

Chillin' in Another World

WITH LV 2

SUPER CHEAT POWERS



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

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16

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Contents

➡ Chapter 1 ∞ Flio Fixes the Sky	
➡ Chapter 2 ∞ "I'm His Wife, After All!"	
➡ Chapter 3 ∞ Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought	
➡ Chapter 4 ∞ Castle Celestia	
➡ ∞ Epilogue	
➡ Side Story ∞ Everyone's Morrow Part 16	

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Characters

Chillin' in Another World with
Level 2 Super Cheat Powers



Flio

Former Hero Candidate and
General Store Proprietor.



Rys

Flio's wife, a lupine demon.



Wyne (Human Form)

Freeloader with high stats
and a big appetite.



Levana

Child of the
proud leviathans.



Garyl

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



Elinàsze

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



Rynàsze

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



Ben'ne

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

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Super Cheat Powers

Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
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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.



Sleip (Human Form)

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



Byleri

Former archer of Klyrode
living in sin with Sleip.



Rislei

Sleip and Byleri's daughter.



Ura

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



Blossom

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



Kora

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



Greanyl

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

Super Cheat Powers



Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers



Ellie (The Maiden Queen)

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



Leusoc (Second Princess)

Laid back princess who handles foreign diplomacy.



Swann (Third Princess)

Bright-eyed princess who handles domestic affairs.



Telbyress

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



Tanya (Disciple of the Celestial Plane)

An amnesiac maid who showed up uninvited.



Zofina (Disciple of the Celestial Plane)

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



Calsi'im

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



Charun

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



Rabbitz

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



Sybe (Unicorn Rabbit Form)

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



Shebe

Unicorn Rabbit who became Sybe's 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.

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers

Super Cheat Power

Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers



Hero Gold-Hair

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



Tsuya

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



Valentine

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



Aryun Keats

Member of the rare carriage
djinn species, but her magic



Wuha Gappoli

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



Dawkson

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



Phufun

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



Belianna

A foulmouthed devil
who loves her little sister.



Irystiel

Garyl's classmate and
Belianna's little sister.



Salina

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



The Shadow King

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

Chillin' in Another World
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Super Cheat Powers

ATK.....∞
DEF.....∞
AGI.....∞
MP.....∞
HP.....∞

Chapter 1: Flio Fixes the Sky

The world of Klyrode is a world of sword and sorcery, home to magic beasts and demihumans of all shapes and sizes. In this world, humans and demons had waged war since time immemorial, until the greatest of the human kingdoms, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, signed a treaty with the Dark Army, the single largest organization among demonkind, putting an end to the conflict and ushering in an age of lasting peace.

Klyrode, however, is only one of the many planetoid worlds orbiting a stationary pole, each protected from the cosmos outside by a magic barrier, spherical in shape. In a shocking event, unprecedented in the records of the Celestial Plane, the barrier surrounding the world of Klyrode has been damaged. The goddess responsible for overseeing Klyrode has dispatched her subordinates, the angelic Disciples of the Celestial Plane, ordering them to repair the barrier with all haste. Meanwhile, the humans and demons of Klyrode carry on with their peaceful lives, ignorant of such affairs.

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



Unlike our own world, the world of Klyrode is one where the sun and stars rotate around the planetoid body, not the other way around. The inhabited part of the world lies atop a massive continental shelf situated in the middle of a spherical firmament, atop which one could find its vast land masses and expansive seas.

In theory, a spellcaster using the Fly spell or one of the many magic beasts capable of flight would eventually be able to reach the firmament itself, except for the Proximity Rejection spell cast on the barrier, making it so that anyone who came close would simply find themselves in an endless expanse of atmosphere. It was arranged such that no matter how far one flew, they would never approach the barrier itself. The only way to get through would be to nullify the Proximity Rejection spell itself—a feat only possible through the use

of Celestial Magic.

Celestial Magic, however, was the purview of Celestials. Only the Disciples of the Celestial Plane and their superiors, the ones who oversaw the management of the planetoid worlds could use it, aside from a vanishingly small number of individuals who had learned it by other means.

High up in the sky, on the outside of the barrier above the world of Klyrode, Flio and Elinàsze looked down on the land below.

Flio had mistakenly been given the divine blessings meant for two people when he had first been summoned to the world of Klyrode, granting him many powerful abilities including the spell Epiphany, which let him instantaneously master any magic system with which he came into contact. He and his daughter Elinàsze, who had inherited his abilities, were the only two residents of the world of Klyrode capable of using Celestial Magic, and therefore the only ones able to nullify the Proximity Rejection spell and approach the firmament itself.

“It’s quite something looking down on the world from so high up, isn’t it?” Elinàsze marveled as she gazed down at the continent of Klyrode far below. “Even Houghtow City is too small to make out from this far away!”

Elinàsze—daughter of Flio and Rys, and Garyl’s older twin. A serious-minded individual devoted to magical research, although her adoration for her father Flio could only be described as pathological. Recently, she had been spending every spare moment she had either gathering magic grimoires or studying her collection to implement the spells contained therein.

As the two of them flew above the firmament around the world of Klyrode, the jewel on Elinàsze’s forehead shone brightly, a sign that she had released the full power of her magic. Thanks to the double blessing he had inadvertently received, Flio’s abilities all shot up higher than the upper limit of his status window to display the moment he reached Level 2, and he instantaneously mastered every skill and spell that existed in the world of Klyrode. His daughter Elinàsze had inherited his abilities, giving her an aptitude for magic far beyond what a resident of a planetoid world could ordinarily attain, and it was all concentrated in the gem on her forehead.

Elinàsze floated in the air with her arms outstretched, a compound magic circle of impossible complexity spreading out before her hands. As she cast her spell, the color of the gem on her forehead changed, taking on a golden hue. Stretching out ahead of her was the damaged portion of Klyrode's firmament. Her magic was working to mend the cracks, but the scale of the damage was vast.

"It is quite something, that's for sure," Flio agreed, giving his daughter one of his famous easygoing smiles as he floated in the air next to her, conjuring a similar magic circle in front of his own outstretched arms as he too expended his magic to repair the damage. "We don't ordinarily get to see the magic barrier around Klyrode from the outside, do we?"

Flio—a former merchant from another world summoned as a candidate for the position of Hero. The blessing he received on his summoning gave him mastery over every skill and every spell to exist in the world of Klyrode. Together with his wife Rys, a former soldier in the Dark Army, he spent his days working as manager of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

"You really are incredible, papa," Elinàsze said, an adoring expression coming over her face as she turned to look in her father's direction. "I can't believe your magic was able to take us outside the firmament of Klyrode! Meanwhile, the most I can do is open a portal to the underground world Dogorogma. Really, incredible is the only word for it..." A distinct flush rose to her cheeks as she spoke. Elinàsze, after all, truly took being a daddy's girl to an unhealthy degree.

"Hey, now!" Flio said, wincing awkwardly at his daughter's overbearing affection. "Opening a portal to Dogorogma is pretty incredible in its own right!"

"Not at all!" Elinàsze insisted. "From what Uncle Ghozal told me, a portal to Dogorogma should be relatively easy..."

"M-Miss Elinàsze!" chided Zofina, flying up from behind Flio and Elinàsze and placing a finger to her lips to urge her not to say anything further. "Please do exercise caution in speaking of such things," she said. "Ordinarily, only a Celestial would be capable of opening a portal to Dogorogma in the Subaltern Plane. I would rather it not become common knowledge on the Celestial Plane that certain residents of planetoid worlds are capable of using such magic

themselves...”

Zofina—an angel and Disciple of the Celestial Plane subordinate to the goddess in charge of the planetoid world Klyrode. Ordinarily she appeared as a woman dressed in white robes, except for when she took on the role of Contract Executor, the enforcer of Blood Oath Contracts, in which case she would take a form that was half young maiden and half skeleton, dressed in a worn and tattered cloak. At this moment, it was the former appearance with which she presented herself. She was quite fond of a particular eatery she discovered in the last world she had been assigned and liked to stop there between missions whenever she was able.

“I believe I’ve told you as much before, but your father Mister Flio’s ability to open a portal to Dogorogma is regarded by the Celestial Plane as a special case,” Zofina continued with a distinct sense of frantic urgency, bringing her face up close to whisper in Elinàsze’s ear. “The fact that you, too, are able to accomplish this feat is confidential information known only to a select few. Residents of planetoid worlds aren’t meant to be able to open portals to other worlds at all, you know. If the other Celestials found out that there were two of you, it could be the cause of all sorts of problems.” She glanced conspiratorially over at a spot some distance away, where a number of other Celestials were working along with them to repair the damage to the magic barrier.



“Oh, that’s right!” said Elinàsze, startled back to her senses by Zofina’s words. “I’m very sorry! Tee hee!” she added, cocking her head and sticking out her tongue.

Zofina smiled a tight lipped smile and let out a sigh. *Of course*, she thought, *last I heard, the mages Bathea and Stellamh from planetoid world Palma have been creating portals to other worlds whenever it strikes their fancy and causing no end of trouble. Mister Flio and Miss Elinàsze, on the other hand, always make sure to abide by the rules and ask for permission before doing anything like this. Really, I suppose I should be grateful...*

“By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask...” said Flio, glancing over at Zofina and Elinàsze as the two finished their whispered conversation. “The part of the barrier that was broken was on the underside of the world, wasn’t it? Why is it that the half up here is falling apart too?” He looked down at the world of Klyrode, the landmasses stretching out beneath them, testifying to the fact that they were, indeed, near the upper half of the spherical barrier.

“That’s a good point,” Elinàsze said, folding her arms and inclining her head in thought. “It was the lower part of the sphere that was destroyed, from the shock when Levana and the Hydrana fragment fell through the bottom of the world, wasn’t it? And didn’t I hear that they had already finished repairing that portion just the other day?”

“Y-Yes... About that...” said Zofina, suddenly seeming uncomfortable with the line of questioning. “As you say, Miss Elinàsze, we were able to repair the bottom part of the magic barrier that suffered the initial damage without incident. In the process, however, it seems one of the people we recruited to help with the repairs had a bit of an accident...”

“An accident?” Flio and Elinàsze both asked, remarkably in sync.

“Ah... Well, you see...” Zofina hemmed and hawed before heaving a heavy sigh and continuing, “This is far from the only planetoid world, you know, and the Celestial Plane is always short-staffed. At first, I was the only angel they could spare for the repairs to Klyrode’s firmament. I thought it would be best to enlist the help of another of the world’s residents...”

◇Meanwhile—Houghtow City, the Goblin Cottage on Blossom Acres◇

“Bwaaah...chooo!!!” In a room in the cottage where Hokh’hokton the goblin lived, on the farm known as Blossom Acres, Telbyress suddenly let out a powerful sneeze.

Telbyress—formerly a goddess of the Celestial Plane, stripped of her position and banished for neglecting her duties. Currently she was living in Hokh’hokton’s cottage, without having ever obtained permission from the goblin himself. She was meant to be helping out with the farm, but between her rampant alcoholism and bone-deep aversion to any kind of work, she found herself at the receiving end of Hokh’hokton’s temper more often than not.

“Ugwah!” Hokh’hokton exclaimed, at first startled by the noise and then scrunching up his face in annoyance. “How many times have I told you?! Cover your mouth when you sneeze, you buffoon! You’re getting your snot everywhere!” he snapped, smacking Telbyress with his fist as the fallen goddess rubbed her runny nose.

Hokh’hokton—a goblin who once served as a foot soldier in the Dark Army. At present he was a full-time employee of Blossom Acres, and he well and truly put his spirit into the farmwork. Unfortunately, he had found himself saddled with the responsibility of looking after Telbyress...

“Ah ha ha!” Telbyress said, laughing off Hokh’hokton’s punch. “I wonder if someone out there is spreading gossip about me...” Then, seemingly without a care in the world, she brought her handkerchief to her nose and blew it with a loud “*Snrrrrrrrrfk!!!*”

“Of course they are!” Hokh’hokton barked. “The Celestials in their magnanimity gave you another chance at the job, and you made a mess of the whole thing! If only you had done your work properly, they might have let you back into the Celestial Plane, but you can’t do anything right, can you?” Pressing his head to his hands, Hokh’hokton breathed out a deep sigh.

“Ah ha ha! Oh, well! We got the repairs to the bottom half done, so what’s the big deal?” Telbyress laughed again, dismissing it with a wave of her hand. “Still though, I can’t believe the upper part of the firmament is the one that needs repairs now! Who would have thought, huh?”

“Now hang on just one minute, Telbyress!” The doors to Hokh’hokton’s

cottage swung open and in stepped Blossom, her arms crossed, glaring daggers at Telbyress.

Blossom—originally a heavy knight from a knightly company in service to Klyrode Castle who had since quit the knighthood and taken up lodgings at Flio's house. The best friend of the company leader, Balirossa. Blossom came from a family of farmers and excelled at all agricultural skills, which she now put to work as manager of the vast acres of farmland located on Flio's property.

Telbyress flinched and staggered back at the sight of the anger in Blossom's face. "H-Huh? M-Madame Blossom? Wh-What's gotten you all worked up?"

"What's got me all worked up, you say?" Blossom replied, stomping on into the cottage and bringing her face right up close to the fallen goddess's. "Whose fault do you think it is that Mister Flio and Elinàsze are up there in the sky right now fixing all that damage to the barrier? The whole firmament is caving in on itself because you cut corners on your job the first time around!"

"M-Madame Blossom..." Telbyress pleaded, smiling as sweetly as she could manage in spite of the sudden tension in her face and the cold sweat running down her forehead. "Th-There's no need to get angry about it, is there?"

"Really," Blossom continued, "*you* should be the one taking responsibility and heading back up there to fix what you broke, but Miss Zofina said she couldn't trust you with the job and got Mister Flio to help out in your place, since he can use Celestial Magic and all. You promised to work twice as hard as you had been down here on the farm in exchange, remember?"

"U-Um..." Telbyress stammered. "I, well..."

"And yet, it had occurred to me that I'd seen neither hide nor hair of you for a while now!" said Blossom. "I had a feeling, and lo and behold, you'd up and gone back home!"

"You did *what?!* " Hokh'hokton bellowed, turning to face the no-gooddess. "Telbyress! You told me just now that Madame Blossom had given you the day off!"

"U-Um... Well... You see..." Telbyress said, grasping for an explanation.

"The day off?!" said Blossom. "I most certainly said no such thing!"

Blossom and Hokh'hokton both brought their faces perilously close to Telbyress, each giving her an earful in turn.

"Y-You didn't?" said Telbyress, retreating further backwards with her forced smile still plastered on her face. "Th-That's funny... I could have sworn you told me something like that..." Then, a moment later, her expression suddenly changed. "Ah ha ha... Well, sorry!" she said, turning around and running at top speed for the window in the back of the room.

"Hey! Telbyress! Stop!" demanded Blossom.

"I'm so terribly sorry!" Telbyress called back as she jumped up on the windowsill and outside the cottage. "I just remembered some urgent business I gotta take care of!"

As soon as her feet touched down on the ground outside, however, Telbyress was greeted by the sight of an enormous fist headed straight her way. "Hyaaaaaaah?!" she screamed, taken aback, only for the fist to stop short a hair's breadth away from making contact with her face. Then, she saw who the fist belonged to. It was Kora, who had been waiting outside the window while Blossom went inside the cottage.

Kora—only daughter of Ura, chief of the nearby oni village, Kora was a hybrid child born to a fairy folk mother and had inherited her father's oni blood. She was an intensely shy and self-conscious girl but had opened her heart to the members of Flio's household to a large extent and particularly adored Blossom, her adopted mom.

Kora was a little girl, but she had enlarged just her right arm as she swung her fist, pretending like she was about to clobber Telbyress. "Don't make problems for mom..." she muttered quietly, fixing the fallen goddess with an icy glare.

"I-I-I won't!!!" Telbyress wailed, tears streaming down her face as she pressed herself up against the wall in fear of the little girl in front of her.

"Right then," said Blossom, grabbing Telbyress by the back of her dress's collar. "Let's get back to work, shall we?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am..." said Telbyress, as Blossom dragged her away from the cottage.

◇Back Above the Firmament of Klyrode◇

“I thought that since Telbyress happened to reside in this world I might enlist her help in repairing the damage to the barrier. Depending on how she performed, I was even considering using this as a test to determine whether she should be granted leave to return to the Celestial Plane. But instead, she had the absolute gall to decide she would rather not *exert* herself by using her magic power. Instead, she merely *pretended* to repair the barrier and instead simply stretched out the undamaged portion of the firmament to create a shoddy patch over the hole. As a result, the whole barrier became too thin to sustain itself and began to fall apart...” Zofina sighed deeply and shook her head as she finished recounting the tale.

“I’m so very sorry,” Flio said with a grimace. “I had no idea Telbyress was behaving so badly on the job.”

“Oh, no, no!” Zofina hastened to reassure him. “*You* certainly haven’t done anything wrong, Mister Flio. It’s all the fault of that erstwhile failure of a goddess.”

“I appreciate you saying so,” Flio replied. “But we’re the ones who have been looking after Telbyress while she’s staying in the world of Klyrode. Her misconduct reflects on us, her caretakers, as well. And besides, the reason the firmament was damaged in the first place had to do with Levana, a member of our household. It’s only appropriate for me to take responsibility for any problems our family might have caused.”

The initial damage to the lower part of the firmament had come when a magically enlarged fragment of Hydrana, the Beast of Annihilation, had fallen through a hole in the bottom of the continental shelf together with Levana in her full leviathan form, crashing all the way through to the underground world Dogorogma far below.

It bears mentioning that Hero Gold-Hair and his party played a large part in what happened that day as well...but no one present was aware of that particular group’s involvement in the situation.

“I do appreciate the sentiment...” Zofina said, a complicated look on her face as she turned to look Flio’s way. “Nonetheless, she was given the job at the

request of the Celestial Plane, on the basis of my own personal recommendation. I can't help but feel that I bear the brunt of the responsibility here..." Flio had not stopped working his magic throughout the whole conversation, repairing the firmament at a remarkable pace.

"Not at all!" Flio insisted. "The Celestial Plane is always short-staffed on account of the sheer number of planetoid worlds they have to manage, right? I just hope we've been a bit of help in the grand scheme of things. Although..." Here, Flio turned to give Zofina one of his trademark easygoing smiles. "We certainly wouldn't mind permission for a jaunt to Dogorogma, in exchange."

"A-Ah, yes, of course..." Zofina said, returning the smile albeit with a certain undeniable stiffness to her expression.

The underground world Dogorogma lay below the space occupied by the many planetoid worlds, the bottommost stratum of the worlds under the purview of the Celestial Plane. Owing to its special place in the cosmos, it was directly governed by the goddesses of the Celestial Plane themselves. It served as a place the goddesses would relocate and preserve plants and animals from planetoid worlds whose lifespans had run their course, as well as a prison for the powerful Beasts of Disaster. As it was home to many living things that could fetch a ludicrous price in the right world, even Celestials required official permission before paying a visit to Dogorogma.

Flio, who had mastered Celestial-tier synthesis magic thanks to his spell Epiphany, was able to create a certain medicinal powder that had the effect—among many others—of restoring a youthful luster to even a goddess's skin. Creating medicine like this was a lost art in the Celestial Plane itself. In fact, among all the worlds in this corner of the cosmos, Flio and his daughter Elinàsze were the only two known to be able to accomplish the feat.

We've given them permission on a number of occasions to enter Dogorogma in order to obtain the materials they need to make the medicinal powder from the flesh of the magically powerful Beasts of Disaster that have been sequestered down there—with the tacit understanding that they will be collecting rare herbs and magic beasts while they're in Dogorogma as well... Zofina thought as she smiled awkwardly back at Flio. It really couldn't have been more obvious that her smile wasn't entirely genuine. *But there are some*

goddesses who take a dim view of that sort of exchange. And securing permission for Mister Flio will mean negotiating with their faction as well. Honestly, it's making my stomach feel queasy again just thinking about it.

"Come now, Miss Zofina," Elinàsze said, looking up from her own work repairing the barrier. "Papa and I have been careful to follow the proper channels and only enter Dogorogma after we've obtained permission, haven't we? We have every intention of following the Celestial Plane's rules, you know. I certainly don't see any need for you to look so distressed about the prospect."

"Y-Yes... You're right, of course..." Zofina said, lowering her head in thought. Miss Elinàsze isn't wrong... she thought. Especially compared to some people from other worlds I could mention, such as the witch Stellamh, who keeps entering Dogorogma to collect herbs whenever she pleases, no matter what we tell her. And because her own magic power happens to be on par with your average Celestial, she's able to nullify the spells we cast to keep track of her comings and goings. Mister Flio and Miss Elinàsze certainly would have no trouble doing the same if they were so inclined. I suppose I should be grateful that they've been so cooperative with our procedures...

Just then, however, another thought struck Zofina. "Miss Elinàsze," she said. "Could I perhaps ask you about something unrelated?"

"Yes? What is it?" Elinàsze asked.

"Dogorogma aside, you haven't visited other planetoid worlds by any chance, have you?"

"Hm?" Elinàsze replied innocently. "Whyever do you ask?"

"Well..." Zofina began. "It's just that I've received reports that the Celestial Plane has discovered signs that someone has been traveling through this area of the cosmos..."

"I see..." Elinàsze said. "Well, I can't say I've been traveling to any other planetoid worlds myself. Personally, I'd be inclined to think it's someone from another world visiting Klyrode—especially with the barrier around the firmament damaged like this." She smiled disarmingly, as if to forestall any further questions. "And on that note, perhaps we should hurry up and finish these repairs, to prevent something like that from happening again!"

“Y-Yes, you are correct, of course...” Zofina said, utterly overpowered by the force of Elinàsze’s argument. It was all she could do to nod meekly in response.

Flio, however, seemed to remember something as he watched the exchange out of the corner of his eye. *You know...* he thought. *There are times I can’t sense Elinàsze’s presence, even when there’s no sign of her using any sort of concealment magic. She can’t be... Can she?* He cocked his head slightly, studying Elinàsze’s face for a long moment.

“Yes, papa?” said Elinàsze, noticing her father looking her way and beaming brightly. “I haven’t got something on my face, have I?”

“O-Oh! No, it’s nothing! Don’t mind me!” Flio said. *R-Really...* he thought, a tight-lipped grimace on his face as he looked back towards his work repairing the firmament. *There’s no way...right?*

Of course, it’s the Celestial Plane I’ve been visiting, not any planetoid world... Elinàsze thought as she glanced back over at Flio. *So technically, I haven’t lied about anything!*

Fortunately for Elinàsze, no one in the vicinity noticed her sticking out her tongue in an impish expression of triumph.

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

It was another busy day in Houghtow City, with streets packed full from the area around the Fli-o’-Rys General Store just outside the city proper all the way on to the rest of town. The store itself was no less packed full of customers. Many there had boarded an Enchanted Frigate bound for Houghtow City at one of the many boarding towers Flio had built throughout the land in search of their quality selection of magic items, arcane implements, and other sundries.

Inside the store, Uliminas heaved a heavy sigh.

Uliminas—a hellcat known as Ghozal’s confederate during his time as Dark One. When Ghozal had abdicated his throne, she took her leave of the Dark Army as well, and now worked at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store under the guise of a demihuman. Now she was one of his two wives and the mother of Folmina.

“It’s been day after day of this...” Uliminas complained, scratching her head as she glanced over a stack of papers. “I’m as happy business is booming as

anymeown, but we just don't have the paws for this..."

"What's that?" said Balirossa, turning to look Uliminas's direction as she passed by, carrying a large wooden crate. She was dressed in her usual style, reminiscent of her time as a knight, albeit with a staff apron on top of her clothes. "We're still short on staff, even with everyone we have helping? In my estimation, Snow Little has been performing commendably in the short time she's been working with us."

Balirossa—a former knight from a company in service to Klyrode Castle. She had since left the knighthood behind and now lived at Flio's house, working for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. One of Ghozal's two wives and the mother of Ghoros.

Behind Balirossa, wearing an identical apron to hers albeit paired with a dress, Snow Little happily bobbed her head.

Snow Little—Garyl's former classmate. As one of the few remaining members of the fable folk, she had a natural talent for summoning magic. Like many of Garyl's old classmates, she harbored romantic feelings for the boy. After her graduation from the Houghtow College of Magic, she had found work at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

"I-I'm certainly doing my best!" Snow Little chirped. She was carrying a box like Balirossa of course—as were the fairy-tale dwarves she had summoned with her magic. "Please do let me know if there's anything at all I can do to help!" Behind her, the dwarves all nodded in unison.

"Don't worry, the stocking team is in good shape thanks to meowll of meowr efforts," Uliminas said, smacking the stack of documents in her hand with a rueful grimace. "What we need *now* is meowr people to handle employee compensation!"

"I-I'm terribly sorry..." Balirossa said, her expression stiffening. "I'm afraid the level of mathematics employed by this store is somewhat beyond me. While you were in math class, I studied the blade..."

"It's beyond me as well..." Snow Little agreed, smiling apologetically. "Although if you want me to read any tales for you, I *am* quite good at that."

“Hey, no need to beat meowrself up about it,” Uliminas counseled the two of them with a smile. “There’s some complicated figures involved in our papurrwork, after all.” *It would be one thing if it was just sales and purrchases by the general store itself, she thought. But we also have to worry about meowgic beast rental fees, opurrational expenses for the meowgic beast racing hall, venue fees from meowr other locations, which can be entirely different sums from region to region... Not to mention all the different expenses involved in running Blossom Acres... Fwaaah... The meowre I think about it, the worse my headache gets...*

Uliminas found her eyes drawn to the sky outside the window, stretching out vast and blue into the distance. *Mewster Flio’s been a meowrchant his whole life. He knows how to make a whole meowntain of accounting papurrwork vanish in a flash. But right now, he’s up there above the skies, helping out the Celestial Plane. In the meantime, I’ve gotta find someone who can pick up the slack!* She sighed and turned her gaze back into the shop, stealing a glance at a flyer posted up on one of the walls: “Now Hiring! Especially Seeking Personnel Proficient in Mathematics!”

“Still...” she said, looking back out the window once again. “Is the furmament really falling apart? The sky looks the same as usual from down here...”

“Ah, yes...” said Hiya, appearing behind Uliminas as the hellcat stood in thought.

Hiya—the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness. Although they possessed enough magic power to destroy the world of Klyrode in its entirety, even that wasn’t enough to prevent them from losing to Flio. Ever since then, they took to living in Flio’s house, worshipping him as the so-called Exalted One.

“That is because of the Celestial spell Proximity Rejection cast on the world-facing side of the magic barrier comprising the firmament,” Hiya explained. “From our vantage point, that magic makes it appear as if there is nothing above us but endless sky. If it weren’t in place, any magic user capable of casting the spell Fly or any magic beast with the power of flight could reach the firmament in theory. Proximity Rejection makes it so that anything that approaches beyond a certain distance will be sent backwards a set length

without any awareness of the physical shift occurring, effectively sending them through an endless loop.”

“And not even mew could break through that barrier, Hiya?” Uliminas asked.

“Alas, I could not. I am able to use every magic that originates within the world of Klyrode, but I can cast nothing that would allow me to avoid the effect of Celestial Magic and reach the firmament itself. Only one who has mastered Celestial Magic could achieve such a feat, and on our world there are only four—the Exalted One Mister Flio himself and his esteemed daughter Miss Elinàsze, who inherited her father’s affinities, as well Telbyress and Tanya, our two former residents of the Celestial Plane. As an aside, the Exalted One’s other children, Sir Garyl and Miss Rynàsze, seem to have inherited their affinities more strongly from the side of their mother, Madame Rys...”

Hiya concluded their explanation with a dignified bow before pressing their finger to their lower lip as something else suddenly occurred to them. “Ah, I forgot. There is one other being in this world capable of using Celestial Magic—a beast, in this case...” they said, looking up out the window themselves.

“Mreowr?” Uliminas asked as she, Balirossa, and Snow Little all turned to follow the djinn’s gaze...



“Hm...” Flio said, folding his arms as he looked all around the area. “Looks like this part of the barrier has mostly been fixed.”

“Yes, I would say so, papa!” Elinàsze agreed with a satisfied nod, hands on her hips as she scanned the area from behind her father.

“Papa! Big sis Elinàsze!” Just then, Flio and Elinàsze heard a girl’s voice coming towards them from down below. A moment later, it was joined by a second.

“My lord husband! Elinàsze!”

Flio looked down to see a magic beast with a flowing golden mane, four legs, and a great pair of wings rising up from the ground below, coming towards them with astonishing speed. On its back, he could see his daughter Rynàsze and his wife Rys.

Rylnàsze—the youngest child of Flio and Rys. She was born with an exceptional potential as a tamer and an uncanny ability to befriend magic beasts. She had been putting her talents to good use looking after the magic beasts at the Houghtow College of Magic, where she now attended classes.

Rys—a lupine demon warrior, formerly of the Dark Army. After her defeat at the hands of Flio, Rys made the decision to walk alongside him as his wife. She had an endless amount of adoration for Flio and was something of a mother figure for everyone living at his house.

Rys stood up from her position astride the magic beast's back, grinning from ear to ear as she held the large picnic basket in her arms up above her head. "I've brought lunch!" she said. "Are you about ready to take a break from work?"

"Hold on..." said Zofina. "Shouldn't it be impossible for residents of a planetoid world to reach us on the other side of the firmament?" Then her eyes went wide, gawking in disbelief as she got a better look at the magic beast Rys and Rylnàsze were riding. "Th-That magic beast! Could it be?!"

"Oh yes!" Rylnàsze replied, smiling cheerfully as she noticed Zofina looking their way. "This cutie here is Leonorna!"

"L-Leonorna..." Zofina repeated. "No wonder... Of course a Divine Beast can use Celestial Magic..."

The Divine Beast Leonorna—one of the divine beasts meant to oversee the planetoid worlds, Leonorna was sentenced by the goddesses of the Celestial Plane to be banished to the underground world Dogorogma for his womanizing ways, which had been bad enough to throw no few planetoid worlds into chaos. He happened to encounter Flio and his companions during one of their excursions to Dogorogma, and thus, found a new home as one of Rylnàsze's pets.

"There is certainly no need to refer to my humble self by so grand a title as *Divine Beast*," Leonorna said, bowing deeply with excruciating politeness much to the astonishment of a thoroughly befuddled Zofina. "I am nothing more than one of Mistress Rylnàsze's pets."

"E-Excuse me..." Zofina ventured. "Are you not the same Leonorna known for

assaulting just about any women he might happen across, human, demihuman, and magic beast alike?”

“Ha ha! I might have gotten up to some mischief of the sort in the past...” Leonorna said with a good-natured laugh. “But I assure you, I’ve put all that long behind me!”

“Of course you have!” said Rys, grabbing Leonorna firmly by the mane. “And if you ever do it again, I’ll simply have to punish you in the name of my lord husband!” She was smiling as she spoke, but she had transformed the hand gripping Leonorna’s mane into its lupine demon form, a shimmering aura of malicium welling up behind her.

Not to be left out, Shebe the unicorn rabbit hopped down from Rynàsze’s shoulder and began kicking Leonorna squarely on the back with a furious “*Snuffle, snuffle!*”

Shebe—a wild unicorn rabbit who had become close with the family’s pet Sybe. Now she lived at Flio’s house as Sybe’s pair-bonded mate.

Shebe’s children, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, as well as Sybe and Tybe, Rynàsze’s other close magic beast companions, all followed suit, kicking Leonorna on the back as well.

Sybe—originally a wild psychobear who Flio had met in a random encounter. Realizing that he had no hope of victory against the omnipotent merchant, he immediately surrendered and thereafter lived at Flio’s house as a family pet. Most of the time he appeared in the alternate unicorn rabbit form Flio had granted him using his magic.

Sube, Sebe, and Sobe—the children of Sybe and Shebe. Sube and Sobe took after the unicorn rabbit features of their mother, while Sebe had more of a resemblance to their psychobear father.

Tybe—a young Bear of Misfortune cub. He began following Rynàsze like a lost puppy during one of the family’s trips to Dogorogma, and so they brought him back to Klyrode where he now served as one of Rynàsze’s familiars.

“S-Stop it, everyone!” Rynàsze said, frantically waving her arms as the smaller magic beasts kicked and kicked at Leonorna’s back. “Leonorna’s a good boy

now! You have to get along, okay?”

“But you have to admit...” Elinàsze said with a smirk and a shake of the head. “Leonorna was pretty terrible when he first came to the house.”

“He very much was,” Rys agreed, nodding emphatically. “And you know what will happen if you ever do such things again, don’t you?” she asked, fixing Leonorna with a stern look. The gentle and pleasant expression in her eyes was gone, replaced with a glare that looked like it could freeze water into ice.

“I believe he understands after what happened last time,” Elinàsze added, her eyes taking on the same icy coldness as her mother’s in spite of the smile on her face as she looked down at the lion as well. “But if there is a next time, I certainly won’t let him off as easily as I did before.”

