Chillin' in Another World with Lv 2 Super Cheat Powers

18



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri


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WITH LV 2
SUPER CHEAT
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Contents

Chapter 1 ∞ Flio's Goddess Problems ..... 

Chapter 2 ∞ The Houghtow City Training Hall ..... 

Chapter 3 ∞ Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought ..... 

Chapter 4 ∞ The Super Beast Incident ..... 

∞ Epilogue ..... 

Side Story ∞ Everyone's Morrow Part 18 ..... 

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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.

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Characters

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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 who lost their 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.

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.



Fina (Disciple of the Celestial Plane)

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



Mulana

Demon with the rare ability to create demon copies. Owes her freedom to Garyl and his companions.



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.

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

Chapter 1: Flio’s Goddess Problems

The planetoid world of Klyrode is a world of swords and sorcery, home to magic beasts and demihumans of all shapes and sizes. In this world humans and demons had been at war for more than five hundred years, until the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, greatest of the human kingdoms, and the Dark Army, the most significant organization among demonkind, signed a treaty of peace. Now large-scale conflict has vanished from the land, and humans and demons alike welcome the days of peace as the two sides make the first steps towards cultural exchange and active intermingling.

Led by the Maiden Queen, its reigning monarch, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the neighboring lands maintain the alliances formed to combat the demon menace in days gone by. As for the demons, they have dutifully followed the edicts of Dark One Dawkson, although some who still cleave to the old credo of “might makes right” have begun to voice their displeasure with the prospect of peace.

Meanwhile, on the Celestial Plane, which oversees the affairs of the planetoid worlds, the goddesses have been busy with one crisis after another, ever since the string of incidents where the firmament of Klyrode was broken repeatedly. And now, to make matters worse, something seems to be happening in the underground world of Dogorogma, where particularly vicious and uncontrollable magic beasts from the various planetoid worlds are sealed away...

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

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

It was early in the morning, the sun not yet crested over the

mountain top even as the sky grew slowly brighter and brighter. Some distance from the peak, Flio's house stood beneath the softly glowing sky.

The light was still dim in Flio's room, where Flio lay on his side atop the double bed he shared with Rys, sleeping quietly.

Flio—a merchant from another world summoned to Klyrode as one of many candidates for the position of Hero. Upon his summoning he received a powerful blessing that gave him mastery of every skill and every spell to exist in the world of Klyrode. Now he spent his days with his beloved wife, the former demon soldier Rys, serving as proprietor of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. The two had a son and two daughters, along with a pair of adopted dragonewts.

Flio slept on, breathing softly, then turned over in his sleep. "Mnnh...mnh?" Sensing something, he slowly opened his eyes, raising his eyebrows. There, looming large in front of him, was Rys's face. She was wide awake, gazing deeply at Flio's sleeping face.



Rys—a lupine demon warrior, once a soldier in the Dark Army. After facing total defeat at the hands of Flio, she made the choice to walk alongside him as his wife. She was utterly devoted to her husband, and something of a mother figure to everyone living at the house.

Rys was lying right next to Flio, her eyes open and a gentle smile on her face as she stared unblinkingly his way. "Good morning, my lord husband," she said when she saw he had woken up, half whispering the words.

Still waking up, Flio stared groggily back at her for a moment before coming fully to his senses. "W-Wah! R-Rys?!" he exclaimed, jolting awake. He went to rise, only to find a weight pressing down on his left arm. Rys, it seemed, was using his arm as a pillow as she gazed up at her husband's face.

Oh, that's right... Flio thought, letting out a breath as he took stock of the situation. *Rys fell asleep with her head on my arm last night...* "Good morning, Rys," he said, patting her gently on the head with his free right arm.

Rys beamed happily at her husband's words, sidling up closer in bed. "It really is such an honor to be able to thoroughly enjoy your sleeping face every morning, my lord husband," she said, burying her head in his chest and rubbing her cheeks lovingly against him. Her lupine tail appeared, thumping against the bed in an expression of sheer joy.

"W-Well, I'm glad to see you so happy!" Flio said, flinching just a little in spite of himself. *"Thoroughly enjoy," did she say?* he thought. *Rys...how long were you lying there staring at my face...?*

"Now," Rys said, smiling happily. "I must be off to hunt a magic beast for today's breakfast. You go ahead and get a bit more rest." Then, with a few more nuzzles against her husband's chest for good measure, she hopped up from the bed, stripping off her nightclothes and changing into her usual dress. Before she could leave through the door that connected their bedroom to the rest of the couples' private chambers, however, Flio called out to stop her.

"Wait up, Rys," he said.

"What is it, my lord husband?" Rys asked, tilting her head

curiously to the side.

"How about I come with you today?" Flio offered, hopping down from the bed himself.

"Oh!" Rys beamed all the way from ear to ear, her tail appearing once more to wag furiously from side to side. A moment later, however, she took a deep breath to calm herself. "R-Really and truly, nothing would delight me more than to grant your request... However! We do need to consider your health, my lord husband!" She clasped her hands tightly together, her voice sounding distinctly pained at the sheer disappointment of what she was saying. "I-It's just, you've been working so late every night, looking over the shop's ledgers and developing new products for sale...a-and on top of that, you find the time to dote on me with such tender love... As your wife, I really must make sure that you're getting the rest you need..."

Flio looked over at his wife with a knowing smile and cast a quick spell, changing his own nightclothes for his outdoor wear. "Thank you for looking after me, Rys, I really appreciate it."

"O-Oh, you..." Rys said. "Looking after her husband is what a wife's meant to do, that's all..."

"Well, I feel perfectly fine this morning, and I was thinking it would be nice to accompany that lovely wife of mine on one of her hunts," Flio said, bringing his own face quite close to hers. "Would that really be such a problem?"

"No, no, not at all!" Rys replied, her whole face turning bright red as she began mumbling indistinctly as if to herself. "I-If you're really up for it, a-and you want to come along with me so badly...it would certainly make me very happy as well..." She paused for a moment, thinking in silence, before giving her conclusion. "Well then!" she said, taking Flio by the arm. "If you're going to say all that, my lord husband, as your wife I could hardly speak against you! Now, let's set out at once!"

Flio smiled to see his wife in such high spirits. "Thank you, Rys. I always enjoy our hunts together, you know."

They kept on talking as they stepped into the hallway. One side of the corridor was lined with windows, doors to the various

residents' private quarters along the other wall. Each of the rooms was magically soundproofed and had spells in place to prevent intrusion. Still, that wasn't enough to completely dissuade certain parties from trying...

As Flio and Rys walked along, they happened upon Hiya farther down the hallway.

Hiya—the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness. Although they possessed enough magic power to destroy the entire world they nonetheless found themselves defeated by Flio, after which they came to live with the others at the house, worshipping the otherworlder merchant as the so-called Exalted One.

"Good morning, Hiya," said Flio.

"Ah, if it isn't the Exalted One himself," said Hiya, holding a hand to their heart and bowing low. "Good morning, and to your wife as well."

"Hiya," Rys asked, "what are you doing so early in the morning?"

"One might say, perhaps, I was embarking on a *morning constitutional*, O wife of the Exalted One," Hiya replied, hiding their mouth behind their fingertips but failing to disguise a distinctive laugh.

Rys furrowed her brows, her suspicion aroused by Hiya's odd performance. "I hate to think it..." she said, "but you weren't by any chance hoping to find someone's door open, so you could sneak inside and possibly catch a peak at some couple in the act of making love, were you?"

Hiya only continued smiling cooly in the face of Rys's accusation. "Oh ho ho!" they laughed from behind their elegant fingertips. "Why, O wife of the Exalted One, I assure you such a thing had never even occurred to me!" But even though their eyes were narrow enough that it was hard to tell if they were open or closed, they seemed to dart to the side...or maybe it was just a trick of the light.

It shouldn't matter one way or another, at least. With the magic soundproofing and the anti-intrusion spells in place, they wouldn't be able to see anything even if the door was *open...* Flio thought, looking between Rys and Hiya and smirking wryly to himself. *Hiya was a real nuisance when they first came to the house, though,*

weren't they? At the time they didn't know anything about sexual relations, and they ended up making a pest of themself learning everything they could. Although by the looks of things, it's still too early to let our guard down...

"W-Well," he said, "in any event, Hiya, please try not to bother the other people in the house. But Rys and I were just about to go on a hunt, if you'll excuse us." Taking Rys by the hand, he led her on towards the stairs.

"I bid you safe travels and good luck," said Hiya, once again holding their hand over their heart and bowing deeply.

◇ ◇ ◇

Flio and Rys left together through the front door of the house. The sun had finally shown its face, bathing the land in golden light. Flio took a moment to look out at the landscape around him—the ranch, and past it, the vast fields of crops and the majestic slopes of Mount Houghtow.

It's amazing to think that none of this was here when we first arrived... Flio reflected, thinking back to when he had first used his magic to teleport the house and its adorning garden outside of Houghtow City in response to a certain golden-haired hero demanding Flio enter into his service. Since then, however, the property had greatly expanded between the house and all its related fields and construction.

"Not only that, but we have an Enchanted Frigate dock built on the nearest mountain to the left of Mount Houghtow..." Flio mused, gazing all around. "This place really exploded in size, didn't it..." With that he took another look over his shoulder at the house itself.

"When we found it, it was just an abandoned cottage left behind by a family fleeing a magic beast attack, remember?" Rys said, following her husband's gaze.

"Of course," Flio said. "We purchased it from the Adventurers' Guild to use as an outpost for hunting magic beasts. Back then it was only a single-story building, and with only a handful of rooms..."

Rys nodded in silent thought.

At first, the only inhabitants of the house had been Flio and Rys. Soon, however, they were joined by Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, and Belano after rescuing the four knights in the forest. Next came Hiya, and then Ghozal and Uliminas. With every addition to the household, Flio used his magic to expand the building, until it had grown to a three-story mansion complete with a two-floor basement.

There were so many people now living at Flio's house that the rooms were divided among a number of distinct family units, each complete with private chambers and separate bedrooms, as well as plentiful storage space.

◇Meanwhile—Ghozal's Bedchamber◇

The room Ghozal shared with his wives was furnished with a bed an entire size larger than Flio's. In demon culture it was acceptable to take as many as three wives, and Ghozal had taken two—the human Balirossa and the hellcat Uliminas. Naturally, they needed a bed big enough for all three of them to sleep in together.

Under the covers, Balirossa tossed and turned. "Nnh..." she mumbled.

Balirossa—once a knight in service to Klyrode Castle, she had since left the order to live at Flio's house. Now she worked for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. She was one of Ghozal's two wives, and the mother of his son Ghoro.

Balirossa felt Ghozal's arms wrapped tightly around her as he lay next to her in bed. "Mh..." *Lord Ghozal...* she thought, a small smile crossing her face. *His arms are so powerful...* The next moment, however, something struck her. *But wait...* she went on, a crease forming in her brow. *Aren't Lord Ghozal's arms stronger than this? And aren't the arms holding me a little...*hairier *than usual...?*

Confused, Balirossa reached out to touch her husband's chest.

Squish!

"It...squished?" she said, even more confused at the unexpectedly soft sensation that met her hand. *What could this mean?* she wondered. *Lord Ghozal's pectorals should be firm and muscular, not soft! This is almost like...I'm touching a woman's*

breast...

Finally, utterly perplexed, she opened her eyes to see not Ghozal, but Uliminas.

Uliminas—a hellcat who was once known as Ghozal's confederate during his reign as Dark One. After Ghozal abdicated the throne, she quit the Dark Army alongside him and now worked at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store in disguise as a demihuman. She was one of Ghozal's two wives, and the mother of his daughter Folmina.

"U-Uliminas?!" Balirossa's eyes shot open. She took another look at the person in front of her, confirming that it was in fact not Ghozal who had been embracing her in her sleep, but her fellow wife Uliminas, lying on her side with her arms wrapped around her—and Uliminas's chest that she was in fact currently groping.

"Mnrw..." the hellcat purred, as she held Balirossa closer in her sleep, her eyes still closed tightly. "Oh Ghozal, mew animal..." she said. "Mew can take me anytime, mew know..."

"Whah?! U-Uliminas!" Balirossa exclaimed. "Y-Y-You've gotten it mixed up! It's—"

"Meow... Meowr body's softer than mewsual today, Ghozal..." Uliminas mumbled.

"Th-That's because it isn't Lord Ghozal at all!" protested Balirossa. "A-Although, come to think of it, where *is* he...?"

◇Belano's Bedchambers◇

In Belano's private chambers, there was hardly an inch of floor that wasn't strewn with some manner of tome or magic grimoire. Belano, along with her husband Minilio, worked as a teacher in the Houghtow College of Magic, and over the course of her studies she had bought a truly prodigious number of books. Belano's bedroom was practically covered; books that she had brought to read in bed occupied much of the space.

Inside the bed itself, three small figures lay back-to-back-to-back: Belano in the very middle of the stack, with Minilio to the right and Belalio to the left.

Belano—once a witch from Klyrode Castle assigned to Balirossa's

company of knights. A small and very self conscious woman, Belano was only capable of using defensive magic. Since quitting the knighthood, she made a home at Flio's house with the rest of her old companions and eventually found a job teaching at the Houghtow College of Magic. She was married to Minilio, and the two of them had a child by the name of Belalio.

Minilio—a magic doll originally created by Flio as an experiment. In terms of appearance he resembled a younger version of Flio himself, hence the name Minilio. He began working at the Houghtow College of Magic as an aide to Belano, over which time they gradually became close, eventually becoming husband and wife and having a child together.

Belalio—child of Minilio and Belano. As the offspring of a magic doll and a human, Belalio was a being of exceptional rarity. Like their father Minilio, they physically resembled a younger version of Flio, but Minilio preferred an androgynous presentation, keeping their gender ambiguous.

Unlike ordinary magic dolls, Minilio and Belalio both had many attributes more in line with human capabilities, and currently they were snoring softly as they slept alongside Belano. The three of them had been up late into the night reading magic grimoires. It didn't seem like they would be waking up anytime soon.

◇Calsi'im's Room◇

Calsi'im's family had a room on the third floor of Flio's house. Every morning, the old skeleton could be seen gazing out the open window at the panoramic view of the ranch and the fields of Blossom Acres, drinking a cup of black tea brewed by his wife Charun. Today, of course, was no exception. Sitting on a chair by the window, he watched as the landscape below lit up in the growing light.

Calsi'im—an old skeleton who once had the honor of serving as Dark Regent while the Dark One was away, and husband to Charun. He had, in fact, already perished once, only to be brought back thanks to Flio's magic. Now he spent his second lease on life living

with the others in Flio's house, occasionally helping at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store as a substitute manager.

"Calsi'im," said Charun, stepping up beside him.

Charun—Calsi'im's wife, a magic doll created long ago by a mage who once served the Dark Army. Calsi'im had discovered her in a state of disrepair and had her restored, and she had accompanied him ever since. Now the two of them were husband and wife, living together in Flio's house.

"Would you perhaps care for another cup of tea?" Charun offered, holding up the teapot in her hand.

"Why, I would be delighted!" said Calsi'im, his jawbone rattling with merry laughter. Then, in front of his eyes, he saw a viscous liquid come dripping down his forehead. "Oh? What's this?" he asked.

Charun looked over to see for herself and sighed. "Oh my..." she said, taking out a pocket handkerchief and wiping away at something atop Calsi'im's head. "Rabbitz, you naughty girl..."

The liquid, it seemed, was a line of drool from the couple's daughter Rabbitz, currently sound asleep draped over top of Calsi'im's head.

Rabbitz—daughter of Calsi'im and Charun. The child of a skeleton and a magic doll, Rabbitz's very existence was phenomenally improbable. She was a bright girl with a perpetually cheerful smile, whose favorite place in the entire world was on top of her father Calsi'im's head. Soon, she would be beginning her primary school classes at the Houghtow College of Magic.

"This girl, I swear..." Charun said. "She really doesn't ever want to get down off your head, does she, Calsi'im..."

"She certainly doesn't!" Calsi'im laughed, reaching up to gently pat the sleeping Rabbitz. "Why, I thought that today I crept to this chair quietly enough not to wake her, but here she is on top of my head yet again! But I suppose I'm inclined to let her—after all, it just goes to show how fond she is of her old pops!"

"Oh?" said Charun, sidling up close alongside him and pouting dramatically. "But you know...*I'm* the fondest of you out of anyone, Calsi'im."

“Oh ho ho!” Calsi’im laughed, wrapping his arm around Charun’s waist. “And I’m terribly fond of you, as well!”

For a while the two simply gazed out the window, smiling happily as they looked out at the land below.

◇Sleip’s Room◇

The bedchambers Sleip shared with his family were much the same as the others in the house.

Sleip—a mighty lichsteed demon and member of the Infernal Four from Ghozal’s time as Dark One. Currently he resided at Flio’s house, where he spent his days managing the ranch along with his wife Byleri and taking part in the races at the magic beast racing hall.

Byleri—the archer from Balirossa’s old company of knights. After the company disbanded, she put her prodigious skill at handling horses to good use looking after the equine magic beasts stabled at the ranch at Flio’s house. Now she was greeting each day with a smile on her face alongside her common-law husband Sleip and their daughter Rislei.

At present, however, the one occupying the large bed shared by the couple was their daughter Rislei, lying on her side alone in the room.

Rislei—half human and half lichsteed, a serious-minded girl and something of a leader of the younger children at Flio’s house.

“Ugh... I didn’t oversleep, did I?” Rislei groaned, her eyes blinking half-open as she sat up in bed, gave a mighty stretch, and cast her eyes around the room for her parents. “Wait, that’s right!” she recalled, lying back down with a smirk. “Papa and Mama are staying the night over at the ranch. They’re not gonna be back this early in the morning.”

She looked down at her outfit, as scanty as it was. She was wearing a tank top above the waist, but nothing but her underwear underneath. “I’m sure Mama would understand, but Papa would be out of his mind if he knew I fell asleep dressed like this. He can be real old-fashioned sometimes, or maybe it’s just that thick skull of his...” she said, sighing. “Still, that attitude of his is one of things I

like about him—not that I'd ever say it to his face! If he ever heard those words come out of my mouth he'd scoop me up in his arms in a second, all crying and wailing my name..."

Papa and Mama sure are loving with each other, though, Rislei thought. *It seems nice...* Before she knew it, the words were out of her mouth. "I wonder if me and Reptor will be like that someday..."

Reptor—a lizardfolk classmate of Garyl, Elinàsze, and Rislei during their time in school. Currently he was working as an employee on Sleip's ranch.

A long moment passed before Rislei came back to herself with a start. "H-Hwah?!" she exclaimed. "Wh-What am I saying?!" Her face bright red, she retreated beneath the blankets.

Oh...but what if it really does *happen?* she thought, her heart beating fast and her mind racing this way and that. *No, no, no, it really is too early to be talking about stuff like that! B-But still...*

It seemed she would be at this for quite some time.

◇The Children's Room◇

The children in Flio's house had their own chambers as well, apart from the rooms set aside for the house's various families. Ghozal's children Folmina and Ghoro slept there, as did Rislei from time to time. The bedroom was furnished with a giant bed, large enough to fit ten children at a time.

Today's sleeping arrangements saw Ghoro on the rightmost side of the bed, with Folmina right beside him.

Ghoro—the half-human and half-royal demon son of Ghozal and Balirossa, although he considered Uliminas to be just as much his mother. He was a boy of few words, fiercely devoted to his older sister Folmina. He had recently begun his schooling at the Houghtow College of Magic, along with Folmina and Rylnàsze.

Folmina—the half-human and half-hellcat daughter of Ghozal and Uliminas, although like her brother Ghoro, she thought of Ghozal's other wife as her mother as well. She was a new student at the Houghtow College of Magic.

Ghoro, who adored his big sister Folmina very much indeed, was

lying on his side fast asleep with his arms wrapped around her. Folmina, in turn, had her own arms wrapped around Wyne on her other side as she slept.

Wyne—a young wyvern dragonewt said to be the greatest warrior among all of dragonkind. Flio and Rys found her one day collapsed on the side of the road and adopted her into the family. She was an adoring big sister figure to Elinàsze, Garyl, and Rylnàsze, as well as all the other children living in Flio's house.

Wyne had been sleeping in this room since Elinàsze and Garyl were young. On one occasion Flio had tried to present the dragonewt with a room of her own, only to be rebuffed. "*I like it here-here! I don't wanna be away-away from everyone!*" she had said. And so, out of Wyne's own strong preference, she had remained in the children's room through the present.

By all appearances Wyne had been sleeping every bit as peacefully as the others in the room, but suddenly her eyes snapped open. She looked over to the person sleeping to her right side. "That's funny-funny..." she said, tilting her head in confusion. "Usually that's Ryl-Ryl's spot on the bed..."

Today, however, it wasn't Rylnàsze next to her but a small girl with long tangled hair, lying on her side with her head resting on Wyne's shoulder, sound asleep. Wyne peered closely at the girl's face, trying to make out who it was, when the door to the bedroom swung open and Ghozal stepped inside.



Ghozal—once known as Dark One Gholl, leader of demonkind. He abdicated the throne to his younger brother Yuigarde and left to live as a human, freeloading at Flio's house. In that time, he and Flio had become something along the lines of best friends. He had since taken both Uliminas, his former confederate in the Dark Army, and Balirossa, the human sword fighter, as wives. Folmina and Ghoro were both his children.

"Well, that explains why I was sensing Mulana's magic power in here..." Ghozal said, breathing a sigh of relief as he glanced down at the girl sleeping beside Wyne. "I guess she must've fallen asleep in the children's room."

Mulana—a young girl of the genesis demon clan, an exceedingly rare species of demon with the power to create artificial copies of many different types of demon. Individually these copies were all very weak, but Mulana could keep summoning them as long as she had the magic to spare. She was living here now under Flio's protection, and also doing a bit of work for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

"Mulana?" Wyne asked, even more confused than before.

"You know Mulana!" Ghozal began. "She was there at dinner last night when... Wait..." Halfway through his explanation, however, the words died in his throat. *That's right...* he thought. *Wyne's so focused on the food during mealtimes, she can never remember anything else that happened...* "Well, this is Mulana," he said. "She's my...hrm...my *underling* at work. She's a good and responsible girl. You don't have a problem with letting her sleep here, do you?"

"She's your underling, Gho-Gho?" Wyne asked.

"Hrm. That's right."

Wyne's face burst into a wide grin. "Then it's no problem-problem! As the head officer of the children's room, I'll take good-good care of her!"

"Hrm," Ghozal replied with an amused smile at Wyne's turn of phrase. "I'll leave her in your hands, then," he said as he turned to leave the room.

That Mulana... Ghozal mused to himself as he walked. *I'd heard her species was targeted by hunters for the magic gems inside their*

bodies. Seems like her physiology's set up to let as little magic as possible escape her body. Even I had a hard time sensing her magic power once she was out of the room... He let out a sigh at the thought. *Although from what I've heard, it was other demons hunting Mulana's people for their magic gems... We might have achieved peaceful coexistence in some regards, but in other ways we're still only halfway there...*

As Ghozal made his way down the halls of Flio's house, eventually he came upon Tanya walking the other direction.

Tanya—full name Tanyalina, a former disciple of the Celestial Plane sent by her superiors to keep an eye on Flio due to the merchant's prodigious magic power. A freak midair collision with Wyne robbed her of most of her memories, however, and now she resided at Flio's house as a full time live-in maid.

"Lord Ghozal, I bid you good morning," Tanya said with an elegant curtsy.

"Hrm. Good morning," Ghozal answered. "Don't I keep telling you there's no need for that kind of formality?"

"I beg your pardon, but I am the maid of Master Flio," was Tanya's response. "I believe it is an essential part of my role to show respect to all the residents of his house."

"Hrm... Well, I can see there's no convincing you," Ghozal said with a sigh. "But that aside, Tanya, are you already cleaning this early in the morning?"

"I am," said Tanya. "I must see to the kitchen first thing in the morning, so that Mistress Rys can prepare breakfast for the house without issue." Indeed, she was carrying a bucket and attached mop as she made her way through the house.

Ghozal eyed Tanya's implements dubiously. "But you know..." he said. "You *could* just use cleaning magic."

"Lord Ghozal, the mop and bucket are the very symbol of a maid's pride and dignity," Tanya said. "I beg your understanding."

"H-Hrm... Well, if you insist, I'll stop prodding you about the way you do your job. Just don't push yourself past the point of reason, all right?"

"I thank you for your kind consideration," Tanya said with a deep

bow.

Ghozal gave Tanya a curt wave goodbye and continued back to his room. *You gotta wonder, though...* he thought. *Tanya was up late last night patrolling the area around the house too. When exactly does that woman* sleep*?*

Tanya had been given her own bedroom like the other residents of the house, but not even Flio had ever seen her use it.

Tanya continued down the stairs to the first floor. The first floor of Flio's house held a living room with a round table at the center big enough for the entire household to eat together at once, as well as a parlor, a storage room, the kitchen, and the baths. Tanya walked down towards the kitchen, pausing as she passed by a large hutch in the corner of the living room on her left side. Sensing something, she turned to look and headed over to the enclosure.

The entrance to the hutch was taller than Tanya herself and decorated with a sign Elinàsze had written when she was still very young: "Sybe's Family Home."

Tanya quietly opened the door and looked inside to see the magic beasts asleep inside. The two ursines, Sybe the psychobear and Tybe the Bear of Misfortune, were both lying on their backs with their bellies sticking proudly in the air.

Sybe—a wild psychobear Flio once met in a random encounter. Sensing immediately that he had no hope of victory against the likes of Flio, Sybe surrendered on the spot and thereafter lived in Flio's house as a family pet. These days he spent most of his time in the unicorn rabbit form Flio had granted him with his magic.

Tybe—a young Bear of Misfortune who grew attached to Rylnàsze during one of the family's trips to Dogorogma and followed her all the way back to the world of Kyrode. Now he served as one of Rylnàsze's familiars.

There atop the two large magic beasts' bellies, Rylnàsze herself lay curled up asleep.

Rylnàsze—the third child and second daughter born to Flio and Rys, beloved by magic beasts everywhere thanks to her incredible talent as a tamer. She was such a prodigy at taming magic beasts, in

fact, that the Houghtow College of Magic saw fit to employ her in their own magic beast pasture even as a new student at the school.

As one of Flio's biological children, it should go without saying that Rylnàsze had her own private chambers in the house as well, but with how fond she was of Sybe and the rest of his family, at some point she had begun spending her nights in the hutch with the magic beasts.

As Tanya looked over the peaceful scene inside, one detail in particular caught her attention. Sybe's mate, the unicorn rabbit Shebe, and their children—Sube, Sebe, and Sobe—were all gathered closely around Rylnàsze's face, four magic beasts in total. They were pressed so close together, in fact, that Rylnàsze seemed to be having trouble breathing, letting out the odd groan of discomfort as she slept.

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

Sube, Sebe, and Sobe—the children of Shebe and Sybe. Sube and Sobe both looked more or less like ordinary unicorn rabbits, but Sebe took somewhat more after his psychobear father.

"I'm glad to see you're getting along so well, but I'm afraid you're bothering Young Mistress Rylnàsze like that!" Tanya said. With a single wave of her right index finger, the magic beasts crowding around Rylnàsze's face all rose gently into the air and floated down closer to her stomach.

Rylnàsze's pained frown vanished from her face, replaced by a look of peaceful serenity. "Mhph..." she mumbled, rolling over in her sleep and spreading her arms and legs out around Sybe's fluffy belly. Sybe brought his right foreleg up, placing it down gently on the back of Rylnàsze's head, almost as if he were petting her hair.

Tanya couldn't help smiling at the sight. "Rest well, everyone," she said quietly, closing the door behind her and heading to the kitchen in high spirits.

◇Elinàsze's Room◇

In Elinàsze's room, the magic lanterns were still lit from the night

before. Elinàsze herself was floating just off the ground in the center of the room with a book in her hands, reading over a passage.

"Let's see... Now, the next step..." Elinàsze gestured with her right hand, and one section of the strange laboratory apparatus set on the table in front of her began to glow with a brilliant kaleidoscope of light. She watched from the air as the light flowed through the four thin pipes on each side of the contraption, looking back and forth between the experiment and her book.

Elinàsze was dressed in her customary unfashionable and disheveled manner. Her hair, which she had let grow long, was tied with a large ribbon, and she was wearing a pair of large round glasses as she read and reread the instructions in her book.

"I do wish I had a more expansive work space for conducting large-scale experiments..." she grumbled as she worked. "There's a limit to how much I've been able to enlarge the space using magic. All I want is a *small* laboratory planetoid, but the Celestial Plane won't even let me have *that*. Still..." she added as she summoned a staff to her right hand, focusing her magic into the tip. "If this experiment goes well, I should have a new item to sell in Papa's store! Mass production is a different story, though..."

Elinàsze stole a glance at the room beside her. Originally this had served as her bedroom, but now there was nothing to sleep on anywhere in sight. The whole room was full of equipment for making magic items, with the magic dolls Elinàsze created moving tirelessly between the stations, making sure the equipment was in working order, testing the finished products, packaging them for sale, and sorting them into Bottomless Bags by type.

"I've made my bedroom as large as I can with the Expand Space spell, but it's still so cramped...and my magic dolls can only handle simple tasks..." Elinàsze said with a sigh. "It would take quite a lot of magic energy to improve my facilities. If I could, I'd love to have some high-purity high-density malicium to work with, rather than the paltry amount you can gather in the world of Klyrode. I suppose I could extract it from the demon lands, but if I did that I would risk disrupting their ecosystem..." She sighed once again, quieter this time, and continued. "There really is no end to the problems...*but!*"

her eyes snapped open, shining with determination. "It's for my Papa's sake, after all! I'll just have to work harder and harder, so that I can become an incredible mage like him! I can't waste my time with something as pointless as *sleep!*"

Elinàsze, alas, still held on to her childhood infatuation with her father even to this day.

