

Chillin' in Another World

WITH LV 2 SUPER CHEAT POWERS



12



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri










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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.



Wynne (Human Form)

Freeloader with high stats
and a big appetite.



Garyl

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



Elinásze

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



Rynásze

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



Ben'ne

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



Hiya

The Djinn who Commands the
Origin of Light and Darkness.



Damalynas

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



Belano

A quiet, shy, and skittish teacher.



Belalio

Minilio and Belano's child.



Blossom

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



Ura

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



Kora

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



Telbyress

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

Super Cheat Powers

Characters

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Ghozal

Once known as the mightiest
Dark One in history.



Uliminas

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



Balirossa

A former knight of Klyrode
and wife of Ghozal.



Folmina

Ghozal and Uliminas's daughter.



Ghoro

Ghozal and Balirossa's son.



Calsi'im

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



Charun

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



Rabbitz

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



Sleip (Human Form)

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



Byleri

Former archer of Klyrode
living in sin with Sleip.



Rislei

Sleip and Byleri's daughter.



Ellie (The Maiden Queen)

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



Tanya

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



Greanyl

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



The Shadow King

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

Super Cheat Powe



Characters

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Hero Gold-Hair

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



Tsuya

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



Valentine

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



Aryun Keats

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



Wuha Gappoli

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



Dawkson

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



Phufun

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



Belianna

A foul-mouthed devil who loves her little sister.



Irystiel

Garyl's classmate and Belianna's little sister.



Salina

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



Sybe (Unicorn Rabbit Form)

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



Shebe

Unicorn Rabbit who became Sybe's bride.



Sube

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



Sebe

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



Sobe

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

Super Cheat Powers

Chapter 1: Demons and Magic Beasts

The world of Klyrode is a world of sword and sorcery, of magic beasts and demihumans. It is a world where humans and demons have waged war since time immemorial—until, that is, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, greatest of the human kingdoms, signed a treaty with the Dark Army, the largest and most venerable institution among demonkind. These days, everyone has been more or less getting along.

The Dark Army continues to stand unbroken with Dawkson the Dark One at its head, but there are still many demons who are loath to pursue friendly relations with humans after the long years of conflict between the two peoples. Dawkson has been tireless in his effort to persuade them, but the discussion is still ongoing.

The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, meanwhile, has had few problems in the realm of politics with the Maiden Queen and her two sisters, the Second and Third Princess at its helm. Many of the nobility and rulers of smaller human kingdoms, however, privately oppose cooperation with their longtime enemy, the Dark Army. The Maiden Queen has been worrying herself sick every day trying to figure out how best to handle the situation.

The Fli-o'-Rys General Store, managed by Flio, has stepped in between those two powers to establish a network of transit routes serviced by their fleet of Enchanted Frigates, ships capable of flying through the skies themselves, bringing their lands closer together. It was a feat for which the enigmatic merchant received tremendous acclaim from human and demonkind alike.

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

◇Houghtow City—Nearby Flio's House◇

It was early in the morning, and Flio and Rys were walking down the road leading away from their house, along with the Maiden Queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode.

Flio was a merchant from another world, summoned as one of the candidates to be this world's hero. The blessing he had received upon his summoning granted him mastery of every spell and every skill to exist within the world of Klyrode. Currently he was keeping himself busy running the Fli-o'-Rys General Store along with his wife Rys, a former demon soldier of the Dark Army. They were the proud parents of three daughters—two by birth and one adopted—and one son.

Flio's wife Rys was a lupine demon and a formidable warrior. Her strength proved useless against the likes of Flio, however, and upon her defeat she made the decision to walk alongside him as his wife. She adored her husband to the point of excess, and played something of a mother role to everyone living in Flio's house.

As for the Maiden Queen, she was the current ruler of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Her full name was Elizabeth Klyrode, but her friends called her Ellie. Her father, the former King, ended up being ousted from the throne for his many misdeeds, leaving her holding the reins of the country. She was in her thirties, but her lifelong obsession with politics had left her with little time for romance. She had gone her whole life so far without ever taking a lover. As this was a secret visit, Ellie was not dressed in an elegant dress like she would be in Klyrode Castle, but in simple attire complete with a pair of large round glasses with false lenses.

The three continued down the road, past the pasture for equine magic beasts. When they came near the vast farmlands outside Flio's estate, however, Ellie noticed something towering in the distance beyond the fields. Her eyes opened wide in shock. "E-Excuse me..." she said. "I remember there being a small hill in that area, but it didn't used to be so...*big*, did it?"

"Yes, that's right," Flio said with an awkward chuckle. "That mountain is the thing I'd been hoping to talk to you about. You see, I recently took in a group of demons who didn't have anywhere else to go after the war ended. I thought it might be best to let you know, just in case."

"I... I see..." Ellie said, staring at the mountain in disbelief.

"There's really no need to be so surprised, you know," Rys told her, smiling

brightly. “There was a village of demons who were struggling to feed themselves, so my lord husband simply brought their mountain over here.”

“‘Simply,’ you say...” Ellie echoed, blinking her eyes and shaking her head. *W- Wait just a moment... she thought. Did he really bring an entire mountain of this size here from somewhere else? B-But if he had cast a spell of such magnitude, surely the castle magicians would have detected the surge of magical power! But I heard of no such report! So how...?*



“Excuse me...” Flio said. “Miss Ellie?”

“Y-Yes?!” Ellie squeaked, so startled she jumped up on the spot.

“Did I do something improper in bringing the demon village here without notifying you first, by any chance?” Flio asked.

“Oh! No, no, of course not!” Ellie replied. “I was merely at a loss for words at the power of your magic! Not many could cast a spell powerful enough to move an entire mountain... B-But that aside, may I inquire as to the number of demons living on that mountain?”

“There’s eighty-three in total, including their chief, Mister Ura,” Flio reported. “There were only around fifty at first, but as rumors of the village spread, more demons started moving in...” He scratched the back of his head, smiling apologetically.

“But that’s no problem, is it?” Rys opined. “Ura may be their chief in name, but the truth is they are all my lord husband’s vassals. See?” She pointed towards the vast farm managed by Blossom, one of the residents of Flio’s house. Here and there they could see demons hard at work in the fields. At first the only ones working on the farm had been Blossom herself and the goblins she had taken under her wing—Maunty, Hokh’hokton, and Maunty’s wife and children. But now...

“Well now! I was wondering who had come to visit us. If it isn’t Lord Flio!” A brawny man with red skin and tusks poking out from the edges of his smiling mouth put his tools to the side to greet the three of them. He was very obviously a demon, and was dressed in an outfit that was clearly inspired by the clothing worn in the Land of the Rising Sun far to the east. As soon as he spoke, the other men stood up in the fields all around them, offering Flio’s party cheery greetings of their own. Unlike the first man who could possibly pass for human, the others working in the field had forms that were openly demonic.

“Good morning, Lord Flio!”

“Lovely weather we’re having, isn’t it, Lord Flio!”

“We were just getting another shipment of fresh veggies ready for you!”

As Flio returned each of their greetings with a smile and some kind words, Rys turned to Ellie. “That first man was Ura, the chief,” she said. “The rest are all residents of the village. As a greater demon, Ura is capable of assuming a human form if he wishes, but the others belong to lesser species. They have some strength, but they aren’t able to change their shape.”

“Oh? B-But in that case...” Ellie’s expression darkened at Rys’s words. *Unless I’m very much mistaken, lesser demons are unable to control the malicism within their bodies...* she thought. *They should be emitting a continual stream of malicism particles at all times—that’s why areas where lesser demons gather become saturated with malicism! Eventually the area becomes too polluted for human habitation, like the Delaveza forest when the Dark Army had its garrison there, and yet...* Ellie looked every which way for signs of malicism poisoning in the environment and cocked her head in confusion at finding none.

Flio, who had a keen guess of what was on Ellie’s mind, smiled his usual easygoing smile. “Oh, there’s no need to worry about malicism,” he said. He held out his arm and cast a quick spell, causing a miniature magic circle to appear above his outstretched palm. A magic gem appeared within the circle shining with a blue light. Then the circle vanished, and the magic gem drifted gently down into Flio’s hand. “This magic gem nullifies the harmful effects of malicism,” he explained, handing it over to her. “As long as the lesser demons all keep one of these on their persons, there’s no risk of malicism accumulation.”

“I-It nullifies the harmful effects of malicism?!” Ellie reeled in shock. “You mean to say such a thing is possible even without the spell Purification?”

It was no wonder that the revelation had Ellie so flabbergasted. Her own magical researchers were certain that there was only one way to nullify malicism: the spell Purification. Purification, however, required a tremendous expenditure of magical power and had a commensurately large area of effect—and more to the point, a casting of Purification would not only eliminate all malicism within its range, but any demons unfortunate enough to be in the area as well.

“A way to nullify malicism without the other effects of Purification...” Ellie muttered in awe, staring at the gem Flio had given her. “Using such a small

magic gem too...”

“We’ve been experimenting through trial and error to synthesize new magic gems we can sell at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store,” Flio said. “I suppose we’ve had a few successes along the way.”

“You’ve been...synthesizing new magic gems?” Ellie repeated. *M-Meaning that this extraordinary gem is man-made...*

Malicium pollution had been a significant challenge for the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode during their war with the Dark Army. Without any means to eliminate malicium in the environment short of the large-scale Purification spell, their only realistic option was to drive the demons out of the affected land and wait for the malicium to disperse naturally.

“And on that note,” Flio said, “I have a request for you, Miss Ellie—or maybe it would be better to call it a request for the Maiden Queen.”

“O-Oh? What is it?” Ellie said, somewhat flustered to have Flio suddenly address her as the reigning monarch. After all, Ellie had been expecting nothing more than another one of her private visits to Flio’s house between official duties. Officially, Ellie had been traveling the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode incognito in order to see the state of affairs of her kingdom with her own eyes. The truth, however, was that these trips were part of Ellie’s ongoing effort to get closer to Flio’s son Garyl and the rest of his household. Her younger sisters, at least, were in on the conspiracy.

Flio waited for Ellie to clear her throat and put herself in the mindset for official business. “Well, you see,” he said with one of his famous smiles, “if it’s all right with you, I’d like to sell all of these magic gems I made to the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode...”

“All of them?” Ellie replied, astonished by how nonchalant Flio seemed about the suggestion. *There could be any number of people who might wish to obtain these gems... she thought. After all, nobody else in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode has ever succeeded in synthesizing a magic gem that can nullify a lesser demon’s malicium! And he wants to sell them to us...?*

As Ellie’s mind struggled to process the situation, two more members of Flio’s household walked up from behind—Ghozal and Uliminas, both expertly hiding

their demonic forms.

“Hrm,” Ghozal grunted affably, his arms folded over his enormous chest. “Selling the magic gems to the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode was my suggestion, you know.”

Ghozal, Dark One Dawkson’s older brother, had once ruled over the Dark Army as the Dark One himself, using the name Gholl. When Dawkson, who at the time was still using the name Yuigarde, challenged him for the throne, however, Ghozal abdicated without a fight and chose the life of a human freeloading at his best friend Flio’s house.

Uliminas, meanwhile, was a hellcat demon, and had been Ghozal’s confederate and right-hand woman during their Dark Army days. She had quit the Dark Army alongside Ghozal and disguised herself as a demihuman, finding work at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. She had since become one of Ghozal’s two wives, alongside Balirossa, a former knight of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. The triad had two children as well: Uliminas’s daughter, Folmina, and Balirossa’s son, Ghoros.

“It was your suggestion, Lord Ghozal...?” Ellie asked.

“That’s right,” Ghozal said with a nod. “I’m sure those magic gems would be flying off the shelves if we sold them in the Fli-o’-Rys General store, but I’m concerned about all the lesser demons who lost their livelihoods when the war ended. Normally, their malicium would mean they couldn’t get work in human kingdoms. If that wasn’t an obstacle, it could be a life saver for a lot of folks. But on the other hand...” Ghozal sighed. “As nice as it would be if all those demons were willing to work on a farm, it stands to reason that most of the demons who lost their jobs because of the peace treaty were mercenaries the Dark Army was paying to fight humans...”

“It’s hard to imeowgine a bunch of hot-blooded warriors being satisfied with a life of farmwork,” Uliminas said, continuing Ghozal’s train of thought. “And what if their human employers are the type who wish they were still at war with the demeowns...?”

Suddenly, Ellie had a flash of understanding. *Come to think of it, she thought, this reminds me of something that came up just the other day...*

◇Klyrode Castle—Maiden Queen's Chambers, Several Days Earlier◇

A few days ago after sundown, the Second and Third Princess paid a late-night visit to the private chambers of the Maiden Queen, their older sister.

The Second Princess, the next oldest after the Maiden Queen herself, was named Leusoc Klyrode. She had been responsible for handling diplomatic relationships with the other human kingdoms since back when the Magical Kingdom was still at war with the Dark Army. She was a very forthright and outspoken woman, unafraid to give the Maiden Queen a frank talking-to when she needed it. The Third Princess, Swann Klyrode, had recently graduated from a prestigious nobles' academy and had already become invaluable for her ability to navigate the Magical Kingdom's internal affairs. She had a somewhat pathological level of adoration for her big sister the Maiden Queen. Together, the two of them were their older sister's right and left arms in the world of politics.

Official government business had ended for the day, and the Maiden Queen had changed her formal gown for a frilly outfit that doubled as nightclothes. The Second and Third Princess, too, were dressed in casual attire.

"Second Princess," the Maiden Queen said, swallowing nervously as her younger sister concluded her report. "You mean to tell me that a foreign kingdom has been scheming to assemble a force of demonic mercenaries?"

"That's the long and short of it." The Second Princess sighed. "They're opposed to your peace treaty with the Dark Army, and it looks like they've secretly been inviting demons into their land as mercenaries. I happened to run into a couple particularly unconvincing human impressions, see, and I got to investigating..." She shook her head in exasperation.

"What in heaven's name are those people thinking?!" The Third Princess huffed in indignation, her mouth turning downward in a pout. "When we were at war with the Dark Army, they left the bulk of the fighting up to the Magical Kingdom, and now that our people are at peace, they're raising an army from the shadows? The nerve of them! I can't believe it!" Her face was turning bright red in outrage, but with her youthful features the display of anger came across as adorable more than anything. The Second Princess covered her mouth with

her hand, doing her best to stifle a laugh. “A-Ahem!” the Third Princess cleared her throat. “W-Well, then, Second Princess, how far along are they in this scheme of theirs?”

“A-Ah! Yes!” the Second Princess replied. “About that. It sounds like it hasn’t gotten very far at all thanks to issues with malicium pollution. Still, it seems like someone’s up to something here. It’s worth keeping an eye on, at any rate.”



Back in the present, Ellie’s expression darkened as she recalled her conversation with the Second Princess. *If Lord Flio puts these magic gems on the market without precautions, unscrupulous nobles or even entire kingdoms will use them to recruit armies of lesser demons...* she thought. *If they were to hire adventurers, the Adventurers’ Guild would end up receiving reports of their activities, but if they could hire a force of lesser demons without the concerns about malicium, they would be able to operate with no accountability to anyone.*

Flio, who once again seemed to know exactly what Ellie was thinking, just smiled like always. “And that’s why we’d like to sell our entire stock of malicium nullifying gems to the Magic Kingdom of Klyrode itself,” he said. “If the Magical Kingdom has a monopoly on the supply, you’ll be able to keep track of the volume being sold and where they’re being sold to.”

Ghozal and Uliminas nodded in agreement. Rys, however, looked somewhat dissatisfied. “Personally,” she said, “I don’t see why we can’t simply obliterate anyone misusing the gems from the face of the world. Between my lord husband himself; me, his faithful wife; Ghozal, the strongest demon in all of Klyrode; Ghozal’s onetime confederate Uliminas; the former Infernal Sleip and his elite guard; the djinn Hiya; Damalynas the Grand Magus of Midnight; and the invincible dragon Wyne, I would say we are more than equipped to handle any foe. Still...” she added, looking right at Ellie. “Even if I don’t care one way or another what happens to some human kingdom, I suppose I’m willing to play along for the sake of Garyl’s prospective bride.”

“Eh?” Ellie suddenly found herself at a loss for words, blushing furiously from her face all the way down to her shoulders. *G-G-G-G-Garyl’s prospective bride?!*

she thought, covering up her face with both hands. *I-I-I mean...I've certainly thought from time to time that I would very much like for the two of us to be married...b-b-but how am I meant to respond when Garyl's mother herself says such a thing out of the blue?!*

"Hm?" Rys said, frowning in innocent confusion. "Would you rather I not call you that?"

"N-N-Not at all!" Ellie said. "In fact, I always find myself wishing to become his bride as soon as I possibly can!" Suddenly, she realized that she had accidentally blurted out her true feelings. "O-Oh..." she muttered, curling up into a ball as her face turned even redder than it already was.

"You're a peculiar human, aren't you?" Rys said, looking very perplexed by Ellie's behavior. "Visiting our house and helping cook dinner is part of your bridal training, you know. What do you have to be so embarrassed about? You've already come this far."

"Now, now, Rys," Flio said, a forbearing smile on his face as he rested a hand on her shoulder. "Let's leave that aside for the time being. Miss Ellie?"

"Ah! Y-Yes?" Ellie said, scrambling to her feet, her face still bright red.

"Will you be able to help with the magic gems, like we asked?" Flio asked, smiling in amusement despite himself.

"Y-Yes, of course!" Ellie said, clasping her hands together and bowing a full ninety degrees. "I will have to bring it before my ministers once I return to the castle before I can give my final word on the subject, but I at least don't see any reason to object! In fact, it seems to me that you are the ones doing *us* a favor..."

"I'm the one who came to you with a request," Flio said, shaking his head. "There's really no need for you to abase yourself like that."

"W-Well," Ellie said. "Just to make certain I understand properly, what volume of magic gems can you produce at a time? I imagine it's no small feat to create something so extraordinary..." *With Lord Flio's guidance and instructions, I imagine we could create some dozen gems in a single month. But with Lord Flio's magical ability, I expect he could work on an entirely different scale.*

Perhaps a hundred, or even a hundred fifty...

“Ah, yes,” Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “About the production...”

◇Meanwhile—Flio’s House◇

In her room on the second floor of Flio’s house, Elinàsze sat at her desk. Elinàsze was the daughter of Flio and Rys, a serious girl with a tremendous talent for magic who adored her father more than anything in the world. She was Garyl’s older twin and a doting big sister to her youngest sibling, Rylnàsze.

Elinàsze opened a hefty magic grimoire with her left hand and made an upward gesture with her right index finger, causing the tome to float up into the air. She read through the page she had opened to, nodding to herself.

“I see,” Elinàsze said with a final nod of understanding. “To activate the spell, I’ll need to use this incantation here...” She began chanting under her breath, and the crystal jewel on her forehead shone with light. A small magic circle appeared at the tip of her index finger and began producing a mess of what looked something like red string.

Elinàsze watched the progress out of the corner of her eye as she cast the spell, until suddenly, with a jarring *clink*, the magic circle and threadlike filament alike splintered and dissipated into the air. “Huh?!” Elinàsze exclaimed, her eyes flinching open. Then a dark cloud came over her expression. “Hmph...” She folded her arms in disappointment. “Another failure...”



“So it seems...” said Hiya, coming up from behind. “Your technique was excellent, Lady Elinàsze, but I am afraid you may lack the experience to perform such a spell.”

“I lack experience, huh?” Elinàsze mused. “I guess I’m still a long way off from being as good as papa...” She lowered her head in thought. “But I would be so much more helpful to him at work if I could cast this Create Djinn spell... I suppose I’ll just have to keep trying until I get it right!” She screwed up her face, nodding with renewed determination before turning back to the grimoire. “Just you wait—I’ll be able to cast this spell before you know it! With the help of your magic grimoire, of course, Hiya!”

Hiya merely smiled.

Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, was a being with enough magic power to destroy the entire world, but after their defeat to Flio they took to calling him the Exalted One and living with the others in his house.

The spell Lady Elinàsze is so determined to cast is one that creates a djinn to serve as the caster’s familiar, Hiya thought. It is indeed recorded within that magic grimoire, but the grimoire itself is a tome of magic from another world entirely, forbidden by the Magical Kingdom. I suspect that there is nobody in the world of Klyrode capable of casting such a spell save for the Exalted One himself. And yet... Hiya glanced outside the room they were in.

All of the bedrooms in Flio’s house were divided into two chambers—one for sleeping, and one to serve as a private space for each individual resident. Hiya, however, was not looking into Elinàsze’s sleeping chamber but a space Elinàsze had created beside it using her magic, where a host of miniaturized magic dolls worked feverishly to produce magic gem after magic gem.

Even without a djinn familiar, to create such a number of magic dolls is no small feat of magic... Hiya thought as they watched the dolls work.

“Oh!” Elinàsze said, smiling brightly when she noticed where Hiya was looking. “I thought that would be a good way to practice my Create Magic Doll spell while also making malicium-nullifying magic gems to sell at papa’s shop!”

Hm... Hiya thought. A magic gem of this type has never been produced in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode before. Even with the guidance of the Exalted One, I was unable to create more than ten in a single month. It seems that these magic dolls, however, can match that number in a single hour. I would be hard-pressed indeed to match that pace myself. And not only that, but she spends her time researching other spells even as she manipulates her factory of dolls... Hiya glanced from Elinàsze herself, to the book she was reading floating in midair, and then to the gem on her forehead shining with brilliant light. I have greatly enjoyed my time training under the Exalted One, but perhaps it would be no less enjoyable to train with his revered daughter...

Just as Hiya thought those words, someone else's voice popped into their head. *"What the heck, Your Divinity?!"* said Damalynas from inside Hiya's mind.

"Oh?" Hiya replied. *"If it isn't Damalynas. Is there something you need?"*

"What do you mean, is there something I need?!" Damalynas shot back. *"I've been waiting patiently in your mindscape like a good girl, and now I hear you've been having fun training with Lord Flio and Lady Elinàsze!"*

Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight, was a master of dark magic. She had long since lost her physical body, however, and now only existed as a psychic construct ever since Hiya defeated and absorbed her into their own mental world to serve as a training partner.

Hiya smirked in amusement at the voice coming from their own head. *"Don't be absurd,"* they chided Damalynas. *"My training with the Exalted One and Lady Elinàsze is in the realm of magic. My training with you is of a different sort entirely, is it not?"*

"I-I mean, I know..." Damalynas mumbled. *"But it's just...well...you get it, right?"*

"I see no need for you to harbor jealousy over it," said Hiya.

"H-Hey, I'm not jealous or anything..." Damalynas insisted.

"Tonight I will give you the training you desire," Hiya said. *"Until then, have patience."*

"W-Well, if you promise..." Damalynas replied. *"I'll be patient, Your Divinity!"*

she added, somewhat more cheerfully.

Satisfied that the issue with Damalynas had been resolved, Hiya nodded their head. *When I first witnessed the Exalted One and his wife entwining their bodies in their nightly lovemaking ritual, I did not know what to make of the behavior, they reflected, pressing a finger to their lips. At first, all I had was questions. But through my training with Damalynas, I feel I have come to at least somewhat understand the emotions behind such actions...*

Elinàsze glanced at Hiya out of the corner of her eye as she worked. *Hiya likes to make those faces out of the blue every now and then... she thought. I'm not sure what to make of it. It makes them look kind of...adult...*

Elinàsze might have reached physical maturity, but when it came to some things she was still very much a child.



“I see...” Ellie said. “So Miss Elinàsze is the one producing the magic gems...”

“That’s right!” Flio said, smiling happily. It wasn’t his usual easygoing smile, but a look of deep paternal joy at seeing his daughter come into her own. “Elinàsze studied hard at the Houghtow College of Magic, and with an incredible spellcaster like Hiya training her personally, I bet it’s only a matter of time until she’s even better at magic than me!”

“I’m not sure about that one,” Ghozal said with a smirk. “Elinàsze’s grown a lot—no doubt about that—but better than *you*...?”

“*Hiss!*” Uliminas cut him off, interrupting him with a full-power elbow to the side of his gut. “I keep telling you to read the room, you meowron!”

“H-Hrm? Oh, is it one of those things? My bad, my bad!” Ghozal said, scratching the back of his head and laughing heartily as Uliminas rubbed her smarting elbow. Uliminas had struck him for everything she was worth, but Ghozal’s body hadn’t yielded an inch. If anything, it was Uliminas’s elbow that seemed to have gotten the worst of the exchange. Soon, the whole group was laughing together at the absurdity of the scene.

“Well then,” Ellie said once they had settled down, rolling up her sleeves. “Shall we return to the house? I believe I should be getting to my breakfast

preparations...”

“Oh, one moment, Miss Ellie,” Flio said, once again smiling his usual easygoing smile. “There’s another place I’d like to show you this morning...”

“Oh? Another place, you say?” Ellie asked, curiously cocking her head.

◇Houghtow City—Near Flio’s House◇

Following the road away from the front door of Flio’s house past the pasture and surrounding farmland, one would come to the gates of the wall protecting Houghtow City. From this point, they would encounter a fork in the road. To the left was Houghtow City proper, while the road to the right led to the neighboring city. And a little ways down the right fork and into the nearby forest was a decently large lake.

“Pfah!” Wyne cried, spitting out water as she came bursting from the lake.

Wyne the dragonewt was said to be the greatest warrior among all of dragonkind. Flio and Rys found her collapsed from hunger on the side of the road and took her in. Since then, she lived as part of their family and was a doting big sister to Elinàsze and the other children.

“Ah ha ha!” Wyne laughed as she soared into the sky leaving a spray of water in her wake. “The water feels so good-good!” A wide grin on her face, she spread her arms and legs as she fell back into the water with a splash. She was, of course, completely naked.

“Big sis Wyne is amazing!” Rynàsze gasped as she watched near the shore of the lake. “She’s just like a fish!”

Rynàsze was Flio and Rys’s youngest daughter. Thanks to her talent for the art of taming, she was beloved by magic beasts everywhere. That talent had earned her a spot on the staff caring for the magic beasts kept by the Houghtow College of Magic even though she was too young to be enrolled in the school herself. At the moment she was wearing a navy blue swimsuit adhering to the lower grade’s uniform requirements alongside her favorite wide-brimmed hat.

Behind Rynàsze, Sybe stood on two legs in his psychobear form watching as Wyne leaped deftly in and out of the water. “Bwor rwof!” he agreed, clapping his paws above his head.

Sybe had originally been a wild psychobear Flio had met in a random encounter, but Sybe, who had sensed right away that he had no hope of defeating the likes of Flio, surrendered immediately and thereafter lived as the family's pet. He spent most of his time in the somewhat less conspicuous unicorn rabbit form Flio had magically given him.

All around Sybe and Rynàsze's feet, the rest of Sybe's family frolicked happily, hopping about and clapping their forepaws—his wife, the unicorn rabbit Shebe, and their children Sube, Sebe, and Sobe. Shebe had been a wild unicorn rabbit who had grown fond of Sybe and came to live in the house with him as his wife. Their children were a mix of their parents' traits, with Sube and Sobe resembling unicorn rabbits more strongly and Sebe taking more after a psychobear.

"Sheesh," said Garyl, who was watching from in front of the nearby shack. "Big sis Wyne has some crazy moves!" He seemed to be enjoying the show every bit as much as Rynàsze and the magic beasts.

Garyl, a friendly boy whose good nature and bright smile had made him the celebrity of the Houghtow College of Magic, was Elinàsze's younger twin. He excelled in physical abilities to a truly outrageous degree. Like Rynàsze, he was dressed in his school swimsuit, with a white parka over his bare chest.

The shack behind him, incidentally, was something Flio had built using his magic after taking a liking to this lake so that his family could come enjoy the water at any time. From the outside it looked no bigger than an average storeroom, but the inside had been expanded using Flio's magic, turning it into a one-story building five times the size of their main house's living room, complete with a basement for storage. Garyl was standing in front of the building, cooking something in a rustic stone oven.

A cloud of mist formed behind Garyl and a woman emerged seemingly from nowhere, dressed in a type of outfit from the Far East known as a kimono and a hood pulled over her head—both white.

"Well, well!" she said, grinning and resting the naginata she carried on her shoulder. "It is no small feat to leap with such force from the water, without even placing one's feet upon solid ground. My master's elder sister is truly

extraordinary!” This was Ben’ne, a swordmaster from the Land of the Rising Sun who had long since lost her physical form, existing only as a psychic construct. Garyl had been the first person to defeat her in single combat and, awed by his strength, she vowed to become his familiar. “Master, are you preparing a meal?” she asked, looking over at Garyl.

“That’s right!” Garyl said. “Dad and the others are gonna be here soon, so I thought it would be nice for us all to eat breakfast together!”

“Understood.” Ben’ne said, grabbing hold of the kimono she was wearing and tossing it off with a single gesture. Underneath she was wearing nothing but a fundoshi-style loincloth over her groin and a cloth wrapping over her chest. “Then I, Ben’ne, shall procure a worthy fish to accompany our meal!” she declared, taking off for the lake without waiting for a response.

“H-Hey! Wait! Miss B!” Garyl exclaimed, his face turning bright red as he called for her to stop. “Y-You can’t run around dressed like that!”

Ben’ne dived into the water wearing hardly any more clothing than Wyne, who was swimming about completely in the nude. Just then, however, a gust of wind came from nowhere, circling the two women, who cried out in surprise.

“Fwah?!”

“Oh...?”

Both Wyne and Ben’ne found themselves baffled—suddenly, they were dressed in school swimsuits like the one Rynàsze was wearing. Then, in a flash, Tanya alighted next to Garyl at the shore of the lake.

Tanya had originally been known as Tanyalina, an angel of immense magic power from the Celestial Plane who had been sent to keep an eye on Flio. She had lost her memory in a freak midair collision with Wyne, though, and opted instead to join the household, serving as the estate’s maid.

Tanya stood and turned to face Wyne and Ben’ne. “Young mistress Wyne, how many times must I tell you not to go outside naked?” she said, chiding the dragonewt. “And you, Ben’ne! Did it not cross your mind that it might cast doubt on young master Garyl for his familiar to be seen in public in such shameful attire?” She spoke as calmly as always, but the aura of anger welling

up behind the angel was unmistakable.

“Nuh-uh, nuh-uh!” said Wyne, grabbing at the fabric of the perfectly tailored swimsuit to take it off. “It’s all clammy!”

Before she could remove the offending garment, however, a spray of bubbles erupted from the water directly behind her. Wyne turned to look just in time to see an enormous magic beast rising up from the depths. It had the body of a blue-scaled serpent with wings all along its back that it beat as it flew straight up out of the water and into the air.

From the window inside the shack, Ghozal’s children Folmina and Ghoros watched the magic beast emerge from the lake, their eyes opened wide in disbelief.

Folmina, Ghozal’s daughter with Uliminas, was half hellcat while Ghoros, the son he had with his other wife, Balirossa, was half human, but both of them treated Uliminas and Balirossa equally as their mothers. Folmina was infatuated with Garyl, while Ghoros, a lad of few words, was fond of Folmina.

“Whoa!” Folmina cried, rolling up her sleeves. “That one’s huge! Hey, you think I could fight it?”

“If big sis Folmina’s gonna fight it, I will too...” said Ghoros, swinging his arms in wide circles as he ran up to his sister’s side.

The two of them changed from their human forms to their demonic selves, wings sprouting from their backs as they took to the air.

“Wait!” Rislei cried after them from inside the shack. “Folmina! Ghoros! Don’t put yourselves in danger like that!” Rislei was the daughter of Sleip the lichsteed and Byleri the human. She was a serious-minded girl and something of a leader figure for the younger children in Flio’s house.

Rislei stretched her arm out the window and waved for Folmina and Ghoros to come back, but between Folmina’s excitement at the prospect of fighting the magic beast and Ghoros’s single-minded focus on protecting Folmina, neither of them heard her shouting after them.

Another girl, however, came running out of the shack. “Let me help...” she said in a very small voice as she tossed off her own kimono-style outfit. She

took a quick run-up and jumped high into the air.

“Huh?!” Folmina exclaimed as the girl leaped straight past her in midair, jumping faster than she could fly. “Wha?! Kora?!”

Kora was the child of Ura, the oni chief of the demon village Flio had transplanted outside the farm. Her mother had been one of the fairy people, making her a mixed-species child as well. She was an agonizingly shy girl, but had been doing her best to open herself up to the other members of Flio’s household.

Folmina watched as Kora flew through the air, dressed like Ben’ne had been, wearing nothing but a loincloth and chest wrap. Kora squeezed her right fist tight, and it suddenly grew to nearly ten times the size it had been before.

“Wawawah?!” Folmina cried in shock. “Kora’s arm got huge!”

Kora spun in midair, building momentum with her oversized arm, and then, with an expressionless *kapow!* she brought her fist down atop the magic beast’s head. The magic beast fell backward, collapsing into the lake with a loud splash.

“Oh?” said Ben’ne, spinning her naginata in a skillful flourish as she ran up as well. “I see you have some skill, young lady. However, I myself am not about to be outdone!” As a psychic construct, Ben’ne was able to control the mass of her body in order to run atop the water’s surface. She thrust her naginata into the lake and brought it upward in a rising slash, launching the magic beast that had only just plummeted back to the water into the air once more. It flew helplessly from the middle of the lake out towards the shore. It seemed to already be nearly unconscious between Kora’s attack and Ben’ne’s follow-up.

“N-No way, no way!” Wyne complained as she watched the magic beast that had appeared right before her eyes only seconds earlier shrink farther and farther away. “This one’s mine-mine!” Blue scales grew on her body as she transformed into her dragonewt form, taking off after the magic beast as fast as she could.

At that very moment, however, a glowing magic circle appeared beside the shack. It revolved on the spot and vanished, leaving a simple black door in its place. The door opened, and Ellie stepped out, dressed in her commoner’s clothes and false glasses—right into the path of the unconscious magic beast.

“Huh...?” Ellie, who had just arrived from the fields near Ura’s mountain courtesy of Flio’s Teleportation spell, blinked, freezing in place at the sight of the oncoming monstrosity. As she stood unable to move, Garyl rushed between her and the serpent, holding out his arm. He caught it single-handedly, halting its movement completely. The magic beast was easily twenty meters in length and many times Garyl’s weight, but the boy seemed to have no trouble holding it in place with a single hand.

“Hey, Miss B?” he started, gently lowering the beast to the ground with a dry smirk. “Next time you send a magic beast flying towards the shore, would you please be careful about where you’re aiming it? There are children in the house, and you knew there were people coming...”

“Ah...” Ben’ne said. “I have committed a grave error. Never in my life have I felt so ashamed...” She walked up beside her master, a look of deep remorse on her face. “For my failure to adhere to your instructions, I am prepared for you to punish my body tonight however you wish...” She bent forward in a lascivious pose, emphasizing the size of her chest.

“I-I keep telling you, you don’t need to do that!” Garyl said, turning his head to look the other way. “You’re my familiar, and I say it’s all right as long as you try to do better...”

“Indeed?” Ben’ne asked. “But I could even bear you an heir, were I to receive my master’s passion...” She idly brought her hand to touch her belly, a faint smile on her face.

When Ben’ne lived in the Land of the Rising Sun, she spent her time challenging warriors to single combat in hopes of finding one stronger than herself. Eventually, Garyl had defeated her and so she resolved to become his familiar. Since then she had followed him everywhere and occasionally joined him for sword training, but lately she had found herself longing to have a child with Garyl as well.

“Aren’t you a psychic construct anyway, Miss B?” Garyl asked. “Would that even work?”

“I wondered the same myself,” Ben’ne said. “But Hiya-dono told me that it should be no obstacle for a psychic construct as long as their intention is strong.

At the least, it seems it is not impossible. If nothing else, we will not know until we try..." Ben'ne reached for the shoulder strap of her swimsuit, but before she could begin sliding it off, she was interrupted by Ellie.

"You mustn't!" Ellie cried, dashing up to Ben'ne. She had been shocked out of her senses by the magic beast, but seeing Ben'ne putting the moves on Garyl brought her back to herself and she hurried to interpose herself between the two of them. "I-It would be...i-inappropriate, I think, for you and Garyl to do such things!" she managed, red-faced and squeaky-voiced as she did her very best to affect an air of calm.

"Oh?" Ben'ne said, holding up her hand to hide her smile at Ellie's behavior. "I suppose you would be my master's first wife."

"F-First wife?!" Ellie repeated, her face going red all the way down to her neck.

"Do not worry," Ben'ne reassured her. "It is not my intention to contest you for the seat of first wife. It is indeed my wish to bear the child of my master, should such be my fortune, but I will happily take the duty of bringing up the children you and he have as well. I trust it will be no issue?"

"That is quite enough nonsense from you." Suddenly, the blade of Tanya's scythe appeared at Ben'ne's neck. Tanya, wearing the traditional tattered cloak of an angel on a mission, stood right behind Ben'ne. Her face had changed to be half human and half skeleton. The scythe she wielded, too, was the Scythe of Judgment—a weapon unique to the disciples of the Celestial Plane. "Any descendant of Master Flio has the potential to one day inherit leadership of the house," she intoned. "I would never permit the education of such a personage to fall to a lascivious muscle woman like you. Their upbringing will be a duty for my own unworthy self, and I will exert the whole of my body and spirit to carry it out. As for *you*, lascivious muscle woman, you had better stay on your best behavior..."

"Oho?" Ben'ne smiled at Tanya's words. "Few can come up behind me without my detecting their presence. Well done. However, this is a matter on which I will not yield." Her body turned to mist and vanished, reappearing behind Tanya with her naginata at the ready. She attacked the angel with a

downward slash only for the strike to be repelled by Tanya's Scythe of Judgment. Tanya drew away, out of Ben'ne's range. "You blocked my attack?"

"My, you didn't think an attack like that would be enough to defeat me, did you?" Tanya shot back, getting on guard herself.

"That's enough, you two!" said Rys, smacking both fighters on the back of the head with the side of her hand.

"Y-Yes, mistress..." said Tanya.

"Yes, madame..." said Ben'ne.

Rys glared at the two fighters, her arms crossed in indignation. "Tanya, Ben'ne, both of you need to consider when and where you are when you do such things! Didn't I tell you we had a guest visiting the house today? And look at the dreadful display you've put on in front of her!"

Tanya and Ben'ne stared back at her, at a loss for words.

