the Maiden Queen went to say a few words. Then a representative of the Dark One, the Infernal Zanzibar, said some words as well, followed by Countess Junia Van Biel from the Calgosi Coast and Esto of the Esto Mercantile Association as a messenger from Indol. When they had all said their pieces, the entire crowd entered the station and ascended the boarding tower to embark on the Enchanted Frigate.

“Incredible, isn’t it?” marveled Rys. “Even with all these people on board, we have plenty of room to spare!” She looked around, pulling up a magic window of her own as she began looking around the ship’s control room, gasping intermittently with awe at this or that discovery.

“It might not look this big from the outside,” said Flio, “but I expanded the ship’s interior using magic. This is the only ship we have capable of carrying this many passengers, though. I’d need another magic gem as large as the one I used for this ship to make another of the same scale...”

“Leave it to me, my lord husband!” Rys declared, the hair on her head perking up like a wolf’s ears as she began to stretch her arm in wide circles. “I will head out for Dogorogma tomorrow and hunt a Beast of Disaster for you at once!”

“There is no need for the wife of the Exalted One to trouble herself on such trifling matters,” remarked Hiya, appearing out of thin air and kneeling down before Flio, bowing deeply. “Say but the word, Exalted One, and your Hiya shall slay a Beast of Disaster and return to you magic gem in hand.”

“Hey, just one second!” said Ghozal. “It sounds like you’re trying to leave me

out of the fun part! That's not very friendly of you!"

"Quite agreed!" said Sleip, standing right beside Ghozal and laughing uproariously. "We'll be coming with you!"

"Papa!" Elinàsze came running up to her father. "Please, leave this to me! I'll capture a Beast of Disaster for you with my magic!"

"W-Well," said Flio, looking between his five eager volunteers. "I suppose we should write up a schedule for magic gem collection duty at some point, but for the time being, let's focus on the Enchanted Frigate launch..."

Flio held out his arm for Rys, who took his hand in her own. Then the two of them, hand in hand, grabbed the lever by the side of the steering wheel. "And the Enchanted Frigate is hereby officially launched!" Flio declared, and together they pulled the lever at once. The ship separated from the tower and began to rise slowly into the air.

Suddenly, they heard a girl's voice coming from outside the vessel. "What gives, what gives?! I got sick of waiting-waiting!"

In front of Flio was an array of windows displaying the ship's status and visuals both inside and out. He turned his attention to one of them, where he could see a girl flying circles around the Enchanted Frigate, a smirking grin on her face.

"W-Wyne!" said Flio. "I thought you weren't coming to the ceremony! What are you doing here?!"

Wyne was a dragonewt—the strongest warrior among all of dragonkind. One day, she had collapsed mid-trip from famine only to be rescued by Flio and Rys, who adopted her as their daughter. She was the eldest of Flio and Rys's children. Right now, her dragon wings were fully manifested on her back. She flew around and around the Enchanted Frigate as it ascended into the air.

"So big! So big! Ah ha ha!" laughed Wyne. "This is fun-fun!" She was wearing her customary loose poncho, and as she made her circuits the wind caught its hem, flipping it up.

Tanya's expression switched immediately. "Y-Young Mistress Wyne! I have told you *so* many times! Why are you not wearing your underwear today?!"

Darting forward, she waved her hand and vanished from the control room. A second later, she appeared on the screen behind Wyne, a pair of feathered angel wings sprouting from her back. “Young Mistress Wyne!” Tanya shouted, chasing quickly after the dragonewt with a pair of underwear in each hand. “Be a good girl and put on your undergarments!”

“No way!” taunted Wyne. “I hate underwear! I hate it!” Changing her heading, she flew straight up in the air, Tanya in hot pursuit.

“You cannot escape!” Tanya declared. “I am going to make you wear your underwear, young mistress Wyne, if it’s the last thing I do!”

The guests inside the Enchanted Frigate, fortunately, knew nothing about the drama transpiring outside the ship. They were all busy looking out their physical windows at the land below.

“That Wyne...” Rys frowned as she watched. “And on my lord husband’s big day!”

“Oh, let her have her fun,” Flio said, smiling his usual smile. “It’s just how things are at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.”

The Enchanted Frigate flew on towards its first destination inside the Dark One’s domain, as Wyne and Tanya followed along after...

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

The Dark One Dawkson strode into his throne room on the second floor of the Dark Citadel and sat himself down on the floor in front of the high, imposing throne of demonkind.

Phufun, Dawkson's minion, stood next to him. "It may not be my place to say this, Master..." she said, taking a step forward and pressing her false glasses up the ridge of her nose.

"Huh?" Dawkson asked. "What's up, Phufun?"

"It's just..." Phufun continued. "Your efforts to rebuild the Dark Army are well underway thanks to your patient diplomacy as Dark One. After all you have done, do you not think you have earned the right to sit upon your throne...?"

Dawkson let out a small sigh at Phufun's words. "Yeah," he said. "I see what you're saying. There's no denying the Dark Army's back on its feet. But y'know...it's still a lot weaker than it was when I first took over. Plus, there's still loads of demons out there who say they won't serve the Dark Army as long as I'm in charge, and they're causing all sorts of problems out there. It just wouldn't feel right to me, sitting on the throne with the state of things. Sorry 'bout that."

"N-Not at all, Master," said Phufun, bowing so low her upper body was at a ninety degree angle to the ground. "Rather, I am the one who spoke out of turn. I apologize most profusely."

Ahh, Phufun thought. *Master Dawkson truly has changed. Back when he went by the name of Yuigarde, if I would ever dare to question him like that he would shout something like, "Shuddap! Don't you talk back to me!" and punch me through a wall like it was nothing...* An unbidden tear came to her eye as she thought back to her master's brutish former self. *And yet... I do somewhat miss the way he used to hit me for the slightest infraction! Sometimes I long for him to hit me hard enough to send my consciousness flying somewhere far away...* She blushed at the memory. Phufun, as it happened, was an inveterate masochist.

"But tell me," Dawkson said, moving the subject on to matters of business,

“you got anything that needs my attention? Anything happen while I was out visiting the pandamen?”

“A-Ah, yes, Master,” Phufun stammered, returning to herself. “My apologies.” She adjusted her glasses again and glanced down at the paperwork she had in her hand. “The Infernal Lord Zanzibar is out today, attending the launch ceremony the Fli-o’-Rys General Store is putting on for their new Enchanted Frigate line. He should be returning shortly. And regarding the issue you’ve been working so hard on of late...we’ve received yet more reports of victims, I’m afraid...”

The Dark One clicked his tongue in frustration at the news. “Those bastards! Somehow I managed to keep the pandamen safe, but there were even more victims while I wasn’t looking, huh?”

“Yes, most unfortunately,” Phufun answered. “Your subordinate, the Infernal Lady Belianna, is currently en route to investigate.”

“What are they trying to do, kidnapping members of rare demon species like that...?” Dawkson muttered. “The fable folk and the others we promised protection are safe in the Dark Citadel, but the losses small clans have been suffering out in the borderlands ain’t no joke. As long as they’re limiting themselves to abducting small groups of demons, I can’t just send out the entire army either. Well, for the time being, we should put every intelligence agent we’ve got on the case.”

“Yes, Master,” said Phufun, pressing her glasses up the ridge of her nose as she bowed. “It will be done.”

We established a new intelligence agency for the Dark Army, per Master Dawkson’s orders... Phufun reflected as she left the throne room, a complicated expression on her face. *But our espionage capabilities are still far from what they were in the days of Dark One Gholl’s spy network, the Silent Listeners.*

Dawkson heaved a heavy sigh as he watched Phufun leave. *This sorta thing never used to happen back when my brother Gholl was Dark One,* he thought. *I’ve still got a long ways to go before I’m worthy of the throne.*

During Dawkson’s reign as Yuigarde, he would invariably blame his subordinates whenever there were any sort of problems. Now, however, he

made it a point to take the initiative to look for a solution himself whenever problems arose, without placing the blame on anyone under his command.

◇The Outskirts of the Dark One's Domain◇

"You there! In the damned suspicious carriage! I order you to stop!" Belianna glided through the forest in pursuit of a fast moving carriage, weaving between the trees as she dramatically spun her scythe.

"*C-Could you perhaps give us a moment?!*" came a woman's telepathic voice from inside the carriage. "*I swear we're not suspicious!*"

"Gimme a break!" Belianna shot back. "Any damned suspicious person would *say* they're not suspicious! That's the most damned suspicious thing in the world! Besides which, I found your damned carriage idling about in the same damned spot where a bunch of rare demons got themselves abducted. Now quit whining and stop your damned vehicle!" She swung her scythe, cutting a swath of nearby trees in half and sending them toppling towards the carriage. Her target, however, was agile. It dodged between the gaps of the falling trees as it carried on full speed ahead.



“Hang on!” Hero Gold-Hair snapped in irritation as the vehicle veered violently to the left and right, sending the occupants tumbling around. “Isn’t

that one of Dawkson's underlings?! Why in the world would *she* be attacking *us?!*"

"W-W-W-Well, you knooow!" Tsuya managed, clinging tight to Hero Gold-Hair's arm as the carriage pitched. "The mooooment she spoke to us, *you* were all, 'Confound it! Run!' and Aryun Keaaats took off! Of *cooourse* she thinks we're suspicious!"

"W-Well, what did you expect me to do?!" Hero Gold-Hair protested. "I thought for sure she was an enemy!"

"Should we use Vaaalentine's thread to stop her from moooving, Hero Gooold-Hair?" Tsuya asked, but Hero Gold-Hair shot her down.

"No way! That woman is one of Dawkson's subordinates! He'll be furious if we hurt her!"

"I-I mean, you can *say* that..." Wuha Gappoli objected from the floor of the carriage—she had fallen out of her seat. "But how *else* are we gonna get out of this one?!"

"My lord," Riliangiu volunteered, "I am prepared to negotiate with this woman if needs must..." She was clinging to the ceiling of the carriage, directly above Wuha, her arms transformed into a pair of blades just in case.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Hero Gold-Hair barked, making Riliangiu stiffen up in surprise. "I would never order one of my precious companions into harm's way like that! Keats, see if you can get into that gap in the cliff!"

"*Yes, sir!*" came Aryun Keats's telepathic response. Aryun Keats was a carriage djinn, currently transformed as the carriage itself. She sped up, aiming for a narrow chasm in the cliff face ahead.

"Wait, damn you, you damned carriage!" Belianna shouted as she flew after them. Suddenly, however, she came upon a sheer cliff. Unable to fly further, she floated down to the ground. "H-Huh? Where did that damned carriage get to?" It had been just ahead of her, but suddenly it seemed to have vanished completely.

"Was that a damned Teleportation spell?" Belianna wondered, shouldering her scythe as she stepped into the narrow passageway formed by the crevice in

the cliff, looking every which way as she proceeded. “No, there wasn’t enough time for a damned incantation! Then where *did* they get to...?”

Some time later, Hero Gold-Hair’s head popped out of a patch of tall grass at the end of the passageway through the cliff. “Good,” he said after looking all around to make sure Belianna was nowhere in sight. “Looks like she passed us by.” Holding the Drilldozer Shovel in one hand, he emerged from a hole in the ground.

Hero Gold-Hair had used his legendary item, the Drilldozer Shovel, to dig a hole big enough for the entire party the very moment they entered the crevice, covering up the hole’s entrance with a convenient patch of nearby grass. The whole operation had taken a mere eight-tenths of a second.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!” Aryun Keats cried as she climbed out of Hero Gold-Hair’s hole. The shock of the fall had undone her transformation, returning her to her humanoid form. “Sir Hero Gold-Hair, I wish you would tell me before digging a hole like that! I fell headfirst, you know!” She was massaging the top of her head, which had turned bright red and tender from the fall. Valentine, Riliangiu, and Tsuya came crawling up after her.

“It was an emergency situation,” Hero Gold-Hair insisted as he offered the rest of the party a hand out of the hole. “I’ll hear no complaints!”

Hm... Hero Gold-Hair thought to himself. *I’ve heard rumors about someone abducting demons. If Dawkson’s subordinate’s on the case, I guess it’s true after all...*

◇That Evening—Flio’s House, Pasture◇

That day, once the Enchanted Frigate’s maiden voyage was finished, Sleip returned home to Flio’s house ahead of everyone else and got to work on the pasture.

“I was wondering where you got to,” MacTaulo, still clad in his armor, said as he stepped up to the old lichsteed. “So you came back here, hm?”

“That I did,” Sleip said, grinning cheerfully as he easily hefted an enormous

bale of hay over his shoulder with his superhuman strength. “I’ve never been much good with big ceremonies. Looking after the horses here suits me much better.”

“So you, your missus, and your daughter run this pasture together, do you?” MacTaulo asked.

“Indeed I do,” confirmed Sleip. “It’s a pretty good life, spending my days in peace and watching my daughter grow up.”

“I see...” MacTaulno nodded. “It does seem like decent way to live, I suppose.”

Back when the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode were at war, Sleip of the Infernal Four and MacTaulo, the Magical Kingdom’s most storied commander, had clashed on the battlefield time and time again. Their fierce battles with each other had given the two men a sense of mutual respect. At some point, their long rivalry gave rise to a kind of camaraderie between them. Now that the war was over, the two had come to know each other as good friends.

“So, MacTaulo,” Sleip grunted, “you said at the ceremony that you had some kind of business with me?”

“Yes, that’s right...” MacTaulo cleared his throat as he leaned back against the wooden fence. “You see, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode is reorganizing their Knight Academy as the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education. I’ve been nominated as the first headmaster of the new institution.”

“Well, now!” Sleip marveled. “That sounds like quite the promotion if I’m not mistaken! I suppose I outta congratulate you! But what’s the difference between the old Knight Academy and this new institute?”

“The Knight Academy,” MacTaulo answered, “was just as its name suggested —a school for educating the kingdom’s knights. It was mainly a military institution that raised up knights to go off and fight in the war against the Dark Army. But now that we’re at peace, it only seems appropriate for the role of the institution to change. The school’s being restructured as a general education institute for Klyrode’s youth. Young folks are the future, after all...”

MacTaulo fell silent, and looked over at Sleip. The old lichsteed looked back. For a second, they just stood facing each other. Then MacTaulo cracked a smile.

"And so," he continued, looking out at the pasture, "the favor I would like to ask of you, Sir Sleip, is if you would perhaps lend us some of your equine magic beasts for equestrian drills at the Chivalric Institute."

"Oho!" Sleip exclaimed, laughing boisterously at the request. "If that's what this is about, then just leave it to me! I'd be happy to supply you with horses!"

In truth... MacTaulo thought, his eyes still studying Sleip's face, *I was hoping to make him a teacher at the school. I would have liked to work alongside him. But the minute I met his eyes, I knew...*

MacTaulo had read a clear message in Sleip's expression: "*I'm happy with my life here. Sorry, but I can't go along with your expectations.*" After all the times the two men had crossed swords, they had learned to understand each other without words.

"Well, would you look at the time!" MacTaulos said. "You had best get going to dinner, I suppose! It wouldn't do to keep Rys and her delicious home cooking waiting!"

"It would not," agreed Sleip. "And since you're here, perhaps you'd care to join us for a meal?"

The two men made their way to the main house, an arm slung around the other's shoulder.

Well, then, MacTaulo thought. *Sir Sleip may have rejected the offer, but perhaps my other target here will prove more amenable...*

◇A Village, Deep in the Mountains◇

Inside a demon village's local pub situated near the border of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, a great crowd had gathered for the evening. Ever since the Dark Army had signed their peace treaty with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode the village had opened the once-closed road to all. There were even a number of humans in the crowd among the demons.

Two horse demon men sat at the bar counter, chatting merrily as they drank.

“By the by, have you heard the rumor?” one of them asked.

“You mean, about demons being spirited away...?” his companion replied.

“Yes, that! They say there’s been demons going suddenly missing on the road outside town.”

“People’ve said it must be the gods of demonkind doing it, since almost everyone it happened to seems to have vanished without a trace.”

“This is just something I overheard,” the first demon said, “but it seems like the victims all shared a particular trait.”

“A trait?” the other demon repeated.

“That’s right. Only rare demon species are getting abducted.”

“Rare demon species?” the second demon repeated. “You mean like fable folk and doppeladlers?”

“Yeah, exactly.” The demon took a swig of his tankard of ale. “And guess what—another spiriting away happened on the pass leading to town...”

Suddenly, a scythe blade appeared from behind and pressed against the demon’s throat. “Wh-What?!” he exclaimed. The pair froze stiff in shock.

“Mind giving me the full damned version?” asked the woman holding the scythe.

“Y-You’re...milady!” exclaimed the first demon.

“L-Lady Belianna of the Infernal Four!” said the second.

She was wearing a hood to hide her face, but the demon men were correct—this was, indeed, Belianna herself. “I’m looking into all these damned disappearances of rare demon species under the order of the Dark One Lord Dawkson,” she explained. “I don’t suppose you two have any damned information you’d like to share?”

“O-Of course! It would be my pleasure!”

“We’d be happy to share our story if it will be of use...”

Belianna withdrew her scythe from around the demon's horse-like neck and slung it over her shoulder, sitting down in the seat beside the pair as they continued their story.

While Belianna was listening to their story, a mixed group of men and women were drinking and conversing at a table near one of the pub's windows.

"Ah ha ha!" a small-framed woman—Wuha Gappoli—cackled. "Aryun's already passed out drunk! You could stand to learn a lesson or two on holding your liquor from the great Wuha Gappoli!" Next to her, a woman in a tidy black outfit lay unconscious, facing the ceiling with a bottle still hanging out of her mouth.

"I...I...I am a hopeless case, I fear..." sobbed the red-faced woman dressed in an outfit reminiscent of the ninja clans to the east as she lay face down on the table.

"Oh, Riliangiu..." tutted the woman next to her dressed in a revealing and beguiling garb. "You always get so weepy when you're drunk!" For her part, she was grinning cheerfully as she devoured plate after plate of food.

"M-Miss Vaaalentine..." another woman in an even more revealing outfit protested, pale in the face as she checked the contents of the group's purse. "Y-You're eating faaar too much! W-We don't have enough mooooney!"

Hero Gold-Hair, meanwhile, wasn't paying attention to the women at his table—he was focusing on the conversation happening over at the bar counter. "Hmm..." he muttered. "So rare demon species really have been disappearing..."

"Ummm..." said the woman with the purse. "Hero Gooold-Hair? Is something wrooong?"

"Oh, Tsuya!" Hero Gold-Hair said. "It sounds like Dawkson's people are in some kind of trouble..."

"Whaaat?!" Tsuya followed Hero Gold-Hair's gaze over to where Belianna was busy pressing the horse demons for more information about their story. "You don't saaay!"

"Oh, Hero Gold-Hair!" Valentine sang, pushing Tsuya out of the way to hug

him tight, interrupting his efforts to focus on listening in to Belianna's conversation. "Would you like something to drink? Something to eat?" She was in the middle of devouring a huge chunk of meat herself.

"Ah ha ha!" Wuha Gappoli laughed, darting up behind Hero Gold-Hair. "Drink up, drink up! You'll be sleeping safe and sound inside me tonight, after all!" Wuha was a mansion djinn, and as such, she had the power to transform into a wide variety of dwellings.

"Shut up, you lot!" Hero Gold-Hair snapped. "I can't hear a word those three are saying with all your racket!"

"Now, now, Hero Gold-Hair!" said Valentine. "There's no call for such language!"

"Yeah, yeah!" agreed Wuha. "The food and drink are both great! You should have some!"

"Idiots!" Hero Gold-Hair barked, struggling to push Valentine and Wuha Gappoli off of him as the two clung on tight. "I said, shut up! I'm in the middle of something serious!" His table had gone completely out of control.

"What's up with that damned racket?" Belianna said, sparing an annoyed glance at Hero Gold-Hair's table. "I can't hear a damned thing these two are saying over that group!"

Chapter 2: Flio Returns to the Calgosi Coast, Part 1

◇Night—Flio's Bedroom◇

Flio sat alone in his room as Rys took her bath, looking over some paperwork for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store when a voice came from behind. "Mister Flio, might I perhaps ask for a moment of your time?"

Flio turned around to see a woman floating in the corner of his room. Her body was half that of a young girl and half skeleton, and she wore a tattered cloak. It was Zofina, angel and disciple of the Celestial Plane, taking the form of the Contract Executor who enforces blood oaths. Flio met her with his usual easygoing smile.

"Don't tell me... I suppose you've already noticed that this body is a projection?" Zofina asked.

"Well..." Flio said, his smile unwavering. "I did notice that there isn't any actual mass to that form, and I can definitely feel faint telepathic waves, so I figured it was something like that. Besides, I'm reasonably certain that even a Disciple of the Celestial Plane would have trouble getting through the barrier around this room."

I see... Zofina said, smirking despite herself. *He deduced that much in a mere instant*...

The Celestial Plane was a higher tier world than Klyrode, but Flio was right. Even Zofina, who came from that world, had no way to get through Flio's barrier. Perhaps, with great effort, she might be able to dispel the barrier he had set up around the house, but it would be completely impossible to make it through to Flio's bedroom. The best she could do was use her telepathic abilities to send a projection of herself through the impenetrable magic wall.

"Should I undo part of the barrier so you have a way in, perhaps?" Flio offered.

“No, there’s no need for that,” Zofina said. “I am here today with a message from my superior in the Office of Otherworld Regulation and Enforcement. I only need you to listen.”

Zofina withdrew a vellum scroll from her cloak and unrolled it. A small image of a goddess appeared in the air, floating above the scroll. “*To the human Flio...*” she stated. “*Thou hast rediscovered the high technology of the Enchanted Frigate, once lost to the world of Klyrode. This is technology of the Celestial Plane, deemed impermissible for use in thy world. In deference to thy strenuous efforts in contribution to the Celestial Plane, however, we have elected to grant thee special dispensation to use this technology. Only heed this: thou must take every pain to prevent the secret of creating Enchanted Frigates from falling into another’s hand, and thou shan’t be permitted to transfer ownership of such a ship to anyone.*”

The goddess vanished. Zofina returned the roll of vellum to her cloak. “Essentially,” she said, “we would like you to exercise caution in your management and operation of these Enchanted Frigate routes. That is the message I came here to deliver.”

“I see...” Flio mused. “So the Enchanted Frigate is technology from the Celestial Plane, huh? But then, why would a djinn from this world have access to it? You see, I found out about the Enchanted Frigate when I happened to get my hands on a random djinn’s knowledge and abilities.”

“If I were to guess...” Zofina ventured. “There was a time long ago when Enchanted Frigates from the Celestial Plane made regular trips to the world of Klyrode, among others. There are certainly a number of vessels we lost to random accidents and have since fallen to ruin. This djinn must have found an occasion to lay their hands on such a husk, and obtained knowledge of its construction. But knowledge alone wouldn’t be enough to actually operate an Enchanted Frigate...”

The magic gems that exist in the world of Klyrode are too small to serve as fuel for an entire frigate, Zofina thought. *Mister Flio must be using large quantities of magic gems from Beasts of Disaster in Dogorogma. Rightly speaking, we* should *confiscate the ships and forbid him any further entrance to Dogorogma, but...* Zofina sighed. *Mister Flio uses the flesh and bones he gets from the Beasts*

of Disaster to create a healing medicine of exceptional potency, which the goddesses of the Celestial Plane have taken to using to rejuvenate their skin. And, as allowing Mister Flio unrestricted to Dogorogma is essential if he is going to continue selling his concoction to the Celestial Plane, the goddesses all agreed that such a measure would be unfeasible. My superiors in the Otherworld Regulation and Enforcement left the entire situation in my hands, only telling me not to let the Celestial Plane's advanced technology spread "further than it already has." Zofina recalled, sighing yet again.

"And so," Zofina said, "I would simply like to ask you once again to please exercise caution in your management and operation of your Enchanted Frigates."

"All right," Flio accepted. "You can let the people at the Office of Otherworld Regulation and Enforcement know that I promise to take full responsibility for the Enchanted Frigate lines."

"Thank you," Zofina said, smiling. "I can't tell you what a relief it is to hear that." *Mister Flio is capable of creating barriers that even my magic as a disciple of the Celestial Plane cannot breach...* she thought. *I shouldn't expect any problems with him in charge.* "And with that settled, I believe I will take my leave." With that, her form vanished.

◇Meanwhile—The Forest Outside Flio's House◇

Hidden behind a tree in the nearby forest, Zofina slowly opened her eyes. She had been sweating so much that her face was glossy and pale. It was evident that she had just undergone a great deal of fatigue.

"That barrier around his bedroom..." she muttered to herself as she caught her breath, shoulders heaving. "I've never seen anything like it before in my life. It was all I could do to send a holographic projection inside, and I'm an angel from the Celestial Plane! What could he possibly be thinking, setting up a barrier like that?"

Suddenly, a scythe blade appeared around Zofina's neck from behind. She looked down and swallowed nervously at the sight of the dull gleam of the

metal.

“Well, well,” said Tanya. “I was wondering who it was. Zofina, the disciple of the Celestial Plane, is it?”

“And you would be Tanyalite, likewise of the Celestial Plane,” Zofina said.

Tanya removed her scythe from Zofina’s neck. “If you are not here on business, I would ask you to refrain from needlessly entering the area around Master Flio’s house so late at night. Otherwise, I’m afraid you’ll have only yourself to blame if you end up decapitated.”

Zofina turned to face her fellow angel. *Even if I was distracted with my holographic projection at the time, there aren’t many who could catch me unawares like that,* she thought. *Well, Tanyalite* was *always said to be an angel with abilities on par with a goddess...*

“I’ve finished my business,” Zofina said. “I was just about to take my leave, in fact. Perhaps you’ll see fit to let me off with a warning tonight?”

“Very well,” Tanya said. “I will allow you to leave peacefully this time. But should you enter this territory without leave again, consider your life forfeit.” She lifted the skirt of her maid uniform in an elegant curtsy.

“Understood,” Zofina agreed. “Next time I will be sure to contact you ahead of time.”

“Oh, and one more thing...” Tanya started. “My name is Tanya, not Tanyalite or anything of the sort. Please take care in the future.”

Tanya had once been an angelic disciple of the Celestial Plane by the name of Tanyalite. She had been ordered to infiltrate Flio’s house. On her way, however, she had a mid-air collision with Wyne that caused her to lose every last memory she had of her previous life. And so, she chose to work for Flio, the man who rescued her. Tanya was all she could remember of her name at the time, and so it was the name she chose to go by.

“I see...” said Zofina. “In that case, Miss Tanya, I bid you goodnight.” She bowed her head and flew outside the house’s barrier, Tanya watching her go until she was out of sight.

◇Back in Flio's Bedroom◇

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, my lord husband," Rys said, entering the room just as Zofina's image vanished. She had a towel wrapped around her wet hair, having just gotten out of the bath. "Um..." she started, stepping up beside Flio, "was someone just here?"

"Oh, yes," Flio replied. "Miss Zofina stopped by to discuss the Enchanted Frigates. Although all she was able to do was send a projection, thanks to the barrier."

"Goodness!" Rys exclaimed, holding her hand in front of her mouth in a gesture of shock. "Angels from the Celestial Plane really are incredible! Even Hiya couldn't make it past that barrier, but Zofina was able to send a projection inside?"

"Ha ha," Flio laughed, smirking wryly at the mention of Hiya's failed infiltration attempts. "I suppose so."

After being defeated by Flio, Hiya had taken to worshipping him as the Exalted One and obeyed him dutifully as his subordinate—his "humble servant" to use Hiya's own words. After witnessing Flio and Rys's close relationship in person, however, Hiya had become fascinated with the emotion humans refer to as "love." It got to the point where they even attempted to sneak into the couple's room at night to spy on Flio and Rys's lovemaking. Flio had made the barrier around his room so abnormally strong as a countermeasure against the djinn.

"By the way," Rys said, "I heard from Uliminas that you've been getting inquiries about the Enchanted Frigates from all sorts of people."

"You can say that again." Flio nodded, looking down at the papers he had been leafing through. "There's been lots of people from the kingdoms surrounding Klyrode coming to ask for the frigate to make a stop at some village or city or other. I've even gotten people asking to buy one, or for permission to watch one being constructed."

"Purchasing an entire frigate aside, I don't suppose it would benefit them at all to watch you construct one of the ships, would it?" Rys asked. "Without my

lord husband's vast reserves of magic power they would have no hope of duplicating the process, let alone any means to obtain a magic gem from Dogorogma to serve as an energy source..."

"Well, I suppose that's true..." Flio said. "But they wouldn't know that, would they?"

Their conversation continued on in that vein. Eventually, Rys sidled up to her husband, leaning her body against his. "You were marvelous at the ceremony today, my lord husband..."

"O-Oh, was I?" Flio replied. "I just tried to be my usual self, that's all."

"You were fantastic!" Rys beamed. "Elinàsze was deeply moved as well, you know."

I don't know... Flio thought, frowning to himself. *Rys and Elinàsze both have a bit of a blind spot when it comes to me, I think..* "O-Oh!" he said. " I just remembered something. Why don't we take the whole family on a trip on one of the regular Enchanted Frigate lines?"

"A trip?" Rys asked.

"Yeah!" said Flio. "I got a letter of invitation from one of the cities where we built an Enchanted Frigate station, actually."

"One of the cities where we built a station..." Rys mused. "Was it from the kingdom of Indol, perhaps?"

"Yes, that's right," Flio replied. "Although, honestly, it seemed like the people from Indol were much more eager to have *you* visit than me, Rys."

A distinct furrow formed on Rys's brow at those words. She had once visited Indol on a shopping trip to buy some cloth and ended up—quite unintentionally—foiling a group of evildoers on the way. Some in the kingdom had taken to revering her as a goddess ever since.

"H-Hm... I guess I can see why you wouldn't be too keen on visiting Indol again, Rys. In that case, how about visiting somewhere else?"

"My lord husband!" Rys exclaimed eagerly, her expression lighting up as she hit on an idea. "How about the Kinosaki Hot Springs? Oh, I would love to have

an Enchanted Frigate line going straight to the Kinosaki Hot Springs Village...” She looked up at her husband, giving him the old puppy dog eyes.

Flio, however, winced at the suggestion. The Kinosaki Hot Springs had seven springs, each purported to have different merits to bathers. It was a lovely town where you could walk around, enjoying each of the different springs to your heart’s content. However... *I’m sure the only spring Rys wants to visit is the Yanagi Bath, with its blessing for fertility...*

“Oh, please, my lord husband!” said Rys, nuzzling up to him. She seemed to know at once what was on his mind. “Rylnàsze is growing up to be an energetic girl—I’m sure she’s coming to the age where she’d appreciate a little brother or sister or two!”

Flio held Rys gently in his arms and pulled her in close. “You’re right. I’ll look into whether we can get a frigate stop at the Kinosaki Hot Springs village.”

“Thank you! Thank you ever so much, my lord husband! Oh, by the way, you’ll never guess what Elinàszse did today...” she began, cheerfully launching into a story about the events of the day. Seeing her like this, it was nigh impossible to believe that this woman had once been the lupine demon Fenrys of the Dark Army, said to be equal in strength to the Infernal Four.

Flio listened to his wife’s story, smiling his usual easygoing smile. And after a bit more pleasant conversation, the two crawled together into bed. Flio waved his index finger and the magic lanterns went out, shrouding the room in darkness...

◇Meanwhile, in the Hallway by Flio's Room◇

In the hallway on the second floor, outside the entrance to Flio's room, Hiya stood with their arms outstretched, casting spell after spell in the direction of the door.

"Hm..." Hiya mused. "Once again, all my efforts come to naught. The Exalted One's magic barrier is extraordinary indeed. I, Hiya, find myself utterly at a loss." Smiling quietly to themself, Hiya bowed deeply towards the bedroom door. "I wished to covertly observe the couple's lovemaking as an example for my own study, but alas, I must concede defeat...for tonight, at least."