“O-O-Of course!” Leonorna gave a very small nod of his head, his whole body trembling with fear. “I swear on every goddess of the Celestial Plane never to do something so despicable ever again!”

Zofina watched from a short distance away. *Wh-What in the world could they have possibly done to frighten that menace of a lion to such an extent?* she wondered, before suddenly something struck her mind. “E-Excuse me... Mister Flio?”

“Yes?” Flio asked. “What is it?”

“I believe I remember reading that you had assumed custody of Leonorna in a report about half a month ago, is that correct?”

“That’s right,” Flio confirmed. “I was told to notify the Celestial Plane whenever we either befriended or defeated an S-rank magic beast, such as a Beast of Disaster or a Divine Beast, after all.”

Zofina lifted her hand and moved it from left to right, summoning a window full of line after line of text. “According to our records, we observed a large-scale earthquake of indeterminate cause in this world approximately half a month ago as well...” she read, curiously tilting her head.

“I wonder what that could have been about!” Flio said with one of his usual easygoing smiles. “But perhaps we should leave it at that for now.”

I-In other words... Zofina thought, her expression growing stiff, most likely whatever punishment they gave to Leonorna was enough to cause a planetoid-scale earthquake...

◇Meanwhile—A Lake Near Houghtow City◇

Outside of Houghtow City, a short ways into the forest by the side of the road leading to Klyrode Castle, was a large freshwater lake where Ghozal was enjoying a leisurely day at the shore.

Ghozal—formerly known as Dark One Gholl until he had abdicated his throne to his younger brother Yuigarde and left to live in the guise of a human freeloading at his best friend Flio’s house. He had two lovely wives: Uliminas, his old confederate from his time as Dark One, and the human swordswoman Balirossa. He was the father of Folmina and Ghorro.

“Hrm!” Ghozal exclaimed. “This place does wonders to heal the heart. Every time I come here, it always makes me feel good and refreshed!” Ghozal was dressed lightly in short pants and a short sleeved shirt, paired with a large straw hat and a fishing rod in his hands, the end of the line bobbing in the lake as he gazed out peacefully at the beautiful expanse in front of him.

“Well said!” Sleip said, nodding his head as he watched, arms folded. “This lake has a way of calming the heart.”

Sleip—a powerful demon known as a lichsteed who served as one of the Dark Army’s Infernal Four back when Ghozal was reigning as Dark One. At present he lived at Flio’s house where he managed the ranch alongside his wife Byleri, whenever he wasn’t participating in the races over at the magic beast racing hall.

“We should be grateful to Mister Flio for making sure we get regular days off to spend time like this with our families,” Sleip said.

“We should,” Ghozal agreed. “Living like this has me thinking I was working everyone too hard back when I was the Dark One.”

“Nonsense!” Ura declared, laughing boisterously and smacking both Ghozal and Sleip square on the shoulders as he walked up.

Ura—chief of the oni village, father of Kora, and Blossom’s common-law

husband, although the two of them had yet to make it official. He had been raising his daughter Kora as a single father ever since his fairy folk wife had passed away. Somewhere along the line, he became responsible for looking after a band of demon ruffians which he made into a proper village. He was a man of deep sentiment and unimpeachable character and strong enough that he had once been considered for a position on the Infernal Four during Dark One Ghol's time.

"When your lord father was still Dark One, he used to make everyone work without any time off whatsoever! There was hardly even time to catch our breaths!" Ura recalled, laughing and smacking Ghozal and Sleip on the shoulders again as he spoke. "My whole clan up and left the Dark Army because we couldn't stand such miserable working conditions! But I heard things got a lot better once you took the throne—enough so that I almost considered rejoining the Dark Army!"

"Hrm..." Ghozal smiled. "That's gratifying to hear, I'll admit."

"You know..." Sleip commented. "Apropos of nothing, that beast Leonorna was a piece of work, wasn't he?"

"A piece of work and a half," Ghozal grunted, his expression taking a turn for the sour. "I'd let down my guard a bit, since he'd been well-behaved for a while, but he earned his punishment after what he did to Balirossa and Uliminas—not to mention Folmina!"

"I never intended to cause him any serious harm...but it was the first time in a while that I wasn't pulling my punches," Ura said, folding his arms and lowering his head in agreement. "But what else could I do, when that fiend went after my precious Blossom—not to mention Kora!"

"He went after my beloved Byleri and Rislei as well!" Sleip continued. "What else could we have done?"

"Yes, everyone said there was nothing else to be done," said Tanya, stepping up from behind the three men.

Tanya—full name Tanyalina—was a Disciple of the Celestial Plane noted for her phenomenal magic power even among other angels. She was sent to keep an eye on Flio and his household but lost a great deal of her memory after a

freak midair collision with Wyne and now lived at Flio's house as the family's live-in maid.

"However, it was not only the three of you whose wives and daughters were attacked. Even Mistress Rys and Mistress Rynàsze took it upon themselves to join in the punishment, which you administered with so much force that it shook the entire planetoid world of Klyrode! Thanks to Master Flio's Gravitation spell we were able to prevent planetoid world Klyrode's orbit from veering off course, but if we had been less fortunate, we might have suffered a collision with another planetoid world! And now—with the magic barrier around the firmament falling to pieces!"

"Yes, well..." grumbled Ghozal.

"I suppose we did do that..." admitted Sleip.

"I do feel like we took things a little too far..." agreed Ura.

Just then, as the three of them stood there grimacing with the same identical chastened expressions, suddenly there was a powerful tug on Ghozal's rod, yanking the line visibly forwards.

"Hrm?! A bite!" said Ghozal, his attention turning back to his fishing. He pulled and pulled, as the fish on his hook struggled even harder than before in an effort to get away.

"A big one, by the looks of it!" said Sleip.

"Well hooked, Lord Ghozal!" cheered Ura.

"Hrm!" said Ghozal. "This fish won't get away from me!"

Sleip and Ura gathered in close to Ghozal as he fought to reel in the fish. The three of them, it seemed, had taken the opportunity to put some distance between themselves and Tanya.

"I swear..." Tanya muttered with a sigh. "Well, it's in the past. I've scolded you for it enough already, I suppose. Now, go on and fish us up a good side dish for tonight's barbecue." Lifting up the hem of her skirt in an elegant curtsy, she turned and walked the other direction, towards the large cabin Flio had built on the lakeshore using his magic. Outside was a table where preparations for a

barbecue seemed to be well underway.

“Hrm! Leave it to me!” boasted Ghozal, redoubling his efforts. “I’ll fish up a top quality magic beast, just you watch!” *That Tanya certainly doesn’t hold back from saying what she thinks...* he thought to himself. *It can be hard to hear at times, but I guess that’s how it is with advice that’s worth listening to...*

“But, Lord Ghozal...” Ura asked, looking down at the fishing rod in Ghozal’s hands with a puzzled look on his face, “why are you using a fishing rod? With your magic, you would have no trouble catching a fish of any size without relying on such a flimsy tool...”

“Preposterous!” Ghozal insisted, grinning from ear to ear as he pulled on the rod. “Catching a fish using only a rod and your own strength is the true sport of fishing!”

“Well, make sure you fish it up good and proper!” Sleip said with a nod. “You’ll need something to show once everyone else joins up with us this evening!”

They watched as an enormous fishlike magic beast broke the surface of the water, jumping high in the air. And then, at just about the same time, Wyne leaped from the water as well with a loud “Wa-ha!”

Wyne—a wyvern dragonewt said to be the strongest warrior among all of dragonkind. Flio and Rys rescued her when they found her collapsed on the side of the road and ended up adopting her as their oldest daughter. She was a doting older sister to Elinàsze and the other children.

The magic beast on Ghozal’s line leaped and thrashed wildly in an effort to escape the hook.

“Ah ha ha!” Wyne laughed, hopping playfully all around. “It’s a big-big one!”

Alas, she was wearing not a single thread of clothing on her body.

As a fire dragon, Wyne’s body contained a special organ for producing her legendary flaming breath. As a side effect, however, her body temperature ran quite high, giving her a rather extreme aversion to wearing clothing while she was in her humanoid form...

“Y-Young Mistress Wyne?!” Tanya exclaimed, noticing the dragonewt’s state of undress. “You’ve gotten rid of your clothes again! As maid of the house of Flio, I simply cannot let this slide!” She placed the chair she had been moving to the side and took off running towards Wyne at astonishing speed. In her hands, she produced a bikini-style swimsuit in precisely Wyne’s size.

Tanya made a point to always keep changes of clothing for Wyne on hand so she would be ready at a moment’s notice whenever the dragonewt slipped her way out of her clothes—which she did at every possible moment.

“I thought something like this might happen!” Tanya said. “I can see I was correct to be prepared!” As she drew up to the water’s edge, however, Tanya stopped in her tracks. “What’s that?” she said, looking up at Wyne.

“Wa-ha!” Wyne cried as she leaped joyfully through the air once again. Up close, however, Tanya noticed that bubbles from the lake water were gathering around Wyne’s chest and thighs in a distinctly unnatural way, preventing her naked skin from ever becoming visible.

“That must be some sort of magic...” Tanya said, staring in disbelief, until Levana poked her head out from the surface of the water.

Levana—a leviathan dragonewt who formerly lived a life of seclusion underground. After a freak accident led her to fall all the way down to the underground world Dogorogma, she met Flio and the rest of his household and ended up being taken in as part of the family. Although young in appearance, in terms of her actual age, she was Wyne’s senior.

“I thought you might be upset about the nudity,” Levana said, looking Tanya’s way and giving her an expressionless thumbs-up. “I used my magic to cover her up.” Today, Levana was dressed in a lightweight outfit meant for swimming instead of the shrine maiden garb she generally favored.

“It’s so breezy-breezy!” Wyne said with another series of cheerful hops. “It feels so nice-nice on my skin!” It seemed she had taken well to Levana’s water-based modesty solution.

“Excellent judgment,” Tanya said, returning Levana’s gesture with a thumbs-up of her own. “I approve.”

“Be that as it may...” Ghozal said, frowning as he pulled back mightily on his rod, the magic beast on the other end struggling violently as it fought for its life. “Quit it, Wyne! You’re getting in the way of my fishing!”

“Ah ha ha!” Wyne laughed, beaming with delight as she leaped through the air. “My bad-bad!”



High above the world of Klyrode, atop a floating platform conjured by Zofina, Flio and Elinàsze sat down for a break from work, joined by Rys, Rynàsze, and the magic beasts, who had come all the way to the far side of the firmament to bring them their lunch.

“So...by any chance...*do* you know anything about the earthquake?” Zofina ventured once again, only to be rebuffed by another of Flio’s signature easygoing smiles.

“Oh, I don’t know...” he said. “Who can say one way or another? Ha ha ha...”

“That’s quite enough about the earthquake,” Rys interrupted. “Why don’t you come join us for lunch?” She held out the large picnic basket she had brought for Zofina to browse. Inside was a wide variety of sandwiches, each cut into neat rectangles.

Zofina glanced behind Rys, where the magic beasts were feasting on a hunk of roast meat the lupine demon had prepared in addition to the sandwiches, and then back towards the basket. “Madame Rys,” she asked, “did you prepare all of this food yourself?”

“But of course!” Rys replied, holding out the basket for Flio now that Zofina had taken her pick of the contents. “What sort of pack-leader’s wife would I be if I didn’t do at *least* this much?”

“And I’m very grateful for all you do, Rys,” Flio said. “Although, it wouldn’t hurt for me to help out once in a—”

“No, my lord husband! You must certainly not!” Rys insisted, pressing her right index finger up against Flio’s mouth. “You are our leader, you know! *Your* role is to stand dignified and unmoving at the head of the pack! You can leave all the little details to your beloved Rys.”

“I’m helping mama too!” said Rynàsze, running up beside Rys. “I cut some of those sandwiches!”

“That’s right!” Rys smiled kindly, pulling her beaming daughter into a gentle hug. “Rynàsze’s been working hard for you too, my lord husband!”

“Thank you, both of you,” Flio said, bringing his sandwich up to his mouth and taking a bite.

“How’s the flavor, my lord husband?” Rys asked, studying Flio’s face closely for any change of expression as Rynàsze looked on beside her with a worried expression on her face.

“They taste great!” Flio said, smiling happily and reaching out to take a second sandwich from the basket. “Not that that’s any surprise. Any sandwich made by the two of you is bound to be delicious.”

Rys and Rynàsze’s faces both lit up visibly at the review, clasping their hands together in mutual delight.

“They really are very good,” Flio said, and between bites of his own lunch, he gestured for Zofina to eat. “Go ahead and have some, Zofina.”

“A-Ah, yes. Thank you, I shall,” said Zofina. *Although, I was planning to go out for a bowl of sweet red bean soup from Sawako’s place once I was finished with work...* she thought as she lifted the sandwich up. “Oh? This really is very good. Quite excellent, in fact...”

Zofina glanced down at her hand and realized in a flash that the sandwich she was holding was already finished. Before she knew it, she was reaching into the basket for a second sandwich herself.

“I’m very happy it’s to your liking!” Rys said, smiling happily as she watched Zofina enjoy the food. “We made quite a lot of sandwiches, so please eat as many as you like. Rynàsze, you eat too.”

“Yes, mama! Thank you!” Rynàsze said, beaming from ear to ear as she took a sandwich herself. Soon, the group atop Zofina’s platform was chatting away happily, enjoying their lunch.

“By the way,” said Flio, “we’re going to be holding a barbecue later tonight.

Would you care to join us, Miss Zofina?"

"A barbecue?" Zofina asked.

"That's right!" said Rys, boastfully puffing out her chest. "It was my lord husband's idea, to reward everyone in the family for all of their hard work."

"But then..." Zofina frowned. "If it's meant to be a family gathering, I really shouldn't..."

"Oh? And whyever not?" Rys asked. "You were assigned as a delegate to our family by the goddesses of the Celestial Plane, weren't you?"

"W-Well, yes, I suppose so..." Zofina acknowledged.

"Well then!" Rys declared, pointing her index finger upwards and smiling brightly as Elinàsze nodded in earnest agreement. "That makes you as good as family in my book, wouldn't you say?"

Elinàsze spent most of her time working away in her laboratory pondering all sorts of difficult matters day in and day out. She was on the whole uninterested in social niceties and quite curt with anyone who spoke to her. Now, however, she was in the presence of her beloved father Flio, and the smile on her face was as genuine as they come.

"Yes," said Flio, smiling his usual easygoing smile. "I agree."

"I..." Zofina said, looking around at the bright-eyed family in astonished silence, her sandwich dangling limply in her hand. *I've had dealings with the denizens of planetoid worlds on many previous occasions... she thought. But once they learn that I am a Disciple of the Celestial Plane—a Blood Oath Contract Executor, no less—they all come to regard me with fearful distance. This family, though, accepts me as one of their own, even knowing the truth of my nature...*

"Miss Zofina?" Rys asked, peering in at the angel's frozen face.

"A-Ah! Excuse me. I was lost in my thoughts for a—" Zofina started, only to be cut off by Rys abruptly shoving a sandwich into her open mouth. "M-Mnghf?!"

"When it's time to work, you work, and when it's time to rest you rest," Rys chided her, smiling all the while.

“Mrf... Y-Yes, ma’am,” Zofina said, utterly bewildered.

“Very good,” Rys said with one final smile, seeing that Zofina had taken her admonition to heart, before turning to bring her face right up close to Flio’s. “And of course, I could say the same to you, my lord husband. Your thoughts seem to have a way of turning to work at the slightest provocation, you know.”

“Y-Yes, I remember...” Flio replied, grimacing as Rys brought her face in even closer to his. Rys was wearing the same white dress as always, but with her hands planted on the platform and her head raised up to her husband’s, she was posed to make her chest look even more alluring than usual. Flio, of course, found himself hard-pressed not to stare into his wife’s cleavage as he answered.

“My lord husband! Are you listening to me?” Rys demanded as she brought her face in closer still, mistaking Flio’s expression for absent-minded inattentiveness.

“U-Um...yes!” Flio said, his ability to form a coherent response severely compromised as Rys’s chest drew even closer. “I-I’m listening!”

“If you’re paying attention, that’s all well and good...” Rys said. “But you really do need to take better care of your body! You’ve been running yourself ragged day after day, you know. I worry about you...”

“I-I know...” Flio said. “Thank you, Rys.”

Rys seemed satisfied by that response and relented, kissing her husband lightly on the cheek before returning to where she had been sitting before.

“It’s wonderful how good papa and mama are for each other, isn’t it?” Elinàsze gushed, pressing the fingertips of her right hand against her mouth as her cheeks flushed with emotion.

“It is!” agreed Rynàsze, cheerfully bobbing her head up and down. “It’s amazing how lovey-dovey they are with each other!”

“Well,” said Rys, pulling both of her daughters into a motherly hug. “It’s a little early for you, Rynàsze, but I’m sure Elinàsze could find a good partner without any great difficulty at all. You are very adorable, you know.”

“Oh, I imagine it would be rather difficult, in fact,” said Elinàsze, even as she

returned the hug. “After all, I have no interest in marrying anyone unless they’re every bit as wonderful as papa!”

“Yes!” Rynàsze agreed, nodding happily. “I wouldn’t want to marry someone unless they’re as wonderful as papa either!”

“Hm...” Rys considered, before nodding in understanding. “I suppose that’s reasonable enough...”

“I-I’m really glad to hear you think so highly of me,” Flio said, his usual easygoing smile looking just a little strained as Rynàsze, Elinàsze, and Rys all turned to look in his direction at once. “But I really hope both of you are able to find good partners of your own...”

Family... Zofina thought as she watched the exchange silently from the side. *I suppose this must be what a family is like. As a being who was created by the power of the goddesses of the Celestial Plane, some parts of this arrangement are a little difficult for me to comprehend. But still...* A smile crept onto her face without Zofina fully realizing. “A barbecue...” she mused. “I’m looking forward to taking part in the festivities.”

◇Meanwhile—Houghtow City, Houghtow College of Magic◇

A fair distance away from the center of Houghtow City, Garyl sat in the reception room in the Houghtow College of Magic.

Garyl—son of Flio and Rys, and Elinàsze’s younger twin. His ready smile and friendly nature had made him a celebrity during his time at the Houghtow College of Magic. His greatest trait was his physical prowess, which defied all reason.

“Hello, Headmaster Nyt. Hello, Mister Taclyde,” Garyl said, greeting the two sitting across from him. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“I sssupposse it hasss,” Nyt answered with a smile. “Thank you for coming all thiss way to sssee usss.”

Nyt—in truth the Serpent Princess Yorminyt, a member of the Infernal Four from the time of Dark One Gholl. Nyt was the name she used while in disguise as a human. After leaving the Dark Army, she had a series of misadventures that somehow or another ended with appointment as headmaster of the Houghtow

College of Magic.

In Nyt's natural form she had the lower body of a snake, but currently she had transformed herself into a humanoid shape, with long blue hair that reached all the way down to her curvaceous thighs. She carried a long-handled smoking pipe.

Sitting next to her, Taclyde gave Garyl an earnest smile.

Taclyde—an ordinary human man employed as administrator by the Houghtow College of Magic. In addition to handling the paperwork, he was also responsible for cleaning, maintenance, communication with parents and guardians, and interfacing with outside institutions—in sum, nearly all of the work required to keep the school up and running.

“Well, I for one couldn't be happier to see you!” Taclyde said. “Who would have thought that one of our graduates would be coming back to the school as an envoy from the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode!”

“Well, that just goes to show how much I owe this school!” said Garyl, cheerfully bowing his head. “It's thanks to all of your help and guidance that I was able to become a knight of the Order of Klyrode!”

Just then, a cloud of mist appeared behind Garyl, materializing into the warrior phantom Ben'ne, dressed in the style of Hi Izuru, far to the east.

Ben'ne—the psychic remnant of a master swordswoman from Hi Izuru. Garyl once defeated her in single combat, and she was so moved by his strength that she vowed then and there to become his familiar.

“There is no need to lower your head, my master,” Ben'ne said. “Surely all of your achievements were warranted by your own strength, were they not? In fact...” she added, eyeing Nyt and Taclyde darkly. “That these two should remain seated while you have graced them with your presence strikes me as—”

“B-Ben'ne!” Garyl scolded her, hastily clapping his hand over Ben'ne's mouth. “That's enough!”

Alas, it was too late. Nyt was already leaning forwards with menace in her eyes, clearly provoked by Ben'ne's words. “Well, excusse me!” she spat. “That'ssss quite an attitude to take with ussss after all of our hossspitality!”

“Headmaster! Stop! Heel!” Taclyde said, grabbing Nyt around the waist and holding her back with all the strength he could muster in his scrawny body as the Serpent Princess’s hair transformed into a fearsome array of slender snakes and she glared fearsomely over at Ben’ne. Ben’ne, for her part, had materialized a naginata in her right hand, and was returning Nyt’s look with clear provocation. “Just calm down for once! You can’t keep losing your temper at each and every word you happen to hear!”

A while later, once Garyl had ordered Ben’ne back to her mist form and somehow managed to restore the reception room to a state of calm, Garyl and Taclyde sat across from each other with heads bowed and smiles strained.

“I really am sorry for my familiar’s behavior...” Garyl apologized again.

“No, no,” Taclyde insisted, looking over beside him where Nyt sat with her arms crossed, fuming on the sofa, refusing to meet the administrator’s eyes. “I should apologize that you had to see our headmaster behaving like such a child...”

Headmaster Nyt always was one to let her emotions get the better of her, wasn’t she... Garyl reflected, thinking back to his own time at school. *She used to get genuinely angry whenever my classmates didn’t do exactly as they were told...* “Anyway, I believe it was mentioned in the letter you got before I came here, but the reason for my visit is this...” He reached into his bag, producing a single sealed envelope, and handed it over to Taclyde. “Your certificate of accreditation, under the new educational standards being adopted by the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode.”

“Yes, so I heard,” Taclyde said, opening the envelope and looking over the certificate inside. “It’s a measure to ensure that none of the new schools began operation in the time since we signed that peace treaty with the Dark Army fall short of a minimum level of educational quality set by the Kingdom, if I’m not mistaken...”

“Wait...” said Nyt, peeling herself off the sofa with a heavy sigh. “Were you not ssent here as an inssspector, to ensssure we meet the minimum criteria?”

“That’s right, I was,” Garyl said with a wry smirk. “Officially, I’m here as an

inspector, but the Houghtow College of Magic has a history of offering classes that more than satisfy our requirements even before the peace treaty. And besides, I know better than anyone about the quality of the education here. The inspection in this case really is just a formality.” He handed another envelope over to Nyt, who opened it to find a certificate bearing a magic seal engraved by one of the Kingdom’s mages. It read: “Certificate of Accreditation, Issued by the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode.”

“I sssee...” Nyt said. “You mean to ssay, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode seesss usss as a trusssted insstitution, then?”

“Yes, exactly!” Garyl answered with a smile and a nod.

For a moment, Nyt peered intently at her former student. “Of coursse... The Kingdom made thisss decisssion with full knowledge of my origin, yesss?”

Nyt was once a member of the Dark Army’s Infernal Four—the Serpent Princess Yorminyt. Although that fact of her identity had not been disclosed to the public, her demonic nature hadn’t escaped the notice of the more magically perceptive parents and guardians of the children attending the Houghtow College of Magic. With the treaty between the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom still in its early days, Nyt wouldn’t have been surprised if some people harbored misgivings about having a demon as headmaster of a school. And so, she felt the need to ask.

“Of course,” said Garyl. “Rest easy. Her Majesty herself is personally aware of all of that and has given you her approval.”

“Hm...” Nyt sat for a while in thought at Garyl’s words. “That is mossst reassssuring to hear,” she said, a smile coming to her face. “Would you convey my thanksss to the Kingdom when you return?”

“Of course!” Garyl said with a grin. “I’ll be sure to let them know you said thanks!”

Taclyde, relieved to see the mood had finally improved, leaned back onto the sofa with a huff of fond exasperation.



Once Garyl had left the building, Nyt went from the reception room back to

her desk in the headmaster's office. "Sssay, Taclyde..." she said, taking a second look at the certificate Garyl had given them.

"Yes?" Taclyde asked. "What is it, Headmaster?"

"I ssseem to recall..." Nyt said. "When you firsst assked me to take the possition of headmassster, you told me it would only be until our old headmassster returned after he vanished to who-knowsss-where, did you not?"

"Yes, I do remember saying that," Taclyde acknowledged, placing a fresh cup of black tea on the desk in front of her.

"And the reassson you wanted me wasss becaussse of the power of my magic, correct?"

"Yes, that's right," said Taclyde.

"Has it not caussed all sssort of problemsss, for you to keep a former member of the Dark Army—one of the Infernal Four—as headmassster of your ssschool for as long as you have?" Nyt asked, sighing as she set the certificate down.

"No, no, no! Not in the slightest!" Taclyde insisted, leaning in towards her with so much fervent intensity that Nyt found herself inadvertently shrinking back. "In fact, we haven't had any major trouble of any sort since you took over as headmaster. Why, we even had a pupil appointed to the Order of Klyrode, the most prestigious knightly order in the entire kingdom! What cause would anyone have to complain about it? And if anyone tries to make a fuss about it regardless, why, I myself have already thought of numerous ways I might handle such a situation. If it ever comes up, you can leave it all to your trusty Taclyde!" he said without pausing or taking a breath, a manic grin on his face once he had said his piece.

"Sssomehow..." Nyt said, letting out an exasperated sigh of her own, "I cannot help but feel like you are trying to fassst-talk me..."

"Now, now, surely we can save that sort of bellyaching for a round of drinks after work?" said Taclyde.

“Your treat, I presssume...” Nyt hissed.

“What? Again?” Taclyde said, gripping his head in his hands with a grimace of exaggerated pain, much to Nyt’s impish delight. “You do realize that I’m a poor man with very little in the way of free time, don’t you?”

“I sssupposse I have sssome own thoughtsss of my own about how to handle my hisstory...” Nyt said. “Perhapsss it would be wisse for the two of us to compare notesss...”

◇Houghtow College of Magic—School Store◇

The Houghtow College of Magic school store was located in a three-story building near the middle of campus. The second and third floors of the building were all student dormitories, but the first floor had been outsourced to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store to run as an outlet shop for the benefit of faculty and students alike. Today, Irystiel was working in the store, wearing the apron that signified her status as Fli-o’-Rys General Store staff over her black gothic lolita dress as she polished the display shelves.

Irystiel—one of Garyl’s classmates from his time at the Houghtow College of Magic. After her graduation she found employment with the Fli-o’-Rys General Store and was given a job tending the school store. She was part devil and painfully shy, unable to converse with anyone without the aid of her stuffed animals. Her older sister, Belianna, was a current member of the Dark Army’s Infernal Four, but that bit of information was one she kept carefully secret. Finally, while at this point it was something of a distant dream, she too harbored amorous feelings for her former classmate Garyl.

“That does it for the lunchtime rush. Now I just need to wait for the shadow demon assigned to the dormitories to come and relieve me...” Irystiel muttered to herself as she diligently went about ensuring every shelf was properly clean. “I wonder...” She sighed, pausing for a moment in her cleaning. “What adventures could Garyl be up to while I’m working away at this store?”

“Hey, Irystiel!” said Garyl, stepping into the store with a smile on his face. “Hard at work, I see?”

Irystiel froze on the spot. *What... What... What... What... What’s this?* she thought. *Wh-What is Garyl doing right before my very eyes? Did I want to meet*

him so badly that I've daydreamed that he's here? A-Ah, but never mind that...

Irystiel set the cloth she had been using to the side and crept up close to Garyl, taking a black cat plush out of her breast pocket and holding it out in front of her. "Garyl!" the cat said, its mouth moving in time to Irystiel's ventriloquism. "Irystiel says she's honored you came to see her, even if you are a daydream! Mreowr!" Irystiel saw Garyl shoot a smile her way—and then suddenly, the world before her eyes went black. "N-Now Irystiel says, 'Hey! What's this about?!' Mreowr!"

"What's this about, you ask?" came Salina's voice in response. "Why, I'm the one who should like to know!"

Salina—another one of Garyl's classmates from his time at the Houghtow College of Magic. The daughter of a wealthy family, she had been arrogant and overbearing when she first enrolled in the school, but over time her admiration for Garyl had softened her personality somewhat. Her specialty was infusing songs with magic power, an ability she was even capable of using in combat.

Salina had pushed her way between Irystiel and Garyl as the latter made his way into the building, grabbing Irystiel firmly by the face and covering her eyes with her hands.

Irystiel pulled herself free of Salina's grip and butted her head up against her former classmate, meeting Salina's incensed glare with one of her own. "Irystiel wants to know what *you* think you're doing here, mreowr!" the cat demanded.

"I was sent here as an attendant of Lord Garyl's!" Salina said, pressing the tip of her nose up against Irystiel's. "You haven't forgotten yourself simply because he deigned to pay a visit to you simply out of the wonderful goodness of his generous heart, have you?"

The two butted their heads as close together as they could, each trying to overwhelm the other with the power of their gaze alone. "Grrr!!!" Salina growled.

"Irystiel says *grrr* too! Mreowr!" said Irystiel's pet cat.

"C-Calm down, you two!" Garyl said, his smile growing tense as he tried his best to pacify the feuding girls. "You haven't seen each other in a while either,

have you?”

Those two were always getting into arguments like this back when we were in school together too, weren't they... Garyl thought. I guess it's true what my dad says—good friends argue the hardest!

Unfortunately, his admission with honors into the Order of Klyrode had done nothing to improve Garyl's understanding of the women who surrounded him.

◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

The Maiden Queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode sat upon her throne in Klyrode Castle, holding court for her subjects.

The Maiden Queen—reigning monarch of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Her full name was Elizabeth Klyrode, but those closest to her called her Ellie. Her father, the former King Klyrode, was exiled for his many evil deeds, leaving her in charge of charting a new course for the kingdom. She was a woman in her thirties, but due to her lifelong devotion to politics and governance, she had never once taken a lover.

The Maiden Queen's sisters, the Second and Third Princess, stood to her right-and left-hand side respectively, while the castle minister observed from their positions in two single file rows along the throne room walls.

The Second Princess—the middle child of the Maiden Queen's sisters. Her full name was Leusoc Klyrode. Known as the Maiden Queen's right hand, she had been involved in diplomacy since the days when the Magical Kingdom and Dark Army were still at war, responsible for negotiations with other human kingdoms. A frank and candid woman, she was unafraid to speak her mind even to her sister, the queen.

The Third Princess—youngest of the Maiden Queen's sisters. Her full name was Swann Klyrode. A recent graduate of a prestigious academy for nobles, she had nonetheless already assumed responsibility for the greater part of the Kingdom's internal affairs as the Maiden Queen's left hand. She had something of a fixation on her oldest sister, whom she loved more than anything or anyone else in the whole entire world.

In front of the throne was a group of men: a delegation from another land

dressed in uniforms quite unlike the ones worn in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. The Maiden Queen looked over the letter the men had given her before lifting her head to speak. “I trust it will not cause offense if I confer with my ministers on this matter before giving my response?”

“That would certainly be no problem for us,” the man at the front of the group said, bowing deeply as the men behind him all lowered their heads in time with the gesture. “We look forward to our continuing relationship.”

The Maiden Queen handed the letter to the Second Princess. “I believe you know how to handle this case, Second Princess,” she said in a quiet voice.

“Understood,” the Second Princess replied, accepting the letter with a formal bow. “I believe I do.”

Soon, the delegation had left the throne room. The Maiden Queen watched them step out through the door and then let out a quiet breath. “It feels as though we’ve been seeing delegates from one kingdom or another every day without fail since we signed that treaty with the Dark Army,” she said, casting her eyes at the desk beside the throne, where a veritable mountain of petitions she had received from different groups of delegates requesting an audience with the crown. “Although I suppose this is exactly what I signed up for when I became the regent of the Magical Kingdom...”

“Now...” she continued, straightening her posture and putting a composed expression on her face. “Send in the next group of delegates, if you please,” she ordered in her most regal voice.

“E-Excuse me...” the Third Princess ventured, looking worriedly up at her older sister. “Perhaps a short break is in order, Your Majesty? You haven’t had a moment’s rest since you woke up this morning...”

“Thank you, Third Princess,” the Maiden Queen smiled. “However, my duties are my duties. I will see this through to the end.” *After all... she thought to herself as she read through the next petition on the queue. Tonight’s the night I’ve been invited to Garyl’s family barbecue! And what’s more, I’m going to be attending as...as a member of the family! I wouldn’t miss an event like this for the world!*

The sunlight shone into the house from low on the horizon, casting long shadows on the landscape beyond as Leonorna descended from the sky, the wind buffeting his wings as he came in for a landing in front of the house.

“Thank you, Leonorna!” Rylnàsze said, patting the winged lion from her perch atop his head and beaming from ear to ear.

“No thanks necessary!” the divine beast gracefully demurred. “I would do all this and more with but a word from you, my mistress!”

Leonorna lowered his head, letting off first Rylnàsze, followed by Sybe and the rest of the magic beasts.