"I-I'm terribly sorry, mistress...I have no excuse..." said Tanya.

"I-I apologize most profusely, madame..." said Ben'ne.

The two fell to their knees and bowed their heads low in the face of Rys's open displeasure.

I-I must have been too focused on that lascivious muscle woman... Tanya thought. I didn't notice the mistress coming up behind me in the slightest...

My master's mother is no less incredible... thought Ben'ne. To think that she could come up behind me and even strike the back of my head...

Flio, who had just stepped out of the Teleportation Portal himself, grimaced at the scene. "I'm just glad I noticed the magic beast coming in time to set up a barrier, even if we didn't need it..." he said.

"No kidding," Garyl agreed, an identical grimace on his face as well. "I'm just glad Ellie's safe."

I-I don't know which is more incredible... Ellie thought, looking between the two. Garyl for stopping a magic beast of that size with a single hand, or Lord Flio for setting up a barrier before he could even act!



A while later, things at the lakeside shack had finally quieted down. Rynàsze, still in her swimsuit, was gently stroking the head of the serpentine magic beast from earlier. “See?” she gently chided it. “You shouldn’t come leaping out of the water at people like that!”

The serpent, who had just undergone a truly terrible experience, cried pitiable tears, lowering its head to Rynàsze. Around them, Sybe in his psychobear form and the rest of his family eagerly chimed in with input of their own.

“Sniffle!”

“Snuffle!”

“Bwower!”

“Sniff sniff...”

Ellie watched the outlandish scene from a seat in the open kitchen outside the shack. “E-Excuse me,” she said. “Lord Flio? What, exactly, is going on...?”

“Oh, that?” Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile as he sat down across from Ellie. “It seems like Rynàsze was born with some powerful taming abilities. I’ve yet to meet a magic beast too ferocious for her to befriend just by talking to them like that.”

“I-I see...” Ellie said with a slight nod. *There are tamers in Klyrode Castle as well, she thought, but none who could possibly converse with a magic beast of such tremendous size!*

“Now,” said Charun, placing a cup of hot black tea on the table in front of Ellie. “Would you care for a cup of tea before breakfast?”

Charun was a magic doll created by a mage working for the Dark Army long ago. Calsi’im the skeleton had discovered her in a state of disrepair and had her restored, and so she had remained by his side ever since. When Calsi’im had taken up residence in Flio’s house, Charun followed him as well.

“Th-Thank you very much,” Ellie said, graciously accepting the tea and taking a sip. “Ah... Your tea is always a delight, Charun.”

“I am overjoyed to hear that my tea is to your liking, Your Majesty,” said

Charun, bowing with perfect grace.

“Oh ho ho!” laughed Calsi’im, supporting his bony body with a cane as he walked up behind Charun. “My darling Charun’s tea is a cut above, after all!”

Calsi’im was an old skeleton who had served for a time in the position of Dark Regent, commanding the Dark Army while the Dark One had gone missing. He passed away once, but he had been brought back to life thanks to Flio’s efforts. These days, he lived out his retirement with the others in Flio’s house.

“Oh, Calsi’im!” Charun said, pressing her hands to her cheeks and squirming with delight. “You won’t get extra tea no matter how much you sweet-talk me, you know!” It was a marked contrast from how she had reacted to Ellie’s words of praise. Clearly the nature of her delight was different when it came from Calsi’im. After all, the two were a well-known couple, and a particularly affectionate one at that.

“Papa! Mama!” Calsi’im and Charun’s daughter Rabbitz came bounding up from behind. She was the child of a magic doll and a skeleton, and there were few others like her in existence. She loved climbing on top of her father’s head, and always had a great big smile on her face.

Rabbitz leaped through the air like the animal that served as her namesake, her arms spread wide. She caught Calsi’im’s head in one arm and Charun’s in another, holding both her parents tight and nuzzling between them, grinning widely. “Papa! Mama! Love love!” Her parents could do nothing but flail helplessly as the girl held both of them tight.

“O-Oh, gracious me, Rabbitz!” Calsi’im protested. “I’m very happy you love us so much, but please...!”

“A-Awawa!” cried Charun. “I-I’m going to spill the tea!”

As Calsi’im’s family continued their antics, Flio and Ellie returned to their conversation. “Anyway,” Flio said, “the thing I wanted to tell you about, Ellie, is our situation with the magic beasts.”

“The...magic beasts?” Ellie asked, cocking her head curiously. “Does this have something to do with the magic beast from earlier?”

“Oh, no, that one’s unrelated,” Flio said, waving Rylnàsze over. “Rylnàsze,

would you mind telling the magic beasts to come out where we can see them?"

"Of course! Right away!" Rylnàsze replied with a cheerful smile. Then she took a deep breath and called out in a loud voice in the direction of the nearby forest. "Everyone! Come out and say hello!"

Suddenly, before Ellie's eyes, magic beast after magic beast began to emerge from the cover of the trees and the waters of the lake to gather, all facing Rylnàsze.

"G-Goodness!" Ellie said, her eyes opening wide in astonishment at the sight. She swallowed nervously at the number of magic beasts in the area. Flio, however, wore the same easygoing smile he always did.

"We've been looking after these magic beasts, you see," Flio said.

"You're...looking after them?" Ellie repeated, still somewhat bewildered.

"That's right," Flio confirmed. "It looks like these magic beasts were all being used by the Dark Army during the war, but due to the peace treaty, they were no longer needed for fighting and ended up getting abandoned."

"Eh?" Ellie said, blinking in confusion. "B-But under the terms of the treaty, the Dark Army and Klyrode Military agreed to take joint responsibility in handling the magic beasts used for the war..."

"Yes," said Flio, "but from what the messenger from the Dark Army told me, a group of nobles in the Dark Army has been abandoning their magic beasts as soon as they're finished with them. And worse, they've been letting them loose inside the borders of the Magic Kingdom of Klyrode as some sort of retaliation..."

Ellie found herself speechless at Flio's report.

◇Klyrode Castle—Maiden Queen's Chambers, Several Days Earlier◇

After the sisters had finished discussing their issue with the demon mercenaries, the Second Princess broached another topic. "There's one more thing that's been bothering me," she said with a frown. "Our little issue with the magic beasts..." It seemed to be unpleasant for her to speak about.

"Our issue with the magic beasts?" the Third Princess asked. "Do you mean all

the incursions of magic beasts on our borders? The ones who seem clearly to have had combat training from somewhere...?”

“The very same,” the Second Princess replied. “This is just speculation on my part, but it doesn’t seem impossible to imagine that now that the war’s over, someone’s been releasing magic beasts they don’t need anymore near our borders in an attempt at petty harassment...”

“They’ve been doing *what?!* ” the Third Princess exclaimed, her face turning beet red as she swung her arms in indignation. “But that would be a clear violation of the terms of the treaty! We must send a letter of complaint to Dark One Dawkson at—”

“Calm yourself, Third Princess!” the Maiden Queen chided her little sister.

“B-But!” the Third Princess protested. “They’re acting like this even after all the endless trials you went through to see that treaty to completion!”

“Nonetheless, you must be calm,” the Maiden Queen said, her expression severe. The Third Princess shut her mouth when she saw how serious her sister looked, but she didn’t stop waving her arms in agitation. “We cannot send a letter of complaint to Dark One Dawkson until we have obtained solid proof of our suspicions,” the Queen continued. “If it happens that the parties responsible for the magic beast outbreaks are demonic nobility who refuse to accept the treaty...well...”

The Second Princess folded her arms, nodding in agreement. “Exactly,” she said. “If we accuse them without proof, they’ll raise an uproar about baseless accusations by the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode to incite more demons to join their cause...”

“O-Oh...” Suddenly the Third Princess understood just how difficult the situation the three of them were dealing with was. Her objections died on her tongue.

“That being said,” the Maiden Queen continued, “let us investigate and see what we can learn pertaining to this case.” The Second and Third Princess nodded in agreement.



Ellie's expression darkened as she thought back to the conversation she had had in her chambers the other day with her two younger sisters. *If Lord Flio's guess is correct, we must move quickly to deal with the situation...*

Sensing Ellie's thoughts, Flio smiled his usual easygoing smile. "And so," he said, "if you discover any magic beasts like this, I'd appreciate it if you sent them to the Fli-o'-Rys General Store for us to take care of. We can finish off any magic beasts who are too low-tier to be tamed and harvest them for materials to sell in the store or pass along to the Adventurers' Guild or Merchants' Association. The tamable ones we can look after here."

"You'll...look after them?" Ellie asked, surprised. She gave the assembled magic beasts a second look and was struck by how many of them had their eyes fixed on Rylnàsze. *That's a maned tiger...* she thought, looking over the crowd. *And behind it, a boargantuan! Those are dangerous magic beasts, ranked S by the Adventurers' Guild! And they're not the only ones...*

The whole menagerie of deadly magic beasts, however—the giant winged serpent Rylnàsze had been tending to moments ago included—seemed perfectly well-behaved, content to wait patiently by Rylnàsze's side. The magic beasts closest to her nuzzled in affectionately, wagging their tails like domesticated puppies.

"I set up a pretty serious magic barrier around the lake, so there's no need to worry about them escaping," Flio told the Maiden Queen. "And I can't imagine anyone would be able to break in here to steal a magic beast for evil ends. Do I have your permission to go forward with the project?"

"O-Of course!" Ellie said, nodding eagerly as a great smile came over her face. "In fact, it seems rather that you're the one doing me a tremendous favor!"

"I'm very glad to hear that," said Flio, his smile unflinching. "In that case, we'll keep on doing our best with the magic beasts here."

At this point, Garyl figured that his father's conversation with Ellie had wound down enough for him to interject himself. He walked over to the two of them, raising his hand in a friendly greeting. "Hi dad! Hi Miss Ellie!" he said, holding up a roast skewer of mixed vegetables and meat. "If you're done with the serious business, how about some breakfast? The skewers are hot and ready to eat!"

“Yaaay!” cried Wyne from over in the water of the lake where she had been swimming. “Meat! Meat!” she cheered, rushing over to Garyl’s side with a great big smile on her face. After her came Folmina and Ghorro, then Kora and the others.

“You should go get something to eat too, Miss Ellie,” said Flio.

“O-Oh! Thank you most graciously for the meal!” Ellie said, smiling awkwardly as she walked up to Garyl herself. *B-But all this meat is a bit heavy for breakfast, isn’t it...?*

Soon, the shore of the lake was full of the sound of laughter and merry conversation.

◇Later—Houghtow City, Blossom Acres◇

“Haah!” Blossom sighed, wiping the sweat from her brow as she noted the position of the sun, high in the sky. “Is it that time already?”

Blossom had originally been a heavy knight from Klyrode Castle. As the company leader Balirossa’s best friend, she had accompanied Balirossa when she made the decision to leave the knighthood and lodge instead at Flio’s house. Blossom’s parents had been farmers and she herself excelled in the fields, and in short order she ended up turning the land outside of Flio’s estate into a vast farmland under her management.

“I gotta say...” Blossom remarked. “It feels like working the farm’s getting easier every day!”

“I quite agree!” the goblin Maunty, who had been working the field as well behind Blossom, said. He smiled as he filled the basket on his back with freshly harvested vegetables.

Maunty had originally been a goblin foot soldier in the Dark Army, but lately he had been spending his days working up a sweat in the fields as one of the Blossom Acres farmworkers. He had brought his wife and children with him as well, all of whom helped out with the farm.

“It’s ’cause we have everyone from Ura’s village working with us, not to mention your entire family,” Blossom said. “When we first started farming this land it was just me, Sybe, you, and Hokh’hokton...”

“Ha ha!” Maunty laughed heartily. “My wife and I are ready to expand the family at any time if you just say the word, Lady Blossom!”

Blossom glanced around at the scores of goblin heads poking out between the rows of vegetables around them. *Huh?* she thought with a grimace. *Last I checked, there were only around thirty of them, I’m pretty sure. But there’s gotta be at least sixty of ‘em running around! I really wish they’d stop multiplying like that...*

It seemed that Maunty and his wife continued to be as fruitful as ever.

“Well, I’m happy just as long as I can be of use to you, Lady Blossom!” said Ura the oni, a cheerful grin on his face as he walked up beside them.

Ura was the chief of the oni village, and the father of Kora. He had been raising his daughter alone ever since his fairy wife passed away, as well as looking after the community of demons he had fallen in with. He was a passionate man with a strong sense of duty and tremendously proud of his strength. During the time of Dark One Gholl, he had even been a candidate for the Infernal Four. Ura was currently in human form, but he was scarcely any smaller than he was as an oni. The basket on his back looked comically small by comparison.

“Good job out there, Ura,” said Blossom with a smile. “I really appreciate all the work you and the others in your village do for this farm, y’know? It’s a big help.” The other demons working in the fields behind them grinned a bit more broadly. “Really!” Blossom said, grinning and waving to everyone working in the fields. “Thank y’all so much!”

Just then, Kora darted up to them, wrapping her arms tight around Ura’s leg. “Oh, Kora!” Ura said, grinning as he tousled his daughter’s hair, which was still wet from swimming in the lake. “How was the lake? Did you have fun?” Kora beamed up at him, heedless of her increasingly disheveled hair.

“You had breakfast with the others by the lake. Isn’t that right, Kora?” Blossom asked, smiling at the sight of Ura doting on his daughter. “I suppose you don’t need any breakfast here in that—”

That was as far as Blossom got, however, before Kora detached herself from her father to hug Blossom in turn, looking up at her and desperately shaking her

head. “No!” she said. “I’ll eat...breakfast.”

“But didn’t y’all have grilled skewers?” Blossom asked. “Didja not have an appetite for ’em?”

“Uh-uh, it’s ’cause...” Kora shook her head. “...’s breakfast goes in a different stomach.”

“Ah ha ha!” Blossom laughed, patting Kora brusquely on the head. “I get it, I get it! In that case, I’ll go ahead and make some breakfast for you and everyone! You better eat up, Kora!”

But it’s funny... Blossom thought. Whenever she talks about me, Kora’s voice gets so quiet I can’t even hear it. I wonder what it is she’s calling me! Maybe I should ask her about it one of these days...

Kora looked up at Blossom with a happy smile on her face as she patted her head, her cheeks flushing pink.

Hokh’hokton, meanwhile, watched the scene play out from a short distance away. Like Maunty, Hokh’hokton had been a goblin soldier in the Dark Army who now spent his days working hard on the farm. Recently, the so-called no-goodness Telbyress, a goddess who had been exiled from the Celestial Plane, had taken up residence in his house quite against his wishes.

“How splendid! Splendid indeed!” Hokh’hokton said, nodding happily as he watched. “Ah, even I can’t help getting a bit misty-eyed at a sight like that!” After a while, however, he sighed, glancing behind him. “And meanwhile, what do I have to deal with...?”

There, back behind him, was Telbyress wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat. Telbyress had been stripped of her godhood for her general unwillingness to do her divine job, and things had been no different since moving in with Hokh’hokton. Nominally she was assisting with the farmwork, but between her love of liquor and pure inveterate laziness, Hokh’hokton had his hands full scolding and haranguing her in hopes that she might make herself useful.

At that moment, Telbyress was squatted down beside a plot full of leafy greens. “At least she seems to be applying herself seriously today, for a change...” Hokh’hokton sighed, returning to his own tasks. A second later,

however, something struck him as off about the woman behind him. “Wait a moment...” he said, cocking his head quizzically as he walked over in Telbyress’s direction. At first glance she seemed to be quietly weeding the fields, but the more Hokh’hokton watched, the more something seemed wrong. “Telbyress,” he began, lifting up her hat. “Why aren’t you making...progress?”

Underneath the wide-brimmed hat was nothing more than a clay doll created by magic.

“Damn that no-gooddness!” Hokh’hokton shouted, kicking the head off the clay doll in his rage. “She’s run off somewhere I can’t see to get out of work again!”

◇Meanwhile—Oni Village Mountain Peak◇

“Hwuh?” Telbyress said, craning her neck to look behind her. “Did someone say my name?” She stood there for a while listening carefully before concluding that there was no one behind her. “Hmm...” She nodded. “Must’ve been my imagination...” Satisfied, she crept into a cave near the peak of the mountain, carrying a large bag in her arms.

She passed through the mouth of the cave, whistling a tune as she went, until she entered a large open space where someone had stashed a number of wooden barrels. There was a magic barrier in place as well, keeping the environment around the barrels sterile.

“Hee hee hee!” Telbyress cackled, a languid smile crossing her face as she rubbed her cheek against the bag in her arms. “Look at how well my distillery’s coming along!” she gloated. “After all, I did set up this place using everything I’ve learned in this world about making alcohol! Ehe hee hee hee!”

She continued on, carrying the bag farther into the cave, cackling like an evil witch all the while. “Buying delicious liquor to drink is all well and good,” she said, “but making the stuff myself isn’t half bad either! Usually I can’t stand hard work, but if it’s for something like this I don’t mind it at all! In fact, I welcome the challenge!”

Telbyress waved a finger, and page after page of text appeared in the air. She followed along with her eyes, nodding as she read. “So I place the rice grain in the sterilized barrels, and then add the starter...” she said, following the

instructions exactly.

Outside the cave, the mountain echoed with Hokh'hokton's voice as he searched up and down for Telbyress, but the no-goodness herself was so engrossed in her work that she completely failed to notice.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

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

Dawkson was the current reigning Dark One and younger brother of Ghozal. Once upon a time he had used the name Yuigarde and ruled as a tyrant, respecting none but himself, but he had since changed both name and attitude, becoming a wise and enlightened ruler.

Beside Dawkson stood his minion, the succubus Phufun. Phufun had served Dawkson since before he took the throne. She came across as well-read and highly intelligent, but she was in fact quite prone to errors and a masochist to her core.

"Lord Dawkson," Phufun said, pressing her false glasses up the ridge of her nose. "Isn't it time you sat upon your throne to conduct court? Since signing the peace treaty with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, you've pursued many successful projects, such as your policy of protection for rare species and your efforts to advance peace talks between feuding demon tribes. Thanks to you, the power of demonkind is nearly restored to what it was in the days of Dark One Gholl..."

Dawkson heaved a heavy sigh. "I still ain't worthy to sit on that throne. This is the perfect spot for a Dark One like me," he said, patting the spot on the floor where he was sitting.

"Very well," Phufun said with a quiet sigh of her own. "If such are the words of Dark One Dawkson, I will withdraw my petition for the time being."

"Sorry," Dawkson said, wincing apologetically and scratching the back of his head. "I know you've got my best interests at heart..."

Phufun said nothing, adjusting her glasses once again. *Back in the day, Master would have lost his temper if I ever found fault with one of his decisions...* she

thought. *He would have shouted something like “Shaddup! Quit findin’ fault with each an’ every thing I do!” and uppercut me into the ceiling! It just goes to show how much he’s changed, I suppose... Although personally, I wouldn’t mind the uppercut...* Her breathing became hot and heavy at the thought, cheeks flushing despite herself. Phufun, after all, was enough of a masochist that the prospect of being sent flying by one of Dawkson’s fists filled her with giddy excitement.

“Hey,” Dawkson said. “Is somethin’ wrong?”

“Wha?!” Phufun exclaimed as the Dark One’s words snapped her back to reality. “N-No, nothing at all! I was merely...thinking,” she said, hastily wiping the drool from her mouth and adopting a mask of calm. “I-I apologize most profusely for that. Now, then...the first item on your daily report concerns the issue with the lesser demons we discussed previously...”

“You mean the ones who’ve been bellyaching about how there aren’t any mercenary jobs anymore?” Dawkson asked.

“Precisely,” said Phufun. “You have been most gracious in handling their case, Master, offering rewards for the destruction of dangerous magic beasts and generous salaries for public works all throughout your domain. But even so, we’ve received reports that some of their number have been hired as mercenaries for human kingdoms...”

“Mercenaries for human kingdoms, huh...?” Dawkson repeated. “What the heck are those people thinking? Don’t they know about the malicium thing?”

“Regarding that,” Phufun answered, “our information suggests some sort of organization is recruiting them from the shadows. Our investigation, however, is still ongoing.”

Dawkson sighed deeply. “Well, I can’t pretend I don’t get it. Before I became Dark One I had all sorts of problems with the way my older brother did things too. I used to go around breaking his orders to pick fights with human kingdoms...” *I see...* he thought. *This must be how my brother felt back then...* Dawkson held a hand to his forehead in a salute as the image of his older brother’s face popped unbidden into his mind.

Dawkson’s older brother, the former Dark One Gholl, was, of course, alive and

well living at Flio's house under the name Ghozal.

"Anyway, I suppose we can't just leave well enough alone with the peace treaty and everything," Dawkson said. "How's that investigation of yours coming along?"

"Lord Zanzibar of the Infernal Four is leading the reconnaissance effort, Master," Phufun reported. "But we keep encountering interference from some organization. It seems to be the same group responsible for the scheme of inviting lesser demons into human kingdoms as mercenaries..."

"Hmm..." Dawkson considered. "Well, I guess we'd better get the details from Zanzibar once he's back in the Dark Citadel. For now, why don't we share our information with the Maiden Queen of Klyrode so we can work together on this one?"

"Even though sharing information like that could put us at a tactical disadvantage?" Phufun asked.

"Of course!" said Dawkson. "It was one thing back when we were at war, but these days we're good friends, with a peace treaty and everything! Why shouldn't we let 'em know what we've found out?"

"Understood, Master," Phufun answered. "In that case, I shall contact them with all haste. Now, our second item...it seems that a number of demons have been releasing magic beasts they no longer need into the wild now that we are no longer at war. Moreover, some nobles, too, seem to be deliberately releasing their magic beasts on the borders of the Magical Kingdom..."

"First mercenaries and now magic beasts, huh?" said Dawkson. "It really is one thing after another, isn't it...?" The Dark One let out a tired sigh as he thought things over. In the past, when he had been using the name Yuigarde, he had gotten so fed up with the endless problems he had to face in his new position as Dark One and had run away, abandoning his throne. Now, however, as Dark One Dawkson, he was determined to come up with some way to resolve the issues before him. In spite of his grumbling, he looked for all the world like a responsible leader deep in thought.

Phufun tore herself away from admiring the serious expression on her master's face and stepped forward, pressing her false glasses up the ridge of

her nose. “Master,” she said. “Forgive my presumptuousness, but would you perhaps like to hear my opinion on this matter?”

“Yeah?” Dawkson asked. “You got some kinda plan, Phufun?”

“Again, forgive my presumptuousness,” Phufun repeated, producing a roll of vellum and handing it over to Dawkson. “But perhaps we might try something like this...”

“I see...” Dawkson said after he had finished reading over Phufun’s scroll. “Sounds interesting. Let’s get started right away.”

“Yes, Master. As you command.” Phufun nodded in compliance and left the throne room behind her. *My Master, Dark One Dawkson... she thought. He thinks through things much more deeply than he ever did before. He never tosses petitioners out in the middle of a meeting in a fit of impatience, but instead considers matters until he understands them properly. He listens to the opinions of his underlings and adopts the good suggestions among them. He really has become quite splendid...*

A satisfied smile crossed Phufun’s face for a moment before she frowned with discontent. *But, she thought, the way he was before—when he would send me flying with his fists whenever anything failed to go his way—was quite splendid as well...*

Once again, Phufun’s breathing became heavy at the memory of all the times the Dark One had hit her with enough force to send her into the air. She began to drool at the thought, her face flush with desire.

Phufun never could hide her masochistic nature, no matter how hard she tried.

◇Somewhere, in a Building◇

In a city somewhere in the world was a dimly lit alleyway leading from the main road to the backstreets. In a room in the second story of one of the buildings standing along that alleyway, a heavysset man sat in a luxurious chair, irritably tapping his foot.

“Well?” the man said, taking a puff from the cigar in his right hand. “How’s our demon mercenary scheme coming along?”

At this, two women appeared from the shadows inside the room. They were wearing matching cheongsam dresses with long slits in the side for their legs, one gold and one silver. “Shadow King...” the woman in the gold cheongsam said with a sigh, folding her arms in front of her chest. “I’m afraid circumstances are against us...”

“Oh?” the Shadow King asked. “What seems to be the trouble, Kintsuno?”

The Shadow King was the father of the Maiden Queen of Klyrode, and had once been the reigning monarch of the Magical Kingdom. With his evil deeds exposed, however, he had been driven from the land and now took to calling himself the Shadow King, dedicating himself fully to the Shadow Conglomerate, a black market organization he had founded while he still sat on the throne. His minions Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver were powerful fox demons originally affiliated with the Dark Army. When the demon fox tribe was destroyed, however, they joined forces with the Shadow Conglomerate. They had been working for the Shadow King ever since.

Kintsuno placed a hand to her forehead and sighed deeply at the Shadow King’s question. “We’ve been recruiting lesser demons who lost their jobs as mercenaries thanks to the peace treaty between the Dark Army and the humans to work for humans who harbor dissatisfaction with the treaty,” she said. “But...”

“I gave you that list of humans who used to make a killing in the war with the Dark Army, didn’t I?” the Shadow King asked. “Surely some of them must be fed up with this peace treaty. How hard could it be to recruit some demonic mercenaries to their banner? And that way we can cause a disturbance in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode without ever getting our hands dirty...”

“I understand,” Kintsuno said, sighing again. “But it looks like there’s nothing we can do about the malicium problem after all...”

“*Nothing?*” The Shadow King was indignant. “But they have those malicium nullifying magic gems on the market now, don’t they? Just buy up a whole bunch of those using our underworld connections!”

“Yes, about that...” Kintsuno said. “It seems the maker of those magic gems has signed an exclusive contract with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode itself...”

“S-Say what?!” the Shadow King recoiled in shock at the news. “Then you mean...anyone who wants to buy the magic gems will have to register their name with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode? But they’re certain to forbid anyone with ties to the Shadow Conglomerate or our affiliated companies...”

“Our affiliated companies don’t want to draw the attention of the Magical Kingdom if they can help it,” Kintsuno said. “It’s bad for anyone’s business, the way things have been since the peace treaty...”

“Hmm...” the Shadow King considered. “If we can’t get our hands on those magic gems, we can’t recruit lesser demons as mercenaries. If we gather too many of them in one spot, the land will end up blighted with malicium before you know it! And once *that’s* happened, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode is bound to detect it with a simple Search spell...” He clicked his tongue in irritation, tapping his foot even faster than before.

“And not only that, but Dark One Dawkson has been offering lesser demons who lost work as mercenaries jobs on public work projects...” lamented Kintsuno. “Of course, some have no interest in quietly doing as they’re told and won’t be satisfied unless they have an opportunity to rampage, but with the peace treaty showing no signs of being annulled anytime soon, more and more of them have given up and accepted that sort of work...”

“Well,” Gintsuno the Silver said, stepping up beside her older sister to join in the conversation, “once we have them under our banner, they’ll be able to rampage whenever they like!”

“Quite right,” said the Shadow King. “These are lesser demons we’re talking about. They have no talent for anything *but* violence. You’ll never see that lot working seriously on public works. It’s impossible!” He punctuated the statement with a large puff on his cigar and continued. “Besides, what about that business with demon nobles not knowing what to do with all the magic beasts they no longer need? What if *we* bought them up on the cheap and sold them with the lesser demons as a set to human kingdoms?”

“Perfect!” yipped Kintsuno. “A brilliant plan!”

“But where will we get the money to purchase all those magic beasts?” Gintsuno asked.

The Shadow King's leg, which had been tapping irritably this whole time, came to a sudden stop. "Well..." he said. "You know... We'll have to have a chat with our treasurer, Janderena..."

"Oh no..." said Kintsuno. "That gloomy woman?"

"I can't stand her," Gintsuno agreed. "Every time I ask her for a bit of funds, she just fusses with that giant abacus of hers, complaining about how there's no money..."

"And her sister Yanderena is even worse..." said Kintsuno. "Always in her own little world, singing to herself and dancing all creepily..."

"Are you *sure* there's no way we might dig into a bit of your pocket money, Shadow King?" Gintsuno asked, holding her hands out with a disarming smile on her face.

The Shadow King glanced between the two sisters and clicked his tongue in irritation. *Damn it all...* he thought. *I get my allowance from Janderena, same as them! And I'm not any better at talking to that woman than these two...*

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

That night, Flio and the rest of his house were finishing up their dinner in the living room on the first floor like always.

"Now, children!" said Balirossa once she had finished helping Rys tidy up, calling to the children who were playing in Sybe's hutch. "Would you like to take a bath together?"

Balirossa had originally been a knight from Klyrode Castle, but she abandoned the knighthood to live at Flio's house. Now she worked at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. She was one of Ghozal's two wives, and the mother of his son Ghoros.

"Yeah, okay!" said Folmina, poking her head out of the hutch and running over with a great big smile. "I'm coming, Mama Balirossa!"

Folmina was Ghozal's daughter with Uliminas, but she saw Balirossa as her mother as well and was very fond of her.

"If big sis Folmina's getting in the bath, I will too..." said Ghoros, tottering along behind.

“I guess I’ll come along as well,” said Rislei, finishing the cup of tea she was drinking at her seat at the table and standing up.

“Hey, Rislei!” said Sleip, grinning at his daughter from his seat across the table. “Whaddaya say to taking a bath with your old man, like we used to?”

Sleip had once been a member of the Dark Army’s Infernal Four, but he had quit the Dark Army during Yuigarde’s reign. Now he looked after the equine magic beasts in the pasture outside Flio’s house together with Byleri, his common-law wife. Rislei was the couple’s beloved daughter.

“D-Don’t be ridiculous!” Rislei sputtered, her face turning bright red. “Why would I take a bath with my papa?! *I’m* going in the *women’s* bath, you know! Papa, you had better be good and bathe with the other men!” Shoulders heaving with anger, she stormed off for the baths as quick as her feet would take her.

“It feels like just yesterday she used to get in the bath with me all the time...” Sleip sighed as he watched her go, a forlorn look on his face. It was hard to imagine that the face of someone who had once struck fear into the hearts of the Klyrode Army as the Infernal Sleip would make such a pitiable expression.

“Oh, Sleip...” said Byleri, stepping up behind him to rub his back. “Like, Rislei’s a fine young lady now, y’know? You should, like, be a bit careful about what you say...”

Byleri was an archer in Balirossa’s knightly company, who left the knighthood alongside her to live at Flio’s house. She excelled at handling horses, and so had ended up taking responsibility for a herd of equine magic beasts. With her common-law husband Sleip and their daughter Rislei by her side, she was living out every day with a smile on her face.

“Hm...” Sleip said, still looking miserable in spite of Byleri’s consolation. “All right. I get it...”

Belano looked over at the pair from her own seat a short distance away.

Belano had originally been a witch serving with Balirossa’s knightly company. She was a small and skittish woman who was only capable of casting defensive spells. Like the rest of the former knights, she had come to reside at Flio’s

house, but she had also found employment as a teacher at the Houghtow College of Magic.

Everyone's getting along so well... Belano thought as she drank from her cup. It was a little large for her, so she used both hands to pick it up. *Lord Flio and Lady Rys, and Lord Sleip and Byleri too...*

As Belano was lost in thought, Minilio and Belalio sat down to her right and left.

Minilio was a magic doll who had originally been created as an experiment by Flio. He had been given the name Minilio because of his appearance—he looked for all the world like a younger version of Flio himself. Minilio had gotten close to Belano through his work as her assistant in the Houghtow College of Magic, and now the two of them were married and had a child, Belalio.

Belalio's status as the child of a human and a magic doll made them an exceptionally unusual being. Like their father Minilio, they outwardly looked like a younger version of Flio. They preferred to dress androgynously, however, keeping their gender ambiguous.

"Huh?" Belano started in surprise. "Y-You two? Is something wrong...?"

Minilio and Belalio hugged Belano tight from either side. They seemed to be saying, *"We get along just as well, you know."*

H-Hawawawah?! Startled at the sudden development, Belano froze in place, her face turning bright red. Minilio and Belalio, however, kept on hugging her tight regardless.

"Hey now," said Blossom with a cheerful grin, looking over her shoulder at Belano's family as she brought fresh straw over to Sybe's hutch. Her voice, however, had a note of coldness. "That's quite a sight!"

Belano tried to respond, but with her husband and child hugging her tight from either side it was all she could do to mutely open and close her mouth.

"Well then," Blossom continued as she finished replacing the straw, "I guess I'll be taking a bath all on my lonesome..." Forcing a smile on her face, she took off for the baths as well. A second later, however, something stopped her, grabbing hold of her leg. "Huh?"

Blossom looked down and saw it was Kora, hugging her tight. Kora had been playing with the others in Sybe's hutch, but the second Blossom made a move for the bath, Kora was right there, wrapping her arms tight around her.

"Oh, that's right!" Blossom said, patting the girl on the head, her grin looking somewhat more genuine than before. "Your old man Ura's out with the other demons again today, right Kora? You want to take a bath with me, then?"

Kora nodded her eager assent.

Soon, most of the adults left behind in the living room had gone with their children to the bath. Flio sat down, watching them walk off with his usual easygoing smile.

"I apologize for the wait, my lord husband," said Rys as she finished her cleaning, running up to him with a smile on her face. "Did I miss some sort of good news?" she asked. "You seem to be in rather high spirits today."

"Oh, well..." Flio began, awkwardly scratching the tip of his nose with his finger as Rys's words made him realize how much he had been smiling. "I was just thinking, it hasn't been long since I came to this world, but we've managed to build quite the happy family together, haven't we? Thinking back to when I was first summoned here, I didn't know what I was going to do. I never would have come this far if I hadn't met you, Rys..."

"My lord husband..." Rys wrapped her arms around her husband's, nuzzling her cheek against his with happy affection. Her lupine demon tail materialized behind her, wagging furiously with delight. The two kept talking for some time in that vein, their bodies intertwined all the while.

Inside Sybe's hutch, however, lying down atop the sleeping psychobear's belly, Rynàsze was desperately keeping her blushing face hidden behind both hands. *O-Oh no...* she thought. *Wh-What am I to do in this situation?!* All around her, the rest of Sybe's family were covering their faces with their paws in imitation of Rynàsze's nervous gesture.



Chapter 2: Dark Mountain Magic Beast Racing Hall

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

"Mrrh..." Rynàsze mumbled, rubbing her eyes as she woke. Sybe and Shebe's children, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, who had snuggled up to sleep beside her, roused themselves immediately when they noticed she was awake, nuzzling against her affectionately.

"Snuffle!"

"Bwor!"

"Sniff!"

"Ah ha ha!" Rynàsze laughed, hugging the three house pets tight. "Good morning, everyone!" she said, smiling brightly.

"Goodness," said Elinàsze when she heard her sister's voice. "Rynàsze, did you fall asleep in Sybe's hutch again?"

"Oh! Good morning, big sis Elinàsze!" Rynàsze answered, beaming back.

"Yes, yes, good morning to you too..." Elinàsze said with a wry smirk.

"Rynàsze, you know you're not supposed to sleep there!"

Rynàsze had woken up in the large hutch Flio had set up in one corner of the living room for Sybe's family. She had her own bed, of course, but it seemed that more often than not she had been coming into the hutch to sleep with the magic beasts.

"Hee hee hee!" Rynàsze giggled as she cheerfully hugged Sube, Sebe, and Sobe. "I had to use the toilet last night, you see. I guess I ended up falling asleep in here afterwards..."

"Snuff snuffle!"

"Bworor!"

"Snuffle snuff!"

The three cried out happily, rubbing their fuzzy bodies back against Rynàsze.

Elinàsze couldn't help smiling at the sight of the happy beasts. "Oh, I can never be angry with you," she said. "Not when Sube, Sebe, and Sobe look so happy from the attention, anyway! Just be sure to wash your face before breakfast. And you had better do it fast! The family's going on an outing today, remember?"

"Of course!" Rynàsze replied, in high spirits. "Right away!"

"Snuffle!"

"Bwor!"

"Snuffle!"

The three cried happily, jumping up on their hind legs at Rynàsze's words.

From the very moment of her birth, Flio's youngest daughter Rynàsze had been adored by magic beasts everywhere. Sybe and his family loved her, of course, as did the equine magic beasts Sleip and Byleri had been raising together on the pasture. With so many companions around, hardly a moment went by without Rynàsze enjoying the company of some magic beast or other.



That day, when the family finished their breakfast, they found an Enchanted Frigate waiting for them in front of the house. Hovering silently in the air, it was half the size of the enormous ships that ferried passengers all around the world on regularly scheduled flights.

Inside the helm room of the Enchanted Frigate, Flio was busy looking over the readings displayed on the various panels set up all around him. After a while he nodded, satisfied. "It's been a while since we used the compact model Enchanted Frigate," he said, "but it looks like everything's good to go."

"Hrm..." Ghozal grunted, looking all around as he walked up behind Flio. "You know," he said, awe evident in his voice, "every time I get on one of these things, I can't help thinking how amazing it all is. Back when I was Dark One, I did some research of my own to see if there was any way to recreate them, but the project never got anywhere no matter how hard I tried."

“Meow kidding,” Uliminas concurred as she followed Ghozal into the helm, looking all around just like her husband had been. “Back then we somehow meownaged to build something that *looked* like an Enchanted Frigate, but the meowgic gem circuits never worked at all. No matter what we did, we just couldn’t get the thing to fly...”

“Besides, we never did manage to synthesize a magic gem with enough juice to power the thing...” Ghozal reminisced.

Boom! Suddenly, they heard a loud sound coming from the direction of the forest.

“Huh?” Flio said, looking up from the controls. “What was that?” The sound seemed to be coming from the lake near the estate grounds. Flio expanded one of the ship’s monitors displaying the area surrounding the Enchanted Frigate, and zoomed in on the lake to see Wyne in her dragonewt form descending fast, dive-bombing something in the forest.

“Hrm?” Ghozal said. “What in the world is Wyne up to...?”

“It looks like we had an intruder in the lake area...” Flio said. “She must be trying to chase them off...”

◇Meanwhile—The Lake◇

“Intruder-intruder!” Wyne cried as she flew higher and higher in the air, draconic wings on her back and body covered in hard scales. Then, with a “Take *that!*” she dived, aiming for something in the trees as she descended rapidly. A second later she impacted the earth with an earsplitting explosion, leaving a great hole where she struck the ground. The two women she was targeting—both dressed in gothic lolita-style outfits—barely managed to step out of the way in time, avoiding the attack by the breadth of a single hair.