Hiya waved and vanished from sight. The hallway fell silent.

A few minutes later, Tanya appeared. She was making her way up the stairs, scythe in hand, as she looked up and down the empty hallway. "I thought I sensed a suspicious presence outside Master Flio's bedchambers a moment ago," she said, "but no one is here..." Still keeping her scythe equipped, she continued on down the hall, careful not to make a sound as she walked.

Tanya was on duty day and night protecting Flio's household from any threat within or without. Nobody, it seemed, had ever seen her actually sleep.

◇Outside Flio's House—Pasture◇

Early in the day, with the early morning sun shining down upon the pasture outside Flio's house, Rislei was once again taking Clecio, her favorite horse, out for a ride. "Giddy up!" she cried, and Clecio sped up, racing along the ground at a good pace.

After riding around the pasture for a bit, Rislei was joined by her mother Byleri, who was riding on her own horse, Dormamu. Rislei and Clecio had been galloping rather quickly, but Byleri caught up to them in a flash.

"That's mama for you," Rislei marveled, turning to face her mother with a wry smirk on her face. "I can't believe you've caught up to me already!"

"No way!" Byleri cried back cheerfully. "I'm, like, barely keeping up with you! You're doing great, Rislei!" Despite her words, however, Byleri and Dormamu hardly seemed to be pushing themselves at all as they kept pace with Rislei,

who was riding all out on Clecio. The difference didn't seem to be down to the horses themselves—no, it was clear to anyone watching that the disparity between Byleri's and Rislei's equestrian techniques was like night and day.

"By the way, mama," Rislei began, "papa told me we're going to be sending some of the horses from our pasture to some place called the Klyrode Institute for Equestrian Education. Is that true?"

"Uh-huh!" Byleri answered, grinning. "So, like, that's why we gotta make sure all the horsies are good and trained!"

"Um..." Rislei ventured. "Tell me if there's anything I can do to help, okay? I wanna be useful to you and papa sometimes, you know."

"Like, thank you, Rislei! I'll let you know for sure!" Byleri said, and spurred Dormamu, leaving Rislei and Clecio in their dust.

"Mama's so amazing," Rislei said to herself, watching from behind as Byleri sped off into the distance with stars in her eyes. "I've got a long ways to go if I'm ever going to measure up to her..." Just then, another horse came running up from behind. "Huh?!" Byleri exclaimed, whipping around to see Garyl riding on one of the equine magic beasts they kept on the pasture.

"Good morning, Rislei!" Garyl chirped. "I'm just doing a bit of training for horseback riding."

"Wha?! G-Gare?!" Rislei exclaimed, her eyes going wide in shock at the boy's sudden appearance. "W-Well, you're welcome to practice, I suppose."

It was no wonder Rislei was so shocked. The horse Garyl was riding was one of the most difficult they had, but with Garyl on its back, it was racing along magnificently, running with all its strength and then some.

That horse is supposed to have some kind of incredible latent potential, but not even mama was able to draw it out! Rislei thought, glancing over at Garyl with a bewildered expression. *Was Gare really able to manage it his first time?! Isn't that just a bit* too *ridiculous?!*

"Well, then, I'll be going on ahead!" said Garyl, and in no time at all, he had zoomed far, far ahead.

“Training for horseback riding...” Rislei repeated. “Somehow, I don’t think Garyl needs it. If anything, it’s just making me lose confidence...” Despite her words, though, there a happy smile spread across her face. “I guess Gare and Eli are going to be graduating from school before too long, aren’t they...? I wonder what Gare’s gonna do next?”

◇Behind Flio’s House—Flio’s Workshop◇

Behind Flio’s house stood another building, which was a size larger than the house itself. There was a sign by the doorway, declaring the structure to be Flio’s workshop. It was there that Flio—along with some help from others—developed and produced items to be sold at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.

In a room on the second story of the workshop, Flio and Tanya were discussing Zofina’s visit the night before.

“I see...” said Tanya when Flio told her what the angel had said. “So that is what Zofina had to say...” An expression of contempt passed over her face. She clicked her tongue. “Ridiculous. Perhaps the technology behind the Enchanted Frigate originated from the Celestial Plane, but only you, Master Flio, could have created one from scratch in a world where no such ships exist in a complete state. I knew I should have ended that woman’s life on the spot when I found her last night.” She glared out the window, her brow furrowed with indignation.

Flio winced. “W-Well, be that as it may, Miss Zofina’s only doing her job. Let’s go easy on her, okay? Besides, I’ve caused her a lot of trouble as well, like back when I used that Temporal Rewind spell to reverse time...”

Temporal Rewind was a spell that manipulated the origin of light and darkness itself. It was an extremely high level spell, one that even Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, would need to use a considerable amount of their power to cast. Flio, however, had cast it himself when Hiya had first appeared as an enemy. Rys took one of Hiya’s attacks for her husband and suffered a mortal wound, but Flio turned back time itself to save her life.

Reversing time, however, had the potential to hinder the smooth operation of a world’s space-time continuum, and as such it was strictly regulated by the

Celestial Plane. Anyone found to be using such a spell for reckless personal reasons was sure to expect punishment.

In Flio's case, however, there were the recovery elixirs he provided for the Celestial Plane's grateful goddesses to keep in mind, and with Zofina's intercession, he was let off with a stern warning.

"Well, Master Flio, I'll do as you say, but I won't pretend to like it..." Tanya grumbled with an expression that made clear there was nothing Flio could say to dispel her anger before moving on. "Incidentally," she continued, changing topics, "we received a letter just today." She waved her arm, and a sealed envelope appeared in her hand.

"Well, let's see..." Flio said, looking over the address written on the envelope. "Ah, it appears to be from Junia Van Biel, countess of the Calgosi Coast." He opened it up, retrieving the letter inside. Just as Flio had said, it was from Countess Junia Van Biel, who ruled the Calgosi Coast region to the south of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode.

"Countess Van Biel was in attendance for the Enchanted Frigate launch ceremony yesterday, if I'm not mistaken..." Tanya remarked.

"Yes, that's right," Flio agreed, thinking back to the ceremony the day before. Junia Van Biel had come all the way from the Calgosi Coast to be in attendance. She sitting with the other VIPs, and boarded the ship for its maiden voyage alongside them, but...

Now that I think about it, Miss Junia didn't say a single word to anyone at the ceremony, did she? Flio thought.

Indeed, just as Flio remembered, Junia hadn't spoken to a single soul the whole time she was in attendance. She had even run away to avoid the Maiden Queen when she came to offer her greetings. For being the person responsible for governing the Calgosi Coast, and for all her noble upbringing, Junia happened to suffer from severe social anxiety.

"What does Countess Van Biel's letter say?" Tanya asked.

"Well, let's see..." Flio began, reading the note written in Junia's exacting handwriting. "First off, um, it looks like she's apologizing for not being able to

greet us properly during the ceremony...” Flio smirked despite himself. *Ah, so she’s self-aware, at least...* he thought before continuing. “And then she says a new Beast of Disaster has found its way into the outskirts of the Calgosi Coast. She’s requesting our help dealing with it.”

Beasts of Disaster were an especially vicious type of magic beast, one that didn’t ordinarily exist in the world of Klyrode. When one appeared, the angelic disciples of the Celestial Plane made it their business to capture it and send it to Dogorogma, a world that existed directly beneath the Celestial Plane itself. Unfortunately, as Beasts of Disaster appeared randomly and unpredictably among the innumerable planetoid worlds, the angels weren’t always able to apprehend them in time. There were many cases of such beings causing untold devastation before they were finally subdued. They were a wellspring of calamity, difficult to defeat even for groups of angels working as a team.

“There’s a dimensional cleft off the coast of Calgosi,” Flio said. “I thought it seemed like the kind of place where it’s relatively easy for a Beast of Disaster to appear, so I told Miss Junia to let me know if one shows up.”

“Is that so?” said Tanya. “In that case, we should prepare to set out at once.”

“We should,” Flio agreed. “And let everyone know, would you? It sounds like a good chance to take a trip on the Enchanted Frigate.”

“You’re going on the Enchanted Frigate, Master Flio?” Tanya asked. “Forgive me for saying so, but couldn’t you make the trip in a single second using your Teleportation spell?”

“It’s true that I could,” said Flio, “but Rys and the rest of the house have been saying they want to take the Enchanted Frigate on a trip somewhere, and the Calgosi Coast happens to be one of the destinations along its route. I can’t think of a better opportunity.”

“I see,” Tanya said with a curtsy. “In that case, I will let everyone know to begin packing immediately.”

“All right then, I’ll leave that to you,” Flio said. “In the meantime, I have some preparations of my own to take care of.” He stood up and made his way out the door.

Even the disciples of the Celestial Plane struggle to exterminate a Beast of Disaster, but Master Flio is treating it as an opportunity to take the household on vacation... Tanya thought as she watched him leave. *Such is his power, I suppose...*

Flio had slain dozens upon dozens of Beasts of Disaster already. In fact, the Enchanted Frigate line they were about to take was fueled by magic gems taken from the corpses of such beasts. Tanya knew this as well as anyone. Perhaps that was why she was able to take his behavior in stride.

◇Several Days Later—Houghtow City, Enchanted Frigate Station◇

At last, the weekend came.

“Oh wow!” Folmina gasped, looking out the window as the Enchanted Frigate line disembarked from the boarding tower. Ghoro and Belalio were crowded up around her, staring out the window as well with gleeful smiles on their faces. “We’re moving! Finally!”

“It’s amazing-mazing!” said Wyne, her face pressed right up to her own window as she watched the scenery outside.

“E-Excuse me, big sister Wyne...I don’t think you’re supposed to push your face against the window like that...” Rylnàsze said, tugging timidly on Wyne’s poncho. She looked adorable in the wide-brimmed hat she was wearing for the occasion.

Wyne gave Rylnàsze a big grin and wrapped an arm around her little sister’s shoulders. “You look too, Ryl-Ryl! You too!”

“B-Big sister Wyne!” Rylnàsze exclaimed, flailing her arms as Wyne pressed her up against the window as well. “Awawahhh!”

“*Snuffle, snuffle!*” Sybe and Shebe shuffled up to Wyne to protest on Rylnàsze’s behalf, along with their newborn children Sube, Sobe, and Sebe. The family of magic beasts were all very fond of Rylnàsze, especially the babies. Lately, Rylnàsze was surrounded by a small mob of unicorn rabbits wherever she went.

“Aha ha!” Wyne laughed when she noticed Sybe and his family at her feet. “You wanna see too, Sy-Sy’s family? You wanna?” she said, beaming and

scooping the whole bunch of them up in her arms to hold them in front of the window. Rylnàsze breathed a sigh of relief as Wyne let her go to pick up the unicorn rabbits instead.

Elinàsze came walking up to her two sisters. “Big sis Wyne, you know we aren’t the only passengers on board,” she said, smiling fondly. “Don’t make a nuisance of yourself, all right?”

“Okay, Eli-Eli!” Wyne replied with a grin. “I understand!” Folmina and the rest voiced their agreement as well. Elinàsze gave a satisfied nod.

Today was the day Flio and the rest of his family boarded the nonstop Enchanted Frigate line bound for the Calgosi Coast far to the south. It was a chilly morning, but the ship itself was equipped with an environmental control system that kept them all warm inside. None of the passengers felt the least bit cold.

“The view from the sky really is the best,” Garyl said, smiling as he looked out the window down at the land below.

“Yes, the very best!” agreed Salina, Garyl’s classmate in the lower-grade classes offered by the Houghtow College of Magic. She was currently clinging tight to Garyl’s arm. She was wearing a brand new one-piece swimsuit for the day and was beaming with delight as she nuzzled up against him. *I can’t believe I was invited to come along for a family vacation like this! s*he thought. *Surely this means I’ve been accepted as Lord Garyl’s bride!* A line of drool dribbled from her mouth as Salina’s thoughts turned increasingly delusional.

“Mreowr! You’re not the only one who got invited on this trip, Salina!” Irystiel, the spirited girl in a gothic lolita style outfit clinging to Garyl’s other arm spoke through plush cat she carried, skillfully using ventriloquism to make it look like her voice was coming from the doll. Irystiel was a very shy girl who found it easier to speak to others if it was through the medium of ventriloquism. Her older sister, incidentally, was none other than the Infernal Belianna of the Dark Army.

“Excuse me?!” Salina snapped.

“You heard me! Mreowr!” hissed Irystiel’s plushy. Suddenly, Garyl found himself trapped between the two feuding girls.

“You two are being so horrible!” Snow Little looked between Salina and Irystiel, squaring her shoulders with anger. “I want to gaze out the window with Lord Garyl too!” Snow Little, for her part, had dressed for the trip in a traditional costume of her people, the fable folk.

“Never!” Salina shot back, a smile on her face.

“You won’t take our spot! Mrewor!” grumbled Irystiel’s plush cat.

“Well!” Snow Little huffed, taking a book out of the pack she had been wearing and casting it open. “If that’s how you’re going to play this, I have some moves of my own! Come forth, my dwarves!” She placed her hand on the pages of the book, which began to glow with light until suddenly a group of very small dwarves popped out of its pages.

Snow Little was one of the fable folk, a tribe of demons with the unique ability to use fable magic, a school of spellcasting that enabled its user to bring beings from stories into the material world. The dwarves she had conjured grabbed hold of Salina and Irystiel’s legs, trying for all their might to pull the two girls away from Garyl. Their bodies were so small, however, that even with their combined effort, they were unable to move either girl a single inch.

Snow Little was still quite young, after all. Her command of fable magic was enough to summon characters and creatures from the stories she read, but alas, she was limited to only the smallest and weakest of beings.

“W-Would you perhaps consider moving away from Garyl?” Snow White pleaded. “The dwarves are trying so hard, after all...”

“I cheerfully refuse!” said Salina.

“Me too! Mreowr!” agreed Irystiel’s plush cat.

The three girls stood facing off against each other with Garyl right in the middle. “Let’s get along, okay?” he requested, giving all three of them a smile in turn. “We’re on vacation, after all.”

“Okay!” the girls said, their eyes going heart-shaped at a single glimpse of Garyl’s smile.

In short order, it was decided that Snow Little should stand in front of Garyl.

That solution, however, gave rise to a whole new argument.

"Hang on just a minute!" said Salina. "*I* want to stand there!"

"Irystiel wants to stand in front of Garyl too, mreowr!" opined the cat.

"I'm afraid I am keeping my spot," said Snow Little.

All Garyl could do was smirk in amusement at the situation.

"The girls are all over Gare like always, I see..." said Rislei, watching the scene play out from the next window over. Next to her were her classmates, Leina Raina and Reptor the lizardman.

"No kidding," said Reptor. "Garyl's got tons of fans at school too."

"Well, who can blame them?" Rislei replied. "Gare's the coolest, handsomest boy around! And maybe it's 'cause he's been growing up so fast, but he's gotten so...I don't know...gentlemanly? Even I've been finding myself gazing longingly at him sometimes..." She and Leina Raina shared a significant look.

Behind them, Reptor made a slightly complicated expression as he swished his lizard tail from side to side. "W-Well..." he muttered. "Even I can see that Garyl's cool and handsome, and I'm a boy..."

Reptor's reaction didn't escape Leina's notice. "Ohhh?" she teased, peering closely at his face. "Don't tell me it made you *jealous* to hear about Rislei gazing longingly at Garyl!" She clapped a hand over her mouth in mock surprise.

"N-No way!" Reptor stammered, his face flushing bright red. "Wh-What are you even talking about, Leina? I-It's not like I'm into Rislei or anything! I mean...she *is* cute, though..."

"Huh?!" Rislei exclaimed, her own face no less red than Reptor's. "Reptor, you moron, snap out of it! What are you saying?!" she demanded, smacking him on the back.

The blow only seemed to make Reptor more flustered than he was before. "N-Nothing!" he protested. "I was just...you know, um..." Everyone watching could clearly see that Rislei and Reptor were both extremely self-conscious around each other.

Just then, Reptor felt an enormous shadow fall over him as something seized

his head from behind. “Reptor, was it?” said Rislei’s father Sleip. “Tell me, what exactly is your relationship to my Rislei?”

“Huh?” Reptor managed. “U-Um, well...I’m her classmate...”

“Oh?” Sleip said, giving Reptor a dubious look. “‘Classmate,’ is it? It seems like you’ve gotten pretty friendly with each other, though, haven’t you?” Reptor could hardly handle the intensity of the questioning he was being subjected to. His whole body had broken out in a nervous sweat.

“P-Papa!” Rislei said. “What are you doing?!” She ran up behind her father and started wailing on him with her fists, trying to get him to let go of Reptor’s head.

“Well, Rislei,” Sleip said. “It’s just, as your father, I want you to take it slow at first and be careful when it comes to dating...”

“I’m telling you—Reptor and I aren’t even going out yet!” Rislei objected.

“R-Really?” Sleip balked. “But...the atmosphere earlier...I could have sworn...”

“Papa!”

From a short distance away, Flio watched Sleip and Rislei’s exchange with a wry smile on his face. *I guess it’s only natural to worry about things like that when you have a daughter...* he thought, glancing over at Elinàsze.

Elinàsze had been chatting with Ghoro and Folmina, but when she noticed Flio looking her way, she smiled back immediately. “There’s no need to worry about that when it comes to me, at least, papa,” she said. “I’m not interested in any men other than you, after all.”

“W-Well, thank you, Elinàsze,” Flio said, his own smile turning distinctly strained. *I’m glad to hear that, I guess...* he thought. *But I can’t pretend I don’t have some complicated feelings about it...*

“Elinàsze will be all right,” said Rys, stepping up to her husband. “When she gets older, I’m sure she’ll find a wonderful partner.”

“Y-Yes, of course.” Flio nodded. *I really hope Rys is right about that*... he thought to himself, wincing.

“Ha ha ha!” Ghozal laughed as he stepped up to join the conversation.

“Everyone’s got worries when it comes to their kids, don’t they? No helping it, I suppose.”

“Are you worried about Folmina and Ghoro’s future prospects too, Mister Ghozal?” Flio asked.

“Nah,” Ghozal replied. “Me and Uliminas aren’t too worried about things like that. Now, Balirossa on the other hand...” Smirking, he shot a glance at his human wife.

“W-Well, Sir Ghozal, I should think it’s only natural!” Balirossa said, her cheeks blushing at Ghozal’s words. “You may have abdicated the throne, but Ghoro is the eldest son of the former Dark One! Not just anyone would be worthy of his hand in marriage.”

Ghozal folded his arms. “I keep telling you, you don’t gotta worry so much about that. His parents aside, Ghoro’s his own kid. Isn’t that right, Ghoro!”

Ghoro came running up to his father and grabbed hold of his leg, skillfully climbing up Ghozal’s body until, in no time at all, he had reached the top of his head. “I’m gonna marry big sis Folmina when I grow up...” he cooed, looking utterly lovestruck.

Ghozal patted Ghoro on the head and laughed merrily. “Well, that’s how our boy feels at the present, anyway.”

Balirossa, in contrast, didn’t seem to find the situation particularly amusing at all. “W-Well, I am aware of how Ghoro feels, of course. I suppose there’s no helping it, since he spends so much time with Folmina. What concerns me, though, is what’s going to happen in the future...”

“I guess you have your share of worries too, Balirossa,” Flio remarked.

“Balirossa’s lucky, though!” interjected Blossom. “She’s already gotten married and had a kid!” She leaned back, folding her hands together to support her head, a distinct furrow forming in her brow. Her arms were sunburned from her long hours working on the farm. “And Byleri has a partner and kid now too, and even Belano! The four of us were always together back when we were a company of knights, but for some reason now I’m the only one who got left behind. Oh ho ho...” she laughed mirthlessly at her predicament.

“D-Don’t worry, Blossom,” Flio said, patting her on the back and giving her one of his easygoing smiles. “You’re still young. I’m sure you’ll meet someone before you know it.”

“I’m certain of it,” Rys agreed. “But all the customers at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store are very fond of you, you know. Are you really having so much trouble finding a partner...?” she asked, tilting her head curiously.

Rys was absolutely correct, of course. Blossom was a cheerful girl whose smile never seemed to dim no matter how tough things got, and there was no shortage of friendly faces eager to speak to her whenever she came to the store to bring a fresh supply of vegetables. However...

“Begging your pardon, Lady Rys...” Blossom said. “But all those customers who’re so fond of me are a bunch of older married folk and their young children. I never get a lick of attention from men my own age...”

“Oh?” Rys said. “Then perhaps you should claim one of the young children before— Abbbh!” she sputtered as Flio hastily clapped both of his hands over her mouth, cutting her off.

“R-Rys!” Flio whispered. “That would be problematic for all sorts of reasons, you know...”

“W-Well, if my lord husband says so, then I suppose I will retract the suggestion...” Rys said, nodding dutifully.

Satisfied that his wife wasn’t going to press the idea any further, Flio breathed a sigh of relief and turned back towards Blossom. “A-Anyway, Blossom,” he said, “just take it at your own pace, okay?”

“Y-Yeah,” Blossom agreed, giving the best smile she could. “I guess that’s about all I can do.” Part of her, however, was still dwelling on what Rys had said. *Hmm... I dunno...* she thought. *Lord Flio’s right that Rys’s idea has plenty of issues of its own, but maybe it’s worth considering...*

As Blossom was lost in thought, Calsi’im came up to her and handed her a cup of tea. His daughter Rabbitz was clinging tight to his head like always. “Now, now, Madame Blossom!” he said. “There’s no need to fret. Have a drink and calm your nerves a little. The tea’s especially good today, you know! Oho ho ho

ho!”

Blossom accepted the tea and glanced over in the direction of the Enchanted Frigate’s onboard service counter. There, behind the counter, she saw none other than Tia, serving her own fresh-brewed tea to customer after customer. “So Tia’s on duty today, huh? Well, if *she* made this tea, it’s bound to be top notch!”

“Quite right!” agreed Calsi’im. “The guests today seem very fond of it as well!”

Smiling, Blossom and Calsi’im each took a long sip of tea, quickly draining their cups. Flio, too, made a quick visit to the counter to get a cup for himself and drank it slowly, looking around at the crowd of people lining up for the Enchanted Frigate with his usual smile.

“Excuse me,” Rys said after a while. “My lord husband?”

“Yes, Rys?” he asked.

“Taking the entire household is one thing, but is it really safe to bring Elinàsze and Garyl’s classmates with us? Our objective this time is a Beast of Disaster, after all...”

“I see your point,” Flio admitted, “but it should be all right, I think. We never had any problems in Dogorogma, did we?”

Flio had visited the world of Dogorogma before in order to hunt Beasts of Disaster. He even used his magic to build a base there, where the family could enjoy a relaxed barbecue when they weren’t battling with the phenomenally powerful magic beasts. The base Flio created was still there in Dogorgma, and Flio made it a habit to visit for a quick hunt at regular intervals.

“Besides,” Flio continued, “Elinàsze and Garyl will be graduating before too long. I thought it would be a good chance to make a few memories with their friends.”

“Yes, I see your point...” Rys nodded.

Flio and Rys looked over at the twins, who were in the middle of an animated discussion with their classmates. Rylnàsze was next to them, surrounded by

Sybe and his family of unicorn rabbits. All the while, the Enchanted Frigate flew along. They were high in the sky now, looking down through the gaps between clouds at the surface beneath. The passengers were enjoying a pleasant trip, marveling at the view and leisurely taking their time until they reached their destination.

◇The Calgosi Coast◇

Some time later, the Enchanted Frigate liner began to descend from its cruising altitude above the clouds of Klyrode.

“Well,” Flio said, glancing out the window, “Looks like we’ve reached the Calgosi Coast.”

Wyne, whose face had been glued to the window ever since takeoff, spotted something outside the Frigate. “Huh?” she said, puzzled. “What’s going on over there-there?”

“Over...there?” Flio asked, taking another look out the window, as did the rest of the passengers aboard. Right before their eyes, they saw Junia Van Biel, the current head of the Van Biel family who governed the Calgosi Coast, flying high in the air—almost as high as the Enchanted Frigate itself—and raining barrage after barrage of magic bullets down upon an enormous magic beast moving atop the ocean’s surface.

“I-I sent a distress call to Klyrode Castle using my Transmission spell...” Junia said. “I-If only we can keep them at bay until help arrives...” She was using every last bit of magic power she had on her magical bombardment, but the enormous beast showed no signs of slowing down even as it took direct hit after direct hit. It was making its way straight for the coast.

Sailing in behind the magic beast was a fleet of pirate ships, firing their cannons as they advanced towards the line of ships waving the Van Biel flag preventing their encroachment. Junia’s ships, undaunted, were firing their own volleys of cannonballs back at the pirates and the magic beast.

“You heard the boss lady, lads!” bellowed Captain Eddsarch, standing on the prow of the largest ship in the middle of the Van Biel fleet, giving signals with both arms to direct the ships around him. “We’ll stop these ruffians here, or me name’s not Captain Eddsarch, commander of Junia Van Biel’s defensive fleet!”

Eddsarch had once been the captain of a band of pirates known as the Blackbeard Corsairs and had been fervently determined to conquer the Calgosi Coast for himself and make Junia Van Biel his wife. With Flio’s help, however, Junia had thrashed him utterly time and time again. Finally, with the demon

pirates joining forces with the Van Biels, Eddsarch was tragically forced to surrender and become one of Junia's subordinates.

"Excuse me, *who's* the commander here?!" shouted back the enormous muscular man wading into the ocean ahead of Eddsarch's ship, his long and wild white hair whipping in the breeze as he made his way straight for the magic beast heading their direction. "Commanding this fleet is *my* job! Don't go around giving yourself titles!"

This was Polseidon, an old seafolk soldier and one of the Van Biel family's most trusted retainers. He was a tough old bearded man who had the ability to temporarily assume giant size.

"What are you doing, you big lug?!" Eddsarch demanded. "If you stand there, we can't use our cannons!"

"Are you an idiot? Figure something out!" Polseidon shouted back. "That's your job, isn't it? Hey, Rolendeim! You coming or what?!"

Polseidon held out his arm, and the slender woman with sun-tanned skin swimming after him interrupted her breaststroke to smirk knowingly in the giant's direction. "Looks like *someone's* gotten a bit too worked up after so long without an opportunity to show off!" Despite her protestations, however, her body suddenly shone with light as she transformed herself into an enormous spear. "Here ya go! We're good buddies, right? So go ahead and use my nubile young body to mow down your enemies!"

Rolendeim was another of Van Biel's most trusted retainers, a hardened slime woman who usually took the form of a girl with jet black skin.

"Hah!" Polseidon shot back. "You may *look* young, but you're nearly as old as I am!"

"Excuse me?!" the spear cried in Rolendeim's indignant voice. "There's no need to say all that...right?"

Polseidon seized Rolendeim by her haft and charged towards the oncoming magic beast. Above his head, the rukh avian Loplanz flew through the sky in full monstrous bird form, flames issuing from his mouth as he too rushed to meet their foe. "Why'd they have to attack *today* of all days?!" he complained. "The

girl I like's supposed to be showing up today!"

Loplanz was another Van Biel retainer, a rukh avian with the ability to transform into an enormous bird monster. His normal form was that of a young boy.

Following Polseidon, Rolendeim and Loplanz came a group of demon women, led by one of them who took the form of a giant squid. These demons had once been enemies of Junia Van Biel as well, but they were defeated by her and Flio and, like Captain Eddsarch, entered into her service.

As Flio and the others watched from the Enchanted Frigate, Junia Van Biel's forces launched a fierce counteroffensive against the magic beast and the pirate fleet. Polseidon wielded his spear—that is to say, Rolendeim—for all he was worth, but the magic beast was even more enormous than his own giant form and wasn't taking much damage. "Damnation!" he bellowed. "This thing is huge! Settle down already, you monster!"

"Wh-What are you doing, you old geezer?!" Rolendeim protested. "You're handling me way too roughly, right?!"

Eddsarch was a storied commander, and the Van Biel fleet was fighting to the best of their ability under his direction, but he found himself desperately outnumbered. The opposing pirate fleet was nearly twice as large. "Drat and damnation!" he barked. "Turn that ship around! Avoid the enemy cannonballs and focus your fire!"

I assume that the magic beast Miss Junia's side is fighting is the Beast of Disaster she mentioned in her letter... Flio thought as he watched the scene play out below him. *But what's the deal with those pirates? There's no way they're being led by the magic beast, is there...?*

"My lord husband," Rys said, tugging on Flio's hand. "Perhaps we should lend them our aid?" Her lupine fangs and tail were already out. She was ready to leap into the fray at a moment's notice.

"You're right." Flio nodded. "We can figure out the details *after* we take care of the magic beast and those pirates."

"I'll go too, dad!" Garyl volunteered, stepping up to his father's side and

removing his overcoat with a grin.

“I-I-If Lord Garyl is to join the fray, then I-I-I shall fight too!” Salina declared, running up behind Garyl despite her trembling knees.

“A-Ahh!” Irystiel brought her plushie up in front of her face, using her ventriloquism to make it speak for her. “Irystiel says she’ll fight as well! Mreowr!”

Snow Little came running up next, carrying a huge pile of fairy tail books in her arms. She was carrying so many books, though, that she couldn’t see what was in front of her and kept tottering from side to side despite her best efforts to move in a straight line. “U-Um!” she said. “I-I would like to accompany you too, please!”

Salina, meanwhile, had linked arms with Garyl. “Lord Garyl...” she said, looking up at him with a stiff-lipped smile and upturned eyes. “When we die, let it be side by side...”

Rislei was watching Salina and their other classmates from a short distance away. “Eh, why not?” she said, deciding to join in herself. “It’ll be a good opportunity to try out the spells we’ve been learning in school, after all!”

“What?!” Reptor exclaimed, his voice trembling. “U-U-U-Um...Rislei? Sh-Shouldn’t we be trying to stay out of danger?”

“Huh?” Rislei said. “You don’t gotta go if you don’t want to. I’m kind of raring to go, myself, though! Ah ha ha!”

“H-Hold on...” Reptor protested. “I-I didn’t say I wouldn’t fight, but...maybe you should stay behind, Rislei...”

“What?” Rislei blinked.

“O-Oh! I-I just, u... N-Nothing, never mind...” stammered Reptor.

“H-Honestly...” said Rislei. “Quit saying weird stuff...”

At some point during the exchange, both Rislei and Reptor’s faces had turned bright red, with them averting their eyes from each other.

“There’s no need for you all to do anything unreasonable,” said Elinàsze, joining the assembled group. “I’ll take care of this situation.” Elinàsze was as

eager to join the fray as Rislei and Garyl—she had already conjured a magic circle in front of her outstretched hands, and the gem on her forehead she usually kept hidden behind her bangs was glowing brightly. She was ready to unleash the full force of her magic at any moment.

“O-Oh...” said Rylnàszse, running up behind her sister. “If big sister Elinàsze is going, then I’ll go too...”

Sybe and the rest of his family—Shebe, Sube, Sebe and Sobe—all came trotting along after Rylnàsze. They stood up on their hind legs and snuffled with fierce determination.

Garyl smiled as he looked over all the other children who had just volunteered to join the battle. “Sounds like all of you are ready to go!” he said. “But...I’m not sure if we’re gonna have a chance to fight today after all, what with *them* involved...”

“Huh?” Salina stared in disbelief. All around her, the other children were looking around the interior of the Enchanted Frigate, equally wide-eyed with bafflement.

“O-Oh?” said Rylnàsze. “Big sis Wyne is gone...and papa and mama, too...”

“Oh ho ho ho ho!” Calsi’im laughed, his jawbone rattling as he and Tia strolled up to the group of children, his daughter Rabbitz clinging to his head. “Why don’t you all just relax and have some of this tea my dear Tia made? Everyone’s already left, after all!”

And so, Tia gave everyone a fresh cup of tea.

