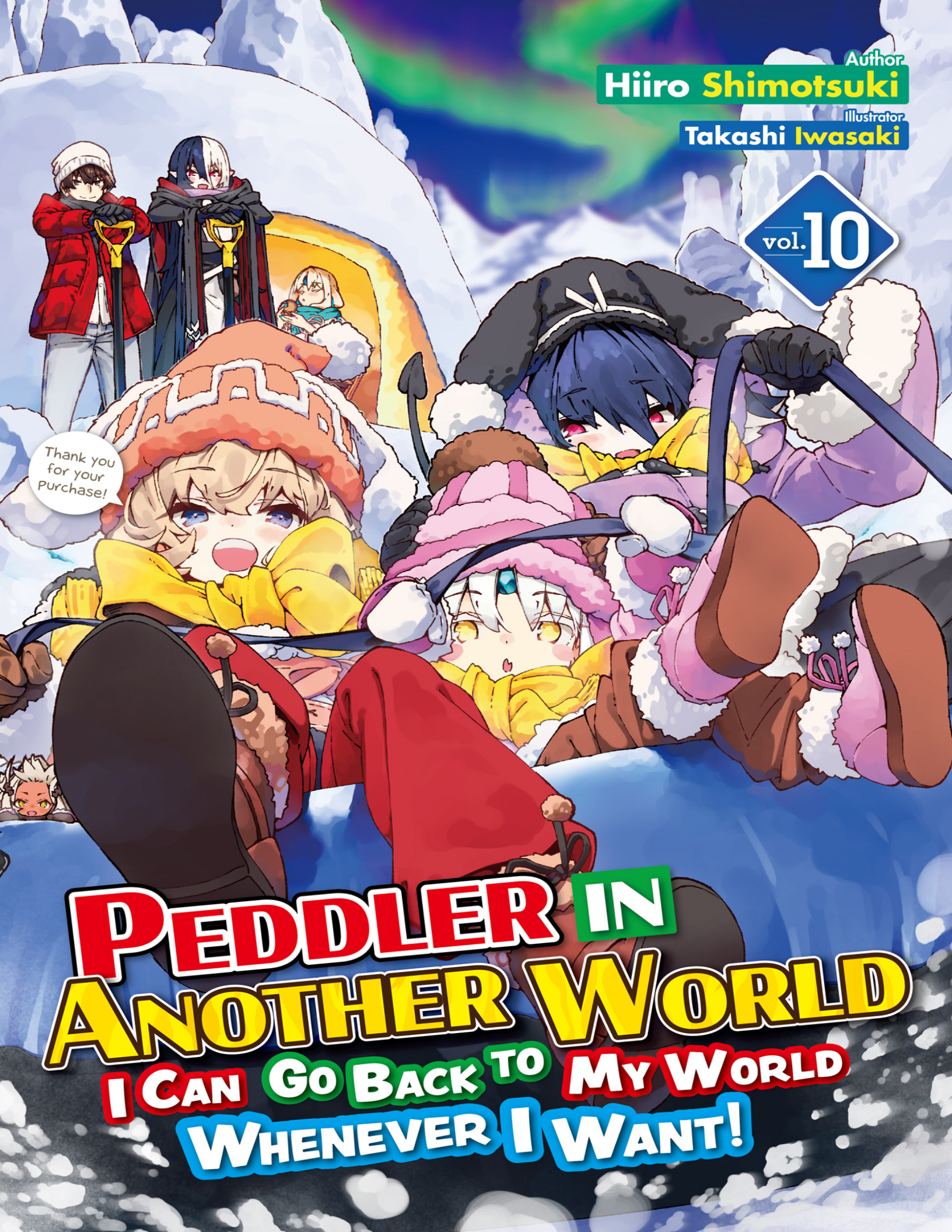
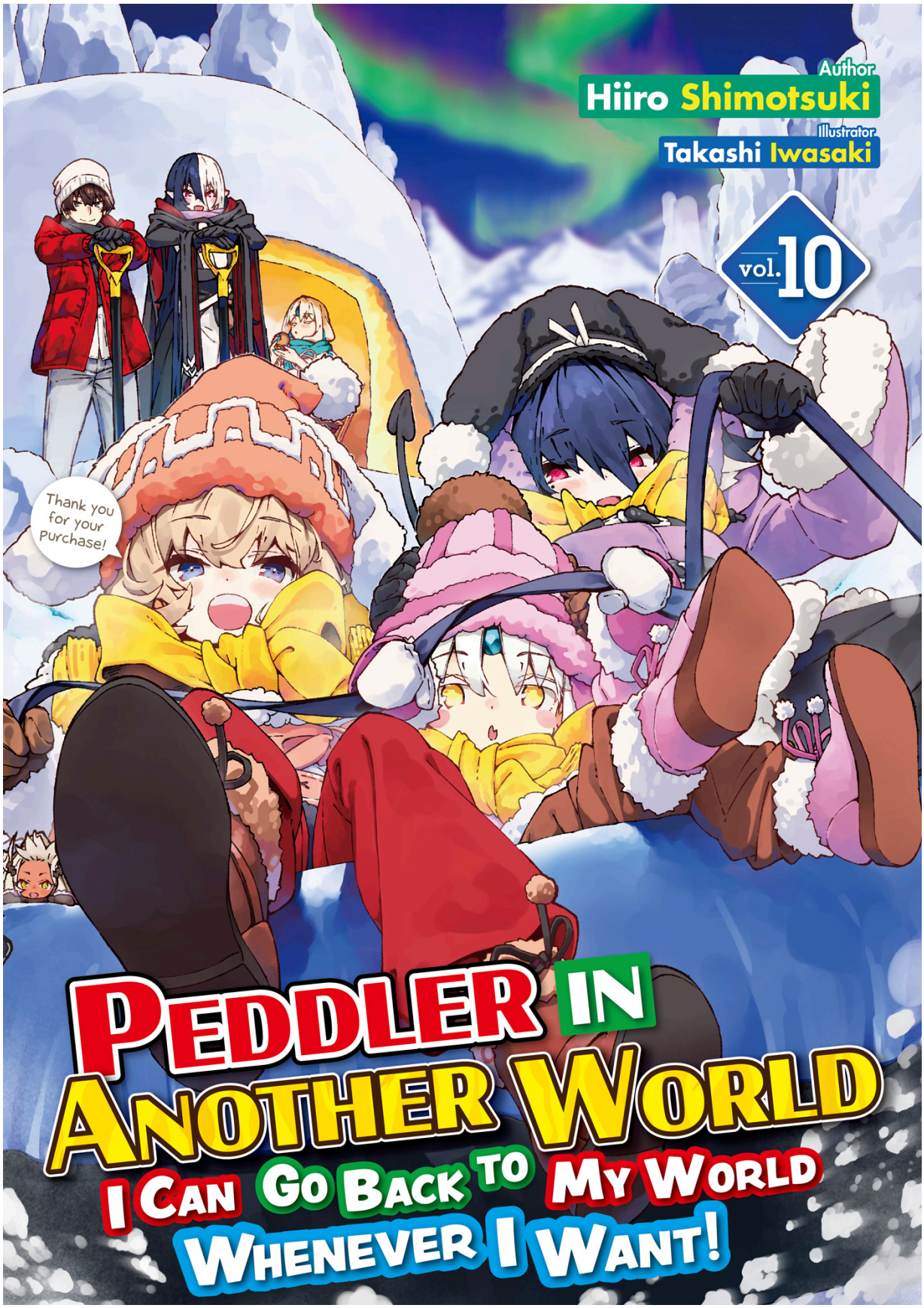

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“Long time no see, Mifa.”
“Dear sister!”
“The ‘Shiro’ my dear sister mentioned to me before.”
“I see. So it is *you*.”




“Aw-raw-ras?”
“We have arrived.”
Upon opening my eyes again, I was met with...
“I think those are auroras.”


WELCOME!
B+
B+
"Ah! I like this one that's light purple!"
"I-It looks fine."



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Summary of the Previous Volume

At Kilpha's request, I agreed to accompany her back to her hometown, Zudah Village, located in the Dura Forest, posing as her fiancé. But almost as soon as we got there, we were confronted by Sajiri, a fierce cat-sìth warrior who turned out to be Kilpha's *real* fiancé. Needless to say, he was none too pleased to see his betrothed with another man, and to make matters worse, he had a huge number of ogres under his control and was planning to use them to destroy Orvil, the city-state that governed the Dura Forest.

I enlisted the help of my friends, and together, we managed to thwart his plans before he had time to set them in motion, but just as we were starting to think the danger had passed, the *true* mastermind stepped out from behind the curtain: Magath Onir, the prime minister of Orvil. It turned out he had been the one supplying Sajiri with ogres in the hope that the cat-sìth would attack the city and take out the king, allowing Magath to swoop in and "save" the day, with his ultimate goal to seize the crown in the ensuing chaos.

And as if ogres weren't formidable enough, Magath brought with him a far more fearsome creature: a black dragon, which he had enslaved using a Collar of Domination. Fortunately, my friends succeeded in defeating the dragon before it could land a single blow on us, allowing me to capture Magath and deliver him to the king to be imprisoned.

And that was that. All's well that ends well. Or so it seemed. For one question still lingered: who exactly had crafted those Collars of Domination that were powerful enough to even subjugate a black dragon?

Chapter One: The Source

"Cheers!"

Having finally made it back from the Dura Forest, I was in the middle of enjoying a few drinks with my friends in Ninoritch, my adopted second home. We'd arrived in town in the evening, and not even an hour later, we were already drinking. What terrible adults we were. *Thank goodness Aina's not here to see this.*

Kilpha and I were at a table in the guild's drinking hall, and we'd been joined by Emille, who had invited herself to sit with us. One after another, adventurers I knew came up to greet me and raise a toast in celebration of my return.

"Oh, hey, you're finally back!"

"Welcome back, Shiro!"

"Drink up! This one's on me."

"Am I seeing things or is that Shiro? Hey, waitress! Bring us some booze over here!"

"Over here too! A mug for me, and one for Shiro!"

"Shiro, have a drink with me, yeah?"

Well, looks like I just started an impromptu drinking party.

Under normal circumstances, Rolf would be casting Cure on us to negate the aftereffects of the alcohol, but since he was still visiting his hometown, we were most likely going to all end up passed out on the floor by the middle of the night. I could only pray that someone would have the presence of mind to stop Emille from dragging me off to a dark room somewhere, because I doubted I'd be able to fight her off in a drunken state, even if I tried. Opposite me, the bunny girl chuckled sinisterly.

"C'mon, mister, drink up. Look, *everyone* wants to toast you! You're surely not going to refuse them, are you? That'd be *terribly* rude of you!" she teased, her eyes locked firmly on me like a predator watching its prey. "Oh, hey, look, mister. Your mug's empty!

I'll order you a new drink, 'kay?"

It was hard to miss the drool that escaped her lips. *I'm kinda terrified.*

"Um, is there anyone here who knows the Cure spe—" I started, turning to the sea of adventurers crowding around us, but Emille cut me off before I could finish.

"Ahem! What are you *saying*, mister?" She fake-laughed. "You want someone to use Cure on you? In here? A drinking hall of all places? That's the most *ridiculous* thing I've ever heard! So uncool! So *lame*!"

Thankfully, Kilpha beside me proverbially leaped to my rescue. "Don't worry, Shiro. I won't let Emi do anything naughty to you, meow."

"Thanks, Kilpha."

She gave me a little pat on the back as if in reassurance, causing Emille to click her tongue. "Oh, get lost, you thieving cat."

"I haven't stolen anything. Shiro was never yours to begin with, meow," Kilpha retorted.

"Oh, but he *is*! He'll be mine one day, so that means he's *already* mine!" the bunny girl declared. In true Emille fashion, her reasoning was completely absurd.

"That makes zero sense, meow," Kilpha said, drawing another, much louder tongue click out of the bunny girl.

Just then, Patty—who was sitting at the table next to ours—fluttered over to me. "Hey, Shiro?" she said to grab my attention.

"Hm? What is it, boss?"

I hadn't noticed before, but she had been sitting with a bunch of other fairies. There were around ten of them all in a circle on the table itself, and it looked like they were having a blast. *Well, would you look at that? Seems Patty's made some friends while I was away.* I attempted to conceal my cheerful surprise at this and turned my attention to what the little fairy was trying to tell me.

"Look over there," she said, pointing to a table in one corner of the drinking hall. "Celes has a real scary look on her face. Did something happen?"

"C-Celes?" I queried. "She does?"

I followed Patty's gaze and I spotted Celes at the table she had indicated. She was talking to Eldos, who was one of the Sixteen Heroes, and his blacksmith brother, Baledos. From what I could tell, the three of them seemed to be in the middle of a pretty serious discussion. *Oh, what's this? Celes just took a large metal band out of her bag and set it down on the table. That's one of the Collars of Domination the now-former prime minister of Orvil was using on those cyclopes, isn't it?*

Collars of Domination were magic tools that—as the name suggested—allowed a person to bend a creature to their will. They were considered taboo artifacts and banned in most nations. I watched as Baledos recoiled in horror when Celes explained what the metal band was. She added that the one in front of them had been used to enslave a cyclops, but the prime minister had also possessed one powerful enough to control a black dragon.

Baledos's eyes almost bulged out of their sockets at that point. "A cyclops and a *dragon*, ye say? Cyclopes are gold-rank monsters, but a black dragon's at *least* platinum! And yer tellin' me these collars were controllin' 'em? Blasted nonsense!"

It seemed their conversation had piqued the interest of folk nearby, as a small crowd was starting to gather around their table. Naturally, I was curious as well. I drained the last of my drink and made my way over to join the crowd so that I could hear their conversation a bit better.

"That is what I have been told," Celes said. "I asked Nesca about it. She said the amount of mana poured into a Collar of Domination on its creation determines the type of creature it can subjugate."

Baledos nodded. "Aye, that's right. Now I'd believe ye if it were regular monsters ye were namin', but a *cyclops* and a *black dragon*? I don't know of a single hume or dwarf who'd have enough mana or be able to forge a collar sturdy enough not to snap under the strain."

So not even dwarves could craft Collars of Domination that powerful? Then, who made them?

"Baledos?" I said, tapping the dwarf on the shoulder to get his attention. Maybe he had some inkling about who might be behind the manufacture of these collars.

He turned to me, an irritated look on his face. “What is it, kid?”

“If theoretically, no hume or dwarf could have made collars powerful enough to tame a black dragon, then who do you suppose made them?”

“Well, ain’t that obvious? Demons, that’s who.”

Demons? That was what he’d just said, right? I’d already had quite a bit to drink, but I was still sober enough for my senses not to be *completely* dulled. To be honest, I was so intrigued by this turn of events, I felt myself sobering up a little. But while my inner child was jumping up and down with excitement (*Demons*! How cool is *that*?), Celes met the suggestion that her kin were likely involved with a blank stare.

“I feared as much. What a nuisance,” she muttered, spinning on her heel.

“Wait, Celes!” I called out to stop her before she could leave. I had known her for long enough by this point to know that whenever she had that blank look on her face, something was weighing heavily on her mind.

“What is it, Shiro?” she said. “Forgive me, but I must go take care of some—”

I interrupted her before she could finish her sentence. “Please don’t go running off just yet, yeah? Um...” I scanned the drinking hall in search of an empty table, but it quickly occurred to me there was no way the two of us would be able to have a calm conversation with this rowdy crowd around us.

“How about we go to my shop to talk?” I suggested.

Chapter Two: Celes's Concerns

Celes and I left the drinking hall and went to my shop, aka "Shiro's Shop." Kilpha and Patty must have also sensed something was troubling Celes, as they had volunteered to accompany us, although I could not have told you why exactly Emille had tagged along too. Once inside, we all headed up to the break room on the second floor, and I told everyone to take a seat while I prepared some drinks. After setting the cups down on the coffee table, I took a seat and got straight to the point.

"So what's the matter, Celes?" I asked.

Seated on the sofa opposite mine, Celes simply stared at me blankly. "What do you mean?" she said.

"There's no point playing dumb. It's about those Collars of Domination, isn't it? Baledos said they were crafted by demons."

She seemed to hesitate a little before eventually saying, "It does not concern you."

I wagged my index finger at her. "Tut-tut-tut. You couldn't be more wrong there. It is *very much* my concern," I insisted. "I was there in the forest with you and the others when we faced that black dragon, and truth be told, I was pretty much the one who sparked that whole battle in the first place. Don't you think I have a right to know what's going on?"

According to Shess, the king's men had been quizzing Magath day after day in an effort to find out how he had gotten his hands on the Collars of Domination, but the former prime minister was refusing to spill the beans. I admittedly hadn't thought much of it at first, but I certainly hadn't been expecting *demons* to be involved. *Life has a funny way of throwing surprises at you*, I mused.

"Besides, this matter's clearly troubling you. I can see it written on your face," I added.

Celes's eyes widened, and she (unconsciously, I assumed)

brought her right hand up to her cheek. Eventually, she huffed and said, "Why would I be troubled?"

"You mean you're not?" I replied. "I haven't seen you looking this tense since we first met."

A few months had passed since my first encounter with Celes. Back then, she had been trying to abduct Suama to use her to cure her sister's illness.

"See? You can't deny it, can you?" I added when Celes didn't reply, though she still stubbornly refused to tell me what was on her mind. "Listen, after that whole debacle with the prime minister, I was granted the title of baronet in Orvil. That means I'm part of the nobility over there now. As such, I *need* to know where these Collars of Domination have come from in order to prevent a similar situation happening in the future, and prevent more people from getting hurt."

Still no response from her.

"Celes, *please*," I begged. "If you have even an inkling about who made these collars, could you—"

That sentence should have ended with *"Could you please tell me?"* but Emille, sitting to my right, rudely interrupted me.

"Whoa, whoa, hold on a minute! Mister, did you say you're a *noble* now?!" she exclaimed, her eyes gleaming intensely and a look of unbridled desire on her face. She grabbed me by the shoulders and forced me to turn and face her.





"A noble! Since when? Mister, you should've mentioned it sooner! I always wanted to marry into nobility!" she continued.

"Um, Emille? I'm kinda busy talking to Celes right now—" I started, but she cut me off yet again.

"Oh, *puh*-lease! Our future together is *far* more important than whatever's going on with this crazy melon-titted bitch. Orvil's full of rich folks, yet you managed to snag yourself a title! That's my mister for you! Still, I never expected you to become an *actual* noble for my sake—"

"Hush up, Emi, meow!" Kilpha must have reached her limit because she got to her feet and delivered a solid punch to the back of Emille's head, the noise of the impact echoing around the room.

"Ouch! Wh-What did you do *that* for, Kilpha?! You know I'm against violence!" Emille protested.

"Shiro and Celes are currently in the middle of a serious discussion, meow," Kilpha replied calmly. "I'm not gonna let you keep interrupting them, meow."

"K-Kilpha's right, Emille!" Patty chimed in. "I don't know what exactly is going on, b-but if demons are involved, it must be important. *Super* important, even! Maybe."

My two friends were both lecturing Emille, but if that was all it took to shut her up, we never would have been in this situation in the first place.

"Hmph! Shut up, you lowly commoners! I'm a future baroness, so you'd better mind your manners unless you want to get punished!" Emille declared.

"Well, a baronetess, technically," I corrected her. "But also, please stop assuming I'm going to marry you." But my plea seemed to pass by Emille unnoticed.

"Oh, don't you worry, mister! Now that you've got your foot in the door, you can just bribe your way up, or hire assassins to kill any noble who decides to stand in your way," she stated. "Soon, we'll be the most powerful nobles in all of Orvil, and we'll bleed all those filthy commoners dry to fund our lavish lifestyle!"

"Commoners"? Why's she acting like she's already a noble? I wondered, then something caught my eye. *Uh-oh. Kilpha's reaching*

for the dagger at her hip. That's not ideal. Plus, Patty's shaking and her face has gone all red. It's only a matter of time before she loses control and unleashes a destructive spell on the bunny.

"Here, Emille. If I give you these, will you promise to stay quiet for a bit?" I said, dropping a dozen or so silver coins into her hand.

The greedy bunny's reaction was instant. "Silver coins! Woo-hoo! Silver coins! Now I can finally pay my rent that's overdue!" she celebrated. "Okay, fine, mister. If you *insist*, I guess I'll shut up for a bit. I'll keep my lips zipped so you can carry on with your conversation." And with that, she rearranged herself on the sofa and finally fell silent. *Seriously, why did she tag along?*

"Sorry about that, Celes," I said, turning to the demon. "We can resume our discussion now... Uh, Celes?"

For some reason, she'd lowered her head and was looking down at the floor. *Wait a minute. She's totally trying to stop herself from laughing, isn't she?*

But despite her best efforts, she eventually couldn't hold it in any longer and laughter burst forth, twisting her entire body in her seat.

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"Phew. Your little spectacle just then made me feel like a fool for fretting so much before," Celes said at last once she had managed to bring her laughter under control, her gaze firmly fixed on Emille.

Unlike earlier, there was no longer a blank look on her face, and a glint of warmth had returned to her eyes. *Who would've thought that Emille's shenanigans (well, her daily antics, if we're being honest) would manage to drag Celes out of her funk?*

Speaking of the bunny girl, she was still sitting quietly on the sofa, the silver coins I'd given her clenched in her balled-up hands. I hoped she would stay that way for a little while longer.

"So, Celes, could you please tell us what's on your mind?" I said.

She gave a nod and finally acquiesced to my request. "Fine. As you guessed, it is about the Collars of Domination. At first, I was simply impressed to find out that humes had also gained the ability to control powerful creatures like dragons. But when I touched the

collar that had been retrieved from around the black dragon's neck, I instantly knew it had not been made by humes. Such a wicked artifact could only have been made by demons."

To summarize Celes's story, when Magath had summoned the black dragon back in the Dura Forest, Celes had found herself secretly impressed by how far hume-made magic tools had come. However, after the fight had concluded, she went to inspect the Collar of Domination that we had removed from the dragon and realized there was no way it could have been crafted by humes. There was simply too much mana woven into it, far beyond anything humes could achieve. Hoping that she was mistaken, she had taken one of the Collars of Domination to Baledos and asked him to examine it, reasoning that maybe—just *maybe*—another race had the ability to craft such powerful tools. But to her dismay, Baledos had simply confirmed her initial theory. Just as she'd feared, the collars were the work of demons.

"As I have told you before, the demon king has forbidden us from attacking humes. But if these items have ended up in the hands of humes..."

"It means some of your brethren have gone against the orders of the demon king," I said, finishing her thought.

"I cannot be certain of that yet. But such items would allow other demons to harm humes without doing so directly, and their lives could even be taken this way."

Kilpha nodded her understanding. "I see. And since it's the humes who are the ones choosing to use the collars, the demons can just claim they 'did nothing wrong,' meow."

"So it's an almost-black-but-technically-still-gray area," I summarized.

"Precisely," Celes confirmed.

"Shiro!" Patty exclaimed to get my attention. "Th-The demon king's the leader of *all* the demons, right? Would anyone really defy an order like that?"

"Yup, the demon king's the boss—no, the *big boss* of all the demons," I explained to the little fairy. "And it seems there really are people who would dare to disrespect their big boss by disobeying

orders.”

“Isn’t that, uh...” Patty paused momentarily. “What’s the word again? Ah! Treason! They’re *traitors*!” she exclaimed.

I considered this for a moment. “Perhaps they are. Although in this case, they *could* argue that what they’re doing isn’t *really* treason. Just about.”

Celes listened to our exchange with a dark expression on her face. “That is why I need to go home and inform the demon king about their deeds,” she declared.

“I suppose you’ll also go looking for the makers of those collars while you’re at it,” I surmised. “That sounds like something you’d do.”

“Naturally. I do not know who is behind all of this, but I will hunt them down and force the truth out of them,” she stated matter-of-factly.

I’d learned recently (not from Celes herself, but still) that she was one of the demon king’s four lieutenants. In corporate terms, if the demons were a company, she’d be on the executive board. That probably explained why she wanted to deal with this situation as fast as possible now that she knew something was up. *Well, she takes her job a whole lot more seriously than the higher-ups at my last company, I’ll tell you that much.*

“As such, I will be leaving Ninoritch and might be gone for some time, Shiro. Do I have your permission?” she asked.

“I’ve told you countless times before that you don’t need my ‘permission’ to do anything,” I reminded her, and she let out a muffled grumble in response. “So if you want to leave for a bit, go right ahead. Oh, but...” I paused and scratched my head sheepishly. “Would you mind taking me with you? Just this once.”

“Why?” she said, visibly taken aback by my request—and she wasn’t the only one.

“Meow?! What are you *saying*, Shiro?!” Kilpha exclaimed. “The northern isle is demon territory! Humes can’t just go waltzing in there, meow!”

“Yeah, Kilpha’s right!” Patty chimed in. “We’re talking about *demons* here! Grandpa—I mean, the clan leader says they’re really

scary!”

Emille was also staring at me wide-eyed, though she kept her promise to me and didn’t utter a word.

“Shiro, do you realize what you are asking?” Celes asked.

“I think I do,” I replied. “It’s just...” I paused. “I feel like stopping the manufacturers of those collars won’t be enough.”

“What do you mean?” Celes said.

I raised the index finger of my right hand. “Well, you see, on the one hand, you’ve got the demons making the collars...” I paused and raised the index finger of my left hand. “...and on the other, you’ve got the buyers, like Magath and the others.” I then crossed both fingers. “I believe they must have had some sort of go-between. A merchant handling demonic items, most likely.”

Everyone was taken aback by my theory.

Chapter Three: A Conversation with Zidan

On our way to Kilpha's village about a month before, we stopped off at the royal capital. While Shess (with Luza tagging along, like always) was busy taking care of some business at the palace, I met up with Zidan, the guildmaster of the Eternal Promise, which was the merchant guild I belonged to. At the time, the birdman was staying in the royal capital to oversee the expansion of his recently opened store. At first, I was a bit hesitant about going to visit him, thinking he might be too busy to see me, but when we got there, he greeted us with open arms, even though we'd dropped in unannounced.

"Shiro? It really *is* you! And Aina and Suama too! You two sure have grown since I last saw you, haven't you? It's great to see you all!"

He invited us to dine with him at a restaurant, and after the girls had headed back to the inn with full bellies, he asked me to stay for a few drinks.

"Let's drink the night away, Shiro!" he hooted as I poured him out some of the alcohol I'd been carrying around in my inventory. He let out a contented sigh. "Your alcohol is always top-notch."

I chuckled. "I'm glad you like it. Want to try this sake next?"

"Sure! I'll drink it to the very last drop!"

As we sat enjoying our drinks, we updated each other on what was going on in our lives. Apparently, Zidan's new shop was doing well, meaning he'd been able to rapidly increase the wages of the children who were working for him. He also told me that another added bonus of being in the royal capital was he had access to a wider network of information, which led to a conversation about a certain rumor he had caught wind of.

"Shiro, have you heard the latest news?"

"Hm? What news?" I said.

"Well, it's more of a rumor that's been doing the rounds among the merchants lately, but..." He lowered his voice before continuing. "Apparently, a merchant dealing in some pretty dangerous items has popped up here and there."

"Really? 'Dangerous' items, you say? What kind are we talking?" I asked.

Even though we were in a private room, Zidan glanced around to make sure no one was listening in on our conversation. Once he'd assured himself that we were alone, he continued. "Items that can turn people to stone, or absorb their life force. Stuff like that. I've even heard people talk about items that can envelop entire towns in poisonous fog, and some that can cause people to transform into monsters."

"Wow. So they're all cursed items, huh? Sounds scary," I said.

"Doesn't it just? No one should even be allowed to possess items like that. If they really do exist, they need to be sealed away in vaults and constantly monitored. They should never see the light of day again."

"'Sealed away,' huh? Do you really think they're that dangerous?" I wondered aloud.

"Well, of *course* they are!" Zidan exclaimed in a hushed tone. "Items like that could completely disrupt the balance of power between nations!"

He added that an overpowered item could wipe an entire nation off the map, which was why most nations on the continent classified such items as "forbidden," though apparently there weren't too many of them, as such dangerous items were incredibly difficult to manufacture in the first place. I sipped my drink as I listened to his explanation, though I wasn't overly concerned about these items he was talking about. After all, Dramom and Celes were with me almost all of the time, and both were able to wipe out cities and even smaller-sized nations in the blink of an eye.

"Hm, I guess you have a point," I conceded to Zidan. "No amount of guards could protect you from such ridiculously overpowered

items."

"Right? And that's not all. There have been rumors about the royal family of the Holy Kingdom of Quinn and a feudal lord in the Kingdom of Chatelia dying in suspicious circumstances. I can't help wondering if their deaths are somehow connected to these cursed items."

"Wow. So you're saying these things might be in circulation across multiple nations?" I asked.

"Remember, it's all just rumors. But apparently, the ruffian dealing in them has been approaching nobles and merchants with lots of enemies and offering them dangerous items to use against their rivals. Well, at least that's what the peddler who told me about it seemed to reckon. I don't know if it's actually true or not." He paused and took a big gulp of his sake. "Still, I have to wonder how this merchant even got his hands on so many forbidden items."

I hummed pensively. "Maybe he bought them off adventurers who'd dug them up in dungeons? I'm sure there must be some pretty crazy things in the depths of those ruins, dating back to the Ancient Magic Civilization Era."

"These are forbidden items we're talking about, though. Besides, adventurers have to go through their guilds if they want to sell something," Zidan pointed out.

"In that case, maybe this merchant goes dungeon diving in ruins himself?" I suggested.

"Do you really think he might? I'm not convinced. I don't know a whole lot about the Ancient Magic Civilization Era, but I've heard the properly dangerous items from that time period have been sealed away for centuries."

"Well, what if those seals broke?" I posited.

"I don't know..." Zidan said hesitantly. "Ah, just thinking about what might happen to me if I ever ran into that merchant is enough to send a chill up my spine!"

I couldn't stop myself from chuckling at his frankly over-the-top reaction. "Don't worry. Even if all of those rumors are true, I'm sure no merchant carrying items like that would ever come near an honest merchant like you."

Zidan was the kind of person who placed more importance on honor and kindness than on profit, to the point where he'd rather suffer a loss than betray his principles. While there were some merchants who disliked his idealism, the majority respected him. I really couldn't envision the ruffian we had been talking about seeking him out to further his unscrupulous trade.

"Do you really think so?" he said.

"I do. Anyway, I see your glass is empty. Should I pour you another?"

"Absolutely."

These rumors had been just some of the many topics Zidan and I had discussed that night as we savored our drinks. They were appetizers, if you will. However, after my most recent conversation with Celes, I was beginning to suspect there might be more truth to those stories than I had initially given them credit for.

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"So yeah, that's what Zidan told me," I concluded once I'd finished recounting my exchange with him to my friends.

"And you think this shady merchant is the one who sold those Collars of Domination to the prime minister of Orvil, meow?" Kilpha asked.