◇A While Later—Outside◇

Flio and Rys stood outside the front door, looking up at the house they called home.

"There really got to be a lot of people living here before we knew it..." Flio said.

"It's all your influence, my lord husband!" Rys said in a cheerful voice. "The leader of our pack is strong, so the pack has become strong as well. And as the leader's wife, I'll just have to work harder than ever to keep up!" She took Flio by the arm, bringing herself up close so that his arm was pressed against her ample bosom. For Rys it was a simple expression of love, but the sensation of her chest against him made Flio's cheeks flush distinctly red.

"W-Well, that aside..." said Flio, grabbing his wife's hand in embarrassment and gently removing his arm from her cleavage. "I guess we'd better get started on our hunt, right Rys?"

"Oh! You're absolutely right!" Rys exclaimed. "This isn't the time to be lollygagging about! Let's get started at once!" With that, she quickly changed into her fully bestial lupine demon form. "Now come, my lord husband! Get on my back!"

"Thank you, Rys," said Flio, hopping up.

Rys checked to make sure her husband was properly seated before crouching into a low running stance. "Now, let's be off!" she said, her hind legs kicking off the ground with a sudden burst of speed. "I sense magic beasts just past the second mountain peak. Let's head that way!"

"All right," said Flio. "I'll leave the running to you, then!"

"Thank you, my lord husband! I won't let you down!"

Happy to be entrusted with a task by Flio, Rys let out a joyful

howl and sped up even further, bolting through the ranch in a second and on through the fields of Blossom Acres.

Blossom looked up from her work in one corner of the farm to see Rys's lupine form come streaming by at breakneck speed with Flio on her back.

"Whoa!" she said. "Was that Madame Rys and Mister Flio?"

Blossom—the heavy fighter in the old company of knights from Klyrode Castle. She was Balirossa's closest friend, and naturally quit the knighthood along with her to go live at Flio's house. Blossom was originally from a farming family and excelled at agricultural work, a skill she was now putting to good use running the large plot of farmland outside of Flio's house.

"Take care, you two!" Blossom called out, waving to the couple as they passed, but by the time she had finished the words they had already vanished past the nearby mountain.

"Ah ha ha!" Blossom laughed, her right hand shifting seamlessly from waving goodbye to scratching the back of her head. "Rys sure is fast, isn't she!"

"Something wrong, Blossom?" Ura asked as he walked up from behind.

Ura—chief of the nearby oni village, and father of Kora, who he had been raising as a single father since the death of his fairy folk wife. The village, in fact, was originally a group of ne'er-do-well demons he had taken under his wing. Ura was a man of deep passion and upstanding character, and so strong of arm that he was once considered for a position on the Infernal Four during Dark One Gholl's reign.

"Oh, Ura!" said Blossom. "Nothing's wrong, Mister Flio and Madame Rys just came running by a moment ago, that's all."

"I see! So it was those two! I thought I sensed some kind of presence! Although they're already out of sight, I see..." Ura tilted his head forwards, squinting as he peered off towards the mountain. "As ever, Rys's speed is nothing short of astonishing—not that I couldn't run that fast myself if I tried!" he said with a boisterous laugh.

"Hey, Ura! Shh!" Blossom shushed him, holding a finger up to her

mouth and gesturing towards her back, where she was carrying a peacefully snoring Kora.

Kora—daughter of Ura, chief of the oni village. She was a hybrid, with fairy folk heritage from her mother and oni blood she had inherited from her father. A painfully shy girl, she had nonetheless come a long way to opening herself up to the members of Flio's household.

"Oh!" said Ura as the situation dawned on him. He clapped his hands over his mouth. "Excuse me!"

"Come on, Ura, you've gotta mind yourself a bit more!" Blossom said, gently rocking Kora on her back to try to keep her from waking up. "You woke her up with that huge sneeze of yours last night too—that's why she's here, you know! She wouldn't stop begging to come down to the farm with me..."

I've hardly seen Kora open herself up to anyone since the death of my wife, but she's been very fond of Madame Blossom ever since she first met her. She's even taken to calling her "Mom..." Ura thought as he watched the two of them. *I really would like to make Madame Blossom my wife, if she would have me...*

"Hm?" Blossom looked up, noticing that Ura had been staring. "What's up, Ura? Do I have something on my face? Oh! Must be dirt from all the weeding I've been doing!" she said, wiping her face with her sleeve.

"Oh! N-no, nothing like that!" Ura stammered, suddenly uncertain what he should say.

For all that he came across as confident and self-assured, Ura certainly had a shy side as well.

◇Meanwhile—Klyrode Castle, The Maiden Queen's Chambers◇

Right around the time when Flio was waking up, the Maiden Queen of Klyrode lay in bed in her room in Klyrode Castle, staring straight up at the ceiling with her eyes wide open.

The Maiden Queen—reigning monarch of the Magical Kingdom of Klkyrode. Her name was Elizabeth Klyrode, but those closest to her called her Ellie. She took the reins of power after her father, the

former king, was driven from the throne. Obsessed with politics from a very young age, she had never taken a lover in all her more than thirty years.

Really, it's a good thing our political situation is so stable... the Maiden Queen thought as she lay awake in bed. *We have been getting more and more reports of guerrilla-style attacks from a certain faction of demons, but thankfully that number is still small owing to our treaty with the Dark Army. They're working with us to try to curtail the attacks from their end, and they sent demons to our kingdom to help. Not to mention the demons from the Fli-o'-Rys General Store's transportation team and all they've done to protect us.*

Even if she closed her eyes, her thoughts would keep returning to the kingdom, preventing her from getting anything worth calling actual sleep. Alas, more of Her Majesty's nights than not were spent this way, lying half-awake in bed until the morning.

A beam of sunlight streamed in through the curtains, settling on the Maiden Queen's face.

"Morning already...?" she said, turning to look out the window. "I didn't realize I'd been lying awake so long..." She sat up heavily and slowly slid out of bed, putting on her slippers and walking over to the mirror on her dresser to get a look at her face.

"I look terrible..." she said, rubbing her fingers against the dark circles around her eyes. "I suppose I'll have to hide it with makeup until the morning council's finished..."

The Maiden Queen sighed and slumped her shoulders. For a moment she just stood there listlessly, then suddenly she smacked herself in the cheeks as hard as she could. Perhaps she was a little overzealous, however—the smack hurt more than she had intended, and there was another long moment where she was seemingly too stunned to move.

"No!" the Maiden Queen exclaimed, gritting her teeth and angling her head down. "I need to get it together! This entire kingdom is my responsibility!"

"Is something happening in there?" came a voice from the direction of her window. Startled, the Maiden Queen jolted upright,

then turned around slowly to see Garyl suddenly inside her room.

Garyl—son of Flio and Rys, Elinàsze's younger twin and Rylnàsze's older brother. His ready smile and friendly disposition had made him a celebrity at his alma mater, the Houghtow College of Magic, and his physical abilities were nothing short of outstanding.

Garyl stepped out from behind the curtain, dressed in the uniform reserved for the Maiden Queen's personal guard. By all appearances he had entered the room through the window in order to see what was happening inside.

After graduating from the Houghtow College of Magic, Garyl had been planning to attend the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education in order to become a knight. His results on the entrance examination, however, were not only higher than all of the other incoming students, but far exceeded any of the knights currently in service. Captain MacTaulo exercised his discretion and made the decision to admit Garyl not into the Klyrode Institute but the knighthood itself. Just the other day he had been promoted all the way to the Queen's personal guard, the highest position a knight could aspire to.

"G-Garyl?!" the Maiden Queen exclaimed, her eyes going wide at the sudden presence of someone else in her room. She stared at him, hand clapped over her mouth.

"I'm so sorry!" Garyl said, walking up to the Maiden Queen and bowing deeply as he realized there was no danger inside the room. "I thought I heard a sound like someone being hit, so I hurried inside to check. I'm glad to see it was nothing."

"Oh!" the Maiden Queen said, blushing bright red. *He must have come in when he heard me hit my cheeks...* "Oh, no, I was just...well...smacking my own cheeks to try to rally my spirits. I'm terribly sorry to have caused a misunderstanding!" She bowed her head even lower than Garyl.

"All right," Garyl said. "But more importantly..." he stood up, grabbing the Maiden Queen by both shoulders and peering right into her face.

"G-Garyl?!" the Maiden Queen said, turning an even brighter red at having Garyl's face so close to hers. Unfortunately for her

composure, however, Garyl only leaned in closer still. *H-He's going to k-k-kiss...* she thought, slowly closing her eyes in anticipation.

"Your Majesty," Garyl said, "have you not been sleeping well?"

"Excuse me?" Caught off guard by the question, the Maiden Queen stared blankly back at Garyl.

"It's just..." Garyl hesitated, "I couldn't help noticing those huge dark circles under your eyes when I came into the room. You look like you're really tired too..."

"O-O-O-O-Oh! Th-This is just..." the Maiden Queen said, her thoughts thrown further into chaos with every word out of Garyl's mouth. *T-Ten years ago, this level of work would never have exhausted me like this...* she thought. *Now that I'm in my thirties, I can't hide all the signs of fatigue... And worse, now Garyl's seen me like this! I wish I could just die on the spot...*

Garyl pulled the Maiden Queen into a gentle embrace.

"G-Garyl...?" she choked.

"I'm sorry," Garyl said, squeezing her tightly. "I was just a bit worried about you. I know you can push yourself too hard at the drop of a hat..."

Such a powerful chest... the Maiden Queen thought, closing her eyes. *Garyl became such a dependable man before I realized it was happening...* "I'm terribly sorry, Garyl..." she said, pressing her head against him. "May we stay like this...for just a little while?"

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

The morning sun shone brightly down on Flio's house as Flio and Rys stepped inside, each hefting a great haul of felled magic beasts.

"I can't believe this was all we could find..." Rys said, folding her arms and frowning in dissatisfaction at the fruits of their hunt. "There simply weren't as many magic beasts as I would have thought..."

"We've been hunting quite a lot on the other side of the mountains," Flio replied as he took inventory of the magic beasts. "Perhaps there are less in that area than there used to be."

Most of the beasts Flio and Rys targeted on their hunts were

species designated as harmful. That way, they could present proof of extermination to the Adventurers' Guild for the bounty as well.

"It's so much easier to turn in magic beast bounties now that all you need is a single ear," Flio remarked as he prepared to cut trophies from the couple's prey. "They used to require us to bring in the entire body for inspection, remember?"

"It is more convenient, I suppose..." Rys admitted with a *humph*. "But I'm not satisfied! It's been so long since we last went on a date together, and the hunt was over in an instant!"

"You know, that reminds me..." Flio said, clapping his hands together as Rys's mournful face sparked something in his memory.

"Yes? What is it, my lord husband?"

"Speaking of our hunts, I asked the Celestial Plane for permission to make a trip down to Dogorogma."

"Dogorogma?!" Rys said, her eyes visibly lighting up at Flio's words. "Why, that place is positively teeming with large magic beasts! We could hunt there to our heart's content!" Color rose to her cheeks at the thought as her lupine tail appeared behind her, wagging furiously.

Flio smiled warmly at his wife's excitement, awkwardly scratching his cheek. "Well...I'm really glad to see you so excited, but I'm a little worried, to be honest. They haven't exactly been forthcoming with permission to visit Dogorogma lately..."

"That's right, I remember hearing that..." Rys said. "I wonder why that is..."

"It seems like there's some kind of instability going on down there," Flio said. "From the looks of things, the Celestials are waiting to see how things play out."

"I see..." said Rys. "S-So, that means...it's quite likely that they'll deny us permission..."

"It's not impossible, at the very least," Flio confirmed.

"But then..." Rys slumped her shoulders. "My dream date...hunting with you all day and all night...it might *not happen?*"

"N-Now now," Flio said, placing a hand on Rys's shoulder with a smile. "For now, let's just wait and see. But more importantly, let's get started on breakfast! I'll help out this morning."

At those words, Rys's mood immediately took a turn for the better, a bright smile appearing on her face. "I'd be delighted to cook with you!" she said. "Although I'm going to be waiting with baited breath for that date..." Transforming her right arm into its lupine form, she took a swing at one of the magic beasts, instantly dicing it into small and evenly cut pieces of meat, which she set about gathering up. "This way, my lord husband! To the kitchen!" she said, beaming as she rushed on into the kitchen proper.

"Right away, Rys!" said Flio, following after her. Using his magic, he made the rest of the meat vanish and reappear inside the kitchen, and soon the aroma of delicious food began wafting out.

◇The Celestial Plane◇

Planetoid World Klyrode, home to the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, was only one of many worlds orbiting in the expanse of space around the Celestial Plane, which towered high above them and governed their affairs. The middle of the Celestial Plane was dominated by a great castle structure bristling with steepled towers, where the goddesses managed the various planetoid worlds that occupied the cosmic stratum beneath them, working tirelessly to quell anything that might threaten their charges.

In a room in one of the many towers, Malune let out an audible sigh.

Malune—one of the goddesses of the Celestial Plane charged with overseeing the planetoid worlds. Malune was a mid-level goddess, and one who had recently found herself entrusted with more and more difficult situations.

"Really, I still can't believe they left *me* in charge of this world..." Malune said, sighing yet again as she gazed into the large crystal floating in midair in the center of the room. Reflected in the crystal was an image of a particular planetoid world. "Planetoid World Klyrode... It's always been prone to trouble, but in the last few months there's been all the issues caused by the magic barrier around the firmament breaking repeatedly on top of everything else. The land *should* have come to a state of peace once the denizens

there defeated the nine serpents, so why are we still having all these problems?" The goddess lowered her head. "Ordinarily we'd give a world entering into an age of peace to a new goddess to help her build experience...but we've had five novices all flee from the assignment because of the incident with the sky. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect it to end up as *my* responsibility..."

Malune swiped her hand from left to right, and two more crystals flew into the center of the room.

"Ah, Planetoid World Palma, my old assignment..." she mused, looking into the crystal on the right, where an image of a planetoid world much like Klyrode floated in its depths. "The human supremacist faction that had been in power there finally collapsed, and things were going well. I was moving up in the world... They were going to make me overseer of the Underground World Dogorogma... Although, Dogorogma might be even more of a handful than Klyrode of late..."

She glanced towards the crystal on the left, showing an endless expanse of trees beneath a vividly colored sky. Then, above the sea of vegetation, something came flying. It looked like a living thing, rising up towards the sky and spewing hellfire from its open mouth.

"Oh, not again!" Malune complained. "That Beast of Disaster's on another rampage! Although, I guess it really can't be called a magic beast at all anymore, can it..." She sighed yet again as she watched the enormous creature tear through the skies inside the crystal. "We've tried dispatching teams of disciples to apprehend that monster twelve times now, only for each attempt to end in failure. Of course, it's always next to impossible to control anything happening in Dogorogma..." She scratched at the tip of her nose, muttering to herself in thought. "After all, it's the place we send beings with enough power to destroy a planetoid world to keep them sequestered away from the rest of the cosmos. And for all the hundreds of years we've been doing this, the strongest of those creatures have been battling among themselves. It's no surprise that one of them would survive long enough to reach a new stage of evolution. Each one of them was strong enough to destroy an entire world as is... Imagine what something like that can do after its

evolution! It staggers the mind to think that nobody even considered that possibility! Or really, I suppose, they *did* consider it, but kept putting off figuring out a solution until something like *this* occurred..."

At that point, the door to the room opened and another goddess stepped inside. Malune looked over to see who it was and let out another sigh. "Well, well," she said, glancing over her shoulder at the newcomer. "Already finished with your scolding from the High Goddess, Zofina? Or should I say...Zofina the Elder?"

"I believe I've told you not to call me that, Malune," the goddess Zofina said, clearly annoyed by Malune's remark.

Zofina—one of the goddesses of the Celestial Plane responsible for overseeing the planetoid worlds. She had earned praise from her superiors for her work and had been on the fast track for promotion, but alas...

"I know, it's tradition in the Celestial Plane to refer to siblings by the same name as long as they are filling different roles," Zofina said. "But really, there's no need to cling so fastidiously to all the ancient customs, is there?"

"I suppose that particular rule is honored more in the breach than in the adherence these days..." Malune admitted. "Although your parents seem to have been an exception to that."

"My mother was a supervising goddess, and actively involved in politics... It's safe to say that she was more than a little old-fashioned in her thinking," Zofina said, breathing a sigh of exasperation and launching into a bad-tempered rant. "You know, I really thought my little sister was being an upstanding worker as a disciple serving the goddess Celbua... I can't tell you how surprised I was when both she *and* Celbua abandoned their posts and ran away to some planetoid world! I'll admit, Celbua never struck me as possessing the sternest character, and she certainly had a bad habit of abdicating her responsibilities, but I hadn't seen any sign of that sort of behavior lately, and I let myself assume she had gotten better. And my sister is so fastidious about her duties, I can easily imagine her snapping under the pressure working for a goddess like that..."

"So..." Malune asked. "Are you going to be standing trial in the Court of Goddesses for her, as her older sister?"

"So it seems..." Zofina sighed, eliciting a chuckle from Malune. "But that's not all. I had a feeling it would come to this as soon as I heard the two of them ran away from the Celestial Plane, since I'm the one who suggested Celbua as my successor and my own younger sister as her disciple...but..." Here she clutched her head as she spoke, issuing the most forlorn sigh yet. "They told me they wouldn't hold me responsible, as long as I can retrieve them and return them to the Celestial Plane to face the Court..."

Malune couldn't help cracking a smile. "Well, of course they did!" she said. "Your little sister ran away from the Celestial Plane!"

"I know, I know..." Zofina grumbled. "But Celbua aside, if that obstinate sister of mine has made up her mind to run away, I can't imagine she'd come and obediently stand trial..."

"Well, what about Celbua?" Malune asked. "Is *she* going to submit to judgment?"

"As a matter of fact, I got a message from Celbua just a while after she left. Something like... '*I changed my mind, I wanna come back!*'"

"Ahhh, well that's no surprise," said Malune. "I can't imagine that girl would last particularly long making a living on some planetoid world..."

"Apparently she had been living in a forest until she was suddenly attacked by magic beasts and decided she was fed up with the whole thing."

"That sounds about right," Melune nodded. "She would've had her Celestial Magic restricted the moment she defected from the Celestial Plane, after all. So...I suppose you're going to go bring the two of them in?"

"Well, I'll *try...*" Zofina said. "But from what I've heard, my sister's changed her name to Fina and started a new life on Planetoid World Klyrode. She's even been looking for a job..."

"Oh no..." Malune groaned. "If she's going that hard at it, she probably won't come willingly at all..."

"No, I can't imagine she would..." Zofina crossed her arms, tutting

her tongue. “I swear, that sister of mine...”

Malune, however, was tapping a finger against her right cheek, staring at Zofina in thought. *She said it was Planetoid World Klyrode where her sister’s lying low, didn’t she? That’s the same one that’s been suffering all those disturbances with the firmament... And it’s where that human Flio lives if I’m not mistaken—the one they let into Dogorogma...*

“Well, why not!” Malune said with sudden cheerfulness, her eyes shining as she clapped her hands together.

“Hm? Wh-What do you mean, Malune?” Zofina asked, flinching in surprise.

“Oh, nothing! Nothing at all!” said Malune. “But here—why don’t you try contacting your sister?”

“I know, I know...” Zofina frowned. “But considering how stubborn and serious she can be, I want to get my thoughts in order before I make an attempt at persuasion...”

“Yes, yes, well, I might have an idea as to how to accomplish that!” intimated Malune.

“*You* do?” Zofina asked, incredulous.

“That’s right, I do! And *you* want your little sister to come back to the Celestial Plane for the sake of her future, don’t you? That’s why you want her to go before the Court of Goddesses, right?”

“W-Well, yes, of course, but...” Zofina said, suddenly at a loss for words.

Malune, of course, was exactly right. More than wanting to avoid a punishment of her own, Zofina’s real concern was her sister’s future. If there was any chance her younger sister might yet return to the Celestial Plane, she wanted to make it happen. Still, something was keeping her from getting her thoughts in order. She looked down at the ground.

“Look, don’t worry!” said Malune, smiling wide and smacking Zofina hard on the back. “Just leave it to yours truly!” *If everything goes well, it should mean good things for Zofina* and *her sister—and not to mention myself!*

“What in all the worlds are you planning...” Zofina asked, looking dubiously up at Malune. “Although, it’s not like I have any brilliant

ideas of my own. I might as well see what you have in mind." Sighing one final time, she led the way on out of the room.

"The Communications Chamber, yes? I suppose I'll join you, then!" said Malune.

The two goddesses exited the room, their tumultuous voices fading away to silence.

◇Houghtow City—Hokh'hokton's Cottage◇

In one corner of the sprawling fields of Blossom Acres around Flio's house, two cottages stood to the side of the path. One of these was home to the goblin Maunty, one of the workers on Blossom's farm, and his wife and children.

Maunty—a goblin who once served in the Dark Army as a lowly footman. Now he worked on Blossom's farm together with his old comrade Hokh'hokton. Maunty was a married man as well, and the proud father of a good many goblin children.

Thanks to the size of his large and growing family, Maunty's cottage had been supplemented with a number of additional floors until now it was five stories tall and full of the happy voices of children. The other cottage was much smaller. This was where Maunty's fellow goblin farmworker Hokh'hokton made his home.

Hokh'hokton—another former footman from the Dark Army now working up a sweat on Blossom Acres. Unfortunately, he'd found himself saddled with an unwanted guest in the form of the so-called no-gooddess Telbyress after she was banished from the Celestial Plane.

These two cottages had originally been one, but as Maunty's number of children only continued to increase, eventually they had to be split apart. Hokh'hokton's cottage was a cozy two-room building, the first room for Hokh'hokton and the second for his long-term freeloader Telbyress—and for the moment, the angel formerly known as Zofina as well.

"I refuse!" Fina's voice called from one of the rooms on the second floor.

Fina—once known as Zofina, due to a custom that had her named

after her older sister. She changed her name, however, after she ran away from the Celestial Plane. Fina was an angel who used to serve as the disciple of the goddess in charge of the world of Klyrode. She was also tasked with the role of Contract Executor, responsible for enforcing Blood Oath Contracts. In that capacity she appeared in a form that was half skeleton and half young maiden. Recently she had abandoned the Celestial Plane, fed up with all the unreasonable demands placed on her by the goddesses above, and left intent on starting a new life on Klyrode.

Fina stood in the middle of the room, her arms crossed and legs braced in a powerful stance, glaring at the image of the goddess Zofina in the window in front of her, projected all the way from the Communications Chamber on the Celestial Plane.

"*Really, sister, you don't need to be so stubborn about this,*" her older sister said. "*Celbua has agreed to accept judgment, and is already on her way back to the Celestial Plane. You should follow her example and present yourself before the Court of Goddesses like a good girl...*"

"I most certainly will not!" Fina declared yet again in no uncertain terms. "I've had just about enough of the Celestial Plane and all the ridiculous ways they treated us! I left that behind me when I chose to run away! What makes you think I'm going to go back and let the Court of Goddesses have its way with me now? I believe I made it very clear in the letter I left behind in my room that I have no intention of ever returning to that place. That should be enough to keep them from holding you responsible for my actions."

In the window, Zofina wrinkled her brow at her younger sister's behavior. "*Y-Yes, I saw the letter...*" she said. "*But you can't stay on that planetoid forever, can you?*"

"Thank you for your concern, but I have it well in hand!" Fina shot back. "Mister Flio, the man who governs this region, gave me his personal permission to reside in his land, and Miss Telbyress, the owner of this house, told me I could stay here for as long as I needed! There's no reason whatsoever for me to return to the Celestial Plane, let alone present myself before the Court of Goddesses."

I had no idea my little sister made so many preparations before she ran away... Zofina thought, at a loss for words in the face of such a firm rejection. *I'm not sure what angle I could possibly take...*

Just then, however, the goddess Malune pushed her way past Zofina to the front of the window. "*Yes, yes, little Fina, you've certainly made your feelings perfectly clear,*" she said.

"Goddess Malune..." Fina said.

"*And I know how serious you are about staying the course, believe you me...*" the goddess continued.

"*H-Hey, Malune!*" objected Zofina the Elder. "*I thought you were here to* help *me persuade her!*"

There was a brief moment of silence as the two goddesses argued with each other on the other side of the window. Then Malune took the front once again. "*W-Well!*" she said. "*Perhaps you might do a small favor for me, in exchange for permission to reside on Planetoid World Klyrode!*"

"A favor?" Fina asked.

"*That's riiight!*" Malune sang. "*It has to do with Mister Flio as well, if you have any inclination of wanting to pay him back for the kindness of letting you stay in his land.*"

"Hmmm..." Fina gave the proposition a bit of thought before replying, visibly relaxing her argumentative demeanor. "I might be willing, if it really is to Mister Flio's benefit," she said. "Depending on what this favor of yours is, mind you."

"*Good girl!*" said Malune, her face lighting up with joy. "*I knew you'd see reason!*"

Meanwhile, outside the room, Hokh'hokton and Telbyress listened from the base of the stairs, curious about Fina's conversation with the Celestial Plane.

"So, no-gooddess..." Hokh'hokton grumbled, looking over at the former goddess and sternly folding his arms. "Care to explain?"

Telbyress—once a goddess of the Celestial Plane, until she was finally exiled for her habit of skipping out on her work. Now she was staying at Hokh'hokton's cottage, where she had ungraciously installed herself. In theory she was meant to be helping out with the

farmwork, but between her love of alcohol and deep natural laziness she found herself on the receiving end of Hokh'hokton's temper more often than not.

"Hmmm?" Telbyress said, putting on a very fake smile. "Explain *what*, do you mean? I really don't have a clue!" She pressed her index fingers against both cheeks, giggling in an exaggerated display of innocence.

"Who told Fina *you* were the owner of the house?!" Hokh'hokton demanded, bringing his enraged face right up close to hers. "You're just some drifter who showed up uninvited!"

"Oh really? She said that? Wow! That's crazy! I wonder why! Ah ha ha!" Telbyress laughed. "I guess she must have gotten confused at some point! I couldn't for the life of me imagine how it happened!" In spite of her words, however, her eyes could be clearly seen shifting suspiciously back and forth.

"Utterly untrustworthy..." Hokh'hokton spat. "Whenever you act like this, it's always because you're trying to hide some scheme of yours..."

"O-Oh, Hokey..." Telbyress pleaded. "Y-You really should try trusting people for a change..."

Hokh'hokton was about to respond when the pair was interrupted by the sound of the door opening. "Oh, excuse me, you two," Fina said as she stepped out of the room. "You didn't need this room for something, did you? I'm very sorry for using it without asking..." She bowed deep, lowering her head to Hokh'hokton and Telbyress.

"No, no, it's nothing like that," Hokh'hokton reassured her. "We were just worried you might be in some kind of trouble..."

"Well," Fina said, lifting her head, "as a matter of fact I was just contacted by the Celestial Plane. They say I might be allowed to stay, as long as I agree to do certain jobs for them while I'm here..."

At this, Telbyress, who had sunk down to the floor in the face of Hokh'hokton's questioning, suddenly seemed to come back to life. "Yaaay!" she cheered, jumping up to give Fina a big hug and beaming with delight. "So that means you'll be staying with us?"

"I suppose so!" Fina said. "Thank you very much once again for letting me stay in your house, Telbyress."

"Oh, yes, about *that*..." Hokh'hokton said, strolling up to the embracing celestials. "Who told you this house belongs to *Telbyress*?"

"Who told me?" Fina asked. "Why, I believe I heard it directly from Miss Telbyress herselmffghhh—!!!" She was cut off, however, as Telbyress shoved the mouth of a bottle right in her mouth.

"Telbyress!" Hokh'hokton snapped, as Fina, caught off guard, flailed in confusion. "Now you're trying to get Fina drunk again to keep me from setting the record straight!"

"Whaaat? Never!" Telbyress insisted. "I just thought darling little Fina here might be thirsty after talking to the Celestial Plane for so long, that's all!" Grinning from ear to ear, she wiggled the bottle back and forth in Fina's mouth. In just the blink of an eye, quite a lot of the liquid had already made its way down the angel's throat.

"You! What are you doing?! You know it's dangerous to force liquid down someone's throat like that!"

"Ah ha ha!" Telbyress laughed. "Oh, but they do say liquor is the best medicine, don't they? So this is medicine!"

It could not have been more obvious that Telybress was forcing Fina to drink in order to prevent her from talking. Alas, however, by the time Hokh'hokton was able to stop it, Fina was already barely holding on to consciousness.

◇Deep in a Forest◇

In a forest near the border between the Dark One's domain and the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, the enraged voice of Belianna echoed through the trees. "Take that, you damned lowlife demons!"

Belianna—one of the devils making up the current Infernal Four, and a skilled fighter with the scythe who was always rushing from one corner of the Dark One's domain to the next on various missions. Her younger sister was Irystiel.

Belianna swung her scythe—taller than her entire body—in a wide circle, diving forwards into the ranks of the enemy demons, who fled in confusion with Belianna hot on their tails.

"I-Is that one of the Infernal Four?!"

"What's a big shot like her doing in some town out in the middle of nowhere?!"

"Hah!" Belianna cried. "We're at peace with the damned humans now, Dark One's orders! If you can't obey a simple damned command like that, you'd better be prepared to face my damned blade!" Grinning like a madwoman, the devil swung her scythe, sending her opponents flying with each swipe.

"Gwugh?!"

"Gyahhh!!!"