◇Aboard the Pirate Flagship◇

On the deck of the large vessel serving as the flagship of the pirate fleet, Captain Briedoc stroked his immaculately groomed beard as he gazed out at the battle ahead. The outfit he wore was decorated with all sorts of extravagant flourishes. “Hmm...” he mused, sighing as he adjusted the monocle on his right eye. “Have we still been unable to capture those minions of Junia Van Biel’s?”

“Captain Briedoc!” one of his men called, running up beside him. “We’ve been doing our best to surround the Van Biel retainers while they’re occupied fighting the magic beast, but Eddsarch’s fleet keeps getting in the way of our

maneuvers!”

“Hmm...” Captain Briedoc repeated. “For a spineless worm who sold out his own pirate soul when he was defeated by Junia Van Biel, he certainly seems determined to stand in our way...” He removed his monocle and wiped it on the handkerchief he kept tucked into his breast pocket. “Well, it is what it is. Send the magic beast under our control to charge Eddsarch’s fleet directly. When their ranks are broken, we can encircle the Van Biel retainers and annihilate them at our leisure.”

“Aye aye, captain!” The man saluted Eddsarch and ran towards the stern of the ship.

“My, my, what a troublesome job this has been...” Captain Briedoc lamented after the man left. “Rare species or not, capturing Junia Van Biel’s retainers alive is no small feat. But it wouldn’t do to disregard a request from them after all the assistance they’ve given me over the years. This business operates on the basis of trust, after all...” He held his monocle up to the sky to make sure it was properly clean before continuing. “That being said, their fortunes seem to have fallen into ruin of late as well. Perhaps the time is ripe after all...” Satisfied, he returned the monocle to its spot and gazed back out at the battlefield before him. “Regardless, having taken this job, I fully intend to see it to a successful—”

“Ka-*pow*!!!” Suddenly, a girl’s voice rang out from somewhere nearby, interrupting him.

“Hm?” Captain Briedoc said. Then he saw a giant pillar of water erupt from the sea in front of him, as one of the ships in his fleet was split entirely in two. “What...?” he muttered, watching wide-eyed as the ship sank beneath the waves. “Wh-What was that? It’s impossible for Eddsarch’s cannons to reach us at that range, and Junia Van Biel’s retainers should have their hands full fighting the magic beast!”

◇ ◇ ◇

“Pfwaaah!” Wyne cried as she erupted from the sea. “Ah ha ha! That was fun-fun!” Her arms were in their fully draconic form. She flew up into the sky and dove down once more, slicing another of Briedoc’s ships in two with a single attack. A moment later, her head reappeared above the water’s surface,

laughing cheerfully.

“Hrm...” grunted Ghozal, his cape fluttering in the breeze as looked down from the sky, a somewhat dissatisfied frown on his face. “So Wyne stole the first blow, huh? In that case, I’ll just have to beat her in terms of numbers!” He reached skyward, and an enormous ball of light appeared in the air above his hand. After a moment the light took the shape of a giant fist. “Hah!” Ghozal shouted, swinging his arm downwards and sending the fist careening towards the pirate fleet.

The force of Ghozal’s attack—the famed Hammer of the Dark One—reduced more than half of the enemy fleet to driftwood in an instant.



“Hey!” Wyne complained. “No fair, no fair! Me too, me too!” She beat her wings, ascending as fast as she could, when...

“Squawk?!”

“Hwah?! Oww!”

As Wyne rose lighting fast through the air, her head collided with Loplanz, who had been flying in the sky overhead. The impact sent the rukh avian boy careening back towards the coast line with incredible force.

“Awawah?!” Wyne sputtered, rubbing her head as she flew after him. “Lop-Lop?!”

In the sky behind her, Ghozal kept swinging his arm, his cape billowing behind him dramatically. “It’s been a long time since I had a proper fight!” he shouted. “Time to show the lot of you what I can do!” In no time at all, there was almost nothing left of the fleet aside from debris floating on the water’s surface. “What...over already?”

“Gh-Ghozal, wait!” Rys cried. “Don’t take all of the enemies for yourself! What about the rest of us?!” Flying on a pair of wings she had grown courtesy of one of Flio’s spells, she dove below Ghozal in a rush to get some of the glory for herself.

Ghozal watched as Rys flew past, keeping a determinedly straight face, thinking, *I just wanted to show Ghoro and Folmina a bit of their father’s cool side...*

Flio came up behind Ghozal and Rys, using his Flight spell to stay airborne. *It looks like there’s not much for me to do this time...* he thought, conjuring lifeboats on the water’s surface to prevent the pirates from drowning.

Garyl and the rest of the children, meanwhile, were watching the scene play out from the window of the Enchanted Frigate liner.

“Th-They’re all incredible!” Salina marveled, her eyes opening wide in disbelief.

Next to her, Irystiel stood shocked silent, too stunned by what she had seen to even use her ventriloquism.

“I-I see...” Snow Little nodded in understanding. “Lord Garyl was right. There

really isn’t anything for us to do here...”

“My family’s full of amazing people,” said Garyl, smirking wryly at the others. “I guess you could say that’s just how it goes.”

Elinàsze and Sleip, for their part, looked quite upset to have been too late to join the fray.

“Aw! No fair!” Elinàsze complained. “I wanted papa to see what I can do...”

“Drat!” Sleip huffed. “I was going to give Rislei and Byleri a heroic display they’d never forget!”

“Now, now, everyone,” said Calsi’im, walking up to the crowd with Rabbitz on his head and Tia by his side. “This isn’t something you see every day, you know! Let’s enjoy some of Tia’s tea and cheer them on from above!”

“Now,” said Tia, holding out a tray with a fresh cup of tea for everyone, “please, help yourselves.”

“Thank you very much, Miss Tia!” said Garyl, smiling as he took a number of cups to hand over to Salina, Irystiel, Snow Little, and the rest.

Sleip and the others also went to get some more tea from Tia. Before long, the atmosphere aboard the Enchanted Frigate had become quite relaxed.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Wh-What in the world is going on...?” Captain Briedoc uttered, looking around him in disbelief at the wreckage all around him. His own ship had the fortune to have been in the shadow of the magic beast when Ghozal unleashed his Hammer of the Dark One attack, leaving it untouched while the rest of his fleet was reduced to driftwood.

Briedoc, however, kept a level head. “I suppose we have no choice in a situation like this,” he reasoned. “We’ll have to retreat using the magic beast as a shield.” He signaled to the crewmen behind him. The ship’s witch, who had been standing by in the back, raised her staff and began a new incantation. The tip of the staff began to glow, harmonizing with the magic gem attached to the beast’s head, and with a mighty roar, the beast began to make its way back out to sea.

“No...!” Junia cried, flying through the air after them. “You won’t get away!” She held out both her arms towards the magic beast, unleashing her Stardust Scattershot spell on the monster below. Orbs of light rained down on the creature’s head.

“Now’s our chance!” Polseidon exclaimed, spinning the Rolindeim spear as he charged in the retreating magic beast’s direction. “Let’s go, Rolindeim!”

“W-W-W-Wait!” the spear wailed in Rolindeim’s voice. “I-I’m telling you—you’re spinning me way too fast...right?”

The magic beast braced itself for Polseidon’s charge, but with Junia’s magic striking it from above, it found itself unable to effectively defend.

Flio was flying in the sky nearby, watching the scene play out. “That magic beast is pretty strong... Miss Junia’s attacks are all hitting, but it doesn’t look like it’s taking any damage.” True to his words, the magic beast seemed completely unharmed. Its movements were being restricted from Junia’s assault, but not due to any damage it received—it was using its body to protect Captain Briedoc’s ship.

“At this rate, they’re going to get away,” Flio observed. “Maybe I should lend a hand...” He extended his arms out towards the magic beast and began an incantation. A magic circle appeared in front of his outstretched hands.

“Gwa?” the magic beast said, seeming to notice something was wrong. It went stiff.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” Polseidon asked, glancing all around. He, too, could tell that something was strange with the magic beast.

The next second, an enormous magic circle appeared above the magic beast’s head, enveloping its body. The beast moved as quickly as it could, desperately trying to escape, but two, then three more magic circles appeared in the blink of an eye, and soon its entire form, as large as it was, had been swallowed up.

“All right,” Flio said. “So far, so good...” Floating in midair, he spun his outstretched hands in alternating circles. The magic circles around the beast began to glow with an intense light.

Back on the Enchanted Frigate, Garyl, Salina, Irystiel, and Snow Little were

watching with their eyes glued to the window.

“Whoa!” said Garyl. “I-It’s so bright!”

“Eek!” exclaimed Salina.

“W-What the heck, mrewor?!” demanded Irystiel’s plushie.

“Wh-What in the world?!” cried Snow Little.

When the light subsided, the magic beast was nowhere to be seen.

“Wh-What just happened?!” Polseidon gaped, wide-eyed.

Rolendeim could only moan weakly. Her eyes on the shaft of the spear were spinning from how fast Polseidon had been twirling her around.

Junia Van Biel, meanwhile, flew around in circles looking for any sign of the creature, completely baffled. “Huh?! Huh?! *Huh*?!”

Flio nodded to himself, satisfied with his handiwork. “Good. Looks like I was able to capture it with my magic circle.” He opened a window to check and saw a flashing icon telling him that the magic beast had successfully been placed in storage. “I can learn more about this magic beast later, but for now, I should do something about that ship.” He looked down at the pirate ship the magic beast had been protecting. Now that the others had all sunk, it was the only surviving member of the fleet.

On the deck of the pirate ship, Captain Briedoc mulled over the situation as he drank a cup of black tea. “And now we are really in dire straits...” he said, taking a sip of the beverage. “What means do I have that might let us escape...?”

“Captain Briedoc...” The witch who had been using her magic to control the magic beast stepped up behind him.

“Hmm...” the captain considered. “There’s nothing else we can do. We abandon ship.”

“Yes, captain.” The witch bowed and waved her staff, conjuring a magic circle around her and Captain Briedoc.

Captain Briedoc gave Junia Van Biel a polite smile. “I believe I will take my leave for today,” he said. “But you can expect another visit from me in the near

future. Now then...” He gave a theatrical bow, holding his hand over his heart. The witch waved her staff a second time, and the pair’s bodies began to glow with light.

“I-Is that Teleportation?!” Junia exclaimed, realizing what was happening. She dove from the sky towards his ship as fast as she could, but Briedoc and the witch were faster. By the time she closed the distance, they were already gone.

“Hmm...” said Captain Briedoc. “That was a little closer than I’d like, but it seems we managed to escape from the battle unscathed...”

“Oh? Have you, now?” came a voice Briedoc didn’t recognize.

Briedoc looked this way and that, but he didn’t see anyone who might have spoken those words. In fact, he seemed to be in a vast empty expanse. There was nothing but white space as far as the eye could see. “What’s this?” he said, turning to the witch. “Where did your Teleportation spell take us?”

“I-I don’t know...” the witch responded. “This isn’t where I intended to go at all...” The two of them shared a worried look.

“You are in my mindscape,” the voice said again as a humanoid figure appeared behind Briedoc and the witch.

“Your mindscape?” Briedoc repeated. “And what, pray tell, does that mean?”

“Ah, my apologies. I should have realized that a man of your poor schooling would be ignorant of such things.” The figure bowed with formal gravity. “I am known as Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, servant of the Exalted One.”

“H-Hiya?” a bead of nervous sweat ran down Briedoc’s face. “I-It can’t be... The same Hiya who very nearly destroyed the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode...?”

“Th-Th-Th-Then...” the witch stuttered. “Th-Th-This is...the mindscape of the djinn Hiya...?”

“Well, the lady seems to have *some* knowledge of this world, at least...” Hiya observed. They looked the witch over, examining her closely from head to toe. “Alas,” they concluded, “I am afraid you do not have the fortitude to join my

friends in our training.” The djinn held out their arm, and a magic circle appeared at their fingertips.

“Eeeeeek!” the witch shrieked as her body was sucked into the circle, vanishing to nothing.

“As I suspected,” Hiya said. “Magic power of such low concentration is insufficient even to produce a magic gem. In that case, I will have to ask you to disappear.”

“D-Disappear...” Briedoc echoed. He was doing his best to affect an air of calm, but he couldn’t stop his voice from quavering just a bit. “B-But that witch has a fair hand at magic, unless I’m very mistaken...”

Hiya smirked. “Unfortunately, she was simply not up to my standards.” They waved their arm, and two women appeared behind them. “Allow me to introduce you to my beloved training partners,” they said, smiling. “This is Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight, and Maglion, the greatest mage in the Realm of Evil. These are the sort of people *I* would consider to have a ‘fair hand at magic.’”

“What are we gonna do with *him*, your divinity?” Damalynas asked, stepping up to Hiya’s right side.

“Shall I obliterate him with my magic?” Maglion offered, stepping up to Hiya’s left.

The two of them raised their arms in unison, but Hiya stepped in front of the pair before they could act. “Ordinarily, I would already have erased him from this world myself,” they said. “However...”

◇ ◇ ◇

“U-Um...” Junia Van Biel choked out, her face bright red as she gave Flio her thanks. “I-I thank you...truly...for, um...coming to our rescue...once again...”

Just as awkward around people as ever, I see... Flio thought to himself, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “There’s no need for thanks,” he said. “But...can I ask you to deal with this man for us?” He gestured towards the figure of Captain Briedoc, who was bound tight with Hiya’s magic ropes. “It looks like he was the ringleader this time. I brought him back with us, since I imagine you’ll need to

question him about his motive."

"O-Oh! Y-Yes, o-of course! I-It's my responsibility to interrogate him, after all..." Junia hurried over where Captain Briedoc waited as Flio watched with a knowing smirk.

"Exalted One," Hiya said, coming over to whisper in his ear. "I brought this man here, as was your command, but if you would allow it, your humble servant Hiya could learn every one of his secrets with my Confession spell..."

I let her use that Confession spell on some thieves who tried to steal vegetables from the farm once... Flio thought, a frown coming to his face. *But afterwards, they lost all of their memories...* "Miss Junia is the governor of this land, though," he said. "Let's leave it to her to handle things."

"Understood," Hiya said, bowing deeply. "All shall be as you will it, Exalted One."

Flio nodded, satisfied, and smiled his easygoing smile once again. "Speaking of which..." he said, walking up to Junia. He found her in the middle of giving instructions to her retainers on where to take Briedoc. "Miss Junia, do you know where the Beast of Disaster you mentioned in your letter is, by any chance? If it's at all possible, I would like to head out to exterminate it right away."

Junia's expression darkened.

"Could it be you don't know it's location?" Flio ventured. "In that case, shall we go looking for it?"

"There's no need for you to trouble yourself with such trivialities, my lord husband!" said Rys, running up beside her husband. "Your beloved Rys shall locate this Beast of Disaster and prove myself useful to you!" No sooner had she said the words than Rys's lupine ears and tail appeared. She was ready to take off running at a moment's notice.

Junia, however, shook her head, clearly flustered. "N-No," she said. "W-We know where it is...but..." She mumbled something indistinct and pointed her hand in Flio's direction.

"Huh?" Flio asked. "Did I do something?"

“W-Well, you, um...” Junia said. “The magic beast you c-collected with your magic, Lord Flio...was the Beast of Disaster...”

“What?” Flio blinked in surprise. “*That* magic beast?!” Confused, he called up a window and looked over his storage, opening another window corresponding to the magic beast he had just obtained:

◇Whale of Woe (Beast of Disaster)

“I guess you’re right,” Flio said. “That *was* a Beast of Disaster.”

“Oh...” Rys slumped her shoulders in disappointment. “So Wyne and Ghozal destroyed the pirate fleet, and my lord husband himself captured the Beast of Disaster...” She sighed. “I suppose I really wasn’t useful to you at all...”

“W-Well,” Flio said, awkwardly scratching his cheek. “Y-You always give your best at housework, Rys. Besides, I wouldn’t want my wife to be in any danger...”

“My lord husband...” Rys said, looking up at him with pleading eyes and poking him in the side. “I’m very glad you think so highly of my housework...but I really would like to be useful to you in times like these as well...”

“Well, um...” Flio said, frowning. “We’re still working on fishing out all of the pirates who got thrown into the ocean. Maybe you could help out there?”

“Understood!” Rys said, brightening up immediately. “This time, I’ll prove myself useful to you, my lord husband!” With that, she ran off towards the sea. Flio watched her go, smiling wryly.

Over on the sea shore, Elinàsze, who had hurried from the Enchanted Frigate when she realized she was late to the action, was busy lifting the pirates who had been unable to board the lifeboat into the air with magic, depositing them on the coast.

“I suppose I’d better help out too,” Flio said, letting out a small sigh before he flew after Rys towards the water.

◇Meanwhile—Calgosi Coast, Inland◇

“Nghhh...” Loplanze moaned, shaking his head as his consciousness returned. “H-Huh? What was I doing just now...?” He racked his brain as well as he could, but his thoughts still felt clouded and indistinct.

Let me see... he thought. *Me, Countess Van Biel, Polseidon, and the rest went out to fight off the magic beast and the pirates...but while I was on my way, something burst from the water and sent me flying...*

"Wait!" Loplanz said as he started to wrap his mind around the situation. "What happened to the pirates?!" He sat up in a panic, only for his face to collide with something soft and squishy, knocking him right back down. "Wha—Huh...?" he managed. Then he realized that his head had been resting on something soft as well and looked around in dismay. A girl's face was right in front of his eyes, her cheeks currently stuffed full of food.

"Oh! Lop-Lop!" the girl said. "You're up-up?"

"Hwah?!" Loplanz exclaimed, realizing whose face it was in a flash. "W-Wyne?!" Gradually, it dawned on him where he was. *S-So...* he thought. *I got knocked out...and Wyne's been looking after me?! B-But then, that would mean the thing I bumped into just now was Wyne's chest! A-And this thing my head is resting on...that's Wyne's lap!*

Loplanz the rukh avian was in love with Wyne the dragonewt and had been working hard every day to one day become a powerful rukh worthy of Wyne's notice.

"Awhaha?!" Loplanz stammered. "W-W-Wyne! I'm so sorry! I-I-I'll get up!" He tried to sit up once again, only for Wyne to push him back down.

"No way, no way! You got blasted super-super far, Lop-Lop! You need more rest-rest!" With her holding the avian boy down, it was like he was completely covered up with her body, her sizable chest pressing down on him from above.

Loplanz's face went bright red and he froze stiff, unable to so much as speak as Wyne looked down at him with genuine worry. They stayed in that position together for some time, off where Loplanz had landed in a forest near the coast.

Chapter 3: Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought

◇In a Forest◇

In a narrow mountain pass, a horse-drawn carriage sped along in an incredible hurry. The man in the driver's seat—an enormous figure—clicked his tongue in irritation as he turned to glance behind him. "Tch! Persistent bastard..." he grumbled as he caught sight of the dark shadow that had been pursuing him.

The shadow kept up with the carriage, quickly running alongside its left flank and swinging the great scythe it carried in a low arc at the axles of the carriage's wheels, splitting them into pieces. The vehicle collapsed on its side with a tremendous sound. The horses, who had come free in the crash, ran on ahead and vanished, leaving the carriage stuck where it was.

"Y-You!" the man shouted as he took to his feet. "How dare you get in our way?!" Swinging his arms in circles, he charged straight towards the shadow that had wrecked his carriage. As a golem, his arms were oversized, even in comparison to the rest of his body, and made for powerful weapons when spun around like that.

"Shut up, you damned demon-napper!" the shadow snapped, swinging its scythe to meet the golem's fists. A beam of moonlight shone through the clouds, and the shadow was revealed to be a woman, slight of frame. Her body was clearly much smaller than her opponent's, but her scythe stopped his oncoming fists dead in their tracks.

"N-No way!" the golem exclaimed, baffled. "How could a shrimp like you block my mighty fists?!"

"Hah!" the woman laughed. "That's what you get for underestimating the damned Infernal Four!"

"Th-The Infernal Four?!" the golem balked in surprise. The woman took advantage of the opening to deliver a series of strikes with her scythe, the blade cutting through his stone body effortlessly and carving him into bits. He

crumbled to the ground, and, after a moment, stopped moving altogether.

“That was a damned handful...” the woman complained. “I’ll need Rolindeim to repair the damned thing later so we can get a proper damned confession...” She shouldered her scythe and set to work digging through the wreckage of the carriage. Before long, she uncovered something that seemed to be a container of some sort—a transparent cube, holding two women cowering in each others’ arms. They were clinging to each other, protecting their heads from the impact of the crash.

The woman with the scythe breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that the two of them were unhurt. Silhouetted by the moon, she swung her scythe and split apart the cage. “Just to make damned sure,” she said, “are you two the missing fable folk we’ve been searching for, Gansel and Hretel?”

The two women—Gansel and Hretel—nodded.

“The name’s Belianna, of the Infernal Four,” the woman with the scythe said, grinning cockily with her weapon slung over her shoulder. “I’ve come to find you under the damned orders of the Dark One Dawkson. To be honest, I’m just damned relieved to see you both unharmed.”

Belianna’s words seemed to do their job of assuring Gansel and Hretel that they were safe. Weeping openly, the two hugged their savior tight.

“Th-Thank you...” sobbed Gansel. “Thank you so much...”

“We were just going for a walk in the woods, when we were suddenly attacked by that golem...” Hretel managed through her tears.

Belianna patted the two fable folk gently on the head. *These two are just about the same damned age as my sister Irystiel...* she thought. *I can’t believe there’s some damned bastard out there abducting kids like this, just because they happen to belong to a rare species. But what do I do now? That damned talking carriage I pursued the other day was damned suspicious, but it gave me the slip. I have no idea where the damned thing is...*

After Gansel and Hretel had settled down, Belianna went to search the ruined carriage for any clues that might lead her to whoever was behind the kidnappings, but she couldn’t find any of the sort, possibly vanishing once she

had destroyed Gansel and Hretel's magic cage.

Damn, she thought. *Nothing, once again. Who in the damned hells is behind this?*

Cursing to herself, Belianna resolved to continue her investigation into this string of abduction cases targeting rare demon species. After all, such were her orders from the Dark One Dawkson himself.

◇ ◇ ◇

A horse galloped through the forest, running through the trees at a breakneck pace. It had been pulling a carriage until just a moment ago, when Belianna came along and wrecked it, separating the horse from its burden.

The horse slowed down for a moment and looked back over its shoulder to ensure nothing was chasing it. Satisfied that it wasn't followed, it sped back up to a full gallop. It moved on ahead, paying careful attention to its surroundings, until it came upon an entrance to a cave located at the intersection of two cliffs and went inside.

As soon as the horse was out of sight, a hole popped open near the trunk of a tree by the cave entrance and Hero Gold-Hair stuck his head out, peering ahead into the darkness. "I had a feeling we'd stumble on something related to the missing demon incident if we followed that Belianna woman..." he remarked. "Looks like I was right."

"E-Excuse me...H-Hero Gold Hair..." Valentine puffed, wiping her brow and struggling to catch her breath as her head popped up behind his. "I-I understand you're trying to find some lead on the disappearances...b-but why did you go chasing after that horse of all things? And using an underground tunnel to do it, even..."

Yes, Hero Gold-Hair had been watching from a hiding position as Belianna destroyed the carriage, and took off after the runaway horse immediately, not letting himself be distracted by the enormous giant for even a second. He had followed after it underground, tunneling through the earth at a phenomenal speed.

This remarkable high-speed digging ability was one of the powers granted to

Hero Gold-Hair by his legendary item, the Drilldozer Shovel. Only the bearer of the Drilldozer Shovel, however, enjoyed this accelerated movement underground. The rest of his party had to run after him on foot through the tunnel he created. It was an effort that had left Valentine utterly winded.

Valentine had originally been one of the Twelve Evil Generals from the Realm of Evil. If she used her magic, she could move very fast indeed. Compared to the Realm of Evil and its malicium-rich atmosphere, however, the concentration of ambient malicium in the world of Klyrode was quite low. As a result, Valentine burned through her reserves of magic power at an alarming pace and had to take great pains to avoid using it recklessly.

"What else was I supposed to do?!" exclaimed Hero Gold-Hair. "That was the only way I could follow that suspicious horse without it noticing us!"

"That's true, I suppose..." said Valentine, finally catching her breath. "I'm certain that horse never suspected it was being followed from underground...but what made you think that horse was so suspicious in the first place?"

Hero Gold-Hair turned to face Valentine, a deadly serious look on his face. "My intuition told me."

"Your...intuition?!" Valentine exclaimed, an utterly befuddled look coming over her face. *E-Even Hero Gold-Hair's intuition can't be* that *good...*

"That's riiight!" came another woman's voice from behind Valentine as Tsuya's face finally emerged from the hole as well, her shoulders heaving as she caught her breath. "Hero Gooold-Hair's intuition is neeever wrong!"

"Oh...?" came an incredulous Valentine, turning to face Tsuya. "And what makes you so sure of this, Lady Tsuya?"

"Weeell," Tsuya began, a dreamy look coming over her face even as she struggled for breath, "because it's Hero Gooold-Hair!"

Come to think of it, I was saved by Hero Gold-Hair's intuition as well, wasn't I? Valentine thought to herself. She had come to the world of Klyrode originally as an agent of the Realm of Evil, but after one thing and another she found herself out of magic power, dangling from the precipice of a death trap with no means

of escape.

Just when her strength failed and she began to plummet to her doom, however, Hero Gold-Hair jumped after her to save her life, declaring, "*My intuition is telling me not to let her die!*"

Back in the present, Valentine peered at the cave ahead of them. "Well then, shall we go ahead and infiltrate this cave of yours?" she proposed.

"Yes, well, I want to investigate this cave as much as anyone, believe me..." said Hero Gold-Hair. "But..."

"Huuuh?" said Tsuya? "O-Oh nooo..."

Hero Gold-Hair pulled and pulled to try to extricate himself from the hole, but with his, Valentine's, and Tsuya's heads all crowded together, the entrance was packed tight. The three of them were unable to budge an inch in either direction.

"H-Hero Gooold-Hair!" Tsuya cried. "Would you pleeease widen the entrance a little?"

"I-I can't move my arms, you idiot!" Hero Gold-Hair exclaimed. "How am I supposed to get the Drilldozer Shovel out of my Bottomless Bag with your body in the way?!"

"Ahn!" Valentine moaned. "S-Stop wiggling! You're squishing my enormous boobs!"

"A-And you keep hitting me in straaange places!" Tsuya complained. "I'm tiiicklish!"

"You imbeciles!" Hero Gold-Hair shouted back. "Don't make this weird!"



In the tunnel behind where the three of them were stuck blocking the entrance, Aryun Keats, Wuha Gappoli, and Riliangiu looked up at them from the

other side.

“Well, now, what do we do about *this?*” mused Aryun Keats.

“I guess we should try pushing on their butts or something?” proposed Wuha Gappoli.

“Indeed,” Riliangiu agreed. “I can think of no better solution.”

The three nodded in unison. Then, Riliangiu took Valentine, Aryun took Tsuya, and Wuha took Hero Gold-Hair, each planting their hands firmly on their party member’s butt.

“W-Wait!” Hero Gold-Hair demanded. “Wuha! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“What does it look like!” Wuha snapped back. “You’re never gonna get out of there otherwise! Now, brace your butt for pushing! All right, everyone, on three! One...two...”

“Three!” said Aryun Keats.

“Pushing, ma’am!” reported Riliangiu.

The three of them pushed as hard as they could.

Hero Gold-Hair, however, immediately had cause for further complaints. “H-Hey! Hang on, Wuha! Why does it feel all slimy back there?!”

“Why do you think?” said Wuha. “You know how weak I am! I can get more power if I use my tentacles!”

“Wh-Where are you tooouching?!” protested Tsuya. “That feels weeeird!”

“Wh-Whatever do you mean?!” asked Riliangiu. “I-I have been touching nothing but Lady Valentine’s behind...”

“I’ve been pushing straight on the middle of your butt, Madame Tsuya, just as I was instructed!” volunteered Aryun Keats.

“A-Aryuuun?!” said Tsuya. “Not *riiight* down the middle! There’s all kiiinds of places you shouldn’t touch down there!”

With each push from the three below, the three stuck in the whole cried out in protest. The back-and-forth, it seemed, was going to continue on for a while.

◇ ◇ ◇

After a while, Hero Gold-Hair and company managed to extricate themselves from the hole, and so they stepped inside the cave they had seen the horse run into earlier.

“I wonder if something’s gonna come out...” Wuha Gappoli said, doing her best to hide behind Aryun Keats at the very rear of the party and looking around cautiously.

“Wuha,” Hero Gold-Hair started from the party’s front, “do you think you could use your manor djinn powers to see what’s waiting for us deeper inside?”

Wuha shook her head in an exaggerated gesture. “I mean...with a normal cave I might be able to do something, but this place is clearly under the effect of a Concealment— W-Wait! Look!” Suddenly noticing something, Wuha cut herself off and pointed ahead.

“Ngh!” Hero Gold-Hair grunted as the party came to a stop at once. A second later, a blast of magic bullets—too many to count—came flying their direction from the cave’s depths. Hero Gold-Hair’s party hastily ran back, taking cover behind a nearby boulder. “Well,” Hero Gold-Hair remarked, peeping out from behind their cover, “it’s not like I was expecting this to be a cakewalk, but this is a bit much, isn’t it?” The projectiles were showing no signs of slowing down. Hero Gold-Hair and the rest were effectively pinned behind the cover of the boulder, unable to move.

“Hero Gooold-Hair, what are we gonna dooo?” Tsuya asked, clutching her head. “Should we wait for the magic buuullets to stop?”

Hero Gold-Hair looked all around for a way out of their predicament, holding out his left arm to cover Tsuya. “As much as I’d love to do that, I’m not sure how much longer this boulder is going to hold out!” Indeed, chunks of rock were being blasted away before their eyes as the boulder took the barrage meant for the party hiding behind it.

“If it can keep up that assault for much longer, we’ll be defeated without ever entering the enemy’s base...” Riliangiu said, frowning in irritation as she transformed her arms past the elbows into a pair of deadly blades.

“In that case,” said Aryun Keats, “perhaps I can use my abilities to transform into an armored carriage, to protect ourselves from the magic bullets as we advance!” She leapt out from behind the boulder, but alas, she took a full blast from the magic barrage before she could begin her transformation. “Aglbhalhhhbh!”

“Y-You idiot!” Hero Gold-Hair shouted, seizing the fallen Aryun Keats by her leg and pulling her back behind cover. “Why did you jump out before you were fully transformed?!”

“I suppose I’ll have to use my Threads of Evil...” said Valentine, strands of dark energy forming between her fingertips as she prepared to unleash her signature move.

“We should probably save that for a last resort, Lady Valentine...” said Wuha Gappoli, who had already begun cautiously creeping forward. “Leave this one to me, if you don’t mind.”

“But I thought you couldn’t use your abilities because of the Concealment spell on this cave?” Valentine asked.

“I can’t see what’s happening further ahead of us, but I bet I can do something about whatever’s shooting those magic bullets at us. Fortunately for me, this cave is an enclosed space...which means it’s basically a room!” Wuha extended her arms forward ahead of her and casted a spell. “All the Room!” Suddenly, her body melted into the cave wall, until she was nothing but a dark patch of wall. Then, with astonishing speed, the same dark coloration spread outwards, deeper into the cave.

All the Room was a spell unique to manor djinn that enabled them to control space itself. By covering the wall of an enclosed space with a darker-colored wall made from her own body, Wuha Gappoli gained the ability to control the minds of all living creatures within, freely manipulating them however she wished.

Wuha spread her dark-colored walls deeper into the cave, and before long, she had stopped the magic bullets. The room was silent once more.

“It looks like that went okaaay,” said Tsuya, holding her hand up to shield her eyes as she looked out into the passage onwards.

“So it seems,” agreed Hero Gold-Hair. “Good job, Wuha! Now come back!” he called. Wuha, however, gave no response.

