

# Chillin' in Another World

WITH LV 2 SUPER CHEAT POWERS



13

Story by Miya Kinojo  
Illustrations by Katagiri



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8

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# Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2  
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**Flio**

Former Hero Candidate and  
General Store Proprietor.



**Rys**

Flio's wife, a lupine demon.



**Wynne** (Human Form)

Freeloader with high stats  
and a big appetite.



**Garyl**

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



**Elinásze**

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



**Rynásze**

Elinásze's little sister. Flio and  
Rys's youngest daughter.



**Ben'ne**

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



**Hiya**

The Djinn who Commands the  
Origin of Light and Darkness.



**Damalynas**

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



**Belano**

A quiet, shy, and skittish teacher.



**Belalio**

Minilio and Belano's child.



**Blossom**

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



**Ura**

An oni with a strong sense of justice.  
Chief of a demon village who lost their  
place in the world.



**Kora**

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



**Telbyress**

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

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# Characters

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**Ghozal**

Once known as the mightiest  
Dark One in history.



**Uliminas**

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



**Balirossa**

A former knight of Klyrode  
and wife of Ghozal.



**Folmina**

Ghozal and Uliminas's daughter.



**Ghoro**

Ghozal and Balirossa's son.



**Calsi'im**

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



**Charun**

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



**Rabbitz**

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



**Sleip (Human Form)**

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



**Byleri**

Former archer of Klyrode  
living in sin with Sleip.



**Rislei**

Sleip and Byleri's daughter.



**Ellie (The Maiden Queen)**

Hardworking queen of the  
Magical Kingdom with a strong  
sense of justice.



**Tanya**

An amnisiac maid who showed  
up uninvited (Disciple of the  
Celestial Plane).



**Greanyl**

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



**The Shadow King**

The former King of Klyrode,  
and head of the Shadow  
Conglomerate.

Super Cheat Powe





# Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers



**Hero Gold-Hair**

On the run from the law despite being the "hero."



**Tsuya**

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



**Valentine**

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



**Aryun Keats**

Member of the rare carriage djinn species, but her battle strength is nothing to speak of.



**Wuha Gappoli**

Member of the rare mansion djinn species, but no use at all in a fight.



**Dawkson**

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



**Phufun**

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



**Belianna**

A foul-mouthed devil who loves her little sister.



**Irystiel**

Garyl's classmate and Belianna's little sister.



**Salina**

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



**Sybe (Unicorn Rabbit Form)**

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



**Shebe**

Unicorn Rabbit who became Sybe's bride.



**Sube**

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



**Sebe**

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



**Sobe**

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

Super Cheat Powers



# Chapter 1: Flio's Hardworking Household

The world of Klyrode is a world of swords and sorcery, home to creatures of many sorts from magic beasts to demihumans. It is a world where humans and demons had waged war since time immemorial—until, that is, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, greatest of the human kingdoms, signed a treaty with the Dark Army, the largest and most venerable institution among demonkind. It has been quite some time since the two sides have laid down their arms, and the world has entered an age of peaceful cultural exchange.

The Dark One Dawkson once ruled the Dark Army as a tyrant, but he has since changed his ways, working diligently to foster harmonious cooperation among the demons within his territory. And after long efforts, he has succeeded in rebuilding the Dark Army from the brink of annihilation, where it had been teetering not long ago. Despite this, however, he continues to face problem after problem from demons who still cling to the credo that might makes right.

The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, meanwhile, has been focusing its attention on diplomatic relations with its neighboring kingdoms, seeking greater solidarity among humanity. There was a time when many foreign nations looked at the Maiden Queen of Klyrode with suspicion for her pursuit of reconciliation with demonkind, but they too have come to approve of her decision. Their approval, however, comes with its share of unexpected requests...

In the midst of it all, the Fli-o'-Rys General Store managed by Flio himself has been steadily expanding the scope of its operations. Flio's wife Rys, as well as everyone else living at Flio's house, have been very busy day after day as customers of all sorts flock to their business.

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

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

It was nighttime, and Flio's house was shrouded in darkness. Most of the windows of the three-story wooden building were dark as well, their residents slumbering peacefully. In Flio and Rys's room, however, the lights were still on.



Rys sat on the edge of the couple's large bed, busy working with a length of cloth. Her hands moved faster than the eye could follow, cutting the cloth and stitching it together, swiftly bringing yet another outfit to completion.

Rys had been a lupine demon warrior in the Dark Army, but once upon a time she lost to Flio and resolved to walk alongside him as his wife. She adored her husband to a somewhat excessive degree, and was something of a mother figure to everyone in Flio's house.

As his wife worked, Flio sat up in bed, watching with his usual easygoing smile. Flio was a merchant who had been summoned from another world as one of the candidates for the position of Hero. The blessing he had obtained upon his summoning gave him mastery of every skill and spell to exist within the world of Klyrode. These days he worked as the proprietor of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store alongside his demon wife Rys. He was the proud father of three daughters—two by birth and one adopted—and one son.

"Your skills are as impressive as always, Rys," Flio said. Indeed, the clothes Rys were making were all finished with a high level of care, well-made and attractive to the eye.

"Not at all!" Rys insisted as she put the finishing touches on yet another high-quality piece at superhuman speed. "In fact, it is only very recently that I've become competent enough to create outfits that can truly be considered satisfactory. I still have a long way to go before I master the skill, I'm afraid." She smiled up at her husband, her hands working away lightning fast all the while. "Garyl will need something to wear for the training camp he's attending at the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education, you know, and Elinàsze and Rynàsze need new outfits as well. And when those are completed, I'll also need to make new outfits for Ghozal and Sleip's children."

"I suppose..." Flio said. "Everything you make is so stylish and expertly crafted, Rys. I'm sure everyone will be happy to get clothes from you..." His smile, however, looked somewhat strained as he glanced at the veritable mountain of clothes Rys had already completed piled up behind her—a far cry from his usual easygoing expression. "But..."

"Oh?" said Rys, noticing where Flio had been looking. "This much is nothing, I



assure you! Why, when I spend a day tailoring, I can make forty or fifty outfits before breakfast!" She punctuated her words with a boastful smile. "After all, it isn't only the children who need new clothing. It is also my duty as wife of the master of the house to provide outfits for Ura and his subordinates, now that he has become one of my lord husband's retainers."

Flio couldn't help wincing at Rys's words.

Rys, as mentioned, was a lupine demon, a species known for having a strong sense of camaraderie within their pack. Her older brother, Fengaryl, had been the leader of the lupine demons in the Dark Army, and as his sister, Rys—or Fenrys, as she had been known at the time—had a position of authority among the pack. She had held on to her pack loyalty even after leaving the Dark Army and saw it as her responsibility to look after not only her own children but all of Flio's household as well. In addition to creating new outfits for everyone to wear, she arranged for everyone's living spaces, cooked their meals, and performed a great variety of other tasks for the house's benefit.

*I do appreciate her helping look after everyone's needs,* Flio thought, *but still...* "I'm glad you're so eager to help," he said, smiling his usual easygoing smile once again. "But if we need clothes for everyone, couldn't we find something suitable for sale in Klyrode Castle Town? That way, you'd have one less thing to worry about..."

Rys, however, smiled and shook her head. "Clothes from the Castle Town would never do!" she insisted. "They're well made, I suppose, but I'm afraid I personally don't find them satisfactory. The clothes on sale in shops simply aren't of a quality worthy of adorning a retainer of my lord husband's, if I may be so bold. And besides, if I make the outfits myself, we don't have to worry about paying for the labor. It's a much more favorable deal for us if I simply purchase the cloth and make the outfits on my own, is it not? Plus, this way, there's no risk that we might pay for an expensive outfit only for it not to suit the tastes of its intended recipient."

"I-I suppose that's true..." Flio admitted. Nonetheless, he seemed concerned for Rys's health. Before he could say anything else, however, Rys continued.

"And in any event, I myself wish to work hard to help my lord husband



however I can,” she said with a cheerful smile. “There is no need to worry on my account.”

Flio could only give a knowing smirk at the sight of his wife’s happy face. “If you’re going to give me a smile like that, I suppose all I can do is lend you whatever support I can,” he said, pulling Rys into his arms.

“With my lord husband supporting me, I will have the power of a hundred housewives!” Rys declared. “Just leave it to me!”

Flio held Rys gently in his arms and whispered in her ear. “I’ll be counting on you, Rys. Only, please take care of yourself as well.”

Instantly, Rys’s face turned bright red in an instant, almost creating an audible *pop*. “O-O-Of course!” she said, her voice suddenly much higher pitched. “Y-Y-You don’t have to tell me that! Th-Th-That much is only to be expected of the wife of my lord husband! B-But...isn’t your face a little too close...?”

Flio and Rys had had three children between them already, but Rys was so enamored with Flio that even now she reacted to his advances with the same frantic blushing as when they had first become a couple.

The two gazed into each other’s eyes. They were alone in the bedroom. Flio moved his index finger in a single small circle outside of Rys’s view and leaned in closer still. Soon, the two were entwined in a passionate kiss. If anything, the couple had only grown more affectionate with time.

*Oh, Flio thought, but first...*

He waved his finger once more as the two went to embrace.

◇Meanwhile—Flio’s House, Hallway◇

A harsh *plink* echoed in the hallway outside of Flio and Rys’s room. A second later, Hiya appeared, seemingly from thin air.

Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, was a being who possessed enough magic power to destroy the entire world. After their defeat at the hands of Flio, however, they had taken to worshipping him as the so-called Exalted One, and came to live with the others in Flio’s house.

“Hmm...” Hiya frowned. “I hid myself in the corner of the Exalted One’s room



in hopes of spectating his amorous training with his wife, but it seems the Exalted One discovered my presence and expelled me with his magic..." They looked up at the ceiling with their perpetually narrowed eyes, the corners of their mouth faintly curling upwards.

Hiya had been created by a great magus of ages past as a being capable of wielding magic to control the origin of light and darkness. As a result of their origin, they initially lacked any comprehension of acts of sexual love. Through observing Flio and Rys's intimate activities, however, they became fascinated with the concept, to the point of developing a habit of spying on Flio and Rys in their bedroom whenever they were given the slightest opportunity.

"Now then..." Hiya said, folding their arms and glancing up and down the hallway. "If that door is closed, then what sort of training should I engage in today...?"

Suddenly, a woman appeared next to Hiya. Her outfit was purple, and quite revealing to boot. "Excuse me, Your Divinity," she said, sidling up to the djinn.

"Oh?" said Hiya. "Damalynas, is it?"

Damalynas was a witch known as the Grand Magus of Midnight, a consummate master of the dark arts. She had long since lost her corporeal body, and now existed only as a psychic construct. She was once vanquished by Hiya, and now she lived on in Hiya's mindscape—the djinn's mental world—as their beloved training partner.

"What is it you seek?" Hiya asked, a smile creeping on their face as they lifted Damalynas's chin tenderly with their fingertips. "Have you come to invite me to train with you, perhaps?"

"N-No!" Damalynas squeaked, her face turning bright red. "A-Actually...Lady Elinàsze has been calling for you..."

"Indeed?" Hiya asked. "I see... I must have failed to notice, as her telepathic messages never reached me..."

"Well, that's only to be expected," said Damalynas. "You blocked yourself off from telepathy in order to infiltrate Lord Flio's room, right?"

"Ah, of course. To think that one of my stature would commit such an error..."



Hiya chided themselves, smacking their forehead with an open palm and good-humoredly shaking their head. “In that case, we had best pay her a visit immediately. Damalynas, our training will have to wait until later.”

“F-Forget that for now!” Damalynas huffed, blushing once again. “We need to hurry!”

With one last glance of amusement at Damalynas’s flustered expression, Hiya waved an arm, and the two of them vanished from the hallway.

### ◇Flio’s House—Elinàsze’s Room◇

Elinàsze sat with her arms folded as she perused the text of the book she had propped in front of her.

Along with her younger twin, Garyl, and her little sister, Rylàsze, Elinàsze was one of the three biological children of Flio and Rys. She was a serious-minded girl with an endless adoration for her father and held a particular talent for the art of magic. That night she was dressed in a gorgeous deep green outfit, but her long hair, tied back in a disheveled ponytail, seemed to be in dire need of grooming.

She adjusted her round glasses and took another look over the book, when Hiya and Damalynas suddenly appeared behind her.

“My Lady Elinàsze,” Hiya said, placing a hand over their heart and bowing deep. “Did you call for me?”

“Hello, Hiya,” said Elinàsze, turning away from the book and looking in the djinn’s direction. “I’m terribly sorry to summon you so late in the evening.” She snapped her fingers and one of her books rose into the air, flying over towards Hiya.

“What is this?” Hiya asked.

“A magic grimoire from another world,” Elinàsze answered. “Our visitor from the Celestial Plane gave this to me today when she was here picking up the usual medicine. I’ve been working on deciphering it, and there’s one place in particular where I would appreciate your opinion on how to interpret the text...”



“Oh? A magic grimoire from another world, you say...” Hiya mused, taking the book in their hands with great interest. *I recognize these characters*, they thought as they examined the book’s cover. *This writing system is indeed unused in the world of Klyrode. The title reads, The Grimoire of Stelamh...*

As Hiya finished reading the title the book opened on its own, its pages turning quickly until they reached the relevant passage and came to a stop. “I want to ask about this part right here,” Elinàsze said. “It seems to be explaining a spell for creating a pocket dimension outside of the space-time continuum, but there are some points I don’t quite understand. It seems like it might be similar to the method you use to create that permanent mindscape of yours, but different as well...”

“I see...” Hiya said. “You are correct, Lady Elinàsze, that this spell is quite similar to the one I use to create my mindscape, albeit with one fundamental difference.” Hiya gestured with the index finger of their right hand and a collection of spheres appeared in midair. “This,” they said, “is the planetoid world of Klyrode, on which we reside. The spell in question creates a miniature artificial planetoid world outside of the bounds of this one. What you must understand, then, is the difference between the location in which the caster chooses to create their world. A mindscape and a planetoid world are worlds of a different order, and are therefore composed of a different essential substance. Therefore, the spells used to create them are different as well.”

“Aha!” Elinàsze exclaimed. “I believe I finally understand. I was so focused on the notion of creating a world that I forgot to consider something so basic...”

“On the contrary, it is a sign of your keen insight that you discerned the commonalities between this spell and my mindscape,” Hiya insisted. “I, Hiya, find myself deeply impressed.”

“Then, in that case...” The two carried on their conversation, sharing their thoughts and making frequent reference to both the book and the spheres Hiya had conjured as a visual aid.





Elinàsze loved her father Flio more than anyone or anything in the world. She had spent many long days engrossed in magic study with the goal of becoming a superb witch capable of assisting her father with his tasks. As a result, she had far surpassed even the magical knowledge of Damalynas. With Elinàsze conversing as equals with Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness herself and an authoritative figure on the subject of spellcasting, it was clear that her knowledge was top-class in the world of Klyrode.

Damalynas's eyes went wide as she listened in on their discussion. *H-Hang on... she thought. Wh-What in the world are Their Divinity and Lady Elinàsze even talking about? I'm the master of the midnight arts, and even I can barely follow their conversation! A cold sweat ran down her back as she stared, dumbfounded. Th-This is no joke! I'd better step up my game, or else Their Divinity might lose interest in me entirely...*

With that in mind, the Grand Magus of Midnight reached out for one of the magic grimoires Elinàsze had left unattended on her desk nearby.

#### ◇The Next Day—Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

Today, as always, the area in front of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store was packed full of people. Some had come to shop. Others had come to discuss some matters of business. Still others were here to rent out workhorses.

"Good, good." Uliminas nodded, a grin on her face as she watched the stream of customers making their way into the shop. "Looks like we've got ameowther day of purrofitable dealings ahead of us!"

Uliminas the hellcat had been Ghozal's closest confederate back when he had served as Dark One. When Ghozal abdicated the throne, Uliminas left along with him and came to work at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store in disguise as a demihuman. Since then, she had become one of Ghozal's two wives, and the mother of his daughter Folmina.

"U-Um... Excuse me..." A woman stepped up to Uliminas, her face hidden by a heavy hood.

"Yes?" Uliminas asked. "Something I can help mew with?"

"W-Well..." the woman faltered. "U-Um... I heard a damned rumor that this

shop was selling equipment branded with the Wolf of Justice seal...”

“Oh!” said Uliminas, pointing towards one corner of the shop. “Those’ll be on the shelves meowver that way!”

“I see them!” the woman said. “Thanks a damned bunch!”

Uliminas watched, smirking, as the woman ran off in the direction she had pointed. A number of other customers followed after her, apparently having overheard her exchange with Uliminas.

*That customeowr was a demon, wasn’t she? Uliminas thought. I guess demeownkind still can’t get enough of the Wolf of Justice!*

When the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the Dark Army had still been at war, Flio had taken to donning a wolf mask when he fought back invasions by the Dark Army, adopting the name of the Wolf of Justice. With his overwhelming power he had no trouble scattering the demons’ forces into the winds, and soon he had become something of a legend among demonkind. Since then, many demons had come to revere the Wolf of Justice with worshipful awe.

*I was the one who had the idea of using the Wolf of Justice’s popularity to sell our meowrchandise, Uliminas thought. But it’s purroven much more effective than I ever could have imeowgined...* The display shelves for the Wolf of Justice branded equipment had been set up just this morning, but there was already a huge crowd of demons vying with each other to get their hands on the choicest goods. Uliminas watched the scene with a satisfied glimmer in her eye.

“Hrm...” said Ghozal, stepping out of the shop’s backroom. “Aren’t we selling that Wolf of Justice equipment at the Dark Citadel branch store too? Why are they all coming *here*?”

Ghozal, once known as Dark One Gholl, had been the leader of the Dark Army until he surrendered the throne to his younger brother Yuigarde in favor of disguising himself as a human and living as a freeloader at his Flio’s house. Over the course of their time together, he and Flio had become something akin to best friends. Since then he had taken two wives: Uliminas, his former confederate from the Dark Army, and Balirossa, a former knight for Klyrode. He had two children as well, named Folmina and Ghorro.



Ghozal was, of course, correct. The Fli-o'-Rys General Store had a branch store located right outside the front gates of the Dark Citadel itself. It had been set up during the period when the current Dark One Dawkson—who had still gone by Yuigarde at the time—vanished from his post, leaving Calsi'im to rule in his place as Dark Regent. Flio had opened the store in response to Calsi'im's request for aid.

"We sell Wolf of Justice meowrchandise in the branch store too, of course," Uliminas confirmed. "But *their* stock is all sold out, with new gear coming in already reserved a fair ways into the future. *These* are the demeowns who've come all this way to try their luck with the main branch's inventory."

"I see," Ghozal said, folding his arms and cocking his head as he looked over the rows of merchandise. "That makes sense. But...Uliminas..."

"Hm? Mew've got a question?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems like all of the Wolf of Justice equipment you're selling is branded with Mister Flio's *blue* wolf mask..." Ghozal frowned, a furrow forming in his brow.

*Aha...* Uliminas thought as she realized where Ghozal was going with this. "To answer meowr question, no," she said, giving Ghozal a narrow-eyed smirk.

"H-Hrm?" said Ghozal.

"We didn't make any with meowr *black* wolf mask."

Ghozal's face fell at Uliminas's words. "But I was there too, you know!" he protested. "I fought right alongside Mister Flio as Black Justice!"

"And we've *tried* selling Wolf of Justice goods with the black wolf mask, but nobody ever bought them!" Uliminas shot back.

"H-Hrm..."

"Besides, mew weren't involved that often anyway," Uliminas pointed out. "We were worried it might cause purproblems if word got out that the former Dark Meown was fighting on the side of humanity, remember? I don't think mew would have earned any fans one way or another."

"W-Well..." Ghozal objected. "B-But still! I fought the Dark Army as Black

Justice a number of times...”

“Not nearly enough to count. And mew were holding back every time,” said Uliminas, giving her husband a sidelong glance as she calmly laid out the simple facts. “The meownly time you went all out was when we were fighting the pirates on the Calgosi Coast. Why would the Dark Army care about Black Justice meowne way or another?”

“H-Hrm...” was all Ghozal could say in the face of the undeniable truth of Uliminas’s words.

Flio hadn’t been the only one active as the Wolf of Justice—many of the residents of his house had pitched in to help when they could. Ghozal had chosen to use a black mask and black-colored costume to distinguish himself from Flio, who wore blue, but it seemed the persona of Black Justice never earned much in the way of acclaim.

“Well, whatever the reason, Black Justice has almost no popularity among demeowns,” Uliminas said. “I have hard sales figures purroving it too, so be a grown-up and let it go.”

“H-Hrm...” Ghozal repeated. “W-Well...if that’s the case, I guess it is what it is...” Dejected, he took a step towards the backroom he had just come from.

A second later, however, Folmina came running up after her father. “Papa!”

Folmina was the daughter of Ghozal and Uliminas, making her half demon royal and half hellcat, although she was equally as attached to Balirossa, Ghozal’s other wife, as she was to her biological mother. She, like many others, was somewhat infatuated with Flio’s son Garyl.

Behind Folmina came Ghoro, chasing after his big sister like always. Ghozal’s son with Balirossa, Ghoro was half human and half demon royal, although, like Folmina, he regarded Uliminas as his mother as much as Balirossa. He was a boy of few words who adored his big sister Folmina.

“You two!” Ghozal said, his eyes opening in surprise as Folmina and Ghoro ran up to him and hugged him tight around the legs. The two of them were both wearing new outfits with a matching color scheme. On closer inspection, they seemed to be Black Justice costumes modified for daily wear. “Where did you



get those clothes?”

“Mama Uliminas got them for us!” Folmina answered, looking up at Ghozal with a smile on her face. “Do they look good?”

“Oh? Uliminas did, did she...?” said Ghozal, looking over at the counter where Uliminas was waiting.

Noticing Ghozal looking her way, Uliminas shyly averted her gaze. “I didn’t want to let inventory go to waste,” she said. “So I asked Rys if she could make them into meowtfits for our children to wear...”

“Hrm! I see!” Ghozal said, laughing merrily as he hoisted Folmina up on his right shoulder and Ghorro up on his left. “I have to admit, it feels good seeing them dressed in those old clothes!”

“These outfits are so cool, papa!” Folmina said, smiling brightly as she gave Ghozal a big hug. “Me and Ghorro both like them a lot!”

Atop Ghozal’s other shoulder, Ghorro nodded his head in mute agreement as he hugged his father from the opposite side.

Uliminas smirked to herself as she looked over at her husband and children. *Well, we had to do something with the meowld inventory, and if those three are happy, all the better...*

“Excuse me,” said a woman, startling Uliminas out of her thoughts.

“Mreow?!” she started. “H-How can I help mew?”

“Oh,” the woman said. “I was just wondering... Do you sell the outfits those children are wearing by any chance?”

“Huh? Th-Those are just something we made as a test, I’m afraid...” Uliminas answered.

“Really?” said the woman. “That’s a pity. My son seems to be very taken by them...” At her feet, Uliminas could see a boy of around Ghorro’s height. He was looking over at Ghorro, who was perched atop Ghozal’s shoulder, with shining wonder in his eyes.

*These two are demeowns as well, if I’m not mewstaken...* Uliminas thought, before turning to look at the child. “Mew like that outfit, kiddo?”

“I do!” came the child’s instant response.

Uliminas smiled. “I see!” she said. “In that case, I’ll give mew a set! If meow’re fine with a test purroduct, that is.”

“Really?!” The boy said, his face lighting up in a radiant smile.

“I-I’ll gladly pay for it...” the woman protested.

“Meow need!” Uliminas insisted. “These are test purroducts, after all! Just make sure he wears it a lot and shows it off to his furiends, and we’re even!” She retrieved an outfit identical to the one Ghoro was wearing from a box by her feet and handed it over to the boy.

“Truly?” the woman said, bowing deeply as she thanked Uliminas. “In that case, thank you very much!”

“Thank you, miss!” said the boy, taking the outfit Uliminas had given him in both arms. “These outfits are so dark and cool! I like them a lot!”

*I see... Uliminas mused as she saw the mother and child pair off with a smile. Demeown children do tend to like dark colors, don’t they? Maybe there’s some merit to selling Black Justice merchandise to them instead...*

While Uliminas was busy at the counter, Greanyl and Dalc Horst, who were on shop tending duty, were engaged in a conversation of their own.

“S-Sir Dalc Horst!” Greanyl cried. “This way, if you please!”

“G-Greanyl? What’s wrong?” Dalc Horst asked.

“We have a customer crushed under our merchandise! I think her back is injured!”

“Whoa!” Dalc Horst exclaimed when he took stock of the situation. “That lady was carrying *five* Wolf of Justice Buster Swords! Miss, didn’t you see the sign?” he said, chiding the customer as he went to pull the swords off of her back. “It says, ‘Product very heavy, limit one per customer please!’”

Greanyl was a member of the Silent Listeners, a group that had once served as the Dark Army’s intelligence agency. Currently she served as a supervisor for



the Fli-o'-Rys supply teams, as well as a pilot and manager for their fleet of Enchanted Frigates. From time to time she worked tending shop as well, in order to help show newer employees the ropes.

Dalc Horst, meanwhile, was a type of demon horse known as a nightmare. He had once been the captain of a team of elite soldiers under the command of Sleip, a former member of the Dark Army's Infernal Four. Now he worked for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store as the head of both the freight and guard teams, although he also tended shop when his schedule allowed.

"Damned sorry..." the woman managed in an agonized mutter from beneath the pile of oversized swords. "I thought I'd have no damned problem handling this many swords..."

That bit of trouble aside, however, business at Fli-o'-Rys carried on as briskly as ever.

### ◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

That evening in the living room after Flio's household had finished their dinner, Charun, a woman of short stature, made the rounds with a full pot of tea. "Please, everyone, don't hesitate to ask if you would like a cup of my first-rate tea as an after-dinner refreshment!"

Charun, a magic doll created long ago by a mage in the service of the Dark Army, was the wife of Calsi'im. Calsi'im had discovered her in a broken and discarded state and had her restored to working order. She had stayed by his side ever since, and now the couple lived together in Flio's house.

The living room of Flio's house was quite a bit larger than what you might find in a typical residence. Not only did it need to accommodate the building's large number of residents, but it also featured a hutch large enough for the household pet Sybe to move freely in his natural psychobear form. The interior of the house had been permanently expanded far beyond what should be possible if one considered the size of the building on the outside, all thanks to one of Flio's spells.

From one corner of the large table in the middle of the living room, large

enough for the entire household to eat meals together at once, Calsi'im the skeleton raised a bony hand. "I'll take a cup of your tea, if I may!" he said.

Calsi'im was an old skeleton who had once served in the office of Dark Regent. He had succumbed to old age once already, but Flio had brought him back to undeath. Now he spent his retirement living with the others at Flio's house.

"Of course, Calsi'im!" Charun said, hurrying at once to his side. Her feet made no sound as she moved along in spite of the superhuman speed with which she arrived next to her husband.

"Oh?" Calsi'im asked, peering over at Charun's teapot. "I don't believe I've seen you use this teapot before, have I?"

"Well spotted, Calsi'im!" Charun replied. "This is a kyusu-style teapot I purchased from a Hi Izuran merchant just the other day. The tea is a variety from Hi Izuru as well, known as hojicha. It is meant to be enjoyed with these special yunomi tea cups."

"I see, I see!" said Calsi'im, his jawbone rattling cheerfully. "I can't wait to have a taste!"

Charun set the elegant cup on the table in front of Calsi'im and began to pour, when suddenly she was interrupted by their daughter Rabbitz bursting onto the scene. "Papa!" Rabbitz cried, grinning from ear to ear and spreading her arms wide as she draped herself over the top of Calsi'im's head, holding him tight.

Rabbitz was the daughter of Calsi'im and Charun, making her a being of exceptional rarity, half skeleton and half magic doll. Calsi'im was not a large skeleton, but Rabbitz had been growing fast, and even though she was already nearly twice the size of her father she refused to abandon her habit of contorting herself in order to fit atop her favorite perch—Calsi'im's head.

"Oh ho ho!" Calsi'im laughed. "Y-You're in high spirits as ever, eh, Rabbitz?"

"Yah!" Rabbitz chirped.

"B-But you know!" the skeleton volunteered. "Th-This habit of yours is getting quite rough on my old neck vertebrae! P-Perhaps it's time we have a talk about sitting next to me instead of on my head..."

“Yah!” Rabbitz readily agreed with a toothy grin. There was no sign, however, that she intended to remove herself from her perch anytime soon.

“R-Rabbitz really loves her father, doesn’t she?” Flio remarked, looking over at the family’s antics with an awkward startled smile as Rabbitz rubbed her cheeks up against Calsi’im’s skull.

“I believe she may love him a little *too* much, if I may,” said Charun, stepping up to Flio in turn and placing a tall yunomi cup full of tea in front of him.

“Thank you, Charun,” Flio said, smiling as he took a sip of the beverage.

“Incidentally,” Charun said, “we have begun selling tea of this sort at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, have we not?”

“Ah, yes,” Flio answered. “Now that we have regular Enchanted Frigate flights going to Hi Izuru, we’re able to do business with merchants from that part of the world. So far we’ve only been buying wholesale goods from Hi Izuran suppliers to sell in our shop, but we’re expecting some merchants to pay us a visit in the near future for sales talks on their end as well.”

“My lord husband!” At this, Rys, who had been busy in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner, came hurrying into the living room. “Will the Hi Izuran merchants be bringing *you know what* when they come to visit?”

“Oh!” Flio said, nodding in understanding. “The cloth they use in Hi Izuran clothing, you mean! Don’t worry—I asked them to bring as much as they could carry.”

Rys smiled, delighted at the news. “My lord husband, thank you so much! I was able to make some excellent products using the test cloth you purchased for me the other day. I’ve been at my wits’ end waiting for a chance to get my hands on more!”

On closer examination, Flio noticed that the outfit Rabbitz was wearing as she clung to Calsi’im’s head bore a striking resemblance to the kimono worn by the people of Hi Izuru. “Don’t tell me,” he said. “Rabbitz’s new clothing is one of your test items, isn’t it? ‘Tanmono,’ I believe that sort of cloth is called...”

“Yes, that’s exactly correct!” said Rys, pridefully thumping a fist against her chest. “I made that outfit and many more out of the cloth from Hi Izuru using



the clothes they wear in the oni village as a reference!”

As if on cue, Kora came dashing up beside Rys on her little legs. Kora was the only daughter of Ura, the chief of the aforementioned oni village. She was of hybrid species, with her mother being a fairy and her father an oni. Kora was an extremely shy and self-conscious girl, but she had made a great deal of progress in opening up to the residents of Flio’s house.

“U-Um...” Kora began, fidgeting shyly as she did a quick rotation in front of Flio to show off her outfit. “R-Rys made an outfit for me too!”

“I see!” said Flio. “It looks great on you, Kora!”

“E-Ehe hee!” Kora giggled. “Thank you! And thank you, Lady Rys, for making me such a wonderful outfit!” She bowed deeply and darted back to where Ura and Blossom were sitting. “Dad, mom!” she said, smiling happily in spite of her beet-red face. “U-Um... Lord Flio praised my outfit! He said it looks great on me!”



“Lord Flio’s got that one right!” said Ura, grinning as he patted his daughter on the head. “You look great, Kora!”

Ura had been raising Kora as a single father ever since his fairy wife passed away, on top of looking after the group of demon misfits he had taken in under his wing. He was kind, passionate, and serious-minded when it came to his duties, and a strong enough fighter that he once had been a candidate for a position on the Infernal Four during the time of Dark One Gholl.

Next to Ura, Blossom smiled happily as well.

Blossom had originally been a heavy fighter from a company of knights in service to Klyrode Castle, and was the best friend of Balirossa, the company’s leader. When Balirossa resolved to quit the knighthood, Blossom followed suit. Now the two of them lived at Flio’s house with the rest of their former company. Blossom came from a family of farmers and was an expert in agricultural work, and in due time she had established an enormous farm on a patch of land outside Flio’s house.

“That’s right!” Blossom said. “Course, you were cute to begin with, Kora. That outfit Lady Rys made for you just made you even cuter!”

“Ehe hee! Thanks, mom!” Kora said, smiling happily as she hugged Blossom tight. Blossom wrapped her arms gently around the girl.

Not long ago, Blossom had gone in front of the entire household and declared that she and Ura were to become husband and wife. Since then, she left her room in Flio’s house and moved into Ura’s house in the oni village where she, Ura, and Kora now lived together. As the oni village was located right outside of Flio’s house, however, she still came by the house nearly every night to join them for dinner.

As Flio’s household all smiled fondly at the sight of the happy family of three, Wyne came running up in front of Flio himself. Wyne was a dragonewt, said to be the strongest warrior among all of dragonkind. Flio and Rys had found her collapsed on the side of the road and rescued her, adopting her into their own family as their oldest child. She was a doting older sister to Elinàsze and the other children.



“Dada!” Wyne said, a great big smile on her face as she spun round and round. “Look-look! Mama made me a new outfit too! Does it look good-good?”

“Ah! I— Geh?!” Flio exclaimed, his expression going stiff as he looked over at her. Wyne was spinning happily in place in her new outfit, but the sash had come undone completely, leaving the kimono open wide and exposing her body for all to see.

“W-Wyne!” Rislei cried, springing up from her seat nearby and running up beside her. “Stop!”

Rislei was the daughter of Sleip and Blyleri, half lichsteed and half human. She was a serious girl, and something of a leader for the younger cohort of children living at Flio’s house.

Wyne, however, kept right on spinning in spite of Rislei’s efforts, smiling all the while.

“D-Don’t look...” Belano, who was seated across from the scene, blushed furiously, covering Minilio’s eyes with her right hand and Belalio’s with her left. The two of them were seated to either side of her, after all.

Belano was another of the former members of Balirossa’s knightly company from Klyrode Castle—the company witch. She was a shy, tiny woman who was only capable of casting defensive magic. After leaving the knighthood she came to live along with the others at Flio’s house, eventually finding employment as a teacher at the Houghtow College of Magic.

Her husband Minilio was a magic doll created as an experiment by Flio. He was given the name Minilio on account of his resemblance to a younger version of his creator. Minilio spent his time assisting Belano with her work at the Houghtow College of Magic. The two of them became close over their time working together, and eventually the two married and had a child they named Belalio.

As the child of a magic doll and a human, Belalio was every bit the rarity that Rabbitz was. In appearance, they looked a great deal like their father Minilio—a younger version of Flio. They preferred to dress in an androgynous manner, however, keeping their gender ambiguous.

“Young Mistress Wyne!” As the scene in the living room descended into confusion, a woman made her way straight towards Wyne, moving with astonishing speed. This was Tanya, the maid in service of Flio’s house.

Tanya’s original name was Tanyalina. She was an angel, a disciple of the Celestial Plane sent to observe Flio due to his tremendous magic power. On her way to Flio’s house, however, she suffered a freak collision with Wyne and lost much of her memory. Since then, she had come to stay at Flio’s house as a live-in maid.

Tanya, dressed in her maid outfit, crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Hah!” she cried, letting out a breath as she began moving with superhuman speed. In the blink of an eye, Wyne’s undone sash was retied around her waist, her open kimono now looking remarkably neat. Tanya, her flurry of motion finished, was left kneeling, her arms spread wide. “It is done,” she said, giving a satisfied nod.

“T-Tanya, wait!” came Rislei’s distressed voice from behind the angel. “Y-You got me wrapped up in the sash too!”

Yes—Tanya’s superspeed movements had succeeded in retying Wyne’s sash and fixing her kimono, but Rislei, who had been running over to Wyne herself from the opposite direction, had ended up caught in the flurry, and was tied up along with Wyne inside the sash.

“Ah!” Tanya exclaimed, springing to her feet. “Y-Young Mistress Rislei! I, Tanya, have committed a most grievous error...” Tanya’s expression remained as cool and composed as always, but the beads of sweat forming on her forehead made it clear how much the mistake had shaken her composure.

“Ah ha ha!” Wyne laughed, jumping up in the air with childish glee. “I’m fused-fused with Lei-Lei!”

Rislei, by contrast, had gone pale in the face. “H-Hey! Wyne! Stop moving around so much! You’re squeezing my belly! A-And right after we ate dinner... Ghk!” she cried, clapping a hand over her mouth in an attempt to prevent herself from vomiting said dinner right back up.

“Y-Young Mistress Wyne!” said Tanya, chasing after the pair. “Please, behave yourself and settle down! And Young Mistress Rislei, please try to hold on a

moment longer!”

At this point, however, they were interrupted by none other than Sleip. “Hey now!” he bellowed, fury in his eyes as he bolted towards them. “What are you doing to my Rislei?!”

Sleip was a former member of the Infernal Four who had left the Dark Army and ended up living at Flio’s house, where he spent his days looking after the equine magic beasts in the pasture outside. He and Byleri were practically husband and wife, although they never formalized their marriage, and he was a doting father to their daughter Rislei.

Wyne ran in circles around the living room, Tanya and Sleip in hot pursuit.

“Oh!” said Charun, barely dodging the rampaging dragonewt. “I-I wish you would please look where you’re going!” A second later, Tanya and Sleip came thundering past. The living room had descended into madness with remarkable speed.

Flio winced as he watched the scene play out in front of him. “Maybe I should lend a hand here...” he said, holding out his right arm towards Wyne.

“You had better not, papa,” Elinàsze said from the seat beside him, closing her eyes and shaking her head just slightly. “If you use your magic to resolve the situation, Miss Tanya will be depressed. That would be far worse than anything happening now.”

“No kidding...” Byleri said, nodding in agreement. “Like, something like this totally happened just the other day? Mister Flio, like, fixed the whole thing with his magic, but that just made it worse! Miss Tanya was all, ‘The Master of the house troubled himself on account of my own foolish mistake...’ and got, like, super depressed. She wouldn’t even respond to anyone for a while after that...”

Byleri had originally been an archer from Balirossa’s company of knights, and was now living at Flio’s house with the rest of her former company. These days she put her exceptional talent for caring for horses to use looking after the equine magic beasts alongside Sleip and their daughter Rislei, greeting every day with a smile on her face.

“You were in quite a state yourself then, weren’t you, Byleri?” said Balirossa,



touching her index finger against her cheek as she recalled the events Byleri mentioned. “You were so upset when Miss Tanya nearly threw away those important books of yours in her depressed stupor...”

Balirossa, of course, had originally been the leader of the company of knights from Klyrode Castle. She had quit the knighthood and now lived at Flio’s house, working for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. She was one of Ghosal’s two wives, and the mother of Ghoros.

“Hwaaah?!” Byleri exclaimed, blushing all the way up to her ears and down to her shoulders the second Balirossa mentioned her important books. After all, the volumes Tanya had nearly disposed of when she was struggling to focus thanks to her flagging spirits had been a collection of adult literature Byleri had obtained in secret. In her ordinary state, Tanya would be sure to meticulously pretend she hadn’t seen such a book if she were to chance on one during her cleaning, but in her depressed mode she lacked the needed discretion.

“By the by,” Balirossa said, “I happened to catch a glimpse of the book at the time. That wasn’t one of those books you collected during our time together in the academy, was it?”