Before the airborne demons could fall back to earth, however, they were grabbed out of the sky by a host of tentacles coming from somewhere behind them, restraining them no matter how hard they tried to get away. There, waiting for them, was Coqueshtti dressed in a pink nurse's outfit, complete with miniskirt.

Coqueshtti—a little mad scientist girl serving as one of the Dark Army's current Infernal Four. She was awarded her position by Dark One Dawkson himself in recognition of the many demons whose lives she had saved with her healing magic, but as she was a sweet and bashful girl, the role didn't seem to match her personality at all.

"Good good!" Coqueshtti sang, smiling brightly as she readied her gigantically oversized syringe. "Now to administer some emergency treatment to these incapacitated demons so we can take them back to the Dark Citadel!"

"W-Wait!" The demons shrank away from Coqueshtti's smiling face as best they could, considering the thrashing they had just received from Belianna. "A-Anything but that!"

"Oh don't worry!" Coqueshtti reassured them. "It only hurts for a little bit!" She hefted the syringe, which was as tall as Coqueshtti herself, and plunged the needle into the buttocks of the nearest demon with an energetic "Hup!"

"Fguwahhh!" the demon shrieked, but Coqueshtti seemed to ignore his cries entirely.

"Good, good!" she said. "Now for the next patient!" She shoved the needle forcefully into a second wounded demon's behind, eliciting yet another tortured cry.

"Oughooo!!!"

All the while, the giant slime-type magic beast behind her kept reaching out with its tentacles, catching yet more demons out of the air as Belianna sent them flying.

Pochner the Slime—a magic beast working for Coqueshtti. Pochner's body fluids possessed a mild healing effect capable of treating light wounds. Its slimy body also served as a convenient way to transport patients, who could be safely stored inside. Pochner could understand language, although it itself was not capable of speech.

"Hey Coqueshtti, what's the big idea?" Belianna shouted over her shoulder as she ferociously wielded her scythe. "These scum couldn't obey a simple damned order from the Dark One! Just leave them to damned well rot!"

"But Miss Belianna!" Coqueshtti argued, tapping a finger against her cheek and smiling brightly. "Didn't the Dark One tell us to take care of any injured demons and bring them back to the Dark Citadel?"

"He did, didn't he..." Belianna scowled, readying her scythe for another swing. "But I tell you, I don't feel a damned bit inclined to hold back!"

"Just please try not to cut anyone in half...for me?" Coqueshtti asked.

"We'll see, damn it!" Belianna barked. *But even so...* she thought, looking around to see her own subordinates—a group of devils standing off to the side. Each was armed and seemed ready to fight, but all they seemed to be doing was standing behind Belianna, showing no sign of joining the fight themselves. "Hey, you damned lot!" she shouted. "If you want to be my underlings, put your damned backs into it!"

Instead, however, the group of devils all jolted nervously and tensed up.

"W-We know, my lady!" one of them said.

"B-But it's just...none of us can keep up with you!" volunteered another. Not one of them stepped forwards to join the fray at their commander's side.

Belianna clicked her tongue. *But I've been showing them how to*

damned fight! What do they mean they can't keep up?! she thought, looking over her shoulders at the devils before turning her attention back towards the demons she had been fighting. "Fine!" she said, lifting her scythe as dense clouds of malicium trailed out from her body. "But I'm in an even worse damned mood than usual today, so don't think you're getting off easy!"

Belianna's opponents couldn't help flinching back at the sight, bracing themselves for doom.

And so, in due order, the demon attack on the nearby human settlement was suppressed by Belianna and the rest of her patrol barely an hour after it had started.

◇A City, Somewhere◇

Night shrouded the dim back alleys of the city where a stone building, four stories in height, stood looming over the narrow roads. In one of the building's rooms, lit only by the light of the stars, a heavyset man sat in the darkness in a luxurious armchair, his knee twitching irritably.

"You there..." the man said, taking a puff of his cigar. "Demon fox sisters..."

As he spoke, two women appeared out of the darkness—Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver.

Kintsuno the Gold—older of the infamous demon fox sisters who once led the demon fox clan to a position of prominence within the Dark Army, famed for her love of the color gold. After the fall of her clan she joined forces with the Shadow King and his organization, the Shadow Conglomerate.

Gintsuno the Silver—younger of the demon fox sisters, known for her preference for silver. Together with her sister, she had joined the Shadow Conglomerate after the demon fox clan fell into ruin.

"Wh-What is it, Shadow King?" Kintsuno said, stepping forwards dressed in her customary golden cheongsam dress with a long slit to give her legs ample space to move.

The Shadow King—once the king of the Magical Kingdom of

Klyrode, and father of the Maiden Queen. He was driven from the country when his many wicked deeds came to light, after which he took on the name Shadow King and redoubled his black-market activities with the Shadow Conglomerate, an organization he had set up during his time on the throne.

"What in the blazes do you *think*?!" the Shadow King bellowed, stamping his foot in a rage and causing the sisters to flinch back from his temper. "How's your strategy of staging guerrilla raids pretending to be demon malcontents been going, hmmm? Where's all that loot and territory you said we could gain from attacking outlying towns and villages?!"

At this, the sisters tensed up even further.

"W-Well, you see..." Kintsuno began. "We've tried, but the Dark Army won't stop getting in our way..."

"A-And not only that!" Gintsuno added. "The Wolf of Justice and his squad keep showing up out of nowhere! They won't even give us time to take the villages' valuables!"

The Shadow King grumbled and snapped in irritation as the two stumbled over each other to explain what had gone wrong. "This strategy was your idea, you know!" he spat. "All you've done is waste my money for no benefit whatsoever! Don't think I'll let you keep getting away with this!"

"O-Of course not!" Kintsuno yipped.

"We understand completely!" offered Gintsuno.

The two bowed deeply and promptly excused themselves, practically falling over each other in their rush to get out of the room. The Shadow King glared after them as they left. *Completely useless, the both of them...* he thought, clenching his teeth. *But there's no denying they're stronger than any of my men. There must be something I can use them for...*

The demon fox sisters hurried out of the Shadow King's room and down the hallway.

"Elder sister Kintsuno..." Gintsuno asked, her brow furrowing as they ran. "Why are we letting that puffed-up human treat us this way?"

“I know what you mean...” Kintsuno said. “That man’s magic couldn’t hold a candle to ours in a million years. But...he’s the one with the money.”

“Then why don’t we just *take* his money?” Gintsuno asked.

“I’ve heard the Shadow Conglomerate is set up to go underground if anything should ever happen to him...” said Kintsuno. “Our best option is to make him think we’re his loyal subjects while taking whatever money we can on the sly. And if all goes well, we might be able to get him to help restore the demon fox clan to glory...”

“I see...” Gintsuno mused. “So you’re playing the long game, then?”

“I always am,” Kintsuno answered.

“Well, in that case, let’s hurry up and start on the next plot!”

“Of course!” said Kintsuno. “First, we need to change our base of operations...”

The demon fox sisters kept scheming all the way out of the building, and vanished into the darkness of the night.

Chapter 2: The Houghtow City Training Hall

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

An Enchanted Frigate flew through the sky, coming to dock at the boarding tower just to the side of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. Inside the ship's control room, bringing the vessel to a landing, was Greanyl.

Greanyl—a shadow demon and one of the Silent Listeners, the old intelligence arm of the Dark Army. When Dark One Gholl and his confederate Uliminas left the Dark Army, the Silent Listeners followed and now had found jobs as staff for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. Greanyl had been put in charge of the Fli-o'-Rys transportation team and Enchanted Frigate fleet.

Greanyl steered carefully, paying close attention to the bow of the ship through a magic window in front of her. As the Enchanted Frigate came to a safe stop beside the tower, she breathed a sigh of relief. "It's been some time since I started piloting Enchanted Frigates, but whenever I think of all the luggage I'm carrying and all the passengers whose lives I'm responsible for, I can't help but worry..." she said as she expertly manipulated the control panel beside the cockpit, calling up several additional windows. Each window displayed various diagnostic data from the ship, such as structural damage and the remaining reserves of the magic gems used as fuel, all set up so a pilot could easily check the current condition of the Enchanted Frigate.

Just as Greanyl finished calling up the windows, another shadow demon appeared behind her. "Leader! Welcome back, madame," she said.

"Thank you, and good luck with your turn at the helm," Greanyl

replied. The two bowed to each other. “Well then... Shall we?”

“Let’s,” the shadow demon agreed.

The two turned to face the windows, pointing at one and then another as they confirmed their status out loud.

“Hull condition: all clear.”

“Hull condition: all clear.”

“Magic gem reserves: all clear.”

“Magic gem reserves: all clear.”

They looked through the windows carefully, checking to ensure there was nothing that might impede the Enchanted Frigate’s next flight.

This safety check was one of the procedures dictated by the Enchanted Frigate operation manual. In order to prevent any accidents from occurring mid-flight, both the pilot being relieved and the incoming pilot were to confirm the status of the ship while switching over the crew.

“Window status check concluded,” the new shadow demon said as the two of them finished up the safety check.

“Yes, you’re ready to go,” said Greanyl. “Oh, and be mindful of the weather. There’s been a large storm cloud sighted between here and the Calgosi Coast.”

“So, I should be careful of lightning...” the shadow demon confirmed.

“I don’t expect any issues, thanks to the protective magic barrier Mister Flio placed on the ships, but it never hurts to take care.”

“Understood.”

As the conversation came to a close, Greanyl grabbed a wooden plate that popped out from next to the touch panel and made for the exit of the ship.

“Thank you, Leader!” the shadow demon said, holding her index and middle finger of her right hand to her forehead in a traditional shadow demon salute.

“Yes, take care,” said Greanyl, returning the gesture.

Greanyl left the tower through the employee’s exit and made her way to the cargo staging area behind the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.

She uncrossed her arms, summoning another window containing

the day's schedule with her right hand. *Let's see...* she thought as she looked it over. *Now I just need to turn in my flight log and I'll be finished with my duties for the day...*

Greanyl closed the window and was headed towards the door when she heard a voice calling out to her and stopped in her tracks. "Hello, Greanyl!" Greanyl turned around to see Flio waving her way.

"Mister Flio, your lordship, sir!" Greanyl said, snapping to attention and then kneeling down before him. "I bid you greetings."

"Greanyl, haven't I told you?" Flio said, wincing awkwardly at the display of fealty. "This isn't the Dark Army, you don't need to do that kind of thing."

"But you are my employer!" Greanyl protested. "And I owe you a debt of gratitude for taking on every one of us shadow demons after we left the Dark Army..."

"I'd say I'm the one who should be thanking *you* for that, considering all the work you've done to help out with the shop," Flio argued.

"B-But..." Greanyl began.

"Really, it's all right!" said Flio.

The two continued on in that vein for a while, until eventually Flio changed the subject. "Well, we can talk about etiquette later. I'm guessing you're headed inside to turn in your Enchanted Frigate flight log for the day, right?" he asked, pointing to the wooden plate in Greanyl's left hand. "Would you like me to take that for you?" Flio offered.

Greanyl, who by now was back on her feet, reflexively went to hide the plate behind her back. "Say what? S-Surely there's no need for your lordship to trouble himself with something like that..."

"You really don't need to treat me so formally," Flio insisted, smiling and holding out his hand. "I have some work of my own to do inside the shop anyway, so it's no trouble."

"I-I see..." Greanyl said, fidgeting uncomfortably. "W-Well, if you truly insist..." Slowly, she took the wooden plate out from behind her back and handed it over.

"All right, I'll get this taken care of," Flio said with a wave and a smile as he headed on inside. "Good job today."

Greanyl bowed low, holding the position as Flio left, when suddenly Ghozal came walking up beside her. “Greanyl, there you are,” he said.

“Lord Ghozal!” said Greanyl, kneeling down once again and lowering her head. “Is there something you need of me?”

“Hrm...” Ghozal grunted. “There’s something I need to talk about regarding you and the other Silent Listeners, but this might not be the best place for it. Would you mind coming with me to the reception room?”

“Yes, right away,” said Greanyl, getting to her feet and following Ghozal into the shop.

“Oh, and,” said Ghozal as the pair passed by Flio on their way, “this has to do with you too, Mister Flio, if you don’t mind joining us.”

“Me?” Flio asked. “Sure, but would you mind if I took care of a small bit of business first?”

“No problem with me,” said Ghozal.

“All right,” said Flio. “I’ll see you in the reception room, then.”

And so the three split up, Ghozal and Greanyl going ahead to the reception room while Flio went into the main part of the shop.

◇Fli-o’-Rys General Store—Reception Room◇

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Flio said, stepping into the room to find Ghozal and Greanyl waiting for him.

“Are you finished with that business of yours, Mister Flio?” Ghozal asked.

“Yes, it’s all taken care of,” said Flio. “I heard we had an unusual item come in, and I wanted to have a look at it myself.”

“An unusual item, you say?” Ghozal lifted an eyebrow.

“Yes, a golden scale from a magic beast,” Flio explained. “When I looked at it with my Appraisal skill, it said it was from a rare sort of magic beast called a doppeladler.”

“A doppeladler!” exclaimed Ghozal. “That *is* rare. Even in demon lands, you don’t see many of those.” *Although Hugi-Mugi from my old Infernal Four was a doppeladler, if I’m not mistaken...* he thought

to himself. “Can I ask, was the person who brought us this scale a man by any chance?”

“No,” said Flio. “The merchant was a woman.”

Hrm... So not Hugi-Mugi, then. For a second I thought they had come around to sell one of their own scales... Ghozal thought, cracking a grin at the idea.

“Something come to mind?” Flio asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Ghozal said, “don’t pay it any mind. More importantly...” He turned to face Greanyl’s direction. “Greanyl.”

“Yes, my lord?”

“I know you and your Silent Listeners have been traveling all over as part of your transportation duties. Have you been up to our old Wolf of Justice activities while you’re at it, saving human towns and villages from attacks by demon malcontents?”

Flio had first invented the Wolf of Justice while the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode were still at war, donning a wolf mask and riding atop Rys in her full lupine demon form in order to protect outlying Magical Kingdom settlements outside the reach of the Klyrode Army. Eventually Ghozal, Sleip, and the others would don wolf masks of their own, helping out whenever they were needed until the peace treaty was finally established.

“We have,” said Greanyl. “There haven’t been any large-scale attacks owing to our present state of peace, but sometimes we will happen across groups of demons acting badly. On those occasions we disperse the attackers wearing these masks.” She took a brown wolf mask out of the Bottomless Bag on her belt, placing it on the reception room table. “We haven’t done something wrong, have we?” she asked, a worried look crossing her face. “We thought we were well positioned to drive them back, with our close-knit teamwork and our understanding of the demons’ movement...”

“No, don’t worry, it’s nothing like that. Sorry to give you the impression you were in trouble!” Ghozal said, half smiling and rubbing the back of his head.

“That’s right, you’re not in trouble, Greanyl,” said Flio, smiling wryly as well. “Actually, Ghozal and I were thinking of giving you a reward for your Wolf of Justice activities...” He reached into his own

Bottomless Bag, retrieved an abacus, and flicked the beads to display an appropriate sum. “To begin with, how does this sound as payment for a single deployment?”

Greanyl peered at the abacus and her eyes opened wide in shock. “Y-You want to give me *how* much?!” she exclaimed. It was rare to see the calm and collected Greanyl lose her cool, but the sum being quoted was far beyond her wildest imagination.

“Going forward we intend to pay a salary for people acting as Wolves of Justice as well,” Flio told her. “If you’d like a position, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“B-But...I can’t possibly accept such a generous reward!” Greanyl protested. “W-We didn’t do all that much, after all.”

“Nonsense!” said Ghozal. “Thanks to all of your actions as Wolves of Justice, Mister Flio and I have been able to focus our attention on the Fli-o’-Rys General Store!”

“That’s right,” Flio agreed. “You and the other shadow demons have been a great help to us.”

Greanyl had been startled just by the sum of money, but as Ghozal and Flio each kept saying one kind thing after another about her and her team, her surprise gradually was overcome by sheer bashfulness. She forcefully pulled the turban she wore down over her face as if to hide from their effusive praise. “I-I can’t... I-I mean, I don’t... I mean... I-I’m very happy just to have been of use to the two of you!” she somehow squeaked out, nervously chewing on her turban.



It took a while, but Greanyl finally calmed down, finished her display of embarrassed incoherence, and acceded to Flio and Ghozal's terms. "Th-Thank you..." she said, bowing deeply as Flio handed over a bag stuffed with gold coins. "I will distribute the money to the other shadow demons myself..." For a while she just stared at the bag in her hands until finally she spoke again. "A-Actually... Mister Flio, there's a favor I'd like to ask, if I may..."

"Oh? What is it?" Flio asked.

"Well... I have a little sister, you see. Currently she's living at home in my old village..." Greanyl began.

"Hrm..." said Ghozal. "Your village is to the east, right? Not far from Hi-Izuru?"

"That is correct, my lord," said Greanyl, speaking haltingly as if the request was difficult for her to say. "My sister was still very young when I joined the Dark Army, so it seemed like our best course of action was to leave her behind in the village. But now that the other shadow demons and I all have stable incomes thanks to you, I thought it might be fitting to bring her here and perhaps have her join the Fli-o'-Rys General Store company staff, if you should see fit..."

I know the Fli-o'-Rys General Store is a very successful business, with no shortage of people applying for work every day... she thought, anxiously looking over at Flio.

"Sure, no problem," said Flio, smiling his usual easygoing smile and nodding his agreement.

"H-Huh?" said Greanyl, taken aback by how easily Flio had agreed to the request. "I-It's really all right?"

"She'll have to take the new employee exam, of course," Flio said. "But if she's your sister, Greanyl, I would be very surprised if she didn't make it."

"Hrm," Ghozal agreed. "The shadow demons are deeply loyal and skilled at their duties. They start their training young in that village too, so you can expect them to know a variety of useful techniques as well. You won't hear any objections from me."

"They've certainly all made for excellent workers," added Flio. "They show up ten minutes early to every meeting and finish any

tasks you give them ahead of schedule!”

“Hrm. And Greanyl here is the most capable of them all.”

In no time at all, Flio and Ghozal’s conversation had shifted from Greanyl’s sister to the many virtues of the shadow demons, and from there to Greanyl’s own excellent qualities. Greanyl herself, meanwhile, had curled up into a ball on the sofa, making herself as small as she could, trembling continually.

O-Oh no... Oh my... she thought, as Flio and Ghozal heaped praise upon merciless praise. *I can’t... I can’t take it... Spare me... Please...*

◇The Next Morning—Houghtow City Training Hall◇

Houghtow City lay on the western border of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, along a major highway connecting the kingdom to the lands to the west—a position that had led to the city’s prosperity. Away from the main street, however, the hustle and bustle of the city faded away fast. It was there, in a quiet corner of the outskirts of town, that Flio had opened the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.

Once, the area had been as lonesome and forgotten as any other part of town so far from the main street, but now it had become a popular location frequented by huge numbers of people drawn every day to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, the Enchanted Frigate boarding tower, and the magic beast racing hall. At some point, in fact, this area had started to see even more visitors than Houghtow City proper.

At the moment, however, just after the break of day, there was hardly a figure in sight anywhere around. There was still some time before the first Enchanted Frigate flight of the day, after all, and the Fli-o’-Rys General Store and other shops had yet to open their doors. There, a short distance from the Fli-o’-Rys General Store itself, Ghozal stood with his arms folded in front of a certain building, looking over the building’s floor plan in a magic window he had opened.

“Hrm...” Ghozal said. “We need a little more here...” He moved his fingers just barely, sending wood and stone and other materials

floating into the building as the sound of construction came from inside. Ghozal, however, never took his eyes off the window even as he conducted the work.

"Lord Ghozal!" Suddenly, Greanyl appeared behind him, kneeling down and lowering her head. Behind her were her subordinates—the rest of the shadow demons—all on one knee as well. The shadow demons had been busy with their various duties as Enchanted Frigate crew or wagon drivers, preparing for the day's launch, when they had discovered Ghozal doing a bit of work of his own and hurried over to pay their respects.

"Well, if it isn't Greanyl!" said Ghozal. "Is there something you need?"

"We just happened to catch sight of your lordship, and we thought we should express our thanks for yesterday..." Greanyl said.

"Oh, that! Don't worry about it!" Ghozal said with a powerful laugh as Greanyl and the other shadow demons knelt with their heads lowered before him.

"We were also wondering if there was anything we could do to assist you with your task," Greanyl continued. "Please feel free to make use of us in any way." With that she sprung swiftly to her feet and moved over to the building behind Ghozal, the other shadow demons gathering around as well, all very eager to get to work.

Ghozal looked over at Greanyl and the others. "Hey now, I was just fiddling a little with the Training Hall's interior design. It's nothing I can't handle on my own, and anyway, I'm almost done. That aside..." he said, placing a firm hand on Greanyl's head and smiling down at her and the others. "You shouldn't let me distract you from your own tasks! Come on, you all, get back to work!"

"I-If that is your will..." said Greanyl, bowing her head low and moving to get back to what she had been doing before.

"Oh, and Greanyl!" Ghozal called after her, stopping her before she left.

"Y-Yes?" Greanyl asked.

"Hrm," said Ghozal. "This sister of yours you mentioned the other day... When can we expect her to get here?"

"I wrote her a letter yesterday and sent it with the Enchanted

Frigate bound for Hi-Izuru, my lord," the shadow demon dutifully reported. "I would expect her tomorrow at the earliest. May I ask why you wish to know?"

"Oh, no particular reason," said Ghozal, smiling and patting Greanyl on the head yet a second time. "I'd just like to see our sisters reunited as soon as possible, that's all!"

"S-Such gracious words... I-I couldn't be happier to hear you say that..." said Greanyl, lowering her head and pulling her turban down in a futile attempt to disguise the tears of emotion welling up in her eyes. "I-I... I suppose I should get back to my duties, then..."

"Hrm," said Ghozal. "Keep up the good work."

"Yes, my lord!" said Greanyl, bowing one last time and vanishing on the spot, along with the other shadow demons who had accompanied her.

"They're physically strong too, those shadow demons! You need strong legs to pull off that signature high-speed dash of theirs..." Ghozal said, nodding in approval towards the spot where they had been. "Still, though... Siblings, huh..." He folded his arms in thought. *It's been a while since I've run into that brother of mine...*

He was interrupted from his memories, however, by the sensation of someone tugging on his sleeve. Ghozal looked to see a small girl —Mulana—standing there, her long and tangled hair bobbing up and down as she hopped in excitement. "Hey! Hey!" she said. "I finished my work! What now?" Behind her, Mulana's demon copies hopped up and down as well in imitation of their summoner. The demon copies had blank faces like strange clay dolls, but the way they were hopping up and down in time with Mulana made them look oddly charming.

"Hrm," said Ghozal. "You finished your work on the area around the building?"

"I did, I did! I worked really hard!" said Mulana, happily rubbing the top of her head against Ghozal's side. She seemed to be saying, "*Praise me, praise me!*" like a child desperate to be pampered.

"I swear..." Ghozal chuckled, patting Mulana gently on the head. "Aren't you too old to be acting like a little kid?"

"Mrhfhfhf!" said Mulana, beaming with her face pressed up

against Ghozal's hand, and even though she was in fact the only one being petted, behind her the demon copies all squirmed and lolled around happily as well.

◇Meanwhile—On the Way to the Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

Snow Little stared wide-eyed as she passed by Ghozal and Mulana, thoroughly captivated by the wholesome scene playing out in front of her.

Snow Little—one of Garyl's old classmates, a member of the rare fable folk species who specialized in summoning magic. Like Salina, she still harbored faint romantic aspirations for Garyl, which had led her to find a job at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store after graduating from the Houghtow College of Magic.

Snow Little had been on her way to work, still dressed in her casual clothes, when she found herself stopped, entranced by the sight of Ghozal, Mulana, and the demon copies.

Oh my goodness gracious... she thought, her face flushed red with excitement and her hands pressed firmly over her mouth. *Mister Ghozal is so big and strong... And Mulana's so small and cute... And not only that, but the way those demon copies are copying Mulana's movements is adorable out of this world! They're so cute together I can't even help it! Oh, I'm so glad I had an early shift at work today... I'm so, so lucky...*

◇Klyrode Castle—Council Hall◇

In the council hall of Klyrode Castle, the ministers of the kingdom sat in a row along a grand table, with the Maiden Queen in formal dress at the head.

We had some of our usual reports of demon attacks at today's meeting too, but in all of them the damage was minimal and the demons were driven away... the Maiden Queen thought with a small sigh, briefly reviewing the written materials as the conference drew to a close. *And besides that, there's the information exchange with the other kingdoms...*

"And that concludes my report on the state of the kingdom," the Third Princess said, standing from her seat behind and to the left of the Maiden Queen and bowing smartly.

The Third Princess—youngest of the Maiden Queen's two sisters. Her actual name was Swann Klyrode. Known as the left hand of the Queen, she took her current position as head of the Magical Kingdom's domestic affairs as soon as she graduated from the noble academy. The Third Princess was well-known for her sister complex and motivated principally by her love for the Maiden Queen, but recently she had been growing very close with Rylnàsze as well...

Once the Third Princess had finished, the ministers all began chatting noisily with each other, a stark contrast to the way they had sat listening seriously with smiles on their faces before. The Third Princess's report had been good, after all, indicating that domestic demand for various items within the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode was trending in a favorable direction. Despite the chatter, however, not one of the ministers deigned to raise their hand with a question.

Sitting behind the Maiden Queen to the right, and playing the role of officiator at the council meeting, the Second Princess took a good look around the room.

The Second Princess—the middle of the Maiden Queen's two sisters, with the real name Leusoc Klyrode. She was known as the right hand of the Queen and had been responsible for the Magical Kingdom's international relations since they were still at war with the Dark Army, personally conducting diplomacy with the other nearby human kingdoms. She had a plainspoken and forthright personality, speaking frankly even to the Maiden Queen herself.

Well, it's not like we have any major problems to speak of at the moment, the Second Princess thought. *Even the opposition party over there who objects to our current government doesn't have anything to complain about.* She cast her eyes to a particular group of ministers seated towards the far end of the table, all grumbling to each other and looking irritable about something. *Back when the Third Princess started doing her work for the kingdom they had all kinds of complaints... Things like "Having someone so young involved in domestic affairs is bad enough, but letting her set the*

kingdom's policies is just absurd!" But in spite of everything they said, the Third Princess has been delivering her reports flawlessly every single day without fail. And since they can't find any fault with her, they've mostly just stopped talking entirely. Now they're like that, tucked away in the corner and powerless to do anything but grumble to each other about it.

Of course... she added to herself, *all of them are useless idiots brought in by the last King Klyrode who earned their positions by toadying up to my father or by bribery. Naturally, by now they've been removed from their posts in all but name. And it's only a matter of time until their terms of office are up as well...*

Stifling a victorious grin, the Second Princess stood up to speak. "Ahem! Well, since it seems like no one has any questions, this morning council meeting is officially adjourned. Thank you, everyone, for your time," she said, finishing the proceedings with a deep bow. Next the Maiden Queen stood up, bowing just her head, followed by all the ministers, who stood up at once to bow in response.

The Maiden Queen and the two Princesses left the council chambers, making their way through the corridor to the wing reserved for the royal family.

"I see you have quite a number of papers yet again today, Third Princess," the Maiden Queen observed with a smile, glancing at the thick sheaves of paper her younger sister had in her arms. "Do you want me to carry some of those for you?"

"O-O-O-Oh, no, that won't be necessary!" the Third Princess insisted, vigorously shaking her head. "There's only a few things I want to double-check. I can put the rest of these papers in my Bottomless Bag where they won't be any trouble at all!"

"All right," the Maiden Queen said, smiling kindly. "Just do try to make sure you're not taking on more than you can handle..."

The Second Princess stole a sidelong glance at the Maiden Queen's face as she fussed over their youngest sister. *Our sister the Queen is so worried about the Third Princess, but I can't help noticing her own makeup is on rather thick today...* she thought. *I suppose she must be trying to hide how dismally unwell she looks*

herself. It's a shame. She seemed to be doing better the other day... Or maybe she was just unusually excited about something. Either way, it looks like it only had a temporary effect...

She rested her chin on her hand, walking along behind the Maiden Queen as she considered the problem. *I'm sure my worrywart of a big sister must be staying up late, unable to sleep and overthinking every last little detail... But what to do...* she thought. And then, finally, she was struck by an idea and came to a sudden stop. *Wait... Now that I think about it, I believe I heard that the Fli-o'-Rys General Store in Houghtow City recently updated a number of their facilities...* "I can use that, I think..." she muttered to herself.

"Second Princess?" the Maiden Queen said.

Startled, the Second Princess lifted her head. She had been so absorbed in her thoughts, it turned out, that she had neglected to walk down the hallway. Suddenly she realized that she had fallen quite a bit behind.

"Is there something wrong, sister?" the Third Princess asked.

"O-Oh! No, no, not a thing!" the Second Princess insisted, wincing to herself as she hurried to catch up.

Thinking back, our older sister was always putting herself front and center to protect the Third Princess and me back when our rotten excuse for a father was still the king... the Second Princess reflected, hiding her smile behind her fingertips as she stepped up between the others. *But things are different now, and I'd like to return the favor if I can...*

The three sisters continued down the hallway, chatting amiably with each other as they went.

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic, Headmaster's Office◇

That day, Nyt was in her office on the first floor of the Houghtow College of Magic.

Nyt—formerly known as the Serpent Princess Yorminyt and one of the old Infernal Four who served under Dark One Gholl, now living in disguise as a human. After she defected from the Dark Army, a

series of misadventures led her to eventually become the headmaster at the Houghtow College of Magic.

In her natural form Nyt was a lamia, with a humanoid body above the waist and a snake's tail below. Now, however, she had transformed herself into a body indistinguishable from a human, with her most notable feature being her long blue hair. She was sitting at her desk with a monocle in one eye, poring over paperwork, when the sound of someone knocking came from the door.