“Something is wrong...” said Riliangiu, pressing her ear to the cave floor to listen. A second later, the dark wall of Wuha’s body abruptly turned back to bare stone. The whole party could hear the sound of footsteps coming their way.

“All the Room, hm?” came a man’s voice that still had its youthful timbre from deeper in the cave. “I’ve heard of it, but this is my first time seeing it myself. Manor djinn are something else! Only a rare djinn species could pull off something like that!” The footsteps drew closer and closer, until the voice’s owner appeared before Hero Gold-Hair. Dressed in a white tuxedo, he looked too young to be called anything other than a boy.

“What’s a kid doing here?” Hero Gold-Hair asked, folding his arms. “Are you lost?”

“Don’t wooorry!” chimed Tsuya, giving the boy a friendly smile. “We can show you the way out of the caaave!” She held out her hand, but the boy simply regarded her with a cold smile.

“What’s this?” he asked, smirking wickedly. “Don’t tell me you assumed I was a child based on my appearance alone. You really are stupid, aren’t you?” He snapped his fingers, and a woman appeared behind him, tentacles extending from her back.

“What?!” Hero Gold-Hair’s eyes went wide. “Th-They’ve got...”

Wuha Gappoli had been captured. She was back in her human form, bound by the woman’s tentacles. Her entire body, except for her head, was subsumed inside the writhing mass. It looked like her mind was distant as well—her eyes didn’t seem to be focused on anything, and her head jerked from side to side every time the woman moved.

“Did you know?” the boy asked, sneering at the helpless djinn. “This girl holding your manor djinn captive is a tentacle djinn. Her tentacles are capable of producing a paralytic toxin, but most of them have had their toxin neutralized in order to sell as a product for sexual release. They fetch a rather high price that way, you see. The black market has been a little overzealous in

poaching these creatures, and now there are very few left alive. Incredible, isn't it, to see such a rare species obey my will?"

"And?" Hero Gold-Hair asked, peering at the boy over his folded arms. "Who are you supposed to be?"

"It's considered bad manners to ask someone's name without introducing yourself, isn't it?" the boy said. "Well, never mind. My name is Collectableu. My hobby is collecting every rare species to exist in the world of Klyrode, and...let's see...how old did I turn this year again? I've lived quite a long time, after all, thanks to my mermaid flesh elixir." Collectableu snickered wickedly as he bowed. "I really must thank you for coming all this way to contribute a rarity Level 8 carriage djinn to my collection. It's quite a delight—I hardly ever get an opportunity to expand my collection of djinn. Now then, I believe your business here is done. On your way with you," he said, making a shooing gesture with his right hand.

"So let me get this straight," responded Hero Gold-Hair, not budging or unfolding his arms as he glared back at Collectableu. "You're an old man pretending to be a little kid, and you have some kind of nonsensical explanation about all this. But I'll have you know that Wuha Gappoli is one of my underlings! She doesn't belong to you!"

"Y-Yeaaah!" said Tsuya, raising her voice. "Give Wuuuha back!" She was clearly intimidated by Collectableu and the tentacle djinn woman, however, and could only issue her proclamation from behind Hero Gold-Hair, her knees trembling with fear.

Valentine, however, stepped forward fearlessly, a beguiling grin on her face and threads of darkness forming at her fingertips. "Return Wuha this instant, boy, and perhaps I'll let you off with a spanking!" she declared. Riliangiu transformed her forearms into blades and stepped up beside Valentine, assuming a low combat stance.

Aryun Keats, for her part, was still lying unconscious behind the boulder from earlier.

"Well, well, well..." Collectableu said, sounding positively delighted as he looked over Hero Gold-Hair's assembled group. "Now that I've gotten a better

look at Miss Voluptuous and Miss Sword Arms, I've never seen either of those species before! Change of plans, then—I'll make the two of you mine!" He snapped his fingers again, and a magic beast that resembled an enormous raging bull appeared behind him, charging straight for Hero Gold-Hair's party.

"Ngh!" Hero Gold-Hair cried, managing to dodge by a hair's breadth. Valentine and Riliangiu jumped away to either side of the beast as well, evading its charge.

Suddenly, Tsuya shrieked. "Eeeeeek!" she wailed, the sound echoing throughout the cave. "Wh-What do you think you're doooing?!"

"T-Tsuya!" cried Hero Gold-Hair, whipping around to see that Tsuya quite literally dangling from the tip of one of the bull's horns by her clothing, desperately covering up her exposed chest with both hands in a desperate attempt to preserve something of her dignity. Then the tentacle djinn reached out with her tentacles and pulled Tsuya inside the writhing mass.

"O-Oooh... Feels kinda...tiiingly..." Tsuya mumbled as the light faded from her eyes. With that, she lost consciousness.

"Y-You fiend!" Hero gold-Hair shouted. "What did you do to Tsuya?!"

"Not to worry, she isn't dead," Collectableu said, turning his nasty grin back towards Hero Gold-Hair. "I just gave her a dose of the same paralytic I gave the manor djinn to make certain you all behave yourselves."

"First you take Wuha, and now Tsuya!" Hero Gold-Hair shouted, his face contorted with rage at having had two companions in succession snatched away from right under his eyes. He was poised to leap at Collectableu at any moment, but Valentine and Riliangiu held him back.

"Hero Gold-Hair!" Valentine pleaded. "He has both Wuha and Tsuya as hostages! We shouldn't do anything rash!"

"Nghhh..." Hero Gold-Hair gritted his teeth in frustration at Valentine's words, as Collectableu watched with his sneering grin.

"You are a strange one, aren't you?" Collectableu said. "Such fury, and only because I captured a few of your minions. One's underlings are best used as disposable pawns, you know."

“‘Disposable pawns’?! Don’t be absurd!” Hero Gold-Hair said, clenching his fist in anger as he glared at Collectableu. “I’ll admit, there was a time when I treated my underlings like that, hiding behind them as a shield to preserve my own life...but things are different now! My subordinates are all my irreplaceable companions! I won’t abandon them! Not a single one!” He raised his arm dramatically towards Collectableu as he spoke, his eyes shining with determination.

Collectableu gave Hero Gold-Hair a slow round of applause, sneering all the while. “Oh, but I must say, if I were in your position I would use my rare species collection as a shield while I ran away. I have magical control over all of them, after all! Though I suppose it would be something of a pity if I couldn’t sell off the items in my collection once I’ve had my fun with them. It’s such a tidy profit, you know! What a shame. Still, all I would have to do is pay a visit to my kind friends—the underworld merchants and all of their criminal contacts—and set about abducting some new rare species!”

He spread his arms theatrically as the tentacle djinn and bull-like magic beast returned to his side to stand by his flanks. Behind him, deeper in the cave, Hero Gold-Hair and his companions could see the horse they had pursued here—apparently likewise a magic beast. Their eyes were all shining with strange light, apparently under Collectableu’s magical control.

“You sell them off once you’ve had your fun, then?” Riliangiu said, glaring with contempt. “You really are something else...”

Hero Gold-Hair wordlessly gritted his teeth, meeting Collectableu’s gaze.

“Let me make a suggestion,” Collectableu said. “Since you’ve come this far, let’s play a game together!” He posed with his arms outspread, and then wrapped his arms around his own body he began his explanation. “The rules are simple. You must face these rare species from my collection. First, you will face them one-on-one, and then the victors of the bouts will join in a melee. Whichever side is annihilated first loses! If you win, I’ll return the manor djinn and the human woman. But if I win, I’ll take all of those rare females for my collection. The blond one, I have no interest in. Well? Doesn’t that sound grand?” he asked, grinning with delirious excitement as he squirmed in his own embrace.

Hero Gold-Hair, who had been glaring at Collectableu through the whole explanation, took a deep breath and folded his arms again. “How about we fight to incapacitation?” he proposed. “I’m sure you wouldn’t want to lose part of your precious collection either, would you?”

“Well, this is a surprise,” Collectableu said. “Can it be that you actually think you can defeat my collection?” A genuinely shocked expression came over his face. It only lasted a second, however, before he was right back to his customary sneer. “Well, why not? I’d hate to dirty my adorable creatures with your filthy blood.”

“In that case,” said Hero Gold-Hair, producing a roll of vellum from the Bottomless Bag on his waist, “care to sign a contract?” On the scroll was written the rules of the tournament Collectableu had laid out earlier. Hero Gold-Hair signed his own name and bit his thumb hard enough to draw blood, which he pressed down to seal the contract.

“There’s no need for such a thing,” said Collectableu. “I intend to keep my word regardless.”

“Oh? You don’t say...” said Hero Gold-Hair, grinning boldly at Collectableu as he held out the contract for him, his famous golden hair in the breeze. “Or could it be that you’re afraid of losing to me?”

“My, my...” Collectableu said. “You have a smart mouth, if nothing else. Well, why not? You accepted my terms, after all. I suppose I might as well sign.” Collectableu took the vellum scroll from Hero Gold-Hair and signed and applied his blood seal immediately, without even bothering to look over the contents.

“You sure you’re not going to read it over first?” said Hero Gold-Hair. “There’s no take-backs if you complain later, you know.”

“It doesn’t matter what it says,” Collectableu sneered, dismissing Hero Gold-Hair’s words out of hand. “After all, I’m the one who’s going to win.”

Hero Gold-Hair took the contract back from Collectableu and stored it in his magic bag, never taking his eyes off the boy. “Where are these matches taking place, then?”

“There are five suitable arenas in this cavern,” Collectableu said. “The

entrances to each are that way." He pointed to one of the cave walls, and five holes appeared. Five of the unfortunate creatures Collectableu had made part of his collection came from where they had been idling in the cave, one leaping into each of the five holes.

"Now," Collectableu said, turning his sneering gaze back at Hero Gold-Hair's party. "Each of you, enter the arena of your choosing! Only...wait! What's this?" With exasperated gestures, he began to count the members of Hero Gold-Hair's party one by one—Hero Gold-Hair, Valentine, Riliangiu, and the currently unconscious Aryun Keats. "Now that I look carefully, there are only four of you, aren't there?" he exclaimed with feigned surprise, his mocking smile on his face the whole time. "Well, I suppose if a fifth person were to miraculously come to your aid, I'd have to allow them to participate...but that's quite a big *if*, isn't it!"

"That suits me just fine!" said Hero Gold-Hair, grinning back with all the confidence he could muster. "I could use the exercise, after all! What's one or two extra opponents?" But despite his puffed out chest and bold words, a bead of cold sweat had already begun to run down his brow.

Valentine is the strongest fighter among us... Hero Gold-Hair thought. *But she can't afford to push herself too hard, what with her magic depletion issues. And Riliangiu is a reconnaissance specialist—she isn't in her element in a head-on fight! For that matter, Keats is still out like a light!* He glanced over his shoulder to see Riliangiu trying desperately to rouse the unconscious Aryun Keats. *Nothing for it, then...* he told himself, taking the Drilldozer Shovel out from his Bottomless Bag and firmly gripping its shaft. *I'm the only one who can do this.*

Just then, he heard a woman's voice from behind. "I'll be your damned fifth member, then."

"What?" Hero Gold-Hair turned around to see Belianna, her scythe slung over her shoulder. "You... Why are *you* here?"

"Hah!" Belianna laughed. "Did you think I didn't know damned well you've been following me? Don't underestimate the damned Infernal Four!" she said, grinning fiendishly as she stepped up alongside Hero Gold-Hair.

Collectableu glanced over at Belianna, unamused by her sudden appearance. "Tch. And here I thought we were going to have five versus four. Well, never

mind. You look like a perfectly normal devil, but if you're good enough for the Infernal Four, I suppose you'll fetch a high price, at least." He punctuated his statement with yet another of his sneering grins.

"You really do love the sound of your own voice, don't you?" Valentine remarked with a smirk.

"What was that?" said Collectableu. "I..." suddenly, however, he realized something was wrong. *Wait! Where did that blond guy go? h*e thought, his eyes opening wide. Hero Gold-Hair was gone, leaving only Valentine, Belianna, Riliangiu, and Aryun Keats, who was finally back on her feet.

Before he knew what was happening, a hole appeared at Collectableu's feet, and out leapt Hero Gold-Hair, landing an uppercut directly on his chin—a special attack utilizing the Drilldozer Shovel's high speed hole digging ability.

Collectableu was caught completely off guard. The force of the blow sent him falling over backwards and tumbling down to the cavern floor. "H-How?!" he demanded. "Why couldn't I sense your presence?!"

"There's another punch like that coming once we've rescued Tsuya!" Hero Gold-Hair declared as he quickly refilled the hole. "You'd better be ready!" Even at times like these, Hero Gold-Hair had a committed policy of closing up a hole once he was done with it. When he had finished, he dove into one of the holes leading to Collectableu's arenas.

"And *I* will squeeze every last drop of magic from your body," said Valentine, stepping up next. "You'd best be ready for that, as well." She looked down at the boy, still lying fallen from Hero Gold-Hair's uppercut, and jumped into one of the remaining holes.

"And I will cut you to ribbons. Be ready," said Riliangiu, transforming her arms into blades and jumping into a third hole.

"Erm..." Aryun Keats shook her head in an attempt to rouse herself. "I don't have the slightest idea what's going on right now, but I suppose I should jump into one of those holes?" With that, she jumped into the fourth hole without thinking to try to stop her miniskirt from fluttering in the breeze as she fell.

"Well, see you at your damned execution, you damned bastard," scoffed

Belianna, brandishing her scythe as she jumped into the last remaining hole.

Collectableu could only watch, dumbfounded, as the members of Hero Gold-Hair's party each picked their respective holes. "Th-That blond man punched me..." he muttered, his voice trembling as he stared after the hole Hero Gold-Hair had leapt down. "Me! I-I've never been punched before in my life!"

“W-Well, whatever...” Collectableu said, rubbing his jaw as he pulled himself off the floor. “They have no hope against my rare species collection. All there is to do now is amuse myself watching them struggle for their lives using my observation windows. I must say, I hope they don’t die *too* easily!”

Collectableu’s face twisted into a truly nasty look as he opened a set of five windows with which to survey the action. “It *is* a little dull just waiting for them to finish,” he said. “Perhaps I’ll have some fun with that human and manor djinn to pass the time...” He turned to look behind him, expecting the tentacle djinn, who had stayed behind with him and was holding Tsuya and Wuha Gappoli hostage. What he saw instead, however, made him freeze fast in place. “Huh?!”

The tentacle djinn had been slammed into the wall, her tentacles severed. Tsuya and Wuha Gappoli were lying on the cave floor, being looked after by a small group of humanoid people. One of them—a woman—stood between Collectableu and his would-be victims, barring his way.

Collectableu sighed and shook his head. “And what do you think you’re doing to my priceless collection? Her tentacles will grow back, of course, but it’ll take *ages* to recover from being sliced up like *that*. Who are you people, anyway?”

“You may address me as Demmie,” the woman—Demmie—said, brandishing her brand-new, freshly sharpened spear. “I am the current head of House Ulgo, of the Dark Army.”

House Ulgo was a major family of demons that had defected from the Dark Army and fallen into ruin during the failed rebellion against Yuigarde. Afterwards they worked with Hero Gold-Hair to put a stop to a group that was fusing demons with magic beasts, and at Hero Gold-Hair’s suggestion, they were allowed back in the Dark Army.

“The Dark Army?” Collectableu asked. “I know the Infernal Four was here a second ago, but why would common Dark Army soldiers be sniffing around here? The members of my collection I slipped into their intelligence operation should have had them thoroughly confused. How strange...” He tilted his head in a curious gesture. “Besides, I put the barrier back up after I lured the manor djinn in here, and I had a magic beast standing guard outside. Why are you here, anyway?”

“House Ulgo never forgets a favor...or a grudge,” Demmie recited in a clear voice. “Those are our two absolute precepts. After everything Hero Gold-Hair has done for us, it’s only natural that we’d come to his aid!” Her retainers, the ironarm demon Genbushien, the golem Rozen Laurel, and the cottonflower demon Rosalina, stood ready behind her as well.

“My cotton tufts are monitoring Hero Gold-Hair’s movements at all times!” Rosalina declared. Indeed, she was surrounded by a great cloud of countless little tufts of cotton floating in the air around the flower blooming proudly on her head.

“Now,” said Demmie, “we will arrest you here and put an end to your absurd little game!”

“Ah ha ha!” Collectableu laughed, sneering incredulously. “Arrest me? Are you stupid? Do you really think you’ll be able to accomplish such a thing? And to think, you came all this way only to be defeated! It really is quite something, don’t you think, manor djinn?” He pointed behind Demmie’s group, towards where Wuha Gappoli lay. Suddenly, the djinn roused and took to her feet.

I already used my Subjugation spell to bring the manor djinn under my domination! Collectableu thought, leering with triumph. *This one’s been mine from the moment my tentacle djinn caught her!*

Wuha Gappoli extended both of her arms and said the magic words to activate her special ability as a manor djinn: “All the Room.” The next second, the cave walls turned black. Then, just as suddenly, another wall jutted out between Collectableu and House Ulgo, separating him from the others.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” Wuha Gapoli doubled over with laughter. “So sorry, Mister Collectableu, but my body belongs to Hero Gold-Hair—plus the rest of his party—and no one else! There’s no way in hell I’m taking orders from a loser like you! Moron!”

“What? What?!” Collectableu’s eyes went wide in disbelief. “My Subjugation spell should have already turned you into one of my minions!”

“Terribly sorry, but it looks like I’ve built up an immunity to that spell after all the hard times it’s put me through!” said Wuha, blowing a raspberry in the direction of the wall dividing Collectableu from the rest.

Collectableu scowled through the semitransparent wall at Wuha's antics. "How utterly immature, the lot of you..." he grumbled. "Things would have gone better if you had all just done what I said."

"And what do you mean by that?!" Demmie shot back. "Collectableu, you are guilty of the abduction of members of rare species and demon trafficking! You are to surrender yourself to the judgment of the Dark One Lord Dawkson!"

"Oh?" Collectableu sneered. "Do you *really* think you're in a position to say all that? The manor djinn may have escaped, perhaps, but I have another hostage right here, don't I?"

Tsuya stood next to him with lightless eyes. By all appearances, she was already under the domination of Collectableu's Subjugation spell.

"Wh-What's Lady Tsuya doing over there?!" Wuha exclaimed, a shocked and bewildered look on her face.

"Ah ha ha!" Collectableu cackled. "Maybe *you* were able to resist my spell, but this woman doesn't seem to have been so lucky! I simply told her to come to me, and she obeyed."

"Nhh..." was all Wuha could manage in response.

"We will rescue her!" declared Demmie, assuming a combat stance. "Release that black wall of yours for just a moment!"

"O-Okay! Got it!" Wuha said, holding out her arm to erase the wall segment between them and Collectableu.

"Oooh?" said Collectableu. "You're sure you don't want this wall between us?" He snapped his fingers, and a hoard of rare species of all sorts appeared behind him, each under the control of Collectableu's Subjugation spell. They marched forward and lined up in front the black wall, protecting him.

"Oh. jeez!" Wuha exclaimed, keeping the wall up. "That's a lot of 'em all of a sudden!" If she lowered the wall, the rare species Collectableu kept under his control would surely leap out to attack them.

Next to her, the members of House Ulgo seemed just as distressed. "We're in hot water now, m'lady..." muttered Genbushien. "The Dark One Lord Dawkson

ordered us to do everything we could to make sure the rare species were safe and unharmed! Some of them have regenerative abilities, like that tentacle djinn earlier, but there's quite a number who don't..."

"Y-Yeah, you're right..." Demmie frowned. "U-Um...so...what do we do...?"

If the wall were released and Collectableu ordered his minions to launch a suicide attack against House Ulgo, there would be no way to escape without seriously injuring many of the rare species in his collection. The group stood rooted to the spot, unable to move.

Having successfully halted Demmie and her retainers in their tracks, Collectableu turned his attention back to the windows he had summoned earlier, to see how things were progressing down in the holes they were using as arenas. "It's a pity after all the work I put into this base, but I suppose I'll have to abandon it and move someplace else," he said, sneering evilly. "But first, allow me to show you the final moments of your beloved Hero Gold-Hair..."

◇◇◇

The five battles all began at nearly the same time, in five different arenas.

◇Riliangiu vs. Shakorbo the Cookpot Djinn

After jumping down her hole, Riliangiu slid through the tunnel to find herself in a large dome-shaped room—a room that was now echoing with the continual sound of thunderous explosions.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" her opponent laughed loudly, showing their long fangs as they hurled magic cookpot bomb after magic cookpot bomb Riliangiu's way, conjuring a new one out of thin air each time. "Take that! And that! And that! You're never gonna win if you keep running away, you know!"

Riliangiu found herself caught in a veritable downpour of magic cookpots, using her high-speed movement abilities to dodge one after another.

"Squirrely one, are ya? Well, fine then!" With a twisted smile, Shakorbo sped up, hurling cookpots Riliangiu's way at nearly twice the rate they had been going before. "*This* will wipe you out for sure! My owner's gonna give me such a great big reward! Oooh, I can't wait!"

Riliangiu tried desperately to evade, but with the sheer number of projectiles coming towards her, it was simply impossible. She took a direct hit from one of the explosions, sending her flying back. “Kh!” she cried as she slammed the wall—but there wasn’t a moment to waste. She darted away as soon as she could, just in time to avoid the barrage of magic cooking pots that came raining down where she had been just a second before.

I dodged that one by the skin of my teeth, Riliangiu thought as she wiped a trickle of fresh blood from the side of her mouth. *But they’re right. I’m never going to win if I keep running away. I need to do something, or the situation is only going to get worse...*

Riliangiu kept an eye on Shakorbo as she ran like the wind around the arena, until suddenly, with a painful smack, her foot collided with a boulder jutting out from the uneven cave floor. She tripped. “N-No!” she cried as she fell to the ground. “I was careless!”

“Ah ha ha!” Shakorbo laughed, hurling a vast quantity of magic cookpots at their fallen opponent. “You fought hard, but that’s as far as you go! Well, then...toodles!”

“That’s as far as I go...?” Riliangiu echoed. She scrambled to her feet, but the magic cookpots were already upon her. An enormous explosion rattled the chamber with a loud *kaboom,* leaving a deep crater where Riliangiu had been—and no sign of Riliangiu herself.

“Oh, what?” Shakorbo gaped in panicked disbelief as they made their way towards the crater. “Oh, no... did she get blasted away to nothing? I really messed up! Familiars from the Realm of Evil are *super* rare! My owner wanted her real bad...”

Suddenly, something flew up from beneath Shakorbo’s feet—Riliangiu herself. “Wh-Whaaaa?!” Shakorbo cried. They tried to leap backwards to avoid their opponent, but Riliangiu struck their head from either side with the flat of both blade-arms before they could get away. “Agahhh?!” they sputtered as they crumpled to the ground, unable to understand what had just happened.

Riliangiu’s shoulders heaved with exertion as she looked down at her fallen foe. “That really *was* by the skin of my teeth...” she said, looking behind her at

the hole in the cave floor she had been hiding in a moment ago. *Just when I thought they had done me in with those magic cookpot bombs, I found myself pulled into that hole...* she thought. *I would never have won without that. But...where did that hole come from?*

As Riliangiu stood there catching her breath, one of Shakorbo's magic cookpot bombs came rolling up to her feet. She picked it up. *Hmph,* she thought to herself as she carried the bomb over to where Shakorbo lay twitching on the floor. *These cookpots of theirs really put me through the ringer, didn't they?*

"This is yours, I believe," Riliangiu said, sticking the magic cookpot bomb right in Shakrobo's mouth. "Dispose of your own things properly." She forced a second and then a third down the terrified djinn's throat before Shakorbo stopped moving completely.

◇Riliangiu eliminates Shakorbo the Cookpot Djinn! (A taste of their own medicine!)

◇ ◇ ◇

Collectableu's sneer didn't falter as he watched the battle through one of his windows. "Well, well!" he marveled. "I never expected the Realm of Evil familiar to win that one! But that's what makes these little competitions so *fun*, isn't it?" He was sitting down on a chair that a member of his collection had brought him, legs crossed. "The cookpot djinn is a fairly low-powered species as far as my collection goes, after all. I only threw it in the mix in the first place to make the game more interesting," he added, turning his attention to another window.

Demmie and the rest were watching as well from behind Wuha's black wall.

"M'lady," said Genbushien. "Do you suppose that is what people call a *flag*?"

"Huh?" asked Demmie. "Wh-Whatever do you mean by that?"

"Ah! O-Oh, never mind that! I meant nothing at all!" Genbushien said, hastily correcting himself. "I was simply wondering if this means we can expect Sir Hero Gold-Hair and his companions to triumph."

"Yes!" Demmie said with a cheery smile. "I think so!"

"Those people..." Collectableu said, side-eyeing Demmie and her companions

as he clicked his tongue in irritation. “They’re starting to get on my nerves...”

◇◇◇

◇Valentine vs. Buffalona the Mad Bull Demon

Unlike Riliangiu, Valentine emerged to find herself in a verdant space full of trees—practically a miniature jungle. As Collectableu watched, Valentine flew from tree to tree, releasing threads of darkness from her fingertips so they covered up the gaps between the trees like a spider’s web. “Now, be ensnared in my web!” she sang.

Buffalona’s horns, however, tore through her webs like tissue paper as he charged straight ahead. “My horns don’t feel a thing, I’m afraid!” he declared. He came within inches of striking Valentine, but at the last second, she dodged with a backwards somersault, retreating back into the air. Buffalona halted his charge and looked over his shoulders at his opponent. “I was told you were one of the great champions of the Realm of Evil. I must say, I’d been looking forward to this bout a great deal! But it’s a bit boring if all you do is run away.”

“Hee hee hee!” Valentine laughed, smirking down at Buffalona with a look of unperturbed confidence. “Is that what you think? How curious!”

“Curious?” Buffalona scowled, clearly disdainful of Valentine’s attitude. “You seem quite full of yourself for someone who’s done nothing but flee!”

“My, my,” said Valentine. “Does it look like I’m running away to you?” She pointed down towards Buffalona’s face. “I suppose you haven’t noticed what I wrote on your forehead after all, then, have you?” she mocked, laughing once more.

“On...my forehead?” Buffalona repeated, taking a mirror out of his Bottomless Bag and looking over his reflection.

On his forehead was written the word: “LIVESTOCK.”

“What do you think?” Valentine chuckled. “Do you like it?”

Buffalona’s shoulders shook with rage. “Making a fool of me, are you?!” he bellowed, his whole body turning red. “How dare yoooou!!!” He lowered himself to the ground on all four limbs, puffs of white steam emitting from his

nostrils as he kicked at the ground with his right leg. “That’s it! No more mister nice guy! I’ll tear you to shreds with my Horn Bash attack!”

Valentine only smirked, as she readied her threads with both hands. “I’ve already seen through all your attacks, you know,” she said, waving to beckon Buffalona forward. “Now, come and meet your death!”

“Wroooaaahhh!” Buffalona cried mightily as he charged straight for Valentine, sending her body flying. She impacted the wall with a sickening *crash*, enough force to bury her body in the wall itself. “All bark, are you?! What happened to seeing through my attacks?!”

Buffalona charged towards Valentine again, aiming to hit her with the massive horn in the middle of his forehead while she was still stuck half-way in the wall. *Crash!* The second charge drove Valentine still further into the wall.

“There’s more where that came from!” Buffalona declared. *Crash! Crash!* He backed up and charged again and again, until Valentine was so completely buried in the wall it was hard to see where she even was. “And the final blow!” Buffalona lowered his horns, preparing a final charge...but suddenly he found his feet trapped on something, unable to move.

“H-Hwuh?!” Buffalona exclaimed, bewildered. He looked behind him to see that his legs were caught in a hole that had suddenly appeared from nowhere. “Wh-What’s this hole doing here? It wasn’t here a second ago, was it...?” He strained his body trying to pull himself upright, but then he noticed that something was wrong. “Wh-What’s this?” His eyes shot open.. He willed his body to charge, but found himself unable to move even a single step. On closer inspection, Buffalona realized that his body was wrapped up in layer upon layer of minuscule dark threads. A look of pure shock came over his face. “W-When did she—?!”

Buffalona tried to rip through the threads with pure force, but the layers of thread wrapped around his body now were much tougher than the threads he had torn through moments earlier. He found himself unable to budge them an inch.

Valentine extricated herself from the hole in the wall and leisurely took a few steps forward towards the mad bull demon. “That really was quite the chore, I’ll

have you know," she said. "But I must say, it was quite frightening watching you tear through my threads with raw power like that. Still, even you can't move a muscle when you're bound up nice and tight like that, can you? All I had to do was stealthily wrap you up in my Threads of Evil. Although, it *was* rather a lot of work..."

"D-Don't tell me..." Buffalona said, looking up at Valentine in disbelief as she drew closer step by step. "You took my Horn Bash attacks on purpose, in order to wrap me up in your thread...?"

"Oh! You finally noticed! However..." She pulled hard on the thread, tightening it around Buffalona, horns and all. He fell on his side, completely powerless. "A little late in coming, wasn't it?" Licking her lips, she pushed on one of his horns with both hands.

"Wh-What are you...?" Buffalona asked, confused. Valentine, however, just pushed harder and harder until the horn itself broke off. "O-Owww! That *hurts!*" Buffalona cried. "I-I see... You're trying to break off my horns so I can't use my attacks. But I'm sorry to say, I have the ability to regrow them! This little plan of yours won't work as well as you think." In act, the horn Valentine had only just broken off was already visibly growing back.

"Oh? Perhaps you've misunderstood." Salivating, she gave the horn a greedy lick. "Absolutely delicious..." she said, tossing the entire horn in her mouth. There was a loud crunching sound as she pulverized it with her teeth.

"W-Wait... What in the world are you doing?" Buffalona asked, turning pale with fright as he watched.

A rapturous expression came over Valentine's face as she swallowed with a loud gulp, and then she reached out to seize hold of the newly regrown horn that had taken the place of the one she had just eaten on Buffalona's head.

"Your horns are just *bursting* with magic, you know. I thought they looked delicious, but I must say, they are even more delectable than I dared to imagine! Hee hee hee! Give me more! I want to fill my stomach!" She licked her lips as the second horn broke off like the first. "I must say, I was a little worried about that stratagem of mine, you know, with how little magic power I had left in my body until just a moment ago. I wasn't certain which of us would give out

first! But the pain was all worth it in the end...” She tossed another horn in her mouth.

“N-No! W-Wait! Spare me!” Buffalona pleaded desperately. “I-I surrender! I surrender!” His horn was already growing back on its own yet again, no matter how much he might wish to stop it.

It cost Buffalona a considerable amount of magic power whenever his horn grew back, and each time Valentine would snap it right off, claiming the magic for herself. This continued until Buffalona’s reserves of magic finally ran dry, and he slumped to the ground, powerless, unable to regrow his horn any further.

“Ah ha ha!” Valentine laughed, her cheeks flushed and her breath hot after such a passionate feast. “What a splendid meal!”

Buffalona, for his part, just lay on the ground, too weak to even twitch.

◇Valentine eliminates Buffalona! (Thanks for the meal!)

Valentine wiped the corners of her mouth with a handkerchief and glanced behind Buffalona at the hole that had suddenly appeared in the ground.

That being said, she wondered, *how long has that hole been there?* It *caught Buffalona’s leg and stopped that final charge of his, didn’t it? If it hadn’t been for that, I might really have been torn to shreds, no matter how much of my thread I’d managed to wrap him up with...*

In the end, she might have lost the fight if it hadn’t been for that hole. Valentine cocked her head, peering at it curiously.

◇ ◇ ◇

Collectableu’s mouth hung open stupidly as he watched the battle between Valentine and Buffalona. *It can’t be...* he thought. *Buffalona was one of the five strongest fighters in my collection!*

“Look, Lady Demmie!” said Rosalina. “Collectableu is in shock! He must be very upset that that cow of his lost its battle!”

