# Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers

17

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri


Chillin' in Another World
WITH LV 2
SUPER CHEAT POWERS
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Mock battle at the arena!


Name Aryun Keats 8
"B-But Hero Gold-Hair...don't you feel lucky to be able to enjoy the sensation of my breasts against your back?"
Name Hero Gold-Hair 8
"Keats, think about it for a second..."
"Oh, Aaaryun..."

# Chillin' in Another World

## with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers Volume 17

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# Characters

**Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers**



**Flio**

Former Hero Candidate and General Store Proprietor.



**Rys**

Flio's wife, a lupine demon.



**Wyne** (Human Form)

Freeloader with high stats and a big appetite.



**Levana**

Child of the proud leviathans.



**Garyl**

Flio and Rys's son. Always worried about the Maiden Queen.



**Elinàsze**

Flio and Rys's daughter. A real daddy's girl.



**Rylnàsze**

Elinàsze's little sister. Always seen with Sybe and the other magic beasts.



**Ben'ne**

Psychic remnant of a swordmaster who haunted Ijo Bridge in the Land of the Rising Sun.



**Hiya**

Djinn who Commands the Origin of Light and Darkness.



**Damalynas**

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



**Belano**

A quiet, shy, and skittish teacher.



**Belalio**

Minilio and Belano's child.

Chill
Level
Super Cheat Power

# Characters

**Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers**



**Ghozal**
Once known as the mightiest Dark One in history.



**Uliminas**
Ghozal's former confederate in the Dark Army and current wife.



**Balirossa**
A former knight of Klyrode and Ghozal's wife.



**Folmina**
Ghozal and Uliminas's daughter.



**Ghoro**
Ghozal and Balirossa's son.



**Sleip** (Human Form)
Former member of the Infernal Four living in sin with Byleri.



**Byleri**
Former archer of Klyrode living in sin with Sleip.



**Rislei**
Sleip and Byleri's daughter.



**Ura**
An oni with a strong sense of justice. Chief of a demon village that lost its place in the world.



**Blossom**
A former knight of Klyrode. Works hard on the farm.



**Kora**
Ura's daughter. A quiet girl who's often lost in her own world.



**Greanyl**
Shadow demon working for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers

# Characters

**Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers**



**Ellie** (The Maiden Queen)

Hardworking queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode who possesses a strong sense of justice.



**Leusoc** (Second Princess)

Laid back princess who handles foreign diplomacy.



**Swann** (Third Princess)

Bright-eyed princess who handles domestic affairs.



**Telbyress**

Drunkard of a no-gooddess who was exiled from the Celestial Plane. Lodging with Hokh'hokton.



**Tanya** (Disciple of the Celestial Plane)

Amnesiac maid who showed up uninvited.



**Zofina** (Disciple of the Celestial Plane)

Dutiful angel with a strong sense of responsibility. Run ragged at all times.



**Calsi'im**

Former Dark Regent now staying at Flio's house along with Charun.



**Charun**

Magic doll who became Calsi'im's wife. Specialist in preparing tea.



**Rabbitz**

Calsi'im and Charun's daughter. Loves to climb on top of Calsi'im's head.



**Sybe** (Unicorn Rabbit Form)

Flio's household pet. Mate of the Unicorn Rabbit Shebe.



**Shebe**

Unicorn Rabbit who became Sybe's mate.



**Sube**

Child of Sybe and Shebe. Unicorn rabbit with slightly upturned eyes.



**Sebe**

Child of Sybe and Shebe. Well-known for the adorable faces it makes.



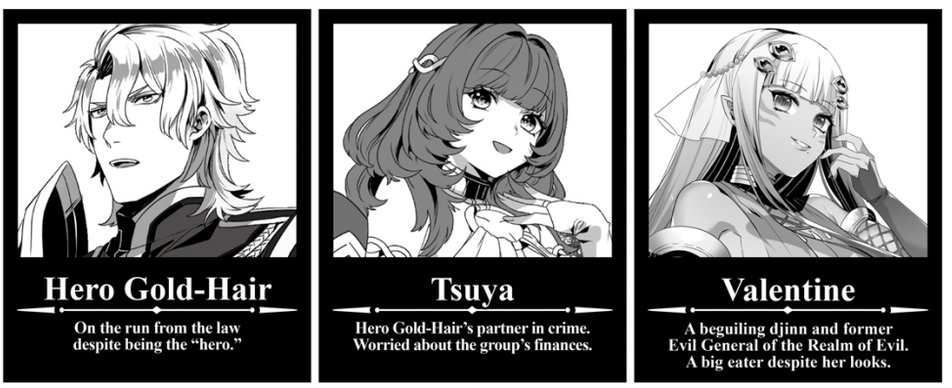
**Sobe**

Child of Sybe and Shebe. A unicorn rabbit with coloration reminiscent of a psychobear.

Chill
Super Cheat Power

# Characters

**Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers**



**Hero Gold-Hair**
On the run from the law despite being the "hero."



**Tsuya**
Hero Gold-Hair's partner in crime. Worried about the group's finances.



**Valentine**
A beguiling djinn and former Evil General of the Realm of Evil. A big eater despite her looks.



**Aryun Keats**
Member of the rare carriage djinn species, but her batle strength is nothing to speak of.



**Wuha Gappoli**
Former member of the Infernal Four living in sin with Byleri.



**Dawkson**
Ghozal's younger brother. Newly crowned Dark One and a believer in camaraderie.



**Phufun**
Dawkson's minion, a succubus, and an extreme masochist.



**Belianna**
A foulmouthed devil who loves her little sister.



**Irystiel**
Garyl's classmate and Belianna's little sister.



**Salina**
Garyl's classmate. Seems to have feelings for him, but...



**The Shadow King**
Former King of Klyrode, and head of the Shadow Conglomerate.

Chillin' in Another World

ATK……∞
DEF……∞
AGI……∞
MP……∞
HP……∞

Level 2~

Super Cheat Powers

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# Chapter 1: Flio, at Home and Abroad

The world of Klyrode is a land of swords and sorcery, home to magic beasts and demihumans of all shapes and sizes. In this world, the war between humans and demons raged from time immemorial, until the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, greatest of the human kingdoms, signed a treaty with the Dark Army, the preeminent organization among demonkind. Since then, the continent has been free of any large-scale conflict, ushering in an era of lasting peace.

While fortress walls still stand at the border between human and demon territory and the roads that lead between them still pass through fortified gates, there are no longer any significant restrictions on travel between the two lands. In fact, with so many wanting to make the trip and with trade as prosperous as it has become, the people of both capital regions have begun to seek out new routes connecting the two realms, extolling the virtues of peace all the while.

While the continent is enjoying its reprieve from war, however, a number of oddities and anomalies have been observed throughout the land. These may be a result of the recent string of incidents that repeatedly and significantly damaged the magic barrier around the planetoid world of Klyrode's firmament. The powers that be, seemingly at their wits' end with all these strange occurrences, reached out to none other than Flio to request his assistance.

And with that, the stage is set. The curtains slowly rise...

◇Magical Kingdom of Klyrode—Calgosi Coast◇

The Calgosi Coast stretched along the southern region of the territory governed by the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Most of the southern coastline was sheer cliff plunging straight into the sea, difficult even to approach. In Calgosi, however, the land met the sea at a vast sandy beach. It was well-known as the only place in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode where one could enjoy the pleasures of swimming in the sea.

Calgosi was also a lively and prosperous capital of trade in its

own right, ideally positioned for exchange with other nations that lay across the sea. The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode entrusted the government of the region to the noble house Van Biel, with the present head of the family inheriting the position.

*Thump thump thump thump thump!*

In a forest near the coast of Calgosi, a herd of magic beasts thundered through the haze of the morning mist with a speed that seemed absurd considering the massive size of their bodies, weaving between the trees. However these beasts, with bodies like wild boars, did not seem to be running simply for the joy of it. Rather, they seemed to be running *away* from something. They were formidable creatures, each more than twice the size of a fully grown human, and yet they stole furtive glances behind, darting through the forest as fast as their hooves could carry them. There, looming behind the herd, was the figure of a human man riding atop an enormous magic beast. Unlike the ordinary knights of the world, however, the man did not have any kind of reins or bridle to direct the movement of his mount. He merely sat atop the beast's back, peering ahead at the magic beasts running wild. In contrast to the frantic retreat of the herd, however, the man seemed to regard the situation with untroubled nonchalance.

"I'll stop the five on the right. All right, Rys?" the man said, leaning to speak into the ear of the magic beast he was riding.

"Understood, my lord husband!" the beast—who was, in fact, Rys in her full lupine demon form—brightly replied. "In that case, please leave the ones on the left to me!"

Flio—a merchant from another world who was summoned to Klyrode as a candidate for the position of Hero. On his summoning, he was given a powerful blessing that imparted mastery of every skill and every magic spell that existed in the world. At this time, he was the proprietor of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store and a loving husband to his wife Rys, a former demon soldier of the Dark Army. The two had also had one son and two daughters.



Rys—once a proud warrior of the lupine demons. After her defeat at the hands of Flio, she chose to walk alongside him as his wife. She was perhaps a bit excessively devoted to her human husband, and took it upon herself to be a mother figure for everyone living at Flio's house.

"All right...no time like the present, I guess!" Flio said, rising gently into the air with a simple application of the spell Fly. Ordinarily this spell would have required an incantation to cast, but Flio needed no such thing.

When Flio was first brought to the world of Klyrode, the goddesses inadvertently gifted him with blessings meant for *two* summoned heroes. As a result, the instant he achieved level two, he became powerful enough to use every spell that had ever been cast on the world of Klyrode without any need for an incantation. Not only that, but every one of his ability scores was raised to a level beyond the status window's ability to display. Now all it would show was the symbol ∞ for every one of his abilities. This, however, was only a result of the limitations of the status window itself. In actuality, Flio's ability scores had only continued to grow higher and higher ever since.

Flio himself, however, was still unaware of any of these details.

Flio flew ahead and to the right, looking down on the runaway herd of magic beasts. Each of them was much larger than the wild boars they resembled. A monster like this ordinarily wouldn't hesitate to charge straight at a human. These ones, however, were running in fear—not of Flio, but of Rys in her bestial form. Lupine demons were at the very apex of magic beasts, and Rys's abilities were top-class even among her species. The boars understood her power instinctively, which was why they were running for their lives.

Flio held out his right hand. "Gravitation!" he said, and suddenly a magic circle appeared in front of his outstretched right hand, shining with light.

*Screeeeeeech!!!*

A moment later, the magic beasts came to a halt dead in their tracks, forced downwards as if they had been nailed to the ground. Flio flew closer, coming to a stop in midair right above the incapacitated magic beasts. "A herd of mount boars, huh?" he said, folding his arms as he looked down on the beasts below.

"But mount boars ordinarily live in the north of the continent, don't they?" came Rys's voice in response, from ahead and to the

left of Flio's position.

Flio looked down at the ground in front of him to see his beloved wife standing astride a pile of unconscious mount boars. She had been no slower than Flio himself in dispatching the left flank of the out-of-control herd, and had already changed back from her magic beast form, hands on her hips with her chest thrust proudly upwards.

"You're as fierce as ever, I see, Rys!" Flio remarked.

"Oh, my lord husband, you flatterer! You know your magic is far more incredible than anything *I* can do!" Rys said, covering up her reddening cheeks with her hands as she squirmed with joy in spite of herself. The motion caused the skirt of her favorite white dress to flare up dangerously, given her elevated position on top of the pile of mount boars.

"R-Rys!" Flio exclaimed, his own cheeks turning a bright shade of red as well as he covered his face with his hand in embarrassment.

For a couple who had already had three children, Flio and Rys could behave remarkably like a pair of newlyweds.

Just then, a sound came from somewhere behind the two lovebirds as Rolindeim appeared in her black panther form.

Rolindeim—a black pantherfolk demihuman who served as one of the familiars of the ruler of the Calgosi Coast, Countess Junia Van Biel. Rolindeim possessed the ability to freely change the shape of her own body. Her ordinary appearance was of a dark-skinned young girl, but despite her apparent age she had been serving the Van Biel family for generations.

"Well, that smarts!" said Rolindeim, shoulders heaving and eyes wide with disbelief as she returned to her humanoid form. "I came running as fast as I could, but it looks like everything is over...right?"

Dressed in shorts and a tank top over her dark and sun-kissed skin with a beach towel wrapped around her waist, Rolindeim's human form looked for all the world like a neighborhood girl who just happened to be in the area.

"And here I thought my speed was something to be proud of...right?" Rolindeim said, a chagrined look on her face as she stepped up towards Flio.

"Not at all!" Flio insisted with one of those easygoing smiles of his. "You wouldn't think it from how big they are, but mount boars are very maneuverable creatures, always changing the

direction they're heading when you least expect it. I imagine you'd have a lot of trouble trying to catch one if you didn't know that about their movement. Rys and I just happen to be used to hunting them on our trips to the forests near Houghtow City."

"My lord husband!" Rys exclaimed with a hint of a pout, jogging over to where Flio and Rolindeim had been speaking and wrapping both her arms tight around one of his. "Those trips are our *dates*, you know! You must call them what they are!" Beaming happily, she pressed her body close to Flio.

"U-Um..." said Flio, blushing again at the sensation of his arm brushing up against Rys's ample cleavage. "R-Rys..."

"Oh?" Rys asked with innocent curiosity, continuing to rub her upper body against Flio's arm with no regard for the embarrassment it was causing him. "Is something the matter, my lord husband?"

"I swear, you two are the lovey-doviest couple I've ever met...right?" Rolindeim smirked, lacing her fingers together behind her head and leaning back.

Rolindeim was interrupted by the sound of loud footfalls coming their way as a pair of heavyset men emerged from the tall grass behind her, looking all around. "Bghhfff!!! I-I've finally made it..." said the first.

"*Huff*... *Puff*..." panted the second. "Wh-Where's these landlubbin' magic beasts of ours?! They'll rue the day they ran afoul of Captain Eddsarch!"

Rolindeim gave the two newcomers a withering sidelong glance. "Hey, Polseidon. Hey, Eddsarch," she said. "Sorry to say but Mister Flio and Madame Rys went and cleaned them up for us already. Maybe I shouldn't say it when I couldn't make it on time either, but talk about slow to the punch, you two...right?"

"I-I don't want to hear about it! *Huff... Puff...*" Polseidon snapped, doubling over with his hands on his hips as he struggled to regain his breath. "I'm a swimmer, not a runner, you know! *Pant... Heave...* There's no need to go digging into my inadequacies! *Wheeze...*"

Polseidon—one of the seafolk who had pledged himself to Countess Junia Van Biel of the Calgosi Coast as one of her familiars. In spite of his advanced age he boasted a powerfully built physique, as well as the ability to enlarge his body to giant size. In that form he could swim easily through the waters of the ocean and boasted a considerable degree of supernatural

strength.

Polseidon, in spite of his long and wavy white hair and long white beard, managed to project an image of something like youth with his muscular and supple body. Eddsarch, by contrast, splayed out his legs and flopped down on the ground.

“I hear ye, old man…” Eddsarch said between gasps for air as he lay on his back looking up at the heavens above. “Put me behind the wheel of a ship and I’m good to go… But running? On solid land? That’s a little beyond me abilities, I’m afraid…”

Captain Eddsarch—an ex-pirate captain famous for his distinctive black beard. Captain Eddsarch took the destruction of his former fleet as an opportunity to turn over a new leaf, pledging himself and his men to the service of Countess Junia Van Biel. Now the former corsairs were responsible for the defense of the Calgosi Coast.

In stark contrast to the well-built and muscular Polseidon, Captain Eddsarch sported a prominent beer belly and was currently drenched head to toe in sweat. In his current state, he seemed unable to even rise to his feet.

Even later still, however, were the rest of Captain Eddsarch’s crew, who arrived on the heels of their captain and collapsed on the spot, apparently winded even more than Eddsarch and Polseidon.

Rolindeim regarded the men with an air of contempt. “Absolutely hopeless…” she said. “We’re lucky Mister Flio and company just *happened* to be paying a visit to Countess Van Biel, or else we might have wound up with those magic beasts charging down into the city! That woulda been a situation and a half for sure…right?”

“Well, you’re right about that…” Polseidon said. “But cut us some slack! Who’d ever heard of land-based magic beasts like these ones showing up around here?! And all of them just ran out of the forest one day, out of nowhere! Completely unprecedented!”

“The boss is right…” Eddsarch managed. “Menacing the Calgosi Coast is supposed to be the job of sea creatures and pirates!”

Unlike Rolindeim, who had long since caught her breath and was now beginning an idle stretch routine, Polseidon, Eddsarch, and the crew were still struggling desperately for air.

Flio looked on with a laid-back smile as the three discussed

the strange events at hand. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything, a woman came flying through the air up beside him. She was a small woman dressed in a white outfit, using the same Fly spell as Flio.

"I...understand how you feel..." the woman said, coming down to land next to where Flio and Rys were standing. "But...don't fight in front of our guests...please..."

The woman spoke hesitantly, but with clear authority. Immediately, Polseidon and Eddsarch, as well as Eddsarch's men, quit their moping and bellyaching and took to their feet, standing tall at attention before her.

"C-Countess Van Biel!" said Polseidon.

"A-A-A thousand apologies for this unseemly display, me ladyship!" fawned Eddsarch.

Junia Van Biel—the current head of the noble house of Van Biel, responsible for the government of the Calgosi Coast. As a small and delicate woman, she often came across as younger than her age, but she was in fact a mature adult. Junia possessed exceptional magic power and aptitude for spellcraft, earning her the moniker "the Sorceress in Her Tower."

Junia looked over at her retinue of subordinates, now standing at attention in an orderly line, and then turned to address Flio. "I...thank you...for your assistance in subduing this herd of magic beasts..." she said, bowing her head low. "You...have my gratitude..."

Junia Van Biel was by nature a painfully shy individual, and speaking loudly in front of others was something she found particularly difficult. Her voice was so extraordinarily quiet, in fact, that the reformed pirates standing at attention behind Polseidon and Eddsarch could hardly make out what she said.

"I know my lord husband took the trouble of coming here today because you said there was a matter you wished to discuss regarding the magic beasts," Rys said, stepping forwards to face Junia. "It wasn't simply a matter of wanting us to handle more land-based magic beasts for you, was it?"

"N-No, no, not at all!" said Junia, lifting her head with a start and shaking it insistently, waving both hands in front of her as if to ward off the idea. "I-I never intended to ask you to do this for us in the first place..."

"But without our help, these hulking men of yours wouldn't be any use at all against a magic beast that doesn't live in the sea,

would they?”

“*Excuse* me?!” Polseidon and Eddsarch bellowed at once in response.

“Now, now, you two,” Rolindeim interjected, stepping forwards between them and Rys before tempers got any hotter. “It’s not that I don’t sympathize with your struggles, but you can’t deny that Madame Rys is right on the money…right?” she said, a clever smirk on her face as she looked between the two hulking men.

“Gwuh!” said Polseidon, his expression going stiff as he found himself at a loss for words.

“Gwuhgh!” exclaimed Eddsarch, following suit.

“U-Um…” a very flustered Junia volunteered. “Th-They really are the best you could ask for when it comes to fighting aquatic magic beasts, though… I rely on them a great deal…”

“C-Countess Van Biel…” said Polseidon, his face lighting up.

“S-Such gracious words…” Eddsarch gushed with emotion.

“But when it comes to *terrestrial* beasts, their performance today is about whatcha get…right?” said Rolindeim, once again giving voice to the harsh truth of the situation.

“Gwuh!” said Polseidon, his expression going stiff yet again.

“G-Gwuhgh!” exclaimed Eddsarch.

*O-Oh dear*… Junia thought to herself, anxiety setting in as she glanced between Polseidon, Eddsarch, and the others. *Wh-What am I meant to say here?*

Flio put on an impeccable business smile with just a hint of his ordinary easygoing expression as he stepped up to speak with the countess. “The letter you sent mentioned that you wanted to discuss something regarding these out-of-place magic beasts,” he said. “How can the Fli-o’-Rys General Store be of assistance?”

Flio’s question seemed to call Junia back to her senses. “O-Oh yes!” she said. “A-Actually… I heard the Fli-o’-Rys General Store operates a school for adventurers… I was wondering if Polseidon and the others might be able to go there for training on how to fight terrestrial magic beasts…”

“Huh?” Flio said, clearly surprised by Junia’s words. Rys, standing next to him, seemed equally confused.

“You heard that, did you?” she asked, tilting her head with curiosity. “But we still haven’t unveiled the Adventurers’ Academy to the general public. How did you happen to find out about it?”

“O-Oh… W-Well… You see…” Junia began, but right at that

moment, before she could answer Rys's question, they were interrupted by a succession of loud crashing thuds. Three more giant magic beasts came falling out of the sky, landing all around them—mount boars, like the ones Flio and Rys had defeated only moments earlier.

"Hi Dada! Hi Mama! Wa ha ha ha ha!" Up in the sky was Wyne, who seemed to be responsible for dropping this fresh batch of mount boars to their doom, her dragon wings and tail on full display as she flew. She went into a fast dive, tackling Flio and Rys out of the air and hugging them both tight.

Wyne—a wyvern dragonewt capable of transforming between human and dragon forms, said to be the strongest fighter among all of dragonkind. Flio and Rys once saved her life when they found her collapsed on the side of the road and adopted her into the family, where she now served as a doting older sister for Elinàsze and the other children.

As deadly as a dragonewt's dive could be, Flio and Rys took it without flinching. Of course, the many passive defensive spells active on Flio at all times immediately conjured a vast array of magic circles, harmlessly absorbing all of the force of the impact. This way, the couple had no trouble simply catching their adopted daughter in a loving embrace.

"You really are remarkable, my lord husband," Rys said with a kind smile as she patted Wyne on the head. "Even I would be a little hard-pressed to stop one of Wyne's full-power attacks…"

Indeed, Rys had transformed her arms and legs back into their bestial forms, her tail manifesting as well in a display of her own lupine demon power, as she prepared to catch Wyne out of her dive-bomb.

*You know, come to think of it, Wyne has been visiting the Calgosi Coast rather often, hasn't she…* Flio thought, looking over at Rys holding Wyne close to her chest. He nodded once in understanding before turning his attention back to Junia Van Biel.

"So, Countess Van Biel…" he said. "By any chance, was it Wyne who told you about the Adventurers' Academy?"

"Oh… Um… Well… Y-Yes…" Junia acknowledged with a slight nod after a moment of panic.

"Now, Wyne!" Rys chided her, bopping Wyne gently on the tip of the nose. "I told you not to mention the academy to anyone outside the family, didn't I?"

“Yeah!” Wyne replied. “So I was real-real careful not to tell anyone but family! See?” she said, pointing up at something high in the sky.

“You…were?” Flio and Rys both said at once, looking upwards in blank confusion. There, where Wyne was pointing, they saw a demihuman man beating his wings to slow his descent to the ground. On his back he was carrying a mount boar as if the hefty beast weighed nothing at all.

“Hey, Wyne,” the man said, smiling at her as he landed. “I got the last of ’em!”

“I was wondering who was up there…” Flio said, nodding to himself as he put the pieces together. “So it was Loplanz, hm?”

Loplanz—an avian demihuman of the monstrous rukh variety, and another one of Junia Van Biel’s familiars. Rolindeim and Polseidon had been training Loplanz to foster his exceptional talents since he was very young, although he had finally reached the point where his species came of age.

“Oh my!” Rys exclaimed, looking over in surprise as Flio mentioned Loplanz’s name. “When we met you in Houghtow City you were just an adorable little thing! I didn’t recognize you at first!”

When Rys had last met Loplanz, his human form was still distinctly immature. Even when he took the form of a great rukh, he hadn’t been all that much larger than a midsized avian species. Now, however, he had grown up into a strapping young man nearly the same height as Flio, and the wings on his back were no less impressive than Wyne’s own dragon wings.

Loplanz placed the mount boar he was carrying down on the ground and turned to face Flio and Rys. “A-Ah… Uh… I…” he stammered, suddenly frozen stiff, blushing red with embarrassment as he struggled valiantly to form a coherent greeting.

“Why are you acting so weird-weird, Lop-Lop?” Wyne demanded, snickering as she came up and grabbed him by the arm. “You were normal when we were hunting the boar-boar!”

“F-Fwuahhhgh!!!” Loplanz cried, leaping up into the air as he felt his arm pulled up against Wyne’s busty chest. He stood there mouthing wordlessly, his face bright red, having completely lost his ability to speak.

“Hwuh? Lop-Lop? What’s wrong-wrong?” asked Wyne, looking over at the immobilized boy in innocent confusion and delicately

rubbing her horns against Loplanz's cheek. As long as Wyne was holding him against her breasts, however, Loplanz seemed completely unable to move.

"My, my..." said Rys, giving Loplanz an assessing look from where she stood next to Flio a short distance away. "He's gotten quite a bit bigger, but if that was enough to incapacitate him I'm not certain if he has what it takes to be one of your vassals, my lord husband..."

"R-Rys..." Flio winced. "It's not about making him a vassal. What matters here is Wyne's feelings, isn't it?"

Although she wasn't related to them by blood, Flio and Rys had adopted Wyne into the family as their daughter after they found her in a forest collapsed from starvation. Both of them treasured the dragonewt very much. As a lupine demon, however, Rys was very choosy when it came to her children's romantic partners. Flio, on the other hand, was a human, and only wanted to support the couple as they deepened their bond.

"Dada? Mama? What are you two talk-talking about?" asked Wyne, curiously looking her parents' way.

"O-Oh, nothing really!" said Flio. "Just that you and Loplanz have gotten very close to each other, haven't you!"

"Yeah!" said Wyne, grinning from ear to ear. "Lop-Lop's great! I love-love him!"

"Fwswahh?!!!" Loplanz cried, his face growing redder still as bewildered thoughts raced through his mind. *W-W-Wyne... W-Wyne said... She l-l-l-l-loves...m-me?!*

"I love him fourth most, after Gare-Gare, Eli-Eli, and Leva-Leva!" Wyne continued, her smile unabated.

"S-So..." Flio said, smiling stiffly. "It's not romantic love, then? It's...more of a sibling sort of thing?"

"So it seems..." Rys agreed, folding her arms and nodding her head.

"I-If I may..." Junia said, taking the opportunity to step forwards and interject. "Miss Wyne has been a great help managing these magic beasts during her visits here... S-So that's why... I, um, I feel terrible about relying on her, so, well..." she trailed off awkwardly, demurely bowing her head.

"You have nothing to worry about, I assure you," said Flio, smiling back as calmly as ever. "Wyne loves flying around to every corner of the world on her outings, and I gather she's especially fond of the Calgosi Coast. If she's been a help to the

people here while she's out playing, it's all the better as far as I'm concerned!"

Rolindeim and Polseidon had been watching from the sidelines as Flio and Junia carried on their conversation. Suddenly, Rolindeim shuffled up beside where Polseidon was standing and seized hold of his long white beard, mercilessly yanking his head to her level.

"Ow!" Polseidon exclaimed as the much smaller woman pulled him down to a kneeling posture. "Rolindeim! What do you think you're doing?!"

"Hey..." Rolindeim whispered in Polseidon's ear. "That little Miss Wyne's supposedly flying all the way from Houghtow City to come and hang out, isn't she?"

"Mh?" Polseidon replied. "Yes, that's right."

"But it takes a horse-drawn carriage just about a month to make the trip from Houghtow City to here...right?" Rolindeim asked.

"W-Well, yes..." Polseidon confirmed. "But can't those new Enchanted Frigates of theirs travel the distance in half a day?"

"Sure!" Rolindeim conceded. "But Miss Wyne over there'll show up at the crack of dawn on one of her *morning flights*, and head home when it's time for breakfast!"

"Th-That's true, I suppose..." said Polseidon.

"So *that* means..." Rolindeim continued, "that she's gotta be even faster than an Enchanted Frigate! And not only that, but she's treating that crazy long-distance flight like an early morning stroll...right?"

"W-Well, when you put it that way..."

"Think about it!" Rolindeim grinned. "If Miss Wyne and Loplanz ever get hitched or whatever, we'll have the security of the entire region well in hand!"

"Oho!" said Polseidon, grinning as he realized what Rolindeim was getting at. "So *that's* your brilliant pl—"

Before he could finish, however, the point of a long sword came quivering to a halt between their faces, its hilt clutched tight in Junia's right hand.

"Gheeekh?!" they cried, flinching back.

"We can't think that way..." said Junia, a slight pout on her youthful face as she slowly lowered her weapon. The blade retracted back to her hand, then traveled down her body where it wrapped itself around her waist. "I don't want us to depend on

outsiders for our protection…”

“Excuse me… Countess Van Biel?” Flio asked, surprised by the movement of Junia’s sword. “Was that a spell you used just now? I didn’t sense any magic power…”

“O-Oh…” said Junia. “I-It’s this Armory Dress I’m wearing, actually… A magic item that can transform into any sort of weapon… It’s powered by magic gems, so I don’t need to use my own magic power to activate it…”

“My!” interjected Rys, suddenly very interested in Junia’s outfit. “What’s the limit on how large of a weapon this dress can make, I wonder?”

“Oh, um…let me see…” said Junia, holding out her right hand once again. “The largest it can make would be about…this.” The fabric of Junia’s dress all gathered in her hand, transforming into a truly massive cleaver of a sword.

“Well, would you look at that!” marveled Rys. “That weapon is even bigger than *I* am!”

“Yes, um, well…I can control the weapon’s size to an extent, but the weight is always scaled to the user’s physical strength… If someone as weak as me tries to create a large weapon, I just end up with an oversized sword with no actual mass…” Junia explained. “But you can create all sorts of things if you know how…like shields, or magicannons…although…there is one small problem…or really, two…”

“A problem?” asked Flio.

“Two of them?” added Rys.

The two looked from the gigantic sword back to Junia herself —only for their eyes to go wide at the sight of the countess of the Calgosi Coast dressed in nothing more than her unmentionables.

“Huh?”

“Why are you—?”

“U-Um…” said Junia. “O-One problem is that weapons created by the Armory Dress can’t be separated from the body of the person wearing it. B-But also… I-If you turn the entire dress into a weapon like this…it can be very embarrassing…” Her pale white skin blushing bright red, Junia quickly returned the dress to its original state.

Meanwhile…

Polseidon as well as Captain Eddsarch and his underlings

strained for a peek at Junia Van Biel's nearly naked form. But unluckily for them, Rolindeim transformed her body into a thin membrane, spreading out and preventing them from getting even a single glimpse.

"Oh, did you think you were gonna see something?" she said, mocking the men. "Shame that I was here too...right?"

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

It was early in the morning, and the Fli-o'-Rys General Store was nearly ready to open its doors. In front of the building was a sign reading "Opening Soon," and inside, the early shift shop workers were busy getting everything ready for the day.

Behind the shop, a magic circle appeared on the ground right beside the area where horse-drawn carts parked to unload their cargo. Then, without any delay to speak of, an unremarkable black door emerged from within the magic circle, opening to reveal Flio and the others.

"Well, then," Flio said, bidding his goodbyes to Junia and her squad of defenders on the other side of the door, where the Calgosi Coast stretched off into the distance. "We'll discuss your request with the rest of the staff and get back to you as soon as possible."