“S-Stooooop!!!” Byleri begged.

“I know you’ve refused my requests to read the books myself in the past,” Balirossa blithely continued, “but I would love to hear what they are about, if you wouldn’t mind telling me...”

“Like, no way!” said Byleri, waving her hands frantically as her face turned redder and redder. “Not in a million years! Y-You’re, like, too young! Or...not too young, I guess, but...u-um...you just can’t!”

“Whatever is the problem?” Balirossa asked, blinking in innocent confusion. “There’s no need to panic like that. I simply want to know what those books were about!”

“Oh, Balirossa...” said Blossom, looking over with a wry smirk on her face. “You sure can be clueless sometimes, can’tcha? I thought everyone at the academy knew about Byleri’s secret pornography collection!”

Belano nodded in agreement.

Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, and Belano had been together since their days in school training to be knights. After all those years, they knew each other better than anyone. Although, because Balirossa was prone to cluelessness, her understanding of her companions was somewhat muddled from time to time.

“So...” Balirossa said, looking blankly between Blossom and the red-faced Byleri with her knowing smirk. “What *were* the books about, then...?”

“Give! Me! A! Hecking! Break!” Byleri cried, waving her arms.

“Goodness...” Rys said, folding her arms as she surveyed the living room. “After dinner or not, this is *far* too much chaos!” She frowned, squaring her shoulders in anger as she tromped over towards Byleri and Balirossa. “I suppose I will have to tell them off, then!”

Before she could reach them, however, Flio grabbed her by the arm, stopping her. “I don’t see the harm in it,” he said. “It’s not that late yet, and everyone seems to be enjoying themselves.”

“Hmph...” Rys said, puffing out her cheeks in a pout as she came to a halt. “Well...if you say so, my lord husband...”

“More impurrantly, Rys, there’s something I want to talk to mew about!” said Uliminas, getting her attention.

“Oh? What is it, Uliminas?” said Rys.

“Mew know those child-size Wolf of Justice meowtfits you made the other day?” Uliminas said. “I’ve been thinking about testing them out as new meowrchandise at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store...”

“Really?” Rys asked. “Are they that popular?”

“Let’s just say I have a feeling they might go over well with demeown children.”

“I see...” Rys said, mulling it over. “If we’re going to sell those outfits as merchandise, I’m afraid my own efforts might not be quite enough. Perhaps we should get some help from the residents of the oni village.”

“We’d be much obliged!” said Ura, raising his hand at Rys’s words. “Us villagers have all been busy helping out at Blossom’s farm, but some of our

women aren't suited for that sort of heavy work. I'll ask some of them if they'd like to assist with the outfits instead!"

"That would be a great help," said Rys. "In that case, all we need is to secure a source for the fabric..."

"I should be able to help with that," Flio volunteered. "I'd already been planning on ordering cloth from different shops all over the land. I'll just be sure to include the materials you need in the order."

"My lord husband!" Rys gushed. "Of course you've already figured it out! Thank you ever so much!"

Suddenly, the conversation in the living room had turned to the subject of work.

Meanwhile, on one side of the living room in a large hutch for the house's pets, a Bear of Misfortune slept peacefully. There was a sign on the entrance to the hutch reading, "Home of Sybe, Shebe, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe," with another, smaller sign appended to the first: "And Tybe!"

Tybe was a Bear of Misfortune cub who became attached to Flio's daughter Rylnàsze during one of the family's trips to Dogorogma and ended up following them back to the world of Klyrode, where it now served as one of Rylnàsze's familiars. In appearance, Tybe looked quite a bit like a psychobear. Currently, it was dressed in a pair of overalls, sleeping on its back on top of a large cushion. It was still quite young, and had a habit of falling asleep shortly after eating dinner.

What was Sybe's family doing, you may be wondering? Well...

◇Meanwhile—The Forest near Flio's House◇

"Come along, everyone!" Rylnàsze sang as she ran on ahead, smiling brightly. "It's time for our after-dinner stroll!"

Rylnàsze was Flio and Rys's third-born and youngest child, blessed with a tremendous natural talent for taming that led her to get along easily with magic beasts of all sorts. Thanks to her abilities she had already become a member of the Houghtow College of Magic staff, helping out at their magic beast pasture despite having yet to enroll in school herself.



Sybe, in his unicorn rabbit form, hopped along behind her. Sybe had originally been a wild psychobear Flio had met in a random encounter. Sensing that he had no hope of victory against Flio, however, Sybe had surrendered on the spot and since then lived with Flio as a household pet. He spent most of his time in the unicorn rabbit form Flio had given him using his magic, although he had the ability to change between either form freely.

Behind Sybe came his mate Shebe, a wild unicorn rabbit Sybe had befriended who was brought into the house as well as Sybe's partner. And down the train further behind Shebe came the couple's children: Sube, Sebe, and Sobe. The children had a mix of unicorn rabbit and psychobear traits, with Sube and Sobe more closely resembling unicorn rabbits and Sebe taking after its psychobear father.

Rylnàsze led Sybe's family on a merry romp through the woods right outside of Flio's house. She came this way every night for an after dinner stroll. By now the path had become fairly well trodden. It was uneven, hilly terrain, but neither Rylnàsze nor the magic beasts seemed to have any difficulty as they continued along at a fast clip.

Behind the group, the goblin Hokh'hokton came running as fast as he could. Hokh'hokton had once been a low-ranking goblin soldier in the Dark Army, but now he was one of the workers on Blossom's farm, Blossom Acres, working hard every day with his various duties. He was currently finding himself occupied dealing with the so-called no-goodness Telbyress, a former goddess driven from the Celestial Plane who had chosen to spend her life in exile lodging in Hokh'hokton's home, quite against the goblin's wishes.

"You there! Telbyress!" he shouted angrily behind him. "Pick up the pace! Enough of your slacking off!"

"E-Easy for you to say... Huff...huff..." Telbyress panted as she ran after Hokh'hokton, lagging a considerable distance behind.

Telbyress was exiled from the Celestial Plane for neglecting her duties as a goddess. Now that she had forced herself into Hokh'hokton's home she was nominally helping with the farmwork at Blossom Acres, but as she was a perpetual drunk and had a strong aversion to any sort of labor, she found

herself being scolded by Hokh'hokton day in and day out.

Telbyress ran for all she was worth, but she was horribly out of breath, her legs trembling and her body on the verge of teetering over. Despite her best efforts, she was only falling further and further behind.

"Hmph!" Hokh'hokton snorted in indignation. "Useless woman! You slack off and skip work whether it's farming or sewing... The least you can do is accompany Madame Rylnàsze on her after-dinner strolls! You damned no-gooddness!"

"D-Don't be so mean to meee!" Telbyress protested. "Goddesses are like humans—we all have work we're suited for and work we're not! My strong suit, for example, would be relaxing and enjoying fine liquor..."

"Drinking liquor isn't work!" Hokh'hokton snapped. "Now quit bellyaching about it and run!"

"I-I caaan't!!!" Telbyress cried, finally collapsing from exertion and falling down on the path.

Hokh'hokton looked back over his shoulder at the fallen Telbyress and removed a bottle from the rucksack on his back. "If you can keep up with us..." he said. "I'll let you have this."

"I-Is that?!" Telbyress's eyes shot open when she caught a glimpse of Hokh'hokton's bottle. "Dadaccai! The phantom liquor! Hardly any of it was ever made! It's almost impossible to find a bottle!"

"You may have it," Hokh'hokton said, returning the bottle to his pack, "*if* you keep up with us for the entire stroll!"

Suddenly, Telbyress sprung to her feet, full of energy. "Booooooze!" she cried, bolting straight for Hokh'hokton's rucksack.

"I told you!" the goblin chastised her. "You may have the booze *if* you keep up with us for the entire stroll!"

"Who cares about that?!" Telbyress objected. "We're inside Mister Flio's magic barrier, aren't we? What's going to hurt us?"

"That's beside the point!" said Hokh'hokton.

Telbyress ran after Hokh'hokton like her life depended on it. With her sudden renewed vigor, it wasn't long before they had closed the distance to Rynàsze and the others.

All in all, it was a typical evening for Flio and his house.

### ◇Klyrode Castle—Maiden Queen's Office◇

In the Maiden Queen's office, tucked away in a corner of Klyrode Castle, the lights were all lit up in spite of the fact that it was well into the middle of the night. Inside, the Maiden Queen sat at her desk.

The Maiden Queen was the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode's current reigning monarch. Her personal name was Elizabeth Klyrode, known to some by her nickname of Ellie. She had taken the reins of the kingdom ever since her father, the former King Klyrode, was sent into exile. She was a woman in her early thirties, but due to her lifelong obsession with political affairs, she had managed to go that entire time without having ever had so much as a boyfriend.

The Maiden Queen grabbed a piece of paperwork, looked over its contents, dipped the tip of her feathered quill pen in an inkwell, and began to scratch out a series of words on the page before setting the completed document to her left and grabbing a new one from the stack of papers awaiting her to her right.

"Hmh..." the Maiden Queen sighed.

It stood to reason that the Maiden Queen's energy was starting to flag. After all, the Queen looked over the majority of the decisions made by the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode with her own two eyes. She had entrusted a great deal of her work to her two younger sisters, deputizing her second youngest sister the Second Princess to act with her authority in regards to foreign affairs and her youngest sister the Third Princess to help her in the realm of domestic politics, but the Maiden Queen still insisted on reading the reports her sisters sent her on the same day they arrived without fail.

"The threat from the Dark Army may be no more, but we are still facing raids in the frontiers by demons who do not follow the Dark Army, not to mention these reports of bandit activity..." the Maiden Queen said to herself. "Then there's the construction requests for new magic beast racing halls to be built in Dark Army territory, and the items of negotiation with neighboring kingdoms... I

know perfectly well that there's plenty of matters that need the eye of the Queen even in times of peace, but still..."

She leaned back, sighing deeply. Then, tilting her neck to the left and resting her weight on her feet, she slid down into the crevices of her chair. *Ahhh... she thought. I'm nearing my limit. It's coming on that time of night, where I always find myself wanting to meet with him...*

Someone placed a cup on the desk in front of the Maiden Queen, interrupting her thoughts. "Hello, Miss Ellie. Would you like to take a short break?"

"Huh?!" Startled by the sudden voice, the Maiden Queen felt her eyes shoot open. She looked over at the hand that had just placed the cup in front of her and followed the arm up to find Garyl's smiling face.

Garyl was the son of Flio and Rys and was the younger twin brother of Elinàsze. His ready smile and friendly disposition had made him a celebrity at the Houghtow College of Magic. His physical abilities were nothing short of outstanding.

"G-G-G-Garyl?!" the Maiden Queen exclaimed, practically jumping out of her seat in shock. She immediately corrected her slacking posture, sitting up straight in her chair. "A-Ahem! E-Erm... How long have you been standing there?" she asked, doing her best to maintain an appearance of calm in spite of her bright red face.

"Oh, I only just got here!" Garyl said. "Someone asked me if I could come over and bring you a cup of tea!" Sensing that the Maiden Queen was worried about being witnessed behaving in an unbecoming manner, he gave her an understanding smile.

The Maiden Queen reached for the cup, her heart aflutter. "Th-That's right... You're participating in a short-term study camp at the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education, aren't you?"

"That's right!" Garyl grinned. "They brought in a former Hero who fought with a Dark One from back in the day as a special instructor! I got to ask him some questions, and in return I agreed to do a friendly duel with him!"

As Garyl finished speaking, a cloud of mist appeared at his back, a woman

dressed in Hi Izuran garb materializing in its midst. She laughed haughtily, hiding her mouth behind her hand. “That former Hero you speak of has some ability to be sure, but not nearly enough to serve as the teacher of my master!”

This was Ben’ne, a master of the blade from Hi Izuru whose corporeal body had long since passed away, leaving her to endure as a psychic construct. She faced warrior after warrior in single combat until at last she was defeated at the hands of Garyl. Impressed by the boy’s strength, she had chosen to follow Garyl as his familiar. Right now, Ben’ne’s smile behind her white hood seemed full of scorn for the former Hero Garyl had mentioned.

“I wouldn’t say that at all, Miss B!” Garyl objected, smiling brightly all the while. “I learned a lot from talking with someone who fought a Dark One from even before Ghozal! And it was definitely a worthwhile opportunity to be able to experience the sword techniques he used back then firsthand!”

“I suppose it is all well then, if such are my master’s words,” Ben’ne said, her smile looking a bit more accepting from behind her fingertips. *My master effortlessly saw through the former hero’s every attack during their duel, and yet he does not boast of his victory, instead seeking ever to extol the virtues of his opponent. Truly he has the makings of a king. Who could be more worthy than him of being my master?*

“Um... Miss B?” Garyl said, looking bashfully back at his familiar. “It’s just...I’d like to talk with Miss Ellie, you know...”

“Oh!” Ben’ne exclaimed. “I beg your pardon! I have committed a significant discourtesy! I am most sorry for having intruded into your lover’s tryst, my master.”

“L-Lover’s tryst...?” Garyl winced, blushing as Ben’ne turned back into a cloud of mist and dispersed from the area. “Ah ha ha...” he laughed, looking nervously over at the place Ben’ne had just vanished from. “Oh, Miss B...”

The Maiden Queen, for her part, could hardly bring herself to lift her face from embarrassment. *N-Now that I think about it, Ben’ne has the right of it, does she not? This is a lover’s tryst—like a knight stealing into a princess’s tower! And there isn’t anyone around so late at night, is there...?* Her thoughts started racing, her heart beating hard in her chest. *Wh-Wh-What am I to do?!*



*N-N-Now that we're finally alone together, how am I meant to go about setting the proper mood for us to have a leisurely and engaging chat?! Th-Th-That is my role as the older of us, is it not? B-B-But I've never had a gentleman caller before in my whole life! H-H-How am I meant to speak to him?!* Her face turned bright red all the way to the ears, beads of nervous sweat running down her brow.

"Um...M-Miss Ellie?" Garyl asked. Lost in her own panicked thoughts, however, the Maiden Queen seemed not to have heard him at all.



As the Maiden Queen froze with distress, the Second Princess, who had been peeking through the crack in her door, frowned in frustration. "Dang it..." she hissed. "That older sister of mine's completely lost her cool..."

The Second Princess, Leusoc Klyrode, was the Maiden Queen's next youngest sibling. She had been handling diplomacy for the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode since the old King Klyrode was on the throne and the kingdom was still at war with the Dark Army, a task she continued now as the right hand of the Maiden Queen, always conversing with leaders from the other human kingdoms in the world. She was a candid, outspoken woman who was no less frank in her dealings with the Maiden Queen herself.

"And after you went to such trouble to create a situation for the two of them to be alone by sending Garyl to deliver a cup of tea to our older sister the Queen... It is most frustrating!" said the Third Princess. She certainly looked frustrated, squatting down on the floor next to her sister and hugging her legs tight to her chest. She was biting down on a handkerchief, furrows on her brow.

The Third Princess's personal name was Swann Klyrode. She had graduated from an academy for children of nobility as quickly as she could in order to serve as the Maiden Queen's left hand, working mostly to lighten her sister's load when it came to domestic politics. She adored her sister the Maiden Queen to a degree somewhat beyond reason—some even said she had something of a complex.

"Oh?" said the Second Princess, looking over at her younger sister. "Well, this is unusual. You're cheering for our sister to get with a man, Swann?"

"W-Well..." the Third Princess said, puffing out her cheeks. "To be perfectly

honest, I'd prefer that no men get close to my beloved older sister the Queen under any circumstances. However, I can't deny that Garyl has helped her out of her fair share of predicaments. If it were him by her side, I suppose I might be willing to allow it... N-No, I mean, I would be happy to welcome him..." she muttered, almost as if she were speaking to herself.

The Second Princess smiled brightly, patting her sister atop the head. *Well, what do you know?* she thought. *This girl's all twisted up because of how much she adores our older sister, but she's still capable of thinking about things rationally. I must say, I'm a bit relieved...* "Anyway," she said, "I set the table for things to go well for those two, but at this rate, things are gonna end without them doing anything but sharing a cup of tea. Now, what should we do...?"

"I can't think of anything..." the Third Princess said. "Nothing short of barging into the room with another request for something Garyl can do for our sister the Queen..."

"Nuh-uh, let's not do that one," said the Second Princess. "If we did that, Sister Dearest would lose her mind from embarrassment and break down even further..."

"Then...what do we do...?"

"Hm... That's the question, isn't it...?"

The two discussed the question in secret as they waited outside the Maiden Queen's office door. Inside, the Maiden Queen had long since finished her tea, and Garyl had already left through the window with the empty cup in hand, but the princesses were too distracted by their conversation to notice his absence just yet.

### ◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

Dark One Dawkson sat as he always did, on the floor in front of his throne.

Dawkson, the reigning Dark One, was the younger brother of the previous Dark One Gholl. He had previously used the name Yuigarde, during which time he conducted himself with supreme self importance, but he changed his name and ways and now ruled as a wise and benevolent lord. He refused to sit on the throne of the Dark One when he conducted politics, however, to castigate

himself for his egotistical behavior during his time as Yuigarde, which had nearly ended with the complete destruction of the Dark Army itself.

“Master,” said Dawkson’s minion Phufun, stepping forward from her position beside the Dark One. Phufun was a succubus who had served Dawkson since before his ascension to the throne. She gave the appearance of an intellectual, but in truth she was a remarkably thoughtless person, and an inveterate masochist.

Phufun pressed her false glasses up against the ridge of her nose with the index finger of her right hand and looked over at Dark One Dawkson. “I will now begin my daily report,” she said. “Our first item concerns the magic beast racing hall we established in the premises of Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park. It seems the venue has been even more popular than we initially anticipated, leading to requests from various regions for permission to open their own racing halls.”

“Hm...” Dawkson considered. “More magic beast racing halls, huh?”

“My Lord Dark One,” said Zanzibar, raising his hand and stepping up beside Phufun from his position waiting off to the side. “Your permission to say a word on this subject?”

Zanzibar was a devil noble, and one of the Dark Army’s current Infernal Four. In the past he had raised a rebellion against Dark One Yuigarde only to be defeated. Since then, he was pardoned and made a member of the Infernal Four for his spirit and initiative, not to mention the knowledge he had gained as a member of the nobility.

“Of course,” said Dawkson. “What’s up, Zanzibar?”

“First, allow me to say that I fully support the proposition of increasing the number of magic beast racing halls,” Zanzibar said. “However, rather than build them indiscriminately, perhaps we might assign each racing hall an individual rank.”

“A rank...?” Dawkson asked.

“Indeed,” Zanzibar explained. “We already require the operators of racing halls to notify the Dark One of the specifications of their establishments. My

proposal is to assign each hall a rank based on seating capacity, course length, and facility equipment, corresponding to the class of magic beasts to participate in their races. We will perform inspections of all magic beasts entered by aspirants, and limit their participation to an appropriate rank of racing hall. By doing so, the high-ranked racing halls will be able to assemble only the strongest racers among magic beasts, to conduct races of a truly phenomenal level. Of course, we can expect high-ranking racing halls to draw a tremendous number of guests, increasing traffic to the surrounding facilities as well. If we assign the highest rank of M-1 to our greatest existing racing hall, we can expect a seventy percent increase in guests to the Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park compared to the previous year.”

“I see. And that would mean more development inside demon territory, huh?” said Dawkson, nodding and folding his arms. “You don’t mind being the one to set up a system for ranking the racing halls, do you?” he asked Zanzibar.

“I do not, if you would be willing to entrust the task to me?” Zanzibar replied with a questioning tone.

“Yeah,” Dawkson nodded decisively. “Seems like leaving it to you would be the best way to do things. If you need anything, talk to Phufun, and I’ll get it figured out for you.”

Zanzibar’s mustache twitched. *In the time of Dark One Yuigarde, this man never trusted another demon with anything, he recalled. He would never be happy unless everything was done exactly to his liking. To think that tyrant would become such a man who would delegate his authority without a moment’s hesitation as soon as he identifies the right demon for the job...* He bowed deeply, holding his hand over his heart. “You may leave it in my hands, my lord,” he said. “I, Zanzibar, shall carry out your will with my whole body and spirit.”

Phufun adjusted her glasses, pressing them up against the ridge of her nose once again as she watched the exchange between Zanzibar and Dawkson, a satisfied smile coming to her lips. *Excellent, my master, she thought, nodding in appreciation. Your stature as a ruler increases by the day. However, his change in character does come with a sharp reduction in the number of times I’ve gotten beaten or punched or kicked around of late. Ahhh, never will I forget the*

*sensation of Master Dawkson's right cross...*

"Hey! Phufun!" said Dawkson.

"Y-Yes?" the succubus replied.

"What's up? You started drooling and making a weird face all of a sudden!"

"A— Huh?!" Startled back to her senses, Phufun hastily wiped the drool from her chin. Just recalling the sweet pain of Dawkson's fists had been enough to cause her to unconsciously start smiling with vacant bliss, even drooling from the memory.

She was, after all, an inveterate masochist.

### ◇A Building Somewhere—In a Room◇

In a dimly lit room, a man of hefty proportions sat on an ornate chair, lost in thought as he smoked a cigar. He was the Shadow King, former King of Klyrode and the father of the Maiden Queen. He had been exiled from the country when his evil deeds came to light and took the name Shadow King, making the black market operations he had dabbled in during his time on the throne his main line of work.

Before the Shadow King stood two women, each wearing identical high-cut cheongsam, one silver and one gold—the demon fox sisters Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver. The two had once been demons of significant authority in the Dark Army, the rulers of the demon fox clans. After the fall of the demon fox stronghold, however, they joined forces with the Shadow King and his Shadow Conglomerate.

"And so..." Kintsuno the Gold, the elder of the two sisters, who of course favored the color gold, continued her speech. "We've come here looking for any good leads we can find."

"It seems the Dark Army performs routine inspections of this area," reported Gintsuno the Silver, the younger sister who naturally enough was fond of the color silver. "Our best move would probably be to make as much money as we can in the meantime and clear out before the inspectors get here. But first, we need more information..."



The Shadow King clicked his tongue in irritation as he thought. “And all because Janderena and her crew are making such a fuss about securing funds... Our only option is to find some way to make a killing, hm?”

“That Janderena girl...” Kintsuno yipped contemptuously. “Always muttering darkly and fussing with that enormous abacus of hers...and the moment anything displeases her she has no compunctions about smashing you with it!”

“Her sister Yanderena’s even stranger if you ask me,” yipped Gintsuno. “Always dancing strangely, looking at you with wide-open eyes...and there’s something unsettling about those dances of hers, like she’s sucking the magic right out of the air.”

The demon fox sisters furrowed their brows in mutual displeasure for the sisters Janderena and Yanderena.

The Shadow King, too, furrowed his brow. “I know they can be a lot to deal with,” he said. “But they’re capable enough, at least.” *If only I had more manpower at my disposal, I would have no need to rely on distasteful individuals like those two,* he thought. *But I suppose nothing can be done about it now...*

In the dimly lit room, the three conspirators all sighed as one.

## Chapter 2: The Houghtow City Girls' Collection

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

The city of Houghtow was located in the western territory of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Situated midway along the trade routes leading to the kingdom of Indol and other lands to the west, Houghtow had achieved a reputation as particularly highly developed among the cities on the fringes of the Magical Kingdom.

It was morning in the city. The sun had only just crested the horizon, illuminating the streets where a few early risers went about their business. And on the outskirts of the city proper, the Fli-o'-Rys General Store was bustling with activity as the staff prepared to open for the day when a number of wagons began to pull up in front of the store.

"Okay!" said Blossom, who was sitting in the driver's seat of the frontmost wagon. "Time for another day of giving it our all!" She stretched and smacked herself on the cheeks with her palms to get her blood flowing.

Pulling Blossom's wagon was Sybe in his psychobear form, dressed in a pair of overalls. He was followed closely by his mate the unicorn rabbit Shebe and their children Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, all cavorting happily as they trailed along. As for the wagons themselves, the one Blossom was driving and the others coming along behind were all stuffed full of vast quantities of fresh produce.

When the townsfolk noticed the train of wagons approaching the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, people began to flock from all over the area.

"Good morning, Blossom!" said one woman—a shopkeeper of Blossom's acquaintance. "What sort of vegetables do you have for us today?"

"Mornin', Mikho!" Blossom answered cheerfully. "We've got a full load of delicious greens today, so make sure you buy a bunch!"

"Oh, excellent!" Mikho said. "Our food always tastes best when we use vegetables from your farm, you know! Having you as a supplier has been

tremendously good for our business, let me tell you.”

“Hey, now, Mikho! Don’t take *all* the vegetables!” said another of Blossom’s customers. “Blossom’s gotta sell some to us too!”

“And don’t forget about us!” chimed in another. “We’re counting on you, Blossom!”

“Excuse me! Excuse me! I would like to buy some vegetables as well, if I may!”

Customers came up one after another all around, each clamoring for Blossom’s attention. “Leave it to us, you hear!” Blossom said, greeting the crowd with a grin. “We’ve been up since the early morning picking all the veggies we could! I promise you, there’s plenty enough to go round!” She raised a fist to the air, eliciting a great cheer from the crowd.

“Way to go, Blossom!”

“Thank you, Blossom!”

“In that case, I’ll just have to purchase as much as I can carry!”

As Blossom faced the crowd, smiling and waving, Kora looked up with starry eyes from her seat next to her in the wagon. “Wow...” she said. “Mom’s so cool...!”

In the midst of all the cheers and fanfare, the wagons came to a halt in front of the store. Blossom hopped down from the driver’s seat and started setting out the merchandise they had brought with practiced efficiency. Sybe, along with Tybe, who had been pulling one of the wagons behind Blossom’s in the train, unloaded crate after crate, making the work look positively easy, while Kora, Shebe, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe all helped arrange them neatly for sale.

A group of children caught sight of the unicorn rabbits hard at work.

“Oh my gosh! Cuuute!” one exclaimed.

“Those rabbits are always the cutest, aren’t they?” another child agreed.

Wild unicorn rabbits were unruly by nature, with a propensity to charge straight for anyone they perceived as an enemy without a second’s hesitation, aiming to impale their opponent on the single horn growing from their forehead. Without a shield or something similar to protect one’s person, the

rabbits were considered dangerous creatures to encounter in the forest. Shebe and her children, though, were well used to human company from living in Flio's house. There wasn't any danger of them suddenly charging at townsfolk—in fact, they had become something of mascots for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

Soon, preparations for the traditional Fli-o'-Rys storefront morning vegetable market were complete, marking the start of the business day.

"All right, everyone!" Blossom said, full of energy and raring to go. "We've got lots of good stuff on offer, so come and get it!" At that signal, the customers descended as one upon her wares.

"Fwaaaaaah!" Amid all the excitement of setting up shop, Telbyress held a hand over her mouth to stifle an enormous yawn. "So sleepy..." she said as she pulled on the reins of the large leonine magic beast drawing the third wagon down the train. She lazily walked in front of the wagon as she led it to the staging area located behind the store. "It's ridiculous..." she muttered darkly to herself. "Why should a goddess like myself have to drive a wagon so early in the morning? Getting up at the crack of dawn day after day like this is gonna *ruin* my complexion..."

"Hey! Telbyress!" Hokh'hokton's enraged voice came from the wagon behind her—the one pulled by Tybe, who had finished unloading the produce. "Quit dozing off and move your wagon along! You're in the way!"

"It's true," said the goblin Maunty, who was driving the wagon pulled by Sybe, which Blossom and Kora had been in earlier. Right now, he was stuck behind Hokh'hokton. "You're blocking my way too."

Maunty was a former goblin foot soldier in the Dark Army currently employed at Blossom Acres, working up a sweat day in and day out. He had brought his wife and children to live with him. His whole family, who all worked the farm together, had come along in the back of his wagon today too, disembarking to help Blossom sell the farm's merchandise.

"I have to get this wagon put away quickly so I can go help the rest of my family with sales!" Maunty insisted.

"And so!" said Hokh'hokton. "Would you kindly hurry your wagon along, if you please!"

“Come on, you two...” Telbyress moaned. “I *wanna* give it my all, you know, I just can’t do it... *Hwaaah...* I’m sooo sleeeeeeepy...” she added, yawning theatrically.

The massive magic beast whose reins Telbyress was holding, meanwhile, gave her a long glance. *This no-gooddess... he thought. Her personality seems somewhat regrettable, alas, but her body is nothing to sneeze at! That curvaceous booty swaying right in front of my eyes as she walks... Why, I can hardly bear it!* His breathing had turned heavy, coming out in lascivious pants. “I-I can’t hold back any longer!” he declared, reaching out with his forepaw...

Before the magic beast could reach the object of his desire, however, Rynàsze, in her overalls and wide-brimmed cap, sprung into action. “Leonorna!” she scolded him.

Leonorna took one look at Rynàsze and quickly withdrew his paw, his expression seizing up. “G-Gheeeh! M-Mistress Rynàsze!”

This magic beast, named Leonorna, was originally a Divine Beast that had been banished to the world of Dogorogma—something he had in common with Tybe. Through a series of somewhat preposterous events, he had ended up living at Flio’s house where he now spent his days serving as one of Rynàsze’s familiars. He was, however, a womanizer without peer, liable to harass any female around him, be they magic beast or human or demon. This habit of his was in fact the very cause of his banishment to Dogorogma. Fortunately, Rynàsze had appeared just in time to prevent him from indulging his vice in this particular instance.

An avian, magically perched atop Rynàsze’s hat, shot Leonorna a piercing flare.

“E-Eeeek!” the lion cried, shrinking under the bird’s gaze. “G-Grimby?!”

Grimby was rescued by Rynàsze during one of the family’s trips to Dogorogma when he had the misfortune to be caught up in a volcanic eruption and ended up mortally injured. Ever since, he had stayed by Rynàsze’s side as one of her familiars. His true form was that of a Divine Beast—one whose physical abilities far exceeded Leonorna’s in every possible respect. Leonorna, needless to say, was too terrified to defy him.



Rylnàsze peered dubiously in Leonorna's direction as the lion froze on the spot. "Um, Leonorna," she said, "Grimby said he wanted to talk to you, so I brought him along, but..."

Grimby, however, didn't wait for Rylnàsze to finish. "*You miscreant!*" he cried, speaking using telepathy so that only Leonorna could hear as he glared daggers from his perch atop Rylnàsze's head. "*You weren't thinking of laying those filthy paws of yours on another woman, were you?! Don't you remember Mistress Rylnàsze's lecture?! She told you in no uncertain terms that you were to quit acting like a wretched pervert! Didn't she?! I tell you, once my wounds are healed and I can soar through the sky on my own wings once more...one of these days I might just kill you without warning. Understand?!*"

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Yes! Of course! I understand! I'm so terribly sorry!" Leonorna blurted out, trembling in terror where he stood.

"Um..." Rylnàsze interjected with a bright, friendly smile. "I'm not sure what you said to him, but let's try to get along, all right?"

"Y-Yes, Mistress Rylnàsze! Of course!" said Leonorna, bowing his head again and again.

"Sooo..." Telbyress said, turning around with a look of utter confusion on her face. "What was *that* about?"

"Oh! Nothing! Nothing at all!" Leonorna insisted. "Now, let's be off, shall we?"

Rylnàsze settled in beside Telbyress, cheerfully leading the group on.

*You know...* Leonorna considered, his expression growing slack once again, *Telbyress may have an exquisite booty, but Mistress Rylnàsze's unripe fruits are quite splendid as—* Grimby shot Leonorna another one of his deadly glares, interrupting his train of thought. Leonorna started trembling once again and then went back to pulling the wagon without any further mischief.

More customers crowded into the space as the wagons pulled out to the back of the shop. Soon, Blossom's morning market was bustling with customers.

Later in the morning, a wagon came rattling down Houghtow City's main central road. "Ahh..." sighed Luna, the woman sitting in the driver's seat, her long elven ears bobbing up and down as she looked all around. "What a lovely city!"

Luna was the vice president of Esto and Company, a mercantile association based in the Kingdom of Indol, as well as the wife of Esto, the president. She looked young, but as a high elf, her true age was well over 150 years.

Luna's wagon continued on down the street. It was a large vehicle, but the road was more than wide enough to accommodate it, allowing for people to safely maneuver around its bulk.

"I thought no street could be better maintained than the grand avenue of Indol City, but this road might just put it to shame!" she said, admiration in her voice as she took in the sights. "Plus, I swear this city is more developed every time I visit..."

All around her, other carriages and wagons made their way to and fro. Not all of their drivers were wearing the typical garb of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode either. Judging by their outfits, many of them seemed to be foreigners like her. And behind the crowd of traffic, she could see a great tower cresting the skyline of the city, an enormous ship seemingly docked at its height.

Luna watched as the ship separated from the tower and gently made its way through the sky. "Thanks to the Enchanted Frigates, we can make these journeys which used to take months in a single direction in a mere half day's time! We really owe them a great deal of gratitude, don't we..." She herself had been on that ship only moments earlier. She turned to look as the Enchanted Frigate flew higher and higher into the sky, a smile on her face. "So, to pay back some small amount of their kindness, I will have to do my best today as a businesswoman as well!" Her smile shifted to a look of determination. She tightened her grip on the reins and turned her attention towards the magic beast pulling her wagon...only...

"Whaha?!" Luna exclaimed. She hadn't noticed until just now, but a girl had come up in front of the beast, gazing at it with bright eyes full of wonder. *Wh-Whatever is this girl doing here?* she wondered, looking down at her in

confusion.

The girl's skin was tanned a soft brown, and she wore a pair of overalls, and a wide-brimmed cap stuffed over her messy hair to protect her eyes. Gathered around her was a crowd of small magic beasts, running around her legs or perching on her shoulder or atop her head.

"Excuse me, miss!" the girl said, looking up at Luna with the same bright eyes. "May I ask you this magic beast's name?"

"E-Eh?" said Luna. "Oh! Her name is Sheeling! She's a type of magic beast we call a camule. They're quite common in Indol."



“Sheeling the camule!” repeated the bright-eyed girl. “My name’s Rynàsze! I’ve never seen a camule before!”

The magic beasts accompanying Rynàsze—Sybe in his unicorn rabbit form, as well as Shebe and the couple’s child, Tybe, and Grimby—all perched on her shoulder.

*Rynàsze, did she say? Luna thought. She certainly seems to like magic beasts—or rather, I suppose magic beasts like her! But...* Luna’s eyes grew wide as she realized what she was seeing. Sheeling the camule had lowered her head, drawing up close to Rynàsze. It was almost as if she was a child fawning after her mother. Luna found herself unable to stop watching. *But Sheeling’s such a shy girl! She usually just runs away if someone she doesn’t know comes up to her! She hasn’t just stopped for this girl; she’s lowered her head to her as well!*

Rynàsze patted the camule on the head, smiling all the while. “Ah!” she said, suddenly. “You were on your way to work, weren’t you, miss? I’m so sorry to interrupt you!”

“Eh? O-Oh, no, it’s perfectly all right!” Luna hastened to reassure her. “In fact, I was delighted to see you get along so well with Sheeling! But I had best be off...” She looked around, scanning from left to right.

“Miss?” Rynàsze ventured. “Is there something you’re looking for?”

“Oh,” said Luna. “I thought I should see about heading to the store I’m meant to be doing business with, only usually it’s my husband who makes these trips, and I’m not entirely sure where it is...”

“What’s this store’s name?” Rynàsze asked.

“The Fli-o’-Rys General Store...” Luna answered.

Suddenly, Rynàsze’s face lit up bright. “How lovely! Fli-o’-Rys is my papa’s store! I’ll show you the way!”

“O-Oh! I see...” Luna began, but then her eyes shot open once again. “W-Wait! Your...papa? Th-Then...would that make you the child of the Divine Maiden Rys?!”

Some time ago, Rys had paid a visit to Esto, where she happened to run afoul



of a group of ne'er-do-wells plotting evil deeds and had brought the lot of them to justice. For her deeds, the people of Indol came to revere her as an incarnation of the divine maiden who once saved their kingdom. Rynàsze, however, had heard nothing of the whole affair.

“D-Divine Maiden?” Rynàsze asked, tilting her head in innocent confusion—a gesture the magic beasts around her all imitated as one. “Well, my mother’s name *is* Rys...”

*Th-That’s right...* Luna suddenly remembered. *The Divine Maiden Rys dislikes the title of “Divine Maiden,” doesn’t she...?* “My apologies!” she said. “Please forget that. A-Anyway, since you’ve been so kind as to offer, perhaps you’ll show me the way to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store?”

“Of course! I’d be happy to!” said Rynàsze, nodding with a smile.

“Ho there!” Another wagon came to a stop beside them, the heavysset man in the driver’s seat raising his voice in greeting. “Are you gentleladies headed to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store as well?”

“That’s right,” said Luna. “And I suppose you are too?”

“Indeed, I am!” answered the man, smiling affably as he introduced himself. “I am Monko the merchant from Hi Izuru, Land of the Rising Sun. I have traveled far to this land under the recommendation of Itsuhachi-sama, the woman in charge of the Nagaseki checkpoint. Back in my homeland I am the proprietor of a shop known as Monko’s Market.”

Luna smiled back at the Hi Izuran merchant. “I see! In that case, you, too, are here to sell your wares to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store?”

“Hoh hoh!” Monko laughed. “But of course!”

Still smiling, Luna glanced away from Monko’s affable face and towards his wagon. *Those goods...* she thought. *I’ve seen them before! Those are tanmono, I believe—fabric for use in Hi Izuru’s famous kimono! But that would mean that we’re business rivals, wouldn’t it...?*

“My, my, my, my, my!” came yet another man’s voice from behind Luna and Monko. “You two are bound for the Fli-o’-Rys General store as well, I surmise?”

Luna and Monko turned around to see a slender man with a wide grin and pale bluish skin. It was clear at a glance that this was a demon. Behind him came a golem that seemed to be in his employ, carrying an enormous wooden crate on its back.

“Leggy Vuitton’s the name!” said the man, bowing deeply to the two and grinning all the while. “I operate a fine clothier business far away in a land of demons. Mister Flio of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, it seems, wishes to discuss the prospect of making a purchase of cloth of the sort used in demonic attire, and so I, the owner of the shop himself, have seen fit to make a personal appearance.”

Luna and Monko watched Leggy Vuitton in silence.

*I see... thought Luna. Mister Flio must be gathering textiles from all over the land in order to judge which company to take on as a supplier...*

*Hoh hoh! thought Monko. Then this summons must be his way of taking the breadth of the field, as it were!*

*I see, I see, I see! thought Leggy Vuitton. I suppose I must strive to make the best impression I can in these sales talks—I would hate to let an opportunity like this slip through my fingers!*

The three merchants kept smiling, doing their best to appear friendly as internally they began considering how to get the upper hand.

“Excuse me, everyone!” said Rynàsze, waving them over with a cheerful smile on her face. “The shop’s this way!” Ahead, they could see the sign marking the doors of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.

“Very good,” said Luna. “Everyone, let’s keep things fair today.”

“Hoh hoh!” laughed Monko. “I have no other intention, I assure you!”

“Of course, of course, of course!” said Leggy Vuitton. “May the best merchant win!”

The merchants nodded and followed Rynàsze inside.