“Yes, it looks that way!” Demmie nodded, and turned to Collectableu on the other side of the wall. “Mister Collectableu!” she said, raising her voice. “If you

want to surrender after all, now would be the time!”

Demmie’s words brought Collectableu back to his senses. “Wh-What nonsense is this?” he asked, returning to his familiar sneer. “Me, in shock! Ah ha ha! What a funny joke!” His smile, however, looked just a little forced.

Keeping that expression on his face, Collectableu turned towards yet another window.

◇ ◇ ◇

◇Belianna vs ???

“Damned nuisance!” Belianna of the Infernal Four flew through a space full of countless pillars, swinging her scythe and carving the figure in front of her to bits. Her scythe, however, passed through the image with no resistance, scattering it into mist. A snickering laugh filled the room, from no direction in particular.

“Eee hee hee!” it laughed, as yet another image appeared. “How long will it take you to find my real body, I wonder!”

“No damned time at all, damn it!” Belianna swore, once again carving through the enemy with an arch of her scythe. To nobody’s surprise, however, this one too vanished without resistance. Then, suddenly, Belianna felt a sensation of intense pain shoot through her body. “Gah!

Damned bastard! she thought. *Each individual attack of theirs isn’t any kind of damned big deal, but if I keep taking attack after attack like this I’m going to be in a damned bit of trouble! And each time it feels like my damned body is getting more and more numb. What in the damned hell is going on here?!* Her eyes darted this way and that as she desperately tried to find her foe, but it was no use. There was nothing in the area that looked like it might be the true body of her unknown enemy. *Damn this damned nuisance!*

Cursing in irritation, Belianna swung her scythe in a great circle, enshrouded in a cloud of darkness. Her wild blows, however, met with nothing but air. Her efforts were doing nothing but helping to exhaust her stamina.

Belianna slung her scythe over her shoulder and leaned back, breathing heavily as she tried to regain her composure, an ashen pallor to her face.

“Eee hee hee! It’s starting to hurt just to keep yourself standing, isn’t it? After all, my attacks each come with a deadly poison of their own!” Another image appeared in front of her, snickering as it mocked Belianna’s predicament.

“Who are you anyway, damn it?!” Belliana demanded, furiously readying her scythe once more.

“Eee hee hee! Who am I, you ask? I’m afraid that if you don’t even know my true identity, your defeat is all but certain!” The image vanished from Belianna’s sight, and once again she felt herself struck by an attack.

“D-Damned hussy!” Belianna shouted, swinging her scythe all around her. Her stamina was already quite depleted, however, and with the poison coursing through her veins, it wasn’t long before Belianna’s strength faltered. She fell to her knees.

“Eee hee hee!” the snickering laugh came again as yet another image materialized. “It seems that this is as far as you go! I suppose I should have no problem offering you up to my owner in this state...” And with those words, the image vanished into mist.

“This sucks, damn it!” Belianna cursed miserably. *The Wolf of Justice would never find himself in a damned situation like this...* she thought, forcing herself to swing her scythe despite her increasingly labored breaths. Her mysterious opponent, however, simply weaved her way through her scythe swings to counter with yet more precise attacks. Belianna was left swinging her scythe in futility, her body covered in wounds from the unknown attacker.

She could feel her consciousness growing dim. *Is this really as damned far as I go...?* she thought. *Damn it all...*

Through the dim haze of her thoughts, Belianna recalled the image of the Wolf of Justice, effortlessly repelling attack after attack from the Dark Army. It was that very strength that ironically won him a tremendous deal of popularity among demonkind, who revered power. Belianna, for her part, had become one of the Wolf of Justice’s most fanatical devotees.

In actuality, the Wolf of Justice was none other than Flio in disguise, but that fact was known only to a select few in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the Dark Army. Belianna had no idea that the true identity of the man she

worshipped was the mild-mannered father of two of her sister's classmates.

Suddenly, Belianna thought she could hear the words of the Wolf of Justice spoken in her mind. "*Justice is not something you see with your eyes*," the Wolf of Justice said, "*but something you feel with your skin.*"

That, it happened, was one of the aphorisms printed on the *Daily Justice* brand quote-a-day calendar now on sale at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, featuring a pearl of wisdom from the Wolf of Justice himself for every day of the year.

Thank you, Wolf of Justice... Belianna thought, raising her scythe high above her head. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, focusing all her attention on her sense of touch. *That's right. It was no damned use going after those images, was it? I have to* feel *her damned presence.*

When she focused her mind, Belianna could feel all sorts of sensations she had never felt before—minute disturbances in the air around her. They were so subtle that it seemed like they should be impossible to detect, no matter how intensely one focused their senses. In that moment, however, Belianna felt them dancing about all around her, fluttering in the air, and sometimes darting straight towards her to deliver another attack.

Belianna focused her mind on the presence alone. *Feel it with your skin...* she told herself. And then, with a forceful shout of "Right damned *there*!" She swung her scythe in a single precise slash. This time, she felt an impact.

"Gyaaaaaah!" the something she impacted shrieked as it fell to the floor. It was a spider, not even a single millimeter in length. It had been split in two by Belianna's attack, and now the upper half of its body writhed pitiably on the ground.

"I've had about damned enough of you doing whatever you damned please in this fight!" Belianna shouted.

"I-I suppose I should congratulate you on discovering my true form..." the spider said. "But it won't save you. All I have to do now is split my body into—" but that was as far as it got. The next second, a lightning bolt struck the spider from overhead with immense force, leaving the creature charred black and sizzling, and not moving an inch.

“Don’t go flapping your damned gums in front of an enemy, you damned idiot!” Belianna spat. “I’m not a damned nice enough devil to wait for you to finish your damned speech!” She was still holding up her arm in the posture she had used to unleash that lightning attack. “Well? Did I get the damned thing?”

The spider gave no response.

◇Belianna eliminates Stelys the Toxispider! (“Feeling with your skin”? How ’bout an electric shock from hell!)

Belianna shouldered her scythe and let out a deep breath. *Wolf of Justice*... she thought. *Thank you for saving a damned fool like me...* Then, her eyes shot open with determination. *I’ll just have to offer him my damned hand in marriage as thanks! Ah...but the Wolf of Justice is the best there ever damned was! A man as damned strong and damned gallant as him probably has a damned wife already.*

In that case... she thought, lifting her gaze up to the heavens with a rapturous look on her face. *I’ll just have to be his damned mistress instead!*

◇Meanwhile, on the Calgosi Coast◇

“Wh-What’s the matter, Rys?” Flio said, giving his wife a puzzled look. After all, Rys had suddenly began glancing around every which way with no explanation whatsoever.

“I’m not sure...” Rys said sniffing with her sensitive nose as she looked around the area. “Perhaps it was just my imagination, but I thought I could detect some ne’er-do-well harboring evil desires about my lord husband...”

“O-Oh!” said Flio, unable to keep himself from cracking a wry smile. “Is that so...?”

◇Inside the Cave◇

One by one, the combatants who had finished their battles began to return to the cave where Collectableu stood facing off against House Ulgo. Belianna whistled as she strolled up to Demmie and the rest, scythe slung over her shoulder. “Here I am, returning damned victorious.”

Rozen Laurel gave Belianna a great big hug with her powerful golem arms. “You did so good!” she said, grinning from ear to ear, before suddenly thinking better of it and quickly letting Belianna go. “E-Er, my apologies. That was a bit too familiar, wasn’t it? You’re one of the Infernal Four, after all...”

Belianna, however, grinned back cheerfully. “It’s fine!” she said. “I don’t give a damn about that, damn it!” She plopped herself down on a nearby boulder next to Riliangiu and Valentine and let out a long breath.

“Only two fights to go, then,” observed Valentine, crossing her arms as she watched Collectableu look over his array of windows on the other side of Wuha Gappoli’s semi-transparent black wall.

Collectableu gave Valentine a thoroughly dirty look in response. *Well, whatever...* he thought, snickering evilly to himself. *Let them have their premature celebrations. If it comes to it, I’ll just use that woman as a hostage to facilitate my escape.*

“Oh?” Valentine noticed Collectableu’s gaze on her. “Is something the matter? Do I have something on my face?” she asked, theatrically rubbing her cheek.

Collectableu clicked his tongue in irritation at Valentine’s sarcastic gesture. “You’ve gotten quite confident, haven’t you? Well, I can’t deny that your side has been winning so far. The last of your little party, however, are facing the two crown jewels of my collection. I’m sure it will be mere moments until they defeat your companions, and then they shall crush the rest of you in turn. Just you wait!” And with that, he turned his attention back to the remaining windows.

◇ ◇ ◇

◇Aryun Keats vs. Elephantino the Colossus

“Ngh!” Aryun Keats stood with her arms crossed in a defensive guard, transforming only her arms into the plating from the outside of her armored carriage form and leaving the rest of her body still in its ordinary humanoid form, dressed in her skintight black top and miniskirt. As one of the rare carriage djinns, Aryun Keats had an ability that let her transform her body into any vehicle she had ever laid hands on, even once. She was even capable of transforming only a single part of her body while leaving the rest unchanged.

She hadn’t been a moment too late either. Elephantino swung his enormous nose like a whip, striking Aryun’s guard. Thanks to her quick transformation, she was able to avoid taking damage from the attack itself, but the impact sent her flying back and crashing into the rough-hewn stone wall of the dome-shaped room with enough force to cave in the wall itself, trapping her.

“Well, goodness gracious!” Elephantino said, peering down at his comparatively minuscule opponent, genuinely impressed. “You’re still in one piece? You’re quite the resilient little thing, aren’t you?” Aryun Keats had already taken more than twenty of Elephantino’s famed Nose Whip attacks and had somehow yet to give in.

“It’s such a shame we had to meet as enemies...” Elephantino continued, putting on his best lady-killer act. “I would very much have loved to have you over for tea sometime...” He sighed for effect. “But perhaps, if you surrender on the spot, I’ll give you an extra special cup of my piping hot black tea—poured directly into your mouth while you’re trapped and unable to move!”

Elephantino jumped on top of Aryun Keats with all of his enormous weight, aiming to lodge her body in the rock itself. “Well well, m’lady carriage djinn...” he said, a pleased smile coming to his face at the sensation—Aryun seemed to have put up no resistance whatsoever. “It seems that all it took to finally break you was a bit of smashing with this body of mine after all!”

“Oh?” came Aryun’s voice from directly behind Elephantino. “Was there some other carriage djinn you broke? Perhaps on the opposite side of that body of yours?”

Elephantino wheeled around, his eyes opening wide in shock. There, right before his eyes, stood none other than Aryun Keats. For some reason, however,

the formfitting suit she wore as a top was gone, leaving her with only her folded arms to hide her exposed chest. Elephantino looked again at the thing he had crushed on the rocks. It was nothing more than Aryun Keats's now very tattered and beaten up suit.

"It was getting a little hot in here, so I thought I might try removing my top," said Aryun. "I suppose I should thank you for giving it such a thorough pressing." With that, she darted forward, straight at her adversary, transforming as she moved into an armored carriage. "I trust this will suffice for the ironing fee?!"

"Eeeeek!" Elephantino shrieked as he scrambled to retreat from the formidable war machine that had seemingly appeared from thin air. His long tusks, however, had gotten wedged in the rocky ground, leaving him unable to escape. A second later, Aryun Keats's transformed body collided with Elephantino, smashing his head into the rocks the same way Elephantino had tried to smash her.

"Yes!" Aryun celebrated, hiding her chest with one arm as she transformed back to her humanoid form. "*That's* how it's done! And I assure you, there is a lot more where that came from!"

Elephantino gave no response. He lay completely still, his head stuck in the floor.

Aryun Keats, however, watched Elephantino closely, not letting her guard down for one moment. "Ah hah!" she laughed. "You're acting as if you've been defeated in order to lure me into letting down my guard! Ha ha ha ha ha! A clever strategy, but I'm afraid it won't work. I, Aryun Keats, know better than to ignore my blind spots while driving!"

No matter how long she stared at him, however, Elephantino's body refused to so much as twitch.

"This is a little excessive for an act, isn't it?" said Aryun. "Come now! Up and at 'em!" She smacked his butt with her right hand, but all the blow did was send Elephantino's massive body crumpling powerless to the floor, his neck stuck at a thoroughly unnatural angle. His face betrayed no signs of life.

Aryun Keats gave Elephantino's face a long hard stare before giving it a couple

of hard smacks on the cheeks. Elephantino, however, gave no more reaction to this blow than he had to the smack on his butt.

◇Aryun Keats eliminates Elephantino! (Flattened by an armored carriage!)

"W-Wait!" Aryun protested, shaking Elephantino's unresponsive body. "Hang on! I still haven't shown you hardly any of what I'm capable of! It can't be over already! Come on! Open your eyes! I'm not done fighting you!"

But it was not to be.

◇ ◇ ◇

Collectableu's mouth hung open stupidly as he watched what transpired through his window. *But Elephantino is supposed to be a strong enough fighter to destroy an entire kingdom on his own! That's why they used to call him the Kingdom Smasher!* he thought, looking on with disbelief as Aryun Keats continued her unsuccessful efforts to rouse her opponent. With only one fight still ongoing, however, not only Collectableu but everyone in House Ulgo and Hero Gold-Hair's party began paying rapt attention to the final window.

"What *is* Hero Gold-Hair doing, I wonder...?" Valentine said, cocking her head in puzzlement despite herself. Collectableu's window, it seemed, was showing nothing but an empty room, its floor covered in so many holes there was no hope of counting them all.

◇Hero Gold Hair vs. Molly-Molly Molegra the Mole Djinn

"Stop running away, darn you!" Hero Gold-Hair bellowed, swinging the Drilldozer Shovel wildly as he raced through the earth.

"That's my line, mole-mole!" said Moly-Moly Molegra, digging headfirst in circles through the dirt with his round red and white body as he did his level best to attack Hero Gold-Hair.

The two kept digging and digging, each unable to effectively attack the other underground in an epic exchange of attack and defense that went completely imperceptible from above ground. All anyone watching the arena through Collectableu's window could see was holes opening sporadically in the earth's

surface, punctuated by the occasional shout from either Hero Gold-Hair or Moly-Moly Molegra.

“Don’t give me that!” Hero Gold-Hair snapped. “It’s thanks to your stubbornness that I wasn’t able to help out Belianna or Aryun Keats!”

“Mole-mole!” Moly-Moly Molegra exclaimed. “I was wondering why I couldn’t sense your presence at times! You were running off to somewhere else in the middle of our fight?! How unserious, mole-mole!”

“What’s wrong with helping out my companions?” demanded Hero Gold-Hair. “If you don’t like it, try and stop me!”

“Well now I’m *really* angry, mole-mole!” said Moly-Moly Molegra. As his temper spiked, he began digging more and more wildly, causing ever more of the arena surface to cave in. If Hero Gold-Hair had been standing on the surface, he wouldn’t be able to avoid getting caught caught in one of Moly-Moly Molegra’s holes. Moly-Moly Molegra, after all, was a specialist in underground combat. With the Drilldozer Shovel in hand, however, Hero Gold-Hair was no less specialized in precisely the same arena. The two were both so in their element that neither could even effectively locate the other underground, leaving both of them digging more or less at random.

This isn’t going anywhere! Hero Gold-Hair thought as he dug. *There must be* something *I can do...but what?* And then it hit him. *Hang on a moment! The two of us have just been digging left and right! Of course we weren’t going to run into each other if we’re both thinking horizontally! In that case...*

“All right, Drilldozer Shovel! I’m counting on you!” Hero Gold-Hair said, addressing his trusty partner. He began to dig vertical shafts in the ground, one after another. He had just started on his fifth when suddenly he heard a scream.

“M-Mole-mole!” Moly-Moly Molegra cried as he fell. “Wh-What’s a pit doing in a place like this?! I-I’m faaaaalling! Mole moooooole!!!” Then there was the loud thud of something impacting the bottom of a pit.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!” Hero Gold-Hair laughed as he made a beeline straight for where the noise had come from. “I have you now, you lousy mole!” He found Moly-Moly Molegra collapsed in a heap at the bottom of a hole, and raised the Drilldozer Shovel high.

Suddenly, the dome-shaped arena was filled with sounds: *Bash! Thud! Ker-smack!*

“H-Hero Gold-Hair really doesn’t hold back, does he...?” Wuha Gappoli said, wincing as she stared at Collectableu’s window.

The rest of the party nodded grimly in agreement.

Eventually the violent sounds ceased. A new hole appeared on the surface of the arena and out popped Hero Gold-Hair, dragging Moly-Moly Molegra with his right arm. He threw the mole djinn down on the floor.

“Big and heavy one too...” he grumbled as he laid his opponent down on his back and rested his hand on the mole’s chest to make sure his life wasn’t in danger. “That was one of the most obnoxious people I’ve ever fought.”

◇Hero Gold-Hair eliminates Moly-Moly Molgra! (A good old-fashioned Drilldozer Shovel bashing!)

◇ ◇ ◇

Hero Gold Hair’s party and House Ulgo let out a cheer when Hero Gold-Hair reappeared in the window.

“It’s Hero Gold-Hair!” said Riliangiu. “I knew he could do it!”

“Well fought, Hero Gold-Hair!” Valentine cheered.

“Nhh...” grumbled Aryun Keats. “I wish I could’ve had a proper fight like that...”

“Mm...” muttered Belianna, a somewhat difficult to read expression on her face. “With that, we’ve damned won...” Thinking of her struggles during her own fight left her with some complicated emotions welling up in her chest.

In Collectableu’s window, Hero Gold-Hair turned to face the camera directly. “Now, Collectableu! Keep your promise and release Tsuya—or else!”

“‘Promise’?” Collectableu laughed in amusement. “What’s that? Can you eat it?” He snapped his fingers, and the tentacle djinn, who had by this point regenerated and recovered her strength, reached out for Wuha Gappoli. Wuha,

who let herself get distracted in her excitement over Hero Gold-Hair's victory, was caught by the tentacles once again and was dragged over to where Collectableu stood.

"Tch!" Without missing a beat, Belianna readied her scythe and charged forward. "Damned coward!"

"My, my!" Collectableu said, perfectly calm. He held a short blade at the throats of Tsuya and Wuha Gapolli, the latter's mind seemingly confused due to the tentacle djinn's neurotoxin. "I wouldn't get any closer if I were you!"

Belianna came to a screeching halt at the sight of the two captives, as did Valentine and the rest, who had also darted forward after the devil.

Collectableu nodded, satisfied that he had stopped his enemies in their tracks, and turned to address Hero Gold-Hair through the remaining window. "My apologies, Gold-Hair," he sneered. "I'm afraid my memory isn't what it used to be after all the long, long years I've lived. I don't have any recollection of making any sort of promise with you!"

"Don't be absurd!" Hero Gold-Hair shot back. "This is *exactly* why I had us sign a blood-sealed contract beforehand!"

"Oh!" said Collectableu, producing the very contract that *should* have been in Hero Gold-Hair's bottomless bag. "Do you mean *this*, perchance?" With a dastardly smirk, he burned the velum up with magical fire. "Ah ha ha! I don't see a contract anywhere! Do you?"

"Unbelievable!" Aryun Keats snapped, leaning forward in anger. "Of all the cowardice..."

Riliangiu glanced over at her companion, who was still naked above the waist. "Oh! Madame Keats! Y-You really should put on some clothing, you know..."

As Hero Gold-Hair's party glared helplessly, Collectableu reduced the contract to ash. "And so," he concluded, "as there exists no evidence that you and I ever made any sort of promise, I will be retreating once again to the underworld along with my collection of rarities. Thank you, everyone, for keeping me company and helping to stave off boredom. Except the human woman, of course. Frankly, I have no interest whatsoever in that one, but I suppose I'll be

taking her along as a hostage to ensure my successful escape."

Collectableu began an incantation, his sneer looking nastier than ever, and an immense magic circle appeared on the ground under his feet. The circle was centered on him, but it was large enough to encompass all of the rare creatures on his side of Wuha's black wall. Collectableu's body began to sink into the magic circle itself. "Now, everyone, I bid you farewell," he said with an exaggerated bow. "I do not believe we shall meet again."

Hero Gold-Hair's party tried to catch up to Collectableu, Valentine at their head, but they had no way past Wuha's wall, which was still preventing them from reaching him. Collectableu was watching their futile efforts with gleeful amusement, when suddenly, with no warning whatsoever, someone yanked him up by the hair. "Eh?" he said, startled by the sudden development. He turned his gaze upward and saw a twisted figure—half maiden and half skeleton—floating in the air above him. She wore nothing but a tattered cape over her naked body, and held a long-hilted scythe with a half-moon blade in one hand, while in her other she held Collectableu's hair in a talon-like grip.

"You..." she growled. "Was it you who broke the Blood Oath Contract?"

"Ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch!" Collectableu cried as she forcefully dragged his body out of the magic circle. "That hurts, I'm telling you!" He struggled for all he was worth, but there was nothing he could do. The twisted figure hoisted him up into the air with little regard for his protests. "Who are you, anyway?" he demanded, impotently flailing his limbs. "Showing up out of nowhere and nullifying my Mass Teleportation spell like that... This is completely unaccountable!"

"I am the Contract Executor," the woman said, holding her scythe to Collectableu's neck. "An angel from the Celestial Plane. I have arrived in this world to investigate a case of failure to perform the terms of a Blood Oath Contract, as is my duty." The Contract Executor's words were as cold as ice.

"H-H-H-Hang on a moment!" Collectableu protested. "Wh-What even is a Blood Oath Contract?! I've never heard of such a—"

"Bold words from one who has indeed signed just such a contract, administered with a drop of his blood," intoned the Contract Executor. "A Blood

Oath Contract is never to be broken by its signatories under the authority of the gods of the Celestial Plane themselves, lest they face punishment at the hands of I, the Contract Executor."

"Preposterous!" sputtered the helpless boy. "I would have *never* accepted such a high-risk—"

"Now, hold on a minute, Collectableu!" said Hero Gold-Hair, who had just returned to the cave entrance where everyone else had been waiting. "You can't go around saying things like that after giving your own blood to the Blood Oath Contract I made for us! After all, *you* were the one who broke our agreement and burned up the contract itself!"

"G-Gold-Hair!" Collectableu said, realization dawning far too late. "Why, you...!" *I see...* he thought. *Hero Gold-Hair discerned that I couldn't be trusted to keep my promises, and so he came up with the idea of having us sign a Blood Oath Contract... It must have been something he wrote on that strip of velum! That way it wouldn't matter if I broke my word or not—the Contract Executor would find me all the same.*

"Incidentally," Hero Gold-Hair added, "the penalty for breaking a Blood Oath Contract is to have one's soul immediately ripped from their body and sent to the very lowest level of the Hell Realms to be imprisoned forever, never to return to the lands of the living."

"W-Wait! Gold-Hair! I-I mean, *Hero* Gold-Hair!" Collectableu pleaded desperately for Hero Gold-Hair to spare his life. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! *I'm* in the wrong here! You defeated me, fair and square, so *please* let me go! I can pay you! I'll give you my entire collection of rare species and all the money I've made selling them over the years! What do you say? Those aren't bad terms, are they?"

"That is quite enough out of you," said the Contract Executor. She raised her right arm high and thrust it straight into Collectableu's mouth. Collectableu thrashed and flailed as he tried to resist, but there was nothing he could do to stop the Contract Executor from pulling his thoroughly blackened soul out of his body. The empty vessel went limp.

"I have secured the soul of the criminal who broke a Blood Oath Contract, as

well as burned the contract itself," the Contract Executor said. "I shall now return to the Celestial Plane." And with that, she vanished.

◇ ◇ ◇

Demmie, who had been staring up at the scene playing out above them, ran up to Hero Gold-Hair. "I must say, Hero Gold-Hair, I am impressed by your knowledge of Blood Oath Contracts."

"Is it that surprising?" Hero Gold-Hair asked, returning the Drilldozer Shovel to his Bottomless Bag as he went to go check on Tsuya. "My brother had a terrible time because of one of those contracts back in the day, or so I hear. He told me all about them."

"Huuuh?" said Tsuya, looking all around and yawning like she had just woken up. "What are all of yooou doing here?"

"Happy-go-lucky as ever, I see..." said Hero Gold-Hair, gently wrapping his arms around her back. "What am I going to do with you...?"

"Wha?!" Tsuya exclaimed, startled by Hero Gold-Hair's sudden behavior. "U-Um... Hero Gooold-Hair?!"

I'm so glad you're safe... he thought.

It was a while before Hero Gold-Hair would let Tsuya go.



◇Several Days Later—Dark Citadel Throne Room◇

The Dark One Dawkson sat on the floor in front of his ornate throne as Belianna finished reading her report.

“And so,” she concluded, “with a damned lot of help from Hero Gold-Hair, we were able to ensure the safety of everyone who had been captured by that damned Collectableu. Additionally, we have seized the damned money he made from his damned trafficking operation, along with his damned records, and have already opened a damned investigation into what happened to those other rare species.”

“You’ve been lookin’ into his activities?”

“Yes, Dark One. It seems a pirate by the name of Briedoc who has been active in the Calgosi Coast, working with a damned witch of Collectableu’s damned employ to round up rare species. Also, it seems the damned Shadow Conglomerate has been assisting him in his damned schemes. We are currently in the process of investigating these leads.”

“Hrm... I see...” said Dawkson. “Hey, Belianna.”

“Y-Yes, Dark One?”

“It was your hard work that got all those rare species folks out safe. Thanks.”

Still seated on the floor, Yuigarde bowed his head low—a gesture that sent a stir through the ranks of the demons present. When Dawkson had gone by the name Yuigarde, he never would have even entertained the idea that someone other than him might have been right about something. He was famous for never offering a word of thanks or lowering his head to anyone. It was a visceral reminder that this was the era of the Dark One Dawkson.

“I don’t believe it...” one of them whispered. “The Dark One lowered his head!”

“He’s become quite an amenable person of late, hasn’t he?” another agreed.

“Th-There is no need to thank the likes of me, Dark One,” Belianna said, kneeling down and lowering her head herself. Zanzibar and Coqueshtti, the other two members of the three Infernal Four who had been on standby behind her, kneeled down as well, followed by the rest of the demons waiting in the throne room. “Now and hereafter, I am sworn to conduct myself in a manner

worthy of the Infernal Four."

Dawkson took a good long look at his Infernal Four. Despite its name, the venerable institution had only three members at present. *I suppose it's four if you count my brother-in-arms...* he thought. In his mind, he could almost see the handsome golden-haired knight kneeling down right next to Zanzibar, trusty shovel in hand. *I need to thank him for his help with the incident this time, don't I?*

As Dawkson was lost in thought, his minion Phufun stepped forward. "Forgive me for interrupting your contemplation, Master," she said, pressing her false glasses up the ridge of her nose with her index finger. "But we are about to begin an emergency meeting concerning the handling of the rare species recovered from Collectableu. And after that, you have a scheduled audience with the western demons, followed by..."

Phufun's itinerary continued on and on. Dawkson listened with a complicated expression on his face. *Sounds like it'll be a while until I have the time to properly thank my brother Hero Gold-Hair, huh...?* he thought, sighing deeply.

Chapter 4: Flio Returns to the Calgosi Coast, Part 2

After arresting Briedoc on the shore of Calgosi Coast and rescuing the pirates who had been cast out to sea, Flio and Junia handed off the captives to the Calgosi Coast office of the guard and were shown to Junia Van Biel's mansion.

In a sitting room on the first story, Flio and Rys sat with Junia Van Biel.

"I really didn't expect that thing to be the Beast of Disaster," Flio said, smiling dryly as he opened a window to confirm the status of the monster he had sent to his personal storage. Himself, Rys, and Junia all looked it over to make sure they had been correct.

◇Whale of Woe (Beast of Disaster)

"In terms of size, it is a bit bigger than the Calamity Wyrms I caught in Dogorogma," Flio mused. "But the Calamity Wyrm had much more powerful abilities, I think..."

"Miss Van Biel, have you been under attack by that Beast of Disaster and those pirates this entire time?" Rys asked.

Junia shook her head. "W-We were able to confirm its presence off the coastline a month ago..." she said. "B-But this is the first time it's actually shown itself... A-And I had never heard of a Beast of disaster accompanying a pirate fleet..." She seemed to be clearly worried.

"Perhaps it's because of this thing..." Flio proposed, pointing out a section in the window he had been pouring over. Rys and Junia gathered around him to get a closer look.

◇Signs of domination from the spell Subjugation

"Oh, so it was under the effects of Subjugation?" Rys said. "I suppose that means the witch Hiya captured was using her magic to make it follow her commands?"

"No, wife of the Exalted One," said Hiya, appearing suddenly behind Flio and

Rys. “It seems that is not the case.”

“It isn’t?” Rys asked.

“From what I learned from my chats with the witch in question, the one who cast the spell is an individual by the name of Collectableu,” Hiya explained. “That witch was no more than one whom this Collectableu had authorized to give orders to magic beasts under his domination.”

“I see...” remarked Flio. “So he set it up so other people could use his own dominated creatures...”

“This is nothing more than supposition, but I imagine our Collectableu must have refined the Subjugation spell himself,” said Hiya.

Flio looked somewhat saddened at that remark. “I don’t know what kind of person this Collectableu is, but if he’s someone who spends his time improving spells like that, I have a feeling I wouldn’t like him very much...”

Flio had been originally summoned to Klyrode from the world of Paluma, a realm where demihumans faced cruel discrimination at the hands of humanity. Many of them had been enslaved using similar spells to Subjugation. The only thing Flio had been able to do in such an unequal world was to try and conduct himself without discrimination in his own affairs, treating demihumans as he would any other. Living in such a society had given him a strong dislike towards magic that dominates the will of thinking beings.

“Your sympathies on this matter are certainly noted, Exalted One,” Hiya ventured. “However, if I may be so bold as to venture my own humble opinion, there are important reasons why one might seek knowledge of the magics of domination.”

“Oh?” Flio asked. “What might those be?”

“If one lacks knowledge of domination, one will find themself powerless to stop another from using such magic for evil ends. Indeed, were they to encounter such a foe, they would likely come under its domination themself. By devoting oneself to the study of Subjugation, one can lower the risk of such an eventuality considerably.”

“I see...” Flio nodded, apparently convinced. “I suppose that makes sense.

May I ask, by the way, how did you learn all that from the witch you captured, Hiya?”

“I questioned her most tenderly with the help of Damalynas and Maglion, over the course of which she voluntarily confessed to us all that she knew. Does the Exalted One wish to know the details of our method of questioning?” A seductive smile came over Hiya’s face.

Oh, Flio thought. *This is about her “training,” isn’t it...?* He shook his head. “No thanks,” he said, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “I think I’ll pass for today.”

When Flio had first defeated Hiya, they found themself deeply awed by his strength, and henceforth devoted themself to his service. Living with Flio and his family, however, Hiya became deeply interested in the nightly activities Flio and Rys engaged in as husband and wife. Now, with the help of Damalynas and Maglion, whom they had ensnared into their own mindscape, Hiya spent their days experiencing all kinds of lovemaking in the name of “training.” After all, as a djinn, Hiya’s usual body had female sexual traits, but they were fully capable of manifesting whichever organs they should like.

“E-Erm...” At this, Junia Van Biel raised a trembling hand. “M-May I ask...wh-what are your plans a-after this...?”

“Oh! Yes!” said Flio, hastily turning away from Hiya to engage with Junia instead. “Since we captured the Beast of Disaster we came here for, I figured we’d spend the day on the Calgosi Coast as a family, and tomorrow head back on the regular Enchanted Frigate flight!”

“W-Well...” Junia offered, fidgeting awkwardly as she spoke. “I-If you like, wh-why not spend the night in my mansion? I-I mean...y-you and all your companions helped us out a great deal, Mister Flio, sir...”

“Perhaps we should take the countess up on her offer, my lord husband, since she managed to say so many words,” suggested Rys.