"Well, we can't be sure of that yet," I admitted. "But if it's true that the demons are the only ones who can make these forbidden magic items, then it's possible this merchant got his stock from them. In all honesty, I'd completely forgotten about those rumors until just now." In fact, it was only thanks to my conversation with Celes that I'd managed to fish them out of my memory at all. All the dots were starting to connect in my mind. "Celes, have you ever heard of any magic items that can turn people to stone or drain their life force?" I queried.

"No, never. But..." Celes paused, her expression contorting with rage. "Drain and petrification? I do know of tribes that can perform those kinds of curses."

The line connecting the dots was growing even thicker. Could the

dangerous items Zidan had told me about have been crafted by demons?

"Okay, it's settled, then. There's a strong chance that this shady merchant is involved in trading Collars of Domination. So with that..." I slapped my chest and put on my best smug grin. "As a fellow merchant, I'd like to come with you, Celes. Please take me to the northern isle. Take me to the demons' domain."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Sure as sure can be. I'm a member of the Eternal Promise merchant guild, after all," I noted. "As such, I can't possibly let another merchant go around selling dangerous items unchecked."

"Now hold on a minute, meow," Kilpha interjected, her voice taut with worry. "Why would you get yourself involved in something so dangerous, meow? This is a job for the kingdom's bigwigs, not a merchant like you, meow."

"Thank you for your concern, Kilpha," I said. "But this is something I have to do. In fact, I think I might be the only one who *can* do it." I paused and looked over at Celes. "After all, how many merchants out there can say they're friends with a demon? That's why I believe I'm the best person for this task."

"Well, I mean..." Kilpha said hesitantly. "You have a point, meow. But I..." She trailed off. Her shoulders were shaking, as if she were trying to hold something in. "Then, I'll go with you, meow!" she eventually blurted out, her words filled with determination.

"Kilpha?" I blinked in surprise.

"And I won't take 'no' for an answer, meow!" she said like a petulant child.

Her words seemed to spark something in Patty too. "If Kilpha's going, I am too!" the little fairy declared.

"You too, boss?" I said in shock.

"You saved me from Sajiri, so now it's my turn to help you out, meow," Kilpha said.

"A-And I'm your boss, Shiro!" Patty added. "If my underling has to go somewhere dangerous, i-it's my duty as the boss to go too!"

The two of them looked at each other and nodded in unison. Their determination was so strong, it was almost tangible.

"Shiro!" the two of them said in perfect sync.

"Please take me with you, meow," Kilpha begged.

"You *have* to let me come with you. That's an order from your boss!" Patty insisted.

They were staring at me with fire in their eyes, which made me feel a little awkward. "Well, um, I'm very happy that you've volunteered to accompany me, but..." I paused, my gaze shifting to the demon in the room. "Celes is the one who gets to decide who tags along this time, not me."

The two girls gasped softly, then turned their intense gazes on Celes in another impressive display of perfect synchronization.

"Celes! Take me with you, meow!" Kilpha said eagerly.

"Me too!" Patty said. "I paid for your meal last time, remember? You're not going to refuse to take me, are you?"

The person on the receiving end of their pleas simply stared awkwardly at them.

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While I was genuinely happy that Kilpha and Patty had volunteered to come with us, I was admittedly a little worried. I had no idea what kind of place the land of the devils—scratch that, what kind of place the demons' domain as a whole was. As such, I inwardly decided that I would trust Celes's judgment on it and not argue against her decision, whatever it might be. If she refused to take us with her, then so be it.

"So you want to come with me?" she said, a pensive look on her face.

"Is that a no?" I asked.

"Not *necessarily*. However, while devils might seem quite simpleminded at first, they can be rather troublesome to deal with. I would need a good reason for bringing you to our village. Hm, what to do, what to do?" she muttered.

So she wasn't debating whether or not to let us come; she was trying to find a way to justify our presence there to her brethren. She should've said so sooner!

"Celes, Celes," I said urgently to grab her attention, like an overexcited kid. "I have a *genius* idea!"

"Yes?"

"What is it, meow?" Kilpha chimed in.

"Well, basically..." I explained my brain wave to them, and all three stared at me like I'd grown a second head.

As for Emille, she didn't say a word, the silver coins I'd given her still clutched tightly in her clenched fists. She had managed to stay silent until the very end of the conversation.

Chapter Four: Persuasion

The following day, I headed over to Karen's office in the town hall.

"And that's why you've come to me, is it?" she said once I was done explaining my reason for visiting her.

"Sure is," I replied with a smile.

On the other side of a paperwork-covered desk, Karen brought a hand up to her forehead and raised her eyes to the ceiling. I could almost feel the headache she was inevitably sporting.

"I apologize, but could you repeat what you just said one more time?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, then cleared my throat. "Celes is going to be returning home—to the isle of the demons, that is—for a time, so I've decided to accompany her."

"There's a lot I want to say about that, but for the time being, it can wait. Continue," she said, resting her chin on her clasped hands and staring at me piercingly.

"But Celes needs an actual reason to take me to her village, on account of me not actually being a demon," I continued. "I imagine that's to prevent the other devils from wondering what a hume is doing in their territory."

I paused and brought my hand up to my forehead before putting on my best troubled expression. *Time for a sprinkling of dramatic flair, I think!*

"I racked my brain to come up with a good excuse. Something that would justify my presence in the devils' den, as it were. And so, after a lot—and I mean a *lot*—of thinking, I finally hit upon the perfect solution: we should just take you with us!" I declared, my fists clenched for emphasis.

"How did you come to *that* conclusion?!" Karen exclaimed, springing up from her chair, which fell backward to the floor with a

loud thunk.

"So I take it that's a no?" I said.

"Of *course* it's a no! I'm not going anywhere near the demons' domain!"

"Pretty please?" I tried.

"You can beg all you like, the answer will still be no," she said, turning her face away from me with a huff before bending down to pick up her toppled chair. "Besides, what good would it do to have me with you? I'm just the mayor of a little town out in the sticks."





My eyes lit up at her question, because I'd been hoping she would ask that. "Well, because Ninoritch and the devils' village have a trade agreement," I said.

For context, several months back, after the whole debacle of Celes trying to kidnap Suama, Ninoritch and the devils' village (or in other words, Celes's home) had signed something akin to a commerce treaty. Essentially, the devils sent us shipments of rare red magic crystals, an ore only found on the northern isle, and in return, we provided them with fresh produce, medicine, and other essentials from my store. Calling it a "commerce treaty" was probably a bit grandiose, because at the end of the day, it was really just a fairly standard exchange of goods, but that was the gist of it. And it just so happened that this trade agreement might help us get into the devils' territory.

"Don't you think that being the mayor of the town they're trading with is a good enough reason to be visiting their village?" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"You could just say you're there to renew the trade agreement. Or to strengthen the ties between the two towns. At the end of the day, the exact reason you're there isn't that important. The part that matters is that *you*, the mayor of Ninoritch, are there to visit their village."

"Well, yes, put like that, it wouldn't be all that suspicious for me to pay them a visit, but..." Karen stopped and gasped, as if hit by a sudden realization. "Oh, I understand now. You and the others could pretend to be my assistants and roam around the devils' village freely. Have I got that right?"

"Bingo. I knew you'd catch on, Karen," I said with a snap of my fingers. "At first, I thought I could just use the fact that I'm the one supplying the devils with medicine and daily necessities as an excuse to go there, but that felt a bit flimsy."

From what Celes had told me, the devils were a warrior tribe to their core. If I introduced myself as a merchant, would they even allow me into their village? Or would they just go, *"We don't care! Kill him!"*? And I definitely wanted to avoid that second scenario. It'd be such a dumb way to die.

"So you need my authority as mayor of Ninoritch," Karen summarized.

"Precisely."

She hummed in thought. "Why do you even want to accompany Celes to the devils' village in the first place?"

"I'd love to tell you that, but it's a bit of a long story."

"I don't mind. Go ahead."

"Okay, well, let's see..." I said. "Where should I start? Hm, so basically, when I was in Orvil with Kilpha and everyone, we..."

I told Karen everything. First, I related our encounter with the black dragon in the Dura Forest and how Orvil's prime minister had used a Collar of Domination to subjugate the beast, then went on to explain how we had discovered while looking into the origins of the collars that they had most likely been crafted by demons. I also brought up the shady merchant Zidan had told me about, and all the dangerous items he was supposedly selling. Finally, I shared my theory with her: What if this merchant had somehow obtained his stock from the demons and was presently selling them across the continent?

"A merchant selling dangerous magic items all over the continent, huh?" Karen said once I had finished. "This is way too big a problem for a mayor of a small town like me." She let out a long sigh, before raising her face and looking me straight in the eye. "However, I see your point and understand the need to act quickly." She gave me a big nod. "I won't pretend I'm doing it 'for the sake of peace' or anything noble like that, but if you need my help, I'll lend it to you."

"You will?" I said in some surprise.

"Heh. I've relied on you more times than I can count. I owe you a debt so large, I'll never be able to repay it," Karen said. "But if I don't start chipping away at it at some point, the interest will just start piling up and up, and it'll get out of hand."

"Oh, come on now. Everything I did was for my own sake. I promise."

"Maybe it was. But the truth of the matter is a lot of people in this town have been saved by you, myself included, and because of that, I have to help you out from time to time. Even when your

requests seem a little—no, scratch that—even when they seem *extremely* unreasonable," she said, flashing me a confident smile.

"Yeah, but are you really, *really* sure? This is the island of the demons we're talking about," I reminded her, just to make sure we were on the same page here.

"Hey, *you're* the one who asked me to tag along, aren't you? Besides, there are some things I do actually want to negotiate with the devils. I was planning on asking Celes to handle it for me, but as this opportunity has arisen, I might as well take care of it in person."

"Ooh, what kind of negotiations are we talking about?" I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

"It's about those red magic stones," she said, standing up and gazing out of the window at the Gigheena Forest in the distance. "I'm sure you already know that the blacksmith, Baledos, and his brothers want to work with them."

"I do, yeah. I mean, they *did* come to this town *and* build a workshop here just in the hopes of getting their hands on them one day, after all."

When the veteran dwarf warrior Eldos's nine brothers heard they could potentially get red magic stones—a rare ore that every blacksmith dreamed of working with—in Ninoritch, they left their entire lives behind and moved to the little town out in the middle of nowhere.

"Exactly. I've heard that the weapons and equipment they make are of incredible quality, to the point where the Fairy's Blessing's top adventurers have been lining up to purchase some," Karen informed me.

"Wow. That's Baledos and his brothers for you, I guess."

"Now, did you also know that the deeper you go into the Gigheena Forest, the stronger the monsters become?"

"Really? Well, I guess that makes some sort of sense. Boss once told me that dragons live in the heart of the forest."

Karen nodded. "And that's why the adventurers need better equipment."

To sum up Karen's story, a few weeks back, she had started providing Baledos and his brothers with red magic stones for them

to use in the making of weaponry and armor. Meanwhile, the adventurers from the Fairy's Blessing were still hard at work exploring the Gigheena Forest and clearing the ruins and dungeons they came across. Most of the adventurers who were registered at the Fairy's Blessing were seasoned fighters, but even they had started struggling the deeper they went into the forest. It just showed how dangerous the place was.

"We need stronger weapons."

"We need more resistant equipment."

Just as they had started thinking they would need stronger gear, new weapons and armor crafted by Baledos and his brothers from the red magic stones Karen had supplied them had started lining the shelves of the equipment stores. According to her, the adventurers had been unequivocal in their praise, outright saying that these red magic stone equipment pieces—known more colloquially as the "Baledos Series"—were the only gear that was even capable of standing up to the stronger monsters at the heart of the Gigheena Forest. This was all news to me, of course, as I had been in Orvil while all this was going on.

As such, the "Baledos Series" had become incredibly popular among adventurers. But Baledos and his brothers didn't have an endless supply of red magic stones, meaning the gear was a little on the expensive side and only the guild's top-ranking adventurers could actually afford to buy it. Of course, that didn't stop each new batch from selling out practically as soon as it hit the shelves.

"Things escalated to the point where the Fairy's Blessing guildmaster actually asked me to supply Baledos and his brothers with *more* red magic stones. She even said she would pay whatever price I set for them."

The bigger the guild got, the more prosperous Ninoritch would become. For that reason, Karen had agreed to Ney's demands and sold all of the red magic stones still in her possession to the dwarf brothers, who happily continued crafting equipment for the adventurers. These weapons and armor had truly become the stepping stone that allowed the exploration of the Gigheena Forest to go ahead. But then, the unthinkable happened.

"Wait, so you're telling me you ran out of red magic stones? Even though you had so many to start off with?"

"Yes," Karen confirmed gravely.

Perhaps it was down to the sheer quantity of adventurers who were working in Ninoritch at present, but Karen's stock of red magic stones had been depleted in the blink of an eye. Ninoritch received the stones from the devils in exchange for crops, but the next harvest wasn't until spring, meaning it would be several months before Baledos and his brothers could get any new red magic stones. Despite all that, the adventurers kept ordering new gear, and according to Baledos and his brothers, it was going to take them several *years* just to honor all the orders they had taken.

"I think I get the gist of it," I said. "Basically, you want to see if the devils will send you some more red magic stones. Is that right?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I wanted to keep things fair when I initially drafted the trade agreement, so the amount of red magic stones we get in exchange for the provisions we send across to them is rather limited."

Per the agreement, the town needed to send a fair amount of food to the devils for every red magic stone they supplied in return. While the stones were basically pebbles to the demons, they were considered incredibly rare and precious in hume nations, to the point that exchanging food for them almost seemed unfair. But when Celes saw the quantity of food Karen was offering in exchange for the red magic stones, her eyes had bulged out of their sockets in shock.

"Are you *sure* we can have all of this?" the devil had asked. This had clearly been proof of Karen's good faith.

"It's almost winter now, so you probably won't be able to get any more until spring, huh?" I mused.

"Exactly. And we don't have enough provisions in stock that I can afford to part with anything. I considered trying to import food from other towns, but it's only a matter of time before the highways get covered in snow."

When that happened, exchanges between the various towns and villages would have to be halted until the snow melted again, and in

the meantime, each town would need to rely on its own stock of provisions in order to make it through the winter. As such, Ninoritch couldn't afford to part with any of the food in its granaries, even in exchange for more red magic stones. Before I had arrived in this world, it wasn't unheard of for people in Ninoritch to die of starvation during the colder months due to a lack of food to feed everyone. But with my shop standing proud in the little town, such a scenario would never happen again. After all, my shelves were always stocked with everything one could need, even snacks.

"If only we had something we could give to the demons instead of food..." Karen muttered, lost in thought.

"There's also the medicine for the Decaying Disease I've been sending them. But I guess they don't need that all the time."

"Indeed. Besides, as long as we keep providing them with food, it's unlikely they'll contract the Decaying Disease again, right?"

"Yeah. The 'disease' is caused by malnutrition."

After doing a little bit of investigation, I had discovered that the Decaying Disease was actually what was known in Japan as "beriberi." Celes's younger sister had contracted it, prompting the demon to leave her homeland and seek out the Immortal Dragon in the Gigheena Forest, which had, in turn, brought her to Ninoritch. I had helped to cure her sister's illness, and our first antagonistic meeting was now nothing more than a funny anecdote.

"Well, I suppose that just gives you even more reason to visit the devils' village, doesn't it? You might find out something else we can trade with them if you do a little field research and observe what they might need," I pointed out.

"You're as silver-tongued as ever," Karen said, amused. "But if even a merchant like you isn't afraid to venture into the demons' domain, I guess I can't really back out now, can I?"

"You *are* the mayor, after all," I agreed.

"That's right. I'm the mayor. A mayor who keeps getting roped into your little schemes."

I chuckled awkwardly. "Is it just me, or are you calling me a manipulator?"

"I don't know. Do you feel like you've done anything to deserve

that title?”

I pretended to ponder the question, humming at length. “Probably more than I can count on both hands,” I concluded.

“You really are incorrigible,” Karen sighed, shrugging in exasperation. “Anyway, go tell Celes that the mayor of Ninoritch wishes to visit the village of the devils. You can tag along too, if you really want to,” she added, a warm smile curling her lips upward.

She really is the coolest mayor ever! I marveled. “Karen?” I said.

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, please. This is nothing,” she replied dismissively.

“Still, thank you,” I said with sincerity. “For always indulging my whims.”

And just like that, I had managed to find a good enough reason to tag along with Celes on her trip home.

Chapter Five: When Are We Going to the Devils' Village?

"The mayor's gonna go visit the village of the devils!"

The rumor spread like wildfire among the residents of Ninoritch—or more specifically, among the adventurers living there. How had they found out so quickly? Quite simply, because Karen had placed a request for an escort at the guild. This had led to all of the adventurers learning about our plans, as well as instigating a more unexpected reaction.

"Miss Mayor! Please take me with ya to the demons' isle!" For some reason, Baledos—who, it must be said, was very much *not* an adventurer—wanted to tag along. He had asked me to act as the middleman for him and to take him to talk to Karen directly, which is how we all came to be gathered in the mayor's office at this time.

"Well, y'eard my idiot brother," said Eldos, one of the Sixteen Heroes and Baledos's older brother, standing a little further back from the mayor's desk than his brother. "Whaddya say, girlie? Will ya take 'im with ya?"

Karen was visibly stumped by this unexpected turn of events. "Please just wait a moment, Mr. Baledos. I asked the guild for an *escort*. Why would a blacksmith like you wish to accompany us to the village of the devils?"

"Well, ain't that obvious? To get me hands on more of them red magic stones, that's why! I 'eard they're common as pebbles in their village. Means I can just grab as many as I want and use 'em fer whatevers I please!" Baledos said, thumping his fist excitedly against Karen's desk.

"I-I see..." the mayor said, eyeing the mountain of paperwork on her desk that was wobbling dangerously. I was almost positive she would faint from shock if that huge stack of paper did actually topple

over.

"Now, now, Baledos. Let's calm down a bit, shall we?" I suggested.

The dwarf was breathing loudly through his nose, and he looked so intimidating, Karen unconsciously took a step back.

"Sorry 'bout 'im, Shiro," Eldos said. "Me brother probably hasn't been able to work with red magic stones for some time now. Looks like he's been sittin' on a lotta frustration."

"*'Course* I am!" Baledos exclaimed, his eyes all bloodshot and his breathing erratic. "Those red magic stones... They're really good ore, let me tell ya," he said, his eyes dropping to look at his own hands. "*Too* good, even! Once ya hit 'em with your hammer a single time..." His frustration was almost tangible. "Ugh! Ya just can't go back to any other ores! I'm seriously cravin' hittin' some of them red magic stones as we speak! And now yer tellin' me we ain't gettin' any more till the *spring*? I seriously gotta wait that long to get me hands on more?! I can't bloody do that!"

"Yeah, 'e's been sayin' that for a few days now," Eldos remarked, throwing an exasperated look at his brother, though I had an inkling he felt bad for him.

"Please, Miss Mayor! Take me with ya to the village o' the devils! They got red magic stones there, don't they? They 'ave plenty, don't they?! Please lemme use those stones!" Baledos begged, his voice growing quite frantic by this point. He gasped suddenly, as if he'd just been struck by an epiphany. "Oh, right! And if they got the stones, they must surely 'ave ore deposits too, right? If we can find one, I'll be able to get me hands on more red magic stones than I can count, and..." I couldn't make out the rest of the sentence, because he muttered it under his breath.

It was almost like he was suffering from withdrawal. *Seems those stones have really taken a hold of him, huh?*

"What do you think, Shiro?" Karen asked.

I hummed. "Well, we *do* need red magic stones if we want to continue growing the town, so it might be a good idea to take Baledos with us," I said. "He's far more knowledgeable on the matter than us, after all. I can't say I know how the demons acquire the

stones, but if there really *are* ore deposits, like Baledos suggests, we might be able to find even more."

Karen hummed at my words, deep in thought.

"Please, mayor girlie, can ya let my idiot brother go with ya?" Eldos said. "All blacksmiths dream of workin' with red magic stones at least once in their lives. I know I ain't in no position to be sayin' this stuff, 'cause I tossed me own hammer ages ago, but as a member o' a family o' blacksmiths, and as Baledos's older brother, I want 'im an' the others to get a chance to work with them stones again."

Eldos was the one who had originally told Baledos and his other brothers that they should come to Ninoritch if they wanted access to red magic stones. I genuinely believed that he was happy that his brothers had gotten the chance to work with this rare ore that any blacksmith would dream of crafting with. However, at present, there were no more red magic stones in the whole of Ninoritch, and after witnessing Baledos's little tirade, I could tell that this news must have come as a huge shock to him. Perhaps the reason we had bumped into the two of them at the drinking hall a couple of days earlier was because Eldos had been trying to cheer up his younger brother.

"So whaddya say, mayor girlie? Will ya grant my idiot brother's wish?" Eldos asked.

Karen shook her head. "I'm sorry, but what I need right now is an escort, not a blacksmith," she said. "Besides, Mr. Baledos is a major asset to our town due to his blacksmithing abilities. I can't possibly take him with us if I can't ensure his safety—"

"Then, lemme tag along too," Eldos interrupted her.

"*You*, Mr. Eldos?" Karen said, her eyes widening in surprise.

"Aye. I can act as yer escort and keep an eye on my idiot brother to make sure he doesn't go gettin' 'imself into trouble. How's about it?"

I was just as stunned as Karen. After all, Eldos was one of the *Sixteen Heroes*! Granted, I didn't really have any idea what he'd done to earn that title, but one thing was clear: he far outclassed any gold-rank adventurer. In fact, I'd even heard rumors that he was

stronger than platinum-rank adventurers, and that was the highest rank there was!

"We should accept his offer, Karen," I prompted.

"But Shiro—" she tried to argue, but I stopped her straightaway.

"You won't find a better escort than Eldos."

"Well, you have a point there, but..." She seemed hesitant to start with, but she at last came around to my way of thinking. "Fine. You can both come along."

"Aaah! I knew ye were a reasonable mayor!" Baledos cheered.

"Thank ya for grantin' my idiot brother's request, mayor," Eldos said. "And thanks to ya too, Shiro."

And so, Eldos the hero and his brother, Baledos the blacksmith, were officially added to our expedition party.

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With Karen and I both set to travel to the village of the devils, there was one little issue we still needed to address: Aina.

"So you're going to the village of the, um, devils, was it? With Miss Karen?" the little girl said, seeking to confirm what I had just told her.

Karen and I had been jointly looking after Aina while her mother was out of town, and when the little girl heard we would be leaving Ninoritch for a time too, a mix of worry and loneliness clouded her face.

"Yeah. There's something really important we need to go take care of," I explained. We had just finished closing up shop and were in the middle of wrapping up the usual end-of-day tasks.

"Is Patty going with you too?" Aina asked in a dejected voice as she swept the floor.

"She is, yeah," I confirmed. "She really wants to come."

"I see," the little girl mumbled, sounding even more disappointed. She must have thought I was about to ask her to stay and hold the fort while we were gone.

"Hey, Aina," I called over to the little girl as cheerfully as I could.

"Yeah?"

"Wanna tag along this time too?"

"Huh?"

"Only if you want to, of course," I added quickly. "If you'd rather not come along, you can stay over at Shess's place until we get back."

The little girl stared at me in shock for a few seconds, then started squirming bashfully. "Can I..." she asked hesitantly. "Can I really come?"

"Of course you can. We've been together this whole time, and we're gonna stick together from here on out."

"I won't be a bother to you?" she asked.

"Not at all. Quite the opposite, actually. I mean, you're such a smart, dependable little girl that I find myself constantly relying on you. Plus, I'm not even the one who suggested you come with us. Celes did."

Now that Karen had agreed to accompany us, we had a good excuse for our presence in the village of the devils.

"I see," Celes had said when I'd told her the news. "Then can I also ask you to bring Aina along?"

"Huh? Aina?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes. There is something I wish to ask of her."

Needless to say, I hadn't been expecting Celes to make a request like that at all. When I queried her over what she wanted to ask Aina, she evaded the question and refused to say.

"Miss Celes wants *me* to come?" Aina asked, sounding similarly surprised.

"Yup. That's what she said."

"Then, I wanna go!"

"Okay. It's settled, then."

"Yeah!"

No more than a moment later, I heard a sinister chuckle from outside. "I heard *everything*, master."

The door to the shop slowly creaked open to reveal Dramom with Suama beside her.

"D-Dramom?" I stammered, surprised to see her.

"Good evening, master."

"Hewwo, pa-pa," Suama babbled.

Uh-oh. This isn't good. Why'd Dramom of all people have to overhear our conversation? I lamented.

"Master, I believe I heard you say something about heading to the village of the devils, yes?" she said as she made her way into the shop with a bright smile on her face, which only made me *more* terrified.

"Y-Yes. Something came up that I have to go take care of," I stuttered, ending my sentence with an awkward chuckle.

It was fair to say that Celes and Dramom didn't exactly get along. In fact, they were basically like oil and water. Every time they were in the same room, the conversation turned into a rap battle, with disses flying left and right. As such, I had decided in advance that I would keep the destination of our trip a secret and ask Dramom to stay behind this time, but unfortunately, it seemed things weren't destined to go so easily.

"I-I was just thinking that it might be better if you stayed in Ninoritch for this one. You know, since we'll be away for quite a while and all that," I said, hoping my vague suggestion would be enough to get her to think again about coming.

But my words were met with a soft chuckle instead. "You are such a jokester, master. Most amusing."

"I wasn't joking—" I started protesting, but I was quickly cut off.

"Naturally, Suama and I shall accompany you to the island of the demons," Dramom declared.

"No way. Nuh-uh. We're going to Celes's *homeland*," I said pointedly. "I'm sorry, but you'll just have to sit this one out—"

Yet again, she didn't let me finish my sentence. "We shall accompany you."

"I just said I'd rather you stayed behind—"

"We shall *accompany* you," Dramom repeated, taking a step closer every time she interrupted me, her smile unwavering. We soon found ourselves standing so close together, our noses were practically touching.

I felt Aina tug at my sleeve. "Mister Shiro, you should say yes," she whispered to me before glancing across at the little dragon girl

holding her hand. “You wanna come too, right, Suama?”

“Ai!” Suama exclaimed, raising her hand high into the air and looking at me with wide, expectant eyes.

Well, if the kids were insisting on it, I could really only respond in one of two ways: “Yes” or “Aye-aye!”

“F-Fine. Let’s go to the demons’ isle together, Dramom,” I said.

“Of course, master,” she said with a radiant smile.

And with that, our little expedition team heading to the demons’ isle was complete. The roster was as follows: the original participants—namely, Celes, Kilpha, Patty, and myself—Karen, Eldos (our escort), Baledos (his blacksmith brother), little Aina, little Suama, and last but not least, Dramom. So all in all, ten people were going on this excursion northward. Once again, we had ended up with a much larger group than I’d initially planned.

Intermission

Aina was in the middle of getting ready to go on the trip to the demons' isle when Celes suddenly appeared behind her.

"Ah, there you are, Aina."

The little girl was taken aback. What did Celes want with her? It must have been fairly important to make her come all the way to the mayor's house, where Aina was staying at present. When the little girl asked Celes what had brought her there, the demon blushed slightly. "I want to..." she replied hesitantly. "I want to buy some clothes for my little sister."

Not for the first time, Aina's eyes widened in surprise. She asked Celes why she wanted to buy clothes for her sister, and the demon said she had promised her that she would bring back a souvenir. In response to this, a smile tugged the little girl's lips upward, and she gladly agreed to help.

"Miss Celes, this here is *the* place to buy clothes in Ninoritch!" she announced on arriving at their destination, which was none other than the shop run by Shiro's sisters, "Beauty Amata." They wasted no time in going inside.

"Welcome!" the twins called out, perfectly synchronized.

"Hi, Miss Shiori, Miss Saori," Aina said.

"Hiya, Aina," Shiori replied, as chill as always.

Saori—the spunkier of the two—grinned and hollered, "Yo, Aina!" in response.

Celes remembered the shop. The last time she had been here, Saori had applied war paint to her face.

"Oh, hey, Celes is with her," Saori noted.

"It's rare to see her in here," Shiori drawled.

Beauty Amata was a very popular shop among the women of Ninoritch, and because it was only open on the weekend, it was still every bit as busy as it had been on opening day.

"Miss Shiori, Miss Saori, could we look at the clothes?" Aina asked politely.

"Sure thing," Shiori said. "Browse to your heart's content."

"If you have an idea of what you want but you can't see it here, just let us know and we'll get it in for you for your next visit!" Saori added.

Aina thanked the twins and took Celes over to look at the clothes that were on offer. Clothing made from cotton was rather expensive in the Giruam Kingdom, but here, it was all surprisingly affordable. That likely explained why this place was also popular among merchants, and why on this particular day—much like all the others—the shop was a full-on battlefield.

"*Ahem*. I had my eyes on this garment first, if you would be so kind!" a fancy-looking woman—a noble, perhaps?—said to a young town girl.

"Huh? Don't be ridiculous, you old bat! I spied it first!" came the reply.

"My, what an impolite little girl!" the potential noblewoman screeched.

The two tugged back and forth at the dress in question, neither willing to let go. But this was such a common occurrence in the store, the twins didn't even look up. Truth be told, they weren't very good shop owners.

"Miss Celes, over here," Aina said, leading the demon to the children's area, which was slightly less crowded than the rest of the store.

"What kind of clothes does Mifa like?"

"I..." Celes hesitated. She had never chosen nor even given any thought to choosing clothes for anyone before. That wasn't to say devils didn't wear clothes—they did, and they even had traditional garments that had been passed down through the generations—but they were regarded as nothing more than the most suitable way of covering their bare skin. Unlike humes, they had no customs that required dressing up or anything like that.

Aina must have guessed that Celes had no idea where to start. "Should I pick something out for her, then?" she offered.

"Please do," Celes replied. That was, after all, why she had swallowed her pride and gone to the little girl in the first place.

"Hm, let's see..." Aina said, perusing the options in front of her. "Ah! What about this one?" She grabbed a dress from one of the racks and showed it to Celes, making sure to grasp it by the shoulders and hold it up against herself to give the demon a better idea of how it might look when worn. "What do you think?"

"It is fine."

"Okay, what about this one?"

"It is fine too."

"And this one?"

"Y-Yes. It is..."—Celes searched for the best word to describe it —"fine."

In all honesty, she couldn't even tell the difference between the dresses the little girl had shown her. But Aina was a smart cookie, and she quickly came up with a new idea.

"Miss Celes?"

"What is it?"

"What is Mifa's favorite color?"

"Color?"

"Yeah, color. Or her favorite flower. Does she have one?"

"Um..."

Celes had never thought about such things before. The mana on the demons' isle was so potent, most plants refused to grow there, and the few that did were, for the most part, monster plants. The rare flowers that did exist looked poisonous, and were often vivid and unsettling hues. But once, a long time ago, Mifa had said *something* aesthetics-related...

"My, this is beautiful. Is it not, dear sister?" were the words spoken by her sister that echoed around in the back of Celes's mind.