“E-Eeek!” one wailed.

“What was that, what was that, what was thaaat?!” the other sang.

They stood for a second, staring agape at the fresh hole, bodies trembling with fear, before running off as fast as their legs could carry them.

“We failed to secure the magic beasts!” the first woman cried. “R-Retreat!”

“Retreat, retreat, retreeeat!!!” the other repeated in a singsong as Wyne came flying out of the hole after them.

“You won’t get away-away!” the dragonewt said.

“E-Eeeeeek!”

“Somebody save us, save us, saaave us!!!”

The two ran for their lives into the trees with Wyne in pursuit. “You won’t get away-away!” she repeated.

“Young Mistress Wyne!” Just then, Tanya came flying at top speed from the direction of Flio’s house. “I am here to assist you!” Her angel wings were fully manifested on her back and she was holding a mop in her hands as she soared near ground level, quickly closing in on the intruders.

“A-Another?!” the first woman said with a gasp. “I can’t take much more of this...”

“Run away, run away, run awaaay!” the other sang.

The pair’s expressions darkened still further, but in spite of everything, they somehow managed to dodge Tanya’s mop attack and ran farther into the forest, hoping to lose their pursuers in the trees.

“You won’t get away-away!” Wyne shouted a third time, flying high in the air in pursuit.

“No intruders will escape on *my* watch!” added Tanya. Wyne flew up and up before diving low to the ground, casting a wide net along with Tanya as they chased after their quarry.



Back on board the Enchanted Frigate, Flio, Ghozal, and Uliminas watched Wyne and Tanya fly through the forest in hot pursuit of the intruders on the monitor display.

“It looks like Wyne’s taken a real liking to that lake,” Flio said. “At least, she’s been spending quite a lot of time there. And I guess this time she happened upon a couple of intruders!”

“Hrm...” Ghozal nodded. “And Tanya’s taken up the chase too, I see. I guess she noticed the disturbance at the lake while she was cleaning the house and came flying. That’s a former disciple of the Celestial Plane for you, I suppose!” he said, clearly impressed.

As the three watched the angel and dragonewt chase the intruders from the lake, Rylnàsze came up from behind with a big smile on her face—more accurately, it was Sybe in his psychobear form who came up behind them, Rylnàsze riding on his shoulders. “Papa!” Rylnàsze chirped. “Everyone’s on board!”

Garyl was the next to enter the ship’s helm, arriving from the ship’s storeroom a deck below with a cheerful smile on his face. “Hi, dad! I finished my inspection of the storeroom!”

Next came Rys, entering at a quick run, seemingly unencumbered by the enormous backpack on her back, which was three times the size of her body. “My lord husband!” she said, sidling up to Flio with a great big smile on her face. “I’ve prepared drinks and snacks for our journey and have gotten together everything we’ll need for our lunch!”

“That womeown...” Uliminas said with a smirk. “Why not just let our hosts take care of handling food for us?”

“Excuse me?” Rys rejoined, proudly puffing out her chest. “It seems only natural to me that the wife of the master of the house should be responsible for preparing food for the trip. After all, it’s been some time since we all went on an outing together!”

“Ha ha ha!” Ghozal laughed loudly. “Well, there’s no question that your cooking skills are up to snuff! Hard to believe you’re the same woman who used to eat nothing but raw meat back in the Dark Army!”

“Gh-Ghozal!” Rys sputtered. “I told you to stop bringing up that sort of ancient history!” Suddenly, her hands transformed into deadly lupine demon claws. It seemed she wasn’t about to let the comment go without a fight.

Flio winced when he saw what was about to happen. “Well, time to set out!” he declared, hastily switching a lever on the ship’s controls, causing the Enchanted Frigate to begin its gentle ascent into the sky. “Everyone, brace for

liftoff!”

“Oh, wow!” gushed Rynàsze, her eyes peeled to the scenery outside the window. “This is amazing!”

Kora ran up beside her as well, likely curious about the view. “Here, Kora!” Rynàsze said, encouraging her to take a look herself.

“Whoa...” Kora gasped, color rising in her cheeks as she looked out at the land below.

“Hee hee!” Rys laughed, sounding every bit as delighted herself. “You two certainly seem to be enjoying yourselves!”

“All right!” said Flio, grabbing hold of the ship’s wheel. “Next stop, Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park!”

The Enchanted Frigate turned in midair, rising higher and higher as Flio plotted a course to the north.

◇Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park◇

Not far from the dead center of the lands controlled by demons, a stone’s throw away from the Dark Citadel, was a large mountain named for the Dark One: Dark Mountain. And on its slopes and peaks, utilizing the full surface area of the mountain itself, stood Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park, an amusement park for demons and their families to enjoy during their time off.

A woman stood alone on the peak of Dark Mountain, just outside the environs of the park. Her name was Peguilla. She was a rainy day demon working as the manager of Pudding Pudding Park, an elegant beauty with a calm and collected demeanor who never seemed to make any facial expressions whatsoever, no matter the circumstance.

Another woman came running up to Peguilla, dressed in a light pink nurse’s outfit and carrying an oversized syringe—nearly as large as her entire body—in her arms. This was Coqueshtti, the little mad scientist girl serving as one of the Infernal Four. A specialist in medical magic and technology, her primary responsibility was the treatment of injuries and maladies that afflicted demonkind. “O-Oh, Miss Peguilla! There you are!” she said.

“Well, this is a surprise,” said Peguilla, bowing deeply in a somewhat incongruous greeting to Coqueshtti’s frantic energy. “If it isn’t Lady Coqueshtti. I trust the day finds you well?”

“Ah, yes!” Coqueshtti squeaked, awkwardly returning Peguilla’s bow. “My pleasure! Thank you for everything!”

The exchange of pleasantries out of the way, the two turned to look at the installation before them—a grand structure with rounded oblong walls built in the style of a coliseum.

“So?” Coqueshtti asked. “How’s the magic beast racing hall coming along?”

“Quite well,” Peguilla answered with a decisive nod of the head. “I am proud to say it has been completed precisely to Dark One Dawkson’s specifications.”

“Thank you so much for going to all the trouble!” Coqueshtti chimed. “Dark One Dawkson very much wanted to come thank you personally, but something came up that he needed to attend to right away so I was sent in his place! Although I’m hardly a substitute for the Dark One himself...”

“It was no trouble,” Peguilla reassured her. “True, we built this racing hall at the request of the Dark One in order to provide employment to former mercenaries who lost their jobs due to the peace treaty with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, and to create a place to send war trained magic beasts who had been abandoned in the wilds. The Dark One also provided the majority of the capital for the endeavor, and thanks to his generosity, we were able to employ all the demons we needed. It did not interfere with the regular operations of Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park in the slightest.”

“I’m very glad to hear that!” Coqueshtti said, cheerfully bobbing her head. “Dark One Dawkson made it one of his highest priorities not to interfere with your operations, after all!”

Peguilla looked ever so slightly surprised to hear those words. *If it was the previous Dark One, he would have given no consideration to our operations at all... she thought. He would have demanded we secure the funds ourselves, whether we had the ability or not!*

“U-Um...” Coqueshtti ventured, studying Peguilla’s face as the manager lost

herself in thought. “Is something the matter?”

“No, no, not at all!” Peguilla hastened to reply. “I was merely absorbed in thought. Now then, shall we make our way onto the premises? The trial race should be underway by now.”

“Of course, of course!” said Coqueshtti. “O-Oh, and may I ask...will our human guests be making an appearance today?”

“Quite right,” Peguilla answered as she led the way into the arena. “If I’m not mistaken, their ship should be arriving shortly.”

Coqueshtti followed along behind, a cheery smile on her face.

◇Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park—Magic Beast Racing Hall◇

The magic beast racing hall was just as the name implied, a grounds to hold competitive races among magic beasts, complete with stands for spectators to sit and enjoy watching the sport. Peguilla and Coqueshtti made their way into the reserved VIP seating at the highest part of the stadium.

“This stadium was constructed to hold contests between magic beasts who were abandoned in the wild, with demons who found themselves without work in the wake of the peace treaty serving as riders,” Peguilla explained as Coqueshtti busied herself looking curiously every which way. “Dark One Dawkson conceived this project as a way to provide homes and occupations to those who lost their places after the end of the war...as you are well aware, of course, Lady Coqueshtti.”

“Oh, yes!” Coqueshtti chirped. “I know all about that! But this is my first time seeing the completed racing hall myself!”

“Look,” Peguilla said, pointing towards the track itself. “The trial race is about to begin.”

Coqueshtti turned around to look out the window of the VIP box, a bright smile on her face.



The racing hall itself was divided into several distinct blocks. One featured a straight track for linear sprints. Another showcased a round track designed for

magic beasts to run along its circumference. And another, located on the other side of the spectator stands, was a winding course incorporating the natural cliff face for magic beasts to contend against each other in difficult terrain full of changes in elevation. As the third track was difficult for the spectators to watch from the ordinary stands, the racing hall was also built with an enormous magic window in the dead center of the building displaying images of ongoing races for the convenience of the guests.

As everyone waited with bated breath, a fanfare began to play, heralding the beginning of a race to be held in the first block—the straight racetrack. Four blue slimes of the same approximate size each took their positions behind the starting line.

In the first lane: the slime Moluut.

In the second lane: the slime Delas.

In the third lane: the slime Goliath.

In the fourth lane: the slime Wobble.

Coqueshtti watched the slimes assemble from her seat in the VIP area. *Oh, dear...* she thought, a bead of sweat forming on her forehead. *All of those slimes are the same color, aren't they? I can't tell them apart at all!*

Nonetheless, she forced herself to smile as she watched a group of especially small goblins step up from the side of the course and each mount their respective slimes, grabbing hold of the reins that were partially embedded in their mounts' gooey bodies in order to control the slimes with their legs.

"Oh!" Coqueshtti exclaimed. "I see! The *goblins* are all dressed differently! That will make it much easier to tell them apart!"

"Precisely!" Peguilla said with a nod. "In the preliminary race we held the other day, the slimes ran on their own, and nobody could tell which slime was which or who came in what place. The goblins were the measure we settled on after reflecting on the problems from last time."

Soon, the slimes were in their places behind the starting line. A skeleton stepped up, raising a flag as he prepared to begin the race. "Ready?" he began. "And...start!" He lowered the flag, and the slimes took off as one.

“Ah ha ha!” Moluut laughed. “Alas for you, *I* am no ordinary slime! Mu mu mu...!” As it repeated its verbal tic, the slime leaped up into the air. Goblin still firmly on its back, it suddenly transformed, adopting a humanoid appearance.

“Wh-What in the world is that?” Coqueshtti asked, astonished by the turn of events.

“*That* is a slime emperor,” Peguilla answered after a quick look over the documents she had on hand. “A species of slime capable of changing their body to a humanoid form. They’re a rare high-level species known to possess higher intelligence than most of their kin.”

“Ah ha ha! We’ll take first place by a landslide, thank you very much! Mu mu mu...” Moluut said, effortlessly outpacing the other slimes with their two-legged running.

“I won’t! Let you!” said Wobble, extending part of its own body into a long cylinder and wrapping around Moluut’s legs, sending the emperor slime tumbling face-first to the ground.

“What are you doing?! Mu mu mu...” Moluut cried.

“First place...is Wobble’s!” Wobble declared as it passed, sparing a glance back at the fallen Moluut. “Running ahead! Not allowed!”

“Never! Mu mu mu...” rejoined Moluut, grabbing hold of Wobble’s body with their right hand.

“Stop it! Give up! Let go!” Wobble protested.

“As if! Mu mu mu...” Moluut spat back. The two shouted invectives at each other as they struggled immobile on the ground.

“This is a race, you know, not a wrestling match!” said Goliath, passing the two squabbling slimes and moving to the front of the pack. “Very well, then. *I* shall take the lead!”

“You’re so coool!” Delas gushed in a feminine voice, keeping right on Goliath’s tail—although she looked somewhat less like a fellow competitor and more like an infatuated stalker. “I think I *liiike* you! I’ll follow you *aaanywhere*!”

“N-Nrgh!” Goliath cried. *Oh, dear... he thought. I seem to have attracted the*

attention of a most troublesome female... Goliath was something of a dandy by slime standards, but with Delas breathing heavily down his nonexistent neck, his ordinarily dignified manner collapsed completely. It was all he could do to keep running as fast as he could in a mad scramble to escape his newfound admirer.

The whole thing was over in a matter of seconds. Goliath finished in first thanks to his desperate efforts to shake off Delas, but the latter wouldn't stop following him even once the race was over. He ended up running off without taking his victory lap, all the way outside the racing hall. In the end, neither Goliath, Delas, nor the two goblins who'd had the bad fortune of riding them, returned to the track.

"U-Um..." Coqueshtti said, beginning to sweat once again as she struggled to find something polite to say. "That was...something!" The two slimes who were left in the racing hall were still squabbling in the middle of the track.

"These are trial races, after all," said Peguilla, as cool and collected as always. "Mistakes are bound to happen."

"A-Ah, y-yes, I suppose so..." Coqueshtti said, her smile looking somewhat strained. "They're just trial races after all! Ah ha ha..."

The others in the racing hall, however, didn't seem quite so optimistic. Coqueshtti could hear chatter all around.

"Oh come on! What was *with* that race?"

"That was just ridiculous..."

"I mean, what do you expect from a race between slimes..."

"Don't make excuses! Slimes or no, this is unacceptable!"

Suddenly, Peguilla looked up towards something in the skies above the racing hall. "Oh?" she said. "It seems our special guests have made an appearance." And without further ado, she stood and exited the VIP box.

"A-Ah!" Coqueshtti cried, hurrying after her. "I-I'm coming too!"

As they left, a new group of slimes took their places for the next race in the linear track, much to the chagrin of the audience. Peguilla and Coqueshtti,

however, had moved on to other things.

◇Outside the Magic Beast Racing Hall—Carriage Parking◇

Right next to the magic beast racing hall was a large space set aside for visitors to stable their steeds and carriages for their visit to Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park or even just the racing hall. The racing hall was reachable on foot, but the entrance to the park itself was located near the peak of the mountain. To get there, guests would have to board one of the park's bone dragon gondolas to be ferried up the high mountain.

In one corner of the carriage parking lot, an Enchanted Frigate came to a landing. Actually, to be precise, it didn't quite *land*. The Frigate descended until it was nearly touching the ground, and a flight of stairs extended from the body of the ship, connecting it to the land below.

Rylnàsze was the first to disembark, wearing the wide-brimmed hat she always wore outdoors to protect her eyes from the sun. "Oh, wow!" she said, looking all around with a great big smile on her face. "This is amazing!"

Following alongside Rylnàsze was Sybe in his unicorn rabbit form; his mate, the unicorn rabbit Shebe; and their children, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe coming along behind.

"That whole family sure loves you, huh, Ryl?" Rislei remarked with a smile, glancing at the magic beasts as she came along behind them. Hearing her voice, though, Sybe suddenly did an about-face and leaped straight into Rislei's arms. "Whoa, Sybe!" she said, beaming as she caught him.

"*Snuffle snuffle!*" Sybe cried happily, nuzzling his cheeks against Rislei's. He seemed to be saying, "*We also love you, Rislei!*"

"Ah ha ha!" Rislei laughed, holding the unicorn rabbit tight. "Thank you, Sybe. I love you too!"

Next off the ship after Rislei came Flio, just in time for Peguilla to arrive on the scene.

"Thank you, truly, for taking the time out of your busy schedule to respond to my request, Mister Flio," Peguilla said.

“There’s no need for thanks,” Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “Your proposal sounds like it will be a big help to us at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.”

“Well then,” Peguilla asked. “Where are the magic beasts you mentioned?”

“Oh, yes,” Flio said, pointing to the lower part of the Enchanted Frigate they had flown in on, where the exterior door to the ship’s storage space had just been opened. “They’re right there in the cargo hold of the Enchanted Frigate.”

“In that case, I shall go inspect the shipment right away,” Peguilla said, starting in the direction of the ship. Before she could take more than a few steps, however, she was interrupted by a man’s voice coming from behind.

“Just a moment if you please, Madame Peguilla...”

Peguilla turned to look over her shoulder and saw a crowd of demons standing behind her. At the head of the group was a man dressed in a black tuxedo, beckoning Peguilla over with a wave of his hand.

“I heard that you requested help from a human merchant to obtain magic beasts to use in the racing hall,” the man said. “Is this, perhaps, the gentleman in question?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Peguilla confirmed. “This is Mister Flio, representative of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. The staff have been a tremendous help in procuring supplies for the attractions in Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park in the past.”

“I see...” the demon man said, nodding along to Peguilla’s explanation before turning his gaze to Flio. “Then you would be the store’s manager...”

Flio greeted the man with his typical smile. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance!” he said. “My name is Flio. I represent the Fli-o’-Rys General Store in Houghtow City.”

“Ah, I see you understand the value of a proper introduction,” the man said, bowing deep with an exaggerated sweep of his arms. “Much obliged. You may call me Brantacca, representative of the Brantacca Company.” His own smile had an air of cunning to it as he lifted his head to face Flio, although the mirrored glasses he wore made it impossible to tell where exactly he was

looking.

“So,” Brantacca continued, addressing Peguilla with the same cunning smile. “You mean to say that this Mister Flio is to provide you with magic beasts? You would truly choose them over the Brantacca Company in spite of our long record in procuring war-trained magic beasts for the Dark Army?”

Peguilla sighed. “I have already explained this matter to you, have I not?” she asked. “We have no intention of ending our relationship with the Brantacca Company. We will continue to purchase your magic beasts as we have been. However, if we are to increase the *diversity* of magic beasts in our races, we must find new supply routes as well. For that matter, the Fli-o’-Rys General Store is not our only new supplier. We have been making wholesale purchases from independent tamers, and—”

Brantacca held up his hand, interrupting Peguilla’s explanation. “That’s quite enough. I won’t hear another word of such absurdities. With our record of supplying the Dark Army, the Brantacca Company should be more than enough to handle this matter on our own. You should have no need of any other suppliers. It would serve you far better to send this Mister Flio back to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store where he came from,” he concluded, giving another one of his exaggerated bows.

“It’s just as Master Brantacca says!” one of the demons who had been accompanying Brantacca added, stepping up from behind. He was an imposing man with the musculature of a bodybuilder. “The Brantacca Company will supply all the magic beasts you could ever want! No need to worry!” He flashed a broad grin as he performed a side chest pose.

“Behold!” said another, a blue-skinned woman with a large horn on her head and a voluptuous figure. She blew a kiss and winked as she stepped up beside the man. “Do you see this splendid magic beast? We are ready at a moment’s notice to provide as many of these as you might want! What need do you have of other supply routes?”

Behind the woman stood a four-legged magic beast, rippling with strong pectoral muscles underneath its thick fur. It looked to be a savage monstrosity indeed. The demon woman was quite tall, but the magic beast was at least five

times her size.

“I am certain a beast like this would make quite a stir at the races,” the woman said, smiling as she stroked the magic beast’s head. “And we have many more like it just waiting for a chance to shine...”

Suddenly, however, the woman was shocked out of her monologue by a little girl’s voice. “Oh, no! Miss, this poor magic beast!”

“Huh?” The woman looked down to see Rynàsze at the magic beast’s feet. She was sitting on the ground near the beast’s front right leg, staring at it intently. “A-A little girl? What do you mean by that?” *Poor magic beast?* she thought. *Wh-What on earth does this girl mean, saying something like that out of the blue...?* Internally she clicked her tongue in annoyance, but she forced a smile on her face as she addressed the child.

Rynàsze reached out to touch the magic beast’s leg. “I mean, this magic beast is hurt, right here!” she said, looking up at the woman with tears welling up in her eyes. It was almost as if she felt the magic beast’s pain were an injury on her own body. “It’s in terrible pain just from coming all this way!”

“What’s that?” the woman asked, peering skeptically at the beast’s limb. “An injury on its front leg? But I don’t see any wounds...”

“It’s not the skin that’s hurt!” Rynàsze tearfully replied. “It’s the bone!”

“Is this the spot, Rynàsze?” Flio asked, stepping up to the magic beast himself.

“Yes, papa, right there,” she said. “Just look at its face...it’s all twisted up in pain!”

“Twisted up in pain, huh?” the demon woman repeated, failing to suppress a chuckle. She covered her mouth with her right hand in a dainty gesture until she got the laughter under control. “These beasts only ever make the one expression, you know. If you’re going to spout nonsense, you should really just keep it to yourself.”

Flio, meanwhile, ignored the woman and held out his hand to the magic beast’s leg, speaking a short incantation. A gently rotating magic circle appeared just above the creature’s paw, glowing with golden light. “I see...” He

noded. “The ligament here seems to be hurt rather badly. I can only imagine this was causing quite a lot of pain.” He cast another spell, and the golden magic circle turned blue. “All right,” he said, turning to Rynàsze with a smile. “It should be all better now.”

The magic beast gave Flio a great big lick in thanks and affectionately nuzzled its head against Rynàsze, licking her face as well.

“Aha ha!” Rynàsze giggled. “It doesn’t hurt anymore? I’m so glad!”

The beast licked her again, this time full on the face. Rynàsze’s face was quickly becoming wet with magic beast saliva, but that didn’t seem to bother her in the slightest. She kept on beaming, hugging the magic beast’s head in her arms.

The demon woman’s eyes went wide in shock as she watched the magic beast cavort with Flio and Rynàsze. *H-Hang on a minute!* she thought. *Wh-What’s this?! For these creatures, licking a person’s face is a sign of deep affection! It’s certainly never done that to me. Don’t tell me it actually was hurt, and this Flio man healed its injury?*

“A-Ahem!” Brantacca stepped in front of Peguilla, doing another one of his exaggerated grandiose bows. “Well, it seems there has been a slight mistake on our part,” he said, “But do not forget that it was the Brantacca Company who provided war-trained magic beasts for the Dark Army! We have many magic beasts far more splendid than this one...” His smile had only grown more conceited, perhaps in an effort to distract from the embarrassment.

“Quite a fishy line, if mew ask me!” came a woman’s voice from behind where Peguilla was standing.

“Hrm,” a man grunted in agreement.

“Oh?” Brantacca said. “And who might you be? I can’t imagine what you might be insinuating...” He lifted his head to see who had interrupted him.

Standing there were none other than Uliminas and Ghozal.

“Mew keep saying ‘Dark Army this,’ ‘Dark Army that’...” Uliminas began. “Care to tell us purrcisely *which* Dark Meown mew supplied meowgic beasts for again?”

“Why, in our long years of operation we have been a favorite supplier for many Dark Ones throughout history! From Lord Gholl, renowned as the mightiest of all Dark Ones, to—”

“Oh?” Ghozal said, cocking his head. “Me, huh?”

“Excuse me?” Brantacca said. “What did you just say? You are a mere ordinary human, are you not? I am speaking of Dark One Gholl, the...”

“So, me?” Ghozal interrupted again, transforming back into his demonic form. His body grew and grew to enormous size, his skin turning blue and horns erupting from his forehead. There was no demon alive who wouldn’t recognize him in that form as Gholl, the former Dark One.

“Nghah?!” Brantacca exclaimed, his jaw hanging open in sheer astonishment. The smile from his face had vanished; in fact, he seemed to have gone completely stiff.

“Hey Uliminas,” Ghozal said. “Did we buy any magic beasts from this Brantacca Company back when I was Dark One? I can’t say / remember that.”

“Meowr, me either,” Uliminas confirmed, transforming from her humanoid form back to her original hellcat body as she spoke. “The Dark Army certainly never did any business with the likes of them. But I do seem to remeowmber that name coming up in meowr intelligence reports. Something about certain shameless companies selling meowgic beasts with low abilities to noble demons for inflated purrices...”

Brantacca just stood there, mouth agape, unable to believe his eyes. *Th-That’s the retired Dark One Lord Gholl!* he thought. *A-And his confederate, the hellcat Lady Uliminas! Wh-What are such important people doing in a place like this with a representative of some human company?!* His mind cast about desperately for a way out of his predicament. *Come on, think!* he told himself. *Think, think, think... All right...how about this?*

Brantacca used his hand to force his jaw back into place, and once more affected his haughty smile. “Ah, excuse me,” he said, wringing his hands and bowing his head over and over again. “My deepest apologies. It seems I have committed a slight error of memory. We did indeed do business with the Dark One, but I suppose it must have been during the time of Dark One Yuigarde.

Please, forgive my terrible rudeness!”

“Hmph,” Uliminas said, giving the man a withering sidelong glance. “So that obvious lie of meowrs was just some purrfectly innocent confusion, huh? Know when to quit.”

“A lie? Perish the thought!” Brantacca insisted, doing his best to maintain his calm disposition and keep the smile on his face. “I can assure you, deceit was most certainly not my intention in the slightest!” *Endure it...* he told himself as he wrung his hands over and over again, smiling as affably as he could. *I must endure this, no matter what! If I do not, the Brantacca Company is as good as done!*

“Hrm...” said Ghozal, stepping up close and glaring down at Brantacca, his eyes burning with anger. “If you know so much about my time as Dark One, I suppose you’d have heard that I despise lies and trickery, hrm?”

N-N-No wonder they call him the strongest Dark One in history... Brantacca thought, his body trembling beneath the immense pressure of Ghozal’s gaze, his congenial smile frozen stiff on his face as his shaking teeth chattered loudly. The man and woman who had stepped up beside him were trembling fiercely too, frozen where they were standing. *J-J-Just one look from him and I can’t move my body at all!*

“Now, now, Mister Ghozal,” Flio said, his smile as calm and easygoing as ever. The violent atmosphere that had come over the scene vanished in an instant. “Everything’s all right.”

“Hrm?” Ghozal said. “Are you sure, Mister Flio?”

“I am,” Flio said. “Just speaking personally, I prefer to conduct my business without giving anyone cause for resentment.”

“Oh, really?” said Ghozal. “Well then, if you’ll just close your eyes for a moment, I can make it so there’s no one around to feel resentment in the first place!” It was impossible to tell from his face whether he was joking or serious. Nonetheless, Ghozal and Uliminas both turned back to their human forms.

When he finally realized that nobody was about to kill him, Brantacca breathed a sigh of relief. “W-Well, how about this...?” he suggested, swallowing

nervously and pointing a finger in Flio's direction. "The magic beast racing hall is busy holding trial races as we speak. I challenge you to a match between the Brantacca Company and the Fli-o'-Rys General Store—our magic beasts against yours! Would that suit your sensibilities?"

"Oh! That sounds like an excellent plan!" Peguilla said, nodding eagerly. "The racing hall is ready to go, but we still don't have enough magic beasts to participate in the races. Right now all we can offer are slimes and other small magic beasts. A race featuring such an enormous creature would be excellent publicity!"

Fwah ha ha! Brantacca laughed to himself, over the moon with glee to hear Peguilla so eager to take him up on the offer. *If I can show my superiority on the racing track, then everyone who wants to participate in the races will beg to purchase magic beasts from the Brantacca Company! Although I must say, I never expected that my opponent would be acquainted with the retired Dark One Gholl...*

"So!" Brantacca said, raising his voice loudly enough for everyone in the area to hear. "What say you? Care to settle this with a one-on-one race between the respective heads of our companies?"

That did the trick. At the sound of Brantacca's voice, the demons who had been milling around the carriage packing lot all came to see what was happening. Naturally enough considering they were demons themselves, the crowd seemed to be on Brantacca's side.

"Did you hear that? There's gonna be a race between the Brantacca Company and those human merchants!"

"Sounds like a blast!"

"All right! Go, Brantacca! You aren't about to lose to some human, are ya?"

"I'll have to buy a magic beast or two myself once Brantacca wins this thing!"

As the cheers from the crowd grew louder and louder, Brantacca's smile started looking downright smug. *Fwah ha ha ha ha!* he thought. *My ploy worked perfectly! Now there's nothing the retired Dark One or his confederate Lady Uliminas can do to interfere! With this Flio guy or whatever he was called*

representing my opposition, winning this race should be child's play! And then there will be nothing stopping us from proceeding as we had originally planned...

"Sounds good to me." Flio nodded, still smiling as calmly as ever. "It seems like everyone's excited by the idea too. I gladly accept!"

Perfect! Brantacca thought, grinning triumphantly as Flio gave his consent. *Just as planned!*

As Garyl watched the proceedings from back by the Enchanted Frigate, a cloud of mist materialized behind him. "H-Hey!" he said, hastily waving the mist away with his hand before Ben'ne could emerge. "Not now, Miss B! We're in the middle of something!" Soon, the mist vanished without a trace.

What in the world is that boy doing? Brantacca wondered, peering dubiously at Garyl's strange behavior. His thoughts were interrupted, however, when Rys stepped out in front of him wearing an enormous backpack on her back.

"Excuse me!" she ventured, raising her hand. "I have a question about the rules for the race, if that's all right."

"Yes, what is it?" Brantacca asked.

"Does the magic beast my lord husband uses for the race have to be one we have for sale? Say, for example, he had a particular magic beast he always brought along whenever he went out hunting. Might he use that one?"

"I see..." Brantacca mused, looking as smug as ever. "I certainly don't see the problem with it. I imagine seeing the shop owner's favorite hunting beast would be a good way to judge the quality of the magic beasts they have on offer."

Rys smiled happily at Brantacca's answer and turned to face Flio. "Did you hear that, my lord husband?" she said. "He said yes!"

A strained smile crossed Flio's face as he realized what Rys had in mind. *U-Um...* he thought, looking over at his wife's beaming face. *Could she mean...?*

Brantacca, however, gave no thought to the silent exchange of glances between Flio and Rys. "Well then," he said, "I believe I will be seeing you

momentarily.” He turned on his heels and went back the way he came, accompanied by the demon man and woman. When they were out of earshot, he turned to his subordinates and added in a whisper, “I believe you know what to do.”

“Yes, sir,” the pair responded, nodding ever so slightly.

Satisfied, Brantacca nodded as well.

◇The Magic Beast Racing Hall—Half an Hour Later◇

The race between the respective heads of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store and the Brantacca Company was to be held on the racetrack located in the back of the spectator stands—one incorporating the natural cliffs of Dark Mountain to create a course full of difficult changes in elevation. The large display screens in front of the stands set up to provide live coverage of races were currently projecting an image of Peguilla’s head and upper body. The actual Peguilla was standing in front of a screen, a magic camera recording her image and broadcasting it for all to see. Right now, she was in the middle of explaining the rules of the race.

“This race will be held around the outside perimeter of the racing hall,” Peguilla said. “Contestants will be permitted to change magic beasts over the course of the event.”

That sent a stir through the crowd.

“Whoa! That sounds wild!”

“Talk about a heart-pounding race!”

“Yeah! I’m getting worked up already!”

While the spectators in the stands chattered and cheered, up in his seat in the VIP box, Ghozal was busy devouring a boxed lunch. “Hrm!” he grunted in appreciation. “This magic beast stir-fry ain’t half bad!”

The backpack Rys had been wearing was stuffed full of boxed lunches, one of which Ghozal was now happily shoveling into his mouth.

“Ghozal, meowt are you doing?!” Uliminas demanded, puffing out her cheeks in anger as she confronted Ghozal. “We were gonna eat lunch together as a

group!”

“Hey, come on now!” said Ghozal. “There’s an old human saying: you can’t fight on an empty stomach!”

“Meow’re a demeown!” Uliminas shot back. “Mew don’t get to dodge the issue by throwing out some human platitude!”

“Seriously, though, this stir-fry is amazing!” Ghozal said. “Cut me some slack!”

Rislei watched in wry amusement from her seat next to Garyl and Rynàsze as the husband and wife carried on their argument. “What about you, Gare?” Rislei asked, turning to Garyl. “You gonna eat your lunch early too?”

“Eating my lunch early, huh?” Garyl replied. “I know I used to do that all the time, but we have Rynàsze with us today. As her older brother, I have to set a good example!”

“Oh? I see...” Rislei seemed surprised at Garyl’s words. *Back in the day, Gare and Ghozal used to always turn lunch into a race to see who could finish theirs faster... she thought. He sure has grown up fast. Well, I suppose he does tend to take after the demonic side of his family...*

Rynàsze, meanwhile, pressed herself right up against the window, a bright smile on her face. “Oh, wow!” she marveled. “Can you believe we’ll get to watch a race between magic beasts from a spot like this? I can’t wait!” On either side of her, Sybe and his family were pressed up against the glass as well in imitation of her.

“Can you believe how adorable Rynàsze and Sybe’s family are like that?” Garyl asked, his gallant features twisted in a positively dopey smile. “It’s just unbelievably heartwarming...”

“Yeah,” Rislei agreed, a vacant smile on her own face as well. “She sure is a cutie...”

Finally, the image on the central screen changed, showing a cave located outside the magic beast racing hall that was being used as the starting line for the race.

Peguilla’s voice filled the racing hall, commentating the race—a benefit of the

magic speakers located throughout the building. *“As the events on exhibition today are trial races, the species or identity of the magic beasts participating in the races are not known ahead of time,”* she said. *“But when we begin holding regular races, we plan to display profiles for the magic beast and rider participants for the benefit of you, the audience.”*

As she spoke, a large number appeared in the top half of the screen, starting the countdown to the start of the race.

In the cave, behind the starting line, Brantacca gloated to himself from atop his magic beast, his smile as smug as ever. “Fwah ha ha!” he laughed. “We should have no problem defeating them in a race. After all, I came prepared with a magic beast of exceptional abilities to demonstrate the excellence of the merchandise the Brantacca Company has on offer.”

The beast he was riding was known as a mountain gore-illa—an enormous creature that stood nearly ten meters tall on its two legs, with arms powerful enough to splinter a hard wood pole with a single strike. It was also capable of moving with alarming speed in spite of its enormous body, easily keeping pace with the famously swift demon horse. According to the records kept by the Klyrode Military, gore-illas were among the fiercest fighters of all the magic beasts used by the Dark Army during the war. Knights everywhere feared to face one in battle.

The mountain gore-illa was wearing a saddle on its back attached by a harness, and had a bit in its mouth for Brantacca to steer from behind as he rode. “Although I must say, the cost of maintaining a magic beast like this one is nothing to sneeze at,” he mused as he waited for the race to start. “The bigger they come, the more they eat, I suppose! Still, I can’t think of a better choice to showcase the magic beasts our company can provide our customers. When I heard they were building a racing hall at Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park, I spent a fortune buying up all the mountain gore-illas I could. Now, no one but we should be able to field such a creature. And what magic beast could defeat a mountain gore-illa? Struggle all they might, this match was over before it even began!”

Still... he thought to himself. *I sent my employees to lie in wait in the cameras’ blind spots throughout the course. I will not allow for any possibility of defeat!*

Brantacca peered at the numbers floating in the air above the mouth of the cave, counting down in time with the screen inside the racing hall.

Three...

Two...

One...

Go!

“The race is on!” Brantacca said, pulling the reins and cracking his whip on the mountain gore-illa’s back. “Go!”

“Wrorh!” The gore-illa gave a hearty cry and took off running, while Flio emerged from the cave entrance beside them on his own mount.

Now, then... Brantacca thought, looking over to see what sort of magic beast his competition had chosen. *Let us see what variety of magic beast our manager of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store has...cho...sen?* Suddenly his expression went stiff. *Huh?*

Before his eyes was the spectacular sight of Flio riding atop an enormous wolf with deadly fangs and beautiful silver fur. It wasn’t quite as big as the mountain gore-illa, but it, too, moved with astonishing speed for its size. In fact, although the race had only just begun, it had already left the mountain gore-illa far behind.

“What?” Brantacca blinked, unable to comprehend what he was seeing as the wolf vanished into the distance. “I-It can’t be! Are my eyes playing tricks on me, or is that a...l-lupine demon?!”

Farther ahead on the track, the silver wolf turned to speak to Flio as the pair rode along, a deliriously happy smile on its face. “My lord husband, this feels wonderful!”

“It sure does!” Flio agreed. “I always enjoy going for runs with you, Rys!”

Yes—the wolf Flio was riding was none other than Rys in her magic beast form. She sped along the bare rock that made up the curving racetrack, her husband on her back. Running for all she was worth, she refused to slow down in the slightest, instead going faster and faster over the twists and turns.



“This is just like how we used to run through the forests back in the day, when you were stopping all those demon attacks as the Wolf of Justice!” Rys said, cheerfully wagging her tail as she ran.

“Now that you mention it, we haven’t gone into the forest in a while, have we?” Flio said, lovingly petting his wife on her furry neck.

“You know, my lord husband...” Rys ventured, looking back up at Flio. “I understand perfectly well how busy you are with all your responsibilities at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, but it would make me very happy if we could go on our hunting dates again once in a while...”

“Of course!” Flio answered, smiling kindly down at her. “I would love to! I’ll just have to find the time...”

Suddenly, Rys’s eyes went heart-shaped, her tail wagging furiously. “It’s a promise!” she said. “In that case, I’ll finish this farce of a race in the blink of an eye!” Letting out a joyful howl, she sped up even further—so fast that the magic cameras set throughout the course had trouble keeping up.

Meanwhile, in one corner of the track, the demon man and woman Brantacca had brought with him lay in wait atop a cliff, hidden in the blind spot of a camera, and ready to drop a large boulder on the course to impede Flio’s progress. However...

“Wh-What was that?” the woman asked. “Did something come running past us just now?”

“Erm...” the man frowned, peering down at the track below. “I’m not sure. I think I might have felt something pass by, but I didn’t see anything...”

The two missed Flio racing past entirely, leaving him and Rys to proceed unmolested to the last section of the course. After all, at the speeds Rys was moving, it was beyond their ability to perceive her with their naked eyes.

“Huh?” the man said. “Is that them?”

“Yes...” the woman concurred. “I suppose it must be...”

The two espied a magic beast making its way towards them along the course.

“It’s hard to make it out from on top of this cliff...” the man grumbled.

“We can do it!” said the woman. “We just need to time this correctly. Ready...?”

They watched as the magic beast drew closer and closer, taking careful note of its speed. The woman gave a signal to the magic beast accompanying them. The beast was one she had tamed herself, and it followed her orders obediently, preparing itself to push the boulder off the cliff on her command.

“Now!” the man said.

“Go!” said the woman, making a signal with her right hand. “Push!”

The magic beast did as it was told and began to push. But then, suddenly, it stopped in its tracks.