“I suppose that’s one way of looking at it,” Flio agreed, smiling as calmly as ever. He turned back to Junia and said, “All right, in that case, if it’s not too much inconvenience, we’d be happy to accept. Although I should tell you, it isn’t just our family today, but the children’s friends as well.”

“O-Of course...!” said Junia. “Th-That isn’t a problem at all... I-In fact, I-I had a wonderful time last time when everyone was here...”

“That’s right!” said Flio, “We stayed at your mansion for the night before the festival as well, didn’t we? Well, thank you for having us.”

Junia simply beamed and nodded.

“All right then,” said Flio. “We’re going to go see how the children are doing.” And with that, he, Rys, and Hiya all exited the room.

“I-I have to hurry and get everything ready for their welcome...” Junia said, watching as they left. “L-Let’s see... They’ll need food...and rooms to stay...” She began counting off tasks to do on her fingers, then suddenly she looked up, interrupting herself. “E-Erm... H-Hang on. I-I feel like I’m forgetting something important...” she said. “Hm... But what could it be...?”

◇Meanwhile on the Coastline◇

After finishing up cleaning the detritus of the wrecked pirate fleet off the beach, Junia Van Biel's retainers, led by Polseidon and Eddsarch, gave word for the beaches, which had been closed due to the pirate attack, to be reopened. On one corner of the coastline, you could see the members of Flio's household enjoying their time.

"Oh, wow..." Rylnàsze gasped as she stared out at the sea, wearing her swimsuit patterned with a meadow grass motif and holding Sybe close. Sybe's family, Shebe, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, were all gathered around her feet. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement.

"This is your first time seeing the sea, isn't it, Rylnàsze?" Elinàsze remarked, stepping up beside her sister with a smile. She was wearing a white one-piece swimsuit, paired with a wide-brimmed hat to protect her skin from the sun.

Rylnàsze smiled back. "Yes!" she said, so excited and anxious that she was practically squeaking. "There was that very large lake from when we visited Dogorogma, but I've never seen the sea before!" Timidly, she reached out a leg towards the water as a wave broke on the shore.

"You mustn't go too far out to sea, you know," Elinàsze told her. "Do your best not to get separated from everyone else."

"I won't! Don't worry, Elinàsze!"

"Elinàsze! Rylnàsze! There you are!" The two heard their brother Garyl's voice coming from behind. They turned to see him standing there in his own swimsuit. He smiled as he approached, but he wasn't alone. He was leading a small pack of his classmates—Salina and Irystiel at the head, and Snow Little and Leina Raina coming up behind. And worse...

"That man is quite handsome, wouldn't you say?"

"I would! Why, he's just my type!"

Somehow, Garyl had attracted an entire group of female beachgoers.

"Garyl's as popular as ever, I see..." Elinàsze remarked, smirking wryly at the

sight.

Garyl, however, just smiled. “Oh, it’s nothing like that! I’m just happy to have been getting along so well with everyone!” With the easygoing look on his face, he was the spitting image of his father Flio.

“I-I’m very grateful that you get along so well with me too, Lord Garyl!” said Salina, sidling up close to Garyl in her frilly bikini and taking his right arm in her hands.

“And Irystiel’s really glad as well, mreowr!” said Irystiel’s plush, which she manipulated using ventriloquism even as she took Garyl’s left arm. Irystiel’s swimsuit was a black one-piece.

“It’s no fair!” Snow Little complained. “I want to get along with Garyl better too!” She ran up behind, joining the other two.

“Y-Yes, me too, I suppose...” agreed Leina Raina, following suit.

The other girls who had started following Garyl, too, took this as an invitation to gather closer.

“I-I would like to as well, if I may...” said one.

“A-And me too, please...if it’s not too much trouble...” said another.

Garyl, however, seemed more than happy for the company of so many people. “I’d love to hang out with all of you now that the pirate situation is under control!”

“Thank you!” the girls all cried as one.

Rislei stood a short distance away wearing a sporty swimsuit designed for ease of motion, doing some warm-up exercises as she watched the girls mob Garyl. “Garyl’s as popular as ever...” she said, stretching her Achilles tendon.

“Well, even a guy like me can tell that Garyl’s good looking,” Reptor said, smiling dryly as he did his own warm-ups alongside Rislei. “Plus, he’s honest to a fault and kind to everyone he meets. It would be weird if the girls *didn’t* like him.”

“Well, why don’t we leave Garyl to them and go have some fun?” Rislei proposed. “It’s been so long since we’ve been to the beach. Race you to that

boulder over there!”

“Yeah!” Reptor grinned, his lizardfolk tail swishing happily back and forth. “But don’t think I’m gonna lose!”

Suddenly, a hand grabbed Reptor’s shoulder from behind. “A swimming race, hmm?” said Rislei’s father Sleip. “Or were you hoping to get some time alone with her out on that boulder, so far from the shore... I really can’t let my guard down with you, can I?”

“Wah!” Reptor exclaimed. “M-Mister Sleip...” His tail stopped its swishing and drooped limply between his legs.

“Hah hah hah!” Sleip laughed heartily, giving Reptor a few good smacks on the back. “No need to look so unhappy! Come now! Let’s all have a race!”

“O-Oh. Okay...” Under the circumstances, Reptor had no choice but to agree.

“You don’t gotta bully Reptor like that, papa...” Rislei objected, a knowing smile on her face at her father’s behavior. “He’s my friend, you know.”

“Hah hah hah! Of course, of course!” Sleip clapped on arm on the lizard boy’s shoulder. “After all, that’s why the *three of us* are going to be spending time together!”

It was all Reptor could to to feebly smile back at Sleip’s overbearing cheer.

◇ ◇ ◇

On a large rock a short distance away from the sandy beach, Ghozal sat humming a tune, a hefty fishing rod in his hands and a straw hat on his head. “Hrm...” He nodded contentedly. “This is the life.”

Uliminas, who was busy dealing with the aftermath of the pirate attack, smirked at the sight of her husband as she watched out of the corner of her eye. *Ghozal’s been hooked on fishing ever since meowr visit to the lake in Dogorogma, hasn’t he?* she thought. *When he was the Dark Meown, he was always busy worrying about the state of demewnkind from meowrning till night, with the darkest scowl mew could ever imagine. But ever since he abdicated the*

throne and started living with Flio, he meowlways seems like he's having fun. I was fond of the meowld Ghozal, but I think I like the way he is now even better... Underneath her smirk, there was a definite kindness to Uliminas's gaze.

As Uliminas was lost in thought, Ghozal turned to look straight at her. "Just you wait, Uliminas!" he said, smiling cheerfully. "You're gonna eat your fill of fresh caught fish tonight!"

M-Meow! Uliminas startled, her cheeks turning red as Ghozal cast his rod out far to sea. Suddenly, a loud boom ripped through the air. Ghozal had cast his rod far too fast, breaking through the sound barrier and splitting the sea in two before Uliminas's very eyes. *H-He's every bit as purrposterous as ever, I see...* she thought, smirking once more.

"By the way," said Ghozal, "Uliminas."

"Meow?" Uliminas asked.

"That swimsuit looks good on you."

"Mrarowww?!" Uliminas leapt in the air as if Ghozal had dealt her a blow, her blush spreading all the way to the tips of her ears. She was wearing a new swimsuit she had prepared especially for that day, with a very revealing cut she suspected might flatter her body line. "G-Ghozal!" she protested. "Meow you're just fighting dirty!"

"Hrm?" Ghozal asked. "What do you mean? I'm just saying what's on my mind! It's like Mister Flio says—people won't know what you're thinking if you don't tell 'em."

"M-Mrewr..." Uliminas mumbled, at a loss for words.



◇◇◇

With the latest pirate incursion over, visitors had started coming back to the beach in large numbers. Among them were Flio and Rys, who had set out from Junia Van Biel's mansion wearing their swimsuits, looking forward to enjoying a nice long day at the beach for the first time in a while.

"It's good to relax like this from time to time, isn't it, my lord husband?" said Rys, smiling as the two walked through the shallows. She was wearing a white bikini that showed off her well-proportioned body to excellent effect. Dressed like this, it was clear just how striking her figure was. She hardly looked anything like a mother of three.

"I-It is..." Flio said, doing the best he could to keep his cool despite the effect Rys's outfit was having on his heart. "It's just been one thing after another lately..."

Rys wrapped her arms tight around one of Flio's pressing her voluptuous chest right up against his skin. The sensation caused his cheeks to redden considerably despite his best efforts. But just then, Flio noticed something. "W-Wait..." he said, coming to a stop and gazing off towards the beach.

"My lord husband?" Rys asked, cocking her head curiously. "Is something wrong?"

"Right over there," Flio said, pointing towards a single spot on the coastline. "It looks like someone's casting Teleportation." A magic circle appeared as the words left his mouth, right where he had been pointing. It revolved in the air, glowing with a golden light.

"Who would be teleporting here, I wonder?" Rys mused, getting on guard just in case.

Flio raised his right arm, summoning a magic circle of his own. It turned slowly, analyzing the unknown circle. "I don't think it's anything to worry about," he said. "It looks like it's being cast by a group of mages from Klyrode Castle."

"Oh, really?" Rys said, relaxing from her combat stance.

"Papa!" Elinàsze came running up, looking all around. "I sensed the presence of a magic circle over here!"

“Indeed...” Hiya made their appearance, materializing behind Elinàsze. “And *that* seems to be the source.”

As the group watched, a party led by the Maiden Queen of Klyrode materialized on the spot. The queen herself was at their head, followed by some very agitated looking armored knights and a group of mages with magic staves. “The coordinates Countess Van Biel gave us in her distress signal are just ahead,” said the Maiden Queen. “Be on your guard, everyone! This area is under attack by pirates!” She looked around the area and began briskly giving commands to her party. “Mages, draw back. You’ll be low on magic power after casting such a long-distance Teleportation. Knights, form a protective perimeter...”

The Maiden Queen of Klyrode had received a distress call from Junia Van Biel’s Transmission spell requesting urgent assistance against the pirates and immediately set out with the knights under her direct command, getting the castle mages to send her straight to the Calgosi Coast.

If Flio had been the one casting Teleportation, he could have sent all of Klyrode Castle straight to the Calgosi Coast itself, but he was the only one in the entire world of Klyrode capable of such a feat. Very few people, Flio included, had any idea just how powerful the shopkeeper was.

When the Maiden Queen confirmed that all of her knights had made it through safely, she continued to survey the area ahead. “Wh-What?” she said, a puzzled look coming over her face. After all, what greeted her was not a scene of carnage, but cheerful beachgoers playing in the water with nary a pirate in sight. The more she looked, the more confused she got.

The Second Princess, who had come along with her sister, and Boralis, commander of the Queen’s personal knights, ran up behind her. “You don’t suppose the battle could already be over, could it...?” the Second Princess asked, every bit as confused as the Maiden Queen.

“But it’s been mere minutes since we received the emergency distress call...” agreed an equally perplexed Boralis. “How could that be in such a short time?”

◇Meanwhile—Junia Van Biel’s Mansion◇

“...?!” As she busied herself getting the mansion ready for Flio and her other guests, Junia Van Biel suddenly managed to scream without making a sound. “Th-That’s right...” she said, rushing to the window. “Th-The Transmission spell I sent to Castle Klyrode... I-I forgot to let them know the battle was over...”

She watched through the window as the Maiden Queen of Klyrode led her knights onto Calgosi Coast. Her already pale skin turned even paler, and she leapt out the window, using her magic to fly quickly to the scene.

◇ ◇ ◇

“I see...” said the Maiden Queen when she caught sight of Flio. “Lord Flio. It was you who defeated the pirates for us.”

“Oh, not at all!” Flio demurred. “All I did was capture the magic beast. My whole household worked together to defeat the pirates.” He explained the details of the situation to the Maiden Queen, who looked visibly relieved.

Just then, Junia Van Biel flew hurriedly from her mansion and landed in front of the Queen. “U-Um!” she stammered, waving her arms frantically as she tried her best to explain. “Y-Your Majesty! I-I forgot I c-contacted you! Th-The p-pirates are... Th-The pirates...”

If it had been the Maiden Queen’s father, the previous king of Klyrode here, he would have bellowed something like, “*Don’t you know how busy I am?! You wasted my time!*” and after thoroughly lambasting her character, he’d have left her with a heavy penalty to pay in gold for the trouble. The Maiden Queen, however, showed clemency on her vassal. “Oh, it’s quite all right. You must have been too busy in the aftermath of the battle against the pirates, I would imagine. Rather, I should apologize to you for failing to arrive in time to assist you.” She bowed her head in apology.

“O-Oh...” said Junia, hastily bowing her head herself. “P-Please, there’s no need... I-I’m the one who made a mistake...”

For a little while, the two both stood in a bow towards the other.

After their meeting, Boralis led the way to take the pirates Junia had arrested into the knights' custody. Flio stepped up to the Maiden Queen, who was overseeing the proceedings. "We've been holding on to the magic beast the pirates were using, as well as the witch who was controlling it. Would you like us to hand them over to you as well?" he volunteered.

"I see..." said the Maiden Queen. "I would ask you to hand over the witch, if I may. But as long as you file the appropriate paperwork, the ownership of a magic beast rightfully belongs to the one who captured it. You may do as you see fit with it, Lord Flio."

"All right," Flio agreed. "In that case, I'll tell Hiya to bring her over to you. They've been busy learning what they can from her, you see."

At the mention of Hiya's name, the Maiden Queen's face went suddenly pale. "H-Hiya, you say..." she echoed. "You couldn't mean...the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness...?" A memory stirred from the depths of the Maiden Queen's mind—Hiya, their Collars of Sacrifice around the necks of every living human in Klyrode Castle, poised to snuff them out at a moment's notice. The knights, who were standing ready behind her, seemed to be recalling the same event. Like their queen, their faces lost their color, and their bodies began shaking noisily in their armor.

Flio had a feeling he knew what was bothering the Maiden Queen and her knights. "Yes, it is the same Hiya," he said, smiling his usual easygoing smile. "But there's no need for alarm. Hiya's changed a lot. They won't be doing anything rash with their magic."

"O-Oh..." the Maiden Queen and her knights all breathed a sigh of relief at Flio's reassurance. "In that case, I'll try not to worry. I-I suppose, then, we'll be heading home on the next scheduled Enchanted Frigate line."

Although it had only been a few short days since the Enchanted Frigate had been launched, there was already a regular scheduled flight heading from the Calgosi Coast back to Klyrode Castle Town. The castle mages would need nearly a full day to recover their magic after casting the Teleportation spell that brought them here in the first place and would be unable to cast it again until they recovered. As such, the current plan was to take the Enchanted Frigate for

the trip home.

“In that case...” Flio started, extending his right arm and beginning an incantation. A magic circle appeared on the ground at his feet, and a black door materialized in the middle. “You can go home using this, if you like,” he said, opening the Teleportation portal he had summoned. On the other side of the unassuming door stood the front gate of Castle Klyrode.

The knights balked in disbelief. “H-Hang on... Was that the Teleportation spell?”

“But I thought Teleportation just transported the people standing inside the magic circle!”

“S-So, if we go through that door, we’ll be back at Klyrode Castle? I don’t believe it!”

The knights on the other side, who had been on duty guarding the front gate of the castle, seemed no less flummoxed by the door suddenly appearing out of nowhere. The Maiden Queen, however, had seen Flio’s portals in action many times before. She just bowed deeply and offered Flio some words of thanks. “We would be happy to accept your generosity, Lord Flio. I am sorry for troubling you with this matter.”

Before long, the knights set about leading the captured pirates through the Teleportation portal, where another group of knights was waiting on the Klyrode Castle side of the door to take them to the castle dungeons.

Suddenly, they could hear a woman’s high-pitched screams coming from somewhere near the portal. “No! I don’t want to go!” she shouted. “I-I can’t live without my big sisters Hiya and Damalynas and Maglion any more! Please! Please, let me stay by your side forever!” It was none other than the witch who had been controlling the magic beast, clinging tight to Hiya’s feet and absolutely bawling.

When she had first been captured, the witch had regarded everyone with a condescending expression and a cold “*I have nothing to say to you.*” But now she was screaming and crying her eyes out, refusing to be separated from Hiya and the other denizens of their mindscape.

Hiya patted the witch gently on the head. “You committed a crime,” they said. “First, you must go to Klyrode Castle to atone for what you have done. When you have finished, I will be happy to take you along once more.”

“Big sister Hiya...*hic*...” she sobbed, looking up at Hiya’s face. “A-All right.” She nodded, eyes still full of tears. “I promise I’ll atone for my crimes and come back to you. And when I do...”

“That’s right,” said Hiya, giving the girl another good pat. “I’ll be waiting.”

And then, the witch walked through the portal to Klyrode Castle on her own two legs.

That witch was really resistant at first, wasn’t she? Flio thought, glancing over with a wry smirk on his face. *What in the world did those three do to question her...?*

“Exalted One,” said Hiya, noticing Flio’s gaze and stepping up to him. “If you are interested in my methods of interrogation, perhaps I might explain them as we watch this video recording I created...” As they spoke, they opened a window.

“No thank you,” said Flio, shaking his head and smiling his usual easygoing smile. “I think I get the gist of it, anyway, and I trust you.”

As they were speaking, the Second Princess walked up to the Maiden Queen, who had been standing by the door watching as the knights did their work. “Our knights have finished moving the prisoners, my sister the queen,” she reported.

“Thank you, Second Princess,” the Maiden Queen said. Then she turned to where Flio, Rys, and Junia were all standing. “It seems the time has come for us to take our leave,” she said. “Countess Junia Van Biel, I leave the Calgosi Coast region in your capable hands once more.“

“Y-Yes...” Junia said, giving a very tense bow. “I-I’ll do my best...”

The Maiden Queen smiled and bowed once again. “When we were at war with the Dark Army in the north, we had need of all the forces we could muster. We had no soldiers left to send south. But now that the war is over, I intend to establish a garrison on the Calgosi Coast posthaste.”

Just then, the Maiden Queen heard a boy's voice calling out to her from the back of Flio's group. "Miss Ellie!" Startled, she jolted her head up to see Garyl.

"Now, Garyl," Flio chided his son. "You know you're not supposed to call the Maiden Queen that when she's working."

"Oh, that's right..." Garyl hastily corrected himself. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty."

"O-Oh! N-No, that's quite all right!" the Maiden Queen said, her dignified and elegant voice cracking uncharacteristically as she flailed awkwardly with her hands. "Th-That is, I was nearly about to return home, after all, so there's really no need to address me so formally..."

At first, the Second Princess didn't know what to make of her sister's behavior. *Hm...?* she thought. *What could be making my sister act so flustered?* Then, she turned her gaze from the Maiden Queen to Garyl and clapped her hands together in understanding. *I see!* "Why, if it isn't Garyl!" she said out loud. "The boy my sister is so enamored with!"

"Bfwah?!" The Maiden Queen practically shouted. "Wh-Wh-Wh-Whatever are you saying, Second Princess?! I...I...I..." Her face turned bright red as she tried desperately to find the words to explain herself.

The Second Princess smiled with amusement. "Now, now, there's no need to panic like that. In fact, I have an idea! You've been working nonstop for nearly half a year with hardly any breaks, haven't you, my sister the queen?"

"W-Well, I suppose that's true..." the Maiden Queen said. "B-But I don't see what that has to do with—"

"Thanks to those Enchanted Frigates, there's been much less need for me to be out of the castle all the time for my diplomacy work. And the Third Princess has been handling herself much better with the internal administration lately. Why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

"T-Take the day off?" the Maiden Queen echoed. "B-But it's so sudden! There's my official duties in the castle, for one thing, and I'd need to get the consent of the ministers..."

"The Third Princess and I can take care of your duties for you," the Second Princess offered. "And I know how to handle the ministers, so don't worry."

“B-But...” the Maiden Queen protested, a deep frown on her face.

“Hey, Garyl,” said the Second Princess, turning to address the boy. “You’d like to spend some time with my sister the queen, right?”

“Huh?” Garyl said, startled at being spoken to so suddenly. “W-Well, yeah! I’d be very happy to enjoy the Calgosi Coast with her!” He smiled brightly.

“G-Garyl...” the Maiden Queen’s face turned red all the way to the tips of her ears as she stood rooted to the spot.

“Cool!” said the Second Princess, wheeling the Maiden Queen around and pushing her forcefully back towards Garyl. “She’s all yours!”

“Eek!” the Maiden Queen cried in an adorably tiny voice as she was thrust forward into Garyl’s arms.

“Well, have fun, you two!” the Second Princess said, nodding in approval as Garyl caught the Maiden Queen and held her steady. “And now, I bid you farewell.” She gestured towards Flio, indicating for him to quickly dispel the Teleportation portal. Flio looked just slightly perturbed, but he lowered his arms and the portal vanished.

The Maiden Queen watched helplessly, held tight in Garyl’s arms. “U-Um... I-I, um...”

“E-Erm...Your Majesty...?” Garyl said.

“O-Oh,” she mumbled, fidgeting. “Um... P-Perhaps you could call me Ellie, like you usually do? I-It’s my day off, after all, I suppose...” That was all the Maiden Queen—Elizabeth—could manage.

◇ ◇ ◇

As Garyl held the Maiden Queen close, a number of figures watched on from the shadows.

“Goodness...” said Salina. “What is happening over there?”

“It’s wrong, whatever it is, mreowr!” growled Irystiel’s plush cat.

“That woman is being *far* too familiar with our Garyl!” declared Snow Little.

The three girls, still in their swimsuits, had lost sight of Garyl and gone off looking for him, until at last they found him here.

“W-Well, by the looks of things, she’s quite a bit older than him, isn’t she?” Salina observed.

“He should be with someone his own age, like Irystiel! Or at least one of you! Mreowr!” the plushy concurred.

“Y-Yes, exactly! That’s exactly right!” agreed Snow Little.

“Um, big sister Elinàsze...” Rylnàsze started to ask her sister as the two of them observed the three girls from a short distance away. “What are Salina and the other girls talking about?” She seemed very dubious about the entire thing.

“Hm...” Elinàsze considered for a moment before answering with a bright smile. “To put it simply, I suppose they’re talking about how much they all love Garyl.”

Rylnàsze’s face lit up at her sister’s explanation. She nodded her head, smiling cheerfully. “I love big brother Garyl too!” she said.

“That’s right,” said Elinàsze, petting her little sister on the head. “Everyone loves Garyl, after all, big sister Wyne and myself included.” *Although...* she thought as she continued to pet Rylnàsze’s hair, *I believe “love” might have a somewhat different meaning between ourselves and those three. But perhaps Rylnàsze is still too young to understand things like that.*

◇That Evening—The Van Biel Mansion Courtyard◇

After they had all had their fill of swimming in the ocean, Flio and company reconvened in the courtyard of Junia Van Biel’s mansion.

“My, what an enormous fish!” Rys exclaimed. Indeed, in one corner of the courtyard lay a truly gargantuan creature of the sea.

Ghozal, who was standing beside the fish still wearing his straw fishing hat and carrying his hefty fishing rod slung over his shoulder, laughed heartily.

“Hrm!” he agreed. “It doesn’t hold a candle to that Beast of Disaster Mister Flio fished up, but it’s not a bad catch, is it?”

Two of Junia Van Biel’s retainers, Polseidon and Rolindeim, stared at the giant fish with bemused expressions.

“Hey, Rolindeim,” said Polseidon. “Am I imagining it, or does that fish look like the old angerweiss they call the King of the Deep...?”

“What a coincidence...right?” said Rolindeim. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

“An angerweiss of that size certainly *looks* like it might rule over the deep...” Polseidon observed.

“What a coincidence...right?” Rolindeim repeated. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

“But you know...” Polseidon mused. “It would have taken an incredible amount of strength to fish that angerweiss out of the ocean depths. Just how strong *is* this gentleman?”

After a short pause, Rolindeim repeated herself verbatim for the third time in a row. “What a coincidence...right? I was just thinking the same thing.”

Meanwhile, all around them, preparations for a barbecue were underway in the mansion courtyard. “Gah ha ha!” laughed Eddsarch. “I, Eddsarch, will show you what a former pirate can do in the kitchen! I’ll make you a barbecue so delicious you won’t *believe* your mouths!” He was no longer wearing the black outfit he had worn during his years of piracy, but a white tuxedo as he deftly carved the fish with his oversized knife.

“I brought more fresh fish from the market!” Loplanz dove from the sky in his monstrous rukh form, clutching a box overflowing with fish in his talons. Eddsarch’s men took the box and began the work of sticking skewers through the fish’s mouths and handing them off to Eddsarch.

Wyne came running over as Loplanz touched down on solid ground. “Lop-Lop!” she said. “Did you bring food-food?”

“We’re still getting everything ready right now,” Loplanz explained. “You’ll

have to wait just a bit longer."

"Aww!" Wyne pouted, stomping her feet. "But I'm hungry-hungry!"

"U-Um..." Loplanz said, casting his eyes all over the area in search of something he could feed Wyne. "W-Well, I'm sorry to hear that, but it's just not ready..."

"Gah ha ha!" Eddsarch laughed again. "Ho there, Loplanz! At a loss for words in front of your girlfriend, I see!"

"Aaah!" Loplanz cried. "W-W-Wyne and I a-aren't in a relationship!"

"Gah ha ha! Well, whatever it is, you go ahead and feed her this!" He handed Loplanz a skewered squid cooked on the iron grill.

"Like, hang on!" objected Byleri, who had been helping out at the grill. "I, like, just finished cooking that one!"

"Gah ha ha! Come on! Don't sweat the small stuff!" said Eddsarch.

"U-Um..." Loplanz muttered, doing a quick polite bow as he accepted the grilled squid. "Thanks..." He turned to face Wyne. "Um, Wyne? How about—" But that was as far as he got.

"Thanks for the *food!*" Wyne said, opening her mouth wide and biting down on the squid, skewer and all. In fact, she was so eager that Loplanz's hand ended up in her mouth as well.

"W-Wait!" Loplanz cried. "Wyne, hang on! D-Don't eat my hand!"

"Nom nom nom..."

"Owww!" Loplanz cried. "D-Don't bite *me!* I-I'd really like it if you didn't bite me!" he waved his hand as he could, but Wyne showed no sign of letting go. A great laugh arose from all around at the pair's antics.

A short distance away, Ghozal was busy cutting up the enormous angerweiss fish he himself had caught with precise application of the Sever spell. "Keep the fire going!" he cried, grinning like a child. "There's lots more edible bits on this thing!" Next to him, his wives Balirossa and Uliminas were skewering and grilling the filets of angerweiss in a stone hearth.

“Mmm!” Folmina exclaimed with delight as she bit into a chunk of fish as big as her own head. “This is delicious!” Next to her, Ghoro was stuffing his own cheeks with angerweiss meat like he was in a trance.

“It looks a little grotesque, perhaps, but this angerweiss fish is simply delectable, isn’t it?” chimed Balirossa, smiling happily at the sight of Folmina and Ghoro happily eating the fish.

“But the meowment Ghozal fished that thing out of the water...” Uliminas rhapsodized. “That one I’ll never furget...”

Uliminas thought back to when Ghozal caught the mighty fish. Ghozal had been casting his rod with preposterous force until finally, the hook found the giant angerweiss. He pulled with all his strength, and suddenly the enormous fish came bursting up out of the depths of the sea. It was such a forceful pull that it sent powerful waves crashing onto the shoreline. An ordinary fishing rod and line would have been torn apart in a second, but Ghozal was using his magic along with some special gear from the Fli-o’-Rys general store, and the line held strong.

“Even after it was fished up, it started thrashing about all meowver the shore...” Uliminas recounted. “I can’t imeowgine anyone other than Ghozal knocking it out cold with their fists...”

“S-Sir Ghozal really did all that...?” Balirossa asked in disbelief.

“Hey, now!” said Blossom, laughing cheerfully as she came up from behind. “That’s just Ghozal for you, isn’t it? But I’m telling you, this is some tasty fish!” Like Folimna and Ghoro, she too was busy delightfully devouring the angerweiss. In fact, all around them, more and more people gathered to try the delicacy.

Not far off, Flio was checking over the contents of one of his windows.

“What are you looking at, my lord husband?” Rys asked, walking up to him with a fresh grilled skewer of fish in each hand.

“Oh,” said Flio. “I was just learning more about the Beast of Disaster I caught today.”

“About the Beast of Disaster?” Rys echoed.

“That’s right,” Flio said. “It looks like this one actually has *two* enormous magic gems in its body. They’re even bigger than the magic gems from the Beasts of Disaster we captured in in Dogorogma.”

“Oh, really!”

“This should be enough to enlarge the interior of another one of the Enchanted Frigates, if I’m not mistaken,” Flio said, nodding happily to himself as he accepted one of the skewered fish from Rys.

“By the way, my lord husband,” Rys began. “Is the Beast of Disaster edible, by any chance?”

“What was that?” Flio blinked.

“Oh,” said Rys, taking a bite of fish. “It’s just, this monstrosity Ghozal caught tastes is actually surprisingly delicious, you know. It has me wondering if perhaps the Beast of Disaster my lord husband caught is this delicious as well...”

Flio folded his arms and lowered his head in thought. “Hmm... I don’t know,” he said. “I can use it as base materials for a recovery potion, but there’s no guarantee that it *tastes* any good...”

“We should try grilling it!” Rys proposed. “We can’t have Ghozal beating us, can we?” She glanced at Ghozal out of the corner of her eye to see that he was still merrily chopping away at the angerweiss, her competitive spirit flaring up inside her. Lupine demons were known to respect strength even more than other demons, and Rys was no exception. She could be a real stickler for competition. She had calmed down quite a bit since she began living with Flio, but sometimes, such as now, something or other would switch this side of hers back on.

Flio, for his part, understood this about his wife. He nodded, a knowing smile on his face. “All right,” he said, producing a manageable slice of the beast’s meat from storage. “In that case, let’s try grilling up a bit of it as a test.” *At the very least, it doesn’t look like it contains anything that would harm the human body...* he thought to himself. He quickly used his magic to ensure that the meat was safe before handing it over.

“Leave the cooking to me!” said Rys, racing over to the iron grill with the meat

in hand.

“Thank you, Rys!” said Flio.

Byleri cocked her neck curiously at the sight of the unfamiliar fish. “Like, what kind of fish is this, Lady Rys?” she asked.

“Hee hee hee!” Rys laughed, grinning triumphantly. “This is the very magic beast that my lord husband captured!” She sliced a fine strip of meat and set it on a skewer. “Now, time to see how it grills!” she said, placing it on the grill.

Moments passed, and gradually, the aroma of seared Beast of Calamity flesh filled the room.

“Wh-What is that smell?!” exclaimed Ghozal, reflexively plugging up his nose.

“It stinks!” Folmina cried, tears in her eyes as she held her nose tight as well. Ghoro, too, was squeezing his nostrils shut as tight as he could.

“W-Well, that’s peculiar!” said Rys, plugging her own nose tight even as she continued grilling the meat.

Junia Van Biel watched Rys cook from across the courtyard, flapping her arms awkwardly as she tried to summon the nerve to say something. *Wh-What do I do?* She thought. *I-I’d like to ask her not to cook something that smells so awful, but I can’t say something like that to Lord Flio’s wife! Awawah...*

Flio noted Junia’s distress and held out his hand to summon a magic circle, casting the spell Deodorize. Instantly, the offensive odor of searing Beast of Disaster flesh vanished without a trace.

“Ahhhh...” exclaimed Byleri, who had been standing right next to Rys, tears streaming down her face despite her best efforts to hold her nose shut. “Like, I’m saved... I thought I was gonna lose my nose...”

Rys, meanwhile, just cocked her head with mild puzzlement. “How strange...” she said. “My lord husband is the one who caught this magic beast, so how could it smell so vile?”

R-Rys... Flio thought privately. *Me being the one to catch something is no guarantee that it’s going to smell good...* ”Well...” he said noncommittally. “Smell aside, maybe we should try a bite. There’s still a chance it might taste

good...”