"I-I'm very sorry to trouble you with this..." said Junia, bowing low at the head of her party. "But...thank you for taking our request..."

"Thank you!" the others all called out behind her, bowing their heads at once in an impressive display of synchronization. And with that, Flio, Rys and Wyne stepped through the portal. As Flio closed the door behind them, it vanished, and a moment later, the magic circle vanished as well.

"So, Junia wants us to train her underlings to fight against terrestrial magic beasts, does she?" Rys mused, folding her arms and tilting her head in thought. "I can't imagine there's any need for you to trouble yourself with this personally, my lord husband. I would be happy to make daily trips to the Calgosi Coast myself in order to drill some discipline into those men of hers."

"Me too! Me too!" said Wyne, beaming as she hopped up into the air. "I wanna come help-help!"

"I'm sure the two of you would do just fine," Flio said, looking over with a wry smile. "But there's a number of other items on

our agenda that might be a good fit with this one, I guess you could say. And besides, I have a few ideas of my own. Would you mind if I took this one on myself?"

"Well... If that's your will, I suppose..." Rys acquiesced. "But my lord husband!" she added, jogging ahead of him and sticking her hands on her hips, thrusting her face right in front of her husband's face, puffing out her cheeks in a puppylike pout. "I know you're an incredible man, and you can do anything at all if it strikes your fancy... But that doesn't mean you need to take every single little thing onto your own shoulders! Won't you please rely on me from time to time?"

"Thank you, Rys," said Flio, smiling happily and petting Rys gently on the head. "I'm really grateful to have you looking out for me."

"As long as you understand, I have no complaints," said Rys, smiling back.

"Mama, no fair-fair!" said Wyne, shoving her way between Flio and Rys and standing on her tiptoes to thrust her head up towards Flio's arms. "Pet-pet me too!" As a dragonewt, Wyne had two horns on either side of her head, and for a moment it seemed like they would jab right into Flio. At the last moment, however, one of the many passive defensive spells Flio had active on his person at all times sprung into action, harmlessly guiding the horns away in what looked like a natural motion.

"Okay, Wyne," Flio said, smiling as he petted her on the head as well. "Is that what you wanted?" Wyne grinned from ear to ear at the sensation.

Flio stood there for a while, patting Rys and Wyne on the head in tandem, until he was interrupted when Hiya materialized beside him.

"Exalted One...and his honorable wife..." Hiya said. "I am glad for your family's harmonious intimacy. However..."

Hiya—the djinn who commanded the origin of light and darkness. Hiya possessed magic power sufficient to destroy the entire world, but after their loss to Flio they came to worship the merchant as the so-called Exalted One. Now they lived with everyone in Flio's house.

Hiya placed their hand to their chest, bowing deeply. "I believe I recall you saying that the schedule for today was exceptionally busy, did you not?"

"Oh! That's right!" said Rys, lifting her head with a start. "My

lord husband, we have our meeting with the Houghtow City Adventurers' Guild this morning, and then our meeting at city hall, and after *that* we're supposed to make that visit to the Houghtow College of Magic!" She grabbed her husband's hand, pulling him along as she hurried off away from the store. "Thank you for the reminder, Hiya!"

"There is no need for thanks," said Hiya, bowing gravely as Flio waved them a cheerful goodbye. "Rather, I owe you my deepest gratitude for your mercy, seeing as I am guilty of interrupting your precious moment of family intimacy."

"I'm coming with-with you!" said Wyne. But before she could rush off after Flio and Rys, Tanya came bursting out of the shop, running her way with incredible speed.

"Young Mistress Wyne!" Tanya shouted.

Tanya—originally known as Tanyalina, an angel sent by the Celestial Plane to monitor Flio due to his enormous magic power. A freak midair collision with Wyne cost her a large part of her memories, however, and she ended up serving the family as the House of Flio's very own live-in maid.

Running like the wind, Tanya darted between the shop workers unloading the carts.

"Ah! Tan-Tan?!" Wyne looked back over her shoulders, furrowing her brow when she saw who was coming her way. Wyne's draconic wings materialized on her back without missing a beat and she took off, dead set on escaping from Tanya's grasp.

"You mustn't run away, Young Mistress Wyne!" Tanya scolded her. Clutched tight in her hand, she held a pair of undergarments. "I've told you time and time and *time* again that you *must* wear your underwear when you go out-of-doors! And yet, *once again* I find that you have gone flying *all the way* to the Calgosi Coast without anything on beneath your dress! I swear, this is the last day you're getting away with this!"

"Nuh-uh! Nuh-uh!" Wyne cried, her mouth turned downwards in a dramatic frown as she took off into the sky at full power. "Underwear's gross!"

"Young Mistress Wyne!" A pair of feathered angel wings appeared on Tanya's back as she took to the sky in pursuit.

Tanya was exceptionally skilled at high-speed flight, even for a onetime Disciple of the Celestial Plane. When it came to sheer physical ability, however, Wyne had her beat. Try as she might,

she couldn't quite manage to catch the dragonewt. Even so, she stuck right on Wyne's tail as she flew madly through the sky, giving her a clear eyeful of Wyne's naked lower body underneath her poncho-like outfit.

"Young Mistress Wyne!!!" Tanya cried, her eyes wide open as she sped up further still. "As maid of the House of Flio, I will permit this unseemly display no longer!!!"

"Nooo! Nooooo!!!" Wyne protested, making sharp midair turns and precipitous dives as she took every evasive maneuver she could in her effort to shake Tanya's pursuit.

Hiya folded their arms as they watched the chase running wild in the skies above. "Ah... Their customary game of tag seems to be a touch more intense than usual today..." they mused. "Still, even if she's lost her memories, Tanya has the abilities of a Disciple of the Celestial Plane. Can she truly not close that gap between herself and Miss Wyne? Quite fascinating..."

Indeed, when Wyne first became a member of Flio's family, she was still very young by dragon terms. Back then, when Tanya chased after Wyne, she could catch her without much difficulty. Wyne, however, had reached an age where a human would be considered an adult. Now Tanya found herself unable to get ahead of the dragonewt no matter how hard she tried.

Hiya kept watching the contest with great interest, until suddenly they heard a voice speaking in their mind.

"*Hey! What are you doing spacing out like that?! Hey!*" came the psychic voice of Damalynas.

Damalynas—the Grand Magus of Midnight, master of the Midnight Arts. She had long since shed her mortal flesh, existing now only as a psychic construct. She was defeated, however, by Hiya, who absorbed her into their own mindscape to serve as their beloved training partner.

"*Don't you remember the time those two got out of hand chasing each other and ended up colliding with an incoming Enchanted Frigate?*" Damalynas said. "*And it's just about time for the first cargo flight of the morning...*" As if on cue, one of the Enchanted Frigates disembarked from the landing zone next to the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, setting out on its voyage through the skies.

Unlike the run-of-the-mill Enchanted Frigates that serviced regular passenger routes, which docked in midair alongside the boarding tower inside the landing zone, cargo frigates landed on the ground, waited to be loaded from horse-drawn carts piled

high with cargo, and then departed directly from there. And so, Hiya watched as the first cargo flight of the morning rose slowly into the air.

“Hmm…” said the djinn. “Damalynas may be correct. This does look ever so slightly like a disaster in the making…”

Hiya raised their right hand, just as Wyne flew straight on a collision course for the ascending frigate with Tanya hot on her tail. Hiya began an incantation, but before they could finish, an enormous magic circle appeared without warning in the sky right in front of Wyne. “Oh?” said Hiya.

“Akhbhth!!!” cried Wyne, frantically beating her wings in a desperate effort to change direction. Alas, however, she was going far too fast to suddenly stop herself from plunging straight into the magic circle.

“That magic circle…” Hiya watched with their hand outstretched from the ground below. “I see… Then Madame Elinàsze has already developed countermeasures…” they said, nodding in understanding.

◇???◇

Wyne flew straight into the magic circle and found herself trapped. Outside the circle, she could see the shape of a room.

“Ugyaahhh!” she shrieked, struggling and flailing in midair.

In the room around her was a veritable spiderweb of magic circles, with Wyne stuck right in the middle like a particularly juicy bug, her arms and legs spread wide and unable to move.

As Wyne struggled fruitlessly, Elinàsze came stepping up to the web of magic circles.

Elinàsze—daughter of Flio and Rys, Garyl’s older twin, and Rylnàsze’s older sister. She was a dependable girl who had devoted herself wholly to the pursuit of magic, as well as a daddy’s girl to a pathological degree. Recently, she had little time for anything other than collecting magic grimoires from around the many worlds in order to put their spells into practice.

“Oh, big sis Wyne…” Elinàsze chided the dragonewt, removing her glasses with an exasperated sigh. “Papa was *just* scolding you for slamming into an Enchanted Frigate the other day, don’t you remember?” She was dressed in the sort of plain and ordinary clothes she favored while engrossed in her magical research.

“A-Ah ha ha…” Wyne laughed, wincing noticeably. “Sorry-sorry, Eli-Eli…” She tried to make some kind of apologetic motion, but the spiderweb-like magic circle was still holding her fast in place, preventing her from moving her body. “Sooo… Is this your room-room, Eli-Eli?” she asked.

“Yes, this is my laboratory…or rather, an extra chamber I had to build at the last minute right next to the laboratory itself. I suppose you could call it my special facility for capturing particularly rambunctious older sisters.” Elinàsze held out her hand towards the magic circle binding Wyne in place and cast a quick spell, causing it to vanish.

“Waphff!!!” Wyne sputtered as she plummeted to the floor. She lay there, clutching her hand to the spot where her face had hit the ground below.

“Are you all ri—” Elinàsze began, stepping forwards to help Wyne to her feet, only for her eyes to go wide as she looked down at her big sister. “B-Big sis Wyne?!”

Wyne’s poncho had fallen completely out of arrangement in the landing, giving Elinàsze a clear view of her naked butt, unadorned by any sort of undergarment.

“H-Honestly, big sis Wyne…” Elinàsze shook her head, once more sighing in exasperation. “You went out without underwear *again*?”

“She did indeed!” snapped Tanya, flying into the room. “I’m really at my wits’ end with this girl!” She landed right behind Wyne, sliding the underwear up her legs with a single smooth motion. “Now, be a good girl and keep your undergarments on!”

“Guhh… Feels gross…” Wyne groaned, grabbing at her underwear with tears in her eyes as she tried to pull it off. “H-Huh? Huh?” she said, bewilderment coming over her face as she found herself unable to move the offending garment even a single inch.

“That underwear is enchanted,” Tanya said, standing right in front of Wyne’s face. “It can’t be removed without my express permission.”

“Ungyaaah?!!!” Wyne leaped to her feet, pressing her cheeks together in an expression of sheer horror.

“You understand?” Tanya said. “This time, you won’t be taking off your underwear so easily!”

Elinàsze shook her head and shrugged her shoulders, heading off in the direction of the adjoining room as Tanya

worked up to a proper lecture.

"Oh, Mistress Elinàsze, I must say..." said Tanya, stopping her before she could make her exit.

"Yes, Tanya? Whatever could it be?" Elinàsze asked.

Tanya slowly looked up from the target of her lecture, turning her eyes Elinàsze's way. "This room..." she said. "Your laboratory, I believe you called it... It isn't located on the planetoid world we came from, is it?"

"Ah..." Elinàsze said, a distinctly guilty expression coming over her face. Catching sight of Elinàsze's expression, Tanya came marching across the room right up to where she was standing.

"I've told you many times before, haven't I?" Tanya said. "I understand you've created a miniature planetoid world modeled after a permanent mindscape outside the world of Klyrode itself to use as your own personal laboratory, but you must stop this at once!"

"Oh... But... Well..." Elinàsze protested.

"Between the repeated damage to this world's barrier and all the abnormal phenomena happening of late, you can expect the goddesses of the Celestial Plane to be on their guard. You would do well to assume that Planetoid World Klyrode is already under special observation," Tanya explained. "I know I've told you as much before, and yet here we are. What do you intend to do if the Celestials discover that there is a resident of a planetoid world capable of producing a space like this?!"

"I... Y-Yes, you're right, of course..." was all Elinàsze could say as she fidgeted nervously on the spot in the face of Tanya's tirade.

Ordinarily, Elinàsze maintained a cool and collected demeanor, unperturbed no matter what happened around her. It was rare indeed to see her reduced to such awkward stammering. Even some of the magic dolls Elinàsze had created, who had been working on their various tasks in the laboratory next door, came to marvel at the sight.

"Hwehh..." Wyne exhaled, watching with her mouth agape as Elinàsze was subjected to Tanya's stern lecture. "Tan-Tan's something else..."

All the while, of course, and without even really meaning to, Wyne had been straining to remove the underwear that had been cruelly placed on her lower body.

◇Meanwhile—Houghtow City, Aboard the Enchanted Frigate◇

In the cockpit of the Enchanted Frigate, Greanyl breathed a sigh of relief.

Greanyl—a member of the Silent Listeners, the Dark Army's former intelligence apparatus. Currently she was employed by the Fli-o'-Rys General Store as the head of the personnel department, where she kept busy providing guidance to her junior employees and helping out with whatever division found themselves in need of extra hands.

"Phew! For a moment, I thought Miss Wyne and Miss Tanya might collide with the Enchanted Frigate again! Fortunately, that magic circle came to our rescue. I knew asking Madame Elinàsze for her help was the correct decision." Glad to be safe, Greanyl took hold of the ship's steering wheel once again. "I always take care to fly as safely as I can, of course, but today especially I'd like to avoid any accidents. We have Sir Dalc Horst, leader of the horse-drawn carriage team, on board, after all…"

That comment didn't pass unnoticed by the other shadow demon women assisting Greanyl in piloting the frigate.

*Captain…* one of them thought. *Are you doing this again?*

*She really is quite clueless when it comes to Sir Dalc Horst, isn't she…* thought another.

*If you ask me, the two of them should just go out already!* thought a third.

All at once, the shadow demons in the room all heaved a heavy sigh.

Meanwhile…

Unlike an ordinary Enchanted Frigate, the ship Greanyl was piloting had no seats for passengers. Instead, the entire hold was packed to the walls with row after row of horse-drawn carts. At the head of the carts was a raised platform, where a large-bodied man surveyed the various teams.

"Bwaaah…choo!!!" The man let out a powerful sneeze before hurriedly setting his jaw in an attempt to regain his composure.

"Sir Dalc Horst! Are you all right?" asked a man sitting on the driver's platform of one of the nearby carts.

"Don't worry, I'm okay," the big man—Dalc Horst—replied, with a smile and a nod.

Dalc Horst—a demon horse who once served as a direct

subordinate of Sleip, a former member of the Dark Army's Infernal Four. Currently he was employed as the head of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store's transportation department, although between jobs he made time to participate in the races over at the Fli-o'-Rys Magic Beast Racing Hall.

"It's weird, though..." Dalc Horst pondered, resting his chin on his hand and tilting his head to the side. "I don't *think* I've caught a cold or anything..."

Dalc Horst's subordinates, each sitting on the driver's seats of their own carts, looked up at him and began whispering furtively to one another.

"No way it's a cold..." said one. "I bet you Madame Greanyl and her subordinates are gossiping about Sir Dalc Horst up there..."

"No kidding..." another agreed. "There's not a soul in the Fli-o'-Rys General Store staff who doesn't know that those two are in fully requited love with each other..."

"But the two of them are both clueless late bloomers when it comes to love... Or maybe they're just shy..." whispered a third.

Needless to say, the underlings' gossip was enough to send another of Dalc Horst's sneezes echoing throughout the ship.

◇Houghtow City—Main Street◇

A few hours later, Flio and Rys were walking along the main street that ran through the middle of Houghtow City, traveling west from the city hall at the very center.

"I guess our meetings at the Adventurers' Guild and city hall both went well enough!" Flio remarked, interlacing his fingers and stretching his arms up towards the sky.

"I suppose they were quick about it this time at least, but it really is all such a hassle, isn't it..." said Rys, letting out an unhappy sigh. "The Adventurers' Guild wants us to set up a new academy for training adventurers, and the city officials want our help ensuring they have enough shops and services for all of the newcomers moving in from other cities or lands afar. Aren't those the sorts of things the Adventurers' Guild and city hall should be able to handle on their own? Why do these people feel the need to impose on you like this, my lord husband, and while you're already so busy..."

Flio couldn't help himself from smiling knowingly at his wife's complaints. "To be fair, the Adventurers' Guild guildmaster and

the officials at city hall were both very apologetic about that point, if you remember. Do you remember what the guildmaster said? Now that the kingdom is at peace with the Dark Army, a great number of folks who used to make their living as mercenary soldiers have been switching careers to work as adventurers. But since those former soldiers all have very different levels of ability, it's dangerous for the guild to send them on missions…"

"Yes, and that's why they want us to expand our weapon testing facilities into a proper academy…but even so!" Rys said, heaving another heavy sigh. "Isn't this exactly why they have their system of assigning ranks to adventurers based on their individual skills?"

"From what they said, their rank system gives a favorable assessment to people with experience in the Klyrode Army, but these people were common mercenaries… In some cases, the Adventurers' Guild has been raising people through the ranks even though the only experience they have is as guards for supply caravans. It sounds like there have been a number of incidents where adventurers were sent out into the field only for the Guild to learn that there was a considerable gap between their rank and their actual abilities."

"Hah…" Rys shook her head. "Well, I suppose I understand the problem for the Guild…but what do these people hope to gain by claiming a rank above their abilities?"

"The higher your rank, the more you get paid," Flio answered. "A higher-ranking adventurer gets more money for their work than a lower-ranking one, even if they're assigned to the same guard duty."

"I see…" said Rys, not bothering to hide her exasperation. "That's the human world for you, I suppose. Everything is some sort of complicated system. Although…" she added, taking the adventurer identification plate she wore around her neck in her hand to look at it more closely. "I can't say I mind having these matching necklaces with you, my lord husband…"

When Flio first arrived in this world, his plan had been to make his living as an adventurer. And so, he and Rys, who had only just begun to follow him as his companion, both registered with the Adventurers' Guild and received a pair of identification plates. Since then the two of them had continued to rise through the ranks, and now they were both gold rank adventurers, the

highest level recognized within the Kingdom of Klyrode.

"That's right!" said Flio, grabbing his own identification plate, which was the exact same color as Rys's. "I'm always happy to match you, Rys!" The couple gave each other a happy smile as they each held up their plates for the other.

"Well, I understand the Adventurers' Guild's request well enough, anyway..." said Rys. "But what about the one from city hall?"

"Oh..." Flio began. "They want us involved because it has to do with the Fli-o'-Rys General Store—or rather, the land surrounding it, and the area around our house too."

"They want to build new homes and businesses in the area between our house and the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, yes?" Rys asked. "But why do they have to do it near our house? There's empty space in the opposite direction too, isn't there?"

"Oh, well, that's because the Enchanted Frigate boarding tower is on our side of the city. A lot of people come to Houghtow City that way. And aside from our house and the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, it's mostly nothing but undeveloped land there outside of the city proper. There's a number of reasons why it's easier for them to expand the city that way."

"That very well may be..." said Rys. "But they want us to move and extend the city walls from where they are between our house and the store! And why should *we* take on the entire cost of the project ourselves?! I simply refuse to accept it!"

"I definitely understand what you're saying, Rys," Flio replied. "But in exchange, they're giving us the legal right to the land being used for development. The Fli-o'-Rys General Store will be able to set rents for all the new shops and residences. And besides, city hall has always given us priority when it comes to the land around the store itself. That's why the construction for all the facilities for the Enchanted Frigates and the Magic Beast Racing Hall went so smoothly."

Rys reluctantly nodded her head as Flio finished his explanation. "Well... If you're happy with the arrangement, my lord husband, I can hardly object..." she said, although her expression still seemed distinctly dissatisfied.

"In any event, we just have one more of these talks left to go," Flio said, giving Rys one of his usual easygoing smiles. "Once we're done with that, how about the two of us get something nice to eat?"

“Yes! I’d be delighted!” said Rys, her expression brightening like the sun coming out from behind the clouds as she gleefully took her husband by the arm.

“In that case, let’s hurry to our next meeting spot, shall we?” said Flio.

“Right away, my lord husband!” said Rys.

The adoring couple picked up their pace as they walked down the road, on to the west of town.

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

The Fli-o’-Rys General Store was once an abandoned shop to the west of Houghtow City that Flio purchased to run as his own establishment. At the time it had been a desolate and disused patch of land where hardly anyone ever came.

That, however, was now long ago. Now the shop was buzzing with employees in the early morning before opening time, all hard at work to prepare for the day’s business. Among them was Balirossa, wearing the same apron over her clothes as all the rest of the staff.

“Oh, Snow Little!” Balirossa said, calling out to a girl as she passed nearby and looking down at the stack of documents in her hands. “Would you bring that merchandise this way, please? Those are for today’s special sale.”

Balirossa—a former knight who once led a company in service to Castle Klyrode. She had since left the knighthood and now resided at Flio’s house, where she spent her days working for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. She was one of Ghozal’s two wives, and the mother of Ghoro.

Snow Little—one of Garyl’s old classmates from the Houghtow College of Magic. As a member of the rare fable folk species, she excelled at summoning magic. She still harbored faint romantic aspirations for Garyl, which was why she found work with the Fli-o’-Rys General Store after her graduation.

“Yes! Right away!” Snow Little replied as she hurried to follow Balirossa’s instructions. The dwarves behind her followed suit, all of them doing a smart about-face as a single unit.

Snow Little’s dwarves were familiars she had summoned using her powers as a fable folk. They followed their summoner as one, marching behind her in rank and file.

“Hey, Snow Little!” another employee called out with a smile

as they stocked a shelf nearby. “I see you and your dwarves are making quick work of things as always!”

“O-Oh, yes! Thank you!” said Snow Little, smiling back. Beneath her smile, however, her heart was a mess of anxiety.

*What am I to do…* Snow Little thought. *I started working here at my lord Garyl’s parents’ store hoping I could ingratiate myself to his mother and father and slowly, slowly work my way in from the outside. They’d think, “What a hard working and lovely little lady! She would make the perfect bride for our son Garyl!” But now…*

At this point, Balirossa noticed that a frown seemed to have darkened Snow Little’s face. “Snow Little?” she asked, stepping up to talk to her. “Is something the matter?”

“On, no, not at all!” Snow Little replied. “It’s just…well… I don’t see Lord Garyl’s father today…”

“Mister Flio?” said Balirossa. “I believe he and Madame Rys have both been out of the shop since the early morning attending to a number of pressing matters.”

“Oh! I-I see…”

“And? Is that a problem?” Balirossa asked.

“N-No, no, not at all!” Snow Little said, putting a very fake smile on her face as hurried to the back of the store. “I should get back to stocking these shelves, shouldn’t I!”

“No?” Balirossa asked, tilting her head in confusion as she watched Snow Little go. “Well, all right, then…”

“Ah ha ha!” Uliminas laughed as she stepped up beside Balirossa. “Meow’re as dense as ever, I see!”

Uliminas—a hellcat once known as Ghozal’s confederate back when he was the Dark One. After Ghozal stepped down from the throne, she quit the Dark Army alongside him. Now she worked at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store under an assumed identity as a demihuman. She was the other of Ghozal’s two wives, and the mother of Folmina.

“Madame Uliminas? What do you mean, I’m dense?” Balirossa asked, narrowing her eyes as she looked over at Uliminas.

“Isn’t it meowbvious?” the hellcat said, a smirk on her face as she leaned to whisper in Balirossa’s ear.

Balirossa nodded seriously as Uliminas spoke, and continued nodding even for a while after she had finished, as if she were trying to wrap her head around what she had just been told. Then, finally, she smacked her fist against her open palm in dawning comprehension. “I see!” she said. “So Snow Little is in

love with Sir Garyl, and she wants to appeal to his parents by showing off her strengths at work?"

"That's the long and short of it!" Uliminas chuckled in amusement. "Furtunately she still does her job even when Mewster Flio and Rys are away, so I wouldn't say it's anything worth worrying about."

"But why would she use such a roundabout approach?" Balirossa wondered, folding her arms and frowning seriously. "If she likes the boy, she should go tell him herself, shouldn't she?"

For a moment, Uliminas's eyes went wide at Balirossa's words. Then, seeming to understand something, she nodded slightly to herself. *Aha...* she thought. *Of course...* "Well then!" she said. "I guess it'd be no purroblem for you to tell Ghozal you love him right here and now, would it!" She turned towards the back of the store where Ghozal was working and called out to him. "Hey, Ghozal! Come here a meowment, will mew?"

"Hrm?" said Ghozal, stepping out into view. "You need something, Uliminas?"

Ghozal—once the Dark One Gholl, Ghozal abdicated his throne in favor of his younger brother Yuigarde in order to live as a human. Over the course of his time freeloading at Flio's house, the two of them became something along the lines of best friends. He had two wives: Uliminas, his former confederate from his time as Dark One, and the human swordfighter Balirossa. Folmina and Ghoro were his children.

Ghozal walked up to Uliminas and Balirossa, balancing a large wooden crate on his shoulder all the while. At first Balirossa simply stood there, staring blankly, as if she hadn't quite understood what Uliminas had said. As she watched Ghozal draw nearer, however, she belatedly seemed to realize what was happening.

"H-Hwaah?!" Balirossa exclaimed, hiding her reddening face behind her sheaf of documents. "M-Madame Uliminas! Y-Y-Y-You know perfectly well I could never say something so embarrassing right to Lord Ghozal's face!"

From her time in the knighthood and onward, Balirossa had always said what she meant clearly and without equivocation. She hadn't hesitated even to express her discomfort with the man the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode had decreed to be the Hero. When it came to matters of romance, however, her overwhelming lack of experience left her completely at a loss for

words.

Ghozal stared blankly after Balirossa as the former knight ran off in the opposite direction. “Uliminas…” he asked. “Didn’t Balirossa have something she needed to tell me?”

“Who knows!” said Uliminas. “Meowbe you should try asking her meowrself!”

“Hrm…” Ghozal nodded. “Good point.”

“Meowre importantly, the shop’s about to open!” Uliminas said. “Let’s hurry up and get ready!”

“Oh, right!” said Ghozal. “I guess we’d better take care of that first.”

The two of them nodded and headed together for the back of the store.

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

The sun was well above the horizon now, the various shops throughout Houghtow City opening their doors for the day as Flio and Rys made their way down the streets and to the headmaster’s office at the Houghtow College of Magic. Soon the husband and wife were sitting across from Nyt and Taclyde on a sofa in the reception area.

Nyt—the Serpent Princess Yorminyt, one of Dark One Gholl’s Infernal Four, disguised in her human form. After deserting from the Dark Army, a series of misadventures led her to end up appointed headmaster of the Houghtow College of Magic.

Taclyde—an unremarkable human working as administrator for the Houghtow College of Magic. In addition to his administrative duties, he also handled cleaning, repairs, communication with parents and guardians, and negotiation with other institutions—in fact, nearly all of the work that went into keeping the college running rested squarely on his shoulders.

“Well?” Rys began, crossing her arms as she looked over at the two of them across the table. “For what reason would you have my lord husband take time out of his busy schedule to come all the way to visit you today?” On her face, however, was a friendly smile, making it clear that her words were meant lightly. As the parent of two of the college’s graduates and one of its current students, Rys had met with Headmaster Nyt on many previous occasions.

Nyt, for her part, had a faintly amused expression on her face as she spoke. “Ah, my apologiesss,” she hissed. “I’m afraid we have a number of circumstancesss to deal with ourselvesss…”

As a former Infernal of the Dark Army, Nyt was well acquainted with Rys’s older brother the lupine demon Fengaryl, also of the Infernal Four. Rys herself was considered to be no less capable than the Infernal Four members themselves in her time. The two of them developed a mutual respect while in the Dark Army as powerful fighters belonging to the same organization, and took care to maintain friendly relations. Even now, they seemed at ease in each other’s presence.

“Um, well, you see!” said Taclyde, raising his hand and leaning forwards as he took over from Nyt. “We really are very sorry to bother you with this while you’re already so busy, but since it has to do with the students’ lessons, I thought it might be a good idea to seek Mister Flio’s help as soon as possible. Or rather…something’s come up, and I was hoping I might borrow your wisdom…”

“It has to do with the students’ lessons?” Flio asked, also leaning forwards on the sofa. “Has something gone wrong with the class materials provided by the Fli-o’-Rys General Store?”

“No, not at all!” said Taclyde. “You’ve helped us with everything from textbooks and classroom materials to operating the cafeteria and managing the student dormitories, giving us top-quality goods for low prices and excellent service in every possible way! It’s just… Well… I’m not really sure how to say this. It isn’t exactly an emergency, but we’ve had a bit of an…*unforeseen problem*.”

“An…unforeseen problem?” Flio asked, his eyes blinking open. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“Every product sold by the Fli-o’-Rys General Store is personally inspected for quality by either Elinàsze or my lord husband, aren’t they?” said Rys, surprise evident on her face as well. “I can’t imagine an inferior item could have made it past the two of them…”

“It’sss not a problem with your productsss,” said Nyt, holding up her right hand to quiet Rys’s speculation. “Perhapsss it might be bessst for you to sssee it for yourselvesss…” Nyt frowned, letting out a sigh as Flio and Rys exchanged a glance.

Soon, Taclyde was leading Nyt, Flio, and Rys down to the

Houghtow College of Magic arena. “You see, our arena is where we hold practical exercises with the aim of improving our students’ abilities…”

“Yes, I’m well aware,” Flio said, nodding along to Taclyde’s explanation as he followed him through the hallways. “Our children Garyl and Elinàsze got plenty of hands-on experience here when they were in school.”

“Ah yes, those two were by far the most outstanding students our college has ever seen!” Taclyde remarked as the party reached the doors to the arena. “And there are some incredible talents among our new batch of students as well…” He showed them through the door to the arena’s spectator stands, from which they could see students taking part in a mock battle below.

“Is that…a military camp?” Rys asked.

“That’s right!” said Taclyde. “It’s a long-running tradition at our school to build these camps inside the arena for our students to simulate a heated battle with a game of capture the flag. We divide them into teams of six, and whichever team succeeds in bringing the flag at the center back to their camp three times is the winner of the match! It’s a simple game, but it’s a great way for students to understand one another’s abilities and to get some valuable experience they could apply to a real battle, where cooperation is key. But look there…” Taclyde said, grimacing as he saw who was participating in the day’s mock battle.

“Is there something wrong?” Rys asked, a look of innocent bafflement crossing her face.

Just then, Flio heard a girl’s voice calling happily from the battlefield as the signal was given to start. “Let’s goooo!!!” It was Folmina, who charged down the middle of the field straight towards the flag the very instant the match began.

Folmina—the daughter of Ghozal and Uliminas, making her part hellcat and part royal demon, although she was equally attached to Ghozal’s other wife Balirossa as she was to her own biological mother. Currently she and her brother Ghoro were attending the Houghtow College of Magic along with Flio and Rys’s daughter Rylnàsze.

Folmina ran like the wind, her feet barely touching the ground as Ghoro hurried along behind her at an uneven pace, crying, “W-Wait for me, big sis!”