◇Midday—The Fli-o’-Rys General Store◇

The flow of customers showed no signs of abating as the early morning

vegetable sale gave way to regular operations at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. Around noon, a magic circle appeared in an inconspicuous location in the back of the building and out stepped Flio himself.

"Hah..." Flio sighed, seeming just a little bit fatigued as he made his way into the shop. "Those talks of theirs sure took a while to finish..." He passed through the employees only hallway and opened the door to the shop's reception room to find Uliminas already inside. "Just you, Uliminas? Is Rys not here?"

"Oh," Uliminas answered with a smirk. "Rys took off straight back home, carrying a huge bundle of the cloth we purchased from those meowrchants," she said, gesturing off in the direction of the house.

"Incidentally..." Flio asked. "How much did you two end up buying?"

"Ha ha ha," the hellcat laughed mysteriously. "You'll just have to find out when mew get home meowrself!"

*Judging by how Uliminas is acting, my guess is they ended up buying quite a lot...* Flio thought, a wry smile coming over his face as he began counting out the vendors on his fingers. *Well, let's see. Today was Esto's shop from Indol, a merchant from Hi Izuru, and someone from Dark Army territory, if I'm not mistaken...*

"Well, let's put it there for the time being," Uliminas said. "As it happens, I have something I'd like to talk to *mew* about myself." She beckoned with her right hand, leading him further into the reception room, where Greanyl was waiting. Ordinarily, Greanyl wore a shadow demon's typical black attire so as to easily blend into the shadows. Her outfit this time, however, was the total opposite. It was bright and colorful to the point of absurdity, decorated here and there with frilly lace. Greanyl, for her part, seemed embarrassed to be seen wearing the clothes. She was fidgeting awkwardly, bright red in the face.

"Uliminas..." Flio said. "What is that outfit Greanyl's wearing?"

"It seems like it's the latest craze ameowng young girls in Klyrode Castle lately to dress up in gaudy one-of-a-kind meowtfits like this one," Uliminas answered, fixing Greanyl with a piercing look. "I figured we might as well try stocking a few meowrselves. What do mew think?"

“L-Lady Uliminas!” Greanyl protested as she covered her face with her hands, conscious of Uliminas’s gaze. “I-I really wish you had assigned this mission to someone else...”

“Mreowr? Don’t be silly,” Uliminas said. “Mew’re more than qualified. Here.” She snapped her fingers, and for a split second, Greanyl’s body seemed to waver. A moment later, she was standing there wearing a completely different outfit.

*Ah... Flio thought, nodding in understanding. Quickchange, is it? So that’s why Uliminas called Greanyl here...*

Flio’s inference was right on the money. Greanyl was using her Quickchange skill, instantly switching her outfit out for another they had prepared in the back of the room. Among all the shadow demons under Uliminas’s command, only Greanyl had mastered this ability.

*I feel bad for Greanyl, Flio thought, but as shop owner I have a duty to properly inspect these clothes.*

Flio brought his head in close, carefully examining Greanyl’s outfit. Next to him, Uliminas did likewise, looking her up and down with her piercing stare.

*Nghhh... Greanyl moaned in her mind, her face bright red even as she continued to dutifully change her outfit each time Uliminas snapped her fingers. I-Is this some kind of humiliation fetish play...?*

Alas, Greanyl’s one-woman fashion show would have to continue for a while yet.



Some time later, Greanyl was curled up in a ball on the sofa, covering her bright red face with her hands. “My purity, gone!” she cried. “Now who will take me as a bride?!”

Uliminas and Flio, meanwhile, went to collect the clothes that had been adorning Greanyl’s body not long ago, looking them over together.

“I suppose they’re in style, and the designs are certainly striking...” Flio said. “But I can’t help but feel like the craftsmanship on these outfits is just a little bit

lacking.”

“Mew handled clothing back in meowr original world, didn’t mew?” said Uliminas. “I guess it’s no wonder mew’re so attentive to the details...”

“Let me guess,” Flio said. “Your plan is to take these designs as inspiration and create items of our own to sell at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store?”

“Purrcisely!” said Uliminas. “In fact, just the other day we got a meowssage from a store in Klyrode Castle Town called the Elmence Fine Clothing Company asking if we might be interested in a business partnership. Purrhaps we should hear them out.”

“Hm?” Flio said. “Couldn’t we create the clothes ourselves, with these as a reference?”

“I only bought these meowtfits to gather infurmation on what meowr rivals are selling,” Uliminas said, grinning as she looked over the articles of clothing. “Rys said she wanted them for reference material too, so I’ll be taking them once we’re done here. I’m sure we’ll purrduce some meowtfits like this in-house, but Rys also has the children’s clothes to worry about. I can’t ask her to do meowr than she’s already doing.”

Uliminas had always had a keen eye for cost management. Even back when she served as Ghozal’s confederate, she had overseen every aspect of the public finances of the Dark Army. Part of that work, however, was knowing when not to push her companions past their limits for promise of future profit, instead working with outside suppliers when it was feasible. In those occasions, she made a point of weighing every quoted estimate against each other, always with a keen eye towards cost.

*I should have expected nothing less from Uliminas,* Flio thought. *I think I can see why Ghozal ended up trusting her with everything under the sun...* “Thank you, Uliminas,” he said. “I appreciate you taking care not to push Rys too hard.”

“Meow need to thank me!” Uliminas said. “I’m just doing the job mew gave me as part of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store staff. Now, would mew like me to take the lead on meowr talks with Elmence? I’ll be sure to ask your opinion every step of the way, of course.”

“All right,” said Flio. “The project’s all yours.”

“Purrfect!” Uliminas declared, grinning and thumping her fist against her chest. “Leave everything to meowr trusty Uliminas!”

From over on the sofa, still curled up into a ball, Greanyl glanced over in Uliminas’s direction. *L-Lady Uliminas... she thought. I wish you had shown me a little of that consideration as well...*

◇A Few Days Later—Fli-o’-Rys General Store, Reception Room◇

A few days later, a sales team from the Elmence Fine Clothing Company paid a visit to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store for a meeting with Uliminas. However...

“Meowht are *these*...?” Uliminas frowned, a deep crease forming on her brow as Elmence, the proprietor of the Elmence Fine Clothing Company, sat in front of her. Elmence was a tall, slender woman, and the look on her face seemed no less confused than Uliminas’s perturbed frown.

Uliminas looked over one after another of the design illustrations Elmence had brought, the crease in her brow deepening with each one. *M-Meowt the heck is up with these illustrrrations?! she thought. These aren’t anything like the designs I looked at with Flio the meowther day... And meowr to the point, they’re all, well, supurr lame...*

The current trend among the young ladies of the Klyrode Castle Town was for strikingly unique, brilliantly colorful clothing. The clothing Uliminas had acquired as reference material had all been of that sort. Looking over the designs Elmence had bought, however, brought different words to Uliminas’s mind.

Words like “purrdictable.” Or “meowld-fashioned.” Or even “mewnadventurous.”

*I thought I’d have meowthing to worry about, partnering with a fameows shop in Klyrode Castle Town, Uliminas thought, but I never expected something like this! My plan was to try selling the same flashy clothes that’ve gotten so popular in Klyrode Castle Town meow that they’re at peace thanks to the treaty with the Dark Army in Houghtow City, and then the rest of the Meowgic Kingdom and all over the world if it went well! But...* She sighed deeply as she



looked down at the designs Elmence had given her. *Th-These won't sell at all. I'm sure of it...*

"Is something the matter?" Elmence asked, rising from her seat. "You asked for fashionable designs from Klyrode Castle Town, no? Then what could be better than my designs from the Elmence Fine Clothing Company, steeped in tradition and stately refinement? Every one of my pieces is strikingly sensible, if I may be so bold as to say so myself!" She bobbed her head in self-satisfaction, a look of rapture on her face as she began singing the praises of her own designs.

Uliminas glanced up at Elmence in stunned disbelief. *I asked for fashionable designs from Klyrode Castle Town...mewning the latest styles, like the meowns I saw with Flio the other day! I couldn't have found meowtfits meowr off the meowrk if I tried...*

Elmence, however, seemed more than pleased with herself if the look on her face was anything to go by.

Needless to say, once Uliminas recovered her wits, she had Elmence removed from the shop.



"The nerve of that woman!" Elmence fumed as she stormed off in the direction of the Enchanted Frigate station. "What exactly is so 'out of touch' about my designs?! How dare she speak to me that way?!"

Uliminas frowned as she watched her go. *I can't say I purrfer to put it as bluntly as that, but if I didn't say it plain and straight, that womeown was never gonna get the picture. Sorry, but that's business...* "But now I'm not sure *meowt* to do..." she said. "I'm sure Rys would be purrfectly willing to help if I asked her, but after making such a big deal to Flio about not pushing her too hard, I'd really rather not... Mreow..." She sighed deeply, folding her arms in thought. "The demeowns living in the oni village can probably handle purrduction...but where am I going to get designs?"

"E-Excuse me..." Suddenly, Uliminas heard a voice from behind.

"Meow?" Uliminas said, turning around to see a young girl clad in glasses and

a loose-fitting overcoat fidgeting awkwardly as she looked up at her. “I recognize mew... Mew were with Elmence when she came to our store.”

“Y-Yes, that’s right...” the girl said. “My name is Faren. I—erm—*was* an employee at the Elmence Fine Clothing Company.”

“Mew...*were*?” Uliminas repeated.

“Yes...” said Faren. “Master Elmence let me go only moments ago. The truth is, I’ve thought for a while now that Master Elmence’s designs are... How do I put this...? Well, they’re *predictable*. Or *old-fashioned*. *Unadventurous*, even. Either way, they certainly aren’t designs that will sell, I think. So when you said as much, Miss Uliminas, I couldn’t keep myself from speaking up. I told her we should consider being more bold with the current season’s designs, and she fired me on the spot.” She laughed dryly.

*Ahhh... Uliminas thought, nodding in understanding. That Elmence does seem like she towers above Dark Mountain in terms of purride if nothing else. I guess it’s no surprise to hear she’d fire an apprentice for saying something like that...*

“E-Erm...” Faren continued. “I’m sorry if this is presumptuous of me, but I happened to overhear what you were saying just now. If you’re looking for designs, I may just have something...” Her arms vanished into the sleeves of her overcoat, rummaging noisily for something before popping out once more, holding a notebook of the sort used in drafting designs.

“What do mew have there?” Uliminas asked.

“These are the outfits I’ve designed in the course of my training,” Faren said, handing the notebook over. “I would be honored if you would be so kind as to look them over, Miss Uliminas.”

Uliminas opened the notebook to find it was full of pictures of girls Faren had drawn, wearing outfits of her own conception. *These meowtfits!* Uliminas thought. *Each meown is designed with the latest trends in the Castle Town in mind, yet they’re all bursting with originality!*

“My parents were the managers of a small clothing shop,” Faren explained. “My mother, who designed our shop’s clothes, taught me the basic principles of

design from an early age. I love thinking up new outfits more than anything in the world, you see, so I like to spend my time watching the women of town as they go about their days, thinking of how I might..."

That was as far as she got, however, before Uliminas interrupted, grabbing her firmly by the shoulders. "These are purrfect!"

"Huh?" said Faren.

"They're purrfect!" Uliminas repeated. "We'll take them!"

"T-Truly? You mean it?" Faren's face lit up at Uliminas's words.

"I do!" Uliminas insisted. "Meowr designs will sell fur sure! I guarantee it!"

"Th-Thank you! Thank you so so so so so so so so much!" Beaming with joy, Faren hugged Uliminas tight.

"M-Mreowr!" Uliminas cried, her face falling rapidly as her back began cracking audibly from the pressure of Faren's embrace. *Th-This girl!* she thought, the color beginning to drain from her face. *Sh-She's a lot stronger than she looks!*

Faren, however, seemed not to notice Uliminas's plight at all. "I-I can't tell you how delighted I am to hear that!" she said, grinning from ear to ear as tears of joy streamed from her eyes. "Thank you for acknowledging my designs! I believed in them this whole time, you know—I knew the day would come when I would meet someone who could see their potential!" She squeezed tighter and tighter as she spoke, mercilessly constricting Uliminas's unfortunate spine.

*M-Mreorwrrr! M-My back! My baaack!* Uliminas tried desperately to escape from Faren's arms, but with the girl's ridiculous strength, it was simply impossible.

"I was a frail and sickly child, you see," Faren jubilantly continued. "I spent all of my time back in those days engrossed in studying my mother's designs. And now, all of my effort has at last been rewarded!"

*Meow way...* Uliminas thought, looking desperately at Faren in an attempt to get her attention. *There's just meow way...*

◇Later that Day—Klyrode Castle Town◇

The last Enchanted Frigate of the day pulled up to dock at the tower outside Klyrode Castle Town, and out stepped the proprietor of the Elmence Fine Clothing Company, Elmence herself. “The nerve!” she declared again, not bothering to hide her expression of impotent frustration. “I’ve never been so insulted in my life! Calling *my* designs out of touch! They don’t understand the first thing about fashion! I tell you, where did some bumpkin shopkeeper and a mere apprentice get the impression that they can speak to *me* as if they know what they’re talking about! Pah!”

As she stomped along down the tower, Elmence grabbed the bag she had been wearing over her shoulder and tossed it in a nearby garbage bin. “I suppose *this* is what they think of my designs!” she spat before leaving the scene in a huff.

She was being watched, however, by a woman in a gold cheongsam some distance away. “I’m certain of it...” the woman said. “That was Elmence, of the Elmence Fine Clothing Company!”

She crept up to the garbage bin herself, taking care to step quietly, and retrieved the bag of designs Elmence had discarded not moments earlier.

“Well now...this looks like something we can use!” the woman said with a satisfied nod. Then, without making a sound, she vanished from the spot.

#### ◇Flio’s House—Flio and Rys’s Room◇

“What’s on your mind, my lord husband?” Rys asked as she sat on the edge of the bed, fixing her hair. “You seem pleased about something.”

“Oh, Uliminas gave me a progress report just earlier,” Flio said with his usual easygoing smile. “It sounds like things have been going well with her clothing line project. I guess it’s put me in a good mood.” The next second, however, a puzzled frown crossed Flio’s face, as if he had suddenly remembered something. *But I wonder...* he thought. *Why was Uliminas’s back in so much pain? I was able to heal it no problem with my magic, but it was a serious enough injury that regular healing magic wouldn’t have stood a chance...*

Rys, however, puffed out her cheeks in a pout. “That Uliminas... If she wanted designs, she could have come straight to me! But, well, I suppose I’m glad she was able to find some new designs.”

“Uliminas said she didn’t want to put more work on you when you were already designing and creating clothes for all the children of the house,” Flio explained.

“She did, did she...?” Rys said with a wry smirk. “Well, I suppose I appreciate the consideration, but I would do all that and more for the sake of my lord husband’s shop! In any event, I’ve already finished making new outfits for everyone using the cloth we purchased the other day—it wouldn’t be an imposition at all! On that note...” She stood up on the bed, spreading her arms wide. “This outfit is just something I threw together last minute, but...what do you think, my lord husband?”

“Oh!” said Flio. “It’s looks—” But before he could finish the sentence, Flio found himself stunned into silence. Rys had used see-through material for much of her outfit, leaving her naked body fully visible through her clothes. “R-Rys!” Flio squeaked, his cheeks flushing red. “Th-That’s...”

Rys simply gave him an enticing, seductive smile.

*Th-That expression... Flio thought. Sh-She must have made it that way on purpose, then...*

Rys had taken sole responsibility for creating outfits for everyone in Flio’s house. It only stood to reason that from time to time she made outfits like this as well, for when she and Flio were alone.

“Well, my lord husband?” Rys asked. “What do you think?”

“A-Ah... I...” Flio stammered, flustered and at a loss for words. “I-It looks great on you, Rys!”

Rys leaned in against him, sensually pressing her body against his. Shortly after, the lights in the room silently went out.

In the dark, quiet room, Flio waved a single finger of his right hand.



The hallway outside Flio and Rys’s room stood empty...that is, until suddenly, with a harsh *plink* sound, Hiya appeared.

Hiya folded their arms, glancing over in the direction of the door to the

married couple's chambers. "Hm," they said, lowering their head as a chagrined smile came over their face. "Another failure, I see..."

No matter how many times Hiya had been cast out of the bedroom, the djinn had yet to give up.

### ◇A Back Alley◇

In an unlit room in the second story of a building tucked away in the back alleys of a city somewhere in the world, a heavysset man sat in an ornate chair. From time to time he took a puff of the cigar in his hand, letting the smoke drift up into the dark room.

"Is that so?" the man—the Shadow King—asked, glancing over at Kintsuno, the woman in the gold cheongsam. "People in the city have taken to wearing strange outfits?"

"So it seems!" Kintsuno yipped. *Personally, I can't say I understand it at all...* she thought to herself. *What does anyone see in those strange frilly outfits?*

For better or for worse, Kintsuno was unaffected by trends in fashion one way or another, preferring instead to wear her tailor-made golden cheongsam in any season or weather.

"Hmm..." the Shadow King considered. "Well, do you suppose we can make a decent profit for the Shadow Conglomerate if we take to selling these outfits ourselves, then?"

"I believe so! After all..." Kintsuno produced a bag full of design illustrations, holding it up for the Shadow King to see. "I just so happen to have gotten my hands on a number of designs produced by a designer from a famous shop in the Klyrode Castle Town!"

The Shadow King smiled, nodding his approval. "Well done, Kintsuno. I knew I could count on you," he said as he began to leaf quickly through the designs, examining them like a man who knew the subject intimately. "Hm... Hmmm... I see!" he said. "Very orthodox designs, rooted in the classic aesthetic forms of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Truly, this sort of design is the highest and most exquisite!" *Well...* he thought to himself. *The truth is, I couldn't tell good design from bad if it bit me. But the signature on these designs belongs to*



*Elmence of the Elmence Fine Clothing Company if I'm not mistaken. They're a well-known shop with a long history, so any design of theirs is bound to be a success!* "We begin at once!" he declared. "Let's create clothes based on these designs and put them on the market! At once, you hear me?!"

"Yessss, sir!" Kintsuno replied as she hurried out of the room. "I'll get it done!" *He's as harsh a taskmaster as always, I see...* she thought, a twisted sneer on her face as she walked down the hallway. *But no matter—that'll just make it all the sweeter when I take the lion's share for myself!*

The Shadow King watched as she left, puffing on his cigar. *Knowing her, she's planning on taking the lion's share of the take for herself,* he thought. *That's a small price to pay for someone who still follows my commands even after all our losses...*

And when they had earned enough, of course, he planned to abscond with their winnings himself. "Keh heh heh..." The Shadow King laughed crudely as he once again brought the cigar to his lips.

◇Later Still—Naneewa Town, Cloth Conglomerate Silkfleece◇

The Cloth Conglomerate Silkfleece had long been a fixture of the merchant town Naneewa, a city located not far from the Klyrode Castle Town. At the moment, a woman stood inside the Silkfleece main building, her arms folded in consternation. "It just doesn't add up, does it?"

"Madame Fetabetz?" asked Lil-Lil, the small woman wearing glasses serving as the shop's head clerk. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh, nothing," replied Fetabetz, the current head of Silkfleece, looking up from her contemplation. "I'm just thinking about that suspicious woman the other day who showed up at our shop without warning to buy bulk quantities of the inferior cloth we'd set aside as too low-quality to serve as merchandise."

"Oh, yes, I remember that customer," Lil-Lil confirmed. "The one who cleaned out our bad stock in one sweep and marched out looking perfectly pleased with herself."

"Well, guess what? That woman didn't show up at just our shop—by the sounds of things she poked her head in just about every store selling cloth in

the neighborhood and bought them out of their inferior cloth, just like us.”

“Oh, really,” said Lil-Lil, sounding not at all interested in whatever it was the mystery woman was up to.

“Listen, you,” Fetabetcz chided her. “You’re the head clerk now, remember? You’d better start taking an interest in that sort of information and keep properly abreast of the goings on in our field, or it’s the shop that’s gonna suffer for it, understand?”

“Ah ha ha!” Lil-Lil laughed lightly. “I suppose that’s true! But thanks to her, we got rid of our deadweight inventory and made a tidy sum for the trouble. Isn’t that enough?”

Fetabetcz pressed her palm to her forehead, smiling in fond exasperation at her subordinate. “I never said otherwise, but gathering intelligence is serious business too. Trends in the fashion world move lightning fast, you know.”

“I know, I know!” said Lil-Lil, still smiling as lightly as ever. “You don’t gotta worry about me!”

“You act like it’s all just a game, but I’ll admit you have a good nose when it comes to big payouts,” Fetabetcz said, smirking as she patted Lil-Lil on the head. “I suppose that’s a talent, of a sort.”

“But of course!” Lil-Lil chirped, looking up at Fetabetcz with a bright and innocent smile. “I don’t care about anything unless it can be useful to you, Madame Fetabetcz!”

### ◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

A magic circle appeared in the entryway of Flio’s house, followed shortly by Flio himself. “And that does it for business meetings on the Calgosi Coast,” he said, exhaling as he let himself relax. “That should do it for work today.”

The Calgosi Coast region lay far to the south of Houghtow City. It was remote enough that an ordinary horse-drawn carriage would take two months to make the journey one way. For comparison, the magic beasts available for rent at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store could make the trip in two weeks, while Wyne flying at top speeds could do it in two hours.

With Flio's Teleportation spell, however, he was perfectly capable of making the trip in an instant.

There were other spellcasters in the world of Klyrode besides Flio who could cast Teleportation. The number of mages capable of traveling the vast distance between Houghtow City and the Calgosi Coast in a single jump, however, numbered a scant few individuals—and considering that three of that number were Hiya, Damalynas, and Elinàsze, most of them were members of Flio's household anyway.

As Flio entered the door to his house, Rynàsze came running up with a great big smile on her face. "Welcome home, papa!"

"Hello, Rynàsze! I'm home!" Flio said, smiling himself as he gave his daughter a hug. "Thank you for coming to meet me at the door!"

Just then, however, another magic circle appeared behind them, out from which stepped Elinàsze. "Rynàsze, that's no fair!" she protested, puffing out her cheeks as she hurried up to their father herself. "I wanted to welcome papa home too, you know!" She waved a finger as she ran up to him, and her outfit transformed from the unfashionable clothes she had been wearing into a stylish dress. Her hair, too, which had grown unkempt and disheveled from her long hours engrossed in her research became a beautiful up-do. Even the bulky pair of glasses she had been wearing vanished from her face. Elinàsze, of course, never neglected to pretty herself up when it came to welcoming home her beloved papa.

"Thank you for coming to meet me too, Elinàsze!" Flio said, giving her a hug as well. "By the way, those outfits you two are wearing..."

"Yes!" said Rynàsze, positively beaming. "These are the new clothes mama made for us!"

"That's right, papa!" Elinàsze chimed in, smiling brightly herself as she nuzzled her head against Flio's chest. "It's not just us either—Mama made lots of new outfits for everyone!"

Suddenly Wyne appeared from behind, her wings fully manifested on her back as she flew through the air with characteristically high speed. "Dada! Welcome-welcome home-home!" The outfit she was wearing wasn't her usual

poncho, but a unique design combining aspects of demonic and Indolan fashion. Or so it would be, if she weren't already in the middle of stripping it off even as she flew.

"W-Wyne?!" Flio exclaimed, his eyes opening wide in surprise. "D-Don't!"

"But, but," Wyne protested, "these clothes are stuffy-stuffy!" She was naked in the blink of an eye, and flew up to Flio without a care in the world, hugging him tight around the shoulders.

"Young Mistress Wyne!" Just as Wyne grabbed hold of Flio, though, Tanya appeared wearing a particularly ferocious look on her face. "Are you behaving shamefully once again?!" She swiftly collected Wyne's discarded clothes, chasing after the dragonewt in a mad dash.

"Nuh-uh, nuh-uh!" said Wyne. "I like being naked best!"

As Wyne was a type of dragon, she had an organ in her body that served as a source of heat. Without it, she wouldn't be able to use her fire breath, but it also meant that Wyne's body temperature had a tendency to run fairly hot. Unfortunately, this led her to dislike the sensation of clothes on her body, causing a great deal of bad behavior.

"You may not!" said Tanya. "You must wear your clothing properly!"

"Nuh-uh, nuh-uh!"

Flio watched with a wry smile as Tanya and Wyne began their customary game of chase up and down the hallway. *Wyne took hers off, I guess, but all of the children's new clothing looks fetching and well-made. I wonder if we're about ready for that...*

### ◇The Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

A few days later Flio sat in the room in the back of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store used for staff meetings, looking over the progress report Uliminas had given him.

"Things are going well, I see," he said. "Faren's designs have all been excellent, and clothing production has been proceeding without a hitch by the sound of things."

“Meow!” Uliminas agreed, nodding happily. “It’s meowll thanks to everyone in the oni village. With Rys at the helm, they’ve been moving purrdution along at a fast clip. We’ve even created an assembly line to meownufacture the children’s clothes Rys has been making. In my humble opinion, the Fli-o’-Rys General Store is ready to begin selling meowr own designer clothing to the general public!”

Flio gave Uliminas’s words a moment’s thought before smiling his usual easygoing smile. “In that case,” he said, “perhaps we should hold a runway exhibition to commemorate the launch of our clothing line!”

“A...runway exhibition? Meow?” Uliminas repeated, tilting her head to the side with a blank expression on her face. It seemed she was unfamiliar with the term.

“Ah, sorry,” said Flio. “I guess that isn’t a common practice in this world, is it?”

Flio, of course, was a human from another world who had been summoned to the world of Klyrode as a candidate for the position of Hero. Before that he had worked as a merchant in the world of Palma, a role that had given him the knowledge and experience he needed to see the Fli-o’-Rys General Store to its present prosperity. Runway exhibitions, like the one he was proposing, were common events in that world.

“In my old world,” Flio explained, “when major companies that specialized in clothing wanted to sell their latest designs, they would hire models to wear their outfits at events where they would unveil their designs to the public. Those events were called runway exhibitions. I thought it might be a good idea for us to do something similar, in order to spread word that the Fli-o’-Rys General Store is stepping into the world of fashion.”

“I see...” Uliminas folded her arms, thinking the suggestion over. *Meowr purrimary purroducts so far have been gear for adventurers, meowgic items, and food...* she thought. *But if we can find a way to advertise meowr everyday clothing line on a large scale, we could take Klyrode Castle Town by storm—no, the whole world! And it sounds like these runway events were purretty successful in Flio’s old world, at least...* “Sounds purrfect!” she declared, nodding decisively as she took Flio’s hands in hers. “We’ll hold a runway

exhibition of our meown!”

“I can handle the event space,” Flio volunteered, still smiling as mildly as ever. “Could I ask you to take care of the models and their outfits?”

“No purroblem!” said Uliminas. “Leave it to me!”

### ◇Naneewa Town—Cloth Conglomerate Silkfleece◇

In the reception room of the Cloth Conglomerate Silkfleece, Flio sat down for a meeting with Fetabetz, the store’s proprietor.

“A runway exhibition, huh?” Fetabetz repeated, looking over at Flio with an air of great interest. “That’s quite the idea you’ve come up with this time, Mister Flio.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Flio said, giving Fetabetz one of his usual easygoing smiles. “The Fli-o’-Rys General Store is planning on holding the event to commemorate the launch of our line of clothing. We’d be more than happy to include Silkfleece as well, assuming you’re interested. What do you think? Would you like to work together on this?”

Fetabetz didn’t waste a second before nodding her approval. “*Would* I?!” she said. “I’d give my right arm for the chance to work on something this intriguing. In all my long years as a merchant in Naneewa Town, I’ve never been this excited to be approached for a partnership! Honestly, I can’t wait for the event!”

She eagerly scooped up the sheaf of documents Flio had brought with him and began poring over the contents while Lil-Lil, who had come by just moments earlier with a pot of tea for Fetabetz and her guest, sat down beside her, reading over her shoulder.

“I see...” Fetabetz continued. “If you’re looking for a venue in the Klyrode Castle Town, how about Lapapa Theater? It’s located along an even more important thoroughfare than the one in Naneewa. The theater itself is a little on the small side, but it’s set up so you can get a clear view of the stage from anywhere in the building. I think it would be perfect for something like what you have in mind.”

“Sounds good,” said Flio. “In that case, I suppose our next order of business



would be to approach Lapapa Theater with our idea.”

“I’ll take care of things on that end,” Fetabetz volunteered. “The people at the theater know my face, after all. If I’m the one making the application, then it should be easier for us to get permission much more quickly, and for a reduced fee as well.”

“And on that note!” said Lil-Lil, retrieving a slip of paper from her pocket. “Here is the application slip for Lapapa Theater!”

“Quick on the uptake as ever, Lil-Lil!” said Fetabetz, sharing a well-practiced fist bump with her head clerk before turning back to Flio. “The two of us should probably have another meeting on location. I intend to give you my shop’s full cooperation on the day of the event, after all.”

“You’ve been a tremendous help already,” said Flio, bashfully lowering his head. “I really hope it’s not any kind of inconvenience...”

Fetabetz, however, simply cracked a grin. “Not at all! You know what they say in the business—you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours. I’ll give you all the help I can now, and next time we put on one of these *runway exhibitions*, maybe it can be for my shop! I’ll pay you a gratuity, of course.” She pressed the palms of her hands together, bowing her head as if she were asking for a favor.

*That explains it,* Flio thought, nodding in understanding. *Fetabetz is hoping to learn the basics of putting on a runway exhibition by working with us. She really is an excellent merchant.* “I understand,” Flio said. “In that case, I’ll look forward to working together. Although, instead of a gratuity...”

“Instead...?” Fetabetz and Lil-Lil repeated, looking nervously between each other.

“Perhaps we can come to an understanding about the price of materials, when we come to you for supplies in the future,” Flio proposed, smiling his usual easygoing smile.

“Flio...” Fetabetz winced. “That would be much harder on our end than a gratuity, you know. You’re already so confoundingly good at negotiations, we barely get out of the red whenever we do business as is...”

“Come now, there’s no need for that,” said Flio, his smile unfaltering. “We’ll

talk it over and make sure whatever arrangement we come to is for the good of both our businesses, right?”

“Fwehhh...” groaned Lil-Lil, growing pale in the face as she did a few calculations on her abacus. “I don’t know if we *can* give the Fli-o’-Rys General Store a bigger discount...”

And the business talks continued on.

### ◇Klyrode Castle Town—Market◇

Lil-Lil, head clerk of Silkfleece, hummed a tune as she walked along the streets of the Klyrode Castle Town, where she had just arrived via Enchanted Frigate from Naneewa. “Haah...” she exhaled. “Well, price haggling aside, I’d say that was pretty good as far as business talks go! Now all I have to do is head to Lapapa Theater to hand in our request, and I’ll be done with work for the day!”

Lil-Lil paused to open a magic window displaying the inventory of the Bottomless Bag on her belt as she walked, double-checking to make sure she still had the paperwork in question, when she heard a woman’s voice calling to her. “You there!”

“Yes?” Lil-Lil said, stopping in her tracks and turning around. “What is it?”

“You wouldn’t happen to be Madame Lil-Lil, head clerk of the famous Cloth Emporium Silkfleece from the town of Naneewa by any chance, would you?” the woman who had addressed her asked, bowing deeply.

“And what if I were?” Lil-Lil replied, smiling brightly. Her eyes, however, were deadly serious as she examined her interlocutor. *Dark clothing, eyes hidden behind bangs...* she observed. *This person certainly looks like she’s up to no good...*

“Actually,” said the suspicious woman, “I have some information I’m sure you would like to hear...an opportunity for profit.”

“Profit?” True to form, Lil-Lil’s ears perked up at the mention of that word.

“You’re interested?” said the woman. “I have a room prepared, if you’ll come right this way. I can tell you the details when we’re in private.”

“I’m certainly willing to hear you out,” said Lil-Lil as she followed the woman

out of sight down a back alley. “Assuming you have something interesting to say.”

They continued on for a ways until they reached a building tucked away in a corner of the street and headed inside, making their way to a room where a man was waiting for them, sitting at a table. At the woman’s encouragement, Lil-Lil took the seat across from him. Atop the table was a pile of clothes.

“Quite striking, don’t you think?” the man said, grinning widely as he gestured with both hands towards the garments on the table. “Just between you and me, what I have here are none other than unreleased designs from the Elmence Fine Clothing Company...”

“Oh?” said Lil-Lil. “You don’t say. The Elmence Fine Clothing Company is one of the oldest clothing stores in the Klyrode Castle Town, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Well, that’s the head clerk of Silkfleece for you!” the man said. “Of course you’ve heard of them! Now, for this reason and that, these outfits have yet to be announced to the public, but it just so happens that my company has a bit of an *in*. Enough to get our hands on these unreleased Elmence designs...”

Smirking, the man leaned back and thumped his fist on the wooden crate he had sitting beside him before continuing on with an air of great confidence.

“Well, head clerk? Any inclination to buy the lot? These are unreleased designs, you know. If you put them on the market, I guarantee they’ll sell out before you know it. To be perfectly honest, I’d much rather be selling them directly myself, but, well, you know how it is, don’t you? I can’t exactly go publicizing my handling of this sort of merchandise! No...I need a discerning client like you to act as an intermediary. That’s why I approached you!”

Lil-Lil cracked a smile herself as she picked up one of the garments lying on the table and held it in her hands. “Uh-huh...” she said. “Well, these certainly do seem to be designs by Elmence of the Elmence Fine Clothing Company.”

“Quite right!” said the man, leaning forward out of sheer eagerness to close the deal. “Well? What do you think? Act now and I can sell them to you for cheap!”

“I see, I see!” said Lil-Lil, smiling cheerfully at the man. “Actually, I have some points I’d like to clarify, if that’s all right?”

“Sales negotiations, is it? Of course! Go right ahead!” said the man, grinning back.

The next second, Lil-Lil seized the man by his nose, using it as a lever to pull his head back.

“F-Fgwhoaaaa!” he cried, caught off guard by the sudden movement. With his nose held tight in Lil-Lil’s fingers, his voice came out sounding quite strange.

The woman, who had been standing in the back of the room observing the negotiations, darted forward, producing a small knife that she must have had concealed somewhere on her person. Lil-Lil, however, showed no signs of distress whatsoever as she handily sent the woman flying with a well-placed kick. The motion sent her skirt flitting upwards, but Lil-Lil paid no mind to her moment of exposure. As for the woman, she impacted the wall of the room hard enough to leave a crater.

*W-Wait! H-Hang on!* The man thought, cold sweat running down his brow as he glanced over at the dent the woman’s body had made in the wall. *Th-That wall is made of stone!*

“Who the hell do you think you’re dealing with, you punk? Hah?” Lil-Lil demanded, bringing her own face dangerously close to his. Her eyes were open manically wide. There was no hint of the personable store clerk she had seemed to be just seconds earlier. The cutesy tone was gone from her voice as well, leaving her sounding positively menacing. “Did you think you could get one over on Lil-Lil the Terrible? Well? *Did you?*”

“Ghfh...” was all the man could say, given that his head was still being wrenched painfully back by the nose.

“You’re telling me these came from the Elmence Fine Clothing Company?!” Lil-Lil spat, punctuating every enraged statement with a twist of the man’s nose. “That’s rich, even for a joke! Sure, the designs look like something Elmence might make, but just look at these inferior materials! The abysmal stitches! Elmence might have fallen behind the times, but her tailors are still some of the best around! You expect me to believe something this shoddy came from her shop? Hah?!”

Needless to say, with Lil-Lil twisting his nose this way and that, the man was

wholly unable to answer.

“You’ve got some guts, punk, trying to pull one over on Lil-Lil the Terrible!” Lil-Lil continued. By now her voice was loud enough to be heard all throughout the building, punctuated by the man’s screams. “I’ll teach you to underestimate the head clerk of Silkfleece!”

A short while later, Lil-Lil stepped back out onto the street, smiling cheerfully and once again humming a jaunty tune as continued on her way to Lapapa Theater. “La la la!” she sang. “No profit, only lies! No thank you, and goodbye!”

Lil-Lil, the head clerk of the Cloth Emporium Silkfleece was an utter mystery. Her family, her homeland, and even her species were unknown. Fetabetcz, the current head of the company, found this girl with no clear origin and took her in, a kindness for which Lil-Lil pledged her complete and utter loyalty to Fetabetcz, body and soul. She was always on the lookout for opportunities for profit in order to help Fetabetcz, but rumor had it that people who thought they could pull one over on her had a habit of going missing...

◇Later that Month—Klyrode Castle Town, Lapapa Theater◇

“Well meow,” Uliminas declared, grinning in triumph as she watched the rehearsal taking place on the theater’s stage. “I’d say our prepurrations are complete! Flio’s brought over all the meowtfits we’re going to use for the show, and the meowdels are ready to go! The staff of Silkfleece is handling the postexhibition sales meet, so I suppose meowr role is just about finished.”

Uliminas was watching the show from the highest point in the building, perched upon one of the poles the theater used to hang lighting like the hellcat she was, using her vantage point to keep an eye on everything that transpired onstage. Some members of the theater staff below were still hurrying about getting everything ready, but most of them seemed to have finished their preparations. At a glance, the exhibition seemed ready to open to the public any time.

“We sent invitations to meowrchants from all over the world, not just the Klyrode Castle Town,” Uliminas said out loud to herself. “If this runway

exhibition goes well, it'll be a good oppurrtnuity to establish relationships with companies we haven't had a chance to do business with until now..." With that, she hopped down from the rafters, doing a triple flip in midair and landing gracefully in the aisle leading to the stage.

"Ah! Miss Uliminas!" Just as soon as Uliminas alighted on the ground, Faren came running up to greet her.

"Meowdy, Faren!" Uliminas said. "Everything good to go?"

"Y-Yes! It's all ready, I think!" Faren replied with a great big smile, bowing her head low. "The last couple of weeks really flew by, didn't they!"

"Meow're telling me!" Uliminas agreed, smiling back at the girl. "And thanks to mew, we have plenty of top tier meowtfits to exhibit!"

"U-Um..." Faren said, a puzzled frown crossing her face. "May I ask something, Miss Uliminas?"

"Meow? What is it?" Uliminas replied.

"I-It's just... Maybe it's just my imagination, but I can't help feeling like you've been avoiding me..."

Faren had good reason for feeling that way. In fact, even though she had just run right up to her only moments before, Uliminas had already put a fair bit of distance between the two of them.

*M-Mreowr?! Uliminas startled, apparently confused herself. It seemed like the taste she had gotten of Faren's superhuman strength on their first meeting had left Uliminas with a fair bit of trauma, leading to her drawing away from the girl on a purely subconscious level. "N-Not at meowll!" she insisted, forcing herself to smile. "Mew know I like mew a ton, Faren!"*

*P-Purrposterous... Uliminas thought to herself. Who ever heard of a hellcat being afuraid of a human...?*

"Th-Thank you!" Faren cried. "Thank you ever so much! I like you a ton too, Miss Uliminas!" Tears of joy in her eyes, she ran up faster than Uliminas could get away and gave the hellcat yet another big, tight hug.