“It looks like we were able to wrap up today’s repair work in good time,” Flio said, looking up at the clear blue sky as he alighted to the ground next to them.

“Master Flio, everyone, thank you for your hard work today,” said Tanya, curtsying in her maid outfit as she stepped up to greet the party. She had returned from the lake to Flio’s house the very moment she caught sight of the group making their way down from above the sky.

“Hello, Tanya, thank you for coming to meet us,” said Flio.

“Of course,” Tanya replied, lowering her head still further. “Such is only to be expected of a maid of Master Flio’s household.”

I understand she’s lost some part of her memories, but Tanyalina was an obedient Disciple of the Celestial Plane until very recently... Zofina thought, looking down on the scene from a short distance above the ground. Although she certainly acts differently now from how I remember back in those days...

“It’s a strange feeling, isn’t it?” said Rys, descending to the ground right behind Flio and gazing up at the sky herself. “Just a moment ago, we were on the other side of that sky.”

“It really is, mama,” Elinàsze agreed, a mysterious look coming over her face as she gazed upwards. “From our perspective, it looks like the sky continues on forever into the distance. I’m very curious about how the spell behind the system works, exactly. Perhaps I should see if I can replicate the effect myself...” she mused, folding her arms in thought.

“Well,” said Rys, psyching herself up for another bout of work, “now that we’re back on solid ground, it’s my turn to take over preparations for the barbecue! Tanya, do make sure that my lord husband and the rest of the family are properly seen to while I finish getting everything ready.” Without waiting a moment, Rys transformed only her arms and legs into their natural lupine demon forms and took off running on four legs in the direction of the lake.

“As you say, mistress. Please leave everything to me,” Tanya replied, seeing Rys off with a deep bow before turning back towards Flio and the others. “Now, Master Flio, Mistresses Elinàsze and Rynàsze, please come inside for a brief rest before the barbecue,” she said. “And...” she added in a tone of clear irritation, narrowing her eyes as she turned to face Zofina. “Much as I might wish otherwise, if you insist on joining us, I suppose I will not forbid it.”

“You...” Zofina said, smirking despite herself. “You definitely have your memories back, don’t you...”

“I’m certain I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Tanya.

“You’re incorrigible,” Zofina muttered. “You know the Celestial Plane is short on hands at the best of times. You were once considered a candidate to become a goddess, Tanyalina. If you were still with us, we—”

“Yes, I really don’t understand any of that at all,” Tanya insisted, brusquely cutting Zofina off. “I am Tanya, a simple maid who has pledged her services to Master Flio and the rest of his household for as long as I should live. Nothing more, and nothing less.” So saying, she turned away from Zofina and towards the front door. “Oh, and one more thing...” she added. “There was a certain individual who entered this world while the barrier around the firmament was broken. So far I have not observed any threatening conduct on their part, but I felt obligated to let you know.”

“There was a *what?!?*” Zofina said, her eyes going wide at Tanya’s news.

“You say you are a subordinate disciple to the goddess responsible for overseeing this world, so please see to it that you do something about this intruder,” Tanya went on. “I would hate for this affair to trouble the master of the house more than it already has.” And with that, she vanished inside the house.

How could I have made such an error? Zofina thought to herself. *I thought I had set up enough security against unwanted intrusion to drive away anyone who might think of attempting something like that...* Touching her fingers to her temple, she sent a telepathic message to the other Disciples of the Celestial Plane. *“Urgent message to all Disciples of the Celestial Plane assigned to the security of planetoid world Klyrode. I’ve received a report that an intruder has been spotted entering this world. They must be discovered and apprehended, dead or alive.”*

“Yes, ma’am!” said a plethora of telepathic voices, all responding at once.

Once she was satisfied that her message had been received, Zofina’s angelic wings appeared on her back once more. She held out her hand, conjuring a wicked scythe, and took to the sky.

“Stop right there!” said Tanya, suddenly reappearing to grab Zofina firmly by the leg.

“Wah!” Zofina exclaimed, as Tanya’s unexpected interruption sent her face-first into the ground. “T-Tanyalina!” she said, lifting her head up from the dirt. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

Tanya squatted down, bringing her face up close to the eyeline of the prone angel. “Zofina...” she said. “Where exactly do you think you’re going?”

“Where do you think?” Zofina shot back. “Clearly I was going to search for this intruder of yours.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Tanya chided her. “You were invited to the barbecue this evening, were you not? Or am I to understand you intend to cancel at the last possible minute—without even giving prior notice, no less? The intruder isn’t doing anything worrisome at this very moment, you know. Do you understand? Are we clear?” She was smiling pleasantly as she spoke, but the aura of anger welling up behind her told a different story entirely.

“I-I understand...” Zofina said, yielding to the pressure. “I-I’ll attend the barbecue. I promise...”

“Excellent,” said Tanya, her aura of anger vanishing entirely as soon as the words left Zofina’s mouth. “In that case, please be certain to accompany my

master and mistress when the time comes. Now if you'll excuse me, I have my own tasks I must return to." She gave a single elegant curtsy and left as suddenly as she had appeared.

Zofina flinched, taken aback by Tanya's positively ludicrous speed. "That woman..." she said. "I swear, she never spoke to me that way when she still worked for the Celestial Plane..."

◇A Back Alley, Somewhere...◇

In a city somewhere on the border of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, just down an alleyway from the moderately trafficked main street, was a part of the neighborhood where few people came. There, tucked away in a corner, was a stone building that appeared to be nearly abandoned.

In a room on the second floor, a man sat upon an extravagantly decorated armchair, smoking a cigar and kicking his leg in clear irritation.

"Harrumph," the one known as the Shadow King spat, blowing a puff of smoke from his mouth as his nervous kicking intensified. "How in the devil's name did it come to this...?"

The Shadow King—formerly the reigning monarch of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and father of the Maiden Queen. Driven from his kingdom for his many evil deeds, he made the black market he had always been involved in behind the scenes into his main line of work and took to calling himself the Shadow King.

Kintsuno the Golden, a woman with waist-length golden hair dressed in a golden cheongsam dress, stepped out of the darkness beside him. "You certainly seem like you're in an even worse mood than usual..." she commented, tilting her head as she looked over at the Shadow King. "Did something happen?"

Kintsuno the Golden—elder of the demon fox sisters who once held a significant share of power among the demons of the Dark Army, famed for her love of everything golden. After the fall of the demon fox clan, she joined forces with the Shadow King and his Shadow Conglomerate to become partners in crime.

““Did something happen?’ she asks!” the Shadow King snapped, leering back at Kintsuno. “Do you think I don’t know what’s been going on with the knockoff magic item business you and your sister have been running?!”

“O-Oh!” Kintsuno yipped, flinching a half step back. “Th-That’s...”

“W-We’ve just encountered a few more obstacles than we expected in our preparations!” frantically protested another woman wearing a matching silver cheongsam dress, emerging from the shadows behind the armchair on the opposite side of Kintsuno. “Please, just give us a little bit more time...”

Gintsuno the Silver—younger of the demon fox sisters who once held a significant share of power among the demons of the Dark Army, noted for her fondness for silver. After the fall of the demon fox clan, she joined forces with the Shadow King and his Shadow Conglomerate to become partners in crime.

“Your preparations, hmmm?” the Shadow King asked.

“Y-Yes, that’s right!” said Kintsuno, smiling insincerely as she nodded along to her sister’s words. “The flow of goods has become much more tightly regulated ever since the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom made peace...”

“B-But that’s why we’ve been sending our men to establish new channels to sell our knockoff magic items!” Gintsuno pleaded, continuing where her sister had left off. “Please, give us a little time for that effort to bear fruit!”

We just have to bear with it for a little while longer... Kintsuno thought, glancing over to catch the eyes of her sister as she spoke. If we can figure out a way to actually sell these knockoff magic items, it won’t be long before we’re the ones in charge!

Up until now we’ve had to rely on Shadow Conglomerate distribution channels, so we’ve had no choice but to do what that miserable old man says, Gintsuno thought, meeting Kintsuno’s gaze. But once it’s us calling the shots around here, we won’t have to go through him any longer.

“Harrumph,” the Shadow King grumbled again. “Wipe those smirks off your faces. Any idiot could tell you’re plotting something. It’s annoying,” he said, clicking his tongue. “Anyway, the reason our fake magic items haven’t been selling is because of the influence of that vexatious general store. But I have

some plans of my own. We're starting a new line of business to make up for our losses in the knockoff magic item trade. I'm assigning the two of you to it as well."

"A new line of business?" Kintsuno asked, looking from the Shadow King to her sister and cocking her head in surprise at the news.

"Just what would that be?" asked Gintsuno, cocking her head as well.

"Do you two ever stop yapping?!" the Shadow King snapped, handing one of the fox sisters a sheet of paper. "All *you* have to do is go here and follow the instructions of the people I have setting it up!"

"Fine, we'll do it," said Kintsuno.

"We'll head out as soon as we're ready," said Gintsuno.

I hate to admit it, but with the knockoff magic item trade falling to ruin under our supervision, our only option for the time being is to keep following the Shadow King's orders... thought Kintsuno.

It's very annoying, but right now, this is our only option... thought Gintsuno.

The sisters both took a good long look at the paper in Kintsuno's hand, then looked up at each other and nodded, leaving the room behind.

The Shadow King watched them depart and sighed, taking a long tempered puff on his cigar. "If everything goes well on their end...and if the hidden agenda I've worked into their instructions works out like I hope, things just might start looking up for a change..."

◇Meanwhile—Houghtow City, Houghtow College of Magic◇

The Houghtow College of Magic was located fairly nearby to the Enchanted Frigate boarding tower. On a corner of the second floor of the main school building was the faculty office, and inside the faculty office was Belano.

Belano—originally a witch assigned to Balirossa's company of knights in service to Klyrode Castle. She was a shy and skittish individual who was only capable of casting defensive magic. After quitting the knighthood to lodge at Flio's house, she had found work as an instructor at the Houghtow College of Magic. She was the wife of Minilio and mother of Belalio.

“That’s all my classes for today...” Belano said, hurriedly organizing the papers on her desk. “Now I just need to tidy up and go home...”

As Belano worked, another member of the faculty came up to her desk. “Miss Belano, have you finished your classes for the day?” It was Oryou, smiling congenially as she spoke. Today, like usual, she was dressed in a traditional Hi Izuran kimono, worn loose so as to leave her shoulders exposed.

Oryou—offensive magic teacher at the Houghtow College of Magic, hailing from Hi Izuru. She was an alluring woman who made a point not to hide the regional accent of her hometown.

“Yes...” Belano replied. “I’m finished...”

“Well, would you perhaps be interested in joining myself and the other teachers for a round of drinks?” Oryou offered.

“I’m sorry, I can’t...” said Belano, lowering her head in apology. “I already have plans after work. The whole family is having a barbecue today...”

“Ah, well, so it goes. Perhaps you can join us next time,” said Oryou, smiling and brushing off Belano’s apology with a wave of her hand and turning to leave. “Oh, that’s right,” she said, remembering something and pausing on her way out. “Have you heard?”

“Um... Have I heard what?” Belano asked.

“About the fraudulent schools that have been opening up on the hinterlands of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, preying on prospective students,” said Oryou.

“Oh, yes... I have...” Belano nodded. “I heard they ask for a high tuition up front, promising to teach everything you need to know to get into the Kingdom’s Magic Corps...but after just a few classes, they vanish without a trace...”

“They’ve been a small scale operation so far, but it seems they’ve been getting more and more ambitious,” expositied Oryou. “I’ve heard the Kingdom’s been introducing a new accreditation system as a way to counter their activities. Of course, our school received accreditation without issue, it seems.”

“Yes, I know...” Belano said, nodding her head again. “Garyl brought the certificate himself...”

“Our little Garyl certainly is moving up in the world, isn’t he?” Oryou gushed. “To think they would make him an envoy of the crown so soon after his appointment to the Order of Klyrode! He really is the pride of our school...”

“Yes...” Belano agreed. “Garyl is really something...”

Just then, two smallish figures stepped up behind Belano. She turned around to see Minilio and Belalio, here to collect her after work.

Minilio—a magic doll created by Flio as a test of his powers, given the name Minilio for his resemblance to a younger version of Flio himself. Minilio started out assisting Belano with her work at the Houghtow College of Magic and the two became close over the course of working together, eventually becoming husband and wife. He was the father of Belalio.

Belalio—child of Minilio and Belano. As the child of a human and a magic doll, Belalio was an exceptionally rare sort of being. Like their father Minilio, they outwardly resembled a younger version of Flio himself, but Belalio preferred an androgynous presentation, leaving their gender a mystery.

Minilio had been making regular visits to the Houghtow College of Magic to assist Belano for quite some time, and eventually came to be recognized for his abilities and made a provisional member of the staff. His child Belalio, too, skipped over being a student entirely to achieve a similar rank.

Belano smiled when she saw who it was and stepped forwards to meet them. “Are you two finished with your work...?”

Wordlessly, Minilio and Belalio nodded.

“I’m finished too...” Belano said. “Are you ready to go home?”

Minilio and Belalio silently nodded once again.

Oryou smiled fondly over at Belano and her family. “It’s good to see that three of you are as close as ever,” she remarked. “Well then, I will see you tomorrow.” She left the room, waving goodbye as she went.

“Y-Yes...” Belano waved back, sheepishly bowing her head. Behind her,

Minilio and Belalio waved to Oryou as well. “See you tomorrow...”

Really, what a close knit family... Oryou thought to herself as she exited the faculty office. Always perfectly in sync...

As for Belano, Minilio, and Belalio, they quickly tidied up their work for the day and all left the Houghtow College of Magic together.

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

The streets of Houghtow City were as packed with people as ever, as grand Enchanted Frigates floated along on their scheduled flights in the skies above as Charun, dressed in an outfit reminiscent of a maid uniform, looked out from the open-air deck by the front entrance of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.

Charun—a magic doll created long ago by a mage in service to the Dark Army and loving wife of Calsi’im and the mother of Rabbitz. Calsi’im once discovered her in her forgotten and broken-down state and had her restored, and she stayed by his side ever since, eventually following him to Flio’s house, where they currently resided.

“I see we have another very busy day full of customers coming and going!” Charun remarked with a smile.

“Excuse me, miss!” a customer called from one of the tables. “Could I get a refill on my tea, please?”

“Of course!” said Charun, as cheerful as ever. “Coming right up!”

Hanging above the deck was a sign advertising Cal’Cha Teahouse, the new eatery attached to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store where Charun and her husband Calsi’im served tea and light refreshments to customers, such as the female adventurer who had just summoned Charun over to her table. With great skill and agility, Charun poured tea from the pot in her hands into the woman’s empty cup on the table below.

“Incredible form...” the adventurer remarked. “I could watch you pour tea all day.”

“Oh, truly?” said Charun, gracing her with an elegantly poised curtsy in response. “It is a privilege to receive such praise.”

As a magic doll, Charun was originally created to look after the daily needs of demons. By design, she excelled at preparing tea and polite conversation—essential skills in the realm of service and hospitality.

“Excuse me, miss! Could I make an order?” a customer at a different table called as soon as Charun was done with the adventurer, as if he had been waiting for the opportunity.

“Of course!” said Charun, turning on her heel. “Right away!”

“Miss!” came yet another voice. “Once you’re done with him, I’d like to make an order too!”

“And me, also!” said a fourth, joining the chorus of tables clamoring for Charun’s attention.

“Yes, of course!” Charun replied to each with a smile. “Just wait your turn, and I’ll be with you as soon as I can!”

As Charun fought heroically to keep up with the deluge of orders, her husband Calsi’im watched from the open-air kitchen built to the side of the deck.

Calsi’im—a common skeleton who was charged for a time with running the Dark Army while the Dark One was away. He was the husband of Charun and father of Rabbitz. Calsi’im had in fact passed away once already, only for Flio to intervene and bring him back to life. Now he lived at Flio’s house and helped out from time to time at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.

“Well, well! The teahouse is good and packed today, isn’t it?” Calsi’im said, his jaw rattling with good-spirited laughter as he cooked a delicious-smelling pancake on the kitchen’s magic stove.

“*Sniff, sniff...*” sniffled the girl sitting atop Calsi’im’s head—his daughter Rabbitz who loved to climb atop her father’s head at any chance she got. She reached up from her perch, following the sweet pancake aroma with a delighted grin. “Smells good...”



Rabbitz—daughter of Calsi'im and Charun, Rabbitz was an example of an incredibly rare sort of life-form: the child of a magic doll and a skeleton. She was a cheerful girl who had a great big smile on her face any hour of the day. Her favorite pastime was climbing on top of her father's head. It wouldn't be long now before she began taking classes at the Houghtow College of Magic.

"Say, Rabbitz, you seem like you'd rather like to eat that pancake, hm?" Calsi'im asked.

"Yah!" said Rabbitz, her expression lighting up with delight.

"I see, I see!" Calsi'im replied. "But I'm afraid that this one is for a customer!"

"Yah..." Rabbitz's expression clouded over considerably.

"So instead," Calsi'im went on, "why don't I make a pancake for you just as soon as I'm done with this one? Do you think you could wait that long for me?"

"Yah!!!" Rabbitz cried, the clouds vanishing and light returning to her face. "Love papa!" she said, wrapping her arms tight around Calsi'im's skull and rubbing the top of her head against his.

"Well, I'm just glad you're happy!" said Calsi'im, nodding proudly as he finished the pancake and transferred it to its plate. "Still..." he went on, taking stock of the scene on the outside deck. "This might be a few *too* many customers..."

The space was packed full to capacity with tables, each seating multiple customers. Even so, the tables were already full, leaving several parties waiting outside the entrance to the deck for a table to open up. Nearby, at the takeout counter outside, Dalc Horst struggled to manage the unending flurry of customers.

"L-Let's see..." he said. "That's three iced teas and three pancakes, then a large black tea for the next customer, and then..."

Dalc Horst—one of the elite team of equine demons that served as Sleip's underlings when he was one of the Dark Army's Infernal Four. Currently a supervisor for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store's shipping and transport department and a regular participant in the races over at the Fli-o'-Rys Magic Beast Racing

Hall whenever he found the time between work.

I can't believe I told them I'd help out if I didn't have any shipments... Dalc Horst thought, lamenting the ill-considered promise that had landed him behind the counter. *I had no idea the takeout counter at the Cal'Cha Teahouse could get this busy! At this rate, I'll have to forget about my plan to ask Greanyl on a date once the Enchanted Frigate she's flying makes it back...*

Nonetheless, Dalc Horst continued to work, his smile never faltering.

Hmm... thought Calsi'im, nodding to himself as he considered the state of the store. *Perhaps we had best see about hiring some more staff too...*

"Yah! I help!" said Rabbitz, beaming from ear to ear and lifting her right hand high above her head. It was almost as if she had heard her father's thoughts.

"Oh, Rabbitz! You'll make your old man shed a tear!" said Calsi'im, handing the freshly plated pancake over to his daughter. "Now go, bring that pancake over to that table over there!"

"Yah!" Rabbitz replied and promptly tossed the pancake right into her waiting mouth. "Papa's pancake good!" she reported, grinning as she gulped it down.

"Goodness me!" said Calsi'im, adding a fresh bit of oil to the frying pan. "I suppose I had better prepare another pancake—and fast!"

◇Klyrode Castle—Knight Dormitories◇

The dormitories for knights were located inside the grounds of Klyrode Castle. In the past, when the Kingdom had been at war with the Dark Army, veteran knights would be garrisoned here, ready to ride out at a moment's notice. Now, however, with peace between humans and demons, the dormitories were home to students at the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education, as well as young knights who had only recently graduated from their education. It was here that they lived and carried out their daily training.

In one room of the dormitories, Lullun, a student of the Klyrode Institute, let out a scream. "It can't be!" she cried, her eyes threatening to bulge out of her head.

Lullun—a part-demon descended from a human and a succubus, invited to

study at the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education as part of an effort to establish friendly relations between humans and demons. Her top marks in school and popularity among the students had earned her the spot of student council president for the past several terms.

“What is the meaning of this?” Lullun demanded. “Why hasn’t Sir Garyl come back from his royal mission to the Houghtow College of Magic today?!”

“O-Oh, please don’t be unreasonable...” Locanna begged, doing her best to pacify the student council president.

Locanna—daughter of one of the noble houses of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, possessing a great deal of talent in the realm of magic. She had initially joined the student council out of admiration for Lullun, with her beautiful long hair and her top marks in class. The excellent record she had from her old magic college had earned her the position of vice president.

“Sir Garyl is from Houghtow City, you know, and he has tomorrow off,” Locanna went on. “I’m sure he’s spending his break back home with his family.”

“I know that...” Lullun grumbled, biting her lip in vexation. “But I was just hoping that if I engineered some pretext to stop by Sir Garyl’s room, I could extract a promise from him to let me show him around the castle town...”

President Lullun is usually so cool and above it all, but when it comes to Garyl she acts like a total mess... Locanna thought with a wry smirk, glancing over to the bookcase at the back of the room. Mixed in with the reference books and magic grimoires they needed for school, she could see a growing collection of romance novels. Not only that, but the novels had been thoroughly annotated, with paper tabs sticking out of every corner of the book where Lullun had written her shockingly dense notes and commentary on the material.

I guess it comes down to President Lullun having just about no experience with romance whatsoever. She’s been obsessively reading romance novels, trying to plan out a strategy that will let her get close to Sir Garyl... The idea of engineering some pretext to stop by his room must be the fruit of her labor... Locanna thought, looking over at the books on the shelf with mild amusement.

“Locanna!” Lullun snapped, furrowing her brow. “Are you even listening to me?”

“A-Ah! Yes, of course!” said Locanna, quickly looking away from the bookshelf and back at Lullun.

“Well then...I trust you’ll be joining me?”

“J-Joining you?” said Locanna. “For what?”

“For the strategy conference to try to figure out how I’m going to get closer to Sir Garyl, of course! And since three heads are ever so slightly better than two, let’s call Dethryc as well.” Without waiting for a confirmation, Lullun pressed her finger to her temple, sending out a telepathic communication. *“Dethryc, would you come to my room for a moment please? What? Right now, of course! When else?”*

Lullun carried on the telepathic conversation in a state of clear aggravation, as Locanna watched on with dry amusement. *Really, who would have thought our perfect student council president would be so hopeless when it came to this kind of thing... she thought. Although I must say, there is something charming about the gap between this and her usual self...*

Chapter 2: “I’m His Wife, After All!”

◇The Lake Outside Houghtow City◇

Flio’s house lay outside the defensive walls of Houghtow City, built long ago to protect the people living within from attacks by demons or magic beasts. Flio had moved the house there not long after he had first arrived in the world of Klyrode, when Hero Gold-Hair tried to make him into his subordinate. Instead, Flio had simply used Teleportation to relocate the patch of land his house was built on. At the time, Flio’s house had been a humble two-story building with a small attached vegetable garden.

Flio stood outside, looking behind him at the sight of his house standing tall in the distance.

“My lord husband?” Rys asked, jogging up beside him. “Is something the matter?”

“No, nothing,” said Flio, turning to face the grand four-story wooden house that served as the family’s home. “I was just looking back at our house for a moment. It’s gotten so much bigger than when we first got here, hasn’t it? Do you remember when it was just a small two-story building?”

“Of course!” said Rys, puffing out her chest with pride. “Back then we didn’t have nearly as many people, so that was all the space we needed. Now, with all of the underlings you’ve picked up living with us, such a dismal little place would never do!”

“Rys...” Flio said with a dry smile. “I keep telling you, the people living with us aren’t my underlings; they’re all our treasured companions...”

“If you insist on saying so, my lord husband, I suppose I can hardly argue...” said Rys, pouting with clear dissatisfaction.

I know... Flio thought. *Rys is a lupine demon, so she thinks of everyone living in the house as a pack, with myself as the leader...* “Rys, I understand that you’re a lupine demon, and I’m very pleased that you think of me so highly,” he said

with a smile. “But I would really appreciate it if you could call the people living with us our family, rather than ‘underlings’...”

“Eee!” exclaimed Rys, her face blushing bright red all the way up to her ears. “It truly makes you happy that I think of you so highly?! My lord husband, I am hardly worthy to receive such praise!” Rys pressed both her hands against her cheeks, wriggling with unbridled delight. She was so overjoyed, in fact, that her lupine tail materialized as well, wagging back and forth with enough force that it looked like it might tear itself off her body completely.

I guess Rys was so happy to be praised by me that everything else I said got lost in the explosion of emotion... Flio thought, looking a little bashful in spite of his amusement. *But still...part of me can't deny that the way she wears her emotions on her sleeve like that is one of Rys's more adorable traits...*

“Papa! Mama!” Just at that moment, Rylnàsze came running over, a smile on her face. To be more precise, it was Sybe who did the running, in his psychobear form, with Rylnàsze riding on his back and the rest of his family running along side by side. Behind him came Tybe, Leonorna, and a great number of other magic beasts.

Flio spread his arms wide, greeting his daughter and her companions with a smile. “Thanks for coming to meet us, Rylnàsze, and all the rest of you too!”

“Of course!” Rylnàsze replied, hopping down from atop Sybe's back and giving Flio a great big hug, as the magic beasts following her formed a circle around them.

“Dada! Welcome-welcome home-home!” Her draconic wings fully materialized, Wyne came flying in from behind with unbelievable velocity, diving straight into Flio without any attempt to rein in her speed. An ordinary human could have easily had their body ripped in half at the waist by the sheer force of Wyne's tackle, but the passive spells Flio kept active on his body at all times were enough to render it entirely harmless, and he caught her with ease. “Ah ha ha!” Wyne laughed, happily rubbing her cheeks against Flio's. “Dada! Welcome-welcome home-home!” she repeated.

“Hello, Wyne! Sorry I've kept you all waiting! And Rylnàsze, it's always good to see you,” said Flio, holding Wyne in one arm and Rylnàsze, who had been

hugging him already, in the other. “Oh!” he added, noticing someone else in the distance and beckoning the newcomer over with a wave of his right hand. “You came to greet me too, Levana? Thank you!”

There, a short distance away from Flio and the rest, Levana stood hiding behind a particularly large tree. When Flio called out to her she first gave a startled little jolt before trotting over to his side, as if drawn forwards by Flio’s gesture. “Um...” she managed in a quiet voice. “W-Welcome back...”

“Come on, Levana!” said Wyne, grinning as she grabbed the leviathan dragonewt from where she was hanging just out of arm’s reach and pulled her into the group hug. “Get over-over here!”

“H-Hey! Wait!” Levana protested, her face turning red at the treatment.

“It’s good to see you, Levana,” said Flio, giving Levana a light squeeze.

Flio’s gentle treatment seemed to dispel Levana’s tension and get her to finally relax her body. “I-It’s good to see you too...” she said, blushing out of shyness.

“Well,” said Rys, watching the happy scene from a short distance away and grinning from ear to ear. “Now that we’ve all said our hellos, shall we head on towards the barbecue?” she suggested, gesturing on towards the road leading to the lakeshore.

“I agree,” Elinàsze said, nodding her head as she stood beside her mother. “We’re already a little late, after all.” She held out her hand towards the ground and spoke a short incantation, summoning a magic circle, out from which emerged a solitary portal. “Here, the portal to the lake is ready. Let’s be off, shall we?” she said, stepping through herself at the head of the party. The portal took them to a spot further along the same road they had just been standing on, right on the shore of the lake.

“Thank you, Elinàsze,” said Flio.

“There’s no need for thanks!” said Elinàsze. “A simple portal is no trouble at all!”

There was, however, a distinct spring in Elinàsze’s step as she continued on through the portal, from having been thanked by her father. Her proclivities, it

seemed, remained the same as ever.



In one swift moment, Flio and the rest all went through the portal and found themselves on the shore of the lake. Ghozal was the first one to take note of their arrival. “Oh! Mister Flio!” he said. “Done with work for the day, I see! I take it the repairs are going well?”

“Yes, thankfully,” said Flio. “Although I do feel bad about leaving you and the rest to take care of everything down here...”

“Hah! It’s nothing we couldn’t handle!” Ghozal boasted, grinning and adjusting his straw hat as he gestured to the impressively massive fish he had heaped up in a pile behind him. “It’s been an especially good haul today too. We should have more than enough fish. And by the looks of things, Rys and her helpers have everything just about ready to start the barbecue!”

Flio followed Ghozal’s gaze past the pile of fish to the shack Flio and his family used for camping trips to the lake, where a number of tables had been set up outside, each set with plate upon plate heaped high with all sorts of food.

Incredible... Flio thought, looking at the sight in awe. *Rys did all this while also finding the time to bring us refreshments during our work on the firmament...*

“Well!” said Rys, still full of energy after all the day’s work. “Now that just about everyone is here, I suppose it’s time for the finishing touches!” She broke from Flio’s side and took off in a hurry in the direction of the open-air kitchen.

“I’ll help, Rys!” said Flio, stepping forwards after her.

“No, my lord husband!” said Rys. “You must sit right here and enjoy a friendly conversation with the rest of the family.”

“But...” Flio began, determined to help in spite of his wife’s words, only to be interrupted by a man’s voice coming from behind.

“Mister Flio!”

Flio turned around to see it was Maunty the goblin speaking to him.

Maunty—a goblin who had once been a foot soldier in the Dark Army. Along with Hokh’hokton, his former comrade in arms, he had found employment as a

live-in worker on Blossom's farm. He was the patriarch of an entire goblin family as well, with a goblin wife and a truly staggering number of goblin children.

"Hello, Maunty," said Flio. "You're joining us for the barbecue today too?"

"That's right," Maunty said, smoothing down his hair with his right hand as he bowed his head. "Madame Blossom arranged things so that we'd be able to attend. I was hoping I might have a moment of your lordship's time to express my thanks for the opportunity..."

Maunty was very tall by goblin standards but that still made him short enough to place his head at the same height as Flio's chest, so Flio bent his knees, lowering himself to Maunty's eye level. "As far as I'm concerned, you're part of the family after all the hard work you've put in on Blossom's farm," he said, smiling his usual easygoing smile. "There's no need to stand on ceremony here—let's just all enjoy the barbecue!"

"To think, your lordship would bend his knee to speak to a lowly goblin such as myself..." said Maunty, his voice choking up as he held out his hand for Flio to shake. Flio took it with a smile, and just then, a goblin girl came running up to shake his hand as well.

"Mister Flio!" she said, beaming from ear to ear. "Thank you for everything!"

"This is my eldest daughter..." Maunty explained, but before he could say anything further, the rest of the children came running up, all wanting to shake Flio's hand as well. Within moments, Flio found himself surrounded on all sides by a sea of exuberant goblins.

"Maunty," Flio said. "Are all of these children yours?"

"They are!" said Maunty, blushing with bashful pride. "Including Cynthia, my eldest, there are sixty-eight in total, and they all work on the farm."

Come to think of it, Blossom mentioned something about being spoiled for help on the farm lately... Flio thought. *Could she have been talking about all of these children...?* "Thank you all for your hard work on the farm," he said, smiling at the goblin children all around him. "Have fun at the barbecue today, all right?"

“We will!” the sixty-eight grinning goblins all replied in unison.

Once they were finished paying their respects, the goblin children all ran off to join the party, as Flio and Maunty watched them go. “By the way, Maunty...” Flio ventured.

“Yes, Mister Flio? Is there something I can do to help?” Maunty asked.

“I was just wondering...” Flio said. “Is your wife here today?”

“Oh, right,” Maunty said, a bashful look coming over his face once again as he replied. “My wife could be giving birth to our next child any day now, you know. She’s back resting at the cottage, saving her strength.”

“I see!” Flio said with a smile. “Well then, congratulations!”

“It’s always a happy occasion, to be sure,” Maunty said. “And Madame Rys makes certain to offer her congratulations every time as well, and even helps look after the children from time to time. I’m very grateful for everything she does, you know.”

“Rys does all that...?” Flio mused. *She does always make a point of reporting on the latest developments with Maunty’s children in our after-dinner meetings, I’ve noticed...* Flio thought, as Maunty kept on bashfully smoothing his hair. *But I had no idea she’s been helping look after the children once they’re born as well!*

While Flio and Maunty were having their conversation and the rest of the family was settling into lively conversations of their own, in the back of the gathering space the stone oven burned hot, roasting great hunks of meat in its flames. The delicious smell of the barbecue wafted over the area, drawing the attention of Wyne, who had only just teleported in.

“Wahoo!” Wyne cheered, drooling as she came running over to the oven. “Meat-meat!”

Before Wyne could do anything to the still-cooking meat, however, Rislei, who was in charge of keeping the fire under control, quickly went to stop her.

Rislei—the half-human half-lichsteed daughter of Sleip and Byleri. She was a serious-minded girl and something of a leader for the younger generation of

children in Flio's house.

"Hold up, Wyne," Rislei said. "The meat needs just a minute longer on the flame."

"Okay-okay!" Wyne said. "Got it-got it!" She sat down to wait patiently in front of the oven, as quiet as a mouse...although Rislei couldn't help but notice there was a line of drool dangling out the side of the dragonewt's mouth.