Ghoro—the son of Ghozal and Balirossa, making him part human and part royal demon. Like his half sister, he was just as close to Ghozal's other wife as he was to his own mother. He was a boy of few words who loved his big sister Folmina a tremendous amount.

Lagging far behind the siblings came the rest of their team, struggling desperately to keep up.

"W-Wait, you two!"

"I'm telling you, that's too fast!!!"

It was easy to tell at a glance just how fast Folmina was, but even with Ghoro's awkward running gait he had remarkable speed. The two of them raced across the battlefield, closing in on the flag in the middle in the blink of an eye.

However...

"Yay! I got there first!"

Moments before Folmina and Ghoro could grab hold, Rylnàsze from the opposing team reached the target and grabbed hold of the flag ahead of the siblings.

Rylnàsze—the youngest daughter of Flio and Rys. Thanks to her phenomenal talent as a tamer, she excelled at making friends with magic beasts of all sorts. Even before she enrolled in the Houghtow College of Magic, she was using her abilities to help out with the magic beasts kept at the school's on-site ranch.

Every day, Rylnàsze would take her menagerie of magic beasts on a breakneck run through the forest. She often chose to ride atop Sybe's back in his psychobear form, but there were also times when Sybe took his other form as a unicorn rabbit, leaving Rylnàsze to run along on foot. Her physical abilities were not to be underestimated.

Rylnàsze focused her magic power into her hands and yanked the flag out of the ground with a single powerful pull. "Got it!" she cheered.

"Oh no you don't!" Folmina leaped into the air, clasping her hands together above her head and bringing them down in a powerful blow.

"Hyahh?!" Rylnàsze cried, twisting her body to avoid Folmina's attack and managing to dodge her by a hair.

*KABOOM!!!*

A thunderous sound shook the arena as Folmina impacted the ground behind her with enough force to leave a crater in the arena floor.

Up in the spectator stands, Belano looked down on the mock battle taking place below.

Belano—a small and skittish witch only capable of casting defensive magic, originally from Balirossa's knightly company in service to Klyrode Castle. After leaving the knighthood, she ended up lodging at Flio's house and working as a teacher at the Houghtow College of Magic. She and Minilio were married, and had a child together named Belalio.

Belano was holding up a staff set with magic gems, pointing it towards the arena, to cast a defensive spell. The staff—and even Belano's body—glimmered with a green light, making it clear to all observers that she was fighting with her full power to maintain the magic. Belano's spell enveloped the entire arena, preventing the students from harming one another or damaging the arena itself...or, so it should have.

Beads of sweat ran down Belano's brow as she clutched the staff with trembling hands. "B-But...I'm using my full power..." she said, straining herself to increase the strength of her spell even further.

Down in the arena, Ghoro brought his right arm down in time with Folmina's attack. "You won't get away..." he said. He focused his magic power into his arm until it began to shoot off crackling embers like a sparkler.

*POW!!!*

Another deafening bang filled the arena as Ghoro's attack left a second crater in the floor below. And then, with a loud *crash* like the sound of glass breaking, the green barrier surrounding the arena smashed into pieces. The damage had simply been too much for Belano's magic.

"A-Ah!" A jolt of worry crossed Belano's face as she focused once again on charging the gems on her staff with magic. Minilio and Belalio ran up from behind to support her, Minilio grabbing the staff with his right hand while Belalio took it with their left.

Minilio—a magic doll Flio created as a test. Physically Minilio resembled a child-sized version of Flio himself, hence the name. Minilio spent his days assisting Belano with her work at the Houghtow College of Magic. The two had become close over the course of working together, and Minilio went from being Belano's assistant, to her husband, to the father of her child.

Belalio—the child of Minilio and Belano. As the offspring of a magic doll and a human, Belalio was a rare sort of being indeed.

Like their father Minilio, Belalio resembled a younger version of Flio and assisted Belano with her work at the Houghtow College of Magic, but Belalio preferred to dress with an eye to androgyny, leaving their gender a mystery for the ages.

"Th-Thank you, you two…" said Belano, managing a smile for Minilio and Belalio even as she pushed herself to reapply her spell.

Meanwhile, down in the arena, Rylnàsze was dodging Folmina's and Ghoro's attacks in a panicked fluster, holding the flag tight in her hands. "I-I-I'd better hurry up and get back to base!" she said, running for her own team's camp with Ghoro and Folmina pursuing from the left and right.

The siblings carried on the attack in perfect sync, their coordinated attacks driving Rylnàsze all the way to the edge of the arena.

*THWACK!!!*

Ghoro's powerful fist slammed into the arena walls, busting a large hole in the structure with a tremendous boom, and once again the defensive spell set up by Belano and her family shattered apart with an audible *crash*.

Rylnàsze's teammates looked on from just out of reach as she barely avoided yet another powerful blow.

"W-We need to do something to help Rylnàsze!" said one.

"B-But that's Folmina and Ghoro she's fighting!" another protested.

"What could we possibly do?!" wailed a third.

They exchanged furtive glances, none of them willing to run to Rylnàsze's aid until one particularly small girl darted forwards, spinning her right arm in wide circles as she ran. "I'll help…!" As the girl focused her magic power into her arm, it grew in size until it was nearly as large as the rest of her body.

Rylnàsze's face lit up and she cried, "Kora! There you are!"

Kora—the only daughter of Ura, chief of the oni village. Kora was a hybrid born to a fairy folk mother and inheriting her father's oni blood. She was a painfully shy and remarkably self-conscious girl, but she had made excellent progress in opening up to the other members of Flio's household. With Folmina and Ghoro now going to school she found herself wanting to go as well, and had begun attending the occasional class in advance of her upcoming enrollment.

Kora ran right past Rylnàsze, aiming a punch for Folmina, who

was swinging for Rylnàsze with another of her two-handed attacks.

“Wha?!” Folmina gawked in helpless amazement as Kora’s fist came her way. “That’s way too big!”

Moments before Kora’s fist struck its target, however, Ghoro came in from the side, striking her fist downwards hard enough to leave it planted in the ground below. Once again the arena was shaken by the powerful impact as the barrier Belano and her family had put up splintered apart.

“I’ll protect you, big sis Folmina…” said Ghoro, glaring daggers at Kora for having dared to aim a punch at her. Ghoro loved his older sister perhaps to an excessive degree, and always took things a bit too far when Folmina was involved. He had, one might say, an overwhelming sister complex.

Rylnàsze’s teammates timidly watched the exchange from behind their fortifications. Among them was a girl holding a staff in her hands—Levana, the leviathan dragonewt.

Levana—a leviathan girl recently adopted into Flio’s family. At first glance she came across as a frail and intellectual sort, but in fact she had been raised since her infancy to believe there was no problem that couldn’t be overcome by pure physical might. Even now, she had all the makings of a consummate musclehead. She was currently enrolled in the Houghtow College of Magic, in hopes that it might both nurture her rather remarkable magical talent and help her overcome her difficulties in communication.

Levana muttered to herself under her breath as she watched her teammates exchange blows with Folmina and Ghoro. “In order for our team to win, we need to bring the flag Rylnàsze’s carrying over here…but Folmina and Ghoro aren’t about to let that happen. I wouldn’t last a second against their physical attacks…and this arena is too small for me to turn into a dragon. In that case, what would be the most effective method…”

Levana followed the action with her eyes as she tried desperately to think of a solution to the predicament. For all that she looked cool and composed from the outside, her thoughts were growing increasingly frantic as she continued to find herself at her wits’ end.

“I could focus on stopping Folmina first…” she mused. “But if I did that, I’d need to rely on Kora to stop Ghoro… But would it be any better the other way around…?” She thought and thought

until finally, fed up with thinking, she snapped. “Oh, who cares, anyway?!” she said, her apparent composure suddenly vanishing. “I’ll just blow them all away!” She swung her staff forwards, the embedded blue magic gem glowing with light as an enormous quantity of water began to issue forth from the tip.

“Akbth?!”

“Gblub?!”

“Awawa!”

“Kyaaa!!!”

A cacophony of voices cried out as Levana’s attack blasted not only Folmina and Ghoro, who had been trying to take the flag, but her own teammates who had been watching.

“I-I’m done for...” Up in the stands, Belano collapsed in a heap, her magic completely spent. Minilio and Belalio hurried to tend to her on the floor, worried looks on their mute faces.

The other teachers, who had been standing by to the side of the arena, came rushing onto the grounds to stop the match. “O-Once again, that was certainly a rather spectacular bout!”

Flio, who had been watching the whole fiasco from the spectator stands himself, folded his arms and furrowed his brow. “Well, Headmaster Nyt... Mister Taclyde... I think I understand why you wanted my help with the situation as soon as possible...”

“Yes...well...” said Taclyde, smiling disarmingly and choosing his words with care. “I’m afraid this new set of children from your household might be just a little bit too...energetic...or nonstandard, perhaps...”

“They are the children of the honorable Retired Dark One Gholl, after all,” Nyt smiled, nodding with evident pride. “It isss no surprissse that they excel above the other children of their year.”

Nyt’s time on the Infernal Four had left her with a lasting admiration for Folmina and Ghoro’s father Ghozal. Perhaps it was no surprise that this was her attitude towards his children.

Next to her, Rys crossed her arms, looking clearly perplexed. “It’s strange though, isn’t it...” she said. “In terms of magic power, Elinàsze and Garyl are both leagues ahead of Folmina and Ghoro. How is it that you never had troubles of this sort back when they were in school?”

“That’s a good point...” Flio nodded in agreement.

“Well, you see,” said Taclyde, “Garyl and Elinàsze both had excellent control over their own magic power, and they always took care to hold back to an appropriate degree…”

“I see… That explains it…” said Rys, nodding in understanding.

“It isn’t that Folmina or Ghoro or Levana are doing anything wrong per se…” Taclyde added, awkwardly scratching the back of his head. “It’s just…well…the building won’t hold up if they keep going at it like this every time, to say nothing of our faculty…”

“Yes, I see what you mean…” said Flio, nodding and folding his arms in thought. He looked down into the arena, full of students still sopping wet from having been just submerged in the water current. Rylnàsze, noticing her parents in the stands, looked up from drying out her clothes to give them a cheerful wave—a little more restrained than usual, given that class was still in session, but a very Rylnàsze-like gesture nonetheless.

Flio lifted his hand, discreetly waving back.

◇Houghtow City—Entertainment District◇

In one corner of Houghtow City, right between the Enchanted Frigate staging ground and city hall, was a part of town where the streets were packed with quality restaurants, one after another. In one such establishment, Flio and Rys were being shown to their table.

“This shop just opened the other day, you know, but Byleri and the others say the food here is excellent,” said Rys, her spirits high as she took her seat. “I’ve wanted to come here with you, my lord husband, ever since!”

It was just about the start of lunchtime, but the shop around them was already jam-packed with customers as a delightfully appetizing smell wafted into the dining hall from the kitchen.

“It certainly seems like a quality establishment,” said Flio, nodding in approval at the sights and smells. “It’s been a busy morning, hasn’t it. Let me see… The Calgosi Coast’s defenders want special training to handle terrestrial magic beasts… The Adventurers’ Guild wants a venue to train new adventurers… City hall wants us to build new shops and houses for immigrants moving to Houghtow City… And the Houghtow College of Magic needs us to do something about their arena. Is that right?” he said, counting items off on his fingers as he reviewed the events of the morning.

“Oh, but we can handle training for the Calgosi Coast defenders and the adventurers with the same training academy, can we not?” Rys asked.

“That’s true,” Flio said. “After all, the Adventurers’ Guild said they especially need training for hunting magic beasts in the forests. Lumping those together might be the best way to handle it. But even so, there’s a lot we have to consider…” he sighed, frowning in thought.

“Sorry about the wait!” Just then, a waitress arrived with plates of food, setting them out on the table in front of Flio and Rys.

Rys smiled as she eyed the table full of food. Without exception, every single dish was giving off a delectable, mouthwatering aroma. “My lord husband,” she said, “perhaps we should forget about work for the time being. After all, we have this delicious lunch to enjoy, don’t we!”

“That’s right!” Flio agreed as he took his fork and knife in hand. “It would be a waste not to enjoy such good food—not to mention the wonderful company!”

Rys, however, was already wolfing down the stir-fried seafood, a blissful smile on her face as she noisily scarfed bite after bite. Watching his wife so cheerfully eat her food, Flio found himself smiling happily as well.

◇Klyrode Castle—Maiden Queen’s Office◇

Down the hallway of the second floor of Klyrode Castle was an area of the inner palace set aside as living quarters for the royal family. There, tucked away in a corner, was the office of the Maiden Queen. It was a large room, big enough not only for the Maiden Queen herself, but her two younger sisters to share as well: the Second Princess, who handled the majority of the kingdom’s diplomacy with its neighbors, and the Third Princess, who was responsible for domestic affairs.

The Maiden Queen was in her office that day, along with the Second Princess. Her Majesty sat at a large table in the middle of the room, looking over a letter she had received.

The Maiden Queen—reigning monarch of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Her full name was Elizabeth Klyrode, but the people closest to her called her Ellie. She took the reins of the kingdom after her father the king was driven from the throne and exiled for his many evil deeds. She had been devoted

to a life of politics since a very young age, so much so that even now, well into her thirties, she had never taken a lover.

"Tell me, Second Princess..." the Maiden Queen said, handing the letter over to her sister. "What do you think of this?"

The Second Princess—the second daughter of the royal family. Her full name was Leusoc Klyrode. She was the Maiden Queen's right hand, and had been handling diplomatic relations with the other human kingdoms since the days when their father was king and the kingdom was still at war with the Dark Army. She was a candid girl with a habit of speaking frankly about whatever was on her mind, even to the Maiden Queen.

The Second Princess scratched the back of her head as she read through the letter. "I've been getting reports of him making moves behind the scenes lately, but this is something else..." she said. "If this is true, then we have a major problem on our hands. But if we play our cards right, maybe this is our chance to be rid of him once and for all..." The Second Princess let out a deep breath and stood up. "So with that in mind, I'd best get ready to leave as soon as I can," she said, heading for the door.

"A moment please, Second Princess!" the Maiden Queen called, stopping her. "May I possibly accompany you on this task?"

"You? The Queen herself?" the Second Princess asked.

The Maiden Queen nodded once. "Yes. If that report is correct and the Shadow Conglomerate is connected to this incident, I should go myself," she said, setting her jaw. "The reigning monarch of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode must be there to bring our father—no, *that man*—to justice." She looked over at the Second Princess, a deeply serious expression in her eyes.

The Second Princess paused for a moment as the look on her older sister's face stopped her in her tracks. The two stared into each other's eyes in silence for a moment, until the Second Princess spoke.

"I understand how you feel, sister, believe me. If you hadn't let him get away when you first became Queen, he wouldn't be running around all about the continent getting up to all kinds of things. I am fully aware that you feel a sense of personal responsibility. However!" she said, grinning teasingly as she poked the Maiden Queen right on the tip of her nose. "Think about it! This isn't happening inside our borders! We're talking about Britland, one of our neighboring kingdoms! We wouldn't

want the Maiden Queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode personally leading soldiers into a foreign kingdom unless we were absolutely sure this information was correct, would we?"

"B-But..." protested the Maiden Queen.

"And *so,*" the Second Princess continued, sticking out her tongue and waving the letter in her sister's face, "you should leave the matter to your one and only head of foreign affairs! You know how good I am at fixing things between all of these other kingdoms."

The two exchanged another long silent look, the Maiden Queen's serious expression unwavering in the face of her sister's antics. Finally, she let out a sigh. "Very well," she said. "But please, let me know the moment you've confirmed that *that man* is involved. I'll send a letter to Britland asking for their cooperation in this matter, so that we may dispatch our armies as allies when the time comes."

"All right, understood," the Second Princess nodded. Then, after a moment or two, she tapped her finger to her own nose in thought. "Oh," she said. "I know it's my usual policy to handle things on my own, but if *he*'s involved, there's a high probability that those demon sisters from the west will be there as well. Just to be safe, could I borrow a certain someone from the Order of Klyrode?"

The queen pursed up her lips at the request, but very slightly nodded her head. "I understand," she said. "I will pass on your request to Captain MacTaulo."

"Great, thanks," said the Second Princess. "I guess I'd better get ready, then..." Instead, however, she stood there for another long moment, staring at her older sister.

"Um... Have I got something on my dress?" the Maiden Queen asked, uncomfortably conscious of the Second Princess's gaze. She brought her arms up to inspect her sleeves, examining her outfit for anything out of place.

"You know..." the Second Princess said, sighing softly at the way her sister was dressed. "I don't think it's a bad impulse of yours to try to limit the royal family's personal spending as much as possible after the way our father, the last king, appropriated funds from the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode for his own personal use. But that dress... You've been using it for nearly ten years at this point!"

"Say what? I-I mean, I suppose so..." the Maiden Queen

admitted.

"It's a good idea to keep the level of castle staff down to the absolute minimum," the Second Princess went on, "but would it kill you to pay a little more attention to your clothes, at the very least?"

"B-But it's still in wearable condition!" objected the Queen. "It was a high-quality dress and I've been very careful with it, after all! B-Besides, I do dress up a bit for meetings with the council and entertaining guests, don't I?"

"Don't you give me that!" the Princess shot back. "Or are you telling me you own a piece of formal wear that *isn't* one of mother's hand-me-downs?"

"W-Well, no..." the Queen admitted, anxiously flapping her hands as she tried to rebut her sister's point. By now the stiff-lipped expression on her face had thoroughly crumbled, leaving her looking rather flustered indeed. "But those dresses are all priceless treasures handed down from generation to generation within the royal family! And I make certain to have them repaired if they ever happen to suffer damage..."

"Hahh..." The Second Princess heaved a heavy sigh. "What about those clothes Garyl gave you? How come I never see you wearing any of them?"

"H-Hyeeeh!!!" The Maiden Queen's face went bright red as she froze stiff on the spot. "I-I wear those..." she said in a quiet voice, fidgeting as she answered. "I wear them when I visit Garyl's house for my cooking lessons..."

The Second Princess couldn't keep herself from sighing once again. *She's always thought of the kingdom first, ever since she was very young...* she thought. *Unfortunately, she has no experience with love whatsoever, even at her age. I guess I can't blame her for being completely useless when it comes to affairs of the heart. Besides...* she added wryly. *It's not like I'm especially versed in the ways of love myself...*

"All I'm saying," the Second Princess said as she left the room, "is maybe you should think a bit less about your duties as queen, and a bit more about your life as a woman, Elizabeth."

Now alone in the office, the Maiden Queen repeated her sister's parting remark to herself. "My life as a woman..." The words immediately called the image of Garyl's face to the forefront of her mind, once again making her blush bright red. She began to pace restlessly around the room. "B-B-B-B-But

aside from Garyl, I've never known anyone I could imagine being a woman *with!* I-I don't know the first thing about what I'm meant to do! Nobody ever taught me! B-But would it be better if I *had* done such things with a partner besides Garyl? Oh, what scandalous nonsense am I thinking?!"

Indeed, while the Maiden Queen governed the kingdom with shrewd acumen, when it came to matters of love, she was completely and utterly hopeless.

◇Later—Klyrode Castle◇

On the grounds of Klyrode Castle were barracks used by the knights of the Order of Klyrode. The order's original barracks had been located outside of the castle's walls and run as an active military garrison on guard against the Dark Army. Back then the knights had only the most basic lodgings—triple bunk beds packed tight along the walls. Since the Maiden Queen took the throne, however, the lifestyle of the kingdom's knights had improved at a rapid clip. Now each knight was granted a private room in a grand facility, complete with a training hall and spectator stands for staging mock battles.

The number of knights staying in the barracks had decreased, of course, but, reasoning that many of the knights had private residences in the castle town below, the Maiden Queen decreed that they be allowed to stay at their homes and report to the castle while they were on duty. Thanks to that system, the number of knights the castle could call on in times of emergency was hardly lower than before.

Those knights still dwelling in the barracks were a collection of the best and brightest tasked with security for the castle as well as protection for important guests and the royal family, including the Maiden Queen herself. As the barracks were located inside the grounds of the castle itself and connected to a number of secret passages for use in case of emergency, the knights were ready at any moment to rush into the castle should an incident occur.

Another feature of the barracks was the training hall in its basement, equipped with everything the knights might need to hone their skills. Today, like always, it was full of knights when Captain MacTaulo stepped inside.

MacTaulo—formerly the finest knight the Order of Klyrode

had to offer, a mighty champion of humanity always fighting on the front lines in the war against the Dark Army. After the peace treaty with the Dark Army brought an end to the war, he was made the first headmaster of the newly established Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education, devoting himself to raising up the next generation.

"Hoh!" MacTaulo remarked, looking up at the training hall's large projection crystal. Displayed inside the crystal was an image of the knights currently racing around the circular track, allowing the knights in the training hall to watch the race from the vantage of the spectator stands. "Looks like the Hero Race is on, then!"

One of the knights watching the show hastily turned around at the sound of MacTaulo's voice, giving the old captain a smart salute. "Ah! Captain MacTaulo, sir!"

"It's all right," MacTaulo said, smiling as he held up his hand. "No need for formalities." The knight dropped his salute, visibly relaxing at MacTaulo's words.

The knights watched keenly as one competitor ran like the wind at the head of the pack. Unlike the others, who were each riding atop a magic beast, the knight in first place was on foot. An ordinary human could never match a magic beast's running speed, but this knight was already well ahead of the nearest runner, the gap between them only growing as he sprinted down the course.

"Damn it..." one of the knights in the pack trailing behind cursed, holding up a red magic orb in his right hand. "One of these had better hit..."

A Hero Race was a training drill where knights engaged in a straightforward contest of speed. The use of magic was disallowed, aside from the spells contained within special magic orbs placed around the track. The orbs came in two types—red and blue, containing offensive and defensive spells respectively. The one and only exception to the ban on other magic was spells pertaining to speed, which could be used without restriction.

The red orb glowed with light as the knight began to cast his spell, summoning a black thundercloud that floated ominously above the head of Garyl—the knight in first place.

"Lightning, huh?" Garyl said, taking note of the impending attack and leaping high into the air with a single bound.

Garyl—the son of Flio and Rys, Elinàsze's younger twin and

the older brother of Rylnàsze. Garyl's ready smile and friendly good-natured personality had made him a celebrity at the Houghtow College of Magic. Suffice it to say, his physical abilities were off the charts.

The knight who had sent the lightning bolt watched with a furrowed brow as Garyl leaped up to the black cloud high in the air above him, striking it with a quick blow from his right hand. The cloud dissipated harmlessly into the air.

"I friggin' knew it..." the knight grumbled in frustration as Garyl landed in the aftermath of the spell's destruction and kept on running as if nothing had happened. "A spell like that's not even enough to slow Garyl down! Not that it'd be much different if I could use my own magic at full power..."

Suddenly, the knight heard a loud voice crying out behind him as another black cloud appeared in the air above his own head. "Aim a spell at my lord Garyl?! Not in a million years!"

"O-Oh no! Gwuahhh!!!" Caught off guard, the knight took the full brunt of his opponent's lightning spell.

The knight who had used a red orb against him shot him a glare as she rode on past. "What were you thinking, using your magic against Lord Garyl? Know your place!" she spat. But the deadly serious look dropped off her face as she faced forwards again, replaced by a sunny and upbeat grin as her eyes fixed on the sight of Garyl running ahead.

"Although..." the knight, Salina, said, her cheeks flushing pink as she stared after Garyl with a lovestruck expression on her face. "Lord Garyl truly is incredible, isn't he, wiping out that spell in a single blow! He's simply out of this world!"

Salina—Garyl's classmate from the Houghtow College of Magic. She was born to a wealthy family and had a very overbearing attitude when she first joined the class, but her long-standing crush on Garyl had softened her personality somewhat. Her infatuation was so great, in fact, that she had enrolled in the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education just to pursue him further.

Hearts were floating in Salina's eyes, her mouth slack as her gaze locked on to Garyl, far ahead of her. Even in that state, however, she kept a firm grip on the reins of her magic beast as she raced along at the head of the scramble for second place.

"You're still just a student!" said another knight, coming up from behind with a red orb in his hand and summoning a

thundercloud above Salina's head. "Don't get full of yourself!"

Salina, however, sensed the attack coming and quickly used the blue orb she had been keeping in reserve, encircling herself with a magic barrier. The lightning came down at Salina's head only to be thwarted by the barrier's defense. "Not a chance!" Salina said, riding on undamaged. "The closest view of Lord Garyl's heroic gallantry is mine!"

"Tch! You had a barrier?"

"But of course!" Salina said. "A proper knight must always have both a red and a blue orb on her person at all times! But that's not the point! I won't hand my front-row seat over to you or anyone else!" She grabbed the reins of her magic beast tightly and gave it a kick on the flank, signaling for her mount to speed up even more.

In the audience, MacTaulo watched Salina's exploits with approval. "Well, well..." he said. "That's one of those high-achieving students from the Klyrode Institute that we let join the knighthood on a trial basis, if I'm not mistaken..."

"That's right," said an instructor who had been watching the race beside him. "Her early education was at the Houghtow College of Magic. She didn't seem like anything particularly out of the ordinary when she first joined our school, but soon she worked her way to the top of the class. Her record has been exemplary, even among the other knighthood trial members."

MacTaulo nodded along with the instructor's explanation. "A student from the Houghtow College of Magic...making her a classmate of our Garyl's, I suppose. As if Garyl alone wouldn't have been more than enough! With all the outstanding talent they've been sending us lately, the Houghtow College of Magic must be a phenomenal school..."

At this point, the image in the crystal projector changed, showing Garyl as he made his way past the finish line to a very comfortable first place.

"Another good race!" Garyl said, stretching mightily and looking back at the racecourse behind him, where he could see Salina charging along at the head of the pack, still a long way from the finish. She continued, undeterred by the hostile spells firing off all around her...or rather, for every attack she took, again and again, she made herself get back up without hesitation, struggling desperately to hold on to her position in second place.

“Salina sure is giving it her all, isn’t she!” Garyl said, grinning at the sight before stepping aside to the designated resting area next to the finish line and letting out a quiet breath.

“Ho there, Garyl!” said MacTaulo, joining the younger knight in the rest area. “Good race as always today! Ah, excuse me. Now that you’re a member of the Order of Klyrode, I suppose I should be calling you *Sir* Garyl, shouldn’t I?”

“No, no!” Garyl demurred with a smile. “At practice like this, I’d rather you address me the way you used to.”

“Yes, I would much prefer it that way too. However…” MacTaulo produced a single envelope from his breast pocket and handed it over to Garyl, leaning in to speak quietly in his ear. “I’m afraid this time there’s a mission I’d like you to do…”

“A secret mission, you mean?” Garyl whispered back.

“That’s right,” said MacTaulo. “Glad to see you’re quick to understand.”

Garyl nodded. “All right. I guess I’d better hurry to my room and get ready, then!” he said, walking quickly as he left.

MacTaulo watched him go, grateful to have such a dependable knight.

Meanwhile…

“Yesss!!! I did it! Second place is mine!” Salina, who had managed to defend her position all the way to the end of the race, pumped her fists in triumph. “Lord Garyl, did you see me?” she said, lifting her head. “I made it into a splendid second place, all thanks to your support! W-Wait… Huh?” Salina looked around at the entire spectator stands, but alas…Garyl was already gone.

“Um…Lord Garyl?” Salina called out. “Where did you go?”

MacTaulo watched closely as Salina looked around every which way in clear distress, folding his arms in thought. There was clearly something specific on his mind. “That student…” he said. “She certainly shows promise, doesn’t she…”

◇Meanwhile—The Third Princess’s Office◇

While the Maiden Queen and Second Princess were having their discussion, the Third Princess was working away in her own private office.

The Third Princess—the younger of the Maiden Queen’s two sisters. Her full name was Swann Klyrode. She had been

assisting Her Majesty with all sorts of things, especially the kingdom's internal administration, since the moment she graduated from the noble academy. She was a devoted follower of the queen, motivated by a somewhat excessive degree of sisterly love.

"So much work, day after day..." the Third Princess cried, collapsing on top of her desk among the veritable mountain of paperwork. "I kept taking on more and more responsibilities, all so I could help lessen my sister's load, even if only a little...but before I knew it I ended up like this... Hwahh..."

Tears in her eyes, she lifted herself up off the desk and reached out to pull one of the documents from the pile. "All I ever wanted was for my efforts to relieve the burden on my sister, but...but I get so lonely when I can't see Rylnàsze..." Swann said, as images of the time she spent with Rylnàsze flashed through her mind.

Having spent her days and evenings studying inside the castle, the Third Princess found herself paralyzed with fear whenever she encountered a magic beast in real life. In an attempt to conquer her phobia she spent a period of time living at Flio's house where she met Rylnàsze, a girl of her same developmental age with an exceptional talent for taming magic beasts. The time they spent together had the desired effect and the princess completely overcame her aversion to magic beasts, but it seemed there had been an unexpected result as well...

"Hah..." the Third Princess sighed. "This simply won't do. I have to finish all my work so I can spend time with my dear friend Rylnàsze..." Tears still streaming down her cheeks, she picked up the next document on the stack. "Oh? This must be the one the clerk brought in just a moment earlier. Submitted by Headmaster MacTaulo, Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education..." She began to read without much interest, but as she got further into the document, the Third Princess's face began to light up.

*Outstanding achievements by knights of the Order of Klyrode trained by the Houghtow College of Magic highlight the necessity for inspection of the school facility, including the content of their lessons as well as their current students...*

A chain of logic began to form in the Third Princess's mind.

*A. Someone is needed to inspect the Houghtow College of Magic.*

*B. I could use these inspections to visit the Houghtow College of*

*Magic under the pretext of business.*

*C. Rylnàsze is currently studying at the Houghtow College of Magic.*

"Would you please call for Headmaster MacTaulo of the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education!" she called out to her staff. "And right away, please! I, Swann, will handle this inspection myself!"

*It's fate—it must be!* the Third Princess thought. *I'll be able to visit Rylnàsze as part of my official duties! V-Visiting the Houghtow College of Magic, I mean! I won't let this chance slip through my fingers!*

"And in that case…" she said, "I can't allow myself to be stopped here!" Gone was the air of grim tragedy that had fallen over the Third Princess, replaced by a spirit brimming over with determination. "Just you watch! I'll finish off this mountain of paperwork in no time flat!"

And so she began tackling the mountain, finishing document after document with furious speed.

◇Houghtow City—Nearby Flio's House◇

Evening had come to the road leading west from Houghtow City, outside the stone walls surrounding the town. The city walls were built when the kingdom was still at war to defend against attacks by the Dark Army, as well as for preventing incursions from frenzied magic beasts and checking the comings and goings of ordinary criminals. Now that the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode were at peace, however, the wall was only needed for the latter two purposes.

A group of children passed through the city gate and headed east along the road as a family of unicorn rabbits came running up to meet them.

"*Snuffle snuffle!*" The lead unicorn rabbit snuffled happily and leaped into the arms of Rylnàsze—the girl walking at the head of the group.

"I'm home, Sybe!" Rylnàsze said. "Thank you for coming to meet me!"

Sybe—originally a wild psychobear Flio had met in a random encounter. Sensing he had no hope of victory against the likes of Flio and Rys, Sybe had surrendered on the spot. Since then, he had lived at Flio's house as a family pet. Sybe spent most of his

time in the unicorn rabbit form Flio had granted him with his magic.