◇Meanwhile—Lapapa Theater, Backstage◇

“Hm?” Flio had been busy double-checking the clothing for the exhibition, when suddenly he looked up in the direction of the stage.

“Is something wrong, my lord husband?” Rys asked, pausing in her own work preparing outfits for the child models.

“Oh, nothing’s wrong,” said Flio. “I just thought I heard something near the stage. It sounded a bit like a scream.”

“A scream?” Rys asked, the distinctive tufts of hair on her head perked up like the wolf ears they resembled as she looked in the direction of the stage herself. “Now that you mention it, I believe I might hear Uliminas’s voice...”

When Rys was in her human transformation, the ear-shaped tufts atop her head were nothing more than ordinary hair. Due to her lupine instincts, however, they had a tendency to twitch and move about whenever she strained to hear a sound.

“Well, Uliminas can take care of herself I suppose...” said Flio.

“She certainly can,” Rys concurred. “But we need to hurry up and finish our own preparations! The models from Silkfleece could be here any moment!”

“Right you are,” Flio nodded, returning to his work.

### ◇Lapapa Theater, Outside◇

In front of the theater, a long line of guests snaked its way up to the entrance, waiting for the doors to open. It was a remarkably fashionable line, with many of the guests dressed in lavishly gorgeous outfits of their own. As they waited, they chatted among themselves.

“A runway exhibition, is it? I wonder what it’ll be like...”

“I’m so excited! I just can’t wait!”

“Is it going to start soon, do you think?”

Hovering behind the very back of the line, however, was a group that didn’t seem to belong in the gaudily adorned crowd—they were wearing heavy black cloaks, concealing their forms.



“Damn that woman...” one of them said. “Head clerk of Silkfleece or no, how did she get so preposterously strong?”

“And thanks to her, we lost all the clothing we made for Lady Kintsuno!” said another. “Lady Kintsuno and the Shadow King are going to punish us for sure, unless we can do something about it...”

The group tossed off their cloaks as one, revealing themselves as demons, all with forms suitable for combat. Some of their number grew rapidly in size, while others began casting spells as they slowly advanced on the line of guests waiting for the show.

“Wh-What’s that?!” said a guest, turning around.

“Ah! D-Demons!”

“A-And it looks like they’re attacking!”

The guests fled screaming as the demons approached, running every which way in their confusion as the man at the head of the group of demons grinned wickedly at the sight. *We made sure to confirm that that ludicrously strong Lil-Lil woman is busy at Silkfleece...* he thought. *With her gone, there’s nothing to stop us from running rampage!* “Listen up, you lot!” he shouted to the demons behind him. “It’s time to pay these people back for ruining our merchandise! We’ll wreck their event, and make off with their products in exchange! Fail, and your life is forfeit!”

“Yeeeah!” the demons roared, working their fighting spirits to a fever pitch.

They soon found their path forward blocked, however, by a single man. “Hrm,” he said, crossing his arms imperiously as he glanced down at the assembled demons. “You. What do you think you’re doing? You aren’t planning on interfering with the show, are you?”

When the demons caught sight of the man’s face, they froze on the spot.

“H-Him! I-It can’t be...”

“Th-The retired Dark One...”

“It’s Lord Gholl!”

The demons began to sweat, unable to move a muscle until the man—Ghokal

—took a step forward. Instantly, the demons shrunk back.

“If they *are* planning on getting in the way of the show, I certainly won’t show them any mercy!” came another voice from the opposite direction. The demons wheeled around to see their escape route blocked by none other than Sleip.

“Ah! Wh-What now?!”

“Th-The former Infernal...”

“It’s Lord Sleip!”

Trapped between Sleip and Ghozal, unable to advance or retreat, the demons had no choice but to resign themselves to their fate. Just then, however, a girl descended from the skies above, landing on the demon’s right flank. It was Wyne, flapping her dragon wings as she alighted to the ground. “You won’t-won’t get away-away with messing with my dada’s work!” she said, her claws and tail manifesting as well as she menaced the crowd before her.

“Th-That girl! Could it be...?”

“Th-The ace of the Dark Army’s strongest division, the legion of dragons!”

“It’s Wyne!”

With so many powerful adversaries on the scene, the demons found themselves rooted to the spot. In their desperation, however, they seemed to find something of a fighting spirit.

“I-In that case, there’s nothing for it but do or die...”

“At least we can go down kicking!”

“A-And run away if we have the chance...”

Even as they trembled with fear, the demons readied themselves to attack...until two more figures stepped up.

“Oh ho ho!” laughed Calsi’im, Charun accompanying him at his side. “Now, now, all of you! There’s no sense in throwing away your lives!”

“I-It’s him...”

“Th-The Benevolent Dark One himself...”

“It’s Lord Calsi’im!”

Weeping openly, the demons all threw themselves to the ground, prostrating themselves before the old skeleton. Calsi’im looked around at the crowd, and nodded in approval. “Good, good,” he said. “I’m glad you understand how foolish you were all being!”

“L-Lord Calsi’im...”

“P-Please...”

“F-Forgive us...”

Tears streaming from their eyes, the demons all crowded up to Calsi’im’s feet as he looked down at them with something like fatherly love on his bony face.

“You truly are extraordinary, Calsi’im,” said Charun. “Even after leaving the role of Dark One behind, you still have the adoration of demons everywhere.”

“Not at all, not at all!” Calsi’im insisted. “I would have never been able to stop them if it weren’t for Lord Ghozal, Lord Sleip, and our little Wyne giving them a proper scare first! But I must say...” he added, turning back to the demons. “It’s certainly good that you all had your change of heart when you did!”

“Huh?!” At Calsi’im’s words, the demons suddenly looked up. The number of figures surrounding them had only increased while they had been busy supplicating themselves. There was Elinàsze, Hiya, and Damalynas, their expressions stone-cold with magic circles at the ready. There was Garyl with his sword drawn, and Ben’ne with her naginata primed. There was Rynàsze, doing the scariest pose she could manage together with her small army of magic beasts. Then there was Greanyl and the rest of the shadow demons, armed with shuriken and prepared for battle. And in the distance, Byleri was approaching fast at the head of a herd of horse demons.

“Wh-What have we gotten ourselves into...?” said one of the demons.

“E-Every one of these people has magic power out of this world...” said another. “Wh-What’s going on here...?”

“W-We never had a chance, did we...?”

Somehow, the demons managed to tremble even more violently than they

had been before.

“I think you can well enough imagine what might have happened had you not thought better of things when you did!” Calsi’im said, his jawbone rattling with laughter. “Now, why don’t you think about what you’ve done and stop causing trouble for people, hm?”

In response, the demons all went back to prostrating themselves before Calsi’im.



In the end, the demons’ rampage delayed the start of the runway exhibition for a little while, but despite that everything seemed ready to proceed without issue...or so they thought.

“Meowt?! The girls who were supposed to be meowdels meowll ran away?!” The color drained from Uliminas’s face when she heard the news.

Fetabetcz, who had been the one to deliver the report, hung her head. For her part she looked every bit as pale as Uliminas. “I-I’m so sorry...” she said. “It seems like they were spooked by the demons and ended up running for the hills...”

“M-Meowll of them?” Uliminas asked.

“Yes. Every last one,” said Fetabetcz, drooping despondently.

*N-Now meow... Uliminas wondered, paralyzed with indecision. The audience section is packed full, and the event is supposed to start any mewwnute! We don’t have time to figure out where the meowdels went.*

Suddenly, there came a knock at the door. “Uliminas,” said Flio, stepping into the room. “Are the models ready? It’s just about time for the show.”

“F-Flio...” Uliminas stammered.

Next, Rys entered the room after her husband. “Uliminas, what is the meaning of this?” she demanded, putting her hands on her hips and puffing out her cheeks in frustration. “My lord husband asked you to stay here to assist the models with their outfits, but there doesn’t seem to be anyone here! What in the world is going on?”

After her came Balirossa. “Yes, what *is* going on? I’ve been standing by ready to assist as well, and yet there’s no sign of the models...”

Even Uliminas’s daughter Folmina poked her head in to see what was going on. “What’s wrong, mama Uliminas?” she asked, stepping into the room.

Uliminas glanced around at the assembled crowd, not moving a muscle.

“Uliminas?” Rys asked, a concerned expression on her face at the sight of the immobilized hellcat.

“Rys...” Uliminas said at last, staring back at her. “Who else came meowll the way here for the show?”

“Who else?” Rys blinked. “Well, Garyl’s waiting in the theater, and...”

“I need womewn!” Uliminas snapped. “Womewn and children!”

“Huh? Well, in that case...” Rys counted on her fingers as she listed the names of the women and young children in attendance. “There’s Elinàsze, Rylnàsze, and Wyne. Hiya and Damalynas are here too, and we could always summon Ben’ne if need be. Then there’s Byleri, Blossom, and Kora...and Greanyl and her shadow demons came as well to help with the preparations...”

Uliminas nodded along as she listened. “I see... Then I suppose there’s meownly one option...”

“Whatever do you mean?” Rys asked, tilting her head in perfect confusion at Uliminas’s words.

Fetabetcz, though, seemed to understand what Uliminas had in mind. She stepped up to Rys, carrying the outfits meant for the exhibition in her arms.



One runway exhibition later, the curtains lowered to thunderous applause. This event had been the first of its kind in the world of Klyrode, and most of the guests had come out of nothing more than idle curiosity. Faren’s cutting edge designs found tremendous favor with the audience, however, and as the models ascended the stage in turn, unveiling one new outfit after another, they were met with excited comments from the crowd.

“Wow...that outfit looks amazing...”

“I’m rather fond of the one that girl is wearing, myself!”

“But *that* woman’s outfit is simply too stylish for words!”

“It said on the program that we’ll be able to purchase these outfits after the show is over, you know!”

“It did?! That’s incredible!”

Indeed, the moment the runway exhibition ended, members of the audience flocked to the market set up outside the venue. In short order Uliminas and co sold out the entire stock of outfits they had brought for the day’s event.

### ◇Klyrode Castle Town—Lapapa Theater, Backstage◇

When the show was finished, Rys made a beeline for backstage, where she plopped down in one of the available chairs. “Really, I feel terribly misused...” she said, sighing deeply.

“Well, I really appurreciate the help!” Uliminas said, wringing her hands as she rushed up in an attempt to mollify her. “Thanks to mew and the others, the runway exhibition was a runaway success! Here, Charun! I think this meowne could use a bit of tea!” she added, beckoning over the magic doll, who hurried over with her Hi Izuran teapot, pouring Rys a fresh cup.

“I’m telling you...” Rys grumbled, the corners of her mouth turned down as she glanced up at Uliminas. “This will be the one and only time I agree to do something like that. I belong to my lord husband, you know. I would prefer not to have my body put on display for others.”

Yes—in the absence of the previously arranged models, Uliminas had recruited Rys alongside the more feminine members of Flio’s house in attendance to take their place. Rys had refused at first, expressing her dismay, but Flio and the other other men pleaded with her. Eventually, she agreed to participate under the condition that it would only be the once.

Rys’s sour mood showed no signs of improving, until Rylnàsze came up beside her chair. “But, mama, you were so pretty!” she said. “I could hardly take my eyes off you at all!”

“It’s true,” Rynàsze added with a smirk. “I had to tap her on the shoulder just to get her to move!” She poked her sister’s shoulder to demonstrate.

“Thank you, both of you,” Rys said, her expression finally softening as she reached out to pat her children on their heads. “You were absolutely adorable yourselves, I’ll have you know.”

“Ehe hee!” Rynàsze giggled, a grin spreading across her whole face. “Thank you, mama!”

“Well, I’m glad you thought so,” said Elinàsze, her own expression looking somewhat more complicated. “Personally, though, I would rather be wearing the lounging clothes you made me...”

Rys beamed at the both of them.

*It looks like Rys finally cheered up...* Uliminas thought, breathing a sigh of relief, only for Rys to shoot her a reproving glare.

“I still haven’t forgiven you, you know!” Rys huffed.

“M-Mreowr!” Uliminas exclaimed, startled into immobility to have Rys’s gaze suddenly turn her way.

Elsewhere in the room, Sleip was busy hoisting his daughter Ryslei up into his arms. “Ha ha ha!” he laughed, grinning from ear to ear. “You were as adorable as ever today, Rislei!”

“Hey!” Rislei objected, struggling and turning red in the face. “Papa, quit it! And why did you insist on shouting my name every time I appeared onstage?! I’ve never been so embarrassed in my life!”

“Ha ha ha!” Sleip laughed again, rubbing his cheeks against her in spite of her protests. “You were just so cute—I couldn’t help myself! Don’t take it too hard!”

“P-Papa, you are just the worst!” In spite of her words, however, Rislei wasn’t putting up any real resistance to letting Sleip do as he liked. It seemed that whatever she might say, she didn’t actually dislike her father.

“I see Sir Sleip and Rislei are as close as ever,” Balirossa observed with a smile, when suddenly she heard Ghozal’s voice from behind.



“Hrm... Balirossa really is beautiful, though...” he said.

“S-Sir Ghozal!” Balirossa’s face went bright red. “Wh-Whatever made you say something like that all of a sudden?!”

“Hey, I’m just saying what’s on my mind!” Ghozal said. “Something the matter with that?”

“N-No...” Balirossa said, clearly flustered by Ghozal’s straightforward personality. “N-Nothing’s the matter at all, just...”

Flio smiled as he watched the scene. Everyone seemed to be excited and full of energy. *Seems like things went well...* he thought, smiling his usual easygoing smile.

#### ◇Meanwhile—Nearby Lapapa Theater◇

In the shadow of a building outside Lapapa Theater, Greanyl lay on the ground curled up in the fetal position.

*T-To think that I should shame myself like that, and in front of so many people...* she thought.

Greanyl had been among the number recruited as models for the fashion show that day. With her Quickchange skill, she was able to dress in more outfits than any of the others, and as a result she found herself ascending the stage the most out of all the models.

*I-I’m so embarrassed I could die...* she thought, pressing her palms against her bright red face as she trembled on the cold pavement. *Now there’s no way anyone will marry me...*

## Chapter 3: Hole: Thus, Hero Gold-Hair Fought *The Golden Warrior*

Deep in a forest, a group of men and women walked along a rough animal path that split off from the road used by ordinary travelers. One of them, a woman named Aryun Keats, looked over at the handsome blond man leading the group. "Hero Gold-Hair," she said. "Perhaps I should transform into a carriage and drive us to the hot springs village."

"What's the harm in a little walk?" Hero Gold-Hair answered, looking away from the natural beauty before his eyes to speak with Aryun. "The scenery here isn't half bad! I certainly plan on enjoying it to its fullest!"

"The scenery's nice, sure..." Wuha Gappoli croaked out as she staggered along all the way at the back of the party, struggling to catch her breath. "But I gotta say, Hero Gold-Hair, I'm pooped..."

Hero Gold-Hair's party had spent the previous night in an inn near the top of a mountain. Their plan had been to enjoy a scenic walk along the mountain roads on their way to the hot springs village at the mountain's peak.

"Come now, Wuha!" Hero Gold-Hair insisted. "Don't be boorish about it!"

"Easy for you to say," Wuha shot back with a pout. "I used a lot of magic last night turning into an inn for the rest of you to stay at! Would it kill you to treat me nicely for a change?"

True to her words, Wuha Gappoli was a rare species of djinn known as a manor djinn, possessing the power to transform her body into any man-made structure she had touched with her own hands. The inn at which the party had spent the previous night was, in fact, none other than her body. As a result, the magic power left within her body was precariously low, leaving her unsteady on her feet even as she walked along the path.

"Hmm..." Hero Gold-Hair considered. "You have a point, I admit. All right. Keats, transform into some vehicle or other for Wuha to ride in."

“Yes, sir!” Aryun Keats gave Hero Gold-Hair a sharp salute.

Like Wuha, Aryun was a rare species of djinn—in her case, a carriage djinn with the power to transform into any vehicle she had ever touched. She didn’t have much magic power in the first place, though, and had to exercise a fair amount of restraint when it came to using her abilities.

Aryun Keats transformed into a vehicle and scooped up Wuha Gappoli onboard...but even though Wuha had been so tired of walking, she now seemed upset about the arrangement.

“Hey. Aryun.” Wuha said.

“Yes?” Aryun’s telepathic voice came from inside the vehicle. “*What is it?*”

“Look,” Wuha said, frowning indignantly. “I’ll admit this technically counts as a vehicle...but why in the wide world of Klyrode would you carry me around in a *baby carriage?!*”

Indeed, Wuha Gappoli was currently snuggled tight inside Aryun Keats’s baby carriage form.

*“I reasoned that this form would be the most efficacious for carrying an exhausted passenger in comfort, Madame Wuha,”* Aryun replied, sounding perfectly confused as to what could possibly be wrong. *“Is something wrong?”*

“You better believe something’s wrong!” Wuha shouted, sitting up in the carriage. “I’ll have you— Grmhff!!!” She was interrupted, however, when something was shoved into her mouth.

“There, that suits you better, little Wuha!” Valentine snickered as she jammed the pacifier in. “Now settle down and enjoy your ride.” In her other hand she had a large fruit she had plucked from a nearby tree, which she nibbled on as the party walked.

Valentine was a native of the Realm of Evil. To maintain her body in the world of Klyrode required a continual expenditure of vast amounts of magical power. That was why she was always eating whenever the opportunity presented itself, as she could absorb the small amounts of magic power found in ordinary food.

“Hee hee!” Tsuya giggled as Wuha was forced back down into the baby

carriage. “Be a good little baaaby, okaaay?”

“Bleh!” Wuha spat the pacifier out. “Hang on, why do you have a pacifier in the first place, Valentine?”

“Hm?” Valentine said. “Don’t be silly. It isn’t *mine*.”

“Then whose is it?” Wuha demanded. “We don’t have any babies in our party!”

“It’s Lady Tsuya’s,” Valentine explained. “She keeps it with her at all times, you know!”

“Fweeeh?!” Tsuya’s eyes shot open wide in shock at Valentine’s words.

“No?” Valentine teased. “You mean to say you *haven’t* been buying up infant care goods whenever you find them and secretly storing them in your Bottomless Bag, just in case you suddenly wind up pregnant with Hero Gold-Hair’s child?”

“Wh-What?” Hero Gold-Hair said, looking over at Tsuya. “Tsuya, is that true?”

“A-Awawawawah!!!” Tsuya cried, blushing furiously. “N-N-Not in the sliiightest! O-Or so I’d liiike to say, but I diiid end up buying a lot of cute baaaby clothes at that runway exhibiiiition event the other day, just in caaase... They were just so cuuute, you know? B-B-But how did yooou know about that, Lady Valentine?”



“Never mind that!” Valentine said, bopping Tsuya on the nose with her right index finger. “We’re going on a scenic walk, aren’t we? We should enjoy it!” She looked around, taking in the sights, and breathed in a deep lungful of fresh air. “Mmmh!” she exclaimed. “This must be what people mean when they talk about getting some *fresh air*—this place is delightfully refreshing! But it’s strange...somehow I feel even hungrier than usual...” She reached out as she spoke, taking another fruit from the branches of a tree as they passed.

Hero Gold-Hair let out a chuckle at Valentine’s behavior. “You’re right about that, anyway! And once we’ve had our fill of the scenery, the next stop is a long, leisurely bath!”

The party set off once again down the road, but they had barely taken a single step before Hero Gold-Hair felt a sudden sense of unease. He halted in his tracks, looking all around...just in time to see two glowing orbs, one red and one blue, erupt without warning from the lake up ahead on their trail, not far from the hot springs village itself. The orbs seemed to be engaged in some kind of chase, flying low over the ground as they darted this way and that.

“W-Watch out!” Hero Gold-Hair shouted as the orbs veered in the party’s direction. “Everyone get down!”

Tsuya and the others obeyed in an instant, throwing themselves flat against the ground just in the nick of time. *Ka-smash!* The orbs careened over the party’s heads, missing them by a hair and colliding with the rocky mountain surface with an ear-shattering sound that seemed to shake the entire mountain. A plume of dust erupted from the impact, swirling around the party and robbing them of their sight.

“Ack, hack! H-Hero Gooold-Hair! Are you okaaay?” Tsuya coughed as she lifted her head, looking up from where she lay on the ground to see Hero Gold-Hair lying prone. Grabbing the baby carriage Aryun Keats with Wuha Gappoli inside, she hurried over to him as fast as she could.

Next to her, Valentine roused herself as well, following suit. “Hero Gold-Hair! Are you all right?”

The two ran up to where they thought they had seen Hero Gold-Hair lying on the ground, but when they got there, they froze up in shock at the sight before

their eyes.

Wuha Gappoli, meanwhile, was frozen for a somewhat different reason—it seemed she had been knocked unconscious from the impact and was now lying peacefully in the baby carriage with a pacifier sticking out of her mouth.

What they found when they arrived at the spot Hero Gold-Hair had been was the red orb they had seen flying just moments ago, buried in the ground with only its top half exposed.

“Wh-Where’s Hero Gooold-Hair?” Tsuya asked, looking around every which way in her confusion. “I-I’m sure he was lying over heeere...” Hero Gold-Hair, however, was nowhere to be seen. “Th-This red oorb didn’t crush Hero Gooold-Hair, did it?” she asked, blanching at the thought as she looked down at the orb through narrow eyes.

“Well...” said Valentine. “It seems like it must have.” She held out her hands, summoning threads of darkness from her fingertips. A cold smile played on her lips, but her eyes were deadly serious. Tsuya, meanwhile, retrieved her Drilldozer Shovel from the Bottomless Bag she carried.

The Drilldozer Shovels were a pair of legendary items that had once been held in the citadel of Klyrode Castle. Of the two, one was in the possession of Hero Gold-Hair while Tsuya held on to the other.

And so, Tsuya and Valentine crept one step at a time up towards the red orb.



Inside the orb, a woman wearing a tattered cloak shook Hero Gold-Hair by the shoulders. Her body was clearly inhuman, with half of it resembling a young maiden and the other half a bare skeleton. “U-Um...” she started. “Mister, are you all right?!”

This woman was one of the Contract Executors charged with the enforcement of the sacred Blood Oath Contract, making her an angel and disciple of the Celestial Plane. When disciples were dispatched from the Celestial Plane to lesser worlds it was their custom to don tattered robes and carry heavy scythes, transforming their bodies into half-maiden, half-skeleton visages, like the one this woman currently wore.

Hero Gold-Hair's body flopped limply in the angel's arms, clearly unconscious.

"Hello! Hello, hello!" she cried with increasing desperation, shaking him again and again. "Are you all right? Mister, won't you please open your eyes?"

Alas, Hero Gold-Hair's body betrayed no signs of life.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no..." the angel repeated, the color draining out of the half of her face that resembled a young maiden. "I'm already going to be in big enough trouble for injuring a living creature from a world I was visiting on a mission!" She quickly placed her hand to Hero Gold-Hair's wrist, feeling for a pulse, and pressed her ear to his chest to confirm whether or not he was still breathing. "His heartbeat is weak, and his breathing has almost stopped..." she said, sitting back up. "Oh, no no no no no no no... This man is on the verge of death, and it's all my fault!"

The angel looked even more frightened after her examination of Hero Gold-Hair's condition. By now the color had gone out of her face completely. "This is really bad..." she said, swallowing nervously. "Even though it was a complete accident that happened while I was chasing the Devil-Beast Bel Munhra after it escaped from the escort taking it to its prison in the Hell Realms, if the goddesses find out I've killed a human of this world whose time wasn't meant to be up, they'll exile me from the Celestial Plane for sure!"

*P-Plus...* she added to herself. *If they find out the whole reason Bel Munhra got away was that I was slacking off and eating sweets, exile would be getting off lightly...* The beads of cold sweat dripping down her forehead at this point resembled nothing so much as a waterfall.

"I-I know!" she suddenly declared, taking a crystal out of the Bottomless Bag she wore on her belt. "Now's the perfect time to use *this...*"

This crystal was a magic item capable of sending messages between worlds, granted to disciples of the Celestial Plane whose missions took them far from home. She held it aloft in her right hand and activated its communication function. "This is Griyn. Repeat, this is Griyn," she said, speaking quickly. "Dina, are you awake?"

After a short while, she got a response. "Griyn?" said the somewhat groggy voice coming out of the crystal. "Haven't I told you enough times to stop



bombarding me with interworld transmissions without any warning? I have plenty to deal with on my own plate, you know.”

Relief washed over Griyn’s face when she heard Dina’s voice. “Th-Thank goodness, it went through... I-I’m very sorry. It won’t happen again.” Griyn took a single deep breath and smoothed her cloak over her chest, taking a moment to compose herself before continuing. “But never mind that, this is an emergency! Someone needs your help, Dina—me! I’m begging you!” She clasped her hands together, desperately entreating her acquaintance.

“Well...” Dina said at last, “I admit, I have an extremely bad feeling about getting involved with whatever this is...but I suppose I can at least hear you out. What in the cosmos is going on?”

Griyn’s face lit up with a smile at Dina’s offer to help, tears welling up in her eyes. Just then, however, the world around her began to shake. “Wh-Wh-What’s this?!” she cried, looking all around. “What’s happening?!”

The walls of her red orb, however, only continued to shake with greater and greater intensity.



“A red orb...” Riliangiu said, extending her arms to cast her Search spell on the object. “It doesn’t seem to be of the world of Klyrode...” Riliangiu had been away when the incident had occurred, but she had felt a disturbance and hurried back as fast as she could.

“I’ve had enough of this!” said Valentine. “Stand back! It’s my turn!” In a single burst, she extended her threads of darkness towards the orb, striking it again and again for all she was worth. The force of the attack shook the orb violently, until a crack formed on one of its sides.

“Give us back Hero Gooold-Hair!” Tsuya shouted, lifting the Drilldozer Shovel high in the air and bringing its head down hard upon the curious object.

*“Next is my turn!”* Behind them, a cannon extended out from Aryun Keats’s baby carriage form, its barrel aimed straight for the enemy orb. *“Bearing, check! Target, acquired! Magic rounds, loaded! Annnd...fire!”*

The barrel of the gun burst into flames. A second later, an enormous

*kabooooooooom!* echoed throughout the mountain forest. The orb took a direct hit, shaking heavily as the crack from Valentine's attacks widened still further.

*"Tch!"* Aryun telepathically clicked her tongue in irritation. *"It's still in one piece? Stubborn thing...and it will take five minutes to charge up the magic power for another shot..."*

"In that case, I'll simply have to destroy it before then!" said Valentine, preparing to use her thread once again.

Before Valentine could strike, however, the orb simply disappeared, leaving behind a crater filled with smoke. And in the dead center, Hero Gold-Hair stood stiffly upright like a soldier at attention.

"Hero Gold-Hair!" the four of them—Tsuya, Valentine, Riliangu and Aryun Keats—all cried at once, running up towards their leader.



"Th-That was a close one!" Griyn said. "That djinn's magitank cannon packed a serious punch! Just a little more and the Ruby Sphere might have been destroyed! And that's to say nothing of the destructive power of those threads that woman from the Realm of Evil was using..."

Currently, Griyn was inside Hero Gold-Hair's mindscape, breathing hard and drenched in sweat as she looked around at the group surrounding her.

Moments ago, Griyn had finally managed to explain the situation to Dina using. After a short pause, Dina's voice came from the crystal in response.

"Let me get this straight, Griyn..." she said. "First, you allowed the Devil-Beast Bel Munhra to escape mid transit due to your own inattentiveness. Then, while pursuing Bel Munhra, you injured a resident of the world of Klyrode severely enough that he might die at any time. And now, that man's companions are about to destroy the Ruby Sphere that was given to you for transportation? Do I have that right?"

"Y-Yes, well...I suppose that's about the gist of it, anyway..." Griyn responded, her voice sounding unnaturally shrill.

Another moment of lag passed. “Are you an idiot?!” Dina snapped.

“Wh-Whaaa?!” Griyn exclaimed, taken aback by Dina’s castigating tone. Castigation or no, however, Griyn kept on pleading desperately. It was hardly the time to worry about appearances. “Well, like I said, I could really use some help! Bring a Resurrection Bead if you can! If we leave things like this, this human is going to die! And I’ll end up being exiled from the Celestial Plane! Then I’d be in the same category as that goddess Telbyress! The shame! I wouldn’t be able to bear it!”

Dina listened silently for a time, before giving a deep sigh. “Fine,” she said. “I’ll see what I can do. But just this once, understand?”

“Yes! Of course! Thank you!”

“For the time being,” Dina instructed her, “possess that human at once in order to prolong his life as long as possible. I’ll see what I can do to bring you a Resurrection Bead, so try to hold out until then.”

“Okay! I will!” Griyn nodded over and over again, tears of gratitude streaming from her eyes.

Back in the present, Griyn plunged into Hero Gold-Hair’s mindscape as he lay unconscious on the brink of death, possessing his body herself. This way she would be able to prolong his life, but as he himself was still comatose, needless to say Hero Gold-Hair’s will would not be able to animate his body for her. It fell to Griyn to control the body in his stead.

*W-Well...* she thought, looking around at Hero Gold-Hair’s party of companions on the outside of the sphere. *For the time being, I suppose I should find some way to trick them and buy time until Dina can arrive...* “First things first, though, all that excitement gave me a bit of an appetite,” she said, retrieving a bag stuffed full of a variety of baked sweets from her Bottomless Bag. She began stuffing her cheeks full, a delighted grin on her face. “Can’t do work on an empty stomach, after all!”

She had been snaking on precisely these sweets in particular when the Devil-Beast Bel Munhra had given her the slip as well, but at that moment, her past failures were the furthest thing from her mind.

Griyn alternated between snacking on her sweets and monitoring the situation around her, when suddenly, she noticed a change. “H-Huh?”

Hero Gold-Hair, possessed by Griyn from inside his mindscape, was standing there like normal as Tsuya, Valentine, Aryun Keats, and Riliangiu all came running up...until suddenly the party recoiled, drawing back and eyeing Hero Gold-Hair with suspicion.

“Something’s wrooong with Hero Gooold-Hair...” Tsuya whispered, misgivings written all over her face. “It doooes look like him, but I don’t knooow...”

“You’re right,” Valentine agreed. “It’s like he’s a different person inside. This whole situation is clearly wrong.” She wove her threads of darkness from her fingertips, making sure not to lower her guard.

“Who are you?” asked Aryun Keats, back in her human form. She was carrying an empty bottle menacingly in both hands, ready to swing should they come to blows. “Show us your true form!”

“They’re far too suspicious, whoever they are,” Riliangiu said, her arms transforming into blades past the elbows as she crouched low to the ground, prepared to spring into the air.

Wuha Gappoli, however, was still unconscious on the ground behind them and had nothing to contribute to the conversation.

The party was showing open hostility towards Hero Gold-Hair. Griyn frowned in confusion as she watched from inside his mindscape. *Th-That’s strange...* she thought. *What could have given me away?* She hadn’t expected this at all. She found herself at a complete loss for words.

At the time Griyn had let it slip her mind, but while possessing Hero Gold-Hair’s body might have prolonged his life, that was all it had done. Yes—as Tsuya and the others ran up, Hero Gold-Hair had simply stood on the spot, a blank and lifeless expression on his face. Ordinarily, when possessing a body like this, one would read their target’s memories in order to interact with the people around them without anyone noticing that something was strange. Griyn, however, had simply forgotten to do this.

Just standing and taking no other action was just about the most suspicious

thing Hero Gold-Hair could have possibly done.

The party stood on guard, keeping their distance as they glared at Hero Gold-Hair's body with open suspicion. Then, suddenly, they heard a rustling sound as the tall grass nearby began to sway, until a woman emerged from the vegetation.

"Ummm..." Tsuya said, taking a halting step towards the woman. "Are you okaaaay?"

It was no wonder she should ask. The woman's clothes were in tatters, and her feet were completely bare. Riliangiu, however, pushed Tsuya back, stopping her. "Wait just a moment," she said, glaring fiercely in the woman's direction.

The woman glared right back.

"Ummm... Is something wrooong?" Tsuya asked.

"That woman is dangerous," Riliangiu answered, refusing to lower her guard. She certainly seemed frightened—her forehead had already broken out in a cold sweat.

"Quite right..." Valentine concurred, turning to face the woman herself, still keeping her threads at the ready. "That woman might have assumed human form, but she certainly doesn't seem to be any sort of ordinary human."

"I-It's her!" Griyn exclaimed inside Hero Gold-Hair's mindscape, her eyes opening wide when she saw who the woman was. "There's no doubt about it! She's in human form at the moment, but that's Bel Munhra!" She gulped. "Judging from its condition, it seems the effect of the Bind spell hasn't completely worn off... If I can keep running until Dina arrives, together we might be able to figure out something we can do... But until then, I should make a tactical retreat!"

She held out her right arm, ordering Hero Gold-Hair's body to flee. The body, however, didn't move a muscle. *H-Huh?!* she thought, holding out her arm once again. But no matter how many times she repeated the gesture, Hero Gold-Hair's Body showed no signs of moving anytime soon.

"Wh-What's going on?!" she asked. "As long as I'm possessing this body, I should be in complete control! Why can't I get it to move?!" Baffled, she held

out her arm time and time again, but Hero Gold-Hair's body stayed rooted steadfast to the spot, not so much as twitching a muscle. "Wh-Why is this happening?!" she screamed inside Hero Gold-Hair's head, getting more and more frantic with every arm swing.

Suddenly, Griyn heard Hero Gold-Hair's voice inside the mindscape itself. "Don't be ridiculous!" he snapped. "What good would running away do us?!"

"Aiiieeee!!!" Griyn shrieked so startled she jumped up in the air. A second later, she found herself face-to-face with a manifestation of Hero Gold-Hair. "F-Fweh?! Y-You! You're that man's psychic construct! But, how?!"

The psychic construct of Hero Gold-Hair held out his right arm. "Keats!" he bellowed. "Blow her away!"

"Wait! B-But you're on the verge of death! You're in a *coma*! How could you possibly produce a psychic construct in that state?! It doesn't make any sense!" She clutched her head, staggering this way and that in sheer confusion.

Aryun Keats, however, turned away from Bel Munhra for a second to glance over at Hero Gold-Hair's body. "I-I'm not sure if I understand what's going on..." she said. "But I thought I could hear someone telling me to 'blow her away'..." She transformed her body into a formidable magitank, aiming her turret straight at Bel Munhra. "*Then blow her away I shall!*" she declared. "*Three! Two! One! Fire!!!*"

Aryun fired a magic shell from her turret with a violent *kabooooooooom!!!*

"Good job! That's how it's done!" said Hero Gold-Hair, clenching his right hand tight into a fist and nodding with satisfaction as he watched from his own mindscape. Griyn could only stare back and forth between him and Aryun Keats outside, unable to believe her eyes.

The area around Bel Munhra was shrouded with smoke in the wake of the point-blank blast from Aryun's cannon. "Grrrrhhh..." A low growl came from inside the plume, as the party saw the Devil-Beast's silhouette move.

"Well then, how about this?!" said Valentine, releasing her threads and lashing out at the figure inside the smoke for all she was worth.

"Graaaaaaah!!!" Bel Munhra roared, swatting aside thread after thread with

her arms and the tail that had appeared behind her. It seemed the threads of darkness had done little more than anger the beast. She howled, shooting a jet of crimson flame from her open mouth that burned away every last one of Valentine's threads.

"It can't be!" Valentine exclaimed, her eyes shooting open in shock. "My threads of darkness!" It was no wonder Valentine was so surprised—her threads were woven with the magic of the Realm of Evil, which was incomparably stronger than the magic of Klyrode. Even a dragon's flames would have been hard-pressed to destroy them. "I could tell that woman was extraordinary, but it seems we've run into a rather troublesome opponent indeed..." she said, producing a fresh batch of thread once more.

Bel Munhra stood there, shoulders heaving as she breathed in and out in ragged breaths. Then, before Valentine's eyes, her arms transformed into bestial limbs as a horn sprouted from her forehead. She was becoming more and more of a Devil-Beast by the second.

"See? I told you!" Griyn said as she watched the events play out from inside Hero Gold-Hair's mindscape. "Bel Munhra is a Devil-Beast, a creature with more magic power than any magic beast! It's too dangerous to try to fight something like that without a plan of some sort! So come on...we need to withdraw!" She cried out again and again, but it seemed Hero Gold-Hair's companions simply couldn't hear her. None of them made even the slightest reaction to her voice.

"Grrrrhhh..." Bel Munhra, however, turned to face straight towards Hero Gold-Hair.

"Noooooooo!!!" Griyn shrieked. She turned towards Hero Gold-Hair, who was standing beside her with his arms folded in front of his chest. "Hey, you! Hurry up and order them to retreat, won't you?! They can't hear me! At this rate, every one of us is going to die!"

Hero Gold-Hair, however, stood right where he was, not moving a muscle.

Griyn pleaded and pleaded, swaying unsteadily on her feet. Finally, Hero Gold-Hair saw fit to move, turning to look over at Griyn. "What are you, an idiot?"

"Thank you!" said Griyn, confused by his sudden response. "Now, tell them to

— Wait, what did you say?!”

Hero Gold-Hair opened his eyes, glaring at the angel with righteous indignation. “And what do you think will happen after we run away?!” he demanded. “There’s a hot springs village at the peak of this mountain, you know! There’s bound to be scores of guests up there, even as we speak! What do you think is going to happen with *them*?!”

Griyn flinched, startled by the force of Hero Gold-Hair’s words. “B-But!” she argued. “Bel Munhra alone has enough magic power to destroy this entire world! How do you expect us to defeat something like that? There’s just no way!”

“Poppycock!” Hero Gold-Hair said, grabbing Griyn by the shoulders and shaking her hard. “What’s with your attitude?! Are you going to do anything but look for reasons why you can’t?!”

Just then, as Hero Gold-Hair shook her, something fell out of Griyn’s pocket and clattered to the ground at Hero Gold-Hair’s feet. “Hm?” he muttered, bending down to pick it up. “What’s this?”

It was a rod-shaped object, emitting a dim light. Hero Gold-Hair stared at the thing, looking it up and down.

“A-Ah!” Griyn cried when she realized that her own magic item had found its way into Hero Gold-Hair’s hands. “S-Stop!” she pleaded, reaching out to take the rod back. “That’s a Celestial Wand, a magic item only we disciples of the Celestial Plane can use! It’s far too dangerous for an ordinary human like yourself!”

Hero Gold-Hair, however, ignored her and went on studying the Celestial Wand. “What have we here? This part looks like some sort of button...” And before Griyn could stop him, he pressed it. The Celestial Wand began to shine with brilliant light. “Wh-What’s happening?!” Hero Gold-Hair cried out, squinting at the sudden radiance as the wand’s glow grew, enveloping the psychic construct that served as his body.



In the outside world, Valentine and Aryun Keats were standing against Bel



Munhra as Tsuya urged Hero Gold-Hair, whose body was still standing motionless, to flee. Then, suddenly, Hero Gold-Hair's body began to shine with light.

"Hwuuuh?!" Tsuya exclaimed, startled by the sudden development.

"Wh-Whatever is the matter, Lady Tsuya?" Valentine asked, glancing over at Tsuya as she continued to fire thread after thread towards Bel Munhra. Aryun Keats and Riliangiu, who had been in the middle of launching their own attacks, turned to look as well.