I remember. Yes, I remember now. On that day, Mifa had picked up a gem in a cave, and with a sparkle in her eye, she had shown it to Celes.

"Mifa once called a light purple gem 'beautiful,'" Celes told Aina, whose face instantly lit up.

"Okay! So she likes light purple!"

"Y-Yes. In all likelihood, she does."

"Let's see..." Aina murmured, turning back to the racks again. "Ah! I like this one that's light purple!" She presented another item of clothing to Celes.

"I-It looks fine."

Having finally decided on the color, the pair resumed their search for the perfect present for Celes's sister. All in all, it took them both a grand total of three hours to decide what to buy.

"Aina, there is something else I wish to ask of you," Celes abruptly said to the little girl as they walked home, the bag containing the light purple dress swaying in her hand. "If that is fine with you," she added, sounding uncharacteristically hesitant.

"What is it?" Aina asked, tilting her head to one side.

After hearing the demon's request, Aina's eyes widened slightly due to how unexpected it was, but she quickly nodded, eager to help. "Okay!"

Chapter Six: The Teleport Gate

Preparations for our trip to the village of the devils were coming along nicely. When I asked Celes about her home, she described it as a place where "the strong wield all the power and the weak are left with two choices: servitude or death." That was certainly fitting for a warrior tribe. They sounded like a brutal bunch of meatheads, no doubt about it. Still, I *had* been hoping for a little more of a practical response, like talking about what the weather was usually like there. I ended up putting that question to Celes anyway, and she told me the devils wore the same kind of clothing all year round. In her case, she always wore a sort of dress with a robe over it, which was the kind of attire that would seem most appropriate in fall or early spring in Japan. *Okay, so the weather on the demons' isle must be quite mild, then, I'm assuming? It's an interesting contrast with Ninoritch, because it's almost winter here.* But just as this thought crossed my mind, I realized something. What if devils had a completely different perception of hot and cold from us?

I stopped off at the Fairy's Blessing guild and gathered up all the information I could get on the demons' isle. Ney helped me find a bunch of books on the topic, as well as pointing me in the direction of a few mages and sages I could ask for info. My research revealed that the demons' isle was actually an extremely cold place, which when I thought about it made quite a bit of sense considering it was also known as the "northern isle."

Whew, that was a close one. If I'd gone there assuming it would be mild based on the clothes Celes always wore, I wouldn't have just been *cold*, I would've been straight up frozen in place.

I headed back to grandma's place via my handy interdimensional portal, then dropped by a large outdoor gear store, where I purchased a bright-red down jacket for myself and winter clothes and boots for all of my companions. I also bought a few other winter

essentials and tossed them into my inventory. With all of that, I figured we should be more than ready for the cold.

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In the blink of an eye, the day of departure was upon us. To get to the village of the devils, we would have to use the teleport gate in the Gigheena Forest, the large forest to the east of Ninoritch, which was a two-day trek from the little town. The walk used to take quite a bit longer—around five days—but grandma had kindly removed all of the trees between the gate and Ninoritch, and had created a stone path for easier access using her magic. We weren't going to need the path this time around, however, as Dramom flew us directly to our destination in dragon form, getting us there in a matter of minutes. I hopped down from her back and gazed at the gate.

"Mister Shiro, is that the teleport gate?" Aina asked. She seemed a bit confused, and I couldn't really blame her, because despite it being called a "gate," its appearance was far removed from any kind of gate the little girl would have been familiar with.

"Yep, that's the teleport gate," I confirmed. "Not that I've ever used one."

"It's my first time using one too!" Patty chirped. "I-I'm so excited!"

"Me too," Aina joined in.

"Shu-ama too!" the little dragon girl exclaimed. She and Aina exchanged glances, both breathing excitedly through their noses, while Patty buzzed this way and that, itching to get a move on. I had made Patty and Aina use my own portal once before to escape a particularly tricky situation, which meant they had technically already experienced teleportation, but this was their first time using a proper teleport gate.

I took a good, long look at the stone structure. At its center was a circular platform, roughly ten meters in diameter and about fifty centimeters high, its surface etched with intricate patterns. I assumed this was what one might call a magic circle. From what I'd

been told, you activated the gate by channeling mana into the four stone pillars that surrounded the platform, though while teleport gates usually required a boatload of mana to boot up, this particular one had already been charged with enough energy for a round trip. The Fairy's Blessing mages had loaded it for us in advance, enticed by the prospect of more red magic stone equipment awaiting them once we returned from our trip. Apparently, ever since Ninoritch had started trading with the devils, some of the guild's mages had taken it upon themselves to keep the gate charged at all times.

"Shiro, should I activate the gate?" Celes asked.

I nodded. "Yes, please." I was secretly just as excited as the kids. I couldn't believe I was *actually* going to visit the island of the demons! By contrast, Kilpha seemed incredibly anxious, if the nervous little meow that escaped her mouth was anything to go by. And it wasn't just her.

"E-Everything will be just fine. The devils signed a trade agreement with us. I'm sure they won't just eat us alive as soon as we set foot in their village. Besides, I'm the mayor. I'm the representative of this town. I need to be more confident. Okay, all I have to do is *look* confident and it'll all be fine!" Karen muttered to herself, her face as pale as a sheet.

The people of this world had been locked in a fierce war with the demons up until about a hundred years ago. For that reason, simply hearing the word "demon" was enough to make them shiver in fear, and it seemed Karen was no exception, despite all the time she had spent around Celes.

"Ooh, will you look at that, Eldos? So that's a teleport gate, is it? That thing sure gobbles up a bleedin' *mountain* o' mana, don't it?" Baledos remarked.

Beside him, Eldos hummed, impressed by what he was seeing. "I've traveled all over this continent, and I ain't never laid me eyes on a teleport gate before."

"I ain't a lad no more, but me heart's poundin' just thinkin' 'bout all them red magic stones waitin' for me on the other side o' that thing!"

Eldos burst out laughing. "D'ya ever think about anythin' *other*

than those blasted stones?”

Unlike Karen and Kilpha, the two dwarf brothers didn’t seem the slightest bit anxious about going to the demons’ isle. Then again, Eldos *was* a hero, and it followed that Baledos was the *brother* of a hero. I supposed it made sense that they would be so calm about the whole thing.

“Everything is ready,” Celes informed us as the magic circle started to glow. “Come on up.”

We all climbed up onto the circular platform and gathered at its center. The light emitted by the magic circle kept getting stronger and stronger until it reached a point where I couldn’t keep my eyes open any longer.

“Teleport.”

As soon as the command left Celes’s mouth, I felt my body grow light. I had never experienced zero gravity before, but I wondered if this was what it felt like. It only lasted for the briefest of moments, however.

“We have arrived,” Celes announced, and upon opening my eyes again, I was met with a picture-perfect winter wonderland.

“Wooow!” Aina exclaimed in awe, unable to stop herself.

There was snow as far as the eye could see, with even the mountains in the distance looking like they were blanketed with a thick layer of the white stuff. When we’d arrived at the gate in Ninoritch, it was midday, but here, it was the middle of the night, which perhaps had something to do with the time difference. The stars twinkled brightly in the night sky, but they weren’t the only things lighting up the place.

“H-Hey, Aina! Aina!” Patty said urgently, fluttering down to Aina’s shoulder.

“What is it, Patty?” the little girl asked.

“Look! Look at that!” the fairy said, pointing up at the sky. “What are all those shiny things in the sky?”

“What shiny things?” Aina followed Patty’s eyeline and gasped excitedly at what she saw. “Oh, wow! That’s so cool! And so pretty!” she exclaimed.

I couldn’t blame her for getting so excited about it. After all, the

sight in front of us was unlike anything I'd ever encountered before.

"Mister Shiro, what are those things?" Aina asked.

"Yeah, what are they?!" Patty chimed in. "They're all so shiny!"

"I think those are auroras," I said, gazing up at the curtains of light that were illuminating the night sky. I had never seen any in person before, but I was sure of it: these were definitely auroras.

"Aw-raw-ras?" Aina and Patty repeated, simultaneously tilting their heads to one side.

"Yup. Auroras," I confirmed.

I had heard that auroras were electrical discharges caused by plasma from the sun colliding with the atmosphere, but as this wasn't Earth, I couldn't tell if the same scientific explanation applied here. If someone were to tell me they were caused by magic or mana, or even the influence of spirits, I probably would have done nothing but nod along and take their word for it.

"Or at least that's what we call this phenomenon where I'm from," I added without offering any further explanation.

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Karen was the first to remark on the temperature. "I-It's freezing! Is the northern isle always this chilly? It's even worse than Ninoritch in the winter," she grumbled.

I took the winter clothes I'd purchased out of my inventory and distributed them to everyone in our group. I had told Aina that the village of the devils was supposedly a very cold place, so she had brought along the woolen hat Stella had knitted for her a few years back. I watched as the little girl took the hat out of her little backpack and pulled it over her head, a big smile on her face.

"Here, I've got one for you too, Suama," she said, producing a second hat that she had knitted herself specifically for this occasion. She had been worried that she wouldn't be able to make one as good as what her mom had made, but I thought it looked great.

"Tank oo, Ain-ya!" Suama babbled cheerily after Aina had helped her put the hat on. She seemed to really like it.

I put on my jacket and changed into my brand-new snow boots.

Once I'd made sure everyone else had done the same, I turned to Dramom. "Sorry to bother you a second time, Dramom, but could we ride on your back again?"

"Of course, master." She was about to change into her dragon form when Celes abruptly stopped her.

"Wait, Immortal Dragon."

"What is the matter, devil?" Dramom griped. "What makes you believe that you are entitled to hinder me when I am in the middle of fulfilling my master's request?"

"Hush up and listen," Celes said. "The Shadow Dragon Tribe lives in these lands. They are under the dominion of the Destruction Dragon."

A gasp escaped Dramom's lips, and her face contorted into a grimace. "You mean to say *it* lives in this area?"

"Yes. And if it knows you are here, it will hunt you down."

Dramom didn't reply.

"Do you understand now?" Celes continued. "If you do, then do not use your powers. Restrain your mana, keep your true identity a secret, and do not under any circumstances do anything that might arouse the dragon's suspicion."

Dramom walked up to me with a frustrated look on her face and bowed her head. "I apologize, master, but I am unable to change into my dragon form while we remain in these lands."

"It's all good. I mean, it sounds like you've got your reasons," I said. "The Destruction Dragon, was it? Is it because of its presence here?"

"Yes," Celes replied in Dramom's stead. "The Destruction Dragon is the Immortal Dragon's equal. In short, it is another high-ranking dragon, just like her. I have heard that it has been pursuing the Immortal Dragon for ages, though I do not know why." She humphed.

"Cease your incessant chatter!" Dramom suddenly yelled with such intensity, we all fell silent. "Do *not* talk about that dragon in front of me," she added before falling silent herself. It seemed things between her and this so-called Destruction Dragon were a tad complicated, so I decided not to press her any further on it.

From their conversation, it seemed Dramom would have to avoid unleashing her full power in order to avoid being detected by the Destruction Dragon. This meant she wouldn't be able to use powerful spells or turn into her dragon form. As a result, my plan of getting her to fly us all to the village of the devils on her back was no longer an option, meaning we would have to make the journey on foot. Dramom looked incredibly frustrated about not being able to carry out the order I had given her, but all of a sudden, she seemed to remember something and her face lit up. "Master!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands together.

"Yes?"

"I can still carry you in this form!" she declared. "Come on, master. Get on my back. What do you call this again?"

"A piggyback ride, meow? Is that what you're looking for?" Kilpha supplied.

"Yes, a piggyback ride. Please come over here, master, and I shall give you a piggyback ride. Just climb up onto my back." She flashed me a bright smile and crouched down on the ground in front of me.





"Suama, come here," I said, calling the little dragon girl over.

"Ai."

I lifted her up with a little "Hup," then placed her on Dramom's back.

"Pa-pa, wook!" Suama said, giggling and waving her hand at me excitedly from her spot on Dramom's back. Meanwhile, the rest of us had to endure a painful trek through the snow. It wasn't a pleasant experience by any means, but Suama's adorable little smile gave me the energy to keep going.

Chapter Seven: The Village of the Devils

Making progress through the snow was tough-going, both on our bodies and our spirits. Aina struggled to keep up with the group at first, but as soon as Celes offered to give her a piggyback, that particular problem was quickly solved. No, the *real* problem child (or children, as it turned out) was me, your resident Japanese human beanpole, and to an almost equal extent, Karen, whose desk job meant she was in a sedentary position most of the time.

Every time we fell behind, Baledos turned and yelled at us, and more often than not, we were having to lean on Kilpha to stop ourselves from getting separated from the group. Whenever we stopped for a break, Karen and I would immediately crumple to the ground, wheezing hard. I couldn't even tell you how many times Dramom had to cast Heal on the pair of us. Kilpha and Eldos, on the other hand, seemed completely unfazed by the arduous trek. For the first time in a little while, I found myself quite impressed by just how strong adventurers were.

And so, we spent every waking hour trudging onward with very few breaks to rest, then at night, we built snow huts and huddled together inside them for warmth. This went on for three grueling days until we finally reached the village of the devils. As we approached, I saw that all the houses seemed to be made of ice, and against the colorful backdrop of the auroras that glowed overhead, it looked like a scene straight out of a fantasy movie. I never would have expected a barbarous tribe like the devils to live in such a whimsical-looking place.

A group of devils made up of both men and women alike were standing guard at the entrance to the village, their outfits practically screaming, *"We're soldiers."* They warily looked our group up and

down with their deep crimson eyes that were the same shade as Celes's, and just like her, their skin was frighteningly white.

Speaking of Celes, she strode right up to them, and lowering her hood, she announced, "It is me."

As soon as the words had left her mouth, the demeanor of the guards did a total one-eighty. "Miss Celesdia!" they exclaimed, dropping to their knees and bowing their heads in a display of submission. It appeared there was a clear pecking order among the devils, perhaps because they were natural-born warriors. It was worlds apart from the rather loose hierarchy we had back in my university wrestling club, which was probably my nearest touchstone for this kind of thing.

"Welcome back, Miss Celesdia," one guard said.

"We are glad to see you have made it back safely," added another.

"We have been eagerly awaiting your return," remarked a third.

The devils at the gate seemed glad to have Celes back among them. She was clearly well respected in these parts, which made sense given that devils were known to value strength above anything else. The guards all gazed at her with zeal and admiration, but she simply ignored them.

"Is the chieftain around?" she asked one of the young male devils.

"No, he is out hunting monsters with the other soldiers," the young man replied, before his gaze shifted to the rest of our group and seemed to linger on me, for some reason. "More importantly, Miss Celesdia, who are these people with you? They *look* like nothing more than weak, pathetic humes to me, but..." His words dripped with vitriol, as if he couldn't bear the thought of a hume beanpole like me standing beside his *esteemed* "Miss Celesdia."

Celes's eyes narrowed. "This is the mayor of Ninoritch and her assistants."

"Oh, you mean the humes who have been supplying us with provisions?" the young man queried after a brief hesitation.

"Yes. They are my guests," she said pointedly. "I will not tolerate any disrespect toward them."

“O-Of course, Miss Celesdia,” the young man stammered, shrinking back under her glare. As Celes delivered her warning, the contemptuous gazes we were being treated to by the other devils morphed into looks of fear, most likely because she had introduced us as her “guests.” This just proved to us how much authority Celes wielded among the devils.

“You,” she said, turning to a female devil. “You will come and find me when the chieftain is back. I will be waiting for you at my home.”

“Yes, Miss Celes. I shall notify you as soon as he returns,” the female devil replied, straightening her back.

“Good.” Celes gave a curt nod to the group of devils, then turned to us. “Shiro—and all the rest of you—follow me. I will take you to my home.”

She was just about to lead on when a little girl started rushing toward us from across the road. “Dear sister!” she called out.

I wasn’t familiar with how age worked for devils, but judging from her appearance and her height, she seemed to be roughly the same age as Aina, and she looked a little like Celes, so I guessed this must have been the younger sister we had been told about.

Panting, Celes’s younger sister (still to be confirmed) dashed toward her and threw herself into her arms with all her might. “Dear sister!”

“Long time no see, Mifa,” Celes replied.

“Yes, it has been such a long time, dear sister! I have anxiously awaited your return this entire time!” Mifa said, a wide grin lighting up her face. She seemed incredibly happy to see her sister, and likewise could be said for Celes, if the soft smile that was tugging her lips upward was anything to go by. I could tell the two of them were close.

“How long will you be staying?” asked the younger of the two.

“I am sorry, Mifa, but I will have to leave again as soon as my business here is concluded.”

“Oh. I see,” the little devil girl mumbled, her shoulders slumping. She finally seemed to notice our presence and cast a curious eye in our direction. “Dear sister, who are these people? Your slaves, perhaps?”

Dramom raised an eyebrow at the word "slave" and she was clearly just about to open her mouth to protest when I placed my index finger on my lips to shush her.

"They are not my slaves, no," Celes replied.

"Then, who are they?"

"Well..." Celes trailed off, uncertain how exactly to introduce us.

I took a step forward and came to her rescue. "Hi there, Mifa. It's nice to finally meet you. We're your sister's friends," I said.

"Dear sister's friends?" Mifa repeated.

"Yup, her friends," I confirmed.

She turned away from me and looked back at Celes, visibly confused. "Dear sister, this man is talking nonsense. Should you not kill him?"

"Kill— *What*?!" I exclaimed, stunned by this response. Beside me, Aina seemed just as shocked, and I frankly couldn't blame her. This little devil girl, who seemed to be around the same age as her, had just suggested that her sister should *kill* someone. No wonder little Aina was so taken aback!

Dramom once again looked like she was about to say something, so I quickly moved my lips toward her ear and whispered, "Dramom, *please* don't start bickering with Celes while we're here."

"Understood, master. I shall obey your order," she said, but I could tell she wasn't happy about it.

As long as we were within earshot of the devils, I couldn't have her squabbling with Celes like she usually did. For starters, it'd be a huge pain to deal with, and I very much wanted to *avoid* a "Dramom versus Celes and the devil warriors" showdown. To that end, I begged her to keep herself in check until we were back in Ninoritch again.

Meanwhile, Celes—who hadn't noticed the hushed conversation between Dramom and me—was gently trying to reason with her sister. "I do not need to kill them, no. Because they *are* my..." She hesitated momentarily. "...my, um, friends. That said, that hume calls anyone his 'friend,' in truth."

"I see. So they are your friends, huh?" Mifa mumbled again. She had her fists clenched and her shoulders were trembling. Was it just

my imagination, or did she look deeply frustrated for some reason?

"Then, since all of us are here, I shall do the introductions, Mifa," Celes continued gamely. "This is Shiro, the hume I told you about before."

For some reason, Mifa's entire body twitched at these words. "*Shiro*?" she snarled.

"Yup," I said with a nod before smiling at the little devil girl. "I'm Shiro Amata. Again, it is a pleasure to meet you, Mifa."

"I see. So it is *you*. The 'Shiro' my dear sister mentioned to me before," she retorted, her tone dripping with disdain.

"Um, M-Mifa?" I stammered, unsettled by her response.

"Shiro, Shiro, Shiro. At last we meet. My enemy. The rat who stole my dear sister away from me," she seethed, staring at me. Or "glaring" might have been a better word for it.

Did she just call me a rat? The shiver that shot down my spine definitely wasn't just from the chill of my surroundings. "Pardon? Y-Your enemy? Who, me?"

Her eyes widened maniacally. "Yes. *You* are my enemy. And you have finally shown yourself to me."

For a little while after that, all she did was stare at me and chuckle to herself.

Chapter Eight: Visiting Celes's House

We'd had three reasons for coming to the isle of the demons.

Reason one: Celes had wanted to tell the demon king about the Collars of Domination the former prime minister of Orvil had been using. As only demons were able to craft these powerful tools that were even capable of controlling a black dragon, it was highly likely they had been forged by demons.

Reason two: I needed to dig deeper into the origin of these collars to see if the person who had sold them to Magath was the shady merchant Zidan had told me about. Of course, this was all supposition on our part at this moment in time, so I would need Celes's help to investigate the matter further and get the information I required.

And reason three: Karen wanted to negotiate with the leader of the devils for more red magic stones, though we were still in the process of getting together leverage for the talks. Celes had decided we should probably tackle this task first, before starting to look into the Collars of Domination, which was why our little group was going to rest up in her house until the chieftain returned.

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According to Celes, most of the houses in the village of the devils were built out of ice. Some elements required the involvement of wood, such as for the support poles, the floorboards, and the door, but by and large, the rest of the building was crafted from magically enhanced ice. This method of construction seemed perfectly suited to this environment, for there were very few trees and plants on the demons' isle. *This place really does scream "fantasy," doesn't it?*

"Karen, how about adding wood to your list of things you can offer the devils?" I suggested as we made our way to Celes's abode.

"You make it sound like that'd be an easy material to provide them with, but who would transport all of that lumber? We don't all have the Inventory skill like you and Patty," she pointed out.

"Oh, yeah, right."

While both Patty and I had the Inventory skill, and Ney—the Fairy's Blessing guildmaster—owned an item that had been enchanted with a similar ability, it was an extremely uncommon way of transporting goods, purely because so few possessed the skill. I was so used to the people around me using it, I'd forgotten how rare it actually was.

"Besides, the devils must find it easier to work with ice than to work with wood, or they wouldn't be able to make such impressive houses out of it," she added.

"True. They almost look like works of art, in a way," I said.

"Don't they just? So as long as they're satisfied with their current architecture, there's not much point in offering them lumber."

I hummed. "You think so?"

"I do."

I glanced around. None of the devils seemed to be wearing winter clothing, and given their houses were literally made of ice, I couldn't help wondering if they had a higher tolerance for the cold than humes. By contrast, I'd had to stick a load of single-use heating patches all over my body just to stop myself from freezing. Still, I was rather impressed by Karen's wisdom. After all, this was her first time visiting the village of the devils, yet she had ascertained that the devils had no need of wood with a single glance. She clearly wasn't the mayor of Ninoritch just for show.

"With the climate as it is here, I can see why food would be so valuable to them," she said, peering around the settlement.

I nodded in agreement. "We didn't see a single plant or critter on our way here, let alone any monsters."

"I noticed that too. I now understand why Celes asked me for food when we drafted our original trade agreement."

Karen and I continued chatting as we followed Celes—whose arm

was interlinked with Mifa's—to her house. After about ten minutes of walking, the devil finally stopped in front of one particular building.

"This is my house," she said simply.

"Wowee. So this is where you live, is it? It's *huge*," I remarked, thoroughly impressed. Celes's house was far larger than any we had seen on the way over here. It was basically an ice palace.

She pushed open the wooden front door and ushered us inside. "Come in."

"Thanks," I said, walking into her house first, before being followed by Kilpha, Aina, and Patty in that order.

"Meow! Even the walls and ceiling are made of ice, meow!" Kilpha exclaimed, gawking at the interior.

"It's a bit colder in here than the snow huts we've been staying in," Aina pointed out.

"A bit?" Patty repeated. "It's *freezing* in here!"

The dwarf brothers were next to cross the threshold.

"Feels a bit like we've entered a cold room, don't it, Eldos?" Baledos remarked.

"Sure does," his brother replied. "This temperature's mighty rough on us dwarves."

"Hm. Well, at least it offers protection from the wind, so it's a bit better than standing around outside," Karen noted as she stepped inside.

"I am worried that master will catch a cold in a place this chilly," Dramom said, her voice tinged with concern.

"If pa-pa get cold, Shu-ama make better!" Suama babbled, toddling into the house behind her mother.

Once everyone was inside, Mifa closed the door behind us, and Celes led us into an absolutely *massive* room. Seriously, it must have been a good eighty square meters at least! The ceiling was vaulted too, which made the space feel even larger. I assumed this must have been Celes's living-cum-drawing room, but to my surprise, there was very little furniture in it, not even a table and chairs. In fact, the only thing in the room was an absurdly large pelt that was spread out across the floor. All in all, it was pretty bleak in there.

Who would've guessed that Celes would be such a minimalist when

she has a massive home like this?

I suspected the emptiness of her room was more a reflection on Celes's own personal preferences than any sort of demonic custom. I mean, just look at the woman: her only interests in life seemed to be fighting and eating.

"Make yourselves at home," she said.

I thanked her, and we all plonked ourselves down on the pelt on the floor. It was surprisingly comfortable, but with the walls and ceiling being made of ice, it wasn't long before I started feeling chilly. Glancing to the side of me, I saw that Aina had removed her mittens and was breathing on her hands to try and warm them up. The snow huts we'd slept in the previous couple of nights had been small enough that we could stay warm by huddling up, but this place was so vast that even if we'd all squeezed together, we wouldn't have been able to keep the cold at bay. As someone who was used to living in houses with heaters in, it was getting a little hard to endure.

"Um, Celes, can I ask you a question?" I said.

"What is it?"

"This might sound a bit rude, and I'm sorry if it does, but don't you and the other devils ever get cold living in these houses made of ice?" I queried, asking the question that was on everyone's mind.

Celes's response caught me completely off guard, however. "Yes, we do feel cold," she said matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, that's what I—wait, what? You *do* feel cold? Even *you*?"

Celes nodded, her expression unchanged. "Of course we do. What do you think we are made of? This is ice we are talking about."

"You don't *look* particularly cold, though," I pointed out.

"We devils have a resistance to the cold."

"Meow? You have a resistance to the cold, but you can still *feel* it?" Kilpha interjected, genuinely curious.

"Yes."

According to Celes, the devils had a natural resistance not only to cold and heat, but also to magic of any of the four classical elements —fire, water, air, and earth—plus lightning magic and dark magic. However, they could still feel the *sensations* of cold, heat, and pain

that came from being exposed to these elements.

"'Ear that, Eldos? S'like us an' our resistance to fire," Baledos remarked to his brother.

"Sure sounds like it," the older dwarf agreed. "Us dwarves can grab hot iron with our bare hands without even feelin' it."

"Ah, c'mon, Eldos. Now ye're exaggeratin'!" the younger dwarf retorted. "Even *I'd* get a nasty burn touchin' hot iron."

"That's 'cause ye lack the trainin'," Eldos said gruffly.

"Bah! Yer always sayin' that!"

This world was inhabited by many different races, and I'd already known that each one boasted specific resistances to certain elements, though I hadn't expected them to still feel the effects of coming into contact with the resisted element, meaning I'd just learned something new about this world.

"Interesting. So Celes feels the cold too, huh?" I mumbled to myself. The gears inside my brain had started turning. Was this a potential business opportunity I was sensing?

I glanced in the direction of Celes, a quizzical hum escaping my lips. Sitting beside her, Mifa was all wrapped up in what I could only assume was a monster pelt. Unlike Celes, who seemed completely unfazed by the cold, the little devil girl was shivering even with the pelt around her.

Celes must have noticed me looking at her as she pulled her sister closer to her and launched into an explanation. "As I have mentioned before, Mifa has a weak constitution. Unlike the rest of us, her resistance to the elements is no greater than a hume's."

"I see..." I said, before flashing the little devil girl a smile. "Mifa, did you want to borrow my jacket?" I offered.

"Do not speak to me in such a familiar manner," she replied curtly, glaring at me.

"Oh, um..." I spluttered, having been caught off guard by her response. "Sorry."

For some reason, she had labeled me her "enemy," and seemed to want nothing to do with me. I was a bit bummed out about it, but Kilpha—who was sitting beside me—patted me reassuringly on the back, as if to say, *"It's okay."*

"I have the pelt of the monster my dear sister hunted for me to cover me. I do not need anything else," Mifa said defiantly, wrapping the pelt tighter around herself.

So Celes had gone as far as hunting a monster just to get its pelt to give to her sickly sister? I was seeing a whole new side to her—one I'd never expected her to have. She really was a good big sister, huh?

All of a sudden, I was dragged out of my thoughts by Aina extending a hand to Mifa. "Take this, Mifa!" she said as she handed the devil girl a single-use pocket warmer. Mifa shot her a quizzical look.

"It's warm," Aina said by way of explanation, before smiling brightly at the little devil girl. This seemed to convince Mifa, who accepted the pocket warmer from her.

"Warmth," the little devil girl murmured, a small smile forming on her lips as she pressed the pocket warmer against her cheek.

Aina sprang to her feet and sat herself down next to Mifa, pressing her body against hers. "I'm Aina!" she said cheerfully, looking the other girl straight in the eye.

The little devil girl seemed surprised, but she eventually whispered, "Mifa."

"Mifa, would you like to be my friend?" Aina suggested.

But Mifa shook her head. "I do not need friends."

"What?" Patty piped up, butting into the conversation. "You don't have any friends?"

"That wasn't very tactful, boss," I chided her.

"I have my sister. I do not need friends," Mifa said. *Ah, look at what you've done, Patty. She's brooding now.*

But Aina was melting Mifa's icy demeanor with ease. "Then that just means I'm your first friend!" she said.

Mifa blinked at her in confusion. "Huh?"

"I'm sure we'll both get along!" the little girl added cheerily, flashing another warm smile at the other little girl.

"Um, okay," Mifa whispered, giving the tiniest of nods in response to this.

Aw, little Mifa's just made her first friend, I thought, feeling a tad

—no, actually, feeling *very* moved. And judging from the way Celes was having trouble stopping herself from grinning, she clearly felt the same. Also, now that Aina had broken the ice, my other companions introduced themselves to Mifa, one by one.

"I-I'm Patty! I don't mind being your friend too, if you insist."

"I'm Kilpha, meow!"

"And I'm Karen, the mayor of Ninoritch."

Unfortunately, it seemed Mifa had no interest in anyone else other than Aina, perhaps because she was the closest to her in age. Well, I assumed that was the case at least, since I still had no idea how aging worked for devils.

Due to how exhausted we all were after the trek to the village, we decided we would have an early dinner. There was just one *teeny-tiny* issue, however: All Celes had in her pantry was raw vegetables. Thinking about it, I seemed to recall her telling me that devils always ate everything raw, including meat. I'd been horrified the first time I heard that, but after coming here, I understood. Wood was simply too scarce in this land, which likely explained why they had never developed a habit for cooking their food. Fortunately, I always kept a portable stove in my inventory, and I hurriedly took it out along with a pot so that I could boil up some water. I also grabbed some cup noodles, freeze-dried meals, and other ready-made food.

"Pick whichever one you like, everyone," I announced, and my companions quickly chimed in with their preferences.

"I want cup noodles, meow! That one with the crunchy tempura on top, meow!"

"Got it. Tempura soba for you, Kilpha."

"I'll 'ave some of that ta-ki-ko-mi go-han like last night," Eldos said, though his pronunciation of the dish sounded a bit off.

"Gimme the same thing as my brother, kid. And booze! And potato chips to snack on!" Baledos added.

"Alcohol *again*?" I groaned. "I'm not even sure I have any left."

"Shiro!" Patty piped up next. "I want ramen! Ramen! It *has* to be ramen! That's an order from your boss!"