"Come in," Nyt said. The door opened, and Taclyde stepped into the room.

Taclyde—an ordinary human who worked as administrator of the Houghtow College of Magic. In addition to his administrative duties, he also handled cleaning and repairs, communications with parents and guardians of the students, and interfacing with outside institutions. In short, nearly all the work that kept the Houghtow College of Magic up and running fell squarely on his shoulders.

"Long day, eh, Headmaster?" Taclyde said with a smile.

"Yesss..." Nyt sighed, giving the administrator a look of deep exhaustion. "Very, very long..."

"Headmaster, you aren't *tired*, are you?" Taclyde asked.

"Isss it any wonder? I've been looking over thessse application forms all day sssince the early morning..." Sighing again, she gestured to a corner of her desk, where there was a squat wooden box labeled "Applications." It was divided into two sections along the middle, with the right side labeled "Reviewed," and the left side "To Review." The left side, unfortunately, was still piled high with paper. "And yet..." Nyt continued, sighing her third sigh of the conversation, "I can't help but feel as though I haven't made any progressss at all..."

"Ah ha ha!" Taclyde laughed good-naturedly, his smile undaunted by the headmaster's bad mood. "Say about it what you will, but our school is out here in the kingdom's frontier, far away from Klyrode Castle, you know! Just about everyone living in the region sends their kids to our school. Unfortunately, more students means more paperwork to do!"

“Yesss, I know...” Nyt grumbled. “But why did I end up becoming headmassster of a school like thisss, I wonder...”

“Well, speaking personally, I consider scouting you for headmaster to be one of the top three climactic triumphs of my life!” Taclyde said with a laugh.

“Pleassse don’t tell me you’re putting on airsss like sssome kind of knockoff hero...” Nyt scowled in open displeasure at Taclyde’s words. “Ssso?” she added, putting the application form she had been reviewing back down on the desk and removing her monocle. “What isss it you need, Taclyde?”

“Oh, yes,” Taclyde said. “I believe I’ve mentioned this before, but Mister Flio from the Fli-o’-Rys General Store is going to be arriving shortly to discuss the prospect of issuing identification cards for discounted fares for students commuting by Enchanted Frigate...”

“Ah, yesss. Now that you mention it, I do recall you sssaying he might be ssstopping by for a meeting after hisss visit to ressstock the school ssstore...”

“Well then,” said Taclyde. “Shall I show him in?”

Nyt sighed loudly as she stood up from her desk. “Yesss, and right away if you pleassse. It wouldn’t do to keep him waiting.”

“Understood!” said Taclyde, leaving the headmaster’s office at a jog. “I’ll be just a moment!”

◇Meanwhile—Houghtow College of Magic School Store◇

Near the center of the Houghtow College of Magic campus was a building that served as both the dormitories and the school store. Despite the school’s location in the far-flung countryside, a great number of the students commuted to class from out of town. The dormitories, however, were for the not inconsiderable number of students who lived too far away for such an arrangement to be suitable.

Incidentally, the operations of the dormitories and school store were handled by the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, which offered a midday meal to all students at the cafeteria in addition to stationery, athletic clothes, and a wide variety of other goods. The store staff on

duty was responsible for managing the dormitories as well, providing dinner to the students living there and handling any trouble that might come up.

"*Huff...puff...*" Inside the staff lodging located at the end of the cafeteria, Irystiel hefted a wooden crate in her arms.

Irystiel—one of Garyl's old classmates. After graduation she found employment with the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, working at the school store at the Houghtow College of Magic. Irystiel was a devil, and so shy that she was unable to converse with others without using a stuffed animal as an intermediary. Her older sister Belianna was one of the Dark Army's current Infernal Four, but that was a fact she kept secret. She still harbored amorous feelings for Garyl, as was the norm among all the girls of his class.

Irystiel brought the crate, which was full of merchandise Flio had delivered earlier to restock the store, to the edge of the room and got to work sorting the contents. "This goes here...and that goes there..." she said as she put items in their place, moving a little slowly but with practiced efficiency.

"Hey, Irystiel!" Just then, Irystiel heard a voice calling to her from the window. "How the damned hell have you been?"

Irystiel's eyes lit up as she turned to see Belianna standing outside, transformed to look like a run-of-the-mill human and grinning as she waved to her sister.

"Big sister!" said Irystiel, a smile on her face as she ran over to the window.

The sisters Irystiel and Belianna were both members of the demon species known as devils, but while Belianna's mother was a devil like her, Irystiel's had been a human. Their father and both their mothers had died when the two of them were young, leaving Belianna to look after Irystiel alone. Worried her precious sister might face bullying at the hands of other demons for the human blood that ran through her veins, Belianna enrolled her in the Houghtow College of Magic, a school known for accepting demihumans of all kinds and even demons if they didn't belong to the Dark Army.

Belianna made a point of visiting her sister at school to see how

she was doing whenever she could between her various duties, a habit she had kept up even after Irystiel graduated and took a job with the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

Belianna stepped into the room and sat down on a nearby sofa as Irystiel prepared her a cup of black tea. "So?" she said, taking a sip as Irystiel sat down next to her. "How've things been damned going? No damned problems lately?"

"Everything's going well!" said Irystiel, smiling brightly as she took a sip of tea as well. "Everyone is very good to me, and I'm having fun every day!"

Irystiel was a painfully shy girl, but with her sister Belianna she had no need for her usual stuffed animal ventriloquism, speaking as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Belianna smiled to see her sister doing so well. *It's a damned relief to see the school's been taking such damned good care of Irystiel...* she thought.

Irystiel, however, suddenly began staring intently at Belianna's face, drawing uncomfortably close to look her directly in the eyes. "What about you, big sister?" she asked. "Is there something wrong?"

"Gh..." Belianna choked, reflexively avoiding Irystiel's gaze. *That's right... Irystiel has that damned Skill that lets her see your damned mental state by looking in your eyes...* "Oh, you know..." she said, trying to avoid the issue. "It's nothing, really..."

Irystiel, however, only brought her face closer, staring deep into her sister's eyes.

"Hey, come on..." Belianna said. "I'm telling you..."

Irystiel stared into her eyes.

"I-It really isn't that big a deal..." she said.

Irystiel stared into her eyes.

In the end, Belianna's best efforts to avoid the subject were overcome by Irystiel's persistent gaze. "Hahh..." she sighed, throwing her hands up in defeat and turning back to face her sister properly. "Fine, damn it..." she said. *I'd better set up a damned Voice Barrier, though, just to be safe...* She waved her right index finger, and a blue magic barrier appeared around the two of them: a Voice

Barrier. This would prevent any sound from inside the barrier from being heard on the other side, and it could even block magical eavesdropping.

"So y'know..." Belianna began. "Somehow or other I made it onto the Infernal Four. And recently they've been giving me all these damned subordinates, who I'm supposed to be in charge of training. But... Well..." She sighed, slumping her shoulders in dejection. "It's just not going right at all! Or more like, every last one of this batch of these damned recruits is a damned wimp! They don't have a scrap of initiative, they're hopelessly scrawny, they won't attack or even fight back if you attack them, and they're so damned weak-spirited that one hit is all it takes to send them running for the hills! I brought 'em with me while I was subjugating some damned rebel demons thinking it would be a chance for them to get some damned combat experience, but the lot of them haven't shown any growth at all..." Covering her head with her hands, Belianna sighed yet again.

"That sounds like a lot of trouble..." said Irystiel, who had been nodding attentively the whole time Belianna was talking.

"It is..." Belianna said, demurely curling up in her sister's lap. "You get it, don't you, Irystiel?"

As a member of the Infernal Four, Belianna had to be confident and powerful at all times, never expressing the slightest bit of doubt or timidity as she charged ahead with her scythe. It was only here, within the borders of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, far from the Dark Citadel, alone with her little sister, that she could really act like herself.

"I don't know much about fighting..." Irystiel said, smiling like the sun as she stroked Belianna's hair. "But I know you're always working very hard, big sister."

"Damned thanks, Irystiel..." Belianna said, pressing her face against Irystiel's thighs. "You know...at times like these, I always wonder... What would my hero, the Wolf of Justice, do..."

"Excuse me!" Just then, the pair heard a voice calling from outside the door. "Mind if I come in?"

Belianna lifted her head out of Irystiel's lap with a jolt, her vulnerable expression changing on a dime, doing her best to project

an air of power as she turned to look in the newcomer's direction. *A damned customer for the school store?* she thought. *He shouldn't have heard my conversation with Irystiel at least, thanks to that damned Voice Barrier I set up...*

"Oh! It's Mister Flio!" said Irystiel.

"Mister Flio?" Belianna asked, confused, as Irystiel brought out her favorite stuffed animal and held it in front of her face.

"Irystiel says, *'This is Mister Flio, the head of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store! He's my employer!'* Mreowr!" the stuffed animal relayed, animated by Irystiel's skillful ventriloquism.

Even now that she had graduated from school, Belianna was the only person with whom Irystiel could hold a conversation without the aid of her stuffed animals.

"Oh! I-I see!" said Belianna, hurrying to her feet and lowering her head to the man standing in the doorway. "Damned grateful for everything you do for my sister..."

"It's quite all right!" Flio assured her with one of his usual smiles as he stepped up to join the two sisters. "Really, more than anything I do for her, Irystiel does a great deal for us. She's a hard worker and a big help around the shop."

"Mnaah!" Belianna squirmed, apparently unable to contain her joy at having her sister praised. "D-Damned right! Irystiel's such a good girl! I'm so proud of my sister..."

"On that note," Flio said, "I was passing by here on my way back from a meeting with Headmaster Nyt, and I happened to overhear your conversation..." Withdrawing a pamphlet from his Bottomless Bag, he handed it over to Belianna.

"Houghtow Training Hall Renewal...?" Belianna read.

"That's right," said Flio. "We opened a facility for training adventurers a little while ago as a test, you see. It's been very well received, so we recently expanded the enterprise, adding a new high-level arena. If you're looking for somewhere to train your subordinates, it might be worth a thought. You're welcome to try it out, if you want to see the training hall for yourself." He smiled. "That's all I came in for. My apologies for interrupting your conversation!" And with that, he left just as suddenly as he had

appeared.

Belianna stared after Flio as he left and then looked down at the pamphlet in her hand. "Y'know, this might be just the damned thing for training those damned subordinates of mine..." she mused, nodding along as she read through the information provided. "It's worth a try, anyway..." Then, suddenly, she stopped, her head jerking to a halt mid-nod. "Wait..." she said, her eyes going wide as she looked back up at the door where Flio had left. "That Mister Flio guy... Did he say that he overheard our conversation? B-But I had a Voice Barrier up the whole damned time!"

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Outside, Flio made his way on towards the school gates. *I wasn't sure whether I should say something or not, but when I heard the Wolf of Justice's name come up I couldn't help but get involved...* he thought to himself, wincing as he awkwardly rubbed the back of his head. *I-I hope I didn't butt in where I wasn't wanted...*

The Wolf of Justice, of course, was none other than Flio himself. It was the identity he had assumed while driving off attacks from the Dark Army back in the day. Wearing a wolf mask and riding atop Rys in her lupine form, he routed the demons with his overwhelming magic power, taking care not to kill a single one. To the demons, who had long followed the principle of "might makes right," his strength made him a legend. Many of them even came to worship him as something approaching a god, even while they were fighting on the opposite side.

"My lord husband!" said Rys, poking her smiling head out from the other side of the gate and interrupting Flio's thoughts.

"Hello, Rys!" said Flio, waving back at her and running over, smiling himself. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Not at all! I just got here!" said Rys, running up to meet him and latching onto his arm, inadvertently pressing her voluptuous cleavage up against him and making him blush at the sensation. "So then, my lord husband... Are you finished with your tasks for the day?"

"O-Oh, yes!" said Flio. "I had the meeting about Enchanted Frigate passes for commuting students and restocked the school store, both without any trouble."

"In that case..." said Rys, smiling happily. "Perhaps we could get something to eat in town?"

"I don't see why not!" said Flio. "I don't have anything else to do today, after all."

"Excellent! Let's go, my lord husband!" said Rys, pulling Flio along by the arm as she led them away from the school. "By the way... That training hall Ghozal's been working on is due to open tomorrow, correct?"

"That's right," said Flio. "I even made pamphlets to distribute around town."

"There will be a leaderboard for the new training hall as well, won't there?" said Rys, practically bursting with excitement. "You can expect me to be taking the number one spot, or my name isn't Rys!"

Come to think of it, the last training hall ended up getting wrecked thanks to Rys and Uliminas fighting over first place... Flio thought. *That's the whole reason we ended up doing this renewal event...* "J-Just make sure you don't overdo it, okay Rys?" he said.

"B-But of course!" Rys insisted, pounding her chest in a somewhat unconvincing display of confidence. "You know I never make the same mistake twice!"

The couple continued on down the road, talking happily all the while.

◇The Next Morning—Houghtow City Training Hall◇

In the area near the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, a crowd of people had formed around a building sporting a brand new sign reading "Houghtow Training Hall." The opening day had come, and with it a long line of people hoping to take part.

"Attention, please! Remember to queue up properly, everyone! No cutting in line!" said Damalynas, wearing a Fli-o'-Rys staff apron and floating in midair as she directed the flow of traffic.

Damalynas—the Grand Magus of Midnight, and master of the

Midnight Arts. Damalynas had long since abandoned her flesh, existing now only as a psychic construct. Since her loss to Hiya, however, she had found herself absorbed into the djinn's mindscape where she now served as their beloved training partner.

"Damalynas," said Hiya, stepping outside of the building to see how Damalynas was doing. They were wearing a Fli-o'-Rys staff apron as well. "Is everything in order outside?"

"Not in the slightest!" Damalynas reported. "It's chaos out here! I'm at my wit's end just getting these people to line up straight when everyone's trying to force their way to the front!" She rolled her eyes, looking over at the line to see that they had finally managed to form something resembling a queue. "But why are there so many people here, anyway? I remember the training hall being fairly popular before this whole renewal thing, but I've never seen crowds like this!"

"Ah..." said Hiya, pointing towards a brilliant golden shield shining in the window of the training hall. "I believe *that* would be the reason."

"That...?" Damalynas asked. "Isn't that the thing that came into the store the other day...?"

"Well spotted, Damalynas," said Hiya. "Yes, that shield was made with the very same doppeladler scale."

"A doppeladler scale, huh..." Damalynas marveled. "I hear that stuff comes with magic and physical reflection, immunity to spells, and a whole bunch of other buffs besides..."

"Indeed," said Hiya. "A shield of the utmost quality, made from immensely rare materials..."

"Wait..." said Damalynas. "Don't tell me..."

"Just so," Hiya explained. "That shield is to be awarded as a prize for coming in first place in the rankings of the new dungeon training arena."

"Heck yeah!" roared someone in the crowd, who was close enough to overhear their conversation. "That shield's gonna be mine, no matter what stands in my way!"

"Don't think I'll let you have it that easily!" piped up another. "The money I could make selling something like that would set me up for

life!”

“Come on! Let us try the challenge, damn it!”

The excitement spread throughout the entire line until the whole area was abuzz with loud voices. “Hey!” Damalynas complained, covering her ears to block out the sound. “That’s *too loud*!”

“Quite so,” agreed Hiya. “It’s a nuisance to the whole neighborhood.” They held out their right arm, summoning a magic circle and shooting out a beam of light. The light enveloped the people waiting in line and quickly vanished, leaving the boisterous crowd utterly silent no matter how much they hooted and hollered. “I’ve created a magic barrier to prevent your voices from escaping,” they told the crowd. “Now things should be pleasantly quiet. The effect will end once you have entered the training hall, so please be patient until then.” And with that, the djinn went back into the building.

The renewed training hall was equipped with a variety of different arenas, including the original format, where teams of opponents fought over territory with weapons that converted the user’s magic power into harmless water in order to prevent injuries. Now, however, visitors also had the option of challenging a five-floor underground labyrinth, competing to see who could conquer the dungeon and reach the goal in the shortest amount of time. The doppeladler scale shield was to be awarded to the first champion of this new dungeon training arena. Not only that, but the dungeon included treasure chests containing healing potions or other items with beneficial effects. These could be used to gain an advantage within the dungeon, or they could be taken home at the finder’s discretion.

“Houghtow Self Defense Society, over here by me!” said one particularly formidable-looking woman, calling over a group of people who had made it past the registration desk. “Listen up!” she said. “There’s a time limit for each floor of the dungeon, understand? If you go overtime, it means the end of your run! But no pushing yourself past your limits to try and go to a deeper floor than you can handle! Get comfortable fighting on the floor you’re at first before

you challenge the next level!”

“Yes ma’am!” the group replied, all clearly raring to go.

“Look at those beginners!” Rys gushed, stealing a glance from her place in line as she and Uliminas waited just a few spots away from the reception desk. “Aren’t they just precious?”

“Meow kidding...” said Uliminas. “Makes mew wonder if *we* were like that when we were furst learning how to fight...”

“You know, Ghozal...” Rys added, looking back over her shoulders at the imposing figure looming directly behind them. “We really are sorry for getting carried away and destroying the last dungeon. We promise we won’t do it again...”

“That’s right...” said Uliminas, looking up at Ghozal as well. “It wasn’t on purrpose, mew know... Would you purretty please give us another chance?”

Ghozal looked between Rys and Uliminas as they both wrung their hands, pleading to be let into the arena, and let out a sigh. “Well, I can’t deny you’ve reflected on your past mistakes...” he said. “But right now I can’t have you charging through the dungeon to try to beat each other’s times! It would disappoint all of these customers if we had to shut the dungeon arena down for repairs. You two can hold on until there’s fewer people waiting for a turn!”

“B-But...” said Rys.

“Meow way...” said Uliminas.

The two slumped their shoulders, crying bitter tears, but no one could deny that their friendly rivalry had previously led both of them to some truly rash behavior.

◇ ◇ ◇

While Ghozal was busy lecturing Rys and Uliminas, Belianna stood nearby waiting her turn in line. Because this was a human training hall, she had disguised herself as a human woman with a quick Shapeshift spell. Behind her were her troublesome subordinates, likewise disguised.

“Finally, it’s our damned turn...” Belianna said, stretching her arms which had grown stiff over the long wait as she stepped up to

Byleri at the reception desk.

Ordinarily at this time of day Byleri would be tending to the wagon staging ground behind the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, where she lent out equine magic beasts. With the Houghtow Training Hall proving even more popular than expected, however, she had been called in on short notice to help with registration.

"Like, welcome!" Byleri said, smiling as she greeted the new batch of guests. "Which training course would you like today?" Above her head was a series of windows displayed by projection crystal technology showing the current state of the various arenas, which Belianna had been eyeing while waiting her turn in line.

I wasn't sure what to expect, but it looks like this place has some damned interesting systems set up... she thought. *But for today...* "Hey, you damned lot!" she barked, calling to her subordinates who were lined up behind her, chattering excitedly as they watched the action happening in the windows. At her command they fell silent, lining up neatly behind her. "We've got a damned group of seven," she told Byleri. "All for the damned underground labyrinth, please!"

"Right away!" said Byleri. "So like, there are three tiers of dungeon arena: beginner, intermediate, and advanced..."

"Advanced, damned obviously!" said Belianna, slamming the registration fee down on the desk. "For all seven!"

Behind her, Belianna's underlings went pale, some furiously shaking their heads.

"W-We're skipping right to advanced?"

"A-And stuck in human form too..."

"I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't..."

Belianna clicked her tongue in frustration at the state of her group. "What, are you afraid of a little training?! It'll be a quick in and out, and you'll leave with some damned combat experience! Besides, this is a damned training hall! No one's gonna be getting injured!"

"That's totally right!" said Byleri, smiling and nodding her head. "Like, the Houghtow Training Hall is set up with defensive spells to ensure no one gets hurt, so you should be safe as long as the demon copies don't hit you anywhere too delicate! And just in case

something were to go wrong, the famous magic beast veterinarian Doctor Stoleanna has her clinic right next door!"

Stoleanna—a magic beast racer who had reigned undefeated over the racetracks in Naneewa Town until she suffered a crushing defeat to Sleip and transferred over to the Fli-o'-Rys Magic Beast Racing Hall. She was also an expert magic beast veterinarian, a skill she put to use in the clinic she had opened near the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

"H-Huh..." one of Belianna's subordinates said, taken in by Byleri's cheerful explanation. "Maybe it'll be okay after all..."

"No, no, no, hang on, what was that she slipped in there about *as long as they don't hit you anywhere too sensitive?*"

"I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't..."

Belianna clicked her tongue yet again, infuriated by her subordinates' behavior. "Quit your damned griping and get in the damned arena, would you?!" she said, imperiously folding her arms.

"Y-Yes ma'am!" the demons said, all seven of them hurrying over to the dungeon entrance.

"Um..." said Byleri, looking over at Belianna. "Are you, like, not joining them?"

"I'm just here to give them some damned guidance," Belianna said. "I'll be watching their damned progress from the viewing room in the back." She turned to leave the reception desk, raising her hand in a casual farewell.

"Oh!" Byleri said, handing seven thin objects over to Belianna, one for each of her seven subordinates. "Like, in that case, why don't you hold on to these?"

"What's this?" Belianna asked.

"It's a present we're giving to everyone taking part in our renewal opening to, like, commemorate the event!" Bylleri said.

"All right," said Belianna. "I'll hold on to these damned presents for...for... Wait, *what?!*" When she saw what the objects she was holding were, Belianna froze in place, her eyes almost bulging out of her head in disbelief. In her hands were seven copies of a particular distinctive wolf mask. "This..." she said. "Is this..."

"Like totally!" Byleri said. "They're replicas patterned after the Wolf of Justice's mask—one of the symbols of the Fli-o'-Rys General

Store! There's a cord attached, so if you have a Bottomless Bag you can—"

"Everyone taking part...gets one of these masks...?" Belianna asked, interrupting Byleri's explanation.

"That's right!" said Byleri. "Everyone who—"

Bang!

With surprising force, Belianna slammed an eighth registration fee down on the table.

"I know I said I was gonna be watching their damned progress," she said, "but I take it back! I'll be running the damned dungeon too! S-So... Please!" she begged, leaning forwards on the desk.

"A-Ah! L-Like, okay!" said Byleri, shrinking back from Belianna's bloodshot eyes and ragged breath. "U-Um... Here you go!" With trembling hands, she held out another Wolf of Justice mask for Belianna, who bowed so low her head practically slammed into the desk, accepting the mask with both hands like a priceless treasure.

To Belianna, a fanatical devotee of the Wolf of Justice, it was exactly that.

◇Meanwhile—Outside the Training Hall◇

Flio stood outside the Houghtow City Training Hall, surveying the busy crowd of customers who had come to take part in the reopening event. "I have to say, this is a lot more people than I was expecting," he remarked.

"I'm sure these souvenirs you made are no small part of that, Papa!" said Elinàsze, holding up her traveling bag to show off the Wolf of Justice replica mask dangling from the handle. "Demons can't get enough of the Wolf of Justice, you know. I wouldn't be surprised if we had demons making multiple attempts to try to get extras."

"I have noticed quite a lot of demon visitors today...although most of them are disguised using the Shapeshift spell," Flio said, nodding thoughtfully at the explanation. *That's right... Ghozal said as much as well, which is why I ended up making the Wolf of Justice a mascot of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store... But to be honest, the*

whole thing is just a bit embarrassing. Part of me wishes everyone would just forget about that entire episode... he thought, wincing to himself before turning back to Elinàsze with a smile on his face. "That reminds me," he said. "Ghozal told me you were a big help with the new dungeon arena, Elinàsze."

"I didn't do anything worth mentioning, really," Elinàsze insisted. "I just made some simple traps and the boss monsters at the end of each floor. I'm sure if it were you, Papa, you'd have made something far, far more incredible!"

"No, no!" Flio demurred. "I wouldn't say so at all!"

"That really is one of your most admirable traits, Papa," said Elinàsze, gazing up adoringly at her father. "Even though you wield the most spectacular magic, you never lord it over anyone. You treat everyone you meet with kindness and humility... You know, Papa, I admire you to the end of the cosmos."

"I really think you're giving me too much credit..." said Flio. "But thank you, Elinàsze." He gently placed his hand on his daughter's shoulder, and she leaned into the touch with such eagerness it looked like he must have pulled her off her feet.

"And of course, I admire my lord husband to the end of the cosmos and back as well!" declared Rys, running out of the reception with surprising force and charging straight for her husband and daughter, pulling them both into a tight hug.

"And I love you too, Mama, of course!" said Elinàsze, hugging her back.

"Me too, Rys," said Flio, doing likewise.

"Thank you...both of you..." said Rys, closing her eyes and holding her family close. "Although come to think of it..." she added after a moment, looking around in sudden confusion. "Where did Garyl get to? Wasn't he supposed to be home today...?"

"Oh, Garyl?" said Flio, glancing in the direction of the house. "Well, you see..."

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Garyl's room was on the second floor of Flio's house. Garyl had

been living in Klyrode Castle since his induction into the Order of Klyrode, but his family had kept his old room back home exactly how he had left it.

In his bedchambers, curled up in his bed, the Maiden Queen lay with her eyes closed, softly snoring. As for Garyl, he sat on the edge of the bed, watching over the sleeping Queen with a gentle expression.

I know my mission from the Second Princess is to protect the Maiden Queen while she performs her observations of the Houghtow City Training Hall, but Ellie's just been so worn out lately, so I told her to get a bit of rest here first... he thought, tenderly pulling the blanket up over her chest. *But it's been almost half a day and she's still fast asleep...*

A cloud of mist appeared behind Garyl, materializing into his familiar Ben'ne.

Ben'ne—a legendary master of the blade from Hi-Izuru, the Land of the Rising Sun. She was defeated by Garyl in single combat and found herself so in awe of his strength that she vowed then and there to accompany him as his familiar.

"My master..." Ben'ne inquired. "Why have you done nothing but stare at her from the edge of your bed?"

"Why?" Garyl repeated, spreading his arms wide in a haplessly fond shrug. "I mean, I'm keeping watch so that Ellie can stop worrying and get some sleep."

"You know, my master..." said Ben'ne. "In my homeland we say it is a disgrace for a man not to eat a meal that has been set out for him..."

"Ah ha ha..." Garyl laughed dryly. "Ben'ne, I really wish you wouldn't say things like that..."

Ben'ne sighed deeply at her master's pitiable state. "Ah, alas..." she said. "If you continue like this, sooner or later she'll be taken away by some other man, I fear."

"I...don't think I'd like that..." said Garyl.

"Oho?" Ben'ne's eyes lit up at Garyl's reaction. *That was a rather prompt response...* she thought, as Garyl continued watching over the Maiden Queen as she slept, his kind expression not changing in

the slightest. *Then perhaps that is not such an ineffective line of attack after all...* Ben'ne held up her sleeve to hide the corners of her mouth, concealing the triumphant smile that had come over her face. *I pledged to look after my master in all ways, after all. I will see these two to their destination, no matter how long it should take...*

From outside, rays of sunlight streamed into the quiet bedroom as the Maiden Queen caught up on some long-overdue sleep.

Chapter 3: Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought

◇Near the Klyrode-Dark Army Border◇

Surrounded on every side by thick-growing trees, a single carriage made its way through the woods. The old highway it was following had fallen into disrepair so long ago that now it looked like little more than an animal path, but the carriage continued undaunted. Inside, Hero Gold-Hair sat with his arms folded, dressed in his customary red outfit.

"Keats, I have to hand it to you," Hero Gold-Hair marvelled, glancing out the window. "You really do know these old roads like the trim of your spokes."

"*Oh, no, navigating the roads is simple enough!*" said Aryun Keats's telepathic voice, emanating from the roof of the carriage.

As a carriage djinn, Aryun Keats had the power to transform her body into the shape of any vehicle she had ever touched. In fact, the carriage in which Hero Gold-Hair and his party were riding at this very moment was none other than her.

"*I'm a carriage djinn, after all!*" Aryun continued. "*I make it a point to always have the latest information concerning the state of the roadways.*"

"Really!" said Hero Gold-Hair. "And where does this information of yours come from?"

"*Well, sir, I asked Madame Riliangiu to keep an eye on the state of the roads while she's out scouting for the party,*" Aryun explained.

"Ah, of course! I see!" Hero Gold-Hair said, nodding sagely. *Riliangiu's a first rate scout, after all!* he thought. *Leave it to her to find the time to keep tabs on something like that* even *with all the other work she does scouting our perimeter! I really need to think of*

some way to show her my appreciation...

As Hero Gold-Hair sat thinking, however, it came to his attention that Tsuya, who was sitting right beside him, kept stealing furtive glances at his face. "Mh?" he grunted. "Tsuya, is there something you want to talk about?"

"O-Oooh!" Tsuya exclaimed, jumping out of her seat in surprise. "Ah ha haaa! I-I mean, it's nooothing, reaaally..."

"Are you sure? If there's something bothering you, I'd rather you just tell me."

"O-Okaaay..." Tsuya said, fidgeting uncomfortably at Hero Gold-Hair's questions and staring at her feet as if whatever was on her mind was difficult to talk about. "So, ummm... How do I puuut this..." she began, looking back up at Hero Gold-Hair. "It was this weeeird dream I had last niiight..."

"A dream?" Hero Gold-Hair asked.

"That's riiight," said Tsuya. "It was liiike...the two of us were shopping in some ciiity, but something about the way you were acting was straaange..."

"I was acting strange?"

Tsuya nodded. "It was weeeird," she said, a puzzled frown on her face as she poked at her cheek in thought. "You weren't taaalking the way you usually do..."