Hero Gold-Hair's body shone brighter and brighter before the group's eyes. The light wrapped around his limbs, transforming into a golden bodysuit as his golden hair seemed to burst out of his head, growing longer until it was long enough to reach his waist and fluttering dramatically in the breeze.

"Whaaa?!" Tsuya, Valentine, Riliangiu and Aryun could only watch Hero Gold-Hair's unexpected transformation.

Wuha Gappoli, however, didn't react at all. She was still out cold from the earlier impact.

They watched as Hero Gold-Hair, his entire body now brilliant gold, got to his feet, gingerly brushing away Tsuya's hand. He swiftly moved his arms and legs this way and that, checking to see if everything was in good working order.

*"Hm..."* came Hero Gold-Hair's telepathic voice. *"I can't say I have much of an idea what's going on, but it looks like I can move normally as long as I'm in this suit..."*

Everyone present stared wide-eyed, stunned by Hero Gold-Hair's transformation. Bel Munhra, however, narrowed her eyes, shooting him a questioning glare full of hate. "You..." she said in an inhuman voice, her mouth twisting into a scowl. "You are not of the Silver Pursuers. Who are you?"

*"Who am I?"* Hero Gold-Hair said, looking back at the Devil-Beast. *"You're looking at the one and only Hero Gold-Hair! And don't you forget it!"* With that, he kicked off the ground, headed straight for Bel Munhra at a pace far outstripping his ordinary running speed. He was so fast that even Valentine, who boasted perceptual prowess worthy of the Twelve Evil Generals of the Realm of Evil, found herself unable to keep track of her movements—to say

nothing of Tsuya, who was nothing more than an everyday human. At his speed he looked like a mere golden blur, zooming straight for Bel Munhra.

“A golden orb? And a man...?” Bel Munhra muttered to herself, watching in disbelief as Hero Gold-Hair closed the distance.

“*Hah!*” Clad in his golden bodysuit, his newly waist-length hair streaming behind him like a banner, Hero Gold-Hair was upon Bel Munhra in a second. The golden warrior struck with a powerful right straight punch, putting all the momentum from his sudden dash behind the blow. Mere instants before the blow landed, Bel Munhra crossed her arms in front of her to block the attack, but it was no use. The overwhelming force of Hero Gold-Hair’s punch sent her flying back into the forest, plowing through hefty trees and sending them keeling over before landing in a heap on the ground.

Hero Gold-Hair, however, was far from finished. With a “*Hup!*” he leaped high into the air, coming downwards towards Bel Munhra with his right leg outstretched in a devastating flying kick. Bel Munhra, finding herself buried in a pile of fallen timber, shook her head as if trying to determine whether or not she was awake while she pulled herself to her feet—just in time to see Hero Gold-Hair bearing down on her from above. She bent down, light emitting from her back as crimson flames gathered in her mouth.

Before she could follow through and roast the incoming Hero Gold-Hair with her fiery breath, however, Bel Munhra found herself bound with countless threads of darkness, reaching all the way to the back of her neck and forcing her head down towards the ground. “Grwaaaahhh!!!” she roared in frustration, unable to properly face her target.

“I haven’t gone anywhere, you know!” Valentine said, smirking as she used her hands to manipulate the threads. “Don’t tell me you forgot about me!”

Bel Munhra’s looked up at Valentine with an expression of pure hatred.

“*Hi-yah!*” Hero Gold-Hair shouted as his kick impacted the back of Bel Munhra’s head with a tremendous burst of force. With Valentine distracting Bel Munhra, she had taken the full force of the attack, cratering her into the forest floor. Hero Gold-Hair alighted to the ground beside her, looking down upon his fallen foe.

Inside Hero Gold-Hair's mindscape, Griyn watched in disbelief, eyes wide and mouth agape, positively stunned. "W-Wait a minute..." she said, swallowing nervously as she looked over at Hero Gold-Hair. "Th-The Celestial Wand is a magic item disciples of the Celestial Plane use to change into a form that enhances our abilities in order to apprehend dangerous magic beasts...but it *should* have a mechanism that prevents it from being used by anyone other than its owner!" She swallowed once again. "B-But somehow...some way or other...this golden-haired man was able to transform...and move...and even fight?" All she could do was stare in disbelief at the sight of Hero Gold-Hair dressed in his golden bodysuit.

Bel Munhra pulled herself to her feet once again, glaring furiously at Hero Gold-Hair. "What are you...you...golden orb man?" she demanded.

*"My name isn't 'Golden Orb Man'!"* Hero Gold-Hair said. *"It's Hero Go—"* But before he could finish, Tsuya, Valentine, and Riliangiu all came running up, hugging him tight.

"Hero Gooold-Hair!" said Tsuya. "We were sooo worried!"

"That's right!" Valentine concurred. "After all, you suddenly stopped moving entirely!"

"I had no idea what had become of you..." said Riliangiu. "Truly, I was out of my mind with worry!"

*"Hero Gold-Hair!"* said Aryun Keats, cutting into the celebrating crowd, still in her magitank form. *"I, too, was very worried!"*

*"Ghah!"* Hero Gold-Hair cried as Aryun Keats's turret jabbed into his abdomen. *"K-Keats! What do you think you're doing?!"* he protested, doubling over in pain.

*"A-Ah! My apologies!"* Aryun Keats said. *"I was so overcome with emotion, I must have forgotten to return to my humanoid form!"* With that, she transformed, wincing apologetically as she scratched the back of her head.

*"What am I going to do with you...?"* Hero Gold-Hair sighed, looking over at Aryun. His face, however, was covered entirely by the golden bodysuit, making it impossible to tell what sort of expression he was making.

Tsuya, Valentine, and Riliangiu all burst into laughter at the sight.

“U-Um... Excuse me?” Wuha Gappoli said as she came walking up to the group in no particular hurry.

*“Oh! Wuha! Finally awake, are you?”* Hero Gold-Hair said. *“I’m glad to see you’re all right.”*

“Well, thank you for your concern, I guess...” Wuha said. “But what about...you know...”

*“Hm?”* Hero Gold-Hair asked, tilting his head in confusion. *“What about what?”*

“Well...” Wuha said, pointing off to the side into the forest. “That freaky-looking woman who was on the ground there ran away while you all were catching up...”

*“S-Say what?!”* Hero Gold-Hair hastily turned to look at the spot where Bel Munhra had been just moments earlier, as did the rest of the team. However, the Devil-Beast was nowhere in sight. *“Th-That won’t do! We need to go after her!”* Hero Gold-Hair said, looking off in the direction Wuha was pointing. Just then, however, his gold suit began blinking red.

“Hero Gooold-Hair?” Tsuya asked, looking utterly perplexed by the changes affecting their party leader. “What’s happening nooow?”

*“H-Hm...”* Hero Gold-Hair said, looking down in confusion at his suit as the rest of the party gathered around. *“I haven’t the foggiest myself, I’m afraid...”*

In Hero Gold-Hair’s mindscape, meanwhile, Griyn clutched her head in her hands, looking up to the heavens. “See?!” she cried. “What did I *tell* you?!”

*Oh no, oh no, oh no...* she thought. *The warrior transformation is about to run out of time! Oh, this is bad... That golden-haired man is going to go back to his human form and succumb to his injuries all over again! Could things possibly get any worse?* Realizing that she was truly in the worst-case scenario, Griyn clutched her head even tighter and collapsed to the floor. “I lost my hold on his body when he transformed...and took a good deal of psychic damage to boot!” she said. “If he weren’t so badly injured, I might have time to redo my

possession, but as it is he's on the verge of death! Oh, what to do, what to do, what to do...?"

Griyn lay on the ground for a while, helplessly flailing her arms and legs, before finally taking her interworld communication crystal out of her Bottomless Bag. "This is Griyn... Repeat, this is Griyn..." she said. "Dina, do you copy? Do you copy, Dina? Dina? Do you copy?" She repeated herself time and time again, until finally, she got a response.

"Griyn..." came Dina's voice. She sounded angry. "Didn't I *just* tell you to stop bombarding me with interworld transmissions out of the blue like this?!"

Griyn flinched back from Dina's voice for just a moment, but she cleared her throat and turned back to the crystal. "W-We don't have time for that!" she said, as quickly as she could. "How are things coming with the Resurrection Bead? Things on my end are looking pretty bad right now..."

"Excuse me?!" Dina snapped. "Don't be absurd! Do you think these things are easy to come by?! I'm working on my request to the goddesses right now, and trying as hard as I can to think of excuses for you!"

*Oh, noooooo!* Griyn thought, the color draining from her face. *If she's still in the middle of making the request, there's no way she'll get it in time! And when they find out I killed this golden-haired man in a freak accident, my life in the Celestial Plane is finished!*

Griyn looked out at the events transpiring outside of the mindscape with an expression of despair. Then, she suddenly seemed to remember something. "Oh, that's right!" she said, pulling something out of her Bottomless Bag—another wand, this one bright red. "Nothing for it, I suppose. I'll have to take the risk!"

Back in the material world, Hero Gold-Hair's suit continued to blink rapidly. With no way of knowing what that might mean, Hero Gold-Hair took off after Bel Munhra. Just at that moment, however, the blinking stopped. "H-Hm?" he said, stopping in his tracks, confused as the golden suit that had adorned his body vanished completely, leaving him back in his usual form. "N-Nghhh..." he moaned, clutching his chest as he collapsed on the spot.

“H-Hero Gold-Hair!!!” Valentine and the others rushed up as Hero Gold-Hair lay on the ground, completely still.

A second later, Hero Gold-Hair’s psychic construct body reappeared inside his mindscape. “Mgh?!” he exclaimed. “I-I’m back here...” He looked around in complete bewilderment. “What in the hells is going on?” He patted his own body up and down before finally looking up. There, he could see an image of what was happening in the world outside—his own body lying unconscious, not moving an inch as his party tried desperately to see to his wounds. “A-And what’s going on over *here*?”

“You’re back!” a woman’s voice called from behind him.

“N-Ngh?!” Hero Gold-Hair said, wheeling around. As soon as he did, the woman from before pressed a red cylinder-shaped object into his hand. “What’s with this stick?”

“Hurry!” the woman—Griyn—said. “You have to press the button on that Celestial Wand! It’s now or never!”

“H-Hm?” Hero Gold-Hair said. “What is this thing, anyway? It looks a bit like the wand I picked up earlier...” Still hopelessly confused, Hero Gold-Hair found the button on the Celestial Wand located in the same place as the one he had handled previously and pressed it. “Nh!” Once again, his psychic construct body began to shine with light.



“Huuuh?!” Tsuya, who had been trying to help the immobile Hero Gold-Hair to his feet, suddenly opened her eyes wide. “H-He’s shiining again!”

True enough, Hero Gold-Hair’s body had once again begun to glow with brilliant light.

“I-Is this the same thing that happened earlier?” Aryun Keats asked, utterly baffled.

“S-So it would seem...” said Valentine, seeming no less confused than anyone else as she watched Hero Gold-Hair closely.

Then, as the party watched on, Hero Gold-Hair's body was once again enveloped in his golden suit, his transformation complete. "*Ghhh...*" he muttered as he returned to consciousness, shaking the cobwebs out of his head.

"H-Hero Gold-Hair!" The whole party cried out with joy, all hurrying to hug Hero Gold-Hair as he lay supine on the ground.

A dry smile came over Griyn's face as she watched from Hero Gold-Hair's mindscape. *A-Aha ha...* she laughed to herself. *I guess I should apologize to Dina for that one, huh. That's the wand I accidentally took home with me from a drinking party over at her place! I can't believe I ended up using it...*

Celestial Wands were designed to prevent anyone other than the designated owner from using their power, but for whatever reason Hero Gold-Hair seemed to be able to use them to transform regardless. That could only mean that the wand's ownership permission had somehow been changed.

Griyn picked up her own Celestial Wand from where it had fallen on the floor of Hero Gold-Hair's mindscape when his first transformation ran out and pressed the button herself, only for a message to appear, reading: "Wand Owner Not Identified."

*I knew it...* she thought, looking down at the wand in despair. "Sorry, Dina..." she muttered to herself. *Oh!* Suddenly, she remembered an important detail. *Transformations from a Celestial Wand only last a short amount of time!*

The color draining from her face once more, Griyn held the crystal that let her send transmissions to other worlds up to her mouth. "This is Griyn, repeat, this is Griyn!" she said. "Dina, hurry! I need you noooooow!"

"How many times do I have to tell you before you finally listen, Griyn?" came Dina's exasperated voice. "Cut it out with the constant transmissions!"

"I-I-I'll apologize good and proper once we've gotten this whole thing wrapped up!" Griyn insisted. "B-But what about the Resurrection Bead? Do you have it yet?!"

"You are just impossible..." Dina said. "Yes, I happened to get my hands on

one right this very moment. I'm heading your way right now. Just give me about an hour."

"Five minutes!" Griyn pleaded. "I need it in the next five minutes, please and thank you! If you can get it here by then, I swear I'll do anything!"

"What?! Griyn, you're being ridiculous! You realize I'm in the Celestial Plane right now, don't you?! You know how much of a hassle it is to leave one world and go all the way to another!"

"I know that perfectly well, believe me!" Griyn said, holding the crystal in both hands. "But please! I'm begging you! You have to make it in the next five minutes somehow! For me!" she begged relentlessly, drowning out Dina's voice.

Outside, Hero Gold-Hair, now once again shining radiantly with golden light, set off to resume his battle with Bel Munhra. "*Right!*" he declared. "*This time she won't get away!*" In fact, with Hero Gold-Hair's transformed state, the party had no trouble at all finding where she had fled. They had hardly even begun the search when Hero Gold-Hair discovered her using his new abilities. When she saw him coming, Bel Munhra slammed her tail against the ground and kicked furiously, deeply vexed to see that her foe had caught her scent so quickly.

"*Settle down and come quietly!*" Hero Gold-Hair said, swinging his arm in a full-power haymaker. The moment he impacted, the color of his suit changed from gold to red—an alternate form of the warrior transformation optimized for sheer power.

Bel Munhra tried to counter with her powerful tail, but Hero Gold-Hair's attack crashed through hers like it was nothing, scoring a direct hit on her body. "Graaaaaah!!!" she cried in a voice halfway between a bestial howl and a human scream as the blow sent her flying through the air.

Tsuya stared after Hero Gold-Hair, eyes wide with awe. "First gooold and now reeed..." she said. "How many colors can you turn into, Hero Gooold-Hair?"

"*Believe me, I'd like to know that just as much as you!*" Hero Gold-Hair snapped. Just then, however, Bel Munhra charged in, attacking with her tail in



an attempt to take advantage of his momentary distraction. *“Gah! That was a close one!”* he said, dodging the sharp point of the tail with a superhumanly quick dash out of the way. This time his suit, which had returned to its default golden color, turned blue as he moved—a form of the transformation optimized for speed.

Hero Gold-Hair used his newfound speed to run circles around Bel Munhra in a ploy to confuse his opponent. The stratagem worked like a charm; Bel Munhra seemed completely unable to keep up.

*“Valentine! Now!”* Hero Gold-Hair barked.

“Of course! Leave it to me!” On Hero Gold-Hair’s signal, Valentine released her thread. Bel Munhra went to burn it away with his fire breath like she had before, but this time she had forgotten an important detail. In order to use that particular technique, she would need to stop moving, leaving her a sitting duck for another one of Hero Gold-Hair’s flying jump kicks.

“Ughraaah!!!” she shrieked as Hero Gold-Hair’s foot impacted her straight in the back of the head, sending her to the ground once again.

When Aryun Keats saw that Bel Munhra was no longer moving, she charged forward, transforming once again into her magitank form. *“Launching follow-up attack!”* she declared, aiming her turret straight for Bel Munhra. *“Bearing, check! Target, acquired! Magic rounds, loaded! Annnd...fire!”* The magic round launched from her turret, impacting Bel Munhra with enough force to violently shake the earth, enveloping the area in a cloud of dust. “I got her!” she said, turning back into her human form and flexing her muscles in a macho pose of celebration. “Ahhh, what a sensation!”

The next second, however, Bel Munhra came charging out of the cloud of dust, striking the off guard Aryun with a devastating rush attack.

“Uwaaah!!!” Aryun cried as she was sent flying far away into the depths of the forest.

“A-Aryun! Waaait!” shouted Wuha Gappoli, taking off running after her comrade.

Hero Gold-Hair, on the other hand, had a somewhat more violent reaction.

*"You fiend!"* he shouted, leaping once more into the air. *"How dare you hurt Keats!"* His leg came down, landing yet another flying kick to Bel Munhra's head—the third such blow the Devil-Beast had taken that day. She fell to the ground.

"Now's our chance!" said Riliangiu, springing into action from her position nearby observing the situation. She transformed her arms past the elbows into sharp blades and pressed them up against Bel Munhra's neck, ready to cut her down at a moment's notice. "Even you can't survive without your head. Now yield!" Completely unable to move, Bel Munhra growled in aggravation.

"And take this, for good measure!" said Valentine, binding Bel Munhra's mouth tight with her threads of darkness to prevent her from breathing flames. She proceeded to tie up the rest of her body in turn, until Bel Munhra resembled nothing so much as a matryoshka doll.

*"It looks like she's finally given up..."* Hero Gold-Hair said, breathing a sigh of relief at the sight of the immobilized Devil-Beast. *"Hey, woman!"* he added, addressing Griyn in his own mindscape. *"Are you watching? What am I supposed to do now?"*

A small box appeared in Hero Gold-Hair's hand, as if in response to his words.

*"I'm supposed to shut away the monster in this tiny thing?!"* Clearly unconvinced, he approached the Devil-Beast when suddenly the box began to glow, sucking its target inside of its own accord. Bel Munhra's body grew smaller and smaller as it was absorbed into the box, until she was safely stowed away.

*"I see..."* Hero Gold-Hair said, marveling over the sight. *"So the box had a trick to it, then!"* Just at that moment, however, his suit began to blink red. *"Nh...?"*

In Hero Gold-Hair's mindscape, Griyn was once again beginning to panic. "Oh no, oh no, oh no..." she said. "This is really, really bad! It will be another twelve hours at least until the first Celestial Wand he used is ready again, and I don't have any other wands to give him!" She pressed her hands against her cheeks in horror as she watched. *It's all over...* she thought. *B-But at least he was able to recapture Bel Munhra... Maybe they won't exile me after all...*

She sat down heavily, and as she did, something came tumbling out of her

pocket. It was a small box. “Wh-What’s this?” Griyn said, looking at the box with mounting distress. “A Box of Imprisonment? But...what’s this doing here? I sent the one I had down to that golden-haired man, didn’t I?” Suddenly, her eyes opened wide in realization. “A-Ah...” she said, a cold sweat beginning to run down her brow. “Now that I think of it, I had another Box of Imprisonment that got destroyed, didn’t I? But then, which one did I send over...?”

Down in the material world, meanwhile, the Box of Imprisonment Griyn had given Hero Gold-Hair suddenly burst into flames in his hands. “*N-Nghah?!*” he exclaimed, startled into dropping the box, where it flew into pieces on the ground.

*I-It was the brooken oooooone!!!* Griyn wailed in her mind as she watched with an expression of growing despair as Bel Munhra appeared once more outside the box, her crimson flames burning away the threads that had held her bound.

*“Damnation!”* Hero Gold-Hair spat, his bodysuit blinking rapidly all the while. *“But I’m not giving up either! Let’s do this one more time!”*

Bel Munhra, however, let out a mighty roar, growing bigger and bigger before his eyes until she towered above the forest.

*“Sh-She’s become a giant!”* Hero Gold-Hair exclaimed with mounting distress.

“In that case, I’m using every thread I have!” Valentine said, conjuring threads of darkness with both hands. “This time, she’s finished!” It only lasted a second, however, before her body began to visibly shrink. In a moment’s time, Valentine’s body had regressed to child form. “Are you *kidding* me?! Magic depletion, at a time like this?!”

Valentine originally hailed from the Realm of Evil, and as such required a massive expenditure of magic power to sustain herself in the world of Klyrode. Whenever her internal stores of magic power became precariously low, her body would shrink down to the size of a child in order to protect itself from vanishing entirely.

“Wh-What are we to do?” Riliangiu said. “We can’t harm an opponent so much bigger than us!” She was running circles around Bel Munhra’s now

enormous feet, hacking and cutting with her arm blades, but her attacks all glanced harmlessly off the hard skin of Bel Munhra's giant form.

*"Not to worry!"* said Hero Gold-Hair. *"I'll just..."* He jumped up, aiming for the giant's head, but somehow he couldn't exert the force he had managed before. The superhuman power that had been animating his body seemed to have completely vanished. *Wh-What does this mean?! he thought, looking down at his blinking suit. Does this have something to do with the way my body is blinking...?*

*"W-W-W-W-Weeell, then!"* said Tsuya, wielding her own Drilldozer Shovel in trembling hands as she looked up at Bel Munhra. *"I-I-I'll juuust..."*

Bel Munhra glared back down at her, piercing her with a deadly stare.

*"Hah...hah...hawaaahhh..."* Tsuya breathed, falling to her knees in the face of her foe's absolute enormity.

Just then, however, Aryun Keats's voice rang out from the forest. *"When you're up against a giant opponent..."* she said, charging out of the trees in her magitank form, on the opposite side of Bel Munhra from Tsuya. *"Just aim for the legs!"*

Aryun's actual plan, however, was to draw Bel Munhra's attention to herself, in order to help Tsuya to run away.

*"Yeah!"* Wuha Gappoli cheered from her perch atop Aryun. *"Go Aryun! Give 'em hell!"* She closed her left eye, keeping her right open, helping the magitank aim the best she could. *"Keep going straight! Straight ahead!"* she instructed her friend. *"Okay, now a bit to the right...perfect! Now!"*

*"And...fire!"* Aryun declared, launching her projectile in time with Wuha's signal. The attack struck Bel Munhra in the back of the leg, scoring a direct hit on the Achilles tendon. Even Bel Munhra couldn't laugh off an attack like that. Her face twisted in pain.

*"All right! It's working!"* said Wuha. *"Again, again!"*

*"Fire! Fire! Fire!"* Aryun Keats launched shell after shell as Wuha Gappoli gave instructions as her spotter. Enraged, Bel Munhra lashed out with her tail in an attempt to destroy the tank, but Wuha saw the counterattack coming a mile

away.

“Wait! Full stop!” she ordered. “Make a hard left!” Aryun did as she was told, driving fast out of range of Bel Munhra’s strike.

Unlike Valentine’s threads, which defeated an opponent by overwhelming them from all directions to disable their movement, Aryun Keats’s magic munitions were doing heavy damage with each attack. After taking so many direct blows, one after another, Bel Munhra’s oversized body was starting to become notably unsteady on its feet.

*“There’s more where that came from!”* Aryun said, firing shot after shot from her turret.

Her current tactic, however, was nothing short of suicidal. Each of the magic rounds Aryun Keats fired was formed out of her own magic power. Firing them off one after another without giving herself adequate time to recover would only serve to deplete her own magic. Soon she would be unable to move, or worse, her life itself might be in danger from sheer magic deficiency.

Hero Gold-Hair fell to his knees as he watched Aryun Keats’s desperate last stand. His suit was blinking even faster than before, and his strength seemed to have left him entirely. *Keats and Wuha are putting their all on the line, and what am I doing?!* He chided himself. But no matter how much he willed himself to move, he had grown too weak even to speak an articulate word. *It’s not over...* he thought. *I can’t give up now! How can I lie here when my own followers are fighting as hard as they can?!*

With desperate effort, Hero Gold-Hair lifted his head. And then, at that moment, he noticed something. *Hm?* he thought, his eyes drawn to something shining on his belt. *Th-That’s...* He reached out, guided by the light, and grabbed hold of his Bottomless Bag. Inside, his hands touched a familiar object. *That’s right... You’ve always been there for me, haven’t you?*

Meanwhile, Aryun Keats was engaged in a desperate battle of her own, fighting on in her magitank form as Wuha Gappoli perched atop, valiantly giving instructions. “Come on, Aryun!” she said. “Go! Go!” Just then, however, Wuha

noticed that something was wrong. Aryun's tank body had begun to sweat, in astonishing quantities of perspiration. "Aryun..." she said. "You're..."

*"Never mind that! It's just a small thing! Let's keep up the pace!"* Aryun said, her own voice full of spirit in an attempt to assuage Wuha's concern.

Wuha nodded just slightly. "That's right," she said. "Let's keep up the pace!"

Aryun sped up, Wuha on her back. The sweat pouring from her body was like a waterfall, but still she kept firing shell after shell as Wuha gave her precise instructions. The two fought on in perfect harmony until at last the giant Bel Munhra fell to her knees.

"Great!" said Wuha. "Now, aim for the head!"

*"Right away!"* Aryun lifted her turret up towards Bel Munhra's head. "O-Oh..." she said, her voice sounding suddenly concerned. *"Oh dear..."* She could feel the last bit of strength leaving her body. *H-How could I run out of magic...right at this very moment...?* she thought, as her movements slowed to a sluggish pace.

"Hey! Aryun!" Wuha said, sensing the change right away. "Don't tell me..."

*I...I can still fire...just one more shot...* Aryun told herself, marshaling her last bit of power and concentrating it into her turret. Before she could manage to reload, however, Bel Munhra's back began emitting the familiar light that appeared whenever she prepared to fire flames from her mouth. She glared down at Aryun and Wuha with a look of sheer enmity.

*"Madame Wuha..."* Aryun said. *"Please, save Madame Tsuya..."*

This, however, was just a pretext on her part. The truth is, she simply didn't want Wuha Gappoli to go down with her.

"I'm not going anywhere!" Wuha insisted. She knew Aryun Keats well enough to understand her intentions. "Don't act like I'm some stranger!" she said, wrapping her arms around Wuha's turret. "We've been partners since forever, haven't we? Two minor djinn up against the world..."

*"M-Madame Wuha..."* Aryun said, finally going still.

Wuha clung tight to the turret, closing her eyes as she braced for the impact.

Crimson flames issued from Bel Munhra's mouth. Wuha and Aryun both could feel the heat on their bodies as they stood there, unable to move...

And then, without any warning, Bel Munhra plummeted down into the ground.

"Huh?" said Wuha.

"*Huh?*" said Aryun.

The two of them stared in disbelief as Bel Munhra vanished from sight into the bowels of the earth. Flames erupted from the ground where Bel Munhra had fallen, but trapped as she was in the pit, the heat had nowhere to go. The Devil-Beast howled in pain as her own flames roasted her alive.

"Wh-What just happened?" Wuha said, hopping down from atop Aryun and timidly creeping up to the spot where Bel Munhra had vanished from their sight. What she found was an enormous hole, reaching down an astonishing depth. And at the very bottom was Bel Munhra herself, her enormous body charred black and twitching.

Wuha blew the insensate Bel Munhra the largest raspberry of her life. "Can you believe it?" she said. "She burned herself with her own fire, just because she fell down a hole! What a loser!"

"*Fwah...*" mumbled Hero Gold-Hair, his golden hand popping out of the ground right next to Wuha. "*Somehow I made it just in the nick of time...*"

"I-I knew it..." Wuha said, tears of joy in her eyes as she hugged him tight in her arms. "I knew you could do it, Hero Gold-Hair!!!"

"*W-Wuha!*" Hero Gold-Hair complained. "*I understand that you're happy, but you're getting snot all over me!*" His right hand was gripping firmly to the Drilldozer Shovel.

When Hero Gold-Hair had been on the verge of losing his last bit of magic power, his hand had been drawn to the Drilldozer Shovel as if the legendary item itself had been guiding him. As soon as he took hold of it, his body felt like it was bursting with strength. Somehow, it had been enough to dig an enormous hole around Bel Munhra's feet.

Valentine, still in her child form; Tsuya, clutching her own Drilldozer Shovel in both arms; and Riliangiu, arms transformed into blades, all ran up. Hero Gold-Hair looked around, and gave the party a cheesy thumbs up.

“Hero Gooold-Hair!” Tsuya said, tears of relief streaming from her eyes as she hugged Hero Gold-Hair tight. “I was sooo...sooo woorried!”

Valentine and Riliangiu followed suit, crying openly as they joined in on the group hug.

*“Who do you think you’re dealing with?!”* Hero Gold-Hair huffed. *“Hero Gold-Hair always triumphs!”*

The next second, however, the bodysuit started blinking once again, turning pitch black before they knew what was happening. Hero Gold-Hair could feel himself growing weaker once again. *Ah, well... he thought. I was able to save everyone, after all. I have no regrets.*

His consciousness faded as he fell to the ground, the world around him seeming to slow before it eventually came to a halt.



“Mnh?” When Hero Gold-Hair next awakened, he was lying on his side, surrounded by an empty red expanse. It was clear that wherever he was, he was not back in his mindscape. “Where...am I?” Hero Gold-Hair muttered, attempting to rise. His body, however, did not so much as twitch. “Ngh...?” he grunted, frowning as made a second attempt to move his body.

Hero Gold-Hair lay there, straining himself for all he was worth, when a woman appeared before his eyes.

“Hm...” he said. “You aren’t that Griyn woman, I see...”

The woman stared intently at him, apparently unable to hear his words. She let out a sigh. “It looks like his mind has yet to vanish,” she said.

“Really?!” Griyn exclaimed, poking her head in from the side. “Really really? We made it? Just in the nick of time? That’s what it means, right, Dina?”

“I swear...” Dina sighed. “I hope you realize how unreasonable your demands have been. I had to get a gate set up faster than lightning to make it on time.



You'd better personally go and thank all the angels who helped get it done."

"Of course!" Griyn chirped, bowing to Dina with a great big smile on her face. "Don't worry, I understand completely!"

"The only time you act like a team player is when we're pulling your bacon out of the fire, after all..." Dina remarked with a wry smirk as she took a blue gem from her Bottomless Bag—the Resurrection Bead. She placed the bead on Hero Gold-Hair's chest and held out her arms, beginning an incantation.

As Dina cast her spell, Hero Gold-Hair could feel his consciousness fading. *H-Hold on!* he thought. *What the devil is going on here anyway?! Would it kill them to offer some kind of explanation?* Thoroughly befuddled, he reached out with his arm towards Dina...



*Squish!*

Hero Gold-Hair could feel his hand grasping something soft. "Hm?" he mumbled, surprised by the sensation.

"Waaah?!" Tsuya exclaimed as Hero Gold-Hair inadvertently groped her chest. Then, realizing that Hero Gold-Hair had returned to his senses, she cried out in a happy voice. "Everyooone! Hero Gooold-Hair's awake!" She quickly pulled him into a tight hug. He was dressed normally once again, the golden suit he had been wearing moments ago nowhere in sight. While unconscious, he had been lying with his head in Tsuya's lap, and now, with how the two were situated, Hero Gold-Hair found his head pressed up against Tsuya's ample bosom. "Oh Hero Gooold-Hair...I thought you were a goner for suuure..."

"Mrmphfh..." Hero Gold-Hair managed as he struggled to pull himself away from Tsuya's chest. "T-Tsuya! Wait! I can't breathe!"

Tsuya, however, paid his protests no mind and continued to hold him tight. Soon, Valentine, Riliangiu, Aryun Keats, and Wuha Gappoli came running up as well, all hugging Hero Gold-Hair tight as he struggled.



High above in the sky, two figures watched as Hero Gold-Hair's party

celebrated his miraculous recovery. One of them—Griyn—double-checked to make sure she was still holding the Box of Imprisonment in her hand and smiled with the satisfaction of a job well done. “Look at that!” she said in a happy-go-lucky voice that seemed completely at odds with her half-skeleton, half-maiden appearance. “Thanks to you, I was able to avoid killing that local, and I even recovered the Devil-Beast! All’s well that ends well, I suppose!”

Dina, who like Griyn was also taking the form of the Contract Executor, rested her scythe on her shoulder and sighed in exasperation. “I’ve told you time and time again, but I’m plenty busy with my own affairs, you know. This had better be the last time, Griyn. I mean it.”

“Of course! I understand, don’t worry!” Griyn said, bowing cheerfully with her hands pressed together in gratitude.

Dina gave Griyn a weary smile, and the two took one last look down at Hero Gold-Hair and company before flying farther up, away into the expanse. “Speaking of which,” Dina said, “you haven’t forgotten that you promised to do anything I ask, have you? I hope you know I’ll be holding you to that.”

“Of course, of course! I understand completely!” said Griyn.

“Oh, and you recovered all of the items you brought with you, right?” Dina confirmed. “It’s not a good look to leave things behind.”

“Don’t worry!” Griyn insisted. “I made extra sure to double check everything!”

“Speaking of which, and sorry to ask this out of the blue, but have you seen my Celestial Wand, by any chance...?”

The two angels kept chatting in that vein until at last they passed through a gap in the clouds and vanished out of sight.



“Hm?” In the middle of the group hug, a confused expression came over Hero Gold-Hair’s face as he felt something out of place. “What’s this?” he said, tilting his head as he reached into his pocket to produce a pair of Celestial Wands.

## Chapter 4: Elinàsze at the Oldwass College of Magic

### ◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

One night, Belano stood knocking on the door to Elinàsze's private room. Much to her surprise, however, there was no response from inside.

*I wonder what's going on...* Belano thought, cocking her head curiously as she went to knock again. *She's usually in her room around this time of night...* The second knock got no more response than the first. *I wonder if she's out...? Or maybe in the bath?*

As Belano stood there, debating with herself whether she should knock on the door a third time, she suddenly heard Elinàsze's voice inside her head. *"Hello? Miss Belano, is that you?"*

"Fweh?!" Belano exclaimed, jumping back. Discombobulated, she looked all around trying to identify the source of the voice. Elinàsze, however, was nowhere in sight.

*"Oh, I'm out of the world at the moment,"* said Elinàsze's telepathic voice. *"Please wait just a moment!"*

"Wh-What?" Belano asked, confused. "You're...out of the world?"

Before long, however, Belano saw a magic circle appear right before her eyes. A black door arose out of the circle. It opened with a click, and out stepped Elinàsze. She was wearing the comfortable clothes she favored for daily wear around the house, complete with a pair of big round glasses. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting," she said. "Is there something you need?"

"O-Oh! Yes..." Belano answered.

"You can come inside if you like," said Elinàsze, beckoning Belano inside the door she had conjured. "Right this way."

Belano took Elinàsze up on her offer and stepped inside, glancing curiously all around. *Is this...a Teleportation Portal?*

The space on the other side of the door was quite large. There was an enormous bookshelf taking up an entire wall, stuffed to the bursting point with magic grimoires. It was more than five times Elinàsze's height, but there was no sign of any sort of ladder or stepladder she might use to reach the top shelves. The room was furnished with a number of tables, each with an array of magic devices set out on top for creating concentrated solutions extracted from medicinal herbs and combining them into magic potions.

Elinàsze led Belano through to another door on the far side of the room, which swung open without her needing to so much as touch its handle. "In here, if you please," she said. As she made her way across the room, she reached towards the bookcase and a number of volumes stored high up on the shelves silently glided through the air and within reach of her hands. Elinàsze selected one and started referencing something written inside even as she continued on through the door.

On the other side of the door was a cozy space quite unlike the vast room they had just passed through. Elinàsze sat down at the large desk tucked away in the far corner.

"Elinàsze..." Belano said, a bewildered look on her face as she looked all around the area they found themselves in. "What *is* this place...?"

"Oh, this is a world I've artificially created," Elinàsze answered. "Technically, it's a planetoid world, of the same structure as the world of Klyrode. Right now the only two rooms are the laboratory you entered through and this study, but I plan to expand it little by little in order to create a convenient space for my purposes." The magic grimoires flying in the air around Elinàsze came to land atop her desk. Then, with a single wave of Elinàsze's finger, she conjured a chair and offered it to Belano to sit down. "Now, what was it you wanted from me?"

"Ah! Y-Yes, of course..." Belano took a single sealed envelope out from her chest pocket. "It's about this."

"A letter?" Elinàsze said, accepting the envelope and looking to see who it was addressed to.

It read: "To Miss Elinàsze, Houghtow College of Magic."

*I sense magic power coming from the letter inside...* Elinàsze mused, flipping

the envelope over to see who it was from.

“What’s this?” Elinàsze asked. “A letter from the Oldwass College of Magic?”

“Yes...that’s right,” said Belano. “They sent a letter just addressed to the college too. It sounds like they want to try a short-term exchange program with the Houghtow College of Magic. They put us in charge of selecting students to participate for the most part. You were the only one they asked for by name...”

“Oh really! I see...” Elinàsze said, looking up from the envelope as Belano explained the situation. She waved her hand and a tea set came flying over from the magic kitchen built into the wall of her study. A cup alighted on the desk in front of Belano, and the teapot promptly flew up in perfect silence, filling it with tea.

After making extra sure that the teapot had finished pouring, Belano accepted the cup. As she lifted it up, the magic rings she wore on her fingers, of which there were a great number, glinted in the light of the room.

Belano noticed that Elinàsze was staring at her rings and quietly stared back, her eyes open wide in confusion.

“Oh! Pardon me!” Elinàsze said, quickly shaking her head as she opened the envelope to retrieve the letter inside. “It’s nothing, don’t pay it any mind!”

### ◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

It happened that the next day was a work holiday in the Kingdom of Klyrode. That morning, everyone gathered in the living room to eat breakfast as usual. There were only a few absences—Blossom, Ura, and Kora had gone to do their early morning vegetable market in spite of it being a day of rest, and Rynàsze had gone to help, taking the familiars and Sybe’s family with her.

“Huh!” Flio said, reading over the letter that Elinàsze had handed him. “So you got an invitation to take part in a short-term exchange program with a school called the Oldwass College of Magic?”

Elinàsze was sitting in the chair beside Flio as always, drinking a cup of after-breakfast tea Charun had poured for her. “So it seems, papa,” she said, finishing her sip and setting her cup to the side. “It’s meant to be an exchange program with the whole Houghtow College of Magic, but it sounds like they asked for me

by name.”

Flio looked over the letter as he listened. It read: “Dear Miss Elinàsze, we at the Oldwass College of Magic most eagerly anticipate your participation in the exchange study with your institution. Signed, Chairman Decona, Oldwass College of Magic.”

*Nothing here seems at all out of the ordinary...* Flio thought as he looked it over. “So?” he asked, looking back up at Elinàsze. “Are you going to participate?”

“Yes, I believe I shall,” Elinàsze reported. “I’ve been trying to further my studies of magic, after all. Studying in a different location might turn out to be a useful experience.”

Flio smiled and nodded. “I see! By the way, what sort of place is the Oldwass College of Magic?”

“I believe I, your humble servant Hiya, may be of use in such an explanation,” Hiya volunteered, turning their ever-narrowed eyes towards Flio and bowing deep. “The Oldwass College of Magic is an institution of magical education that lies in the north of the Magic Kingdom of Klyrode, on the border between that kingdom and the Dark One’s domain. It was established during the first days of the Magical Kingdom itself, for the purpose of training first-class mages that might labor for the kingdom. Indeed, the very mage who created me, Hiya, was among the mages produced by the Oldwass College of Magic.”

“Well, what do you know!” Flio said, an expression of surprise on his face. “The mage who created you, huh...”