"Shoyu, miso, or shio?" I asked, listing the various types I had

available.

"Miso!"

Aina and Suama chimed in after her. "I think I'd like some vegetable soup," Aina said softly.

"Shu-ama too!" the little dragon girl babbled.

Next up, it was Karen's and Dramom's turn. "Shiro, do you have any pastries? I'd love a cream bun, if you had one," said the mayor.

"Master, I would like some shrimp pilaf," Dramom requested.

"Got it. I'll get everything ready now, so just hang tight, everyone," I said, pouring hot water into all of the dehydrated meals, and arranging the canned food and pastries on a few paper plates I had brought along with me.

After a few minutes, their meals were all ready and my companions happily started digging in. I was glad they hadn't grown tired of the food I'd brought along yet, even though we'd been eating the same kind of stuff for every meal over the past three days. Then again, Japanese preserved food was really good quality, probably due to our culture placing such a strong emphasis on flavor.

However, Mifa, who had never eaten cooked food before, stared in confusion at the cup of instant noodles that had found its way into her hands. "Dear sister, is this warm thing really food?" she asked in puzzlement.

"It is," Celes replied. "Humes have this tradition that is known as 'cooking.' They mostly eat warm food."

"Coo-king..." the little girl repeated, testing the word out.

"Yes, cooking. You can go ahead and give it a try, Mifa," Celes encouraged her sister.

"Yes, dear sister."

Mifa brought her face closer to the paper cup in her hands and cautiously sniffed the contents, before plunging her fork into the noodles and—after some struggling—extracting a forkful, which she moved toward her lips. Her expression hardened to one of resolve, and she quickly shoved the fork in her mouth as if trying to just get it over with. But almost as soon as she bit into the noodles, her eyes widened in surprise. She swallowed her first mouthful, then dove

right back into the noodles again, eating forkful after forkful of the stuff in quick succession.

"It is most delicious! Dear sister, this is very good!" she exclaimed, eliciting an amused chuckle from her sister.

"Is it?" Celes asked softly.

"Yes! I have never tasted anything this exquisite before!" the little devil girl said, her eyes sparkling.

Imagine going through life and the finest meal you'd ever eaten was instant cup noodles. Except I shouldn't have been too surprised about that, for in this land of snow and ice, simply finding something to eat must have been difficult.

"I did not expect these wormlike things to taste so good!" Mifa added.

"Me neither," Celes agreed. "The first time I saw them, I thought they were parasites, like the ones you get in the guts of monsters."

Hearing this, Kilpha instantly froze in the middle of enjoying her tempura soba. "Celes, you dum-dum! You can't just go and say gross things like that while we're eating, meow!" she grumbled.

"Kilpha's right," I chimed in. "It's bad manners. What if you make us lose our appetite?"

The devil squirmed in embarrassment. "My apologies."

"Mmmeow, I'm not sure I can forgive you, meow. I'll have to take one of your pastries as compensation, meow!" Kilpha declared, reaching her hand out toward Celes's plate, but the demon instantly wrapped her arms around her food to protect it.

"No! You may not touch my melonpan!"

"Aw, c'mon, give it to me! No one likes a cheapskate, meow!" Kilpha said, not giving up.

"Did Shiro not give you one also?" Celes asked.

"I already ate it, meow."

"Then you will have to wait until our next meal to have another one."

"Don't wanna, meow!" Kilpha moaned.

"Cease this instant!"

Clutching her melonpan like her life depended on it, Celes tried to move away from Kilpha, but she gave chase, using the walls,

columns, and even the ceiling to propel herself toward the demon, who managed to narrowly dodge every lunge. It was, quite frankly, a rather impressive display, and my companions seemed to agree.

"Get 'er, Kilpha! She's goin' thatta way!" Eldos called out, cheering the cat-sìth on in between taking big gulps of his drink.

Beside him, Baledos roared with laughter. "These lassies have got some pretty good moves, aye?"

"Miss Kilpha, Miss Celes, do your best!" Aina called out, encouraging both participants in the chase, while beside her, Suama just giggled at the spectacle, thoroughly enjoying the hijinks.

"Go, Kilpha, go! Grab some of that melonpan for me too!" Patty shouted excitedly.

We all laughed merrily at the pair's antics. Well, all apart from one person.

"Sister?" Mifa whispered, bewildered by the scene that was unfolding before her eyes.

Chapter Nine: An Audience with the Chieftain

Two days after we'd arrived in the village, a devil woman came to inform us that the chieftain had returned from his hunting trip.

"I see. Tell him to come here," Celes instructed the woman.

"Yes, Miss Celes."

I was taken aback by this command. I had been under the assumption that *we* would be going to *his* place, not the other way around. Devil society was all about strength, and as one of the demon king's four lieutenants, it seemed that Celes was higher up the food chain than the village's chieftain. But this actually worked in our favor, so I wasn't about to start complaining. Why, you might ask? Well, for the past two days, I had been deep in discussion with the others—particularly Karen—over what items the devils could possibly need. And happily, we had finally hit upon an answer.

◇◆◇◆◇

"There you are, Galbady."

"It seems I have kept you waiting, Miss Celesdia," the chieftain said on stepping into Celes's living room. Going from appearances, he looked to be in his forties, and he had sharp, piercing eyes. Although he was slim, he had a well-defined build with visible muscle tone, and the scars that littered his body spoke of the many battles he had fought. He was apparently one of the strongest devils—second only to Celes, in fact—as well as an excellent advisor. He also happened to be the person who had signed the trade agreement with Ninoritch, and Karen told me they had conversed via letter on a number of previous occasions.

"I heard you were out hunting monsters," Celes stated.

"Indeed I was. We engaged the frost wyvern that had appeared up in the western mountains. We should now have enough meat to last us for some time to come." The chieftain paused, then turned to Karen. "So you are the mayor of Ninoritch, yes?" he asked, his gaze so piercing, she was momentarily taken aback.

She quickly managed to compose herself again. "Yes," she said with a firm nod. "I'm Karen Sankareka, the mayor of Ninoritch. We've exchanged quite a lot of letters in the past, but it's good to finally meet you in person, chieftain of the devils."

"I am Galbady, chieftain of this village. My subordinate mentioned that you wished to speak with me. Is that correct?" he asked.

"Right to the point, I see. That's a relief. Well then, Mr. Galbady, please take a seat," Karen said, and the man sat down on the floor cushion opposite her and crossed his legs.

There were only four of us in the room—Celes, Mr. Galbady, Karen, and myself—and we all sat on the floor around a square, table-shaped contraption. As for everyone else, they were waiting in another room.

"Well? What could have possibly brought humes like yourselves all the way to our island— Hm?" As he spoke, Mr. Galbady's gaze lowered to the contraption that sat between us. Or to be exact, to the center of it. "Fire? Why do you have a fire in there? Are you burning some of the wood?" He paused again as he took a closer look at what was in the middle of the "table." "No, wait. That is not wood. Mayor of Ninoritch, what is the meaning of this?"

Karen and I exchanged looks with each other and nodded. The chieftain's reaction was exactly what we had been hoping it would be. He seemed visibly intrigued by what we had brought.

"This is called 'charcoal,' Mr. Galbady," Karen explained.

"'Charcoal'? What is that?" he asked.

"It's made out of wood, but it burns for much longer than firewood, and it's much easier to light."

Mr. Galbady's eyes were fixated on the fire that was crackling away inside the irori fire pit table. "So this is real fire, hm? How long has it been since I last saw anything other than magic-made flames?" he muttered to himself.

"I apologize, but do you mind if we keep the charcoal burning while we have our conversation? We humes aren't as resistant to the cold as you devils are, you see," Karen said, making sure to emphasize the word "charcoal."

"I do not mind," Mr. Galbady replied. It seemed the warmth of the charcoal fire had well and truly captured his heart.

Charcoal hadn't been on my packing list when we'd set out for the devils' village originally, but after some discussion with my companions about what might help to improve the daily lives of the devils, we had landed on charcoal, a simple yet efficient resource that could warm up a room. As soon as we had come to this decision, I'd hurriedly (but stealthily) warped back to Grandma's house, zoomed over to the nearest hardware store, and picked up some in the camping section.

At first, I'd planned to just get a brazier to burn them in, but my eye landed on something that sparked a sudden realization within me. As mentioned previously, Celes didn't have a whole lot of furniture in her house, so I decided that if I was going to buy something to put in there, where was the harm in making it a traditional Japanese piece? Japanese furniture had evolved a lot over the centuries, giving rise to countless ingenious designs, including what was the *ultimate* in hybrid furniture: the irori table, a table with its center cut out and replaced with a built-in fire pit.

Of course, I pretended I'd had it all prepared in advance when I pulled it out of my inventory to show to my companions and install it in Celes's living room. As soon as I lit the charcoal, I knew I was right on the money. It was everything I'd hoped it would be. Even though the walls and ceiling were made out of ice, the irori table quickly warmed up the room, and soon, my companions and Mifa (*especially* Mifa) were glued to the side of it, refusing to move. Even Celes, who was more resistant to the cold than the rest of us, had a hard time tearing herself away from its warmth, which was undeniable proof of the efficiency of the irori table. And it appeared that Mr. Galbady was the latest to fall under its spell.

"Mayor of Ninoritch, is this 'charcoal' you speak of valuable to humes?" he asked.

“I believe it’d be better if I let Shiro over here answer your question,” Karen replied, and Mr. Galbady’s gaze obligingly shifted to me.

I immediately switched to merchant mode. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Galbady. I’m Shiro Amata, Karen’s assistant and a merchant from Ninoritch. It’s an honor to make your acquaintance.”

The man nodded, which I took as a sign to launch into my explanation.

“Charcoal is made by burning wood in a kiln. Where I’m from, there are two types: binchou-zumi, or white charcoal, and kuro-zumi, or black charcoal. I won’t bore you with a lengthy explanation on the differences between the two, but suffice to say, white charcoal is usually more expensive than black charcoal.”

“Which one have you used here?” the chieftain asked.

“The white variety.”

“Oh? The more expensive one, then.”

“White charcoal burns for longer than black charcoal, so it’s more suitable for heating purposes,” I explained.

“I see. And it is more expensive because it burns for longer, is that it?”

“Exactly.”

The fact he was asking questions showed he was interested in my charcoal, and if that wasn’t enough of a sign, I noted he hadn’t moved his eyes off the fire once since the start of our conversation.





"Do humes use this charcoal stuff to warm themselves up?" he asked.

"No. Well, at least not in our town," I corrected myself. "We have a huge forest right on our doorstep, so we mostly burn firewood to keep warm."

He hummed thoughtfully. "Your land seems quite different from ours."

"Is that so? Oh, because you don't have forests? Is that what you mean?" I asked.

This time, it wasn't Mr. Galbady who answered my question, but Celes. "We do have forests. And other types of woodland as well. But the trees give off noxious smoke when they are burned."

"What?" I said, blinking in surprise.

"They also scream when they are cut down," she added.

It took me a moment to process what she had just said. "Wait. Celes, did you use wood from *those* trees to build this house?"

"Yes," she said matter-of-factly. "It is poison treant wood. But do not fret. It is completely harmless unless it is burned."

Karen and I were speechless. This island was absolutely brutal! Then again, this *was* the demon king's domain. If this had been an RPG, this would have been the last place to head to after doing all your grinding. It made total sense that even the monsters here were overpowered.

"I take it that trees in your hume lands do not emit a poisonous smoke?" Mr. Galbady said.

"They don't. Well, not as far as I know, anyway," I replied.

A glint of what seemed like yearning appeared in his eyes, along with a hint of sadness. The devils lived in a world of perpetual ice and snow, but perhaps they dreamed of residing in a land that was bathed in golden sunlight.

"Oh, right! I almost forgot to mention something else about this charcoal. It actually has *another* use beyond simply keeping you warm. And it's a pretty cool one at that!" I said, raising my voice a little higher than necessary to try to change the mood. I then turned in the direction of the room next to ours, and called out, "Aina! Could you bring in the you-know-what?"

"Yes!" the little girl called back enthusiastically. "Let's go, Mifa!"

"R-Right."

The two little girls entered the living room carrying trays, and Aina strode confidently toward us with Mifa trailing hesitantly behind her.

"Miss Celesdia's younger sister?" Mr. Galbady said in some surprise, before turning back to me. "What exactly are you planning to do?"

I chuckled conspiratorially. "Well, I was just thinking it'd be nice if we put this charcoal to good use by cooking something."

"'Cooking'?" he repeated with a frown, the word unfamiliar to him. "What is that?"

The trays Aina and Mifa were carrying had vegetable and meat skewers laid out on them. I placed a kettle stand over the irori in the middle of the table, then put a grill on top, before reaching for a brush to cover it with a layer of olive oil.

"Mister Shiro, are we grilling the skewers now?" Aina asked.

"Yup. I'm counting on you girls."

Aina grabbed the skewers comprising chunks of meat interspersed with vegetables from her tray, and placed them on the grill. Mifa followed suit a moment or two later.

Mr. Galbady watched them, visibly confused. "What is going on here?"

"This is a method of cooking that we call 'barbecue' where I'm from. It basically consists of grilling meat and vegetables over a fire," I explained.

He blinked. "And why would you do that?"

"I believe you'll understand once you try it," I said confidently.

The salted meat and vegetable skewers sizzled over the charcoal fire, the aroma rising from them so tantalizing, Celes—who, up to this point, had been listening to our conversation in silence—started drooling.

"All righty. These should be ready." I grabbed the now-cooked skewers, arranged them on a plate, then placed the plate down in front of Mr. Galbady. "Give 'em a try."

Mr. Galbady picked up a skewer and brought it up to his mouth

without any hesitation. Just like Celes, drool had been dribbling out of the corner of his mouth for the last couple of minutes, so he must have been impatient to try the skewers. He took a bite, and almost as soon as he did, his jaw dropped. He was completely stunned. He resumed chowing down on it, then no sooner had he finished his first skewer than he reached out for a second without saying a word.

"It goes very well with barbecue sauce too," I said, squirting some sauce onto the plate.

"D-Does it? I suppose I can give that a try, then."

Chomp, chomp, gulp.

"I have mayonnaise too, also known as the 'forbidden sauce.'" This time, I drizzled some mayo onto his plate.

"Mngh?!" came the barely coherent reaction to tasting it.

Chomp, chomp, gulp.

The girls had grilled enough skewers to feed several people by this point, but the chieftain was devouring them all by himself in record time. I wondered briefly if he could feel the glare Celes was boring into the side of his head.

"This is my first time ever eating something so delicious. I cannot believe there is something in this world that is even better than ice lizard meat," he mumbled, completely enraptured, his belly visibly swollen after his feast.

I didn't waste a single second before embarking on my sales pitch. "I can see your experience has been an enjoyable one. Charcoal fires provide a more stable heat than other types of fire, making them ideal to cook on. Plus, anything that's grilled over charcoal tends to taste far better than food cooked over a regular fire."

"I have never eaten cooked meat before, so I have no reference point to compare with, but that was delicious. Would it work with magical beast meat as well?"

"I would assume so, yes," I replied. People in Ninoritch ate monster meat, and I assumed magical beast meat couldn't be all that different.

"It really is impressive, though, this charcoal," Mr. Galbady said, his serious expression returning (the effect lessened somewhat by

the fact that he still had sauce smeared all around his lips).

"Now, returning to the original question about the value of charcoal," I began. "As I mentioned before, charcoal is made by burning wood in a kiln, which takes both time and effort, making it pricier than firewood," I explained.

"Is that true for black charcoal—or whatever it is called—too?"

"Yes."

A shadow fell across the chieftain's face. "How does it compare to the crops you have been sending us?" was his next question as he leaned forward.

Yes! He took the bait! I rejoiced, inwardly fist pumping. I'd successfully hooked him with my little presentation on charcoal, and now I just had to reel him in.

"Hm..." I pondered aloud. "That's hard to say."

"Why?"

"Well, the value of a crop varies depending on the harvest yield for that year or season," I explained. "If there's a bad harvest, for example, the crops become more valuable than if the harvest was plentiful."

He nodded. "Just as the number of magical beasts differs each year, right?"

"Yes, that's a good comparison," I said. "This year's harvest was good in Ninoritch, so the value of the crops is lower than it was last year."

"I see. So we cannot ask you to replace the crops with charcoal, then."

Aaaaand gotcha! Hook, line, and sinker! I winked at Karen to signal to her that she was up.

"Mr. Galbady, we actually have a request for you regarding that," she interjected.

"Oh? What is it, Mayor of Ninoritch?"

"Could we please ask you to increase the amount of red magic crystals you supply to us?" she replied. "In exchange, we can add charcoal to the list of items we will trade with you."

Mr. Galbady was visibly shocked by her proposition. "Are you sure? You could easily go and get as many magic crystals as you

want just by visiting a nearby cave." Baledos would have jumped for joy if he had heard this, so it was a good thing he wasn't in the room at this time.

"We'd prefer it if you could actually provide them directly," Karen said. "That's actually the purpose of our visit."

"Red magic crystals are very valuable to us humes," I added.

"All right. I will ask my subordinates to gather some right away," Mr. Galbady said, making a move to get to his feet.

"Ah, please wait a moment," Karen said, stopping him. "I think it'd be best if we finalized the details before you went."

The two of us negotiated the deal with Mr. Galbady, and let me tell you, that was *not* easy. The devil tribe solely valued strength, which meant they had no real concept of how much goods and resources were worth in the same way we did.

"What do you say to one red magic stone per piece of charcoal?" he suggested nonchalantly, as if that weren't ridiculously in our favor.

It was at that moment that I realized Celes really hadn't been exaggerating when she had once said that red magic crystals were as common as pebbles on the isle of the demons. She had even told Karen that she would give her "as many red magic crystals as she wanted" on hearing she wanted some several months back. Celes was at the top of the devil hierarchy, higher even than the chieftain, so if she gave the order, the other devils would scramble to get her as many crystals as she wanted.

But back then, Karen had refused that initial offer. "It's a generous offer, but I'll pass. As the mayor of Ninoritch, I want a deal that's as fair as possible for your people."

Karen hadn't wanted her town to be the only one that benefited from a trade agreement with the devils. They had already agreed to exchange their incredibly valuable red magic crystals for our crops, so she wanted to make sure they truly got what they wanted in return. She explained that she had chosen charcoal as our new trade item after noticing poor little Mifa shivering due to the cold. Ninoritch had no trouble producing charcoal, to the point where this trade could in fact serve as the perfect opportunity for developing a new

industry for the town should the devils ever desire even more of it. The expression on Celes's face as she listened to Karen's explanation was one of admiration. It was clear that she greatly respected her. In her own way.

"So five red magic crystals for one crate of charcoal. Are we all agreed on that?" I asked.

"I have no objections," Mr. Galbady said.

"Neither do I," Karen added.

"In that case, I've drawn up a contract based on those terms. Karen, if you could sign *here*..." I paused as she did so. "And Mr. Galbady, if you could just sign there..."

"Sign?" the devils' chieftain asked, frowning.

"Oh, it just means to write your name," I explained. "Or well, it doesn't *have* to be your name. Anything that can be used to identify you will work just fine."

"Then I shall use my blood." And with that, Mr. Galbady bit his finger and smeared some of the blood erupting from the wound across the paper. "Is that all right?"

"Oh, um, yes," I said after a slight pause. "That's perfect."

And so, a new trade agreement between Ninoritch and the devils' village was signed, with about eighty percent of the paper it was written on drenched in Mr. Galbady's blood.

Chapter Ten: The Barbecue Party

After successfully signing her new contract with the devils, Karen was visibly more at ease. When Baledos heard the news, he practically danced for joy, and when we told him we'd be visiting the red magic crystal mine the following day, he let out a triumphant roar as tears streamed down his face. To my surprise, his brother, Eldos, also started crying in sympathy.

As for Mr. Galbady, he seemed very excited about the charcoal. I learned later that he was already making plans to use it to create a nice, warm room for his elderly grandmother where she could be comfortable. I had been told that devils valued strength above all else, and that even if they were family, the weak had one of two choices: serve or die. But as it turned out, Celes wasn't the only one who cherished her family.

When I shared this nugget of info with Kilpha, she opined, "They want to become strong because they have someone they want to protect, meow." And maybe she was right on that. Maybe the reason Mr. Galbady had fought tooth and nail to rise to number two in the devils' ranks was to protect his family. There was certainly no doubt in my mind that it was all for Mifa's sake that Celes had come as far as she had.

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The day after Karen and Mr. Galbady had signed their new contract, the devils organized a welcome party for us.

"Let me make the introductions, everyone," Mr. Galbady announced to the devils that had gathered in the village square. "This is Miss Karen, the mayor of Ninoritch."

"Hello, I'm Karen Sankareka. It's an honor to have been invited to this gathering."

The feast we indulged in consisted of vegetables from Ninoritch and meat from the frost wyvern the devils had hunted the previous day. Of course, everything was served raw, so I set up portable barbecues all around the venue, and Aina and Kilpha moved from group to group, showing the devils how to use them. Before long, the welcome party had transformed into an impromptu barbecue.

"Th-This is delicious!"

"I had no idea meat could taste this good!"

"It is even better when you put this brown stuff that looks like muddy water on top of it!"

"Hah. I would argue sprinkling a little salt on top is the superior way of enjoying it."

"You old-timers and your salt..."

"What did that kid say this was called? 'Spices'? I believe I could get hooked on this."

"Tell me about it. This pepper thing—or whatever it is called—really enhances the flavor of the meat!"

"Wait! That is my meat!"

"No, it is mine!"

"It belongs to neither of you, for it is mine."

"No, mine!"

All of the devils were sitting around the portable barbecues, grilling their food, when a squabble broke out at one of the stations. Celes noticed and approached them without a word. When she reached them, she expressed her irritation with a disapproving noise, then delivered a round of punches to the troublemakers.

"Eek!" was the prevailing noise that rose into the air from the group.

And to give Celes her dues, at least this way was efficient, as they instantly calmed down. It reminded me once more that devils really *did* value strength over anything else.

I heard Baledos guffaw loudly at another of the barbecue stations. "Some of 'em devils appreciate good booze, Eldos!"

"Aye, they do, don't they? Well, Shiro's booze is bloody delicious, after all."

"Can I have another pint, dwarf?"

“Me too.”

“Just the one? Ah, don’t be silly! Drink as much as ye like, ye ’ear?”

“Ooh! Thank you, dwarf!” the devil beside him said.

“I cannot believe we are drinking this renowned alcohol,” remarked another devil. “I have not felt this happy in a long time, dwarf!”

It seemed the dwarf brothers had started a drinking party at their station. Well, alcohol and barbecue pretty much went hand in hand, so it shouldn’t have come as much of a surprise. I had, however, made the mistake of teaching them how to make atsukan—hot sake—and well, once that particular genie was out of the bottle, there was no stopping them. They hung a pot over their portable barbecue and filled it with water and an absurd amount of sake warmers. Plus, as the pair were dwarves, their mastery of fire was perfect, meaning they managed to heat the sake to the perfect temperature every single time. Because of this, more and more devils were slowly going red in the face.

“Cheers to hot sake!” Baledos said, guffawing.

“Cheers!”

I made a mental note to add alcohol to our list of trade items.

All in all, my idea of bringing charcoal and barbecue grills to the island was a huge success, as the devils seemed to like the idea of using them to warm themselves up *and* cook. In only an hour, they had experienced firsthand just how useful they could be.

As we watched on, Karen and I both let out a sigh of relief.

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Evening came with the barbecue party still in full swing. Daylight didn’t last for long on the northern isle, so even though it was relatively early still, the sun had already set. That didn’t mean it was dark, however, for the auroras brought ethereal colors to the sky, while the crackling charcoal fires cast a warm glow around the village square.

“A barbecue party under the auroras...” I mumbled to myself,

standing in a corner with my eyes to the sky and a can of beer in my hand. "This is the absolute *best*. And that's putting it mildly."

I'd thought I was alone, but I suddenly heard a voice from behind me. "There you are, merchant from Ninoritch."

Turning around, I saw the village chieftain. "Whoa! Mr. Galbady?"

"Did I startle you?" he said.

"You did," I admitted. "I didn't think you'd be standing there."

"Apologies for that," he said with a soft chuckle. He came and stood beside me, then allowed his gaze to sweep over the lively scene in the square with a hint of amusement in his eyes. "I've never seen this village so full of life," he remarked.

"Really?"

"We do not have a tradition of 'enjoying a warm meal,' as you humes put it," he explained.

"I see. So that's why everyone looks like they're having so much fun," I said, gazing around the square as well.

"Yes. You have introduced us to something rather troublesome. I fear that now they have had a taste of this so-called cooking, most of them will be unable to go back to eating their food raw."

I couldn't help chortling at his comment. "I might have overstepped the mark a little."

Mr. Galbady shook his head. "No, I am grateful to you, actually. Our village is in an especially cold part of the island, and until now, there has never been anything we could burn to keep warm." He paused as a smirk curled his lips upward. "Though I suppose it is this harsh environment that has made us as strong as we are."

"Well, it's a little *too* harsh for us humes," I admitted.

"Is that so? It seems the legends about humes being less resistant than even the weakest of our kind might be true," he said, glancing at my down jacket. It was minus fifteen degrees Celsius that night, which was a relatively warm evening by devil standards, or so I'd been told. "Though I assume it is your weakness that led you to invent this 'charcoal' thing," he reflected.

"Who knows?" I said. "Charcoal's been around for so long, no one actually knows when it was first discovered."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Back where I'm from, they say it's been in use for at least three hundred thousand years."

"Three hundred thousand *years*?!" he repeated, gawking at me.

I chuckled. "Well, that's what people say, anyway. No one really knows how long it's been. After all, humes have pretty short lifespans," I said playfully.

Mr. Galbady flashed me an exasperated smile. "You claim to be a merchant, yet you are quite unlike the merchants I know," he said.

"Is that— Huh? Hold on a minute." I blinked as I tried to process what he had just said. "You guys have merchants here too?"

Devils understood the concept of "business"? Celes hadn't told me about this!

"No, we do not. There are no merchants among the devils. Nor among the demons as a whole, for that matter."

"Then, who—" I started, but I was cut off.

"The only merchant I know is a hume, like yourself."

My heart skipped a beat. Another hume merchant had visited this island? Could this person be the "dangerous merchant" Zidan had told me about?

"What brought this merchant here? To the demons' island, I mean," I asked, my voice trembling so badly, even I could hear my nervousness. I hadn't expected to stumble across clues purporting to the whereabouts of the shady merchant I was trying to track down so quickly.

Thankfully, it seemed Mr. Galbady hadn't noticed my inner turmoil. "He claimed he had come to see Miss Celesdia," he said.

"To see *Celes*?" I repeated in surprise.

"Yes. If I remember correctly..."

Mr. Galbady proceeded to tell me everything about the merchant's visit.

Chapter Eleven: The Mysterious Merchant

On a day where a blizzard had painted the whole world white, a male hume arrived in the village of the devils.

"I've heard that a devil by the name of 'Lady Celesdia' resides here. I've come to find her. Could you please tell me where she is?" he said, a smile plastered across his face.

When the devils asked the man who he was, he introduced himself simply as a merchant. Two demons with collars around their necks stood to attention on either side of him. The demon king—the leader of all demons—had instructed them not to kill any humes, which made the situation too fraught with danger in Mr. Galbady's eyes to leave it to his subordinates to handle. What if they ended up accidentally killing him? How would he explain that to "Miss Celesdia," as he called her? For that reason, he decided he would deal with the merchant himself.

"What do you want with Miss Celesdia?" Mr. Galbady asked.

"This humble servant has come from afar, hoping to be of help to her and the rest of the devils," the merchant replied, his smile unwavering.

"You wish to help us?"

"Indeed I do. I have heard that Lady Celesdia possesses the Feeding skill, a blessing that is granted to only a handful of devils," the merchant continued. "As such, I have come here in the hopes of assisting her to gain even greater power."

Despite the man being a hume, an undeniably weak creature, Mr. Galbady felt a shiver of something akin to fear shooting down his spine as he spoke.

"Please tell me: Is she around?" the merchant queried.

Mr. Galbady pondered the merchant's question, his gaze shifting

to the collared demons standing on either side of him. He knew he would easily be able to take the one on the right, but the one on the left was a different matter. The hood of the demon's mantle was pulled down low over his eyes, meaning Mr. Galbady couldn't see his face, but his instincts were warning him that he couldn't beat this one. In fact, his presence was very similar to Miss Celesdia's, which suggested to him that if they were to fight, there was a high probability that not only would he suffer, but so would the entire village.

"Miss Celesdia is out of town. I do not know when she will return," he eventually said.

"Is that so? Such a pity. A real pity, indeed," the merchant said, his shoulders slumping.

"Yes, it is quite unfortunate," Mr. Galbady agreed. "Especially considering how far you must have traveled to get here."

"I suppose it simply means it isn't yet time for us to meet. But I won't give up. The god of business loves me, you see," the merchant said, flashing Mr. Galbady yet another smile. "Still, now that I've come all this way to your land, is there anything I could help you with, perhaps? As I said before, I am a merchant. Oh, a merchant is someone who buys and sells all sorts of items. You might be interested in some of my wares."

"A frail hume like you wishes to help *us*? Forgive me, but that sounds like an unfunny joke to me," Mr. Galbady replied.

"While it may sound surprising, I actually have several good friends among the other demon tribes," the merchant said. "I understand your feelings." And to make sure he wasn't misunderstood, he added, "The ones you keep hidden deep within your heart."

"Oh, really? A mere hume like you?"

"I apologize if I've offended you," the merchant said, before adding, "Devils love fighting, right? I hear that even compared with the rest of the demons, your tribe is the most combative of all."

"What are you driving at?" Mr. Galbady asked, his eyes narrowing.

The pleasant smile on the merchant's face had been replaced by an eerie, unsettling smirk. "Do you not yearn for war? And the

exciting, *thrilling* bloodshed it brings?" He paused, his smirk growing wider. "Do you not desire war with the humes?"

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"A *war*?!" I blurted out, so shocked by Mr. Galbady's tale that I ended up interrupting him. "Did he really straight up ask you if you wanted a *war*?!"

"That is what he said," he replied, a severe look crossing his face, as if the mere memory of his conversation with the merchant disgusted him. "I told him we would never participate in anything of the sort unless Miss Celesdia commanded it."

"I see..." I said. "So what did the merchant do next?"

"He left with that sinister smirk still plastered across his face. As he had done on his arrival, he did not hesitate to step into the wall of white caused by the blizzard, though not before promising he would return." And apparently, that was the last they had seen of the merchant, bringing Mr. Galbady to the end of his tale.

"Is he attempting to reignite the ancient conflict between the demons and the humes?" I wondered aloud.

"I cannot say," Mr. Galbady replied. "Either way, we would not engage in such a conflict unless Miss Celesdia commanded us to."

"Have you told her about this?" I asked.

"No, I have not, and I do not plan to. She would never entertain any proposal from such a suspicious individual."