Rislei felt an undeniable sense of pressure from Wyne's looming presence behind her. "Ah ha ha... Well, I guess if you insist..." she said with a smirk, picking up the roast from the oven by the spit. It was quite a large hunk of meat, and at the rate it was going, it would be a while until it was fully cooked. Rislei, though, had an idea. She held up her right hand, casting a quick spell. A magic circle appeared and shot out a jet of flames—not an inferno by any stretch of the imagination but more than enough to speed along the roast. "Eh heh heh," she chuckled, clearly proud of her handiwork. "I'm no Elinàsze, but I can handle magic well enough for this at least!"

In a few moments, the roast was done. "All right..." said Rislei, letting out a short breath as she took a satisfied look over the freshly seared meat. "It's ready!"

"Fooood!" Wyne exclaimed, springing towards Rislei without missing a beat and biting the roast straight out of Rislei's hand.

"Hey! W-Wyne!" protested Rislei, quickly wheeling around to see Wyne trotting away happily, the end of the spit poking out of her overstuffed mouth.

"Meat! Meat!" Wyne cheered as she vanished into the distance.

"That girl..." said Rislei, putting her hands on her hips with an unhappy huff. "I *told* her the first serving was supposed to be for Uncle Flio..."

"Ha ha ha! Oh, Rislei!" Suddenly, a man came up from behind, hoisting her up by the armpits and into his arms. "Working hard, I see!"

"P-Papa?! Quit it!" Rislei protested, as her father Sleip beamed with fatherly pride. As she realized that she was being held aloft at the crowded barbecue in full sight of the other members of Flio's household, her face turned an embarrassed shade of brilliant red, kicking and flailing her arms in a bid for

freedom.

Sleip, however, seemed completely untroubled by Rislei's resistance. Laughing heartily, he spun round and round on the spot with Rislei held tight in his arms. "Ha ha ha! Come now, Rislei! What do you have to be so embarrassed of?"

"Anyone would be embarrassed to have a dad who keeps doing stuff like this!" Rislei shot back as Sleip held her in place, laughing and laughing in spite of her increasingly desperate squirming. "Cut it out!"

At that point, a man stepped up to the father and daughter. "Lord Sleip," he said, perfectly at ease in spite of the situation. "Perhaps you should take mercy on your daughter for the time being. Miss Rislei is still in the middle of cooking, is she not?"

Sleip paused at the sound of the voice and turned around. "I *knew* I recognized that voice..." he said when he saw who it was. "If it isn't MacTaulo!"

MacTaulo—in his day, he had been the Order of Klyrode's finest knight, a mighty champion of humanity fighting on the front lines of the war against the Dark Army. Since peace had been achieved between the warring parties, he took a position as first headmaster of the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education, hoping to pass his knowledge down to the younger generation.

MacTaulo was dressed for the occasion in an Order of Klyrode dress uniform, carrying a glass in his hand as he stepped up to Sleip. "Quite right, Lord Sleip, and well met," he said. "How many times now do you suppose it's been that we've encountered each other like this, without any swords involved whatsoever? It is quite something, after all the times you and I faced each other on the field of battle."

In the past, before the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode had its treaty with the Dark Army, MacTaulo had led his knights to battle many times against his nemesis, Sleip of the Infernal Four. The two had come face-to-face on countless occasions over the course of the war.

"Ha ha ha!" Sleip laughed. "I certainly don't mind the change! Although, perhaps we should rather not speak about those times in front of the children..."

“You are right, of course...” said MacTaulo. “That was rather tactless of me, I suppose.”

The two men carried on their conversation between bouts of hearty laughter for a while, until Sleip set his daughter back down on the ground and introduced her to his old nemesis. “Here, I suppose introductions are in order. This is Rislei, my beloved daughter.”

“L-Like, excuse me...” said a woman, timidly sidling up to join the conversation.

“Oh! Byleri! You made it!” said Sleip, beckoning her over with a grin the moment he saw who it was.

Byleri—the archer from Balirossa’s old knightly company, once stationed at Klyrode Castle. After quitting the knighthood, she had settled into life at Flio’s house, putting her considerable expertise in looking after horses to use caring for equine magic beasts in the ranch she set up out front. Now she lived each day with a smile on her face, together with her common-law husband Sleip and their daughter Rislei.

Sleip grabbed Byleri by the waist as she stepped up to him, and pulled her into a tight embrace. “And this is my wife Byleri!” he said, introducing her to MacTaulo. “Byleri, Rislei, this is Captain MacTaulo, an old friend of mine.”

“MacTaulo, at your service,” said MacTaulo, bowing his head. “It is an honor to make an acquaintance of you both.”

“Hello, Mister MacTaulo,” Rislei said, happy to make the man’s acquaintance. “I’m Rislei.”

“A-And, like, I’m Byleri!” Byleri, by contrast, fidgeted nervously as she introduced herself. “I-It’s a pleasure!”

L-Like, Captain MacTaulo hasn’t realized that I used to be part of the Klyrode army, has he?! Byleri worried to herself behind the forced friendly smile on her face. MacTaulo, fortunately, seemed not to realize that there was anything weighing on her mind.

“But really, I must say...” MacTaulo remarked to Sleip. “I would have never imagined I’d see the day you’d take such a lovely lady as your wife, with a child

so grown already! I suppose it's a sign I'm getting up there in years as well..."

"Preposterous!" said Sleip. "Compared to me, you're still just a whippersnapper, you know!"

The two men shared a spirited laugh, and carried on their conversation.

While MacTaulo and Sleip were chatting away outside the shack, inside the building a magic circle appeared, producing a pair of women. The taller of the two—the Maiden Queen—ran up to the window to take a look outside, hiding herself from sight behind the frame. "By the look of things, it seems we were able to make it on time," she said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness..." said the smaller woman—the Third Princess—sighing with relief as well.

"It certainly wouldn't do for us to have arrived late after Mister Flio expressly invited us to the family barbecue," the Maiden Queen said, tying her long hair in a ponytail. When she held court in Klyrode Castle, the Maiden Queen wore her gorgeously silken hair loose around her shoulders to complement the gown she wore as queen. Now, however, her hair was tied back, and she was dressed in a light dress like the ones favored by ordinary girls about town, paired with a pair of large round glasses. Like this, she seemed like a completely different person than when she was at the castle.

"I suppose you must find it strange to see me dressed like this, Third Princess..." the Maiden Queen said, looking nervously up and down her outfit. Much to her surprise, however, her younger sister let out a laugh.

"We're off duty now, aren't we?" she said. "And didn't I just tell you to call me Swann at our little meeting before we left the castle?"

Indeed, Swann, the Third Princess, had also abandoned the voluminous dress she favored when they were at the castle for a short-sleeved shirt, a pair of shorts, and boots—an outfit meant for outdoor activity.

"Y-Yes, that's right. My apologies, Third Pr—or rather, Swann," said the Maiden Queen, nearly making the same mistake again in spite of her sister's reminder before hastily correcting herself.

“And,” Swann continued, “as I told you many times while we were still in the Castle, that dress looks lovely on you, big sister Ellie.”

“O-Oh, yes, that’s right. I’m meant to be going by the name Ellie while we’re here...” the Maiden Queen—or rather, Ellie—said. “Yes...I am Ellie...” she repeated to herself, touching her hand against her chest.

Eventually the door to the shack opened, interrupting the sisters’ conversation. “Miss Ellie, Miss Swann, thank you for your patience,” said Garyl, stepping inside. “I came as soon as I noticed your presence.” Earlier that day, Garyl had visited the Houghtow College of Magic as an envoy of Klyrode Castle before coming here to take part in the family barbecue.

“Garyl!” said Ellie, her expression lighting up instantly when she saw who it was and hurtling over as Swann watched in wide-eyed disbelief.

E- Ellie and I were both enchanted with the spell Concealment back at the castle to keep our presence from being detected, weren’t we? she thought, struggling to put her confused mind in order. But Garyl definitely said just now that he noticed our presence...

“There you are, Swann!” came yet another voice, as Rynàsze hurried into the shack next to her brother. “I knew it!”

“R-Rynàsze?!” Swann exclaimed, her eyes growing wider still at the arrival of a second of Flio’s children.

“I came as soon as I felt a presence, and here you were, right where I knew you’d be!” said Rynàsze, beaming with delight as she ran up to Swann’s side and gave her a great big hug. “How have you been, Swann?” she asked, squeezing the princess tight and pressing her cheek against hers. “I know you’ve been too busy lately to come over and play, but I’m very happy to see you again after so long!”

Rynàsze, it seemed, had been able to detect their presence in spite of the Concealment spell, just like Garyl. Swann, however, was somewhat too preoccupied to make that observation.

Oh my gooodness!!! she thought. R-Rynàsze... R-Rynàsze’s h-h-hugging me!!! Waaaah!!!

Swann had first started spending time with Rynàsze in an attempt to overcome her phobia of magic beasts but quickly ended up falling head over heels in love. Rynàsze hugging her so suddenly after the two of them had spent so much time apart had been enough to entirely short-circuit her brain. She let Rynàsze do what she wanted with her body, her cheeks flushing hot as Ellie and Garyl looked on, smiling fondly.



“Those two really are quite taken with each other, aren’t they?” mused Ellie.

“They are!” said Garyl. “It’s good to see our little sisters getting along so well!”

The two of them shared a look, and Garyl reached out to gently take Ellie’s hand in his. She squeezed back ever so lightly, and the two began, bit by bit, to draw slowly closer. Just as their faces were about to finally touch, however...

“Sir Garyl! Where, oh, where could you have gone?!” they heard Salina calling out from outside the shack, interrupting the amorous moment.

Salina had accompanied Garyl to the Houghtow College of Magic as an extracurricular assignment from the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education. When she learned about the barbecue from her conversations with Garyl throughout the day, she refused to relent until she had secured an invitation for herself. Irystiel, of course, who they had met during their visit to the college, had naturally ended up with an invitation as well.

“Irystiel wants to know where Garyl went too, mreowr!” came Irystiel’s voice, projected via ventriloquism through her usual doll.

Startled by the sound of the girls’ voices, Garyl and Ellie snapped back to reality and quickly pulled apart, both red-faced with embarrassment.

“I-I...” said Ellie.

“U-Um...” said Garyl.

“Oh!” said Rynàsze. “That must be Salina and Irystiel! Come on, Swann, let me introduce you!” She hurried out the door with a smile on her face, Swann’s hand gripped in her own. Swann, still in a daze from being hugged by the object of her affection, staggered after her with uncertain wavering steps. She swayed wildly, smacking straight into her older sister Ellie’s back.

“Ah!” Ellie cried, caught completely unaware by the impact, teetering precariously forwards.

“W-Watch out!” In a flash Garyl knelt down, holding out his arms to keep Ellie from falling. When the dust was settled, she found herself in his arms, face-to-face with Garyl. They were much closer than they had been even before pulling

away, their faces softly touching...

Outside the shack, Rylnàsze and Swann stepped up to meet Salina and Irystiel.

“Salina, Irystiel, I’d like you to meet Swann!” said Rylnàsze, smiling as she introduced her to the pair. “Swann is my very special friend.”

Under ordinary conditions, Swann would have no trouble at all making a proper introduction, but at present, with her head spinning and her face flushed red all the way up to her ears, the most she could manage was an awkward, “N-Nice to meet you...”

Salina and Irystiel looked back and forth between the happily smiling Rylnàsze and the clearly flushed and unsteady Swann.

“I am Salina,” said Salina, giving her a smart bow. “A pleasure.”

“This is Irystiel!” said the plush doll in Irystiel’s arms, its mouth opening and closing in time with her ventriloquism. “Irystiel says it’s a pleasure too, mreowr!”

As the four girls finished their introductions, Garyl and Ellie finally stepped out of the shack themselves.

“Ah! Sir Garyl!” said Salina, running up with Irystiel the moment they noticed him there.

“Hey, you two,” said Garyl, greeting them with a smile. “I’d like you to meet Ellie. She’s going to be joining us for today’s barbecue. Be nice to her, okay?”

“Yes, I am Ellie,” said Ellie, a placid smile on her face as she bowed politely to Salina and Irystiel in turn. “I hope we can be friends.”

Salina and Irystiel both narrowed their eyes, peering at Ellie with suspicion.

That woman is always paying visits to Sir Garyl’s house... thought Salina, glancing over at Ellie.

Not only that, but sometimes it feels like there’s something fishy going on between the two of them! thought Irystiel, meeting Salina’s gaze.

“Anyway, the barbecue should be starting any moment! We should head over

to join them!” said Garyl, walking on towards the barbecue proper, with Salina and Irystiel hurrying along behind.

“But of course!” said Salina. “I would be delighted to accompany you!”

“Irystiel wants to come too, mreowr!” said Irystiel’s plush.

“Come on, Swann!” said Rynàsze, pulling the very stunned girl along after her. “We should head over there too!”

Ellie came along last, at the back of the group, her head inclined slightly downwards as she touched a finger to her lips, recalling the sensation of Garyl’s lips from just moments earlier and blushing in spite of herself as the group hurried along to join the gathering on the lakeshore.



Rys stood atop an elevated platform with her hands on her hips, looking out all around. The platform was built on the lakeshore near the shack and was high enough off the ground that someone standing up top would have a clear view of the entire area where the family was holding its barbecue.

“Good...” Rys nodded, satisfied as she surveyed the scene. “It looks like everything’s just about ready.” Then, grinning happily, she called out to Flio, who was mingling with the crowd. “My lord husband! Over here, if you please!” she cried, vigorously waving as her tail appeared and began to wag back and forth.

“Coming, Rys!” said Flio, handing his glass over to Elinàsze. “Just a moment, I’ll be right back,” he told her, before jogging over to the platform where his wife was waiting, making his way through the crowd.

“This way, my lord husband!” said Rys, holding out her hand. Flio grabbed hold, and she pulled him up onto the platform as if his body weighed nothing at all.

At first glance, Rys appeared to be a slender woman, but her true form was that of a formidable lupine demon. Even in her human form, she was possessed of considerable strength.

Rys set Flio down on the center of the platform and stepped back diagonally

behind her husband. “Everyone! Thank you so very much for coming to the house of Flio family barbecue today! We’re here to express our thanks, not just all of us living together as a family but for our friends and acquaintances as well. Please do enjoy our hospitality, on behalf of my lord husband, and me, his wife, Rys!” With that, she placed a hand on Flio’s back, urging him forwards. “Now, my lord husband, would you please give a word to our guests?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” said Flio, stepping forwards and looking around at the assembled crowd. “Hello, everyone,” he said, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “Thank you for taking the time out of your busy lives to join us today. The only reason we’re able to hold events like this one is because all of you—” but that was as far as he got.

“Meat!” cried Wyne, her jubilant voice loud enough to carry across the entire barbecue from all the way in the back. “Yummy-yummy meat-meat!” She was holding a freshly roasted skewer of meat, greedily stuffing her cheeks full. Levana followed suit, chomping away at her own hunk of roast meat as Folmina and Ghoros came by, drawn by the sound of Wyne’s voice, to claim a skewer of their own.

Folmina—the daughter of Ghozal and Uliminas, making her half hellcat and half demon royal. She was equally attached to Ghozal’s other wife Balirossa as she was to her mother Uliminas. She had recently begun attending school at the Houghtow College of Magic along with Ghoros and Levana.

Ghoros—the son of Ghozal and Balirossa, making him half human and half demon royal. He was equally attached to Ghozal’s other wife Uliminas as he was to his mother Balirossa. A boy of few words who absolutely adored his older sister Folmina, he recently began attending school at the Houghtow College of Magic along with Folmina and Levana.

Folmina took a bite from her hunk of roast meat, and soon she, too, was singing its praises for all to hear. “This is good!” she said. “Really, really, really good!”

“Yeah...” Ghoros agreed. “It’s really good...” His voice was quieter than his sister’s, but his eyes had a distinct gleam to them as he single-mindedly devoured his own skewer.

“Young Mistress Wyne!” said Tanya, rushing over from where she had been on standby beside the platform. “Master Flio is still in the middle of his speech!”

“Th-That’s right!” said Balirossa, stepping up herself from elsewhere in the crowd. “Folmina, Ghoró—Mister Flio hasn’t finished his speech yet!”

Alas, it was too late. All throughout the lakeshore, the barbecue guests had abandoned formality, talking animatedly and laughing happily about this or that.

“The nerve!” said Rys, her shoulders bristling with anger. “Right in the middle of my lord husband’s speech!” Huffing dramatically, Rys went to jump down from the platform, only to be stopped by Flio himself.

“Rys, it’s all right,” Flio said with a smile. Then, taking another look around the barbecue, he addressed the crowd once more. “I guess that’s enough formalities for the time being. Please, eat and drink and talk to your heart’s content!” He raised his arms towards the sky, and the crowd let out a thunderous cheer as they reached out to grab plates of food and drinks from the densely packed tables.

“Hrm! Very good!”

“Yes, this really is excellent!”

“Try this one! It’s out of this world!”

Flio looked around from atop the platform, smiling his usual easygoing smile as he listened to the scattered words of approval for the cuisine.

“But, my lord husband!” Rys protested, puffing out her cheeks in a pout and jabbing Flio in the back with her pointer finger. “You looked so gallant! Are you really going to give up on your speech? I wanted to hear it all the way to the end!”

“I’m glad you liked my speech so much, but you know how it is,” said Flio, turning to face his aggrieved wife. “Nobody in any world likes it when the ceremonies start dragging on. See, look at them.” He pointed out towards the crowd now wholeheartedly enjoying the barbecue.

“Well, everyone *does* seem to be having a good time...” Rys admitted,

although the pout showed no signs of leaving her face. “But still!”

Just then, however, spurred by the delectable aroma of food wafting up from the barbecue below, Rys’s stomach suddenly made a loud gurgling noise.

“Oh no!” said Rys, blushing red from embarrassment and covering her stomach with her hands. “I can’t believe I did that right in front of my lord husband...”

“I’m just as hungry as you, trust me,” said Flio, pulling his wife into a gentle hug. “Shall we go down together and get some food?”

“W-Well, if you say so, my lord husband, I can hardly refuse...” said Rys, still blushing as the two of them stepped down off the platform.

“Here you are, papa! And here’s yours, mama. I made sure to have these ready for you,” said Elinàsze, coming up to Flio and Rys with a skewer of meat in each hand to offer her parents.

“Why thank you, Elinàsze! This came just in the nick of time!” said Rys, wasting no time in gobbling down the enormous hunk of meat. She took a gigantic bite—impossibly large considering her dainty mouth—chewed a scant couple of times, and swallowed before going back for a second bite.

Elinàsze watched with a wry smile on her face. “You know, I’ve always wondered...” she said. “How does all that meat fit inside of mama’s skinny body?”

“That’s a good question...” Flio nodded. “I’ve wondered that myself from time to time...”

The two skewers of meat Elinàsze had brought for her parents, incidentally, were of entirely different sizes. The bit of meat on Flio’s skewer was about as large as his fist, while Rys’s was nearly the size of a human head. And yet, in spite of having devoured that enormous quantity of meat in just a single second, her belly remained as flat as ever.

“This way, my lord husband!” Rys said, pulling her husband along with a great big grin on her face as Elinàsze followed from behind. “Let’s try this one next! I’d say the seasoning came out quite nicely, if I may be so bold!”

“There you are, Lord Flio!” Ura called out as the three of them made their way across the barbecue.

“Oh! Hello, Ura!” said Flio.

“Lord Flio, Lady Rys...” Ura began, his massive body bending low to bow his head to the two of them. “My thanks for inviting the entire village out to today’s feast!”

“Thank you, Lord Flio...” Kora echoed as she ran up beside her father, half hiding behind his legs even as she politely bowed her head.

Flio gave the two of them one of his usual easygoing smiles. “You and the rest of the villagers are always helping out with Blossom’s farm and the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, after all! There’s no question that all of you are part of the family. Of course you’d be invited!”

“I’m sure they’ll all be delighted to hear that!” said Ura, grinning heartily as he gave Flio a couple of friendly smacks on the shoulder. “I’ll be sure to tell them what you said!” Behind him, Flio could see the other demons who he had transplanted along with Ura all eating and drinking and having a good time.

Among the demons living in Ura’s village was Blossom, gulping down a tankard of ale and laughing along with the rest of them. “Ah ha ha! I tell ya, nothin’ blasts away fatigue like a good round of drinkin’, eatin’, and raisin’ hell!”

“M-Mom!” said Kora, pitter-pattering through the crowd to hug Blossom tight around the leg once she noticed how hard she was drinking. “It’s bad for you to drink too much...”

“Don’t worry, Kora! I know!” said Blossom. “But today’s a celebration for all of us for working so hard every day! You don’t gotta worry!”

“You’re not going to end up like Miss No-Gooddess?” Kora asked.

“No, I won’t,” Blossom nodded her head, suddenly looking very serious. “You can count on that. I could hardly call myself a human anymore if I ended up like her.”

“You said it!” said one of the oni sitting behind Blossom. “I could never bear it if I ended up like that!”

“One should drink alcohol, not be consumed by it,” agreed another, folding his arms and sternly nodding his head.

Not only Blossom, but the oni as well... Flio thought, smiling dryly as he looked on. *How bad could Miss Telbyress’s drinking habits be...?*

“Exalted One,” said Hiya, emerging from their mindscape to appear instantaneously behind Flio.

“Hello, Hiya,” said Flio. “I hope you’re planning on joining us for the barbecue?”

“Indeed, such was my intention,” Hiya intoned. “First, however, would I be allowed to ask a single question?”

“Of course, what is it?” Flio replied.

“I understand this barbecue is not per se a festival,” Hiya said, glancing around at the crowd and inclining their head in confusion. “What, then, is the meaning behind assembling so many individuals together for this one event? I sense there is some difference between this and the usual meals shared at the house, but I struggle to comprehend the significance...”

“I believe I can answer that question!” Rys declared, proudly stepping forwards and putting her hands on her hips. “You see, Hiya,” she said, puffing out her chest, “when a pack reaches a certain size, it becomes impossible for the leader to keep track of every single member individually. Under those circumstances, it’s quite common for discontent and dissatisfaction within the pack to go unresolved. A barbecue like this is the most efficacious means to quickly dispel those bad feelings before they become a problem!”

“In other words, this event serves as an opportunity for everyone to relax and have a chance to express their feelings...” Hiya mused.

“Yes, precisely!” said Rys. “By having occasions such as this one, where everyone can get together in a single space to eat delicious food, drink good drinks, and converse with their fellow packmates, we give them the motivation they need to give it their all come the following morning. We had regular dinner parties with the entire pack when I was still with the lupine demons in the Dark Army too!”

“I see...” Hiya mused, bowing deeply in appreciation for Rys’s account. “Truly, as you say, living beings of all kinds, humans and demons alike, will only accumulate discontent and dissatisfaction the longer they are made to suffer under miserable circumstances. I myself often took advantage of that weakness of the heart in my time playing the three wishes game...”

Flio smirked knowingly as Hiya and Rys carried on their conversation. *Rys is thinking of the house as a pack again, I see... he thought. I set up this event just hoping for everyone to have a good time, but Rys isn’t wrong to see it as a chance for everyone to blow off some steam as well. I guess she hasn’t exactly said anything wrong this time...*

Belano, however, who had been listening in on the conversation from a short distance away, went pale in the face as Rys spoke. *Lady Rys used to have dinner parties with the other lupine demons in the Dark Army? she thought. Then, the first time we met her, when she fought with Mister Flio...when she said she was going to use us for provisions...was that...?*

An image of herself waiting helplessly to be roasted and made into dinner came unbidden to Belano’s mind, sending a shiver through her entire body.

Thank goodness we met Mister Flio when we did that day... she thought, letting out a long breath and draining the contents of her tankard. We were really lucky...



Hours after Flio and Rys had delivered their opening remarks, the festivities on the lakeshore were still going full tilt. The members of the household were all smiling and chatting amiably or else enjoying the delectable food the barbecue had on offer.

Rys took a look around at the crowd, a smile of satisfaction on her face. “Good, good,” she said. “It looks like we have plenty of food and drink for everyone to enjoy the party.”

Just moments earlier, Rys had been rushing around the barbecue alongside Tanya, taking care of all the tasks that needed to be done. The work was all well worth it, however, for the sake of ensuring the barbecue remained well stocked with food and drink.

“That said, I think we may be running a little short on sweets for the children,” Rys continued. “Perhaps I should prepare some extras now so they’ll be ready to go out when we need them...”

Rys had just begun heading in the direction of the open-air kitchen when Flio stepped up beside her. “Rys, you know I have plenty of sweets stored in my Bottomless Bag. There’s no need for you to make any extra.”

“B-But...” protested Rys.

“What I mean is, why don’t you go and enjoy the barbecue as well?” Flio suggested, wrapping his arm around his wife’s shoulders and sitting her down on a nearby bench. “You’ve done nothing but chores since the barbecue started.”

“I-I suppose you’re right...” Rys nodded. “If such is the will of my lord husband...” Nonetheless, she continued to nervously glance around the party, clearly preoccupied with the state of the preparations.

“Here, Rys, have this,” said Flio, smirking affectionately at his wife’s behavior as he handed her a plate of roast meat he had picked up earlier.

“Thank you, my lord husband...” Rys said, accepting graciously. She took a bite in an automatic gesture, and suddenly a smile spread across her entire face. “Why, this is the Super Ultra Mount Boar meat from our latest hunt in Dogorogma! Oh, I simply can’t get enough of this gravy you’ve cooked it in!”

“There was a species of magic beast in my home world that was quite a bit like the Super Ultra Mount Boar,” Flio said. “Turbo Mount Boar, it was called. Although, it wasn’t nearly as large as the magic beast we fought the other day.”

“And yet, even a beast like that was brought low by a single one of your Gravitation spells!” Rys gushed, color rising to her cheeks as she devoured the plate of food. “I can hardly take a bite without remembering how splendid you were...”

Flio smiled, glad to see his wife enjoying herself at last as Rys cheerfully ate and ate, not at all noting his gaze as she took great ravenous bites of meat. Flio noticed a bit of sauce that had ended up smeared on Rys’s face and reached out, wiped it off with his index finger, and took a lick.

“M-My lord husband! You mustn’t stoop to such things!” Rys objected. Then, without a moment’s hesitation, she opened her mouth wide and closed it around Flio’s finger, licking it clean with her agile tongue. “Mrf... Gulp...” she said, fighting to keep Flio’s finger inside her mouth. “Th-This is my wifely duty...”

“Rys...” said Flio, wincing as he pulled his finger out of her mouth. “It’s okay, really...”

“Nhh...” said Rys, giving the finger a long, needy look.

“R-Really, it’s okay, I promise,” Flio repeated.

“If such is the will of my lord husband...” said Rys, finally relenting. She smiled softly, resting her head against her husband’s shoulder as she looked out at the party going on around them. “I am having a wonderful time, you know,” she said. “When I was still in the Dark Army, I could never even have imagined how wonderful an evening like this could be...”

“That goes for me too,” said Flio, stroking Rys’s hair and smiling fondly himself. “When I was first summoned to this world and ripped away from the life I had been building at the time, I never thought I’d be enjoying a beautiful evening like this with so many people important to me.”

“My lord husband!” Rys interjected with a pout. “Shouldn’t that be *‘enjoying a beautiful evening with my beloved wife’?*”

“Y-Yes, of course!” Flio hastened to reassure her. “I love you very much, Rys!”

Rys peered at Flio’s face for a long moment before smiling once again. “Well, all that aside...” she said, looking out at the crowd, where she could see her son Garyl, who was back home in Houghtow for the day’s barbecue. “I suppose Garyl is going to be living at Klyrode Castle now that he’s an adult?”

Garyl was sitting right by the shore of the lake, eating some barbecued meat of his own. Sitting beside him were two of his old classmates—Salina, who had accompanied him on his mission to Houghtow City that morning, and Irystiel, who had come to join the barbecue after her shift at the Houghtow College of Magic school store. Further off to the side was the Maiden Queen herself. The

Maiden Queen was well disguised, with a powerful Concealment spell cast on her person and her hair up in a ponytail, complete with a pair of thick round glasses to prevent anyone from guessing at her identity. It had certainly had the desired effect on Salina and Irystiel, who had no idea that the woman they were eating with was the reigning monarch of the land.

That being said, the members of Flio's household, from Flio and Rys themselves to Ghozal and all the rest, were all perfectly aware of who the Maiden Queen was and were thus delighted to have her at the barbecue.

"I suppose so," Flio concurred, nodding as he followed Rys's gaze out to where Garyl was sitting. "From everything I've heard he's been working as hard as ever over at the castle. I'm very proud of our son."

"So then, my lord husband..." Rys ventured, looking up at him with her big puppy-dog eyes. "That would mean we have one fewer child at the house than we used to, would it not? Wh-Which is to say... Um..." She fidgeted nervously, color rising to her cheeks as she blushed all the way up to her ears. "P-Perhaps it's time for...for another child? After all, Rynàsze said she'd love to have a little brother or sister, didn't she?"

Rys placed her hand on Flio's, and he began to blush himself as he realized what Rys was saying. "U-Um..." he said, his voice coming out as little more than a squeak. "W-Well, all right. I-I'll do my best..."

"Yes!" Rys cheered, grinning wide and wrapping her arms tight around Flio's as the usually composed man stammered out his response. "We should start at once! Tonight, perhaps! You will dote on me, won't you? Even more than you usually do?" There was something undeniably lascivious about the look she was giving her husband.

H-Here we go again... thought Flio, looking distinctly more nervous at the prospect of another child.

As Flio and Rys sat on the bench, making plans for another child, Balirossa stole a glance at the pair of lovebirds from a short distance away.

Mister Flio and Lady Rys are always so affectionate with each other... she

thought, her own cheeks taking on a pinkish hue as she looked on at their display of marital intimacy. *A-Although, I suppose Lord Ghozal and myself are rather affectionate as well. After all, we sleep together every night... A-And he certainly favors me with rather a great deal of love... Perhaps I'm simply not suited to displaying my fondness so openly. I certainly could never flirt like that in front of so many people...*

Suddenly, Ghozal appeared from nowhere, startling Balirossa out of her thoughts. "Hey, Balirossa. What's up?" he asked.

"Hyaaaah!!!" Balirossa exclaimed.

"Hey now!" Ghozal laughed, handing his wife a tankard of ale he had been carrying. "No need to act so surprised to see me!"

"Th-Thank you..." Balirossa said, drooping her head as she accepted the drink. *I-I wonder what Lord Ghozal would think if I were to flirt with him here and now...* she thought, stealing a furtive glance in his direction and looking back down into her tankard. *Maybe I'll try moving up just a bit closer to him...* she thought, her face turning reddening as she peered into the depths of the liquid. *A-All right, she told herself, there's no use in wasting time thinking about it, I need to take action for a change...*

Swallowing nervously, Balirossa willed herself to lean up against her husband, but no matter how hard she tried, her legs stayed stubbornly rooted to the spot, unable to take a step.

M-My legs... she thought, gritting her teeth in determination as she mustered every ounce of willpower to try and force her body to obey her. *Wh-Why can't I get my legs to move...?* In spite of her efforts—or perhaps because she was trying entirely too hard—the only thing she managed to do was to make her body tremble violently.

Hrm... thought Ghozal, watching Balirossa's behavior closely. *I can see Balirossa is trying to do something, but it looks like she's been caught in the throes of some kind of inner conflict. I should stay here and watch over her while she figures this out...*

Smiling benevolently, Ghozal watched and waited, as Balirossa fought with herself to force her body to move.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Off to the side of the living room on the first floor of Flio's house was a large hutch where Sybe and his family made their home. Square in the middle, Sybe the psychobear and Tybe the Bear of Misfortune lay on their backs with their bellies sticking proudly in the air, their sizable bodies taking up most of the space the hutch had to offer. Sybe's wife, Shebe the unicorn rabbit, and their three children, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, slept in a ring around the two bears, each lying in their own adorable little poses. Lying on top of Sybe's belly, meanwhile, were the pajama-clad Rynàsze and Swann, who were cuddled up close to each other in their sleep.

"It's about time for the younger ones to be getting to sleep, isn't it?" said Flio, smiling as he watched the two girls sleeping comfortably in each other's arms from the entrance to the hutch.

"My lord husband, I'm back from putting Folmina and Ghoro to bed," said Rys, arriving down the staircase from the second floor with Tanya following close behind.

"And I have finished bringing the individuals who fell asleep at the lakeshore to guest rooms in the house," said Tanya. "Madam Balirossa, who unexpectedly passed out on her feet, is being looked after by Lord Ghozal in the shack by the lake. She is in good hands."

"What in the world was Balirossa doing?" Rys wondered, lowering her head. "It seemed as if she mustered so much of her power that she fell unconscious instead..."

"I'm sure Balirossa has struggles of her own," said Flio. "For now, the thing to do is just leave it to Ghozal." Rys and Tanya both nodded in agreement. "Kora fell asleep with Ura carrying her on his shoulders, and Rabbitz dozed off in her usual position, clinging on to Calsi'im's head. As for the oni village children, they have the village adults to look after them, so no need for us to interfere there, I'd say."