Rylnàsze hugged Sybe tight, nuzzling her cheeks against his as the rest of Sybe's family hopped up all around them. "*Me too! Me too!*" they seemed to be saying.

"Yes, yes, you too, Shebe, and Sube, and Sebe, and Sobe!" Rylnàsze said, scooping the rest of them up in her arms. "Thank you all for the welcome!"

Shebe—a wild unicorn rabbit who grew close to Sybe, eventually joining him at Flio's house as his mate.

Sube, Sebe, and Sobe—Sybe and Shebe's three children. Sube and Sobe looked more like unicorn rabbits, while Sebe took after his psychobear father.

As Rylnàsze showered the family in affection, the sound of heavy footfalls came from behind as Tybe, a magic beast who looked very much like a psychobear, bounded up, a step behind Sybe and his family.

Tybe—the cub of a Bear of Misfortune, a Beast of Disaster that Flio's family fought in the world of Dogorogma. Tybe had grown attached to Rylnàsze and followed her all the way back to Klyrode, where he now served as one of her familiars.

"And you, Tybe! Thank you!" said Rylnàsze, beaming as she held the smaller beasts tightly.

Tybe came to a halt right in front of Rylnàsze and sat like a dog, happily wagging his tuft of a tail. Sybe, too, hopped down beside him and transformed back to his psychobear form, sitting down just like Tybe. Kora, who had been walking along behind Rylnàsze, trotted up and grabbed onto Tybe from behind, shimmying her way up the sitting creature's back. It was difficult going, but finally she succeeded in climbing all the way up Tybe's back to reach the top of his head. She clung on with both arms and both legs, grinning with triumph.

"Ah ha ha!" Rylnàsze laughed, smiling at the sight. "Having fun up there, Kora?"

"Yeah...!" Kora bobbed her head happily. "I like it here..."

"Magic beasts sure do like Rylnàsze, huh," Folmina remarked as she and Ghoro watched from behind.

"Yeah... I'd say so..." Ghoro agreed, nodding his head.

Further behind still came Levana, her arms folded as she walked. Unlike the two siblings she seemed preoccupied, muttering to herself. "Where did I go wrong in our mock battle

this morning…” she said, thinking back to the match earlier that day when she’d ended up flooding the arena and considering what she should have done differently. “Am I having trouble controlling the force of my magic? Or do I just need to observe the situation more carefully before I cast a spell…” It seemed like she would be at this for quite a while.

As the group of returning students and their magic beasts were stopped on the road, Byleri came from the direction of the city.

Byleri—once a knight specializing in archery and formerly in service to Klyrode Castle. After leaving the knighthood she ended up staying at Flio’s house, where she put her prodigious skill at caring for horses to work looking after a herd of equine magic beasts. Now she was living her best life every day along with her common-law husband Sleip and daughter Rislei.

“Oh, hi!” Byleri said, hopping down from her horse and greeting the children with a smile. “You’re, like, on your way home?” As she dismounted, the horse changed back to human form, revealing himself to be Byleri’s husband Sleip.

Sleip—a mighty lichsteed who was once a member of Ghozal’s Infernal Four. Currently he lived at Flio’s house with his wife Byleri, where he spent his days running the ranch and taking part in magic beast races in his demon horse form.

“Ha ha hah!” Sleip gave a hearty laugh. “Having fun together after school, I see! Splendid!”

“Oh! Miss Byleri! Mister Sleip!” said Rylnàsze, beaming as she noticed the pair. “Welcome back from work! We were all just headed home ourselves!”

“Uncle Sleip!” said Folmina, running up to hug the old lichsteed when she saw who it was, glomming onto him and grinning from ear to ear.

“Ha ha hah! You’re in good spirits today, little lady!” Sleip said, holding Folmina tightly. “Did you have fun at school?”

“I did!” Folmina replied, nodding her smiling head. “It was another fun day with everyone!” Ghoro came running up right behind her, silently nodding in agreement.

“Good, good!” Sleip said with a nod. “As long as you’re having fun, that’s what matters!” As a former member of the Infernal Four, Sleip still held Ghozal in the highest esteem, just as Nyt did. He naturally attached great importance to Ghozal’s children, Folmina and Ghoro. “Now head on home, or else Rys will be

cross with you for getting back late!”

“Okay!” the children all said in response, and they began walking in the direction of home, Rylnàsze at the head of the group riding on psychobear Sybe.

Byleri watched them go with a warm smile on her face. “Kids are, like, the best, huh,” she said, leaning against Sleip.

Sleip wrapped an arm around Byleri’s shoulders and pulled her in close. “Our Rislei’s grown up now too, and giving it her all at the race track... What do you say? One more kid wouldn’t be so bad, would it?” he said with another hearty laugh.

“L-Lord Sleip! J-Jeez!” Byleri exclaimed, blushing in surprise. She lowered her head, fidgeting nervously with her hands as she glanced up at her husband. “L-Like...I guess I’d like that...” she muttered quietly.

“Excellent! And now that that’s settled...” Sleip changed on the spot into his centaur form, scooping Byleri up into a princess carry as he galloped away. “It’s straight to our bedroom, eh, Byleri?”

“L-Lord Sleip, like, wait!” Byleri protested, red in the face. “There are children here! Please, like, you gotta keep your voice down about that kind of thing!”

Soon, Sleip had overtaken Sybe completely, running on ahead as Rylnàsze and the other children followed behind, everyone hurrying on towards home.

◇Flio’s House—Inside◇

Flio’s house was home not only to his own family, but Ghozal’s, Sleip’s, and Calsi’im’s as well, to name a few. Even so, the household maintained a custom of eating breakfasts and dinners together in the living room on the first floor.

This evening was no different, and the household had just finished its dinner. Now some of their number were enjoying an after-dinner bath.

The baths in Flio’s house were divided into a men’s and a women’s section, each of them featuring a large communal tub. Inside, Rislei had just finished rinsing the dirt off her body and settled in to soak.

Rislei—the daughter of Sleip and Byleri, half lichsteed and half human. She was a serious-minded girl, and something of a leader figure for the younger children at Flio’s house.

“Ow ow ow…” Rislei said, wincing as she lifted her right elbow. “It still hurts where I hit that magic beast in today’s race…” Indeed, there seemed to be a large bruise forming on her elbow.

Blossom, who was already in the bath, peered over at Rislei’s hurt arm.

Blossom—the heavy fighter from Balirossa’s old knightly company. As Balirossa’s close friend, she came along when Balirossa quit the knighthood and went to live at Flio’s house. Blossom hailed from a farming family and was an expert on all things agricultural, and in her time there she had transformed part of the land outside Flio’s house into a large working farm.

“That looks like it hurts all right!” said Blossom. “Have you gone to Stoleanna to have her look at it yet?”

“I didn’t think it was a big deal at the time…” Rislei said. “But if it keeps on hurting this bad, maybe I *should* take it to Stoleanna…”

Stoleanna—a magic beast racer who had been undefeatable at her old stomping grounds, the Naneewa Town Magic Beast Racing Hall, until the day she happened to encounter Sleip and found herself completely outclassed, spurring her to change venues to the Fli-o’-Rys Magic Beast Racing Hall in Houghtow City. She was an authority on magic beast veterinary science, to the extent that she had once been in charge of caring for the equine magic beasts used by the knights of Klyrode Castle. These days she ran a magic beast clinic that she worked at between races.

“Stoleanna’s a first-rate healer, no doubt about that, but why don’t you go ask Elinàsze for help?” Blossom suggested. “She could heal you up in no time with one of those spells of hers!”

“I mean, I guess…” Rislei winced. “But I feel kinda bad going to Elinàsze for each and every little thing, y’know? And knowing her, she wouldn’t even charge me for it…”

“Well you’re right about that, I reckon,” said Blossom, nodding in understanding. “But you know, Elinàsze’s potions are rated as top quality by the Magical Kingdom. They sell for a pretty penny over at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store!”

“I know…” said Rislei. “And that means a healing spell from Elinàsze *should* be just as expensive. She’s my childhood friend, and I don’t wanna take advantage of her generosity…”

“Again with that nonsense?” Elinàsze said, appearing without warning beside her. “Really, I keep telling you, any childhood

friend of mine is perfectly welcome to impose."

"E-Elinàsze?!" Rislei exclaimed, her eyes going wide.

Elinàsze used her magic to summon hot water, rinsing off her body and entering the bath next to Rislei. She touched Rislei's elbow with her right hand and cast a quick spell. A magic circle appeared around Rislei's arm, and within moments the bruise was completely healed.

"Th-Thank you..." said Rislei. "And holy heck, Elinàsze, your healing magic is something else! It doesn't hurt at all anymore!" she added, breaking out into a smile as she realized the pain was completely gone. "But it's like I was telling Blossom... I really should be paying you for treatment, especially since we're childhood friends and all..."

"One week should do it," said Elinàsze, bopping Rislei on the nose to stop her from sidling up too close.

"Huh?"

"Treat me to one week's worth of froppuccinos from Calsi'im's tea house and we'll call it even," Elinàsze declared, stretching her arms wide as she sank into the bath.

"S-Sure! No problem!" Rislei said with a smile and nod, hugging Elinàsze tight. "You're the best, Elinàsze! Ah ha ha!"

"H-Hey!" Elinàsze complained, pushing Rislei off her in alarm. "Don't hug me!"

"That's childhood friends for you," Blossom remarked, grinning as she ladled up some bath water to rinse herself off. "Those two sure are close."

*Seeing those two get along so well sorta makes me want a child of my own...* she thought to herself. *I bet Kora wouldn't mind a younger brother or sister either...*

◇Some Hours Later—Blossom Acres◇

In front of Flio's house was a large ranch managed by Sleip and Byleri, inhabited mainly by demon horses and equine magic beasts. Beyond that, and larger still, the fields of Blossom Acres stretched off into the distance.

Blossom had a hand in all of the work that went on in the farm, with help from the residents of the oni village located atop the nearby mountain and the goblins who had been working for her even longer.

The goblins made their lodgings in a stone cottage on a

corner of the farm, right beside the road leading to town. It was there, in one of the rooms, that the goblin Hokh'hokton sat with knitted brows.

Hokh'hokton—a goblin who had once been a low-ranking foot soldier in the Dark Army. Currently he spent his days working up a sweat as a farmhand on Blossom Acres. Unfortunately, the so-called no-gooddess Telbyress had moved into his house quite against his will after she was banished from the Celestial Plane.

Hokh'hokton watched with consternation as the two women in his house carried on their conversation.

"I'm telling you!" one of the women said. "If you're going to be staying here, the least you can do is pitch in with the work!" The words were hard to refute, but they lost any persuasive power since the woman speaking them clutched a bottle in her hand and drank from it whenever there was a lull in the conversation.

"Come on, Zofina, you don't gotta be mean about it!" protested Telbyress. "Beshides, you've jusht been freeloading here ever shince you quit your old job for the Celeshtial Plane, right?" she added, cackling as she smacked Zofina hard on the back.

Zofina—an angel and disciple of the Celestial Plane, who had been in service to the goddess responsible for overseeing the planetoid world Klyrode. She had another duty as well: serving as the Contract Executor, responsible for judging and enforcing Blood Oath Contracts. In that role, she took a form that was half skeleton and half young maiden. Her favorite food was the sweet red bean soup served in a restaurant on a planetoid world far from Klyrode.

Telbyress—a former goddess of the Celestial Plane, exiled for her habit of shirking her divine duties. Currently she resided in Hokh'hokton's house, against the wishes of Hokh'hokton himself. Nominally, she was helping out with the farmwork on Blossom Acres, but between her love of alcohol and inveterate laziness she found herself on the receiving end of Hokh'hokton's temper more often than not.

Zofina clammed up for just a moment at Telbyress's barb before giving a forceful retort. "Th-That's just because I'm still in the process of looking for work!" she insisted, taking another swig of her bottle. "I only just came to this planetoid world, you know! Unlike you, I have every intention of earning my keep!"

"Ah ha ha!" Telbyress laughed. "I had a period where I thought

like that too, you know! But in the end, I realized that mooching off Hokh'hokton wash the way to go."



Hokh’hokton watched icily as the two former Celestials carried on. “What a headache…” he muttered to Maunty, a fellow goblin standing beside him. “Those two are both drunk out of their minds! They just keep repeating the exact same conversation…” Clutching his head in his hands, Hokh’hokton let out a sigh.

Maunty—a goblin who had once been a low-ranking foot soldier in the Dark Army. Now he lived and worked on Blossom Acres along with Hokh’hokton and his wife and many children.

“Hey…Hokh’hokton…” Maunty ventured.

“Yes, Maunty?” Hokh’hokton replied.

“I heard from Madame Blossom, but…is it true those two are both Celestials?”

“They are,” said Hokh’hokton. “Or so I gather, anyway…”

“So what are the two of them doing getting drunk in your room?” asked Maunty.

“Believe me, I would *love* to know the answer to that…” Hokh’hokton said, clutching his head tighter still.

*Having to look after Telbyress alone was bad enough…* he thought. *Why in the blazes is there* another *one?!*

Alas, the erstwhile Celestials had no idea what Hokh’hokton was thinking.

“I’m telling you!” Zofina insisted. “You’ve gotta worrrk!”

“Ah ha ha!” Telbyress laughed. “You’re sho funny, Zofina!”

And so, the conversation looped around to repeat once again.

◇Flio’s House◇

Calsi’im’s family had their living quarters on the third floor of Flio’s house, sharing three rooms between them in addition to their bedchambers. In one of those rooms, Jajana sat in a chair, clacking the beads of her abacus back and forth.

Jajana—a demon woman who once worked for the Shadow King as an accountant for the Shadow Conglomerate under the name Janderena. Her fortunes changed, however, when she was sent to infiltrate the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, where she was won over by the company’s excellent working conditions. Thereafter, she permanently changed her name to Jajana and turned over a new leaf, working under the auspices of the Cal’Cha Teahouse. Jajana excelled at mathematics and carried her large abacus—which also served as a concealed weapon—in a Bottomless Bag that she kept on her person at all times.

“Good, good…” Jajana said, nodding in satisfaction as she finished calculating the sum. “Another day of favorable sales. With this, we’ll have more than enough to cover the cost of materials and depreciation.”

As Jajana worked, Charun set a cup of black tea down on her desk.

Charun—a magic doll created by a mage who served the Dark Army long ago, and the wife of Calsi’im. Calsi’im discovered her in a broken and abandoned state and had her restored. She had accompanied the skeleton ever since. Now the couple lived with the others in Flio’s house and spent their days running the Cal’Cha Teahouse.

“Still busy with the books even after we’ve gone home for the day, I see,” Charun observed. “Thank you, as always, for all of your hard work.”

“N-No need for thanks!” Jajana stammered in a startled panic. “Th-This is my job after all!” *My old boss at the Shadow Conglomerate never thanked me for anything, even once…* she thought as she lifted up the teacup with both hands. *No matter what I did, all I ever got from him was insults and abuse. He only ever took my work for granted…* “U-Um…” she ventured. “I suppose I should pay you for this…”

“Oh?” Charun asked. “Whatever do you mean?”

“It’s just… This tea is every bit as good as what we sell in the teahouse, isn’t it…?” Jajana said, nervously producing a note of paper money.

Charun, however, pushed Jajana’s hand back with a smile. “I’m giving you this cup as a reward for a job well done,” she said. “Please consider it a normal benefit of your job. It certainly doesn’t help me in any way for you to second-guess every bit of generosity.”

“B-But…” Jajana began.

“You had better drink it quickly, before it gets cold,” Charun said, cutting her off. “It’s best when it’s hot, you know.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am…” Jajana said, succumbing to Charun’s pressure and finally accepting the drink. She brought it to her lips and took a long sip. “It’s good…” she said, letting out a contented breath in spite of herself as the rich, mellow flavor of the tea filled her palate.

“I’m very glad that you like it!” Charun said with a smile as she watched Jajana enjoy her tea. “You’re welcome to have another

cup if you like!"

"U-Um... Thank you very much..." Jajana said. "And thank you for lending us a room to stay in too. I'll be looking for new lodgings as soon as I can..." She looked over to the simple bed beside her where Yayana was fast asleep and snoring, her arms and legs spread out wide.

Yayana—formerly known as Yanderena when she worked for the Shadow King, putting her deadly Assassin Dance to use as a guard for the Shadow Conglomerate. She was sent to infiltrate the Fli-o'-Rys General Store along with Jajana, where Calsi'im and Charun gave her the recognition she deserved for her agile dance steps. Since then, she'd been working hard as a staff member at the Cal'Cha Teahouse.

Since Jajana and Yayana were once employed by the Shadow Conglomerate, it was difficult for them to establish proof of their identity in order to rent lodgings. The two of them had been having trouble finding a place to live. When Calsi'im became aware of the issue, however, the old skeleton proposed a simple solution. "*Well, why don't the two of you come stay with us!*" he had said, his jawbone rattling with laughter. "*There's never a shortage of space with Mister Flio around!*"

Calsi'im—a humble skeleton who was once selected to serve as Dark Regent while the Dark One was missing, and doting husband to his wife Charun. He had in fact already perished once, only to be brought back by none other than Flio. Now he lived at Flio's house, where he ran the Cal'Cha Teahouse along with his wife.

"Really, there's no need to worry about that," Charun told Jajana. "But if you wish, I'm certain Mister Flio would be happy to provide the two of you with rooms of your own."

"Th-There's no need!" Jajana insisted. "If anything, I'm glad to have a space so close to do my work. That way, if I have any questions I can go straight to you..."

Charun only smiled warmly as Jajana rushed to explain herself. "I see," she said. "In that case, why not simply stay here indefinitely if you wish? As you say, it's to the teahouse's benefit as well. Although I must say, I wish you wouldn't work so late into the night. Please try to exercise moderation."

"Y-Yes, ma'am..." Jajana said, standing up from her chair to bow deeply.

Just then, one of the adjoining doors opened as Rabbitz

poked her head out to peer into the room.

Rabbitz—daughter of Calsi'im and Charun. As the child of a skeleton and a magic doll, she was a being of utmost rarity. Rabbitz had a bright smile that never left her face and a penchant for climbing on top of her father Calsi'im's bony head. She was not yet attending class at the Houghtow College of Magic, but the family had plans for her to start her education soon.

"Mama busy still?" Rabbitz asked, her long ears twitching as she looked across the room over at Charun.

"Just a bit longer! I'll be right there!" Charun said, her smile growing strained as she looked over at her daughter. "That child, I swear..." she added, turning back towards Jajana. "She would spend all day climbing on top of Calsi'im's head if you let her, but when it's time to sleep it's no good unless I'm in bed with her. We really are spoiling her, I'm afraid..." She shook her head. "And so, I suppose I should be getting to bed. You should get some rest as well, Jajana."

"Y-Yes, ma'am," Jajana said, bowing yet again as Charun took Rabbitz by the arm and led her out of sight. "And...good night."

◇A Street Corner, Somewhere...◇

Near the northern border of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, a great distance away from Klyrode Castle at the center of the realm, was a city. There, down the back alleys that led away from the main thoroughfare, stood a stonework building. In a room on the second floor of that building, a man sank back into his luxurious armchair, illuminated only by the moonlight streaming in through the window as he fumed and snapped his tongue.

"I don't believe it!" he spat, snapping his tongue once more for emphasis. "I send Yanderena and Janderena to infiltrate some company in Houghtow City, and next thing I know they've broken contact?!"

The Shadow King—the father of the Maiden Queen, and the former king of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. After being driven from the kingdom for his many evil deeds, he made the black market dealings he had always dabbled in behind the scenes his main line of work, calling himself the Shadow King.

As if on cue, the door to the room swung open and two women stepped inside. "Well, what did you expect?" asked

Kintsuno, heaving a heavy sigh. “It’s only natural with how hard you made them work for such little pay, isn’t it?”

Kintsuno the Golden—one of the two sisters who once ruled over the demon fox clan, a faction of significant power within the Dark Army, noted for her love of everything golden. The demon foxes, however, were brought to ruin, and since then the sisters had joined forces with the Shadow King and his Shadow Conglomerate.

“Say what you will, but those two were outstanding workers,” added Gintsuno.

Gintsuno the Silver—the second of the two sisters who once ruled over the demon fox clan, famed for her fondness of the color silver.

The Shadow King clicked his tongue with renewed intensity at the sisters’ words. “Shut it! I’ve had more than enough of your bellyaching over spilled milk!” he said. “I take it you still don’t know where they’ve run off to, then?”

“Well…” said Kintsuno. “Considering they lack proper identification, most likely you’ll find them living in some inn on the outskirts of town, or else renting a room from some shady types. We’ve been looking for them in places of that sort, but—”

“—we still haven’t found anything to indicate where they might be!” Gintsuno continued, finishing her sister’s sentence. “If the Shadow Conglomerate can’t find them in the area, I can’t imagine they’re still near the Fli-o’-Rys General Store…”

The sisters shared a look of distress as the Shadow King snapped and grumbled over their report.

“Well, if they’re not to be found, there’s no helping it…” the Shadow King said. “But never mind that! I have a new assignment for you!” He threw the documents he had in his hands on the floor at Kintsuno’s feet.

“What’s this?” Kintsuno asked.

“You see this kingdom?” the Shadow King spat. “It’s one of our neighbors. I sent some underlings there back in the day, when I was still the king of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, with a plan to take it over. All I need *you* to do is follow those instructions to the letter and help move the preparations along.”

“A neighboring kingdom?” Kintsuno said, her expression darkening as she read. *All that aside…* she thought. *Janderena was the only one of our employees we could count on to set up something like this without the information getting out somehow or*

*other...*

*And this plan...* Gintsuno thought, her own expression darkening as she read over her sister's shoulder. *It seems solid at first glance, but when you look closer, it's actually full of holes...*

The two shared a furtive glance and sighed in exasperation.

"What are you doing?!" the Shadow King bellowed, taking note of the sisters' negative attitude. "Go on! Get to it!"

"Yeah, yeah. I hear you..." grumbled Kintsuno.

"We'll head out at once!" yipped Gintsuno, and the two hurried on out of the room.

"Sister," Gintsuno said, as the two of them walked down the hallway out of the building. "Are we really going to try to follow this plan of his?"

"We can complain all we like, but with our stronghold destroyed we *need* the Shadow King's stockpile of capital..." Kintsuno said. "Let's play along for now—on the surface, anyway."

"On the surface?" Gintsuno asked.

"Yes, that's right, on the surface," said Kintsuno. "After all, the kingdom he's sending us to this time is in the west."

"The west..." Gintsuno repeated. "Our name might still command some respect in that part of the world..."

"That's right," said Kintsuno, lowering her voice to a whisper as a cunning grin crossed her face. "And think! There's someone else we might find in the west, isn't there..."

# Chapter 2: The Houghtow College of Magic, Renew

◇Houghtow City—Main Street◇

It was early in the morning, several days after that busy day when Flio was given a full itinerary of miscellaneous tasks. Most of the shops along Houghtow City's main road were not yet open for business as a fleet of wagons made its way across town to the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

"Come along!" said the heavyset man sitting on the drivers' platform of the wagon at the head of the fleet, stroking his mustache with his thumb and index finger. "We must make it there by the first Enchanted Frigate flight of the morning in order to peddle our wares!"

"That's right!" said the muscular man sitting beside him and holding the reins of the horses. "With the number of passengers they've had lately, we might not be able to board the flight unless we arrive well ahead of departure, after all!" He pulled on the reins, looking up at the road, and then tilted his head, blinking in confusion. "Hm?" he said.

"What is it, Heath?" the other man asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Well, no..." the muscular man said. "It's just... Was the road here always this long?" he asked, pointing at the road ahead.

The heavyset man looked where his colleague was pointing. There, in the distance, he could see the Enchanted Frigate staging ground ahead and to the right. But the wall, which should have come right after it, seemed to have moved.

"I don't think you're imagining it..." he said. "The city wall looks a lot farther away than it was yesterday..."

The two stared at the wall in the distance, utterly befuddled. And it didn't seem that they were the only ones who had noticed the change. The other wagons following behind them were abuzz with gossip.

"Wh-What's going on?"

"What's the wall doing all the way over there?!"

"And the whole area past the Enchanted Frigate staging

grounds is packed full of new buildings! Or have I gone mad?"

"No, you're right! It's true! There's way more buildings than there were just yesterday, and the wall's gotten way farther away!"

◇Houghtow City—The Night Before◇

It was shortly after midnight, the night before. The city, so busy during the day, had settled in for the night, its streets deserted without so much as a stray drunk in sight as Flio, Hiya, and Elinàsze stood in front of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, closing shop for the day.

"It's gotten late," Flio said, looking apologetically to the other two. "I can handle this on my own. You two should head home and get some rest…"

"Don't be silly, Papa," said Elinàsze, smiling warmly. "We'll get it done faster if we all work together, won't we?"

"Madame Elinàsze is correct," Hiya agreed, placing a hand over their heart and bowing deeply. "Indeed, I can think of no greater joy than to be of use to the Exalted One."

"All right," said Flio. "In that case, thank you for your help. Here's what I have in mind…" He held up his right hand, projecting a pair of blueprints against the backdrop of the night sky. "First up, we're going to move the city walls and expand the main road to match the blueprint to the right. After that we'll head to the Houghtow College of Magic to reconstruct their arena like you can see in the one to the left."

Elinàsze and Hiya listened carefully and looked over the blueprints floating above their heads. "Yes, all right… This all seems good…"

"Of course, I would never think to gainsay the plans of the Exalted One," Hiya added, nodding decisively.

As the three of them stood reviewing the blueprints, Damalynas materialized in the space beside Hiya. "I saw the plans too while I was in Their Divinity Hiya's mindscape," she said, grinning and bobbing her head. "So let's get to it! I, Damalynas, Grand Magus of Midnight, am here to assist you!"

"Oh?" said Hiya, a cunning smirk crossing their face as they turned to face Damalynas. "In other words, you are eager to have this finished quickly so that I might give you your nightly training?"

Damalynas's face turned bright red at the suggestion. "N-N-No way!" she squeaked, looking the other way. "I-I-I wasn't thinking that, I swear!"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure you weren't," said Hiya, their smirk only widening. "Ahem!" They cleared their throat, their expression becoming serious once more as they turned back to face Flio. "Now then, Exalted One...shall we begin?"

"Yes, let's," said Flio. "Everyone ready?" He held both arms out forwards, a magic circle appearing around them as a much larger circle took shape around the road itself. The city wall began to move slowly along the ground as if it were being pushed by Flio's magic circle, out away from the center of town. Naturally, this process left gaps in the wall as it moved to its new position—which was where Elinàsze came in.

Elinàsze flew through the air, arms outstretched with a magic circle glowing in front of her and corresponding circles appearing wherever there was a missing segment of wall, summoning countless stones to tightly fill the gaps.

"I prepared an abundance of stones for the wall ahead of time!" she said. "We have plenty left, even if we decide to expand the wall further still!"

"Thank you, Elinàsze," said Flio. "That's a big help."

Between the two of them the walls of Houghtow City grew further and further outwards, as Hiya and Damalynas reviewed the expanded interior. "While they're off doing that, I, the great Damalynas, will see to the road!" Damalynas declared.

"Then I, the Exalted One's humble servant Hiya, shall see to the buildings," said Hiya.

The two of them each held out their arms and flagstones appeared on the ground, extending the city's main road further and further as new buildings took form all around.

"The buildings all have the same layout as the one in the blueprints, right?" Elinàsze asked.

"That's right," said Flio. "I figured we would just make the buildings the same for now and adjust them later to suit the preferences of the inhabitants once they move in. Oh, and I have here a Bottomless Bag full of stone I prepared earlier, so feel free to use it if you need. Speaking of which, I think we're just about done with the wall extension..."

"Understood, Papa," Elinàsze replied. "In that case, I'll go over and help Hiya with the buildings."

“I’ll go too,” said Flio. “Shall we finish it off together?”

“I assure you, Exalted One, there is no need for you to trouble yourself with this!” Hiya insisted. “I, Hiya, am more than enough for a simple task like this. The two of you may go and rest, if you please.”

“I’d rather not,” said Flio. “We’ll be doing the revisions to the Houghtow College of Magic arena after this, so we might as well wrap things up here as fast as we can.”

“Quickly…but without cutting quarters or sacrificing quality, right, Papa?” Elinàsze chirped.

“That’s the idea!” said Flio, and the four of them got to work.

Ghozal stood outside not far from Flio’s house, peering out at the city wall. “I thought I’d head out and see if there’s anything I could do to help…” he said, folding his arms. “But by the looks of things, I don’t think they need it…”

Ghozal watched as scores of magic circles made their way back and forth, shining intermittently as the number of buildings grew before his very eyes.

“Mew know…” said Uliminas, strolling up alongside Ghozal and leaning back to rest her head in her hands, taking in the spectacle as well. “Fur as flashy as this whole purrformance is, they sure aren’t making a whole lotta sound…”

Next came Tanya, hurrying up behind them. “What have I done…” she despaired. “I took so long cleaning the bath that I was late to assist Master Flio with his work!” The mop she was holding, which she had been using just moments earlier to clean out the bath, shone with light as it transformed into a magic rod, and she took off at full speed after Flio and the others.

“Cleaning the bath, was she?” Ghozal said, a smile crossing his face as he watched Tanya go. “I bet she wanted to make sure Mister Flio and the rest had a warm bath waiting for them first thing after they finished their work.”

“It’d be meown thing if it were some run-of-the-mill bathtub…” Uliminas marveled, wide-eyed at the task. “But *meowr* bath is big enough for twenty men and twenty women at meownce! And she couldn’t have started cleaning until after everymeown else finished their baths for the night! That doesn’t leave her with a whole lotta time…”

“My lord husband!” came a voice from behind Ghozal and Uliminas, as Rys ran by carrying a large wrapped bundle in her

arms.

“What have you got there, Rys?” Ghozal asked.

“Oh, this?” said Rys. “Why, dinner for my hardworking lord husband and his helpers, of course!” She gave him a look to say, “*Are you serious? Could you really not tell?*” before suddenly remembering what she was doing. “But I can’t stop to talk now! I need to hurry up and bring them their dinner!” she said, rushing into the distance.

“Hrm…” Gholl grunted as he watched her go. “If Rys is going too, we might as well head out there ourselves,” he said, flying off towards where Flio and the others were working.

“If mew insist…” said Uliminas, sighing and shaking her head as her arms and legs changed into their bestial hellcat forms. “I suppose I don’t mind lending a paw.” She took off as well, running like the wind.

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

“So,” said Flio, casting his eyes around the control room of the new arena, “we finished our revisions here without any issues.”

Next to him, Headmaster Nyt and the school’s administrator Taclyde looked all around at his handiwork, wide-eyed with shock. When Flio had visited the arena earlier that week it had been a single story building that had to be set up by hand according to the demands of each new mock battle. Now, however…

“This time, I’ve included a system that lets you change the environment inside the new arena from the control room right here,” Flio explained. He pressed a button, and the ground inside the arena transformed into a verdant forest. He pressed another button, and suddenly it was a beach. A third, and the arena floor became a flat and level sandy surface. With each button pressed, the arena would briefly shine with light before changing shape to its new form. Flio demonstrated all of them in order before setting it back to the first—the forest stage. “Everyone got it?” he said. “Now, how about we head down and have a look?”