“Of course!” Rys said, immediately recovering her spirits. “What’s important is the flavor!” She went on cooking, more intently than before, and in a few moments the morsel was ready to eat. “My lord husband! I’ve finished cooking the fish!” Beaming, she presented Flio with a plate of the seared monster.

Rys, of course, had no ill intentions at all. She was just following her instinct as a lupine, which told her she should first present the food to the pack leader. Flio understood Rys’s behavior well by this point, so he forced a smile and accepted the plate. *It doesn’t smell like anything anymore thanks to my Deodorize spell...* he thought. *But...is this really safe?*

Flio studied the meat from all angles before steeling his will and, with a single bite, taking it into his mouth. He chewed and chewed for what felt like minutes before finally, with big gulp, swallowing it down.

“How is it, my lord husband?!” Rys asked, her eyes shining as she nuzzled up against Flio.

Flio looked like he wasn’t sure what to say. “Well, how do I put this...? It has an...*unusual* texture. Sinewy, maybe. Or maybe just tough. And it has plenty of juice, but it doesn’t really taste like anything...”

Rys’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. “I see... So it wasn’t as good as Ghozal’s fish after all...”

Frowning, Flio held his hand over the remaining meat. *Flavor aside, there’s something else going on here...* he thought, summoning a magic circle to analyze the meat’s composition. “Huh?” he said, his eyes blinking open when he read what the window had to say.

◇Nutritional Supplement (Super)

◇Improved Nervous System Function (Super)

◇Cold Recovery (Instant)

◇Fatigue Recovery (Super)

◇Disease Purification (Super)

◇...

The list went on and on, featuring dozens and dozens of various effects. Flio couldn't hold back an astonished gasp. "Hang on! This is incredible! If I use this as a base for making recovery potions, they should have an even stronger effect than the bones and meats I've been using! We shouldn't be eating this—we should be using it as raw materials for medicine!"

"My!" Rys's face lit up with joy. "So, the fish my lord husband caught is *far* too useful to be used as mere food!"

"W-Well, I suppose that's true..." Flio said, smirking wryly to himself as he nodded. Rys, for her part, was absolutely preening in victory, her head held high and great big superior grin on her face.

Rys really does act like a child sometimes, Flio thought, smiling his usual easygoing smile at the sight of his overjoyed wife. *But I guess that's one of the things that's so charming about her.*

◇Meanwhile—Calgosi Coast, Inland◇

Inland in the Calgosi Coast region stood an imposing mountain range. In one corner of the range, a train of wagons stood dead in their tracks. The wagons were under the effect of a Concealment spell so that none in the area would detect their presence. At their head, a man stood grumbling and clicking his tongue in frustration.

"What in the blazes is going on?" the man demanded, taking a puff of his cigar. "No matter how long we wait, there's no sign of this Briedoc showing up with Junia Van Biel's retainers!"

Just then, two women ran up to the man's wagon, wearing matching cheongsam dresses with a slit that ran well up their thighs—one gold and one silver.

"Shadow King, terrible news!" yipped the woman in the gold cheongsam.

"Briedoc has been captured, and he and his crew were all taken away to Klyrode Castle!" added the woman in the silver cheongsam.

"C-Captured?!" the man bellowed, springing to his feet. "W-Well, what about

her? The witch that Collectableu fellow loaned us?”

“Well...” said the woman in gold, “it seems she too was sent to Klyrode Castle...”

“Wait! Hang on just a moment!” the Shadow King said. “What about the magic beast the witch was controlling? We were going to sell that one Collectableu too, weren’t we? He even gave us an advance payment!”

“Well...” said the woman in silver. “The beast might have been captured as well. We can’t detect it anywhere. We searched high and low, as hard as we could, but all our spells only turned up the slightest blips. And when we followed the one reaction we did find...it took us right to Junia Van Biel’s mansion...”

“Impossible!” the Shadow King clutched his head like he was in pain. “Then...Junia Van Biel captured them all, including the magic beast?!” *I’ve heard that Junia Van Biel is a proficient magic user, true, but I had no idea she was capable of something like that!* the Shadow King thought.

The Shadow King had once been king of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode itself, but he was always far more interested in lining his own pocket than governing the kingdom. While he reigned as monarch, he appropriated the kingdom’s budget for his own private use, and with the money he gained, began to do a thriving business in the black market. His evil deeds, however, came to light back while the Maiden Queen was still known as the First Princess, and he was driven from the throne. Thereafter he began styling himself the Shadow King, throwing himself fully into his underworld dealings.

“Collectableu pays well, but he’s trouble if you can’t keep your end of the bargain,” the Shadow King grumbled irritably. “I don’t want to *imagine* what he’ll do to us if he finds out we let one of his rarities get captured. At the very least, we should do everything we can to recover the beast and deliver it to him.”

Collectableu, of course, no longer existed in the world of Klyrode thanks to some quick thinking on Hero Gold-Hair’s part, but the Shadow King still had no idea this had happened.

The Shadow King turned to his two accomplices. “Kintsuno the Gold. Gintsuno

the Silver.”

“Yip?” said Kintsuno.

“Yip yip?” said Gintsuno.

“You don’t happen to know any dependable sorts we could call on by any chance, do you?”

“Well...” Kintsuno began.

“I suppose we might...” Gintsuno continued.

The fox sisters, Kintsuno and Gintsuno, whispered something in the Shadow King’s ear that made him smirk with wicked delight.

“In that case, summon them immediately!” he said. “We need to come up with a plan, and quick!”

“Yes, sir!” yipped Kintsuno.

“We’ll call him right away!” added Gintsuno.

The pair bowed, and ran off away from the wagon train, transforming into a gold and silver fox as they ran and darting into the forest at breakneck speed.

The Shadow King clicked his tongue as he sat alone in the wagon. “I swear,” he muttered darkly, taking another puff of his cigar. “Thinking back, everything started going wrong when I first appointed that golden-haired man as Hero. I hear he’s a wanted fugitive in the Magical Kingdom now, at least. They had better hurry up and capture him. The day he faces public execution will come as some relief, at least...”

◇Meanwhile—A Forest Road Somewhere◇

“A-ker-*choooo!*” With no warning whatsoever, Hero Gold-Hair suddenly sneezed loudly in his seat in Aryun Keats’s carriage form.

“H-Hero Gooold-Hair!” Tsuya exclaimed, hastily producing a handkerchief and handing it over. “A-Are you coming down with a cooold?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Hero Gold-Hair said as he wiped his nose with Tsuya’s

handkerchief. “I expect someone’s been talking about me...”

“Ooooh!” said Tsuya. “Do you think it’s the Daaark One Mister Daaawkson?”

“It could be!” Wuha Gappoli nodded. “After all, you did refuse his offer to reward you for resolving the rare species abduction case.”

“Yes, perhaps...” echoed Valentine.

“*Sir Hero Gold-Hair, perhaps we could still plot a course for the Dark Citadel?*” came Aryun Keats’s voice from the roof of the carriage.

Hero Gold-Hair slowly and deliberately shook his head. “There’s no need,” he said. “All I did was follow my own whims for my own reasons.”

“Hero Gold-Hair...” The rest of the party seemed deeply moved by Hero Gold-Hair’s words.

“In that case,” said Riliangiu, “there is also the cash reward the Dark One’s minion Phufun offered. Shall we turn that down as—”

“No,” Hero Gold-Hair declared, cutting Riliangiu off and holding out his palm in an abjuring gesture. “That, we will gratefully accept.”

“What?” Riliangiu asked. “W-We shall?”

“Yes, because I say so!” Hero Gold-Hair. “Am I understood?”

“Y-Yes, sir!” said Riliangiu. “In that case, I shall go to receive it posthaste!” She leapt out of the carriage and ran off, out of sight.

Hero Gold-Hair watched as Riliangiu left. “Well, you know...” he said. “It’s just that you can’t eat ideals...”

“Hee hee!” Tsuya chuckled. “And that’s what I liiike about you, Hero Gooold-Hair!”

They carried on their merry way, Aryun Keats’s carriage form rolling along the tree-lined path in no particular hurry.

◇That Night—Calgosi Coast, Van Biel Mansion◇

“Simply peculiar...” Salina, who was staying the night at Junia Van Biel’s mansion with the rest of Flio’s party, made her way down the hallway looking every which way. Irystiel and Snow Little approached from the opposite side, looking from left to right as she walked much like Salina.

“Salina,” said Snow Little, cocking her head to the side as they approached. “Have you seen Lord Garyl anywhere on your side?”

“I haven’t,” Salina admitted. “I was certain he would be with Lady Elinàsze and the others, but when I went to check, there was no sign of him.”

“He wasn’t with the rest of the College of Magic students either, mreowr!” said Irystiel’s plush cat, given voice by Irystiel’s ventriloquism as she held it tight in her arms.

Salina crossed her arms and tilted her head. “I was so looking forward to the opportunity to take a nice long nighttime walk along the Calgosi Coast together with Lord Garyl...” she said. “But if he has gone off somewhere, what are we to do?”

Irystiel and Snow Little folded their arms as well, lowering their heads in thought.

◇Meanwhile...◇

“The stars are so beautiful tonight...” Ellie, the so-called Maiden Queen, smiled as she gazed up at the night sky. She was sitting on the roof of the Van Biel mansion, with the elusive Garyl beside her.

“I’m glad I got to see this night sky with you, Miss Ellie,” agreed Garyl, a laid-back smile on his face.

“You know,” said Ellie, glancing at the cheerful boy beside her, “I’d never been to a barbecue like that before tonight. It was quite exhilarating.”

“Oh, really?” Garyl asked. “My family does stuff like that all the time!”

“Yes, now that you mention it, you’ve told me such tales before,” Ellie reflected. *I’ve spoken to Garyl many times using the pair of transmission gems that Lord Flio made for us,* she thought. *But to be able to see him face-to-face and speak to one another directly... Nothing could make me happier.*

They continued chatting on for some time about this and that, until they reached a lull in the conversation. Ellie cleared her throat. “Um...” she started, turning to face Garyl directly. “Garyl?”

“Yes? What is it?” Garyl asked.

“You’re going to be graduating from the Houghtow College of Magic’s elementary level courses soon, are you not? Have you given any thought as to what you intend to do next?”

“What to do next...?” Garyl repeated. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m going to be moving on to study at the Institute for Chivalric Education! After all, I have to protect you, Miss Ellie.”

Garyl’s remark made Ellie’s cheek’s turn distinctly red. *When I first met him, Garyl was a cheerful, energetic boy...* she thought. *But even back then, he always said he wanted to protect me.* Garyl had grown up quickly thanks to his demon ancestry, and by now he had matured to a splendid young man no shorter than Ellie when they sat. *He’s become a lot calmer now too,* Ellie observed, *and he’s taken to speaking like an adult as well...*

Suddenly, Ellie realized that she had been staring at Garyl’s face. She snapped suddenly back to her senses. *Oh,* she thought, *but... even as grown-up as Garyl seems, perhaps a girl of his own age might suit him better. He even has all those classmates, like Miss Salina and Miss Irystiel, who he brought on this trip... And I know I’m not the prettiest girl in the world. Plus, between all of my official duties governing the kingdom, we’ve never found time to go on a proper date. I can’t imagine it would be very fun for Garyl, being with me...*

Ellie had a bad habit of immediately turning to negativity when it came to herself. Perhaps it was only to be expected—after all, she had gone until her early thirties without ever once engaging in a romantic affair with the opposite sex.

“Um...” the Maiden Queen began, her voice choked with painful emotions,

before forcing herself to speak. “Garyl? P-Perhaps it would be better for you to do this with one of the girls your own age...”

Garyl put a hand on Ellie’s shoulder. “Salina, Irystiel, Snow Little, and the rest are all my precious friends...but you’re the girl I love, Miss Ellie. I’ve loved you since the day we first met...” He leaned in gently, bringing his face close to hers.

“Huh?” the Maiden Queen squeaked out, her own face turning redder and redder as Garyl’s got larger in her field of vision. “U-Um...Garyl?”

“It’s all right if you’d rather not...” Garyl said, beginning to blush himself. “But...may I kiss you, Miss Ellie?”

“Huh?” Ellie’s eyes went wide in panic. “U-Um...I, u-uh... What?!”

“Ah ha ha!” Garyl laughed awkwardly, pulling away. “Sorry! I guess that was a weird thing to say out of the blue...” He scratched the back of his head, embarrassed.

Ellie just stared, completely immobile. “Huh?” She repeated. “I...I, er...huh?” *H-He stopped...* she thought. *Even though he finally worked up the courage to ask...even though he would have been more than welcome to simply push past my resistance...* She shook her head. *N-No... It’s because I’ve been panicking altogether far too much. Oh...why is it that at times like these, I always make a fool of myself?* She took a deep breath.

“G-Garyl?” Ellie said, grabbing his cheeks with both her hands.

“Wha?” Garyl said, startled by Ellie’s sudden movement.

This time, Ellie was the one who brought her face close to his. Their lips met under the moonlight. Ellie closed her eyes and kissed him. After a second, Garyl, who had been confused at first, closed his eyes as well and pulled Ellie into a gentle, lingering embrace.

◇The Following Morning—Calgosi Coast◇

After having breakfast at Junia Van Biel’s mansion, Flio and company headed back to the beach while it was still early.

“Lord Garyl!” Salina scolded, wearing a bikini and folding her arms in indignation. Her outfit today was even more revealing than the one she had worn yesterday. “Where *did* you wander off to last night? We looked everywhere for you, you know!”

“Sorry, my bad,” said Garyl, smiling even as he bowed his head in apology. “I had something I needed to take care of.” His cheeks, however, were a little flushed even now. It was obvious to everyone that something out of the ordinary must have happened.

“Well, if you had business, I suppose it can’t be helped,” said Salina. “You will simply have to make up for last night by playing with me today!”

“No fair, mreowr!” Irystiel objected, using ventriloquism to speak through her plushie like always. “Irystiel wants to play too!”

“Excuse me...” Snow Little leaned in from behind Irystiel. “I should like to join you as well, if I may.”

“Sure, okay!” said Garyl, smiling at the three girls. “Let’s all play together!” Then he ran over to where Ellie was sitting by the beachside and took hold of her hand. “C’mon, Ellie! You should join us!”

“Huh?!” Ellie squeaked, extremely flustered. “U-Um, I...er...” In her mind, she was flashing back to the events of the previous night. The sensation of Garyl’s lips on her own came back to her, as clear as when it had been happening. *Garyl was so brave last night...* she thought, squeezing her fist tight. *He did something frightening, all for my sake...* She raised her head. “I-If it’s no trouble, I would be delighted to join you.”

Garyl took Ellie by the hand and set off towards the shore. Ellie smiled ear to ear as she walked alongside him, her face bright red.

Flio watched Garyl and Ellie from a short distance away, sitting on a cloth under the shade of a parasol set in the sandy beach. *I’m glad to see Garyl and the Maiden Queen’s relationship coming along so well,* he thought, smiling his usual easygoing smile. *But I have to admit I’m a little worried...*

“Indeed,” said Hiya, appearing next to Flio. “Lord Garyl is the son of the Exalted One. It would befit him to be at least a little more forceful in his affairs.

I, for one, find it simply unaccountable that last night concluded with nothing more than a simple kiss." They sighed and folded their arms in exasperation.

"Um..." Flio ventured. "Hiya, you weren't watching watching Garyl and Ellie last night, by any chance..."

"Yes, I was observing them," Hiya answered quite casually. "I trust that won't be a problem?"

Flio shook his head. *I suppose not...* he thought. *I told them not to peep at the house, but if something were to happen to the Maiden Queen, it would be a problem for the entire Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. I can't say Hiya is completely in the wrong this time...* "In any event, let's not tell anyone about what happened last night, okay?" he said after giving the matter some thought.

"If that is your will, Exalted One, I can only obey," said Hiya, placing their hand over their heart and bowing deeply.

At that point, Rys came running up. "My lord husband, what are you discussing with Hiya?" she asked.

"O-Oh, n-nothing, really..." Flio said. "We're finished, anyway."

"I see..." said Rys. "In that case, would you like to go swimming together?" She was wearing a white bikini, and between her voluptuous bosom, dignified posture, and beautiful features, she stood out among the beachgoers. She was getting stares not only from the men but the women as well.

Flio just smiled like always. "I'd love to. Shall we, then?" He stood up and walked over to Rys, and then suddenly stopped, turning to look in the direction of the coastline. "Hm?"

"My lord husband?" Rys regarded him with a curious expression. "Is something the matter?"

"Nothing serious..." Flio said, shielding his eyes with his hand as he gazed out to see. "Just something I— Huh?"

"Wh-What's wrong?" Rys asked again, furrowing her brow as she followed her husband's gaze.

"So you've noticed too, Mister Flio?" said Ghozal. He walked up beside them,

carrying an enormous three-meter-long fish he must have caught only moments ago. “Well, I wouldn’t say it’s anything to worry about, but— Huh?” Like Flio, he seemed to have noticed something on the ocean’s surface. He scrunched up his eyes, watching closely.

◇Meanwhile—Out at Sea◇

“Ohhh, this pisses me off!” As Flio and the others watched, a girl out at sea, covered head to toe in a black skintight outfit, raised her voice in anger. She was standing astride the head of a giant serpentine magic beast, her arms crossed as the snake made its way for the Calgosi Coast with alarming speed. Behind them followed more snakes, each nearly as big as the one she was riding.

“I came to attack the Calgosi Coast as a favor to my childhood friends, the demon fox sisters...” she grumbled. “But then they tell me my snakes and I are just supposed to draw Junia Van Biel’s attention by rampaging along the coast so that *they* can get back some Beast of Calamity she captured! I am *so* pissed off right now! I am Una the Great, the beast tamer who controls the waves themselves, and they’re playing me for a fool!”

The girl—Una—glanced behind her as she raged. “Well, whatever!” she exclaimed. “Come, my minions, let’s tear up the Calgosi Coast and show the demon fox sisters what we can do! Got it?!” She raised her right fist high, and the magic beasts let out a mighty shout in reply.

Una turned back to look towards Calgosi Coast and furrowed her brow. *Huh...?* There was a boat on the water, right in front of her. As she watched, someone in the boat stood up. “What’s that?” Una asked. “A child?” Indeed, just as Una said, the boat’s passenger seemed to be a little girl.

Inside the boat, Elinàsze noticed the swarm of magic beasts drawing close. “R-Rylnàsze!” she cried. “Sit down, would you? I’ll send us back to shore with my magic!”

Earlier that day, Rylnàsze had come to her big sister saying, “*Big sister Elinàsze, could we please go on the water?*” Obliging her request, Elinàsze had

rented a boat to take them out to sea. And now here they were, face-to-face with Una and her monstrous serpents.

As Elinàsze watched, Rylnàsze stood up in the boat, peering over the edge with a great big smile on her face. “Wow!” she marveled, catching sight of the magic beasts coming towards them. “Look at all those animals!”

“Rylnàsze!” shouted her sister. “What are you doing?!”

Despite Elinàsze’s panic, however, Rylnàsze seemed perfectly relaxed. “Don’t worry, big sister Elinàsze! They’re friendly!” Smiling, she turned back towards the swarm.

“Hmph...” Una grumbled. “Just some child with the bad luck to be in the way of my magic beasts. Never mind, everyone! We charge on through!” She pointed her arm dramatically in the direction of the coast.

Before Una’s very eyes, however, Rylnàsze held out her hand towards oncoming magic beasts, her smile unfaltering. “Stop, please!” she called out. Immediately, the entire swarm came to a sudden halt.

“Huh? Wha?!” Una cried. She hadn’t been the one to tell the magic beasts to stop, and she found herself tossed forward by the sudden change in direction, tumbling off the head of the giant snake she had been riding. “Wh-What is the meaning of this?!” she demanded, complaining even as she flew through the air.

Without their master, the magic beasts gathered before Rylnàsze, now moving at a relaxed pace. “Good job!” said Rylnàsze, smiling down at them. “You’re all such good little darlings!” The serpents brought their heads up to her like fawning children, and Rylnàsze pet each gently on the head. “They’re very good, aren’t they, big sis Elinàsze?” she asked, beaming at her sister.

Elinàsze smirked as she watched her sister cheerfully pet the ferocious magic beasts. *If I’m not mistaken, I believe that woman who got sent flying was in control of these magic beasts,* she thought, half not believing her eyes. *But I suppose Rylnàsze’s abilities as a beast tamer are simply greater than hers. After all, the magic beasts are all doing what Rylnàsze tells them...*

“Perhaps my little sister is actually somewhat terrifying?” Elinàsze mused to

herself, accidentally speaking the words out loud.

◇ ◇ ◇

As Rylnàsze stood up in her boat, patting the serpents on the head, Wyne and Tanya watched from the skies. Wyne had her dragon wings fully manifested on her back, while Tanya's angel wings were likewise on display. The two were flapping their wings to keep themselves airborne, not moving from their position in the sky.

"Hey, Tan-Tan?" asked Wyne. "Does Ryl-Ryl not need our help after all?"

"I believe I have mentioned this to you before," Tanya said, "but my name is not 'Tan-Tan.' It is Tanya. That being said, it seems they are in no need of assistance."

"Huh!" said Wyne, grinning and folding her hands behind her head. "I was gonna hit''em like 'ka-pow!' but if Ryl-Ryl and Eli-Eli are safe, it's all good-good!"

"Yes," Tanya agreed, bowing courteously. "As long as everyone in Master Flio's family is safe, than all is well."

As Wyne and Tanya spoke, Damalynas and Maglion caught up from behind. All four of them had come running to save Elinàsze and Rylnàsze when they noticed the magic beasts headed their way.

◇Calgosi Coast◇

"Pwah?!" Una, who had been sent flying with such velocity that her head had ended up buried in the beach sand, finally regained her senses and pulled herself to her feet. "What the heck was that?!" she complained between spitting out bits of sand that had gotten stuck in her mouth. "This is seriously pissing me off!"

"Excuse me," said someone behind her. "Perhaps we can have some words, if you've calmed down a little?"

“What?” Una spat angrily, wheeling around to face the stranger. “How clueless do you get?! I’ll show you what...I...” But the words gradually died on her tongue. Her face went pale. Before her, in addition to Flio—the man who had spoken to her—she could see Rys with her lupine fangs and tail on full display, the immense Ghozal cracking his knuckles, Hiya conjuring a separate magic circle with both their hands, Balirossa with her sword, Blossom with her hoe made from the scales of a slain dragon, and Tia with a pot full of hot tea. Everyone from Flio’s house was there, except for the ones who had flown off to rescue Rylnàsze.

Una fell to her knees, trembling in the face of the unimaginably vast magic power arrayed before her. *Wh-Who are these people...?* she thought. *This is just unreasonable! Nobody told me there’d be people* this *outrageous involved!*

“Can you hear me?” Flio asked. “If you’ve calmed down a little, I would like to have some words.” He was smiling, but somehow it didn’t seem to quite reach his eyes.

◇Meanwhile—Behind the Van Biel Mansion◇

In the grassy field behind Junia Van Biel’s mansion, the Shadow King and the demon fox sisters lay in wait.

“Kintsuno...” the Shadow King started. “When is this Una friend of yours planning on beginning her rampage? We need her for our plan to sneak into the Van Biel mansion during the chaos and recover the Beast of Disaster.”

“I-It’s strange...” agreed Kintsuno the Gold, a bead of nervous sweat running down her brow. “I fully expected her to be raising hell by the time we got here...”

Gintsuno the Silver stood next to her, panic written on her face. Behind them stood a force of rogues from the Shadow Conglomerate, standing by alongside the Shadow King to attack the mansion when the time was right. But no matter how long they waited, there was no sign of any chaos at all taking place on the beach. All they could do was hide themselves in the tall grass and try to move as little as possible.

◇The Calgosi Coast◇

“I-I offer my most sincere and genuine apologies for my wrongdoing...” said Una, prostrating herself in the sand and pressing her head to the ground again and again.

Rylnàsze stood before her on the water’s edge, surrounded by the magic beasts she had won over from Una. “Um...” Rylnàsze said. “These magic beasts are all very kind and friendly,” she said. “You really shouldn’t order good magic beasts like them to go on a rampage, no matter what.”

“I-I understand!” Una said, bowing and bowing. “I promise—I’ll never do it again, no matter what!”

Flio and company had tied Una up tight and subjected her to one lecture after another before finally agreeing to release her back to the sea. She had been prepared to die from the moment she set eyes on Flio and his companions, and couldn’t believe her luck at being let go with nothing more than a talking-to. They were even going to return her magic beasts. And so, Una found herself apologizing over and over again from the depths of her heart.

Flio placed a hand on Una’s shoulder as she abased herself on the ground in front of Rylnàsze. “You won’t go pulling mischief like that again?” he confirmed.

“I-I won’t! I promise forever!” Una begged, bowing to Flio this time.

Junia Van Biel watched the exchange from behind, her smile looking a bit stiff. *I-I suppose to Lord Flio, even the combined power of all those magic beasts is just a bit of mischief... After all, Miss Rylnàsze had no trouble stopping the magic beasts on her own...* Her smile twitched involuntarily as she looked over at the host of magic beasts who had gathered in the water’s edge. Each one of them was a creature of considerable power. It was easy to imagine that if all of them had attacked at once, it would have meant trouble for the Calgosi Coast. *A bit of mischief...* she thought, regarding Flio and his friends with the same dry smile as before.

There was yet another person standing by, watching from behind—the

Maiden Queen of Klyrode. She was in disguise, wearing a pair of glasses and a straw hat low over her eyes as she watched Flio speak to Una. “Lord Flio is incredible, of course, but so is Miss Rylnàsze...”

“Yeah,” said Garyl. He was nuzzled right by her side—all the better to protect her—and was smiling cheerfully. “Rylnàsze’s something else...”

The Maiden Queen turned to look at Garyl. When he had first detected magic beasts closing in on the Calgosi Coast not long ago, he had swept up the Maiden Queen, still dressed in her bikini, with a bold, “*Here, Miss Ellie. I’ll take you to safety,*” before setting off at a run, holding her bridal style in his arms.

Garyl had told Salina and the others to come with them as well, of course, but just thinking about the incident made the Maiden Queen turn red all the way to the tips of her ears. *H-He carried me like a bride...* she thought. *In front of so many people too...* Embarrassed, she lowered her head.

“Huh?” said Garyl. “Is something wrong, Miss Ellie? Are you not feeling well?” Frowning with concern, he began to massage the Maiden Queen’s back.

“U-Um...” the Maiden Queen protested, lowering her head further and turning redder still. “Th-That’s quite all right, thank you...” *W-Wait!* she thought to herself. *R-Right now...Garyl’s hands are rubbing my back? I-Is this... Is this real...?*

◇That Evening—Aboard the Enchanted Frigate◇

Flio and company boarded the regularly scheduled flight departing from the Calgosi Coast station tower.

“We’re going home, everyone!” said Rylnàsze, hugging Sube, Sebe, and Sobe in her arms as she sat in a chair by the window. Sybe and Shebe came running up to her feet, and Rylnàsze gave them pets as she looked out the window. Outside, she could see Una and her score of magic beasts on the coastline. The serpents were looking up at the Enchanted Frigate as if they were sad to see Rylnàsze go. “I’ll be back to visit, everyone!” she said, waving out the window with a bright smile. “Let’s play more then!”

“It really isn’t only just Sybe’s family, is it?” Elinàsze observed from behind. “Magic beasts are fond of her, just like animals.”

“It’s nothing like that, big sister Elinàsze!” Rylnàsze objected, smiling shyly. “We’re all just good friends!” All of Sybe’s family nuzzled up happily against her as if to accentuate the statement.

Outside, Wyne flew alongside the vessel on her draconic wings. “Ah ha ha!” she laughed, grinning broadly as she flew circles around the Enchanted Frigate. “This is fun-fun!”

“W-Wyne!” Loplanz exclaimed, chasing after the dragonewt in midair. “You need to board the ship! It’s going to leave soon!”

“No problem, no problem!” said Wyne, flying up alongside Loplanz. “I’m gonna fly home with the Enchanted Frigate-Frigate! You wanna come too, Lop-Lop?” She grabbed him by the hand and flew with him around the Enchanted Frigate.

“W-Wyne, wait!” Loplanz protested, blushing bright red to the tips of his ears. “You can’t just say something like that!” Wyne, however, just continued to lead him on her merry flight.

Tanya stared out at Wyne as she made her circuits around the outside of the ship. “The Young Mistress is wearing her undergarments today, I see...” she muttered to herself, nodding in satisfaction.

Another woman appeared behind Tanya and stepped up beside her, the wings that marked her as a disciple of the Celestial Plane on full display. “Hello, Tanyalina,” she said. “Long time no see.”

“Excuse me,” Tanya replied. “Who were you, again?”

“Zofina, your former colleague...” the angel, Zofina, said with a frown. “You still don’t remember me, then? Or are you only pretending to have forgotten?”

Tanya was once sent to Flio’s house on a mission by the goddess she worked for at the time, but on her way suffered a freak midair collision with Wyne and lost a good portion of her memories. Flio nursed her back to health in her amnesiac condition, and she made the choice to live as Flio’s maid Tanya.

“Well,” Tanya said, “what business does Madame Zofina, disciple of the celestial plane, have with Master Flio’s humble maid?”

A sad, lonely smile came over Zofina’s face at Tanya’s words. *It seems that nothing will get her to speak as Tanyalina...* she thought. “It isn’t anything too serious,” she said. “We’ve just been having a great deal of cases lately of low lifes violating a Bloat Oath Contract and not enough angels to administer their punishment. Just the other day, I had to go carry out the sentence of a demon by the name of Collectableu—my eighth case in the past week. It would lighten my burden considerably If you could perhaps take the role of Contract Executor once again. I would very much appreciate the help.”

“I see,” said Tanya, lifting up the hem of her skirt in an elegant curtsy. “However, as I have no knowledge of this Contract Executor you speak of, I am afraid I will be of little help.”

“Very well...” Zofina said. “If you don’t remember, I suppose you don’t remember.” With a beat of her wings she flew high up into the sky and cut a rift in the cosmos with her scythe, vanishing from sight.

Tanya gazed up at the spot where Zofina had been and curtsied once more.

Flio stood glanced over the inside of the ship, smiling his usual easygoing smile.

“My lord husband!” Rys said, running up to him with a smile on her face. “I had a lovely time today!”

“Me too,” said Flio. “I had a great time swimming and eating barbecue. Although there was just a little bit of trouble, wasn’t there...?” Flio pursed up his lips as he opened a window displaying the current appearance of the Beast of Disaster.

“What are you going to do with that magic beast when we get home?” Rys asked.

“Well, let’s see...” Flio said. “We learned that the magic beast’s flesh has all kinds of useful properties, so I figure the first order of business is to start experimenting to see if I can’t figure out a way to synthesize medicine from it. After that, I’ll look into powering up one of the Enchanted Frigates using the

magic gems inside its body...” He began poking and prodding at the window, launching into a spirited explanation of everything he had in mind as Rys listened with rapt interest. “Oh, sorry,” Flio said after some time. “I got a little carried away, didn’t I? That must have been boring to listen to.”

“Not at all!” Rys insisted, smiling up at him. “I always enjoy listening to anything my lord husband has to say!”

Flio smiled back with one of his usual easygoing smiles.

Before long, the Enchanted Frigate separated from the boarding tower and ascended into the air until it was flying high above the clouds. Soon, it was out of sight.

◇That Night—Klyrode Castle, Maiden Queen’s Chambers◇

“Excuse me?!” Second Princess Leusoc said, gaping in disbelief.

“E-Erm...”The Maiden Queen blinked in confusion at her sister’s reaction. “Did I perhaps say something strange?”

“So...” the Second Princess slumped her shoulders in disappointment. “Are you for real? He seriously kissed you and didn’t do anything else?”

“O-Of course not!” the Maiden Queen insisted. “Garyl is a proper gentleman!”