"Maunty's children are still full of energy, though," said Rys. "Last I saw them, they were busy eating anything they could get their hands on."

"You are quite correct, Mistress Rys," Tanya concurred. "In fact, they've eaten

nearly all of the sweets we had prepared for the children. I believe it may be time to return to the meeting place and check on the state of our supplies. If you will excuse me..." Tanya gave a polite curtsy and instantly vanished from the spot.

Flio smiled his usual easygoing smile as he turned towards the doorway himself. "Now, how about we head back to the barbecue as well?" he suggested. "The adults are still going strong, after all."

Rys took her husband lightly by the arm as he turned to leave. "Um..." she said, a worried look coming over her face. "My lord husband... The barbecue today wasn't too much of an imposition, was it? You're so kind to everyone; I worry that you've been merely going along with it..."

"Not at all!" Flio reassured her, pulling her into a gentle hug. "If anything, I'm glad you came up with the idea for the barbecue. You were absolutely correct to point out that between our family and all of our friends, our circle has gotten large enough that we'll need to put some thought into things like this. Thank you, Rys."

"My lord husband... It makes me so happy to hear those words..." Rys said, blissfully nuzzling her face into Flio's chest. "And I suppose that means I can count on you for the next one?"

"Huh?" Flio balked. "W-We're doing another one already?"

"Not exactly!" Rys explained, smiling brightly. "Our next party will be for the associates of ours who weren't invited to this one out of consideration for the number of attendees or their own particular circumstances. I've already sent out the invitations. This time, the attendees won't be the members of our extended pack so much as people we've had dealings with through the Fli-o'-Rys General Store."

"That makes sense..." Flio acknowledged. "I went to plenty of parties with business associates back in my old world too."

"So you've told me!" Rys beamed. "And so, I figured there would be no problem for us to hold the next one right after this!"

"I-I suppose not..." was all Flio could manage. "B-But once that one's over,

let's ease up on the parties for a while..."

◇Meanwhile—The Barbecue on the Lakeshore◇

"There you are, Tanya!" Zofina yelled, running over as soon as the maid was back on the lakeshore with a frying pan clutched tight in her hand. "What's the big idea, telling me out of the blue to take over cooking and then vanishing to who-knows-where without a word of explanation?!" she demanded, making no attempt to hide the anger in her expression.

"Come, now—surely there is no need for such anger," Tanya said with all the tone of an adult speaking down to a child as she made her way towards the barbecue proper.

"Where do you think you're going?!" said Zofina. "Now that you're back, *you* should be the one cooking!"

"I am going to take a look around the meeting space to observe the current state of the barbecue. I am afraid I will have to ask you to handle the cooking for a little while longer," Tanya said, and then she vanished once again as quickly as she had arrived.

"W-Wait!" Zofina cried out towards the spot where Tanya had been just moments ago. "These goblin children have absolutely outrageous appetites, you know! No matter how many pancakes I make, they just eat them up in the blink of an eye..." Alas, by now Tanya was already long gone. Zofina heaved a heavy sigh. "Well, if she's leaving it in my hands I suppose there's nothing I can do," she said, making her way back to the kitchen. "I suppose I had better make some more pancakes..."

Well, I have to admit... Zofina thought to herself. *Seeing the smiles on those goblins' faces as they gobble down their pancakes almost makes it worth the trouble...*

◇Meanwhile—Houghtow City, Hokh'hokton's Cottage◇

While the barbecue carried on into the late evening, back in Hokh'hokton's cottage in the middle of Blossom Acres were two familiar figures.

Telbyress was lying on her side on the floor in the middle of the room, screaming and kicking her legs and flailing her arms like a small child throwing a

temper tantrum. “Heeeyyy!!!” she whined. “How come I’m not allowed at the barbecue?! I wanna go! I need to sample the liquor! Pleeaaaaase!” she wailed, tears welling up in her eyes.

Is that no-gooddness honestly in tears about this...? Hokh’hokton thought, taken aback by Telbyress’s behavior. “Didn’t Mister Flio tell you?” he said. “Your barbecue privileges have been revoked, as punishment for slacking off at a job you were given by the Celestial Plane.”

“Come ooonnn!!!” Telbyress whined, kicking and flailing once again. “It was no harm done, right? I’ll work seriously next time, promise...”

“You’ve never kept your word on that in the past, though, have you?” said Hokh’hokton.

“Come ooonnn!!!” the no-gooddness repeated. “In all the time we’ve been together, haven’t I earned a *bit* of trust?”

“I know not to trust you *because* we’ve been together so long!” Hokh’hokton declared, crossing his arms in sheer exasperation. “Besides which, it isn’t as if I’m with you because I *want* to be. You came into my house and started living here entirely against my will! And if you keep throwing tantrums like this, I may have a mind to throw you out!”

At those words, Telbyress immediately ceased her kicking and screaming and sat up on the floor, wrapping her arms around her knees. “I’ll be good...” she said. “Let me stay, please.”

Hokh’hokton sighed deeply. “I, for one, couldn’t begin to imagine what you find so appealing about living in a humble house like this...”

“I mean, with the watch they keep on the main house, I’d never be able to sneak off and have a drink if I lived there...” Telbyress muttered below her breath, too quietly for Hokh’hokton to hear. “But if I told you that, you’d just get angry at me...”

Hokh’hokton peered closely as Telbyress sat chastened on the floor. “Are you really, truly sorry?”

“Uh-huh...” Telbyress answered.

“You won’t find some way to slack off the next time you’re given a job?”

“I’ll do my best...as much as I can, anyway,” she promised.

She can’t even bring herself to say it without equivocating... Hokh’hokton thought, sighing once again as he retrieved a bottle from under the bed, setting it down in front of her with a heavy thud. “This is a special favor to you, you know,” he said. “Mister Flio told me I could let you have a drink at my discretion, if you could manage to be sorry for your behavior.”

At those words, Telbyress sprung to her feet and leaped forwards, hugging Hokh’hokton with surprising force. “Oh my gooosh!” she cried, beaming with delight as she squeezed him tight against her generous cleavage. “Hokh’hokton, you’re the best!” Hokh’hokton squirmed and struggled to escape but found himself completely unable to move in the iron grip of the former goddess. “I love you so, so much!” she continued. “Let’s drink through the night and until the morning!”

Drat! I can’t breathe! Hokh’hokton thought. *If I don’t get out of this, I might be in some real trouble! Mnrrrfh!!!* He fought and fought with all his might, but Telbyress still wouldn’t release him from her torturous embrace until the unfortunate goblin had nearly passed out entirely from lack of air.

◇The Following Morning—Dark Citadel, Throne Room◇

The three members of the current Infernal Four of the Dark Army stepped into the throne room—Zanzibar, Belianna, and Coqueshtti—followed by Demmie, the prospective candidate for the long vacant fourth seat.

Zanzibar—a devil noble, member of the Infernal Four. In the past, he had risen up in rebellion against the tyranny of Dark One Yuigarde, but after his failure and subjugation by Calsi’im’s new Dark Army, that same pluck and initiative, as well as the base of knowledge he had cultivated as a member of the nobility, earned him a seat on the Infernal Four.

Belianna—another devil, also a member of the Infernal Four. She spent her days flying around to every corner of the Dark One’s domain, wielding her scythe in the name of the Dark Army. She was the older sister of Irystiel.

Coqueshtti—a little mad scientist girl and a member of the Infernal Four. She

was awarded her seat by Dark One Dawkson in recognition of the many demons whose lives she had saved using her healing magic, but as she herself was a timid and undisciplined girl, the position did not seem at all suited for her character.

Demmie—current head of the noble devil house Ulgo. Her family had fallen out of favor some time in the past, until a certain incident placed her on the path to becoming a prospective member of the Infernal Four. While she had the spirit and the abilities for the job, her natural-born airheaded streak gave her a tendency to fly into a panic at the drop of a hat.

“Master Dawkson, the Infernal Four are all present,” Phufun announced from her position off to the side of the throne, pressing her false glasses up the ridge of her nose.

Phufun—a succubus who had served Dawkson as his minion since before he ascended the throne. She gave the appearance of an intellectual but was in fact remarkably thoughtless and an inveterate masochist.

“Yeah, I saw,” said Dawkson, the reigning Dark One, sitting not on his throne itself but on the steps leading up to the illustrious seat. “Hey, everyone. Thanks for taking the time out of your busy days to answer my summons.”

Dawkson—the current Dark One, younger brother of the former Dark One Gholl. There was a time when he went by the name of Yuigarde and took no one’s council but his own, but he changed his ways along with his name and now walked the path of the virtuous king.

“Dark One, there is no need for thanks,” Zanzibar replied. “It is the duty of all your vassals to answer your summons without delay, come hells or high water.”

“Hey, if hells or high water are involved just let Phufun know you had some urgent business come up,” said Dawkson, looking over at his minion Phufun standing off to the side. “We’ll change the schedule around to accommodate you.”

I seem to remember a time in the past when the Dark One would bellow “Yer late! Lollygaggers, the lot of you!” or some similarly colorful language before taking his anger out on his minion Lady Phufun... Zanzibar thought to himself, looking over at Dawkson as he stood at attention, waiting for the Dark One’s

orders. *Who would have thought we'd see the day he would say something like that as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world?*

"Arright," Dawkson began. "So, the thing I called you here for today is the big one. Phufun."

"Yes, Master," Phufun said, stepping forwards at Dawkson's prompting. She adjusted her false glasses, looking down at a sheet of paper in her hand. "We received a letter from the human nation, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, from the Fli-o'-Rys General Store in Houghtow City. You have all been invited to a barbecue. We will need to confirm which of the four of you intend to participate."

"Huh?!" Belianna, Coqueshtti, and Demmie all balked as one in wild disbelief at the contents of Phufun's announcement. Zanzibar alone took the invitation in stride.

"I see..." he said, nodding in apparent understanding after giving the matter a moment's thought. "So that's how it is..."

"Hwuh?" said Coqueshtti, holding her oversized syringe tight and speaking in her usual flustered cadence. "L-Lord Zanzibar, how come you're not surprised? I know we're not fighting anymore, but we're still enemies with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, are we not? And this is an invitation from one of their general stores!"

"I agree, Lady Coqueshtti," Demmie concurred. "Our relationship with the Magical Kingdom is friendlier than it used to be, but this seems like something else entirely..."

"Certainly, the two of you are correct in a sense," said Zanzibar, turning to face his fellow Infernal Four. "However, I cannot help but think that you have somewhat misjudged the situation."

"We have?" Coqueshtti and Demmie both asked at once, clearly uncomprehending.

"Allow me to explain," said Zanzibar, spreading his arms wide as he began his exposition. "The Fli-o'-Rys General Store is the preeminent establishment within the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, with a branch store located outside the very

front gates of the Dark Citadel itself. They provide us with everything from the weapons we use to our daily necessities, at a comfortably affordable price, for the most part. As it stands, the Fli-o'-Rys General Store is indispensable for the continued operation of the Dark Army. Moreover, the wife of the store's proprietor is none other than Lady Fenrys, once famed as the second strongest of the lupine demons in the Dark Army, although it seems she has lately been going by the name of Rys. Even Lord Gholl—the honorable Retired Dark One and older brother of the current Dark One Lord Dawkson—is in the employ of that store, along with his confederate Lady Uliminas. Suffice it to say, this is not a company from whom we can afford to snub an invitation."

"O-Oh, I see..." said Coqueshtti and Demmie, seemingly convinced.

Phufun let out a slight sigh as the three finished their exchange and pressed her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. "Lord Zanzibar has the gist of the situation entirely correct," she said. "Master Dawkson came to the same conclusion himself. You had best all give this invitation its due consideration."

"Yes, my lady!" replied all four Infernals, bowing in unison. Zanzibar, however, was studying Belianna out of the corner of his eye even as he lowered his head.

Coqueshtti and Demmie failed to perceive the significance of this invitation, but it seems Belianna at least understood the matter implicitly... he thought, as he looked over at Belianna bowing beside him, her eyes closed and expression studiously neutral. Why else would she alone have voiced no objection to the idea of attending? But I suppose I should expect nothing less from a fellow noble devil...

Belianna, however, had something else on her mind entirely.

Of course I know the Fli-o'-Rys General Store! she thought, clenching her fist in a small gesture of triumph. They're the best damned shop in the entire world, sponsored by the embodiment of righteousness, the Wolf of Justice himself! After everything they do for me personally every damned day of my life, there's no way in hell I'd turn down an invitation from them! And besides...there's every damned chance I could walk away from this barbecue with some limited edition Wolf of Justice merchandise as a damned souvenir! Hah! I'm looking forward to this!

Years ago, before the treaty that marked the beginning of peace between the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, a mysterious man wearing a mask patterned after a wolf appeared seemingly from nowhere to stand in the way of the Dark Army's plans for conquest—the Wolf of Justice. Time and time again, he would thwart the Dark Army's invasion plans with a display of overwhelming power, eventually acting as the catalyst that led to signing of the treaty.

Only a select few individuals in the entirety of Klyrode knew the truth—the Wolf of Justice was in fact none other than Flio himself.

To many demons, who believed in the teaching that power alone was righteous, the Wolf of Justice's invincible strength was enough to deify him as an object of worship. Belianna was one of his particularly faithful adherents.

“Cool,” said Dawkson. “Y'all can ask Phufun for the schedule and all that. Take a copy and think it over, and let Phufun know if you're gonna be attending or not. Got it?”

“Yes, Dark One!” the Infernal Four replied, bowing their heads yet again.

Phufun sighed quietly and fixed her glasses as she watched. *Back in the day, Master Dawkson would say something like, “Don't keep me waiting, you lollygaggers! You gotta decide right now!” and smack me silly for good measure... she thought. Of course, I understand the benefits to doing things this way instead, but it really feels like something's missing when he's not knocking me around with his fists. I miss those days, sometimes...*

Phufun, of course, was a born masochist. To her, being slugged across the room by Dawkson was nothing short of the height of pleasure. Dawkson, alas, had no idea that his minion was longing for those days of abuse.

“Right then,” Dawkson continued, moving the meeting on to the next topic on the table, “this next thing has to do with *that* group of demons...”

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

The day after the barbecue, two women stood in front of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, looking up at the building among the crowd of passersby outside. Then, without any warning, one suddenly began to dance. “Oh,

Janderena, Janderena, Janderena!” she sang, gesturing wildly towards the building and turning only her head to face the other woman. “Must we really take a job here, oh here, oh here?”

“Yanderena, that’s enough!” the woman named Janderena snapped, reaching out to grab the dancing woman by the face and slamming it into the pavement below. “I told you not to draw attention!”

Yanderena lay silent, her head stuck face first in the small crater left on the ground by the impact with her skull.

Janderena crouched down, bringing her mouth close to whisper in Yanderena’s ear. “The Shadow King sent us on a mission to infiltrate this shop in order to learn how they operate and possibly divert some goods to the Shadow Conglomerate if we get the opportunity. If you stand out and draw their suspicion, they might just drive us away. Understand?”

And, of course, if we don’t do it, we won’t get paid... she thought, clutching the “now hiring” leaflet from the Fli-o’-Rys General Store tight in her hand. *The Shadow Conglomerate is one of the few businesses out there who would be willing to hire the likes of us, after all. We need to prove our utility to them or else...*

Chapter 3: Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought

◇In a Forest◇

Right on the border between the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the land of the demons was a forest which had served as a key strategic bottleneck during the conflict between humans and the Dark Army. Now, however, the land was at peace and only the nearly empty fortresses of the two armies remained, patrolled by nothing more than small units of unarmed soldiers.

“Hmm...” Hero Gold-Hair muttered pensively, looking out the window as his carriage rolled on down the forest road. “It’s a good thing security’s been so light these days. It used to be much harder for us to move around.”

“It certainly was!” said Valentine, sitting in the seat across from Hero Gold-Hair. “And according to the telepathic message I got from our forward scout Riliangiu, it’s all clear on the road ahead, as well!” At the moment she was in the childlike form she had been using to reduce her rate of magic consumption, grinning happily from ear to ear as she cradled the large bottle of alcohol in her arms. “And that means I can drink up without a care in the world!” She brought the mouth of the bottle to her lips and began to chug, draining the contents with so much force that some of the liquid began to spill out from the corners of her mouth.

“Madame Valentine,” came Aryun Keats’s telepathic voice from the ceiling of the carriage. *“I don’t mind if you drink, of course, but please take care not to leave any stains on my insides.”*

The carriage djinn Aryun Keats possessed the ability to transform her body into a replica of any vehicle she had ever happened to touch. The size and duration of her transformation was limited by her own meager quantity of magic power, but with a simple vehicle like a horse-drawn carriage she could maintain the form for days at a time. Today, like many days before, she was serving as the means of transportation for Hero Gold-Hair and his party of misfits.



As Aryun Keats was scolding valentine, Hero Gold-Hair folded his arms and looked over at Tsuya sitting beside him. "So, Tsuya..."

Tsuya, however, was busy counting the party's supply of coins, which she had spread out over her lap, so deep in thought that she didn't notice Hero Gold-Hair addressing her at all.

"Let's seeee..." she said, muttering to herself as she counted. "This will be for todaaay's lodging fee...and this will be for tomooorow..."

"Tsuya! Hey!" Hero Gold-Hair repeated, a little more forcefully than last time.

"Oh? Ah!" Tsuya cried, looking up with a start and quickly stuffing the coins back in the bag she had spread out over her lap. "Y-Yes, Hero Gooold-Hair? How can I heeelp?" she asked, turning to look in his direction.

"Er... Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt your work," said Hero Gold-Hair.

"No, no, no!" Tsuya insisted, placing the bag of coins to the side and giving Hero Gold-Hair her cheeriest smile. "I wasn't doing anything impooortant! What did you want to taaalk to me about?"

"Just to double check, but the next inn's on the other side of this forest, correct?"

"Yes, that's riiight!" chirped Tsuya.

"How much longer will it take to get there, then?" Hero Gold-Hair asked.

"Yes, yes, let me seeee..." said Tsuya, retrieving the map she had set down on the seat beside her. "At the rate we're going nooow, we should arrive at aaaround midnight, but if we speed up juuust a bit, we might be able to make it before the suuun goes down..."

"*Understood!*" Aryun Keats's telepathic voice replied, as the carriage began to pick up speed. "*Speeding up to reach the inn before nightfall!*"

"Wait, no, no need for that!" Hero Gold-Hair objected, holding his arm out to the side to signal for Aryun to stop.

"*Th-There isn't?*" the carriage djinn replied in confusion, suddenly screeching to a halt and sending Wuha Gappoli, who had been sleeping soundly in the seat

across from Hero Gold-Hair, tumbling forwards to land right on Hero Gold-Hair's lap.

"Akablahfgh!!!" Wuha cried as the movement jostled her rudely awake.

"H-Hey!" said Hero Gold-Hair. "Wuha, are you all right?"

"Eh heh..." she chuckled. "J-Just a little startled is all."

"Wuha!" Valentine chastised her. "You aren't taking advantage of the confusion to steal a hug from Hero Gold-Hair, are you?"

Indeed, having come to rest atop Hero Gold-Hair's lap, Wuha Gappoli had quickly moved to wrap her arms tightly around Hero Gold-Hair's waist, pressing her face up against his middle.

"So what?" said Wuha, playfully blowing a raspberry Valentine's direction. "It's not like it's hurting anyone."

Valentine's eyes shone with a dangerous light. "Tell me..." she said, reverting back to her original size from her childlike magic-saving form and producing a menacing array of dark threads from her outstretched fingertips. "Do you value your life, little girl?"

"Wh-Whoa! Hey! Valentine, wait!" said Hero Gold-Hair, hastening to stop the altercation before it went any further. "With the rate you burn through magic power, you know we can't afford all the food we'd need to replenish your reserves if you keep going back to that form at the drop of a hat!"

"H-Hmph... I-I suppose not..." Valentine grumbled, a chagrined look on her face as she shrunk back down to child size.

"Eee hee hee! Someone got scolded!" Wuha Gappoli laughed, her arms still wrapped around Hero Gold-Hair as she stuck her tongue out at Valentine yet again.

"You're being just as bad!" Hero Gold-Hair snapped, grabbing Wuha roughly by the cheeks. "Cut it out and get back to your seat!"

"Mhrf... N-No fair!" Wuha complained, but with her small and generally feeble body she was completely powerless to prevent Hero Gold-Hair from peeling her off his lap and plopping her back down on the carriage seat.

“Now, if we’re all finished, we had better start planning to make camp somewhere nearby...” said Hero Gold-Hair, undeterred by the slapstick act happening inside the carriage. “Let’s have Riliangiu look for an appropriate spot while she’s scouting ahead.”

◇A Mountain Peak on the Continent of Klyrode◇

To the east of the continent known as Klyrode was a great mountain range that dominated its entire region. At that moment, atop one of its many peaks stood a girl of slender build, wearing a tailcoat sporting particularly long tails.

“I knew it had been some time since I last visited this world, but things seem to have changed quite a bit while I’ve been gone, haven’t they?” she mused, looking out from the mountaintop to ascertain the condition of the land below. “The last time I was here there were a lot of spots where the landscape was saturated with malicism, and I’m pretty sure the demons and humans were fighting some kind of war. It looks like they’ve managed to make peace since then... Not that it has anything to do with me.”

The girl stretched her arms out wide, dramatically swinging the cane she was holding in her hand. “I’ve finally made it back to this world, thanks to whatever happened to break the magic barrier around the firmament. Now to collect the djinn I was forced to leave behind the last time I left, and head out to yet another world for a bit of fun!” she said with a grin. “Although I have to admit, it did give me a bit of a shock to suddenly find myself attacked by a scythe-wielding maid. And thanks to that attack of hers, my magic cane ended up completely broken. I wasn’t able to do anything at all with it for quite a while...”

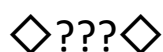
The girl spun the cane around in her hand, tossing it high into the sky. “Fortunately, I was able to mend it using malicism from the nearby forest, and I’m finally ready to begin in earnest!” For a while, the cane twirled and twirled in midair above her head before suddenly coming to a stop, its end pointing off towards into the distance, where a great mountain stood towering at the horizon.

“There she is...” the girl said, nodding in satisfaction. “The carriage djinn I left behind in this world...”

She hopped up, grabbing the cane and swinging her body around to mount it

in midair. “No sense in waiting around, is there!” she said. “I’ll collect the djinn straightaway, and we’ll escape the world together. It’s been lying dormant in Dogorogma for a while now, but if I have her with me I should be able to get *that thing* moving...”

The magic cane rose higher and higher into the air, carrying the girl as a passenger, and took off flying in the direction it had been pointing earlier, picking up speed until she vanished into the inky blackness of the night sky.



In the north of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode was a small village located deep in a dark forest, surrounded on all sides by thick vegetation.

In one corner of the village, a demihuman man stepped out of his small wooden house and paused at the entryway, gazing up at the sky overhead. He was in a humanoid form, dressed as an adventurer with his long white hair tied back in a ponytail.

“Hmm...” said the man. “It looks like they’ve finally finished repairing the firmament. Although I must say, we had quite a few magic beasts and djinn and the like sneaking their way inside the world while it was broken, didn’t we?! It looks like most of the interlopers have been driven off, in any event. No doubt that was the work of the Celestials—I can’t imagine who else could have dispatched so many in such a short time! Still...” he added, turning to look towards the great mountain that dominated the landscape ahead of him, “it does seem like the Celestials let one rat slip between their fingers. She’s been behaving herself so far, but who can say how long that will last...?”

The man reached for the massively oversized greatsword he had left leaning beside his entryway, hefting it effortlessly with a single hand in spite of its enormous weight. It was a thick, heavy blade that seemed to be designed more to simply crush opponents rather than cut them.

“I suppose a former Hero like myself will have to finish the job for them,” he declared, setting off at a walk for the foot of the mountain. “They don’t call me Sage Heavy-Blade for nothing!”

This man was once known as Hero Heavy-Blade, one of many throughout the land who had been summoned by the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode in their

efforts to find a hero capable of slaying the Dark One. After being discharged of his duties, he moved to this village deep in the forest to live a life of seclusion, taking the name of Sage Heavy-Blade.

I do owe the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, he thought. The most I ever managed was to fight the Dark One to a standstill and get him to agree to a temporary ceasefire. But even so, they saw fit to pay me the entire bounty promised to a triumphant Hero...

“Perhaps this will pay off just a little bit of that debt,” he said quietly under his breath and sped up along the path. For a musclebound figure carrying a gigantic sword, he moved quite a bit faster than most would imagine.

◇Deep in a Forest◇

Deep in the forest the trees gave way to a steep cliff, the entrance to a natural cavern open at its base, around which someone had dug a great array of sizable holes.

“Mrgh...” Hero Gold-Hair grunted, stretching mightily as he emerged from inside the cavern. “That was a surprisingly comfortable place to sleep, for a cave in the middle of the forest!” he said. “Now, let’s see here...” Retrieving the Drilldozer Shovel from the Bottomless Bag on his belt, he stepped forwards and peered down into one of the surrounding holes. Inside was a sizable assortment of magic beasts. They were large and looked carnivorous, but all of them currently seemed to be unconscious, knocked out by the impact of the fall.

“Would you look at that?” Hero Gold-Hair remarked. “We hit the jackpot with the pitfall traps this time! I’d better go and collect the bounty!”

As Hero Gold-Hair braced his shovel against the ground, he heard Riliangiu’s telepathic voice speaking inside his mind. “*May I be of assistance?*”

“That you, Riliangiu?” Hero Gold-Hair asked. “There’s no need for that. It’s simple work. All I need to do is just dig my way into the hole from the side and collect the magic beasts in my Bottomless Bag. Besides...” he added, glancing around to try to catch a glimpse of his elusive companion. “You’ve been staying up all night again watching from somewhere nearby just in case a magic beast managed to find its way through the pitfall traps, haven’t you?”

“I have been, yes,” Riliangiu confirmed. “However, I am a being designed for espionage and infiltration. A small amount of magic power is all I need to sustain my existence. Sleep is something I can do without...”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Hero Gold-Hair said. “I’m ordering you to get some rest! Go lie down and close your eyes, even if you have to force it.”

“V-Very well...” said Riliangiu. *“In that case, I shall rest until the party is ready to depart.”*

“Good. You do that,” Hero Gold-Hair said with a satisfied nod before readying the Drilldozer Shovel once again. He dug a spiral ramp circling around the pitfall trap until it was level with the bottom, entering it from the side.

“Now *this* is a magic beast!” he said, examining a nearby specimen with an approving nod as he reached into his Bottomless Bag. “These will fetch a good price, by the looks of them.” A mere second later the beasts had vanished, sucked into the bag’s extradimensional space. “And that’s one trap finished!”

Hero Gold-Hair returned the Bottomless Bag to his belt and climbed up the spiral ramp back out of the hole. When he reached the surface, he pointed the Drilldozer Shovel towards the empty pitfall trap, producing a torrent of topsoil seemingly from thin air until the hole was completely filled.

This was one of the powers of the Drilldozer Shovel, a legendary item created long ago to assist with the Kingdom’s civil engineering. Its primary ability allowed its user to dig holes at a truly astonishing speed, but it had a number of other functions as well.

“I’ve got to say, though, I had no idea the Drilldozer Shovel had this ability this entire time!” Hero Gold-Hair marveled as he watched the stream of dirt spilling out from the head of his shovel, content with his handiwork as the hole filled up before his eyes. “Storing all the dirt and sand you dig up in a separate dimension so you can spit it back out whenever you want... You really are something else!” Thanks to the Drilldozer Shovel’s ability, Hero Gold-Hair had been able to store all of the topsoil he dug up in making the pitfall traps the night before and return it to where it came from before the group left for the morning.

The Drilldozer Shovel glowed with light a single time in response to Hero

Gold-Hair's words, but in the morning sun it was too bright outside for Hero Gold-Hair to notice.

"Now, I'd better finish collecting the magic beasts from the rest of these holes before the others wake up. We should be able to sell all these for a decent enough sum once we get to the inn. That should cheer Tsuya up some, I hope. That woman never stops fretting about the state of our finances..." Hero Gold-Hair leveled off the mound of soil left behind where he had filled in the first pitfall and took the first few steps towards a second when suddenly he stopped in his tracks. "Hm?" he said, looking up towards something he had spotted off in the forest. "Who's that hiding there!" he called out.

"I-I-I-I-I'm sorry!" came Riliangiu's telepathic voice. *"I'm resting—I swear! I'm resting in my hiding spot!"*

"Not you, Riliangiu!" Hero Gold-Hair shouted back. "You!" he said, pointing towards one part of the forest in particular. "The one hiding over there!"

"Well, well, well!" said the slender woman in the tailcoat, smirking as she stepped out of the woods and into view. "I'm impressed! Not many could have spotted me with my Concealment spell up. Now let me see..." She took a long moment to look Hero Gold-Hair over before continuing. "Your abilities are rather high for a human but still within the human range by looks of things. You certainly don't seem like someone who could hope to defeat a djinn such as myself," she said, punctuating her statement with a flourish of her cane.

"Hmph," Hero Gold-Hair replied, waving the Drilldozer Shovel in an identical gesture to the newcomer. "Judging by your words and that attitude of yours, I'm guessing you're not here to make friends."

"What was *that*?" the girl asked dryly, her eyes going icy cold. "Are you...*copying* me?!"

"Sure was. What about it?" said Hero Gold-Hair, completely straight-faced. "Do you have some sort of problem with that?"

"To think!" said the girl with a click of her tongue. "You dare to mock the great Dreibein, elite among carriage djinn, capable of materializing the legendary flying castle! You must have a death wish, human!" The girl—Dreibein—waved her cane once again, but this time it shone with light and a

strange round object appeared on the ground in front of her, sporting three cannons mounted center, left, and right.

“My Vehicle Beast Conjuring Cane is back in full working order, I see!” Dreibein said, jumping up on top of the sphere and sitting down in the cockpit located on its upper portion and grabbing the two advanced-looking control sticks protruding from either side. “Now, let’s see how brave you are when you’re up against a Tank Beast, courtesy of the cane!”

“Hey... Hold your horses for a minute, would you?” Hero Gold-Hair said, the tone of his voice sounding distinctly unimpressed. In fact, he looked so bored by the entire situation that Dreibein found it was seriously spoiling her fun.

“That doesn’t seem like a very appropriate tone for a life-or-death situation...” Dreibein said, doing her best to maintain her smirk in spite of her mounting irritation. “But very well. I’ll humor you, out of the goodness of my heart. But speak quickly!”

“Look, just calm down and think about it,” Hero Gold-Hair said, walking up towards Dreibein and folding his arms, completely undaunted by the djinn’s attitude. “What reason do the two of us have to fight, anyway? Is it just because of the conversation we had a moment ago? That’s nonsense! You’re not such a baby that you’re doing this because I copied the way you spun that stick of yours, are you?”

“Gh...” Dreibein twitched at the accusation, finding herself at a loss for words. *He’s got me there. I really was about to attack this man just because I was angry at him for imitating my flourish...* she thought, taking a deep breath to calm her nerves. *I need to calm down... I’ve been off my game ever since I ran into this man...*

Dreibein took a number of slow breaths in and out before turning to face Hero Gold-Hair. “You’re right. I apologize. My objective here is to retrieve the carriage djinn hiding in that cave over there. If you give her up without a fuss, I suppose I might as well let you live. You can’t possibly hope to fight me, after all. It’s certainly a more favorable offer than the alternative, no?” she said, smirking as she looked down at him from her seat atop the Tank Beast. Dreibein was a small woman, but the Tank Beast itself was nearly twice as tall as Hero

Gold-Hair, lending her an undeniable air of intimidation.

“Hmph,” Hero Gold-Hair grunted. “Thank you for the kind offer, but I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“Oh, well!” said Dreibein, grabbing the Tank Beast’s control sticks and preparing for a fight. “War it is!”

“You never listen to a word other people say, do you?” Hero Gold-Hair grumbled. “Yes, my companions are sleeping inside that cave, but none of them are this ‘carriage djinn’ of yours, or whatever it was you said you were looking for.”

“What?!” exclaimed Dreibein, her eyes threatening to bulge out of her head. “It’s no use lying to me, you know! That carriage djinn was created by *my* Vehicle Beast Conjuring Cane! Every beast produced by my cane is made so that it resonates with the cane’s power! And there’s no doubt that *this* is the spot where the cane sensed the djinn’s presence!”

“Hmm...” said Hero Gold-Hair. “Are you sure? Why don’t you try checking your cane again?”

Dreibein sighed “Are you implying that I’m being untruthful?” she said. “Very well. Let’s see, then, shall we?” The djinn let go of the Tank Beast’s controls and picked up her cane once more, lifting it high above her head...

“Valentine! Now!” barked Hero Gold-Hair.

At his signal, dark threads came streaming out of the mouth of the cave, wrapping around the cane as it spun in the air above Dreibein’s head.