"He wasn't talking like usual?" said Wuha Gappoli, who had been sitting across from Tsuya and Hero Gold-Hair. She was dressed in a short-sleeve shirt and short pants, an outfit that made it easy for strangers to mistake her for a boy at first glance, especially considering her flat chest and slender frame. "You mean, so he *wasn't* acting all high-and-mighty? Or referring to himself in the third person all the time?" she asked, grinning deviously.

"Wuha, don't interrupt," Hero Gold-Hair said. "Besides," he added, puffing out his chest, "I don't act high-and-mighty! And I've certainly never referred to myself in the third person!"

Wuha Gappoli smirked in silence in response to Hero Gold-Hair's declaration, while Tsuya just smiled with obvious insincerity. Even Aryun Keats seemed to be regarding him with a kind of stony silence.

"*ZZZzzz...*" Fast asleep, Valentine let out a loud snore, heedless of anything happening around her.

A long moment of silence passed, and Hero Gold-Hair nodded his head, apparently satisfied. "Well then!" he said. "I see everyone has been stunned into silence by the clear truth of my argument!"

Wuha Gappoli and Tsuya both slumped over in disbelief, although Tsuya's fake smile didn't leave her face for a second. Aryun Keats, of course, would be hard-pressed to slump over in her current form, but her continued silence spoke volumes nonetheless.

"*Zzzzz...*" snored Valentine.

As the carriage continued on in markedly awkward silence, Tsuya thought back to her dream. *The way the Hero Gooold-Hair in my dreeeam was talking, he keeept saying things like, "*hy*ou* hw*astrels!" or "*hy*ou won't get a*hw*ay* hw*ith this!"* she remembered. *But now it feels too aaawkward to saaay anything...*

"So?" Hero Gold-Hair asked. "Tsuya?"

"Eee! Y-Yeees?" asked Tsuya, jolting out of her seat to hear Hero Gold-Hair suddenly say her name.

"What were you going to say earlier?" he asked. "Wuha didn't make you forget what you were saying, with her *thoroughly* uncalled-for remarks, did she?"

"U-Uhhh... Oh, ummm..." said Tsuya, faking a smile and pressing her fingers against both her cheeks. "Th-Thaaat's funny! I-I guess I diiid forget!" she insisted, cold sweat running down her brow. *Wh-What do I dooo...*

Just then, however, Valentine finally opened her eyes. "Hm...?" she said, rousing herself from sleep.

In her natural form Valentine was a tall and voluptuous beauty, and very proud of her figure. Unfortunately, as a native of the Realm of Evil, a world with a much higher concentration of malicium, Valentine required a considerable amount of magic power in order to sustain her body on Klyrode. In order to minimize her malicium consumption, she now spent most of her time transformed into the body of a young girl, which she called her power-saving mode. She was in her power-saving mode today as well, rubbing her eyes as she turned to look out the window.

“What’s wrong, Valentine?” Hero Gold-Hair asked. “Are you getting hungry again?”

At those words, the blood drained from Tsuya’s face. *D-Don’t tell me we’re about to see the return of Laaady Vaaalentine of the booottomless pit! She’s hardly needed to eat aaanything since we took that huuuge magic gem that was powering that straaange magic beast...* she thought.

Tsuya had good reason to be concerned. Valentine had three principal methods to recover her body’s reserves of malicium. She could take it directly from crystallized malicium, known colloquially as magic gems. She could absorb it from living beings with malicium-based physiologies. And finally, she could obtain it from ingesting particularly malicium-rich food.

Magic gems could be somewhat difficult to come by and were expensive to purchase. As for the method of absorbing malicium from living beings, it was more profitable to the party to sell any magic beasts that came into their possession for ordinary currency. With the first two methods therefore off the table, Valentine found herself getting most of the malicium she needed to survive from food. Unfortunately, though, this method had a truly miserable rate of absorption, requiring a staggering quantity of food just to break even.

Before Valentine had learned how to use her power-saving mode, her monstrous appetite had put a dire strain on the party’s finances. As the group’s designated treasurer, Tsuya used to find herself racking her brain day after day just to make ends meet.

Panicking and white as a sheet, Tsuya held her head in both hands. Valentine, however, paid her behavior no mind whatsoever. She had stuck her head out the window, looking all around as if she were searching for something.

“Hey, Valentine!” Hero Gold-Hair called out to her a second time. “What’s got you so worked up?”

“I’m not entirely sure...” Valentine replied as she scanned their surroundings. “For a moment I thought I could sense something out of the ordinary...” She furrowed her brow in concentration and a small magic circle appeared in front of her left eye, tinting the trees

in her vision a shade of red. “Was I imagining it, perhaps?” she wondered. “But it really did seem like something was there...”

Valentine peered out at the road ahead, stretching out into the distance and dotted with small hills, regarding one hill in particular with evident suspicion...

◇Near the Klyrode-Dark Army Border—Atop a Nearby Hill◇

Not far from the border between the Dark One’s domain and the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode was a spot where the forest gave way to a patch of hilly land. Near the top of one of those hills was the entrance of a cave guarded by a pair of demons standing on either side with their spears crossed. Inside, the cavern grew gradually wider and wider until it reached its deepest point, which had been carved to resemble nothing short of a palace.

There, in the inner palace, standing upon the ruins of an ancient altar, was a demon woman. She was draped in hooded robes and holding a magnificent staff inlaid with magic gems, reading from a grimoire floating in midair before her eyes as she carved out a magic circle at her feet.

“Hee hee hee!” the woman laughed as she drew the circle on the ruined altar with the end of her staff. “Yes... Yes! It’s working!” With each stroke, the light of the magic circle shone brighter and brighter, flowing from the circle out towards the grand gate behind her. The gate was made of stone and seemed to be of considerable antiquity, the glyphs that had once been engraved on its surface now weathered to nigh illegibility.

As the brightly glowing magic circle bathed the entire cavern in its pale light, a younger demon girl stepped into view from deeper in the complex. “Diablomancer Anhella!” she called out to the demon on the altar.

“Ah. If it isn’t Dotsuno the Bronze,” Anhella replied. “Well done on your labors.”

“No, no!” said Dotsuno, bowing her head as low as she could manage. “The labor isn’t done at all!”

Dotsuno the Bronze—a girl from the fox demon clan, who

Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver treated as something of a younger sister. Even though she wasn't related to the two sisters by blood, there was no one working harder than her to bring about their dream of restoring the fortunes of the demon fox clan.

Two stories below the chamber where Anhella was doing her work, Dotsuno craned her head to look up at the woman. "Well?" she asked. "How are your preparations coming along?"

Anhella paused, letting her staff rest and returning the grimoire that had been floating in midair back to her hand. "Better than I could have hoped," she said, proudly nodding her head and lowering her hood to reveal the features and deep brown skin of a dark elf as she stepped down from the altar. "Indeed, if I can continue at this pace, the magic circle should be complete in a matter of days."

"And once it's done, we can finally get our plan to work!" Dotsuno said, grinning with excitement as she leaped up behind Anhella.

"Indeed," said Anhella, leading the way out of the building and sitting down on part of the ruined structure that happened to be shaped well enough to function as a chair. "It won't be long now."

"Ah ha!" Dotsuno laughed with joy, hugging Anhella tightly and patting the dark elf on the head as if she were a small child. "Thank you so so much! I'm so glad I went to you for advice, Anhella! Besties for life, right!"

"I keep telling you, stop treating me like a child!" Anhella scowled, pushing Dotsuno off her with all her might. "I'm more than a century older than you!"

"O-Oh! S-Sorry!" said Dotsuno, scooting away from Anhella and clasping her hands together and bowing her head in apology. "I know you're older than me, but you're just so tiny and cute, you know? I guess I wasn't thinking..."

In fact, Anhella was a full head shorter than Dotsuno, who herself was not terribly tall, and she had a face that could easily pass for a child's—a result of the magic cosmetics she applied in order to boost her magic power, albeit with the unintended side effect of making her appear much younger than she actually was.

"You know how much it bothers me to be treated as a child, Dotsuno..." Anhella complained, pulling the hood of her robe back up

to hide her face.

"Ah ha ha! I'm really sorry, for reals!" Dotsuno pleaded, sitting down beside her and looking up at the ancient staircase. "But never mind that! Once you finish the magic circle, we can get that gate working again, right? A gate we can use to summon a super powerful magic beast from the Underground World!"

Even Anhella couldn't help smiling beneath her hood at Dotsuno's gleeful exuberance. "And you intend to...*hire* this magic beast, did you put it? All in order to be useful to the demon fox sisters?"

"That's right!" said Dotsuno. "Last time they gave me a mission, I messed up big-time. The artificial magic beast even wound up getting wrecked. But if I can bring back another magic beast as a replacement, maybe they'll let me do missions again! Good riddance to old mistakes!" she declared, jumping to her feet to give three rousing cheers.

Anhella smiled with wry amusement at her partner's display of pure innocent joy. *Dotsuno the Bronze... She chose a strange name for herself, but she's certainly not without her charms...* she mused, looking down at the grimoire in her hands. *I can do this. Just as long as I copy the magic circle exactly as it appears in this grimoire, nothing should go wrong. And so far, it's been going well. There should be nothing to worry about...* She nodded to herself, before looking back up at Dotsuno. "So then, Dotsuno. How is this distraction of yours coming along?"

"O-Oh. Right..." Suddenly, the joy faded from Dotsuno's face, leaving a distinctly embarrassed expression in its place.

"No!" Anhella exclaimed, clearly alarmed by Dotsuno's reaction. "Don't tell me the Dark Army has discovered our location?!"

"No, no, no, nothing like that!" said Dotsuno. "With all the demons breaking the peace treaty to do guerrilla attacks on human villages, the Dark Army's way too busy to notice us here! It's just..." she hesitated, struggling to find the words.

"It's just...?" Anhella prompted. "Just what?"

"Well, you know... It was one thing when we were just dealing with Belianna and Zanzibar from the Infernal Four, but now the Wolf of Justice's minions have started interfering too! With those guys

involved, I'm finding fewer and fewer demons who wanna join the raids every day... Ah ha ha..." she gave a self-deprecating laugh, awkwardly scratching the back of her head.

"I see..." Anhella intoned, echoing Dotsuno's concerns. "Yes, that *would* make things difficult, wouldn't it. If we lose our guerrillas, there will be little stopping someone from discovering the magic power we are concentrating here and coming to interfere. In theory my magic barrier should keep our energy sequestered from the outside, but when I am feeding power to the gate to the Underground World I must charge the core beneath the magic circle with a truly vast amount of energy. We must have some kind of distraction to prevent them from detecting us during that moment..." Sighing, she rummaged in her robes for a moment until she found what she was looking for and withdrew a small leather pouch. "Take these magic gems, and use them to hire mercenaries to your cause," she told Dotsuno, handing her the pouch. "It isn't much, but it should be enough to pay their fees, at least until the circle is compleeetaghhh!!!"

"Thank you thank you thank you thank you *thank you*!!!" Dotsuno cried, squeezing Anhella tightly around the shoulders just when she had least been expecting an attack and eliciting a truly undignified cry from the diablomancer. "I love you, Anhella! You're the best!"

"Gh... Kh... S-Stop! Get off me!" Anhella complained, struggling to extract herself from Dostuno's grip. The fox demon, alas, was far too overwhelmed by emotion to hold herself back. She squeezed Anhella as hard as she could, nuzzling with wild intensity.

All the while, up the stairs from where the two were sitting, the stone gate glowed with an unearthly light...

◇ ◇ ◇

Dig, dig, dig, dig, dig...

The sounds of scraping and shoveling echoed underground as Hero Gold-Hair tunneled through the earth like a man possessed. The Drilldozer Shovel glowed with a golden light in his hands, digging through everything ahead of him at a remarkable clip. Tsuya,

Valentine, Wuha Gappoli, and Aryun Keats were coming along after him in a single file, running to keep up with the ludicrous pace Hero Gold-Hair was digging.

"U-Ummm... *Huff...puff*..." Tsuya ventured. "H-Hero Gooold-Hair...? *Huff...puff...*"

"Yes, Tsuya?"

"I-I was just wooondering... *Huff...puff...* Wh-Why do we have to go undergroooound...? *Huff...puff...*"

"Th-That's right...! *Haah...haah...*" Valentine agreed. "Th-The disturbance I sensed was at the *top* of the hill, wasn't it...? *Haah...haah...*"

"Y-Yeah...! *Gasp...wheeze...*" added Wuha Gappoli. "Why can't we ride up in Aryun like we were before...? *Gasp...wheeze...*"

"W-Well said, Wuha...! *Pant...pant...*" Aryun Keats concurred. "S-Surely it would be more comfortable for all of you to ride inside me...! *Pant...pant...* A-And I personally would find it much easier as well... *Pant...pant...*"

Hero Gold-Hair, however, just kept shoveling in spite of the complaints of the four women struggling for breath as they ran all out simply to match his digging speed. "True, letting Keats carry us there would be a lot more comfortable..." he admitted, the Drilldozer Shovel not pausing for a single moment as he spoke. "But it's dangerous to head that direction on the surface, so we're going underground! That's the safest way!"

"I-It's daaangerous...*huff...puff...*to head that direeection...? *Huff...puff...*" asked Tsuya.

"H-How...*haah...haah...*do you know that...? *Haah...haah...*" Valentine wondered.

"It's not...*gasp...wheeze...*like you can use detection magic...*gasp wheeze...*is it?*"* protested Wuha Gappoli.

"A-And we haven't heard anything at all...*pant...pant...*from Madame Riliangiu...*pant...pant...*" pointed out Aryun Keats.

At that, Hero Gold-Hair stopped digging, finally giving the women a bit of a reprieve. "Isn't it obvious?" he said, turning to face the rest of the party and puffing out his chest, hands posed boldly on his hips. "It's my intuition, of course!"

"Huuuh?" said Tsuya.

"Excuse me?" asked Valentine.

"Are you for real right now?" grumbled Wuha Gappoli.

"There it is, I suppose..." sighed Aryun Keats.

Th-That's funny... thought Hero Gold-Hair, standing frozen in his heroic pose in the face of his companions' pronounced side-eye. *After a declaration like that, I thought they'd be showering me with praise and adoration! They* should *be saying things like "That's our Hero Gold-Hair!" or "Hero Gold-Hair, you're the best!" or "I always believed in you, Hero Gold-Hair!"*

Sensing that the mood in the tunnel wasn't quite what he had hoped, Hero Gold-Hair cleared his throat. "A-Ahem! W-Well, that's the long and short of it. Now, let's keep going!" he said, hefting the Drilldozer Shovel once more and getting back to work on the tunnel.

Tsuya, Valentine, Wuha Gappoli, and Aryun Keats all let out a heavy sigh.

"Well..." said Tsuya, "we've come thiiis far, anyway..."

"That's true..." said Valentine. "At this point, it would be just as much of a hassle to turn back..."

"Hey, Aryun," Wuha Gappoli asked. "How about letting me ride on your shoulders?"

"I'm afraid I must decline," said Aryun Keats.

And so, the four of them continued on through Hero Gold-Hair's freshly dug tunnel.

◇ ◇ ◇

The next morning, Dotsuno the Bronze was hiding in the woods somewhere on the Dark Army's side of the border. Behind her, a particularly brawny bunch of demons did their best to conceal themselves behind the trees as well. *All right...* she thought. *This should be enough distance from the cave where Anhella's doing her work. Now I've just gotta take these mercenaries I found in the area and get them to attack this convenient nearby village, and it should draw the attention of the Dark Army nicely...*

"Okay, everyone!" she said, nodding towards the mercenaries.

"Time to get to work!"

"Just leave it to us!" said one of the group.

"We've had it up to *here* with the current Dark One's attitude!" said another, making a rude gesture.

"Why should we make *peace* with those pathetic wimpy humans?!" questioned a third.

"We're with you, Dotsuno! Things would be a lot more fun around here if we drove out the Dark One and put the Demon Fox Sisters in power!" came a bold declaration from a fourth.

"And you know..." a fifth demon suggested. "From what I hear, Belianna from the Infernal Four's gone away somewhere to train up her subordinates..."

"And the other Infernal, Zanzibar, is busy putting down some other group of rebels, so *he* won't show up either!" said a sixth.

Dotsuno surveyed her eager fighters and raised her right hand. "All right, troops!" she said, bringing her arm forwards in a dramatic gesture. "Move out!"

"Raaaaaaahhh!!!" Bursting forth from the trees with a mighty shout, the demons fell upon the village with Dotsuno at their head...only to come to a screeching halt. There, standing tall, a single woman stood barring their way.

"Is that...a dark elf?" Dotsuno frowned.

Behind her, the group she had hired seemed suddenly hesitant as well.

"Wh-Who's that woman...?" asked one.

"It's not like she has a lot of meat on her..." another observed. "But somehow I get the sense that she's made of all muscle..."

"But what's she thinking, coming out alone to meet a whole group of demons?" worried a third.

The dark elf woman, who was dressed in a leather outfit that left precious little to the imagination, took a long look at the crowd in front of her and sighed. "*Hahhh*. Just a bunch of small fry. And here I was hoping for something that would win me some merit," she said, summoning a magnificent thorned whip into her hand with a quick incantation. "But even so...if taking down this group here and now can win me even the slightest bit of Dawkson's favor, that's one

step closer to the day I become his bride!" Smirking fiendishly, she struck the ground at her feet with the end of her whip, violently gouging out a patch of earth.

Dotsuno and her mercenaries found themselves shrinking back in spite of themselves, frightened by the force of this woman's whip. "J-Jeez! This lady seems like one heck of a fighter..." Dotsuno admitted. "B-But there's just one of her! We have numbers on our side!"

"Y-Yeah! That's right!" a mercenary chimed in.

"Besides!" another added. "If we ran away now, we'd be no better than that scaredy-cat Dark One who went to humanity with his tail between his legs, begging them to make peace!"

Twitch! At those words, a vein popped out noticeably on the dark elf's forehead.

"You said it!" one of them agreed. "Forget that weak-kneed excuse for a Dark One! It's the Demon Fox Sisters who'll lead the Dark Army to glory!"

Twitch twitch! The vein throbbed.

"It's just one woman!" said the largest of the mercenaries, a towering cyclops. "Hurry up and—"

Swish crack! Thoroughly enraged by the string of insults directed towards Dark One Dawkson, the dark elf lashed out with her whip straight for the cyclops's face, cutting him off mid-sentence as the whip wrapped tightly around his head. He tried to struggle, but the force behind the whip was simply too great.

"Hrmf!" the dark elf grunted, pulling back hard on the whip to tighten the lash even more firmly around the unfortunate cyclops's head. "Hah! All bark and no bite, I see, if this is all it takes to bring you to your knees! Now"—her lips turned upwards in an oddly bewitching smile as she pulled back harder still—"squeal like a pig!"

Shrieking in agony, the cyclops fell to the ground with a thunderous crash. As for his face—

****The following description has been omitted due to the graphic nature of its contents.****

"I-I know who that is!" a dark elf man from among Dotsuno's gang of mercenaries exclaimed in sudden recognition as their enemy leered down at the defeated cyclops. "Th-That's Princess Nerona, from the dark elves who rule over the northern demon lands!"

A shiver ran through the entire group at the mention of that name.

"P-Princess Nerona of the dark elves...?"

"Th-The barbarian princess? Th-The one who likes to beat her opponents to a bloody pulp, grinning all the while...?"

"I-I hear she's so monstrously savage even the Dark One didn't want to marry her..."

Once again, the vein on Princess Nerona's forehead *twitched* visibly.

"Y-You know, I heard that of the three women who came to the Dark Citadel for that contest to see who was gonna marry the Dark One, she's the only one who didn't go back home once it was all wrapped up..."

"I-I bet it's because she's so violent the dark elves refused to take her back!"

Twiiitch...

"F-Forget about all that!" said one of the mercenaries. "L-Let's get out of here!"

Wrapping up their round of gossip, the whole group did an about-face, white with fear...but it was too late.

"You bastards!" Nerona spat. "You think I'm gonna stand here and take that kinda talk?!" She charged straight for the mercenaries and lashed out with her whip, her slender but powerfully toned body delivering a frightening amount of force.

"Whgyahhh?!?!"

"Hieeee!!!"

Each strike from Nerona's whip sent multiple demons flying through the air, crying out in pain as the thorns bit into their flesh.

"*Obviously* the reason I'm still at the Dark Citadel is because I haven't given up on becoming Dark One Dawkson's bride! That's why I'm working as hard as I can to study cooking and cleaning and

everything else I'm bad at, and why I'm going around whenever I have a spare moment doing patrol missions like *this!* I-I'll admit, it's not like I've had any suitors of my own...b-but that's just because my father knows perfectly well that I'm not interested in anyone besides Dark One Dawkson!"

Come on, Dawkson, hurry up and make me your bride already... she thought. *I've been working so hard for you...and surely our childhood friendship has got to count for* something*, right?* A single tear fell from her eye, unnoticed in the savage chaos as she tore into Dotsuno's band of ne'er-do-wells.

◇Meanwhile—Dark Citadel◇

"Uoughhh..." Dark One Dakwson, who had been walking down the corridors of the Dark Citadel, suddenly let out an odd-sounding groan.

Dawkson—the current Dark One, younger brother of former Dark One Gholl. Under his old name, Yuigarde, he had once ruled as a vainglorious tyrant, but he eventually changed his name as well as his outlook on life and now walked the path of the enlightened monarch.

Phufun, who had been walking alongside Dawkson, came to a stop. "Master Dawkson, is there something wrong?" she asked, pressing her false glasses back up the ridge of her nose.

Phufun—a succubus demon who had been Dawkson's loyal minion since before he ascended the throne. At first glance she came across as an intelligent and worldly woman, but in fact she was an inveterate masochist and more than a bit of an airhead.

"I-I dunno..." said Dawkson, frowning as he scanned his surroundings for anything amiss. "Maybe it's nothing. I just had a shiver run down my spine..."

"Don't tell me..." Phufun glanced around the hallway as well. "Is that Princess Nerona up to something again...?"

"That woman..." Dawkson sighed. "She's sure been eager to handle all the cookin' and cleanin' herself. If only she was any good at it..."

“If only, indeed...” Phufun concurred. “Remember the other day, when the gargoyle statue she was polishing came plummeting down from the ceiling?”

“How could I forget...” said Dawkson. “If I’d been just a second later noticing it coming my way, that thing would have given me one hell of a headache...”

“And what about the time she swapped your dinner out with her own cooking?”

“Ah, well...” Dawkson shrugged. “It was easy enough to tell the difference at least, thanks to the smell...”

The two shared a long look before hanging their heads, sighing with exhaustion.

“You know...” said Phufun, adjusting her glasses again. “I hinted to the dark elf elder that she really needed proper training in the bridal arts, and I asked if he might take her back in order to further her studies among her own people...”

“I heard...” Dawkson grunted. “He made all kinds of excuses for why he couldn’t possibly take her back, didn’t he? If you ask me, they don’t *want* Nerona to come home, not since they finally managed to have a son...”

“W-Well, in any event, I don’t see our princess anywhere nearby for the time being...” Phufun sighed.

“I suppose not,” said Dawkson. “Guess we’d better go on and finish up our business while she’s out of our hair, hm?”

◇Next Morning◇

At the very end of the tunnel Hero Gold-Hair had been digging was a chamber where the space opened up to an expansive room; the walls, floor, and ceiling alike were all built with fine construction and luxurious materials, such that it resembled a room in a first-class inn far more than an underground tunnel. It was furnished with an expensive-looking carpet, sofas and beds, and even magic lanterns hanging from the walls to illuminate the darkness.

“Well, Wuha, like always, you certainly know how to make a room comfortable,” Hero Gold-Hair remarked, looking around the room.

"*Ah ha ha!*" came Wuha Gappoli's telepathic voice, projecting down from the ceiling. "*That's high praise to a manor djinn, you know!*"

As a manor djinn, Wuha Gappoli possessed the ability to transform her body into a mansion worthy of the name, but her power had enough flexibility to change the underground space dug by Hero Gold-Hair into a proper room as well. It was an ability that had saved the party a great deal of money which they might otherwise have spent on lodgings in a more ordinary sort of inn.

"*There's one thing I'm wondering, though...*" Wuha continued.

"Mh? And what's that?" Hero Gold-Hair asked.

"*Well, putting aside the issue of why we had to travel by tunnel...now that we've come this far, what's the logic in resting here?*"

"I could ask the same..." seconded Valentine with a quizzical tilt of her head as she lounged on a sofa across from Hero Gold-Hair. "My Search spell shows a large open space just on the other side of this bedrock, so if we just went a little farther..." She looked up towards the barrier that stood between them and the ancient ruin, the wall towering above her in her tiny power-saving form. Thanks to Wuha's ability, of course, the wall in question currently looked less like bedrock than it did the inside of a luxurious building.

"Oh, is that all?" said Hero Gold-Hair, sitting up straight and folding his arms. "I just wanted to give Keats a chance to rest a bit after pushing her carriage form so hard, that's all."

Valentine glanced at the carriage djinn sitting beside her, holding a liquor bottle tightly in her arms and sleeping not at all peacefully. She was snoring up a storm, her shirt hanging open over her chest and her legs splayed wildly, miniskirt hiked up around her hips. She must have felt hot after drinking and loosened her clothes in an attempt to cool down, too drunk to consider that she was putting all the most indecent parts of her body on display for the world to see.

"Is that really reeesting?" wondered Tsuya, who was sitting on the sofa next to Hero Gold-Hair. "It looooks like she's been spending the whole time driiinking herself into a stuuupor..." She scratched at a spot on her cheek, unable to keep herself from stealing an amused

glance Aryun Keats's way.

"Y-Yes, well... Hmh... How to put this..." Hero Gold-Hair hemmed and hawed, deftly avoiding turning his gaze towards Aryun as if he sensed it would only cause problems to get a clear look at her in her current state. "A-Ahem! Th-That is to say..." he said, clearing his throat in an effort to collect his thoughts, "the time is not yet right."

"The time...is not yet right?" Valentine repeated, wide-eyed in disbelief.

"That's right," Hero Gold-Hair declared without a whiff of indecision. "Nothing will come of it if we go into battle now."



Sensing what was coming next, Tsuya found herself fixing Hero Gold-Hair with a sidelong glance. "A-And the reaaason you know that...I-I don't supooose it would be...?"

"Why, my intuition, of course!" he boasted proudly, causing Valentine and Tsuya to both slump over in their seats at once.

I had a feeeeling, somehow... thought Tsuya, sharing a long-suffering look with Valentine.

He always works on pure intuition, that man... thought Valentine.

"*But still, Hero Gold-Hair's intuitions are right more often than not!*" Wuha interjected. "*Seems fine to me!*"

"I gueeess that's true..." admitted Tsuya.

"I suppose I can't deny it..." conceded Valentine.

"That's right!" said Hero Gold-Hair, flashing a grin and laughing heartily. "See? Wuha gets it!"

As for Aryun Keats, still lying sprawled out in a heap and clutching an empty bottle, she showed no signs of awakening anytime soon...

◇Yet Another Day Later—Underneath a Nearby Hill◇

Deep inside the cavern near the summit of the nearby hill, Anhella sat on the ruined stairs with her knees pulled up to her chest, her head bobbing precipitously forwards and back as if she might succumb to sleep at a moment's notice. Finally she bobbed too far, sending her forehead crashing down hard against her knee.

"Fngyah?!!!" she cried in surprise and pain, scrambling up to her feet. "No, no, no..." she muttered, wiping a line of drool from her mouth. "I can't be falling asleep now! Not when I've finished the magic circle, and my preparations for the ritual are finally complete! Although...where has that girl gotten to, I wonder..."

Frowning, Anhella looked all around, cupping her hand up to her mouth as an impromptu megaphone. "Dotsuno!!!" she shouted. "Where are you?!"

No one answered. The only sound was her own voice, echoing throughout the cave.

"Dotsuno!!!" she shouted again, but still there was no response.

"It's most unusual..." she said. "Our plan was for her to spend yesterday drawing the eye of the Dark Army and then return here today. I hope she didn't run into some kind of trouble..." Pressing her right index finger to her temple, Anhella tried a different tack. "Perhaps I can reach her with telepathy..." She cast a quick incantation and a small magic circle appeared at the end of her finger, a window opening in her field of vision.

"*Dotsuno, can you hear me?*" she said in her mind, projecting her thoughts towards Dotsuno. "*If you can hear this, please respond.*"

Dotsuno, however, did not answer.

"*Dotsuno?*" Anhella repeated. "*Can you hear me?*"

Nothing.

"*Dotsuno...?*"

Finally, on the third attempt, the demon fox girl's voice came screaming into Anhella's head. "*A-Anhella!!!*" Dotsuno wailed. Her face appeared in the window Anhella had summoned too, but something was wrong...

"*D-Dotsuno!*" Anhella exclaimed, stunned nearly speechless by the state of Dotsuno's appearance. "*Wh-What happened to your face?!*"

The image of Dotsuno projected in the window showed a face covered in horrible cuts, as if she had been lashed repeatedly by something like a whip.

"*Th-That's...*" Dotsuno started, desperately trying to catch her breath. By the looks of things, she was just about on the verge of collapse. "*I-I've been running from this crazy lady from the Dark Army since yesterday!* Hack... Wheeze... *I-I'm so tired... I'm not sure I can last much longer...*"

"What? S-Since yesterday?" Anhella repeated. "But then, the person chasing you must also be close to exhaustion, shouldn't she...?" She adjusted the window, zooming out from Dotsuno's face to see what was happening behind her, and caught sight of the powerfully built dark elf woman lashing out with her whip as she bore down on Dotsuno's back.