“Huh?!” the man and woman exclaimed at once, dumbfounded looks on their faces as they watched the magic beast beneath them stay still.

“Hey!” the woman cried. “What do you think you’re doing?!” She stepped up to the magic beast, eyes wide in disbelief that a beast she had tamed herself would disobey her commands. The magic beast, however, seemed to suddenly be in a bad mood. It was looking off to the side, refusing to budge an inch.

As the woman approached closer still, the magic beast rubbed the spot on its right leg where its injury had been.

“H-Hey!” the man cried, interrupting.

“Wh-What is it?” the woman asked.

“Look! There!”

“Huh?” The woman looked where the man was pointing, where the course opened up to a wide rocky area and finally got a clear view of the magic beast that had passed them.

“Th-That’s Mister Brantacca, isn’t it?” the man said.

“You’re right...” the woman agreed. “That’s one of our mountain gore-illas, without a doubt...”

“So...” the man started. “If we had dropped that boulder just then...”

The two stared, mouths agape, as it dawned on them that they had nearly

dropped a boulder on the wrong person entirely.

Flio, needless to say, had long since finished the race in first place.



Even after the race between the Fli-o'-Rys General Store and Brantacca Company had long since finished, the spectators in the stands were still chattering excitedly about what they had seen.

"I tell you, that magic beast was something else!"

"No kidding. Its speed was out of this world!"

"You don't suppose that was an *actual* lupine demon, do you?"

"Lupine demon? Doesn't the Wolf of Justice have one of those as a companion?"

"Now that you mention it, I've heard the Wolf of Justice is partnered with the Fli-o'-Rys General Store..."

"So then...that magic beast could have been a lupine demon after all!"

On the racing floor proper, preparations were underway for yet another four-way slime race on the straight course. The slimes who were meant to serve as contestants seemed to have no focus to spare for the task at hand as they dawdled at the starting line, chatting among themselves.

"*Bloop*... Is it just me, or is nobody actually watching us...?"

"Kinda makes it hard to get in the spirit..."

"I'd rather be having a lover's tryst anyway!"

"S-Stop it! Must you cling to me even in the middle of a race?!"

In the VIP box, meanwhile, Flio's party, Peguilla, and Coqueshtti were no less distracted. "Ghozal!" Rys exclaimed, her hands on her hips and her voice full of indignation. "Eating your own portion ahead of time is one thing, but eating my lord husband's as well?! What in the world were you thinking?!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Ghozal laughed as he lowered his head in a casual apology. "That race earlier was so incredible—and the food you made was so good—that

before I knew it, I'd eaten more than my share! Hope you'll forgive me."

"It's all right, Rys," Flio reassured her, wincing as he did his best to calm his raging wife. "I can eat after we get home."

Rys's anger, however, showed no sign of subsiding anytime soon. Her manifested wolf tail was sticking straight up with fury as she continued to glare daggers in Ghozal's direction. "No, my lord husband!" she growled. "If we don't address this behavior immediately when it happens, it will only become a habit!"

Oh no... Flio frowned, powerless to do anything but watch. *What am I supposed to do here?*

"Excuse me, Mister Flio?" Peguilla said, pulling his attention away from Ghozal and Rys. "Are these terms really acceptable to you?"

"Oh!" said Flio. "Yes, there's no problem."

"But..." Peguilla protested, a troubled expression on her face as she looked over the document Flio had given her outlining the terms of his victory. "Having won the race, you would be well within your rights to stipulate that every magic beast we purchase has to come from the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. I don't see how these terms serve to benefit you at all!"

Flio had set no more than three terms for his victory:

The decision of whether or not to purchase a magic beast will be left to the discretion of the individual race participants.

The Fli-o'-Rys General Store will be granted the right to operate a ranch for magic beasts on the property of the racing hall.

The Fli-o'-Rys General Store will receive permission to construct a landing tower for regularly scheduled Enchanted Frigate flights.

Brantacca was putting pressure on us to agree to limit ourselves to only using magic beasts purchased from the Brantacca Company if he won the race... Peguilla thought, bewildered, as Flio kept on smiling his usual easygoing smile. *But even back when Mister Flio helped us rebuild Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park, he was still so generous... Despite all that he's done for us, he's*

hardly asked for any concessions in exchange for his assistance. Maybe I shouldn't be so surprised...

“Understood,” she said. “In that case, the owners of the magic beasts shall decide which they will use in the races as they see fit. However, we can’t simply permit any and all magic beasts to take part in events. I propose we establish a system where magic beasts must first be approved by the operational committee beforehand.”

“That seems like a sensible thought,” Flio said, nodding in agreement. “Otherwise we might end up with a lot of magic beasts we wouldn’t have the resources to keep and would have to let them go.”

“Additionally, Mister Flio...” Peguilla added, looking over another one of the papers she was carrying. “This is unrelated to the current matter, but there’s something else I’d like to discuss with you, if that’s all right.”

“Of course!” Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile as he nodded his assent. “Feel free to ask me about anything at all. I’ll be happy to do what I can to help!”

“Actually,” Peguilla began, looking between the papers and Flio as she spoke, “we’ve been thinking of adding a number of facilities to our new racing hall. A dining area, for example...and a gift shop...”

“I see...” Flio said, giving the matter a bit of thought. “I might have an idea about how to handle this. Would you give me just a little while to get things ready?”

“Of course,” Peguilla said, bowing as she held out her hand. “In that case, I will be eagerly awaiting your response.”

Flio took Peguilla’s hand in his and shook it, smiling his usual easygoing smile.



Some time later, Flio handed the magic beasts he had brought with him over to Peguilla, then boarded the Enchanted Frigate, leaving the racing hall behind him.

“Those magic beast races were a blast!” Garyl said, a giddy smile on his face

as he gazed out the window, watching Dark Mountain fade farther and farther into the distance. “I mean, the slime races were one thing, but watching those huge magic beasts thunder across the track was a lot of fun!”

“It was incredible!” Rylnàsze agreed, hopping up and down in excitement. “The magic beasts all seemed like they were having tremendous fun as well!”

Right next to her, Sybe’s family were hopping for joy as well, crying out happily.

“Bwowf!”

“Snuffle!”

“Bwowf!”

“Snuffle!”

Rislei glanced over at Rylnàsze and the celebrating magic beasts, smiling fondly. “You certainly seemed to have a blast in the one race with Sybe, running for all you were worth...” she said with a wistful sigh, turning back to look out the window at Dark Mountain. “I’d like to try participating in a race myself sometime!”

Behind them at the helm, Rys stepped up to approach Flio as he operated the ship’s steering wheel.

“I must say, my lord husband... Are you truly satisfied with those terms you settled for? Setting aside everything about who is allowed to sell magic beasts to the racetrack, surely you could have at least asked for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store to have exclusive rights to sell merchandise on the premises! You didn’t even set a penalty for the Brantacca Company, after their manager said those horrible things and ran away when he lost in a race against you!” She puffed out her cheeks in an indignant pout as she spoke, clearly unhappy with how the negotiations had gone.

“That’s true,” Flio conceded, frowning. “Ordinarily, you’d be absolutely correct, Rys.”

“I *am* absolutely correct!” Rys huffed, rolling up her sleeves as she hurried over to the ship’s exit. “And now that that’s settled, let’s turn back at once!”

First, we should go apprehend that Mister Brantacca and...”

“Hold meowr horses!” Uliminas said, grabbing the ribbon tied around the neck of Rys’s dress as she passed, pulling it loose and causing her dress to come undone around her upper body.

“H-Hey!” Rys exclaimed, her face turning bright red as she barely managed to keep her dress from falling down entirely. “Uliminas?! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Just settle down, okay?” Uliminas said. “This isn’t the time fur that. If mew go tearing off on meowr meown, all of the careful planning and negotiation Mister Flio’s been doing on behalf of demeownkind will be fur naught!”

“On behalf of demonkind...?” Rys asked.

“Hrm. That’s right.” Ghozal nodded, his arms folded imperiously. “The magic beast racing hall is something Dawkson had built to provide aid to magic beasts and demon mercenaries who’ve found themselves without work. In other words, you can expect most of the demons there to have some degree of reservations about the idea of working with humans. And how do you think those demons would take it if the Fli-o’-Rys General Store—a company with a human for a general manager—claimed exclusive rights to sell merchandise or magic beasts?”

“I-I...” Rys said, frowning with thought as she fixed her dress.

“Purrhaps we could resolve things easily enough by emphasizing the Fli-o’-Rys General Store’s partnership with the Wolf of Justice,” Uliminas said. “He’s enormeowsly popular with demeowns, after all. But mew know, there are plenty of demeowns living on the fringes who couldn’t tell mew the name of the current Dark Meown. They purrobably haven’t even *heard* of the Wolf of Justice...”

“Hrm,” Ghozal grunted. “And that’s why we need to make it obvious that the magic beast racing hall isn’t run by just humans *or* just demons, but by humans and demons working together. I’m sure that’s what Mister Flio was thinking...am I right?” he asked, looking over in Flio’s direction.

Flio nodded, smiling. “I can’t tell you whether it’ll work out or not, but I

thought things would be better this way. Next time we're in the area, I'll try sounding out the Brantacca Company staff and see if there's some way we can mend our relationship. After all, now that we finally have a peace treaty between humans and demons in place, I'd like to do everything I can to avoid starting unnecessary conflict."

"Hrm," Ghozal nodded, smiling himself. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help. As your friend, I promise to assist you with the whole of my power."

"Thank you very much," Flio said with another nod. Behind him, however, Rys was once again making a distinctly unhappy expression. "Um... I-Is something wrong, Rys?"

"No..." Rys mumbled, pouting. "It's just...Ghozal and Uliminas both understood my lord husband's intentions, but I, your wife, had no idea whatsoever..."

Just then, a cloud of mist appeared behind Garyl, and Ben'ne emerged from within. "There is no need to reprobate yourself so, mother of my master," she said. "You at least had the understanding to accept that man's offer to settle the affair in a race. In my case, I was poised to take his head straightaway with a single strike of my naginata!"

"I had a feeling that was why you tried to come out!" Garyl said with a smirk. "I knew I was right to stop you."

"Hrm," Ghozal grunted. "I never thought I'd meet someone who was quicker than Rys to resort to violence. Incredible..."

Ben'ne, however, bowed deeply. "Your words do me honor," she said. "I am hardly worthy to receive such praise from the retired Dark One himself!" It seemed she had somewhat misinterpreted Ghozal's words.

Ghozal sighed in exasperation. "That wasn't praise, I assure you."

Soon, the whole party was engaged in friendly conversation. Flio looked over the scene from his position behind the ship's wheel and gave a satisfied nod as he flew the Enchanted Frigate higher and higher, charging a course back to Houghtow City.

Chapter 3: Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought *The Tamer and the Magic Beasts*

“Hey, Riliangiu,” Hero Gold-Hair said, frowning as looked over at the woman beside him. “Are you sure this is the place?”

“I believe it should be, according to the information we received in town earlier...” Riliangiu said, cocking her head in confusion. She looked around every which way, but her confusion only grew until she looked every bit as perplexed as Hero Gold-Hair himself.

Riliangiu had formerly been a familiar of the Realm of Evil, and was now one of Hero Gold-Hair’s companions serving primarily as the party’s source of information. Right now, the two of them found themselves in the middle of a vast grassy field without a single man-made structure as far as the eye could see.

“But Riliangiu,” Hero Gold-Hair pointed out. “I don’t see a building anywhere that could possibly be any kind of recruitment center!”

“It’s strange,” Riliangiu agreed, looking down at the map in her hands and the red X symbol marking their destination. “I’m certain this is the place we were told about.”

“Hmm...” Hero Gold-Hair said, peering at Riliangiu’s map from the side as well. “Well, this does seem to be the spot marked on the map.”

“Yes,” said Riliangiu. “Perhaps we had best return to town...”

“I don’t know,” Hero Gold-Hair grumbled. “That job offer you sniffed out seems like it would pay a good deal of money. If it’s real, it would be a shame to let it go.”

“I agree,” Riliangiu said. “If we could secure a job like that, Lady Tsuya and the others would no longer have any need to work part-time in town...”

As they spoke, the pair kept looking between the map and their surroundings,

trying to find any sign of their destination.

At the moment, Hero Gold-Hair's party had halted their travels in a town nearby. Tsuya, who was in charge of the group's finances, had finally reached the end of the money they had on hand, so they had split up to find part-time jobs and earn what they could. Hero Gold-Hair had gotten a job washing dishes in a local pub, while Riliangiu worked as a waitress. One day, however, one of Riliangiu's customers happened to mention a job promising a tremendous reward in cash, and the two of them hurried off right away.

When they reached the spot where the recruitment center should be, however, they arrived to find nothing at all remotely fitting that description. That was why they now found themselves glancing around a grassy field looking thoroughly befuddled.

Hero Gold-Hair looked up from the map and heaved a heavy sigh. "If only Valentine could do something about that appetite of hers... That would make managing our finances a hell of a lot easier."

"A-As you say..." Riliangiu admitted. "But as a former denizen of the Realm of Evil, I know that consuming the trace amounts of magic power contained within foodstuffs truly is the fastest way for her to obtain the energy Lady Valentine needs to sustain her body in this world. She could absorb energy from magic gems as well, but I am afraid that would be even harder on our finances."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Hero Gold-Hair. "Don't mind me—I'm just complaining. But speaking of which...Riliangiu."

"Yes? What is it, Sir Hero Gold-Hair?"

"You're from the Realm of Evil too, aren't you?" Hero Gold-Hair asked. "How come *you* don't need to eat such a ridiculous amount of food?"

"Ah," Riliangiu replied. "In my case, I was created with a corporeal body for the purpose of performing reconnaissance in the world of Klyrode. Unfortunately, that also means that I am incapable of using the magic of the Realm of Evil."

"I see. So it has its pros and cons, then, I take it." Hero Gold-Hair nodded in understanding. "Well," he added, turning back the way they came, "there's no

use waiting around in a place like this. Should we head back to town?"

Just then, however, something caught Riliangiu's attention. "Sir Hero Gold-Hair," she said. "Wait a moment."

"Hm? What is it, Riliangiu?"

"Quiet..." she said. "Do you hear that noise?"

"A noise?" Hero Gold-Hair asked. Following Riliangiu's lead, he focused on listening as intently as he could. Before long, he heard it—*thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump...* "Hm?" He craned his neck, listening closer.

"Hmmm?!" He turned to face Riliangiu. "You're right! I do hear something!"

"Yes..." Riliangiu said. "And perhaps it's just my imagination, but it seems to be growing louder."

"Then," Hero Gold-Hair ventured, "what do you suppose that sound is?"

"I'm afraid I have no idea..."

The two looked all around as they spoke, scanning the horizon for the source of the sound.

Thump thump thump thump thump thump thump...

"It *is* getting louder..." Hero Gold-Hair agreed. "But where in the world is it coming from?"

"Perhaps it's just my imagination," Riliangiu said, turning to face a nearby forest, "but it seems to be coming from the trees over there..."

Hero Gold-Hair followed Riliangiu's gaze, and the two peered into the woods. Looking closely, they noticed that something deep in the forest was causing the trees to sway back and forth. And perhaps it *was* just their imagination, but it seemed to be drawing towards them as well.

The swaying in the trees grew closer and closer until suddenly, with a loud rustling of leaves, an enormous magic beast sprung forth into plain sight.

"What?!" Hero Gold-Hair exclaimed.

"Ah!" cried Riliangiu.

The creature before them resembled a powerfully muscular kangaroo,

running along so quickly that it was hard to believe it was nearly five times the size of Hero Gold-Hair. Its head was disproportionately large even for its massive body, and it was charging straight for Hero Gold-Hair and Riliangiu, its mouth opened wide.

“Th-This is bad!” Hero Gold-Hair said. “We have to escape!”

“Y-Yes, sir, Hero Gold-Hair!” Riliangiu replied, snapping back to her senses.

The two turned on their heels in a panic, looking for all the world like frightened rabbits in their hurry to get away.

“Hurry, Riliangiu!” cried Hero Gold-Hair.

“A-As you command!” Riliangiu readily agreed, running for all she was worth. As a familiar of the Realm of Evil specially designed for search and destroy missions, Riliangiu’s running speed was nothing short of phenomenal, and in short order she had left Hero Gold-Hair far behind.

“W-Wait! Wait!” Hero Gold-Hair cried. “Riliangiu, wait! Don’t leave me behind!”

“B-But sir!” Riliangiu protested. “My top running speed is—”

“I don’t want to hear it!” Hero Gold-Hair snapped. “I told you to hurry, not to leave me behind!”

“D-Don’t be unreasonable, Sir! With my strength I am far too weak to carry you on my back!”

The two ran like their lives depended on it, but the enormous magic beast stayed right on their tail. Its mouth was open wide, sending flecks of saliva flying every which way.

“DDamnation...” Hero Gold-Hair cursed. “Has this magic beast mistaken us for food?!”

“Mistaken, you say?” Riliangiu repeated. “But magic beasts are omnivores. I believe we would serve perfectly well as its sustenance.”

“As if!” Hero Gold-Hair shot back. “I’m not letting some magic beast gobble me up!”

Desperate, he forced his legs to move even faster. Riliangiu, worried, looked back over her shoulders at Hero Gold-Hair as she ran on ahead.

“R-Riliangiu!” Hero Gold-Hair barked. “Slow down a little, would you?!”

“If I did that, I might very well be eaten by the magic beast myself,” Riliangiu replied. “But there is no need to worry. Should you end up eaten by this magic beast I will be sure to relay the news to Lady Valentine and the others so they can come rescue you at once.”

“Y-You!” Hero Gold-Hair shouted. “You’re planning on sacrificing me so you can get away!”

Hero Gold-Hair kept running, but the magic beast pursuing him was quick. Despite his best efforts, it was drawing closer little by little. But then, suddenly, he heard a scream.

“H-Heeelp!!!”

Hero Gold-Hair might have been occupied with running for his life, but that didn’t stop him from looking all around, trying to find the source of the scream. No matter where he looked, however, he couldn’t see anyone who looked like they might have been the one calling for help. Then he heard it again, clearer than the last time.

“Heeeeelp!!!”

“That scream!” Hero Gold-Hair said, completely at a loss. “Where in the world is it coming from?!”

Riliangiu, though, suddenly seemed to notice something as she ran ahead of him. “Sir Hero Gold-Hair!” she called with a start, pointing up at the magic beast’s head as she ran. “Up! Look up!”

“Up?” Hero Gold-Hair repeated, blinking in surprise as he looked where Riliangiu was pointing.

There, tied around the large horn atop the creature’s enormous head, he could see something like a rope. There was a woman clinging to the other end of the rope with both arms. Each time the magic beast moved its head, the rope shook violently from side to side, causing the woman dangling from the other

end to sway precariously as well. She was doing a valiant job of holding on so far, but it was only a matter of time before she would be flung clean off.

“A woman!” Hero Gold-Hair cocked his head as he ran, looking back over his shoulder. “What’s she doing in a place like that?!”

Just then, a carriage crested over the horizon, speeding along with nary a horse in sight. “*Hero Gold-Hair!*” came a woman’s telepathic voice. “*It’s good to see you well!*”

“Well, what do you know!” Hero Gold-Hair cried, a joyful grin spreading over his face. “It’s Aryun Keats!”

Yes—the carriage was none other than the carriage djinn Aryun Keats transformed, a proud member of Hero Gold-Hair’s party. As a carriage djinn, Aryun had the power to assume the form of any vehicle she had ever touched. Her personal magic power, however, was not especially high, leaving her unable to become anything particularly large.

“I came to meet you once I finished work for the day, but the staff at the pub told me you went this way on the trail of some sort of high-paying work,” Aryun Keats told them. *“Naturally, I came to join you straightaway! But...why are you being chased by a magic beast?”*

“I’ll explain later!” Hero Gold-Hair shouted. “Just do something about that thing!”

Not a moment later, the doors of Aryun Keats’s carriage form shot open and out leaped Valentine.

“Just leave it to me, my dear Hero Gold-Hair!” she said, jumping up on Aryun’s roof. She spread her fingers wide, preparing to shoot her threads of darkness. “Now, you will regret attacking the likes of Hero Gold-Hair. I’ll drag you to the underworld!”

Valentine raised her arms and swung them down, causing the threads to soar through the air towards the magic beast in an elegant wave. At first the beast bit at the threads with astonishing fury, but the more it moved, the tighter the threads binding it became. Soon, its body was completely immobilized.

“Abababahhh...” Unfortunately, the woman the magic beast had been

dragging along through the air as it ran found herself trapped by Valentine's threads of darkness as well.

"Ngh!" Hero Gold-Hair exclaimed. "That won't do! Riliangiu! Cut that woman free!"

"Y-Yes, sir!" Riliangiu's arms transformed into blades past the elbows, and she leaped towards the magic beast, performing an elegant midair slash. Her arm blades were unable to cut through Valentine's threads, but with a skillful motion she was able to sever the rope the woman had been holding without hitting the indestructible threads of darkness.

"Fwahaaah?!" the woman cried as she flew through the air. Beneath her, the magic beast collapsed to the ground with a thunderous sound, bound up in a tight cocoon of thread. The woman landed atop the beast and bounced several times before finally crashing face-first to the ground. "Gweh!"

"Hey! You there!" Hero Gold-Hair said, hurrying to the woman's side. "Are you all right?"

"Pfaaah!" The woman spat out a mouthful of sand. "I-I was sure I was about to die!" she said, looking up at Hero Gold-Hair with an expression of astonished gratitude as she wiped the rest of the dirt off her face. "You saved my life!"

Incredible... Hero Gold-Hair thought. That woman's lucky to be alive after taking a fall like that!

"Hero Gooold-Hair!" cried Tsuya, exiting Arjun Keats's carriage door and running up to his side, followed by Wuha Gappoli. Valentine, finished with her dark thread attack, hurried along as well. "Are you okaaaay?"

"Who do you think I am!" Hero Gold-Hair declared, folding his arms in a haughty pose. "Of course I'm okay!"

"Uh-huh," Wuha Gappoli snickered, jabbing Hero Gold-Hair in the flank with her elbow. "But if Lady Valentine hadn't shown up when she did, you'd be in deep magic beast doo-doo right about now, wouldn't you?"

"W-Well..." Hero Gold-Hair admitted, looking the other way and clearing his throat in embarrassment. "Let's just say I'm grateful you showed up when you did..."

The woman who had landed face down on the ground not long ago watched as Hero Gold-Hair's party carried on their banter. When she noticed the roll of vellum clutched in Hero Gold-Hair's hand, however, her eyes shot open in recognition. "Oh?" she said. "Could you be here looking for work...?"

"Oh, this?" Hero Gold-Hair said, his expression darkening. "We heard there was someone recruiting for some kind of job around here, but there's no sign of them anywhere... It's been quite the headache, I tell you."

"It's me!" the woman said, her expression brightening considerably. "I'm the one recruiting people!"

"Wh-What?!" Hero Gold-Hair's eyes widened in shock. He took another look at the information written on the scroll and glanced back up at the woman. "Then...you'd be Telma, the tamer looking for assistants?"

The woman, Telma, smiled brightly and pulled herself to her feet. "Yes, exactly! Thank you ever so much for responding to my request! Now, let's get started at once!"

"Hold on!" Hero Gold-Hair protested, holding out his right hand. "We haven't agreed to anything yet! Shouldn't you explain what it is you want from us first?" *What in the world is with this job?* he thought. *This whole situation is nothing but red flags...*

"O-Oh, yes! Of course! You're exactly right!" Telma said, clearing her throat and wiping the mud from her clothing. "Allow me to introduce myself once again. I am Telma, the tamer who put out that request for workers. You see, I thought I might try to capture some giant magic beasts for use in the new racing hall they opened in Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park. Unfortunately my own ability as a tamer isn't quite enough to restrain a beast of that size! If I want to do this, it seems I will need some help..."

Here, she lowered her head, bowing deeply. "Please!" she begged. "There isn't much time until the deadline I promised my client! Would you perhaps lend me your assistance?"

Hero Gold-Hair listened to Telma's words with a serious look on his face, considering her proposition. He glanced over at the enormous magic beast now lying bound up in Valentine's threads of darkness. "So?" he said. "How many of

these things do you need to capture, exactly?”

“Forty in total,” Telma said.

“And...” Hero Gold-Hair asked. “How many have you managed to capture so far?”

“Just the one!”

“Just one?” Hero Gold-Hair repeated.

“Yes, just the one,” Telma confirmed.

“Wait...” Hero Gold-Hair’s expression darkened once more. “Telma...don’t tell me... When you say you’ve managed to capture one magic beast, you don’t mean the one lying here, do you...?”

“Yes, that one!” Telma replied, a cheery smile on her face.

Meaning... Hero Gold-Hair thought, furrowing his brow, *that until this very moment, she hadn’t managed to capture any...*

“Isn’t that funny?” Telma said, holding her stomach as she doubled over with laughter. “There’s only three days to go until the deadline, and I still have to capture thirty-nine more!”

A bead of cold sweat dripped down Hero Gold-Hair’s brow as he watched Telma laugh in cheery amusement at her own plight. “Wh-What are you laughing about?!” he said. “You’re in some serious hot water, by the sounds of things!”

“Oh, you know...” Telma said. “It’s just, at first I thought I would somehow be able to manage using my abilities as a tamer, but it turns out there’s nothing I can do against a rampaging magic beast! I’m really at my wit’s end—what else *can* I do but laugh? Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!” She laughed, holding the rope she had been clinging to for dear life only moments earlier up beside her face. “But it’s strange,” she added. “My taming abilities shouldn’t be *that* weak. It’s almost like something has worked these creatures into a state of abnormal excitement...”

No, no, no, come on... Hero Gold-Hair thought, wincing at the sight of the feeble length of rope. *This is no laughing matter! And abnormal excitement or*

no, how was she expecting to control a magic beast like that with nothing but a rope! If that's the only trick this woman has, I might be exposing my party to a considerable amount of danger by accepting this job... He sighed. "Well...I'll admit you're offering some decent money if we could actually pull it off, but I don't know if—"

Before he could say another word, however, Tsuya interrupted, holding up the bag she used to store the party's money as a purse. Even at a glance, it was obvious that it was completely empty.

I suppose we haven't had any big jobs lately, now that I think about it. Hero Gold-Hair heaved another heavy sigh.

Tsuya just stared up at Hero Gold-Hair with tearful eyes, clutching the tragically empty bag tight in her hands. "*I knooow this job is kinda fishy...*" her eyes seemed to be saying. "*But we need to make money soomehow...*"

Kh... Hero Gold-Hair mentally clicked his tongue. *Better to lose a limb than a life, I suppose...*



Some time later, enormous thundering sounds rang out in the forest as Valentine faced off against yet another enormous magic beast.

"Now it's time for me to get serious!" Valentine declared, swinging her arms up towards the sky and sending a rain of dark threads down upon her opponent.

"Graah?"

The magic beast, who had been stomping furiously in an effort to squash Valentine flat, looked up at the oncoming threads. A second later its head had been wrapped up thoroughly, cutting off its field of view.

"Graaaaah!!!" it shrieked, charging towards Valentine in spite of its bindings, but more threads followed the first, covering up its enormous body bit by bit. It struggled for all it was worth in an effort to escape, but the threads came faster than it could shake them off and in no time at all the beast was completely bound. Wrapped up like a cocoon, it found itself unable to move even a single muscle.

“Miss Valentine, thank you ever so much!” Telma said, running over to join them. “Please leave the rest to me.” She held out her hands in the direction of the magic beast’s head, casting a spell. “Now, mister magic beast, be a good boy for me, would you?”

A magic circle appeared, rotating in midair. After a moment, the magic beast stopped trying to escape from the threads of darkness and seemed to calm down, eventually ceasing its movement altogether.

“Ehe hee!” Telma giggled, looking up from the magic beast with a happy smile on her face. “It looks like my taming abilities aren’t useless after all, as long as you can hold the target still!”

“I suppose so...” Hero Gold-Hair said, following along behind her. “And that makes number seven, I believe? But Telma...” he added with a sigh.

“Y-Yes? What is it?” Telma asked.

“Look, I don’t mind working for you...” Hero Gold-Hair said. “But would it have killed you to do just a *little* bit of planning? Hiring someone to capture the giant magic beasts for you is one thing, but I can’t believe you never once considered how you were going to transport these things...”

Behind Hero Gold-Hair came Aryun Keats, transformed into a large cargo wagon as she made her way over to the fallen magic beast. In the body of the wagon were six other magic beasts Telma had managed to tame, bound up by dark threads.

“Okaaaay!” Tsuya chirped. “Let’s get this one loooaded! Aryun, are you holding uuup?”

“*More or less...*” Aryun Keats answered. “*I think I could manage two or three more...*”

“‘Kay ‘kay!” said Wuha Gappoli. “Let’s go!”

“On three!” said Valentine. “One...two...and heave!”

With Valentine, Wuha Gappoli, and Hero Gold-Hair’s combined efforts, they managed to load the seventh magic beast onto Aryun Keats.

Wuha’s certainly making a great show of effort... Hero Gold-Hair thought,

glancing over at his companion. *But those arms of hers aren't any stronger than your average human child, are they? Her help doesn't particularly matter much...*

"I'm so terribly sorry," Telma said, bowing apologetically over and over again as she explained. "My plan had been to lead the magic beasts away using my taming abilities, you see, but that didn't exactly work out..."

Hero Gold-Hair sighed as he turned Telma's way. "And don't you see how careless that was?" he chided. "You accepted a task you had no hope of actually completing!"

Telma frowned and folded her arms, apparently unwilling to accept the point. "But you know..." she said, lowering her head. "It really is peculiar. I never used to have a problem getting the magic beasts in this region to obey me using my taming abilities. But as soon as I took this job, I found the forest full of magic beasts I'd never seen before, and my taming abilities wouldn't work at all! Really, what in the world is going on...?"

"Hmm..." Hero Gold-Hair said, resting his chin on his hand in thought. "So in other words, there's something out of the ordinary happening here..."



As Hero Gold-Hair and company were busy loading Aryun Keats's cargo bay full with magic beasts, another group kept watch from atop a cliff a short distance away. At the group's head were two women, hiding behind a large tree as they grumbled and spied on Hero Gold-Hair's companions.

"I don't believe it..." said the woman in the black gothic lolita dress. "They've come here to capture magic beasts, just like us! This will damage our profit margin considerably."

This was Janderena, the treasurer of the Shadow Conglomerate who oversaw all of the organization's financial matters. She was a frail woman with a fondness for gothic lolita fashion who carried an oversized abacus on her back everywhere she went. Right now she was clacking the beads of her abacus back and forth, clicking her tongue as she calculated the precise sum that Hero Gold-Hair's party's activities would cost them.

“This spot is at the very edge of the Dark One’s territory,” Janderena continued, seething as she glared down at Hero Gold-Hair’s companions below. “It’s right outside human lands, making it a prime location for demons looking to release all the magic beasts they no longer have use for. I thought we could make a tidy sum by scooping up their abandoned magic beasts and selling them at the new racing hall in Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park, but it looks like someone beat us to the punch. Shit!”

She cursed furiously at the impediment to her plans. “This is all the Shadow King’s fault, anyway. Everything that man’s ever touched has been a complete and utter failure. I’ve told him time and time again that our finances have been completely ruined by his idiocy, but still he keeps sending those fox sister lackeys of his to demand more money! Shit! Shit! *Shit!!!*” Her hands trembled as they clutched the abacus tight.

As Janderena swore and fumed, her younger sister Yanderena, dressed in a nearly identical dress, danced wildly behind her, large dark eyes open wide as she spun and spun on one leg. Yanderena served as Janderena’s bodyguard. Her affinity for gothic lolita fashion was on par with her older sister’s, and she seemed to dance furiously every second of her life. In combat she fought with spinning kicks and unarmed strikes, singing in an operatic style all the while.

Yanderena spun faster and faster as her sister’s rage grew, as if her dance were an expression of Janderena’s anger. “All who oppose, oppose, oppose us must die, die, diie!” she sang, raising her voice in a high falsetto.

“Shut up, you lousy excuse for a sister!” Janderena snapped, smashing her abacus right into Yanderena’s face.

“Gwaaaaah?!” Yanderena cried as the blow sent her flying backward through the air. She fell to the ground where she lay twitching and covering her face with her hands. “My...jaw...”

“You’re too loud! Do you *want* them to find us? Shit!” Janderena said, looking down at her fallen sister in irritation as she returned the abacus to her back, before peeking back out from behind the tree to continue spying on Hero Gold-Hair. “I thought we’d gotten our hands on some choice magic beasts in that wretched backwater Houghtow City, but that dragonewt and maid got in our

way, and the mission ended in failure...” she recounted in a low voice. “If we can’t capture the magic beasts here to sell to the racing hall, our war chest will be essentially screwed! Shit! Do you understand?!”

Yanderena nodded from where she lay on the ground, still holding her face in her hands.

“Our only hope is for that other group collecting magic beasts in the area to clear out at once...” Janderena concluded as she once again began fussing with her abacus.

“Well then, well then, you know what we should do?” Yanderena sang, springing back up to standing using only her shoulders. “Shoot the beasts full of our special stimulant to set them on our impertinent intruders!”

“You’re right,” Janderena said, frowning as she calculated sum after sum until finally her fingers came to a sudden stop. “Sending the magic beasts on a blind rampage might be the only way to stop them from capturing every last one. I tell you, those lowlifes have gotten on my last nerve! Goddamn!”

She glared down at Hero Gold-Hair, grumbling and cursing. Then, suddenly, a sinister smile came over her face. “Although,” she said, chuckling darkly to herself as she once again began clacking the beads of her abacus back and forth, “Perhaps I’ve come up with something of a plan...”



“Come ooon...” A while later, Tsuya was running through the forest at a mad dash, tears in the corner of her eyes as she wove between the trees. Behind her came a magic beast in hot pursuit, running all out on its four legs. If a tree got between the beast and its quarry, it would simply be knocked aside from the force of its charge.

“J-Just a bit fuuurther...” Tsuya told herself, but the magic beast was gaining fast. Tsuya, after all, ran like the daintiest maiden you’ve ever seen. With her feet pointed inward and her arms swinging from side to side, she was hardly able to speed up at all, no matter how hard she tried. “Eeeek!” she cried as the beast approached closer and closer.

But just as the beast seemed poised to catch its prey, Valentine appeared

from where she had been waiting atop a nearby cliff. “Well done, Madame Tsuya!” she said. “Allow me.” She released her threads, wrapping them around Tsuya’s midsection and hoisting her up into the air.

“L-Lady Valentiine!” Tsuya cried, relief washing over her face even as she struggled to catch her breath. “I thought you’d neever come!”

The magic beast let out an aggrieved growl as Tsuya rose into the air, then bent down on its haunches, preparing to leap into the air after her. Before it could leave the ground, however, it found itself plummeting down a hole that had suddenly appeared right beneath its feet.

“Yes! Got ‘em!” Hero Gold-Hair cried, jumping out from behind a nearby tree when he saw that the beast had safely fallen into his pitfall trap. He ran up to the edge of the hole, his signature Drilldozer Shovel in hand, grinning widely.

“That was incredible!” Telma said, running up after Hero Gold-Hair and peering down into the hole with evident awe. Inside, the magic beast lay unconscious, not moving a muscle.

“Ehe he!” Wuha Gappoli chuckled, grinning with pride as she stepped up alongside Telma to look down the hole herself. “Whaddaya think?” she asked, lounging back and resting her head on her entwined hands. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“Hang on!” Hero Gold-Hair protested. “I’m the one who dug that hole, you know! Why are *you* acting all high and mighty about it?”

“Hey, come on!” Wuha said, waving her right hand dismissively and smirking cleverly in the face of Hero Gold-Hair’s befuddled expression. “All for one and one for all, right?”

“Hah. Cheeky, aren’t you?” Hero Gold-Hair smirked wryly as he rested the Drilldozer Shovel on his shoulder. “Well, then, let’s get that magic beast out of there!”

“Oh, yes, of course!” Telma nodded, reaching towards the magic beast trapped in the pit. “I’ll tame this one right away!”

As Telma was handling her part of the job, Aryun Keats rolled up in her cargo wagon form, followed by Valentine and Tsuya, who had been waiting from atop the cliff.

“Haaah...haaah...” Tsuya panted as she made her way down. “Wh-Whyyy do I have to be the baaait, though...?”

“Magic beasts are quite clever,” Valentine answered, resting her jaw against the index finger of her right hand as she followed Tsuya down the cliff. “They would be much more cautious if it were Riliangiu or myself playing your part.”

“We need Aryun to carry the luggage, Hero Gold-Hair to give us instructions, and Miss Telma to tame the magic beasts,” Wuha added, turning her cocksure smile Tsuya and Valentine’s way. “You’ve gotta play the role of bait by process of elimination.”

“Yes, quite right,” Hero Gold-Hair said, nodding along to Wuha’s explanation as he watched Valentine pull the magic beast out of the hole with her threads of darkness. “And by that logic, there should be no issue with using *you* as the bait for our next round...right, Wuha?”

“Exactly!” Wuha said, nodding in agreement until it suddenly dawned on her that it was *her* name Hero Gold-Hair had mentioned. “I mean...wait...what?!” Her eyes went wide, panic overtaking her smug expression.

“I seeeee!” said Tsuya, placing a hand on Wuha’s shoulder and smiling cheerfully down at the djinn. “Let’s have Miss Wuuha do it this time, then!”

“Wait...what? What?” Wuha repeated, looking well and truly distressed.

“All right, Wuha, we’re counting on you,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “Everyone, return to your positions!”

“Yes, sir!” replied Valentine, Tsuya, and Telma as the three of them, plus Hero Gold-Hair, spread out to assume their places.

“Wait!” said Wuha, looking around frantically every which way. “Me? Are you serious? *Me?*”

“*I will lead the next magic beast your way,*” came Riliangiu’s telepathic voice speaking in Wuha’s mind. Riliangiu had been playing the role of reconnaissance, scanning the forest for serviceable magic beasts.

“You’re serious?” Wuha said, cold sweat running down her back. “You’re seriously doing this? With me?”

The next second, an enormous magic beast appeared from deeper in the forest, felling trees as it charged straight for Wuha Gappoli.

“E-Eeeeeeeek!!!” Wuha shrieked, running like her life depended on it.