“Ah, well, my creator he might have been, but I lost any illusions I had about him when I came to understand the depths of his incompetence. The fool was not even able to dispel my Collar of Sacrifice when I— Ahem, perhaps I have said too much...” Hiya cleared their throat with a chuckle and a suggestive grin.

*The Collar of Sacrifice...* Flio thought, his own smile somewhat stiff. *That’s the magic item that Hiya used to place on people’s necks to mark them as ritual sacrifice for payment when they felt like granting wishes to humans. Did they really use that on their own creator? Th-That seems like a bit much, even for Hiya...*

“Returning to the point at hand,” Hiya continued, “after that incident, the Oldwass College of Magic continued to produce outstanding mages and send them to the Magical Kingdom...until a certain time, at which point the flow of students stopped. This is the first time I have heard their name spoken in over a decade.”

“What happened at that certain point of time?” Flio asked.

“In exchange for their efforts training mages to the highest degree of quality, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode made a promise to provide the Oldwass College of Magic a stipend of funds. The former King Klyrode, however, discontinued the provision of financial aid under the name of war expenditures for the conflict with the Dark Army.”

“I see...” Flio said, nodding in understanding. *The Maiden Queen’s father, huh? he thought. From everything I’ve heard, that guy practiced some pretty egregious misappropriation of funds. I wonder if the money he saved from discontinuing support to the Oldwass College of Magic went to lining his own pockets too...*

“Thank you, Hiya!” Elinàsze said with a smile. She had been listening to the conversation between Hiya and Flio from off to the side. “I suppose I’ll try out the exchange program after all. It sounds like this school has a lot of history, and if it’s the school your creator came from I’m even more interested!”

“If that’s your decision, you have my support,” Flio nodded, his usual easygoing smile on his face.

“Thank you, papa!” said Elinàsze, beaming back at her father. “Just you watch—I’m going to learn a ton of magic, and then I’ll be better at helping you out!”

◇Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, North—Oldwass College of Magic◇

The Degadon Mountain Range lay to the north of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Unlike the temperate Houghtow City, the mountains were a world of winter white, closed off from the rest of the kingdom by frozen ice and snowstorms that raged year round. It was deep in those frozen mountains where one could find the Oldwass College of Magic.

Chairman Decona stood in his office at the pinnacle of the tall tower located

at the very middle of the college. With him was the magus Neriep, the current headmaster, dressed in her black robes. “Chairman Decona...” she said, her voice calm and composed, but steeped in quiet anger at the old man across from her. “Exactly what, may I ask, could you possibly have been thinking?”

Decona, the chairman of the college’s board, laughed a good natured “Oh ho ho!” as he stroked his beard, which came all the way down to his waist. “Now, now, Neriep! There’s no need to lose your temper!”

“On the contrary, I haven’t lost my temper at all,” Neriep objected.

“Oh ho ho! You haven’t? It rather looks like you have to me, but if you say so, I suppose I must be mistaken!” Decona waved one of his fingers and a cup of black tea appeared in front of Neriep. It was steaming, as if it had been brewed only just then. “Here, have a drink and calm your nerves a little,” he said, offering her the cup with a smile.

“I’m telling you, I haven’t,” Neriep insisted, glaring indignantly in Decona’s direction. When the old man just kept on smiling as cheerfully as ever, though, she sighed heavily and accepted the cup. “Very well, if you insist. Thank you for the tea.”

Decona nodded in satisfaction as Neriep picked up the cup. “Neriep,” he said, “I understand your concerns perfectly well, believe you me. But please do try to keep a cool head. We know the Diabolists have been working to extend their influence into the Oldwass College of Magic. For all we know, their minions might have already infiltrated the school...”

“But Chairman Decona!” Neriep protested, her eyes snapping open. “That is *exactly* why we should be gathering the students and faculty of the college in one place while we work to seal the Diabolists back under the permafrost from whence they came, is it not? Why would you invite another school for a short-term exchange study program in such a state of emergency? And without a single word to me about it, no less!” She drained her teacup and returned it to the table, fixing Decona with an angry glare.

Decona smiled as warmly as ever as he met Neriep’s eyes. “Oh, well, how do I put this...? I hope you can tolerate a few whims of my own during the twilight years of my life...” he said with a sickly cough that he seemed to be doing on



purpose. In fact, while Decona looked quite old, his long ears were as perky as ever. It was clear from looking at him that at least some of his ancestry was from the long-lived elven folk.

*This old man...* Neriep thought to herself. *Always bringing his age into things just to make my life harder...* Still, Neriep couldn't help but soften at the performance. After a while she sighed, resigning herself to defeat. "Very well," she said. "I'll let you have your way this time. But I would very much appreciate it if you would find someone besides myself to put in charge of the visiting exchange students." She turned with a flip of her robe and left the chairman's office behind.

*Simply ludicrous...* Neriep thought. *He has no concern for what others think sometimes. We still have to worry about the Diabolist's attack—what would we do if something should happen to him...?*

She strode down the hallway with long steps, a complicated expression on her face.



Alone in his office after Neriep had left, Decona shook his head, sighing as he stared after the door she had left through. "Neriep is an excellent magus, to be sure, but I'm afraid she knows precious little about subjects other than magecraft," he said. "It's hard to blame her, of course. She became headmaster during the years when we had broken off ties with the Magic Kingdom of Klyrode, after all. She never knew what it meant to rely on help from others in the first place. I suppose that doesn't just go for Neriep, though. All of us in the Oldwass College of Magic are in the same boat, as far as that's concerned..."

Decona pressed his right index finger to his temple, sending out a telepathic signal.

*"You summoned me, Chairman Decona?"* came the response.

"There you are, Aryun Parn-Parn," Decona said with a warm laugh. "I'm terribly sorry, but would you be willing to be the one to meet our exchange students from the Houghtow College of Magic? Neriep refused me point-blank."

*"I had a feeling that would happen,"* answered the voice. *"Although I must*

*say, I can't imagine what you could possibly be intending, inviting exchange students over now of all possible times..."*

"Oh, don't you start with that. I'm asking you a favor here," said Decona.

*"All right, I'll do it. But in exchange, you had better pay me a handsome bonus."* With that, Aryun Parn-Parn cut off the telepathic conversation.

"Oh ho ho!" Decona laughed again as he strolled his way over to the office window. "Under the Maiden Queen's leadership, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode has once more become a place with which we would do well to have a formal relationship," he said, muttering to himself as the snow fell outside his window. "If our current predicament can result in us reestablishing our old connection, why not leap at the opportunity?"

Decona watched intently as the flakes of snow danced through the air. Whenever one touched the building, however, it would immediately evaporate and vanish into the air. The defensive spells active on the Oldwass College of Magic meant that no snow storm would ever touch its walls.

### ◇Days Later—Houghtow City◇

One day, a single Enchanted Frigate came to a stop beside the boarding station next to the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. A smaller model than a typical ship of the fleet, this one had been prepared specially by Flio for the purpose of taking the students from the Houghtow College of Magic to the Oldwass College of Magic high in the Degadon Mountain Range for their short-term exchange program.

A smile came to Garyl's face as he looked up at the ship. "Looks like it's finally time to set out for the Oldwass College of Magic!" he said. He wasn't wearing his usual adventuring attire, but had instead showed up dressed in the uniform of the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education.

"So you're going dressed in uniform then, Garyl?" Elinàsze asked, stepping up beside her brother.

"That's the idea," Garyl confirmed. "The Houghtow College of Magic doesn't have a school uniform, after all, so when I tried to think of how I should dress properly as a visiting student, this is what I came up with." *Plus*, he thought to

himself, *I wouldn't want to mess up and do something that might cause trouble for Miss Ellie...*

"I see..." Elinàsze considered. "I suppose I can see the logic." For her part, Elinàsze was dressed in the same dark-colored casual outfit she wore when she was working in her laboratory, her long hair tied back in a simple messy ponytail.

"Big sis..." Garyl said. "You didn't come straight from your laboratory, did you?"

"Oh! You could tell?" Elinàsze chirped.

"I mean...I'd have to be really out of it not to," Garyl replied, glancing over with a smirk.

"Ah, well..." Elinàsze sighed, looking down. "I suppose I can't get away with this outfit, then, can I?"

"I mean, maybe..." said Garyl, choosing his words carefully. "Everyone thinks you're cute. You probably won't get in trouble for it..."

Elinàsze, however, could infer what Garyl was trying to say. "All right, then," she said, waving a finger. "How about this?" Suddenly, her outfit transformed into a gorgeous blue ensemble made from Indolan cloth, complete with a miniskirt that lent the whole thing a soft and flowery appearance. Her hair, meanwhile, formed itself into a three-strand braid that reached down to the base of her neck. "What do you think?" she asked, removing her glasses and turning back towards her brother.

"It's great! I think that'll do fine!" said Garyl, smiling brightly. "By the way..."

"Hm?" Elinàsze asked.

Garyl raised his head to look at the veritable mountain of suitcases stacked up behind his sister. "Are you bringing *all* of that stuff aboard...?" he asked with a smirk.

"Well, what else am I supposed to do?" Elinàsze countered. "The rules say that all items brought aboard the Enchanted Frigate must go through a security check! Once we've gotten through that I'll send them all to my private world,

though, so I'll be showing up at the College of Magic empty-handed." She waved her arms as if to demonstrate, smiling cheerfully.

"Even so, that sure is a lot of luggage!" Rislei, who had come to see the others off, smiled in amusement herself at the unwieldy pile.

"Is it?" Elinàsze said. "It's mostly magic items and grimoires. It's not as if I have that many daily necessities." *Besides, if I've forgotten something, I can always go get it from the laboratory space I can enter at any time. Although I was planning on keeping that bit to myself...*

As Rislei began chatting with Elinàsze, Salina watched from off to the side, staring intently. Behind her was a massive pile of nearly fifty enormous suitcases. It was easily twice the size of the heap of luggage Garyl had been teasing his sister for. *But, but, but...* she thought to herself, litigating the matter inside her own head. *I was lucky enough to be selected to participate in the exchange program, after all! That means I've won a whole week to spend together with Lord Garyl! This much luggage is the bare minimum I need to avoid embarrassing myself in front of him! Yes—all of this is for my beloved Lord Garyl! What else could I have done?* She nodded, apparently satisfied with her reasoning.

A short distance away, a number of other girls had come to see the ship off.

"That Salina..." Irystiel's black cat plush grumbled, animated by its owner's ventriloquism. "I can't believe it! Mreowr..."

"Me neither!" agreed Snow Little, puffing out her cheeks in a pout beside her. "I should have been the one to win the ticket for a weeklong date with Lord Garyl..."

Those two were far from the only wistful ones. No small number of students from the Houghtow College were there—and most of the girls seemed to be glaring in Salina's direction with clear envy.

Oryou and Belano, who had boarded the ship ahead of the students, looked down at the crowd. The two were there as members of the Houghtow College of Magic faculty, chosen to look after the students on their trip.

“Miss Oryou...” Belano said with a polite little bow. “Thank you for helping today...”

Oryou, however, didn’t respond.

“Um...Miss Oryou?” Belano asked.

“Ah! You are speaking to one such as myself? Or...I mean...to me?” Oryou said. “I apologize for my inattentiveness. It is I who must thank *you*.”

Belano stared back at Oryou in silent confusion as her colleague replied. *That’s strange...* she thought, cocking her head to the side as she watched Oryou look out at the crowd. *It doesn’t look like anything’s wrong with Miss Oryou, but there was definitely something off about the way she was talking just now...*



As everyone busied themselves getting ready to board the ship, Flio appeared in front of the crowd.

“Papa!” Elinàsze cried when she saw who it was, her expression brightening instantly. She had been standing to the side waiting for the ship to finish its preparations with a somewhat cold demeanor, but the instant Flio arrived she couldn’t help herself from running up to greet him, full of cheer. “Have you come to see us off?”

“Well, not exactly,” Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “I’m going to be flying the ship and visiting the school along with you all.”

“You will?!” Elinàsze’s smile grew even brighter at Flio’s words. “Really?!”

“The Enchanted Frigates are the property of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, after all,” Flio explained. “And since this is our first time going to this school, I thought it might be a good idea to pay them a visit and introduce myself.”

“Oh, hooray!” Elinàsze cheered, hugging her father tight. “I’m so glad we’ll be making the trip there together, papa!”

Garyl cracked a knowing smile as he watched Elinàsze’s sudden display of unreserved emotion out of the corner of his eye. *Big sis Elinàsze acts so cool and aloof towards everyone so much of the time*, he thought, *but she’s so*

*expressive whenever dad comes around...*

Elinàsze paid her brother no mind whatsoever, simply reveling in her father's attention as Flio patted her gently on the head.



Some time later, with everyone on board, the Enchanted Frigate disembarked from the tower. Flio, who had taken the helm in the ship's control room, gestured in front of him with his right hand and a map appeared at his fingertips displaying the surrounding region. In one corner of the map, the location of Houghtow City, was a blinking light indicating the position of the Enchanted Frigate. To the north, deep in a part of the map dominated by towering mountains, blinked another.

"All right," Flio said. "No problems entering in the destination. Then, shall we be off?" He took the controls, and the ship began to rise into the sky. Down on the surface, the students and faculty from the Houghtow College of Magic who had come to see them off waved as the Enchanted Frigate flew away, picking up speed.

"I wonder what the Oldwass College of Magic is gonna be like," Garyl said, watching the land go by from one of the ship's windows as they flew.

"No matter what it's like, any place is as good as the Celestial Plane itself as long as I can go there with you, Lord Garyl!" said Salina, who had sidled up next to him as close as she could possibly manage. She clasped her hands together, holding them against her cheek in her very best attempt at an adorable pose, complete with a sugary sweet smile pointed straight towards the object of her affection.

Garyl, alas, did not even turn away from the view outside to look.

*W-Well, that's no matter!* Salina told herself. *I have an entire week with Lord Garyl after this! That's plenty of time to appeal to him with my cuteness...* Forcing a smile to her face, she nodded resolutely.

Next to her, Garyl's thoughts were on a different matter entirely as he gazed out the window. *Rylnàsze stayed behind to look after the magic beasts, and Rislei wasn't chosen for the exchange program...* he thought. *And none of the*

*other kids in the house have started school yet, so they couldn't come along. Wyne really wanted to join us, though, didn't she? I wonder why she didn't show up to see us off...*

The ship flew along smoothly above the clouds. Outside was a sea of white as far as the eye could see. And then, all of a sudden, Wyne's face popped out of the clouds right in Garyl's field of view. *"Aha! Gare-Gare!"* she mouthed, waving excitedly with a huge grin on her face. *"There-there you are!"*

"Big sis Wyne!" Garyl said with a wry smirk when he saw his premonition had been right on the money. "I had a feeling you'd turn up."

*"Ah ha ha!"* Wyne laughed inaudibly on the other side of the window. *"Of course I'm coming with you-you! Wait...how do you open these windows? Gnhhh!"* Before Garyl's eyes, Wyne seized the window with her hands, doing her best to wrench it open by force. *"Gah! This thing's a pain-pain in the butt!"* she declared, her eyes glowing bright red in her mounting frustration. Garyl could see crimson flames welling up inside her mouth.

"B-Big sis Wyne! Wait!" Garyl cried, flailing his arms to try to signal for Wyne to stop. "I'll take care of it! Just no breathing fire!"

Salina stared in disbelief as Wyne raged outside the window. *I-It's another one of Lord Garyl's sisters!* she thought. *And the meathead of the bunch, no less. This is going to be a chore and a half, isn't it...?*

Still, she didn't neglect to take advantage of Garyl's distraction to grab hold of one of his arms.



"Oh? Big sis Wyne's coming along too, is she...?" Elinàsze shook her head, smiling with exasperation. She had been scanning the area outside the Enchanted Frigate when she noticed Wyne, her draconic wings fully manifested, clinging to the side of the ship.

"I sensed her coming right after we took off," Flio said, smiling wryly. He understood Wyne's motivations as well as anyone. "I guess she'd prefer to join us than just see us off."

"What should we do, papa?" Elinàsze asked.

“Well,” said Flio, “we could try convincing her to go home, but she probably wouldn’t listen right away, and taking the time to convince her would delay our time of arrival. Here, why don’t I bring her along and tell them she’s accompanying me as an assistant?” He waved his hand, transporting Wyne to the inside of the ship. Immediately, she vanished from the scan Elinàsze was doing of their surroundings.

“Incredible as always, papa!” Elinàsze gushed. “I can’t believe you were able to cast Teleportation on big sis Wyne while she was moving around like that!”

“Now, now,” Flio demurred, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “That spell wasn’t anything special.” He looked over at his daughter, who was beaming joyfully beside him. *Come to think of it...* Flio thought. *Elinàsze was supposed to be sitting with Garyl and the others for this trip. She came into the ship’s helm at some point acting like she belonged here...* He smiled knowingly, as the ship sailed through the sky on its way to the Oldwass College of Magic in the Degadon Mountains.



Half a day’s flight later, the Enchanted Frigate entered an area shrouded in a blanket of snow.

“I’d been told what to expect, but that really is a lot of snow!” Elinàsze remarked. She had magic windows open all around her, each displaying images of the area around the Enchanted Frigate. Just as she had said, however, there was so much snow that each and every window simply displayed an image of pure white. It was too thick to properly make out their surroundings.

“Although...” she continued. “There’s something odd about all this snow...”

“So you noticed it too, Elinàsze?” Flio asked, nodding. “This snow was created by magic, no doubt about it.” Turning the ship’s wheel, he waved his hand and the dull *plink* of an enchantment being broken rang out. The snowstorm, which had been raging so fiercely just seconds earlier, vanished immediately.

“While they clearly set up a barrier to make it look like it’s snowing, I don’t sense any hostility from the magic,” Elinàsze observed, folding her arms as she looked over the situation in her windows. “If they were really trying to keep us away from the Oldwass College of Magic, one might have expected them to



include some sort of offensive magic as well.”

*I wonder... Flio thought as he steered the Enchanted Frigate down towards the land below. Maybe they were testing us to see how powerful our own magic is...*

Ahead they could see the Oldwass College of Magic, built using the terrain in a natural gap in the mountains.



In a room in the Oldwass College of Magic, Headmaster Neriep peered into the crystal on her desk, which currently displayed an image of Flio’s Enchanted Frigate making its way through the sky.

“These are students hoping to study at our Oldwass College of Magic,” she said. “If they can’t dispel a barrier of that level, then as far as I’m concerned there’s no chance of allowing them in our institution.” She watched through the crystal for a while as Flio accomplished exactly that. She sighed. “Ah. It seems they were capable after all. In that case, I suppose I must provide them with a suitable level of reception, lest Chairman Decona’s reputation fall into complete ruin.” Sighing again, Neriep stepped out of the room.



“Eghk! S’cold! Cold-cold!!!” Wyne wrapped her arms tight around her body, shivering furiously as she disembarked from the Enchanted Frigate. Wyne might have been a dragon with hot fire burning inside her body, but dressed as she was, in only a light poncho, the intense cold proved unendurable.

“Big sis Wyne, honestly...” Elinàsze waved her hand, and a heavy winter outfit appeared on Wyne’s body. “Well? Still too cold?”

“Nuh-uh! Thank you, thank you, Eli-Eli!” Overjoyed to be given relief from the cold, Wyne hugged her sister tight—so tight that Elinàsze felt like she was struggling for her life, crushed by her sister’s immense strength.

The slopes of the Degadon Mountains were a winter wonderland, silver snow falling everywhere as far as the eye could see.

“I-I thought it would be cold...” Salina said. “But this is a bit more than I

expected!” She was wearing decently heavy winter clothing herself, but even so, she was shivering hard as she pulled a supplementary coat out of her Bottomless Bag.

Flio, meanwhile, didn’t seem to pay the cold any mind as he looked all around. “Well, this is the spot Headmaster Neriep told us to dock the ship...” he said, peering every which way.

The group was in a forest not far from the Oldwass College of Magic. The ground had been artificially leveled in order to provide a clear landing area, but there was no sign of any person in the area. Flio tilted his head in confusion before noticing a group of people making their way towards them. *Hm...?*

Said group was using the spells Concealment and Camouflage, moving silently through the woods as they approached. “I don’t sense any clear hostility...” Flio muttered under his breath. “Maybe I should just watch them for now and see what they do.”

Flio and Elinàsze, as well as the instructors Oryou and Belano, had all spent time honing their magic, while Garyl and Wyne both possessed keen intuition. The six of them all noticed the group’s presence as they approached and stood to face them.

Salina, however, had no idea anyone was there at all. “What? What?” she said, looking around at everyone in bewilderment. “What’s going on? Is something happening?”

Flio reached out with his magic, scanning the area around them. *I’m still not getting any hostility...* he thought. *If I had to say, it seems like they’re observing us.*

After some time with the party from the Houghtow College of Magic standing on guard against the invisible group approaching them, a collection of robed figures revealed their forms.

One of them, a young girl with long rabbit ears, stepped forward, her arms folded as she looked over in Garyl’s direction. “You would be the exchange students, I suppose?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s right!” said Garyl with a smile and a polite bow. “We’ll be in your

care for the next week. It's nice to meet you!"

For once, this girl showed no signs of swooning over Garyl. She looked him over, her expression unmoving. "Yes, that's all well and good. But first, would you perhaps be interested in a friendly bout? Nobody at school is any match for us—we've all been desperately bored." Her long ears wiggled two, then three times as she examined the Houghtow College of Magic group. "Although I must say," she added, the corners of her lips turning up. "The lot of you do look somewhat *weak*."

"Excuse me?!" Elinàsze shot the girl an icy glare. "We look *weak*, you say?" she demanded, the gem on her forehead glowing red. "I don't suppose you're including my *papa* in that, are you?"

The color of light Elinàsze's gem gave off changed when she was experiencing a strong emotion. Red corresponded to the emotion of rage. Elinàsze, obsessive daddy's girl that she was, could not suffer an insult to her beloved father. As for the insult to herself, she paid it no mind one way or another.

Flio, noticing his daughter's state, wasted no time in placating her with a pat on the head. "That's enough, Elinàsze," he said. "Let's leave it there."

"But, papa!" protested Elinàsze.

"Now, now, settle down," Flio said.

"Well...if you say so..." At Flio's urging, Elinàsze finally calmed back down. The light in the gem on her forehead vanished as well.

Another of the robed figures—a boy with a distinctly girlish face—stepped up to the rabbit-eared girl. "Loppul, stop it!" he said, furrowing his brow. "Didn't Professor Aryun Parn-Parn tell us to welcome the exchange students and show them to the College?"

Loppul, the snow rabbitfolk girl, shot the boy a stern look. "Nobody asked you, Ysel!" she snapped. "We finally have some opponents who might give us a bit of entertainment; what's wrong with taking a little while to play with them first?"

She turned from castigating Ysel, who seemed to be a run-of-the-mill human, and snapped her fingers. On cue, a particularly hefty male student stepped

forward from behind her.

“This is Jentle, a polar bearfolk. He and I will be your opponents,” she continued, turning to the Houghtow group. “Now, send someone to face us, if you please. Although I’ll warn you, we do happen to be *quite* strong opponents. I don’t expect even your adults could hold a candle to us!” Loppul gave Jentle, the polar bear folk, a few good smacks on the back, around his waist level, snickering mischievously.

“Hey, Loppul...” Jentle said. “C-Can I really do *those* kinds of things with the girls...?” He was breathing heavily in anticipation, leering at the women in the party—especially Wyne and Oryou.

“Hey!” said Salina, her face growing red with indignation. “Why are you looking at *them* instead of *me*?!” It seemed she was offended that Jentle’s leering gaze didn’t appear to include her in its list of targets.

“You don’t have enough tits and booty for my taste,” Jentle answered flatly.

“Hmph!” Salina flailed her arms and stomped her foot. “Why, I’ve never met such a rude boy in my life!”

“That *was* very rude!” Garyl agreed, stepping out in front of Salina. “And especially to such a lovely girl as Salina!”

“What?” Salina blinked. “I-I’m lovely?”

“Of course!” said Garyl, giving her a cheerful grin. “I think you’re a wonderful lady, Salina!”

*Ba-dump!* Salina’s heart skipped a beat. As she gazed at Garyl’s smiling face, her face turned even redder than it had been from her rage just moments earlier.

“Why don’t you let me take them on?” Garyl offered. “I’d be happy to pay them back for saying such horrible things.” Still smiling, he stepped out towards Loppul and Jentle and began doing warm-up stretches.

“Are you making fun of us?” Loppul said, clicking her tongue in irritation as she watched Garyl do his calisthenics alone. “You can’t be planning to take on the both of us alone.”

Jentle looked positively angry as he regarded his prospective opponent. “Hey, come on!” he complained. “Loppul! This one isn’t a girl!”

“I suppose not,” Loppul said. “Fine, then. How about I promise to go on a date with you if you win? Would that be sufficient motivation?”

At that, Jentle’s disposition did a complete one-eighty. Suddenly, he seemed raring to go. “All right then! In that case, I’ll send Mister All-Style-No-Substance flying!” Without waiting for a signal for the match to start, he clasped his fists together, swinging them down towards Garyl’s head.

“Wait! You coward!” Salina cried. The next moment, however, her eyes opened wide in confusion. “Huh?”

Jentle was more than twice Garyl’s size. Ordinarily, one would expect the smaller boy to dodge a full-power attack from such a massive opponent. Garyl, however, stood firm, meeting Jentle in a matching grappling stance. It seemed he intended to contest him with pure physical strength.

“Ghrrr...” Jentle’s body shook as he pushed down on Garyl, an expression of monstrous exertion on his face. A magic circle appeared around his arm. There was no question as to the effect of the spell—he was using magic to heighten his physical strength still further. Garyl, on the other hand, had a cool smile on his face. He didn’t seem to be taxing himself much at all as he held Jentle’s massive arms in check.

“What are you *doing*, Jentle?!” Loppul demanded, smacking Jentle on the back in irritation. “Enough playing around! Just toss him away like you always do!”

Jentle’s strategy of using magic to enhance his physical power resulted in a fighting style boasting top tier attack strength even among the Oldwass College of Magic. As a result he had a bad habit of underestimating his opponents, leading to him intentionally holding back. Loppul thought that this was another such occasion of Jentle falling into his bad habit.

“Seriously, quit it with the games!” Loppul said, smacking him on the back once more. “Hurry up and end it!” *If this takes any longer, she thought, the professor is going to arrive!*

“Ghraaaaaah!!!” Jentle concentrated more and more power into his arm. His whole body was shaking with exertion as he planted his feet and redoubled his efforts to crush Garyl’s guard. Soon, however, his face contorted in pain. “Th-That’s not it...” he gasped. “I-I’m using my full power! B-But this guy won’t budge an inch...”

“S-Say what?!” Loppul’s eyes shot open.

Garyl, meanwhile, simply continued to hold fast against Jentle’s assault. “Are you finished?” he asked. “Then...how about I do an attack of my own?!” And with that, he effortlessly lifted Jentle’s body up in the air.

“H-Hwah?!” Jentle cried out in shock at having been hoisted so easily. He was more than twice Garyl’s height—and Garyl was a slender boy—but Garyl had lifted him in one go without even using any magic.

“And...hup!” Garyl said, tossing Jentle straight towards a nearby cliff.

“Fwaaaaaaah!!!” Jentle’s massive body flew through the air like a ping-pong ball. Garyl had tossed him without much apparent effort, and yet now he found himself careening with truly incredible velocity. Jentle was tough, but even he wouldn’t emerge unscathed from a full-on collision with the cliff face at that speed.

“W-Wait!” Loppul began a hurried spell, trying to stop Jentle in midair with magic. At her casting speed, however, it didn’t seem like she would make it in time before Jentle’s momentum came to an unceremonious halt.

Garyl glanced over at his sister Elinàsze, who sighed and waved her hand with an air of great tedium, conjuring a magic net mere moments before Jentle collided with the cliff, catching him and depositing him in the nearby snow. “All right,” she said with another sigh, looking to make sure Jentle was unharmed. “Well fought, you two.”

Loppul, who had been staring wide-eyed for a while now, fell back on her butt in pure astonishment. *H-How can this be?* she thought. *It was like Jentle’s power wasn’t doing anything at all! And that girl was able to cast magic even faster than me! H-How could some nobodies from a magic school in the countryside perform such magnificent feats?!*

Just then, the group heard a voice coming their way. “Hey! Loppul! Jentle! What do you think you’re doing?!” It was Aryun Parn-Parn, arriving to greet Flio and the rest. He was sprinting towards them, pale-faced and wild-eyed with anger. With Jentle twitching off in a snowbank and Loppul sitting on her backside in shock, there was little room to doubt what had happened here.

Flio stepped forward to meet him. “Ah, excuse them, please,” he said. “These students were just giving us...how to put it...a passionate welcome.”

“A-A passionate welcome?!” Aryun Parn-Parn repeated, eyes threatening to bulge out of his skull.



Thanks to Flio and the rest of the party’s intercession, the Oldwass College of Magic chose to overlook the conduct of Loppul and the other students who came to test their strength, although they did get a good scolding from Aryun Parn-Parn. Loppul and the rest were chosen to help show the visitors from the Houghtow College of Magic around the school. And after their experience being hopelessly outmatched by Garyl and Elinàsze, the group never tried to start a fight with them again.

### ◇Oldwass College of Magic—Grand Hall◇

That night, Flio and company were shown to the grand hall of the school. They arrived to find row after row of tables set up in the middle of the room, with flags displaying the emblem of the Oldwass College of Magic hanging proudly from the ceiling. The entire student body and all of the faculty of the school had already gathered in the hall ahead of them, chatting animatedly as they waited for their guests.

The exchange students from the Houghtow College of Magic, Elinàsze, Garyl, and Salina, as well as Oryou and Belano, the instructors responsible for the group, took their seats in the innermost part of the room in front of a carved stone statue of a witch, directly facing the crowd of students. From their vantage point, the five of them had a good view of the entire room.

“Goodness...” Salina said, growing increasingly tense as she glanced around every which way. “That’s quite a lot of people, isn’t it?”

“It really is quite the number!” Garyl agreed, for his part seeming perfectly relaxed as he took in the sights. Garyl had spent time in the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education, and had grown comfortable sitting in front of such vast crowds. “I’d say there’s ten times as many students here than at the Houghtow College of Magic...or maybe even more!”

Elinàsze, seated next to them, just seemed vaguely bored with the proceedings. *Haah...* she sighed to herself. *I had really been hoping to spend the entire time with papa, since he came along and everything...* she thought. *I can’t believe they wouldn’t let him take part in the welcome ceremony...*

The students and teachers from the Oldwass College of Magic were whispering to each other as they stared at the newcomers seated in the back of the room.

“What are students from some seedy backwater school doing here, anyway?”

“At least the boy is somewhat handsome...”

“They say they’re exchange students, but the school they study at is just some country magic college, isn’t it?”

“I can’t imagine students from a school like that would have any magic power to speak of...”

Salina’s face turned bright red with indignation when she heard what everyone was saying. “Why! The nerve!” she fumed. “I wouldn’t mind if they were only speaking ill of me, but how dare they belittle Lord Garyl and Elinàsze?! Are the people of this college blind?!” Before she could spring to her feet in a huff, however, she felt Garyl place his hand gently on hers. “Hwhah?!” Salina exclaimed, her eyes opening wide.

Garyl smiled and leaned in towards Salina. “Don’t let it get to you, okay?” he said in a quiet voice.

*Ba-dump!* Once again, Salina’s heart skipped a beat. *Lord Garyl...* she thought, a blush creeping into her cheeks. *He has such a magnanimous heart...*

Eventually, Chairman Decona, who had been sitting with the other Oldwass College of Magic faculty, got slowly to his feet and raised his right hand. All at once, the chatter ceased. When he saw that the hall was quiet, Decona gave a



satisfied nod. “Well then!” he began. “Teachers, my precious students, today is an auspicious day. Today we have been given an opportunity to welcome our fellow students of the art of magic, who have journeyed from afar to visit our institution!”

Decona turned to face the students from the Houghtow College of Magic and began to clap. The rest of the faculty and students joined in. It was a somewhat heartless and scattered applause, however, lasting only a scant few seconds. Decona tilted his head as if he were puzzled by the perfunctory applause. Then, clearing his throat, he turned towards the large statue of a witch Garyl and the others had been seated in front of.

“The statue in the great hall depicts the first practitioner of magic, who founded the Oldwass College of Magic many centuries ago. Since then, thanks to the efforts of everyone here and those who came before us, we have set the gold standard for magic education in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, an achievement for which we no doubt take a great deal of pride in.” Decona gave a meaningful nod of his head. “Surely such a venerable college of magic would never wish to give a cold reception to their guests...would they?” He smiled at the assembled crowd, a glimmer of mischief in his eyes. The room began another round of applause—a far cry from the few paltry claps that had come before. This one almost threatened to bring down the hall itself in its din. Decona looked around the room and nodded happily.

*The chairman is amazing!* Garyl thought in admiration as he watched. *That speech he gave completely changed the mood of the room!*

Decona let the applause continue for a long moment, then smiled and raised his hand. Once again, the room fell silent. “Remember, everyone, you must never become satisfied with your current level! Exchanging knowledge with our colleagues in other institutions is an opportunity to hone your own ability. You must see this as an invaluable part of your studies. Take this to heart and welcome our friends from afar for this coming week. I’m asking for your cooperation to make this time a worthwhile experience for our guests and for yourselves.” Decona bowed his head low towards the crowd.

“Yes, sir!” the hall replied as one. It was clear, however, that a majority of the students of the Oldwass College of Magic regarded their guests as nothing more

than a nuisance. Decona had urged them to applaud and even gone so far as to lower his head, but it was clear from the faces of the crowd that they looked down on Garyl, Elinàsze, and Salina, and had no desire to welcome them with open arms.

*My, my...* Decona thought to himself, sighing deeply. *My students are excellent at their art, it's true, but after so much time cut off from the outside world they've developed a bit too much contempt for students from other schools...or perhaps they've come to overestimate their own abilities...* Nonetheless, he cleared his throat, rallied his spirits, and continued. "Now, with that out of the way, we've prepared a small banquet to welcome these students to our school! Everyone, please enjoy this time to its fullest and take the opportunity to get to know our guests!"

Decona raised his arm again, and plates of food were brought into the hall, eliciting the most genuine cheers of the assembly. Decona smiled wryly. *I suppose I can't fault them for being more excited for food than a lecture,* he thought, looking towards the foot of the teachers' table, where a number of students were sitting. As if on cue, the three of them stood up—it was Loppul, Jentle, and Ysel, the trio who had picked a fight with Garyl and the others when they had first arrived.

"You three are acquainted with our exchange students, are you not?" Decona asked. "Would you be so kind as to look after their needs?"

"Yes, sir!" they replied together, standing sharply at attention.

Suddenly, the students in the hall began whispering to each other once more as Loppul and the others stepped up to the guests.

"H-Hey... Wasn't Loppul's gang opposed to taking in exchange students?"

"How come they're so eager to wait on them...?"

"What the heck is going on?"



"Um..." Loppul said as she handed Garyl a plate heaped full of food from the buffet. "I-I really hope you don't take too much offense at how everyone's been acting. They just don't know how good you are, that's all. They would never

take an attitude like that if they did. Once they know what you can do, I'm sure they'll change their tune in a heartbeat...I-like we did, you know?"

Behind her, Jentle and Ysel were bringing plates of food to Salina and Elinàsze as well, smiling all the while. Ysel's seemed genuine, but Jentle's smile looked somewhat forced after the crushing defeat he had received from Garyl just earlier. "L-L-Loppul's right..." Jentle said. "We've always been able to crush students from other magic colleges whenever we've fought them before... I'm sure they have no idea there's anyone as strong as you at any school outside our own..." He bowed his head in apology, as did the others.

"I understand! We've only just met, after all!" said Garyl, a smile on his face. "And don't worry! Loppul, Jentle, I think of you as my first friends at the Oldwass College of Magic! I'd like it if we could get along." So saying, he offered his hand to the pair.

"Us?" said Loppul.

"Your first friends...?" said Jentle.

The two shared a look, and then burst out smiling. "W-We'd be honored!" they said at once. This time, the smiles on their faces looked like genuine articles.

"Erm..." said Ysel, timidly approaching from the side. "I-I hope I'm not out of line, but is there any chance I could be your friend too?"

"Of course!" said Garyl, giving Ysel a smile as well. "It would be my pleasure!"



The students in the great hall eyed Loppul's gang as they chatted happily with the visitors from the Houghtow College of Magic. One of them, Laddon of the snowmallet clan, looked over at Tsulala, a snow rabbitfolk and president of the student council. "Hey, Tsulala..." he said. "What's your sister doing hanging out with that bunch?"

Tsulala's long snow rabbit ears twitched busily, but before she could reply, the snow maiden Khime leaned in from her opposite side. "Weren't Loppul and her friends telling everyone they were going to grind the exchange students to a pulp when they got here?" she asked, her expression as cold as ice. "Why are

they playing at being lapdogs for those outsiders?”

Tsulala heaved a hefty sigh. “They didn’t stand a chance, by the sounds of it.”

“For real?” Laddon cocked his head. “Somehow that’s a bit hard to believe.”

Khime folded her arms. “Well, what’s done is done, I suppose. Tsulala, you’ve already prepared our next move, I assume?”

Wordlessly, Tsulala nodded.



*Rumble...*

“Wh-What was that?” Garyl asked, startled by the loud noise that came reverberating throughout the room.

Decona wheeled around in his seat at the head of the room towards the college guards stationed in the back. “Guards! What’s going on?!”

No sooner had he asked than another guard came bursting into the grand hall. “S-Sir! It’s an emergency!” he cried. “A devil golem appeared out of nowhere—it’s headed straight for this room!”

“Say what?!” Decona exclaimed in alarm. “How could a Diabolist combat automaton have found its way inside our school?!” He stood and rolled up the sleeves of his robes, hustling across the room to the front door of the grand hall. “Well, be that as it may, I must ask all students to evacuate posthaste. Teachers, behind me! We will fight this thing together!”

“Chairman Decona, wait!” Neriep objected, running up behind the chairman. “Don’t tell me *you* intend to fight!”

“Of course I do!” Decona snapped, furiously rubbing his long white beard with both hands. “Why would I have spent all that time practicing my spellcraft if I didn’t intend to fight at times like this?!”

Neriep hurried along after the chairman as he ran towards the door. “You can’t! I don’t want you taking part in any battles! You and I should evacuate along with the students, and—”

Before Neriep could finish, however, the door to the Grand Hall shook

violently. A mere second later, it came flying off its hinges, debris scattering every which way. In the ruined doorway stood an enormous golem.

“I don’t believe it!” Neriep gasped in surprise. “How could one so large have made it all the way inside the school without anyone noticing?!” She watched as the golem swung its lumbering arms, shattering the nearby pillars to pieces and sending shards flying everywhere. “Watch out!” she cried, turning towards the students, who had only just begun to evacuate. She reached out, conjuring a magic barrier above the students’ heads to shield them from the falling rubble.