Flio led Rys, Nyt, and Taclyde out of the control room and down to the arena itself.

“My goodness!” Taclyde gasped as he poked his foot into the river running through the forest stage. “This river! It’s like there’s water running right through the arena!”

“That’s right,” Flio said. “The water isn’t actually flowing out of the building, of course, but we’ve set it up using magic gems to make it look like it is. You can use the same method to change the weather in the arena to clear, cloudy, rain, or snow, and to set the time of day anywhere from noon to midnight. And not only that…” Here, Flio cast the spell Fly, rising quickly up into the air.

“W-Watch—o-out…?” said Taclyde, holding up his hand in expectation of Flio hitting his head on the top of the arena. Instead, to his astonishment, Flio continued to fly higher and higher without any sign of encountering the ceiling, growing smaller and smaller in the distance.

“*You can control the size of the internal space from the control room, like this,*” Flio said, speaking telepathically as he was now too far away for his words to carry. “*Now you should have plenty of room, even if Levana changes into her dragon form.*”

“W-Well, I’ll be…” Taclyde marveled, taking another look around the arena.

Even Nyt seemed flabbergasted. “You created all thisss…in only a sssingle night?” was all she could say.

Flio came back down as quickly as he had flown up, landing on the arena’s forest floor in front of the rest of the group. “I think that should fix any issues with the facilities,” he said. “Which leaves us with your other problem, of how to handle students with too much magic power. I expect they’ll learn to control their own power like Elinàsze and Garyl can, once they get a bit older, so what we need is a temporary solution for them…and other students whose magic is still immature. This is a bit of a last-minute idea, but here’s what I came up with…” He produced a large gun-shaped object resembling a magicannon, which Nyt and Taclyde eyed with great curiosity…

◇Some Days Later—On Board an Enchanted Frigate◇

At the heart of Houghtow City stood the city hall, with major roads leading away to the north, south, east, and west. Following the road west led to the wall surrounding the city and a gate out of town. Houghtow City was a merchant town located at the far west end of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode—any farther west along the road would take you outside the borders of the kingdom, on to a vast desert, and beyond that, the neighboring

kingdom of Indol.

A single Enchanted Frigate flew along in the sky above the western road. This was a passenger ship, with most of its hull divided into three styles of accommodation. The first was a single large chamber where the cheapest seats on the flight were located, featuring a large window on the rear to allow passengers to gaze out at the scenery as they passed by. The other two options were private rooms, smaller ones for individuals and others large enough for an entire family. These rooms came furnished with beds and desks, as well as windows with views from the ship's sides.

In one of the family rooms was a group of four. One of them, a small and slender young girl with refined features, stood gazing out the window.

"Fond of the view from up here, are you, Shiana?" said the man sitting behind her, looking up from his book.

The girl turned around, her eyes shining with excitement. "Yes, Father, very much so!" she said. "I've spent my whole life with nothing but the city streets of Indol to look out at, after all. It's only natural that I would be taken with such a view!"

Shiana's father nodded approvingly at the sight of his daughter's smiling face. "Very good," he said. "From what I hear, these ships fly out from Houghtow City every day without fail. Once we've settled into our new home, perhaps we should take one on a trip somewhere!"

"Really? Then it's a promise!" Shiana beamed, turning to look back out the window.

Her mother smiled as she watched, then turned to the other girl, standing behind Shiana. "I'm very sorry, Thelmi, but I'm afraid I'll have to impose on you to look after Shiana once again when we arrive in the city. I'm especially hoping you can be there for her at her new school, the Houghtow College of Magic. I've heard the curriculum there is very high-level, and if rumors are to be believed, they have some sort of relationship with our goddess as well..."

"Understood," Thelmi said with a formal bow. "I am Mistress Shiana's maid, after all. You may leave everything in my hands." Thelmi was wearing a black outfit in the traditional style of Indol, with an apron on top like a proper maid. There was a decided stiffness to her expression, as if she might be nervous about something.

“Oh, Thelmi,” said Shiana, turning around as she noticed how the maid was acting. “You really don’t need to act so stiff, you know! We’ve been together since I was a little girl, after all. We’re just about sisters!” she said, beaming from ear to ear.

“I am much obliged to know that you think of me so, Mistress,” Thelmi replied, rather stiffly.

Shiana frowned, clearly unsatisfied. “Well, never mind,” she said. “In any event, Thelmi, I suppose I’ll be in your care in our new home, Houghtow City, as well! Let’s do our best together, and maybe someday we’ll both be as incredible as the goddess of Indol!” Smiling once again, she took one of Thelmi’s hands in both of hers and squeezed tight.

“Yes, Mistress, as you say,” said Thelmi, her expression unchanging as she squeezed back.

Shiana’s parents smiled fondly as they watched on, and soon the Enchanted Frigate began its descent as Houghtow City came into view below.

◇Later Still—Flio’s House◇

Swann, Third Princess of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, took an Enchanted Frigate from Klyrode Castle Town to Houghtow City and walked from there straight towards Flio’s house, where Rys came to meet her at the door. Swann bowed low, launching into an explanation before Rys could utter a word of greeting. “Um…” she said, holding out the gift box she had brought from the castle town without so much as lifting her head. “I-I mentioned in my letter, but I’m here in Houghtow City in order to observe the College of Magic. I-I suppose I’ll be staying with you, as Swann, while I’m here…”

“Of course!” said Rys, smiling warmly as she accepted the gift. “It’s our pleasure to have you!”

“Oh! There you are, Swann!” Just then, Rylnàsze came running up from behind, grinning happily. Today was a day off from school, and Rylnàsze had been at home all day waiting for Swann to arrive.

“A-Ah!” Swann cried. “R-R-R-R-Ryl—”

Before she could finish, however, Rylnàsze squeezed Swann tight. “It’s been so long! I’m so happy to see you again!” she said. Both girls were on the small side, but Rylnàsze happened to be just a bit taller. The way she was hugging her brought Swann’s

head right up against her chest.

*Awawawawahh!!!* Swann thought, going completely stiff as her face turned a brilliant shade of red. *I-It's been so long since I've smelled Rylnàsze's…Rylnàsze's… W-Wait! O-Oh no! My brain's too tired after working through the night to finish all of my paperwork! I-I can't handle this level of s-s-stimulation…*

"Rylnàsze," said Rys, as Sybe and the other magic beasts came up behind the girls. "Swann only just arrived and she's very tired. Perhaps you could take her to the guest room to—"

"N-No, no!" Swann insisted, suddenly returning to herself. "I can stay in my usual spot while I'm here!"

"Your usual spot…" Rys repeated. "But aren't you here for work this time?"

"Yes, I am," said Swann. "But I'll be more effective at my work if I'm comfortable, you know! As long as I take care to groom myself properly before I leave, it shouldn't be any sort of problem."

"But…" Rys objected, glancing between the cot in the living room and Swann, who was still being held tight in Rylnàsze's arms. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure!" said Swann, nodding with forceful conviction.

That night, Flio came home late from a meeting in the city and went into the living room to sit in his favorite chair.

"I see…" he said when Rys finished giving him the news of the day. "So Miss Swann's over there right now, is she?"

"Yes," said Rys, smiling wryly as she placed a cup down in front of Flio. "I actually prepared a guest room for her since she's here on work this time, but she insisted on her usual sleeping arrangements…"

The two looked over at Sybe and his family's cot in the corner of the living room, where the two large bears slept side by side, just about filling out the cot with their girth—Sybe the psychobear, and Tybe the Bear of Misfortune. There, cuddled up beside Rylnàsze, Swann lay fast asleep on top of Sybe's fluffy belly. She was snoring quietly, clearly exhausted as the two girls slept in each other's arms.

Back in Klyrode Castle, Swann had been suffering from insomnia, headaches, and stiff shoulders due to her workload. Now, however, she looked perfectly relaxed lying down face-to-face with Rylnàsze. It was clear at a glance that she was finally

enjoying a night of sound sleep.

Flio smiled his usual easygoing smile. “Well, if Swann’s all right with it, I’d say it’s not a problem.”

“True enough,” Rys chuckled. “Rylnàsze and the magic beasts seem more than happy to have her, as well.”

As Rys had said, Shebe the unicorn rabbit and her children were lying in a circle around Rylnàsze and Swann, all snoring happily cuddled up next to the two girls.

*Ah…* Swann thought, as she savored her first night of good sleep in a long while. *I’m so happy…*

◇The Following Morning—Houghtow College of Magic◇

In a classroom in the Houghtow College of Magic, the morning meeting was underway. Belano stood at the podium in front of the class, with two new transfer students standing beside her. “Would the two of you please introduce yourselves…?” she said.

“Of course!” said Shiana, cheerful as ever. “My name is Shiana. I just moved here from the kingdom of Indol. It’s nice to meet all of you!”

“I am Thelmi, Mistress Shiana’s maid…” said Thelmi. “A pleasure…” Like before, she seemed distinctly tense, her expression strained and rigid as she forced out the words.

“Now, your seats…” Belano said. “They’re right over there, in the back row…”

Shiana and Thelmi went to the seats Belano had indicated at the back of the room. “Hi! Nice to meet you!” Rylnàsze said as they sat down, giving the pair a great big smile from the seat next to Shiana’s. “I’m Rylnàsze! Since we’re in the same class, let’s be friends!”

“I’m Shiana,” Shiana said, smiling back as she introduced herself. “And this is my maid Thelmi. Well, she’s my maid officially, but really she’s more like my sister. I hope you’ll be friends with her, as well!”

*I’d heard the Houghtow College of Magic had a high-level curriculum, but I can’t say anyone in this class looks like they have all that much magic power…* Shiana thought, looking around the room out of the corner of her eye as she gave Rylnàsze a fully disingenuous smile. *I suppose it can’t be helped, though, can it! After all, I was the top student at the Indolian National Academy of*

*Magic! I can't expect any of them to keep up with me, can I?*

◇That Afternoon—Houghtow College of Magic Arena◇

"I mussst thank you for coming all the way from Klyrode Cassstle to obssserve our inssstitution," Nyt said as she led Swann from the headmaster's office down the halls on to the arena.

"Not at all," said Swann. "In fact, thank *you* for agreeing to the observation with such good grace."

Swann was at the school in her capacity as the Third Princess of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, wearing a dress appropriate to the situation and doing her best to conduct herself with solemn formality. There was no sense of the unaffected earnestness she had shown when she was with Rylnàsze.

"Ssspeaking of your visssit, you came here by Enchanted Frigate, no?" Nyt asked. "I take it you noticed the changesss to that part of town?"

"Hm? O-Oh! O-Of course!" said Swann.

"We've had a great number of immigrantsss from neighboring landsss moving to Houghtow City ever sssince the peace treaty with the Dark Army," Nyt explained as the Third Princess smiled and nodded along. "It happened we had a surplusss of land in the area around the Enchanted Frigate landing zone, ssso the good people at the Fli-o'-Rysss General Store expanded the city for usss as fassst as you could blink."

*W-Was that part of town different?* Swann thought, wiping a bead of cold sweat off her brow as nonchalantly as she could while the two of them walked on towards the arena. *I-I was in such a hurry to see Rylnàsze that I didn't notice in the slightest!*

At last, the group reached the spectator seating for the arena. Nyt led the way towards a spot in the stands that gave them an unobstructed view of the entire stage, talking all the while. "Incidentally, thisss arena was alssso reconssstructed recently, thanksss to the Fli-o'-Rysss General Store. We'll be holding a new type of mock battle, desssigned for children who are ssstill too young to properly control their magic power. We would appreciate it very much if you would ssstay for a match as part of your observationsss, Your Highnesss..."

Meanwhile, in the girls' changing room located by the

entrance to the arena, Rylnàsze peered down at the outfit she was wearing—a navy blue swimsuit, far from the clothes she was used to. “I know they told us to wear these for our class in the arena today, but I’m not sure I understand why,” she said, doubtfully tilting her head. “A bit of magic resistance shouldn’t make that much of a difference...”

As Rylnàsze mused over the significance of the clothes, Levana held her own swimsuit up, looking it over with a curious expression on her face. She was so focused on the clothing, however, that something else slipped her mind.

“L-Levana!” Rylnàsze exclaimed. “You shouldn’t walk around naked, even if it’s only girls here! You can look at the clothing once you’ve dressed yourself!”

Levana had taken off her clothes, only to end up distracted by the mystery of the swimsuit right as she went to put it on. She was so curious, in fact, that the fact that she was still naked completely slipped her mind.



The girls chatted amiably as they changed into their swimsuits. In one corner, Shiana frowned in confusion. “How peculiar…” she said. “Why would they have us change into swimsuits for a magic battle? I’m afraid I don’t quite understand…”

“Me neither…” said Thelmi, no less confused as she looked over the outfit herself. “I’ve never seen this design before…” Thelmi’s bare skin underneath the swimsuit was a deep brown, common among people hailing from Indol. Shiana, on the other hand, had pale white skin—even lighter than the other students in the changing room.

Shiana and Thelmi finished changing and headed for the entrance to the arena. There, next to the door, they found a set of hefty magicannons waiting for them. “What’s this?” Shiana wondered, looking over at the guns. She grabbed hold of one by the grip, and a magic circle appeared around her wrist like a bracelet.

As the students regarded the weapons with sheer bewilderment, Belano stepped into the room. “These magicannons change your magic power into water and shoot it out the end,” she explained. “The water pressure should be the same no matter what, in order to make sure nobody gets hurt, but the volume you can shoot depends on your own magic power. Those of you who have a lot of magic power will have an advantage, but once you’re hit by a set amount of water you’ll be taken out of the fight, so take care. Finally, when the large magic gem in your opponents’ base is hit by a certain amount of water, it will change to your own team’s color and you’ll win the match. You can also win by putting everyone in the opposing team out of action.” With that, Belano picked up a magicannon herself. “Since this is our first time trying this style of mock battle, I’ll take part as well.”

The students let out a cheer at that last announcement.

“Glad to have you with us, Miss Belano!”

“Miss Belano’s defensive spells are out of this world!”

“You can do it, Miss Belano!”

In her mind, Belano sighed happily to herself at the words of support from her class. *I-I’m so glad…* she thought. *Even someone like me who can’t use offensive magic to save my life can participate in a battle like this!*

Wearing a swimsuit of her own, Belano led the way into the

arena at the head of the group of students. Inside they found a dense forest, the opposing team out of sight. For the most part, anyway…

The enemy teacher's voice came booming from across the arena. "My, if it isn't Miss Belano! But I'm afraid this is the end of the road! This victory is mine!"

"That voice…" Belano said, the color draining from her face. "It's Miss Oryou…"

Oryou—the offensive magic teacher at the Houghtow College of Magic, hailing from Hi-Izuru, the Land of the Rising Sun far to the east. Oryou boasted top-class magic power, even among the faculty of the school.

As Belano froze with the realization of who she was fighting, a bell rang, signaling the start of the mock battle.

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A while later another bell rang out in the arena, signaling the end of the match. Taclyde, who had been monitoring the mock battle from the control room, let out a relieved cry. "Thank goodness…" he said. "We had Folmina, Ghoro, and Kora taking part in the battle, but it still ended without any damage to the structure or any students getting hurt… Thank goodness… Thank goodness…" he repeated, muttering the words again and again like some kind of mantra.

In the spectator stands, Nyt watched as the mock battle came to its conclusion. *We had to put the new ssstyle of mock battle into practice before we were properly ready once we heard the royal obssserver was arriving sooner than expected…* she thought, internally sighing with relief even as she maintained a mask of perfect calm. *Thank goodnesss no one was hurt, and the ssstructure wasn't damaged in any way…*

"What did you think of the mock battle, Your Highnesss?" Nyt asked, turning to face the Third Princess in the seat beside her.

The Third Princess, however, failed to respond as she sat frozen solid in her seat. *O-Oh heavens!* she thought. *I-I-I can't believe I got to see Rylnàsze in a swimsuit…a-and soaking wet too…*

Outwardly the Princess had been quietly watching the mock battle, but in fact she had had her eyes fixed on nothing but Rylnàsze in her swimsuit, following her every move. Even now that the battle was over, the memory of it continued to play in

her mind.

“Excussse me…Your Highnesss?” Nyt asked again.

The Third Princess said nothing.

“Your Highnesss?” said Nyt.

Still there was no response.

“Hey!”

“Oh! U-Um…yes?” the Third Princess said, as Nyt’s voice finally brought her back to her senses. She turned her head slowly, eyes blinking.

“What did you think of the mock battle…Your Highnesss?” Nyt asked again.

For a moment, it seemed like the Princess’s words were caught in her throat. “O-Of course!” she finally managed. “U-Um… It was very, very good!”

*It feelsss like there’sss sssomething I’m missing…* Nyt mused, sensing something off about the Third Princess’s response. *But everything seemsss to have gone well, so I supposssse this wasss a successss…* she nodded to herself, as if she were the one who needed persuading.

Inside the arena, Belano stood in front of the enemy’s magic gem, which had turned a brilliant shade of blue, her arms thrust upwards in victory.

“We won…!” she said, her shoulders heaving with effort as she grinned with the satisfaction of a job well done. Next to her, Rylnàsze, who had been her ally on the blue team, let out a cheer.

Their teammate Kora let out a cheer of her own in response, although her expression betrayed some disappointment at the results. “I wish I wasn’t taken out of action, though…” she said.

The small girl was soaking wet from head to toe, and above her head were the words “*Out of Action*.”

“That’s okay!” said Rylnàsze, doing her best to cheer Kora up with her own bright smile. “There’s always next time!”

During the mock battle Rylnàsze had taken the role of commander, giving her allies clear and precise instructions even as she assisted them directly from the front line. Even Folmina and Ghoro, with their overwhelming magic power and perfect synchronization, had been unable to force her to retreat. And with Rylnàsze in the lead, the team was able to fight on equal footing, eventually claiming victory against Ghozal’s children.

Levana stood behind Rylnàsze and the others, her arms folded and her head lowered in thought. “I don’t really understand what happened…” she said to herself, frowning as she struggled to puzzle out the reason for their victory. “I just did whatever Rylnàsze said, and we ended up winning…”

“But you were the one who blasted away Miss Oryou right when she was about to get our own team’s magic gem!” Rylnàsze said, beaming as she gave Levana a celebratory hug. “If you hadn’t done that, we would never have won!”

“I was just annoyed with her, that’s all…” Levana insisted. “I wasn’t thinking…”

“That was quite a lot of water to fire off without thinking, I should say!” said Oryou, wincing as she walked up to the winning team. The same “*Out of Action*” text was displayed over her head. “And I was my team’s commander, as well…”

“Well, I for one don’t accept this result!” said Folmina, her cheeks puffed out in a pout over her defeat.

“Big sis Folmina… I’m sorry…” said Ghoro, dejectedly lowering his head. He, too, was sporting an “*Out of Action*” message.

“Oh, no, Ghoro, you didn’t do anything wrong!” Folmina said, patting Ghoro on the head with a smile. “You were taken out of action because you were covering me, right? If you hadn’t been there to protect me, I would have ended up out of action myself! You did well!”

“Big sis Folmina…” said Ghoro, breaking into a smile.

When Folmina was sure that Ghoro was all right, she turned back to face the enemy team. “We’ll get you next time!” she declared, pointing her finger at Rylnàsze. “Just you watch!” The rest of her team let out a cheer in response.

“Eh he he!” Rylnàsze laughed. “We’re not planning on losing either! Right, everyone?” she said, thrusting her fist up in the air and eliciting a cheer from her own teammates.

Oryou and Belano, meanwhile, watched their students from a short distance away, nodding to each other in satisfaction. “They’ve never had this much team spirit before, have they…” Belano observed.

“Indeed not,” Oryou agreed. “I suppose it’s good to have games like this from time to time after all, isn’t it…”

As an aside, it was the swimsuits that magically determined when a combatant wearing one had been taken out of action.

Only the swimsuits meant for students had been enchanted this way, however, so Oryou and Belano had to wear student swimsuits when they took part in the match. While Belano fit neatly in a small, Oryou needed to wear an extra large to accommodate her tall, voluptuous body. Even then, there were all sorts of places where she was spilling out of her suit. Needless to say, it was a sight that had an undeniable effect on Taclyde the administrator as he watched from the control room, as well as many of the male students participating in the bout.

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In the back room of the arena after the mock battle, Shiana dried herself off with a towel.

"Mistress Shiana..." Thelmi said, walking up beside her with a towel of her own. "I'm very sorry I was unable to be of use to you today..." She bowed her head gravely, her expression as stiff as ever.

The two of them had been on Oryou's team during the mock battle. At first, Shiana had felt assured of an easy victory. "*Oh, is that all? We're just using water to attack instead of magic? This will be easy!*" she told herself, ignoring Oryou's orders and charging ahead of her teammates only to find herself the primary target of the opposing team. Thelmi was knocked out of action first in a heroic bid to protect her mistress, and just moments later Shiana herself was defeated.

*I couldn't do anything at all in that battle...but how could that be?! I was the top student at the Indolian National Academy of Magic, wasn't I?!* Shiana thought, wrapping herself in her towel to hide the bitter look on her face. All the while, Thelmi stood with her head bowed low beside her.

After a while, however, Shiana suddenly let out a deep sigh and dried her hair violently with the towel, lifting her head. "I'm really sorry, Thelmi..." she said, pulling the maid out of her extended bow and into a hug, patting her gently on the back. "We lost today, as much as I hate to admit it. But we'll get them next time."

"Yes, Mistress," said Thelmi, hugging back.

"Um, I'm not interrupting, am I?" said Rylnàsze, walking up to the pair.

"Oh! Erm...Rylnàsze, was it?" said Shiana, as she and Thelmi

both reeled back, startled.

"Yes, that's right, it's Rylnàsze!" Rylnàsze said, smiling cheerily and holding out her hand. "Good job today!"

Shiana looked utterly perplexed as she slowly reached out to grab Rylnàsze's hand in her own. Thelmi followed suit, placing her own hand on top of Shiana's.

"So..." Rylnàsze said, beaming with her entire face. "The two of you just moved into the New Houghtow Commercial District, right? The part of town by the Enchanted Frigate boarding tower? My house is over that way too! Why don't we walk home together?"

"E-Excuse me...?" Shiana and Thelmi both stared blankly at Rylnàsze's smiling face, as if they couldn't believe their ears.

◇Houghtow City—Main Street◇

After school, Rylnàsze and the others were walking down the street, headed for home.

"You were great in the mock battle today, Ghoro!" Rylnàsze said as they walked.

"Me...?" Ghoro asked.

"Yes, you!" Rylnàsze nodded. "I was sure I was going to hit Folmina with that big burst of water, when suddenly you jumped up out of nowhere to protect her!"

"That's right!" Folmina agreed, bobbing her head. "Ghoro did really well today, didn't he! And next time we'll do even better!"

Ghoro blushed, looking bashfully down at his feet at the praise.

"Oh, Shiana," Rylnàsze said, suddenly turning her attention to the girl. "You aren't in a hurry, are you? There's a quick stop I'd like to make, if you don't mind coming along."

"A quick stop?" Shiana asked, looking uncertainly over at Thelmi.

"Let me think..." said Thelmi. "There isn't anything in particular scheduled for today, so I don't think it should be a problem..."

"In that case, let's go!" said Rylnàsze, brightly nodding her head.

Rylnàsze led the group off of the main road down a winding side path that stretched off in the direction of the lake. Behind her came Folmina and Ghoro, then Levana leading Kora by the

hand, and finally Shiana and Thelmi in the back of the group.

*Rustle rustle…*

Suddenly, from off the side of the path behind them came the sound of something moving through the tall grass.

“Wh-What’s that?!” Shiana exclaimed, suddenly on guard. “A magic beast?!”

“Mistress, behind me!” said Thelmi, rushing forwards with her arms spread wide to protect Shiana from danger. In spite of her brave words, however, Thelmi’s knees were visibly wobbling with fear.

Shiana and Thelmi watched as a unicorn rabbit poked its head out of the tall grass in front of them.

“O-Oh…” said Shiana, breathing a sigh of relief. “It’s just a small one…”

“No, mistress!” Thelmi cautioned her. “They may be small, but a unicorn rabbit’s horn can be very dangerous if they decide to charge…”

As the two spoke, however, three more unicorn rabbits poked their heads out of the grass, one after another.

“*Snuffle!*”

“*Snuff snuffle!*”

“*Snuffle snuff snuffle!*”

The rabbits ran forwards, seemingly charging towards the girls.

“Th-There’s so many of them!” said Shiana, staggering backwards in distress.

“M-Mistress Shiaaaana!!!” Thelmi cried. She held her arms out as wide as she could, desperately covering her mistress even as her legs seemed on the verge of giving out entirely.

Then, from behind the unicorn rabbits, came yet another magic beast—this one an enormous bearlike creature.

“A-A psychobear?!!!” Shiana’s eyes went wide, her whole body freezing.

Thelmi, meanwhile, fainted entirely, wailing “M-Miiistresss!!!” as her eyes rolled back in her head.

The magic beasts, however, ignored Shiana and Thelmi completely, moving past them and jumping up at Rylnàsze at the head of the group.

“W-Watch out!” said Shiana, raising her voice to warn the girl. When Rylnàsze caught sight of the unicorn rabbits and psychobear coming her way, however, she simply smiled and

spread her arms out wide.

"Sybe! And everyone! You came out to meet me!" she said, as the unicorn rabbits all bounded up into her arms. Rylnàsze caught them and held them tightly, cheerfully nuzzling her cheeks against the armful of critters. Even the psychobear let out an affectionate sound as he went to embrace Rylnàsze.

Shiana stared in disbelief, rooted to the spot. "H-Huh?" she said, after a long moment of silence. "Wh-What's going on?"

"Don't tell me you didn't know!" said Folmina. "Those magic beasts are all our household pets!"

Ghoro and Kora nodded along to confirm Folmina's explanation.

"What?" said Shiana. "Your...p-pets? Not just the unicorn rabbits, but the psychobear too?"

"Not quite!" said Rylnàsze, waving her hand for emphasis.

"Oh, I see..." Shiana said. "That isn't a psychobear, is it? That makes sense, I suppose. Psychobears are categorized as S-tier magic beasts! It would take an entire company of knights to—"

"Tybe here is a Bear of Misfortune cub!" Rylnàsze explained, beaming brightly.

"A-A Bear of Misfortune?" Shiana asked. *I've never heard of such a magic beast!* she thought. *I suppose they must be a docile sort of creature, suitable for domestication. I simply must have never heard of them, that's all! Although...it does sound rather like the name of one of the Beasts of Disaster recorded in the books of legend... B-But that's impossible! I must be mistaken!* She shook her head, forcing herself to reject the notion.

Of course, a Beast of Disaster was precisely what Tybe was—a class of magic beast so rare that few had even seen one. The idea of *taming* a Beast of Disaster was completely out of the question, but thanks to the transcendent-tier Taming skill Rylnàsze had inherited from Flio's blessing of Transcendence, even such an unheard-of feat was possible.

Once they had finished their reunion with the magic beasts, Shiana followed along after Rylnàsze, content in her misunderstanding that Tybe must be some sort of particularly well-behaved magic beast. Together with Thelmi, who had finally managed to return to her senses, they made their way down the side path towards a spot just beside the lake, where the trees gave way to a clearing.

"Hello, Leonorna! Good evening!" Rylnàsze said, cheerily

waving to something ahead on the path.

"Leon…orna?" Shiana asked, looking up to see an immense magic beast sitting in splendid repose, his body shining a brilliant gold in the dusky forest. Shaking his magnificent mane, he slowly lifted his head to look over at Rylnàsze.

"Why, if it isn't Rylnàsze!" the magic beast said. "You've come to visit me again, have you?"

"Of course!" said Rylnàsze. "That's why I'm here!"

"Of course, of course!" the lion said, his mane rustling as he nodded his smiling head. "And I must say, it is a joy simply to see you!"

Leonorna—one of the legendary Divine Beasts said to hold the power to preserve the harmony of a Planetoid World. Many of their number, however, found themselves poached during the recent pet craze on the Celestial Plane when it became fashionable for goddesses to keep pet Divine Beasts of their very own. Now Divine Beasts had become nearly extinct on their native planetoid worlds. Leonorna, who had always been a troublemaker, wound up escaping from the poachers and currently lived by the shore of the lake outside Houghtow City, under the protection of Flio.

"A…giant magic beast…" Shiana marveled, looking wide-eyed up at the divine lion before her.

"A-And it's…obeying a girl?" Thelmi added, her body trembling as she looked over towards Rylnàsze.

"J-Just like *Her*…"

"Th-The goddess!"

With that, the two of them lost consciousness entirely, collapsing on the spot.

◇Some Time Later—Flio's house◇

In the living room of Flio's house, Rylnàsze sat with her shoulders slumped in her chair at the dinner table. "I only wanted to introduce Leonorna to our new transfer student Shiana, but it seems like I gave her an awful scare…" she said.

"Well, at least no one was hurt, right?" said Flio, giving the gloomy girl a smile. "I don't think you need to beat yourself up about it."

Shiana and Thelmi had fainted in the clearing just as Flio arrived to bring Leonorna his meal, and he had brought the two

of them back home to recover. Now he and Rylnàsze were relating the story to the rest of the family after dinner.

“Should I not introduce Leonorna to my friends?” Rylnàsze asked.

“Maybe not…” Flio said. “People in Houghtow City know about Sybe and the others, so it shouldn’t be a problem with them, but Leonorna might be a little too *unique*…”

“Okay, Papa! Thank you!” Rylnàsze said, hopping up to her feet and bowing her head.

“U-Um…” Swann ventured, appearing from where she had been hiding at the foot of the stairs and timidly raising her voice. “A-Are you finished with your family meeting?”

Swann had very much wanted to go home with Rylnàsze after she was finished with her observations of the Houghtow College of Magic, but with all of the meetings and formalities she had to observe she had just made it back to the house.

“Oh, yes!” said Rylnàsze, smiling happily and running up to Swann when she saw she was there. “We just finished.”

“Hello, Swann!” said Rys. “Would you care for dinner? I can get you some right away if you’d like.”

“Yes, please, I’d—” Swann began, only to be cut off as Rylnàsze took her by the arm.

“Do you want to take a bath together, Swann?” Rylnàsze asked. “I’d like to take one as soon as I can, after how soaking wet I got at school today…”

“Y-Y-Y-Y-Yes, please, I would!” said Swann, her face flushing bright red as Rylnàsze led her away. “L-Let’s take a bath together, Rylnàsze!”

Flio and Rys watched fondly as the two girls ran off towards the baths. “Well then,” said Rys, “I suppose I’ll wait until she’s out of the bath.” Then, after a moment, she lowered her head in thought. “My lord husband…” she said. “May I ask you an unrelated question?”

“What is it, Rys?” Flio asked.

“Well… It’s just that there were a few things I noticed in Rylnàsze’s story earlier. She said those new transfer student friends of hers said a few things like ‘*a giant magic beast obeying a girl…*’ and ‘*the goddess*,’ didn’t she?”

“Yes, I believe so,” said Flio.