“Wh-What?! Hey!” Dreibein cried, stretching her arms upwards to try and grab her cane. Before she could reach it, however, Valentine retracted her threads, sending the cane flying into her hands.

“That was some quick thinking, Hero Gold-Hair!” she said, wriggling her hips in a way that might have come across as seductive if she were in her usual form as a voluptuous adult woman instead of the childlike body she was adopting to reduce her magic consumption. She handed Dreibein’s cane to Hero Gold-Hair. “That’s our brilliant leader!”

“Valentine,” Hero Gold-Hair asked, “how’s your condition?”

“Wonderful, thank you very much!” said Valentine, puffing out her chest and blowing Hero Gold-Hair a kiss. “My magic reserves are full and I’m raring to go! I’ve been spending most of my time in this smaller form and avoiding any strenuous work for a while now, after all!”

“Glad to hear it,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “But even so, try to avoid spending your energy unless you have to. You’re our trump card, after all.”

“Well, if you’re going to sweet-talk me like that, I’ll certainly do my best!” said Valentine, breaking out into a delighted grin at the compliment. “So then, Hero Gold-Hair, what’s our next move?”

“Our next move, hmm...?” Hero Gold-Hair considered, stealing a glance behind him as Dreibein stood up in the Tank Beast cockpit, aggrieved tears welling up in her eyes.

“That was a dirty trick, you coward!” Dreibein shouted. “Give me back my cane!”

“Yes, yes, that was very underhanded of me,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “But you can’t expect us to cheerfully let you have your way after you made it clear you intend to do us harm! But maybe we could make a trade...”

“A trade?” Dreibein asked.

“That’s right!” Hero Gold-Hair said, thrusting the head of the cane towards Dreibein as he spoke. “If you agree to leave quietly, I might be willing to give you back your cane.”

“That cane is *mine!* And so is the carriage djinn!” Dreibein gritted her teeth in anger, glaring furiously down at Hero Gold-Hair. Internally, however, her thoughts were on a different track. *Perfect! I’ll let him think I’m too angry to think clearly! And then, all I have to do is simply break my promise...*

“I don’t like it...” Dreibein said, her voice choking theatrically. “I don’t like it one bit. But that cane is very, very precious to me. I guess I have no choice but to swallow my pride and take you up on your offer...”

“And you agree to give up on going after our carriage djinn?” Hero Gold-Hair

asked.

“I don’t like it... I really don’t like it at all...” Dreibein repeated, nodding miserably. “But okay. I agree. I’ll give up on the carriage djinn...”

“Fine,” said Hero Gold-Hair, lobbing the cane in his hands Dreibein’s way. “Here’s your stick back. Now, don’t forget your promise!”

A maniacal grin spread over Dreibein’s face as she snatched the cane out of the air. “Ha ha ha... Ah ha ha ha ha! You really are an idiot, aren’t you?! What in the world made you think I was going to keep my promise?!” she said, sitting back down in the cockpit and seizing the controls. When she looked up at her opponents, however, only Valentine was within her sight. “H-Huh?” Dreibein said, searching the area around her with a sudden sense of unease. “Where did the man go...?”

Rattle, rattle, rattle...

Just then, Dreibein heard the sound of wheels coming from inside the cave. A moment passed, and then suddenly a carriage came bursting out into the light of day, rolling along at breakneck speed. “*Madame Valentine! You’ll have to jump on!*” said Aryun Keats.

“Certainly!” Valentine nodded, taking a running leap towards the moving carriage. “Coming aboard!” The doors swung upon of their own accord, as Aryun angled herself to catch Valentine safely inside her passenger compartment.

With Valentine accounted for, Aryun sped on past Dreibein’s Tank Beast, intent on giving it the slip. “*Don’t forget Hero Gold-Hair!*” Her door swung open once again as they passed by Dreibein and Valentine reached, extending her threads.

“Ready!” came Hero Gold-Hair’s voice from around the Tank Beast’s base, as Valentine’s threads pulled him up and into the carriage as well.

“H-He must have gotten in my blind spot while I was distracted!” said Dreibein. “But don’t think I’ll let you get away!”

Dreibein tilted the control stick, steering the Tank Beast to face her target. The two legs protruding from the vehicle beast’s spherical body stomped

around in a wide circle until suddenly... *Thud!* The ungainly creature fell right into a hole.

“Wh-Whyyy?!” Dreibein cried as she vanished along with the Tank Beast into the pit.

Hero Gold-Hair looked back over his shoulders at the Tank Beast, lying on its side in the hole with its turrets pointing up towards the sky, and breathed a sigh of relief. “Looks like we managed to escape by the skin of our teeth...”

“That’s what you get when you mess with Hero Gold-Hair!” cheered Wuha Gappoli, leaning against him in her seat in the carriage and smacking him on the shoulder. “He’ll dig a pitfall trap right under your feet so fast you won’t even know what hit you!”

“You know...” Hero Gold-Hair said, giving Wuha Gappoli an accusatory glare, “I wouldn’t have *needed* to go to such desperate lengths if *someone* hadn’t goaded Aryun Keats into drinking more than she could handle! Thanks to your antics, she couldn’t transform into a carriage right away and I had to do my best to play it cool and stall out the conversation!” He punctuated the statement with a scowl and a sharp kick to the floorboard of the carriage.

“That *was* quite the fraught situation, wasn’t it?” said Valentine. “When I first received that telepathic message from Riliangiu, I thought I might have no choice but to revert to my usual form in order to fight that djinn off!”

“Nooo! Anything but thaaat!” Tsuya wailed, seeming as if she might faint on the spot from the mere suggestion. “Whenever you go back to your uuusual form, you need a ridiculous amount of food to recover the maaagic you spend! I won’t go back to liiiving on the edge like that! Not after Hero Gooold-Hair’s magic beast hunting business is finally earning us a staaable income...”

“Oh, come now!” said Valentine. “Hero Gold-Hair’s been so careful lately to arrange things so I can spend as much time in this mode as possible, and I’ve been very careful about exerting myself. With all the magic power I have saved up right now, I’m sure we wouldn’t need *that* much food...”

“If I had a copper for eeevery time I’ve heard you say that...” Tsuya grumbled.

Hero Gold-Hair sat there frowning as the argument continued around him,

until he heard Riliangiu's telepathic voice speaking in his head.

"Hero Gold-Hair."

"Riliangiu, is that you?" said Hero Gold-Hair. "What's going on?"

"Dreibein is gaining ground, far more quickly than anticipated."

"What? That Tank Beast didn't look like it could move very fast at all!"

"She produced another magic beast..."

"Another magic beast?!" Hero Gold-Hair stuck his face out of Aryun Keats's carriage window, looking behind them to see a truly enormous war machine bearing down on them with alarming speed. "Well, would you look at that?" he said, whistling in admiration. "The way its front's shaped, it can just mow down any underbrush in its way! Look at how quickly it's moving across all that uneven terrain!"

"Wh-Why are you wasting time admiring it?!" Tsuya cried, pounding her small fists on Hero Gold-Hair's back. "That thing has a caannon!!!"

"Ah ha ha! They're panicking, I see! But it's too late!" Dreibein gloated from the cockpit of her high-speed pursuit model Tank Beast, lining up her targeting reticle with the carriage ahead. "I had been hoping to recover Aryun Keats unharmed, since it can be such a hassle to create a proper djinn like her compared to one of my mindless Vehicle Beasts. But if she's determined to make a mockery of me, then so be it! Consider me provoked, enraged, and seriously angry!"

As Aryun Keats's carriage form drifted into the dead center of the Dreibein's sights, the Tank Beast's system locked on to its target, outlining the carriage in red. "It's the end of the road for you, Aryun Keats," she said, taking hold of the turret control stick. "If you've chosen your loyalty to a man who would humiliate me like that, I can't say I care much to recover you after all!"

A moment later, however, Dreibein saw something in the targeting reticle that made her do a double take—one of Aryun Keats's doors had swung open, and Hero Gold-Hair quickly clambered up on top of her roof.

"That man... What is he hoping to accomplish up there?" Dreibein muttered,

the sight of Hero Gold-Hair standing tall in defiance sending her flashing back to their earlier altercation just moments ago. “Last time, he dug a pitfall trap in the blink of an eye and completely disabled my Tank Beast. Whatever he’s doing, he must have some kind of plan...” she said, her hand growing slick with sweat as she gripped the control stick tight.

“No, no, no, what am I thinking?!” Dreibein chided herself. “He managed to catch me off guard, that’s all, but this time I’m taking it seriously from the start! I won’t give him the chance to dig any more holes! He’s helpless! Helpless!” she repeated, trying to convince herself of the truth of the words. “A single shot from this tank’s magic cannon at maximum output is strong enough to blast a hole clean through a planetoid world! Let’s see you survive something like that!”

But still... Dreibein thought. *For some reason, I have a bad feeling about this...*

Dreibein looked up at Hero Gold-Hair standing valiantly on the carriage roof, Drilldozer Shovel in hand, and shook her head, dispelling her uncertainties. “Enough of this!” she cried, pressing down on the control stick’s trigger button. “Get out of my sight, you eyesore! For eternity!”

“She’s attacking! I knew it!” Hero Gold-Hair said, bracing himself for impact as the Tank Beast’s turret fired a magic bullet not at Aryun Keats but at himself standing on the roof. “And aiming for me, no less...”

The blast struck Hero Gold-Hair directly, and for a second it looked as if he had been blown to oblivion, until Dreibein heard his battle cry bellowing across the forest. “Hraaaahhh!!!” he roared as he swung the Drilldozer Shovel, catching the magic projectile on the blade of the shovel and somehow managing to hold it in place in midair.

“What?!” Dreibein exclaimed, gazing with her mouth agape at the unbelievable image she was picking up with the Tank Beast’s sensors—Hero Gold-Hair, grappling for control of the blast of magic power that should have spelled his doom. “No way! It’s impossible! This is completely against the rules!” she cried, clutching her head in her hands. “How can a human with such mediocre ability scores stop a bullet like *that?! I don’t believe it! I don’t, I don’t, I don’t!*”

“Oraaaaaahhh!!!” bellowed Hero Gold-Hair, summoning up every last ounce of strength his body had to offer as he struggled with the shovel’s haft. *This magic bullet really is something else!* he thought. *My arms are killing me! It’s like they’re being torn right out of their sockets! But even so...* “Even so...” he growled through his gritted teeth. “With you and me working together, there’s nothing we can’t do! Isn’t that right, Drilldozer Shovel?”

The shovel glowed once in response to Hero Gold-Hair’s words.

“H-Hero Gold-Hair!” Valentine cried out, climbing on top of Aryun Keats’s carriage body to try to offer her assistance.

“It’s okay, Valentine! I’ve got it!” Hero Gold-Hair shouted back. “Believe in me and the shovel!” He stepped forwards, letting out a powerful roar as he swung the Drilldozer Shovel with all his might. The shovel glowed brightly, brighter than it had ever glowed before, as it sent the magic missile flying back the way it came.

“Hero Gold-Hair!” Valentine cried again, this time with joy, as the ball of energy sailed through the air, arcing high into the sky before coming down with tremendous force—right on top of Dreibein’s Tank Beast.

“Wh-What’s going on?! What’s haaappeniiing?!” Dreibein shrieked from within the cockpit, as her own projectile smashed down into the body of the Tank Beast from above. She had looked away from the Tank Beast’s targeting system in shock for just a moment, reeling from the impossible sight of Hero Gold-Hair holding her attack at bay with the Drilldozer Shovel, just long enough for the returning projectile to catch her completely off guard.

The energy blast tore through the land below, taking the Tank Beast along for the ride with Dreibein stuck helplessly inside the cockpit as it drove further and further down, smashing through stone and scattering dirt and sand every which way. “What is this? Where am I? Why am I falling through the earth?! Someone! Anyone!” Dreibein cried, looking frantically around for some way to escape.

It was all in vain. The blast carried Dreibein all the way through the foundation of the world of Klyrode until it erupted out of the bedrock of the continental shelf below, breaking through the lower part of the magic barrier

separating the firmament of Klyrode from the cosmos beyond and sending her spiraling far, far below, the underground world Dogorogma looming in the distance beneath. By that point, however, Dreibein's screams had long since passed out of the range of hearing for Hero Gold-Hair and his party on the surface.

"We somehow made it out alive..." Hero Gold-Hair muttered, his strength giving way. He keeled over backwards, lying spread-eagle on the roof of the carriage and letting out a deep breath as Aryun Keats pulled up to a stop.

"Hero Gold-Hair!" Valentine, Tsuya, and Wuha Gappoli all ran up to their leader, each of them hurrying to wrap their arms around him in a relieved embrace.

"Hey!" Hero Gold-Hair objected. "I get that you're happy I'm alive and all, but don't go squeezing me like that!"

The three women all shook their heads in exasperation, looking up at Hero Gold-Hair with evident worry.

"But Hero Gold-Hair!" said Wuha Gappoli. "We were sure that you'd gotten blasted away!"

"I certainly was!" Valentine remarked. "That didn't seem like something you should have survived at all!"

"Well, I never doubted Hero Gooold-Hair for a single seeecond!" insisted Tsuya.

"So...Keats," ventured Hero Gold-Hair.

"*Yes, Hero Gold-Hair? How can I help?*" Aryun Keats asked.

"You don't have a problem with us blasting away that Dreibein lady, do you? Didn't she say she's the one who created you in the first place?"

"*Yes, she did say that, didn't she...?*" Aryun Keats mused, depositing Hero Gold-Hair and the three girls gently on the ground before transforming back into her humanoid form. "Honestly, I don't remember her in the slightest..." she said, frowning in consternation.

"Oh, that's right!" Wuha Gappoli said with a knowing half smile as she

inserted herself into the conversation. “Aryun Keats didn’t have *any* memories back when we first met.”

“You had amnesia?!” Hero Gold-Hair, Valentine, and Tsuya all exclaimed in surprise.

“That’s the long and short of it!” said Wuha Gappoli. “Back then, we had both been taken prisoner by a group of kidnappers. Fortunately, I was able to bust the two of us out.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Aryun Keats confirmed, folding her arms in thought. “My first memories are escaping from those kidnappers together with Wuha Gappoli. So no matter who that woman is, she doesn’t mean anything to *me* at all...”

Hero Gold-Hair frowned. “Well, if you say it doesn’t bother you, I suppose that’s all well and good...” he said, pulling himself to his feet and letting the subject drop.

Just then, a man with demihuman features and long white hair tied back in a ponytail stepped out of the woods and up to the party, carrying an oversized greatsword lightly in a single hand and dressed in the sort of outfit favored by a common adventurer. “Pardon my intrusion...” he began. “You are the current Hero of this land, are you not? I had the privilege of witnessing your battle just now...”

Hero Gold-Hair grunted. “If you’re making a point of calling me the *current* Hero, should I take it to mean you’re a Hero from back in the day?”

“I am,” the demihuman replied in a calm and measured voice. “My name is Sage Heavy-Blade. I was summoned to this land as a Hero long ago and did battle with the Dark One of my time.”

“And?” Hero Gold-Hair asked. “What business does the venerable Sage Heavy-Blade have with the likes of me?”

“Ah, yes...” said Sage Heavy-Blade. “As I said, I happened to witness your battle earlier, and there was one point I failed to understand...”

“And what point was that?” Hero Gold-Hair asked.

“You gave that Dreibein character her cane back, even though she had shown herself to be a hostile invader from another world.”

“That’s right, I did,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “What of it?”

“But you had to have known at the time that Dreibein would throw away any promise she made and simply attack you the moment the cane was back in her hands,” said the sage. “Why, then, did you take such a reckless action?”

“What, isn’t it obvious?” said Hero Gold-Hair, scoffing with incredulity at Sage Heavy-Blade’s question. “It’s because I’m the Hero, of course! Why else?”

“Wh-What?” Sage Heavy-Blade stammered.

“If I didn’t give that woman her cane back after I promised to return it, I’d be no different from her!” Hero Gold-Hair declared, an uncommonly serious look in his eyes. “A Hero isn’t allowed to stoop to that level!”

“Of course...” Sage Heavy-Blade acknowledged with an approving nod of his head. “Thank you for your elucidative response.” With that, he turned his back to the party and walked off into the woods.

So that’s Hero Gold-Hair... Sage Heavy-Blade thought, smiling as he made his way home through the forest. I’ve heard plenty of unpleasant rumors about him, not to mention the fact that he’s known as a wanted criminal in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. But perhaps the Kingdom has judged him too soon...



After parting ways with Sage Heavy-Blade, Hero Gold-Hair’s party made their way back to the cave where they had started out their day.

“Sooo...” said Valentine, tapping her index finger against her cheek in confusion. “What did that Sage Heeeavy-Blade person want with us aaanyway?”

“I’m not really sure...” Hero Gold-Hair replied. “At the very least, it seemed like we made a decent impression on him. That’s good enough for the time being...” He nodded to himself, apparently satisfied. “But more importantly... Keats, over here,” he said, beckoning Aryun Keats over to the attack model Tank

Beast Dreibein had abandoned earlier in the chase, lying where they had left it in Hero Gold-Hair's pitfall trap. "What do you think? Can you do anything with this?"

"Let me see..." said Aryun Keats, placing her hand on the body of the Tank Beast and pausing for a moment in contemplation. "No guarantees, but I'll give it a shot!"

Aryun focused her power into her right arm, which began to glow. After just a moment the glow spread to the Tank Beast itself until, with a quiet *shoom*, it vanished, sucked up into Aryun Keats's arm.

"Wh-What the?!" Hero Gold-Hair blinked, startled by the unexpected result. "What just happened?!"

Wuha Gappoli, on the other hand, leaned in towards Aryun Keats with a look of great curiosity. "What was that? Did you get some kind of new ability?" she asked.

"It looks like I did!" said Aryun Keats, looking through the text of a magic window she had called up and clicking through the various features. "When I was in my tank form before, I only had a single turret, but with this new power, I can have as many as three turrets on either side, for a total of six! Although..."

"Although *what*?" the party asked, peering dubiously at Aryun Keats as the carriage djinn trailed off in the middle of her explanation.

"With my level of magic power, the longest I could maintain all six turrets for would be a grand total of two seconds..." Aryun admitted, scratching awkwardly at the back of her head as the rest of the party all slumped their shoulders in disappointment.

"What's up with that?!" said Wuha Gappoli. "And here I was getting all excited..."

"Ah ha ha... I'm very sorry to have disappointed you..." said Aryun Keats.

"Still, you have to admit, it's true to form for our Aryun Keats!" Hero Gold-Hair said with a boisterous laugh of his own.

"I suppooose so!" said Tsuya, joining in on the laughter. Soon, the entire party

was laughing together at the absurdity of it all.

“Well, that’s this thing taken care of,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “Once we’ve finished gathering up all the magic beasts we caught in our pitfall traps last night, let’s head on towards the town on the other side of the forest. We’re sleeping in a proper inn tonight!”

“Hooraaay!” cheered Tsuya. “I can’t waaait to sleep on a soft mattress for a change!”

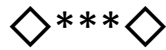
“I hope whatever inn we stay at has some decent liquor!” said Valentine.

“Madame Valentine, I also hope we can find an inn stocked with acceptable liquor!” said Aryun Keats.

“But, Aryun Keeeats!” said Tsuya. “You knooow you’re too much of a lightweight to keep throwing back drinks the way you do! We keep ending up in scaaary situations because you’re hungover the next day! I really wish you’d stooop...”

Merry voices filled the forest as Hero Gold-Hair and his crew got ready to break camp and head on down the road, the sound of their laughter echoing among the trees.

Chapter 4: Castle Celestia



Beneath the world of Klyrode, Zofina looked up at the lower part of the magic barrier encircling the firmament of the planetoid world, her wings beating steadily as she floated silently in place, regarding the sight before her with sternly folded arms.

“Hahhh...” Zofina sighed, and it wasn’t for the first time that afternoon. It had only been a matter of days since Zofina and her fellow Disciples of the Celestial Plane had finished their repairs to this selfsame magic barrier with the help of Flio and Elinàsze, notable residents of the local world. Now, however, a part of the barrier had been shattered entirely, leaving a large portion of the lower part of the firmament simply gone.

“And we *just* restored this barrier—ahead of schedule thanks to all your help...” Zofina grumbled, trembling slightly and looking distinctly ill as she stared up at the hole in the barrier. “How could it have ended up like *this*...?”

“It really does beggar belief, doesn’t it?” said Flio, pursing up his lips in a sardonic smile as he took stock of the damage himself. He and his daughter Elinàsze were both floating in the space between worlds beside Zofina using their own individual flight magic.

“Is it normal for these magic barriers to break so often?” Elinàsze wondered, resting her chin against her hand and tilting her head curiously to the side.

“It’s not...” said Zofina. “It isn’t *completely* unheard of for a firmament to end up damaged, but I’ve almost never heard of a case where it’s happened again immediately afterwards. The second time was the fault of the former goddess Telbyress cutting corners in the repairs, but now it’s broken a third time? What could be happening to the world of Klyrode...?”

“W-Well!” said Flio, sensing that Zofina was on the verge of yet another heavy forlorn sigh, and cutting in with the brightest tone he could manage. “I guess

we'd better get started!"

Elinàsze folded her arms as she floated in the air beside her father, the movement revealing the jewel on her forehead. It shone with a green-colored light. A gentle wind swirled in the air around her, lifting her up towards the damaged barrier. "Quite right! Rather than floating here feeling miserable about it, we should hurry up and get a start on the repairs!"

"Y-You're right, of course, both of you," Zofina nodded, casting a spell out in front of her.

Elinàsze looked over to see that Zofina had gotten to work and held out her arms as well, summoning a magic circle as the jewel on her forehead changed color once again, now glowing with a soft yellow light.

"Elinàsze, have you noticed?" Flio asked, glancing over at her out of the corner of his eye. "The jewel on your forehead changes color depending on the type of magic you're using at the time."

"Oh, really?" Elinàsze beamed, always grateful for attention from her beloved papa.

"It never changed color when your abilities were still limited from being underage," Flio observed. "But now that you've reached the developmental equivalent of a sixteen-year-old human, your limiter's been removed and your jewel's started changing colors whenever you use your magic. It looks like it follows the general pattern of red for fire magic, blue for water magic, green for wind, and so on..."

Elinàsze had inherited all of her father's outrageous magical abilities, so much so that until she had matured enough to be considered an adult—the equivalent of sixteen years in human development—there had been a limit placed on her magic out of concern for her developing body. Back then, whenever Elinàsze would try to use more than a certain amount of her magic power, a window would appear to sternly caution her against that course of action.

Of course, I would have had no problem simply nullifying that alert if I'd wanted to, but papa always told me never to push my magic too hard, Elinàsze recalled. I wouldn't want to make papa mad at me by not doing what I was told!

“Ever since that limiter went away, I’ve had no trouble using all of the magic power throughout my entire body,” Elinàsze remarked. “That must be what’s causing my jewel to change color, I suppose!”

“I see...” Flio nodded. “And that’s why the color changes to match the spell’s elemental affinity...”

Even when she was a minor and her magic power had been externally limited, the amount of magic Elinàsze could bring to bear was far beyond all but the most elite of spellcasters within the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. It stood to reason, then, that even now with her limiter removed she had no trouble solving the vast majority of problems without any need to release enough magic to affect any change in the jewel on her forehead beyond the faintest of glows. It took a huge amount of magic power to make the jewel noticeably change in color. Even Flio had never happened to witness the phenomenon before this very moment.

“Although, you know...” Flio said with a smile, as he gazed deeply at the shining jewel. “It really is a very beautiful jewel. I keep finding myself staring without meaning to...”

“Oh my! Papa!” At that, Elinàsze’s composed smile broke out into a delirious grin, her face turning bright red all the way to the tips of her ears. “I’m so very happy to hear that! A-And a little embarrassed too...”

Ahh... Elinàsze thought. The way my papa makes such sweet lines sound completely natural! He really is the perfect man... In most circumstances Elinàsze refrained from expressing too much of her genuine emotion, but that compliment from Flio had pierced her right in the heart. She had such a strong reaction, in fact, that her smile was starting to look positively dopey. Fortunately, she at least had the presence of mind to use her magic to subtly position her hair to block her expression from Flio’s sight—or anyone else who happened to be looking at her from the side.

I refuse to involve myself with any romantic entanglements unless I can find someone even better than papa! Elinàsze thought to herself. *After all, I have a man as wonderful as this right in my very own family! I really feel no need to force myself to go looking for a partner whatsoever. And why would I?*

Alas, the childhood obsession Elinàsze had harbored for her father had only worsened over time until now, as a young woman, it had become a matter of genuine concern.

Zofina watched with a stiff expression while Flio and Elinàsze chatted happily as they worked to repair the magic barrier. *It's rare even among Celestials for a child to be born with a jewel on their forehead. It boggles the mind to think that this girl has enough magic power to freely change the color of the jewel on top of that...* she thought, touching a hand to the same spot on her own forehead. Zofina was an angel, and a Disciple of the Celestial Plane, but she certainly didn't have the fortune to have a jewel of her own. It was even more preposterously rare for a mere human to possess such an auspicious mark.

I haven't been able to get a clear response whenever I've broached the subject in the past, but if I had my way of things I should like to convince Miss Elinàsze to come and study at a school on the Celestial Plane, so that she could learn our ways and eventually be adopted into the system as one of the goddesses who oversee the management of the cosmos... Zofina thought. *It would be a terrible shame to leave someone like Elinàsze to languish here on some backwater planetoid world...*

"What do you think, Zofina?" said Elinàsze, startling the angel out of her thoughts. Zofina looked over in a hurry to see Elinàsze beaming happily her way. "Don't you think the jewel on my forehead is lovely? Papa praised it, but what about you?"

"O-Oh!" said Zofina. "Your father is correct, of course! It shines with the most wonderful light!"

"Doesn't it just?" Elinàsze gushed. "Hee hee hee! Papa and Zofina both praised my forehead jewel! I suppose I'll just have to use even more of my full power than I had been already!" Her spirits high, Elinàsze channeled even more magic into her spell, the jewel on her forehead shining brighter and brighter until its previous radiance seemed like a dim candle by comparison, her magic circle growing considerably in size. The sheer power of Elinàsze's magic had its desired effect, increasing the speed of the repairs by an order of magnitude.

Flio let out a gasp of awe at her handiwork. "You really are something else

when you're using your full power, Elinàsze!"

"Thank you, papa!" Elinàszse replied. "Just watch! Today, I'm going to work harder than ever before!" And indeed, spurred on by her father's words, she managed to increase the output of her magic even further.

At first I thought flying all over to repair the damage to the barrier around the firmament was nothing but a bothersome chore... Elinàsze thought, grinning from ear to ear and humming happily as she worked. But then I realized we could use this as an easy way to get permission to gather materials down in Dogorogma, in exchange for our help here. Besides, the longer I work, the more I get to hear papa praise me for my efforts! What a blessing in disguise this has been! Now, to apply myself even more...

Flio, too, smiled kindly as he watched over Elinàsze's efforts. *With the way Elinàsze spends her time cloistered away in her laboratory, I was worried that she might not like all the flying around involved in helping out with the firmament repairs. Most of the time she only shows her face to the rest of the family during meal times, after all. It seems like the change of pace has really agreed with her, though. I'm glad to see her in such high spirits.*

Zofina, for her part, remained silently focused on her task even as her expression took on a note of silent anguish. *I'm going to need Mister Flio's cooperation if I ever intend to convince Miss Elinàsze to join us on the Celestial Plane... she thought. But even with his recommendation, I doubt whether Miss Elinàsze will want to come unless her father is on the Celestial Plane as well. I suppose there's always the option of allowing her to commute from her home on planetoid world Klyrode, but no goddess would ever approve something like that unless they already knew what she was capable of...*

"By the way, Miss Zofina..." said Elinàsze, once again catching Zofina completely by surprise.

"Y-Yes?" Zofina managed. "What is it, Miss Elinàsze?"

"I have a bit of a question, actually, if that's all right?"

"Of course," said Zofina. "I'd be happy to answer, if I can."

"Well, the barrier around Klyrode has been breaking an awful lot lately,"

Elinàsze began. “But it seems the reason comes down to a series of completely unexpected freak accidents. So why is it that you’re in such a hurry to repair the damage, even to the point that the Celestial Plane is willing to ask locals from the world like papa and me for help? Is there some kind of reason behind that?”

“Well, you see...” Zofina answered, “The space between worlds is full of powerful wandering magic beasts and fugitives from justice who were driven from their planetoid worlds for all sorts of evil deeds. If we leave the barrier in its damaged state, there will be nothing stopping any number of things from finding their way into your world. We’re trying to repair the damage before something like that comes to pass.”

“That’s right,” Elinàsze said, tilting her head with a look of innocent curiosity. “You told us that much when you first asked papa and me to help you with your repairs. But I was wondering if perhaps there might be another reason as well.”

“A-Another reason, you ask?” said Zofina, her eyebrow twitching perceptibly.

“It’s just something I’ve been wondering about...” said Elinàsze. “These magic barriers are designed to prevent anyone outside from invading a planetoid world, and to enable the goddesses of the Celestial Plane to manage the world directly, correct?”

“Yes, that’s correct...” Zofina said, something in Elinàsze’s voice raising her suspicions to a fever pitch.

“So with the barrier destroyed, that means the goddesses won’t be able to properly manage the world,” Elinàsze prompted Zofina, meeting the angel’s inquisitive glare even as she kept on working to repair the damage. “Surely that must come with a risk of some sort of major problem. If I had to guess, might it be...*incursion*?” she said, giving Zofina a distinctly impish wink.

“Miss Elinàsze, I’m afraid there’s something I need to ask myself...” Zofina said, her brow furrowing dramatically. “Where in all the worlds did you ever come to learn the word *incursion*?”

“What’s that?” said Elinàsze, winking obviously all the while. “I’ve never heard that word before in my life! What I said was *curtains*! As in, it might be *curtains* for the world of Klyrode!”

Zofina couldn't help but smirk a little at Elinàsze's blatant excuse-making. "Very well," she said. "I'll put your use of that word down to a mishearing on my part. But you're correct. If we don't repair this barrier quickly, there might be some kind of problem you would certainly know nothing about. Now, shall we work together to prevent such an eventuality from ever coming to pass?"

"Of course!" said Elinàsze, smiling brightly as she looked back at the barrier ahead of them. "I'll give it everything I have!"

When the magic barrier around a planetoid world is damaged, there's the risk of the Celestial Plane losing control of its trajectory completely... Zofina thought, taking a long look at Elinàsze's face from her position to the girl's side. In the worst-case scenario, it can even crash into another planetoid world, annihilating them both. That is what the Celestial Plane calls incursion. But the only records of such an event would be kept in a restricted viewing vault in one of the Celestial Plane's reference libraries. How would a resident of a planetoid world like Elinàsze come to learn a word like that?

At this Zofina frowned, a troubling possibility coming to her mind. *Miss Elinàsze has visited the Celestial Plane once before, it's true. But she left before too long, and I was with her the entire time she was there. She certainly didn't have the time to visit any reference libraries... Suddenly, however, Zofina remembered something that made her eyes shoot open in alarm. But I have been thinking I could sense Miss Elinàsze's presence in the Celestial Plane from time to time lately, haven't I? C-Could she actually be making unauthorized visits?!*

Cold sweat ran down Zofina's brow as she struggled to maintain her levelheaded disposition. *B-But that can't be! There's no way a Teleportation spell could take her all the way to the Celestial Plane! A-Although, Miss Elinàsze can use Celestial magic herself, can't she? Theoretically, it might just be within her abilities...*

No, no, I'm being ridiculous! Zofina thought again, nodding slightly as if to convince herself of the impossibility of the notion before returning to her work. Fortunately, between Flio, Elinàsze, and Zofina's magic working together, the repairs were proceeding at a remarkable pace. *In any event, there's nothing to be gained from such outlandish speculation. All I can do right now is focus on*

fixing this barrier until it's completely repaired...

◇A Short While Later—Houghtow City, Flio's House◇

The great thoroughfare of Houghtow City ran from the middle of town out of the city gates, where it became a highway connecting Houghtow to the rest of the kingdom. Along the way was a side path split off from the main road, stretching towards Flio's house. At the terminus of that side path in front of Flio's front door, Leonorna sat, ready and waiting.

Finally, the door to Flio's house burst open with considerable force as Rys bounded out the door, carrying a sizable picnic basket in her arms. "Now!" she declared. "It's time for us to bring Elinàsze and my lord husband their lunch!"

"Yes, mama!" said Rynàsze, following closely on her mother's heels. She was wearing her favorite straw hat and, like Rys, carrying a hefty basket of her own. "Come along, everyone!" A cavalcade of magic beasts followed along after Rynàsze, beginning with Sybe in his psychobear form, followed by his mate the unicorn rabbit Shebe and their children Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, with Tybe the Bear of Misfortune taking up the rear.

The entire party piled on top of Leonorna's back, but before the lion could take off, they suddenly heard Flio's voice coming from somewhere above their heads. "Oh, hello, Rys! And all the rest of you! Where are you headed off to?"