“Gentleman or not, a real man wouldn’t just leave it there!”

“A-A real man...?” the Maiden Queen repeated, her face turning bright red at her sister’s words. “Leusoc...what in the world are you saying?!”

Leusoc sighed deeply. “It’s hopeless,” she said. “My sister the Queen will go unmarried as long as she lives. A life-long v-card holder.”

“V-card?” the Maiden Queen shook her head. “I really don’t understand what you’re talking about. But I have quite a lot to consider, you know! Next I must speak with Garyl’s parents about various matters and work to slowly reduce the distance between—”

“Ahhh!” Leusoc cried out, interrupting her sister. “This is taking far too long!” She placed a hand on the Maiden Queen’s shoulder and squeezed tight.

“Nothing for it, then.” she said, a fiendish smile playing on her face. “I will simply have to be your wingwoman!”

“W-Wingwoman, you say...?” the Maiden Queen said. There was something in her sister’s leering smile that sent a shiver running down her spine. “Really...what on earth are you thinking?”

Epilogue

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

One day, the door to Flio's house swung open. "I'm home!" came Garyl's cheerful voice.

"Oh! Big brother Garyl! Welcome home!" Rylnàsze came running to greet her brother, Sybe in his unicorn rabbit form and his wife Shebe right behind. Further behind them, the couples' children, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, came trailing along.

"Thanks for coming to greet me, everyone!" Garyl said with a smile and a bow as the five unicorn rabbits gathered around him, standing on their hind legs and snuffling proudly.

"Where is big sister Elinàsze?" Rylnàsze asked.

"She said she was gonna stop by the Fli-o'-Rys General Store today," said Garyl.

"Oh, I see!"

Garyl made his way into the living room, where his father Flio was waiting. "Welcome home, Garyl," Flio said.

"Thanks, dad," said Garyl, returning the greeting. Then, he noticed the other person in the room—a woman. "Huh?" Garyl's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"U-Um..." the Maiden Queen started. "W-Welcome home, Garyl!"

"M-Miss Ellie?" Garyl asked, his expression a mixture of joy and confusion. "W-Why are you in our house?"

The Maiden Queen looked down at her feet, cheeks flushing red with embarrassment, apparently unable to speak. Noticing her predicament, Flio took over and explained the situation, smiling his usual easygoing smile. "The Maiden Queen is trying to deepen her understanding of the lives of her subjects, and so she wanted to find an ordinary household where could stay

and participate in daily life on her days off. We were just discussing whether or not our house would be suitable. Personally, I'd say we won't know until we try it, but what do you think, Garyl?"

O-Of course, it was Leusoc who proposed this whole plan... the Maiden Queen thought to herself.

The small amount of progress Garyl and the Maiden Queen had made in deepening their relationship during their trip to the Calgosi Coast had only exacerbated Leusoc's sense of crisis about the whole affair. "*The only way to solve this is to have you and Garyl live under the same roof!*" she had declared and had immediately begun brainstorming with Flio to try to think of a plausible enough pretext.

"O-Oh!" the Maiden Queen said, looking up at Garyl with slightly pleading eyes. "A-And while I'm spending time under your roof, I would like it if you would treat me not as the Maiden Queen but as Ellie, the ordinary girl..." She was wearing a pair of false glasses in an attempt to disguise her identity.

Garyl smiled cheerfully. "Of course she can stay! I can't think of a single reason to refuse!" He rushed up to her, lifting her off her feet and grinning from ear to ear.

"Huh? G-Garyl?!" Ellie exclaimed as Garyl held her in his arms. This time, it was her turn to be unsure if joy or confusion was the appropriate reaction.



“Miss Ellie?” said Rys, smiling as she poked her head in from the kitchen. “I’m terribly sorry to interrupt you when you seem to be enjoying yourself so much,

but could you perhaps give me some assistance?”

“O-Oh! Of course! Coming!” the Maiden said. Garyl placed her back down on the floor, and she ran off towards the kitchen in a considerable rush.

“I would like you to try peeling vegetables today, if you don’t mind,” Rys said.

“Y-Yes, understood!” said Ellie. “S-So...you want me to peel all of these?”

“That’s right,” Rys confirmed. “This is a large household full of big eaters, after all. I trust you’re up to the task?”

“Y-Yes!” Ellie replied, straightening up her back. “I will do my best!” She took a knife in one hand, grabbed a potalpo from the basket Rys had handed her, and began to peel with a very serious expression on her face. She was doing her best, but her skills left something to be desired.

Flio and Garyl smiled as they watched Ellie work in the kitchen. “It looks like Miss Ellie’s giving it her best shot, in a number of ways,” Flio said.

“That’s right,” said Garyl. “And I’ve gotta give it my best shot too, so I can get into the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education!” And with that, he hurried back for the front door. “Dad? Would you mind helping me study magic until dinner time? I still have a lot of trouble with flying spells...”

“Sure!” Flio said, smiling back at his son. “Let’s head outside, then.” *When did Garyl become this mature...?* he wondered to himself as he followed Garyl out the front entrance.

The evening sun shone down on Flio and Garyl as Flio helped his son practice flight magic while dinner was being prepared. Eventually, Elinàsze made her way home and joined in on their impromptu lesson, as did Hiya and Damalynas. More and more people came to watch, until eventually a great crowd had gathered in the front garden. It was another peaceful day for Flio and his family.

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part Ten

◇Deep in a Forest◇

Somewhere deep in a forest, surrounded by trees, there stood a cozy little wooden cottage. It was here that the doppeladler Hugi-Mugi, a former member of the Infernal Four, lived out their life disguised as a human.

"Look papa!" said a boy, pointing up at the sky. "A big flying boat!"

"A big flying boat, is it, yes?" said Hugi-Mugi, stepping out of the house to see what the fuss was about. In their undisguised form, Hugi-Mugi was an enormous two-headed demon bird, and even in their human form they spoke with two distinct overlapping voices. The boy didn't seem to find that at all peculiar, though. He took Hugi-Mugi's hand and led them into the front garden. "It's true, yes!" Hugi-Mugi exclaimed. "Yes, a big flying boat!"

"That boat is really cool, isn't it, papa?" the boy said. "I wanna ride on it too!"

"Hmmm..." Hugi-Mugi considered. "Want to ride on it, yes?" Then they turned to the house. "Oh, Cartha!"

"Yes, Hugi, what is it?" said a woman, poking her head out from one of the windows. "I'm a little busy getting everything ready for dinner..." Cartha once operated a farm outside the nearby village, but now she lived with Hugi-Mugi full time.

"Excuse me, yes, but what exactly is that boat up there?" Hugi-Mugi asked. "Yes, do you recognize it?"

"Ahhh!" Cartha exclaimed. "That must be an Enchanted Frigate! Folks have been talking about it back at the village! I've heard they're operated by some shop called the Fli-o'-Rys General Store in Houghtow City."

"Huca says he wants to ride on the boat, yes!" Hugi-Mugi reported. "Yes, how would we do that?"

"Well, I suppose I would need to go to Houghtow City to learn the details..."

Cartha mused. Then she turned and called out to someone in the garden. “Excuse me, Shino? You wouldn’t know anything, would you?”

A woman walked up, carrying a baby on her back and dressed in priestly vestments. This was Shino, who worked as a priestess in the village Cartha was from. “The Enchanted Frigate?” Shino asked. “I’ve only heard rumors at the church myself...” Suddenly, however, her expression changed. “W-Wait, could you hold on just a moment?! There’s something warm running down my back...I think Muno must have wet himself!” She hastily unstrapped the baby from her back and put it down. “Oh, goodness, you really did wet yourself, didn’t you? You really can be such a naughty child sometimes, Muno. But I suppose it’s something you have in common with my lord husband, after all!” Blushing, Shino went to change her baby’s clothes. It seemed like a task she was very used to.

Just then, a wagon rolled up to the cottage. “I have returned!” said the woman driving the team of enormous magic beasts hitched to the reins. She stepped down to the ground, mindful of her large pregnant belly.

Hugi-Mugi came running right away. “Mato, there’s no need for you to go to town to trade right now, yes! Yes, you are nearly about to give birth!”

Mato had been traveling in the forest one day when she found herself attacked by bandits. Just when things were looking bad, though, Hugi-Mugi came to her rescue. Ever since, she had been living with them in their cottage.

“Oh, well...” Mato said. “I realize it may be a little improper for a wife, but I would still like to do everything I can to be of use to you, if you will allow it.”

“There’s no need to worry about that, yes! Yes, after all, I’m the one who took you as a wife!” said Hugi-Mugi. “What worries me is your body, yes! Yes, please don’t push yourself too much!” The magic beasts all nodded in agreement. It seemed as if they could understand Hugi-Mugi’s words.

“Lord Hugi-Mugi... Everyone... Thank you. I will do my utmost not to push myself overmuch.” Then, she glanced up at the sky. “Oh! Is that the Enchanted Frigate I see?”

“It is, yes!” said Hugi-Mugi. “Huca wants to ride on it, yes! Do you know how, Mato?”

“Oh!” said Mato. “It just happens that I heard something while I was doing the day’s trading! It seems you can purchase tickets at the village hall. But to get on board, we’d need to go all the way to a town on the other side of the mountain...”

“I see!” said Hugi-Mugi. “Well, then, shall we be off, yes?”

“Oh, but Hugi!” Cartha protested. “Won’t it be quite the hassle to go all the way to the other side of the mountain? I know the magic beasts are very fast, but it would still take two entire days, I should think. I don’t know if we should be leaving Mato alone for so long when the baby could be due any day now...”

“There is no need to worry about me, Miss Cartha,” Mato said with a bright smile. “I will gladly watch over the house while you are away!”

“All of you are family, yes!” Hugi-Mugi said. “Yes, I don’t want to leave even one of you behind!”

Under demonic law, a demon could take as many as three wives, and Hugi-Mugi had filled out their full quota, marrying Cartha, Shino, and Mato, bringing them into their cottage and having a child with each of them in turn.

“Lord Hugi-Mugi...” Mato said. “I really do appreciate the sentiment, but...”

“There’s nothing to worry about, yes!” said Hugi-Mugi. “Yes, if we do *this* we can cross the mountain in half a day!” Their body began to shake violently and shine with a golden light, and soon Hugi-Mugi had reverted to their original two headed body. “Now, everyone, get on, yes!” They lowered their wings to the ground to make it as easy as possible for their wives to climb onto their back.

“Thank you, Hugi!” said Cartha. “Come on, Huca! Let’s get on papa’s back!”

“Okay!” said Huca.

“Here, Mato,” Shino said, holding out her hand. “I’ll help you up, so please do take it easy.”

“Thank you very much, Lady Shino,” said Mato, accepting Shino’s hand. One by one, the family climbed onto Hugi-Mugi’s back.

“Is everyone on board, yes?” asked Hugi-Mugi. “Make sure you grab on tight, yes!”

“Yes, Hugi, I am!” said Cartha. “I have a firm grip on Huca too!”

“I am quite ready!” said Shino.

“It feels almost disrespectful to grab onto your feathers...” Mato remarked.

When everyone had responded, Hugi-Mugi began to beat his enormous wings, taking to the sky. In no time at all, they were flying even higher than the Enchanted Frigate. “Now, let us fly, yes! Yes, across the mountain in one go!”

“Oh my gosh, wow!” Huca gasped in awe. “You’re even better than the Enchanted Frigate, papa!”

“Ah ha ha ha ha!” Hugi-Mugi laughed. “We can still go higher, yes! Yes, now hold on tight!”

“Yeah!” Huca nodded happily as Hugi-Mugi flew higher and higher, up through the clouds.

“Huca,” Cartha asked, “isn’t riding on papa’s back more fun than the Enchanted Frigate?”

“Yeah! That’s right, mama!” Huca nodded again.

“Muno seems delighted as well,” said Shino, as the baby in her arms cried out with delight.

“I hope my child is born soon, so I can enjoy this with them as well...” said Mato, smiling as she watched Cartha and Shino with their children.

Hugi-Mugi flew faster and faster as they gained altitude, soaring like an arrow. “Hang on, Hugi! Wait!” Cartha cried. “Too far! Too far! We’ve passed three mountains already!”

“D-Did we, yes?!” Hugi-Mugi exclaimed.

“Miss Cartha, perhaps today we can simply enjoy flying through the skies like this?” suggested Shino.

“I agree with Lady Shino,” added Mato.

Cartha looked down at the boy in her arms. “Would you be happy with that, Huca?”

“Yeah!” Huca said, smiling delightedly. “I wanna ride the Enchanted Frigate

sometime too, but today I wanna fly with papa!” The tiny wings on his back fluttered with excitement—he had inherited them from his father, a sign of his demonic blood.

“All right, Hugi!” Cartha said. “In that case, why don’t you show us what you can do?”

“Of course, yes! Yes, just you wait!” Hugi-Mugi said, letting out a mighty bird call as they sped up even further still. Soon the cottage was far, far out of sight.

◇Meanwhile—Aboard the Enchanted Frigate◇

The shadow demon Greanyl stood at the hull of the Enchanted Frigate as it flew through the skies above Hugi-Mugi’s cottage.

Greanyl had originally been a member of the Dark Army’s intelligence network, the Silent Listeners. The Silent Listeners, however, had left the Dark Army when Ghozal abdicated the throne, Greanyl included, and found employment instead at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. They were responsible for transporting Fli-o’-Rys’s products to places far and wide, and for gathering information about the various realms in which Fli-o’-Rys did business.

“That magic beast...” Greanyl said, staring wide-eyed after the enormous demon bird that had just flown past the Enchanted Frigate at breakneck speed. “Could that be Lord Hugi-Mugi, the former Infernal?! I’d heard reports from the other shadow demons that they had retired from the world to live a life of seclusion in the mountains, but I didn’t realize that this was where they made their home!”

“Well, Lord Hugi-Mugi or not, they don’t seem to be an enemy,” said a man, stepping up to her with a smile on his face. “It’s nothing to worry about, I think.”

“O-Of course, Lord Dalc Horst, you are correct...” said Greanyl. “At the speeds they are flying, they don’t seem to be in pursuit of the Enchanted Frigate. I will carry on our voyage and report what we saw to Lord Flio upon our return.”

“Right, sounds good,” Dalc Horst agreed, nodding.

“I-Incidentally, Lord Dalc Horst...” Greanyl ventured, glancing at her companion out of the corner of her eyes as she kept the ship on course. “May I ask why you are aboard the Enchanted Frigate I am piloting?”

“Why?” Dalc Horst repeated. “Well, we demon horses of Byleri Pasture made the decision to accompany you shadow demons for security, just in case some disaster should happen. You’re the ones Lord Flio had learn how to fly these things, after all!”

“No, that isn’t what I’m asking...” Greanyl said. “It’s just that I am reasonably certain I was scheduled to be with Lord Udkhupa today...”

“Oh,” said Dalc Horst. “Udkhupa had something come up. I’m here as his replacement. Is that a problem?”

“N-N-N-No!” Greanyl exclaimed. “I-I-It’s not a problem at all! I-In fact, after all the time we spent together on the supply wagon teams, having you here puts my mind at ease...”

That’s right... Greanyl thought. *Before I started piloting the Enchanted Frigate, I used to transport goods in a Fli-o’-Rys supply wagon. For some reason I was frequently paired with Lord Dalc Horst back then as well. In fact, I would say it was more common for us to be together than not. A-And then there was the conversation I overheard, where I learned that Dalc Horst was intentionally arranging things in order to spend time with me! D-Don’t tell me he’s still doing it!*

Dalc Horst, meanwhile, was standing to the side, stealing glances at Greanyl. *I was really at my wits’ end when Greanyl got moved to piloting Enchanted Frigates...* he thought. *It’s a good thing we decided on assigning protection for the pilots! Thanks to that, I can keep going on missions with Greanyl! Maybe I’ll ask her out to dinner again this time...although, come to think of it, she never says yes, does she?* He folded his arms as he thought. *What to do...?*

Next to her, Greanyl carried on deliberately ignoring Dalc Horst’s presence as the Enchanted Frigate made its way over the forested mountains.

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

“What...is thisss...?” Sitting behind the headmaster’s desk, Nyt blinked in disbelief at the mountain of paperwork before her.

Nyt was another former member of the Infernal Four, once known as the Serpent Princess Yorminyt. Since leaving the Dark Army she had faced all sorts of trials and tribulations, before eventually finding employment as a faculty member of the Houghtow College of Magic. And in short order, she rose in the organization until she became the headmaster.

“It zeemz to be work,” said Zarmas, holding her glasses in place as she bowed dutifully.

Zarmas was a demon as well and had been Yorminyt’s aide in the Dark Army, quitting alongside her and following her all the way to the Houghtow College of Magic.

“Zarmasss...” Yorminyt said. “I am fully aware of *what* this isss. But isssn’t this quantity of work...abnormal?”

“It iz only to be expected,” said Zarmas. “With the Enchanted Frigatez in operation, it iz much easier for studentz to travel to attend school. We have been pozitively flooded with the sudden increaze in prospective enrollmentz, az well az tranzfer requestz from other schools, and institutionz wishing to partner with ourz.”

“I sssee...” Nyt said, a stoically miserable expression on her face. “You know, “I wasss only forced to accept the role of Headmassster due to the circumstancesss. I never actually *wanted* to do thisss sort of work...”

“In that case, perhapz you could quit, and make a living as an adventurer?” Zarmas proposed. “If it iz your wish, Lady Nyt, I would gladly accompany you.”

Just then, there came a knock on the door. “Excuse me! It’s Taclyde the administrator! Do you have a moment?”

“Yesss, come in,” said Nyt.

“Thank you,” said Taclyde, entering the room. He was wearing his work outfit. “Excuse me. I’m terribly sorry, but could you perhaps look over these papers? And these ones as well? And there’s going to be an emergency staff meeting tomorrow, so I’ll need to get your approval on these too. And after that...”

Taclyde immediately began handing over paper after paper, not slowing down for a second and explaining all the while. Soon, the mountain of paperwork on Nyt's desk had become more of a mountain range.

It all lasted but a brief moment, and soon he had handed over everything he had. "Terribly sorry about all the work!" he said. "I'll leave it in your hands!" With a bow, he departed from the headmaster's office, leaving Nyt to glance over the papers with a dry grimace on her face.

"What shall we do, Lady Nyt?" Zarmas asked. "Give up on all thiz work and flee?"

Nyt sighed deeply. "As much as I might want to, he did give usss an explanation at least..." she said. "And it seemsss there is a meeting tomorrow. Let'sss do our best, at at least until all thisss paperwork is one..."

Sighing once more, Nyt began to look over the papers. It seemed it would be a while yet until Nyt and Zarmas left the Houghtow College of Magic.

◇Flio's House—Blossom Acres◇

The shadow of the Enchanted Frigate passed over Blossom Acres.

"Oho!" cried Hokh'hokton, pausing his farmwork and wiping his brow as he looked up at the sky. "It seems one of Lord Flio's Enchanted Frigates is departing! Ah ha ha... It makes my heart race every time!"

Hokh'hokton had originally been a goblin soldier in the Dark Army, but now he lived and worked on Blossom's farm together with his friend Maunty, Maunty's wife, and their rather excessive amount of children.

"That's right!" said Maunty, folding his arms and nodding intelligently. "And with the Enchanted Frigates, we'll be able to ship our vegetables farther than ever before!"

"Indeed!" Hokh'hokton nodded. "Well said!"

"By the by, Hokh'hokton..." Maunty ventured, furrowing his brow and pointing towards a woman some distance away from them in the fields. "What

are you planning on doing with that woman?”

Hokh’hokton furrowed his brow as well when he saw who Maunty was pointing at. “That’s the rub, isn’t it...?” he said darkly. “She refuses to leave me alone no matter what I tell her, she can’t cook, she can’t do laundry...and whenever she has a spare moment, she spends it stealing drinks of my precious liquor! I tell you, I am really at my wits’ end with that one...”

The subject of Hokh’hokton’s diatribe was Telbyress, a former goddess in charge of an entire world. She had been exiled from the Celestial Plane, and with nowhere else to go, ended up staying in Hokh’hokton’s room. Currently she was busy doing all sorts of energetic motions among the vegetables. At a glance it looked like she might have been helping with the farmwork, but on closer inspection, she had been standing up and sitting down in the same spot for a while now. Her harvesting basket was completely empty.

“Excuse me,” Hokh’hokton said, walking up to the errant goddess. “Madame Telbyress? Might I have a word?”

“Hwuh?” Telbyress said, staggering as she turned around to face Hokh’hokton. Up close, Hokh’hokton could see that her face was flushed and her breath smelled strangely like alcohol. “Oh, if it isn’t ol’ Hokey!”

“Yes, quite...” said Hokh’hokton. “You haven’t been pretending to work while you drink my liquor, have you?”

“Whaaa?! I’d never!” Telbyress protested, her words slurring as she tried to defend herself. “Seeee? I‘m helpin’ out with the farmwork all—*hic!*—all proper n’ stuff!”

Hokh’hokton’s eyes shone dangerously as he peered up at the former goddess. “Oh? In that case, what’s *this!*” He leapt in the air, thrusting his arm right into Telbyress’s cleavage.

“Eeek!” Telbyress cried, doing her best to quickly cover her chest. “Hokey, you perv!” But it was too late. Hokh’hokton had already extracted something from between her breasts—a small bottle of alcohol.

“You scoundrel!” Hokh’hokton shouted. “Look! You’ve attached a tube to the lid of this bottle so you could sneak drinks out of it! And worse, this is my very

finest liquor that I keep hidden under the floor in my room!”

“But I can’t heeelp it! The liquor tastes so gooood!” Telbyress protested, entirely straight-faced. “You can’t ’spect me to not drink it jus’ ’cause you tell me not too!”

“Useless idiot!” Hokh’hokton spat. “This is why everyone calls you the no-gooddess! I’m confiscating this liquor! You hear me?!”

“No waaay!” Tellbyress pleaded as Hokh’hokton made to leave with the liquor bottle. “This is cruelty! I’ll diiiie!” she wailed pitiably, clinging to the goblin’s feet.

Maunty smirked knowingly as he watched the two go at it. “Hard to believe we’re seeing Hokh’hokton, the world’s most ineligible bachelor, sticking his arm into that woman’s chest like it’s nothing...”

“Mister Hokh’hokton and Miss Telbyress have quite a lot in common, I would say,” observed his wife.

“They’ve been spending every day in the same room, but I haven’t seen any signs of them pairing up,” said Maunty. “I wonder what’ll happen from here...”

The husband and wife watched as Telbyress abased herself at Hokh’hokton’s feet, pleading desperately. Meanwhile, In the skies above, the Enchanted Frigate gleamed in the sunlight as it passed by overhead.



◇Flio’s House◇

The children were at school, and as it was a weekday, Flio and the others had left for work, leaving Hiya and Tanya alone in the living room. They sat facing each other, with the table between them.

“Madame Tanya, there is something I feel we must discuss, if I may,” ventured Hiya.

“Of course,” Tanya said. “What is it?”

“Well...” Hiya began, taking care to speak gently and calmly. “As the maid of the Exalted One, you have taken it upon yourself to perform domestic duties for this house. These duties, however, had once been tasks that fell to me. If I may, I would like to ask you to refrain from such activities in the future.”

“So you say,” Tanya said bowing deeply. “However, with all due respect, if I am to be Master Flio’s maid, I cannot yield on the matter of housework.”

“Under no circumstances?” asked Hiya.

“Yes, under no circumstances.”

With their opposing positions now clearly stated, the two fearlessly met each other’s gaze.

“It seems we are at an impasse,” Hiya observed. “Would you perhaps be amenable to entreating a third party to deliver an impartial judgment on this matter?”

“Very well...” Tanya conceded. “You may use who you like, as long as it is not one of your training partners. Then, who shall be our judge?”

“A good question,” said Hiya. “Shall we, perhaps, use him?” They pointed towards the corner of the living room, where Sybe was amusing himself by rolling around on the floor.

“Master Sybe...” said Tanya. “I have no objections.”

“In that case, let us begin immediately.” The two nodded to each other and stepped up their designated judge. Hiya scooped the unicorn rabbit up in their hands, holding him aloft by the armpits.

“*Snuffle?*” Sybe asked, tilting his head curiously as he looked up at Hiya.

“Sybe,” Hiya intoned. “Do you believe myself or Madame Tanya to be more worthy of this estate’s housework?”

“*Snuffle snuffle?*” Sybe repeated, peering questioningly between Hiya and Tanya’s faces. It looked back and forth between them for a while before finally, with a loud cry of “*Snuffle!*” it leapt from Hiya’s hands and raced for the door.

“I’m home!” cried Rylnàsze, appearing in the front entrance. Sybe leapt in the air and into her arms. “Oh, Sybe!” she said, hugging him tight. “Thank you ever so much for coming to greet me!”

Hiya and Tanya, meanwhile, watched Rylnàsze and Sybe snuggle affectionately from across the living room.

“I suppose we will have to call it a draw for the time being...” said Hiya.

“Indeed...” agreed Tanya. “So it seems...”

◇Flio’s House◇

That day, Ellie—the Maiden Queen—happened to be visiting. As reigning monarch, Ellie ordinarily spent her time managing the entire political apparatus of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, but between all of the busy days in her schedule she found time about once a week to stop by Flio’s house, where she took part in the daily chores as a full member of the family. At the moment, she was busy helping Rylnàsze wipe down the living room table after dinner.

“Big sister Ellie, would you wipe over there too, please?” Rylnàsze asked.

“Yes, right away!” Ellie went to the end of the table and began to wipe.

Rylnàsze looked somewhat apologetic. “U-Um.. I-I’m sorry. I shouldn’t ask the most important person in the kingdom to do something like this...” She clasped her hands together and bowed gravely.

“Oh! There’s really no need to stand on that sort of ceremony between us,” Ellie hastened to correct her. As long as I’m in this house, you may treat me like any other member of the family.”

“W-Well, then...” Rylnàsze ventured, looking up at Ellie with big puppy-like

eyes. “I-In that case...may I ask you a question?”

“Of course!” Ellie nodded, a smile on her face. “Ask me anything you like, as long as it’s something I can answer!”

“U-Um...” Rylnàsze stood there for a while just fidgeting. “Th-There’s something I’ve been really really really wanting to know...” embarrassed, she stepped up to whisper in Ellie’s ear, cupping her hands so that nobody else could hear what she was saying. “Big sister Ellie...when are you and Garyl going to be getting married?”

“Bfweh?!” Ellie exclaimed, before being suddenly overcome by a violent coughing fit.

“O-Oh!” Rylnàsze said, flustered by Ellie’s panicked reaction. “I-I’m so sorry! Did I ask something I shouldn’t have?” Confused, she began bowing repeated apologies, her head bobbing up and down.

“N-No, no! You have nothing to apologize for, Rylnàsze! I-It’s just, well, I *would* like to be Garyl’s bride some day, but—”

“We’re back!” Just then, Flio and Garyl entered the living room, having just returned home.

“Abahhhffh!” Ellie sputtered incoherently at the sudden appearance of the topic of the conversation.

“Huh?” Worried, Garyl hurried over to Ellie’s side. “Miss Ellie, what’s wrong? Are you not feeling well?”

“I-It’s nothing of importance!” Ellie insisted. “I was simply a little startled, I suppose...” She turned her face away so that Garyl wouldn’t see how red she was blushing from sheer embarrassment.

“Well, maybe it’s my imagination, but I thought your face looked a little red...” Garyl said. “Are you sure you don’t have a fever?” Then, he pressed his own forehead right up against hers.

Wh-What? Ellie thought, suddenly unsure of what was even happening.

A second later, Garyl pulled back. “Hm...” he said. “Well it doesn’t feel hot to me, but you should probably take it easy anyway...”

G-Garyl's forehead...was touching mine... the Maiden Queen thought, her mind finally processing the latest turn of events. And then she fainted, keeling over backwards.

"M-Miss Ellie!" Garyl rushed to support Ellie's body, holding her in his arms as she collapsed, her body bereft of strength. "Miss Ellie! Miss Ellie, are you all right?!" he cried, staring intently at her face.

Hmm... Flio considered as he watched the scene play out from behind. *It would be easy enough to wake her up with one of my spells, but if Miss Ellie came to now, she'd probably just faint again upon realizing Garyl's holding her in his arms. Now, what to do...* He reached out towards Ellie, considering option after option, but was unable to act from sheer overthinking. *This might be harder than capturing that magic beast...* he thought as he desperately searched for the optimal solution.

"My lord husband, is something the matter?" Rys asked, hurrying over from the kitchen where she had been tidying up. Then she followed Flio's eyes to where Garyl stood holding an unconscious Ellie in his arms. A wry smirk came over her face. "Oh my, has our dear Miss Ellie had another fainting spell?"

"Yes..." said Flio. "It's becoming a rather common occurrence..."

"Well, after all!" Rys said, laughing with amusement. "Every time Garyl gets close to her, she faints dead away!"

"Yes, I suppose she does..." Flio agreed, nodding.

"U-Um..." said Garyl, his own face starting to turn red at his parents' conversation. "I wish you wouldn't have that kind of conversation where I can hear you... Now I don't know how I should handle Miss Ellie when she wakes up..."

"You don't?" said Rys. "But there's no need for you to worry about such things, is there?"

"Huh?" Garyl asked. "I-Isn't there?"

"Of course not! You're arranged to be married, after all—she's going to have to start getting used to you one way or another!"

“I-I guess that’s true...” Garyl said, but he didn’t seem to be entirely convinced.

“You agree, don’t you my lord husband?” said Rys, beaming cheerfully in Flio’s direction.

Flio winced. “W-Well, I suppose it’s certainly one way of looking at things...” he said, dodging the question.

“Oh, dad, that reminds me. There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask for a while...” said Garyl, looking up at his father. “Would you tell me how you proposed to mom? J-Just for the sake of future reference...”

“Huh?” said Flio, his eyes blinking open in surprise at the unexpected question. “M-Me and Rys?”

Rys, however, held her chest high with pride despite the blush creeping into her cheeks. “I see no harm in telling them, my lord husband, do you?” she said, smiling rather smugly. “First, your father used his body to— Mrrff!”

“R-Rys!” said Flio, quickly clapping a hand over her mouth. “That’s quite enough! L-Let’s take it one thing at a time when it comes to that subject, okay...?” The clearly forced smile on his face, however, did nothing to help the impression that he was trying to hide something.

By this point, Ellie had actually regained consciousness a while ago, but she had kept her eyes shut, pretending to still be unconscious. *Wh-What do I do...?* she thought. *It seems they’re in the middle of some sort of important conversation! It would hardly do for me to wake up now of all times! I-I suppose I had best simply stay like this a while longer...*

Because she still hadn’t opened her eyes, Ellie had yet to realize that Garyl was the one holding her in his arms.



Afterword

Once again, thank you very much for reading this book. Can you believe we've finally reached ten volumes of *Level 2 Cheat*? I would have never gotten this far if not for all the support I received back when the story was being released as a serialized web novel. I can't tell you how grateful I am to everyone.

Like the previous volumes, this one is being released alongside the manga version created by the great Itomachi. I've been very much enjoying seeing the adaptation myself. And just like the previous volume, a great deal of this one was devoted to the adventures of Hero Gold-Hair. We also got to see Flio's son Garyl's relationship with the Maiden Queen move forward just a tiny bit. I hope you're looking forward to seeing what's in store for the two of them in the future. They're both quite popular characters, after all.

In addition to volume three of the *Level 2 Cheat* manga, the good folks at Comic Jardin have just released the first volume of the manga adaptation of *Food Stall in Another World "Enishi-tei"* (Japanese: *Isekai Yatai Meshi Enishi-tei*). I would be delighted if you look that one up as well.

Last but not least, thank you as always from the bottom of my heart to Katagiri for once again creating such splendid illustrations for this volume, to everyone at Overlap who worked on helping get this book published, and to all of you who picked up this book.

July 2020, Miya Kinojo