“H-Hey! Wuha!” Hero Gold-Hair shouted from behind a nearby tree. “The next hole is *this* way!”

Wuha, however, was entirely too preoccupied with running for her life for Hero Gold-Hair’s words to register. “Aaaaaaahhh!” she cried. “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t, I caaaaaan’t!!!”



“I tell you...” Hero Gold-Hair furrowed his brow as he looked down at Wuha Gappoli. “Is it so hard to just follow instructions?” He’d had to scramble to dig a new pitfall trap to catch the beast chasing after Wuha, who was now lying on the ground with her arms and legs spread eagle, both physically and mentally exhausted.

Wuha seemed to be trying to say something back but she was unable to catch her breath, let alone form articulate words.

“Miss Wuuha...” Tsuya said, her smile looking distinctly strained. “I’ll do the neeext one, okaaay?”

Off to the side, Valentine was just finishing up wrapping their newest acquisition. Aryun Keats was waiting to the side, her cargo wagon form already piled full with a considerable number of magic beasts.

“All right...” Hero Gold-Hair grunted, nodding as he counted the magic beasts they had caught so far. “I suppose it’s about time we take a break.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you ever so very very much!” gushed Telma, running up to Hero Gold-Hair and bowing her head over and over again between her profuse words of gratitude. “The way things have been going, I might just manage to make the shipment by the deadline!”

“It is peculiar though, isn’t it?” mused Valentine, tilting her head curiously to look over at Telma as she manipulated her threads of darkness. “With your taming abilities, I wouldn’t expect you to have any trouble earning the

obedience of magic beasts of this level.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself!” Telma cried out, her eyes suddenly full of tears. “I swear, I’ve never had trouble taming magic beasts before! I thought this time would be the same as always, but no matter how hard I tried, they would just break free of my control and go on a rampage! I haven’t been able to tame them unless they’re unconscious at the bottom of a hole or wrapped up in those dark threads of yours! It’s *very* strange...” Having said her piece, she hung her shoulders despondently, choking back her tears.

Hero Gold-Hair folded his arms in thought. *Hmm... he wondered. So something strange is going on. It’s almost like the magic beasts around here have all suddenly gone savage...*

As Hero Gold-Hair thought the matter over, Aryun Keats came up to speak to him, still in her cargo wagon form. “*Hero Gold-Hair, may I perhaps have a word?*”

“Hm?” Hero Gold-Hair responded. “Oh, Keats. What’s wrong?”

“*Well, Sir,*” Aryun Keats reported. “*It seems that the magic beasts you loaded into me just now had foreign objects stuck to their bodies...*” A small rack appeared beside her cargo compartment, displaying a number of what appeared to be large needles. They were hefty implements and were fletched with feathers like arrows. It appeared that someone had shot the magic beasts with these needles from long range.

“What are these needles?” Hero Gold-Hair asked, picking one up in his hand and staring at it intently.

“*These needles were found in the bodies of every single one of the magic beasts who were resistant to Madame Telma’s taming abilities,*” Aryun answered. “*Upon closer inspection, they seem to have been coated with some sort of stimulant.*”

“Hmm...” Hero Gold-Hair muttered, looking the needle up and down once again as he took in the information. “You don’t suppose these are the reason Telma’s taming ability hasn’t been working, do you?”

“A-A needle, you say?” Telma asked, staring at it over Hero Gold-Hair’s

shoulder.

“Let me see,” said Valentine, picking up one of the needles herself and touching a fingertip to its tip. “Well! This is quite the stimulant indeed! If these magic beasts were all injected with a drug like this, it’s no surprise your taming ability didn’t work on them.”

“Huuuh! I seeee,” Tsuya said, joining in the crowd peering at the suspicious needles.

Next came Riliangiu, who had returned from her separate operations in the forest. She stepped up to the scene and held out her right hand towards the needle, speaking a quick incantation. As a specialist in surveillance, Riliangiu possessed the skill Identify. A magic circle appeared in midair in front of her hand, rotating around the tip of the needle.

“Well now, this is quite a hazardous little thing!” she exclaimed. “The stimulant drug coating the tip of this needle is strong enough to be in violation of the law. It’s so powerful that it could even cause its target to die of overstimulation under the wrong circumstances. I can only imagine that whoever is behind this must be fairly dangerous.”

“Huh,” Hero Gold-Hair said, leaning in to peek at the window Riliangiu’s skill had created. “Who would have thought this needle would be coated with such a troublesome drug?”

Thunk.

Just then, Hero Gold-Hair felt a strange sensation in his thigh. “Hm?” he mumbled, turning his head to look. What he saw was a needle sticking out of his leg, exactly like the one he had been examining only moments ago. “Wh-What in the blazes?!” he cried, hastily grabbing the needle to yank it out.

“H-Hero Gold-Hair! No!” said Riliangiu, holding out her arm to stop him. “If you try to pull that needle out, the stimulant will enter your body all at once! And since your body isn’t nearly as large as one of these magic beasts, you might end up in a truly dangerous situation. Leave this to me.” She held out her arm and cast a spell, conjuring a magic circle that appeared around the needle sticking out of Hero Gold-Hair’s thigh, when...

Thunk.

“Wh-What?” As Riliangiu reached out to remove the needle, she felt something strike her right arm—another needle, just like the one in Hero Gold-Hair’s thigh. “We’re being targeted! But where are they shooting from?!”

“Th-This is bad!” said Hero Gold-Hair, barking orders as he hid behind a tree. “We’re taking fire! Everyone, scatter!”

The rest of Hero Gold-Hair’s party ran every which way, hastily hiding themselves behind trees as well. Just then, however, a deluge of needles came raining from overhead. It was as if their attacker had been waiting for them to do precisely that.

“Well, well, well...” said Valentine, weaving a web with her dark threads to protect the party from the missiles coming down from above. “We seem to be in a rather precarious situation...”

“Grh...” Hero Gold-Hair grunted as he hid behind his tree. “Where *are* those needles coming from?” He searched every which way for a sign of where their attacker might be located, but he could already feel his thoughts growing confused from the drug coursing through his system.



“Tch.” Janderena clicked her tongue in irritation, glaring down at the protective webbing Valentine had erected to protect the party from their needles. “They’ve stopped us with some kind of barrier...”

“Attack, attack, more more more!” Yanderena sang to a rhythm of her own, her abnormally large black eyes open even wider than usual. “I can shoot you any time, anywhere! Ah ha ha ha ha!” She had a large bow in her hands, ready to shoot more needle-tipped arrows at a moment’s notice. Yanderena was proficient in all sorts of deadly weapons, and was well able to handle the hefty longbow. Even from as far away as they were, she had been able to hit Hero Gold-Hair and Riliangiu as easily as the much larger magic beasts.

“No,” said Janderena, fiddling with the beads of her abacus as Yanderena waited impatiently to take another shot. “According to my calculations, your arrows would be unable to penetrate the threads making up that obstruction.”

“Oh reeeaaally?” Yanderena sang, spinning in a dissatisfied pirouette. “But we won’t know until we tryyy!”

“No need,” said Janderena, returning the abacus to her back. “Some of the needles will have hit their target. Now all we need to do is wait for the stimulant to take effect as they hide behind that wall...” Her lips curled up in a leering smile, chuckling darkly as she watched.

“I suppose, I suppose, I suppose that’s true!” Yanderena agreed, pressing her cheek up against her sister’s, a near identical smile coming to her face as well. “Ah ha ha ha ha!”



As Janderena and Yanderena spied with leering smiles, on the other side of the barrier, Wuha Gappoli wiped a bead of sweat from her brow.

“Phew!” she said, breathing a sigh of relief as she pulled Riliangiu’s face back with both of her hands. “Just in the nick of time...”

Riliangiu, meanwhile, seemed to have no idea whatsoever what was going on. “I... What was I doing...?” she said, utterly stupefied. Underneath her, Tsuya was lying on her back...or, to be more accurate, it seemed that Riliangiu had been lying on top of Tsuya, her arms holding the human woman down.

“O-Oh thank gooodness,” Tsuya said. “That was so scaaarry, Riliangiuuu! Your eeeyes suddenly went all blooodshot when you pushed me dooown!”

“I...pushed Madame Tsuya down?” Riliangiu repeated, trying desperately to recall what she had been doing. *How peculiar...* she thought, her mouth frowning underneath Wuha Gappoli’s hands. *The last thing I remember is realizing that there was a needle sticking out of my leg...*

“Heh heh heh...” Wuha giggled, letting go of her face and smacking her on the shoulder. “Want me to explain?”

“Y-Yes, if you don’t mind...” Riliangiu said, looking genuinely puzzled.

“It’s the effect of that stimulant! You know, the one from the needle you got shot with. You got crazy worked up and went to take it out on Madame Tsuya’s defenseless body!”

“What?” said Riliangiu. “B-But...”

“Well, not that I blame you,” Wuha went on. “I ran an analysis on the stimulant’s basic composition, and it seems like this thing has the effect of kicking a living thing’s three fundamental appetites into overdrive. First food, then sex. And when both of those appetites are fulfilled, finally sleep. That’s why those critters ended up like *that*.” She pointed a finger in the direction of the magic beasts stashed in Aryun Keats’s cargo bay.

“Y-You were able to figure out all that?” Riliangiu asked, balking with surprise. “You?”

“That’ll teach you to underestimate a manor djinn!” Wuha chided her, cackling pridefully. “We manor djinns are creatures who take the form of habitable dwellings, luring humans or demons inside and lulling them to sleep with our special medicine. With a background like that, you can bet I know a thing or two about drugs! One taste is all it takes me to analyze the precise effect of a drug—and whipping up something to counteract it is a piece of cake!” She puffed out her chest and stood haughtily with her hands on her hips—although with how flat her chest was, it unfortunately didn’t have much of an effect...

“I-I see...” said Riliangiu, a faraway look on her face. “So you were the one who restored me to my senses. But where were those needles being fired from, I wonder...”

“Uuum...” Tsuya sat up, her cheeks blushing red. “You really don’t remember aaanything?”

“I don’t,” Riliangiu confirmed. “Perhaps it’s a side effect of the drug...”

“Ah ha ha! Well, that’s a pity!” Wuha laughed, to the chagrin of Tsuya and Riliangiu both. “In my case, as soon as the drug entered my body, I was able to break it down into its components. Right now I have my whole body producing the antidote I made. So this is the fastest way to get it into your system!” With that, she grabbed Riliangiu’s head with both hands and brought her lips to hers, their tongues entwining as she transferred saliva from her mouth into Riliangiu’s.

M-Meaning... Riliangiu thought, finally understanding why Tsuya had been

blushing so furiously, *the antidote is her saliva. I-I must have been partaking of Madame Wuha's saliva this way just moments earlier!* She pulled away, peeling Wuha Gappoli off her. Their mouths separated with a wet *smack*.

“And so!” Wuha cackled, wiping the saliva from her face with her right hand. “That’s the gist of it!”

“W-Well, I-I suppose it was an emergency, so I’ll refrain from making too much of a fuss...” Riliangiu said, wiping the spit from her own mouth as well. “B-But perhaps there was some way other than kissing...” Her cheeks, however, were turning a particularly vivid shade of red. *I-I can’t believe my first kiss was with a girl...!*

“We have biiigger fish to fry!” said Tsuya. “Hero Gooold-Hair was hit with one of the neeedles! We need to get him the aaantidote! A-And maaaybe, we could put it in thiiis if you don’t mind,” she added, holding out one of the party’s canteens.

“Really?” said Wuha. “Wouldn’t it be faster to give it to him directly than put it in a container like that?”

“S-S-Stiiill!” Tsuya protested. “You caaan’t just go around kiiissing people like that!”

As Wuha Gappoli and Tsuya argued, however, Valentine, who had been busy protecting them with her threads of darkness, looked over at Hero Gold-Hair and cocked her head. “Hm?” she said, noticing a change.

Hero Gold-Hair slowly turned his head to look back at Valentine, his shoulders heaving up and down with heavy breaths. His eyes were red and bloodshot, his trousers straining mightily against a protuberance in his crotch region that seemed poised to rip the fabric apart. “Woooman...” he moaned, panting like a beast as he began shambling Valentine’s direction.

“What? H-Hero Gold-Hair?!” Valentine recoiled at Hero Gold-Hair’s strange behavior, her eyes going wide in disbelief. “This is bad! The stimulant’s gotten to Hero Gold-Hair! He’s acting strange!” Valentine was busy keeping her wall of threads directly overhead to stop the needles from raining down upon them, meaning she was stuck unable to move from the spot. She looked all around, frantic for some kind of solution.

“Heeey, Hero Gold-Hair!” said Wuha, interposing herself between Hero Gold-Hair and Valentine. “How about a steamy hot kiss full of my special antidote? I promise it’ll perk you right up!” She ran towards Hero Gold-Hair, puckering her lips, only to be stopped in her tracks by Hero Gold-Hair’s muscular arms.

“Hmph...” Hero Gold-Hair grunted.

“Huh?” said Wuha, confused and distressed. “Wh-What? Hang on, what are you doing?” Hero Gold-Hair wasn’t moving to embrace her at all; rather, he was pushing her back, preventing her from getting near his face.

“Give me wooomaaan!!!” Hero Gold-Hair bellowed, tossing her to the side with both arms.

“N-Nothing?!” Wuha protested as she soared through the air. “You don’t see me as a woman at all?!”

“This is just conjecture,” Aryun Keats offered, “But perhaps to a true boob fiend like Hero Gold-Hair, someone with a chest as flat as yours would not qualify as a target for sexual attraction. Incidentally, as I am currently in the form of a cargo wagon, I, too, am outside the range of his preferred body type.”

“Th-Thank you for the explanation, I guess— Oof!” Wuha Gappoli said as she finally landed face-first on the ground, losing her consciousness on the spot. Hero Gold-Hair, meanwhile, was drawing closer and closer to Valentine, still under the effect of the stimulant.

“Oh no!” said Valentine. “At this rate, Hero Gold-Hair is going to assault me!” Suddenly, however, her distressed eyes lit up. *Wait a minute... she thought. Would it be so bad to be assaulted by Hero Gold-Hair? I could never manage to successfully entice him with Madame Tsuya around keeping an eye on everything... But now, since it’s an emergency, perhaps...* She nodded and looked up at the oncoming man. “Everyone!” she declared, undulating her body more than was perhaps strictly necessary. “Hero Gold-Hair has lost his mind thanks to the drug! But fear not! I, Valentine, will offer my own body to keep him occupied and stop him in place! Please forgive me for any unseemly acts I might commit!”

“Um...” Telma said from behind the cover of a nearby tree. “Couldn’t you just capture him with your threads, like you did with the magic beasts?” She was, of

course, absolutely correct. Valentine, however, chose to ignore Telma's words entirely.

"Here, Hero Gold-Hair!" she said, her voice breaking as her cheeks began to flush with desire. "Don't hold back! Enjoy my voluptuous, alluring body and keep yourself occupied for as long as you can!"

Ah... Telma thought, a cold look in her eyes as she desecrated Valentine's intention. She's doing it on purpose...

Before Telma's eyes, Hero Gold-Hair, who had lost his senses completely, contorted his body with lust as he advanced on Valentine, grabbing at her chest with greedy hands.

"Anh!" Valentine moaned. "I-I'm certainly not letting you do this because I want to! But I must protect everyone from Hero Gold-Hair's rampage, for Hero Gold-Hair's own sake! Yes—I have no choice but to sacrifice my very body!" She seemed quite excited herself as she let Hero Gold-Hair do whatever he liked. "Yes... No need to hold back! I, Valentine, will use my body to hold you in place. But only because I have no choice! This is the only way!"

Ahhh... Valentine thought to herself, her breath hot, her cheeks flushed, and an elated smile on her face as the drugged out Hero Gold-Hair fondled her body to his heart's content. Hero Gold-Hair is so wonderful! At this rate, he'll end up doing this...and that...and maybe even that! Yes, and all because I have to. It was the only thing I could do!

Hero Gold-Hair's hands grasped at Valentine's outfit, poised to rip it off and expose her generously portioned breasts, when he was interrupted by the sound of Tsuya's scream.

"I-It's the middle of the daaay!" she shouted. "No hanky-paaanky, please and thaaank you!" She swung the Drilldozer Shovel, which she had picked up off the ground after Hero Gold-Hair dropped it in his delirious haze, and hit Hero Gold-Hair hard in the face.

"Gwaaaaah!" Hero Gold-Hair cried out, collapsing to the ground and clutching his face with both hands.

"H-Hero Gold-Hair?!" Valentine's face went pale.

“Oh, my...” said Telma, furrowing her brow as she looked pityingly at Hero Gold-Hair, who was writhing on the ground. “That looks painful...”

“W-Well done, Madame Tsuya!” Aryun Keats said, her voice sounding somewhat forced. *“Not a moment of hesitation...”*

Tsuya ran over to where Wuha Gappoli was lying on the forest floor, still unconscious and twitching after being tossed aside by Hero Gold-Hair. Then she grabbed Wuha’s face in her hands and closed her eyes tight, kissing her deeply on the lips.

“What?!” Everyone in the area cried out with shock at the development as a loud sucking sound filled the area. Tsuya, it seemed, was sucking the saliva right out of the unconscious Wuha Gappoli’s mouth.

After a while, Tsuya tossed Wuha back down. She landed with an undignified “Aghbth!” and resumed her position face down on the ground.

Ignoring Wuha Gappoli’s plight completely and keeping her mouth shut tight to prevent the antidote stored in her cheeks from leaking out, Tsuya rushed back to Hero Gold-Hair’s side, where he was still curled up on the ground, clutching his face in pain where it had been struck by the Drilldozer Shovel.

Tsuya grabbed Hero Gold-Hair’s face tight in her arms, steeled her nerves, and kissed him. “Mhhh!” She entwined her tongue with his, releasing the antidote she had taken from Wuha’s mouth directly into his.



“Mhf... Mhgff...” At first Hero Gold-Hair held Tsuya tight, moving to remove her clothes, but as the medicine entered his body, his movements began to relax. Eventually he went still, and Tsuya, seeing that he had settled down, removed her lips from his.

“Hero Gooold-Hair...” Tsuya said, gazing down at him with worried eyes.

Hero Gold-Hair still seemed to be in a great deal of pain, but nonetheless he managed to croak out a few words. “That’s right... I’m okay, Tsuya...” he said, only managing to halfway open his eyes.

“Hero Gooold-Hair... Thank gooodness...” Tsuya said, smiling with relief.

“Yes, thank goodness!” agreed Valentine. “Are you two all right?”

At those words, however, Tsuya took to her feet, wielding the Drilldozer Shovel in one hand as she advanced on Valentine.

“N-No, Madame Tsuya, please understand!” Valentine said, offering a desperate string of excuses. “I was only doing that because I had to, in order to stop Hero Gold-Hair from going on a rampage! It was the only way! I couldn’t stop him, so I had to offer him my body instead!”

Tsuya bounced the Drilldozer Shovel menacingly in her hand. “Oooh?” she said. “But it seeeemed like you were quite haaappy about it, weren’t you? It didn’t look like you were doing it because you had to at aaall!” She leaned in, pressing her face right up against Valentine’s.

“U-Um, well...I-I’m sorry!” was all Valentine could say, tears in her eyes as she apologized to Tsuya.

A second later, the sound of the Drilldozer Shovel impacting flesh rang out in the forest.



“That was a pleasantly bracing strike!” Valentine opined, fresh red markings on her face as she maintained the barrier of dark thread.

“You have to keep up your threeads, after all,” Tsuya grumbled, folding her arms and puffing up her cheeks in a childish pout. “I had to hold back a liiittle...”

“Yes, yes, thank you for the consideration. And I’m very sorry that I got just the littlest bit carried away,” Valentine apologized, wielding her magic power even as she spoke to ensure the safety of the group.

Somewhere behind Tsuya and Valentine, meanwhile, Riliangiu was busy helping Hero Gold-Hair to his feet from where he had been lying sprawled out on the ground. “I feel like I’ve been through the wringer, let me tell you...” he said, shaking his head darkly.

“Well, that’s only to be expected,” said Wuha as she walked up beside him, hands folded behind her head. “That stimulant was some pretty strong stuff. It’s one thing for someone from the Realm of Evil like Riliangiu, but you’re a human. It’s no surprise you’re having a rough time even with my special antidote in your system.”

“I see...” Hero Gold-Hair said, rubbing his forehead as he nodded in understanding. “That explains the splitting headache, I suppose...” Just then, Aryun Keats drove up in her cargo wagon form, her cargo bay piled high with magic beasts—at a glance, there seemed to be at least twice the number they had assembled up to this point. “Hm? Keats, where did those magic beasts come from?”

“According to Madame Wuha’s analysis of the stimulant, once the magic beasts have satisfied their appetites for food and sex, the next stage should be an overwhelming desire for sleep,” Aryun explained. “I thought there might be more magic beasts who’ve been dosed and ended up fast asleep. So I looked around, and sure enough there are magic beasts sleeping like logs all over the forest! I was able to find all we need.”

“You’re right! There’s easily over forty!” Telma cried for joy when she finished counting and began bowing her head over and over again in effusive thanks. “Thank you! Thank you ever so much! Now all we need to do is deliver these magic beasts to the racing hall at Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park!”

“Well...” said Hero Gold-Hair, a satisfied smile coming to his face as he glanced over at Telma. “I suppose everything worked out all right in the end, one way or another...”

“We have the magic beasts we need, and the needles seem to have stopped

raining down as well,” Valentine said, dismissing her threads. “I don’t see any reason not to head straight for Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park, do you?” She turned towards Hero Gold-Hair, smiling cheerfully in spite of the shovel mark that was still clearly visible on her face.

“Fair enough,” Hero Gold-Hair agreed. “I’m a bit curious about whoever those bastards that attacked us are, but completing the job should take priority for the time being...” Shaking his head, he slowly pulled himself to his unsteady feet.

“H-Hero Gooold-Hair!” Tsuya cried, running over before he could teeter once again. She wrapped her arms around his body, lending him support.

“Rhfh...” Hero Gold-Hair grunted. “Thank you, Tsuya.”

“Not at aaall!” Tsuya demurred. “This is the leeeast I could do! But you knooow, it seems like this job took a looot out of you... Maybe, once we get paaaid, we could spend some time taking it easy in the hooot springs! We haven’t done thaaat in a while...”

Hero Gold-Hair nodded in approval at Tsuya’s suggestion. “Good idea,” he said. “Lately it’s been part-time jobs morning, noon, and night. It might be good to treat ourselves for a change.”

“Oho?” Wuha Gappoli, who had been keeping an eye on Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya, suddenly seemed to notice something. “Well, well, well...” she said, squatting down in front of Hero Gold-Hair. A djinn of short stature, Wuha’s current stance brought her face directly on level with Hero Gold-Hair’s crotch. “Your body seems pretty exhausted,” she snickered, peering straight between the man’s legs, “but it looks like your little guy’s raring to go!”

Indeed, while Hero Gold-Hair seemed tired enough to collapse on the spot, the organ between his legs, at least, looked to be full of energy.

“Oh dear, that looks like it must hurt!” Valentine smiled seductively, licking her lips at the sight of the bulge in Hero Gold-Hair’s pants. “Why don’t you let Valentine take care of that for you. Only out of concern for your well-being, of course...” she said, reaching for the zipper of his trousers.

“I tooold you to knock it oooff!!!” Tsuya cried, swinging the Drilldozer Shovel

at Valentine's face once more as Valentine brought her head down to the level of Hero Gold-Hair's lower body. No longer occupied with her threads, however, this time Valentine was free to dodge the blow. The shovel missed her by a hair.

"My, my!" Valentine teased, grinning beguilingly at the human woman. "I have the utmost respect for you, Madame Tsuya, but if you think I will allow you to stand in my way, you are *sorely* mistaken."

"Hmph!" Tsuya said, readying the Drilldozer Shovel for another swing.

"Fwa ha ha ha ha!" cackled Valentine, crossing her arms dramatically as she faced off against Tsuya.

And then, just at that moment...

Gurgle...

A loud rumbling sound issued from Valentine's stomach, cutting through the tense atmosphere that had surrounded the pair. A second later, Valentine's body abruptly shrank. "Oh, my..." she said. "It seems I've run out of magic power..."

Ordinarily, Valentine was the taller of the two women, but between capturing magic beasts and creating the barrier to protect the party from incoming missiles, she had spent a considerable amount of her magic power creating threads of darkness and was now suffering the effects of magic depletion—complete with a smaller stature. Valentine was not originally from the world of Klyrode, but hailed from the Realm of Evil, a world thick with malicism. To survive in Klyrode, with its low density of atmospheric malicism, she required constant infusions of magical power to sustain her physical body.

"Well, let's call it a truuce for now..." Tsuya said. "We should go to Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Paaark as faaast as we can, complete the jooob, and recharge your maliicism first..."

"Yes, thank you, I very much appreciate it." The miniaturized Valentine nodded in agreement.

"N-No need to worry on my account..." Hero Gold-Hair said, using his cape to conceal his crotch as casually as he could manage as he made his way over to Aryun Keats. "Let's just hurry up and finish the job."



Before long, Hero Gold-Hair and company piled on board Aryun Keats and made their way through the forest. They made a point to stick to areas with a thick leafy canopy overhead, preventing Janderena and Yanderena from getting a clear view of their progress as they watched from their camp atop the nearby cliff.

“L-Look! They’re getting away!” Janderena shouted, urgently raising her voice. “Yanderena! Hurry up and fire more needles at them before they escape!”

Yanderena, however, did no such thing. “Gone, gone, gooone!” she sang, dancing frantically with her bow in hand. “No more needles leeeft! There’s nothing, nothing, nothing I can dooo!” The only thing it seemed she was able to do now was dance, her huge eyes brimming over with tears.

“Wh-What do we do?!” Janderena said, panic rising as she looked between Yanderena and Hero Gold-Hair’s party. “That was the only method of long range attack we had!”

“No needles, no drug, nothing to be dooone!” Yanderena sang, dancing through her bitter tears.

Janderena clicked her tongue in irritation and began adding sums on her oversized abacus. “In that case, our only option is to meet up with the carriage team and lie in wait for them at the forest exit...” she said, clacking the beads of her abacus back and forth as she considered her strategy. “We’ll ambush them and *take* their spoils...”

At that moment, as Janderena was distracted with her calculations, *something* seized her by the head and hoisted her up into the air.

“Wh-What’s happening?!” she cried, clutching her abacus in both hands and swinging it every which way in an attempt to break free of whatever it was that had her in its grip. “Who’s there?!” she demanded. “What are you...d-do...ing...”

The creature held Janderena up in front of it, and the color drained from her face when she saw what had her in its grip. It was a giant—a humanoid magic

beast nearly ten meters tall, staring intently at her as a smile crept to his face.

Something about that smile struck Janderena as distinctly lecherous.

“W-Wait!” she protested. “Wh-Why is a giant looking at me like that?! D-Don’t tell he sees me as a potential mate! But I thought giants barely even *had* emotions!” Then she saw a glint of light reflecting off something—something that made her gasp. “W-Wait...”

Sticking out of the giant’s head was a needle, one of the ones Yanderena had fired off only moments ago.

“It can’t be...” Janderena said, somehow managing to go even paler with horror. “You’re...under the effect of our stimulant...”

In response, the giant stuck out his tongue and gave Janderena a big, wet, sloppy lick right on the face.

“E-Eeeewww!!!” Janderena shrieked. “Y-Yanderena, what are you doing?! Come help me at once! This is *your* arrow’s fault in the first place!” She looked down at the giant’s foot, where Yanderena had been dancing earlier, only to find her sister gone.

Damn that good-for-nothing sister of mine! Janderena thought, a vein popping on her forehead from sheer anger. *She ran away!*

The giant just beamed down at the much smaller woman in his arms.

Hero Gold-Hair’s party, of course, had no idea any of this was happening. By now, they were long out of sight.

◇A Few Days Later—A Building Somewhere◇

In a second-story room of a nondescript building located in the back alley of a town near the border between the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the Dark One’s territory, the demon fox sisters Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver were making their case to Janderena, treasurer of the Shadow Conglomerate.

“And so,” Kintsuno concluded, wringing her hands and bowing obsequiously to the woman seated in the chair in front of them, “we would very much appreciate some funds from the Shadow Conglomerate war chest...”

“I-It’s a direct order from the Shadow King himself, you know,” Gintsuno added. “And if you could, we’d appreciate a bit more money than last time...”

The two put on their most mollifying smiles, bowing again and again as they begged before Janderena. Janderena, for her part, merely regarded the pair with silent contempt. She leaned back on her chair’s armrest with her legs folded imperiously, revealing the thigh-high boots she wore under her black gothic lolita dress.

Wh-What’s this...? Kintsuno thought. *Why isn’t she saying anything?*

I-I don’t know how much more of this silence I can stand... thought Gintsuno.

Still, despite their mounting distress, the demon fox sisters kept on wringing their hands pleadingly, forcing themselves to smile.

Finally, Janderena spoke. “Money, is it...?” she said with a sigh.

“Y-Yes!” yipped Kintsuno.

“As soon as possible, if you please!” Gintsuno added.

Taking heart in the fact that Janderena had finally replied, the two leaned forward with renewed eagerness. Janderena, however, glared at the foxes through heavy-lidded eyes and sighed once more. She produced her oversized abacus from the wall behind her and began flicking the beads back and forth. Then, with a loud *clack*, she abruptly stopped.

“Hm...” Janderena said, sighing yet a third time as she thrust her hand into her pocket. She produced a bag of gold and tossed it over to Kintsuno.

Kintsuno’s face split into a broad grin as she snatched the bag out of the air. “Thank...y-you...?” she started to say, but the second she looked inside she went abruptly stiff.

“Wh-What’s wrong, elder sister Kintsu...n-no...?” Gintsuno started to ask, sensing something was off and following her sister’s gaze into the bag. When she saw its contents, however, she went stiff as well.

Inside the bag was nothing but a single gold coin.

The two turned to look up at Janderena with mounting distress.

“U-Um...” Kintsuno ventured.

“What’s this...?” Gintsuno asked.

“Money,” was all Janderena said.

“Yip?” said Kintsuno.

“Yip yip?” echoed Gintsuno.

“I gave you your money,” said Janderena. “Now get out of my face.”

“Y-Yip?”

“Y-Yip yip?”

The fox sisters’ eyes went wide. They seemed to be rooted to the spot.

“I told you, didn’t I?!” Janderena snapped, seething with anger. “Right now, that’s all I have to give you! That’s the *limit!* Am I understood?! Now get out there and *make me more money!*” Enraged, she lifted the abacus high above her head.

“Eeeeeek!” Kintsuno cried.

“I get it! I get it!” pleaded Gintsuno.

The two scrambled out of the room, fleeing before Janderena’s wrath. Once they were gone, Janderena sat back down on her chair, glaring after them as she caught her breath.

“What a week...” she grumbled, returning to her abacus. “I barely escaped being violated by a giant...Yanderena’s run off to gods know where...and on top of it all, we didn’t capture a single magic beast...”

For the next several days, townsfolk swore they could hear the telltale sound of the beads of an abacus clacking back and forth almost nonstop whenever they happened to pass by the building.

Chapter 4: The Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education

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

Class was still in session at the Houghtow College of Magic as three individuals settled down to a meeting in the headmaster's office.

"Now then," said Headmaster Nyt, sighing ever so slightly as she sat in her own chair across from the sofa she used for treating guests. "What isss thiss about?"

Nyt, once known as Yorminyt the Serpent Princess, had once been of the Dark Army's Infernal Four during the reign of Dark One Gholl. Currently, however, she was disguised in a human form using magic. She had been through all sorts of trials and travails after deserting the Dark Army, eventually ending up at the Houghtow College of Magic, where she now served as headmaster.

"But I musst ssay," Nyt added, "I certainly wassn't expecting a vissit from Your Majesssty..."

The Maiden Queen smiled benevolently, bowing politely as she sat down on the sofa across from Nyt. "First," she said, "I would like to thank you for making time to see me. I understand that it was a sudden request during a period when you were occupied with other tasks..."

Before she could get further, however, a knock came on the office door and in stepped Taclyde, carrying a number of cups of black tea balanced on a tray.

Taclyde was a local man employed by the Houghtow College of Magic to handle its administrative tasks. He was a tremendously capable individual, able to handle the logistics related to repairs, cleaning, tuition, and staff salaries entirely on his own. The parents of the younger students enrolled in the college's primary education courses trusted him implicitly.

"Erm... Excuse me, Your Majesty," Taclyde said, clearly awkward in the presence of royalty. "I have some tea here, although I'm not certain it's suitable

for your royal palate..." He placed one of the cups in front of the Maiden Queen.

"Oh, not at all! I'm sure it's lovely!" the Maiden Queen reassured him, bowing her head just slightly, wearing the same benevolent smile as earlier. "Thank you very much!"

Taclyde placed another cup in front of Nyt, bowed, and made to leave the office.

"Taclyde," Nyt said, stopping him. "I would like you to ssstay here for the meeting, pleassse."

"What?" Taclyde balked. "M-Me?"

"Depending on Her Majessty's bussinesss, I may need to make a correct judgment," Nyt explained.

"Erm, well, I really can't say how knowledgeable I am about these affairs..." Taclyde hemmed and hawed. "But all right. If you say so, Headmaster Nyt, I will..." Bending his torso low and bobbing his head respectfully, Taclyde sat on the sofa across from the Maiden Queen.

"I am very sorry to take you away from your pressing duties, Mister Taclyde," the Maiden Queen said, lowering her head.

"No, no, not at all, not at all!" said Taclyde, waving his hands in front of him to dispel the notion.

Nyt took a sip of tea, looking over at her two guests sitting in opposite sofas from her own seat in the headmaster's chair. "With that out of the way..." she said. "May I asssk what bringsss Your Majessty all thiss way to meet with usss?"

"Yes, of course," the Maiden Queen said, turning to face Nyt. "I assume you are familiar with the new school under construction in Klyrode Castle?"

"Ahh," Yorminyt nodded in recognition. "That would be a reorganization of a previousss insstitution, if I am not missstaken..."

"That is correct," said the Maiden Queen. "The previous institution was a military school, with a curriculum focused on the knowledge and combat

techniques our knights would need for the war against the Dark Army. With a peace treaty in place between us and the Dark Army, however, we have been reorganizing the academy as a place where students can study fields unrelated to war—the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education.”

The Maiden Queen paused, took a sip of her tea, and continued. “It is our hope that this new campus will be a place not only for humans, but one where demons, too, may come to study if they so desire. However...” she hesitated. “Many of those who reside in Klyrode Castle have little love for demonkind. Your Houghtow College of Magic, meanwhile, has already taken on a number of demons if I am not mistaken. I was hoping, perhaps, that you might help me persuade some of the people at the castle with your history of success...”

Nyt’s eyes went wide. Even Taclyde spat out his tea when he heard the Queen’s request.

“Um...pardon me?” the Maiden Queen said, looking blankly between Nyt and Taclyde. “Is something the matter?”

Ah, I sssee... Nyt told herself as she met the reigning monarch’s gaze. I wasss worried for a moment that I had been found out, but it ssseems the Maiden Queen doesss not know that I myssself am a demon...

“Oh, of course,” the Maiden Queen continued. “This isn’t something you speak publicly of, is it? Rest assured, I myself fully approve of your decision to enroll demons in your school...and of your position as well, Headmaster Nyt.”

“Wh-What?” Nyt said, caught off guard by the Maiden Queen’s last statement. “O-Oh, I sssee...”

The Maiden Queen failed to stifle a slight giggle at Nyt’s reaction.

G-Give me a break! Taclyde thought to himself, eyes daring nervously between Nyt and the Maiden Queen. I was sure our school was too far in the middle of nowhere for anyone to find out we’d enrolled those demon kids...but it sounds like Her Majesty already knows that Headmaster Nyt is a demon as well! He wiped the corners of his mouth with a handkerchief, doing his best to keep a pleasant smile on his face.

“There’s no cause to worry,” the Maiden Queen reassured him, guessing what

was going through his mind. “I haven’t breathed a word of your situation to anyone at the castle.”

“And in exchange for your dissscretion,” Nyt said, “you would like usss to openly accept demon children as we have been up until now. Very well. It would not be much of a change for usss, after all.”

“Thank you very much for your cooperation,” the Maiden Queen said, rising from the sofa to give an elegant curtsy.

“Incidentally,” said Nyt, “may I assk a quesstion of my own?”

“Yes?” the Maiden Queen answered. “What is it?”

“When precisssely does Your Majessty intend to marry our Garyl?”

“Pffffh?!” This time it was the Maiden Queen’s turn to violently spit out a mouthful of tea. Her cheeks bright red, she desperately tried to retain some semblance of calm. “W-Well!” she said. “Th-That’s a private matter, you know! I’m afraid I can’t quite give you an answer just yet! W-Well then, now that our business is concluded, I had best be off!” Bowing deep, Her Majesty left the headmaster’s office in an evident hurry.

“A-Ah!” said Taclyde, hurrying after the Maiden Queen himself. “I-I suppose I should see her to the exit!”

Nyt found herself alone once again, smiling in something like amusement as she watched Taclyde and the Maiden Queen speed out the door. “Sssso *that*’sss the geniusss who brokered peace between demonsss and humankind...” she mused, finishing off what was left of her tea in a single drink. “She hasss a cute ssside to her as well, I sssee...”

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

That evening before dinner, Garyl stood on guard against his father, wooden training sword in hand. “All right, dad, here I come!” he said.

“Whenever you’re ready!” answered Flio, smiling his usual easygoing smile.

That day, upon coming home from school, Garyl had challenged Flio to a sparring match. He was wielding a wooden sword. Flio had no weapon, simply standing with his right arm outstretched. For a brief moment they stood facing

off against each other until Garyl sprung forward with a “Hah!” bringing him within striking distance. He thrust his sword towards the base of Flio’s neck, landing a clean hit...or so it appeared. The instant the sword was about to connect, however, Flio was simply gone.

Garyl’s eyes shot open. Flio, who had moved behind him in the blink of an eye, placed his hand on the middle of his son’s back. Garyl was sent cartwheeling through the air in the direction of the pasture, but even though the attack had taken him completely by surprise, he managed to correct his posture in midair and land in a crouch in front of the pasture’s fence.