“And didn’t she say that these transfer students moved here from the kingdom of Indol?”

“That’s right,” Flio confirmed.

Immediately, a look crossed Rys’s face. *I remember what happened when Wyne and I went to Indol on a shopping trip a while ago…* she thought. *I had to give some evildoers a well-deserved thrashing, and somehow it ended up with everyone saying I was a goddess from some legend! They can’t still be going on about that, can they? But I’ve made it a point to avoid going to Indol ever since…*

“Rys?” Flio asked.

“Hyah!” Rys jumped in the air, startled out of her thoughts. “I-I-I-Is something the matter, my lord husband?”

“No, it’s just, you suddenly went silent,” Flio said. “It seemed like you had something on your mind.”

“Oh, no, no, no!” Rys insisted, smiling cheerfully in an effort to dodge the question. “It’s certainly nothing you need to worry about! I must be overthinking things, that’s all…”

*Yes…* Rys thought, nodding to herself as she struggled to believe her own words. *I’m overthinking it, surely…*

“You know, that reminds me…” Flio said, folding his arms in thought. “A decent number of the people moving into the new lots in the New Houghtow Commercial District have been from outside the kingdom…and quite a lot of them are from Indol specifically. Balirossa even told me she thought it was strange while she was working on the business end of things…”

“O-Oh my! I-I wonder why that could be! A silly little girl like me certainly wouldn’t know anything about that!” said Rys, her smile growing visibly more fake as she panicked, falling over herself and saying whatever came into her mind in a vain attempt to play it cool.

“U-Um…Rys?” Flio asked.

“O-Oh! No! That’s not what I meant at all!” said Rys, crawling under the chair to hide as her face turned bright red in embarrassment. “P-Please forget I said that, my lord husband! Forget all of this, I’m begging you!”

Flio stared in confusion at his wife’s inexplicable behavior, wondering what might have come over her.

# Chapter 3: Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought ~Attack on the Desert Checkpoint~

◇The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode—North◇

In the north of the kingdom was a road leading through a dense forest. It was deep in the wilderness, with few signs of human habitation, but the road itself was paved with stone and seemed to be well maintained. Just off the road to the north, however, was another path, one so rugged it could have been mistaken for an animal trail. Once upon a time this road was an important thoroughfare, but it had never been paved, and now it had fallen into disrepair. Hardly anyone came this way since the completion of the new paved road nearby, and weeds had grown all over the path. Only wheel ruts remained to show that it had ever been a proper road.

Around one bend of the old road was a spot where the forest gave way to a small clearing. The thick foliage of the forest cut away, revealing a rocky cliff face and a hole that seemed to be the entrance to a cave.

It was early in the morning, not long after daybreak, and the area around the cave entrance was still wet with dew as a man emerged from inside, dressed in a red outfit with a distinct knightly character. Combing his fingers through his hair, the man took a good look around the clearing.

“Well, that’s strange…” the man—Hero Gold-Hair—said, tilting his head and holding his right hand to his chin in thought. “With all the pitfall traps I dug, I would have expected at least *one* of them to have caught something…” Hero Gold-Hair tapped the ground in front of him lightly with his foot, sending the earth crumbling away to reveal a large round hole.

“*Hero Gold-Hair,*” came a woman’s voice, speaking telepathically inside Hero Gold-Hair’s mind.

“Is that you, Riliangiu?” Hero Gold-Hair replied. “How are things looking out there?”

“*I’ve scouted a wide area around the perimeter of the cave,*” reported Riliangiu. “*And while I have seen a number of smaller magic beasts, there has been no sign whatsoever of any of*

*significant size...*"

"Hmm... That *is* strange..." Hero Gold-Hair said. "This part of the forest had plenty of large magic beasts living in it before..." *I wonder if this has something to do with the way the sky's been breaking recently...* he thought, standing with his arms crossed as he considered the situation. *It seems like something's changed with the magic beasts. This far to the north we're right up against demon territory and its high concentration of malicium. Ordinarily this place should be chock-full of large magic beasts, but I guess we can't even count on that anymore...*

"But that aside, if we can't capture some magic beasts to sell in town we won't have enough money to pay for food. Next thing you know, Tsuya will be in tears, clutching her purse and crying, '*We're out of moooney!!!*'" A clear image of a tearful Tsuya wailing appeared in Hero Gold-Hair's head as he spoke. "Well, how about this..." he said, his brow furrowing at the thought. "Our plan was to capture some magic beasts around here and sell them at the town ahead. But what if we changed our bearing and headed for the mountains to the west?"

"*The mountains to the west?*" Riliangiu said. "*That would take us near the territory of the western demons...*"

"The western demons, hm?" Hero Gold-Hair echoed back. "From what Dawkson told us, those folks support the Dark One on the surface, but they're well outside the range of the Dark Citadel's power and always up to some sort of trouble..." He stood silently for a while, weighing the party's options, before letting out a heavy sigh. "Nothing for it, I suppose. We'll just have to be careful to keep out of the western demons' territory while we hunt..."

"*Understood,*" said Riliangiu. "*I shall leave at once to scout ahead.*" With that, she cut off her telepathic communication, and Hero Gold-Hair thought he could sense someone leaving the area outside of camp.

"Fwaaaahh!!!" Just then, Aryun Keats stepped out of the cave, yawning loudly and stretching her arms. She was dressed in her usual miniskirt and military-style jacket, but her buttons were undone, revealing her undergarments for the world to see. Aryun still seemed to be mostly asleep, and didn't seem to realize how she was dressed. "Oh, Hero Gold-Hair! Good morning, sir!" she said.

"G-Good morning?!" Hero Gold-Hair exclaimed, turning his

head away from Aryun's unseemly display. "Wh-What do you think you're doing, going out dressed like that?! You're still an unmarried young lady, aren't you, even if you *can* turn into a carriage!"

"Eh?" Aryun asked. "Is there something wrong with my clothes?" She looked down at her body, staring languidly at her open jacket for a moment before looking back up at Hero Gold-Hair. "Ohhh," she said, taking a few groggy steps out of the cave. "The liquor we had last night was so delicious I ended up drinking a little too much, you see... I hope you'll forgive my mis—take?!" Suddenly, Aryun went silent.

"Hmh?" Hero Gold-Hair grunted, glancing out of the corner of his eye at the place where Aryun had been, but she was nowhere to be seen. "Don't tell me..." he said, looking over to see a large hole in the ground right where she had been standing moments before. "Keats!" he said, running over to check. "Did you fall into *another* one of my pitfalls?!"

Hero Gold-Hair peered down into the hole to see Aryun sprawled out unconscious at the bottom. "I swear...why does that girl always need so much looking after?" he asked, covering his face with his palm in exasperation as he looked up to the heavens. "Oh well. I suppose I'd better dig a side tunnel to get her out, then..."

In spite of his grumbling, Hero Gold-Hair retrieved the Drilldozer Shovel from the Bottomless Bag on his belt and began to dig. All the while Aryun lay unconscious at the bottom of the pit, not even stirring as Hero Gold-Hair worked to get her out.

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Several hours later, Hero Gold-Hair and his party were walking down the road.

"And here I'd gotten used to riding everywhere in Keats's carriage form..." Hero Gold-Hair grumbled. Alas, the carriage djinn in question was currently being carried on Hero Gold-Hair's back.

"I really can't apologize enough for this state of affairs..." lamented Aryun. "To think a twisted ankle from falling down that pitfall trap would be enough to temporarily prevent me from transforming! I assure you, I am well and truly ashamed..." She bowed her head over and over in apology, awkwardly rubbing

the back of her head.

“You’re always…carrying uuus…around, though!” Tsuya argued. “I don’t…miiind walking instead…every now and then…” In spite of her words, however, Tsuya’s breathing was labored and painful from walking all day. The look in her eyes made it clear to everyone that her legs might give way beneath her at any time.

“I have to say, though…” Valentine added. “All of this walking has been terrible for my magic consumption…” Valentine was in her magic-saving child-sized form, which was how she had been spending most of her time lately, but even so she was taking one item of food after another out of her Bottomless Bag and devouring it voraciously as she walked along.

As a onetime denizen of the Realm of Evil, Valentine’s body required a great deal of malicium to maintain. The quickest way for her to obtain enough magic power to sustain herself in a low-malicium atmosphere like Klyrode’s was to absorb it directly from either magic gems or living things possessing strong innate magic. Magic gems, however, were too expensive for Hero Gold-Hair’s party to procure in great numbers, and short of another Dark One joining the party it would be difficult to find any living creature with enough magic power to satisfy Valentine’s needs. As a substitute, Valentine could consume ordinary food and convert it into malicium, but the amount of malicium that could be produced this way was agonizingly small, with a downright abysmal rate of absorption to boot. To keep it up, Valentine needed to be eating food without pause every hour of every day.



“Hero Gold-Hair…” Valentine said. “I’m afraid I have some rather unfortunate news…”

“Y-You do?” Hero Gold-Hair asked. “What is it, Valentine?”

“Alas…” she answered. “It seems our Bottomless Bag has run out of food…”

“What?!” Not just Hero Gold-Hair, but Tsuya and Wuha Gappoli too all exclaimed at once.

“B-But Lady Vaaalentine!” Tsuya protested. “The fooood in that bag was supposed to last aaall of us an entire weeeek!!!”

“Oh, but Tsuya…” Valentine breathed, affecting a distinctly erotic tone of voice to no effect whatsoever. “Don’t you know that what was once lost can never be regained?”

“What, are you trying to seduce Tsuya or something?” Wuha Gappoli said, unable to resist the temptation of getting in a jab. “Good luck with *that* one…”

Hero Gold-Hair took stock of the party’s situation and let out a hefty sigh.

“Oh, Hero Gold-Hair, you mustn’t sigh like that!” Valentine chided him. “If you grumble at every little misfortune, all your good luck will go away!”

“What are you on about, bringing up *good luck* in a situation like this!” Hero Gold-Hair snapped. “Lately it’s been nothing but one misfortune after another! We haven’t been making enough money to cover our living expenses because the mount boars and other big game magic beasts we’d been hunting in the north all suddenly vanished for some inexplicable reason… Aryun Keats can’t transform into a carriage…and now, you’ve gone and eaten all our food!” he complained, counting off the woes that had beset them on his fingers.

Aryun snapped to attention, suddenly very serious. “Hero Gold-Hair!” she said, smiling happily. “I, Aryun Keats, shall be the one to deliver you your good luck!”

“You’re going to be the one to bring me good luck?” Hero Gold-Hair repeated dubiously. “*You?*”

“I am indeed!” said Aryun, thumping her fist against her chest as if to dispel all uncertainty. “Just leave it to me!”

“Fine…” Hero Gold-Hair said. “Let’s see what you’ve got, then.”

“I most certainly will! And…here I come!” Aryun pressed her breasts up close to Hero Gold-Hair, beaming pridefully as her hefty bosom—rivaled only by Tsuya among all of the party—squished against his back.

“Keats…” Hero Gold-Hair said.

“Yes! How may I be of assistance?”

“Don’t tell me…was *this* what you meant by *luck*?”

“H-Huh?” said Aryun, a confused expression coming to her face. “B-But Hero Gold-Hair…don’t you feel lucky to be able to enjoy the sensation of my breasts against your back?”

“No, think about it for a second…” Hero Gold-Hair said. “If I’ve been carrying you on my back all day, what do you think those breasts of yours have been touching the whole entire time?”

“Wh-Wha…?” said Aryun, blinking in perfect incomprehension.

“Come on, Aryun! You can figure *that* one out, can’t you?” said Wuha Gappoli. “Wait…” she added, a look of pity coming over her expression as she took stock of Aryun’s face. “Maybe she can’t…”

“It really does seem like she has no idea…” Valentine agreed, looking over at Aryun with a near-identical expression to Wuha’s.

“W-Would you please stop looking at me like that?!” Aryun begged, clutching her head in anguish. “I-I’m not sure how much of those sad eyes my heart can take!”

As for Tsuya, meanwhile, she began striding briskly towards Aryun. “Oh, Aaaryun…” she said, grabbing the djinn firmly by the shoulder.

“Um…M-Madame Tsuya?” Aryun said, fearfully looking behind her to see Tsuya’s smiling face looking back at her…although something in her eyes didn’t seem mirthful at all.

“What was thaaat I heard you were pressing up against Hero Gooold-Hair’s back?” Tsuya asked, fixing Aryun Keats with a glare cold enough to freeze water. “You wouldn’t care to repeeeat yourself, would you?” Her words sounded gentle enough on the surface, but Tsuya was doing nothing to hide the irritation steeped into every syllable.

“A-A-Ah!” Aryun Keats stammered, flailing her arms and legs from her perch on Hero Gold-Hair’s back. “I-I-I’ve really done it now! I-I-It seems I’ve made a critical miscalculation!” she said, struggling to free herself from Tsuya’s grip. No matter what she did, though, Tsuya’s hand held on tightly.

Valentine and Wuha Gappoli put their heads together as they watched from a short distance away.

“Seriously, what a moron…” Wuha whispered, stealing a glance at the action. “Doing something like that right under Tsuya’s nose…”

“You’re not wrong…” Valentine whispered back. “Even *I* can’t

handle Tsuya in her psycho girlfriend mode—not while I'm stuck in my power-saving form, at any rate…"

"S-S-Stop whispering to each other and help me! Please!" begged Aryun, extending her arm out towards Wuha and Valentine.

Just then, Hero Gold-Hair's attention was pulled from the group's antics by Riliangiu's voice speaking in his head. "*Hero Gold-Hair…may I have your attention for a moment?*"

"H-Hm?" Hero Gold-Hair replied, pressing his right index finger to his temple as he focused on the telepathic conversation. "Y-Yes, but give me a second… Hey everyone!" he said, raising his voice over the rest of the party. "Keep it down for a minute, would you?!"

The party all froze in place at once. Silence returned to the forest road.

"All right, Riliangiu," Hero Gold-Hair said. "Sorry for the holdup. You have something to tell us?"

"*I do,*" Riliangiu reported. "*I've begun scouting the area ahead, but there's something strange happening in the west…*"

"Something strange?" Hero Gold-Hair furrowed his brow.

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Hero Gold-Hair's party made their way west along the road, following Riliangiu's instructions. All the while, Hero Gold-Hair carried Aryun on his back, with Tsuya right behind him looking over the map as she walked.

"Hey, Tsuya," Hero Gold-Hair said. "Have we reached the spot where we're supposed to find Riliangiu's *something strange* yet?"

"Let me seeee…" Tsuya said, looking back and forth between the map and the road before pointing ahead with her finger. "According to the maaap, it should be juuust around the next right turn…"

"The next right turn…" Hero Gold-Hair repeated. "That should be that narrow path through the divide in the cliff, if I'm not mistaken. Once we're past that we'll be in the western demons' territory, but I don't remember anything about the place being *strange*…" He racked his brain, lowering his head to consider his memories as he walked, still proceeding along as Riliangiu had told them.

When he reached the bend in the road, however, Hero Gold-

Hair stopped in his tracks. There, ahead of them, was the narrow crack dividing the cliff face in two and the path leading on between the sides. Just a short way in, however, was a stone building standing imposingly before them, completely sealing off the pass.

"Well..." Hero Gold-Hair remarked, staring wide-eyed at the new obstacle ahead of them. "I suppose *that* certainly counts."

Tsuya touched her pointer finger to her cheek, trying to recall some memories of her own. "Doesn't this building kiiinda look like a magic beeeast?" she mused. "Yooou know...that legendary magic beast from the kiiingdom of Indol! What was it caaalled again...?"

"Oh! Now that you mention it, you're right!" Wuha Gappoli nodded in recognition. "The legendary Divine Beast of Indol! It's called the Liorn, right? Or something like that, anyway..."

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Inside the building, in the control room located behind the lion-shaped structure's right eye, a small humanoid figure watched through a magic screen as Hero Gold-Hair's party approached and came to a stop. Thanks to the magic gem-powered projectors hidden in the building's front, this screen gave her a clear view at everything coming down the road.

"Well, well..." the girl said. "Looks like a couple more suckers have come our way!" The girl looked young, not yet a full adult, and possessed the distinctive ears and tail of the fox demon tribe, covered in soft bronze fur. Her outfit—a cheongsam dress worn with long trousers—was the same bronze color as her fur.

"Leave it to my big sisters Kintsuno and Gintsuno to come up with a brilliant idea like this!" the girl said to herself, lifting her arms in the air as she grinned with fervent joy. "This road is the one and only path leading from human territory to the lands that the western demons control. If we build a barrier here, we can scam travelers out of their money just by calling it a checkpoint toll! Why, there's no one more devious in all the land, or my name's not Dotsuno the Bronze!"

Dotsuno the Bronze—a young girl of the demon fox tribe and something of a younger sister figure for Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver. Although she was not related to the infamous duo by blood, she was as determined as anyone to

give her sisterly support for their ambitions towards the revival of their ruined village.

"Oh!" Dotsuno said. "I guess I'd better do my part too! Let's see..." Clearing her throat, she pressed a button on the control panel.

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"There wasn't anything like this here before, was there?" Hero Gold-Hair asked.

"I don't thiiink so..." Tsuya confirmed, looking blankly between the map in her hands and the obstacle blocking the party's path. "It isn't on the maaap either..."

Just then, the party was interrupted by a girl's voice coming from the strangely shaped building. "*A-Ahem! Is this thing on? You there, in front of the checkpoint! Can you hear me?*"

"Hm?" said Hero Gold-Hair.

"What was thaaat?" wondered Tsuya.

The party all looked up at the sound of the voice. "*Good! Seems like I'm coming through!*" it continued. "*Um... This is a checkpoint! If you wanna pass, you've gotta pay the toll!*"

"A toll?!" Hero Gold-Hair and company all exclaimed in unison.

"*That's right! A toll!*" the voice replied. "*Oh, and don't go getting any bright ideas about forcing your way through! I'll have you know this entire building is one giant man-made magic beast!*" As if to demonstrate, the building slowly reared up, the checkpoint barrier itself serving as its hind legs. The four-legged lion-shaped building—or, perhaps, the man-made magic beast—opened its mouth, menacing its unfortunate victims. "*So what's it gonna be? Play nice and hand over the money? Or do you wanna take your chances against my magic beast? Now personally I don't mind either way...but just between you and me, I'd go with the first one if you value your lives!*"

Somehow, the voice gave the distinct impression that the speaker was certainly enjoying herself.

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Inside the artificial magic beast's control room, Dotsuno was having the time of her life. *This magic beast's movement is powered by all the magic gems big sisters Kintsuno and Gintsuno*

*collected!* she thought. *We're still short on magic gems, actually, so it can't fly yet...or really move at all...but it's more than enough to intimidate losers like them! Everyone I've tried it on so far has been so frightened they paid the toll right away!*

"Now..." she said, turning back towards the magiphone. "About that toll..."

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"*Place it on the ground, right in front of the magic beast!*"

With Aryun still slung over his back, Hero Gold-Hair considered the mysterious building's demand. "Why should we have to pay the toll?" he said. "It's not like we were going to western demon lands, anyway."

"That's riiight!" Tsuya nodded. "*We* just wanted to see what the straaange thing Riliaaangiu spotted was..."

"I guess that one's settled!" said Wuha Gappoli, resting her head back on her hands as she turned around to face the direction they had come from. "Ready to get back to the road, Hero Gold-Hair?"

"Sounds good to me!" Hero Gold-Hair agreed, turning around himself.

Before they could depart, however, Aryun's hand shot up in the air. "E-Excuse me!" she said. "Perhaps we might stop here for a little while?"

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"Well, that gave me a shock!" Dotsuno said, breathing a sigh of relief up in the control room and correcting her sitting posture. "I didn't expect them to turn around and start to leave! But at least it seems like they've thought better of it..."

On the screen, she could see Hero Gold-Hair and company making their way back towards the magic beast, seemingly changing their minds about their decision to walk the other way.

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"You want me to bring you right up to this man-made magic beast thing?" Hero Gold-Hair asked as he approached the contraption one step at a time, feeling the way in front of him with his toes, hunched over with Aryun on his back. "What do

you have in mind, Keats?”

“Just something I was wondering…” Aryun said, reaching out to touch the so-called magic beast. As Hero Gold-Hair moved forwards, her hand drew closer and closer, one step…and then another…until finally her hand made contact with the creature’s foot.

Instantly, a window appeared in Aryun’s field of view:

◇Demon Fox Clan Artificial Magic Beast Acquired◇

“I knew it!” Aryun said. “This artificial magic beast of theirs *does* count as a vehicle!”

“*That’s* a vehicle?” Hero Gold-Hair said.

“So it seems!” Aryun declared. “After all, I just now acquired its form! From now on, I’ll be able to transform into this artificial magic beast whenever I need to!” Deftly navigating through the window interface, Aryun Keats began looking over the internal construction of her new vehicle form.

“That’s our carriage djinn for you!” Wuha Gappoli said, clapping her hands together. “You can instantly copy the schematic of any vehicle just by touching it, right? And then you can transform into it whenever you want!”

“That’s right!” Hero Gold-Hair exclaimed. “It’s been a while since you’ve turned into anything other than a carriage, so I forgot you had that convenient feature!”

“It certainly is convenient, I suppose,” Aryun mused. “But that ability’s the reason we carriage djinns were…we were…” The words, however, caught in her throat.

Aryun Keats was a carriage djinn, a rare species even among the elusive djinn folk. In the present day, hardly any existed in the world. Most of them had been abducted, taken by villains seeking to use that very convenient ability for their own evil ends. Aryun, too, had found herself at the mercy of such a villain more than once over the course of her life. Her body went stiff as the memories of those times came flooding back. She began to tremble…

“Keats! Are you okay?” Hero Gold-Hair asked.

“Ah… Yes… Well…” Aryun stammered, stumbling over her words.

“Look. If there’s something troubling you, you can always talk to me about it,” Hero Gold-Hair said, looking back over his shoulders at the trembling djinn. “I’m a Hero, after all! You’re one of my companions, and I’m gonna protect you if it’s the last thing

I do! There's nothing to worry about as long as I'm around!" he added, laughing confidently.

Hero Gold-Hair's bold proclamation echoed in the depths of Aryun Keats's heart.

*Protect me...?* she thought. *You're...going to protect me?*

Once before, another person had told Aryun those exact words, only to betray her and sell her off to people interested in using her abilities.

All those bad memories and more kept playing over and over again in her mind, until the sound of Hero Gold-Hair's bold laughter cut through the haze and dispelled those thoughts from her mind. "Ha ha ha ha hah!"

"That's right... Hero Gold-Hair has never betrayed me, not even once..." Aryun muttered. "Is it... Is it really all right for me to be one of your companions?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Hero Gold-Hair declared, smiling. "Of course it is, you idiot!"

While Hero Gold-Hair was helping Aryun through her sudden bout of trauma, meanwhile, Valentine had been peering over the carriage djinn's shoulder at the window displaying the schematic for the artificial magic beast. "So..." she said. "These are the internals of that hunk of rock of ours, are they?"

"Oh, yes!" Aryun, who had finally returned to her senses, turned her attention back towards the window. "Although...why do you ask, Lady Valentine?"

As her power-saving mode left her child-sized, Valentine needed to crawl on top of Wuha Gappoli's back in order to get a good look at the window. "Just something I've been wondering..." she said. "That area, right there. Could that possibly be what I think it is?" she asked, pointing at a spot on Aryun's schematics.

"Why yes, I believe it is!" Aryun said, nodding energetically as she realized what Valentine had in mind...

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Inside the control room, Dotsuno watched the scene playing out at the foot of the magic beast, puzzling over the party's strange behavior. "What in the world are those people doing?" she wondered. "I don't see any sign of them giving us money, but it doesn't seem like they're turning back again either..."

Dotsuno crossed her arms, tilting her head this way and that

as she tried to work out what Hero Gold-Hair and company were doing. Soon enough, however, the group seemed to have had enough waiting around and once again started to move.

"Wait... What are they doing now?" Dotsuno asked. "They're all backing away except for that little girl...*she's* coming straight for the magic beast..." Indeed, the projection showed a clear image of Valentine in her miniature form walking towards her alone. "What's the big idea? There's nothing a girl that little could possibly do against a magic beast as big as mine!"

Alas, at this point Dotsuno could not have foreseen her adversary's next move. She watched impatiently as Valentine drew nearer and nearer to the stone machine.

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"Let's see..." Valentine said, stepping closer to the artificial magic beast as the giant stood there immobile, reared up on its hind claws. "The blueprint said it was right about *here*, yes?" She looked up at its stomach, casting about for something in particular. "No doubt about it...I can feel the presence of magic gems wafting towards me from right there..."

Valentine licked her lips, barely able to restrain herself a moment longer. "Hee hee hee!" she giggled. "Ohhh, that looks *delicious*..."

Reaching up with both arms towards the object of her desire, Valentine fired scores of dark threads from the palms of her hands. The threads stretched out towards the midsection of the artificial magic beast, puncturing rock and ripping its body apart in a single go.

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Inside, Dotsuno suddenly found herself assaulted with an attack of alarming force. "Wha-wha-whaaaa?!" she cried. "What in the world was *that*?!" Unable to comprehend what was happening, Dotsuno tumbled out of her chair, falling forwards as attack after attack continued to rock the body of the artificial magic beast, not giving her any opportunity to pull herself to her feet.

"*Yip yip yip!!!*" the fox girl cried, reduced to senseless confusion.

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Valentine's threads of darkness pierced the magic beast time and time again, until its abdomen lay in utter ruin.

"Yes!" Valentine exclaimed. "There it is!" Focusing in on her target once again, she lashed out with her threads for one more attack, sending a great clump of something rattling out of the crumbled stone. It landed on the forest floor with a *thump*, shining with violet light. Valentine's face broke out into an enormous grin.

That mass was none other than the magic gems that had been powering the stone creature, all fused into one misshapen orb.

"Aha! Oh, it's such a *big* one!" Valentine cried out with delight, rubbing her hands against her cheeks with excitement. "How long has it been since I've had a feast like *this*?" Color rising to her face, she leaped for joy all around the giant magic gem. For a short while she amused herself by stroking her fingertips along its contours, gazing lovingly into its resplendent depths, but soon her appetite could no longer wait.

"Hee hee hee hee hee..." she laughed. "Now...time to dig in!"

The little girl opened her mouth wide...

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In the control room, Dotsuno had finally managed to pull herself to her feet as the violent shaking died down. When she saw what was happening in the window displayed by the projector, however, she went completely stiff.

"I-Impossible..." Dotsuno said.

Dotsuno watched as Valentine began to very literally devour the oversized magic gem, chewing and chomping greedily as it vanished down her throat. For a while, Dotsuno could only stare in disbelief at the sight playing out before her eyes.

"Sh-She's eating it!" she said. "A-And then she's going to eat *me*! I'd better get out of here!!!"

Dotsuno wasted no time. Assuming her bestial form, she transformed into a demon fox and ran from the control room at breakneck speed. She squeezed herself through the emergency exit, making a mad dash straight for the forest. Without looking back even once at the magic beast, she ran like the wind until

she was well and truly out of sight.

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Some time later, Tsuya surveyed the scene before her with a jubilant smile on her face. “Ah ha haaa! Just loook at all of them!” she cheered, marveling at the collection of treasure they had extracted from the wreckage of the artificial magic beast.

“I thought we might find *some* money inside, since that voice was saying something about a toll and all, but I wasn’t expecting anything like *this*!” Hero Gold-Hair said, laughing as he emerged from inside the beast with yet another sack of valuables slung over his shoulder. “I’d been worried about how we were going to make it with hunting suddenly out of the picture, but with this haul I think we’re going to be all right.”

“Oh, yeees!” Tsuya exclaimed, making sure to count the items as she transferred one after another to her Bottomless Bag, beaming from ear to ear as she worked. “We won’t have to worry about money for a whiiile, now!”

Behind Tsuya, Valentine lay on the ground with her arms and legs splayed out, a deeply contented expression on her face. “And with a magic gem like *that*, I won’t have any reason to worry about magic depletion for quite some time!” Valentine had abandoned her power-saving mode for the time being and was luxuriating in the glory of her natural form.

“That’s right!” Wuha Gappoli said, looking over at Valentine. “You used to look like that all the time, Valentine! I’d gotten so used to only seeing you in your power-saving mode, I’d completely forgotten what you actually look like!”

“Hee hee hee! Me too, honestly!” Valentine said, an oddly bewitching smile crossing her beautiful face. Wuha Gappoli couldn’t help laughing as Hero Gold-Hair emerged once more from the magic beast with yet another sack of loot.

“Well!” he said, setting it down in front of Tsuya and clapping the dust off his hands. “That looks like the last of it!”

“*Hero Gold-Hair!*” came Aryun Keats’s telepathic voice as a carriage appeared behind Hero Gold-Hair. “*I’m ready to depart at any time!*”

“Is your injury all better, Keats?” Hero Gold-Hair asked. “It’s all right to rest some more if you need it, you know.”

“*No, no!*” Aryun insisted, her voice sounding even more

chipper than usual somehow. “*Thanks to you, Hero Gold-Hair, I’m happy to say that I am perfectly healed!*”

“In that case, I guess we’re riding Keats for the rest of the day,” Hero Gold-Hair declared. “Everyone, hop aboard!”

“Yes, sir!” the party all replied.

Soon, Aryun Keats was back on the road, with Hero Gold-Hair and company safely on board. They turned around the way they had come, setting off into the wild blue yonder.

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That night, Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver stared in disbelief as they arrived on the scene. The artificial magic beast that had stood there blocking the road just that morning lay in ruins. Someone had even pulled it unceremoniously to the side of the path where it wouldn’t get in the way of traffic.

“Wh-What in the devil’s name happened here?” Kintsuno asked.

“D-Don’t look at me!” Gintsuno insisted. “And for that matter, where did Dotsuno get to?”

The two looked around every which way, but Dotsuno was nowhere to be found.

“Big sister Kintsuno…” Gintsuno said, pointing to a spot in the debris of the magic beast. “Look…”

Kintsuno hurried over as well, getting a closer look. “This is where we put all those magic gems to use as a fuel source, isn’t it…” she said.

“That’s right…” said Gintsuno. “But it looks like the magic gems are gone without a trace…”

“No way…” Kintsuno stared in disbelief. “But who could have walked away with a fused magic gem as big as that? And it had a high level of purity too… I doubt anyone could have split it apart…”

“If someone left with a magic gem like that, you’d expect it to leave *some* kind of trail…” Gintsuno mused. Holding up her hands in front of her, she cast a Search spell to see what she could find in the immediate area. With no obvious leads, however, all she could do was scroll randomly through the map, hoping to find something.

Next to her, Kintsuno gave the ruined stone form another look. “All of the tolls we collected have vanished too…” she said.

“No sign of our treasure anywhere. I don’t want to believe it, but I think it might actually be gone…”

“But…what about the revival of the demon fox clan?” Gintsuno wailed.

The two sisters clutched their heads in despair, helplessly at a loss. Only the hulking ruin of the magic beast was there to witness their despair…

# Chapter 4: Garyl and the Second Princess —Top Secret

◇The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode—Western Highway◇

A single carriage made its way through a forest, pulled by a slender equine magic beast with a young man holding the reins, skillfully driving along the rough stretch of road. He wore a cloak, its hood pulled up to hide his face.