Neriep clicked her tongue. *My barrier is too small to protect everyone*, she thought. But just then, a barrier much larger than her own appeared, enveloping Neriep’s barrier and then some. “Wh-What an extraordinary barrier!” she exclaimed. “Who could possibly be casting it?” She glanced around the room, puzzled, until her eyes settled on Belano, standing with her arms reaching up towards the ceiling as she chanted a complicated magic incantation. The one casting the high-level barrier, it seemed, was her.

“Leave this part to me,” Belano said, glaring defiantly at the golem as she continued to chant.

“That’s our defensive magic teacher!” Salina cheered. “You can do it, Miss Belano!”

Just as Salina spoke, however, Belano was struck by a sudden wave of nausea. “Ngh!” she grumbled, desperately resisting the urge to vomit.

Belano, it happened, was born with only a small amount of innate magic power. Her body simply couldn’t handle expending large amounts of magic all at once. Whenever she tried, she would find herself suffering symptoms of magic depletion and wind up expelling the contents of her stomach all over the floor.

*N-No way*, Belano thought. *Is this really all I can do?* Pushing herself, she managed to suppress the nausea suddenly welling up in her stomach. In the struggle to control herself, however, she lost her concentration on the spell and a portion of the barrier began to falter.

“I’ll help, Miss Belano!” Elinàsze volunteered. She ran up beside her teacher

and waved her index finger a single time. All at once, a gigantic compound magic circle appeared above her head, encompassing the entire student body underneath and keeping them safe from anything that might fall on their heads even after Belano was forced to excuse herself.

“It looks like we’re okay on the defense front,” Garyl said, lowering himself to a running stance. “All right! Let’s go!”

“Let’s go-go!” Wyne echoed from behind him. She charged ahead at breakneck speed, overtaking her brother and strafing past the golem, which was still attacking the pillars, doing its best to destroy the room. She lashed out with her tail as she passed, striking the golem square in the face. “Got ’em, got ’em!”

“Gwaaahhh!!!” The golem staggered back, clutching its head. Wyne was moving so quickly that the golem’s senses had been completely unable to keep up—fast enough that the single blow with her tail had dealt it a considerable amount of damage. But that wasn’t all.

“Hah!” Garyl, who had come dashing after Wyne, delivered a kick to the golem’s chest, not slowing his pace in the slightest as his foot made impact. The golem reeled back still further from the direct hit, but Garyl wasn’t finished. “Hiiyah!” he cried, focusing his magic power into his legs, which glowed bright red as he launched kick after kick against the golem’s chestplate, each blow sending chunks of the golem’s body flying off.

The golem raised its arm, trying to knock Garyl out of the air, but as it tried to bring its arm down it found there was something holding it in place, keeping it from moving. While Garyl and Wyne had been launching their assault, at some point someone had begun singing a peaceful melody.

*I can stop the golem from moving, if only for a moment!* Salina thought. *I will be of use to Lord Garyl!* Standing close beside the golem, she sang the Song of Binding. The song moved through the air like a living thing, wrapping around the golem and preventing it from moving completely.

As Salina’s magic held the golem in place, Wyne took in a deep breath of air. “Take this-this!” she shouted, breathing out a roaring inferno. Overwhelmed by her dragon’s breath, the golem fell to the floor.

“All right and now, the finishing blow!” Garyl took a great leap into the air, planting his feet on the ceiling and using that vantage to launch himself back down towards the ground, plummeting with tremendous velocity straight towards the fallen golem’s head. His right hand transformed into the claw of a lupine demon as he lashed out with a powerful blow. There was a tumultuous crash, and a cloud of dust enveloped the area, blocking both Garyl and the golem from sight.





The students watched with bated breath as the dust cleared, revealing the golem lying motionless on the floor. And given that everything above its neck was completely and utterly destroyed, it didn't seem like it would be getting up anytime soon.

"Hah." Garyl, his arm once more returned to its human form, let out a breath once he was certain the golem had stopped moving. "Looks like we did it!"

"Lord Garyl! You were so cool!" said Salina, tackling Garyl and hugging him tight, a big smile on her face. "I mean, of course you were!"

"Yeah! Yeah!" Wyne agreed, hugging Garyl tight as well. "That was awesome-awesome!"

"Hmmm," Elinàsze muttered to herself as she approached the golem, a hand extended as she used magic to scan the figure. "Now, this is interesting. I wonder what sort of magic it is." She cast a spell under her breath and a magic circle appeared around the fallen golem. The golem vanished, sucked into the circle. Elinàsze had effectively taken advantage of the confusion of the moment to claim the golem as materials for her own research.

Unfortunately, her actions had not gone without notice.

"E-Erm... Madame Elinàsze, is it?" One of the guards in the great hall called out to Elinàsze, stopping her before she could leave the room.

"Yes?" Elinàsze asked. "Is there something you need?"

"Well, it's just I-I'm terribly sorry, but could I possibly impose on you to kindly return the golem's remains to the college?"

"Hmmm," Elinàsze said, hemming and hawing in clear dissatisfaction at the request.

"B-But," the guard stammered, "I really do apologize, but we need to examine the remains in order to learn who was controlling the golem."

"Hmmm," Elinàsze repeated.

"C-Come now. Would you please be reasonable about this?"

"Hmmm" was all Elinàsze would say.

The two of them continued on in that vein for quite some time.

Meanwhile, the eyes of the room were on Garyl. Even Decona hurried to the boy's side. "Well now, Garyl! I never would have expected a student to be the one to defeat that golem. Truly, you have my gratitude."

"It wasn't just me," Garyl insisted, a cheerful smile on his face as he looked between Wyne and Salina, who were still hugging him tight, and Elinàsze, who came walking up beside them. "My friends and I all worked together to beat it!"

Suddenly, the students of the Oldwass College of Magic began an uproarious round of applause for Garyl and his friends, chattering animatedly.

"D-Did you see that wolf boy? He was incredible!"

"I told you! I told you he was handsome!"

"They were all rather incredible, to be honest."

"I'm sorry for not clapping for you earlier!"

As the applause grew louder and louder, Loppul, Jentle, and Ysel came walking up to Garyl as well.

"Oh!" said Garyl. "And a big thanks to you three too, for helping all the Oldwass College of Magic students evacuate! We wouldn't have been able to fight so hard without you!" The three of them grinned happily at Garyl's words.

As the students' adulation swelled to a veritable storm of spontaneous applause, Decona stroked his beard with a satisfied smile. "The golem was a little unexpected, but the students here seem to finally understand how skilled the students from the Houghtow College of Magic are. They certainly seem eager to laud them with praise and applause," he said, nodding to himself. "Very good, very good."



The group left the college's grand hall, which had been wrecked in the golem attack, to continue the welcome banquet in the assembly room. Throngs of Oldwass students gathered around Garyl, cheerfully clamoring for his attention. Where before there had been a wall of prejudice against the students from Houghtow for having come from a different college, now everyone was eager to

make friends. There was no longer any trace of their original attitude. Some of their number were still directing the odd hostile glance towards Garyl and the other outsiders, but they were now clearly in the minority.

Decona stroked his beard as he looked out over the crowd. *If this has gotten them to understand that people of extraordinary talent exist in the outside world as well, that alone should mark this exchange program a success.* His gaze fell on a table in the back, where he noticed a group of students from the faction still taking a dim view of the visitors from the Houghtow College of Magic. He watched them for a while, before calling over one of the guards. “Tell me,” he said. “Did that girl ever end up handing over those golem remains for our examination?”

“Yes, sir,” reported the guard. “Although I have to say, she took some convincing.”

“She certainly seemed like she was being stubborn on that point, from what I saw,” Decona said. “Well? Have we learned anything?”

The guard leaned in to whisper in Decona’s ear. “The examination is still ongoing, of course,” he said. “But we were able to analyze the magical record engraved in its body and identify the individual believed to be controlling the golem.” He whispered the next part even more quietly, taking extra care not to allow the people around them to overhear.

### ◇Oldwass College of Magic—Gymnasium◇

The morning after the incident with the golem, students gathered in the college’s indoor gymnasium. It was an enormous space, boasting vast dimensions both vertical and horizontal. At that moment, Wyne was flying circles around the room. “Yahoo!” she cried out in a cheerful voice.

Chasing after Wyne came two students mounted on broomsticks, flying after her at high speeds and doing their best to shoot her out of the air with their attack spells. “What the heck!” one of them complained. “This girl never stops moving!”

The students were currently attending their Offensive Magic class, where they had been partnered with Wyne for a mock battle in the gymnasium. Even though she was outnumbered two-to-one, however, Wyne was able to dodge

every spell with ease, sometimes dropping precipitously or making sharp turns to avoid projectiles as she flew around the room unimpeded.

“I know the Oldwass College of Magic rules say that big sis Wyne has to be treated as a student and participate in class exercises, but really, it’s not a fair contest to pair her up against students.” Elinàsze smirked with wry amusement as she watched from the stands.

Wyne was still quite young, but she had once been known as the ace of the legion of dragons, the strongest unit in the entire Dark Army. She was used to fighting in actual battles. The students of the Oldwass College of Magic, who had little experience with real combat, didn’t even register as opponents.

“Oh! It’s Eli-Eli!” Wyne looked Elinàsze’s way, smiling and waving without any concern for the training exercise she was taking part in. “Hi-hi!” The students she was fighting launched an attack while Wyne was distracted by her sister, of course, but Wyne simply dodged it without even looking.

“Big sis Wyne, honestly!” Elinàsze said, unable to stifle a laugh at the sight. “There’s no need to speak to me right now! Focus on the mock battle!”

“Ah ha ha!” Wyne laughed. “Don’t worry-worry! I’ve got this in the bag-bag!”

At that, the other students from the Oldwass College of Magic who were watching the fight let out a laugh as well—not a scornful laugh mocking a reviled outsider, but a laugh full of affection that one would give a friend.

Her opponents, for their part, grumbled atop their broomsticks. “She’s really giving us the runaround, isn’t she?”

“How can we be losing against someone who can’t even use offensive magic?! All she can do is run away!”

“I can do way-way more than run away!” Wyne protested. She began spinning in midair, her wings spread wide as she flew up alongside the pair. The move produced a blast of air that buffeted the students, ruining their balance on their broomsticks and sending them plummeting to the ground.

“Wh-Wha?!” they cried, and then, swift as the wind, Wyne grasped them out of the air and hoisted them up by their lapels. The two dangled precariously from Wyne’s arms.

“Are you okay-kay?” Wyne asked, genuine worry in her voice.

“Y-Yeah, thanks.”

“You saved us.”

The two acknowledged their defeat, thanking Wyne for the rescue. The students watching all laughed and cheered happily, applauding and celebrating Wyne’s victory.

“Those two sure talked tough, but they couldn’t do a thing against that girl!”

“Who was just boasting about how they’d never lose to a demihuman, hmm?”

“But wow! That Wyne girl is one demihuman who sure can fly!”

“No kidding! That was, like, total freedom of movement!”

The students applauded on and on. Not one of them, it turned out, had it in their heart to dislike Wyne.



Ever since their victory over the invading golem, the students from Houghtow were finding themselves receiving favorable treatment from everyone at the Oldwass College of Magic. It had come to light that the golem who attacked the banquet had already defeated a number of college guards. It was an enemy even trained fighters couldn’t handle, but the visitors from the Houghtow College of Magic had bested it and had come out virtually unscathed. It was a feat that earned them the respect and approval of the Oldwass student body. There were still a number of students who insisted on treating them as outsiders, adopting an attitude of open contempt, but by the end of the day, their number had dwindled to a small group of holdouts.

In the break period after the mock battle exercise, Salina found herself sitting in the school dining hall. “Well, I suppose I should be grateful,” she said, taking a sip of the black tea she had purchased, glancing furtively at the group of girls from the Oldwass College of Magic. They were surrounding Garyl from all sides, bombarding him with words of effusive praise.

“Oh, Garyl! You were so dashing yesterday, you know!”

“You saved our lives!”

“I’ve never met someone so handsome and gallant!”

“You were extraordinary in the mock battle today too!”

Hemmed in on all sides, Garyl smiled awkwardly and thanked everyone in turn. “Oh! Well, thank you for saying so!”

Garyl and Salina had gone together to the dining hall after the mock battle was over but had split up when they arrived; Salina went to get herself a drink while Garyl bought something from the bakery. No sooner had they separated, however, than Garyl had wound up surrounded by a throng of female Oldwass College of Magic students. It was hardly a surprise. Garyl was a well-groomed boy with handsome features and every quality that made someone a target of attraction. Not only that, but he had played the greatest and most dramatic role in defeating the golem the day before, and his attitude throughout the day he had been in the college made it clear that he valued his companions dearly.

Many of the girls at the Houghtow College of Magic had fallen for him already. They had begun whispering to each other in the halls.

“He’s not just a pretty face, is he?”

“His strength is certainly extraordinary.”

“No kidding! I’m getting the chills just thinking about it!”

“And he’s such a loyal friend too, isn’t he?”

Before anyone knew it, Garyl’s fanclub had spread to the Oldwass College of Magic. And now, once again, he was surrounded by girls.

Finally, Salina had had enough. She strode over to Garyl, haughtily clapping her hands to get everyone’s attention. “That’s enough, everyone!” she said. “It’s nearly time for the next class to begin, you know. Now, clear out and hurry back to your classrooms!” She pushed her way into the middle of the group, circling protectively around Garyl.

The other girls tried to pull her away from Garyl by force. “Hey! Who does this girl think she is?” said one.

“I do hope you’re not trying to get between us and Garyl,” said another.

Salina, however, refused to budge an inch. She kept on loudly clapping her hands, circling around Garyl in an attempt to keep the girls away. In the end, they relented and left Garyl with Salina despite their clear reluctance to go.

“Come back never!” Salina said, making a tremendously rude gesture at the girls’ retreating backs.

“Thanks for helping me out there,” Garyl said, wincing at Salina’s behavior. “But I really wish you wouldn’t make gestures like that, Salina. It’s not a good look for a girl as lovely as you.”

“M-My apologies...” Salina dropped her head, deflated. “I won’t do it again.”

### ◇Oldwass College of Magic—Assembly Room◇

Following the golem’s attack, the school locked the door to the assembly room shut, sealing it with magic. Inside were the remains of the golem itself, graciously returned to the college after Elinàsze had briefly claimed it for her own. The faculty of the Oldwass College of Magic had been busy over the past day, inspecting it thoroughly with all kinds of spells.

“As I suspected,” said a man wearing a blue outfit stood with his arms folded, staring at the golem as it lay lifeless on the floor. “I don’t see any of the signs we would expect if this golem had come from outside the college.”

“So, then, Sage Ironwall, we were correct?” Beside him, Decona delicately touched his hand to his beard.

Sage Ironwall had originally been one of the Heroes summoned by the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. In the world he had come from, he had been an accomplished martial artist with a particular focus on defensive techniques, his abilities earning him the name of Hero Ironwall. Since his retirement from the post of Hero, he had become a famous practitioner of defensive magic. He changed his title from Hero to Sage, living out his remaining days in the Degadon Mountains and making occasional visits to the Oldwass College of Magic to deliver the odd guest lecture. That day, however, Sage Ironwall had stopped by the college for a different reason—investigating the golem that had appeared suddenly and caused such a stir.

Sage Ironwall crossed his arms as he looked around the room. “I see no sign

of any incursion from the outside,” he said. “Besides, for a golem created by the Diabolists’ magic to appear inside a building as heavily protected by magic security as the Oldwass College of Magic, I would have to conclude that someone deliberately let it in.”

Decona furrowed his brow at Sage Ironwall’s report. “You know, we were able to analyze the traces of the technique used to create this golem and identify a member of our college who uses the same style of magic, but I’m afraid this individual never returned to her room after the incident last night.” He shook his head from side to side. “It’s truly a terrible situation. We need to find her as soon as we can!”

“Well, chairman?” Sage Ironwall asked, turning to face Decona. “What is this individual’s name?”

“Ah, yes,” Decona said. “Her name is—”

#### ◇Oldwass College of Magic—Student Dormitories◇

That evening after classes had finished for the day, Elinàsze returned to her room. All of the exchange students from the Houghtow College of Magic had been assigned empty rooms in the student dormitory to stay in for the duration of their trip.

“I really hoped I would be able to stay with papa while I was visiting this college,” she said, puffing out her cheeks in a sullen pout. “Why is he staying in an inn in Klyrode Castle Town while I’m all the way over here?” As Elinàsze pondered her misfortune, however, there came a knock on the door. “Yes? Who is it?”

The door opened, revealing a girl dressed in the student uniform of the Oldwass College of Magic—Tsulala the snow rabbitfolk, president of the student council.

“Oh! Good evening, Tsulala,” Elinàsze greeted her. “Have you paid Loppul a visit yet? She was looking for you back when we were finishing our classes for the day.”

“I have,” said Tsulala, tilting her head down and glancing at the room around her with upturned eyes. “Don’t worry about that—it’s all taken care of.”



“Hm?” Elinàsze noticed Tsulala casting her gaze around the room. “Is there someone else you’re looking for? I’m afraid the only one in this room is me.”

“I see,” Tsulala said. “That’s all right. I don’t mind if it’s just the two of us.” She raised her head, looking up at Elinàsze. “I know a spot behind the residence hall where you can find magic flowers with uncommon properties growing in the wild. Would you perhaps accompany me there, as a symbol of our friendship?”

“Oh?” Elinàsze cocked her head, clearly interested. “Rare magic flowers, you say?”

Tsulala nodded, an eager smile on her face.

### ◇Oldwass College of Magic—Behind the Residence Hall◇

Some time later, Tsulala was leading Elinàsze on a walk behind the dormitories. “So, Tsulala,” Elinàsze said. “We’ve been walking for quite a while, haven’t we? How much further are these wild-growing magic flowers of yours?”

“We’re almost there,” Tsulala said, looking back over her shoulder at Elinàsze. “They’re just a short ways up the slope of the mountain behind the school.” She went to take Elinàsze’s hand to lead her farther on, but a magic circle appeared at Elinàsze’s fingertips, forcing Tsulala’s hand away. “E-Elinàsze?” Tsulala asked, confused.

Elinàsze refused to budge from the spot. “I’m very sorry,” she said, looking over at Tsulala. “I can’t go any farther away from the dormitory. Our group leader Miss Belano told us in no uncertain terms that it wasn’t allowed.” She bowed politely and turned around, starting back the way they came.

“H-Hey, wait!” Tsulala called to her, holding out her hand. “It really is just ahead! We’ve come this far—we should really go all the way!”

“I’m very sorry,” Elinàsze repeated, without so much as turning around. “I really can’t break the rules.” She continued on her way back towards the dorms.

“Tch,” Tsulala muttered under her breath. “And I was so close to getting her outside the Oldwass College of Magic barrier. Well, no matter. This is close enough.” She raised her right arm to the heavens, a black magic circle appearing at her feet. It began to rotate, summoning golem after golem. Even a quick glance would be enough to tell that they were the same sort of golem

that had attacked at the banquet the night before.

“Hm,” Elinàsze said. “So you were the one, Tsulala.” She pressed a hand to her temple, sending a telepathic message. “Garyl, can you hear me?”

There was no response.

“What a pity,” Tsulala said, a victorious leer on her face. “There’s a spell on this area preventing telepathic communication. I’m afraid there won’t be any calling for help from you. Not only that, but you’ll find the spell Seal Magic will prevent you from using any of your own magic as well.”

“Oh, really,” Elinàsze said, seeming strangely unconcerned as she looked down at her hands.

*This girl.* A crease formed in Tsulala’s brow. *Does she not understand the situation she’s in? Or is she so overcome with fear she’s gone a little strange?* “Elinàsze,” she said, smirking diabolically. “Come along quietly and be my hostage, if you please. With your life and Tsulala’s as bargaining chips, this time we might just be able to claim a certain item from that old fool Decona.”

Elinàsze curiously cocked her head. “Tsulala’s life, you say. You know, I had a hunch there was something off about you since we first met. I suppose my instincts were right. So then, who are you *really*?”

The girl who had taken Tsulala’s form changed before Elinàsze’s eyes, becoming a small girl with pink skin and two jet black wings. “Not Tsulala, for certain, but someone taking her form,” she said. “Ah, but I’m afraid I have my reasons for not giving you my name.” She spread her wings, flying at Elinàsze and knocking her to the ground. Without delay, she set to binding Elinàsze’s hand behind her back. “You’re my precious hostage, you know,” she said as she stuffed a magic gag into Elinàsze’s mouth. “Behave yourself, and you might just make it out of this alive.”

“So tell me.”

“Huh?”

“This thing you’re trying to get from the chairman—would you tell me what it actually is? I have to admit, I’m a little curious.”

“No! Shut up! I told you to behave yourself!”

“Oh, come now, there’s no need to be so mean about it. Would you at least give me a little hint?”

“No, no, no! You’re my hostage, I say! Behave yourself, and—” Just then, the pink girl realized something was very wrong. *W-Wait a minute*, she thought. *The only people here right now should be me and Elinàsze, right? And I have Elinàsze tied up with a magic gag in her mouth to prevent her from speaking! Then...who have I been talking to?*

The pink girl stopped what she was doing and looked up, confused. There in front of her was none other than Elinàsze, sitting on the ground with her hands wrapped around her knees. “Hwaaah?!” she exclaimed, wide-eyed in disbelief.

“Hm?” Elinàsze said, her own expression one of mild curiosity. “Is something the matter?”

“Wh-Wh-What do you mean, ‘is something the matter’?!” the girl sputtered. “I just tied you up, didn’t I?!”

“Oh, that?” Elinàsze said. “That was just my illusory double.”

“What?!” The pink girl’s eyes shot open once again. She looked down at the image of Elinàsze she had bound at her feet and watched as it slowly melted away. “Y-You cast the spell Illusory Double? But how?” she asked in disbelief. “It should be impossible to use magic inside this area!”

“Oh, because of your Seal Magic spell?” Elinàsze said. “I’m sorry, but that spell isn’t enough to seal away my magic.” She waved her right hand, summoning an array of magic circles wherever she pointed. The spell Seal Magic, after all, was only able to prevent spellcasting as long as its target was a lower level than the one casting it.

“Th-Then...that would mean your magic level is higher than mine?”

“Yes,” said Elinàsze. “By quite a bit.” A magic circle appeared behind Elinàsze’s back, rotating slowly. The pink girl trembled in fear at the sight.

“W-Well!” the girl said, rallying her spirits. “My magic level may be lower than yours, but that only means your weakness is brute force! Do you think you can

handle an attack from this many of my golems?" She swung her arm dramatically, giving an order to the golems she had summoned earlier, who were still standing by behind her...or so she thought. "H-Huh?" When there was no response to her signal, the pink girl finally sensed that something was wrong. She turned around to find that there was not a single golem anywhere in sight. "Wh-What's going on?" she said, looking all around in mounting distress. "What happened to all those golems I just summoned?"

Elinàsze regarded the pink girl wordlessly. *I claimed them all with my magic circle, to make up for having to give back the golem remains from earlier*, she thought. *But if I tell her that, she'll tell me to give them back too, so I think I'll keep my mouth shut for now.* And so, she simply watched as the girl continued to panic.

"Wh-What?!" the girl snapped, noticing Elinàsze staring at her. "Don't you look at me like that! I don't need your pity!" A tear ran down her cheek.

*She does seem sort of pathetic like this, though, doesn't she?* Elinàsze thought. If she hadn't pitied the girl before, she certainly was now.

"Elinàsze?" Just then, Elinàsze heard a man's voice calling out to her from behind.

*Th-That voice!* Elinàsze turned around in a hurry. There, having come looking for her, was her father Flio. "Papa! What are you doing here?"

"Well, it's almost time for dinner," Flio said, "and I saw your signal was coming from this place in the middle of nowhere. I was worried something was wrong, so I came to check. I'm not interrupting something, am I?"

"Oh, um... No, it's all right," Elinàsze replied, clearly disappointed. She was happy to see Flio of course, but there was a complicated expression on her face as well. *Now that papa's here, I suppose we've been caught. And now he'll figure everything out himself.*

The pink girl looked fearfully between Elinàsze and her father. *I-Impossible!* she thought. *This man's magic level must be higher than my own as well!*

"There was no need to worry for one as accomplished as Madame Elinàsze, of course," said Hiya, appearing by Flio's side. "So this is the mastermind behind

the golem attack...”

“I mean, I wasn’t *worried* or anything,” Damalynas agreed, showing up as well. She fixed the pink girl with a piercing stare. “So, who’s she supposed to be?”

“Big sis Elinàsze!” said Garyl, who had come running all the way from the dorms. “What’s up? How come you cut off your telepathy?”

“Oh, excuse me,” Elinàsze said. “This person said she had sealed my magic, so I thought I’d play along for a little bit.”

*D-Don’t tell me...* the pink girl thought, trembling even more violently as she listened to the newcomers’ conversation. *Her telepathic message went through after all...?*

Before she knew it, the girl had found herself surrounded by the members of Flio’s house.

“Oh, yes,” Elinàsze said, suddenly remembering something. She turned back towards the pink girl, who at that moment was lying on the ground, arms and legs bound tight by Hiya’s magic. “You said you had the real Tsulala captured somewhere, didn’t you? Would you mind telling us where she is?”

“Ha!” the girl turned her head away defiantly. “I’ll never talk!”

“Hm. I can’t say I hadn’t anticipated this, but it seems this girl is unwilling to cooperate,” said Hiya, a lascivious smile spreading over their face as they looked down at the bound girl. “In that case, Damalynas and myself shall simply ask the question of her body instead, with the arts we have mastered over our training.” They gave a sinister, suggestive laugh.

The girl twitched, straining against the bonds to lift her head and look up at Hiya. “Y-Y-You won’t be speaking to me like that in just a moment! Don’t let it go to your head just because you have me tied up! Soon, my allies will come to my aid, and then you’ll be sorry!” Her eyes were swimming with tears, but even so her voice was still full of bravado.

“By allies, do you mean them?” Garyl asked. He pointed behind him, where Ben’ne appeared, carrying two girls in her arms wrapped in a bamboo mat—Laddon of the snowmallet clan and Khime the snow maiden, Tsulala’s best

friends at the Oldwass College of Magic, who followed her wherever she went.

“They have already confessed to everything,” Ben’ne said. “How they grew close to the maiden Tsulala, earned her trust, and then captured her so that you could take her place.” She tossed her two captives to the ground and thrust the naginata against their throats, looking down at the pink girl.

“I-I’m so sorry...”

“We were just following orders...”

The two murmured feverishly, pale-faced with terror.

“U-Um, Ben’ne?” Garyl started.

“Yes, my master?” Ben’ne asked.

“Well, it’s just... Those two seem really, really afraid,” Garyl said. “What did you do to make them confess?”

“I did nothing worthy of note,” said Ben’ne. “Merely the lightest application of the interrogation techniques passed down in the Land of the Rising Sun.”

“Merely the lightest touch, huh?” Garyl said, looking down at the pair. Laddon and Khime were both shivering with fright. *Somehow I find that a bit hard to believe*, he thought, frowning and cocking his head to the side.

“Now then,” said Flio, smiling his usual easygoing smile as he looked over at the pink girl. “It looks like there’s nobody coming to help you. Even if you have allies outside of the Oldwass College of Magic, they can’t break through the barrier around the school, can they? It would make this a lot easier if you’d cooperate and tell us what you know.”

“I must object,” said Hiya. “There is no need for you to sully your hands with this, Exalted One. Your unworthy servant Hiya can easily change her attitude with the skills I have mastered in my training.” They looked down at the bound girl, making ominous grabbing gestures with their hands.

“No!” said Ben’ne, pointing the blade of her naginata towards the pink girl’s neck. “Please, allow me to use my interrogation techniques to secure her confession!”

“Y-Y-You’d better not do anything stupid, or you’ll never learn anything!” the

girl said, still putting on a brave face in spite of how hard she was trembling. “You don’t even know my name, do you?!”

At this, Flio pressed his right index finger against the bound girl’s forehead, summoning a small magic circle.

“Wh-What are you—” the girl began, but Flio ignored her and simply finished casting the spell.

“This girl’s name is Gelado,” he reported, removing his finger after just a moment.

“What?!” the girl—Gelado—stared in disbelief. “You! D-Did you just read my mind?!”

“She’s a part of the Diabolist clan,” Flio explained, smiling as mildly as ever all the while. “It seems they’ve been trying all sorts of things to bring the Oldwass College of Magic under their control. I was able to figure out where they’ve been keeping the real Tsulala too.”

Elinàsze, Garyl, Hiya, Damalynas and Ben’ne all gathered round to hear what Flio had to say.

“W-Wait!” Gelado said. “Wh-Who are you, anyway?”

The look on her face was one of pure despair.



The next part happened unbelievably fast. Flio, having pulled the location Tsulala was being held captive straight from Gelado’s mind, brought Elinàsze and the rest straight to her prison, rescued Tsulala, and destroyed the building in less than a minute’s time. Then, after reporting the situation to Decona with a quick telepathic message, they headed back to the Oldwass College of Magic.

“Sister!” When they got back, Loppul, who had been informed of the situation, greeted Tsulala with a joyful hug. “You know, I did think you had been acting strange lately...” she said. “I can’t believe that was an impostor...”

“Loppul...” said Tsulala. “I thought I might never see you again... I’m so glad...”

The two sisters hugged each other tight, tears streaming from their eyes. Decona smiled as he watched, placing a hand on his long white beard. “I must

say, Mister Flio, you and yours have done us a great service today,” he said.

“Not at all!” Flio remarked, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “I just did what anyone would.”

“Incidentally, Mister Flio, if I may...” Decona continued.

“Yes? What is it?” Flio asked.

“Well...who exactly are all these people you have with you?” Decona gave a bewildered glance at the pile of unconscious humans and demons of various types, all tied up together in a big bundle.

“Oh!” Flio said with a smile. “These people were all stationed as guards protecting the prison where they were keeping Tsulala. I figured I might as well capture them and bring them along.”

Decona’s hand stopped mid stroke. “Th-Then...you mean to tell me...*all* of these people are Diabolists?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Flio said.

*But if that’s the case... Decona thought. There has to be at least fifty of them in that pile!* He looked back towards Flio, flanked by Elinàsze, Garyl, Hiya, Damalynas, and Ben’ne for a total of six. *Did six people really just destroy an entire Diabolist stronghold?!*

“Chairman Decona,” Sage Ironwall said as he walked up. “We should dispatch a team to investigate the ruins of the stronghold Mister Flio destroyed. If we can find something that might lead us to the Diabolist’s headquarters, we might just be able to bring this conflict to an end.”

“Yes...” Decona said. “Quite right.” He began stroking his beard once again, as if he had just remembered it was something he was supposed to do.

“In that case,” said Sage Ironwall, “let us leave at once.” Then, turning to Flio, he smiled and held out his hand. “Mister Flio, was it? I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your assistance in this incident. Myself and Chairman Decona can handle the rest.”

“Oh!” said Flio, looking just slightly alarmed. It only lasted a moment, however, before he returned to his usual easygoing smile. “Um...well...good



luck with that!”

They exchanged some words of parting, and Sage Ironwall stepped out of the room. *I wonder...* he thought. *Why did Mister Flio seem so perturbed for that one moment?* He made his way down the hall, the matter nagging at his heart the whole way.



Several days passed, and the exchange program came to an end. Elinàsze and the rest boarded the Enchanted Frigate, with Flio once again taking the wheel.

At the ship’s helm, Wyne was pouting dramatically about the events of the trip. “It’s no fair!” she said. “I wanted to go smash-smash bang-bang too!”

“Well, *I* wanted to see Lord Garyl heroically vanquish the evildoers!” Salina chimed in, stomping her feet.

Wyne and Salina had been complaining about being left out of the attack on the Diabolists’ stronghold for the whole duration of the exchange program.

“Ah ha ha,” Garyl laughed wryly. “Well, will you forgive us for this one if I promise to let you know the next time something like this happens?”

Elinàsze scoffed as she looked over at Wyne and Salina. “Those two can be such a headache sometimes,” she remarked. “Don’t they know they’d be better off *not* getting into fights?”

“Well said, Elinàsze,” Flio said, nodding his head. “I agree.”

Behind him, Belano nodded in agreement as well.

“By the way,” Elinàsze said, turning to look over at Oryou, who had been standing next to Belano. “How long do you plan on keeping up that disguise, Hiya?”

A smirk came over Oryou’s face. “So,” she said, “you found me out?” Oryou’s body changed shape, transforming back into Hiya’s usual form.

“I mean...” said Elinàsze. “Your magic is a completely different color.”

“That’s right,” Flio nodded, an amused smile on his face. “I would be surprised if you hadn’t figured it out, to be honest.”

Hiya gave the two a deep, elegant bow. “I was simply struck by the desire to visit the place of my birth after so long away,” they said. “And, well, I suppose you can infer the rest.”

“And?” Flio asked. “Was it worth the trip?”

“It was indeed,” Hiya said with another bow. “I must thank you for the opportunity.”

Flio gave Hiya one of his easygoing smiles and put his hands on the controls. As he did, the ship rose into the air. “All right,” he said. “Ready to head home?”

The crowd of teachers and students from the Oldwass College of Magic who had come to see them off waved vigorously as the ship took off, while Garyl and the others waved back from the windows as they flew higher and higher.

“All right!” said Flio, turning the ship’s wheel. “Next stop, Houghtow City!” The bow of the Enchanted Frigate turned south, speeding up until it vanished into the clouds on its course back to Houghtow.

# Epilogue

## ◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

At the gates of the Houghtow College of Magic, Taclyde and the rest of the faculty stood in an orderly line, shoulder to shoulder, watching as the Enchanted Frigate drew closer in the sky. “Well, it looks like they made it back in one piece,” Taclyde said, a frown crossing the administrator’s face as he looked up at the ship.

It had been one week since students from the Houghtow College of Magic had departed on the same Enchanted Frigate bound for the Oldwass College of Magic. Now, watching the ship come to a landing, Taclyde’s expression grew darker and darker as he recalled the telepathic message he had received from the Oldwass College of Magic just hours ago.

*In the message they sent, they told me Elinàsze was nearly abducted by some miscreant! Taclyde thought. Security during the exchange program was the responsibility of the Oldwass College of Magic, of course, but what am I meant to say as the representative of the institution who sent them on that trip? And worse, the target was our darling Elinàsze! One of our college’s greatest assets! What if this incident causes her to break off ties with us?*

Taclyde did his best to keep a stiff upper lip as the Enchanted Frigate alighted to the ground in front of the college gates. A ramp descended from the body of the ship, and out stepped Elinàsze, the first to disembark.

Taclyde’s expression grew even stiffer.

Elinàsze gave a bright simile to the assembled crowd. She must have noticed that Taclyde had been staring.

“A-Aha ha...” Taclyde laughed nervously, forcing himself to smile as he waved to the returning students.

After Elinàsze came Garyl, Salina, Belano, and then finally Flio.

“Mister Flio,” Taclyde said. “Thank you for looking after our students!”

“And thank you for everything as always, Mister Taclyde,” Flio replied.

“Well then...” Taclyde said, frowning and choosing his words carefully. “How was...you know...your daughter’s...”

Sensing what Taclyde was about to say, Flio cut him off with a wave of his hand. “Elinàsze and the rest have all returned home safe,” he said, smiling as usual. “And I was able to conduct a number of fruitful business talks during my time there. The trip was very much worth our while. There was some minor trouble along the way, but nothing really worthy of note.”

“M-Mister Flio...” At long last, Taclyde breathed a sigh of relief, slumping his shoulders in exhaustion. “Thank you ever so much...”

The two shook hands, both parties sharing a smile.



After dropping the children off at the Houghtow College of Magic, Flio boarded the Enchanted Frigate once again, this time plotting a course for his own house.

The Enchanted Frigates operated by the Fli-o’-Rys General Store were managed and maintained in a special dock built into one of the mountains nearby Flio’s house. The compact model Enchanted Frigates used for unscheduled flights like this one were stored in that facility as well.

Flio looked down from the helm as the mountain that served as home to the oni village came into view, then the vast fields of Blossom Acres, Byleri’s Ranch, and finally, Flio’s house itself.

“Papa!” Wyne cried out happily as she looked out the window herself. “We’re home-home!”

“That’s right,” Flio said with a smile. “We’re home after a whole week away.”

The Enchanted Frigate began its descent, heading for the slopes of a mountain located to the side of his house. Near its peak was an area that Flio had enchanted to look like an unremarkable part of the mountain; it hid a large cave complete with docking facilities for the intake of Enchanted Frigates.

Flio flew the ship through the illusory stony surface and into the mountain.

Inside, he could see the vast docking area stretching out before his eyes. He guided the ship to the dock for compact Enchanted Frigates located all the way in the back, and cast a quick spell to secure it tight. “All right,” he said. “Ready to disembark?”

“I’m ready-ready!” Wyne said, grinning from ear as she followed Flio off the ship, where they found Rynàsze waiting for them.

“Papa!” Rynàsze said. “Welcome home!” She was riding on Tybe’s back, a huge smile on her face and the Divine Beast Grimby perched atop her head. Sybe’s family had gathered around Tybe’s feet as well—Sybe in his unicorn rabbit form, as well as Shebe, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, all jumping about with great joy. Rynàsze came running up, and her father pulled her into a hug. She hugged him back, smiling happily as her familiars watched with delight.

“I’m home, Rynàsze,” Flio said. “Has everyone been keeping well back home?”

“Yes, everyone’s been very well!” said Rynàsze.

The two of them talked about this and that, smiles on their faces as they made their way out of the dock, where they were greeted by Rys running up from the house with her arms spread wide.

“My lord husband!” Rys said. “Welcome home!”

Her lupine tail fully materialized as she ran, picking up speed until she was running fast enough that a tackle at her velocity would easily be enough to kill an ordinary human. Flio, however, made no attempt to escape. He held his own arms wide, preparing to receive his wife. Rys charged along at breakneck speeds, ignoring the road entirely, and leaped into Flio’s arms, hugging him tight.

Flio, of course, caught her without any evident effort at all.

“Wow...” Rynàsze’s eyes went wide with awe as she watched her father absorb the devastating impact unscathed. “Papa really is incredible!”

The couple held each other tight right in front of Rynàsze. “I’m home, Rys.”

“I’ve been waiting for you, my lord husband,” Rys replied. “Are you tired from

your trip? I was just in the middle of preparing tonight's dinner."

"I can't wait to try it," Flio said.

The two made their way down the road back to the house, sidling up close to each other. Rynàsze followed along beside them, moving closer to her party of magic beasts. And so, by the light of the setting sun, they all made their way back to the house.

"By the way, my lord husband..." Rys said, leaning in to whisper in her husband's ear. "It *has* been an entire week, you know. You *will* dote on me properly tonight, won't you?" Blushing, she punctuated the statement by wrapping her arms close around Flio's.

"U-Um..." Flio said after a pause, a blush creeping into his cheeks as well. "I-I suppose it has. I'll certainly do my best."



## Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 13

### ◇Houghtow College of Magic◇

It was a visitation day at the Houghtow College of Magic, when the parents and guardians of the younger children had the opportunity to come by the campus and see the college at work. Classes were in session and the hallways were full of people—presumably the parents and guardians—coming and going.

Among their number was none other than Hugi-Mugi.