“That was incredible, dad!” Garyl said, smiling earnestly as he paused to trade words with his father. “I really thought I had you there!”

“You were pretty incredible yourself,” said Flio, returning his son’s smile in kind. “With how fast you were moving, I wasn’t able to hold back as much as I’d have liked to. But you know, as fast as that thrust was, coming straight in like that makes it easy to read your movements. And the easier an attack is to see coming, the easier it is to dodge.”

“I see...” Garyl stood up, frowning seriously as he took in Flio’s criticism. “I guess speed alone isn’t enough after all.”

Not far away, a small group of Garyl’s classmates had gathered to watch him spar with Flio. “Garyl is amazing, but so is his lord father...” remarked Salina, her eyes opened wide in awe at the brief exchange she had just seen.

Salina was a young lady from an aristocratic family with a strong case of unrequited infatuation for Garyl. She specialized in water elemental magic.

Next to her, dressed in her usual black gothic lolita-style dress, was Irystiel. This time she was holding a black rabbit plush in her hands, making its mouth move and projecting her voice using ventriloquism.

“Irystiel says, ‘It’s too bad Garyl didn’t win, but he still looked really cool!’” the rabbit reported.

Irystiel, like Salina, was quite infatuated with Garyl herself. She was a shy girl, unable to converse with others without the help of her stuffed animals. Her specialty was curse magic. She was also the younger sister of Belianna, one of

the current Infernal Four, but that was a secret from the other children.

“Hah,” Sadjitta scoffed, preening and puffing out his chest. “I guess Garyl’s not so tough after all! He couldn’t even handle fighting his own dad! It’s only a matter of time before I surpass him too!”

Sadjitta was a boy from Garyl’s class, and the son of an important family in Houghtow City. He favored an even mix of offensive and defensive magic, although his ability with both was nothing special. He insisted on playing the role of Garyl’s rival at every opportunity, even though the contest between them was one he had no hope of ever winning.

Snow Little narrowed her eyes, giving Sadjitta a withering sidelong glance. “Quite a bold declaration,” she said. “Remind me, though, who was it who found himself every bit as unable to handle Garyl himself in our fencing club activities, even though he was plainly holding back every time you fought?”

Snow Little belonged to a species of demon known as fable folk, and skilled at summoning magic. Like the other girls in her class, she, too, was quite smitten with Garyl. Secretly, she was the younger sister of Snow White, one of the candidates for Dark One Dawkson’s hand in marriage.

“Gah!” Sadjitta exclaimed, stammering out some incoherent excuse. “W-Well, yeah, b-but I was holding back myself too you know...”

As he spoke, a cloud mist materialized next to Sadjitta, growing steadily larger until Ben’ne appeared beside him. “Do not speak so boastfully, boy,” she said, chuckling indulgently and patting Sadjitta on the head. “I, too, witnessed your match in the fencing club today, and you were most assuredly challenging my master with the whole of your strength.”

“Th-That’s not true!” Sadjitta insisted, turning his face away in a huff. “O-Or rather, I never said I was stronger than him *right now*! I’m only saying that I’ll surpass him eventually...”

“Good,” said Ben’ne, speaking in gentle tones as if Sadjitta were her own unruly child. “That is a splendid goal. Most would yield to despair from the very start. To continue in your discipline rather than shrink from such a foe will be a path of many trials. To overcome it, boy, you must practice discipline at all times and in all places.”

“I-I know...” Sadjitta nodded, frowning just a little at Ben’ne’s words.

Alas, Ben’ne thought as she looked down at the boy whose head she was patting. For an upstart pup with only bark and no bite such as yourself, it would be many lifetimes of discipline indeed before the day would come for you to defeat my master...

Internally, she was also seething that Sadjitta would dare speak ill of Garyl.

In front of the crowd of onlookers, Garyl assumed a fighting stance and challenged his father once more. “You wanna go another round, dad?”

“Sure!” said Flio, smiling his usual easygoing smile as he raised his hand once again. “Let’s do it!”

Just then, the doors of Flio’s house swung open. “My lord husband! Garyl!” Rys called. “It’s almost time for dinner! Hurry on inside!”

Flio and Garyl exchanged a glance. “Sorry, Garyl,” Flio said. “I suppose we’ll have to continue this later.”

“Okay, all right then,” Garyl agreed, following his father back towards the house. On his way, he stopped by the group of his classmates. “Thanks for coming to cheer for me, everyone! Shall I see you off?”

“O-Oh!” Salina squeaked in a higher pitched voice than usual, her cheeks flushing pink. “A-Actually, if it’s not too much trouble, I would love to stay at your house just a little longer, Lord Garyl...”

“Irystiel says there’s still plenty of time before dormitory curfew!” Irystiel’s black rabbit plush insisted.

“A-And my sister is going to be out of town today...” added Snow Little, flushing pink as well. “I would love to stay, if you’ll have me...”

All of the girls, it seemed, wanted to stay at Garyl’s house for as long as they could.

“How about this, everyone?” proposed Flio. Standing behind them, he smiled his usual smile and reached out with his arm. A magic circle appeared in front of his hand, and from it emerged one door for each of Garyl’s classmates. “The first door leads to the space right in front of Salina’s house, the second leads to

the Houghtow College of Magic Dormitory where Irystiel is staying, the third leads to Snow Little's house, and the fourth leads to Sadjitta's."

The girls slowly turned to look.

G-Garyl's papa is simply far too preposterous... thought Salina.

I-Irystiel wishes he'd give a little more consideration for a young girl's feelings... thought Irystiel.

H-He's doing this again...? thought Snow Little.

Holding back bitter tears, however, the three girls managed their best "Thank you very much!" before stepping through the doors. Sadjitta, on the other hand, simply took his door home without any fuss whatsoever.

◇Flio's House—Second Floor Lounge◇

From the outside, Flio's house appeared to be a three story wooden building. The interior, however, had been vastly expanded by a permanent magic effect courtesy of Flio. Inside, the building boasted five aboveground floors and three basement levels, each with space to spare.

The first story featured numerous parlors and the dining room where the whole family ate dinner as a household. It was equipped with an enormous indoor bath divided into men's and women's areas, and boasted a kitchen rivaling the finest restaurants. The second floor and above were for individual rooms, or else rooms shared by one of the house's couples. The more mature children—Garyl, Elinàsze, Rynàsze, and Rislei—each had their own rooms, while Folmina and Ghoró, who were still quite young, shared a room. Rabbitz shared a room with her parents, Calsi'im and Charun, as did Belalio with their parents, Belano and Minilio.

Wyne, incidentally, seemed to prefer spending time in Folmina and Ghoró's room over her own, while Hiya spent most of their time in their own mindscape and had no need for a room in the material world.

Each person's individual room was divided into two chambers, one to serve as a private space and the other for sleeping quarters. In addition, each floor had its own common lounge in the area around the stairway.

In the lounge on the second floor, Garyl, Rislei, and Elinàsze were having a conversation.

“Your dad sure is strong, huh, Gare?” said Rislei, sighing with admiration as she thought back to the match she had witnessed between Flio and Garyl. “Even the invincible Garyl, scourge of the school fencing club, has no chance at all against him.”

“But of course!” preened Elinàsze from the seat beside Garyl. “That’s papa, you know! You weren’t expecting him to be *weak*, were you?” She cast her head back with so much force that she nearly toppled over in jubilant laughter, only further cementing her reputation as a daddy’s girl par excellence.

“Tell me about it,” Garyl said with a wry smirk, scratching the back of his head. “You know, between my lessons in school and the training I did on my own, I thought I’d managed to get just a little bit stronger, but I guess I’m still not even close...”

“There is no need to take such a pessimistic view, my master,” said Ben’ne, appearing from a sudden mist behind Garyl. “In all my long centuries training in the Land of the Rising Sun, not once before have I met a warrior of your caliber, I assure you.” *Or rather...* she thought to herself. *It does no good to compare oneself to beings on my master’s father’s scale. To say such a thing would be disrespectful to my master, though, and besides, he must assuredly know it better than anyone.*

“Thank you, Miss B...” said Garyl, lifting his head with a smile and looking around at the others in the room. “And I know my dad’s incredible. But that’s exactly why I want to do everything I can to get even a little bit closer to his level! That way, I could protect Miss Ellie from anything, no matter what.”

“Well,” said Elinàsze, “I expect it would be absolutely impossible for you to surpass papa or anything like that, but there’s certainly nothing wrong with keeping him as a benchmark to work towards. It *will* be *absolutely impossible*, though, if I’m not mistaken.”

Repeating the words “absolutely impossible” like that was Elinàsze’s way of telling her brother not to lose heart over failing at something nobody could have expected him to succeed at anyway, and to simply continue his training. It

seemed like Garyl must have understood her intention, though, as he smiled cheerfully at his sister's words.

"Thanks, big sis Elinàsze," he said. "I'll try hard and do what I can."

"I would gladly serve as a partner in your training, master, whenever you see fit to call on me," Ben'ne offered.

"Of course!" said Garyl with a smile and a nod. "I'll be counting on you!"

At Garyl's response, however, Ben'ne suddenly began stripping off her clothes, removing her kimono and undoing the cloth wrapping she wore over her chest.

"U-Um... M-Miss B?" Garyl asked. "Wh-What are you doing?"

"I am preparing myself for our training, my master," answered Ben'ne.

"W-Well, hang on!" Garyl protested, laughing nervously as he grabbed at Ben'ne's clothing in an effort to prevent it from falling completely off her body.

"I-It's getting a little late tonight. I don't want to train this *very moment*..."

"Oh? Is that so...?" Ben'ne said, inclining her head. "In that case, I shall await the time when you wish to train with me." With a smile, she began removing her clothes even faster than before.



“All right, that’s enough!” said Elinàsze, holding out her hand. A magic circle appeared, and as it rotated in midair in front of her, Ben’ne found herself forcefully dressed in an outfit that resembled a leotard.

“Oh?” Ben’ne chuckled. “A bold play befitting the elder sister of my master. However...” she said, transforming her body back into mist. Ben’ne’s body was a pure psychic construct, not made of genuine flesh and blood at all. By returning to her mist form, she would normally be able to nullify any magic effect that had been applied to her. But when she reassumed her corporeal body, however, she found the leotard still on, stubbornly covering up her nudity. “What is this...?”

“Unfortunately for you, that outfit won’t go away until I cancel the spell,” Elinàsze said, smiling brightly.

Ben’ne tried to reach between the leotard of her skin, only for her fingers to slide off harmlessly without disturbing the fabric. “I see...” she said. “Truly, a spell worthy of the elder sister of my master indeed. I acknowledge my defeat.” She lowered her head in a good display of sportsmanship in spite of the chagrined look on her face.

“J-Jeez...” Rislei complained, peeping at the scene playing out in front of her through the gaps in her fingers even as she covered her face with her hands. “Miss B...” As embarrassed as she was, she was getting to be the age where she was starting to develop an interest in things such as nudity.

“Speaking of training,” Garyl said with a smirk. “I wonder how *theirs* is—” But that was as far as he got, however, before something seemed to catch his attention. “Hm?” he said, quickly reaching for something in his pocket. He produced a ring which was at that moment vibrating and blinking with light. “Sorry, I gotta step out for a bit. The rest of you should probably get to sleep.” Smiling, he hurried out the nearby window, crouched down on the windowsill, and sprang up all the way to the roof.

“Well, well,” Elinàsze giggled as Garyl exited the scene. “I can only imagine who this *they* Garyl mentioned might be. If I had to guess, I suppose it would be the same person who just contacted him now.”

“Huh?” Rislei blinked. “Eli, what was up with Gare just now?”

“Did you see that ring he was holding?” Elinàsze replied. “That’s a ring my papa made and set with a Conversation Gem.”

“A...Conversation Gem?” echoed Rislei.

“That’s right. It’s one part of a set of two rings, enabling their holders to speak to each other no matter how far apart they may be. It has security features as well, preventing anyone from listening in on the conversation. Even if one of the pair was being watched over by a constant guard and behind a magic barrier over in Klyrode Castle, for example, nobody would be able to interfere with their conversation—or even notice, for that matter.”

Elinàsze’s example was right on the money. During the war with the Dark Army, Klyrode Castle had found itself infiltrated by enemy spies on many occasions. To prevent any such spies from using a spell to transmit sensitive information, the castle was kept under a powerful magic barrier at all times by a team of high level mages. It was a practice that continued even now that the war had come to an end.

“It can get through the barrier around Klyrode Castle?” Rislei asked. “That’s an incredible little ring...”

“Isn’t it?” Elinàsze gushed with so much pride you might think she had been the one to create it. “That’s my papa for you! He really is the most incredible man.”

“Hm...” Rislei paused, thinking. “But if the other ring is in Klyrode Castle, that would mean Garyl’s mysterious conversation partner is...”

“Yes, exactly,” Elinàsze confirmed. “It’s Miss Ellie, without a doubt.” The two girls shared a knowing smile before Elinàsze continued. “Well, not that it makes much of a difference. Miss Ellie will be here tomorrow to help make dinner as part of her bridal training. Papa and mama both are giving the two of them their full support.”

“Yeah,” Rislei said, folding her arms in thought. “But on the other hand, Miss Ellie is the Queen of this land, you know. If Gare marries her, he’s gonna end up being King of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode...”

Elinàsze let out a spat of laughter. “His Majesty King Garyl, hm? I hate to say

it, but I can't imagine that at all. Garyl really doesn't cut much of a kingly figure. A king should have perfect command of magic as well as impeccable combat abilities. He should be intelligent, and handsome, and absolutely perfect at everything he does! Yes, such a person would be worthy, I think..." She clasped her hands together, a dreamy sparkle coming to her eyes. "In other words, someone like papa! I can't imagine anyone else who could manage it!" For a moment she lost herself in the fantasy of Flio as a king. "And next to him..." she rhapsodized, picturing herself in the place of a consort following along at King Flio's side.

Elinàsze's reputation as a daddy's girl, it seemed, remained as secure as ever.

◇Meanwhile...◇

"Hm...?" Rys, who had been combing her hair in front of the mirror on the bedroom dresser, suddenly looked up from her grooming and glanced all around the room.

"What's wrong, Rys?" Flio asked. He had been sitting on the corner of the bed reading a book as Rys finished her routine.

"I'm not sure..." Rys said, continuing to glance suspiciously this way and that. "I might just be imagining things, but I thought I could sense vibrations indicating that someone was entertaining some sort of highly inappropriate fantasy involving my lord husband..."

Rys's senses were keen enough even to pick up on her daughter's idle daydream. After all, if Elinàsze was a credit to daddy's girls everywhere, Rys's reputation as an adoring wife to her lord husband was every bit as high.

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Rislei smirked as Elinàsze lost herself in her fantasy, eyes sparkling with wonder. *Oh, Eli...you never change, do you?* she thought. "Well," she said out loud, "I'll admit that if anyone's worthy of being king, it would be your papa. I mean, he's even stronger than the former Dark One, Mister Ghozal, and a djinn as tough as Hiya..."

As she mulled it over, Rislei let out a slight sigh. *If I had a ring like that,* she thought, *I'd have no trouble getting in contact with Reptor...* She sighed again as

an image of her classmate Reptor, the lizardfolk boy, popped into her head. *I'd really like to get to know him better, but papa is guaranteed to get in the way if I invite him over to our house. And if I try to take him on a date in the city, papa will just appear out of nowhere anyway! I wish I had parents who approved of my relationship like Gare's do...but father would never let a boy get close to me...*

Rislei's father Sleip, for his part, had a legendary reputation as an overbearing father.

"Ah ha ha," Ben'ne laughed, smiling fondly at the two children. "Ah, the troubles of youth. How very nostalgic."

◇Later that Week—Klyrode Castle◇

A few days later, Garyl and Flio took a trip to Klyrode Castle.

"Miss Ellie—or rather, Her Majesty the Maiden Queen—contacted me the other day," said Garyl. They were within the castle walls at this point, so he had to remember to refer to the Maiden Queen by her official name rather than the name he knew her by. "She said she wanted me to stop by the castle to visit the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education."

"The Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education, hm?" Flio said. "You know, I heard it was a product of a number of educational institutions consolidated together, like the Klyrode School for Young Knights aimed at children and the Klyrode Knight Academy for young adults..."

"That's right," said Garyl. "And now..."

Before their conversation could continue any further however, a man came up to the two of them, dressed in a knight's uniform—the retired Knight Commander MacTaulo. "Well, if it isn't Garyl! I've been waiting for you!"

MacTaulo was the highest ranking commander of the knights of Klyrode during the war against the Dark Army and one of humanity's mightiest champions. He had fought for many long years on the front lines, particularly against the forces of Sleip of the Infernal Four, with whom he had clashed numerous times throughout the course of the war. Now that their people were at peace, however, he and Sleip had forged a bond of friendship.

With the war behind him, MacTaulo had taken the opportunity the peace treaty had given him to quit the military and refocus his efforts on educating the next generation, now serving as the first headmaster of the new Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education.

“Headmaster MacTaulo,” Flio said, politely bowing his head. “Thank you for coming out of your way to meet us.”

“Hello, Headmaster,” said Garyl, bowing as well. “I’ve come to visit, like I promised.”

MacTaulo nodded in approval at the father and son. “I couldn’t be happier to have the pride of the Houghtow College of Magic paying a visit to our institution,” he said, firmly shaking hands first with Flio and then with Garyl. “Please take your time and look around to your heart’s content.”

“I’m really nothing that special,” Garyl demurred as he shook MacTaulo’s hand. “But thank you for having me!”

As MacTaulo smiled kindly at Garyl’s words, Rabianna, the rabbitfolk woman accompanying him, smirked. “Headmaster MacTaulo would be hopping to teach you himself if it weren’t for his injuries!” she volunteered. “He brings it up every chance he gets, like, *‘Oh, if only it weren’t for my bad knee...’*”

“Well, can you blame me?” MacTaulo argued, giving the offending knee a forlorn glance. “It feels like it was only the other day I was fighting on the front lines, after all! And before everyone got on my case about my bad knee, I was hard at work leading drills in this very institution...”

“Listen to yourself!” Rabianna chided him, crossing her arms in aggravation. “You’re getting to a hopping old age, Headmaster. Be a good boy and focus on your management duties, if you please!”

“Preposterous!” MacTaulo insisted. “I could lead drills with one hand behind my back if I had to! You can’t expect me to be satisfied cooped up behind a desk all day.”

“I’m telling you, sir, you have to think of your age!” Rabianna said rather earnestly. The teasing tone was gone from her voice. “Everyone knows how incredible you were leading soldiers at the front line! We all respect you a

hopping great deal! But that's exactly why we don't want to see you pushing yourself too hard!"

Something about the way MacTaulo and Rabianna carried on made them seem like father and child.

Flio smiled knowingly as watched the exchange. *I'd have no problem curing Mister MacTaulo's knee with a simple Heal spell*, he thought, glancing between the pair. *But it seems like Miss Rabianna is just as happy having the excuse of his injured knee to prevent him from pushing himself too hard. Hmm...how to approach this...*

Flio watched the two argue for some time, but MacTaulo and Rabianna showed no signs of stopping anytime soon. Eventually, Flio resorted to raising his hand to get the pair's attention. "Excuse me... I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation, but we do have limited time here. Perhaps we should get moving?"

"Oh!" MacTaulo started. "My apologies! Rabianna, let's leave this conversation for another day and give Mister Flio and young Garyl here their tour!"

"That's exactly what I was *trying* to say!" Rabianna insisted, getting in one last jab at MacTaulo before turning to bow her head cheerfully to Flio and Garyl. "Now then, Mister Flio, Mister Garyl, I'm very sorry to have kept you waiting! If you'll hop right this way, we can begin your tour!"

◇Meanwhile—Houghtow College of Magic◇

When she heard that Garyl would be absent from class for a visit to the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education, Salina hurried to Elinàsze's seat to ask for details. "Is it true? Is Lord Garyl really visiting another school?"

"That's what I said, isn't it?" Elinàsze answered, giving the girl a tired glance. "It's just a visit, though. Don't get too excited."

"But, but, but..." Salina stammered, leaning in close over Elinàsze's desk. "Wh-What if he meets some beautiful lady in the capital and decides he'd rather be with her! What am I to do *then*?!" Salina kept on tearfully catastrophizing in that vein, clutching her head in her arms as panic began to

set in.

Elinàsze sighed as Salina carried on atop her desk. *Hahh...* she thought, looking down at her in exasperation. *What should I have said, I wonder? Maybe I should have just told them Garyl's decided to attend the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education...but something tells me if I said that I'd just throw Irystiel and Snow Little into a panic as well...*

Suddenly, Salina ceased her distressed writhing and lifted her head. "By the by," she said. "Elinàsze..."

"Yes? What is it?" Elinàsze asked.

"You are this school's top student, are you not?"

"I suppose I am," Elinàsze said. "For what it's worth..."

Salina held Elinàsze's hands tight in hers. "Listen to me, Elinàsze..." she said, a serious look in her eyes as she squeezed Elinàsze's hands as hard as she could. "You are one of my very most precious friends. Of course I would like to be with Lord Garyl more than anything, but I would also very much like to graduate alongside you. I hope you understand that..."

"Salina..." Elinàsze said, finding herself at a loss for words. *W-Well...* she thought. *I did say it would be too much of a hassle to transfer to the Klyrode Institute myself, after all...* A complicated expression crossed her face.

"Ahhh!" Salina cried, finally removing herself from Elinàsze's desk. "I simply can't stop worrying about Lord Garyl! I do hope he comes back soon..."

◇Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education—Student Council Office◇

"President Lullun!" A girl with long hair threw open the door to the student council office with a somewhat excessive amount of force. Followed by a boy wearing glasses, she came to an ungainly stop before the student council president's seat. "G-Garyl's here!"

"He arrived with a man who seems to be his father," the boy added. "Headmaster MacTaulo already showed them inside the building!"

The president, a girl with purple hair done up in pigtails, pressed her false glasses up the ridge of her nose. "Calm down, Locanna. And you too, Dethryc,"

she said with cold detachment. “Why are you so worked up over this boy? He’s a mere human-demon hybrid, if I understand correctly—meaning that half of his blood is common human stock. And he’s from the countryside, no less...”

Locanna, the girl with long hair, and Dethryc, the boy with glasses, looked at the president in exasperated disbelief. “H-Half of his blood is human...?” said Locanna.

“But *all* of *your* blood is human, isn’t it, class president?” said Dethryc.

“It’s just a turn of speech,” Class President Lullun said, adjusting her glasses once again. “Don’t take it so seriously.” She stood from her seat and continued. “But this Houghtow College of Magic he studies at currently...I’ve heard it’s a fairly low-level school. Rumor has it they teach demihumans who can barely read and write, and now that we have a peace treaty with the Dark Army, they’ve even announced their intention to accept uneducated demon children as well! I cannot for the life of me imagine why the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education would accept a student with an alma mater like *that*...”

She sighed deeply before continuing. “However, as Headmaster MacTaulo instructed me to introduce myself to this boy and give him a tour of our campus, I suppose I must go to meet him. I simply can’t help but wonder if he really is the sort of individual we need in our institution. And he’s having trouble deciding whether to transfer here, they say? I expect it’s simply nerves—nothing worth using my wiles over.”

“No, you don’t understand!” said Locanna. “Garyl’s very famous, even among the students here!”

“Trust us on this!” begged Dethryc.

Lullun sighed and adjusted her glasses once again. “Yes, yes, I understand,” she said. “Well, I suppose I am off to the headmaster’s office. You two, accompany me as well.”

“O-Okay!” agreed Locanna.

“Yes, ma’am!” said Dethryc.

Lullun left the student council office with Locanna and Dethryc hurrying along behind her, and made their way through the halls to the headmaster’s office

where MacTaulo was waiting.

◇Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education—Headmaster’s Office◇

“This school really is amazing, huh?” Garyl exclaimed when he saw the enormous spear decorating the side wall of MacTaulo’s office.

“Oh?” MacTaulo’s eyes blinked open in surprise. “Don’t tell me you know what this spear is!”

“Well...” Garyl said, smiling bashfully. “I don’t know the weapon’s name or anything, but I can sense something. It must have belonged to a demon with an incredible amount of magic power.”

“No need to be modest,” MacTaulo told him. “It’s quite impressive that you can tell that much. The legendary knight commander Sir Geldredda claimed that spear from the Dark One of his day, or so the story goes. He’s the founder of one of our predecessor organizations, you see—the Klyrode School for Young Knights. In a way, it’s one of the symbols of our institution.”

“Wow!” Garyl said, his eyes shining as he gazed up at the spear. “No wonder I can feel so much magic power from it, then!”

Flio looked up at the spear from his seat on the office sofa. It was true—magic energy was spilling out of its head. It seemed like it had been used to slay a demon possessing a high level of magic power. Flio focused his senses on the spear, magically calling up a window only he could see and replaying the events of a battle that happened long, long ago.

Flio watched as a man who seemed to be the knight commander descended upon an enormous demon, swinging his hefty blade and knocking the demon’s spear to the ground. *Hmm...* he thought, a knowing smirk coming to his face. *Well, it does seem to be true that it was taken from a powerful demon, but that doesn’t look like the Dark One, or even one of the Infernal Four. It seems to be a demon on the level of a division commander, maybe...*

Flio decided not to share his findings at that very moment, however. The mood of the room didn’t seem right. Instead he watched as MacTaulo happily relayed the weapon’s history to an enraptured Garyl.

Knock knock.

At that point, there came a knock on the door. “Yes, come in!” said MacTaulo. The door opened, and three students stepped into the reception area of the office—Lullun, Locanna, and Dethryc.

“Student Council President Lullun here at your request, Headmaster MacTaulo, accompanied by Student Council Vice Presidents Locanna and Dethryc,” Lullun announced herself, bowing smartly and pressing her glasses up the ridge of her nose. Locanna and Dethryc bowed their heads low as well.

“Ah, you three,” said MacTaulo. “Thank you for taking the time out of your student council duties.” He clapped a hand on Garyl’s shoulder. “This is Garyl. He’s come today to pay the school a visit and see how we operate.”

“I’m Garyl, from the Houghtow College of Magic,” said Garyl, giving Lullun an easygoing smile that was somehow reminiscent of his father’s. “Thank you for agreeing to show me around!” He held out his hand.

Locanna’s heart skipped a beat. “I-I’m Locanna, vice president of the student council!” she squeaked, desperately trying to maintain a calm demeanor as she shook his hand, blushing all the while. “I-It’s my pleasure!” *H-He’s rather handsome for a country boy, isn’t he...?* she thought.

Dethryc, on the other hand, seemed to be perfectly calm. “I’m the other student council vice president. My name is Dethryc. It’s nice to meet you, Garyl,” he said, giving Garyl’s hand a leisurely shake.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” said Garyl.

Having made the acquaintance of the two student council vice presidents, Garyl went to shake student council president Lullun’s hand as well. Lullun, however, showed no sign of offering her hand. She simply stood with her arms crossed, fixing Garyl with an inquisitive gaze.

“Um...” Garyl said. He kept holding out his arm, his smile unfaltering despite his mounting confusion.

Lullun pressed her glasses up the ridge of her nose in a sharp motion, and stood fixed in place without so much as a twitch.

MacTaulo, who had been growing uncomfortable in the face of Lullun’s attitude, stepped in between the two. “W-Well then, there you have it!” he

said, giving Garyl a toothy smile. “These three are the representatives of the student body of our institution. I’ll be having them take you on a tour, if you don’t mind!”

“Thank you very much, everyone!” said Garyl, letting down his arm and happily returning MacTaulo’s smile. “Shall we get going?”

The two vice presidents, also acutely aware of their superior’s strange behavior, stepped in between Lullun and Garyl, bowing over and over again.

“No, no, no, thank *you!*” said Locanna.

“Feel free to ask any questions you have and I’ll tell you what I know,” offered Dethryc.

Lullun, rooted to her spot, kept on watching Garyl but otherwise did nothing aside from the odd adjustment of her glasses.

Afterward, Garyl, Flio, MacTaulo, MacTaulo’s secretary Rabianna, and the three from the student council took a tour around campus. The students shared facilities for practicing horseback riding, jousting, and archery with the knights of Klyrode, meaning those classes were held in the wider castle rather than the Institute for Chivalric Education itself. The institute’s main building, a large three-story stone structure, was within the bounds of the castle grounds but some distance away from the training fields. All around it were smaller buildings designed for various types of practical education as well as areas to practice magic spells. MacTaulo and the student council members explained the purpose of the various facilities as they walked along.

“And this is where we teach courses on sword maintenance,” explained MacTaulo as they passed one of the buildings.

“Hey, Locanna,” said Dethryc. “Remember the time you bent a sword all the way in half during repair training? You’ve always been absurdly strong...”

“H-Hey!” Locanna protested, turning bright red at her co-vice president bringing up details of her personal life. “Dethryc! There’s no need to bring up irrelevant stories like that!”

They continued in that vein around the campus, the vice presidents taking the

brunt of the work of introducing Garyl to the school. It was a weekday, and class was in session as usual. Everywhere they passed by, they could hear classrooms full of whispering girls gossiping about their visitors.

“Look over there! It’s that Garyl everyone’s been talking about, isn’t it?”

“The boy who was so incredible at the grand tournament?!”

“He’s so handsome, just like they say...”

“B-B-But why is he *here? Today?*!”

“If only we weren’t in class... I want to talk to him!”

“M-Maybe I’ll slip out for a moment...”

“Hey! No cutting in line!”

Garyl could only grimace at the strangely familiar spectacle.

The tour concluded in the afternoon. MacTaulo and Rabianna showed Flio and Garyl off to the school gates.

“I’m sorry we didn’t have enough time to properly explain everything today,” MacTaulo said. “Perhaps you could tell just by looking, but I guarantee the facilities and equipment at the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education are all brand-new and state of the art, and our faculty are a collection of truly formidable individuals. I am confident that we have what it takes to assist you in your training. All of us are eagerly awaiting the day you join us here to study, practice, and further refine your abilities alongside your fellow students.” He held out his hand.

“Thank you,” said Garyl, giving MacTaulo a firm handshake and an easygoing smile. “But like I told you before, I want to properly finish my studies at the Houghtow College of Magic first. I’d be happy to come visit along with my friends from Houghtow, though, if we could hold something like a training camp...”

“Of course,” said MacTaulo. “Her Majesty the Maiden Queen mentioned your idea for a training camp to me earlier. We’ll see about setting up a system for applicants in the next couple days.”

Garyl said his goodbyes to Locanna and Dethryc, who were waiting behind MacTaulo, but their superior, the student council president Lullun, was nowhere to be seen.

“Hmm...” MacTaulo said. “No sign of Lullun, I see. Well, I suppose that finishes our business today. Mister Flio, Garyl, thank you both very much for paying us this visit.” He bowed his head, and Flio and Garyl politely returned the gesture.

“How are you getting home, Garyl?” Locanna asked. “A carriage? Or perhaps you’ll catch an Enchanted Frigate?”

“Oh, no,” said Flio, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “We’ll be using this.” He held out his hand and cast a spell, summoning a large magic circle. It rotated silently on the ground, shining with a mystic light, until a massive door emerged from inside.

“What?” Locanna blinked. “I-Is that...? Could it be?”

“There’s no way!” said Dethryc, his eyes going wide. “Is that a teleportation portal?!”

As the two watched in disbelief, Flio opened the door with perfect nonchalance, revealing the front door of his house on the other side. “Well then,” he said, “we’ll be taking our leave,” and with one last smile he left through the door.

“Til we meet again,” said Garyl. “And tell Miss Ellie hi for me, please!”

The door closed behind them, and vanished on the spot.

“Huh? H-Hang on a minute...” Locanna looked like she couldn’t believe her own eyes. “But this is Klyrode Castle, isn’t it?”

“It should be impossible to cast Teleportation here, thanks to the barrier put up by the mages of the castle,” Dethryc agreed as the two stared blankly at the spot where the door had been.

“Well, that’s Mister Flio and Garyl for you,” MacTaulo said, lowering his head. For his part, he seemed confused on a different point entirely. “By the way...” he started, glancing over at Rabianna. “Do you know this ‘Miss Ellie’ Garyl mentioned, by any chance?”

“Never hopping heard of her, I’m afraid...” Rabianna said, coming up equally blank.

There were very few people indeed who knew the Maiden Queen by her nickname Ellie, a fact that had slipped Garyl’s mind as he was leaving.

After some time staring at the patch of earth where Garyl and Flio had disappeared, Locanna and Dethryc suddenly returned to their senses.

“W-Wait a minute...” Locanna said, leaning in to whisper quietly to her companion. “Where did our president get to, anyway? I thought she was going to use that famous Charm spell of hers to convince Garyl to transfer schools. But instead she didn’t say a word the whole time and disappeared halfway through! What in Klyrode could have happened?”

“That’s a good question...” Dethryc whispered back. “I don’t have any more of a clue than you. She certainly seemed determined to go through with it back in the student council office...”

“The nerve!” Locanna huffed. “I can’t believe she let such a cute boy get away! O-Or rather, such an *excellent* student, I mean...” She hastened to correct herself. “Having someone like him here would be motivation for everyone in the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education!”

“What’s going on, you two?” MacTaulo said, cocking his head as he looked over in the direction of the whispering students. “Something the matter?”

The two fervently shook their heads.

“O-Oh! Nothing! Nothing at all!” Locanna squeaked in a panicked falsetto.

“Th-That’s right!” added Dethryc. “Nothing whatsoever, Headmaster MacTaulo!”

◇Meanwhile—Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education, Girls’ Lavatories◇

At that moment, Lullun, who had gone missing partway through the tour, had sequestered herself in the girls’ lavatories. Her body looked different than it had earlier—she no longer resembled a human, but a pale-skinned demonic woman.

“To think that I—Lullun, the succubus-human hybrid—would be reduced to

such a state,” she muttered to herself, nervously adjusting her glasses over and over again.

She was also, as it happened, blushing furiously. An image of Garyl’s smiling face floated unbidden to Lullun’s mind, causing her cheeks to turn even redder than before. The blush was only growing more and more pronounced as she thought about the boy.

“I am an elite succubus, invited to this school on a full scholarship!” she told herself. “H-H-How could I fall in love at first sight with some country bumpkin?! It just can’t be real...” She covered her face with her hands in shame. “M-M-My emotions started running wild the moment I set eyes on that boy... Not only could I not manage to say a single word in front of him, but worse, before I knew it I had lost my ability to hold on to my human form! Not being able to speak is one thing, b-b-but I wish I had been able to stay with them until the end...”

Lullun, it turned out, was a hybrid herself, with a succubus demon and a human for parents. She was one of the students invited to the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education as part of the Magical Kingdom’s ongoing project of deepening the bonds of friendship between humans and demons.

In fact, the Houghtow College of Magic had been the first school to offer her a spot among their student body due to her being half demon, but she had rejected them out of hand, saying, “*Some country school is no place for an elite such as myself!*” Instead, she had opted to attend the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education, keeping her ancestry a secret. Only MacTaulo knew that she was part succubus.

“Whyever was I so stubborn back then?” she cried as she sat red-faced on the toilet. “If only I had gone to the Houghtow College of Magic from the very beginning. Oh, my sweet Garyl...”



“Whoa!” said Garyl, a sudden tremor running through his body.

“Garyl?” Flio asked, concerned for his son. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh, sorry, dad,” Garyl said with a wince. “It just felt like there was something

running down my spine all of a sudden. Everything seems to be in working order now, though!" He flexed his muscles, demonstrating his good health.

Flio smiled his usual easygoing smile. "Well, then, what did you think of today's visit?"

"It was really interesting!" said Garyl. "But I wonder why Miss Lullun, that half human, half succubus girl, ran off partway through..."

"Oh?" Flio asked. "You noticed she was half succubus?"

"Yeah," Garyl nodded. "I mean, she was leaking out a fair amount of magic power."

"She certainly was, at least a bit..." Flio confirmed. "But I'm impressed you could pick up on such a subtle amount of magic energy."

"I suppose..." said Garyl. "Maybe I'm just sensitive to it since I live with so many demons myself."

The two of them made their way up to the front door of the house, talking all the while, when who should come running their way down the road but Salina, followed closely by the rest of the group of classmates Garyl spent most of his time with at the Houghtow College of Magic.

"Ah!" cried Salina. "Lord Garyl!"

"Salina?" Garyl said, turning to greet his fellow students. "And the rest of you? What are you doing here?"

"Lord Garyl!" Salina cried, leaping his direction and casting her arms tight around his shoulders. "Tell me it isn't true! You aren't transferring schools, are you? You'll stay at the Houghtow College of Magic until we all graduate?" She hugged him tight, begging and begging for reassurance.

"Of course!" said Garyl, giving an easygoing smile. "I'll graduate from the Houghtow College of Magic. Going to the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education will be my next step after that."

Salina's face lit up with a bright, relieved smile at the news.

"Irystiel says she's happy to hear that too! Mreowr!" said the black cat plush Irystiel was carrying, opening and closing its mouth thanks to a simple

application of Irystiel's skills as a ventriloquist.

"How lovely!" Snow Little concurred. "And while we're at school together, I must convince Lord Garyl to pledge his future to—"

"Snow Little! That's quite enough rank opportunism out of you!" Salina said, hurriedly covering Snow Little's mouth with her hands before she could say something truly preposterous.

"Hmph..." Sadjitta said, folding his arms in the back of the group. "Your being here doesn't make a difference to me one way or another," he said. "But...let's keep doing our best together, I guess..."

With that, Reptor, the lizardfolk boy, jabbed Sadjitta in the flank with his elbow. Reptor was a boy of few words with an imposing physique and a gentle nature that made him inclined to see the best in the people around him. He and Rislei, incidentally, were getting to be quite close.

"Hey!" Sadjitta complained. "Reptor! What was that for?!"

"Can't you be honest and tell Garyl you're happy he's staying, at least this once?" Reptor urged him.

"Wh-What?!" Sadjitta sputtered. "Wh-Why would I be happy about that?! Besides, what about *your* honesty?!"

"Mine?" Reptor asked.

"Yeah, yours!" Sadjitta shot back. "What is your actual relationship with Rislei?!"

"Huh?!" Reptor balked. "I-I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"You're not fooling anyone with lines like that!" said Sadjitta. "I know you and Rislei are a couple!"