"*You're a clever and quick-footed little fox, but this is the end of the road!*" Nerona said between strokes of her whip. "*Why don't you*

give up and let me catch you already?!" Unlike Dotsuno, who was visibly struggling for gasps of air as she ran for her life, the dark elf princess didn't even seem to be breathing hard. If anything, she looked like a mighty beast merely toying with its prey.

"Wh-What kind of monster have you picked a fight with *this* time?" Anhella asked as she watched in disbelief. Then, suddenly, she opened her eyes in shock. Something about the forest in the background of Nerona and Dotsuno's frantic chase made her shiver with recognition. In the window, Nerona lashed out with an especially powerful strike of her whip, digging a deep groove in the ground with a deafening *crack*.

Just then, timed nearly perfectly with the blow on the screen, Anhella felt a distinct tremor from somewhere nearby...

"That forest...and that impact just now..." she said. "Dotsuno! Don't tell me you've led that woman *here?!*"

"W-Well, I mean, where *else* was I supposed to go?!" Dotsuno cried back. "Save me, Anhella! I need your help!"

Anhella swiftly grabbed her magic staff, holding up her right hand to make her grimoire float into the air, flipping through its pages as fast as she could. "That beast of a woman will be here any second!" she said, cold sweat running down her face as she read through the instructions. "My only chance is to use the secret art..."

I can do this... she told herself. *As long as I do it exactly how it's written in the grimoire, nothing should go wrong...*

Tracing the letters with her fingers and reading slowly to ensure she spoke the words exactly as they were written, Anhella began an incantation.

I can do this... she repeated to herself as she cast the spell. *I can do this... And once I've performed such a large-scale technique without any flaws, the other Diabolists will finally acknowledge me...*

The Diabolists were a clan of demons known for their specialization in magic, which was extreme even by the standards of the magically powerful demonkind. Anhella had been born into the tradition and possessed tremendous innate magic power as well as phenomenal talent with both spellcraft and incantation, enough so that she had grown up being told she had the makings of a future

among the Infernal Four.

However...

While Anhella had amassed an enviable collection of grimoires and gained extensive knowledge of sorcery, she was exceedingly nervous when it came to actually casting any of her spells. To this day, she had never once performed one of her techniques, leaving her woefully lacking when it came to real achievements. This habit of hers was bad enough that the Diabolists ultimately exiled her from the clan, bringing her to her current ignominious conditions.

Anhella continued the incantation, her hands shaking and her knees buckling so badly it looked like she was about to collapse on the spot. Her eyes were spinning in her head, unable to focus. But even so, she continued the incantation.

Rumble...

The ground shook beneath her feet as the gate began to glow with light.

I can do this... I can do this... Anhella repeated, forcing herself to keep chanting.

Then the ground where she was standing shone a brilliant violet as the gate turned an identical hue.

It's working! Anhella thought, a grin of delirious joy coming over her face. *I've managed to draw magic power from the Underground World Dogorogma into this world! Now it should keep pouring in, filling the empty magic gems I placed underneath the circle with the energy of Dogorogma. And then...*

Waving the end of her staff left and right, Anhella continued the spell. With each movement, the violet light that had encompassed the magic circle trailed off towards the gate, which grew brighter and brighter.

Rumble...

Slowly, the stone gate began to slide open, and from the other side emerged the head of a truly enormous magic beast.

I-I did it! Anhella thought, continuing to cast the spell even with her knees chattering and eyes unfocused. *F-Finally! I've summoned a powerful magic beast from the Underground World!*

"A-Anhellaaa!!!" Just then, Dotsuno came bounding into the

cavern, screaming her head off all the while. "S-Saaave me!!!"

"Enough of these games!" said Nerona, bursting in after her. "Stop running away so I can arrest you!"

As soon as they set foot inside, however, the two stopped in their tracks.

"Wh-What...is *that?!*" yipped Dotsuno, falling down on her backside and lying there, gasping for breath.

"Whoa!" said Nerona, freezing on the spot, her whip poised to strike in her hand. "I've never seen a magic beast like *that* before..."

The two watched as the magic beast's long dragon-like neck stretched out from the gate, turning to look their way. "*Grrrrrr...*" it growled, glaring with its bloodshot eyes as flames like the fires of hell welled up in its throat. The creature's head was all that had made it out of the gate so far, but even its neck was thicker than the width of the gate should allow—only the magic power flowing from the Underground World, widening the dimensions of the gate, allowed the beast to pass through.

The magic beast lifted its head, ready to breathe its deadly fire at Dotsuno and Nerona alike. "Oh no, no, no..." Anhella said, trembling with fear as she watched from atop the ruin, clutching her staff tightly. "L-Let's see... If the magic beast doesn't obey you... Come on...think, think, think..." Pointing her staff towards the beast, Anhella wracked her brains as hard as she could...but it was no use. "H-H-How do I cast an obedience spell again?!"

Throwing her staff aside, Anhella began reading through her grimoire, turning through the pages with her hands as she searched for anything related to an obedience spell as if her life depended on it. Never before had she been in such a situation, and she was finding herself very nearly at her wit's end. Nonetheless, she kept on frantically reading through her book even as her legs gave way and she fell uselessly to her knees in the middle of her magic circle. "Obedience spell...obedience spell...obedience spell..." she muttered. "Obedience...obedience...o..."

Finally, Anhella's hands stopped moving, and she began to shake violently with fear. She clutched her head in her hands and opened her eyes wide, letting out a horrible scream.

"Aaaaaaahhh!!!"

Suddenly, the light vanished from the gate and the magic circle alike, leaving the ruins in darkness. The gate, which had grown in size thanks to the magic power supplied from Dogorogma, burst apart. The magic beast's neck, which still hadn't quite made it all the way out, was severed by the collapsing gate, sending its head falling to the ground where it landed with a dull *thud.*

With the light gone, however, Anhella had no way of knowing what had happened to the magic beast. She curled up on the spot and didn't move again for a long while after.

◇Meanwhile—Underneath the Ruin◇

Directly beneath the ruin where Anhella had performed her ritual was a large empty space, where the large magic gems that stored the magic power absorbed from Dogorogma were set in stone. There, reaching out towards the gems with an expression of rapture on her face, Valentine moaned with pleasure as she absorbed every last drop of the energy meant for the ritual above. "Oh! Yes! This magic power... It's simply divine!" she gushed. "More! Give me more!" She had abandoned the power-saving mode she used to cut down on her magic consumption as she feasted, appearing now in her voluptuous natural form.

"Jeez..." Wuha Gappoli winced as she watched Valentine go about her business. "This feels kinda lewd, doesn't it..."

"Well, I suppooose..." Tsuya agreed. "But Lady Valentine doooes need the energy, after all..." But despite the wry look on her face, her cheeks were flushed faintly pink as well. "But what reaaally gets me is the way Hero Gooold-Hair somehow knew that all this maaagic was coming!"

"No kidding!" Wuha nodded her head. "Everyone was just relaxing and making themselves at home when suddenly he shouted, *'Now's the time! Come on!'* and broke through my wall with that Drilldozer Shovel of his! At first it just seemed like a bunch of empty magic gems..."

"But suuuddenly, all this maaagic came flowing in, filling them up

just like thaaat!" said Tsuya, giving Hero Gold-Hair an admiring gaze as she finished recounting the events of moments ago.

"Of course, I knew something like this was probably gonna happen from the very start," Wuha insisted, as she too turned to look towards Hero Gold-Hair.

"Yes, well, I had a feeling something like this might happen..." said Hero Gold-Hair, raising his arm and bringing his hand to his forehead in a theatrical pose. "This power of mine... Sometimes, I even frighten myself..."

Tsuya and the others just stared mutely as Hero Gold-Hair held his pose, stunned into silence by the performance.

Yiiikes... Tsuya thought.

Only Valentine seemed unaffected, as focused as she was on the ecstasy of absorbing her much-needed magic power.

The moment, however, was short-lived. With a start, Hero Gold-Hair seemed to realize something. "Damnation!" he cursed. "Keats! We need a high-speed carriage, now!"

"S-Say what?! You want me to turn into a carriage?!" Aryun Keats exclaimed, a worried look coming over her face. "B-But Hero Gold-Hair, sir! Aside from the room we came in from, that tunnel you dug was quite narrow! I'm not sure whether my carriage form would fit!"

"I had the same thought," Hero Gold-Hair told her. "That's why I widened the tunnel last night while everyone else was sleeping!"

"You did what?" Aryun Keats blinked in surprise.

"Never mind, just hurry up and transform!"

"Y-Yes, sir!" said Aryun, turning into a carriage as fast as she could. Fortunately, her carriage body was fully capable of moving on its own, meaning there was no need for any cumbersome horses.

"Come on!" Hero Gold-Hair urged the rest of the party. "Everyone on board!"

"O-Okaaay!" Tsuya climbed inside, followed by Wuha Gappoli. A short while later, Valentine joined them as well, smiling with satisfaction as she entered the carriage.

"Phew!" Valentine exhaled. "I'm so full..." Outside, the magic gems had gone completely dark, the flow of new magic power that had been pouring into them apparently having stopped.

Once everyone was safely on board, Hero Gold-Hair closed the door. "All right, Keats!" he said. "Let's get out of here!"

"*Sir, yes sir!*" Aryun Keats sped out of the space beneath the ruins, back into the space that Wuha Gappoli had turned into a lavish room only moments ago. Now it had returned to its original form—a dark chamber carved out of the solid rock. Aryun passed through in a moment, driving quickly towards the tunnel leading out of the other side. True to Hero Gold-Hair's words, the tunnel had been widened considerably, giving Aryun more than enough room to maneuver. She sped up, plunging ahead.

Crash!

Suddenly, the ceiling of the empty space where they had found the magic gems came crashing down with a tumultuous noise, crushing the gems beyond recognition. A moment later, the dark elf princess Nerona landed amid the rubble. "That weird magic power just now came from down here, I'm sure of it..." she said, looking around. But with all the dust in the air from the destruction of the chamber's ceiling, there wasn't much that she could make out.

"Ugh..." Nerona frowned. "It looks like I won't be able to investigate this place anytime soon. Oh well. For now, I guess I'd better take those two miscreants I've got tied up back to Dawkson..." Crossing her arms, she looked up towards the hole where she had busted her way through the rock. "A fox and a Diabolist..." she mused. "I'll put the screws to them and get them to confess whatever it was they were doing down here! Imagine if I wound up blowing the lid on some kind of grand conspiracy! Maybe then Dawkson would seriously consider making me his bride..." She squirmed her body, blushing at the thought.

When she emerged from the chamber beneath the altar, however, Nerona found nothing but lengths of rope—long enough to tie up a pair of troublemakers—strewn chaotically over the floor. As for the troublemakers themselves, they were nowhere in sight.

In the forest, a short ways away from the cavern, Anhella flew through the air with Dotsuno unconscious on her back. She held a wand in her teeth, the magic gem on its tip glowing, a clear sign

that this item was the thing powering her magical flight.

Th-This isn't over! I won't let it end here! Anhella thought, speeding up as fast as she could. *One day...one day, I* will *become a great magus worthy of the Infernal Four!*

Just then, however, she heard Nerona's voice echoing from the cavern entrance, a shout of rage loud enough to shake the very trees. "Those bastards!!! How *dare* they run away?!!!"

"E-Eee!!!" Anhella cried, careful not to drop the wand in her mouth. Wringing out its last bit of power to speed up even more, she and Dotsuno disappeared deep into the trees.

Chapter 4: The Super Beast Incident

◇Houghtow City—A Lake Near Flio's House◇

Emerging from Mount Houghtow was a road that wound its way north past Blossom Acres, then Byleri's ranch, and finally Flio's own front door. It continued north for a short way before splitting into two—one path leading farther north, and the other east.

To the east, clearly visible from the fork in the road, were the tall outer walls of Houghtow City, leaving city-bound travelers no doubt of which path to take. The northern fork, meanwhile, continued on into the woods, where it passed by the shore of a large freshwater lake.

On the lakeshore stood a sizable shack, a vacation home Flio had built for trips with the rest of his household.

In the thick undergrowth of the nearby forest, the Divine Beast Leonorna sat facing the shack.

Leonorna was from another planetoid world far from Klyrode, where he was meant to serve as a divine guardian. At the time, however, Leonorna's immature personality had made him completely unfit for the role. Unable to restrain his lusts, he forced himself indiscriminately on any female that caught his eye, be they human or demihuman or magic beast. It got so bad that the Celestial Plane couldn't ignore the possibility that Leonorna might actually destroy the entire planetoid world, so they sent Disciples to capture the Divine Beast, throwing him into the Underground World Dogorogma.

Dappled by beams of sunlight filtering in through the trees, Leonorna sat with his eyes closed peacefully in elegant repose. "Ah... What a fool I was back then," he mused, thinking back to days gone by. "I shudder to think what might have become of me if I hadn't

come to this world and met my fair lady! Truly, it must have been a meeting ordained by fate...”

“Leonorna!” came Rylnàsze’s voice, calling for him as he sat deep in thought.

“Oho! My fair lady!” Leonorna cried out happily, opening his eyes. There in front of him was Rylnàsze herself, riding on Sybe’s back in his psychobear form and waving merrily with her right hand. Sybe was pulling a large wagon behind him, packed full of fruits and vegetables fresh from Blossom Acres.

“Oh, Leonorna...I keep telling you not to call me that, don’t I?” said Rylnàsze, smiling in amusement. All around her, bird-type magic beasts and other small creatures gathered close, showering the girl with affection.

With her high-level natural taming ability, Rylnàsze had found herself adored by magic beasts of all shapes and sizes ever since she was born. She’d even managed to win over Leonorna, spurring a genuine change of character in the divine lion.

“Now, come on!” Rylnàsze said, bringing the wagon up in front of him and looking back over her shoulder with a great big smile. “It’s breakfast!”

“Oh, excellent! My jubilant thanks, as ever!” Leonorna exclaimed, leaning in towards the wagon. “But, my fair lady... I do worry for you, traveling on the road alone. Your taming is less effective on magic beasts of low intelligence, you know. Although thanks to my influence, no magic beast with wickedness in their heart can come near the lake, of course...”

“It’s very sweet of you to worry about me,” Rylnàsze said, bowing graciously with a smile on her face. “But I have Sybe and the rest of my friends...and today, big sis Wyne is with me too!”

“Mademoiselle Wyne is here?” Leonorna asked, looking all around but failing to find any sign of the dragonewt, either in Rylnàsze’s immediate vicinity or anywhere nearby.

Just then, however, Wyne’s voice came echoing from over by the lake, positively bursting with energy and cheer. “Leva-Leva! Good morning-morning!”

Leonorna turned in the direction of the voice, as did Rylnàsze,

Sybe, and the other magic beasts. There they saw Wyne in the middle of the water, clinging to Levana in the latter's full leviathan form.

Levana—a young leviathan girl Flio had adopted into the family. She came across as an intelligent girl, but she had been raised since a young age to see brute force as the best way to solve any problem, leaving her now with a serious case of bullheaded thoughtlessness. She had the makings of a talented mage as well, and was currently attending the Houghtow College of Magic to both improve her technique and hopefully overcome her difficulties with interpersonal communication.

"*B-Big sis Wyne...*" Levana said, speaking telepathically in her leviathan form. "*Wh-What are you doing here...?*"

Wyne held Levana tightly and flapped her wings, somehow lifting her enormous frame up into the air as if it were an effortless load. "I've missed-missed you!" she said, happily rubbing her cheeks up against Levana's much larger body. "You haven't been sleeping-sleeping in the house!"

"*You...missed me?*" Levana said, visibly confused.

Levana had a spot reserved for her in the children's room in Flio's house, but as a leviathan she preferred sleeping beneath the waters of the lake over any kind of bed. Recently, she had spent her nights there far more often than not.

Still in midair, Levana changed into her humanoid form. "W-Well, all right," she said. "B-But could you put me down...?"

"Ah ha ha!" laughed Wyne. "Come on-come on, it's fun-fun! Lemme fly-fly you to breakfast!"

"O-Okay! Okay!" Levana agreed, although a clear note of distress was creeping into her voice. "B-But at least let me get dressed first, all right?"

Levana, who had been underwater until the moment before, was in fact not wearing a single thread of clothing.

Rylnàsze watched the scene playing out in midair with a tight-lipped smile at their antics. "You see?" she said. "And it looks like I'll have big sis Levana with me too on my way back home! There's no way I won't be all right!"

“Hm?” said Leonorna, bravely managing a smile as well. “O-Oh, yes! Quite!”

Soon, the normally quiet lake shore was abuzz with noise and activity...

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

After her trip to deliver Leonorna his food, Rylnàsze made her way back to the house. Later that day, Rys, Tanya, and Hiya were busy in the living room, moving about with a tremendous sense of urgency.

“There we go! One dish per person!” said Rys, smiling as she hurried between the others present with not only cutlery but three heaping plates of food balanced high in her arms.

“The platters we can share between the three of us,” said Tanya, carrying one hefty platter of food in each hand, swiftly placing each on the table.

“And here is the soup, prepared specially by the wife of the Exalted One,” Hiya intoned with a wave of their arm, conjuring a soup bowl from thin air for each place setting as the stockpot lifted into the air, the ladle working seemingly on its own to fill the bowls with soup.

“Do you need any help, Rys?” Flio offered, moving to stand up from his seat.

“My lord husband, heaven forbid!” Rys protested, coming up swiftly behind him and placing her free hand on his shoulder, pushing him back down into the chair.

“R-Rys...” said Flio, a chagrined smile coming over his face.

“My lord husband, *you* are the leader of our pack!” Rys explained. “Your job is to stand in the middle of us, as our invincible pillar. Everything else can be left to me, your wife! I am your wife, after all! And this is a wife’s duty!” She puffed out her chest proudly, placing perhaps more emphasis on the word *wife* than was strictly necessary. “So, with that being said, you just wait right there, please, my lord husband! I’ll have everything ready in just a moment!”

Flio watched as Rys hurried back towards the kitchen, nearly dancing as she went. *Well, I guess I can't really tell her no if it's so important to her...* he thought, smiling wryly as he sat back in his chair.

"Excuse me, Master Garyl," said Tanya, placing a plate of food in front of where Garyl was sitting. "And his future wife," she added, placing another in front of Elizabeth—the Maiden Queen herself—who was sitting right beside him.

"W-Wife?!" exclaimed Elizabeth, covering her face with her hands as it turned a brilliant shade of red all the way to the tips of her ears.

A few days prior, Elizabeth had come to Houghtow City under the pretext of performing an official inspection of the training hall for its grand reopening. The truth, however, was that the Second Princess had arranged this trip, hoping to give her sister, who had recently been even more exhausted than usual, a chance to get some rest. Garyl, of course, had been sent along as the Queen's personal bodyguard.

Or so it was on paper, at least.

"Y-You know..." Elizabeth said, "I-I really only intended to get the slightest bit of rest. I-It wasn't my intention at all to sleep for the whole entire day! And now I've ended up intruding on your family meal! I'm terribly sorry for the trouble..." She frowned with worry as she spoke but pressed on nonetheless, drawing on all her experience managing the kingdom's government. "I-In any event, I'll return straightaway to Klyrode Castle once we've finished this meal..."

"Really, sister?" said a familiar voice from somewhere beside her. "There's no need to be in such a hurry to leave, is there?"

"Fweh?!" Elizabeth's eyes shot open as she turned to see Swann, the Third Princess, sitting at the table as well. "S-Swann?! Wh-Why, how long have you been here?!"

"How long?" Swann repeated. "Oh, since last night!"

"Last night?!" Elizabeth asked, her eyes widened further still.

"That's right!" said Swann. "We received a message at the castle from Mister Flio, saying you were still fast asleep! Our sister Leusoc insisted that since you were already asleep, we might as well give

you the week off in order to get some proper rest. I'm here to deliver the message—and also, a change of clothes or two and a few other things you might need!"

"Th-Thank you, Swann..." Elizabeth said, rising from her seat and bowing her head. Then, realizing something, she cocked her head curiously to the side. "Um... Swann?"

"Yes?" said Swann.

"Didn't you say...that you arrived here last night?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, that's right!" Swann cheerfully answered.

"Well, then... Why is it you're still here?"

"Oh!" Swann replied with a nod of her head. "Leusoc told me that since I was coming out here anyway, I might as well take a bit of a break myself!"

Elizabeth stared back at her younger sister. *That's right... Swann hasn't had any time off for quite a while, has she...* she thought. *Although come to think of it, Leusoc hasn't had any for even longer! I suppose we'd best rest up as well as we can for the week so we can get back to work as quickly as possible! Then maybe Leusoc will finally be able to get a bit of rest herself...*

"That's great, Ellie!" said Garyl, grinning from ear to ear as he looked over from his seat next to her. "This way you can take some time to really relax! And I'd be happy to show you around town—with me as your guard, of course!"

Seeing Garyl's smile so close to her own face made the color rise to Elizabeth's cheeks. "O-Oh! U-Um... Of course!" she said in an oddly quiet voice, daintily holding her hands up in front of her mouth. "I-I'll look forward to it!"

"Great!" said Garyl, his smile growing brighter still. "It'll be my pleasure!"

Rylnàsze watched the exchange between Elizabeth and her brother, smiling very brightly herself. "And that means you'll be spending the whole week here too, right Swann?" she said, coming up beside the princess and hugging her tightly.

F-Fwoahh ha ha?!!! Swann thought, so taken off guard at finding herself suddenly in Rylnàsze's arms that she froze up entirely.

Once upon a time, Swann had a phobia of magic beasts so severe that she was completely unable to handle even the slightest bit of contact. In order to help her overcome her fear, she began spending time with Rylnàsze, who made friends with all sorts of magic beasts with absolute ease. Over the course of their time together, Swann began to develop feelings for Rylnàsze—feelings that seemed to be somewhere in the vicinity of love.

R-R-Rylnàsze... Rylnàsze's touching meee... Swann thought, unable to move a muscle as her entire face turned an even deeper red than her sister the Queen's.

"A whole week!" Rylnàsze gushed as she wrapped her arms around Swann. "We'll be able to have *lots* of fun!" At some point, Sybe and Tybe and the other magic beasts who lived in the hutch on the other end of the living room came up behind Swann as well, licking her fondly on her ears and cheeks.

"Now, now, everyone," said Rys, smiling in amusement at Elizabeth's and Swann's flustered states. "The table's set. Let's start the week with a good meal, why don't we?" Then, taking her seat next to Flio, she added, "After you, my lord husband."

"All right." Flio nodded, looking around at everyone seated at the large dinner table. "Everyone, let's give thanks," he said, pressing his hands together. "Thank you for the food!"

"Thank you for the food!" the rest of the table echoed back, copying Flio's gesture as well.

And so, like they did every morning, Flio's household settled in to enjoy their breakfast.

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A little while later, once everyone had finished eating, Charun began her rounds around the table, teapot in hand. "Now," she said, "would anyone care for a cup of tea?"

"Oh! Yes please, if that's all right..." said Elizabeth, shyly raising her hand.

Charun smiled and stepped up Elizabeth's direction, pouring her a fresh cup of black tea. "Make sure you drink it while it's hot!"

“Thank you very much!” Elizabeth smiled back, gently bringing the cup to her lips. “I-It’s wonderful...” she said, sighing happily in spite of herself.

“I am honored and delighted that my tea is to your taste,” said Charun, bowing with excellent courtesy.

“Everyone loves Charun’s tea, after all! Our customers at the shop can’t get enough!” said Calsi’im, his jawbone rattling merrily as he finished his tea—Charun had served him a cup even before pouring one for Elizabeth. He seemed every bit as proud as if he had been the one who brewed the tea.

Knock, knock.

The household’s moment of postbreakfast calm was interrupted by a knock on the front door.

“Hrm...” Ghozal grunted, looking towards the entryway. “Awfully early for a guest...”

“Is it?” Rys asked, a teasing grin coming over her face. “It seems to me they managed to arrive just as we were finishing our breakfast. Whoever they are, I’d say they have far better manners than a certain Dark One I could name who used to show up *before* breakfast and leave straightaway once he’d imposed on our family’s hospitality...”

“That’s right, I did do that, didn’t I!” Ghozal laughed, smirking as Rys ran off to see who it was.

“Hello! Who is it?” Rys called, opening the door to see Fina and Telbyress waiting on the other side.

“I beg your pardon for bothering you so early in the morning,” said Fina, bowing her head low.

“Not at all!” Rys insisted. “We were just finishing breakfast! You aren’t interrupting at all! So... Is there something you need?”

“Actually, yes...” Fina said. “I have a message to pass on to Mister Flio...and something I’d like to discuss, if that’s all right...”

“A message to pass on, and something you’d like to discuss...?” Rys asked, curiously inclining her head.

“Sounds like it’s for me, then,” said Flio, arriving at the doorway shortly behind his wife.

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Flio showed the two former celestials to the first-floor parlor attached to the living room. As they sat down, Charun arrived to set two cups of hot black tea on the table in front of them. "Please, have a cup of tea," she said. It was the general custom at Flio's house, after all, for Charun to greet any visitors they might happen to receive with a cup of her famous tea.

"Thank you for your gracious hospitality," said Fina, bowing her head from her seat on the sofa as Telbyress, sitting next to her, took a long drink from her cup.

"Hmm..." Telbyress opined, stealing a glance in Charun's direction. "The tea's good, I guess...but personally, I'd rather have liquor."

"You'd...rather have liquor...?" Charun repeated, frowning ever so slightly in distress.

"N-No, no, not at all!" said Fina, putting on the most convincing smile she could manage and pinching Telbyress hard on the upper thigh. "Please forget she said that..."

"Yeowch!" yelped Telbyress, leaping into the air from the pain of Fina's attack.

Ignoring the erstwhile goddess, Fina turned her attention back towards Flio. "I-In any event, I've been asked to pass on a message to Mister Flio on behalf of the goddesses of the Celestial Plane..."

"The Celestial Plane, huh?" Flio said. "Well, what's the message?"

"A few things..." Fina answered. "First, they're giving you permission to enter the Underground World Dogorogma, beneath the base of the Celestial Plane. They've set a time limit of one week."

"A whole week?!" Flio and Rys both exclaimed at once.

"That's quite some time..." Flio observed. "The longest we've gotten until now has been three days."

Fina nodded. "Yes, they're giving permission for a very long stay this time. Although needless to say, the Celestial Plane has—"

"Reasons of their own?"

"That's right," Fina said, calling up a window. "This is the current

state of Dogorogma, caught by the Celestial Plane's own crystal projection technology..."

She pointed to something in the corner of the image, where a magic beast resembling a great winged pterosaur flew high above the trees. Then, Flio watched as a truly enormous magic beast emerged from the trees directly below, snatching the pterosaur out of the air with a single bite. The pterosaur flopped lifelessly in its mouth, apparently done in by that single attack.

Fina paused the video and zoomed in close on the new magic beast's face.

"Look here," she said. "This is a Beast of Disaster that underwent evolution thanks to the conditions of Dogorogma. Or, to be precise, it is now what is called a Super Beast of Disaster. For hundreds of years now, the Celestial Plane has been banishing Beasts of Disaster to the Underground World Dogorogma. There they have propagated and battled for domination, until now they have produced a beast of terrible violence unlike any we have known before."

"Well, well... What do you know..." said Flio, watching closely and nodding along to Fina's explanation. Next to him, Rys too was staring intently into the window, her arms folded in concentration.

"S-So..." Fina continued, her words beginning to falter as she looked between the two of them, as if she didn't know how to say the next part. "Well..."

At this, Telbyress, who up until now had just been sitting next to Fina with a ridiculous grin on her face, continued in Fina's place. "So the Celestial Plane is hoping you'll look into this whole Super Beast thing for them, and if they're lucky, maybe even take care of it on your own, basically!" she said brightly, smiling cheerfully all the while.

"Telbyress?!" Fina protested, her eyes going wide as she swiftly clapped a hand over Telbyress's mouth. "You can't say it like that!" she hissed in her ear. "It makes it sound like the Celestials just want Mister Flio to clean up after their own mistakes! They can't just ask a resident of a planetoid world to take care of a monster even they can't handle!"

"Mghf! Mhfhf! Mrhfhf!!!" was all Telbyress could say with Fina's

hand clamping down hard on her mouth until finally, after a brief struggle, she managed to free her face. "Pwah!" she cried. "B-But what else are we gonna say, Fina?! They said we had to get this done ourselves, *or else!* And besides, if Mister Flio wants to keep visiting the Underground World, he's gotta do something about the whole situation anyway! But if you really hate it, I guess you could always go back to the Celestial Plane and accept your judgment..."

"Excuse me?! Th-That has nothing to do with this!" said Fina, trying to get her hand over Telbyress's mouth once again, only for her to playfully avoid her arm.

All the while, Flio watched the two former Celestials' antics with a somewhat tight-lipped smile.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

In the very middle of the lands ruled by demonkind stood the Dark Citadel, where the Dark One himself made his home. There, among the building's many rooms, was the throne room, holding the august seat where Dark Ones throughout history had ruled. But Dawkson, the current Dark One, chose to sit instead on the short stairs leading up to the throne instead.

Once, when he had still gone by the name Yuigarde, Dawkson had driven the Dark Army to the brink of total annihilation through his heavy-handed tyranny. Ashamed by his past misdeeds, he refused to allow himself to sit on the throne, saying, "*I still ain't fit to be a proper Dark One.*" To this day, he would only sit on the stairs, not the throne itself.

At the moment, Dawkson's minion Phufun was standing in front of the throne, adjusting her false glasses with her right index finger as she read through the itinerary of the day.

"And finally, two demons thought to be the ringleaders behind the recent widespread guerrilla attacks were apprehended by Princess Nerona, who also succeeded in destroying their base of operations. However, it seems the pair managed to escape while she was investigating their headquarters. Their whereabouts are currently unknown..."