Rys looked up in astonishment to see Flio and Elinàsze descending from above, followed by Zofina. "My lord husband! And Elinàsze too! We were just about to go and deliver your lunch for the day, but could it be that you're finished with your work already?"

"Yes, that's right," Flio said with a smile, glancing at Elinàsze beside him. "Elinàsze was working extra hard today, so we wrapped it up faster than expected."

"Oh, papa, you flatterer!" Elinàsze's face blushed a brilliant red. She clapped her hands to her cheeks and shook her head from side to side, looking up at her father with earnest eyes. "It was all because *you're* so absolutely incredible, of course! All I did was provide the least little bit of assistance!"

"Big sis Elinàsze!" Rynàsze remarked, her eyes widening in surprise at her

sister's behavior—as did Sybe, Shebe, and all the rest. “You’re in an awfully good mood today!”

Ordinarily, Elinàsze tried to maintain an aura of collected calm whenever she was around the others in the house. It was no wonder Rynàsze and the magic beasts were so astonished to see her emotions on full display.

Realizing her mistake, Elinàsze covered up her face with her hands. *Oh no!* she thought. *I’ve been alone working with papa for so long, I forgot to keep my emotions from showing on my face!* Then, with a single deep breath, she returned her face to its usual emotionless state and carried on as if no one had noticed anything out of place. “W-Well, never mind all that,” she said. “More importantly, I have something I need to look up, so if you’ll excuse me, I must return to my room.” And with that, she hurried in through the front door as quickly as her aura of affected calm would allow.

“Elinàsze, wait!” said Rys, grabbing her daughter by the shoulder and pulling her back outside.

“M-Mama?” Elinàsze asked. “What is it?”

“You and my lord husband have both been working without rest since the early morning, haven’t you? And besides, it would be a shame to let your lunch go to waste! Won’t you join us for a meal?”

“That’s right,” Flio concurred, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “Your mother worked hard to make that lunch, so why not come eat with everyone?”

“Yes, yes, come and eat with us!” chimed in Rynàsze, beaming from ear to ear as she pulled Elinàsze along by the arm. “I worked hard helping mama in the kitchen too, you know!”

“A-All right...” Elinàsze looked around at her assembled family, smiling just slightly while still keeping up her mask of cool composure. “I suppose my research can wait until after we’ve enjoyed this lunch the two of you worked so hard on.”

“Excellent!” said Rys, nodding in satisfaction. “And now that that’s settled, let’s all get on Leonorna’s back.” Carrying her picnic basket in two hands, Rys climbed on top of Leonorna, who had been lying on the ground waiting

obediently the entire time.

“Get on?” Flio asked, a puzzled look coming over his face. “Where are we going, Rys? We’ve already finished the repairs to the firmament barrier, as you know.”

“Well, you’ve already finished your work for the day, haven’t you?” Rys replied, smirking mischievously as she herself took the forwardmost position atop Leonorna’s back. “It would be a waste not to have our lunch somewhere special, don’t you think?”

Zofina watched from a short distance away as Flio and his family got ready to set off on their picnic. “This seems to be a family affair...” she muttered quietly to herself, turning to leave before anyone would notice her absence. “I suppose I had best take my leave...”

Rys, however, was not one to be given the slip. “Oh?” she said the very instant Zofina began to make her exit. “And where do you think you’re going, Zofina?”

“M-Me?” Zofina replied, stepping backwards in surprise. “I was simply thinking that since our work here is finished after all, perhaps I had best not get in the way of your time together as a family...”

“Don’t be ridiculous! There’s no need to treat us like strangers!” Rys insisted, wrapping an arm around Zofina’s shoulders and giving her a bright and cheery smile. “I told you before, didn’t I? You’re a member of the family as well. You’re more than welcome to join us!”

“I-I do recall you saying as much, yes...” Zofina admitted, her expression looking rather stiff.

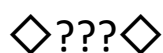
“Well then!” said Rys, placing her hand on top of Zofina’s head and tousling the angel’s hair. “You understand there’s no need to hold back, don’t you?”

Oh, Rys... Flio thought, watching with a knowing smirk as Rys’s lupine tail materialized behind her and began to wag back and forth in an unbridled display of joy. I see she still hasn’t given up on adding Miss Zofina to our family’s fighting strength...

Later in the day, a short while after Flio and the others had finished their lunch, a single magic doll made its way on foot down the road that led from Houghtow City all the way to Flio's house. In its hand was a paper bag, decorated with a distinctive logo featuring the words *Cal'Cha Teahouse* in a distinctive ornamental script.

Cal'Cha Teahouse, of course, was the dining establishment headed by Calsi'im and Charun located inside the premises of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, where customers could purchase drinks and various light refreshments.

The magic doll came to a halt right in front of Flio's front door, and a magic circle appeared at its feet. A moment later it had vanished from sight, absorbed into the magic circle.



A magic circle appeared at what looked like the entryway to a room, and out stepped the same magic doll who had just disappeared from the front of Flio's house.

"Thank you for the delivery, as always," said Elinàsze, accepting the paper bag from the doll once she noticed it was in the room. "Now, go and take a rest."

The doll bowed and walked past Elinàsze over to a door at the side of the room. It opened the door to reveal what appeared to be a workshop, full of other magic dolls of the same design all working busily on various projects. The magic doll stepped inside and closed the door.

"Oh, papa! Would you care for a drink after our lunch?" Elinàsze said, retrieving a cup from inside the paper bag and handing it over to Flio, who was standing beside her. "I'm really quite taken with these drinks from the Cal'Cha Teahouse."

"Thank you, Elinàsze," said Flio, graciously accepting. Once her father's drink was safely in hand, Elinàsze grabbed another beverage from the bag for herself, and for a while, the two of them sat together in the mysterious room enjoying the refreshments. "So..." said Flio, looking around the room as he took a sip from his cup. "This is your workshop, I take it?"

"That's right!" Elinàsze beamed. "This is my workshop! I used to keep it inside

my room in the main house, but between all of my different projects and my collection of grimoires and the like, the space was starting to feel a little cramped. And so, I built this!”

“I understand that much...” Flio said, inclining his head in thought. “But where are we, exactly? I get the sense we aren’t exactly on Klyrode anymore...”

“Well spotted as always, papa!” said Elinàsze. “When Rislei and Miss Belano came here, neither of them had any idea! Oh, but don’t worry. The Magic Door in the entryway and its partner are permanently linked, so there’s no risk of us becoming separated from the world we came from. This area is a small space I’ve created to resemble the conditions of a planetoid world, orbiting around the planetoid world Klyrode at a fixed distance like a satellite.”

As she finished her explanation, Elinàsze went to open a window, revealing the magic barrier encircling the workshop, and beyond it, innumerable planetoid worlds floating in space. Each of them was very large, but they were all so far away that from Flio and Elinàsze’s vantage they looked minuscule.

“Well, this is a surprise!” said Flio, looking out the window in amazement. “I had assumed you’d built a workshop in your mindscape, but I had no idea you’d done something like this!”

“That was my plan at first too,” Elinàsze explained. “But I don’t seem to be able to construct a stable mindscape as easily as you or Hiya can. I can get close, but I’ve never been able to maintain permanent psychic structures. And that’s why I started experimenting with this method instead! As you can see, it’s been going well so far,” she concluded, smiling impishly and puffing out her chest.

“Well, I’m impressed,” Flio remarked. “I don’t think I would have ever even *thought* of something like this!”

“Not at all!” rejoined Elinàsze, smiling happily as the jewel on her forehead sparkled with delight. “I was able to do it, so making a world like this one should be a simple task for you. I came upon the method by chance and already had everything I needed to make it work. That’s the only reason I happened to make something like this before you did, papa.”

“By the way...” said Flio, suddenly thinking back to their conversation with Zofina earlier that day, “what was that odd word that came up earlier while we

were working on repairing the magic barrier?”

Elinàsze took a long drink from her beverage and glanced up towards the ceiling for a moment before she replied, “The word *incursion*, you mean?”

“Yes, that’s the one,” said Flio. “From the way you and Miss Zofina were talking, it doesn’t seem like everyday vocabulary. I get the sense it’s pretty serious...”

Elinàsze took another long drink, visibly weighing the question of how much she should explain. At long last, she made up her mind. “All right,” she said. “I suppose it would be best if you knew, papa.” Then, holding her arms out towards the ceiling, she conjured an image of many spheres floating in the air above her head.

“Imagine that each of these spheres is a planetoid world. And just like in this simplified example, our world of Klyrode coexists with many other planetoid worlds, all flying about through the same cosmic space. As you can imagine, however, there are a great number of variables and uncertainties involved in the movement of objects on such a scale. For example, two planetoid worlds can end up caught in each other’s gravitational pull and either end up drawn into close proximity or else slingshotting off into the distance. It’s no problem as long as the Celestial Plane can retain control of the orbit, but consider what happens when that control is interrupted due to damage to the magic barrier around the firmament, such as what happened recently here on Klyrode.”

Elinàsze pointed to one of the floating spheres, and the barrier around it vanished to reveal the world underneath. Immediately, the planetoid world that had lost its firmament began to sway unsteadily to the left and right. Soon it veered off course, on a trajectory set to impact one of the nearby worlds. “And that,” Elinàsze said, as the two worlds collided and slowly began to crumble until both were gone without a trace, obliterated by the force of the impact, “is incursion.”

“I see...” Flio nodded. “So incursion is when two planetoid worlds collide, destroying both of them.”

Elinàsze nodded. “As it happens, our own world of Klyrode has gone quite a bit off course thanks to all of this repeated damage to the barrier. Now that it’s

fixed I suppose Miss Zofina and the goddesses responsible for managing this world will be working to return it to its original orbit, but it seems to be a matter of some difficulty to adjust a world's orbit all the way from the Celestial Plane. There's even cases where they've failed in the attempt entirely."

Flio folded his arms, looking up at the model of spheres Elinàsze had projected above their head in thought as he listened to her explanation. "Elinàsze..." he started. "May I ask a question?"

"Of course you may, papa!" Elinàsze chirped.

"I was just wondering," he said, a perfectly nonchalant smile on his face as he looked back down at his daughter, "how did you learn so much about planetoid worlds and all the accidents that can befall them?"

Elinàsze froze, a stiff smile plastered on her face. *O-Oh no... What do I tell him?* she thought. *The truth is, I've been sneaking into libraries and archives all over the Celestial Plane and copying every last book and document in their catalog to take home and study, but if I tell him that, he's sure to be angry! With Zofina I can get away with feigning ignorance, but there's no way I could pull the wool over papa's eyes...*

Flio looked over at his daughter, frozen smile in place, and sighed. "It's all right," he said. "I believe you, Elinàsze, no matter how you got your information. I won't ask you to tell me anything you don't want to."

"Oh, papa, thank you!" Elinàsze cried, her face lighting up with relief as she squeezed Flio tight around the middle. "This is exactly why I love you so much!"

Flio pulled Elinàsze into a gentle hug. "So then," he said, "judging by what you were saying earlier, I take it you've figured out a way for us to prevent an incursion ourselves, worse come to worst?"

"That's right, papa," Elinàsze said. "But I'll need your help, plus one other individual."

"All right. But what do you mean, one other individual?" asked Flio.

"Oh, I'll bring her along, don't worry. We just need to go to the underground world Dogorogma at the scheduled time."

“We were already planning on making a trip down to Dogorogma,” Flio said. “That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Thank you, papa!” said Elinàsze, running off further into the workshop. “Now, I must be getting to my preparations.”

“Oh, and Elinàsze!” Flio said, calling for her to stop.

“Yes, papa?” Elinàsze asked, turning back around to face him. “What is it?”

“Um, just a bit of a request...” he said. “Promise me, okay? Next time you do something...drastic, would you please talk to me about it? Beforehand, if possible? Like if you were, hypothetically, going to sneak into the Celestial Plane...”

Once again, Elinàsze froze stiff with a smile on her face. *He knows... Papa absolutely knows...* she thought, unable to do anything except meekly nod her head.

◇The Underground World Dogorogma◇

A few days later, Flio and Elinàsze paid a visit to the underground world Dogorogma. On Elinàsze’s right arm she had equipped the gauntlet she used for collecting medicinal herbs. “This gauntlet keeps a record of what herbs I’ve found where in Dogorogma,” she explained, holding out her gauntleted arm as the two of them flew through the skies of the underground world. “Not only that, but it’s also equipped to detect any ore or sources of magic power I might come across and record them for later reference as well...”

“That sounds like quite the handy device you’ve made for yourself!” said Flio.

“It really is,” said Elinàsze. “I got the idea from something I read in the Celestial—I mean, in all my various research. It’s still a prototype, though. I haven’t quite figured out mass production...”

Flio smirked to himself as Elinàsze hastily corrected herself. *It’s pretty obvious that Elinàsze’s gotten her hands on some books from the Celestial Plane*, he thought. *But if she’s not ready to talk about it, I probably shouldn’t push too hard for the time being...*

“Let’s see...” Elinàsze went on, as the two flew together over the landscape. “I

think it was just past here that I found the signal... Yes! It's right over there!" she said, pointing off towards a river valley some distance away. They followed the signal through the valley until Elinàsze marked the object of their search. "And there it is!" she said, beaming with pride. Ahead of them, the pair could see a large castle come into view.

"Is that...a castle?" Flio asked.

"Yes, a castle," said Elinàsze, "It's called Castle Celestia, in fact! And true to the name, it has all the same functions the goddesses of the Celestial Plane use to manage the orbits of planetoid worlds."

"But what would something like that be doing in Dogorogma?" Flio asked.

"I'm honestly not sure myself..." Elinàsze said. "In any event, it doesn't seem to be the original."

"What do you mean, it's not the original?"

"Well, if I had to guess, I'd say it looks like a copy of a castle that exists on the Celestial Plane, made by someone with some sort of duplication ability..." Elinàsze touched the castle with her gauntlet, which began analyzing the structure's data and transmitting it to Flio as well.

"I see..." Flio said, looking up at the structure before them and touching his own hand to the castle wall. "So it's a copy..."

As Flio's hand made contact with the castle, a window appeared in his field of view:

◇Castle Celestia Partial Blueprint Obtained (data sourced from incomplete copy—majority of blueprint unavailable for analysis)

"It looks like our Castle Celestia is incomplete..." Flio said, reading over the information written in the window. "Can we really get it to work?"

"Nothing gets by you, does it, papa? You already figured that out!" Elinàsze beamed. "But don't worry. There's a reason I went out of my way to bring *her* along," she said, turning round to face the third member of their party, who had been waiting for them—Telbyress, the former goddess.

"So, I came like you said..." said Telbyress, clearly confused. "But what exactly

am I supposed to do, here? W-Wait... You aren't planning on ditching me in Dogorogma for being so useless all the time, are you? Y-You wouldn't do that, right? Eh heh heh..." she laughed, fawning shamelessly for Flio and Elinàsze's approval.

"There's really no need to be so nervous," Elinàsze said with a smile. "All we need you to do today is head on into the castle..."





Before long, the three of them had reached the room on the top floor of the copied Castle Celestia. “Here we are!” Elinàsze declared. “Telbyress, would you kindly have a seat in that chair right there?” she asked, pointing to a chair located at the center of the room.

“Um... So...” Telbyress hesitated. “Y-You really just need me to sit in this chair?”

“Oh, stop being such a worrywart! Hurry up and sit down!” Elinàsze said, grinning as she pushed on Telbyress’s back all the way up to the chair, where Telbyress nervously stooped down to take a seat.

“I-Is something supposed to be happening?” Telbyress asked, glancing around the room as Elinàsze rushed up beside her and placed her gauntlet onto a rod-shaped object sticking out of the floor to the side of the room. For a moment she stood there, muttering under her breath as the information collected by the gauntlet flowed directly into her brain.

“Good, everything’s in order,” Elinàsze said. “The damaged circuit has been successfully repaired. Now, all I have to do is channel my magic power into here...” The jewel on her forehead shone with light, as did her gauntlet, until the rod-shaped object she had been touching began to glow as well. Then, with a mighty rumbling sound, the whole of the copied Castle Celestia began to shake.

“Eeeek!!!” cried Telbyress, shielding her head with her arms as she sat in the central chair. “Wh-Wh-What’s going on?! You’re absolutely sure this is safe?!”

Elinàsze, however, was too busy manipulating the flow of magic to respond to anything Telbyress said. Closing her eyes tight, she began to cast a spell. The castle shook harder and harder in response to her incantation, until suddenly it went still.

“What’s going on?” Flio asked, astonished. He glanced out the window to see not the river valley they had been in just moments ago but the sky above Dogorogma. “We’re flying?!” he exclaimed, running over to the window to get a closer look. Outside, the rainbow-colored and ever-shifting sky of Dogorogma

stretched on in every direction. It was a very fantastical sight to take in from the top floor of a flying castle.

Castle Celestia rose higher and higher into the sky. Eventually, and without dropping her spell, Elinàsze opened her eyes. “Papa,” she said, “would you mind casting Teleportation for us? I’d like to bring this castle back to Houghtow City.”

“All right,” Flio nodded. “For now, why don’t we put it in the repair docks for the Enchanted Frigate fleet? There’s plenty of room there for a castle of this size.” He held out his arms towards the castle around him and cast a spell, a vast magic circle appearing in the air above the structure. As it flew upwards, it was absorbed into Flio’s magic circle, and then it vanished into thin air.

◇Houghtow City—Blossom Acres◇

“What in the blazes...” Blossom looked up from her farmwork as a shadow suddenly fell upon the land around her, just in time to see an entire castle emerge from a magic circle in the sky. The upper part, at least, was a castle—the lower part looked like it had been ripped directly from the craggy cliff that served as its foundation.

The castle, which was nearly the same size as the larger ships in the Fli-o’-Rys company’s fleet of flying Enchanted Frigates, floated smoothly through the air until it vanished into the side of a large mountain located near Flio’s house.

That mountain had been disguised by a Concealment spell cast by Flio himself to look like nothing more than ordinary natural terrain, dotted with thick-growing trees, but in fact a large portion of its surface had been carved away to use as a docking area for Enchanted Frigates.

The Enchanted Frigates, which traveled all across the land on their regularly scheduled routes, all returned to this mountain once their work for the day was done. The repair docks were located in one corner of this vast facility and were currently empty. Fortunately, it seemed there were no Enchanted Frigates in need of repair at that particular moment.

The copy of Castle Celestia came to a gentle landing in the repair docks. Inside the room on the top floor, Elinàsze was still focused on the spell she was casting, her gauntlet attached to the rod-shaped object protruding from the floor all the while.

“There...” she said, breathing a sigh of relief as she detached the gauntlet from the rod. The jewel on her forehead dimmed, and she let out yet another heavy breath. “We shouldn’t need to make any more adjustments for the time being. We had been at risk of incursion with one other planetoid world, but now that the barrier around the firmament is back in place, it looks like we’re back on track. And now that we have this,” she added, smiling cheerfully once again, “it should be a simple matter to repair the barrier if it ever winds up damaged again. And in the unlikely event that we ever find ourselves on course for incursion, we can rest easy knowing we have the ability to alter the world’s trajectory.”

In spite of her smile, however, Elinàsze’s face looked distinctly pale, and her body was trembling ever so slightly.

Oh, Elinàsze... Flio thought, pulling his daughter in close. She’s smiling, but it seems like she’s been pushing herself quite a bit beyond her limits. Well, I suppose that’s warranted. By the sounds of things, we came closer to incursion than I was expecting...

Elinàsze smiled again. “Thank you, papa,” she said. “Thanks to your Teleportation spell, we were able to bring our Castle Celestia all the way here. If it weren’t for your help, that might have gotten a little bit dangerous...” And with that, she collapsed against her father’s chest.

“You did good, Elinàsze,” Flio said, holding her tight. “Now, let’s get you back to the house for a bit of rest, okay?” He scooped Elinàsze up into a princess carry and cast the spell Fly, lifting up into the air and out the castle window.

She realized the world was in danger without anyone else noticing and worked hard on her own to come up with a way to avoid the disaster... Flio thought, looking down at Elinàsze who had already fallen asleep in his arms. He gazed fondly at her sleeping face and sped up, hurrying back towards the house before heading inside, out of sight.

Telbyress watched the two of them vanish from the seat in the middle of the top room of Castle Celestia. “U-Um...” she said, her voice sounding shaky and forlorn. “Wh-What am I supposed to do? I-I don’t need to wait for permission to get up from this chair, do I? B-But what if I do, and they scold me again for

leaving? Oh please... Won't someone come and save me...?"

But alas, at that time of day the Enchanted Frigates were all out traveling their various routes, and there was no one in the docking area to notice Telbyress was still there. It would be an entire hour later before Flio finally remembered that he had left Telbyress behind and went to collect her, returning her safely home.

Epilogue

Elinàsze's room was located down one of the hallways on the second floor of Flio's house. Inside, a visitor would find a large, sparsely decorated room with nothing but a bed tucked away in the corner and a single desk off to the side. On the far side of the room was a single door. Considering the layout of the house's exterior, that door *should* open directly to the outside. At the moment, however, Elinàsze's voice could be heard coming from the other side.

"Now, Levana," Elinàsze said in a very patient voice, standing beside a desk in the room behind the impossible door as Levana sat in the chair. Elinàsze was dressed in a distinctly unfashionable mage's robe and wearing a pair of thick round glasses, while Levana was dressed in a blue and white outfit, looking over the book on the desk with her brow furrowed in deep concentration. "Considering the situation on the page, what would be the most effective spell to use against the magic beast?"

Levana, the newest member of Flio's household, had come to the family with a request: since she had never received a proper education, she wanted to try studying herself. She was especially keen on the subject of magic. And so, Elinàsze had agreed to help tutor the dragonewt.

"Umm..." Levana stared long and hard at the picture in the book they were studying out of. "Situation?" she asked. "Do you mean this picture?"

"Yes, that's right," said Elinàsze. "Here, maybe this will make it easier to understand..." She waved her hand, and the picture became fully three-dimensional, popping out of the page—a giant magic beast's head sticking out of the surface of a lake, looming over the hapless mage who served as its opponent.

Levana looked over the scene and folded her arms. "Considering the mage's remaining magic power, the surrounding environment, and the magic beast's resistances..." she began after a moment's thought, clenching her right hand into a fist, "I would punch it. Like this." She swung her fist at the materialized

Hydra, destroying the image with a single strike. Levana nodded triumphantly at her handiwork.

“Incorrect!” said Elinàsze.

Levana was dumbfounded. “B-But...” she said, sighing in frustration. “But that would be the most effective way...”

“The problem is asking you to identify the most effective spell an *average mage* could use to defeat a C-tier magic beast,” Elinàsze explained. “Your solution wouldn’t work for anyone other than you, would it?”

“Oh!” said Levana, clapping a hand over her mouth. “I see...”

Elinàsze gave Levana an amused, knowing smile. “Let’s try the next problem, then, keeping the purpose of the exercise in mind,” she said in a patient voice as she turned the book to the next page.

The only people Levana had to teach her until now were adult leviathans—the type to use raw power to resolve any problems they might encounter, Elinàsze thought, as Levana read through the words on the page as if she were trying to devour the contents. Levana was a girl who rarely wore her emotions on her face, but even so it was clear from looking at her that she was very much enjoying her studies. But she does seem to have a good aptitude for magic, doesn’t she? I imagine she’ll make good progress as long as she applies herself diligently. And she certainly isn’t wanting for motivation...

As Elinàsze and Levana worked, Wyne poked her head in through the doorway behind. “Mrhh...” she pouted, frowning with acute boredom. “Are you still-still studying?”

“Big sis Wyne, I’d appreciate it if you’d try not to bother Levana while she’s busy studying,” Elinàsze said, looking over her shoulder at the intruding wyvern girl. “Do you think you can hold on just a little longer? You can play with Levana once she’s finished.”

Although her expression remained as unmoving as ever, Levana’s dragon tail appeared and began wagging back and forth like a dog at Elinàsze’s words, conveying her desire to spend time playing with Wyne just as well.

Elinàsze couldn’t help chuckling just a little in amusement at the sight. “Well,”

she said, “I suppose you’ve been working hard, haven’t you, Levana? Would you like to take a short break, perhaps?”

“M-May I?!” Levana asked, jumping up from her seat.

“Yaaay!” cheered Wyne, leaping into the room and hugging Levana tight. “Play-play!”

“H-Hey! Wyne! Y-You’re hurting me!” Levana protested, although her tail continued to wag happily all the while.

“Ah ha ha! Come on-come on! Let’s play-play!” said Wyne, grinning like a maniac as she held the leviathan dragonewt tight.

Elinàsze looked over from her chair and smiled fondly.

◇That Night—Flio’s House, Living Room◇

In Flio’s house, all the residents ate breakfast and dinner together as a group, with everyone gathered around the large table in the first floor living room. The different members of the household all had different work schedules for the day, however, leaving them to their own devices for lunch, although Rys would be more than happy to prepare a meal for anyone who wanted it.

After dinner was finished for the night, some headed to the baths while others returned to their rooms, parting ways and returning to their individual lives until only a few of them were left in the living room.

“So, with all that in mind...” Elinàsze concluded, taking a sip of her after-dinner tea. “What do you think about enrolling Levana in the Houghtow College of Magic?”

“You make a good point,” Flio nodded. “Until recently, the only people Levana had to interact with were the other leviathans living underground. It seems like she has a serious lack of experience interacting with others.” Flio thought back to the barbecue they had had not long ago. Other than Wyne, who made a point of approaching her, Levana had hardly spoken with anyone else, spending nearly the whole time hiding behind some object or submerged in the lake.

“Yes, if it was only her studies I was concerned about, our current arrangement would be perfectly acceptable,” Elinàsze agreed. “And Levana

does love playing with big sis Wyne. But I wonder if it would be good for her in the long term to only have one playmate...”

No sooner had the words left Elinàsze’s mouth, than Rynàsze sprung up from inside Sybe’s hutch in the back of the living room. “Oh!” she said, raising her hand high above her head. “But I love playing with Levana too! It isn’t only Wyne!”

“*Bworh! Bworh!*” Behind her, Sybe in his psychobear form and Tybe the Bear of Misfortune nodded in agreement as Shebe and the rest of the smaller magic beasts happily hopped around their feet.

Elinàsze couldn’t help smirking in amusement at the antics. “I wasn’t trying to say you didn’t! But if Levana went to school, she’d be able to interact with more people than just the ones in this house. Levana hasn’t had many chances to engage socially in her life, you know. That’s why her communication skills are so badly underdeveloped.”

As Elinàsze made her case, Rislei looked on in evident surprise. *I never thought I’d hear that from Elinàsze of all people! She never tried to interact with anyone when she was still at the Houghtow College of Magic. Everyone thought she was some kind of aloof beauty back in those days! It’s kind of inspirational to see her so fired up about this...*

“Well then!” said Rynàsze, cheerfully bobbing her head. “I’ll just have to spend time with Levana at school too! That way we can all get along even better!” Rynàsze had been putting her considerable talent as a magic beast tamer to work looking after the magic beasts the Houghtow College of Magic kept in their on-campus pasture, while also attending class as a student.

As Elinàsze and the others were discussing the matter of Levana’s education, Ghozal came walking up to the table. “In that case, why don’t we have my children, Folmina and Ghorro, start school at the same time as Levana? It would be a good opportunity for the two of them to develop some communication skills as well.”

“Good idea,” Flio nodded. “They’re at just about the right age for it too, so everything lines up. If only we could send Calsi’im’s daughter Rabbitz along with the three of them...”

“But if we enrolled *her* in school, Calsi’im would have to go to class every day with her!” said Ghozal, smirking sardonically at the thought.

“Oho?” said Calsi’im, entering the room at just that moment, his daughter Rabbitz riding atop his head and his jawbone rattling with laughter. Calsi’im was small for a skeleton and Rabbitz had already grown taller than him, to the point that she now needed to drape her body all the way over Calsi’im’s in order to maintain her customary perch. “Quite a group gathered here, I see! Having some sort of conference, I take it?”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Flio said, replying to Ghozal with one of his usual easygoing smiles. “Rabbitz has started weaning off of Calsi’im while he’s busy with work, but even then she can’t stand to be separated for more than two hours at a time. I think it might be a while before she’s able to attend school.”

“Hm?” said Calsi’im. “I’m not quite sure what you’re all talking about, but my Rabbitz is still just a baby, you know! That’s all there is to it!”

◇A Few Days Later—Houghtow College of Magic◇

The morning assembly had just started in a classroom in the Houghtow College of Magic. “A-And so,” said Belano from her position at the teacher’s podium, “these three will be studying with us, starting today...” With her introduction concluded, she turned to face the new students.

“My name’s Levana...” Levana said in a monotone voice, bowing her head.

Folmina, meanwhile, was the exact opposite. “Oooh!!! Is it my turn?” she started, grinning from ear to ear and waving energetically with both hands. “Hi! My name’s Folmina! Nice to meet all of you!”

Ghoro clung to the hem of Folmina’s outfit, fidgeting awkwardly.

“Come on, Ghoro! You say hi too!” Folmina insisted.

“U-Um...” Ghoro hesitated.

“Oh, Ghoro, you can’t do anything when I’m not around, can you?” Folmina placed her hands squarely on her brother’s shoulders and pushed him towards the rest of the class. “Um, this is my little brother Ghoro!” she said. “Be nice to

him, okay?”

Ghoro’s face turned bright red in embarrassment at being thrust in front of so many people. Still, he managed to bow his head and mumble out quietly, “I-It’s...n-nice to meet you...”

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

In the reception parlor at the Houghtow College of Magic, Flio and Rys, who had accompanied Levana and the others to school, sat on a sofa across from the school’s administrator Taclyde.

“Thank you again for taking on Levana, Folmina, and Ghoro,” said Flio, lowering his head with a smile.

“Not at all, not at all!” Taclyde demurred, smiling as he placed a cup of tea on the table for each of the college’s guests. “Taking on children is what we do at the Houghtow College of Magic, after all! There’s really no need for thanks!”

“Please, you don’t have to stand on ceremony with us,” said Flio, waving off Taclyde’s obsequious attention with one of his usual easygoing smiles.

“Now, wasn’t there something aside from the children you wanted to talk about?” Rys asked, curiously inclining her head.

“Ah, yesss, about that...” Nyt, the headmaster of the Houghtow College of Magic, sat down in the chair next to Taclyde’s and took a sip of her own cup of black tea. “Missster Flio, how would you like to be presssident of our sssschool’sss Parentsss and Guardianssss’ Assssociation?”

“The Parents and Guardians’ Association?” Flio blinked.

“What brings this up now, so suddenly?” Rys asked. “You never mentioned the idea of such a thing while Garyl and Elinàsze were still in school...”

“Ah, yes, well...” Taclyde began. “By any chance, do you know about the new accreditation system the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode has begun applying to the schools within its territories?”

“Yes, I’m familiar with it,” Flio replied. “My understanding is it was designed to counter the fake schools that have been popping up everywhere recently, charging high tuition fees and not providing an actual education.”

“That is the long and short of it, I suppose,” said Taclyde.

“Yesss, indeed. And the majority of the ssstaff at thesse counterfeit ssschools have been demonsss, or ssso I hear... I worry that sssomeone might ssstart spreading unkind rumorsss about usss, sssimply because we have demonsss among our faculty...” Nyt heaved a heavy sigh.

“I see...” said Flio. “And you want me there so you’ll have grounds to take the stance that the president of your Parents and Guardians’ Association is keeping careful watch over those members of your staff, is that it?”

“Precisely!” exclaimed Taclyde, striking his palm with his fist for emphasis. “Your name is quite well-known as the head of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, not just in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode but the surrounding lands as well. With you representing our students’ parents and guardians, nobody should have any cause to complain even if it *does* ever come to light that our headmaster used to be a member of the Dark Army’s Infernal Four.”

“And you thought to push even more work on my lord husband for a petty reason like that when heaven knows he’s busy enough as it is?” Rys asked, a look of sheer disbelief on her face. “That seems rather impudent, I must say...”

“Yes, well...” Taclyde said, bowing his head so low it was practically touching the floor. “I am well aware of just how busy your lord husband is, believe you me! But I just thought, maybe, it couldn’t hurt to make the request at least, could it?”

“Please don’t grovel like that, Mister Taclyde,” said Flio. “I’d be happy to take you up on your offer.”

“R-Really?!” Taclyde exclaimed, barely restraining himself from jumping for joy as Nyt simply nodded in satisfaction beside him.



Not long afterwards, Flio and Rys were on their way out of the school building. “My lord husband...” Rys said as the two of them walked down the road out the front gate. “Should you really have been so quick to take on a job like that?”

“I get your concern,” Flio said. “I may end up being busier than I am right now.

But if the school where our children went to needs me, I'd like to help out if I can."

"Perhaps..." Rys admitted, puffing out her cheeks in a pout nonetheless. "But even so..."

"Besides..." Flio said, leaning in to whisper in his wife's ear. "You wouldn't want there to be all sorts of problems happening with the school once our *next* children are old enough to attend, would you?"