"Cut it out!" Reptor clapped a hand over Sadjitta's mouth, his face turning pale with fear. "This isn't the place for that conversation!"

Suddenly, two heard a sound approaching from behind. *Clop clop clop clop clop...*

"Huh?" Sadjitta said, confused. "What's that sound?"

Reptor, on the other hand, turned even paler than before. “Oh no...” he said, swallowing heavily and gazing off towards the pasture outside Flio’s house. “He’s coming...”

Something was running in their direction from the deepest part of their pasture. It was Sleip in his centaur form, his skin bright red with anger.

“Crap, crap, crap...” Reptor said. “It’s Rislei’s papa! He’ll never listen to reason when it comes to his daughter!” He took off running down the road as Sleip raced after him with tremendous speed.

“You wastrel!” Sleip bellowed. “Still keen on wooing my Rislei, are you?!”

Reptor ran down the road, over a hill, and nearly reached the forest before he was caught, his screams echoing throughout the area. The chase was over in a matter of seconds.

Garyl winced at Reptor’s predicament before turning his attention back to the rest of the group. “If I had known you all were coming, I would have bought some kind of souvenirs,” he said, bowing apologetically. “Sorry that I came back empty-handed this time.”

“Well, why don’t we have everyone over for dinner?” Flio offered, smiling as usual. “If we let Rys know, I’m sure she’d be happy to prepare food for you, and I can send you home with Teleportation before it gets too late.”

“Yes, please!” said Salina, raising her hand high without a trace of hesitation. “I would like to stay!”

“Irystiel is happy to accept your invitation as well, mreowr!” said Irystiel’s plush cat.

“W-Well, then, I suppose I shall impose on your hospitality as well,” said Snow Little.

“Hmph...” said Sadjitta. “I guess I’d better stay too...”

And so it was decided.

Chapter 5: A Festival for the New Town

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

It was early in the morning—Blossom's customary time to get out of bed. The sky was gradually becoming less dark, but it would still be quite some time before the sun crested the horizon.

"Fwaaah!" rousing herself from slumber, Blossom yawned, stretching her arms wide as she sat up in bed. Like the other rooms in Flio's house, Blossom's room was divided into two chambers, one for sleep and one to serve as a private sitting room. Blossom slept in the nude by habit, alone in her large bed. Today, too, she had woken up as naked as the day she was born.

"All right! Time for another day working hard in the... Hm?" As got out of bed, Blossom felt something strange—a weight resting atop her hips. She looked down at her body. All of her hard labor in the fields had given Blossom a powerfully built physique to rival any man's, her chiseled abdominal muscles forming a distinct six pack. At the moment, however, a slender pair of arms was wrapped around her muscular middle. There was a small girl clinging to Blossom's body, sound asleep. Even though Blossom had already roused herself and gotten out of bed, the girl had held on tight, clinging to Blossom's body without waking up herself.

"That's right..." Blossom said. "Kora came to bed with me last night, didn't she?" She smiled fondly, remembering the previous night as she looked down on the determinedly snoozing Kora.

She's gotten quite attached to me, hasn't she... Blossom thought to herself, patting Kora softly on the head. *Well, if Kora's fine with it, it doesn't bother me none...*

Just then, the door to Blossom's room shot open. "Good morning, Lady Blossom!" said Ura. "I'm here to pick up Kora!"

Blossom's bed chamber was separated from the entrance to her room by a

partition, one partition over from the entrance to her room. Ura would have to pass through her private sitting room if he wanted to reach Blossom and his daughter.

“O-Oh!” said Blossom, poking her head out the door to her bed chamber with a smile on her face. “Well, good morning, Ura! Or rather...” Suddenly, remembering she was naked, Blossom ran up to the door and forced it shut. “H- Hold your horses, will ya? G-Give me just a moment!”

“H-Hm?” said Ura. “Is something the matter, Lady Blossom?”

“No!” Blossom answered. “I-I mean, there’s a bit of a situation! It’s a bit much to explain, but just wait a bit, you hear?”

“Won’t you tell me what’s wrong?” Ura asked from outside the door. “I’ll gladly give you my assistance if you need it!”

“N-No! I-It ain’t something I need help with...”

“Really, I’m happy to help!” said Ura. “Here, I’m coming in.”

“No, I’m telling you! That’ll just make things worse!”

They stood on opposite sides of the door, Ura trying to pull it open and Blossom desperately trying to hold it closed like a wild game of tug-of-war. And all the while, in spite of the vigorous motion, Kora kept sleeping as she peacefully dangled from Blossom’s abs, the blanket from the bed wrapped over her shoulders.

◇Later that Day—Oni Mountain Peak◇

Some time after Blossom had woken up, Flio stood at the foot of the mountain outside the farm—the one with the oni village located at its peak. “This village has gotten quite big, hasn’t it?” he said, gazing up.

When Flio had first transported the village here, mountain and all, the village had been limited to the very top of the mountain and immediately surrounding area. Now, however, there were a number of dwellings even down near the base of the mountain. Here and there were fields and fruit orchards as well, each full of hardworking demons.

“Another great achievement on the part of my lord husband, for taking in

those demons who had nowhere to go out of the goodness of his heart,” Rys gloated as she looked up at the mountain herself. Her lupine demon tail was fully manifested, wagging happily as well. *Hee hee hee!* she thought to herself. *Our fighting force continues to increase!*

Rys... Flio thought. You're thinking rather loudly, you know... He smirked wryly at his wife's thoughts that he had inadvertently overheard. *Still, fighting force and such aside, I'm glad I was able to help all those demons find a stable livelihood...*

Ura had founded the village back in the day when he encountered a group of demons who had turned to petty banditry for want of work. He took the group under his wing, supporting them with his own labor. There was only so much he could do to secure a decent life for so many demons, though, and soon Ura was at his wit's end trying to earn enough money all on his own.

After Flio's magnanimous act of transporting the village (mountain and all), the other demons were able to find gainful work at Blossom Acres or the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. And now that the residents all had plenty of resources to safely support their lives, rumors of the village had spread throughout the land, attracting demons from all over to come settle.

As Flio looked up at the mountain in thought, a man with a loud voice greeted him from behind. “Oho! I was wondering who that was. If it isn't Lord Flio!”

Flio turned to see Ura, smiling cheerfully as he walked up. Blossom stood next to him, holding Kora's hand tight in her own.

“Good morning, Ura,” said Flio. “And good morning Blossom and Kora, as well.”

“Good morning yourself, Mister Flio!” said Blossom. “Come on, Kora, say good morning.”

“Okay...” Kora said, quietly bowing her head. “Morning...” She must have been in an especially shy mood today, because she hid behind Blossom's leg as soon as she squeaked out the words, lowering her head.

Blossom smiled and lovingly ruffled Kora's hair. “Ah ha ha! You're getting better at your greetings every day, Kora! Good job, kiddo.”

Flio smiled his usual easygoing smile. “So, it seems the village is coming along nicely.”

“Yes, quite!” Ura beamed happily. “This is the result of everyone’s efforts. Back in the day it was just me and a small handful of the residents doing mercenary work to try to earn enough money to keep things going, but it was always rough going. But since you moved the village here—mountain and all, as they say—we’ve all been working in the fields or in jobs you introduced us to at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. Now, far from just barely covering the costs of maintaining the village, we have enough resources to take on more demons who’ve lost their employment! Gah ha ha!” He punctuated the sentiment by cheerfully thumping Flio square on the shoulder.

“It’s been a huge help to me too, let me tell you,” said Blossom, smiling just as happily as Ura. “Now that I’ve got the help of everyone from the oni village we have enough manpower to expand the fields in the blink of an eye. We’ve even been using the slopes of the mountain for fruit orchards and the like!” She thumped Ura on the shoulder just like the oni had done to Flio. Blossom was tall for a woman and had a muscular build, but even in his human form Ura had a physique worthy of an oni. Needless to say, he was quite a bit larger still. Your typical woman might have felt intimidated by the difference in size between the two of them, but Blossom seemed to pay it no mind at all, cheerfully roughhousing with the much larger oni.

“Oh, I nearly forgot!” Ura said suddenly. “Lord Flio, there is something I wish to discuss with you before we get to work.”

“Something you wish to discuss, hm?” Flio asked, cocking his head.

“Yes. Actually, we at the village have been thinking of holding a festival,” Ura said. “Might we have your permission for such an activity?”

“A festival, huh?” Flio asked.

“That’s right!” Ura declared. “We hold a festival in the village every year, you see. We set up outdoor stalls, and dance, and drink together... It can get to be a pretty raucous time with everyone up there! Although, I’m ashamed to say it’s been a while since we’ve been able to hold a proper festival, what with the shortage of funds we’d been dealing with up until recently...”

“And now that you’re flush with surplus thanks to my lord husband’s generosity, you wish to hold your festival once again?” Rys asked, nodding along to Ura’s account.

“Yes, Lady Rys, that’s precisely right!” said Ura.

“Well, *I* for one don’t see the harm in it,” Rys said. “A festival is an excellent way to raise everyone’s fighting spirits!” Her tail had appeared once again, wagging furiously as she smiled and nodded her head.

Rys... Flio thought, smirking wryly to himself. I’m not going to stop them from having a festival, fighting spirits or not. He smiled his usual easygoing smile as he turned to address Ura. “Well,” he said, “how about this for an idea—why don’t you extend an invitation to the festival to everyone in Houghtow City as well? It’s a special occasion, isn’t it? You might as well liven things up a bit.”

“That sounds like a great idea!” Ura said, laughing as he stretched out his arm as if in preparation for hard labor. “Some visitors to liven up our festival sounds like a rare treat!”

“You sure are raring to go, eh, Ura?” Blossom observed.

“Of course I am!” answered Ura. “Festivals are an oni’s favorite pastime! I’m sure you’ll love it too, Lady Blossom!”

“Well, if you’re gonna say all that, I suppose I’d better look forward to the event!” said Blossom. “I’ll be glad to help out with the preparations too, of course!”

“And we’re very glad for your help!”

As Ura and Blossom chatted merrily, Kora came running up between them on her tiny legs. “Dad...I’ll help too!” she said.

“Of course you will!” said Ura. “We’ll be counting on you, Kora!”

“I guess me and Kora will both be helping out!” said Blossom, patting Kora on the head from one side as Ura patted her from the other.

Kora, for her part, smiled happily, thrilled to be getting head pats from both Ura and Blossom at once.

That day, like always, everyone living in Flio's house had all gathered in the living room to eat breakfast.

"A festival, you say?" Elinàsze asked, looking over towards Blossom as she ate a spoonful of her soup.

"That's right!" said Blossom, who had begun delivering an impassioned monologue on the subject to all in attendance the moment she had finished her food. "It's a commemoration of the day old man Ura put the village up there on the right track! We'd like all of you to take part and help out with things if you can!"

"I see, I see!" Calsi'im said, nodding in approval as he sipped his after-meal tea. "How splendid! It'll be good for the villagers to have a bit of fun!"

Calsi'im's daughter Rabbitz, incidentally, was currently perched on top of his shoulders, snoring away with her arms wrapped around his head. The young girl was still quite sleepy on account of having eaten until her stomach just about burst at dinner last night.

"Why don't we have meowr store set up a stall?" Uliminas suggested. "It would be a waste not to!"

"A festival?" Uliminas and Ghozal's daughter Folmina sat up tall in her chair, beaming and waving her arms. "That sounds fun! I wanna go!"

"If big sis Folmina's going, then me too..." said Balirossa and Ghozal's son Ghoru, finishing off his drink and looking up at his big sister in the chair next to him.

"I'd be glad to help with something like that!" Rislei offered with a smile, already in the middle of helping clean up after dinner.

"Gah ha ha!" Sleip laughed, grabbing Rislei from behind and hoisting her up into the air. "I'll give it all I got for my little Rislei too!"

"H-Hey!" Rislei exclaimed, her face turning bright red at having suddenly been lifted off the ground. "Papa! W-Would you stop doing things like this?! You're embarrassing me!"

In spite of Rislei's protests, however, Sleip began waving her from side to side

in the air without a care in the world.

“Like, Lord Sleip?” Byleri said. “Rislei’s, like, just a bit shy, y’know? You should probably, like, save that kinda stuff for times when the others aren’t around?” She sounded rather easygoing about the whole thing.

“M-Mama!” Rislei objected, turning to look Byleri’s direction. “I-It’s not because I’m shy! I don’t want to be picked up like this!”

The rest of the household who were still at the table watched the Sleip family antics with knowing smiles. *Same as ever, I see...* was the thought shared universally between them.

The lively conversation continued in the living room for a while. After some time, Blossom stood up and turned to Kora in the seat beside her. “All right, Kora,” she said. “Wanna come get in the bath with me?”

Kora nodded happily and jumped down from the chair, following close behind Blossom with a great big smile on her face.

“Ah ha ha!” Blossom laughed, patting the girl fondly on the head. “You really like your baths, huh, Kora!”

“Uh-huh...” Kora said, smiling. “I like baths... This house has a really big bath... It’s nice...”

Just as Kora said, the bath in Flio’s house was abnormally large. It was split into men’s and women’s sections, each boasting as much space as the entire living room. The baths themselves were kept supplied with plenty of clean, hot water to bathe in thanks to one of Flio’s permanent enchantments, with a mechanism designed to automatically replenish the water in the tubs whenever it started running low.

The water, it bears mentioning, was transported directly from the Yanagi bath in the Kinosaki Hot Springs at the strong insistence of Rys and a few of the other women in the house. They had, of course, explained the situation to the Kinosaki Hot Springs Village Association and received formal permission—for the price of a regular fee for the usage of the spring’s water. There was even an official certification posted on the wall by the entrance to the baths proudly

stating: *“Water sourced from Kinosaki Hot Springs.”*

“In our house, we have to wash with a pail of cold water...” said Kora.

“C’mon!” Blossom beckoned her over. “And remember, you gotta keep your whole body up to your neck underwater for a count to one hundred!”

“Okay!” said Kora, holding hands with Blossom as they left the living room headed for the bath.

Flio watched the pair leave, peering intently after them.

◇The Next Day—Oni Village Mountain Foot◇

The next morning, Flio paid another visit to the foot of the mountain where the oni village was situated, where he was met by Ura.

“Mister Ura,” Flio said. “I’m sorry for calling you out here when you were in the middle of getting ready for the day’s work.”

“Not at all, not at all!” Ura laughed boisterously. “For a summons from the one and only Lord Flio, I’d drop whatever I was doing and come running, no matter what it was! Although, having someone speaking directly in my head like that was quite an experience...”

Flio had telepathically contacted Ura earlier that morning, saying, *“Pardon me for the interruption, but I’d like to have a short talk before work today, if you don’t mind.”*

“Sorry about that,” Flio said, lowering his head apologetically. “I guess I’ve just gotten in the habit lately...”

“Ha ha ha!” Ura laughed. “And that’s exactly why I’d drop what I was doing and come running at one of your summons! Although, and I beg your pardon, if Kora needed me for something, I might have to prioritize her...”

“Of course,” Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “I’d expect nothing else when it comes to your child.”

The two shared a moment of good cheer before Ura broached the main topic. “Now then, Lord Flio, what is it you need?”

“Well, the truth is, I was hoping you could tell me more about the state of

affairs in your village,” answered Flio. “Do the people there have access to baths?”

“Baths, is it? Well, mostly we just use things like this,” Ura said, holding out the twisted hand towel he had been wearing draped around his neck.

“Um...” Flio frowned. “What is that...?”

“Well, you see,” Ura began, “you dunk a towel in well water, twist it up tight, and scrub every nook and cranny! That’s what we do for bathing. In the summer months, we’ll dig a hole and fill it with water to swim in and clean our bodies too. Oh, and we occasionally used to go on trips to use the public bath in the nearby town, but it was run by humans, so the only people who could come were the ones who could disguise themselves as humans...”

Flio listened to Ura’s explanation with a complicated expression on his face. *Back in my old world Palma, demihumans faced horrible discrimination. They wouldn’t even build waterways in the demihuman quarters within the capital, to say nothing of bathing facilities. I set up the baths in our house here myself, but unfortunately, it looks like things ended up that way in other parts of this world...*

“Lord Flio?” Ura said.

“Y-Yes?” Flio answered.

“What’s the matter, Lord Flio?” Ura asked, looking in confusion at the expression on Flio’s face. “You went quiet all of a sudden!”

“Oh!” said Flio, wincing. “I’m sorry! We were in the middle of a conversation, weren’t we? Um, Mister Ura...would you prefer it if there were something like a public bath in the village for everyone to use?”

“A public bath for everyone to use?!” Ura’s eyes shot open wide at the offer. “I’d be delighted to have something like that—everyone in the village would be overjoyed, I’m sure!”

“I see,” said Flio. “Well, in that case...” Holding his arms outstretched, he turned to face the forest that stood beside the mountain—the original terrain of the land from before Flio had transplanted Ura’s village.

“Lord Flio? What are you doing?!” Ura asked, looking between Flio and the forest with a dumbfounded expression even though he really should have been able to guess what Flio had in mind.

Flio cast a spell and, like always, a magic circle appeared before him. It appeared first in front of his hands before quickly flying forward, growing bigger and bigger as it approached the forest ahead. Soon there was an enormous magic circle in the sky above the trees, rotating slowly as Flio continued casting his spell.

“Wh-What in the world...?” Ura said, nervously swallowing at the sight.

Next, Flio began moving his fingers this way and that. The trees of the forest were ripped from the ground and flew into the sky in response to his movements. These were sizable trees, big enough that even with a demon’s preternatural strength, it would still take a considerable amount of labor to pull one from the ground. Then Flio gestured with his fingers once more, and all the floating trees suddenly split apart. Bark, roots, and foliage all sloughed off the woody bodies of the trees in blocks, leaving clean rectangular logs. The logs began emitting steam, apparently being dried out in midair.

“N-No way...” Ura stared agape, his wide eyes fixed on the unfolding scene. “You’re doing construction work in midair with those massive logs!”

He watched as the logs came flying together, assembling themselves into a building. Once Flio had reached a certain stage in the construction, he pointed his hand straight down. Immediately, the land before him was cleared with astonishing force, the ground becoming level as countless rocks and boulders came flying from the forest. Flio laid the rocks down neatly in the freshly cleared plot, the bumps and roughness polished away as they flew through the air. Magic circles appeared around them, cutting the rocks into shape and sending shards of stone flying everywhere. The shards were sucked into the magic circle and vanished so as not to dirty the area, while the cut stones flew in to join with the wooden materials harvested from the trees atop the cleared land to form a completed building.

The whole thing happened lightning fast, all at once.

“I-Incredible...” Ura muttered. It was all he could do to watch as the

fantastically high speed construction unfolded before his eyes.

“I divided the bathhouse into men’s and women’s sections,” Flio said. “Would you like me to build you an outdoors bath as well?” He had lots of other ideas for revisions too, discussing each idea with Ura before quickly going to implement it. “Why don’t I expand the reception area so you can use it for taking meals?” he proposed before adding, “Maybe we should set up a lodging house too, just in case...”

All Ura could say in response, however, was, “Sure, sounds good...” over and over again like a parrot. “Sure, sounds good... Sure, sounds good...”

Flio kept working, magically implementing one idea after another and making the building grander and grander.



After half an hour of work, Flio finally lowered his hands. “All right,” he said, nodding and smiling his usual easygoing smile. “That should do it.”

Before him stood a two-story building, with one large room on each floor. Visitors would enter through a curtain hanging over the main door, the word “Bath” written on the fabric.

“W-Wait...” said Ura, raising his voice a little more than he had intended. “*This* is the bathhouse?!”

“That’s right,” said Flio. “I thought it would be good for the people of the village to have a bath they could use. I hope this will be of service? If there’s anything about it that doesn’t fit the village’s needs, don’t hesitate to let me know. I’ll have it changed in no time.”

“Never mind that!” Ura laughed. “It wouldn’t bother us in the slightest if there’s something a little different from how we do it. I’m sure everyone will be overjoyed just to have a public bath we can use! Ha ha ha ha!”

The other villagers began coming down from the mountain to see what had their chief in such high spirits. Soon they were gathering around, chattering as they inspected the building that had appeared next to their mountain.

“Wh-What’s this building doing here...?”

“It wasn’t here when I woke up, that’s for sure!”

“Huh? Look what it says on the curtain on the entryway! Is this a bath?!”

When they realized that the mysterious building was a public bath intended for their use, the villagers let out a great cheer.

“Wait...” said Ura, the smile suddenly vanishing from his face. “Excuse me... Lord Flio, pardon me for asking, but how much are you gonna charge?”

“How much...?” Flio echoed, confused.

“Well, you know...” Ura said, awkwardly choking out the uncomfortable words. “How much are you gonna charge us for using the bath? Public baths have to collect fees to stay in business...”

“Oh!” said Flio, smiling like always. “There’s no need for that!”

“Wh-Whaaat?!” Not just Ura, but the villagers assembled behind him cried out in astonishment.

“L-Lord Flio...” said Ura, bringing his own face up close to Flio’s. “M-Maybe I’m misunderstanding you, but are you saying we won’t have to pay a fee to use the bath?”

Flio surveyed Ura and the crowd of other villagers staring at him with the selfsame bewildered faces. “That’s right,” he said, his usual smile still on his face as he nodded in confirmation. “I have no intention of collecting bathing fees from the village. Although I was hoping I could ask you to help manage the bathhouse.”

“Manage the bathhouse, you say?” Ura asked. “Well, what exactly do you mean by that?”

“Well,” Flio explained, “we’ll need someone to clean the bathhouse and its surroundings. And I was thinking we might charge a fee if anyone from outside the village wants to use the facilities. We’ll need someone to collect that as well. Would your people be able to do that?”

“W-Well, yes, that would be no problem...” Ura said. “But is that really all you want from us in exchange for such an amazing bath?”

“On the contrary,” said Flio, “I would very much appreciate the help.”

Maintaining the spell that cleans and cycles the water is essentially free, he thought, and I can easily handle any repairs and maintenance the buildings need with magic. But if I let people outside the village use the baths for free, we'd be flooded with requests for me to build more bathhouses all over the land. I'll have to take care with how I manage things...

Around him, Ura and the other villagers were cheering for joy. The building that Flio had set up in a scant few minutes was named "Flio's Bathhouse."

The ever modest Flio, of course, found himself wishing they had called it something else.

◇One Night—Oni Village Mountain Peak◇

It was a few days after Flio set up the bath outside the oni village, and the sun was setting beyond the horizon, casting the land around Flio's estate in deepening twilight. The road that stretched from Flio's house to the oni village was usually a dark and treacherous path this time of night, hard for a traveler to follow without any light of their own. Tonight, however, the way was brightly lit. A great variety of stalls and carts were set up along the road, creating a string of lights that stretched all the way to the village.

"It looks like they've already gotten started," Flio said as he arrived at the village entrance at the mountain peak, smiling his usual easygoing smile as he looked out at the ongoing festivities.

"This way, my lord husband!" said Rys, waving her hand in his direction with a delighted smile on her face.

"Rys!" said Flio, waving back and running up to his wife. "Sorry I'm late!" As he approached, he noticed that Rys wasn't wearing her usual dress but a light robe that seemed to float around her body. "What's that you're wearing, Rys?"

"Oh, this?" said Rys, doing a quick twirl to show off the outfit. "It's an arrangement I put together from some of the clothes we bought on our trip to the Land of the Rising Sun! This is called a yukata. I've heard it's what they wear in summer festivals in Hi Izuru."

"I see!" said Flio.

"What do you think?" Rys asked. "It doesn't look strange, does it?"

“Not at all!” Flio reassured her. “It looks great on you. I can hardly bring myself to look away!”

“M-My lord husband!” Rys exclaimed, hiding her blushing face behind her hands.

Rys really is adorable... Flio thought, watching as Rys wiggled happily at the praise. *Not that that’s anything new.*

“Oh! Papa!” Just then, Elinàsze came running up, wearing a yukata of her own that Rys had made for her. Compared to her mother’s, her yukata had a design that gave a neat, refined impression. “Look! Mama made this outfit for me. Do I look cute?” she asked, tilting her head ever so slightly as she looked up at Flio.

“You do!” said Flio with his usual easygoing smile. “You look adorable, Elinàsze!”

“I do?” a big smile spread over Elinàsze’s face. “I’m so happy you think so, papa!”

“Hey! Big sis!” Garyl cried, getting Elinàsze’s attention.

“Oh?” said Elinàsze, turning around to face him. “Garyl? Is there something you need?”

“Well,” Garyl began, “me and the other students from the Houghtow College of Magic were going to look around the festival together. Do you wanna come along?” Garyl, like his sister, was wearing a yukata that had been made for him by Rys. With him was Rislei, a fellow member of Flio’s household, as well as Salina, Irystiel, Snow Little, Sadjitta, and Reptor.

“I’m fine looking around with papa,” said Elinàsze, sparing the group a single glance before moving to Flio’s side, opposite Rys.

“Wouldn’t you rather explore the festival with your friends, Elinàsze?” Flio asked.

“Of course not!” Elinàsze chirped, shaking her head with a smile on her face. “I would rather be with you, papa!”

Elinàsze’s obsession with her father, as always, was completely unwavering.



The members of Flio’s household split up into separate groups to wander around the festival. As the night wore on, more and more people arrived at the village until the festival had grown lively indeed. Everywhere, vendors were noisily hawking their wares.

“Get your magic beast skewers! You’ll love ’em!”

“Grilled egg batter cakes! Try a free sample!”

“How about a roast apool!”

There was no stop to the customers either.

“All right! I’ll take one!”

“Gimme one of these and one of those!”

“My lord husband, let’s try that one!”

As the sun set completely out of view, the festival only seemed to grow in energy. The residents of the oni village were there, of course, but so were a throng of humans and demihumans from Houghtow City who had come here on a special Enchanted Frigate flight for the festivities. People of all sorts were celebrating in good harmonious spirits—humans and demons, who had been at war until very recently, were all chatting with smiles on their faces as they enjoyed the festival to its fullest.

Just as the clamor of the festival reached its peak, Ura raised his arm and let out a cry. “All right!” he roared. “Come on, everyone—let’s show ’em what we got!”

“Yeah!” cheered the demons living in the village, raising their arms in response.

Ura ascended the platform the villagers had set up in the middle of the town square, where a traditional oni instrument known as a taiko drum, passed down through oni lines from the distant past, was set up and waiting for a drummer. “So-re!” Ura cried, striking the taiko with a wooden stick.



Don! Doko doko doko, don! Doko doko doko... As the rhythm of the taiko drum echoed throughout the village, Kora came running up beside her father

holding a wooden flute. She brought the mouthpiece to her lips and closed her eyes as she began to play a slow, lingering melody. The tones of her delicate flute mingled with the powerful beat of Ura's drum in a perfect harmony that could be heard all throughout the mountain.

"All of you! Dance! Dance!" Ura urged, and the demons of the village obliged, dancing around the platform. They raised their arms in time with the taiko while their legs followed the flute in well-practiced steps. Each demon was dancing in their own individual style, but judging by the flawless ring the dancers formed around the central platform, there must have been some sort of order guiding their movements all the same.

"What a beautiful dance!" Rys gushed, holding Flio's arm in hers and leaning her head against his shoulder as she watched the villagers dance. "It looks rather fun..."

"I've never seen a dance like it before," Flio said with his usual easygoing smile as he watched the dance as well. "It *does* look kinda fun, doesn't it?"

Soon, the visitors from Houghtow City and other towns who had arrived via Enchanted Frigate for the festival had all gathered round the ring of dancers. And in their midst was Wyne, halfway through devouring a whole watermelon.

"That looks fun-fun!" she said, jumping with delight as she ran to join the ring. "Let me dancedance too!"

"That's the spirit!" Ura cried out cheerfully between beats of the drum. "Dance! Dance! You don't want to just watch, do you?! You've come all this way, so join in! Don't worry about how to do it! Just follow the crowd!"

"A-hip! And a-hop!" Wyne sang, grinning from ear to ear as she danced around to her own rhythm entirely. At some point her wings materialized on her back and she took to the air, dancing in the sky above the ring of villagers. Her yukata, which she had been wearing loose to begin with, started to come undone from her frenetic dancing, very nearly exposing the onlookers to a rather scandalous sight.

"How many times have I told you?!" cried Tanya, flying in quickly on her own angel wings to protect Wyne's modesty from the crowd of onlookers. "A young lady mustn't act so shamelessly!" She hurried to where Wyne was dancing in

midair, swiftly fixing her yukata.

“Hmph!” Wyne pouted irritably. “But it’s harder to dancedance this way!”

“Your yukata was coming undone because of your reckless dancing, Young Mistress Wyne,” Tanya said. “I will provide an example for you, if you will forgive my presumption, so please copy my motions.” She held out her arms in a neat pose in midair and let out a breath, closing her eyes and focusing on the sound of the drums and flute.

“Behold!” she cried, her eyes snapping open as she began to dance in time with the music. It was a precise, skillful dance without a single wasted movement, well suited to Tanya’s character. Wyne couldn’t have asked for a better demonstration. Tanya looked for all the world like an illustration in a textbook.

“Whoa!” Wyne exclaimed as she watched Tanya dance from behind. “Tan-Tan, you’re good-good at dancing!”

“A-Ahem!” Tanya coughed, seemingly embarrassed by the praise. “I studied the festivals of the lower worlds during my time in the Celestial Plane, after all. But come, Young Mistress Wyne—dance with me!”

“Okay-kay!” said Wyne, resuming her dance once more. It didn’t look much at all like she was even trying to copy Tanya’s movements, but at least she was closer than last time to matching the rhythm.

A group of children looked up at Wyne, dancing with a great big grin on her face. “Look at that girl go!” one of them said. “She looks like she’s having lots of fun!”

“Yeah!” another agreed. “That looks like so much fun!”

The children joined the ring of dancers, cavorting around in imitation of Wyne.

“And after I provided them with a proper example and everything...” Tanya grumbled, glancing down at the crowd below. When she saw Wyne’s joyful face, however, she decided to let her dissatisfaction go. “Well, it *is* a festival, after all. As long as they’re enjoying themselves, that’s what matters.” She resolved to simply focus on her own dance.

“Oh?” said Ghozal, looking up at Tanya dancing in the sky above the crowd as he took a bite of his candied apool. “Tanya’s dancing, is she?”

“She’s so serious most of the time,” said Balirossa, following Ghozal’s gaze up as she walked beside him. “I would have expected her to refuse to take part in anything so frivolous as a *festival*...but the way she keeps her back so straight as she dances is truly beautiful, isn’t it?” In fact, she seemed thoroughly charmed by Tanya’s movements, unable to take her eyes off the dancing angel.

“I wanna dance too!” said Folmina, running out from between Ghozal and Balirossa to join the ring of dancers.

“If big sis Folmina is dancing, then me too!” said Ghorro, hurrying after his sister. The two did their best to imitate the villagers, cheerfully moving their hands and feet to the rhythm.

“I thought I heard some kind of commotion...” Rislei said as she returned from a tour of the stalls with Garyl and the rest of their classmates. “They’re doing some kind of dance!”

“It looks kinda fun!” said Garyl, running up to take part in the festivities. “I’ll try joining in!”

“I-If Lord Garyl wishes to dance, I shall join as well, naturally!” said Salina, hurrying after Garyl. She had been sticking close to him the whole time they were exploring the stalls as well.

Irystiel followed after them, using her ventriloquism to speak through the black rabbit plush in her arms. “Irystiel says she’ll dance if Lord Garyl is dancing!”

“Hmm...” said Snow Little. “This seems quite a bit different from ballroom dancing, but...very well! I-I’ll do my best!” She nodded emphatically, steeling her nerves as she ran up to join the dance.

“Seems like everyone’s having a blast!” said Rislei, her eyes shining with excitement. “All right! I’ll go too!”

Before she could reach the ring of dancers, however, her father Sleip came up from behind, grinning wide as he took Rislei by the hand. “Ha ha ha!” he laughed, pulling her forward into the ring. “Come on! Let’s dance together,

Rislei!”

“Wah!” cried Reptor, going stiff on the spot. “R-Rislei’s papa!” He had just been about to ask Rislei to dance, only to be interrupted by Sleip.

“What’s up?” said Sadjitta, smacking the stupefied Reptor on the shoulder. “Let’s go dance.”

“A-Ah!” Reptor cried. “Th-Thank you!”

Soon, Sadjitta and Reptor too were dancing in a circle around the central stage.

A short distance away from the center of town where the crowd was dancing along to joyful music, Calsi’im and Charun sat on a reed mat. “Oh ho ho!” Calsi’im laughed, his jawbone rattling happily. “These summer festivals have quite a way to them, don’t they? And that’s to say nothing of this delicious tea of yours we have to enjoy as we watch the dance!”

“My!” Charun exclaimed happily, refilling the teacup in Calsi’im’s hands. “If you keep saying such sweet things, what choice do I have but to pour you another cup?”

“Mrrr...” Rabbitz, who had been snoring away on Calsi’im’s back, sat up and rubbed her eyes awake. “Something sounds fun...”

“Oho?” said Calsi’im, looking back over his shoulder. “Rabbitz, you’re awake!”

“Papa!” said Rabbitz, crawling up Calsi’im’s body and seizing hold of his head. “Dance! Let’s dance!”

“I-I’d love to!” said Calsi’im, frantically waving his arms as his daughter fastened herself tight to his head. “But how am I going to dance with you on top of my head?!”

“Go, papa! Go!” said Rabbitz.

“H-Hmm... You want me to dance like this, then, do you?” Calsi’im said, distress evident in his voice. “You’re asking rather a lot of your old man, you know!” In spite of his protests, however, he took to his feet with a grunt and stepped up to join the circle with Rabbitz still atop his head.

“Shall I accompany you, then?” said Charun, neatly folding up the mat and following after Calsi’im. Soon, the family of three had joined the dance as well.

“My lord husband!” said Rys, tugging on Flio’s arm as she watched. “We should dance as well!”

“We should!” agreed Flio. “But first...” He raised his arms towards the sky and cast a spell, a magic circle appearing at his fingertips and flying up and up until it burst in a shower of color, shining against the night sky like a radiant flower in bloom.

“It’s beautiful...” Rys gasped.

The rest of the crowd was of much the same opinion, crying out with delight as they gazed up at Flio’s magic.

“Wow! Incredible!”

“Is that magic?!”

“I’ve never seen a spell like that before!”

“Exalted One,” said Hiya, appearing behind Flio. “Allow your humble servant to offer their meager assistance.” They raised their arms high as well, and an array of smaller magic circles appeared in the sky around Flio’s large one, painting the sky in a panoply of color.

Next, Damalynas appeared, materializing next to Hiya. “Let me help, Your Divinity!” she said, raising her arms skyward.

“Hrm!” grunted Ghozal as he too raised his arms to the night sky. “In that case, I’ll help too!”

“Well, if all of you are joining in, I suppose I should show you a little of what I can do when I’m serious,” said Elinàsze, tearing her eyes away from the dazzling display of Flio’s magic and joining the other spellcasters.

It was a display of artistry from the greatest mages in the whole world of Klyrode. Later on, the performance would come to be known as the Miracle of the Oni Village Festival, but at the time, everyone in attendance simply enjoyed the moment of magic without a care in the world.

Epilogue

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Early in the morning, Blossom stepped outside through the front door of Flio's house. "Right, then!" she said, stretching mightily before setting off down the road leading off into the distance. "Another day of workin' hard on the farm!" She walked on by the pasture at the side of the road where Sleip and Byleri looked after the equine magic beasts and continued towards the vast acres of farmland under her management.

"Blossom!"

As she was walking, Blossom heard a voice calling to her from behind. She turned around to see Balirossa, accompanied by Sybe.

"Heya, Balirossa!" Blossom said. "You're up early today!"

"I suppose I am," said Balirossa. "I wanted to go on a hunting expedition with Sybe today, you see."

"*Bwor! Bwor!*" Sybe cried cheerfully.

"I see..." said Blossom, hanging her head in exaggerated sorrow. "Then I suppose I won't have anyone to help me with today's harvest, huh..."

Sybe's good cheer vanished instantly at Blossom's declaration, worry and concern taking its place. "Come now, Blossom, you shouldn't bully Sybe!" Balirossa objected, frowning as she hugged the psychobear and patted its head. "Besides, you take him with you nearly every morning. Surely you can spare him *sometimes*."

"I know, I know—I'm just kidding," Blossom said, changing her expression on a dime to a mischievous grin. Smiling, she gave Sybe a few firm pats on the head.

"*Bwowf!*" said Sybe, happily nuzzling his cheek against Blossom's. He was so much larger than her, though, that Blossom had to plant her legs firmly in the

ground and brace herself not to be pushed off her feet. Balirossa, for her part, couldn't quite stifle a bit of laughter at the sight.

"Y'know..." said Blossom. "Things sure have changed around here."

"Yes, you're quite right," Balirossa agreed. "When we first moved to this land with Sir Flio, there was nothing as far as the eye could see."

"Hey, whaddaya mean *nothing*?" objected Blossom. "We had my little hobby garden already by that point."

"Aha ha," Balirossa laughed, gazing at the cultivated fields that stretched out before her. "Yes, I suppose we did. But that little garden grew into something completely absurd..." In the distance, she could see the mountain where Ura and the rest of his village lived. Blossom's farm now extended all the way to that mountain and halfway up its slope. "By the way, Blossom," she added. "There's something I've been meaning to ask..."

"Hm? What is it, Balirossa?"

"When are you and Mister Ura and Kora going to officially become a family?"

Blossom sputtered in shock, taken off guard by Balirossa's blunt line of questioning. "A-Ack! Ahem! Wh-What're you doing asking something like *that* outta the blue?"

"Well..." Balirossa hesitated. "Perhaps I've misread the situation, but it seems to me that the three of you have become rather intimate of late. I was certain things were going in that direction. Am I wrong?"

"I-I mean..." said Blossom, unsure how to respond. "Well... How do I put this...?" As she stood there dithering, however, who should appear in front of them but Kora. "Huh?! K-Kora?!" Blossom exclaimed as the girl came running up, wrapping her arms tight around Blossom's leg.

"Morning, mom..." Kora said, a blush coming to her cheeks.



“A-Ah...” said Balirossa, apparently reaching an understanding. “W-Well, I should go take Sybe on our hunting trip. Have a good time with your family, Blossom. I’ll see you later.” With that, she and Sybe took their leave.