"Hrm..." Dawkson considered. "Well, what's that mean for the guerrilla attacks?"

"There have been no further attacks since the ringleaders fled," reported Phufun. "The Infernals Lady Belianna and Lord Zanzibar have been on patrol ever since, however, just in case something might come up."

Dark One Dawkson nodded, satisfied with Phufun's words, and took out a letter of his own.

"Master Dawkson," Phufun said, "what is that?"

"Oh, this?" said Dawkson, sighing loudly as he read through its contents. "Just a bit of trouble that's fallen on my plate..."

"Is something wrong, Master?"

"Nah, it's nothing like that..." Dawkson said. "But I gotta head out for a bit. Send me a telepathic message if anything comes up."

"Yes, Master," said Phufun with a formal bow.

Dawkson stood up and left the throne room, leaving Phufun alone.

He's taking everything about these guerrilla attacks so calmly... Phufun reflected, thinking back to her master's old savagery when he had still gone by the name Yuigarde. *In the old days, he would have flown into a fury and charged off without a thought in his head to fight the guerrillas himself, saying, "Whazzat?!!! Not gonna do what I tell you, huh?!!! Guess it's time for the mighty Lord Yuigarde to knock some sense into you himself!" And in the end, we'd have wasted our army's power to no effect...*

When Zanzibar had raised a rebellion against him, Dawkson had charged forth at the head of the army himself, only to find himself toyed with and utterly humiliated by his quarry, spending all his military might on a fruitless campaign. It hadn't been long before the Dark Army itself was on the brink of collapse, thanks to his lack of any sort of tactical acumen.

But now he waits patiently in the Dark Citadel, taking careful stock of the state of our forces, ready for any emergency that might come... He really has matured splendidly...

Without her realizing, tears of emotion had formed on the edges

of Phufun's eyes. But then, just as suddenly, her expression darkened.

Although I really do wish he would punch me like he used to... she thought. *Sending me flying through the air, bellowing, "Can't you do a damned thing right?!!!" Ah...*

She pressed her hand against her flushing cheek at the memory of the impact, contorting her body with passion.

Phufun, after all, was a natural-born masochist. To her, those heavy punches were the height of pleasure.

◇Near the Klyrode-Dark Army Border◇

By the border of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the lands controlled by the Dark One and his army was a spot where the forest gave way to a stretch of land dotted with hills. Near the peak of one of those hills was the entrance to a cave—and in front of it was Elinàsze, peering into the darkness.

Floating through the air with her Fly spell, Elinàsze continued on into the cavern, looking all around as she went.

"This is the spot that strange magic energy I detected came from, no doubt about it," she said, nodding to herself as she examined the walls of the cave. "Something *definitely* happened here..."

The state of the cavern made that much obvious enough. The walls had been badly damaged, to the point that it looked like they might collapse at any time.

Elinàsze continued on, casting a spell to magically reinforce the structure around her as she went, until she came upon the ancient ruin. The great stairs at the middle of the structure had collapsed entirely, with a large hole nearby gaping wide. Even the surrounding walls had been thoroughly wrecked, leaving it hard to imagine how the building might have originally looked.

"If only I could find someone who knew about this place, in order to extract an image of what it used to look like from their memory... But I don't even sense any magic beasts in the area..." Elinàsze mused, scanning the area with a Search spell as she flew closer to the ruin. "Oh? What's this?" She approached the uppermost portion

of the ruin and knelt down, brushing the dust from the floor with her hand. “A magic circle...” she said. “And it seems new...”

Tracing the magic circle with her fingertip, Elinàsze examined the state of the room. Suddenly, her eyes fell upon a pile of rubble lying nearby. She stepped up, placing her hand on one of the rocks. “Something tells me this isn’t just an ordinary stone...” she said, summoning a magic circle of her own in front of her hand. A window appeared, displaying a detailed analysis of the fragments.

“Fragments of a gate to the Underground World...?” Elinàsze read. She looked back at the pile and cast her Analysis spell yet again.

Once again, the results came back, “Gate to Underground World: Fragments.”

“Well, well...” she said, extending her arm towards the pile. “That seems like it might be useful, doesn’t it...” A magic circle appeared, absorbing the broken fragments into itself one by one until there were none left.

With the area clear, Elinàsze took another look around and spotted something on the other side of the ruin. “A hole... And it looks like there’s something on the other side...” She flew down to the rim of the hole in the ground and descended inside, where she found a large empty space. And there...

“Hm...?” Elinàsze said, cocking her head to the side as she peered at the thing lying unmoving before her. “What have we here...?”

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

Later that morning, shortly before noon, the residents of Flio’s house had gathered in front of the building.

“Furtunately, work’s been relatively calm lately thanks to Yayana and the other new hires,” said Uliminas. “I should have no purroblem coming along!”

“Well, I’ve gotta spend the mornings managing the workers on the farm,” said Blossom. “I’ll have to come back here for the early part of the day, at least.”

"You can't play with us for the entire day, Mom...?" Kora asked.

"Ghk..." Blossom choked. "C-Come on, Kora, don't give me that look!"

"But like...isn't there some kinda big dragon magic beast down in Dogorogma right now?" Byleri fretted.

"Don't worry, Byleri..." said Belano in her quiet voice. "Blossom's a Dragon Slayer, after all."

"Hey!" Blossom objected. "B-Belano?!"

"And here," Belano continued, holding up a long gardening hoe, "is her sacred hoe of dragon slaying..."

"A-And what the heck are you doing with that thing?!"

As everyone chatted amiably, Rys stepped up in front of the group and raised her right hand, looking around at the crowd. "Hello, everyone!" she said, drawing everyone close. "We'll be heading out in just a moment!"

Most of Flio's household was there, ready for the trip to Dogorogma. Staying behind were Tanya, Garyl, and Rylnàsze, as well as Elizabeth and Swann, who were currently in the house as guests.

"Miss Elizabeth and Miss Swann, you'll be staying here until we've finished our investigation into the Super Beast, just in case," Flio told the two royals, smiling his usual easygoing smile. "We'll call you over once we've wrapped things up. In the meantime, Garyl and Rylnàsze will be here to show you around."

"Thank you very much for your consideration," Elizabeth said with a polite bow. *Th-They're leaving me here alone with Garyl...* she thought, stealing a furtive glance at the side of Garyl's face.

"Okay, Dad!" said Garyl with a cheerful grin. "We'll take care of everything here!"

Elizabeth couldn't help blushing at the sight of his smile in profile.

Elizabeth, the Maiden Queen, had spent so long focusing on nothing but the affairs of government that even now, in her thirties, she had never had the slightest bit of experience being romantically involved with a man.

"I'll do my best too!" Rylnàsze cheered, raising her hand high beside Garyl. Then, very suddenly, she reached out and grabbed hold of Swann's hand from where she had been standing on her

other side, and pulled the princess in close.

"Hweh?!" Swann cried, her face turning bright red.

As if in response, Sybe and his family came hopping up all around the two of them as if to say, *"And we'll be able to have lots of fun with Rylnàsze while the others are away!*"

"Well then, Tanya," Flio said with one last look over the party, turning to the maid waiting behind him. "I'll leave the rest in your hands."

"Of course, Master," Tanya replied with a bow and a low curtsy. "You may rest assured that I will see to everything."

Until Flio had called on her, Tanya had been busy staring daggers at Fina and Telbyress, who had been standing behind Flio as well. Her eyes gave the overwhelming sense that they were saying something stern—something along the lines of "*I trust you know what will happen if you do anything to cause trouble for this house?*"

Fina found herself shrinking back in the face of Tanya's forceful stare. *I-I understand, believe me...* she thought, swallowing hard. *Aside from the machinations of the Celestial Plane, my own personal circumstances are a large part of why Mister Flio and the others have become wrapped up in this affair, after all. But I suppose we'll all just have to try, to the best of our abilities...*

Mulling the matter over, Fina glanced over at Telbyress and found herself surprised to see the fallen goddess in oddly high spirits despite the situation. "Excuse me..." she asked, frowning in confusion. "Why do you seem so excited about this? We're going to be investigating and possibly even fighting the Super Magic Beast, you know..."

"Well, I mean..." Telbyress started, her smile not faltering for a moment. "It's a Super Magic Beast, right? It's *super*! Nothing like it has ever appeared before in the entire history of Dogorogma! Ahh... How will it taste, do you suppose? What liquor should I pair with it, I wonder?" She grinned with pleasure at the thought, color rising to her cheeks.

Now that she was looking at her up close, Fina noticed the mouth of a bottle poking out from the top of the backpack Telbyress was wearing and slumped over in disappointment. *Oh, Telbyress...* she

thought, sighing audibly. *It's really no surprise why that woman was stripped of her rank as Goddess...*

"Okay!" said Flio, interrupting the exchange. "Let's head to Dogorogma, shall we?" He turned around to face the front of the house and extended his arm, casting a spell. As he performed the incantation, a great magic circle appeared on the ground before him. Out of it came a large door—a portal leading all the way to the Underground World Dogorogma, far from the world of Klyrode.

Ordinarily—and barring certain exceptions—it was impossible to teleport from one world to another. Dogorogma, however, was a vast and unmoving plane sprawled out below the space occupied by the many planetoid worlds. Since the world itself was stationary, targeting it with teleportation wasn't out of the question...although only someone with mastery of the particular Teleportation spell found within the Celestial Plane could hope to make the trip.

"There we go," said Flio, looking up at the shining red teleportation portal and taking a magic tag out of his Bottomless Bag; the tag was an item given by the Celestial Plane to those who had been granted permission to enter the Underground World, in order to dispel the Forbid Entry spell cast on the entire plane of Dogorogma. Flio attached it to the portal and the light changed color from red to blue.

We should follow the rules this time, since Fina and the others are here... Flio thought as he went to open the door. *Although if I wanted to, I'd have no trouble getting past the seal on my own...*

That, of course, was only natural. Thanks to Flio's divine blessing of Transcendence, the slightest contact with a new system of magic was enough for him to instantly learn every spell that system had to offer. Flio had long since mastered all of Celestial Magic and could have easily created a Seal-Breaking Tag of his own if he had so desired.

Of course, if the Celestial Plane ever found out that he had circumvented their rules, they might forbid him from going to Dogorogma entirely, and so Flio found it prudent to exercise restraint.

"Everyone ready?" Flio asked, opening the door wide. On the

other side they could see an enormous lake stretching off out of view.

Levana—being a leviathan—reacted before anyone else could move. "The lake...!" she said, darting through the portal into Dogorogma past Flio and heading straight for the water, stripping off her clothes as she ran.

"Ah ha ha! Me too-me too!" said Wyne, her wyvern wings appearing on her back as she took off flying after Levana. Needless to say, she too tossed off the poncho she had been wearing, revealing her naked body for the world to see.

"Levana! Wyne!" Rys barked, picking up the discarded clothing as she charged swiftly after the two dragonewts, changing into her lupine demon form as she ran. "Stop right there and put your clothes on!"

Not just Wyne, but Levana too this time... Flio thought, watching wryly as he stood on the Klyrode side of the portal, holding the door open for the rest of the household to go through.

On the other side of the portal, the party came to the shore of the lake. Beside it was a cliff with an immense waterfall feeding great quantities of water into the lake, the sound of falling water echoing throughout the entire area.

Over in the lake, Levana was swimming happily while Wyne flew overhead, deftly keeping herself directly above the leviathan. Rys was on the shore, shouting at them as loudly as she could. "At least wear a swimsuit, you two!!!"

Past the waterfall, meanwhile, built into the solid stone of the cliff, was a grand mansion that served as the family's vacation home for their trips to Dogorogma, its upper stories bristling with gargoyles.

The rest of Flio's housemates made their way towards the building, Balirossa at the head of the party with Folmina and Ghoro following happily at her feet. "First things first, we'll have to put the house in order," she said, rallying her spirits. "Although I'm sure the gargoyles will have kept things nice and clean."

"Let me help!" Folmina volunteered.

"I'll help too..." added Ghoro.

Behind them came the other families within the house—Sleip with his wife and daughter, Belano with her husband and child, and Ura along with Kora and Blossom. All of them were chatting happily, clearly regarding the visit to the Underground World as a long-awaited vacation.

Flio watched from the Teleportation Portal as everyone disappeared into the house. "Just one more to go..." he said, looking out into the Klyrode side of the portal. After a while, a magic circle appeared on the ground nearby, and out stepped Elinàsze.

"Papa!" she said, running towards the portal as the magic circle disappeared behind her. "I'm sorry I'm late!"

"Oh, no, it's no problem at all!" Flio said. "And sorry for asking you to look into that strange presence we felt..."

"No, no, no problem whatsoever!" Elinàsze said, shaking her head for emphasis. "I know how busy you've been getting everything ready to go to Dogorogma! I'm just delighted I can serve as your replacement while you're busy with other things!" It was rare to see Elinàsze smile so earnestly. To most people, she came across as cool and aloof.

"All right," Flio said as Elinàsze trotted through the portal. "That's everyone who planned to cross over today, so I'll close the Teleportation Portal for the time being. I'll come back once we've finished looking into this Super Beast thing."

"Okay, Dad!" Garyl nodded. "Take care out there!"

With that Flio closed the door, which promptly vanished behind him.

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"Now then..." Making sure the portal was properly locked, Flio turned to face his five companions: his wife Rys, his daughter Elinàsze, the djinn Hiya, and the two former celestials Fina and Telbyress. "Let's see what we can do about this Super Beast of Disaster."

"Leave it to me, my lord husband!" said Rys, starting to

shadowbox. She was clearly raring to go. “Your trusty Rys will flush it out in no time, then vanquish the monster at the speed of light!”

“Your humble servant Hiya would be happy to offer their assistance as well,” said Hiya, bowing gravely.

Telbyress, on the other hand, seemed to be blissfully occupied with a somewhat different matter. “Should we roast it, maybe? Or boil it, perhaps... Or, what are the odds it would be good as sashimi?”

“Would you cut it out?!” Fina snapped harshly at the so-called no-gooddess’s attitude. “We haven’t even *found* it yet, you know! Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a single magic beast in a world as huge as Dogorogma, no matter how much magic power it has?!”

“Mister Flio...” said Ghozal, walking up to the party. “Are you sure you don’t need my help? All you need to do is ask.”

“I’m sure, don’t worry,” Flio replied with one of his breezy smiles. “Think of your time off as a reward for all your hard work getting the Houghtow City Training Hall up and running. And besides...you have a guest today, don’t you?”

Behind Ghozal, the current Dark One Dawkson was waiting, transformed into his human form and awkwardly avoiding looking his brother’s way.

“Hrm...” Ghozal nodded. “Well, let me know if you need me, and I’ll come running.”

“Thank you, I’ll be sure to keep that in mind,” Flio smiled, watching as Ghozal walked over to Dawkson before turning back to Fina and the others. “All right, let’s get this search underway. Let’s start by heading for the place the Super Beast was last seen and—”

“Excuse me... Papa?” Elinàsze interrupted, raising her hand. “May I have a moment?”

“Yes, Elinàsze? What is it?”

“Well...I think I might have a way of locating the Super Beast of Disaster...” she offered, much to the surprise of everyone assembled.

“You do?!” the group all exclaimed at once.

Elinàsze raised her right index finger up towards the sky, summoning a magic circle above her head, which solidified into a

device resembling a compass. She took the compass and applied a single drop of something that looked like blood. As the blood spread out over the surface of the compass, the needle began spinning wildly until finally it came to a stop, pointing in a specific direction.

"It's that way," Elinàsze said, "I think." With that, she cast another spell, creating another magic circle and taking to the sky, flying off in the direction indicated by the compass.

Rys transformed into her lupine form and Flio flew up onto her back. A magic circle appeared in midair and she hopped on top, using it like a platform to run through the sky.

Hiya flew through the air after Flio and Rys, with Fina following behind. Soon, the whole group was streaking across the sky after Elinàsze at an astonishing speed.

Everyone, that is, except for Telbyress.

"Good luck, everyone!" Telbyress cried, waving goodbye as the party swiftly vanished into the distance. "Now, I'll take a nice break while I wait for them to come back with the Super Beast meat..."

Taking a bottle out of her backpack, she ambled off towards the forest, looking for a good place to sit down.

◇A Short While Later—Near Flio's Dogorogma Vacation Home◇

"Here I come!!!" Dressed in a swimsuit, Blossom barreled straight for the lake with Kora riding on her shoulder. She leaped into the air, landing in the water with a splash.

"Kyah!" Kora cried as the water spray hit her, laughing happily as she clung to Blossom's head for support.



“All right!” Sleip bellowed, galloping off towards the water in his centaur form. “Come on, Rislei, us too!”

“J-Jeez, Papa...” Rislei complained, folding her arms and turning her head to the side like a perfect tsundere. “Aren’t I too old to be doing stuff like that? But...well...if you insist...” she relented, taking off after her father.

Farther down the shore from where the rest of the household was merrily enjoying their vacation, Ghozal and Dawkson sat on a pair of small camping chairs, fishing rods cast into the lake. The two of them were wearing a matching pair of straw hats, wordlessly staring at the ends of their rods.

For a while the brothers passed the time in silence, until at long last Dawkson opened his mouth to speak...but no words came out.

“Hrm?” Ghozal asked. “What is it?”

“No, nothing... It’s just... I was wondering... Why would you invite *me* of all people on your trip to Dogorogma?” Dawkson asked, not moving his eyes from his fishing pole for a single second.

“Hrm?” said Ghozal. “No reason in particular...” He, too, kept staring fixedly at his fishing rod as he spoke. “I was just wondering how you were holding up, I guess...” With that, he pulled in his line and cast it out yet again.

“After all this time, huh...?” Dawkson said, recasting his own rod.

With the ice broken, the two began to exchange the occasional words as they fished. Neither had a lot to say, but it was clear the two brothers had each been spending a lot of time thinking about the other.

This meeting was a long delayed reunion between the two brothers—the current and former Dark One, ruler of demonkind. At the moment, however, they just seemed like the two young boys they once were.

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While Ghozal and Dawkson were fishing down by the lake, Flio’s party came to a stop above a forest somewhere in Dogorogma.

"Is this it?" Flio asked.

"It is..." Fina nodded once. "No mistake..."

Below them, an enormous magic beast lay collapsed amid the trees.

"That's the Super Beast of Disaster?" Rys asked.

"It must be," said Hiya, holding out their hands towards the gigantic figure, summoning a magic circle and casting a Search spell. "Its energy is completely unlike an ordinary Beast of Disaster..."

"So...what happened?" Flio asked, flying down near where the beast's head should have been. Instead, its body terminated abruptly. The Super Beast resembled a Calamity Wyrm, albeit much larger. It might have cut an imposing figure if its long neck hadn't been cut completely in half. "Look at this cut... It's extremely clean, isn't it..."

"Indeed, Exalted One, it is as you say," Hiya agreed, folding their arms and lowering their head in thought. "Something cut cleanly through the hard scales of its neck to sever the head entirely. But how was such a feat accomplished...?"

Once again, Elinàsze raised her hand. "Um... I might have some idea," she said. She summoned a magic circle that aligned with the magic beast's stump, out of which emerged the gigantic severed head and neck of a very similar-looking beast.

"W-Well, I'll be..." said Flio, looking between the body and head.

"It's a perfect match!" marveled Rys.

"Miss Elinàsze..." Fina asked, distress and confusion written on her face. "What in all the worlds...?"

"Hm, hm... Yes, I thought that might be the case..." Elinàsze nodded, folding her arms as if she had just figured something out. "You see, the other day Papa and I detected a strange magic energy emanating from a spot near the border of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the Dark Army's territory," she explained.

"Indeed?" Hiya asked, clearly distraught to learn that they had been unable to detect this strange energy.

"Hiya, you shouldn't blame yourself for not seeing it," Flio reassured the djinn. "Someone had set up a magic barrier to hide the unusual power source. Even Elinàsze and I were only able to

detect it some of the time."

"Even so, such a failure is unbecoming of a follower of the Exalted One," said Hiya, taking a somber knee in midair. "I must practice even greater discipline, so that I am not caught unaware like this in the future..."

"No, really!" Flio insisted. "It's not that big a deal."

"Well, in any event," Elinàsze continued, "the energy was coming from an ancient ruin that seemed to have been used by mages long ago. But it looked like someone recently tried to use it to summon a magic beast from the Underground World Dogorogma."

"I-Incredible..." said Fina. "That would have to involve long-lost magic from the primeval age... Why would someone try to perform such a spell in the present day?"

"I couldn't tell you why they did it," Elinàsze said. "But in any event, it seems the beast they ended up summoning with the spell was none other than our Super Beast of Disaster."

"What?!" Fina exclaimed, eyes widening with shock. *H-Hold on...* she thought. *The Celestial Plane wanted us to hunt down and hopefully destroy the Super Beast because it's a life-form capable of destroying all of Dogorogma! If such a thing had been summoned to an ordinary planetoid world...* She swallowed hard at the idea, her face white as a sheet.

"However," Elinàsze said, pointing to the Super Beast's severed neck, "it looks like the spell failed in the middle of casting. The spell connecting Klyrode to Dogorogma vanished while the Super Beast was still coming through...and its neck was severed as a result. Or at least, that's my best guess as to what happened."

Flio watched from behind as Elinàsze compared the severed head and the body, nodding to herself as she carried on her investigation. "Well, in that case..." he said, "I suppose examining the corpse will count for investigating the Super Beast. And it looks like the extermination mission is already complete, wouldn't you say?"

"O-Oh, yes! You're quite right, Mister Flio," said Fina, Flio's words bringing her back to her senses. "I'll contact the Celestial Plane and see if they have any further instructions..." She took out the magic transmitter she had brought along, tuned to contact the Celestial

Plane. Much of Dogorogma was afflicted with severe malicium pollution, making it impossible to communicate with the Celestial Plane without the use of a specialized magic item.

Seeing that Fina was busy contacting the Celestial Plane, Elinàsze cast a spell of her own. Something like a large discus appeared in her hand, and she used it to shear off a portion of the Super Beast's neck. The part she had removed quietly vanished into her magic circle as if nothing at all had happened.

"I put half of it in your Bottomless Bag, Papa," she said, flying up to whisper in Flio's ear and giving him a mischievous wink, eliciting a wry smile from her father.

"Now then, my lord husband, I suppose we can leave the rest to Fina, wouldn't you say?" said Rys, happily coming up beside him as well. Even in her human form, her lupine tail had appeared, wagging eagerly back and forth. Flio could just about hear his wife's inner voice saying, "*Come on! I wanna go play in the lake! And have a barbecue! And go on a date hunting in the woods!*" Then, taking his arm in both of hers, she pulled him off towards the vacation home, as if to say, *"Let's go back* right now*!!!"*

◇A While Later◇

A magic circle appeared in front of Flio's house, producing a Teleportation Portal in the shape of an unassuming door. Flio opened it from the other side, closing it behind him, then walked inside the house to the first floor living room.

"There you are, Garyl," Flio said. "We're finished with the magic beast extermination, so if Elizabeth and Swann are ready—"

Garyl, however, held a finger to his lips, signaling for quiet, and Flio cut himself off mid-sentence, taking a closer look. Next to Garyl, Elizabeth was lying asleep in her chair, while, in the hutch in the back of the room, Rylnàsze and Swann were both fast asleep in each other's arms as well, resting atop Sybe's sleeping belly.

Seeing the situation he had stepped into, Flio quickly covered his mouth with his hand.

It would be a while yet before Garyl and the others were ready to

join the rest of the family in Dogorogma.

Epilogue

◇The Underground World Dogorogma—Flio's Vacation Home◇

Not far from the waterfall that marked the entrance to Flio's vacation home in Dogorogma, Rys was busy roasting skewers of meat in a stone oven, dressed in a swimsuit. Next to her, also in swimwear, Byleri, Balirossa, and Uliminas were all working at ovens of their own, skillfully preparing a variety of dishes.

"Ha ha ha!" Ghozal laughed, walking up to the four women with his fishing rod in hand. "Check out this whopper of a fish!" Behind him, Mulana, Folmina, Ghoro, and a whole squad of demon copies Mulana had summoned were all working together to heft the enormous fishlike magic beast Ghozal had procured.

"Goodness!" said Rys. "What an excellent fish! Mulana, would you carry it over here, please?"

"Yes ma'am!" said Mulana, pumping her fist into the air as she directed her demon copies to move the fish to the spot Rys had indicated.

"Just you wait..." grumbled Dawkson, walking up behind the rest of the group with a sour look on his face. "You might'a caught the bigger fish, but mine'll win in terms of taste, I guarantee it!" In spite of his attitude, something in his expression made it seem like he was actually having quite a bit of fun.

"Yes, yes," said Rys. "You can bring your fish over there, please."

"O-Over there...?" Dawkson squinted. "Seems like an awfully small oven..."

"Well, for a fish of that size it should be more than enough, shouldn't it?" Rys countered.

"Gnghhh..." protested the Dark One. "Fine. I got it." Defeated by Rys's rebuttal, Dawkson obediently placed his fish where he had been told.

Meanwhile, Garyl and Elizabeth stood by the shore of the lake. Elizabeth looked deeply embarrassed, blushing bright red as she fidgeted with her hands folded in front of her. "I-I'm really so terribly sorry..." she said. "I can't believe I fell asleep *again*..."

Elizabeth was wearing a wide-brimmed white hat and a loose-fitting shirt, seemingly with a swimsuit underneath, judging by her bare legs and feet. Having her legs on display like that seemed to only heighten her embarrassment, if the way she was squirming was any indication. Garyl, for his part, was wearing a pair of ordinary swimming trunks.

"You don't need to apologize!" Garyl said with a smile. "It's your time off, isn't it? You should get as much rest as you can!"

Elizabeth hung her head, lowering her gaze—only for her eyes to fall upon Garyl's exquisitely toned upper body. *O-oh my goodness...* she thought. *Garyl's just...a-amazing...*

Garyl's build was slender and strong, smooth and supple but with defined ridges from his powerful muscles. He was the very definition of lean muscle.

Elizabeth, however, turned her gaze from Garyl's body to look down at her own. *Th-This is terrible...* she thought, frozen in place. *I can't believe I let Swann and Rylnàsze talk me into wearing a swimsuit! Lately I've been working from dawn till dusk, and my body has gotten even flabbier than usual... Oh, I can hardly bear to let Garyl see me like this...*

Just then, Rylnàsze and Swann came running up to Elizabeth, shaking her out of her thoughts. Behind them followed Sybe, Tybe, and all four of their children.

"Miss Elizabeth, let's swim together!" exclaimed Rylnàsze.

"Yes, sister! Come with us!" added Swann.

"You all seem like you're having fun!" said Garyl, smiling at the sight.

"Indeed..." Elizabeth said, nodding her head.

At that moment, Wyne came flying up from behind. Rys must have given her quite an earful indeed, judging by the fact that she was now wearing a bikini-style swimsuit.

Swoosh!

Flying past Elizabeth, Wyne grabbed hold of a handful of her clothing.

"Huh...? *Huh?!*" the reigning monarch of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode cried in distress as the dragonewt hoisted her into the air by the collar of her shirt. "*Hwuh?!!!*" She flailed her legs and arms in confusion, but before long she found she had slipped out of her shirt entirely. Now she was plummeting straight for the lake.

"Fwahhh!!!" Elizabeth's eyes went wide in shock to find herself suddenly in freefall. Then, just as suddenly, she felt a pair of arms grabbing her, catching her out of the air. When she returned to her senses, she found herself looking up at Garyl's handsome face.

They were quite high up in the air, but Garyl had leaped the entire height using only his raw physical ability. He smiled down at her and said, "Hold on tight! We're gonna hit the water!"

"Huh?! I-I mean... Okay!" In spite of her nervousness, Elizabeth nodded her head, trusting in Garyl's words, and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

Ker-splash!!!

A pillar of water erupted from the lake as Garyl and Elizabeth plunged beneath the surface. They were submerged for only a moment, however, before Garyl began to swim, kicking with his powerful legs until they reemerged on the surface.

"How was that, Ellie?" he asked, grinning down at her face.

"O-Oh my goodness..." Elizabeth said. "It was...incredible..."

She had been afraid at first, but seeing Garyl's smiling face in front of her made the stress vanish from her body, and soon she was smiling and laughing along with him.

Levana swam up to the couple, moving through the water with the ease of the leviathan she was.

"Hey, Levana! What's up?" Garyl asked.

Levana held out her hand, holding a bikini top clutched in her fist.

For a moment the two of them just stared, unsure what to make of it. Then something struck Elizabeth's mind. *Wait...* she thought. *That swimsuit... Where have I seen it before...?* With mounting distress she looked down at her own chest to see that she was in

fact not wearing her bikini top at all—her naked upper body was on full display for the world to see.



Yes... Elizabeth's swimsuit had come undone the moment she hit the water, and it would have been lost to the lake forever if Levana had not had the wherewithal to retrieve it. Flustered, Elizabeth covered her chest with her hands as best she could, while Garyl turned to look steadfastly the other way.

"I-I'm not looking!" he said, his cheeks growing very red. "I didn't see anything!"

Elsewhere, in the forest above the waterfall, Telbyress was sitting under the shade of a particularly large tree, laughing merrily to herself as she drank from a bottle of liquor. "Ah ha hahh... Ohhh, to be young! Look at thoshe lovebirds..."

Having successfully absconded from the hunt for the Super Beast, Telbyress had gone searching for a well-hidden spot where she could unwind and enjoy a leisurely drink, eventually settling on her current position.

"Pwah!!! Shooo good!" she cried as she drained the last of the bottle. "It'sh a vacation after all, ishn't it?" she said, nodding in satisfaction at her own cleverness. "Shneaking out of all that work nonshense wash *definitely* the right call!"

"Oh? Sneaking out of work, you say?"