"Fair point."

This was Celes we were talking about, after all. I couldn't imagine her taking anyone up on an offer to "help" her, even if that offer promised her more power, and the idea of her actually agreeing to go to war with the humes sounded even more implausible. Mr. Galbady knew this as well, which was why he hadn't even mentioned the merchant's visit to her.

I hummed pensively. What exactly had that merchant wanted to offer Celes? Judging by what he'd said, it seemed to have something to do with her Feeding skill, whatever that was.

"So he knew she had that skill, and that's why he came to visit

her, huh?" I muttered to myself before turning to the demon next to me again. "Mr. Galbady, is the Feeding skill rare among devils?"

"Extremely. Only a handful of people in the history of devilkind have ever possessed it," he told me.

"I see," I said, deep in thought. "I assume Celes is the only one who currently possesses it, then."

To my great surprise, Mr. Galbady shook his head. "No, there is another."

"What? Someone other than Celes?"

"Yes. However, unlike Miss Celesdia, she cannot actually use it," he said, looking out at the town square once more. I followed his gaze and saw that he was looking at Mifa, who was busy laughing away and enjoying the barbecue with her sister.

"Wait. Do you mean to say the other one is..."

"Miss Mifa, Miss Celesdia's younger sister," he confirmed, completing my unfinished sentence.

He explained that the Feeding skill allowed its user to absorb part of any creature's powers simply by consuming some of its flesh. The more they ate, the more power they gained; the more power they gained, the stronger they became. But while it might sound like some kind of infinite power cheat code, there was a catch.

"If the user's body cannot withstand the power they have consumed, it will collapse," Mr. Galbady said.

As such, the user needed to already be strong in order to use the skill, or they wouldn't survive its effects. Celes's body was naturally strong, to the point where she was considered one of the toughest (if not *the* toughest) of all the devils who had ever possessed the skill. Mifa, on the other hand, was considered weak by devil standards, and her resistance levels were roughly on par with a hume's. Unlike her peers, she couldn't even withstand the poison inherent in all the island's crops, so needless to say, her body was far too fragile to cope with the Feeding skill.

"The skill is worthless if the wielder cannot use it," Mr. Galbady explained. "As such, Miss Celesdia is at present the only one of us who can activate it."

He added that only a select few knew about Mifa's Feeding skill,

making it unlikely the shady merchant would have heard about it. But what would happen if he found out about it? What did he even want from the devils in the first place? What had been his thought process in coming here? I reflected on what Mr. Galbady had recounted to me earlier. The merchant had said he would "return," meaning there was a high probability that we would run into him if we just waited here in the village.

"Bleh, I'm super nervous all of a sudden," I muttered to myself, a shiver coursing down my spine even though there was no wind that night. I decided to pretend it was because of the snow instead.

Chapter Twelve: A Clumsy Present

The barbecue party showed no signs of winding up anytime soon. This was the first time the devils had prepared and cooked food, and laughter and the delicious smell of grilled meat filled the air. It wouldn't have surprised me at all if the feast had continued into the early hours of the morning.

I made my way back over to where the rest of Team Ninoritch were sitting, minus Eldos and Baledos, who were still drinking with a group of devils a little way off. Karen wasn't there either, because she was busy roaming the village square and asking the devils about their favorite vegetables. So that left eight of us: Celes, Mifa, Aina, Patty, Kilpha, Dramom, Suama, and myself. When I got to Team Ninoritch's table, they were all sitting around a rectangular portable barbecue grill, cooking meat skewers. *Oh, Kilpha's just started grilling some franks too.* I looked around at some of the other grills and saw huge slabs of mystery meat on them, which I figured must have been the frost wyvern Mr. Galbady had mentioned.

"Welcome back, Mister Shiro," Aina piped up.

"Hiya, Aina," I said. "You having fun?"

"Yeah, lots! Here, Mister Shiro. I grilled this one for you," she said, handing me a skewer.

"Oh, thanks, Aina."

Chunks of beef and juicy vegetables had been threaded onto the skewer in an alternating pattern, and all in all, I had to say the nutritional balance was pretty good.

"Mifa, you should eat the same kinds of meat as Shiro and the others," Celes said to her little sister.

The creatures that roamed the demons' isle were all brimming with mana, which meant their meat was like poison to Mifa, due to her weak constitution. As a result, our barbecue station only featured vegetables that had been grown in Ninoritch and an

assortment of meats that I had bought from a supermarket back in Japan.

"The frost wyvern meat will poison you," Celes added to emphasize her point.

"Understood, dear sister," Mifa replied with a nod, though I couldn't help noticing that she seemed a little sad and frustrated about it.

Among the devils, there were some who were classified as the "weak," a term used to describe those of their tribe with fragile constitutions who couldn't hunt their own food and needed to rely on others to survive, obeying their orders in exchange for food. Apparently, Mifa had served another devil once, until Celes became the strongest in the village and snatched her back.

Glancing around the village square, I spotted a number of devils being ordered around like servants who were scurrying around to carry out their tasks. Judging by the fact that they were visibly much smaller than the other devils, it didn't take me long to figure out they were the "weak." According to Mr. Galbady, up until very recently, the weaker devils had tended to die off a lot due to either starvation or the below-freezing temperatures, and that was before you even mentioned the ones who contracted the Decaying Disease. However, ever since the devil tribe began receiving fresh produce from Ninoritch, the number of casualties among the "weak" had dwindled to zero. Hearing that the trade agreement between Ninoritch and the devils had saved so many lives made me incredibly happy.

However, it was clear that there still remained clear disparities between the "strong" and the "weak" in this village, most likely because the latter were forced to rely on the former to survive. And while I was a firm believer in equality—y'know, "love and peace" and all that jazz—I knew better than to try to impose my own values on a culture that wasn't mine. As such, all I could do was help to ensure that the weaker devils were getting enough food to fill their bellies and enough charcoal to keep them warm. *C'mon, Shiro, you can do this!* I silently encouraged myself.

Beside me, Aina scooched closer to Mifa. "Here, Mifa! Eat one

with me," she said, offering the little devil girl a skewer.

"All right," Mifa said with a nod, before taking a bite. Yet even though she found the food delicious, she didn't smile.

Celes must have noticed too, because she suddenly spoke up. "Mifa, you should ask Aina to teach you how to cook. Her cooking is delicious. I am sure you will like it."

"Is that so?" Mifa said in a small voice.

"Yes. She is the one who taught me what cooking was in the first place," Celes replied.

However, her words seemed to only succeed in making the little devil girl even sadder.

"Wh-What is the matter, Mifa?" Celes asked, taken aback.

Aah, that's no good, Celes. You can't go praising Aina in front of your sister when that sister is so obsessed with you! The poor mite is feeling jealous!

Aina seemed to have noticed the shift in Mifa's mood too. "Miss Celes," she said in a hushed voice, before proceeding to explain something to her using only gestures.

Celes gasped, then turned back to her sister. "B-By the way, Mifa, I brought you a souvenir, like I promised."

"A souvenir?" Mifa said softly.

"Yes. Do you remember?" Celes continued. "I said I would bring you back something the next time I returned to the village."

In the blink of an eye, Mifa's downcast expression transformed into a beautiful smile. "I-I do! Yes, I remember!"

"Good." Celes produced a paper bag from the bag on her back and handed it to Mifa. "Here. This is your souvenir." The words "Beauty Amata" were emblazoned across the paper bag in Japanese characters.

"Is it a garment?" Mifa asked, delving into the bag.

"Yes. It is a hume-made garment. I thought it would look nice on you."

Mifa pulled the light purple dress out of the bag, and I had to agree with Celes that this kind of muted color would look lovely on her.

"I am delighted with it," the little devil girl said, hugging the dress

to her chest. “Dear sister, may I go try it on?”

“Of course. Come show me when you are done.”

“I will!”

Mifa practically skipped out of the square and returned a few minutes later, wearing the dress.

“Dear sister, um... How do I look?” she asked, fidgeting nervously and clearly feeling a little shy.

Celes didn’t reply, however, for all she could do in that moment was gaze at Mifa wide-eyed, as if in awe of how adorable her sister looked. A grin broke out across my face, and I nudged her with my elbow. Kilpha followed suit, but instead of giving her a gentle nudge like I had done, she drove her elbow into Celes’s side with way, *way* more force. Based on the resulting noise, it must have hurt a lot. But hey, at least our double attack had helped to reboot her brain.

“It, um, looks nice on you,” the devil said.

“Celes,” I whispered quietly in her ear. “You have to tell her she looks cute.”

“Shiro’s right, meow,” Kilpha added just as quietly. “She wants you to compliment her, meow.”

“I-I know,” Celes replied. She cleared her throat, and with her face going bright red, she regarded her sister once more. “You look very cute, Mifa.”

The effect that one simple comment had on Mifa was almost magical. “Do you really think so, dear sister? Do you truly think I look cute?” she said, her eyes brightening as her face lit up with a smile.

“I do. You really do look cute. I would have expected nothing less from a dress chosen by Aina,” Celes added.

But this time, her words caused her sister’s smile to falter, and a hint of disappointment flickered across the little devil girl’s face. *Why in the world did you say* that*, Celes? Mifa looks so awkward now!*

“Jeez, Celes, you big doofus, meow!” Kilpha exclaimed, thrusting her elbow into Celes’s side once more. The resulting sound echoed around the square beneath the aurora-lit sky.

Chapter Thirteen: Sisters

And with that, a new trade agreement between Ninoritch and the village of the devils was concluded. It wasn't anything particularly huge—we had just added charcoal to our list of trade items in exchange for extra red magic crystals—but it was perfect for the devils, now that they had been made aware of the wonders of cooking. One of the ideal forms of trading was for both parties to receive things they needed, and after the barbecue party, the devils' desire for charcoal had skyrocketed, its value going from "zero" to "indispensable" overnight.

"Let's go gather some red magic crystals!" a young devil declared.

"Great idea! I'll come too," another chimed in.

"So will I!" a girl added.

"Let's gather all the familiars! And some empty sleighs we can fill with ore!"

"Okay!"

One after another, the younger devils left to go in search of some more red magic crystals.

"Y-Ye're goin' off to gather some red magic crystals, ye say?!" Baledos exclaimed. "Can ye really find 'em that easily? Please take me with ye!"

The dwarf had bonded with the residents of the village over drinks the previous night, so the devils happily allowed him to tag along. They climbed into a handful of sleighs that were pulled by magical creatures that looked a bit like wolves, then disappeared off into the horizon. Their sleighs would most likely be full of red magic crystals on their return.

"I'll need to consult with the townsfolk about starting up charcoal production as soon as we return to Ninoritch," Karen said.

With the huge forest right next to the town, there was certainly no shortage of wood to turn into charcoal, but they would soon need

to start producing large quantities of the stuff to export to the devils, which meant Karen would need to get workshops built, plus hire a load of laborers to work in them.

"So many things to do," she grumbled, but even so, she had a smile on her face. There would most likely be a second mountain of paperwork appearing on her desk on our return to Ninoritch, but she was happy to see the town thriving.

As a reminder, when we set out for the demons' isle, we had three goals: to go tell the demon king about the Collars of Domination and other dangerous magic items that were finding their way to the mainland, to investigate the shady merchant, and to establish a new trade agreement with the devils. Thanks to my successful charcoal demo and Karen ironing out all the contract details with Mr. Galbady, we had successfully accomplished the third of these goals.

Mr. Galbady had also provided me with some very helpful information regarding our second objective. If that mysterious hume merchant had spoken the truth and he was really planning to return to the village of the devils, then it was highly likely we would run into him if we stayed here. I relayed this information to Team Ninoritch, and we had a discussion on what our next course of action would be. In the end, we decided that it would be best for the rest of us to stay in the village while Celes went to see the demon king alone. To be completely honest, I was a little bummed out that I wasn't going to get even a glimpse of the demon king, but staying behind in the village made eminently more sense, and this way, we would make progress on both our first and second goal at the same time.

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Celes had unfurled her black wings and spread them wide in preparation for her trip to the demon king's castle, and we had all come out of her house to see her off.

"Mifa, I am off to report to the demon king. Wait here in the village with Shiro and the others," Celes said to her sister, but her

instructions were met with a hint of reluctance from the little girl.

"Dear sister, you have only just returned, yet you are leaving again *already*?"

"I cannot tell you why I must go, but it is *very* important to us and the rest of the demons that I do."

"I see," Mifa mumbled dejectedly.

"Do not fret," Celes reassured her. "I shall make time for you on my return."

Mifa didn't reply. She seemed to be on the verge of tears. And who could blame her? Her beloved sister had finally come home after a long time away, and she was leaving again almost immediately. No wonder the poor mite was devastated.

"I promise I shall return very soon. In the meantime..." Celes paused, then brightened up, as if she'd just had a genius idea. "I know. You should play with Aina. You two are friends, are you not?"

Mifa hesitated, but after a long moment spent in total silence, she gave her sister a little nod. "Yes."

"Good. According to Shiro, having friends is a good thing," Celes told her. "That is why before I returned home, I asked Aina to become your friend."

Kilpha and I were completely flabbergasted by what we were hearing. Heck, even Patty looked shocked, and she was hardly known for her tact. As for Aina, she seemed visibly flustered, unsure what to do. Not that there was anything any of us *could* do to make up for Celes's blunder. *I mean, seriously, Celes. First, it was that thing with the dress yesterday, and now this. This is your second faux pas in quick succession.*

Don't get me wrong. I totally understood her feelings. She simply wanted to help her little sister to make friends. But she absolutely should *not* have revealed that she had given Aina the task of befriending Mifa.

"Dear sister, did you say..."—Mifa paused—"you asked Aina to be my friend?" She might have been softly spoken, but her words were crystal clear, leaving no room for any misunderstanding over what she was asking.

It was at this point that Celes *finally* realized her error. "Oh, I-I...

I just...” she stammered anxiously. She was eager to downplay her blunder, but she couldn’t find the right words to dig herself out of the mess she had created.

Seeing that an answer wasn’t forthcoming from her sister, Mifa turned to the little girl beside her. “Aina, is this true?”

“U-Um, well, Miss Celes actually—” the little girl started, trying to think up an excuse on the fly, but Mifa was having none of it.

“Please just tell me the truth!” she demanded.

“Mifa...” Aina whispered.

“Aina, did my dear sister *ask* you to be my friend?” Mifa said pointedly.

“Y-Yeah,” the little girl eventually said with a nod, caving under the pressure.

Aina was the type of little girl who could get along with anyone and everyone, so I was positive she would have become friends with Mifa even without Celes saying anything. It was also probably a major factor in why she had admitted the truth so quickly. She didn’t want to lie to her new friend.

However, Mifa had no way of knowing all this. “I... I see,” she muttered, her voice low as her head drooped and a deep sigh escaped her lips.

“Listen, Mifa, all I wanted was—” Celes started, trying to explain herself, but her little sister interrupted her before she could get very far.

“I do not *need* friends!” she yelled. “I have never wanted any! I just...” Her voice broke slightly. “I just want *you* to stay with me, dear sister! I do not need anything else as long as you are by my side!”

“Mifa...” Celes breathed, shocked by her sister’s outburst.

“This dress too...” Mifa added, tightly gripping the hem of the purple dress as tears spilled from her eyes. “I would have preferred it if you had picked it out for me yourself!”

“I’m sorry, Mifa,” Aina murmured, her voice filled with guilt. “I’m sorry that it was me who chose that dress for you.”

“No, do not apologize, Aina,” Celes interjected firmly. “I am the one who asked you to aid me in finding a dress for Mifa. You have

done nothing wrong."

"Still..." Aina said. "I'm sorry." The little girl's shoulders slumped, and Celes reached out to comfort her.

Upon witnessing this, Mifa's tears started flowing even faster. "Dear sister, you... You big idiot!" she yelled, then ran off.

"Mifa!" Celes called out, moving to go after her.

"No! Do not follow me! Please just leave me alone!"

"Mifa..."

Judging from Celes's reaction, this must have been the first time that Mifa had ever spoken to her like that. She was frozen in place, totally unsure what to do or say. Eventually, it looked like she had arrived at the decision of not listening to her sister, and she was about to go after Mifa when I stopped her.

"Wait, Celes."

"What? Why are you stopping me?" she asked.

"If you go after Mifa now, it'll have the exact opposite effect to what you want," I explained. "She'll only withdraw from you even more."

"Then, what am I supposed to *do* exactly?!" she exclaimed, her impatience and frustration growing.

"I believe it's my time to shine. After all..." I paused and smirked at her cockily. "She won't want to show weakness around someone she hates, will she?"

"Shiro..."

"As such, *I* will be the one running after her," I declared to Celes and the rest of the room.

"I'll come with you, Shiro, meow," Kilpha offered.

"Thanks, Kilpha. Let's get going."

"What about me?" Patty piped up. "What should I do?"

"Look after Aina for me, will you?"

"You got it!"

And with that, Kilpha and I set off to find Mifa.

Chapter Fourteen: Mifa's First Rebellious Phase?

"A 'rebellious phase,' meow?"

"Yeah. Is that not a thing among cat-sìths?"

Kilpha and I were holding a quick strategy meeting while we searched for Mifa. Although she was considered weak by devil standards, she could run much, *much* faster than me, and we had already lost sight of her. But that wasn't an issue. Not with Kilpha by my side.

"Shiro, this way, meow," she said, tracking Mifa's scent.

We had left the devils' village by this point and were making our way across a vast snowfield, the pristine snow crunching under our feet. Small footprints dotted the white expanse and they seemed to be leading us into the forest up ahead.

"A 'rebellious phase,' huh? Never heard of that before, meow," Kilpha said.

"Really? You never got angry at your parents for no reason back when you were a teen, for example?" I asked.

"Well, I left my village at thirteen, so..." She trailed off. "Oh! But I *did* kind of hate my grandmother a little bit for trying to marry me off to Sajiri, meow!"

"Right? Well, that's what we call the 'rebellious phase' where I'm from," I explained.

Mifa probably hadn't experienced a rebellious phase before this latest outburst. First and foremost, she didn't actually have parents to rebel *against*. I'd heard they'd given up on her when she was very young, leaving Celes to raise her. As such, Celes wasn't just her sister but the closest thing she had to a mother.

"Mifa loves Celes, so she most likely couldn't control herself in the situation she found herself in," I continued.

"What situation is that, meow?" Kilpha asked quizzically.

"All of us being around."

Thinking back on it, we had actually made quite a few blunders since arriving in the village of the devils. While that could partially be put down to the fact that we were enjoying our excursion to this island, we should definitely have tried to be a little more considerate of Mifa.

"She doesn't have anyone other than Celes, you see," I continued.

"You think, meow? But the chieftain called her 'Miss Mifa,' like he respected her," Kilpha remarked.

"That's just because she's Celes's sister. He shows her respect because she's related to Celes, but I don't know..." I thought for a moment. "I didn't get the sense that he felt any kind of *affection* for her, if you get what I mean. Or they didn't seem particularly close, at least."

"It's impressive you noticed all that, meow," Kilpha said, nodding thoughtfully.

"So yeah, in other words, Celes is the only person Mifa can trust. It's only natural she'd feel confused watching her sister acting all friendly with other people—in this case, us."

Kilpha let out a little gasp of realization.

"She must be feeling like we've stolen her sister away from her," I added.

"So she's jealous of us, meow?" Kilpha asked, wanting to make sure she was on the same page.

"Yeah. Most likely."

She fell silent for a short moment. "I see. I think I can understand her feelings a little bit better now, meow," she said eventually, her gaze fixed on me. It sounded like she could relate to Mifa's feelings.

"That's why we need to find her and tell her just how much Celes really cares about her. And about how she's the most important thing to her by a country mile."

"I'll tell her too, meow! I'll tell her how Celes nearly killed me for her sake!"

The Blue Flash crew had fought Celes back during that whole Suama debacle. According to Raiya, she had beaten them up so thoroughly, it had almost "felt good." The whole reason the almighty Celes had been so hell-bent on getting the Immortal Dragon's egg was to cure her sister's illness, and she would have stopped at nothing to get it if I hadn't come up with an alternative solution to her problem.

"She was *so* scary back then, meow," Kilpha continued. "Just facing her in battle, I felt like I was going to die, meow."

"Are you *really* going to tell Mifa that, though?" I asked, slightly dubious about how effective that would be.

"Yeah! It meant Celes was ready to do anything—even *kill* us—to save her."

"I mean, I guess you have a point there, but..." I paused and scratched my head. "I still think it might be a better idea if we didn't tell Mifa about that."

"Huh? Why not, meow?" Kilpha blinked at me in confusion.

"Oh, no particular reason. Anyway, let's shake a leg."

Kilpha and I plunged into the forest to the accompanying sound of snow crunching beneath our feet.

◇◆◇◆◇

A chilling thought crossed my mind once we were among the foliage of the forest. *Hold on a minute. Will there be poison treants like the ones Celes mentioned in this forest?* I voiced my concerns to Kilpha, but she reassured me by telling me that treants generally didn't attack people unless provoked. I was quite relieved to hear that, but I still trod carefully as we made our way through the woods.

"Now, where could Mifa be?" I wondered aloud.

"She's over there, meow," Kilpha said, pointing to the foot of a large tree.

She was indeed huddled up against the tree, sitting on the ground and hugging her knees. "Why are *you* here?" she said, raising her head from where it was resting on her arms and glaring

at us. She must have heard our footsteps.

"Sorry for being the one to come after you," I said.

The little devil girl treated me to a harrumph before turning her head away, as if refusing to even acknowledge my presence.

That didn't bother me in the slightest, though. "Celes wanted to run after you, but I stopped her." I paused to see if Mifa would react to that, but she didn't, so I continued. "You know as well as I do how bad your sister is at everything that doesn't involve fighting, so I figured she might put her foot in it again if she tried talking to you now."

I'd purposefully made it sound like I was really close to Celes to get a rise out of the little devil girl, and it worked a treat.

"You know nothing about my sister!" she bellowed. She made a snowball and hurled it at me, though it missed and hit Kilpha instead, who let out a startled meow. "I shall not miss next time," she warned, preparing another snowball.





I quickly raised my hands in capitulation. All I'd wanted to see was if she still had the energy to get upset, and by the looks of it, she clearly did. "Sorry, sorry," I said, taking another step toward her. "I just really wanted to talk to you without Celes around."

"Well, *I* do not want to talk to you," she said pointedly.

"Aw, c'mon, don't say that," I cajoled. "Don't you want to hear about what Celes is like when she's not with you? Aren't you curious about the side of her you don't know about?"

Mifa's shoulders twitched at this. I seemed to have successfully captured her attention. "A side of my dear sister that I do not know about?" she whispered.

"Yup. Has she ever told you about what she gets up to in Ninoritch?" I asked.

Mifa shook her head. "No. Dear sister has only told me a little of the outside world."

"Really? Then, how about we tell you all about the first time we met her?" I suggested. "Well, unless you don't *want* to know, that is," I teased.

Her expression tightened into a frown. "I *do* want to know! Tell me all about it. Right now!" she demanded, eager to learn more about the sister she loved so much.

"Sure thing," I said. "Back then, some adventurer friends of mine had told me that a demon had shown up in Ninoritch. So I..."

I began to recount the story of our first meeting with Celes: how she'd pretended to be a hume and wandered around Ninoritch asking everyone she met if they had seen an egg she'd "lost"; how Saori had accidentally given her a makeover that made her look like a wrestling heel; how the egg she'd been looking for had already hatched and Suama had popped out of it (Mifa was very surprised to learn that Suama was actually a dragon); and how Celes had kidnapped Aina, thinking I was the one with the egg.

When I'd finished, Mifa was visibly shaken, her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open slightly. "Dear sister *abducted* Aina?" she whispered in disbelief.

"Yup," I said with a nod. "That's just how desperate she was, you see. But Suama had already hatched from the egg by that point, so I

didn’t know what to do.”

Mifa was completely absorbed in the story, so I continued.

“That’s when I got the idea of making a fake dragon egg.”

I explained how I’d asked Shiori to craft a decoy out of papier-mâché, then had Patty stage a surprise attack on Celes to buy us enough time to escape.

“Celes was *so* scary when she was running after us,” I said, laying it on thick. “I think ‘sinister’ is a good way to describe how she was then. Her aura was seriously menacing.”

“Yup, totally. Celes was *super-duper* strong, meow,” Kilpha chimed in. “Our best adventurers had to team up to fight her, and even with all of us combined, we couldn’t take her down, meow.”

The Fairy’s Blessing had ganged up on Celes en masse in order to gain us the time we needed to look for the Immortal Dragon—or Dramom, as she came to be known—and in the end, the whole lot of them had been beaten to a pulp.

“But that’s not even the coolest part, meow,” Kilpha continued. “We learned afterward that she’d been going *easy* on us, meow!”

“She went easy on you? My dear sister?” Mifa said, visibly surprised.

“Yeah, meow!” Kilpha confirmed. “Do you have any idea how much harder it is to defeat someone without killing them than it is to just finish ’em for good, meow?”

“It is hardly a challenge for my dear sister,” Mifa said self-importantly, as if she were bragging about her own achievements.

“In the end, we were completely outmatched,” I admitted, taking up the baton from Kilpha. “But then, things took an even more dangerous turn.”

When we arrived in the Immortal Dragon’s lair, all we found there was the skeleton of a dragon. Overcome with despair, we then had to fight Celes, who had followed us inside. Fortunately for us, my grandma appeared just in time to save the day, telling me to revive the Immortal Dragon with a drop of my own blood, which to my utter amazement actually worked.

I was having a great time recalling the sheer chaos of it all, and so was Kilpha, if the way her tail was excitedly swaying about was

any indication. “And so, thanks to my grandma coming to our rescue with her witchy powers and the newly reborn Immortal Dragon joining our side, the tables had turned, and we were finally able to beat Celes,” I said, concluding the story.

Mifa pouted at this ending. “My sister is the strongest. She does not lose to anyone.”

“She is very strong, indeed,” I agreed. “She fought with everything she had right up until the very last moment, all for you. She told us she didn’t care what happened to her, just so long as she could save you.”

Tears welled up in the little devil girl’s eyes, but unlike earlier, they were tears of joy instead of frustration.

What Kilpha said next, however, completely ruined the moment. “And listen to this, Mifa, meow! After everything had gone down, Celes came back to Ninoritch and told Shiro she was now his slave, meow!”

On hearing this, Mifa’s eyes narrowed again. “His *slave*? You made my sister your slave, you rat?” she spat at me.

“No, I refused! I really did! I totally refused. Didn’t I, Kilpha?” I said, seeking backup from my cat-sìth friend.

But she simply shrugged. “Yeah, I dunno, meow.”

“Huh?! ‘I dunno, meow’?! What do you *mean*, ‘I dunno, meow’?! Why would you betray me now?” I lamented.

Kilpha giggled mischievously. “Just kidding, meow,” she said, then turned back to the little devil girl. “Mifa, Shiro didn’t *make* Celes his slave, meow. She *offered* to become his slave to repay him for curing you of the Decaying Disease.”

The little devil girl’s head dropped. “I...” she started. “I knew you were the one who sent me that medicine for my illness.”

“Y-You did?” I stammered.

“My sister told me she had become indebted to a male hume.”

“I didn’t do it so she would be indebted to me. Anyway...” I paused and crouched down so that I was at eye level with the little girl. Her eyes were red from crying. “Do you see how hard Celes has been working to help you now?”

She gave me a slight nod. “I have known from the start. I have

always known that my dear sister has done everything she could for me. Even back then...” She paused, seeming lost in her memories. “One day, when I was sick, she came to me and said, ‘I have found a way to cure your illness,’ then promised me ‘everything would be fine.’ After that, she left. But I did not know until now how much she had struggled...”

Warm tears flooded to her eyes again and spilled down her cheeks before falling to the ground and creating tiny holes in the snow.

“‘Everything would be fine,’ huh? Sounds like a very Celes thing to say,” I mused. Knowing how clumsy she was with words, that had clearly been her best attempt at trying to comfort her sister. “Mifa, Celes still cares about you the most out of everyone in the world. That’s the truth, I promise,” I said softly.

“Yup, meow!” Kilpha chimed in. “I’ve never seen Celes look as shaken up as she did when you ran off just now. She cares about you so much, she didn’t know what to do, meow.”

Mifa nodded timidly.

“That’s probably why she asked Aina to be your friend too,” I added. “She must’ve genuinely thought you’d be happier if you had a friend.”

“I told you to stop talking about my dear sister as if you understand her,” the little devil girl snapped.

“Ah, um, sorry about that.”

She stood up, quickly wiped her tears away, and glared at me. “I... I know that much,” she said defiantly.

“Oh, I see.”

“So I also know I have to apologize to Aina,” she added.

“Should we head back to the village together, then?” I suggested.

But the little girl shook her head. “No, I *hate* you, you rat. So you can go back by yourselves,” she said, waving her hand around in the air as if shooing us.

Kilpha and I looked at each other and shrugged.

“All right,” I said. “We’ll head back first, then.”

“Hurry up about it,” Mifa demanded. “Remember, I *hate* you.”

“Yes, yes, I heard. We’re leaving.”

Kilpha and I turned and headed back to the path we had taken to get here. I felt like I heard Mifa mutter something behind me, but I couldn't make out what it was.

"What was that? Did you say something, Mifa?" I called over to her.

She seemed to hesitate momentarily but eventually replied, "I did not."

"Oh? Uh, okay then. Don't stay out here too long, you hear? Celes is worried sick about you."

"That is none of your business. Now hurry up and go."

"Okay, okay."

Kilpha and I headed back to the village, and about two hours later, Mifa came back too. As soon as she stepped inside the confines of the village, Celes scooped her up in her arms without a word. She didn't scold her, nor express relief or joy at seeing her. No, she did none of that. It was as if she were silently trying to use her embrace to fill the loneliness in the little devil girl's heart.

The two sisters finally let go of each other after a long moment, and just like that, they were back to being as close as ever. I could tell that Mifa was still a bit uneasy, however, likely wondering how she would apologize to Aina. I could see the little girl was clearly contemplating the same thing, since she felt guilty for revealing to Mifa that she had become her friend at Celes's request. For her part, Mifa felt bad for claiming she didn't need any friends. Neither little girl knew how to approach the other to make it all better. I felt sorry for them, but they were children. It wasn't like I could just butt in and force them to be friends again. As such, I decided I would just watch over them for the time being.

"Fighting and making up with friends," I mumbled contemplatively. "That's what youth is all about."

At that point, I hadn't yet noticed the change in Mifa. In fact, none of us had. Yet she had returned a completely different person from the one we had left in the forest.

Chapter Fifteen: Contact

"But more than anything else, I hate myself."

The words Mifa murmured under her breath hadn't reached Shiro's or Kilpha's ears.

"What was that? Did you say something, Mifa?"

"I did not."

"Oh? Uh, okay then. Don't stay out here too long, you hear? Celes is worried sick about you."

"That is none of your business. Now hurry up and go."