Hugi-Mugi was a doppeladler—a two-headed monster bird—who had been part of the Dark Army's Infernal Four during Ghozal's reign as Dark One. Right now, however, they were disguised as a human. After leaving the Dark Army, they had taken up residence deep in a forest, where they lived a life of leisure with their three wives and children.

"Hmm..." Hugi-Mugi said, looking all around. "So this is the school our children attend, yes?" They appeared to be a young man of slender proportions, but when they spoke it was with two voices at once, a mark of their true nature as a doppeladler. "Yes, the school attended by our children! We came here to see how everyone is doing, yes, but it does seem to be a more serious school than I expected..." Hugi-Mugi nodded in approval.

Some of the people passing by cocked their heads at Hugi-Mugi's strange way of speaking, but since their appearance was outwardly normal, nobody had a stronger reaction to their presence than that.

Until, that is, Hugi-Mugi heard a voice from behind. "What's thisss?"

"Hm?" Recognizing the voice from somewhere, Hugi-Mugi looked back over their shoulder. When they saw who it was, their eyes shot open wide. "Wh-What?! Wh-What are you doing here, yes?! Yes, why are you here?!"

Before their very eyes stood a woman with long blue hair wearing a pair of glasses. She smiled, taking a step towards Hugi-Mugi. "Why, you assk? Well, it jussst so happens that I am the headmassster of this ssschool."



Hugi-Mugi stared in shock. “You?! Yorminyt, yes, *you’re* the headmaster?!”

“My, my, but it hasss been quite some time sssince anyone called me by that name. I have been going by the name Nyt of late. It’sss a pleasssure to make your acquaintance once again.” Nyt gave Hugi-Mugi a smirk, playfully holding up a finger to her lips.

Nyt was another of the Infernal Four during Ghozal’s time as Dark One—known then as the Serpent Princess Yorminyt—although currently she too had adopted a human form. She deserted the Dark Army during Yuigarde’s reign and, after a series of misadventures, found herself being begged by the staff of the Houghtow College of Magic to accept an appointment to the post of headmaster.

“Ah, yes!” Hugi-Mugi nodded their head a bit too quickly, grasping the gist of the situation from Nyt’s gesture. “Yes, we understand...more or less, yes.”

Nyt found herself smirking in amusement at Hugi-Mugi’s behavior. “Ah ha ha... But I mussst say, I never expected to have your children attending our inssstitution...”

“Wh-What is that supposed to mean, yes?” Hugi-Mugi demanded. “Yes, is there something strange about our children going to this school?”

“No, not at all,” Yorminyt said. “But you were the youngessst member of the Infernal Four, you know, and I had alwaysss worried about whether you might be able to find a ssspouse. I sssuppose I was sssimply moved to sssee you’ve not only found a ssspouse, but even produced offssspring.” Then she smirked again, daintily hiding her mouth behind her fingertips. “Although I sssuppose there wasss the time you tried assasking Phufun’sss underling Coqueshtti out on a date...”

“Ah! Ah! Ah!” Hugi-Mugi cried, cutting Nyt off as the Serpent Princess grinned wickedly. “Th-There’s no need to bring up something that happened so long ago, yes! Yes, and besides, Coqueshtti worked for Yuigarde’s minion Phufun, Lord Gholl’s enemy, yes! We could have never gotten close to her, yes, never!” Hugi-Mugi had turned bright red in the face at this point, their shoulders heaving with anger.

Just then, Hugi-Mugi felt a hand grab them from behind. Shocked out of his

rant, he slowly turned around to see his three wives standing there; Cartha, Shino and Mato.

Cartha was the daughter of a farming family. She had fallen in love at first sight with Hugi-Mugi's youthful human form, and after a long and hard-fought battle, finally secured from them the vaunted position of *wife*. She now lived with Hugi-Mugi in their cottage in the forest along with their other two wives.

Shino was a holy sister who lived in the same village as Cartha, and, like her, had fallen in love with Hugi-Mugi at first sight. Now she was happily living with them as one of their three wives, although she spent most of her time in the village, where she worked as a priestess healing the sick and injured.

Mato, meanwhile, was a passing merchant who happened to come under attack by bandits in the forest where Hugi-Mugi lived, only for Hugi-Mugi to come flying to her rescue. In gratitude to them for saving her life, she pledged herself to their service and fell in love over the course of their living together. Now she too lived with the rest of the wives.

"There you are, Hugi!" Mato said, grabbing Hugi-Mugi by their right arm. "Hurry! Our children's class is about to start!"

"A-Ah! Yes! We understand, yes!" Hugi replied, sounding just the least bit panicked.

"Please do hurry," said Mato. "It would make them so happy to see the whole family in attendance!"

"And think of how sad they'll be if there's nobody to cheer them on!" added Shino.

Together, Hugi-Mugi's three wives grabbed them by both of their arms.

"Y-Yes, yes!" the doppeladler cried. "Y-Yes, let us hurry, yes!" They lowered their head in a farewell to Nyt, a smile on their face, and turned to continue down the hallway.

"That was the headmaster, wasn't it?" Cartha asked.

"Y-Yes, so it was, yes," said Hugi-Mugi.

"I'm certainly not complaining, mind you..." she began. "But am I imagining it,

or were the two of you just having a curiously personal conversation?”

“N-No, yes! Yes, no, nothing of the sort! Yes!”

“And I thought I heard something about someone named Coqueshtti...”

“That’s right!” said Shino. “I heard that too! Weren’t you saying something about a *date*?”

“Yes, a date!” Mato agreed. “I would certainly like to hear more details, if I may...”

Suddenly, the three wives’ gazes seemed full of suspicion as they held Hugi-Mugi firmly between them on their way down the hallway.

“W-Well, no, a little, yes...” Hugi-Mugi admitted. “Yes, it was about something that happened a long time ago...” Part of them wished they could vanish on the spot, but surrounded as they were on all sides, Hugi-Mugi found themselves completely at the mercy of their wives.

“My, my,” Nyt said as she watched Hugi-Mugi go. “So the girls love Hugi-Mugi after all, I sssee...” She laughed happily, being sure to cover her mouth with her hand. “To think that after their role in Lord Ghozal’ssss Infernal Four they would get married and even have children! And come to think of it, our comrade Sssleip married a human woman and had a child ass well, and at hisss age no lesssss...”

Then it hit her. *W-Wait... D-Doesss that mean that of the sssurviving members of the old Infernal Four, the only one who still hasn’t gotten married isss...me?* she thought, the smile vanishing from her face. *Even when I fought in the Dark Army, my fearsssome reputation as the Ssserpent Princesssss meant that no man would ever approach me...I-I hope my marriageable daysss haven’t completely passsssed me by...* A bead of sweat trailed down her forehead.

“Ah! There you are, Headmaster Yorminyt!” Nyt heard the voice of Taclyde, the administrator of the Houghtow College of Magic, calling her from behind.

“My...” said Yorminyt. “Taclyde? Whatever do you want?”

“What do you mean, whatever do I want?!” Taclyde exclaimed. “We have important figures of Houghtow City visiting us today! I told you you need to

wait in the headmaster's office!"

"My, my..." Yorminyt touched a finger to her cheek in thought. "Now that you mention it, I do ssseem to recall there being sssomething like that...perhapsss..."

"Yes, yes, now save it for later, if you please!" said Taclyde, taking her by the arm. "The bigwigs are arriving as we speak—come along with me!"

"Yesss, yesss, I'm coming..." said Nyt.

Taclyde hurried down the hallway at a run, Nyt following along behind, her eyes boring into his back. *Hahhh...* she thought, slumping her shoulders and touching her hand to her forehead. *At thisss rate, my marriageable period will ssslip through my fingersss completely...*

### ◇Dark Citadel Basement—Infirmary◇

"And...hup!" Coqueshtti, the little mad scientist girl dressed in a pink nurse's outfit, hoisted her comically oversized syringe up in her arms.

Coqueshtti was one of the current members of the Infernal Four. The reigning Dark One Dawkson had handpicked her in light of her achievements saving the lives of a great many demons with her healing magic, but as she was a cheerful and timid girl, the position didn't seem to suit her personality at all.

Coqueshtti brought the syringe down, sticking its head into Belianna's buttock as she lay face down on the examination table in front of her. The needle of Coqueshtti's syringe was an illusion created by the girl's magic, but even so Belianna twisted her face and cried out in an incomprehensible shout as the needle penetrated her skin. "Daaamnedadammmn!!!"

Belianna was a devil—a member of the devil nobility, in fact—and one of the new Infernal Four. She was a courageous fighter and specialist in the weapon arts of the scythe with a tendency to plunge straight into enemy ranks. Recently, she had taken up a fanatical worship of the Wolf of Justice that led her to spend the greater part of her salary entirely on the purchase of Wolf of Justice branded merchandise.

"Lady Belianna!" Coqueshtti said. "This treatment doesn't cause any pain, I promise!"

“I-I damned well know that!” Belianna scrunched up her face, her cheeks turning red in protest. “But still! There ain’t no damned rule that says a demon can’t have a damned phobia!”

“Oh my!” Coqueshtti said, giggling as she pressed the needle in and began injecting Belianna with the magical medicine contained within the syringe. “Lady Belianna, you’re still afraid of needles even after all the times you’ve had this treatment? You’re just like a child, aren’t you?”

“Damn it all!” Belianna said, gritting her teeth at the sensation of the needle entering her flesh and tensing up with her entire body. “I-I can’t help it! This is the one damned thing I can’t do anything about...” *I just damned well hope my little sister Irystiel never sees me in such a damned embarrassing position...* she thought.

“Yes, yes, well, the treatment is all finished,” Coqueshtti said, breathing a small sigh as she set the syringe down beside her. “Thank you for bearing with it.”

Belianna sat up on the examination table, moving her body from side to side to test the feeling in her spine. “Ahhh... You’re a damned lifesaver. My damned back doesn’t hurt a bit!” Grinning, she retrieved her boots from where she had set them underneath the table.

“By the by, Lady Belianna,” Coqueshtti asked with a tilt of her head. “How did you wind up hurting your back so terribly?”

“Ugh...” Belianna suddenly found herself at a loss for words. *Th-There’s no damned way I’m telling her that...* she thought. *Who would believe that Lady Belianna of the Dark Army’s Infernal Four hurt her damned back trying to carry too many Wolf of Justice brand buster swords at once from the damned Fli-o’-Rys General Store...* Beads of nervous sweat began appearing profusely along her brow. “Um...well...you know,” she said. “I was out there doing my damned duty under Dark One Dawkson’s orders...”

“Oh, I see, I see...” Coqueshtti said, clearly unconvinced by Belianna’s explanation.

*Damn it...* Belianna thought. *I-I’d better find some damned way to change the subject...* “S-S-So! Have there been any damned developments with that thing

you were talking about earlier?”

“What?” Coqueshtti said, blinking in perfect innocent confusion. She clearly had no idea what Belianna was talking about. “‘That thing’? Whatever do you mean?”

“You know—that damned thing!” Belianna said. “The thing you were damned on about just earlier! About how someone confessed their damned love to you!”

“Fweh?!” Realizing at last what *thing* Belianna was referring to, Coqueshtti’s face turned bright red, eyes opening wide in alarm. “N-No, no, no, not at all!” she sputtered. “Th-Th-That was long ago, you know? It’s long gone! Void! Impossible!”

“Oh really?” Belianna said. “But it sounded like there were all kinds of damned promising developments! You seemed pretty happy about it before.” *That was a damned close one!* she thought, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief. *Seems like I managed to change the topic...* “Anyway, it sounds like this other person’s made their feelings plenty damned clear. Don’t you give up, damn it!”

Belianna raised her hand in a casual goodbye and walked out of the room, doing her best to keep a level head. When she was gone, Coqueshtti was left muttering to herself in a quiet voice, trembling as she hid her scarlet face behind both of her hands.

“I-I admit, perhaps, they did invite me on dates... I heard them say, ‘*Would you like to go to Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park together, yes?*’ more times than I can count...and I took them up on it a fair number of times too. But then they left the Infernal Four and vanished to who knows where, and I haven’t heard a word from them since...” Coqueshtti wrapped her arms around her oversized syringe, unconsciously holding it close. “But...” she said, “*I am* still waiting for them...” Her face reflected in the side of the syringe had its mouth turned down in a tight little frown, but nonetheless she was blushing all the way up to her ears.

### ◇A Room in a Building Somewhere in a City◇

In an unlit room somewhere in the world, a heavysset man sat in a lavish armchair, smoking a rolled cigar. Between puffs, he was tapping his foot in clear

irritation, clicking his tongue over and over again. This was, of course, the Shadow King. “What is the meaning of this?!” he finally spat, his face twisted in anger. “You’re telling me they weren’t able to sell *any* of the clothes we worked so hard to make?”

The man who had brought him the report held his position kneeling down on a single knee, but his face was dripping with sweat in the face of the Shadow King’s anger. “N-No, sir,” he said. “It seems the very first merchant they approached was able to tell immediately that they were low-quality imitations, and not only refused the deal but destroyed our merchandise as well...”

The Shadow King clicked his tongue even more loudly and intently than before, glaring down at his subordinate. “Damn fools... This is exactly why I made such a point of telling them they needed to choose their mark carefully! Do these idiots not know the first thing about the business?! Hrmph!”

“I-I’m so terribly sorry...” the man said. “I’ll be sure to make certain that everyone understands that point in the future...”

“And another thing!” the Shadow King continued. “Am I correct in hearing that those imbeciles tried to interfere with this runway exhibition, and were not only driven off but captured by the last man?!”

“I-It’s true, I’m afraid...” answered the messenger.

“Unbelievable... What were they thinking, the lot of them...” He sat there for a moment just tapping his foot, then heaved a heavy sigh. “What about the demon fox sisters? What have they been up to?”

“W-Well, sir...” the messenger replied. “The two of them said they were off to bet on magic beast races, but they left without giving any more details than that...”

“Well, it’s true you can make a decent enough amount of money at the magic beast racing hall, so I suppose I can’t complain about that,” the Shadow King said, a crease forming in his forehead as he clicked his tongue once again. “But I swear, why is it that nothing we do ever goes right? I’m not sure how much longer we can even stay in business...”

As always, the Fli-o'-Rys General Store was positively bustling with customers. Greanyl the shadow demon was in the back of the store, busy with the day's work—in theory, anyway. She was present at the very least, but whenever anyone came up to her she would immediately find a nearby object to hide behind. It couldn't have been more obvious that she was trying to avoid interacting with anyone at all.

Greanyl had been doing this for a number of days now, much to the concern of a certain Dalc Horst, who looked over at her hiding spot and cocked his head. "Why is Greanyl acting that way, anyway?" he asked aloud, crossing his arms. "It seems she's getting her work done in spite of her behavior, though..."

"Meow?" said Uliminas, who happened to be passing by Dalc Horst. "Don't tell me mew haven't heard?"

"Oh! Uliminas!" Dalc Horst said. "Does that mean you know the reason?"

"Of course I do!" Uliminas said, a cunning smirk spreading over her face. "What, are mew curious?"

"W-Well, yes, of course I am!" Dalc Horst stammered. "She's my colleague at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store after all!"

"Oooh?" Uliminas grinned in amusement, using her elbow to jab Dalc Horst in the side. "Meowr *colleague*, huh? Well, fine. I'll tell mew. Just lend me meowr ear..."

Dalc Horst leaned in, and Uliminas began to whisper. At first Dalc Horst listened seriously, nodding along to her account, but as he listened his cheeks suddenly began to turn red. "W-Wait, Uliminas! Are you for real?!"

"Mra ha ha!" Uliminas laughed. "Every detail, I purromise you!"

"Y-You mean...Greanyl really appeared as one of the models in the runway exhibition?!" Dalc Horst exclaimed, not minding his volume in the slightest. Naturally enough, Greanyl, who had been quietly managing the shop's inventory in the back, heard as well.

"Wh-What?!" Greanyl said, her own face turning bright red as well. She scrambled over the boxes she had been unpacking, hurdling her way towards Dalc Horst and Uliminas. "Y-You!" she said, drawing a kunai—a favorite weapon



of shadow demons everywhere—and pressing it up to Dalc Horst’s throat. “Wh-What was it you were discussing?!”

“H-Hey, my bad!” Dalc Horst said, holding up his hands in submission. “I just heard about you showing up in the runway exhibition, and I guess my imagination got the better of me...”

At those words the blush in Greanyl’s face spread all the way to the tips of her ears, and she glared daggers at Dalc Horst as she held the kunai to his throat with trembling hands.

Dalc Horst, however, didn’t seem particularly bothered. *Hmm... he thought, puffing out his cheeks with a horselike snort. Greanyl always seems so cool when she’s on a mission, like she could kill someone just by looking at them...but seeing her struggling so hard to hide how embarrassed she is isn’t bad either! It’s like a whole new side of her...not to mention absolutely adorable!*

Greanyl was so embarrassed, in fact, that tears were welling up in the corners of her eyes.

“Hey...Greanyl... S-Sorry...” Dalc Horst said. “You’ve been out of sorts lately, and I’ve been worried about you, is all. Uliminas was just telling me what was going on.”

“I’ve been out of sorts?” Greanyl said. “I’m impressed you were able to tell. I’m certain I had perfectly concealed all signs of my state...”

It was all Dalc Horst could do to keep from bursting out in laughter at those words. *D-Did she really think she was hiding it from everyone?* he thought, trembling for a somewhat different reason from Greanyl. *Seriously, that’s way too cute, Greanyl...*

Greanyl, noticing Dalc Horst’s reaction, curled up on the spot and started trembling all the more. “Y-You see? E-Even you can’t help laughing at the idea of a woman such as myself appearing as a model in a runway exhibition! I know better than anyone how little suited I am to such work...and now, I will never be married...”

Dalc Horst placed a hand on Greanyl’s shoulder as she sat curled up in a ball on the floor, sending a startled tremor through the shadow demon’s body. “I-I

dunno,” he said, suddenly shy. “I wouldn’t worry about that if I were you. I mean...I’d be more than happy to have you as a bride, if you don’t have anyone else...”

At this, Greanyl went completely still. A long moment passed in uncomfortable silence.

“U-Um... G-Greanyl?” Calling her name, Dalc Horst peered down at Greanyl’s face. And then...

*Poof!*

The area where Greanyl had been was suddenly filled with smoke.

“H-Hey!” Dalc Horst staggered back, covering his mouth with his hand. “G-Greanyl! Using a smoke bomb at a time like this...” When the smoke cleared, Greanyl was nowhere to be seen. Dalc Horst slumped his shoulders in disappointment. “Well, dang it!” he said. “I guess that was too sudden, huh? I didn’t get to hear her response...”

After that incident, Greanyl took the entire next week off from work, claiming she had come down with a sudden illness.

#### ◇Oldwass College of Magic—Chairman’s Office◇

“S-Say what...?” Chairman Decona simply blinked, dumbfounded at the report he had received from Sage Ironwall. The sage himself, for what it’s worth, seemed no less bewildered by what he found himself saying.

“Yes...” he said, looking down at Decona as the chairman sat in his chair. “When I first realized what had happened, I didn’t believe it myself either...”

There was a long moment of silence, as neither man seemed to know what to say. After a while, Decona finally spoke up. “Then...” he said. “The results of your investigation...are that the Diabolist stronghold Mister Flio destroyed wasn’t a stronghold at all, but their main base itself...”

“Without any doubt,” Sage Ironwall confirmed. “Furthermore, among the Diabolists Mister Flio apprehended for us was Gringlass, the Master Diabolist himself, as well as every last member of the Diabolists’ upper echelon.”

Once again, Decona found himself at a loss for words. *Th-The Diabolists have*

*been giving us no end of trouble for decades at this point, he thought. And now, Mister Flio wiped them out just like that, with only a handful of magi?*

It was simply too much. All Decona could do was laugh dryly in disbelief at the news.

*Now that I think of it, Sage Ironwall thought, back when Mister Flio gave his report of the incident, he had that peculiar reaction for a moment when I mentioned the main Diabolist base, didn't he? I suppose he must have been aware of it at the time, then.* At that thought, Sage Ironwall found himself laughing dryly as well.

The two men laughed and laughed, unable to do anything else for quite some time.

### ◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

It was early in the morning, before sunrise. The sky had only just begun to grow brighter as dawn approached. As the light grew, its illumination gradually reached Flio's house and its surrounding environs. Before long, everything had become pleasantly bright.

A single bird was perched on the highest point of the roof of the three-story structure that served as Flio's house—the Divine Beast Grimby, one of Elinàsze's familiars. Grimby sat there with his eyes closed, perfectly still, not moving a single muscle. In due time, however, the rays of the sun began to crest the ridge of the mountain. The very moment they reached Grimby, the bird's eyes shot open. He spread his wings and let out a mighty "Kiyaaaaaaaah!!!" which reverberated throughout the property.

From its epicenter at Flio's house, Grimby's cry could be heard in the nearby dormitory housing the farmworkers who lived on Blossom Acres, and even all the way in the oni village atop the mountain.

It was the Divine Beast Grimby's natural instinct to let out a loud cry upon the coming of morning. His voice was no coarse bellow, but a beautiful clarion tone that worked directly on the subconscious of those who heard it, helping them to awake refreshed and happy.

Grimby looked out proudly, watching as the residents of Flio's informal little

fiefdom began to stir. Soon, however, his expression turned sour as his eyes fell on one corner of the farm next to farmworkers' dormitory, at the cottage where the goblins who served farm's overseers lived: Maunty, his family, and Hokh'hokton.

Grimby took flight, soaring from the roof down towards the goblins' cottage, where he alighted upon one of the window frames in Hokh'hokton's wing of the building and deftly opened it with one of his wings. A terrible stench of alcohol wafted out from the window, making Grimby scowl involuntarily when it reached his nose. The divine bird poked his head inside and looked towards the bed.

Lying there, completely naked and clutching a bottle of liquor, was none other than Telbyress, fast asleep and happily snoring. She must have heard Grimby's call to wake up, and yet the former goddess showed no signs of rousing anytime soon. The scores of empty bottles lying atop the bed and all around the room made it clear that she had spent the previous night deep in the drink.

Grimby clacked his beak in open disdain at the shameful display of slovenliness. *"This woman..."* he said. *"It's always sleep, sleep, sleep every day, and then drink, drink, drink every night. No wonder they call her the no-gooddess..."* He came up next to the bed, bringing his beak right up next to the top of Telbyress's head. Then he took a deep, deep breath, and let out another mighty *"Kiyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"* right next to Telbyress's ear.

Grimby used his power as a divine beast to prevent the sound from escaping the confines of the room. The same cry that had been loud enough to echo throughout every corner of Flio's vast territory was concentrated entirely on Telbyress.

*"Fhgwaaaaaah?!"* As soundly as Telbyress had been sleeping, even she could not hope to sleep peacefully through such a sonic assault. She leaped out of bed and into the air with a shriek, which Hokh'hokton heard from his own private room on the second floor.

*"Damn that no-gooddess..."* Hokh'hokton muttered in exasperation as he changed into his work clothes—he had been awakened by Grimby's first cry along with the rest of the farm. *"She must have needed to be woken up by*

force yet again! I swear, there's been no stop to the noise ever since she came tumbling down here. I'm really at my wits' end..." Sighing, he grabbed his signature pair of goggles, hanging them from his neck to complete his outfit. "Although..." he admitted. "It would be a little lonely around here if she suddenly vanished, I suppose..."



Hokh'hokton made his way down the stairs, where he immediately caught sight of an empty bottle lying at the landing. "Again?" he said, narrowing his eyes in anger. "Now where was that no-goodness hiding all this liquor *this* time..." Fuming, he stormed into Telbyress's room.

For a while afterwards, the sounds of Hokh'hokton's angry shouts and Telbyress's tearful apologies could be heard throughout the goblins' house. All in all, it was an utterly typical morning.



Inside the house, Rys was busily running all about the kitchen. "Now..." she said. "I need to focus, and prepare breakfast for everyone properly!" Effortlessly holding an enormous frying pan nearly twice the size of her own body in a single hand, she tossed a truly staggering quantity of food up in the air.

Awestruck by the performance happening right in front of her, Byleri found herself unable to stop watching Rys's movement, momentarily forgetting to attend to her own tasks in the kitchen. *Lady Rys is, like, just way too good at this, isn't she?* she thought. *Like, I get that she's super strong because she's a demon and everything, but it totally seems like she's getting better every day...* She stared transfixed as Rys heroically stir fried the thin-cut ingredients.

"Oh?" Rys said, suddenly. "Byleri, why have you stopped cooking?"

"Fweh?!" Byleri exclaimed, hastily returning to her work. "A-Ah! Y-Yes, ma'am! I'm, like, totally sorry!"

"There's no need to rush, you know," Rys told her. "In fact, you can injure yourself by moving too quickly in the kitchen."

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" Byleri repeated, putting down the knife for a moment and taking a deep breath. Only when she was sure she had calmed down sufficiently did she pick the knife back up.

Rys nodded, satisfied. *Good, now Byleri is less likely to wind up hurting herself,* she thought. *As the wife of Lord Flio, the head of this house, it is my duty to mind the underlings!*

Rys was a great champion of the lupine demons, a people known for their powerful sense of pack solidarity. Rys made it her concern to look after not only her children, but everyone living in the house and its attendant settlements.

As the two labored in the kitchen, Charun entered the room wearing her usual maid's outfit. "Good morning, Madame Rys, Miss Byleri," she said.

"Good morning, Charun," said Rys. "Are you here to help us with breakfast?"

"Yes," Charun said with a deep formal bow as she stepped into the kitchen proper. "Please allow me to be of assistance." She retrieved the magic box containing her stockpile of tea leaves, and began preparing her vessels for the proper brewing of tea.

Charun, of course, was always on tea duty in Flio's house.



At the same time as Rys, Byleri and Charun were preparing breakfast, Flio and Elinàsze were speaking with each other inside Elinàsze's extradimensional laboratory.

"You know," Flio said, "Hiya told me that you created this space outside of the world of Klyrode itself."

"That's right," Elinàsze replied with a smile. "I'm still experimenting to see what works and what doesn't, but I've learned how to expand the space indefinitely." When Elinàsze was engrossed in her research, she came across as cold and without emotion, often working in complete silence. Now, however, she was with Flio, her beloved papa. She sidled up beside him, smiling without restraint. "Now then," she said, leading Flio into a new room she had only recently added to her laboratory. "There's something I wanted to show you, papa."

Inside the room was an enormous golem.

"Elinàsze..." Flio said. "Is this golem...?"

"That's right!" Elinàsze said. "It's one of the golems the Diabolists used at the Oldwass College of Magic! It ended up here one way or another during my conversation with Miss Gelado." To punctuate the statement, she winked



impishly and stuck out her tongue.

*She couldn't have gotten her hands on a golem like this just by talking, could she?* Flio thought, a complicated expression on his face. *Come to think of it, I wonder what happened to Miss Gelado after we left. She wasn't listed among the people we handed over to the Oldwass College of Magic, and when I asked Hiya about it, they just dodged the question. She couldn't have ended up involved with that "training" of theirs, could she...?*

"Papa?" Elinàsze said. "Is something the matter?"

"A-Ah, excuse me!" Flio said. "I just have a couple of things on my mind..."

"Well," said Elinàsze. "For now, I'd like you to listen to what I have to say." Smiling brightly, she produced a magic grimoire and held it out for Flio to see.

"What's the story with this magic grimoire, Elinàsze?" Flio asked.

"It's a copy I made of one I found in the Oldwass College of Magic library," Elinàsze said. "If you look here..." As she spoke, she began leafing rapidly through the pages of the hefty tome.

*Maybe I'm wrong,* Flio thought, lowering his head, *but didn't I see that book in the forbidden shelves in the library?* Flio had spent some time during the trip studying in the library himself, and thought he recognized the book in his daughter's arms.

Finally, Elinàsze found the page she was looking for and pointed it out to Flio.

"Huh?" Flio said, his eyes going wide. "This is..."

The title of the section Elinàsze pointed out to him read, "A Spell For the Artificial Generation of Djinn." Most of the original text, however, was gone. There were characters missing all over the page, making the contents of the section nearly impossible to decipher.

"I've been wondering whether this might just be the spell that was used to create Hiya," Elinàsze said. "What do you think, papa?"

"That's a good question," Flio said. "It certainly seems like it might be possible." He touched his hand to the pages of the book, but alas, there was no sign of his skill Epiphany activating, which allowed him to instantaneously

master any magic he happened to touch.

*I wasn't able to learn it just by touching...* Flio thought, staring at the grimoire.  
*Maybe because too much of the text is missing? Or maybe...*

"Well?" Elinàsze said, beaming with delight as she looked up from beside him.  
"This seems like it might be interesting, doesn't it?"

The two carried on their discussion of magic, up until Rys came to call them to breakfast.

## Afterword

Thank you so much as always for reading this book!

And so, *Level 2 Cheat* has reached volume thirteen. My personal focus this volume was on bringing background characters from previous volumes back into the story. There was the demon merchant who appeared back when Calsi'im was in charge of the Dark Army, characters from Hi Izuru and Indol, and even the Divine Beasts. All in all, this book has familiar faces hidden all throughout its pages. I might suggest taking the opportunity to go back and reread some of the previous volumes. Maybe it will make you enjoy this one all the more!

The section featuring the retired Hero was entirely new to the print version. Perhaps I'll dig more into that setting later on... Of course, there were many episodes drawn from the original web novel, but these two were heavily revised. All told, almost all of this volume ended up being original writing.

This book is coming out at the same time as volume six of the manga adaptation of the story. As the author of the original, I very much hope you enjoy that version as well. And I'm delighted to say that the manga serialization of *Otherworld Izakaya: Sawako's Tale of Seizing Prosperity with Slender Arms* has been well received so far as well!

And finally, I'd like to thank Katagiri for once again providing this book with some truly excellent illustrations, the people from Overlap Novels who helped with the publication and everything else, and every one of you who picked up this book. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

January 2022, Miya Kinojo



# Chillin' in Another World

WITH LV 2

## SUPERCHEAT POWERS

# 13









“Hero  
Gooold-Hair,  
I’m sooo  
happy you’re  
awake! I  
thought you  
were dead  
for suuure!”

“Ts-Tsuya,  
wait!  
You’re  
suffocating  
me!”



# Bonus Short Stories

## Elinàsze's Oopsie

*The following story depicts a discussion that takes place the day after the events of this book.*

◇Houghtow City—Elinàsze's Room(?)◇

Elinàsze stood with her arms folded in a room lined wall-to-wall with bookshelves, packed tight with innumerable magic grimoires. She was perusing one of her texts, which was floating in the air in front of her, the pages turning by magic in response to the movement of her eyes. "I see..." Elinàsze nodded as she read, touching the rim of her large round glasses. "Yes, I do believe this would be a perfect use case for that spell..."

*Knock, knock...*

As Elinàsze read, there came a knock on the door. Instantly, her eyes lit up. "Papa! Come in!" As she turned to face the entrance, she quickly changed the dark-hued and drab outfit she had been wearing during her work into a gorgeous white outfit featuring an elegant skirt with a single wave of her finger. Removing her glasses and placing them in her pocket, she went to open the door.

There on the other side was Flio—just as Elinàsze had surmised. "Hello, Elinàsze," he said. "How did you know it was me?"

"Well, my laboratory is in a whole other world, of course!" Elinàsze replied with a smile as she showed Flio in. "You're the only one who could possibly show up here uninvited."

*That's right...* Flio thought as he glanced over the surrounding shelves. *Come to think of it, didn't Hiya say they were unable to enter this place directly? But I was able to get in with my Teleportation spell...*

"So, papa," Elinàsze said. "What brings you here today?"

“Actually,” Flio began, “the Oldwass College of Magic sent us a message.”

“The Oldwass College of Magic?” Elinàsze cocked her head ever so slightly. Not long ago, she and a small number of her classmates had visited that institution on a short-term exchange study program. “Do they want me for another exchange program, perhaps?”

“Um, well...no. It isn’t that...” After a moment of searching, Flio’s eyes landed on one book in particular among the many tomes in Elinàsze’s laboratory. “So, Elinàsze,” he said. “Didn’t you tell me you made copies of some of the books that the Oldwass College of Magic forbids people from removing from their library?”

“That’s right,” Elinàsze nodded. “What about it?”

“Well apparently, one of the magic grimoires in the library was found to have been replaced with a copy...” Flio reached out, casting a quick spell. The book he had spotted flew off of the shelf, gliding through midair into Flio’s hands. He opened it to find a wax seal on the inside of the cover, testifying that this volume was in fact the original. A knowing smirk crossed his face.

“You know, now that you mention it, I remember the library’s security magic going off when I left. At the time I just dispelled it without giving it any further thought. I suppose I must have taken one of the originals by mistake. Oopsie!” Elinàsze said, playfully sticking out her tongue.

*I thought the library’s security magic was supposed to be pretty tight... Flio thought as he looked over at his daughter’s expression of innocent mischief. I guess Elinàsze was able to dispel it without anyone noticing...*

“So, papa!” Elinàsze said, a distinct sparkle in her eyes. “Would you like for me to accompany you when you go to the Oldwass College of Magic to return the book?” *That way I can spend a whole day with my papa!*

Flio cast another quick spell. The magic grimoire shone with light and promptly vanished, a new one appearing in its place. “No need,” he said, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “I already made the exchange.”

“Oh...” said Elinàsze, her expression visibly darkening. *Leave it to papa to switch out the book all the way from another world... she thought. But... But I*



*really thought I'd have a chance for a daddy-daughter date...*

Flio couldn't help from looking just a bit amused at Elinàsze's disappointed reaction.

## Elinàsze in Anguish

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Belano was confused.

She was sitting at the living room table after dinner, enjoying a cup of Charun's tea. Elinàsze was sitting across from her, nominally doing the same, but for some reason she was sitting completely still, holding the Hi Izuran teacup without taking a drink. Plus, her eyes had been focused on Belano for a while now.

*Sh-She isn't looking at my face, though...* Belano thought. *She's looking at something lower than that, I think...* Distressed, she took a sip of tea, only to see Elinàsze's eyes flicker slightly, moving to follow the cup. *W-Wait...* Belano thought. *Is it just me, or are her eyes moving every time my hands are...?* Unable to tell what Elinàsze could possibly be thinking, Belano could do nothing but sit there as her confusion mounted.

"Oh, Belano," Flio said, stepping up beside her and interrupting her thoughts. "How's the new magic ring treating you?"

Belano, as it happened, was born with only a small amount of magic power in her body. In order to increase her volume of magic, Flio had designed a training regimen for her that involved wearing a number of magic rings of his own creation. Even as they spoke, the fingers of both her hands were covered in an astonishing number of gems—only her thumbs were free of such decoration.

"A-Ah!" Belano said. "W-Well, I did feel a little unwell at first, but I think I've mostly gotten used to it..."

"The new one should increase your magic power further above what you're used to," Flio said, smiling as usual. "Keep it up, but don't push yourself past your limits, okay?"

“Th-Thank you very much...” said Belano. “I’ll do my best...”

Belano idolized Flio as something of a surrogate for the father and older brother she lost in the war with the Dark Army. Needless to say, receiving such words of praise and encouragement from him put a great big smile on Belano’s face.

Elinàsze watched the exchange with conflict in her eyes. *All those rings Miss Belano is wearing...* she thought, keeping her expression completely neutral as she stared at the rings on Belano’s fingers. *I know they’re only training to help her increase her magic reserves—intellectually, I know that...* Elinàsze clenched her teeth together tight in an unconscious gesture of frustration. *But even if it’s only for training...it makes me just miserably jealous to see her receive new rings from papa so often!*

To Elinàsze, who loved her father more than anything in the world, it would be simply impossible for her not to envy Belano for the rings Flio gifted her on a regular basis.

*I could ask for help with my own training...* Elinàsze thought. *But there’s no need to increase my magic reserves at all, is there...? I wonder... Is there any way I could convince papa to give me rings like that?*

## The Guardians of Rynàsze’s Slumber

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

In the living room on the first floor of Flio’s house was an enormous table big enough for all the residents of the building to sit at together. Further back, in a carpeted area by the window, stood a large hutch. This hutch was home to Flio’s pet Sybe and his family.

It was early in the morning, before the sun had risen, and Sybe’s family were sound asleep in their hutch just like always. Sybe was in his psychobear form, lying flat on his back and snoring away. Shebe, his unicorn rabbit wife, and their children Sube, Sebe, and Sobe were all asleep on top of his belly, with Rynàsze nestled up in the middle. She was lying face down in Sybe’s fur, sleeping very comfortably. Rynàsze had her own bedroom on the second floor, but she loved

Sybe and his family very dearly and ended up falling asleep like this more often than not.

“Mrrrh...” Rylnàsze adjusted ever so slightly in her sleep, and settled in once again.

Just then, a magic beast’s head came poking into the entrance of the hutch—Leonorna. *Mwa ha ha...* he thought. *Little Rylnàsze looks so peaceful when she’s sleeping!* The lion licked his lips as he tiptoed into the hutch itself.

Leonorna was by all accounts worshiped as a Divine Beast in some faraway world, but due to his excessive fondness for women of all species he had been exiled to the subterranean world of Dogorogma. All in all, he was a magic beast with a very shady past.

*Today’s the day, I just know it!* Leonorna thought, a stupid smile on his face as he crept step-by-step up to where Rylnàsze was sleeping. *Today’s the day I sleep cuddled up to my darling Rylnàsze, as thanks to her for taking me in!*

Suddenly, however, Leonorna felt something pulling at his tail from behind. “Whaha?!” he exclaimed, his eyes opening wide in surprise as his whole body was hoisted forcefully out of the hutch and into the air. There, before his eyes, he could see the menacing visage of Tybe pressing close to his face. “M-My...” he said. “If it isn’t Tybe!” *Oh no! Tybe might be young, but he’s still a Bear of Misfortune! Even for a Divine Beast like myself, he might be a little too hot to handle...*

Tybe glared angrily at Leonorna as the lion dangled by his tail. It was clear he understood perfectly well what Leonorna had been trying to do.

“O-Oh, well, you see...” Leonorna said, floundering for some kind of adequate excuse. “Th-There’s a perfectly innocent explanation for all of this, I assure you...”

At that point, Leonorna sensed a telepathic voice coming from below. “So,” Grimby said with a sigh, placing his colorful wings on his hips. *“Once again you’ve come to disturb Rylnàsze’s precious beauty sleep. I suppose you haven’t learned your lesson then, you incorrigible bastard...”* All around him were the other magic beasts who served as Rylnàsze’s playmates.

*Geh!* Leonorna thought, his face rapidly losing color as he understood the situation he was in. *The Divine Beast Grimby spotted me! A-And he's brought quite a number of formidable magic beasts...*

*"We'll wake Rynàsze if we do this here,"* Grimby said. *"So let's continue our discussion elsewhere."* With one wave of his wings, the magic beasts surrounding Leonorna vanished. A moment later, there came a sound from somewhere far off. It sounded something like Leonorna's screams.

Rynàsze, however, kept on sleeping as peacefully as ever.

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Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers: Volume 13

by Miya Kinojo

Translated by Meteora Edited by Samantha J. Moore

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