On the front of the carriage, the small window beside the driver opened just enough to allow the woman inside to peek out—the Second Princess of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. “The kingdom we’re headed to is a place called Britland. They’ve been a center of magical research for ages, and on good enough terms with our kingdom to regularly collaborate on projects. There’s even been talk that Britland might become part of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode at some point in the future,” she said, speaking quietly so that only the driver could hear what she was saying. “But now, that man…my father…has his eye set on one of Britland’s magic laboratories. By the sound of things, he’s been up to his usual mischief.”

“Mischief? What do you mean?” the driver asked, taking care to speak quietly as well.

“Well…” the Second Princess answered, “I’m sure you’ve heard of the way he used to divert the kingdom’s resources for his own criminal ends. It seems like one of the things he was doing with that money was bribing the laboratory in question to use the facilities for all kinds of crazy projects. He kept that up until the Britlandish government figured out what he was doing. It was a big enough scandal at the time that it seemed like they might cut off diplomatic relations on the spot…and they might have, if this hadn’t been back when we were still at war with the Dark Army. Britland is a small kingdom that shares a border with the Dark One’s domain. Without the support of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, they’d have no way of repelling an attack by the Dark Army. Fortunately for us, my sister ascended the throne not long after the old king’s misdeeds came to light, and now relations between our kingdoms are harmonious once more.”

The Second Princess stood up in the carriage and opened the window wide, agilely squeezing her body through the opening and onto the driver's seat next to the man holding the reins.

"And now there are rumors that his allies have been seen coming and going from the same laboratory..." the man confirmed, glancing over at the princess from beneath his hood. "Our mission this time is to see if there's any truth to that story, right?"

"That's about the long and short of it," the Second Princess replied, then smirked. "But I'm wondering...why is it that *you're* the one coming along with me this time, Garyl?"

"I'm not sure what to tell you!" Garyl—the man driving the carriage—said, smiling an easygoing smile reminiscent of his father. "Because Captain MacTaulo ordered me to, I guess?"

"Well, sure, I suppose..." the Second Princess conceded. "And they *do* say you're the best knight in the kingdom, so I wouldn't call it an error on his part, exactly..." *I guess I'll just have to grill my older sister about it once I get home...* she thought, massaging her temple and wincing as she imagined the scene waiting for her upon her return.

"Um..." Garyl asked, taking note of the Second Princess's strange behavior. "Is something wrong, Your Highness?"

"Oh, no, everything's fine," the Princess insisted. "It's got nothing to do with you or the mission, anyway. I guess I'm just feeling a little under the weather. But forget about that... Here." She folded her arms, subtly showing Garyl a piece of folded paper hidden in the crook of her elbow.

*That must be her way of passing on a message without being noticed by anyone who might be watching...* Garyl thought. Following the Princess's lead, he made a large motion with the reins, disguising his hand as he stealthily plucked the paper from its hiding place. He slowly unfolded the paper, taking care to keep his movements natural.

"We're getting close to the Britlandish border," the paper read. "Don't forget what MacTaulo told you, and make sure to call me by my assumed name."

Garyl thought back to MacTaulo's instructions before they departed on their mission. "*These days, everywhere in Britland is under strict magical surveillance,*" the old knight had said. "*Even ordinary conversation will be a risk once you're inside the kingdom's magic barrier. You'll have to take every caution not to be*

*discovered…*"

Out of the corner of his eye, Garyl took another glance at his traveling companion. Ordinarily, the Second Princess looked much like the Maiden Queen, aside from her habit of wearing her hair in a short bob, with the same pale skin and the same color hair and eyes. For their mission in Britland, however, she had changed all of these—cosmetics to darken her skin to a tan, black color contacts in her eyes, and a long black wig to hide her hair. All together, it was quite a dramatic change in appearance.

In her role as diplomat, the Second Princess habitually finished her makeup with a fine eyeliner, neither too plain nor too flashy. Today, however, she had taken pains to affect a natural look, appearing for all the world to be an ordinary and modest girl. Her clothing, too, had been subtly altered from her usual habits of dress. At a glance, no one would be able to tell that this woman was the Second Princess of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode.

*The Second Princess is amazing, huh! She can't cast Shapeshift, so she had to do all of that with just props and makeup!* Garyl thought, before remembering the note she had given him and hastily correcting himself. *Oh, wait, I forgot…I'm supposed to call her Miss Cosuel…and I'm gonna be going by Fang…* And with that, he turned his attention back to monitoring their surroundings.

*Is he scouting the area with just his natural senses?* the Second Princess thought, keeping an eye on Garyl even as she feigned looking the other direction. *Garyl really is something else…*

As the two of them drove onwards, Garyl moved his hand ever so slightly, signaling to the Second Princess without letting go of the reins: *Three pursuers behind us…armed but no sign of an attack…*

Interpreting Garyl's signs, the Second Princess stretched her arms wide and spoke, putting on a voice completely different from her natural speaking tone. "I must say, my throat is getting rather dry, I'm afraid…" she said. "I don't suppose there's a river nearby, is there?"

*In other words, stop for a while nearby and see what they do…* Garyl thought. *Let's see…if I'm remembering the map right…* "I believe there is a river shortly up ahead. Shall I make the detour, Miss Cosuel?"

"Yes, please do," the Princess said, smiling softly and nodding her head.

And so, Garyl drove the carriage off to the side of the main road, towards the river nearby.

◇Meanwhile—Klyrode Castle◇

In the Maiden Queen's chambers, the monarch of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode was busy with some paperwork.

"The report on the Houghtow College of Magic, I see..." she said, picking up the stack of papers and leafing carefully through the pages. "The Third Princess handled this one personally, if I recall correctly."

*It doesn't feel like that long ago the Third Princess would shut herself away in her room every day without fail, hunched over her desk and thinking about nothing but paperwork...* the Maiden Queen reflected. *It makes me so happy, both as a sister and her supervisor, to see her taking the initiative to leave the castle when she needs to...* The kind smile on her face as she looked over the report hardly made her look like a queen at all. It almost looked like the smile of a mother happy to see her family growing up.

"I see!" the Maiden Queen said out loud, thinking things over as she read. "This system they have for their arena sounds fascinating! Perhaps we could use something similar to train the students' combat skills at the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education..."

In short order, the Queen looked over the entire report, then selected yet another item from her to-do stack. This one had a red text reading "*Top Secret*" stamped across the cover, with the folder itself locked by magic.

"And this will be the case the Second Princess is on, I believe..." The Queen placed her right hand on top of the folder, reciting a quick incantation. A magic circle appeared, and the locking spell was released with a quiet but audible *click.*

The Maiden Queen took the folder in her hands, looking through the documents inside. "The Kingdom of Britland..." she muttered to herself. "If the Second Princess's information is to be believed, there's no sign that *his* influence extends to the government itself, but when that man's involved it's hard not to worry. I'm sure the Second Princess feels much the same way..."

She read along, until her eyes stopped on a particular passage. She stared at it, as if doubting her senses.

"Accompanied by...by *who*?!" the Maiden said, suddenly unable

to move. Unfortunately, the document recorded the name of the Second Princess's escort quite clearly:

"*Sir Garyl, Order of Klyrode.*"

"A-And…" the Maiden Queen muttered, reading through the relevant passage yet again as if it might change what was written there. "A-And *how long* is he going to be gone…?"

◇Near the Kingdom of Britland◇

Not far from the road, the carriage was stopped beside the bank of a nearby river. It was growing dark, but the carriage itself was illuminated by the light of a crackling bonfire, with the Second Princess sitting on a fallen tree.

*Rustle rustle…*

Suddenly, she heard the sound of something moving in the grass close by and turned her head to look. To anyone watching, the Princess would have seemed perfectly relaxed and at ease, but in fact she had a knife concealed beneath her seat as well as a bow and arrows hidden in the underside of the carriage. She had situated herself so she was prepared to draw either at a moment's notice should she ever have need.

Nonchalantly moving her hand towards her hidden knife, the Second Princess peered out at where she had heard the noise. She watched as the tall grass parted to reveal Garyl.

"Fang!" she said, breathing a sigh of relief for just a moment. "Finished with your hunt?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Garyl replied. "I'm back with our dinner!" He held up the carcass of a four-legged magic beast, already cleaned and ready to be put on the fire.

"You dressed it by the river, I take it?" the Second Princess observed.

"That's right!" Garyl said, sitting down beside her to roast the beast on the open flame.

*I guess he's holding back from using his beast form just in case someone happens to be watching…* the Second Princess mused as she watched. *I take it he killed the beast with that spear?*

Garyl had only taken a single spear to the hunt—a humble weapon that would have seemed more at home in the hands of a novice adventurer. It was a flimsy-looking thing with a head that seemed liable to snap off in the ground if its wielder ever missed a throw. Garyl, however, had returned with the spear

slung over his back, looking as good as new.

"Tell me something, Fang…" the Second Princess ventured, in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes, Miss Cosuel?" Garyl whispered back.

"I'm just curious… Did you use that spear you're carrying to hunt this magic beast?"

Garyl paused for a brief moment before answering. "Yes," he said. "That's right."

"Hm…?" the Second Princess said, Garyl's response only giving her further questions to ponder. *Is it just me, or did Garyl hesitate for just a second?* In spite of her curiosity, however, she made up her mind that this wasn't the time to pry.

Garyl, meanwhile, was the very picture of calm as he roasted the meat next to her. Internally, however, he suppressed a pang of worry. *I tried to make it* look *like I did it with the spear, anyway, but the truth is I just ran up alongside the magic beast and took it down with my bare hands… I guess it ended up looking a bit fishy though, huh…*

After dinner Garyl went about cleaning up the campsite, using subtle hand signs to communicate with the Second Princess all the while. "*Three observers in area… Armed, but no sign of attack… Same individuals following us all day…*"

"*Message received,*" the Second Princess signed back.

"All right," Garyl said. "I'll take the first watch, then?"

"In that case, I suppose I had better get some sleep." the Second Princess said with a very formal curtsy before climbing back into the carriage to rest. "Don't hesitate to wake me if anything comes up, all right, Fang?"

The sound of rustling came from inside the carriage, as the Second Princess changed out of her clothes for the night.

The Second Princess took advantage of the moment of privacy to look over her equipment. *We'll reach Britland by noon tomorrow,* she thought. *This will be my last opportunity to make sure everything's in order…* Placing the outfit she had been wearing to the side, she retrieved another set of clothes from the back of the carriage to check the condition of its various attached hidden tools.

*We can't use magic on this mission, and I won't be able to check whether these are in working condition…* she reflected. *Well, I have*

*been maintaining them regularly, so it shouldn't be a problem…*

The Second Princess finished her final check and wrapped herself up in a blanket, resting her back against the carriage wall to sleep. This way she could rouse herself at a moment's notice, were an emergency to occur.

*I guess I should rest my body while I can, while Garyl takes first watch*… she thought. And hugging her knees close to her chest, the Second Princess closed her eyes.

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Inside the carriage, the Second Princess roused from her slumber.

"Time to change watch, I suppose…" she said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Looking up, however, she was shocked to see the rays of the morning already streaming through the carriage window.

"It's sunny…?" she muttered, her groggy mind still spinning in circles. "But why? It was nighttime just a second ago…" Then, finally, it hit her. Her eyes snapped open. "A-Ah! It's morning!" she exclaimed, jumping up to her feet.

By habit the Second Princess kept her schedule with perfect aplomb, always finding the most efficient solutions to any problems that should come up and quickly correcting course. It was this sheer competence that had earned her her position. Finding now that she had uncharacteristically overslept, she bolted outside without a thought for her morning routine. *I don't believe it! I never oversleep! And while we're on a secret mission, no less!*

"I-I'm so sorry!" The Second Princess said, leaping out of the carriage and landing forcefully on the ground below. "I-I must have overslept…" She was wide-eyed and frantic, her forehead sticky with sweat, but Garyl greeted her with a cheerful wave and an easygoing smile.

"Good morning, Miss Cosuel!" Garyl said. "I made breakfast!"

"O-Oh… Good morning, G—or, I mean, good morning, Fang," the Second Princess stammered, nearly speechless to see Garyl behaving as if he hadn't been on watch for the entire night. She sat down next to him, her blanket still draped around her shoulders.

*Well, at least one of us seems comfortable…* the Second Princess

thought, uncharacteristically unable to calm her nerves in the face of the unfamiliar situation. Garyl handed her a cup filled with some sort of hot drink and she took a long sip, doing her best to get her breathing under control. “Hahhh…” she sighed as the tension finally left her body.

Garyl smiled as he watched out of the corner of his eye, ladling her a bowl of soup from the pot over the bonfire. “I made a soup with the leftover meat from yesterday’s dinner and some wild greens I found,” he said. “Have as much as you like.”

“Th-Thank you.” The Second Princess nodded her head, accepting the bowl from Garyl. *What’s wrong with me…* she thought. *I’m all out of sorts today… I can’t even manage a decent conversation…* It was almost as if Garyl’s efforts were having the opposite of their intended effect. The more he tried to make her feel at ease, the faster her heart was pounding and the more she found herself completely unable to settle down.

The Second Princess took a drink of the soup and did her best to master her emotions. By now, however, she was self-conscious about the heat rising to her cheeks and completely unable to calm her beating heart.

Garyl, for his part, kept smiling the same easygoing smile he had inherited from his father as he set about tidying up after breakfast. He had already finished his meal so he busied himself with preparing the carriage to set out, working efficiently as the Second Princess finished her soup, watching him out of the corner of her eye.

◇◇◇

Later on in the day, the carriage was making its way down the road, the midday sun high in the sky as they continued along. The Second Princess kept a keen watch on her surroundings, her eyes glancing this way and that even as she took pains not to make any obvious movements of her head.

*Once we make it to the top of this hill, we’ll be inside the magic barrier around the Kingdom of Britland…* she thought. *If they’re planning on doing something before we reach the border, this is their last chance…* The Second Princess had woken up that morning in a state of complete disarray, but half a day’s time was more than enough for her to regain her usual cool.

Garyl, sitting next to her and holding the reins, seemed to be

focused on the road ahead, but he too was keeping a sharp eye out for trouble. Suddenly, he spoke. “They’re here,” he said, standing up on the driver’s seat.

The Second Princess had noticed the pursuers’ presence as well. Tossing off her cloak, she hopped up on top of the carriage. *We may be alone on the road right now, but why would they launch a brazen attack in broad daylight?* she wondered, pointing her right hand towards the oncoming assailants. *What are they hoping to accomplish?*

In response to her gesture, the material of the Second Princess’s clothes seemed to gather, moving up towards her right hand. The Armory Dress she was wearing looked like ordinary clothing most of the time, but it was in fact a powerful item, capable of transforming itself into any kind of weapon with a simple application of magical power. The fabric changed shape in her hand, becoming a fearsome magicannon.

Alas for any hope of modesty, but it took most of the Armory Dress’s material to create the Second Princess’s weapon, leaving her lower body rather exposed as she knelt down to prepare to fire. At least her inadvertent exposure didn’t seem to bother the Second Princess in the slightest.



“Leave the left side to me!” she said, taking aim from her position on top of the carriage. Through her magicannon’s scope, she looked to see a veritable swarm of attackers—demons, by the looks of things.

*How did such a large number of demons get so close without me noticing in the slightest?* she wondered, a pang of worry in her heart as she prepared for battle. Still, her aim was true, and a hail of magic bullets—drawn from the Second Princess’s own reserves of magic power—shot down one assailant after another with unerring accuracy.

Garyl, meanwhile, stood tall and imposing on the opposite side of the carriage, longsword in hand. Whenever a demon dared to draw close, one thrust of his blade was all it took to send them back the way they came. His movements were so unbelievably fast that he hardly seemed to be moving at all, standing like a statue as demons fell one after another all around him.

Between the Second Princess’s magicannon and Garyl’s longsword, not a single demon succeeded in reaching the carriage.

“Wait a minute…” Garyl said, a realization striking him as he returned to his guard position from yet another furious plunge into the demons’ ranks. “There’s something weird going on, isn’t there…”

“You’re right,” the Second Princess concurred. “I’ve been thinking the same thing. These guys have just been vanishing into thin air as we defeat them, haven’t they?”

Indeed, once the demons were felled, they lay defeated on the ground for only a short while before seeming to melt away, vanishing into thin air.

*These demons have some kind of material presence, but something tells me they’re not actually living things…* Garyl pondered. *I wonder…were they created by some kind of spell?* He thought of Charun, Minilio, and Belalio—the three magic dolls of his acquaintance. All of them had been created by magic as well.

*These demons don’t seem as real as Charun and the others…* Garyl thought, keeping up the attack all the while. *I’d bet anything they only exist for a short period of time. Which means…*

“Miss B!” Garyl cried. A cloud of mist formed behind him in response, and dutiful as ever, out stepped Ben’ne.

Ben’ne—a swordmaster from Hi Izuru, the Land of the Rising

Sun, who had long since abandoned her physical form to exist as a construct of pure thought. Garyl once defeated her in single combat, impressing her with his strength to such a degree that she chose to follow him as his loyal familiar.

"I believe I was told there would be no need for me on this mission," Ben'ne said, kneeling rather dramatically before her master. "I must say, I am delighted to have you call for me nonetheless." One of the demons drew close to the carriage, and Ben'ne effortlessly sliced it in half with her polearm, not even bothering to rise to her feet.

"There must be something that's making all these demons," Garyl told her. "Do you think you could find it for me?"

"As you command." Ben'ne closed her eyes and focused her senses as Garyl stood in front of her, keeping the demons at bay while she worked.

With the sheer number of demons bearing down on them, Garyl found himself unable to pinpoint exactly where the magic creating them was coming from. He thought Ben'ne would have better luck.

After a period of intense concentration, Ben'ne opened her eyes and let out a breath. "The flow of magic here is exceptionally convoluted," she said. "But with some effort, I believe I have found our foe!" She leaped high into the air, where a large bird was circling above the carriage. "It will take more than a paltry transformation to fool *my* eyes!" she said, aiming a strike at the bird.

The bird tried to dodge Ben'ne's attack, but it was too slow. "Fgwuah?!" it cried in a distinctly un-birdlike voice as Ben'ne's weapon sent it spiraling to the ground. The bird reverted to a demon form in midair as it fell, and all the demons who had been swarming the carriage suddenly vanished without a trace.

"Is it over...?" the Second Princess asked, standing up on the carriage roof. She looked up just in time to see the mysterious demon plummeting from the sky on a collision course with the ground.

"I've got it!" Garyl said, darting over to catch the demon in his arms.

"That fiend is the cause of this disturbance, are they not?" Ben'ne objected, alighting on the ground with much more grace. "A little fall would serve them right, I should say."

"Yeah, it looks like they were the ones causing this," Garyl

agreed, smiling as cheerfully as ever. “But that’s why we don’t want them hurt! There’s a bunch of questions we’ve gotta ask!”

“That’s right,” the Second Princess said, looking down at them from on top of the carriage roof. “I certainly have a number of questions myself…”

“Uh…yeah!” Garyl said, hastily averting his eyes from the Second Princess. “Absolutely.”

“Hm?” The Second Princess said, tilting her head in confusion. When she looked down at her own body, however, the reason for Garyl’s discomfort quickly made itself clear. She had turned so much of her magic power into bullets that her outfit had almost vanished entirely below the waist, leaving her dressed in nothing more than a thong bikini. “Oh! My bad!” she said, quickly reverting the magicannon back to cloth. Then, blushing furiously, she jumped back inside the carriage.

Ben’ne shook her head in bemused exasperation. “Truly, I will never understand this custom of yours,” she said. “There is no shame to be seen in one’s naked skin, I should think!”

“Come on, Miss B, you know how it is…” Garyl said.

They waited outside as the Second Princess finished changing into a new set of clothes.

◇Later◇

The carriage came to a stop somewhere deep in the forest, well away from the road.

“We should be safe from Britland’s detection magic here,” Garyl said, looking around at their surroundings with a nod of his head.

“Yes, I believe so…” the Second Princess agreed.

The two spent a moment searching the area before turning their attention back to the demon currently sitting up on the carriage seat with her whole body wrapped in rope. “Ready to get started?” Garyl asked.

“Yes,” said the Second Princess. “I believe it’s time we asked our guest a few questions…”

The demon, who had regained consciousness some time ago, sniffled between her messy tears. “Wahhh! *Sniff…*”

*From her appearance, she looks like a little girl…* the Second Princess thought, appraising the sobbing demon with a keen eye. *But as young as she looks, she must have a frightening amount*

*of magic power to be able to create that many demons out of thin air...*

"I-I failed my mission..." the girl said between her sobs. "M-Master is going to p-punish me..."

"Your master?" the Princess asked.

"Y-Yes, that's right..." the weeping demon answered. "I-I was captured and enslaved during the war and sold to my Master, who put me under an Absolute Obedience spell... One of the terms of the magic was that I'd be punished if I ever failed a mission..."

"And who is this master of yours?"

"I-I can't say... Not while I'm under the spell..."

Garyl and the Second Princess exchanged a look.

"It looks like we're not getting anything out of her until we do something about that spell..." Garyl observed.

"You're right..." the Second Princess nodded. She pressed her hand to the demon girl's head, chanting an incantation and focusing her magic power into the point of contact, only to be blocked by a purple magic circle which suddenly appeared in response.

"I-It hurts! It hurts!" the demon girl wailed, curling up on herself. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

The Second Princess quickly withdrew her hand at the sight, stopping her spell immediately. The magic circle vanished, and the girl breathed easily once again, seemingly no longer in pain.

"No such luck..." the Second Princess shook her head. "Not with my magic, at any rate. What about you, Garyl? Could you pull it off?"

"I don't know..." Garyl said. "Magic was never really my strong point. But I bet my dad or my sister could do it."

The Second Princess sighed. "Well, this girl's certainly a prime figure in our investigation. It wouldn't do to head into Britland without hearing what she has to say, would it..."

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Garyl and company traveled on through the night, arriving in Houghtow City as the morning dawned.

"I see your house coming up on the horizon, my master," said Ben'ne, sitting up in the driver's platform and holding the horses' reins. Because of the need to keep watch over the captured

demon girl during the trip home, Garyl had left the driving to Ben'ne.

"Mnhhh..." the Second Princess said, very slowly opening her eyes. For a while she just stared off into space as her consciousness returned, until suddenly with a start she realized that she had been dozing off against Garyl's shoulder. "A-Ah! Oh no! I fell asleep *again*?!"

"It's okay," Garyl reassured her, giving her a smile. "She's been fast asleep too, so there's nothing to worry about." True to his words, the demon girl was sleeping comfortably with her head resting on Garyl's lap.

The Second Princess breathed a sigh of relief. *That's good to hear...* she thought. *But thank the heavens Garyl was there to keep anything from going wrong! Who* knows *what would have happened if I had been on my own!* She blanched at the idea, her mind playing out all sorts of horrible situations.

"Hey," said Garyl, seeming to understand what she was thinking. "We were perfectly safe the whole time you were sleeping. You haven't caused any problems, so don't beat yourself up about it, okay?"

"I-If you say so..." the Second Princess said, acquiescing to Garyl's good-natured reassurances and nodding her head. The look on her face, however, didn't seem quite convinced.

Before long, the carriage came to a stop in front of Flio's house.

"Hi, Garyl! Welcome home!" said Flio, who was standing out front as if he had known they were coming.

"H-Hi Dad!" said Garyl, startled for just a moment to find his father already waiting for him as he exited the carriage. "It's good to be back!" He was carrying the demon girl, still sound asleep, in his arms. They had untied the ropes after their attempt at questioning the night before, judging that she was only acting out of fear of the Absolute Obedience spell and was unlikely to resist or run away.

"Who's this demon girl you've brought with you, Garyl?" Flio asked, gently touching the top of her head.

*Pling!*

A sound like breaking glass rang out as Flio's hand came close, and a window appeared above the demon girl's head:

◇Inhumane forbidden spell "Absolute Obedience" detected. Magic dispelled◇

Garyl and the Second Princess stood staring at the words before sharing a dumbfounded look.

“Um…I guess that’s that!” said Garyl.

“Is… Is it already done?” the Second Princess asked.

“Uh…” Flio said, looking between the two of them in confusion. “I haven’t done something wrong, have I?”

◇Klyrode Castle—The Maiden Queen’s Chambers◇

Several days after Garyl and the Second Princess’s return from the Kingdom of Britland, the Princess met with the Maiden Queen in her private chambers.

“So the one who attacked you was a demon girl by the name of Mulana…” the Queen said as she read through the Second Princess’s report.

“That’s correct,” said the Second Princess, delivering her report with fastidious formality rather than her usual laid-back way of speaking. “It seems Mulana is a very rare type of demon with the ability to create copies of demons with her magic. When I looked into the matter, I was told that this ability is unheard of in the Dark Army outside of distant rumors. Even her fellow demons don’t seem to know much. I did observe, however, that while she was capable of producing a great number of these copies, each individual one was quite weak. They vanished when they were defeated, as well. Apparently they turn back into pure magic, to be reabsorbed by the demon who created them.”

The Queen mulled over the information. “I believe I understand Mulana and her circumstances,” she said, returning to the written report with a heavy sigh. “Now, about the wicked fiends who would inflict her with the spell Absolute Obedience, forbidden the world over for its cruelty…”

“Yes,” the Second Princess answered. “With Mister Flio’s help we were able to undo the spell, but it seems she’s lost all of her memories from the time she was under its influence. We tried asking her several times before then, but the Absolute Obedience spell stopped her from answering…” The Second Princess heaved a sigh every bit as heavy as her sister’s.

“This is only speculation on my part…however…” the Maiden Queen said, closing the report and taking out a letter signed *His Majesty, the King of Britland*. “This letter arrived from the Kingdom of Britland right as you were leaving. It seems an

unknown laboratory was discovered within the kingdom's borders. The Britlandish army attacked the facility and brought it under their control. The demons in charge of the laboratory fled during the assault, but it seems highly probable that it was a base for the Shadow Conglomerate…"

"Is that why Britland has been increasing the scale of their detection magic?" the Second Princess asked. "They're expecting those demons to come back to try to retake the laboratory? That would make sense, with everything we've seen…"

"It's all just speculation, though. We still don't have any proof," the Maiden Queen reminded her. "And if Mulana's lost her memories, I'm not sure what we can do…" *But where could they have cast the spell on her, I wonder…? s*he thought to herself. *If it was within the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, our countermagic should have activated to prevent it from being cast. I hate to even think it, but could it have been done in that laboratory in the Kingdom of Britland?* She shook her head, putting the unpleasant thought out of her mind.

"In any event, I suppose that's the end of our current investigation," the Second Princess said. "As for Mulana herself, I believe she can be absolved of any guilt in this incident, considering that everything she did was under the influence of the Absolute Obedience spell. For the time being, I've left her in safe hands. Now, if you'll excuse me…" She bowed, turning to make her exit…only to feel the Maiden Queen's hand grab her firmly by the shoulder, stopping her from leaving.

"Just a moment, Second Princess," the Maiden Queen said.

"U-Um… Is there something else, my sister the Queen?"

"Well…" the Maiden Queen began. "You didn't mention it in your report, but you and Garyl spent two days and two nights in each other's company, did you not?"

"A-Ah…" the Second Princess choked out. "W-Well…y-yes, I suppose we did…"

"And?"

"A-And?" the Princess echoed back. "Wh-What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Isn't it obvious? I want to know everything about what the two of you got up to, of course!"

Grinning from ear to ear, the Maiden Queen launched into a series of questions as the Second Princess, wilting in the face of such exuberance, struggled to find her words. Alas, it seemed it

would be some time before she would be free of her sister's questioning.

◇Houghtow City—Near the Magic Beast Racing Hall◇

Flio stood in a newly constructed building, just outside the Magic Beast Racing Hall. He was clearly indoors, but all around him were trees and other lush vegetation.

"Looks like everything's up and running," he said, looking around and giving a nod of approval. "Of course, I'm just reusing the same system I created for the Houghtow College of Magic arena..." The trees in the building had been created with magic, but they looked and felt just like the genuine article. "Okay, Mulana!" Flio said, looking up at the control room. "Ready to get started?"

In response, a score of demon copies appeared out of thin air, each of them brandishing their various weapons as they marched forwards to attack Flio.

Flio held out his right hand towards the oncoming demons. "Gravitation!" A magic circle appeared at the spot where he was pointing, and in mere moments the group of demon copies had been crushed flat. More and more came to attack, only to meet a similar fate at the hands of Flio's magic. "The demons could use a bit of fine-tuning, but that's the general idea," he said.

Up in the control room, Mulana watched the battle through an image projected on a screen. Both of her hands were extended outwards as she focused on managing the demon copies, twisting her body this way and that to conjure more as their numbers started to flag.

Ghozal crossed his arms over his chest as he watched. "Hrm..." he said. "Mulana's demon copies make for perfect training dummies for the Adventurers' Academy, don't they! And by the looks of things, she has no problem stopping them from doing lethal damage. Still..." he added, looking over at the girl in question, who almost seemed to be dancing as she summoned copy after copy. "I'd only ever heard stories about the demon copy ability before the folks at Klyrode Castle came to ask me about it. Who would have thought it actually existed!"

"I'm just glad my ability is so useful!" Mulana said, beaming with delight as she kept on summoning copy after copy. "I'm really, really happy!"

Mulana might have lost her memories of her time under the influence of the Absolute Obedience spell, but her present self seemed more than satisfied simply to be of use. It seemed like a great relief to be needed.

◇A City, Somewhere◇

In a back alley of a city somewhere in the world was a building made of stone. There, in a room towards the back part of the second floor, shrouded in the darkness of night without a single lantern to illuminate his surroundings, the Shadow King sat in his luxurious armchair, snapping his tongue and fuming about recent events.

"Unbelievable!" he sputtered. "Not only was the laboratory in Britland taken from me, but now the demon I sent to recover it vanished without a trace! Why am I surrounded by useless incompetents?!" He snapped his tongue again, louder than before, and continued. "All she had to do was steal a carriage from someone headed to Britland, enter the kingdom in disguise as an ordinary civilian, and take back the materials and capital we lost from the laboratory—that's all! And somehow, she couldn't even manage a mission as simple as *that*!"

Hidden behind the doorway, Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver watched as the Shadow King ranted and raved. The two of them had hidden their presence with a Concealment spell to prevent the Shadow King from detecting their presence.

"Wh-What do we do, elder sister?" Gintsuno whispered. "He's going to be furious if he finds out we ditched the mission in Britland for our plan with the artificial magic beast..."

"Th-That's true..." Kintsuno whispered back. "But what's done is done..."

"S-So then...what now?" Gintsuno asked.

"W-Well..." said Kintsuno. "That's what I'm trying to figure out..."

# Epilogue

◇Kinosaki Hot Springs Village—Yanagi Bath◇

The Kinosaki Hot Spring Village lay to the north of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. There, seven streams of hot water gushed forth from the earth, each with its own reputed effects. One of these springs was known as the Yanagi Bath.

In the women's section of the spring, Rys, Uliminas, Balirossa, Byleri, Blossom, and Belano had all gathered for a soak in the hot water. Balirossa, who had just finished rinsing off her body, slowly lowered herself into the basin. "The bath at our house is excellent too, of course, but there really is nothing like bathing in a hot spring…" she said, sighing happily as she lowered herself into the water down to her shoulders. Her long hair was done up in a bun, leaving the nape of her neck exposed.