Mifa watched the retreating silhouettes of Shiro and Kilpha growing smaller and smaller in the distance before looking up at the sky where the auroras were peeking through the gaps in the canopy.

"Dear sister..." she mumbled. "I have no one but you. Dear sister..."

The argument back in the house had been the first time in Mifa's whole life that she had said no to her sister. She had even called her an idiot before running off in a fit of frustration. But after that, Shiro and Kilpha had come to find her, then shared stories of her beloved sister—stories Mifa had never heard before—just to show how much her sister cared about her. According to Shiro, she wasn't even angry that Mifa had run away. He said she was confused and worried, yes, but not angry. *Even though I can do nothing for myself... Even though I would have died long ago if not for my dear sister... Even though she is the only one who loves me, I...*

Oh, how foolish she had been. Why had she rejected her dear sister's company even though she loved her so much?

"Dear sister..." she whispered, calling out to the person she cared for so deeply.

The dress her dear sister had bought for her was in Mifa's favorite color. She had remembered. She had remembered the time Mifa found a light purple gem in a grotto and called it "pretty." That had

made the little devil girl's chest swell with joy. But when she had learned that Aina had picked the dress out for her, she had almost angrily ripped it up out of jealousy. But she could not bring herself to do it. It had still been a present from her dear sister, after all.

The only reason she was still alive was thanks to the man she despised so much. Her sister had told her so herself. "I hate Shiro. But..." She paused and sighed deeply. "But more than anything else, I hate myself."

Mifa wanted to disappear. She was powerless and nothing more than a burden as a sister. Everything would be easier if she was just no longer around. She hated that man for stealing her sister from her, but she also owed him her life. How ironic that the person she resented the most was the person responsible for her still being alive.

"More than anything else, I hate myself," she repeated, tears rolling down her cheeks.

And that's when *it* happened.

"Dear me, dear me, dear me. What is a little demon girl doing in the woods all by herself?" a masculine-sounding voice called out from somewhere behind her.

Mifa whirled around and found three men standing not very far away from her. How long had they been there? Two of them were demons with collars around their necks, and in between them stood a third man who was seemingly the leader of the trio. Somehow, Mifa couldn't sense any mana coming from him. But that was impossible. Was he a *hume*? *But what would a hume be doing here on the northern isle?* she asked herself.

Could he be another guest of Mifa's dear sister? No, that wasn't very likely either. In fact, the question had barely crossed her mind before she realized there was no way her sister would have invited this man to their home. Why, you might ask? Because of his creepy smile. Mifa's beloved sister would never be friends with such a shady individual.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The man gave an elegant bow. "I am but a humble merchant, little devil lady."

"A merchant?" she echoed.

"Indeed, a merchant. I acquire whatever it is people seek, then offer it to them in exchange for a fair price."

The merchant with the creepy smile took a step toward Mifa.

"You appear to be having a bit of a difficult time, correct? I believe it is fate that has brought me to you today. Is there anything I might be able to help you with, perhaps? If you wish to confide in me, I shall do my utmost to aid you."

"I do not. Please leave," Mifa replied curtly, taking a step back.

The merchant immediately took another step forward, however. "Is that really true?" he asked.

"What are you insinuating?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. I just happened to notice you were crying earlier. Purely by coincidence, of course. But it is not often that someone cries without a reason for doing so, is it?"

Mifa didn't reply.

"There is no need to look so guarded," the merchant continued. "As you can see, I have friends among the demons." He gestured to the demons on either side of him. "I have actually been here previously to extend my friendship to the devils as well, but..." He paused. "Hm? Wait a moment..." The man scrutinized Mifa's face, an expression of surprise plastered across his own. "Could you be Lady Mifa? Lady Celesdia's younger sister?"

Mifa's breath caught in her throat and a chill shot down her spine. *How does he know?* "And what if I am?" she said, inadvertently confirming his suspicions.

The man's smile instantly widened. "I see, I see, I see. So you *really* are Lady Mifa," he said.

"Do not come any closer to me, or I shall call my sister. She will make short work of you," Mifa warned coldly.

"There is no need to be so wary of me. I am just a weak hume, after all. I hold no ill intent toward you, Lady Celesdia's younger sister. I promise." The man spread his arms wide, as if to show he was no threat to her. "I actually crossed the sea and came all the way here just to see you, Lady Mifa."

"To see *me*?" the little devil girl said.

"Indeed, indeed, indeed. I have come from very far away to meet you. If I am not mistaken, you have the Feeding skill, do you not?"

How did he know *that*? Only a handful of people in the village knew about Mifa's skill.

I need to run. Her instincts were screaming at her to flee, but her curiosity got the best of her. She was eager to know what this man was about to reveal to her.

"Lady Mifa, wouldn't you like to be able to use your Feeding ability to its fullest potential?" he asked.

"I cannot use the Feeding skill at all," Mifa replied.

"Ah, indeed. I'd heard whispers of that. Your body is simply too frail to harness it, is it not? How unfortunate! Has there ever been a situation quite so tragic?" the man lamented, shaking his head from side to side as if to emphasize just how regrettable it was. But it didn't take long for the wide smile to reappear on his face. "Yet you are in luck today, for you see, I just so happen to own a magic item that should allow you to use your Feeding skill, regardless of your current limitations."

Mifa felt her heart start to race at his words. "A magic item?" she mumbled.

"Indeed, indeed, indeed. A magic item. It allows the user to steel their body far beyond their normal limits. With it, your body may become strong enough for you to wield your Feeding skill without any adverse repercussions. What do you say?"

As he said this, he produced something from his chest pocket which turned out to be a black bracelet that was glowing dimly.

Mifa audibly swallowed her saliva. She had always yearned for a body that was strong enough to withstand her Feeding skill. She knew if she could attain that strength, she would no longer be a burden on her beloved sister, and the other devils in the village would stop criticizing her behind her back. No, perhaps she could even stand beside her sister as an equal. The village's elder had once said the Feeding skill had that kind of power. And with a strong body, Mifa might finally be able to grasp that power. She and her dear sister could rule over the devils together.

"Well, you *do* look interested," the merchant said, seeing right

through her, his smile widening even further. “Well then, how about this, Lady Mifa? Would you like to try the bracelet out for yourself?”

“Try it out?” Mifa echoed.

“Indeed. There are times when testing a product once—just once—can convey its value far more effectively than a lengthy explanation of it. I believe this bracelet is one such item.”

Mifa unconsciously reached a hand out toward the bracelet before immediately pulling back.

“There is no need to hold back,” the merchant assured her. “Naturally, I won’t charge you simply for trying it on. And you can easily remove it if you find you don’t like it.”

“Then I shall give it a try,” Mifa mumbled, succumbing to temptation. She accepted the bracelet from the merchant, and he smiled broadly again.

“You can put it on either arm, but as it is a little on the large side, I would recommend placing it on your nondominant wrist,” the merchant advised.

“All right,” Mifa said as she passed her left hand through the metal band.

In the next instant, her heart started thumping hard inside her chest, and she could feel something rising up from deep within. A scream escaped her lips. *My body... It feels like it is burning.* What was this *thing* rising up within her? What was it?!

“What do you think, Lady Mifa?” the merchant said, smirking. “Can you feel the power surging up inside you?”

“The p-power?” Mifa stammered.

“Oh, yes, indeed. Power, Lady Mifa. Can you not feel something hot rising up within you? Can you not feel that tremendous power drawing up from the depths?”

She could feel it. Of course she could feel it. It felt as if her body were about to explode from the sheer volume of it. *So this is power, is it? The thing I have been yearning for all this time?*

“Do you like it? This bracelet drastically strengthens the wearer’s body, you see,” the merchant explained. “But that’s not all it does. It can also absorb mana from the wearer’s surroundings and pump it straight into their body to reinforce it still further. What do you think?

Isn’t it just perfect for you?”

Mifa could feel the power flowing through her entire body. She punched a nearby tree to test out her new strength, and the force of the impact caused it to crumple and fall immediately, accompanied by a loud cry that echoed around the forest. That was the telltale sign of a poison treant dying. One punch. All it had taken was one punch to fell a creature that even the village’s warriors preferred to keep their distance from.

“Incredible...” she whispered, awestruck.

“It would seem that you *do* like it,” the merchant remarked gleefully. “Strong mana dwells in this land, and as long as there is an abundance of it, the bracelet will continue to enhance your body.”

Mifa wanted this bracelet. She wanted to keep it whatever it cost. With it on, she could stay by her beloved sister’s side for as long as she wanted.

“I desire this bracelet,” she said to the merchant.

“My, my, my. Is that so?” The merchant nodded repeatedly, a satisfied smile playing across his lips.

“What can I do to keep it?”

“Well, you see, this bracelet is actually quite difficult to produce, which makes it *incredibly* valuable. However...” He paused as his lips stretched into another one of those creepy smiles of his. “The gods have granted you the Feeding skill, which is an exceedingly rare ability. This humble servant would not wish to deprive you of its powers. So for that reason...”

He leaned in closer, and Mifa felt another uncomfortable shiver shoot down her spine.

“All I ask of you is that you use a sliver of that power to aid me if the need ever arises. If you agree to that, I am willing to give you that bracelet for no extra cost.”

“Are you telling the truth?” Mifa said skeptically.

“Indeed, indeed, indeed I am. However, you *will* need to help me if—”

Mifa didn’t even let him finish his sentence. “I will! If you give me this bracelet, I will lend you my powers! As much as you want!”

The man beamed at her. He looked delighted from the bottom of

his heart. “Thank you very much, Lady Mifa. That seals our agreement. The bracelet is now yours. Now then. Since you have it on, why not try out your Feeding skill? This humble servant has brought you something special to test it on.”

The merchant beckoned one of the demons forward, and after a nod of acknowledgment, the demon set down the bag he was carrying and pulled something out of it.

“Meat?” Mifa said quizzically, eyeing up the lump of raw flesh in the demon’s hand.

“Indeed,” the merchant confirmed. “It is the meat of a magical beast we defeated on our way here. What do you say, Lady Mifa? Would you like to try out your Feeding skill?”

Mifa hesitated, then nodded. “I would.”

She grabbed the lump of meat from the demon’s hand and brought it up to her mouth, then tore into it and chewed it up with fervor before swallowing the mouthful down. The effect was immediate.

“My body...” Mifa whispered. “It feels like it is *throbbing*.”

She had just acquired a new power. She focused her attention on her right hand, and lo and behold, sharp claws began to extend from her fingertips. With these, she could easily tear through the flesh of any magical beast.

“Oh, wonderful, wonderful, how *wonderful*, Lady Mifa! I also have other types of meat to hand. Would you like to try those out too?”

Mifa nodded. Frost wolf, ice lizard, dark mantis... She devoured every different type of meat the merchant handed to her, and gained new powers with each bite.

“Truly wonderful!” the merchant marveled. “Your innate talent may even surpass that of your sister!”

Surpass dear sister? Who, me*?* How delighted Mifa would be if that were true! If she truly was stronger than her, her dear sister would finally approve of her. Never again would she be abandoned for being too “weak.”

Mifa could finally say it: She was powerful.

The merchant flashed her one last smile before disappearing as swiftly as he’d appeared. “We shall see each other again, Lady Mifa,”

he said as he departed. “You will repay me then.”

And just like that, he was gone.

Chapter Sixteen: Change

The following day, Celes set off for the demon king's castle. Although the demons' territory was technically an island, it was so vast that it would take her a good three or four days to reach her destination, meaning we weren't expecting her back for about a week. In the meantime, everyone else in our little group would await her return at her house. Or well, *almost* everyone else.

"Look at this, Miss Mayor! Look at all these red magic crystals I dug up!"

Baledos and Eldos were too busy mining for red magic crystals with a group of devils to sit around with us. To cut a long story short, the two had recently visited the grotto where the devils got their crystals from and Baledos's suspicion that it was in reality a mine had been confirmed. According to him, realizing the mine's full potential could yield an extraordinary quantity of crystals.

As soon as the new trade arrangement between Ninoritch and the village of the devils kicked into force, an unprecedented influx of red magic crystals would hit the little town, far surpassing the amounts it had seen to date. Karen would then sell these crystals on to the blacksmith brothers, giving them the opportunity to make more pieces in the Baledos series to supply to adventurers. In turn, armed with all of this new equipment, the adventurers would be able to venture deeper into the Gigheena Forest in order to pillage dungeons for treasure and materials the guild could then sell to loot merchants. A portion of these sales would then flow back into the town in the form of taxes, fueling the town's growth and expansion. *Now that's what you call a cycle of prosperity!* I thought. And naturally, as a merchant, I had every intention of contributing to it.

I would even go as far as arguing that Ninoritch—long dismissed as a backwater out in the middle of nowhere—was on the verge of surpassing not only the Giruam Kingdom, but all the other nations

on the continent in terms of growth potential. After all, the town had been attracting an ever-growing influx of merchants from all corners of the continent in recent months, and it was only a matter of time before it began making waves across the rest of the world due to its potential.

This might spur the lords of the Giruam Kingdom's other fiefs—and perhaps also the rulers of neighboring nations—to try to interfere with the town's growth, but I wasn't too worried on that front, because for starters, the first princess of the kingdom was presently residing in Ninoritch, and although she was supposed to be there undercover, Shess's mere presence might turn out to be a blessing in disguise. After all, if anyone tried to mess with the town in any way, she could use her authority as a member of the royal family, much like how Tokugawa Mitsukuni—the so-called vice-shogun—would take down all the bad guys in the long-running period drama about his life.

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"Mister Shiro, have you seen Mifa anywhere?" Aina came up and asked me while I was taking a stroll around the village. She was a little out of breath, which made me wonder if she had run all the way to find me.

"I haven't, no," I replied. "She's not back at the house?"

"No. She went out, so I followed her, but then..." She trailed off.

"Were you looking to make up?" I asked.

Aina nodded. "I haven't apologized to her properly yet," she said.

"I see."

The little girl felt guilty for asking Mifa to be her friend just because Celes had requested it, and I knew the little devil girl was feeling just as bad about claiming she didn't need friends. However, both girls had yet to find the opportune moment to apologize, and as a result, they hadn't spoken to each other for the better part of four days. *Should I maybe intervene? No, it's still too soon. Actually, scratch that. I shouldn't get involved in this at all*, I decided. This experience would be invaluable to both little girls, and as an adult,

all I could really do was watch over them from afar.

Something was weighing on my mind, however. Mifa had started acting differently from before, and quite obviously so. All of a sudden, she was much harder to approach, and she tended to go off on her own for long periods. At first, I figured she just didn't want to be around me, but I was beginning to think there was more to it than that. Aina must have noticed the change in her behavior too, which likely explained why she had been struggling so much to find the right moment to apologize.

"Mifa hates me now, doesn't she?" she mumbled. I figured the words had just slipped out due to how anxious she was. I noticed her eyes were filling up with tears, so I gently placed my hand on her head and ruffled her hair a little.

"Of course she doesn't," I reassured her. "She really wants to patch things up with you too. I can tell."

"But she never wears the dress Miss Celes gave her," she observed, and it was true. Mifa hadn't worn the light purple dress once since Celes left the village. That fact seemed to be weighing heavily on Aina's mind.

"Maybe she doesn't want to put it on because it's so precious to her? Or maybe she only wants to wear it when Celes is around?" I suggested.

"Do you think so?" Aina sniffed.

"I do."

After all, Mifa *had* said she wanted to apologize to Aina when Kilpha and I chased after her that time. That meant she must have wanted to make up with the little girl too, right?

"You're still worried, aren't you?" I presumed. Aina gave a little nod in response. "All right. I have an idea."

"Oh?"

"Let's go—"

I was about to suggest the two of us go look for Mifa when the yells of a man interrupted me. "M-Magical beasts! They're coming this way!"

In the next instant, a beastly roar echoed around the whole village. It was so powerful, the earth started trembling, and I

unconsciously clapped my hands over my ears to block out the noise.

"Mister Shiro, look!" Aina urged, pointing in front of her.

I followed her gaze and saw a group of humongous humanoid monsters over ten meters in height approaching the village.

"*T-Titans*?! No, wait. Yetis?"

They looked just like the classic depiction of yetis, with white fur covering their bodies and sharp fangs protruding from their mouths. Each one was holding what looked like an entire tree in one hand, swinging it around like a massive club. *Are those trees poison treants? It sounds like they're groaning. So monsters have started using other monsters as weapons now? Ugh, you gotta be kidding me.*

"Giant trolls! Someone fetch the chieftain! Hurry!" a nearby devil exclaimed.

"He is surely already on his way after hearing that roar. We should prepare for battle instead!" another devil suggested.

"But what are giant trolls doing *here*? They are only supposed to be found in the deepest levels of dungeons," yet another remarked.

"And Miss Celesdia is not even here to fight them..." one of the devils lamented. "What terrible timing."

"No, this is great! We can show these beasts what we are made of!"

So it seemed these monsters were actually trolls, but the giant variety. Nesca had once told me that trolls had strong regenerative capabilities, which made them incredibly annoying to defeat. This presented something of an issue, because not only were there several of these trolls presently bearing down on the village, they were also giant. Wouldn't that prove to be a little *too* much to handle, even for the devils? Judging by how everyone was panicking, it certainly seemed that way.

"Shiro, you two should get out of here," the chieftain told us as soon as he arrived on the scene.

"Mr. Galbady, can the devils handle these trolls alone?" I asked with a note of concern.

"Well, I can take three down by myself, just about. But with this

many...” He paused, then admitted, “It will be tough.”

Being the human beanpole I was, I knew I was highly unlikely to be of any help, but I had friends who could make a difference. Kilpha was a silver-rank adventurer, Patty could use some mighty powerful offensive spells, Dramom could take care of the healing, even while restraining her powers, and Suama could help with that too. Plus, if I fetched Eldos from wherever he was at that particular moment, we’d have one of the Sixteen Heroes on our side. They could definitely help to defend the village, even if I personally was a fifth wheel in this situation.

“Should I go get my companions? Or is there anything at all I can do?” I asked.

Mr. Galbady shook his head. “We cannot ask Miss Celesdia’s guests for help. Leave this to us.”

“But—” I tried to argue, but my words were drowned out by another deafening roar.

A moment later, one of the giant trolls brought its club (well, more accurately, its poison treant) down on several houses, destroying them all with a single swing. Its overwhelming rage and aura reminded me of the fictional supersized monsters known as kaiju that were mainstays of Japanese TV and cinema, and I found myself wishing a superhero would show up to defeat these behemoths.

“Shiro, take the others and go find somewhere to hide outside of the village!” Mr. Galbady told me before turning and charging at the pack of giant trolls. He leaped at one of the beasts—which was over five times his size—and started striking it with his fists. This appeared to be the cue for the rest of the devils to make their moves too.

“Everyone, follow the chieftain!”

“They are just trolls. What can they do to us?”

“Get ready, magical beasts! We are coming for you!”

“We shall dedicate our victory to Miss Celes!”

“Let us kill them and eat their flesh!”

Now, *that’s* a warrior tribe for you. One after another, they started leaping toward the giant trolls.

"Take this!"

"Die, damnable beasts!"

The devils' battle cries intermingled with the thunderous roars of the giant trolls. Within an instant, the village had turned into a battlefield, and Aina and I watched on nervously as the devils initially gained the upper hand, only to lose it again moments later, the tide of the battle lurching back and forth unpredictably. It wasn't long before our companions appeared, most likely alerted to the ongoing situation by all the noise.

"Ah, there you are, Shiro, meow!" Kilpha said.

"And Aina too!" Patty exclaimed.

"Thank goodness you are both safe," Karen added.

Dramom and Suama were also there. "Master, let us leave this place at once."

"Pa-pa, you o-tay?" Suama babbled.

I couldn't see Baledos and Eldos with them, which likely meant they were still down in the mine.

"Wh-What should we do, Shiro? Sh-Should I go help out?" Patty asked.

Her expression was a mix of fear at the idea of fighting these trolls and determination to protect her friends. She might have acted tough on the daily, but in reality, she was a bit of a coward, and the sheer size of the giant trolls must have made her resolve waver.

"Mr. Galbady told us to flee, but..." I trailed off and looked back at the battle.

In the brief moment that I had looked away, the situation had changed drastically. Many of the devils were wounded and sprawled out on the ground, unable to fight. The others—including Mr. Galbady—were still holding their own, but who knew how much longer they could last? In fact, at present, Mr. Galbady was surrounded by a group of six giant trolls, and he could do little more than defend himself against their attacks.

"I think we should help them," I decided.

I had a dozen bottles of Dramom's healing potion in my inventory, and if I handed some to Kilpha, the two of us could pour them down the throats of the wounded devils and get them back in the fight,

right?

"Damn it. Stop being such a wimp, Shiro," I mumbled to myself, punching my own trembling legs. *I have no time to think. I need to go help out the devils before—*

"Heh heh heh."

The chuckle from who-knows-where interrupted my train of thought. Whoever was laughing sounded like they were finding this whole situation incredibly amusing, and it took me a few seconds to realize that I knew exactly who the voice belonged to.

"Mifa?" Aina whispered in shock.

I followed her gaze and saw the little devil girl standing near a bunch of the giant trolls. "Mifa! It's too dangerous! Come here—" I tried to shout to her, but she just chuckled again and resumed marching straight toward the giant trolls, swaying like a ghost with each step she took.

"Guoh?" One of the beasts had noticed her.

Oh no! "Run, Mifa! *Run*!" Aina yelled at the top of her lungs.

I started running in the direction of the little devil girl with the intention of rescuing her, and Kilpha did likewise. She was much faster than me, but it was too late. Neither of us were going to reach Mifa in time. The giant troll closest to her swung its club at the little devil girl.

"Heh heh heh. Die," Mifa uttered before disappearing into thin air.

An instant later, a cracking sound echoed all around us.

"What?" I whispered in bewilderment as I gazed up at the giant troll, whose head was suddenly bent at an unnatural angle.

"I am nowhere near done," I heard Mifa declare, finally spotting her flying high up in the sky near the troll. Just like Celes, she had black wings, and her expanded arms were as large as logs. "I am going to eat you. Give me your strength."





She landed on the giant troll's shoulder, and true to her claim, she sank her teeth into its throat.

"Guoooh!" it screeched.

Mifa cried out in ecstasy, her mouth smeared with the blood of the beast. Anyone watching her must have realized what had just happened: she had become able to use her Feeding skill. Like Celes often did, she had gained power from consuming the flesh of the troll.

"Heh heh heh. I will kill you all," she announced.

Her arrival marked a complete one-eighty in the situation. She flew from one troll to another, almost as if dancing, and took them down one by one. This boosted the morale of the other devils, and the battle turned completely in their favor. It wasn't long before the last of the beasts fell to the ground with a resounding boom that made the earth shake. The trolls had taken more damage than their regenerative capabilities could keep up with, and they all lay motionless. Mifa chuckled once more at the sight before her.

One of the devils stepped forward from the crowd and bowed his head in her direction. It was Mr. Galbady. "I see you have awakened your powers, Miss Mifa."

"Heh heh heh. I did. I can use the Feeding skill now," she replied.

"Congratulations. I am sure Miss Celes will be delighted to hear it."

One after another, the devils knelt before Mifa and paid their respects to her.

"I have grown strong. I no longer need my sister to protect me," Mifa said, chuckling slightly before erupting into fits of wild laughter. A cold gust of wind swept around the area as her laughter echoed all around us.

It wasn't until the following day that I noticed the Collars of Domination around the necks of the giant trolls.

Chapter Seventeen: What Is His Objective?

The giant trolls had been wearing Collars and Bracelets of Domination, magic items that were forbidden in most hume nations. I counted them all up after they had been removed from the monsters' corpses and found there were thirty-two in total. About three days after the attack, my companions and I went to inspect the haphazard pile they had been tossed into on the edge of the village.

"No matter which way you look at it, this is bad," I remarked as we all stared at the pile.

"You said it, meow," Kilpha agreed. "Looks like your intuition was right, meow."

We all exchanged our opinions on the situation, starting with Karen. "So creatures being controlled by these Collars of Domination have now started appearing on the demons' isle too. It seems you were right all along. That dangerous merchant you mentioned really is connected to the demons."

I nodded. "Yup. That theory just went from a 'hm, maybe' to an 'almost definitely.'"

"Who do you think this merchant was targeting, then? The devils or us?" she asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. "It's entirely possible he could've just been after the devils. Or maybe he'd noticed us snooping around."

"Shiro," Eldos chimed in, "ya reckon it coulda been a warnin' for the devil girlie?"

"I think ye might be onto somethin' there, Eldos," Baledos piped up, nodding. "I mean, she came to warn the demon king 'bout that merchant, right? Maybe he's just tryin' to get his revenge on her."

"Ooh, I guess that's a possibility, yeah," I said.

Their theory made a lot of sense. After all, the timing of the attack was extremely questionable. Perhaps the merchant was trying to send a warning to Celes so that she would stop investigating the origin of the Collars of Domination. *Well, either way...*

"It's highly possible this merchant knows what we're up to," I said. Yup, the attack was just way too convenient to simply dismiss it as a coincidence. This merchant must have had a reason for sending the giant trolls to attack the village of the devils.

"Master, what did the chieftain of the devils have to say about the attack?" Dramom asked.

"Well, in his words..." I paused. "He said it was 'inconsequential.'"

The vein on her temple pulsated at this. It seemed she didn't appreciate Mr. Galbady's rather dismissive response. "He calls monsters attacking the village and putting your life in danger 'inconsequential,' does he*?*" she said, her voice ice-cold.

I'd been far enough away from the monsters to avoid getting harmed at all during the attack, but Dramom had clearly seen it differently. As always, her loyalty to me was so intense, it was difficult to deal with.

"Now that Mifa has—how did Mr. Galbady phrase it again? 'Awakened her powers.' Was that it? Well, anyway, now that she's super strong, he said it doesn't really matter who was behind the attack, since she can now defeat any creature that gets sent this way."

None of the devils seemed all that concerned about the Collars of Domination, because to them, it was simply a trifling detail now that Mifa could finally tap into her full power. The Feeding skill was an incredibly rare ability, and they now had *two* people in the village who wielded it. They were in full "Bring it on!" mode, totally unafraid of any creature that might attack them.

I turned to the little girl beside me. "Aina, do you know where Mifa is?" I asked.

She shook her head. Ever since almost single-handedly defeating the giant trolls, Mifa had been spending most of her time hunting magical beasts outside of the village. She would either go off after them by herself or take the village's warriors with her to show off

her new powers like a child who had just been given a new toy.

"I'm a bit scared of her," Aina admitted.

"I see."

Things had already been pretty awkward between the two of them, but Mifa was now just plain unapproachable. And with both little girls unsure how to bridge the gap, the distance between them just continued to grow wider.

"What if we *can't* be friends anymore?" Aina wondered aloud, her voice sounding feeble.

I placed my hand on her head. "I'm sure you can," I said, patting it gently.

More hands started joining mine atop her head. "Shiro's right, meow," Kilpha chimed in, also patting her. "You'll be fine, Aina, meow."

"Yes, the two of you will be friends again soon, I'm sure of it," Karen added.

"Y-You definitely will!" Patty interjected. "And I'll help!"

"Shu-ama help too!"

We all haphazardly began ruffling Aina's hair, and her lips formed a feeble smile as a few tears rolled down her cheeks.

The following day, Celes came home.

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"Mifa..." Celes said in an uncomprehending tone. "Are you saying you killed all of these magical beasts by yourself?"

Celes had only just set foot in the village when Mifa had come running up to her wearing her light purple dress and welcomed her home by leading her to the village square, where the severed heads of the beasts the little devil girl had killed were proudly on display.

Mifa beamed with excitement in response to her older sister's question. "Yes, I killed all of these magical beasts by myself, dear sister! My powers have awakened, and I can now use the Feeding skill!"

Her sister's puzzled look gradually melted away and was replaced by one of pure joy as she excitedly scooped the little devil girl up in

her arms. “Your powers have *awakened*? That is...” Her voice momentarily deserted her. “That is incredible! My little sister is remarkable!”

Mifa was overjoyed at receiving such enthusiastic praise from her beloved sister, and the two of them squeezed each other tightly with wide grins on their faces.

“Mifa looks happy,” Aina remarked quietly, a small smile curling her lips upward.

I nodded. “She sure does.”

The two little girls still hadn’t made up, but Aina seemed genuinely glad that her friend was so happy.

“I’ve never seen Celes make a face like that before, meow,” Kilpha said.

“What a heartwarming scene,” Karen agreed.

“I don’t really get it, but it sure looks nice to have a sister, doesn’t it?” Patty added.

All of Team Ninoritch watched the two sisters embracing with broad smiles on our faces.

“Ma-ma, Shu-ama want little sister too,” the little dragon girl babbled to her mother.

“You do? Then I shall ask master for his help.”

What? What is she planning on asking me exactly? Please tell me it’s not what I think it is...

“Mifa, show me your powers,” Celes said to her little sister.

“Of course, dear sister!”

Making sure not to damage her dress, Mifa started transforming different parts of her body one after another, and every time she did, Celes exclaimed, “Amazing!” and “You can do *that* too?!”

“So your powers really *have* awakened, Mifa. I am very proud of you.”

“Dear sister...”

The two sisters gazed into each other’s eyes, and it was evident from their expressions just how happy they were that Mifa had managed to unlock her latent powers.

Unfortunately, the moment was interrupted by a male voice. “This humble servant is very glad to have been of assistance to you, Lady

Mifa," the voice said.

Chapter Eighteen: The Price of Power

"This humble servant is very glad to have been of assistance to you, Lady Mifa."

My head whipped around in the direction of the voice, and I saw a man who looked like a traveling merchant standing in one corner of the village square. Going by his appearance, I surmised he was a hume around thirty years old who was roughly the same height as me. Flanking him were two men who had the hoods of their cloaks pulled low over their faces, obscuring their features. This could only have been the merchant Mr. Galbady had mentioned before. *Who would've guessed he'd show up right now?*

"Who are you?" Celes said curtly.

"I am but a humble merchant," the man replied, his gaze shifting to me as an eerie smile played across his lips. "And it seems I am not the only one here."

He took a few steps forward, and his two minions followed suit, but their hoods shifted slightly as they walked, and I caught a glimpse of the collars around their necks that were glowing dimly.

"I was admittedly surprised when Lady Mifa told me there was another merchant in these parts," he continued, his eyes fixed on me.

I took a resolute step forward. "Well, what a coincidence. I was also surprised when the chieftain mentioned another merchant had visited the village."

"We merchants are all after the same thing: profit," he mused aloud. "If one were to desire greater profits than all the rest, perhaps it is inevitable they would end up in this region."

"Profits, huh? And who exactly stands to 'profit' in this scenario?" I asked.

"Both seller *and* buyer, naturally. Is that not the core principle of trade? With that said..." The man ended our exchange at a seemingly arbitrary point without allowing me the chance to respond and turned to Celes. "It is my pleasure to finally meet you, Lady Celesdia."

She didn't reply, her expression remaining guarded.