"That'sh right! I—" Telbyress answered reflexively before she could stop herself. *W-Wait...* she thought. *Who's that I'm talking to...?*

Telbyress slowly lifted her face, suddenly feeling quite a bit less happy about how drunk she had gotten. There, floating in the air in front of her with her arms sternly crossed in front of her chest, was none other than Fina.

"I was wondering where you had gotten to when you suddenly vanished..." Fina said. "So you were slacking off in a place like this, hm?"

"Erm... Uh..."

"Luckily we were able to resolve everything quickly thanks to Miss Elinàsze," Fina continued, "but I have to ask, what were you planning to do if the search had gone long?"

"Well... I... You shee..."

"Never mind!" Fina snapped, bringing her face up close to the increasingly incoherent Telbyress. "A group of Disciples of the Celestial Plane will be arriving momentarily in order to recover the Super Beast's corpse. *You* are going to come with me to meet them!"

"O-Okay..." Telbyress said. "Oh, wait a shecond..."

"What is it?"

"Sho like..." the former goddess asked. "Do you think there'sh any chance they'll let ush have a little bit of the Shuper Beasht meat?"

Telbyress's eyebrow twitched noticeably. "Of course there isn't! Don't you have a single thought in that head of yours?!"

"Sheesh, calm down!" Telbyress protested. "I jusht thought I'd ashk! You don't gotta get bent outta shape about it!"

"Maybe *you* could afford to stop saying things that get people bent out of shape!" Fina shot back.

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The sun grew gradually lower in the sky, turning the lakeshore a brilliant shade of vermilion as Rys ran in her lupine demon form with Flio on her back, enjoying the feeling of the wind on her face.

"*It's such a wonderful feeling to be together in a place like this, isn't it!*" she said, speaking telepathically to her husband.

"It is!" Flio agreed.

"*But I must say, everyone certainly had quite an appetite for lunch today. I think I ended up overeating a little as well...*"

"It's a beautiful spot for a barbecue, after all," Flio said with a smile. "And, of course, your cooking is always delicious. I ended up eating a bit too much myself, to be honest..."

"*Perhaps our dinner tonight should be on the light side, then,*" Rys said. "*Although I suppose Ghozal and Dawkson and Sleip and the others have been working up an appetite all day playing with the children. They've been asking about dinner since before we went out for our evening walk...*"

"Well, then..." said Flio. "Shall we head out and find something to cook for dinner?"

"*A date, you mean!*" Rys exclaimed with joy as she changed her direction, running off into the forest. "*Why, nothing would make me happier!*"

From his seat on her back, Flio could feel just how excited Rys was at the prospect. "You know, Rys..." he said quietly as he gently petted her fur. "I love spending time together like this too."

"*Hm?*" Rys asked. "*Did you say something just now, my lord husband?*"

"Oh, nothing much," said Flio. "More importantly, let's try to catch a big one, why don't we!"

"*Of course, my lord husband! Just leave it to me! I'll find something that makes that magic beast Ghozal fished up look like a shrimp!*"

With that, Rys sped off, charging into the forest with Flio on her back.

The trees, too, seemed almost red in the setting sun.

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 18

◇Deep in a Forest◇

In the far reaches of the kingdom, a long way away from Klyrode Castle, there was a small forest town whose people made their livelihood harvesting lumber, hunting magic beasts in the woods, or growing vegetables for trade. Once this town had been little more than a sleepy village, too far away from any big cities to see much in the way of trade. Recently, however, their fortunes had changed.

In the depths of the forest, outside the town itself, stood a solitary cottage. The sun had already set, and lights could be seen shining from the windows. Inside, three women were sitting in the cottage's living room.

"Things have gotten a lot more lively in town, thanks to those Enchanted Frigate whatchamacallems, haven't they?" one of them—Cartha—remarked with a self-satisfied grin.

Cartha—daughter of a farming family. She had fallen in love at first sight with Hugi-Mugi in their human form, and after a dedicated offensive she finally succeeded in securing the vaunted position of *wife*. Now she lived in a cottage in the forest with her husband and Hugi-Mugi's two other wives.

"You certainly have done well in the fields, Cartha... You've always excelled at farmwork," Shino said, also smiling as she praised her fellow wife. "It's splendid to see all those plump vegetables ready to go to market!"

Shino—a priestess from the same village as Cartha, who like her found herself smitten with Hugi-Mugi. Now she lived as another one of the doppeladler's three wives. She spent most of her days in the village, however, tending to the sick and injured.

“Quite right!” agreed Mato. “Those peddlers who were visiting town had nothing but good things to say—about the vegetables, I mean. But the real prize was that scale our husband happened to shed! Selling *that* brought in more than enough to cover our living expenses for a long while!”

Mato—a traveling merchant who was saved by Hugi-Mugi when she came under attack by bandits in the forest. She began living with them and the others in an effort to return their kindness, but before long she too had fallen in love with Hugi-Mugi, eventually becoming their third wife.

“You sold that scale to the same company that runs the Enchanted Frigates, right?” Cartha recalled.

“Yes, that’s right,” said Mato, her smile widening further. “I shopped around at a number of establishments, and they were the ones willing to pay me the highest price. A mature doppeladler like our husband only sheds one or two scales in a single year, after all, so I put in the extra effort to find the best possible deal.”

“That’s our Mato!” said Cartha. “You really know your stuff!”

Shino looked between the other two and smiled happily to herself. “I must say, though, who would have thought the three of us would learn to get along so well! It feels a little strange, to be perfectly honest...”

“I suppose so...” Cartha reflected. “When we first moved in with our darling Hugi, none of us had any idea that they were a demon, after all! It really set a strange mood for the whole affair.”

“We certainly had more than a few dustups between us as a result, didn’t we?” said Mato.

“Now that we all have children to worry about, it feels much more like we’re on the same side!” Cartha laughed.

At that point, the wives heard the sound of a door opening down the hallway, and the two overlapping voices of their husband. “The children are out of the bath, yes!” they said. “Yes, they’re all finished!”

Hugi-Mugi—a type of monstrous two-headed bird known as a doppeladler, and a former member of the Infernal Four from the time of the Dark One Gholl. Now they spent most of their days

disguised as a human man. Since leaving the Dark Army, Hugi-Mugi had settled down to a peaceful life with their three wives and three children deep in a certain forest.

In their natural form, of course, Hugi-Mugi was a gigantic two-headed bird. Even when disguised as a single human, they spoke with two distinct voices.

The three wives all rose from their chairs, changing modes in an instant just in time for their three children to come bursting into the room, cavorting and laughing happily.

Cartha spread her arms wide, catching one of the children in a loving hug. "Did you have a nice bath with your Papa, everyone?" she asked.

"Yeah!" the child said. "It was fun!"

To her left and right, Mato and Shino each scooped up their own children as well. The wives retrieved a set of bath towels draped over the nearby chair and set to work drying off the children's hair. They were all smiles as they worked, but something in their eyes betrayed a serious focus.

Usually, we go in the order of me, then Shino, then Mato... Cartha thought, communicating with nothing more than occasional stolen glances between her and the other wives.

And the seventh day of the week—which happens to be today—we pick at random... thought Shino.

Today's a good day too... Mato thought. *None of us will want to yield our position...*

It was exactly how it seemed. The three wives had developed a strict system for determining who would have the right to sleep with their husband Hugi-Mugi on which day. They had agreed, after a long discussion, that it would be unreasonable to ask their husband to take all of them on every day, considering how busy Hugi-Mugi was around the house and helping out with the town, and so they'd decided to limit themselves to one partner per night.

"Okay, children," said Cartha. "It's another big day tomorrow, so rest up, all right?"

"Okay!" the children all replied at once, smiling as their mothers led them to their shared bedroom.

The wives were smiling as well, but underneath they were each cementing their resolve.

For my dream... Cartha thought. *My dream of running a big farm together with all my children...*

For my dream... Shino thought. *My dream of rebuilding the local church together with all of my children...*

For my dream... Mato thought. *My dream of opening a general store together with my children...*

Hugi-Mugi sat down in a chair in the living room, watching as their wives led the children away, heroically keeping their friendly smiles up all the while.

It's strange, yes... they thought. *Yes, when we were on the Infernal Four, we never dreamed of having this sort of life! Yes, never dreamed of it... Quite beyond our imagination, yes...* They reached for the bottle of fruit wine on the table next to them and took a long drink—quite a bit longer, in fact, than they had intended. *Demons are allowed up to three wives to try to propagate our species, yes... Yes, because we have quite a bit of trouble conceiving children, yes... But we must say, it can be quite a bit of work, yes... Yes, so much work...*

"We're finished!" said Shino, stepping back into the room at the head of the other wives. Her right hand was still in the shape of the scissors she had used to triumph in the wives' game of chance. Behind her, Cartha and Mato stood with tears in their eyes, their hands seemingly stuck in the paper position.

"Why couldn't I have just thrown rock...?!" lamented Cartha.

"*Sob...* I don't believe it..." wept Mato.

"Are the children asleep, yes?" Hugi-Mugi asked.

"They are," Shino reported, smiling fondly. "They've been falling asleep the moment they're in bed lately. I suppose they're having so much fun at the Houghtow College of Magic that they can't help it."

"Back in the day, no one would have ever dreamed of going all the way to Houghtow City every day for school," said Cartha. "Those Enchanted Frigates have been a real lifesaver for us."

"And with the student commuter pass, the price is quite reasonable!" added Mato.

Hugi-Mugi listened with a patient smile, before asking the question. “So, yes...yes, tonight?”

“Y-Yes...” Shino said, her cheeks blushing noticeably. “I’ll be your partner tonight...if you’ll have me.”

Hugi-Mugi stepped forwards and gently pulled Shino into their arms, while Cartha and Mato watched on with clear disappointment.

“Well, yes, you know...” Hugi-Mugi said, looking over at their other two wives and beckoning them to come over as well. “We are feeling rather energetic today, yes...”

Suddenly, Cartha’s and Mato’s expressions lit up with delight.

“Oh, you’re so gallant, Hugi! I love you!” gushed Cartha.

“That’s what I was going to say!” added Mato, as the two both went to embrace them at once.

Shino, however, couldn’t help frowning at the development. “No fair...” she complained. “It was supposed to be *my* day...”

All at once, the situation had reversed, with Cartha and Mato beaming for joy and Shino pouting with disappointment.

Hugi-Mugi went to hug Shino even closer than before. “Now now, yes! Yes, you mustn’t say such things! We have enough love for all of you, yes!”

Shino blushed yet again and squirmed with embarrassment at Hugi-Mugi’s words.

Then, surrounded by their wives, Hugi-Mugi led the way towards their own private room. The magic lantern in the living room went out, leaving the house in darkness. The only light that could be seen in the forest outside now was the gentle twinkling of the stars.

◇Houghtow City—Hokh’hokton’s Cottage◇

Night had fallen on Hokh’hokton’s cottage in the corner of Blossom Acres. Everything was dark, except for Hokh’hokton’s window, where a magic lantern filled the room with light.

Hokh’hokton was sitting at the living room table on the first floor, using some sort of tool to do complicated-seeming maintenance on one of his magic items, when Fina stepped into the room.

“I’m finished with the bath,” she said.

“Good, good,” said Hokh’hokton. “And thank you for all your work.”

The cottage came equipped with its own private bath and toilet, providing comfortable accommodations for Hokh’hokton as well as his two lodgers, Telbyress and Fina.

Fina walked over to the cottage’s kitchen and grabbed two cups, filling them both with water and placing one in front of Hokh’hokton as he continued working on his project.

“Thank you, much obliged,” Hokh’hokton said.

“Well, we’re going to be living together, after all,” said Fina, sitting down across from him. “This much is the least I should do.”

“So you say, but you’ve been a tremendous help ever since you moved in,” Hokh’hokton insisted. “No matter how much I cleaned, there was no way a single goblin could keep up with the amount of filth that no-gooddess produced...”

“I do seem to recall having trouble finding anywhere to stand with all the liquor bottles littering the floor...” Fina agreed. The two shared a wry smile at the memory, but they were interrupted when the front entrance swung open with a healthy amount of force as Telbyress stepped into the cottage.

“I’m hooome!!!” the no-gooddess called. It seemed like she was in particularly good spirits.

Anticipating that the living room would be Telbyress’s next stop after the front entrance, Hokh’hokton and Fina halted their conversation and turned to face their housemate.

“You’re in a good mood today, aren’t you?” Hokh’hokton observed. “You went off drinking somewhere, I presume?”

“No, no, I haven’t been drinking at all!” Telbyress laughed. “I’ve been doing marketing for my own Telbyressh Brand Liquor!”

“Telbyress Brand Liquor?” Hokh’hokton asked. “You mean that drink you and Mister Flio brewed while you were down in Dogorogma?”

“That’sh the one!” said Telbyress, squeezing Hokh’hokton tightly. “I put sho much work and care into making it, after all, I thought it would be only fitting for it to be shold in shopsh!”

In fact, it couldn’t have been more obvious that Telbyress was

drunk. Her face was flushed red, and she tottered and staggered every time she took a step.

Hokh'hokton recoiled from Telbyress's grip, gasping for air and pushing her away. "Get off me! You stink like liquor! You *have* been drinking, haven't you!"

"Ah ha hah! No waaay! Thish much barely countsh ash drinking!" Telbyress insisted, holding the goblin tightly in spite of his struggles and puckering up her lips for a kiss.

Something about the sight made the blood drain from Fina's face. In her mind, she found herself reliving the time Telbyress had forced a bottle down her throat, forcing her to drink the entire thing at once...and the terrible hangover she'd suffered for two days after the fact.

Why does Madame Telbyress want to drink something that puts you in a state like that... she wondered, reeling with distress. *And how can she handle drinking so much of it...*

"Oh!" Suddenly seeming to remember something, Fina took a sealed envelope out of her back pocket. "Madame Telbyress, this is for you."

Telbyress and Hokh'hokton both stopped struggling with each other and turned to look at Fina.

"A-Ah!!!" Telybress cried when she saw what Fina was holding, flailing her arms in a panic. "Fiiinaaa!!! Y-You're shupposed to give me that *later!* And in *shecret!*"

The former goddess dove across the room, trying to snatch the envelope out of Fina's hands...only for Hokh'hokton to grab her firmly by the back of her clothes, throwing her fiercely to the ground.

"Just a moment!" the goblin barked.

"Gwueahhh!" Telbyress cried as her face impacted the floor, twitching like a frog.

Hokh'hokton held Telbyress down with his right arm and looked up at Fina. "So. Miss Fina. What exactly is in that envelope, may I ask?"

"Oh, it's the month's rent," Fina told him. "Since the house belongs to Madame Telbyress, after all, she told me to make sure to

pay her for each month of accommodations."

"Hmph." Hokh'hokton said, glancing down at Telbyress. "Just so we're clear..." he said, "this house belongs to *me*."

"What...?" said Fina, staring in blank disbelief.

"So you see," Hokh'hokton explained, "you and the no-gooddess here are both lodging in *my* house."

"R-Really..." Fina replied, holding out the envelope to Hokh'hokton instead. "So, that means I should be paying rent to *you*, Mister Hokh'hokton..."

Hokh'hokton, however, pushed the envelope back, shaking his head. "I don't need your money," he said. "I've never asked the no-gooddess for it either. Not even once."

"Oh...?" said Fina, utterly confused.

"That explains things, though..." Hokh'hokton muttered to himself. "No wonder she was so determined to give you acute alcohol poisoning the time you let it slip that she had told you she owned the house... She completely derailed my investigation!"

"S-So..." Fina asked. "The rent I've been paying up till now...?"

"I'd imagine it's all gone down this woman's gullet, in the form of expensive liquor!"

"Nh..." Fina said, words failing her completely.

"A-Awawahh..." Telbyress cried, twitching on the floor as she listened to the conversation. She struggled to escape, but Hokh'hokton had her pinned like a rare insect in someone's collection, keeping her from moving even a single inch.

Fina and Hokh'hokton both glared down at the helpless fallen goddess.

"Today's the day, Telbyress," Hokh'hokton declared. "I'm going to give you an earful you'll never forget!"

"Madame Telbyress..." said Fina. "I have a number of questions I'd like to ask about this whole affair as well..."

Telbyress fought for dear life, flailing her limbs with increasing desperation. "C-Come on, you two!" she pleaded. "Th-There'sh no need to be sho upshet about it, ish there?!"



That night, the lights didn't go out in Hokh'hokton's cottage until the early hours of the morning.

◇Klyrode Castle—Castle Town◇

Klyrode Castle lay at the very heart of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. While Houghtow City had been growing quite a bit busier in recent years, the settlement surrounding Klyrode Castle had long been a bustling city, full of tremendous crowds and prosperous commerce.

The dark elf princess Nerona walked the streets of Klyrode Castle Town, hiding her elven features to disguise herself as merely a dark-skinned human.

"It was supposed to be somewhere around *here*, wasn't it...?" Nerona muttered to herself.

As she walked she kept glancing down at something in her hand —an illustrated pamphlet full of dense text and detailed information, with bold words emblazoned across the top reading "Mileno Culinary School: New Students Welcome!"

That fox and that Diabolist who were behind all those problems vanished into the night, and even that huge magic beast head vanished without a trace when I wasn't looking... Nerona thought. *That's not gonna earn me a lot of points when it comes to becoming Dawkson's bride! But that's all right... Once I've learned how to actually cook, I'll seize his heart through his stomach!*

She continued down the streets, studiously following the map on the pamphlet, until finally she came face-to-face with a sign reading "Mileno Culinary School."

"Aha!" she cried out, breaking into a jog. "That's it! That's it! I've found it!"

Nerona stepped inside the building. For a while, the time outside passed uneventfully. And then...

Ka-BOOM!!!

A tremendous bout of flames came bursting out of one of the classroom windows. A crowd of onlookers quickly gathered around the building, clamoring to see what had happened.

“What was that?!”

“What’s going on?!”

Nerona stuck her head out the window, hacking and coughing in the smoke-filled room. “W-Well, I mean, come on!” she protested. “It takes forever to cook the food with that wimpy flame you’ve got on the stove! Isn’t it more fun to do it in a single blast with some proper hellfire?”

Farther behind her, the school’s head teacher Mileno found herself reliving some of her old memories.

“R-Reminds me of another student we had once who used to do that kind of preposterous thing...” she said to herself between fits of coughing. “D-Don’t tell me we have another one like *her* again...”

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

A knock came on the door to Elinàsze’s room on the second floor of Flio’s house. After one, then two knocks without any response, whoever was outside started to open the door.

“Young Mistress Elinàsze,” said Tanya, stepping inside. “I’m here to clean your room.”

Tanya was wearing her usual maid outfit, with a long slit in the skirt for maximum maneuverability. In her right hand she held a mop, and in her left, a bucket.

Elinàsze, however, was nowhere to be seen.

“Hmm...” Tanya pondered, conjuring a magic circle just around her eye and peering carefully around the room. “Ah, there it is,” she said after a few moments, pressing her hand to the wall right next to one of the windows. Her hand, however, did not stop at the wall but slipped inside as if it were being absorbed right into the building.

Tanya continued on, stepping through the wall entirely to find herself transported to a completely different space. She was in a large room, the walls covered in bookshelves packed full of magic grimoires all the way up to the ceiling. As if even that wasn’t enough storage space, there were even more grimoires artlessly strewn all about the floor.

Tanya took a long look around at the state of the room. “I see

you've added another two hundred and fifty-three volumes to your laboratory library, Young Mistress Elinàsze," she said, her eyes falling upon one bookcase in particular near the back-right corner of the room. "Where should I have them shelved?"

There, in the shadow of the bookcase, sat Elinàsze, thoroughly engrossed in one of her grimoires. She was sitting on the floor, so focused on the text she was reading that she didn't react even when Tanya said her name.

Tanya sighed and stepped across the room to Elinàsze.

"Oh, Tanya!" Elinàsze said as the maid approached, finally reacting to her presence. She took off the thick round glasses she favored for reading and looked up from the book. "How long have you been here?"

"You can't really expect me to believe that you didn't notice me coming inside your laboratory..." Tanya said.

"No, I suppose not," Elinàsze replied with a smile.

"But I must say..." Tanya added. "The work you've done disguising that portal as a wall is nothing short of impeccable. If I hadn't known it was there, I'm certain I would have never found it."

"That's quite high praise from you, Tanya," said Elinàsze. "I'm honored."

"I would have to agree," said Hiya, appearing behind Elinàsze to join the conversation. "It was a stroke of brilliance to move your laboratory to the space beneath the Exalted One's mansion in the Underground World Dogorogma. That way, you can use as much space for your projects as you like. And not only that, but your work restoring the old gate you discovered in the wilderness means you can travel to Dogorogma whenever you— Mnmnphffff!!!"

Elinàsze quickly covered Hiya's mouth with both of her hands, cutting short the djinn's ecstatic litany in praise of her brilliant success. "H-Hiya!" she scolded them, smiling and keeping her tone as light as she could manage. "Let's not say any more about that, all right?"

Her smile, however, looked more than a little forced. The fact that Elinàsze usually came across as cool and collected, rarely showing strong emotion to anyone aside from Flio, only made the expression

look even more obviously fake.

Tanya grinned knowingly at Elinàsze's behavior. "It's quite all right, Young Mistress Elinàsze," she said. "The gate was merely something you just so happened to find in the wilds, after all. The fact that you just so happened to get the gate working again, and the fact that it just so happened that a ruin as ancient as this one would not be affected by the Celestial Plane's Forbid Entry spell is nothing more than a string of innocent coincidence. I certainly see no need to speak of this matter to anyone, I assure you."

"Thank you, Tanya..." Elinàsze said, breathing a sigh of relief. "I can't tell you how glad I am to hear you say that."

"However..." Tanya continued.

"However...?" Elinàsze asked, cocking her head.

"While I will not be speaking of this portal to anyone...I certainly cannot promise that it will never be found." Smirking wryly, Tanya stepped to the side to reveal Flio standing right behind her.

"P-Papa?!" Elinàsze exclaimed, her eyes going wide.

"Well, would you look at that!" Flio said. "You built an entire laboratory underneath our vacation home in Dogorogma, did you?" He spread his arms wide, casting a spell of his own without a word of explanation. A magic circle formed in front of him, and all at once the laboratory glowed with light.

"U-Um... Papa?" Elinàsze asked, a worried note in her voice. "Wh-What are you—"

"All right, that should do it," Flio said, letting out a breath and lowering his arms. "I used my Celestial Magic to set up a Concealment Barrier around your laboratory. With that, I doubt anyone from the Celestial Plane will be able to find it. Although, I really would appreciate it if you tried not to go *too* crazy down here..." he added with a mischievous smile.

"Papa!" Elinàsze cried, her face lighting up with joy. "Thank you! I love you so much!" Grinning from ear to ear, she embraced her father tightly around the shoulders as Flio gently hugged her back.

"Oh, my lord husbaaand!"

Just then, Rys's voice came echoing through the laboratory. Everyone present wheeled around to see her, too, stepping through

the gate.

"I've improved my recipe for lembon pie!" she said, beaming with pride. "Would you like to have a taste?"

"O-Of course!" Flio nodded, smiling back. "I'll be right there! But... Um... Rys...?"

"Yes?" Rys asked. "What is it, my lord husband?"

"Well, I guess I'm just surprised that you were able to find me here!"

"Oh, well, that's no mystery!" said Rys, taking him by the arm and leading him back out of the gate. "You're my beloved lord husband, after all! I always know where you are, no matter what!"

With the two of them gone, Elinàsze, Tanya, and Hiya were left at the gate staring after them.

"But this room was just hidden by a spell originating in Celestial Magic..." Hiya said. "Not even the Celestial Plane should be able to detect someone here..."

"And she came straight to him..." added Tanya.

"It's the power of Mama's love for Papa, I suppose..." said Elinàsze. "It simply can't be stopped."

All three nodded, apparently satisfied by that explanation.

"There's enough for everyone, you know!" Rys added, sticking her head back through the portal with a great big smile. "Come to the living room once you're finished here if you'd like to try a slice!"

Afterword

I'd like to take a moment to thank you for reading this book.

Level 2 Cheat has now reached its eighteenth volume. This one was focused mainly on the characters' daily lives and the setting of the Underground World Dogorogma. We had an all-new episode featuring the Klyrode City Training Hall too, and a fresh adventure in Dogorogma, with Hero Gold-Hair getting in on the action a little more directly than usual. I can't recommend it enough if you want to see a somewhat different Hero Gold-Hair than the version from the anime adaptation.

Meanwhile, like an old friend, the manga adaptation has released another volume at the same time as this one, bringing it up to volume 11, where we see a major event happen in the story. I'm very excited to see where the manga goes from here!

The anime has been well received too! I've been watching the episodes every week and enjoying them very much. I hope the rest of you have been having as much fun with it as I have!

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, July 2024

Bonus Stories

“Hawawawawahh?!!!”

“I’m hooome!” Byleri’s cheerful voice rang out from the front entrance into the living room of Flio’s house, followed closely by Byleri herself. “Fwahhh!” she exclaimed, stretching her arms as far as she could as she stepped into the room. “Like, that’s another busy day done for me and all the horsies! I’m all finished giving everyone their food, so, like, I guess I’ll just take a break until Lord Sleip and Rislei get back.”

Before Byleri could sit down, however, another equally cheerful voice came from right behind her. It was Rylnàsze, Flio and Rys’s second daughter. “I’m hooome!!!”

“Oh! Like, Rylnàsze!” said Byleri, turning to face her. “Like, thank you so much for all your help with the horsies earlier!”

“Oh, of course! No trouble at all!” Rylnàsze said with a bright smile and a polite little bow. “I love taking care of animals, you know! It was my pleasure!”

Recently, Rylnàsze had been using her prodigious taming abilities to help out at Sleip and Byleri’s ranch whenever she had a moment to spare.

“I should totally make you something sweet!” Byleri offered. “Like, to thank you for all the help!” She took a step in the direction of the kitchen, only for Rylnàsze to call out, stopping her.

“U-Um!” she said. “Before you go, the horses wanted me to give you something. They say you dropped it earlier...”

“I, like, dropped something?” Byleri asked, completely at a loss. *Like, I wonder what it could be...* she wondered, turning around to see what it was. The moment her eyes fell on the book in Rylnàsze’s hands, however, her eyes went wide with shock. *I-Isn’t that like totally from my stash of adult books I have hidden in the*

supervisor's room in the stables?!!!

"Is this a book about horses, maybe?" Rylnàsze asked, nothing but well-meaning curiosity as she went to open the front cover. "I might be interested in—"

"Hawawawawahh?!!!" With astonishing speed, Byleri leaped across the room, snatching the book from right under Rylnàsze's nose. "L-L-L-Like, no way!!!" she said. "I-I-It's got nothing to do with horses! It's... Um... Like... Y'know..." Byleri cast around desperately for an explanation, but the more she thought the more flustered she became, until she was totally at a loss for words.

"Well? What kind of book is it, then?" Rylnàsze tilted her head curiously, the very picture of innocence.

The Wives' Designs

One day, Flio payed a visit to the Kinosaki Hot Springs Village, a resort town dotted with natural springs sending trails of steam up into the sky.

On the corner of one of the roads running through the center of town, Flio sat down on a bench. "This bench is made of bumboo, if I'm not mistaken..." he observed, admiring its distinctive regional style. "You see a lot of things made from material in the far east."

"Hrm..." Ghozal grunted in satisfaction as he arrived at the bench after Flio, dressed in one of the Hot Springs Village's yukata. "Nothing like a hot spring, is there? The wind feels so refreshing after a dip in the hot water..."

"I'd certainly say so!" Flio agreed.

Just as Flio and Ghozal had started talking, Sleip appeared from the same direction as Ghozal. "Hey, you two! Sorry to keep you waiting!"

"Not at all! I just got here!" said Ghozal, as the two of them greeted the newcomer with a smile.

"And I haven't been waiting long at all," said Flio.

"Good, good!" said Sleip, looking all around before staring back at the building he had just come out of. "So... I don't suppose Byleri is

still at it, is she...?"

"Hrm," Ghozal grimaced. "Balirossa and Uliminas are still in there too..."

"Rys, also," added Flio with a very similar expression to Ghozal's.

Beside them, the sign decorating the building set up around the nearby hot spring proudly read "Yanagi Bath."

In a large basin in the women's bathing area, Rys, Balirossa, Uliminas, and Byleri were all soaking in the hot water. Each of them was utterly silent, eyes closed and submerged all the way up to their chins.

A child for my lord husband... thought Rys. *A child for my lord husband...*

I-If I'm the wife of the retired Dark One, I really should try to have at least one more child... thought Balirossa.

W-Well...meown more kitten wouldn't be so bad... thought Uliminas.

I'm sure Rislei would love a little brother! thought Byleri. *Or a little sister...*

The Yanagi bath, of course, was famous among all the waters of the Kinosaki Hot Springs for the blessing of fertility it was purported to hold. Needless to say, it would be quite a while before the women would come to rejoin Flio and the others.

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers 18

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri




Name Uliminas
Name Belano
Name Balirossa
Name Rys


Name Valentine 8
“Oh! Yes! This magic power... It’s simply divine! More! Give me more!”
Name Tsuya 8
Name Hero Gold-Hair 8

Table of Contents

Cover

Characters

Chapter 1: Flio's Goddess Problems

Chapter 2: The Houghtow City Training Hall

Chapter 3: Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought

Chapter 4: The Super Beast Incident

Epilogue

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 18

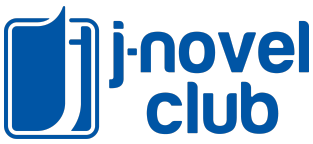
Afterword

Bonus Short Stories

Color Illustrations

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by Miya Kinojo

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