"No kiddin'," Blossom said, sitting down right next to Balirossa, a towel wrapped around her own hair. She spread her arms wide, leaning against the rim of the bath. "Every now and then I get the urge to soak in the hot springs here." Byleri, who was still in the middle of rinsing out her hair, nodded mutely in fervent agreement.

"I suppose it's meowt bad, fur a change of pace…" Uliminas, who was sitting across from them, admitted, not even turning her head to look in their direction.

"Like, now that you mention it…" said Byleri, sliding herself comfortably into the hot water, "for someone who always finishes her baths as fast as she can back home, you've been soaking here for, like, a crazy long time, haven't you, Uliminas?"

"M-Meow?" An involuntary jolt shot through Uliminas's body at the comment, a pink hue rising to her dark-colored cheeks as she looked over in evident distress.



“Well, the waters of the Yanagi Bath have a blessing of fertility, don’t they?” said Rys, poking Uliminas with her elbow with a knowing smirk. “I suppose our dear Uliminas must be hoping for another child from Ghozal, hm?”

“Mreowowr!” Uliminas said, leaping up out of the bath and turning bright red all the way down to her shoulders. “I-It’s meowthing like that!”

“No? It isn’t? Do you really think you can fool us with that?”

“Mrrr…”

“If I’m wrong, then why have you been glued to my hip the whole time I’ve been in the bath?” Rys chuckled.

“Th-That’s because…” Uliminas stammered, seemingly unable to formulate a reply. In fact, she had already calmed down enough to return to exactly where she had been before jumping out of the bath: right next to Rys with the water all the way up to her nose.

Rys and Uliminas were both former comrades in the Dark Army. They were close to each other in age, as well, and had long been on good enough terms to give each other a few friendly barbs. In fact, very little had changed since the two of them had come to live at Flio’s house.

“Um… Excuse me…” Balirossa asked, frowning over at Rys and Uliminas from the other side of the bath. “Uliminas, why *are* you sticking so close to Madame Rys?”

Uliminas, in fact, was so close to Rys that their bare skin was actually touching.

“Like, yeah, now that you mention it…” Byleri said, something in her memory clicking into place. “I mean, is it just me, or has Uliminas gotten in right next to Rys, like, every time we come to the Yanagi Bath?”

“M-Mreow?!” This time, Uliminas’s eyes shot open. “M-M-Meowt at all!” she insisted, frantically shaking her head and waving her arms in front of her. “I-It’s just a coincidence, I purromise you!” In spite of her words, however, Uliminas refused to budge from Rys’s side, sticking every bit as close to her as she could.

Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, and Belano all shared a look and tilted their heads in confusion at Uliminas’s strange behavior.

“Oh, I can explain that!” said Rys.

“R-Rys! No!” Uliminas protested, shooting her hand out to cover Rys’s mouth in a vain attempt to keep her from talking.

Rys, however, caught the arm before it could reach her, holding it in place with a smile.

"I'm sure you know, but we demons have a somewhat difficult time conceiving children," Rys began.

"I've heard that..." Balirossa said. "That's the reason demon men are allowed to have as many as three wives, isn't it?"

"Well," Rys explained. "There's an old wives' tale among demons, that if you bathe alongside a woman with many children, you too can share in her blessing."

"There is?!" Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri and Belano all shouted at once.

Among all the women of Flio's household, the only one so far who'd had multiple children was Rys. It was no wonder that Uliminas had chosen her as the one to bathe—very closely—alongside.

Suddenly, the hot springs broke out in commotion.

"Uliminas, how dare you!" said Balirossa. "Relinquish the spot closest to Madame Rys at once!"

"Meow! I refuse!"

"Oh Ryyys!" Byleri sang. "Like, I'll take two or three more children with Lord Sleip, please and thank you!"

Belano said nothing but simply dove underwater, swimming up right in front of Rys.

"Well, ah..." Blossom considered. "Me and Ura aren't married yet or anything, y'know...but at this point I'm his wife in practice if nothing else, and Kora's been sayin' she could do with a little brother or sister... Oh, what the heck! Pardon my reach, y'all!"

"Oh my," said Charun. "If it really does have such an effect, by all means, count me in!"

"Ch-Charun?!" Uliminas exclaimed. "How long have *mew* been here?!"

Before anyone knew what was happening, the area around Rys had turned into a grand melee, each of the women fighting for the closest spot.

"Hey, that looks like fun-fun!" said yet another voice as Wyne came running towards the water, grinning wildly.

"Young Mistress Wyne, you stop right this instant!" said Tanya, grabbing the dragonewt from behind.

"Ngyahh!!!" protested Wyne. "I wanna get in too-too!"

"Young Mistress, no!" Tanya insisted. "You must rinse your body before entering the— A-Ah! Miss Levana! Wait! That water's

meant for rinsing yourself before entering the bath! You aren't supposed to go inside!"

And so, with Wyne, Tanya, and Levana joining the fray, the scene in the women's bath went from mere ordinary chaos to pure pandemonium.

◇The Men's Bath◇

"Ha ha ha!" Ghozal laughed over in the men's bath. "Seems like things have gotten a bit wild over on the women's side, hrm!"

"I'm glad they're having fun, certainly..." said Sleip, frowning deeply and folding his arms. "But does Byleri really want two or three more children...?"

"Well, I'm sure you'll love them all no matter how many you end up having, right?" Flio said, giving Sleip a knowing smirk. "There's no need to overthink things, whatever comes."

"Hm," Sleip considered. "I suppose I can't fault your logic there..."

"That's exactly right!" Ghozal agreed with another burst of laughter. "There's no need to look so grave about it, you know! But that aside...that was a hell of a job you wrapped up this time, Mister Flio, wasn't it!"

"I didn't do it alone," Flio demurred, lowering his head. "All I did was create the new arena mechanism and draft plans for all the revisions to the city. It was everyone working together who helped make it a reality! That's the only reason we were able to take care of everyone's requests as quickly as we did."

"Hrm..." said Ghozal, rising from the bath. "If you say so, Mister Flio, I suppose we'll leave it at that. Now, if you'll excuse me, as much as I enjoy a good soak in the hot springs, I'd hate to miss out on the Kinosaki Hot Springs Village food!"

"That's right!" said Sleip, standing up as well. "It's just about time to head to the banquet hall, isn't it!"

"I suppose it is," Flio said, following the other two out.

At that moment, the men heard another snippet of the argument happening over in the women's bath.

"...and that's why I should be the one next to Madame Rys!"

"Uliminas! Like, let someone else have a turn! Come on!"

"Meow! Never!"

"We'll see about *that,* won't we!"

"*Gablub blub*..."

Ghozal smirked in wry amusement. “I guess the women aren’t going to be making it to dinner until a while later at this rate…”

“Yes, it seems so…” said Sleip.

“Well,” said Flio, “shall we go ahead of them?”

The three left the bath and went to change back into their clothes. All the while, and even after they had left the changing room behind, sounds of the boisterous exchange could be heard coming from the women’s side.

# Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 17

◇Deep in a Forest◇

Somewhere in the world of Klyrode there was a forest, utterly unremarkable in every way save for the small village located nearby, nestled up by the entrance to the woods. By the standards of the remote frontier where it was located, the village was considered a fairly large settlement, with several well-trafficked roads running through the town center giving it a pleasant, lively feel.

A little ways farther into the forest was a single small cottage. Today, the humble building was playing host to a particularly important group of guests.

"A pleasure to finally make your acquaintance," said the old man who had come to visit. "I'm the mayor of the village, you see..."

Sitting across from the mayor, Hugi-Mugi nodded their head. "We know, yes! Yes, we are very well aware!"

Hugi-Mugi—one (or possibly two?) of the Infernal Four who served under Dark One Gholl. In their natural form they were a type of two-headed monster bird known as a doppeladler. After quitting the Dark Army, they made a home deep in a certain forest where they now lived a pleasant laid-back life along with their three human wives and their children.

Although they were currently in disguise as a single human, Hugi-Mugi's true form was that of an enormous two-headed bird. When they spoke it was with two distinct overlapping voices, a fact which seemed to be causing a certain amount of distress among the village youths who had come accompanying the mayor. The mayor, noticing some of his entourage shooting glances between one another, raised his hand, signaling for silence. Quickly, the others snapped to attention and corrected their posture.

Once the youths were back in line, the mayor turned his attention back to Hugi-Mugi. "I apologize for my intrusion," he said. "I've come on behalf of the village to offer you our thanks, first for driving away those ne'er-do-wells who tried to open that

fake school of theirs to prey on our village, and also for your recent work keeping away the local magic beasts." The mayor stood up from his chair to bow his head low in thanks, the youths who had come along with him all bowing in unison as well.

Hugi-Mugi cocked their head. "We drove away those con artists, yes! Yes, that we did! But what do you mean about the magic beasts, yes? The magic beasts were just a little shocked when the barrier around the planetoid world broke! Yes, they decided to find a new place to live, we think!"

"Ho ho hoh!" the mayor laughed warmly. "There's no need to be modest, Mister Hugi-Mugi! Your wives have told us everything about all you've done for the village!"

"Yes...yes?" Hugi-Mugi said, a look of confusion coming over their face as they turned around to look at the three women they had married: Cartha, Shino, and Mato.

Cartha—daughter of a family of farmers. Cartha fell in love with Hugi-Mugi upon her first sight of their human form, and after a fierce campaign she finally managed to secure for herself the vaunted position of wife. Now she lived in Hugi-Mugi's hut in the forest along with their two other wives.

Shino—a priestess hailing from the same village as Cartha. Like Cartha, she fell madly in love with Hugi-Mugi and now lived with them as one of their wives. She spent most of her days in the village, healing the sick and injured.

Mato—a traveling merchant who was once rescued by Hugi-Mugi when she happened to come under attack by bandits in the forest. She began living with the doppeladler in order to pay them back for saving her life, but over the course of her time with them she too came to fall in love and now counted herself among their wives as well.

The wives seemed to be conspicuously avoiding looking Hugi-Mugi's way, as if all three of them were suffering from a guilty conscience.

*Oh crap!* Cartha thought, as Hugi-Mugi looked back at her and the other two. *I definitely told that lady a story or two about my wonderful husband when I was helping out with the farmwork the other day... That didn't go on to become some sort of overblown village rumor, did it?*

*I-I might have perhaps exaggerated just a bit when I was telling the people of the village about everything our husband does to keep*

*this region safe…* Shino reflected. *B-But really, only a very little bit!*

*I for one haven't been keeping quiet about our husband and his many heroic feats! It's certainly made my sales talks go a bit smoother than they would otherwise…* Mato considered. *I suppose it's no surprise the people of the village found out…*

*Hmm, yes…* Hugi-Mugi thought as they surveyed their wives' faces. *Yes, it looks like all three of them have some idea how this might have happened…* Clearing their throat, they turned back to the mayor and his companions. "Erm, well, yes… If there is anything you need, yes, please let us know. Yes, let us know! We'll be happy to help, yes!"

"Well now!" The mayor smiled. "That's very encouraging to hear! In fact, Mister Hugi-Mugi, if you will, there *is* something I'd like to ask from you…"

"There is, yes? Yes, whatever could it be?" Hugi-Mugi asked.

"Oh, you know…" the mayor hemmed and hawed. "Actually, I was wondering if you might accept the position of captain of our village's self-defense squad…"

"Captain of the self-defense squad, yes?"

"That's right," the mayor said. "Our village has gotten a bit busier in recent years. We've even had young folks moving in from out of town! But it seems youngsters these days aren't as used to fighting. Most of them have never even fought a magic beast…"

"You know, yes," Hugi-Mugi suggested, "we hear they've opened an academy for adventurers in the city where our children go to school, yes! Yes, something to do with fixing a problem with the adventurers' system…"

"I've heard that too," the mayor concurred. "But there's been news of some disturbance near the demons' territory to the west. We need to be ready to respond quickly if some sort of emergency like that happens here, you know! We've been discussing in the village who might be best to entrust with our safety in a crisis, and everyone was in agreement that we should see if you might be willing to do it."

The youths who had come in with the mayor all nodded their heads in agreement.

"Of course, yes! Yes, of course!" said Hugi-Mugi. "Your village has been good to our family, yes! Yes, we would be happy to help with this!"

"Oho! Splendid, splendid!" the mayor cried, clasping Hugi-

Mugi’s hands tightly.

After that there was a brief meeting to discuss the new village self-defense squad, and then, at last, the mayor took his leave of Hugi-Mugi’s house.

“Now then, yes, that’s finished. Yes, the mayor’s finally gone…” Hugi-Mugi said, turning around to look at Cartha, Shino, and Mato, who had been standing by waiting for them to finish. “Why did we feel like you were hiding something in the conversation earlier, yes? Yes, each of you in order, please.”

“Oh! Um…” Cartha considered. “I don’t know, Hugi! Are you sure you weren’t imagining it?”

“Yes, it’s all a misunderstanding!” insisted Shino. “None of us have anything to hide, I should think!”

“That’s right!” said Mato. “I for one haven’t done anything at all out of the ordinary!”

Hugi-Mugi peered at their wives, folding their arms. The three women all smiled cheerfully back, but there was something that seemed distinctly forced about their expressions…

“Well, let’s see, yes…” Hugi-Mugi said. “Yes, we suppose we have until the children get back from school to see if you can’t come up with a better answer than that, yes!”

Needless to say, when Hugi-Mugi’s children returned from school that day, they arrived to find their mothers in an uncharacteristically gloomy mood…

◇The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode—A Town in the East◇

That day, Zofina found herself in a town in the eastern territory of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. She was sitting on the driver’s platform at the head of a fleet of wagons, with Greanyl beside her holding the reins.

“I see…” Zofina nodded in understanding. “The town is surrounded by mountains on all sides… No wonder you can’t use Enchanted Frigates to make your deliveries here.”

“Well spotted,” Greanyl confirmed. “The Enchanted Frigates are convenient in many ways, but they require a large amount of room for arrival and departure. In a town like this, without any space appropriate for a landing area, shipping by wagon is the only way to go.”

Greanyl continued her explanation of the work, steering the

horse pulling the wagon by the reins all the while. Strictly speaking, the reins were not necessary—the wagon was being pulled by none other than Dalc Horst of the Fli-o'-Rys shipping team in his full equine form. There were people watching everywhere in the city, however, and for appearances' sake Greanyl felt the need to keep up the act in public.

Even so, Dalc Horst couldn't help attracting attention. Gossiping voices surrounded them as he pulled his wagon through the middle of town at a leisurely walk.

"Whoa! Check it out! What kinda magic beast is that?!"

"I know magic beast horses are bigger than the normal kind, but that one's just huge!"

"You said it! I bet that horse could pull five whole wagons without breaking a sweat!"

Pressing on past the onlookers, Greanyl turned to ask Zofina a question. "If I may…" she said. "What is it that made you want to work on the wagon fleet so suddenly? From what Mister Flio told us, you've ended up needing his protection due to circumstances of your own. In that case, surely there is no great rush for you to find a job? And besides, I would think Blossom Acres would have more need for an extra worker than we do…"

"I was told the residents of the nearby mountain had everything on the farm well in hand," Zofina answered. "But as for your main question, it's just my personality, I suppose. I would hate to not have any work to do just because I'm under someone's protection…"

*Th-That's right!* Zofina told herself. *A former disciple of the Celestial Plane like myself would* never *be caught dead slacking off work to drink and sleep all day like Telbyress, that rotten excuse for a goddess…* She shook her head, dispelling the image of Telbyress and her dead-end lifestyle that had come unbidden to her mind.

"I-In any event, I promise you I'll work hard to be useful!" she concluded. "And thank you for the opportunity!"

"Hm…" Greanyl nodded. "Well, far be it from me to turn down extra help!"

And so the Fli-o'-Rys General Store wagon team continued on through the streets of the mountain town.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Considering the size of his family, Ghozal's chambers were

expansive even by the standards of Flio's house. Aside from the bedroom, there were three other rooms, allowing Ghozal, Uliminas, and Balirossa to each have their own private space.

That night Ghozal lay on his side with his eyes closed, alone in bed and enjoying the sensation of the soft mattress after his evening bath, when Balirossa opened the door and stepped inside. She seemed to have just finished taking a bath as well, with her hair still wrapped in a towel.

*U-Uliminas did say that she was going to be late coming home, owing to some urgent business...* Balirossa thought.

Mindful not to wake Ghozal, she crept forwards on her tiptoes towards the dresser by the side of the bed. Before she could reach it, however, Ghozal suddenly reached out and grabbed her by the hand.

"S-Sir Ghozal?!" Balirossa exclaimed, caught completely off her guard.

"Ha ha ha!" Ghozal laughed, amused by Balirossa's evident panic. "What's the matter, Balirossa?" he asked, sitting up in bed. "You seem awfully on edge..."

"O-On edge?" Balirossa said, quickly putting on a very fake-looking smile. "I-I wouldn't say that, especially..."

"Well, never mind, then..." Ghozal said, letting go with his hand. "But Balirossa...do you mind if I ask you something?"

"O-Oh? A-And what would that be?"

"Hrm..." Ghozal folded his arms over his chest and lowered his head in thought. "It's just something that's been bothering me since that day a while back..."

"That day...?" Balirossa asked, looking genuinely like she had no idea what Ghozal was talking about.

"It was back when we were restocking the merchandise at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store..." Ghozal said. "Uliminas called me over saying you had something you wanted to tell me, but instead you just ran away on the spot..."

"H-Hwah?!" Balirossa let out a truly undignified noise, her cheeks turning bright red in recognition as her eyes widened to the size of saucers.

Ghozal took Balirossa's hand gently in his, slowly pulling her close. Balirossa found herself completely unable to resist, and was soon swept up into Ghozal's arms.

*O-Of course I remember that day...* Balirossa thought, blushing furiously as she thought back to the occasion. *I was supposed to*

*tell him, "I love you..."*

"So?" Ghozal asked, bringing his face up close to hers and smiling with a vaguely mischievous expression. "What was it you wanted to tell me back then?"

"T-Too close..." Balirossa choked out, finding herself completely unable to move as Ghozal brought his face even closer still.

"What was it?" Ghozal asked again.

"Y-You know perfectly well what I wanted to say, don't you!" Balirossa demanded, screwing up her face like a child. "You're being very mean..."

"Even so, I'd like to hear it from you," Ghozal said.

"Meanie!" Balirossa protested, flailing her fists against Ghozal's mighty pectoral muscles in an even more childish display than her earlier pout before burying her head against his chest. "I..." she said, her voice faltering as she tried desperately to choke out the words. "I... I..." But it seemed that was as far as she could get.

Outside the bedroom, Uliminas stood pressed up against the door, her presence expertly hidden as she listened in on Ghozal and Balirossa's conversation.

*I was the leader of the Dark Army's old intelligence appurratus, the Silent Listeners, mew know!* she thought, grinning deviously as she focused all her senses on the voices coming from inside the room. *Spying on the two of them is like taking candy from a baby!*

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Elsewhere on the second floor of Flio's house, Elinàsze stood inside her room, surveying her handiwork. *There,* she thought. *I've expanded this place with magic, although it really is just a bit cramped compared to the laboratory I made off the planetoid world. Still, it would be a headache for certain if Tanya found me using that place again. I think I'm starting to understand how big sis Wyne must feel...*

It was forbidden under the laws of the Celestial Plane for anyone other than a Goddess to create anything like a planetoid world, a prohibition they took very seriously. Tanya, who still retained a deep connection to the many rules and customs of the Celestial Plane in spite of her amnesia, had tried to impress this on Elinàsze on many occasions.

Elinàsze, of course, already had a plan. She would play it cool for now, then quietly go back to using her extraplanetary laboratory—committing, from the perspective of the Celestial Plane, a fully premeditated crime.

*Knock knock!*

The sudden noise interrupted Elinàsze's thoughts.

"Hello, Elinàsze," came Flio's voice. "Is now a good time?"

"Papa! Of course it is!" Elinàsze said, flinging open the door in delight and beckoning her father into her room. "So, to what do I owe the pleasure?" she asked.

"Well, I wound up getting something earlier today," Flio said, withdrawing what looked like a piece of clothing from his Bottomless Bag. "I thought I might give it to you."

"Is that an Armory Dress?" Elinàsze said, taking the outfit with a smile and looking it over.

"That's right," Flio said. "Junia Van Biel from the Calgosi Coast was showing me how they're made. What do you think of my design?"

"Oh! This is *your* design, Papa?" Elinàsze's eyes lit up. "Why, I love it! I'll treasure it forever!" she said, holding the outfit close to her chest, folded in her arms.

"Well, I'm glad you like it!" Flio said. "But actually, if you don't mind, I'd appreciate it if you put it on for me some time. There's a few things I'd like to test about how it works..."

"Of course, Papa!" said Elinàsze, wasting no time in stripping gleefully out of her current clothes. "If that's what you want, I'll put it on for you right away!"

"E-Elinàsze, wait!" Flio reminded her. "If you're going to change, do it in another room!"

"Oh..." Flio's words returned Elinàsze to her senses, and suddenly she realized that she was standing right where her father could see her, dressed in little more than her underwear. "I-I'm sorry!" she said, teleporting away to the adjoining room.

Flio breathed a sigh of relief as Elinàsze vanished from sight. *I know we're family, but even so...* he thought, wincing to himself.

A few minutes later, a smiling Elinàsze ran back into the room dressed in the new Armory Dress. "What do you think, Papa?" she said, twirling to show off the outfit for her father. It seemed she was very taken with it indeed. "How do I look?"

"You look great, Elinàsze!" Flio answered, smiling at the sight

of Elinàsze enjoying her dress.

“Oh, Papa, thank you!” said Elinàsze, smiling with just the slightest hint of embarrassment.

Elinàsze struck a pose, and then another and another, as if she were putting on a fashion show for Flio’s benefit.

“Okay, Elinàsze,” Flio said. “Are you ready to start testing the dress?”

“Oh, that’s right! Yes, I’m ready!” Elinàsze nodded and held out her arm in front of her, closing her eyes as she analyzed the dress’s mechanism. “All right, I think I have the system more or less figured out. I just have to circulate my magic power through the dress while visualizing the weapon I want it to turn into…” she said, frowning in concentration. “All right…watch me, Papa, I’m going to try it!” Full of enthusiasm, Elinàsze started sending her magic power into the Armory Dress, which suddenly began shining with enchanted light.

Flio’s eyes went wide. “H-Huh?” he said. “It didn’t glow like that when Junia was using it…”

“Hmh!” Elinàsze exclaimed, focusing even harder as Flio watched in surprise. The next second, a massive magicannon, bigger than her entire torso, appeared in Elinàsze’s right hand, the air around it shining with pure concentrated magic. One glance was all it took to see that this weapon boasted some serious stopping power.

“Well, Papa? How about that?” Elinàsze said, looking up at the magicannon and then over at her father with a grin of smug satisfaction. “Pretty incredible, isn’t it?”

“Elinàsze…” Flio said, covering his face with both hands. “Go back…go back…”



“Go back?” Elinàsze asked, innocently tilting her head to the side in perfect incomprehension. She stood there for a moment in thought, trying to puzzle out what had gone wrong…until she happened to catch sight of her own body.

As it turned out, Elinàsze had been just a bit *too* eager to help, and now the entire Armory Dress—underwear included—was contained within the magicannon in her hand. As a result, Elinàsze was currently standing in full view of Flio without so much as a thread of fabric on her body.

Elinàsze froze at the realization, tensing up in shock. Then she teleported away, vanishing without a word.

Flio stared at the spot where Elinàsze had been just moments before. “I guess I should have explained things more thoroughly first…” he said, awkwardly scratching the back of his head as he reflected on his mistake.

After that incident, it would take Elinàsze nearly a month before she was again able to look her father in the eyes.

# Afterword

I'd like to take a moment to thank you for reading this book.

*Level 2 Cheat* is now in its seventeenth volume. The theme this time was changes to everyday life, from all the changes that Houghtow City and the College of Magic underwent at the hands of Flio and his family to new experiences at work. Even Hero Gold-Hair had to deal with changes to the usual magic beast habitats, inadvertently striking down the wicked along the way with a little help from his friends.

Once again, like an old friend, the latest volume of the *Level 2 Cheat* manga adaptation was released at the same time as the light novel. As the author of the original, I'm thrilled to see the manga all the way up to volume ten. Not only that, but by the time this book is in stores, the anime will have begun to air. I for one am positively bursting with excitement to see Flio and his family in fully animated adventures. All of this was only possible thanks to all of your support. I couldn't be more grateful.

Finally, like always, I'd like to thank Katagiri for the wonderful illustrations, the publishing staff at Overlap Novels, and everyone else who helped make this book a reality, as well as all of my readers, from the very bottom of my heart.

Miya Kinojo, March 2024

# Bonus Short Stories

## Rys in the Kitchen

Flio stepped into the house through the entryway, carrying a paper bag stuffed full of parcels. “I’m home, Rys!” he called out. “I brought you the things you asked for!”

But there was no sign of Rys greeting him with a smile and a warm “*Thank you, my lord husband!*” All that came out of the room was Sybe in his unicorn rabbit form, followed by the rest of his family.

“*Snuffle snuffle!*” went the unicorn rabbits as they ran up to Flio’s feet.

“Well, hello there!” Flio said with a smile, placing his bag on the living room table and kneeling down to pet each of them on the head in turn.

“*Snuffle!*” Sybe made a come-hither gesture with his forepaw and ran off towards the kitchen along with the rest of his family. Flio followed behind them, only to find Rys sitting in a chair in the kitchen, apparently asleep. Her eyes were closed and she was slowly breathing in and out.

Sybe and the others all gathered around Rys, but Flio called them back. “Over here!” he whispered, beckoning for them to come to him instead. *Rys is always up early hunting or making breakfast or doing the laundry or other housework…* he thought, a kind smile on his face as he watched her sleep. *She needs to get her rest sometimes*.

Flio waved his finger and a thick blanket appeared, draped over Rys’s body. “Come on, everyone. Let’s give Rys some quiet,” he said, leading the group of magic beasts out of the kitchen.

A few hours later, Rys awoke in the chair with a blanket on top of her and a bag of goods sitting on the table. It took her a moment to understand what had happened, and then shrieked. “I-I-I-I slept through my lord husband returning home!” she wailed. “I was supposed to meet him at the door! How could I have failed him so utterly?!”

By then, however, Flio was already gone.

## The Second Princess's Usual Schemes

The Second Princess flopped hard onto the large sofa in her room on the second floor of Castle Klyrode. "Hahh..." she sighed loudly, letting herself sink into the softness of the cushions. "Finally, I'm released from my older sister's questioning... It certainly was a long one this time!" she said, smiling sardonically up at the ceiling.

The Second Princess had just returned from a secret mission for the Queen—accompanied by none other than Garyl as her bodyguard. The Maiden Queen, of course, had wanted to know every last detail, and she had found herself subjected to a protracted interrogation. "*You stayed the night together, but nothing happened?*" the Queen had asked. "*Really? You aren't lying to me, are you?*"

"Well, I guess it is a little bit my fault," she ruefully admitted. "I should have realized I'd probably end up with Garyl when I asked for their 'strongest knight at single combat.' Everyone knows Garyl's outlandishly strong, even compared to the other knights! But maybe it was for the best. With how well he performed on that mission, nobody would have cause to complain if we made him the Maiden Queen's personal guard tomorrow. And maybe then, the two of them can finally work on getting a little closer..."

A furrow formed in the Princess's brow as she thought. "Oh, who am I kidding?" she said. "This is my sister we're talking about! No matter how head-over-heels she is for that boy, she's just too prim and proper, and with no relationship experience whatsoever, she doesn't even know where to start! I've given her advice when I can, and even deepened her relationship with his parents under the pretext of *cooking classes*, but I'm not sure what else I can do..."

With another sigh the Second Princess hopped up from the sofa, stretching her arms and back. "Well, let's call it another small step towards my sister's marital bliss," she said, smirking to herself.

As cool as the Second Princess came across, the truth was she harbored a deep reverence for her older sister and wished for her happiness first out of everyone in the world. In her own way, deep down she had something of a sister complex.

The Second Princess reached into her pants pocket and pulled out a small memo pad. "I know..." she said, jotting down notes as

she thought. “There’s going to be a pretty big festival soon, isn’t there? I should send the Maiden Queen to observe, in the name of official business. And for protection, of course, who better than Garyl!”

## The Maiden Queen’s Headache

One day the Maiden Queen was in her room in Klyrode Castle, with a very vexed expression on her face. She stood with her arms folded, staring intently at the back of the room where a number of outfits hung from the wall.

“M-My…” she said, “they’re so very… Hmmm…” Her cheeks flushed red as she looked the clothing over from right to left and left to right again and again.

None of the outfits hanging on the wall for her perusal sported anything more modest than a miniskirt—and each had a lot of exposed skin above the waist as well.

*B-But this is the day I’m going to be sneaking out with Garyl to visit his family for the first time in ages…* she thought, leaning forward to get a closer look at the scanty garments. Then, suddenly, from somewhere in her mind, her earlier conversation with the Second Princess came back to her.

“*Say, have you ever thought of changing up your outfit sometimes?*”

“*Changing up…my outfit?*”

“*Come on! Don’t you get tired of going out in the same long-sleeved, full-skirt dress all the time?*”

“*W-Well, I suppose…*”

“*You see? Exactly! It would do you good to show some skin from time to time! And think about how Garyl might react…*”

The Maiden Queen blushed all the way to her ears and shook her head, dispelling the memory. “B-But even so!” she protested, covering her face with her hands and peeking out at the clothes from between her fingers. “Th-These outfits the Second Princess prepared for me… I-I just don’t know if I have the courage!”

“Still…” the Maiden Queen sat down unsteadily, struggling to get her thoughts in order. “I can’t deny there’s a certain logic to the Second Princess’s argument…”

An image of Garyl popped unbidden into her mind.

*Oh…* she thought.

The next morning, Garyl showed up at the Maiden Queen's door. Because they were sneaking out, he had come directly from his own quarters. "Here I am!"

A single beat later, the door to the room swung open. "H-Hello, Garyl," the Maiden Queen said, smiling shyly as she came out of the room. "It's a pleasure to see you, as always." She was dressed not in a miniskirt, but her usual long-sleeved full-skirt dress.

Garyl smiled brightly. "You look lovely in that dress, Your Majesty," he said.

Long ago, when the Maiden Queen had first met the young Garyl, he had given her a great big grin and said, "*That dress looks awesome! I like you!*" When the Maiden Queen remembered that moment, she made up her mind to wear her usual dress on the day's outing.

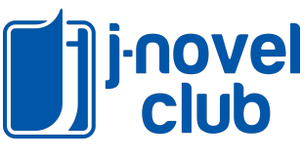
"W-Well then, shall we be off?" the Maiden Queen said.

"Certainly, Your Majesty!" Garyl replied.

"O-Oh... Um..." she ventured. "Th-This is our private time, you know..."

"Oh, that's right!" said Garyl. "Well then, lead the way, Ellie!"

And so the two made their way down the hall.



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by Miya Kinojo

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