"I am pleased to see my little present was to your liking," the man continued.

"What do you mean? I do not recall receiving a present from you," Celes snapped, her tone cold and sharp.

"Oh, dear me. My apologies. It seems I have gotten ahead of myself. My present was"—he pointed in front of him—"Lady Mifa herself. You see, I helped her to unlock the full potential of her Feeding ability. This, Lady Celesdia, is my present to you."

The little devil girl started visibly panicking, while a dumbfounded look appeared on Celes's face. "Mifa, what is he talking about?" she asked.

"Um, dear sister, th-this is not what it looks like. Y-You!" Mifa exclaimed, pointing at the merchant. "What are you doing here? Why have you come *now*?!" It was totally obvious that she was taking her anger out on him.

The man didn't seem to take offense, however. Instead, he shrugged dramatically and feigned disappointment. "How strange. Did you not make a deal with me, Lady Mifa? Did you not promise to lend me your powers if I should come to you for help? Did you not claim you would offer your powers to me to be used *as much as I want*?"

"I..."

"Lady Mifa, the time has now come. I am here to ask for your help," he said.

"Mifa, is he telling the truth?" Celes asked the little devil girl, who was clearly at a loss for words.

Seeing that the younger sister wasn't going to answer the older sister's question, the man took it upon himself to speak on her behalf. "It is indeed the truth. This humble servant offered Lady Mifa a very special magic item to strengthen her body, and in turn, unlock

the full potential of her Feeding skill. Look at her left wrist. Is there not a bracelet there?”

All eyes turned to Mifa, who quickly tried to hide her arm, but was fractionally too slow. Just as the man had said, she was wearing a black bracelet on her left wrist.

“You are saying this bracelet is what allows her to use the Feeding skill?” Celes queried.

The man nodded. “Indeed. I heard that Lady Mifa was born with a weak constitution, and as such, could not use the Feeding skill,” he explained, another creepy smile curling his lips slowly upward. “And that got me wondering: Would the issue fix itself if only her body were stronger? Might she harness the Feeding skill with the aid of a magic item? So I merely decided to test out my hypothesis.”

He took another step toward Celes.

“Do you understand now? Lady Mifa earned this power thanks to *my* assistance. Now, she most likely never would have been able to use her Feeding skill with an ordinary magic item. But my wares are of unparalleled quality, so they succeeded where others would fail.”

“What is your point?” Celes said curtly.

“I sincerely apologize for presenting you with a gift without your consent, but I did it in the hope of building up a friendship with you and the other devils.”

“Don’t let him deceive you, Celes,” I cut in. “It sounds to me like it’s not ‘friendship’ with you guys he’s after, but ‘compensation’ for his so-called generosity.”

The man raised an eyebrow and shook his head in exasperation. “Ah, I must admit, you’ve got me there. I *was* planning on hiding my true intentions, but I should have known better. You are a fellow merchant, after all. You have seen right through me.”

“I did too, meow,” Kilpha chimed in.

“Me too!” Patty added. “I-I could tell you were up to no good too!”

The man scratched his cheek, seemingly at a loss over how to reply to these interventions.

Celes delivered the final verbal blow. “What is your objective?” she asked, cutting straight to the point with bloodlust seeping from

every word that was so palpable, even I—a born and bred Tokyoite—could sense it.

However, the man seemed completely unbothered by her tone. His guards readied themselves to protect their master in case Celes decided to attack, but he made them stand down by raising his hand. "We are not done negotiating yet. Let us hold off on any hostilities for now and keep that as a last resort," he said smoothly.

"Fine," his guards muttered with a nod before easing themselves back into more relaxed stances.

"My objective, you ask?" the merchant said. "It is quite simple, really. I merely want to give you, the devils, what you truly desire."

"Oh?" Celes said, her voice cool. "And what might that be? Do enlighten us."

The man's creepy smile didn't budge an inch. "A war," he replied smoothly. "I want to offer you a war."

"We do not wish for war!" Celes snapped.

"Oh my. Is that true?"

"What are you trying to imply?" the devil said pointedly.

"Well, Lady Mifa seemed quite eager for battle, you see," the man said.

The little devil girl's breath caught in her throat, and a flicker of panic briefly crossed her features.

"As soon as Lady Mifa managed to harness her true powers—with my assistance, of course—she was overcome with an undeniable thirst for violence. At her request, I provided her with the location of a number of magical beasts, and when she told me she wished to flaunt her powers to the people of her village, I even offered her one of my most valuable wares, my prized pack of giant trolls, so she could—"

"Sh-Shut up! Do not say another word!" Mifa yelled at the top of her lungs, interrupting the merchant.

I couldn't believe my ears. Mifa had been the one who unleashed the pack of giant trolls on her *own* village just so she could show off her newly acquired powers? The devils were as stunned as I was. Luckily, no one had died in the rampage thanks to Dramom's healing abilities, but the number of devils who sustained serious wounds in

the battle was easily in triple digits. The devils' opinion of Mifa was clearly beginning to shift from respect to something much harsher and colder. *That's not good.*

I needed to divert their attention away from her and fast. "Ohhh, so *you're* the one who provided Mifa with those giant trolls?" I said to the merchant, raising my voice louder than was necessary to draw every eye toward him instead. It worked. "So were you also the person who sold a black dragon with a Collar of Domination around its neck to the prime minister of the city-state of Orvil?"

A flash of surprise flickered across the merchant's face, but it vanished almost instantly to be replaced by his signature unsettling smile. "My, my. You *are* well-informed. No, that deal was not made by me, though I hear it was a merchant from the guild I belong to."

So there were several merchants involved in the dangerous magic item trade, not just this guy. And furthermore, they all apparently belonged to the same organization. I thought back to what Zidan had told me about dangerous items being in circulation in several nations across the continent and came to the conclusion that it made a lot of sense that it wouldn't be the work of just one person, but of a larger group instead.

"What's your goal?" I asked the merchant. "What does this guild of yours hope to achieve by distributing all of these dangerous items around the continent?"

"As I said before, I am simply a merchant. My only goal is to make a profit," he replied, then turned back to Celes. "Now, Lady Celesdia, let us resume our discussion, shall we? After witnessing Lady Mifa defeat all of these monsters, I am now convinced battle is the devils' natural state."

"And so, we must hanker for war. Is that what you are trying to say?" Celes said.

"Indeed, indeed, indeed," the merchant said, nodding. "And if you accept my help, I can provide you with an endless stream of skirmishes and conflict. As such..." He paused and spread his arms wide, as if welcoming a new friend. "Come with me and let us kill the incumbent demon king, Lady Celesdia. Then, we can wage war on the humes."

I couldn't believe the outrageous proposition he had just put to Celes. I now understood his goal: He wanted a war. The phrase "merchant of death" floated up in the back of my mind as I gazed at him, stupefied.

"So what do you say, Lady Celesdia? Will you join me?" the man pressed. "I have done everything in my power to help Lady Mifa, and by extension, yourself. As such, to repay me for my time and efforts, I ask that you join forces with me."

"To repay you? To *repay* you?" Celes spat, the bloodlust radiating from her growing even more intense. It was obvious to anyone watching that she considered the merchant her enemy, yet here he was, daring to ask her for repayment.

"Indeed, indeed, indeed. I'm asking you to repay me for giving that useless little girl over there the power she craved," the man replied, totally unbothered by the animosity shown toward him.

Celes lost it at this. "Do not speak of my sister that way, you louse!" she snapped as one of her arms morphed into that of a beast. She swung her beefed-up arm at the merchant, but one of his guards stepped in front of him and blocked the strike before it could land.

"Not on my watch," he grunted. The impact created a gust of wind strong enough to blow his hood off, revealing a demon in his prime with crimson eyes, just like Celes and the other devils.

"Y-You..." Celes stammered, visibly shaken.

"It has been quite a while, Celesdia. I have been looking forward to seeing you again," the demon said.

A buzz coursed through the spectating devils, and I eventually caught a name being whispered, which I assumed was the man's.

"Mr. Nozeer?"

"He is alive?"

"Wait, did you just say Mr. Nozeer? As in, the former head of the demon king's Big Four? *That* Mr. Nozeer?"

"I thought he was supposed to be dead."

Hold on a minute, I thought. *Did they just mention the "demon king"? And the "Big Four"?* The presence of Mr. Nozeer seemed to have the devils at a complete loss. It was their way to always follow

the commands of the strongest among them, and judging by their collective reaction, it was clear even to me that Mr. Nozeer must have been every bit as strong as Celes.

"What appears to be the matter?" he scoffed, scowling at the spectating devils while fending off all of the strikes Celes was raining down on him. "I have finally returned home, and *this* is your reaction?" The devils were throwing nervous glances Celes's way, as if hesitating over which of the two they should be following.

"Do not listen to him! He is merely a former chieftain of this village. The current one is Galbady, and I am the strongest of the devils!" Celes yelled to the crowd.

"Oh? You call yourself the strongest, girlie? That is some big talk for someone who just happened to be born with a rare ability," Mr. Nozeer said.

"Nozeer, you wretch!" Celes snarled.

"Whatever is the matter, Celesdia?" he countered. "Are you planning to rebel against me—your own uncle—again?"

"You have no right to say that!" Celes retorted before turning her other arm into some sort of blade and swinging that at Mr. Nozeer too.

But he easily dodged the attack and put some distance between them again. "What a difficult child you are," he chuckled.

From what I could make out of their conversation, it seemed the pair were uncle and niece, which meant Mr. Nozeer must have been a devil as well.

"Lord Nozeer, might I suggest leaving the tearful reunion with your niece for a later date?" the merchant suddenly interjected.

Mr. Nozeer clicked his tongue. "Fine. It is not as if I can disobey you while I am wearing this collar, anyway."

"Please do not make me out to be the bad guy here," the merchant remarked. "We *both* agreed to the terms of our contract. Did we not?"

Mr. Nozeer didn't say anything, simply harrumphing as he went to take up his position behind the merchant again.

Celes, on the other hand, wasn't about to back down. "You just asked me to kill the demon king and called my sister a 'useless little

girl,'" she growled. "I will not allow you to say whatever you please in front of me!"

"Oh, I see, I see, I see," the merchant said, nodding to himself. "It seems the rumors speaking of the tribe's devotion to the demon king are true. Hm, it appears convincing you to side with me will not be as easy as I imagined. Well, I suppose that means I have no choice now. I regret that I have to resort to this, but I suppose I will have to change my approach." He turned to Mifa, his eerie smile widening. "Well now, Lady Mifa. You will be repaying me for the bracelet yourself, it seems," he said brightly.

"Huh?" the little devil girl mumbled in confusion.

But the man ignored her reaction and snapped his fingers. The bracelet on Mifa's wrist began to glow. She screamed loudly as her body started swelling up, her light purple dress getting torn to shreds as beastly arms, insect legs, and wings sprouted out of her body.

"Mifa!" Celes cried out.

"Dear sister..."

"Mifa! Mifa!" Celes ran over to her and scooped her up in her arms. "What have you done to my sister?!" she spat at the merchant.

"The bracelet she is wearing absorbs mana from the land and delivers it straight to her body. In other words, it is almost as if she is under the effects of a continuous strengthening spell. All I have done is *slightly* increase the amount of mana being supplied to her. However..." He paused, a twisted grin curling his lips upward as he gazed upon Mifa's deformed shape. "It would appear it has been a little too much for her body to handle. What a grotesque sight."

Celes looked down at her sister in her arms. "Mifa! Try to hold on! Open your eyes! *Please*!" she cried out.

"Dear sister..." Mifa said, her voice so strained, it was barely above a whisper. "I am sorry..."

"Mifa!"

We all immediately rushed over to the little devil girl.

"Dramom, can you heal her?" I asked.

Practically before I'd even finished the question, she was already

casting a healing spell on the little girl. But she eventually shook her head. “I apologize, master, but the mana that is being constantly absorbed by her body is rampaging through her. I barely have time to heal one part of her body before it transforms again. I am sorry to say that I cannot heal her at the moment.”

“Damn it,” I cursed through gritted teeth. “Then, let’s try removing that bracelet from her wrist—”

“That would probably be unwise, my fellow merchant,” the merchant interrupted me just as I was reaching out to take Mifa’s arm.

“Do you really think I’d believe anything you say?” I shot back.

“You are free to believe me or not. However, I would like to remind you that the bracelet has strengthened Lady Mifa’s body, allowing her to use her Feeding skill, which has gained her even more power,” he said.

I paused in my tracks.

“You do understand what that means, yes? If you were to remove the bracelet now, her body would return to its original state, and it would find itself unable to bear the power she gained through her Feeding skill. What do you think would happen? Would that frail body of hers collapse in on itself? Or would it explode? Who can really say?”

The man brought his hand up to his mouth and chuckled darkly.

“Ah, just thinking about it is making me shiver in horror. Please do not make her go through such a cruel ordeal.”

“You son of a bitch,” I growled, accidentally cursing in front of Aina. I hadn’t been this furious in a long, *long* time, but I was doing everything in my power to suppress my feelings of anger, knowing that I had to stay calm and levelheaded for the time being.

“Mifa, hang in there! Open your eyes!” Aina pleaded with big fat tears rolling down her cheeks. She clutched the little devil girl’s right hand tightly, which had somehow miraculously escaped the monstrous transformation that was affecting the rest of her body.

“Aina... I am sorry...” the little devil girl said weakly.

“Mifa!”

“I was jealous of you...” Mifa admitted. “I am sorry...”

"It's okay! I'm sorry too! I'm really sorry for picking that dress out," Aina said.

Mifa chuckled weakly. "I am...not angry...anymore. After all...dear sister said...I looked cute...in it. Besides..." A faint smile curled the corners of her lips. "We are...friends."

"Mifa!" Aina cried out.

"Aina, move away from her, meow!" Kilpha hurriedly warned the little girl as she scooped her up and jumped backward.

An instant later, one of Mifa's newly transformed arms swept through where Aina had just been sitting. If she had still been there, she might have been badly injured.

"I am...sorry. I am...really sorry, Aina. My body...will not listen to me...anymore," Mifa apologized weakly. It seemed she was no longer in control of the beastly limbs that were sprouting from her body. "Dear sister...please move away from me. Everyone else...should too..."

"I will not! I am your sister. I will stay by your side, no matter what!" Celes cried out as tears streamed down her face and she clutched her little sister close. The limbs growing out of Mifa's body occasionally brushed against her, but she paid them no heed.

"Dear sister, I am sorry...for ruining the dress...you bought for me," Mifa mumbled.

"It is fine! There are other dresses in the world. I will buy you another one!"

Mifa's body was swelling up even more. The changes had reached her face by this point, and one side of it had morphed into something else entirely, yet she still managed a smile on the unaffected half.

"Dear sister. Am I still...cute? Does the dress you picked out...still suit me?" she asked.

"You are! Yes, you *are* cute! And the dress suits you!" Celes assured her, nodding vigorously despite the tears running down her face.

A soft giggle escaped Mifa's partly deformed lips. "Dear sister, did you...know? You are a terrible liar. But even so, I am...happy."

"Mifa!"

"Dear sister, do not worry...about me anymore," Mifa said, her voice strained to the point where each word sounded as though it needed to be forced out with immense effort. "Thank you...for protecting me...all this time. If I am ever reborn...I wish to be your sister again."

"Mifa! Mifa!" Celes cried out, clutching her sister tight.

A low chuckle echoed around us. It was coming from the merchant, whose signature eerie smile was stretched wide across his face, as if he was finding the whole scene highly amusing.

"Oh, dearie me, where are my manners? I shouldn't be laughing during such an *emotional* moment, should I?" he said, his tone dripping with mock sincerity. "Lady Celesdia, have you changed your mind at last? Will you come and defeat the demon king with me?"

"You... You rat!" Celes roared.

"You should probably make up your mind soon. That is, if you do not wish for Lady Mifa's body to be transformed beyond all recognition and the damage irreversible," he said airily. "Come now. I am waiting."

Her teeth clenched in frustration, Celes looked down at her little sister. The transformation had begun spreading to the right side of her body as well. The man was right. There was no time.

Damn it! Isn't there some way we can save Mifa? Think. Think, Shiro! I knew the bracelet was the key here. We couldn't help her unless we removed it. But if we did, we'd end up killing her. *So what are we supposed to—*

I gasped as a flash of inspiration struck my mind like a bolt of lightning.

"Lady Celesdia, could you please give me your answer?" the merchant asked in a leisurely manner. "I trust you will make the right decision."

Celes's shoulders started shaking. "Fine," she mumbled eventually. "I will—"

"Dear sister...no," Mifa weakly interrupted her.

"But Mifa..." Celes protested.

"Do not suffer...on my behalf," the little devil girl said with difficulty, before her gaze dropped to the bracelet that was biting

into her left wrist. “If I...remove this...my body will break, and...”

She reached out with her still-functioning right hand toward her left wrist and attempted to remove the bracelet. It seemed she would rather choose death over her beloved sister being forced to obey that wretched merchant on her account.

“Mifa, no!” Celes cried out.

“Dear...sister. Goodbye—”

Mifa grabbed the bracelet and was just about to remove it when I lunged at her, letting out a theatrical “Hyaaah!”

There is. There is a solution! I thought. There was only one way to save Mifa.

“If the bracelet absorbing the surrounding mana is the thing that’s causing her to transform, then we simply have to stop the process!”

“Let me go...you rat. You will...die,” Mifa muttered.

“Aw, you’re worried about me even though you hate me so much? You’re such a kind girl, Mifa.”

“Do not...act so familiarly...with me.”

“Don’t worry, Mifa. I’ll save you,” I assured her before turning to her older sister. “Celes, leave Mifa to me.”

She nodded vigorously. “Please save her, Shiro!”

“I will,” I said, trying to show off as I bent down to pick Mifa up.

However, I had forgotten that I wasn’t on good ol’ Earth anymore, I was on Ruffaltio. Despite how small Mifa was, she was unnaturally heavy, as if her body defied the laws of physics. But I wasn’t about to let that stop me. After all, I was a man.

“Hnnngh!” I groaned as I lifted up the little girl through sheer determination, willpower, and guts alone. “All righty!”

With her in my arms, I materialized the portal back to grandma’s house behind me.

Yup, that’s right. My solution for removing Mifa’s bracelet was to head to grandma’s house. After all, if the bracelet was absorbing the ambient mana, all we had to do was take Mifa somewhere without any mana whatsoever to cut off its supply. However, there was one teeny tiny snag in my plan. While I’d managed to lift Mifa up with a lot of effort, it meant I didn’t have a hand free to slide open the

door. I couldn't even do it with my foot, since there was no way I'd be able to cope with all of Mifa's weight being on one leg without toppling over.

"Mister Shiro!"

Thankfully, Aina was there to come to my rescue. She had already been to grandma's house once before, so she knew what I was attempting to do.

"I opened the door for you!" she said.

"Thanks, Aina. Okay, let's go!"

I dove through the portal with Mifa clutched tightly in my arms, and swiftly ran into issue number two. The little devil girl's body was so swollen, I couldn't get her through the opening.

"Ugh! I-I can't get through!" I exclaimed in exasperation.

Aina quickly started pushing against my back, making groaning noises as she strained to propel us forward. Suama joined in, but the two little girls weren't strong enough to make Mifa's body budge.

"I dunno what's going on here, but I'll help too, meow!" Kilpha said, moving toward Aina and Suama to join them in their attempts to move us.

But Patty stopped her before she could reach us. "Move, Kilpha. I'll do it," she declared.

"Meow? What do you have in mind, meow?" Kilpha asked.

"Isn't it obvious? I'll send Shiro flying through there with my magic!"

"Huh? N-No, wait, boss! Don't do—" I started, desperately trying to stop her before she could unleash her spell, but it was too late.

"Wind Shooter!" the little fairy chanted, and a strong gust of wind burst forth. And I mean a really, *really* strong one.

I yelled like a baby as the gust of wind barreled into my back. *Ouch, ouch, ouch. That definitely just broke my spine.*

Despite my griping, the wind successfully managed to give us the final push we needed to get Mifa's body through the portal, and the two of us tumbled into the room with grandma's altar.

Chapter Nineteen: In the Altar Room

"Ow," I grumbled before coming to my senses. "Ah, wait! The door! I have to get that door closed!"

The impact of my body hitting the floor of the altar room in grandma's house had left me aching all over, with my spine, in particular, screaming in agony. Even so, I somehow managed to get to my feet despite the pain and shut the closet door.

"Next, I need to see to Mifa," I mumbled to myself, turning around to tend to the little devil girl.

It was then I noticed I hadn't come through the portal with just Mifa.

"Ouch."

"Shu-ama, ouchie."

Aina and Suama had ended up in the altar room too. They must have—no, they had *definitely* gotten caught up in Patty's spell. The gust of wind had also left the room in a sorry state, and peering around at the mess, I saw grandma's memorial portrait—the one with her throwing double peace signs—lying forlornly on the floor, looking particularly battered. But I didn't have time to worry about all of that right at that moment. First, I needed to make sure Aina and Suama were unhurt.

"Aina, Suama, are you two okay?" I asked.

"It hurts a bit, but I'm fine," Aina replied.

"Shu-ama, o-tay," the little dragon girl babbled positively.

"That's good," I said, relieved they were both uninjured.

Satisfied that the two girls had no lasting damage, I turned to Mifa, who was groaning in pain on the floor. It seemed my plan had been successful, and the bracelet on her wrist had stopped absorbing mana, causing her body—which had been all swollen with

monster limbs growing uncontrollably out of it—to begin to return to its original form.

"Suama, can you heal Mifa?" I asked the little dragon girl.

"Ai," she chirped with a nod, holding her tiny hands over Mifa. Her palms started glowing, causing a warm light to envelop the little devil girl's body, and after a few seconds, Mifa's labored breathing became more rhythmic. With the bracelet no longer absorbing mana and her uncontrollable transformation finally halted, she lost consciousness, as if the weight of the whole situation had tuckered her out.

"Thanks, Suama," I said.

"Ai."

Thanks to the little dragon girl's healing magic, Mifa's body was completely back to normal, which was impressive work from a kid who wasn't even a year old yet. Then again, she *was* Dramom's daughter. The Immortal Dragon's blood flowing through her veins sure was something, even at such a young age.

Mifa showed no signs of rousing, but I was relieved to see her looking visibly better at least.

"All righty," I said, standing up and cracking my neck. I asked Suama to quickly fix up my spine, and then I was all good to go. "Time for a counterattack," I said, a bold smile on my face.

But the words had barely left my mouth when the altar room's door slid open.

"Huh? Bro, are you in here?"

"Bro-broooo?"

My twin sisters, Shiori and Saori, poked their heads around the door and their eyes widened at the devastation that had been wrought by Patty's spell. They were even more surprised to see Aina and Suama sitting on the floor.

"Shiori! Saori! Perfect timing!" I said as I laid out a futon in the middle of the room and gently placed Mifa on it.

On seeing the unfamiliar little girl passed out in the room, my sisters must have realized something was going down. They exchanged glances and nodded at each other.

"Bro-bro, what do you want us to do?" Shiori said.

"Yeah, tell us if there's anything we can do, bro! Oh, but we're not gonna work for free, just so you know," Saori added.

"Thank you, Shiori. You too, Saori. I need to go somewhere, so could I ask you to look after Aina and the girls for me?" I said.

"Of course," Shiori drawled in her usual happy-go-lucky manner.

"Sure thing, bro! Leave these kiddos with us!" Saori said, slapping her own chest in a display of self-confidence.

I turned to Aina and Suama next.

"Aina," I began.

"Yes?"

"Can you stay with Mifa? I'm sure she'll feel reassured if you're by her side when she wakes up."

"Of course. After all..." She cast her tender gaze over the little devil girl. "Mifa's my friend."

"Yeah. She sure is," I agreed with a smile.

"Pa-pa, Shu-ama stay with Ain-ya?" the little dragon girl asked.

"Yup," I replied, giving her a pat on the head. "I want you to use your magic on Mifa if she looks like she's in pain at any point."

"O-tay. Shu-ama do best!"

"You do that. I'm leaving Mifa in your hands."

I walked over to the closet and breathed out slowly as I stood in front of the door, poised to open it. I had managed to save Mifa, and it was now time to help Celes out. First, I'd let her know that Mifa was safe and well, and then I'd punch that annoying merchant in his damn face on her behalf. No, scratch that. A punch wouldn't do it. I'd have to unleash my ultimate technique, the Rainbow Suplex, on him!

"All righty!" I said, pumping myself up as I placed my hand on the closet door, ready to rumble.

"I don't have a clue what's going on, but good luck out there, bro-bro," Shiori drawled in her usual laid-back way.

"Yeah, do your best, bro!" Saori called out.

The two must have sensed my determination, since they were cheering me on despite not knowing any details about the situation.

"You can do it, Mister Shiro!" Aina called out next, following the example set by my sisters.

Suama followed suit. “Pa-pa, good wuck!”

I balled my right hand up into a fist and raised it into the air. “Thanks, girls! I’m heading out now!”

I slid the closet door open and stepped into the portal that led to Ruffaltio.

Final Chapter: Counterattack

I exited the portal and found myself in the village of the devils, standing in the exact spot I had been when I left. I quickly scoped out my surroundings to take stock of the present situation, although things didn't seem to have budged at all while I was away, perhaps because I'd disappeared off with Mifa. Celes and the rest of my companions were eyeing the merchant warily and waiting for his next move, while the merchant and his goons were doing exactly the same thing in reverse. In effect, they were all simply glaring at each other in a silent standoff. But my return had gotten the ball rolling again.

"Shiro! Mifa..." Celes said. "How is Mifa?"

I gave her a confident thumbs-up. "She's safe and well. Suama healed her up and her body's all back to normal. I took her somewhere that's a little bit far away, but Aina's with her, so you don't need to worry about her."

Celes took a moment to relish in the wave of happiness that washed over her at the news I had brought her. With her fingertips, she wiped away a few tears that were lingering at the corners of her eyes.

"You have my thanks, Shiro," she eventually said, then she raised her head and focused her gaze on the merchant and his minions with no sign of hesitation on her face. "I hope you are ready for what comes next," she said to them. Her voice was quiet, but the words were crystal clear.

A dry smile curled the merchant's lips upward. "Well, well. I have to admit I am surprised. I never expected I would witness a teleportation spell in action. It is thought to be a long-lost magic. Still, I have to wonder..." He paused and glanced at me, before turning his attention back to Celes. "Lady Celesdia, are you positive you should believe the words of that merchant? Lady Mifa's body

was on the brink of total collapse. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if she had already passed away. What if he lied just then to trick you into killing me?"

"Lying, you say?" Celes asked, her voice low, as if trying to contain herself.

"Yes, indeed. Lying. I am a merchant as well, you see, so I can tell these things. We merchants are greedy little creatures who make our profits by spinning deceitful tales and passing them off as the truth. We lie as much as is needed if there is aught to gain out of it, and we do so without a shred of remorse."

When it was clear that a response wasn't forthcoming, the man continued. "So, Lady Celesdia, let me ask you again." He paused as a creepy smile spread across his face. "Do you truly believe the words of that merchant? I am the only one who can control that bracelet, yet he spirited your sister away to who-knows-where. She might even be dead already."

Hey! That louse just called me a liar. He's really starting to get on my nerves. I knew what I needed here in this moment: something hard and *sharp*. Something that'd shut him up for good. But before I had time to take any sharp implements out of my inventory, Celes raised her voice.

"Do not lump Shiro in with the likes of *you*," she rebuked the merchant sharply. "Do not speak of my friend as if he is the same as you!"

For the first time since his grand entrance, the man's smile wavered slightly. "Lady Celesdia, do you really trust a merchant?" he said, dumbfounded.

"It has nothing to do with merchants. I trust Shiro. I believe what he tells me. Because he is my sworn friend!" Celes declared.

"Celes..." I mumbled, my eyes filling up with tears. Her words had gone directly to my heart.

"Celes is right, meow!" Kilpha chimed in, spurred on by the devil's words. "We trust Shiro, meow!"

"Y-Yeah, we do, you villain! *Everyone* trusts Shiro. He's my underling!" Patty added.

Karen eyed the man coldly. "I would appreciate it if you didn't

group my town's merchants in with people like *you*. It is an extremely unpleasant insinuation."

Eldos burst out laughing. "Shiro may be scrawny, but 'e's got more guts than the whole lotta ya!"

"Hear, hear! Ye're right there, Eldos!" Baledos agreed.

One after another, my friends were speaking up about how much they trusted me.

Dramom was the last to speak. "How pathetic, lowly merchant. No matter how much a *grub* like you yells and gripes, the trust we all have in my master cannot be shaken," she said sharply, not even attempting to hide how she viewed the merchant.

"I see, I see, I see," the merchant said, his smile vanishing completely. Perhaps he was irritated that things weren't going according to plan, or maybe it was Dramom calling him a "grub" that had wounded his ego. "'Trust,' hm? Well, that complicates the matter somewhat. Not to mention, he has that teleporting spell up his sleeve. Oh well, never mind. It's not like he's the only one with a secret weapon." The merchant produced from his pocket something that looked like a flute.

As soon as she laid eyes on it, Dramom's face turned as white as a sheet. "Devil! Do not let him use that flute!" she called out to Celes, who made a quizzical noise but immediately charged toward the merchant all the same. However, Mr. Nozeer blocked her way.

Celes tutted. "Move, Nozeer!" she snarled.

"Why will you not call me 'uncle,' little idiot?" Mr. Nozeer replied.

"If you refuse to move, you will have to die!"

The two of them started exchanging blows, giving the merchant the opportunity to bring the flute up to his lips and play a sharp, high-pitched note.

"She did not stop him in time," Dramom whispered. She sounded horrified. *Wait, are you telling me* Dramom *of all people is panicking now? What in the world is that flute for—*

But the words had barely left her mouth before a mighty roar echoed from somewhere beyond the sky, snapping me out of my thoughts. *What the hell was that?!* My entire body broke out into a cold sweat. *That roar just now...*

"Shiro! It's a dragon, meow! A d-dragon is flying toward us, meow!" Kilpha shouted.

"A *dragon*?! Again?!" I exclaimed. We had fought a black dragon in Orvil only recently, and in truth, I hadn't expected to face another one so soon. Looking up, I could indeed see a pitch-black dragon soaring through the sky toward us.

"So you came, Destruction Dragon," Dramom muttered to herself.

Destruction Dragon? Isn't that another high-ranking dragon just like her? Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on a minute. Things are actually bad for real this time, aren't they?

"Oh? You know of him?" the merchant asked, presumably overhearing Dramom's comment. Another creepy smile had spread across his lips, and it seemed he had regained some of his earlier confidence on seeing Dramom's reaction to his trump card. "I'm not just friends with the demons, you see, but with the Destruction Dragon as well," he added as the aforementioned Destruction Dragon drew nearer and nearer.

I glared pointedly at the merchant. "Did you put one of your go-to Collars of Domination on this Destruction Dragon too?" I said.