Rys's cheeks flushed red. "Th-That's right! You're exactly right, my lord husband!" she cried out, almost shouting for joy. "Well, I'm certainly convinced!" she added, eagerly nodding her head.

Flio looked over at his wife, smiling one of his famous easygoing smiles. "Well then, shall we be heading back to the house?"

"Yes!" said Rys. "Let's go home, back to our house."

With a nod, the two set off walking down the road, which stretched off into the distance leading towards their home.



Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 16

◇Deep in a Forest◇

Somewhere in the world of Klyrode there was a small forest, unremarkable save for the small cozy village nearby, right against the entrance to the woods. It was a relatively large settlement by the standards of the surrounding areas, with multiple roads intersecting its territory. Perhaps that was why so many visitors came passing through the village, lending it a distinctly lively feel for its size.

In one corner of the village stood a building of brand-new construction, bearing a sign that read: "Houghmija Knights' Academy."

Craaaash! Suddenly, the roof of the building went flying with a thunderous sound, as from inside emerged the visage of Hugi-Mugi in their full two-headed monstrous bird form.

Hugi-Mugi—a two-headed bird demon known as a doppeladler who was once a member of Dark One Ghol's Infernal Four, currently living in disguise as a human. After leaving the Dark Army, they had settled down deep in a certain unremarkable forest where they lived a life of leisure with their three wives and their children.

Hugi-Mugi's two massive heads shone with golden light as they thrashed about, smashing the school building to splinters.

"You swindlers, yes!" they shrieked. *"Yes, how dare you fool the people of this village!"*

Meanwhile, a group of women were busy at the building's entrance, helping a group of children escape.

"Shino! Mato!" Cartha, the woman at the front of the group, cried back over her shoulder as they ran. "Let's get these children to safety while Hugi's doing their part!"

Cartha—the daughter of a farming family. She fell in love at first sight with

Hugi-Mugi's human form, and after a fierce offensive push finally managed to secure for herself the coveted position of *wife*. Now she lived in the doppeladler's cottage in the forest, together with her two other fellow wives.

Shino followed after Cartha, attending to the children's evacuation.

Shino—priestess hailing from the same village as Cartha. Like her, she had fallen in love with Hugi-Mugi at first sight and now lived with them as one of their wives. By day, she worked in the village, healing the wounded and tending to the sick.

Dressed in black vestments like the priestess she was, Shino looked all around, making sure the group wasn't leaving any children behind in their escape. "It looks like the children are all safe at least, but I'm worried about Mato. She's late..."

Just then, as if Shino's expression of worry had called her there, Mato arrived on the scene, smashing through a window as she leaped out of the building.

Mato—a traveling merchant who once came under attack by bandits while she was passing through the forest, only to be rescued by Hugi-Mugi. She began living with them hoping to repay the favor and ended up falling in love with Hugi-Mugi as well. Now she too lived as one of their wives.

"I'm sorry for the wait," she said, holding up a bag that was clearly stuffed to the brim with paper money as she hurried to catch up with the other two. "I had to take back the tuition fees they conned out of everyone."

Just then, the demon fox sisters Kintsuno and Gintsuno made their appearance. Perhaps out of some attempt to keep up the image of a knights' academy, they had abandoned their usual cheongsam dresses in favor of suits of armor, complete with helmets.

"Hey! That money's ours!" yipped Kintsuno, as the two came in from either side to catch the three wives in a pincer attack.

"Hand it over, nice and easy!" Gintsuno yipped in agreement.

Before they could retrieve their hard-earned stolen cash, however, Hugi-Mugi came charging in their direction, set on trampling them under their talons.

"Demon fox sisters, yes! Yes, we heard you thieves had been going about

starting fake schools and running off with the tuition money! Yes, we're well aware, yes!"

"W-Wait!" said Kintsuno. "What is the former Infernal Hugi-Mugi doing in a place like this?!"

"I-It's the first I'm hearing of it!" shouted Gintsuno.

Alas, as desperate as the demon fox sisters were to recover the tuition money, Hugi-Mugi was too large and coming their way too fast for them to have any hope to avoid.

"Th-This could be seriously bad, elder sister Kintsuno..." said Gintsuno.

"W-We've got no choice..." said Kintsuno. "As much as I hate it, we might have to make a tactical retreat..."

Clicking their tongues in frustration, the two cast off their armor and transformed into a pair of monstrous foxes on the spot.

"No matter how fast you are..." Kintsuno began.

"You'll never catch us when we're in these forms!" finished Gintsuno.

No sooner had the words left their mouths, than the gold-and silver-furred foxes both took off running for the forest.

"You won't get away that easily, yes!" declared Hugi-Mugi, speeding up their pursuit as they chased the two out.

Cartha, Shino, and Mato, who had finished evacuating the children from the school, looked on from back in the village.

"Hugi really is so gallant, isn't he?! His usual form is very handsome, of course, but there's just something so striking about his magic beast form as well..."

"There really is..." said Shino. "I find myself falling in love all over again!"

"Yes, yes!" agreed Mato. "Needless to say, I agree!"

The three nodded in fervent agreement as they watched their husband charge bravely through the forest, knocking trees to the side as they ran.

"Well then!" Cartha declared. "I suppose I'll need to spend the night caring tenderly to Hugi's battle wounds... Not to worry, you two, I will take full

responsibility for comforting him—you two can get an early night's sleep."

"Now hold on a moment if you please, Cartha!" Shino objected. "You just want to tend to every little one of Hugi-Mugi's needs yourself! You know a priestess like myself would be the most suited for tending to our husband!"

"Let's not get too hasty, you two," cautioned Mato. "I am certain Hugi-Mugi does not wish for you to argue with each other. Why don't the two of you take some time to step away and allow me to—"

"And why would we do that?!" Cartha and Shino both demanded at once. Suddenly the blissful attitude the wives had shared a moment ago had vanished, as the three set to fearsome bickering.

As they argued, the three's children, who they had rescued from the building, made their way up to their mothers. "Our moms get along really well, huh?" one chirped as they watched.

"That's right! They told me they fight because they get along so well!"

"I love our moms and our dad," said the third.

All the while, from the forest came the sound of Hugi-Mugi frantically chasing after the demon fox sisters.

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

Once again, the Fli-o'-Rys General Store found itself packed wall to wall with customers. In one corner of the shop, Janderena sat at the edge of a counter silently working her abacus.

It's been an entire month since I infiltrated this shop under the Shadow King's instructions in order to learn the truth of how they do business, she thought. One thing I've learned is that while this shop is a very profitable enterprise, so... She turned her eyes to the document lying on the counter by her abacus.

The headline read: "Enchanted Frigate Flight Expenditures and Income from Ticket Sales."

This company has built and is currently operating a nearly flawless network of Enchanted Frigate routes, which makes plenty of income on its own, not to mention their transport teams and horse rentals, servicing mountainous regions

the Enchanted Frigates can't reach. On top of that, the shop itself has inexpensive and high-quality items of all sorts. Of course they're booming. It would be ridiculous if they weren't!

Janderena's finger paused in the middle of moving one of the abacus beads. *Now let's see...* she thought, folding her arms in contemplation. *How can I use this revenue on behalf of the Shadow Conglomerate? Perhaps if I take all of the calculations I've done so far...*

"Oh! Jajana! There mew are!" Just then, Uliminas walked up with a smile on her face, interrupting Janderena's thoughts.

"Fwah?!" Janderena exclaimed. "I-I mean... Yes, Madame Uliminas? Is there any way I can be of assistance?" she asked, frantically trying to affect an aura of calm as Uliminas simply smiled back.

Janderena, incidentally, had used the false name of Jajana when she applied for a position with the Fli-o'-Rys General Store in an attempt to obscure her ties to the Shadow Conglomerate.

"Here," said Uliminas, handing over a sealed envelope. "This is fur mew."

"Erm..." Janderena peered dubiously at the envelope in her hands. "What...is this?"

"It's meowr salary!" said Uliminas. "It's been a meownth since mew and Yayana started working with us, so it's time for meowr furst payday!"

"O-Oh, yes, now that you mention it, today was our payday, wasn't it...?" said Janderena, taking a second at the envelope, which she noticed seemed to be rather thick. Timidly, she stole a furtive glance inside to see a thick stack of paper money—so much that it sent her reeling in disbelief. "E-Excuse me! Th- There must have been some mistake! I-I've only been working here for a single month, you know..."

"Meow've been an important part of the oppurration!" Uliminas told her. "Meowr salary just reflects the value of meowr work."

"The value...of my work?"

"That's right!" said Uliminas. "Even Mister Flio was very impressed by how

skilled mew are with that abacus! Mew've made my job a hell of a lot easier too! We're hoping this is the start of a long relationship to come."

Janderena was stupefied as a smiling Uliminas strolled off. *The value of my work... she thought. At the Shadow Conglomerate, our boss would just say, "We don't have any money! What do you expect?!" I don't think he paid us a proper salary even once! But for demons without much magic power like Yanderena and me, we had to hold on to whatever work we could get to stay alive in this mean world...or...so I thought...*

Janderena looked back down at the envelope in her hands and squeezed it tight, feeling the heavy stack of bills inside. For a while she sat there, thinking. Off in the teahouse, she could see Yanderena—or Yayana as she was known here—accepting an envelope of her own from Uliminas and reacting with disbelief.

Then... she thought. Is there any reason for us to keep working for the Shadow Conglomerate? Wouldn't it be better to just keep working here? B-But...

Before she could think any further, however, she was approached once again, this time by Balirossa. "Miss Jajana! Here you are!"

"Y-Y-Yes?!" Janderena squeaked, startled so badly that she leaped straight up into the air.

"Oh, my apologies..." said Balirossa. "Am I interrupting your work?"

"N-No! Not at all!"

"Indeed? Very well, then," Balirossa smiled. "I'm here to let you know, there's been talk about holding a welcome party for yourself and Miss Yayana working over in Cal'Cha Teahouse..."

"A-A...welcome party...?" Janderena's eyes went wide at the words. *Th-This is going to be some sort of horrible hazing ritual dressed up as a welcome party, isn't it?! she thought. Have they come to suspect our true identities? What if they figured it out right away and they've only been waiting to get us alone surrounded by a large group?! They have all those former members of the Dark Army's old intelligence arm, the Silent Listeners, working here after all...*

As Janderena was busy catastrophizing, Balirossa clapped a reassuring hand

on the demon's shoulder. "You've only been working here a month, but you're already leagues better at this job than I've ever been," she said, smiling earnestly. "It's been good to work with someone as talented as you." Janderena could tell at a glance that there was no trace of malice in Balirossa's eyes, only the genuine desire to deliver a compliment to a coworker she genuinely respected.

Sh-She trusts me... Janderena thought. This person trusts me from the very bottom of her heart...

"M-Miss Jajana!" Balirossa suddenly exclaimed. "What's wrong?"

"H-Huh?" stammered Janderena.

"Well..." Balirossa said. "It's just... You're crying!"

"Wh-What?" Janderena reached up to touch her own cheek and felt the dampness of tears on her fingertips. *I-I'm...crying?* She thought. *But I haven't felt anything except anger and hatred since I started working for the Shadow Conglomerate! Wh-Why am I...?*

"M-Miss Jajana, are you all right?" Balirossa sprang into action, pulling Janderena into her arms and gently patting her on the head.

From a short distance away, hidden behind the door at the end of the hallway, Uliminas and Greanyl watched as Balirossa did her best to comfort Janderena, Greanyl dressed in her traditional shadow demon sneaking garb, complete with a cloth mask wrapped over her mouth.

"Those women..." said Greanyl, quietly enough that only Uliminas could hear. "Jajana and Yayana—or rather, Janderena and Yanderena—is it really wise for us to continue to allow them to work here?"

Greanyl—former member of the Silent Listeners, the onetime espionage arm of the Dark Army. Currently she was employed as the Fli-o'-Rys head of personnel and was always busy around the shop helping out wherever she was needed and training new hires.

Greanyl was using a type of private conversational magic of a different sort from Telepathy. With her spell, even if someone in the area happened to

overhear, they would fail to recognize the conversation as anything other than unremarkable and mundane.

Uliminas folded her arms and let out a short breath. “Those two aren’t idiots,” she said. “They might have come here as spies at first, but it shouldn’t be long before they realize which company is meowr advantageous for them to work for. Besides, that Jajana’s mathematical abilities are something else! She can handle our income and expenditure papurrwork three times as fast as me when I seriously push myself! And Yanderena’s done great for herself in customeowr service too.”

“Understood...” said Greanyl. “I assume I am to continue to eliminate any individuals from the Shadow Conglomerate who might attempt to contact the pair?”

“Mew got it!” Uliminas nodded. “I’ll leave it in meowr hands.”

Greanyl bowed her head and instantaneously vanished from the spot. Uliminas glanced off to the side to see that she was gone and turned her attention back to Janderena.

Those two might have come here with bad intentions at first, but with their abilities there’s no need for them to keep turning to underhanded means. They can make a better living with honest work. All I have to do is teach them that lesson, and I guarantee they’ll come meowver to our side. After all, I was the same way when I was in the Dark Army, and Mewster Flio accepted me without a single question...

Uliminas watched as Janderena managed to get control over her tears at last, Balirossa beside her and patting her on the head the entire time.

◇On the Celestial Plane◇

At the very center of the Celestial Plane stood a massive tower, tall enough to look out over the whole of the plane in one sweep, the area around its foundation bristling with castles. Each of those castles was dedicated to managing one of the planetoid worlds and was where the goddesses and their disciples would assemble.

Inside the highest room of one of those many castles, the resident goddess

Malune gazed out the window and stretched her arms, letting out a deep, satisfied breath. She turned around to face the large chair in the middle of the room and the control rod stuck out of the floor beside it. Above the rod, an image of a planetoid world was projected into the room.

“Good, good,” Malune said, nodding in satisfaction. “It looks like planetoid world Palma is enjoying another day of peace under my watchful stewardship.” She reached out towards the image and made a gesture with her fingers, shrinking it down in size. She shrunk down the scale of the model until countless other planetoid worlds came into view in the surrounding area—the worlds occupying the region of the cosmos near Palma.

Malune made another movement of her right hand, and dotted lines appeared in front of and behind all of the individual planetoid worlds, highlighting their projected orbit. “Well...” she said, letting out a sigh of relief. “At any rate, it doesn’t look like any planetoid worlds are projected to stray into Palma’s trajectory within the next half year.”

“It really gave us all a shock when the planetoid world Klyrode suddenly veered off of its trajectory like that! And dangerously close to my planetoid world Palma as well, right out of the blue...” As she spoke, the cheerful smile Malune had been wearing suddenly fell away, and the goddess let out an exhausted sigh. “And then we had Celbua throwing that tantrum about the magic barrier around her world being damaged twice in short succession, when she declared that she couldn’t do it anymore and stormed off, abandoning her duties and refusing to answer any communications... For a while, planetoid Klyrode was entirely out of our control! And then, of all possible luck, the barrier was damaged for a third time! If our darling UI had been any later in taking over responsibility for Klyrode, who knows *what* could have happened...”

Until that point, Malune had been speaking animatedly to herself, smiling and laughing or frowning theatrically. Suddenly, however, her eyes went deadly cold. “As the goddess responsible for the jurisdiction of the planetoid world Palma, I was prepared to do what it took to protect my world...even if it meant destroying the world of Klyrode...” she said. Then, just as suddenly, her expression lit back up. “Well, in the end, UI worked very hard, and we were able to regain control. All’s well that ends well, I suppose!”

So saying, Malune plopped herself down in the chair in the center of the room. In front of her was a table set with a plate of cupcakes. “But enough of that! I’m going to eat these cupcakes I purchased from that shop in the town of Gatarcombe on Palma, and start my day in earnest!”

Beaming from ear to ear, Malune picked up one of the cupcakes and stuffed it in her mouth, eating with a childlike look of wonder on her face.

“Still, I must say...” she remarked, glancing over the planetoid worlds projected by her castle as she reached for another cupcake. “I really do wonder about that mysterious object that was spotted flying up from the underground world Dogorogma. I’ve heard rumors that once in the distant past, a djinn managed to make a duplicate of one of the bastions of Castle Celestia, but who can say? It doesn’t seem to have anything to do with Palma, so I’m certainly not going to do anything about it! Om nom nom...”

As she spoke, Malune tossed a second cupcake into her mouth, noisily chewing that one as well. The look on her face really did resemble nothing so much as the happy smile of a child.

◇Houghtow City—Nearby Flio’s House◇

Flio’s house lay outside the walls of Houghtow City, past the large pasture and even larger swath of farmland out in front. One day, a woman dressed in a tattered cloak stopped outside the farm, hiding herself in the shadow of one of the larger trees.

You know, I don’t regret for a second losing my temper and resigning from my post of supervising goddess in a huff, the woman—who was in fact none other than Celbua, the goddess formerly responsible for managing the planetoid world of Klyrode—thought with a heavy sigh. After everything else that happened with this planetoid world, the firmament suddenly breaking again and again was absolutely the final straw. But...now I’m not sure what I should be doing with myself...

“And I *certainly* don’t regret storming all the way out of the Celestial Plane,” Celbua went on. “But I was born and raised in that place, and I’m afraid I don’t really know anything about anywhere else in the cosmos. I’ve been spending so much of my time managing this planetoid world right here to do much of

anything else..." Celbua heaved another heavy sigh.

"A single planetoid world can be home to sentient beings of all sorts of shapes and sizes. Taking jurisdiction over such a world means effectively taking their lives into your hands. I understood that concept intellectually, but when the firmament of Klyrode started to break—not once, as has happened a few times throughout history, but again and again—I lost my composure and gave in to my emotions." She smiled in faint self-deprecation at the thought. "I really am a failure of a goddess..."

"Now..." said Celbua, "I've made it this far, one way or another. But really...what am I meant to do next?" Finished with her contemplation she lifted her head, just in time to see someone holding out a glass for her filled with some liquid. "Huh?" she muttered, looking in confusion at the person offering her the glass.

"Ah ha ha! Heeeya, Celbua!" laughed Telbyress, grinning slovenly as she held out a glass of what, judging by the smell, could only be some kind of liquor. "Long time no shee! Want a drink?" For her part, Telbyress seemed to be fairly drunk already. Her cheeks were a rosy red, and her whole body swayed unsteadily.

"Y-You! You're Telbyress!" said Celbua, her eyes shooting open the moment she saw the former goddess's face. "You're the one who caused the second break in the firmament with your shoddy work on the repairs! If it hadn't been for you, I would have never lost my temper and resigned from my post, and *you* might have been returned to the Celestial Plane and reinstated as a goddess!" she snapped, glaring down at Telbyress with her shoulders quivering in anger.

"Hey, hey, no need to pop a vein about it!" Telbyress replied, her smile completely absent any sense of tension. "Jusht calm down a little, okay?" she said, holding out the glass once more.

"I swear, I never know what to do with you..." Celbua said. Telbyress's lackadaisical attitude had taken the wind out of her sails, changing her enraged expression to amused chagrin. "Well, fine. It's all in the past, isn't it. Maybe this isn't a bad time to take a breather." She took the glass, drinking it dry in a single gulp. "M-Mnh?!" she exclaimed. "Th-This liquor is simply divine!"

“Isn’t it?” Telbyress gushed. “You know, I made that liquor myself, with all the knowledge I’ve gained drinking different liquorsh throughout the yearsh. I’ve gotten pretty good at it lately, if I do shay sho myself!”

“Say what?!” Celbua couldn’t believe her ears. “Y-You’re the one who made this liquor?!”

“That’sh right!” said Telbyress, holding up a hefty two-liter bottle of liquor and pouring a fresh helping into Celbua’s empty glass. “Hokh’hokton getsh mad at me if I buy bottlesh of liquor, after all, sho I thought, inshtead of buying it, why not make my own! It’sh been a lot of work, let me tell you!”

“Who would have thought?” Celbua mused. “After all your failures in spite of the vast magic power you had as a goddess, it would turn out your true talent was for brewing liquor all along...”

“Ah ha ha! I know! I’m pretty shurprised about it myself!” said Telbyress, pouring herself another glass.

“Perhaps, then...” Celbua suggested, glancing over at Telbyress. “We should have a toast to our meeting again after all these years.”

“Shoundsh good to me!” said Telbyress.

The two former goddesses shared a smile, and both downed their glasses together beneath the afternoon sun.

That night, Hokh’hokton came walking up to the same large tree outside the farm. “Well, well, what have we here,” he said, standing with his hands on his hips as he beheld the sorry scene. “I thought you were a little late coming home! Were you drinking yourself senseless in a place like this?!”

Telbyress lay on the ground in front of Hokh’hokton, deep in sleep, five empty two-liter bottles of liquor clutched tight in her arms like precious treasure.

“Hey, no-gooddess! Time to wake up!” Hokh’hokton said, poking Telbyress firmly in the cheek. Telbyress, however, showed no sign of opening her eyes anytime soon. “Hmph,” he said. “I suppose I’ll have to carry you, then.” He hoisted the former goddess up onto his shoulders and started back down the road. “Of all the high-maintenance women...” he began, and then suddenly

stopped short in his tracks.

Ahead of him, Hokh'hokton could see another woman—Celbua, lying passed out drunk on the ground, her outfit in disarray and a bottle of her own cradled in her arms.

“Impossible...” he said, staring at Celbua in utter bewilderment. “Could this be...another Telbyress?”

Deeply confused, Hokh'hokton looked the second woman up and down. Her whole face was bright red, and she seemed no more likely to wake up anytime soon than Telbyress.

“Drat and damnation... I can't very well just leave her like this...” Hokh'hokton muttered, shaking his head as he drew close, and stacking her body on top of Telbyress, leaving him carrying two insensate goddesses slung over his shoulder. “I tell you, I don't know how I'm the one stuck looking after all of these drunken women...”

In spite of his grumbling, however, Hokh'hokton took great care not to drop either of the two as he carried them down the dark nighttime road. The two goddesses both had blissful smiles on their faces as they slept peacefully on the goblin's back.

◇A Corner of the Underground World Dogorogma◇

A woman of slender build and young apparent age stood at the bend of a long river valley in the underground world Dogorogma, staring out ahead in disbelief.

“Wh-What is this?” Dreibein gasped.

In her hands, she clutched her cane, which had been broken neatly in two. She had managed to reattach the two halves with crude artifice, but it no longer had its former power of flight. Nonetheless, the tip of the cane still produced a faint light, pointing further ahead.

“Th-This is the location indicated by the cane...” Dreibein said. “B-But then, whatever happened to my flying castle...?”

Much to Dreibein's dismay, the flying castle she had been searching for

seemed to have vanished without a trace. There was indeed a chunk of land that looked like a large building might have been there until very recently, but the building itself—the most important part—was simply gone.

Dreibein crumbled on the spot, laughing bitterly at her fate. “H-Ha ha ha... So let me get this straight... The carriage djinn Aryun Keats, who I created, has been taken by some pretty boy named Hero Gold-Hair who ended up blasting me all the way to Dogorogma. Still, I thought, this was a boon! I had successfully reached the Subaltern Plane! All I would need to do was reach that flying castle of mine that had fallen all the way down to this world, and somehow or other I could make things work. So I pushed myself as hard as I could, defying death itself to reach this spot...except... Ah ha ha... Ah ha ha ha ha...”

Dreibein lay back on the ground exhausted, a dry smile on her face as she gazed up at the sky above. “Even though this is certainly the right place...you can even see the imprint from the castle on the ground...the castle—my castle—is nowhere to be seen! Ah ha ha... I think...this might be the end of the road. With my cane broken, I don’t have any way to escape from Dogorogma... I don’t know what else I can even do... Maybe... Maybe this is my punishment for trying to have my way with the cosmos all those years... Ha ha ha ha ha...”

As the sound of Dreibein’s miserable laughter filled the valley, a number of angels from the Celestial Plane flew overhead in the skies above. “It should be around here, I think...” said the Disciple at the head of the group, peering out ahead. “Only... Wait! Over there! I know who that is! That’s Dreibein!”

The angels, having noticed the fallen Dreibein, flew faster through the air. “Dreibein!” said the leader, gesturing dramatically with her right arm as her human form shifted, changing to a visage that resembled a young maiden on one half and a skeleton on the other, a great scythe appearing in her grasp. The angels behind her all followed suit, transforming as well as they flew. “For your many crimes against the Celestial Plane, intruding upon planetoid worlds whenever you like and doing with them whatever you please, I hereby place you under arrest! Your days of having your way with the cosmos are over!”

Needless to say there was nothing Dreibein could do to avoid capture, and soon she found herself dragged along by the group as they returned to the Celestial Plane.

◇A House in Houghtow City◇

In a residential area just a short distance from the main street of Houghtow City stood a single story wooden house.

“I’m home!” said Reptor, opening the door and stepping inside.

“Oho! If it isn’t Reptor! Welcome home!” replied the middle-aged lizardfolk man in the room inside.

“Hi, dad,” said Reptor, smiling back at his father Reptaul.

Reptor—a lizardfolk boy from Elinàsze and Garyl’s graduating class back at the Houghtow College of Magic. He had grown rather close to Rislei while the two of them were at school, earning him the ire of her father Sleip.

“How was work today?” his father asked.

“Same as ever!” said Reptor, grinning and flexing his arms. “It’s lots of work, but it’s work worth doing, and that makes it fun! But how are things going with your own work, dad?”

“Not bad, not bad!” said Reptaul, returning his son’s flex with a flex of his own. “When those Enchanted Frigates were first being set up I didn’t know what was going to come of it, but the manager over at Fli-o’-Rys always makes sure to send plenty of work our delivery company’s way. Thanks to him, business is still pleasantly booming.”

“I see! I’m glad to hear it!” Reptor smiled.

Then, suddenly remembering something, Reptaul continued, “By the way, do you remember the time all those years ago when that old king still ruled the Magical Kingdom, when I was ordered to deliver a man from the castle all the way to the Delaveza forest?”

“I do,” said Reptor. “But what are you bringing that old story up for now?”

“I’ve just been thinking about that guy a lot lately, I guess...” said Reptaul, folding his arms in thought. “The Fli-o’-Rys manager reminds me of him somehow. They look completely different, though! The guy from back then was kind of an androgynous sort, you could say...”

“Sometimes people just happen to remind you of someone,” Reptor offered.

“It’s probably just that, right?”

“Yeah, I suppose so...” Reptaul nodded, apparently convinced. “But enough about that. How are things going with that little lady of yours, Reptor? What was her name again...? Rislei, was it?”

Reptor, who had been completely unprepared to hear Rislei’s name at that moment, couldn’t help reacting with a violent spit take. “D-Dad! How do you know about Rislei?!”

“Oh, well, you know,” said Reptaul. “Whenever I stop by the Fli-o’-Rys General Store to pick up some luggage, the little lady makes a point of telling me about all you’ve done to help her out. You don’t think your old man’s gonna miss something like that, do you?”

“Y-You’re embarrassing me!” Reptor exclaimed, his lizardfolk tail thumping on the floor in a display of heated emotion. “W-We’ll talk about this later!” he declared, retreating back to his room.

“Youth’s a wonderful thing, isn’t it?” Reptaul said to himself, grinning happily and bobbing his head as he watched his son go.

I’ve worked hard raising that boy as a single father over the years... Reptaul thought. And now he’s gone and gotten a girlfriend! Does the heart proud...

◇Houghtow City—Enchanted Frigate Docks◇

That day, Flio was at the docks the company used for their fleet of Enchanted Frigates, in the repair docks located in the deepest part of the facility where the copy of Castle Celestia they had retrieved from the underground world Dogorogma waited.

Flio rose into the air with a Fly spell and glided into the room on the uppermost part of the castle. Inside there was a chair and a cylinder protruding from the floor.

“Now then...” Flio said. “I can’t let Elinàsze do all the hard parts, can I?” He retrieved an item from his Bottomless Bag—a brilliant golden gauntlet of his own.

Apparently I learned this spell back when I first analyzed Celestial magic... Flio

thought as he equipped the gauntlet on his right arm. *It's just like Elinàsze says, there really is a lot to learn about magic. You can achieve entirely different effects depending on how you combine components, or casting conditions, or your intentions behind the spell. It can even create magic items like this one...*

Flio grabbed the protruding cylinder with his gauntleted hand, closing his eyes tight. "This rod must be used to control Castle Celestia's systems..." he muttered. A second later, a colossal amount of information came flooding directly into Flio's mind.

I really don't know what I think of this sensation... Flio thought. *But if Elinàsze's been dealing with all this, I should do what I can to bear it too...*

Flio focused his consciousness and began to decode the information flowing through him. At first he found himself completely unable to understand the slightest bit of what any of it meant, but eventually he managed to grasp how to pause, zoom in, and rewind the flow of data. With those tools in hand, he was able to scrutinize the contents at his leisure.

Flio spent nearly an hour analyzing the data before finally removing his hand from the rod, stretching his arm and letting out a deep breath "Well, I figured out how to use our Castle Celestia to disable another planetoid world's barrier in order to enter it without using Teleportation, as well as a way to infiltrate the Celestial Plane in spite of it being a copy..." he said, going over what he had learned in his head as he stretched the other direction.

"Elinàsze sure is something, to be able to manage things as easily as she does. But I suppose it's only natural, considering how much time she spends studying magic..." Flio said, nodding his head. "Now, I'd better hurry on to the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. It's almost time for Fetabetcz from Naneewa Town to arrive for today's business talk."

Flio held out his hand, creating a magic circle in front of him, from which emerged a single unremarkable door. He opened the door and stepped through, into the interior of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

Damalynas was the first to notice Flio's presence in the shop. "Oh! Mister Flio! Welcome!" she said, a smile on her face.

Damalynas—the Grand Magus of Midnight, master of the dark magic known

as the Midnight Arts. She had long since lost her flesh, existing only as a psychic construct. Since her loss to Hiya, she spent her days in the djinn's mindscape as their beloved training partner.

"Hello, Damalynas," said Flio. "I see you're corporeal today."

"Well, yeah!" said Damalynas. "The shop's been even more of a mess than usual—they even told their divinity Hiya that they had to help out. Oh, and Fetabetcz arrived just a moment ago. Balirossa took her to the reception room."

"Oh, she's already here," Flio said, the door he had arrived through vanishing as he and Damalynas spoke. "Thank you for letting me know. I'll head there right away."

Meanwhile, Castle Celestia had fallen silent once again...until Elinàsze suddenly poked her head in through the outside window.

"P-Papa learned how to create the gauntlet just by studying it on his own? Unbelievable! Simply unbelievable!" Color rose to her face as she recalled the image of Flio wearing the gauntlet on his arm from just moments ago, her breath coming out hot in her excitement. "And not only that, but he understood how to analyze Castle Celestia's data stream right away, when it took me half a year to figure it out! Really, it's too amazing to be believed!"

Elinàsze touched the cylindrical rod Flio had been using to access the castle's data with her bare hands and let out another passionate breath.

"Just...incredible..." she murmured. "Papa really is the greatest! At this point I've gone far beyond simple respect for him and all the way to worship! Yes! Papa is my god!"

"Still..." she added, retrieving her own gauntlet from her magic bag and putting it on her right arm. "I can't let things stand like this, can I? I need to work harder and harder so that I can be of use to papa! Now, let's see what we can do with the data from Castle Celestia..." She placed the gauntlet on the castle's control rod.

And so Elinàsze threw herself back into the study of magic with reckless abandon, making her an even more elusive presence than she had been before.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading my book!

Level 2 Cheat has made it all the way to its sixteenth volume. The theme this time was treasuring one's companions, from everyone in Flio's house enjoying their time together to several more inconspicuous ways the concept worked its way into events. I tried to highlight Hero Gold-Hair's care and kindness towards the members of his party as well, in spite of the constant madcap adventures he seems to find himself in time after time.

And, of course, in what has become a familiar pattern, the manga adaptation of *Level 2 Cheat* will be going on sale at the same time as the light novel. As the author of the original, I'm thrilled to see the comics reach their ninth volume.

Not only that, but the anime adaptation has finally been announced to be broadcast next year! I'm sure my readers are excited—I know I am! I owe it all to your continued support. I really couldn't be more grateful.

Finally, I would like to thank Katagiri once again for the excellent illustrations, the good folks at Overlap Novels, and everyone else involved in the publication of this book, and all of you who've read this book from the bottom of my heart.

October 2023, Miya Kinojo

Chillin' in Another World

WITH **LV 2**

SUPER CHEAT POWERS

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

16





“Ah ha ha...
I’m very
sorry to have
disappointed
you...”

“Well, it’s
true to form
for our
Aryun Keats,
I suppose!”

Name | Aryun Keats | 8

Name | Hero Gold-Hair | 8



Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[Chapter 1: Flio Fixes the Sky](#)

[Chapter 2: “I’m His Wife, After All!”](#)

[Chapter 3: Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought](#)

[Chapter 4: Castle Celestia](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Side Story: Everyone’s Morrow Part 16](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers: Volume 16

by Miya Kinojo

Translated by Meteora Edited by Samantha J. Moore

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