The man's eyes widened at the suggestion. "You think I collared *the* Destruction Dragon?" He chuckled. "Oh, I could never. I might have exaggerated a *little* when I called him my 'friend,' but the Destruction Dragon is actually a customer of mine."

"You claim that a grub like you has managed to strike a deal with a *dragon*?" Dramom snarled.

The man nodded. "Indeed. Well, we have a bit of a master-subordinate relationship going on, with him being my master. However, we did agree that he would lend me his power if I ever found myself in trouble. So for instance, capturing magical beasts for me or eliminating my enemies—which is *precisely* what is about to happen here."

He has the Destruction Dragon capturing magical beasts for him? Oh, it all makes sense now! That explained how he had managed to secure and collar the cyclopes and the black dragon for the former prime minister of Orvil, as well as the giant trolls that attacked the village of the devils before.

"I am very much obliged to the Destruction Dragon," the merchant continued. "He is far more magnanimous and mature than that useless little girl who did nothing but beg. Don't you agree?"

It was obvious which "useless little girl" he was referring to.

"You louse. How *dare* you insult Mifa?!" Celes roared.

"I am merely stating facts. Oh, and would you look at that? The Destruction Dragon has arrived. You will finally get to taste absolute despair and all-consuming fear, Lady Celesdia. After all, this dragon is far, *far* more powerful than you will ever be, demon king's lieutenant though you may be. But first..." The man paused, his smirk widening. "Allow me to ask you this one last time. Lady Celesdia, if you do truly value your life and the lives of your friends, won't you join me and lend me your power?"

The ground shook as the Destruction Dragon landed behind the man, and the village of the devils immediately broke out into chaos. The devils understood that no one had a hope of defeating this dragon, so most of them scattered in every direction, away from the confrontation. The Destruction Dragon must have had an incredibly overwhelming aura if its mere presence was enough to cause a battle-hardened tribe like the devils to flee. Other than Team Ninoritch, only a handful of devils—including Mr. Galbady—had stayed to stand and fight. The Destruction Dragon let out a low rumble as it gazed down at us. As for the merchant, he was in high spirits again, perhaps buoyed by the arrival of this new powerful ally to the battlefield.

"Well, Lady Celesdia? Can I have your answer?" he prattled on dramatically, as if he were an actor in a theatrical play.

However, it wasn't Celes who answered, but Dramom. "She refuses, of course. Right, devil?"

Celes smirked. "Of course."

"Are you *sure*?" the merchant asked after a slight pause. "I mean, not only do I have Lord Nozeer on my side, who is every bit as strong as you, I also have the Destruction Dragon. If I may speak candidly, you have no hope of winning any fight, even if you are strong."

"Well, who can say that for sure? We cannot be assured of the

outcome just yet," Celes said.

"The devil is correct," Dramom chimed in. "There is one possible way—just the one—that we can defeat the Destruction Dragon."

What? There is? And it seemed I wasn't the only one taken aback by her statement.

"Does this solution you speak of truly exist?" Celes asked.

Dramom nodded, then thrust her arm out in front of the devil.

"What are you doing?" Celes queried, visibly confused.

"Consume my flesh, devil," Dramom instructed.

"What?"

"You will grow stronger if you consume my flesh, will you not? Well, if that frail body of yours is even able to handle my power, that is."

A daring smile appeared on Celes's face in response to Dramom's rather unsubtle provocation. "Heh. Then I shall take the bait. Mifa managed to withstand the power that was delivered to her body all at once, so as her older sister, I must not run from this challenge!" She grabbed Dramom's arm and opened her mouth wide. "I shall consume your flesh," she declared before sinking her teeth into the dragon woman's arm.

I instinctively looked away. *Thank goodness Aina and Suama aren't here to see this,* I thought.

The change in Celes's body was instant. She let out a loud, guttural cry and crouched down on the ground with her arms wrapped around herself, as if forcefully trying to prevent her body from morphing out of control. A scream escaped her lips as a powerful gust of wind suddenly whipped up around her.





After a little while, her body seemed to settle enough for her to stand again, though she was still panting from her exertions. "Whew," she eventually sighed. "Well, what do you think? I would say my body handled your power just fine."

Dramom nodded. "You have indeed taken part of my power and made it your own. It is actually rather impressive."

Celes's left eye had changed from its normal crimson to a bright, sparkling gold, the same color as Dramom's.

"Well, I am not entirely sure what *that* was all about, but would I be correct in assuming that you have decided to oppose me?" the merchant asked.

"That has been my intention from the very beginning," Celes replied matter-of-factly.

"I see. It truly is regrettable, Lady Celesdia," the merchant sighed before looking up at the dragon behind him. "It seems negotiations have failed. Lord Destruction Dragon, you are welcome to amuse yourself with them to your heart's content."

A low rumble emanated from the dragon. "Can I kill them?"

"If you so wish."

Despite the creature being far from human, I could almost sense the Destruction Dragon smiling at the merchant's words. "I understand," the dragon said before soaring up into the sky.

"Devil—no, Celesdia," Dramom said, causing the devil's breath to catch in her throat as it was the first time the dragon woman had called her by her name. "You heard that nonsense the Destruction Dragon just spouted. What should we do?"

"What an unpleasant creature. To borrow a word you like to use, I believe we should eliminate him. Come on, Dramom!" This time, it was Celes's turn to call Dramom by her name (well, nickname) for the first time.

Dramom chuckled airily. "Let us go together."

With a grunt, Celes spread her new wings, which were the same snow-white color as Dramom's.

"It is time for you to perish, Destruction Dragon," Dramom announced, transforming into her dragon form. Where she had been standing, a pure-white dragon appeared on the ground, contrasting

with the black dragon circling overhead.

"A white dragon? I-Impossible! Are you the Immortal Dragon?!" the merchant yelled out in shock.

But Dramom ignored him completely, her gaze locked firmly on the Destruction Dragon above.

"Oh! That beautiful figure can belong to none other than the Immortal Dragon!" the Destruction Dragon called down from on high. "I see you have revived and come to me to become my mate!"

"Cease your prattling. The only person I would take as a mate is my master," Dramom retorted.

"In that case, I shall kill you once more and await my next opportunity."

"You cannot kill me, because I will eliminate you right here and now! Celesdia, do it with me!"

"Right."

Dramom opened her maw wide, and beside her, Celes did likewise.

Boom!

A beam of intense heat shot out of each of their mouths. This was Dramom's go-to Laser Breath technique, and both heat rays hit the Destruction Dragon, causing him to wobble as he hovered.

"Why?" he groaned. "Why do I feel your powers coming from that devil?"

"Do you really think I am going to tell you the reason?" Dramom retorted.

"How amusing. In that case, I shall ask again, but I will use my powers to do so this time," the Destruction Dragon said.

Beside Dramom, Celes harrumphed. "You can try. But you will fail."

The pair spread their wings wide and soared up into the sky to fight the Destruction Dragon head-on.

"Die!" Celes yelled at the same time that Dramom roared, "Perish!"

The deafening sound of explosions echoed down to us from high up in the sky. Even to the untrained eye, it was obvious that the Dramom and Celes tag team had the upper hand, since the

Destruction Dragon could only defend itself from their onslaught. That meant I should start doing my part.

"How about we settle things down here? You know, just the two of us, merchant against merchant?" I called out to the man who was craning his neck to watch the aerial battle between the three forces of nature above us.

His gaze quickly shifted to me, and I noted that his disturbing smile had vanished from his lips completely. "Who would have guessed that you would have the Immortal Dragon under your control? You continue to be full of surprises," he remarked.

"Under my control?" I said, repeating the phrase. "Don't be silly. Dramom—I mean, the Immortal Dragon is my friend."

The man's eyes narrowed at this, as if my words displeased him. Meanwhile, Mr. Nozeer came and stood in front of him.

"Should I kill this merchant?" he asked.

"Ye wanna kill Shiro? Not while I'm still breathin', ye won't, devil warrior," Eldos interjected, stepping forward to protect me from harm.

Eldos was one of the Sixteen Heroes, and he shifted his battle-axe with "Justice" inscribed on it—the battle-axe Grandma had crafted for him—off his shoulder and pointed it at the devil. He had accompanied us to the village of the devils as a bodyguard and was fully prepared to live up to that role.

"An old dwarf? You seem"—Mr. Nozeer searched for the appropriate word as he dropped his hips into a fighting stance —"strong."

By contrast, Eldos maintained his rather relaxed posture. "Oh? Ye can tell how strong I am jus' by lookin' at me, can ye? Impressive. As fer ye, I'd say yer about as strong as the devil girlie. Well, as strong as she was *before* she took a bite outta the Immortal Dragon, that is."

Mr. Nozeer's face went red with anger. While on first blush, it might have *seemed* like Eldos was complimenting him, the dwarf hadn't passed up the opportunity to slip in a little jab right at the end. That pretty much summed up heroes and their gift for trash talk.

"Do you think you can kill him?" the merchant asked his demon ally.

"I am not sure," Mr. Nozeer replied. "This old dwarf is tough."

"I see." The merchant sighed and gazed up at the battle taking place in the sky above once more.

In the few minutes since we had taken our eyes off the skirmish, the Destruction Dragon was covered in wounds and had suffered a ton of damage.

"The Destruction Dragon is losing as well, it seems. This is the first time that one of my plans has gone so awry. I guess we have no choice but to retreat."

He turned to the third man in his group—who had remained completely silent this whole time—and muttered some sort of command at him. The man nodded, placed a hand down on the snow-covered ground, and began reciting an incantation. Before long, a magic circle appeared in the snow and a winged, four-legged beast materialized in it. *A summoning spell,* I surmised.

"Well then. While it pains me to part from you, I shall take my leave now," the merchant said, as he and his two minions climbed up onto the back of the beast.

"Do you really think we're gonna let you leave just like that?" I said.

"Yeah, meow!" Kilpha chimed in. "We won't let you escape, meow!"

"Shiro! Should I go boom now? You know, like *boom*?" Patty asked me. By "go boom," she meant using her magic again.

I briefly pondered the question, but her magic was so powerful, there was a chance she might end up killing the merchant, and I wasn't too thrilled about that potential outcome.

"Oh, but we *are* leaving, whether you like it or not," the merchant insisted, before blowing on his flute once more.

The Destruction Dragon immediately disengaged from his aerial battle with Dramom and Celes, and hurtled down to the ground at tremendous speed.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Lord Destruction Dragon, I apologize for bothering you in the

middle of your battle, but we wish to leave now, and we need you to distract these people so we can make good our escape."

The black dragon let out a low, displeased grumble at this request.

"We have an agreement, remember?" the merchant continued. "I promised I would find the Immortal Dragon for you, and I have fulfilled my end of the bargain—though admittedly, by sheer accident."

"The agreement, huh? I suppose I have no choice, then. I shall buy you some time."

It sounded as if the merchant had successfully convinced the Destruction Dragon to keep us occupied while he fled. The beast shifted its focus onto us and was just about to attack when Dramom and Celes plunged out of the sky to intervene.

"I will not allow you to lay a single hit on master!" Dramom yelled.

"You will not touch Shiro!" Celes added.

For once, the pair were perfectly in sync as they shielded me from the attentions of the Destruction Dragon.

"Well then, Lord Destruction Dragon. I leave the rest to you," the merchant said.

"Do as you wish," the dragon replied.

The beast that the merchant and his minions were sitting atop spread its wings and took off.

"Lord Shiro, was it? This humble servant shall now be taking his leave," the man said.

"Why don't you at least tell me your name before you run off with your tail between your legs?" I shot back.

"Oh, dear me. Did I forget to introduce myself?" The man broke out into one of his signature creepy grins and brought a hand up to his chest. "I am Jilvared of the Setting Sun merchant guild."

"Jilvared of the Setting Sun," I repeated. "I'll be sure to remember the name. And the next time I see you, I'll greet you with one of my special dropkicks, so please look forward to that."

"In that case, I shall have to stab you in the chest in return."

The man and I glared at each other for an instant before the

beast they were riding on carried him and his goons up into the sky, then soared off into the distance.

As for the Destruction Dragon, he was growling angrily at the whole situation. “You... You damn devil! How *dare* you interrupt my romantic reunion with the Immortal Dragon?!”

It seemed their battle was also well and truly over.

“You shall pay for this. And next time...” the dragon spat. “The next time I see you, Immortal Dragon, I will make you my mate, mark my words!” With that parting threat that was more reminiscent of a crazy stalker, the Destruction Dragon fled.

“Hmph. We failed to kill him,” Celes said, panting in exhaustion.

“Destruction Dragon. The next time I see *you*, I shall eliminate you for good,” Dramom declared to his retreating form.

The two of them sported deep wounds, and they had unfortunately let the Destruction Dragon escape, but even so, we had managed to repel both the beast *and* the mysterious merchant named Jilvared. It marked the first time we had encountered the Setting Sun merchant guild, and on this occasion, we had come out on top.

Epilogue

Our fight with Jilvared of the Setting Sun had been the most grueling thing we had ever faced. Not only had Celes's uncle—Mr. Nozeer—been on his side, but he also commanded the Destruction Dragon, a high-ranking dragon who was on par with Dramom. To repel them, we had engaged them in combat with our own dragon—Dramom herself—Celes, who had used her Feeding skill to absorb part of Dramom's powers and wield it as her own, and Eldos, one of the Sixteen Heroes. That was an insanely powerful lineup, and unfortunately, the clashes between these titans had been so intense, a good half of the devils' village had been totally destroyed. As a consequence, we were presently busy helping the devils to restore their village back to what it once was.

"Dwarven craftsman, as chieftain of the devils, I thank you for your aid in rebuilding all of the destroyed houses," Mr. Galbady said to Baledos, who burst out laughing.

"Don't sweat it, chieftain o' the devils. I'll build as many 'ouses as ye need in exchange for them red magic crystals!"

Before actually constructing the new houses for the devils, we had needed to clear all of the debris from the destroyed houses and level out the ground that had been damaged, meaning there had been tons of things to do, and it really hadn't been easy. But it had been a dream come true for Baledos, since he had managed to secure a ton of red magic crystals in exchange for his services.

"Oh? Is that 'ow ye shave the ice? That's interestin'," the dwarf had remarked when it came time to begin the task of rebuilding the houses.

"Would you like to try it yourself, dwarf?" a devil had asked him.

"Yeah! Lemme have a go!"

As such, he had even learned the devils' way of making houses out of ice, and all in all, he looked very satisfied with the situation.

On top of that, he had become fast friends with the devil craftsmen, which had likely been fueled by the copious amounts of booze they had shared during the barbecue party.

As for the flooring and the supports, we had used the poison treants that Mifa—who had since regained consciousness—had cut down. Yup, you read that right: Mifa had woken up. Aina had tirelessly cared for her while she was asleep, while Suama had cast healing spells on her every single day. Then at last, on the third day after I had initially taken her to grandma's house, she opened her eyes.

"Ugh..." she groaned. "Aina?"

"Mifa! You're awake! Thank goodness!" the little girl celebrated.

"Pa-pa! Pa-pa! Mi-fa woke up!" Suama chirped.

"Yes, she has, hasn't she?" I let out a long sigh of relief. "Thank goodness. Suama, thank you for using your magic on her."

"Ai!" the little dragon girl babbled.

Wearing a pair of pajamas, Mifa slowly sat up with Aina's help, and I told her everything that had happened while she had been unconscious.

"I want... I want to see my sister," was all she said when I had finished.

Aina looked at me and the two of us exchanged smiles. Why, you might ask? Well, because Celes had said exactly the same thing.

"All righty. Should we go see Celes, then, Mifa?" I asked the little devil girl, offering her a hand to help her up. Though almost as soon as I did, I froze completely. *Oh, right. She hates me, doesn't she?*

She seemed to feel my hesitation. "I want you to help me up, Shiro," she assured me, grabbing my hand.

"Uh, sure," I said absentmindedly as I helped her to her feet, too surprised by her actions to form a proper sentence.

Then, I slid open the closet door and the two of us headed back to the village of the devils. I was somewhat concerned that Mifa's body might go haywire again due to the bracelet as soon as we stepped out of the portal, so just to be on the safe side, I stood fully prepared to reopen the gateway back to grandma's house if anything went wrong. But fortunately, Mifa's body didn't react in the way that

I was fearing, which suggested the bracelet had stopped absorbing the ambient mana with Jilvared no longer here.

"D-Dear sister..." Mifa hesitantly called out as Aina and I helped the little devil girl teeter her way over to her.

Celes was in the middle of supervising the reconstruction efforts, but when her beloved little sister's voice reached her ears, she immediately stopped what she was doing. "Mifa?" she said.

The last time Celes had seen her, Mifa's body had been completely out of control, with monster limbs sprouting from everywhere, but she was completely back to normal.

Seeing her little sister safe and well caused Celes's eyes to fill up with tears. "Mifa," she whispered.

"Even ogres can be moved to tears," or so we say in Japan. Of course, Celes is a devil, but it still works.

"Dear sister... Dear sister!" Mifa cried out as she broke into a run and barreled toward Celes, who caught her in her arms.

"Mifa..." Celes breathed. "I am glad. I am so, *so* glad to see that you are safe." She squeezed her little sister in a tight embrace.

Mifa held her older sister just as tightly. "Dear sister, I am so sorry for worrying you."

"You really did," Celes replied. "You are precious to me, Mifa. Do not scare me like that again."

"I will not, dear sister!" Mifa replied, a bright smile blossoming on her face as her eyes shimmered with tears. I was in no doubt that they were tears of joy. She must have really liked Celes calling her "precious" to her.



[redacted]

With the sisters' tearful reunion over and done with, it was time to tackle the next item on the agenda: the giant troll raid that had been organized by Mifa. Both Aina and I were worried the devils would punish the little girl for what she had done, but we soon realized our concerns were totally unfounded.

Celes got all of the devils to gather in the village square and told them that Mifa was very sorry about the incident. "She regrets what she has done, and now realizes it was a mistake, so I would like all of you to forgive her," she added.

Some of the devils clearly had mixed feelings about how to respond to this "apology," but Celes took the initiative, and went over to stand right in front of each and every one of them, asking, "You *will* forgive her, yes?"

"O-Of course, Miss Celesdia!" they all ended up stammering, one after another.

This, ladies and gentlemen, was a textbook example of a hierarchical society enforcing order through the implicit threat of violence. But seeing how Mifa had kept her Feeding skill even after that whole debacle, I was pretty sure most of the devils would have eventually accepted her apology anyway.

With that minor problem(?) solved, we all resumed working on the reconstruction of the village, building one house after another. And at last, a few days later...

"Hello, everyone. As Mr. Galbady just said, I'm Shiro Amata, a merchant from Ninoritch."

I was standing on a platform in the town square, while all around me, the residents of the village were enjoying the barbecue party that had been thrown to celebrate the completion of the reconstruction.

"Per the requests of Mr. Galbady and Miss Celesdia, I am honored to lead tonight's toast. If it's all right with all of you, that is. Well, anyway, do we all have our glasses in our hands?" I asked, scanning the village square.

Most of the devils were holding up transparent receptacles made of ice that were filled with beer or wine—or for the children, juice—while a few had regular cups filled with hot sake, following the

example set by Eldos and Baledos. Everyone's attention appeared to be on me.

"That scrawny hume is also a 'merchant,' no? Or whatever that other hume introduced himself as," one of the devils commented.

"He is. I hear he is the one supplying our village with food," another replied.

"He looks stupid," a third piped up.

Another immediately shushed him. "Stop that. Do not ridicule him."

"Why not?"

"You do not know? He is the Immortal Dragon's mate."

"Wh-What?!" the astounded devil cried out. "Did you just say he is the white dragon's *mate*?"

"That is not all. He is also Miss Celesdia's 'sworn friend,'" the second devil added, much to his friend's astonishment.

"Sworn friend? Miss *Celesdia's*?!"

"Yes. It means that Miss Celesdia herself greatly respects him."

In pockets around the square, I could hear the devils gossiping about me. *Hold on a minute. Since when did I become Dramom's mate?* I wondered, casting a glance in her direction. If I'd overheard that remark, she'd *definitely* heard it too, yet she was in no hurry to correct them. *Seriously, give me a break already.*

But thanks to that rumor, the puzzled expressions on the faces of the devils morphed into ones that were a mix of respect, fear, and curiosity as they all stared at me.

"Ahem." Mr. Galbady cleared his throat pointedly and the devils fell silent. That must have been my cue to continue the toast.

"Well then, everyone. Let us toast to the restoration of the village, its future growth, and the relationship between the devils and Ninoritch. Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

The sound of clinking ice glasses echoed all around us, signaling the start of the barbecue party.

"Here, Mifa. I cooked you some meat," Aina said, placing some food on Mifa's plate.

"Th-Thank you, Aina," the little devil girl replied timidly.

"Mi-fa, Shuama cook for you too," Suama babbled.

"O-Okay. Thank you, Suama."

Team Little Ones (as I was now calling them) were getting along better than ever, grilling meat for each other while tasting and comparing all the different types. A warm and fuzzy feeling spread through my chest as I watched them.

Once I had finished giving my toast, Karen, Mr. Galbady, and I started chatting together, and over the course of our conversation, we decided that twenty or so devils would move to Ninoritch, including Mifa. Not only would this cover our need for laborers in the town's burgeoning charcoal industry, but it would also provide relief to the "weak" devils who had trouble living comfortably on the northern isle. That way, Karen and I were happy because it meant we didn't need to go looking for laborers from other towns, and the devils were happy because they could escape the island's harsh environment. It was a win-win situation all around.

We hadn't told Celes and Mifa about the decision yet, and I couldn't help eagerly anticipating their reaction when they learned the news. *Speak of the devil...* While I was sitting there, grinning to myself, Celes approached.

"Shiro."

"Yeah? What is it, Celes?"

"There is something I wish to say to you. Is now a good time?"

"Sure," I said with a nod, and I turned toward her to give her my full attention.

She was also looking me straight in the eye. I noticed her left eye had turned back to its usual crimson color, perhaps because she was containing her powers at present. Did that mean it only turned gold when she was in full "Awakened Celes" mode? That'd be kinda cool, actually.

"I was a little hesitant to let you come here at first, but..." She paused and scratched one of her reddening cheeks. "I am glad you did. I am glad all of you came here with me." A soft smile curled her lips upward. "Thank you, Shiro. From the bottom of my heart."

"Oh, there's no need to thank me. After all, I'm your 'sworn friend,' remember? And what else are friends for?" I said, teasing her

in order to cover up my own embarrassment.

But Celes wasn't taking the bait this time, and simply continued to smile tenderly at me. "Indeed. Well then, my dear friend, I will continue to rely on you from now on." Her smile was so radiant, it even rivaled the beauty of the auroras overhead.

"Should we make a toast? Just the two of us?" I suggested.

"Heh. I would like that."

"Cheers, Celes."

"Cheers."

I was still worried about this Setting Sun merchant guild and Jilvared's stated plan of assassinating the demon king, but for the time being, I chose to push those concerns to one side and live in the moment, eating, drinking, and enjoying the company of friends.

And as it turned out, beer tasted even better out of a glass made of ice.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the tenth volume of *Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back to My World Whenever I Want!* I'm the author, Hiiro Shimotsuki.

I always wanted to include Mifa—Celes's little sister—in the story, and in this volume, I finally managed to make that happen. Now, Aina has one more friend who's around her age (maybe?) in addition to Shess. I'm really excited to see what Team Little Ones—with Shess included—will get up to over the next few volumes.

Now, onto the usual acknowledgments:

To the illustrator, Takashi Iwasaki-sensei, thank you as always for the simply wonderful illustrations! I was shocked by how detailed they were! I was literally shaking with excitement when I received the draft illustration of Awakened Celes (I'm not even kidding!).

To Shizuku Akechi-sensei, who is responsible for the manga adaptation of this series, thank you and good work on the manga serialization! Every chapter is just as high-quality as the one before. Also, congratulations on your marriage! Let's get together and celebrate sometime soon!

To my editor and the whole editorial department of HJ Bunko, thank you for letting me release yet another volume in this series.

To my dear family, my friends, and my dogs, thank you for always supporting me.

And lastly, the biggest, fattest thank you of all goes to you, the reader, for reading up to this point! We've reached the *tenth* volume, guys! It's always been my dream to write a series that reaches double digits! And this was only possible due to your support. The adventures of Shiro and his merry companions are far from over, so I hope you'll stick around for the rest of the journey as well.

Lastly, I will once again be donating part of the royalties from this book to children in need. So by purchasing this book, you are

helping these children.

See you all in volume 11!

Hiiro Shimotsuki

Bonus Short Story

The Amata Sisters' Quarrel

At present, Shiro's twin younger sisters, Shiori and Saori Amata, were in the middle of an argument.

"We absolutely *have* to go with the bunny pajamas!" Saori declared.

"But Saorin, this girl is around the same age as Aina. Bunnies will be a little too childish for her, don't you think?" Shiori drawled in her usual unhurried manner.

"What are you even talking about, Shiorin? Aina's only *nine*! She'd be a third-grader here in Japan. There's nothing childish about a nine-year-old wearing bunny pajamas," Saori insisted, brandishing the fuzzy pajamas with bunny ears attached to the hood. "I mean, just look at them! You can become a bunny by wearing this thing! Isn't that incredible? We *have* to go with them," she declared triumphantly, as if she had just won the debate.

"Well, I *do* think they're cute, but I like these ones with the strawberry better," Shiori said, advocating for the pajamas she'd picked out that had a large strawberry on the front.

"Yeah, because a huge strawberry isn't childish," Saori retorted sarcastically.

"No, it really isn't. Plus, they're not all fuzzy like that bunny pair, so she won't get too hot in them," Shiori pointed out.

Like always, she was all smiles, while Saori had more of a determined look in her eye. For a moment, the sisters stared—no, "glared" would be a better word—at each other from either side of the futon on which Mifa was sleeping. Thirty minutes had passed since Shiro had entrusted the little girl to them before leaving for Ruffaltio again, and the twins were arguing over which pair of pajamas they should put her in.

"It *has* to be the bunny ones!"

"But I like the strawberry pajamas better."

Due to being spoiled rotten by their big brother growing up, neither sister was accustomed to compromising, and while they usually got along like a house on fire, when they did butt heads, even Shiro struggled to keep the peace.

All of a sudden, the sisters broke off from their silent standoff and whipped their heads sideways in perfect sync.

"Aina! Which ones do you like better?" Saori demanded.

"Aina, could you tell us which you prefer?" Shiori asked at the exact same time.

The little girl let out a yelp of surprise at the simultaneous questions from the sisters. They must have realized they wouldn't be able to resolve the dispute on their own and had instead turned to Aina for help, the little girl having observed the whole argument from one corner of the room. But needless to say, she was utterly perplexed by the situation she found herself in. Mere minutes ago, she had been in the village of the devils watching her friend suffer (though she was sleeping peacefully now, thank goodness). Yet here these two were, arguing over *pajamas* of all things.

"C'mon, Aina. Which pair do you like?" Saori urged, being as pushy as ever.

"Um..." The little girl hesitated as she glanced back and forth between the two sets of pajamas the sisters were holding.

Miss Saori said her ones were supposed to make the wearer look like a "bunny," didn't she? Based on the design of the pajamas, Aina assumed they meant a "rabbit" by that. However, the only rabbits she knew of were horned rabbits, which were dangerous creatures with sharp, pointy horns. *Why would Miss Saori want to dress Mifa up like a monster?* she wondered.

Her gaze shifted to the sleeping devil girl. She couldn't deny that the pajama set Saori was holding *was* cute, but Mifa's body had been metamorphosing out of control and into something monstrous not even an hour before, so to Aina, it felt like it wouldn't be right to put her in clothes inspired by such a dangerous creature.

She hesitantly pointed to the strawberry pajama set. "I like the

one with the, uh, strawberry, was it?"

"See, Saori?" Shiori crowed triumphantly. "Aina prefers mine!"

Saori's face twisted into a pout, but it only lasted for a second before transforming into a grin as her gaze shifted to Suama, who was sitting beside Aina.

"What do you think, Suama? This bunny pajama set is super cute, right? Like, if you *had* to choose, you'd pick this one, right?" she asked eagerly.

Suama's response was instant. "Ai!"

A look that was pure gloat spread across Saori's face as she turned to face her sister again. "Aha! Hear that, Shiorin? Suama says *my* bunny pajamas are better!"

"Aw," Shiori pouted. "Don't you prefer these ones with the strawberry on them, Suama? Oh, this red fruit here is called a 'strawberry.' It's very sweet and yummy," she said, trying to get the little dragon girl to switch sides.

But her attempts had little effect. "Nuh-uh. Shuama wike this one!" the little dragon girl babbled, pointing to the bunny pajamas.

"Well, that makes it two-for-two. What should we do now, Shiorin?"

"What do you mean?" drawled Shiori.

"Uh, duh. How are we gonna decide what pajamas to put on Mifa?"

"Oh. Well, it's obvious, isn't it? We'll have to do *that*."

Saori nodded. "Yup, that's what I thought too. All right, let's settle this matter!"

The twins got to their feet and balled up their fists.

"Rock..." Saori started.

"Paper..." Shiori continued.

"Scissors!" they yelled in unison, launching into an impromptu game of rock-paper-scissors.

But after drawing five times in a row, they decided a last-minute change of rules was necessary. Rather than it just being the two of them playing, they decided to make it a three-way contest with Aina, and whoever beat the little girl would get to choose the pajamas Mifa would wear. They quickly brought Aina up to speed with the

rules of the game, and the contest was soon underway.

"Okay, I'm ready to play, um, rock-paper-scissors, was it?" Aina said.

"Bring it on, Aina!" Saori cheered.

"I'm ready too-hoo," Shiori announced in a singsong voice.

Aina balled up her little fist and pumped it a number of times as she chanted, "R-Rock, paper, scissors!"

As soon as the last word passed her lips, she made her choice. She had thrown scissors. And the winner was...

"Yay, I won!" Shiori cheered.

"Damn," Saori cursed in frustration.

"I'm gonna go help her change now. What was her name again? It was Mifa, right?" Shiori asked.

Aina nodded. "Yeah, it's Mifa."

"Okay. I'm gonna change Mifa into this strawberry pajama set."

That was how the little devil girl had ended up dressed in strawberry pajamas, even though she'd been asleep the whole time, and when she did eventually wake up, she had no idea what was happening.

"Ain-ya. Ain-ya. Ain-ya, wook! Roaaar!" Suama called out to her friend. She had put on the bunny pajamas that were much too big for her.

Meanwhile, Aina turned back to the twins with an expectant twinkle in her eyes. "Miss Shiori, Miss Saori, can we play rock-paper-scissors again?" she asked.

The atmosphere in the little room was quite lively, and a soft smile curled Mifa's lips upward as she slept soundly.





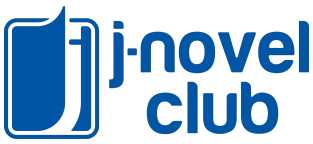







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Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back Whenever I Want! Volume 10
by Hiiro Shimotsuki

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