Blossom could only frown after Balirossa as she left. “Well...” she said, gently patting Kora’s head as she clung to her leg. “it’s not like I haven’t been thinking the same thing myself, I suppose.”

Kora smiled with delight as Blossom, looking down at her with a complicated expression, patted her hair.

◇Some Time Later—Flio’s Workshop◇

Behind Flio’s house was a building he used as a workshop, for projects too large scale to work on in his room, or jobs involving dangerous merchandise or the like.

“E-Excuse me!” said Blossom, poking her head in the workshop’s entrance. “Mister Flio? Are you here?”

“Oh! Hello, Blossom!” said Flio. “I’m just working on something. Would you like to come in?”

“Well, all right...” Blossom said, opening the door all the way and stepping through. Inside, she found Flio casting some sort of spell on an enormous clay figure. “Wh-What’s that? It’s huge!”

“Oh, this?” said Flio. “I had the idea to create a golem that’s capable of repairing castle walls.” He paused his spellcasting and flew through the air down to where Blossom was standing. “So, you have something you wanted to talk about? Is it about the farm?”

“O-Oh, no, not that...” Blossom said. She shook her head. “I’m no good at this kinda stuff. I’ve been agonizing for a while about what I should do...so I figured I should ask your opinion, Mister Flio, if you’re willing to hear me out...”

“Of course,” said Flio. “You can ask me anything, if you think my advice can help.”

“Th-Thank you very much...” Blossom said, bowing deep. Then she lifted her head and tried to speak. Alas, her embarrassment must have gotten the best of

her. She stood there, face bright red, hemming and hawing and stumbling over her words. “Erm, well... That is... You see...” It seemed she wasn’t about to get it out anytime soon.

Flio waited patiently, smiling his usual easygoing smile, doing his best not to put any unnecessary pressure on Blossom.

Rys, however, had a different idea.

“That’s it!” she declared, charging into the workshop. “I’ve had just about all I can stand of this!” She must have overheard their conversation from outside and lost her patience with Blossom’s sudden inability to speak a proper sentence. She barged right up to Blossom, shoving her face up close to hers without any regard for Blossom’s personal space. “So, you wanted to talk about Ura and Kora, did you? Hm?”

“Ghrk...” Blossom choked. “H-How did you...?”

“It was *obvious*,” said Rys. “You’ve been looking wistfully up at the oni mountain whenever you have a spare moment lately, even in the middle of your farmwork. You’ve been sharing a bed with Kora, always looking like you have something on your mind... Did you really think we hadn’t noticed?”

Blossom flinched back in the face of Rys’s tirade. Despite her distress, however, she steeled herself and lifted her head, meeting Rys’s eyes.

“A-Actually, I’ve been thinking lately that I’d rather like to be Kora’s mom. S-So...” For a second she stumbled over her words, but she raised her head once more and tried again. “W-Well...you see, Ura says Kora’s actual mom was one of the fairy folk, which is why she had such a short life span. I looked it up, and it turns out fairy folk only live for about thirty years. Now oni life spans vary quite a bit depending on the specific lineage from what I hear, but even a short-living oni species has a life span of easily over a hundred years. Ura’s one hundred percent oni, so he’ll probably live quite a while, but Kora’s half oni as well. She’ll probably live a fairly long life, I’d imagine...”

Having said that much, Blossom apparently lost her ability to speak entirely, opening her mouth again and again only to close it without saying anything as Rys stared intently at her, arms folded. Flio, however, placed a hand gently on Blossom’s shoulder. “That’s fine, isn’t it?”

“Huh?” said Blossom, confused by Flio’s sudden words.

“I mean,” said Flio, “I think it’s fine that way.”

Blossom’s eyes opened wide in understanding. Rys, however, seemed confused. “Excuse me...” she said, furrowing her brow. “What exactly do you mean by that...?”

“Blossom is a human, right?” Flio explained. “The average human life span is around fifty years or so. Blossom’s struggling to decide if it would be right for her to be Kora’s mother, when Kora is almost certainly going to live longer than that. She’s worried about leaving her without a mother for a second time.”

“Ah...” said Rys, nodding her head in understanding. “I see...”

“And so,” said Flio, turning back to Blossom, “my advice to you is that it’s fine.”

Blossom could only stare.

“Kora wants to be with you, Blossom. There’s no mistake there. And you want to be with Kora, and her father Ura, don’t you?”

Blossom mutely nodded.

“So just enjoy the time you have together to the fullest,” Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile as he patted Blossom on the shoulder. “That’s what’s important, I think.”

Blossom gave it some thought. “You’re right...” she said at last. “Yeah. You’re right!” Suddenly, she realized that she had been crying. “Thank you, Mister Flio! Madame Rys!” She wiped the tears from her eyes. “I’ll be back in a second!” And with that, she left the workshop at a run. Flio and Rys watched her go, smiling fondly.

“That girl needs all the help she can get, doesn’t she?” said Rys.

“She worries so much because her feelings are serious,” said Flio. “Or, that’s what I think, at least.”

“Well, I suppose I can understand where she’s coming from...” Rys said. “Still...” She leaned forward and planted a kiss on Flio’s cheek. “For my part, I have no regrets.”

“Rys...” said Flio.

The two gazed into each other’s eyes for a moment before kissing each other tenderly on the lips. Outside the workshop, they could hear Blossom’s footfalls fading off into the distance.

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 12

◇A Town near a Certain Forest◇

An enormous Enchanted Frigate came to its regularly scheduled stop outside the boarding tower in the middle of town. As the passengers disembarked from the ship and made their way down the tower's stairs, a storage unit was lowered from the hull of the Frigate to the ground below, where it was carried to the local warehouse to distribute foodstuffs and other air delivery orders made by the people in town.

Greanyl the shadow demon watched from the magic window installed in the helm of the ship, ensuring everything was proceeding smoothly.

Greanyl was a member of the Dark Army's former spy network, the Silent Listeners. Now, however, she was piloting the Enchanted Frigate as the demon in charge of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store's transportation network.

Good, she thought. It looks like the demons we have handling the warehouse's groundside have gotten used to their tasks.

The warehouse demons were all lesser demons vouched for by Ura. Some of them had objected to the idea of taking such unassuming work, but...

All we had to do was advertise the Wolf of Justice's relationship with the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, and they were more than happy to work... Greanyl recalled. She watched, nodding in satisfaction as the demons carried out their tasks at a brisk pace.

During the war, Flio had taken to wearing a mask patterned after a lupine demon, assuming the persona of the Wolf of Justice and driving off demon raiding parties all over the land with judicious application of overwhelming force. It got to the point that many demons, who traditionally revere power above all else, began to worship the Wolf of Justice with something akin to religious fervor.

We have more demons working for us than we used to, Greanyl thought.

Lately I'm even often finding myself with free time at work. Well...I suppose there's nothing wrong with enjoying one's leisure now and again. An image of the demon horse Dalc Horst popped unbidden into her mind at the idea. Suddenly, her face flushed bright red.

Wh-Wh-Why would Sir Dalc Horst's face come to my mind at a time like this?! she thought, covering her face with trembling hands in shame. Y-Yes, perhaps Sir Dalc Horst has treated me more kindly than I deserve...a-and I suppose I don't entirely dislike him...

On the platform next to her were two tickets for admission into the Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park racing hall. Greanyl, it seemed, had been thinking of inviting Dalc Horst if she ever got a chance. But...

I-I-I just can't do it! she thought. Asking a gentleman to accompany me for something like that is far too high a barrier for an absolute novice to romance like myself!

She shook her head, which had turned as red as a steamed lobster, clearing her mind as best she could. It seemed it would still be some time before she would work up the courage to use those tickets.



Soon, the Enchanted Frigate had finished loading and unloading its passengers and cargo. It disembarked from the boarding tower, heading on to the next town on its route as two children stared up at the vessel from the tower's base.

"Can you believe it?" one of the children said to the other. "We were on that big ship just a second ago!"

"Yeah!" the other answered with a smile. "I take that ship to school every day, you know! It's a lot of fun!"

Suddenly, with a noisy fluttering of wings, an enormous two-headed bird monster descended from the sky. As it landed, it glowed with light, becoming smaller and smaller. Soon it had transformed completely into a man with a slender, slight build. This was the doppeladler Hugi-Mugi, former member of the Infernal Four. Since quitting the Dark Army, they had retired to a quiet life

deep in the forest with their three human wives.

When the children saw Hugi-Mugi, they ran up to hug them, smiles on their faces.

“Papa!”

“We’re home, papa!”

“Welcome home, you two!” Hugi-Mugi said, smiling from ear to ear themselves. “Yes, you two, welcome home. Did you have a good time at school, yes?” Hugi-Mugi’s original form was of a two-headed monster bird—they spoke with two distinct overlapping voices even in their human form.

Hugi-Mugi’s children each took one of their hands as the group set off walking down the road.

“Guess what, papa!” said the first child. “I’ve been learning how to use magic at school! Isn’t that amazing?”

“Well! How amazing, yes! Yes, very amazing! You’re very clever, Huca, yes!”

“I can use magic too!” said the other child. “Praise me too!”

“Of course, yes! Yes, of course!” Hugi-Mugi said, turning their happy smile from one child to the other. “You’re quite amazing too, Muno, yes! Yes, well done! Now, yes, shall we buy those things your mamas needed and return to our cottage?”

“Yes, papa!” the children cheered.

“I’ll help with the shopping!” volunteered Muno.

“Oh! Well, I’ll help too!” added Huca.

“Yes, yes!” said Hugi-Mugi. “Let’s do our shopping and head home, yes! Yes, shopping together!”

The three (or four, depending on how one counts Hugi-Mugi) made their way down the street to the town’s shopping district. As they left, however, a woman in a tattered gothic lolita-style dress with abnormally large and shiny black eyes stepped out of the shadows behind them. She was a very strange-looking person, enough so that a crowd of townsfolk had already begun to form a circle

around her, keeping a wide berth. The woman did nothing to change the townsfolk's impression, then, when she suddenly began to dance.

"Drat, drat, and damnaaaation!" she sang in a high operatic voice with musical cadence but no particular tune, twirling and contorting her body in a strange dance all the while. "We failed, oh failed, oh failed in our plan to capture the magic beeeaaasts! Now, oh, now, oh now, what can I do, but catch the rumored, rumored, rumored golden bird! If only I could fiiiind it, my sister Yanderena would surely forgive, forgive, forgive me...but oh where, where, where could it be?"

Of course, this strange singing and dancing woman could only be Yanderena.

The golden bird Yanderena was hunting, incidentally, was none other than Hugi-Mugi in their monstrous demon form, but she had no hope of guessing their identity from the display of doting parenthood she had witnessed.

Unfortunately, Yanderena had another problem to worry about immediately.

"Excuse me, sir guard!" cried one of the townsfolk. "That's her, I'm sure of it!"

"Well, she's certainly a suspicious individual..." said the guard. "You there! You aren't the criminal we're looking for, are you?!"

"Waaaiit!" Yanderena wailed. "Please, oh please, oh please, don't call the guuuuaards!"

"What was that?" the guard replied. "I knew you were suspicious! Now come along quietly!"

"No, no, no, I won't, I won't, I wooon't!" Yanderena sang, quickly dancing away from the scene. The guard followed her as she left the road, twirling all the way into the forest.

"What was that commotion about, yes?!" said Hugi-Mugi. "Yes, what was that commotion?!"

"Never mind that, papa!" said Huca. "We need to buy potalpos for mama Cartha!"

"Yes, yes, the shopping is more important, yes!" Hugi-Mugi agreed. And so

the family continued merrily on their way, completely ignoring the altercation.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Right in the middle of the second floor of Flio's house was a living space shared by Ghozal, Uliminas, and Balirossa. It had one room for Ghozal's private living space, one for Uliminas, one for Balirossa, and one bedroom that all three shared. From the hallway, it didn't seem any larger than any of the other two chamber rooms used by the residents of Flio's house, but thanks to Flio's magic, the interior had been expanded to a size suitable for a married triad.

Ghozal sat in a chair in his private room, reading a magic grimoire when someone came knocking on the door. "Hrm," he said. "It's open."

The door opened up, and Uliminas stepped inside. "Meow isn't a bad time, is it?" she asked.

"No, now is fine," said Ghozal. "What do you need?"

"Mrr..." Uliminas considered, awkwardly avoiding eye contact as she approached her husband. "Well, *need* is a bit of a strong word... A-Actually, I was just thinking of how meowch fun I had at the magic beast racing hall..."

"Oh, that," said Ghozal. "Dawkson built something pretty decent, didn't he? I had a good time on our visit too."

"Yes! Folmina and Ghoros both had a great time! A-And I had a purretty good time too..." She had stepped right up to Ghozal now, but she was still looking down at the floor.

Ghozal tilted his head, puzzled. Uliminas was fidgeting terribly, clearly struggling to find the words to something she wanted to say. "Uliminas... What exactly is this about?"

"Mreow!" Uliminas exclaimed, twitching involuntarily. "Erm, well... I-I, um..." she said, stumbling over her words. She stood there, averting her eyes and squirming uncomfortably, clearly hiding something behind her back, until she finally worked up the courage and held out the thing she had in her hands. "H-Here!" she blurted out, blushing bright red and still refusing to lift her head.

"Magic beast stir-fry...?" Ghozal said, looking at the large plate in Uliminas's

hands piled high with a large helping of stir-fried meat.

“W-Well...mew know...” Uliminas said. “It seemed like mew really enjoyed the homemade meowgic beast stir-fry Rys meowde us for lunch when we went to the racing hall, so...I-I thought I’d try meowking it myself, as best I can...”

“Oh?” said Ghozal. “You made this, Uliminas?”

“Th-That’s what I’ve been trying to tell mew!” said the blushing hellcat.

Ghozal accepted the plate from Uliminas with a great smile. He grabbed the spoon Uliminas had provided him and scooped up a bite of meat. “Hrm!” he declared. “This is delicious!”

“Meow way...” said Uliminas. “Mew don’t gotta flatter me...”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ghozal reassured her. “You know full well I don’t say anything I don’t mean!”

“W-Well, I can’t purrentend to deny *that*...” Uliminas admitted, her face growing redder still.

“Hah,” Ghozal laughed, grinning as he took another bite of the stir-fry.

“E-Excuse me?!” said Uliminas. “Meowt exactly do you find so funny?!”

“Nothing, nothing!” said Ghozal. “I just can’t believe I finally got to taste your cooking, Uliminas! I’m glad.”

“M-Mreowr...” Uliminas said, mumbling as she spoke. “W-Well, mew know. Back in the Dark Army, I was busy with my duties as meowr confurderate. I didn’t have time to do things like this.”

“Hrm,” Ghozal agreed, smiling at his wife’s behavior between bites of stir-fry. “That’s true. We were both always busy with something in those days. Back then, I would have never imagined how soon we would end up living such a relaxed, peaceful life...”

“Yeah...” said Uliminas, sitting down across from Ghozal—although she still hadn’t managed to bring herself to look him in the eyes. “It’s something to be happy about, I suppose...”

Ghozal smiled, and went back to eating his food.

◇One Night—Flio's Bathhouse◇

"What's this, what's this, what's *this?!'*" Hokh'hokton came running out of his cottage, running as fast as his legs could carry him towards the public bath.

Hokh'hokton had just recently been appointed to the position of troubleshooter for the new bathhouse Flio had built outside the oni village—the one the villagers had confusingly taken to calling Flio's Bathhouse.

"I don't believe this!" he fumed as he stormed into the entrance to the bath. "The very day I'm appointed bathhouse troubleshooter, there's already trouble to shoot!"

The front door of the bathhouse led to a large front room before the bath proper, lined with lockers for visitors to use to store their shoes while bathing. Hokh'hokton swiftly changed into a pair of slippers and hurried farther inside. Past the front room straight ahead was the attendant's booth. To the right were the women's baths, and to the left, the men's.

It was obvious at a glance that something was wrong. The demon woman villager on duty in the attendant's booth was looking fearfully in the direction of the men's bath, while outside a number of male demons paced back and forth in agitation, wearing towels around their waists.

"Mister Hokh'hokton!" said the woman in the attendant's booth. "This way, here!"

"Hmm..." Hokh'hokton mused as he approached. "So the trouble's in the men's bath, is it? So much for using my duties as a pretext to enter the women's bathing area—*not* that that was ever my intention!" he hastily added, realizing he had said a little too much. "Well, what *is* going on in there, anyway?"

"Well..." the attendant said, "some strange troublemaker has been keeping the bath occupied."

"A strange troublemaker...you say?" Hokh'hokton asked.

"That's right!" one of the men volunteered. "Seems she's been drinking in the bath, making a nuisance of herself to anyone else who steps foot inside!"

“Plus, there’s the fact that there’s a woman in the men’s bath,” another added. “Can’t be too careful in how we handle the situation...”

Hokh’hokton twitched involuntarily at the men’s report. “There’s a...woman in the men’s bath?” he asked.

“That’s right,” said the attendant. “That’s what makes this so tricky...”

“Hmmm...” Hokh’hokton said. “And you’ve tried all sorts of methods to get this perv—this *woman*—to leave, I take it? The nerve! Why, my blood is boiling so hot I can just about feel the steam coming from my ears!” He stretched out his shoulders in preparation, grinning jubilantly at the prospect of giving this mysterious drunken woman some much needed discipline.

“And...” the attendant continued with a note of misery in her voice, “I did my best to be brave and kick the woman out, but she wouldn’t listen to me! She just kept going on saying, ‘*Who cares? What’s the harm?*’ while she stripped off my clothes! And she did this...and that...and some other things...” At this the demon did what she had been threatening to do for a little while and burst into noisy tears as the other demons hurried to reassure and comfort her.

Hokh’hokton’s expression fell. He had been enjoying himself imagining a fantasy of charging in to drive some lady pervert out of the bath, but suddenly, it hit him. *There’s only one woman I know who’s that much of a nightmare drunk...* he thought. *Don’t tell me I’ve gotten involved with her again!*

Keeping a stiff upper lip, Hokh’hokton stepped gingerly into the men’s bath. As he passed through the changing room, he heard someone singing up ahead, an undulating wavering melody: “Oh what fun to roam and quest, with wine in hand from east to weeest.”

That singing voice... Hokh’hokton thought. *I knew it!* He walked briskly up to the door to the bath, and cast it open. There on the other side was Telbyress, drinking away in the men’s bath.

“Yooou!” Hokh’hokton bellowed. “I knew this was your doing, you damned no-gooddess!”

“Hwuuuh?” said Telbyress. “Who’sh there? Get out! I’m jush gettin’ to the good partsh!” She seemed to be in uncommonly high spirits.

Hokh'hokton seized a nearby washing pail and flung it at the fallen goddess's face. He scored a clean hit, sending her reeling out of the water. Telbyress didn't make the slightest effort to conceal her voluptuous body, but Hokh'hokton paid her figure no mind whatsoever as he made a beeline straight for his foe.



“O-Ohhh?” said Telbyress. “I-If it isn’t Hokh’hokton! Wh-What’s got you so angry?”

“That’s quite enough out of you!” Hokh’hokton declared.

“B-Buuut,” the no-goodness protested, “I was jusht havin’ a nice time drinkin’ in the bath! Can’t you cut me shome slack?!”

“I will not!”

“S-Shuddenly I see the errorsh of my waysh!” Telbyress pleaded. “I-I’ll jusht be leaving, then?”

“Yes,” said Hokh’hokton. “Because I’m kicking you out!” He descended upon her, heedless of her pleas. A moment later, the sound of a single merciless blow rang throughout the bathhouse.

“Well, *that* was certainly a bit of trouble!” Hokh’hokton declared, arriving back in the bathhouse lobby with the rolled up towel he had used as an improvised weapon slung over his shoulder. “But I assure you, the culprit has been punished!”

“Th-Then...” said the attendant. “The woman...?”

“I taught her a lesson and expelled her from the premises—don’t you worry about that!” Hokh’hokton said. “You can all go about using the bath in peace.”

The demon men who had been forced to wait in the lobby let out a cheer and went back into the bath.

“E-Excuse me...” the attendant said, smiling down at the triumphant goblin. “Mister Hokh’hokton?”

“Yes?” said Hokh’hokton. “What can I do for a lovely lady?” He gave her his coolest smile—a far cry from the enraged expression he wore when dealing with Telbyress.

“I just wanted to thank you,” she said, reaching down into her booth and rummaging for something. “You were a tremendous help today. Here, let me give you something...”

“No need, no need at all!” Hokh’hokton assured her, grinning with delight and striking a pose. “But if you really want to thank me, perhaps we can have dinner together sometime, in a restaurant somewhere with a beautiful view of the night sky! And then afterwards, perhaps, we could spend a night entwined in passion! Ahhh—my blood is boiling just thinking of it!”

The woman in the attendant’s booth, however, didn’t seem to have heard him. “Here you go!” she said, producing a bottle and handing it over to Hokh’hokton.

“What...is this?” Hokh’hokton asked.

“It’s cuffee milk!” she said. “A new item from the Fli-o’-Rys General Store!”

“C-Cuffee...?” Hokh’hokton repeated.

“That’s right!” the woman said with a smile. “It’s made with cowdin milk combined with a drink called cuffee. It’s the perfect beverage for right when you get out of a bath. Take it along with my gratitude!”

“Ah...right...” Hokh’hokton said, accepting the bottle with a dazed look on his face. He left Flio’s Bathhouse, cuffee milk in hand, towel still slung over his shoulder.

◇Flio’s House—Elinàsze’s Room◇

That day, Zofina arrived in Elinàsze’s private chambers.

Zofina was an angel and disciple of the Celestial Plane, as well as a resident of that realm. She also served as one of the Contract Executors who enforce the magic of the Blood Oath Contract. When she worked in that capacity, she took on an appearance that was half young maiden and half skeleton.

“H-Huh...?” Zofina said, looking around Elinàsze’s room with evident confusion.

Elinàsze had been sitting at her desk in her room poring over a magic grimoire. She was just in the middle of conjuring a magic circle when Zofina appeared. “Um... It’s Miss Zofina, isn’t it?”

“Y-Yes, that’s right,” Zofina said. “But um...do you know what I’m doing in this room, by any chance? I came here to pick up the usual supply of medicine from

Mister Flio, but somehow I ended up here...”

The medicine in question was a very special concoction that could only be synthesized from the bones of a Beast of Disaster, a dangerous type of monster not meant to exist in the world of Klyrode at all. It had all sorts of powerful restorative effects, from nourishment to fatigue recovery to skin beautification. Moreover, it worked even on the goddesses of the Celestial Plane, who were ordinarily unaffected by mortal medicine. However, not even the celestials themselves possessed the ability to refine Beast of Disaster bones. In fact, of everyone in all the worlds under their purview, Flio and Flio alone was capable of carrying out the process.

Or so Zofina thought.

“Yes, here it is,” said Elinàsze, handing a bag over to Zofina.

“Excuse me,” Zofina said, looking between the bag and the girl in front of her. “M-Miss Elinàsze... Is this...?”

“It’s the medicine,” Elinàsze answered. “Papa asked me to make it for him.”

There was a moment of silence. Then...

“Wh-What?!” Zofina’s eyes threatened to boggle out of her head as she finally managed to wrap her head around what Elinàsze had just told her. “M-M-Miss Elinàsze! Wait a moment! D-Do you mean to say that *you* were the one who synthesized this?!”

“Yes, that’s right,” Elinàsze said. “Here, look.” She opened one of the drawers of her desk, pulling out a Beast of Disaster bone left over from the last batch of medicine she had created. The ends of the bone had been broken off and neatly polished, a telltale sign of the refinement process that went into producing the much desired medicine.

Zofina looked at the paper bag in her hand in disbelief. She summoned a magic circle, scanning the contents up and down. Once her spell had finished its investigation, it displayed the results in a window that appeared before her eyes.

◇Powdered Medicine (Beast of Disaster Bone)

Zofina stared in disbelief.

“Is there a problem?” asked Elinàsze.

“Huh?” said Zofina.

“I believe that should be the precise quantity of medicine promised to you by my father.”

“O-Oh! Yes!” said Zofina, finally coming back to her senses. “D-Duly received,” she added, bowing her head low. *Th-This medicine can only be derived from Beast of Disaster bones, I’m sure of it...* she thought, a bead of cold sweat running down her brow as she stared at the paper bag. *I-I never would have imagined that anyone other than Mister Flio himself could do it...*

Zofina was still dumbstruck as she left the house through the front door. *But no matter how much I think about it, it doesn’t make sense,* she thought. *The fact that Mister Flio can produce this medicine is unbelievable enough in the first place. But his daughter Miss Elinàsze can do the same thing?*

As Zofina puzzled it over, she passed Rynàsze coming the other direction riding on a magic beast.

“Good afternoon, miss!” Rynàsze greeted her, bowing politely from atop her mount.

“Ah, yes. Good afternoon,” said Zofina, returning the greeting out of habit. As Rynàsze went by, however, Zofina did a double take. “W-Wait! That magic beast you’re riding...” she said, trembling at the realization. “C-Could it be...?”

“Oh!” said Flio, coming up from behind her. “That would be a Bear of Misfortune cub.”

“M-Mister Flio!” Zofina exclaimed, startled, as she wheeled around to face him. It looked like Flio had just arrived home via a Teleportation spell—the door he had come out of was still visible behind him. Zofina glanced between Flio and Rynàsze, her mouth opening and closing like a fish, at a loss for what to say.

“We heard a rumor about a Beast of Calamity during one of our recent visits to the Land of the Rising Sun, and Garyl and I went to go capture it,” Flio explained.

“C-Capture it, you say...” said Zofina. “But even if it is a juvenile, a beast like that would be extremely dangerous...”

“Yes, the mother bear was quite tough,” Flio agreed. “Still, we managed to defeat it.”

“Y-Yes, I suppose you are more than capable of defeating a Beast of Disaster on your own...” Zofina nodded.

“Oh, no,” Flio corrected her. “It was Garyl who took down the Bear of Misfortune this time.”

“What?!” Once more, Zofina found herself reeling. *W-Wait! Slow down!* she thought. *It takes a whole team of Disciples of the Celestial Plane to challenge a Beast of Disaster without seriously imperiling an angel’s life! Mister Flio’s magic is on par with a goddess’s power, so perhaps I can understand why he is capable of defeating Beasts of Disaster alone...but his child Mister Garyl can do the same thing?!*

As Zofina’s distress mounted, Flio gave the best explanation he could, smiling his usual easygoing smile all the while. “After we defeated the Bear of Misfortune, we found this cub in its nest. It seemed fond of Rynàsze, so we decided to take it home as one of her familiars. Oh, and not to worry—we made sure to perform the familiar contract properly.”

Zofina’s face was completely blank as she took in Flio’s account. *A familiar contract...* she thought, her head positively spinning. *With a child, perhaps, but still. A Beast of Disaster...as a familiar.* She pushed through it, however, and snapped out of her befuddled state. “I see... Well, I suppose I will be back for my next scheduled pickup.” It was a strangely businesslike thing for her to say, but it would have to serve for parting words. Zofina conjured her Scythe of Judgment and spun it in a full circle. The space where the blade of the scythe passed through split open, and she gracelessly threw herself into the space between worlds.

I need to stop thinking about Mister Flio and his family... she thought to

herself as she left. *They're simply too exceptional. Trying to understand it is a waste of time.* Having reached that conclusion, she quieted her mind and returned to the Celestial Plane.

Flio cocked his head with benign curiosity, staring after the space where Zofina had vanished. "Miss Zofina seemed to be in a strange mood today," he said. "I wonder if she's doing all right." With that, he turned and headed towards home.

"Papa!" cried Rynàsze as she noticed Flio returning to the house. "Welcome home!" she said, beaming with her whole face. She rode the Bear of Misfortune cub up to her father.

"I'm home, Rynàsze!" said Flio, holding back his daughter's exuberant mount as it bounded up to him. It might have been a cub, but it was still a Beast of Misfortune, and its charge was a force to be reckoned with. With all of Flio's continual magic effects, however, he had no trouble at all arresting the monstrosity in place. "Rynàsze, you have to make sure not to let this cub charge at anyone other than me."

"Of course!" Rynàsze nodded, smiling brightly. "I know!"

"Speaking of which..." Flio continued. "Have you decided on a name yet?"

"Well..." Rynàsze considered, "I have a lot of ideas, actually. I'm having trouble picking one."

"How about coming up with something together with your papa?" Flio suggested.

"Oh, may we?" Rynàsze said, nodding happily. "I'd be delighted!"

The Bear of Misfortune nodded its head eagerly as well, seeming to understand what was happening. And so, the bear, man, and girl together made their way inside the house.

"I'm home!" Flio called as he stepped into the threshold.

Afterword

Thank you very much for checking out this book!

Level 2 Cheat has made it all the way to volume twelve, and the characters have grown up quite a bit as well. Garyl, especially, has gone from a fresh-faced child with a rascally streak to a young man who seems to have inherited his father's calming aura. I hope you've all been enjoying the ongoing saga of the Maiden Queen, and her inner turmoil at Garyl's accelerated development courtesy of his demon blood.

A full two-thirds of the episodes in this volume were entirely new writing as well—all new events not appearing in the web novel version of the story. I hope you enjoyed reading them!

Also, this book is going to be available for sale at the same time as the fifth volume of the manga version of the story! As the author of the original, it's been very exciting to see the manga come out. Not only that, but volume three of *Food Stall in Another World "Enishi-tei,"* my other original work, is scheduled to be released by Comic Jardin this September, and to top it all off, we're starting production this year of two more manga adaptations of my work. I would really be overjoyed and delighted if you would consider reading them as well.

Finally, I would like to thank Katagiri as always for the incredible illustrations, the people at Overlap Novels and everyone else who helped get this book published, and, of course, each and every one of you who purchased a copy of this book.

July 2021, Miya Kinojo



Chillin' in Another World
WITH LV 2
SUPER CHEAT
POWERS

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

12





Name | Hero Gold-Hair | 8

“Oh no!
Hero Gold-Hair’s
under the effect
of the drug!
He’s lost himself
completely!
I, Valentine,
must do what
I can to hold
him in place—
so perhaps
you’ll allow it
this once...?”

Name | Valentine | ∞

Bonus Short Stories

Oni Village Festival: Champions of the Food Stalls

One day, the village of demons who had been transplanted near Flio's house decided to hold a summer festival. In attendance were not only the residents of the oni village but humans and demihumans from Houghtow City as well, who had heard about the festival and taken an Enchanted Frigate flight to the village to see for themselves. Stalls had been set up all over the slopes of the oni mountain, and everywhere you looked you could find crowds of excited festivalgoers.



Tucked away among the busy festival stalls, there was one stall in particular that seemed to be drawing an especially large crowd. In front of the stall dangled a sign reading, "Eat it all within the time limit and win a gold coin!" Next to the sign was posted a piece of paper reading, "Extra large extra spicy extra hearty soup."

Gwa ha ha! the man behind the stall thought to himself, a cunning sneer on his face. No ordinary demon or human could ever finish this soup within the time limit! I'm giving them an extra large bowl with an extra large helping, and the soup itself is chock-full of the spiciest ingredients I could get my hands on! Not only that, but I've written "Ten gold coin penalty for each unfinished bowl" in smaller letters underneath the advertisement! I'm gonna make a killing!

At first things went exactly like he thought.

"You're on! I accept the challenge!"

"Hey mister! Gimme a bowl!"

Lured by the promise of gold, challengers with powerful appetites came aiming for the jackpot one after another, only for each of them in turn to fall in defeat before the soup. The stallkeeper watched the scene play out in smug

satisfaction—right up until his face suddenly went white.

Before the man's eyes were Wyne, Ben'ne, and Ghozal, each of them devouring a bowl of soup with astonishing speed.

"Seconds! Seconds!" called Wyne.

"Indeed!" said Ben'ne. "It is a fine soup. I, too, would entreat you for a second helping!"

"Hrm!" Ghozal agreed. "Not bad at all! I can feel the heat welling up inside my body! Give me another bowl!"

The three of them chatted happily away as they finished off one bowl after another.

The stallkeeper racked his brain for a way to expel the three from the stall, but it was no use. Their display of gustatory prowess had drawn a crowd of onlookers, watching intently and cheering them on.

Wh-Wh-What should I do?! the man thought, growing paler and paler still. If I close the stall now, those onlookers will never let me hear the end of it! But if I keep serving them, I'll go broke handing out prize money...

"Seconds! Seconds!" demanded Wyne.

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Yes ma'am!" he replied, unable to do anything but serve up another bowl of soup.

All around them, the bustling festival continued.

Oni Village Festival: Hiya and Damalynas

One day, the village of demons who had been transplanted near Flio's house decided to hold a summer festival. In attendance were not only the residents of the oni village but humans and demihumans from Houghtow City as well, who had heard about the festival and taken an Enchanted Frigate flight to the village to see for themselves. Stalls had been set up all over the slopes of the oni mountain, and everywhere you looked you could find crowds of excited festivalgoers.



The lamps of festival stalls and floats lit up the slopes of the oni mountain, making it look like the silhouette of a castle as Hiya gazed upon it from their perch atop the roof of Flio's house. "A festival, is it...?" they mused, a faint smile on their face.

As Hiya looked out into the distance, Damalynas appeared beside them. Damalynas, who had long since lost her corporeal body, now existed purely as a psychic construct and spent most of her time in Hiya's mindscape—the djinn's mental world.

"Oh?" Hiya remarked. "Is there something you need, Damalynas?"

"Ehe hee," Damalynas laughed, smiling brightly. "I just thought it might be nice to get a chance to enjoy the festival atmosphere! Something like this doesn't happen every day, after all!" She sat down next to Hiya, resting her chin in her hands and gazing off at the mountain. She kept looking away, however, stealing glances in Hiya's direction before returning her eyes to the mountain.

"Hah..." breathed Hiya. "Are you truly here to enjoy the festival atmosphere? You seem to have eyes for nothing but myself."

"Not at all!" Damalynas insisted. "It's just...how do I put this..." She lowered her head, concealing her eyes behind the wide brim of her hat as if she were trying to hide her embarrassment. "For years and years, I devoted myself completely to pursuing mastery of the dark arts. Back then, I didn't have a thought to spare for anything else. But..." She glanced up at Hiya once again. "I keep thinking that even just watching the festival from a distance is really nice, now that I'm doing it with the one I love..." With that, she planted a kiss on Hiya's cheek.

"Hm..." Hiya considered. "So it's that sort of thing, is it?"

"Y-Yeah, it's that sort of thing..." Damalynas acknowledged, shyly looking the other way.

Such emotions are strange to a djinn like myself... Hiya thought. Even now, I do not fully understand them. However... They wrapped their arms around Damalynas's shoulders, pulling the mage in close. I must say, I find these

unfamiliar emotions quite fascinating...

Damalynas shut her eyes as Hiya's face drew close to hers. Just as they came together, however, a gorgeous display of magic circles bloomed in the sky above the oni mountain.

"That is the Exalted One's magic, I believe..." Hiya observed.

"I-It's pretty, isn't it?" said Damalynas.

"It is," Hiya agreed. "Shall we go and lend him our assistance?"

"O-Okay! Sure! Let's go!"

The two separated, smiling. Hiya raised their right arm, and the pair vanished from the roof.

Oni Village Festival: The Maiden Queen's Fateful Encounter

One day, the village of demons who had been transplanted near Flio's house decided to hold a summer festival. In attendance were not only the residents of the oni village but humans and demihumans from Houghtow City as well, who had heard about the festival and taken an Enchanted Frigate flight to the village to see for themselves. Stalls had been set up all over the slopes of the oni mountain, and everywhere you looked you could find crowds of excited festivalgoers.



From foot to peak, the oni mountain was full of lights from the festival stalls and the happy voices of excited festivalgoers. The festival had reached its peak, and Ura and Kora had ascended the platform erected atop the mountain, Ura playing the drum and Kora the flute in joyful harmony as the crowd around them danced to the rhythm for all they were worth. The ring of dancers extended far beyond the area around the platform, all the way down to the main road. The whole of the mountain was alive with the excitement of the festival.

A magic circle appeared somewhere in the mountain's foothills, followed by three mages materialized out of thin air. In the middle of their ranks was the

Maiden Queen. They had done so out of sight so as not to attract attention, and the Queen herself was not dressed in her usual courtly attire but a robe in the yukata style from the Land of the Rising Sun, which was given to her by none other than Rys.

“S-So this is the festival...” she said, poking her head out from the group’s hiding place. *I can’t believe I’m showing up so late after Garyl went to the trouble of inviting me...* she pouted to herself as she made her way over to the main road on the double. *Honestly, how could I get so tied up with government affairs on a day like today!*

The Maiden Queen reached the road and began looking restlessly around as people danced and shopped and enjoyed festival food. *I haven’t told Garyl I was on my way, have I...?* she thought, hastily retrieving her ring set with a Conversation Gem from its case, of the same color as the yukata she was wearing. *I suppose I had best use the ring Mister Flio gave me to let him know I’ve arrived...*

Just as she put the ring on her finger, however, the Maiden Queen found herself bumped by another festivalgoer. “Ah!” she cried. Not used to her current style of dress, she lost her balance and went tumbling face-first towards the street. She closed her eyes...

“Are you okay, Miss Ellie?”

The next thing the Maiden Queen knew, she could hear Garyl’s voice in her ears. Her eyes shot open to see Garyl, holding her in his arms to avert her imminent collapse. “G-Garyl?” she said. *H-He already found me, even though I never used the Communication Ring...* she thought, a blush rising in her cheeks.

“I had a feeling you were here,” Garyl said, smiling cheerfully as he helped the Maiden Queen back up to her feet. “Good thing your outfit didn’t get dirty!”

Th-This must be fate... the Maiden Queen thought, shyly lowering her head as her face turned redder still.

Garyl pulled the Maiden Queen in close. “There’s tons of people here today. How about I show you around? We can enjoy the festival together!”

“O-Okay!” said the Maiden Queen, her voice coming out a somewhat higher

pitch than usual.

The two made their way up the main road, taking their time and enjoying the scenery as above them a beautiful display of magic circle artistry began to appear, shining in the sky.

Oni Village Festival: A Bit of Support for a Hardworking Mom

One day, the village of demons who had been transplanted near Flio's house decided to hold a summer festival. In attendance were not only the residents of the oni village but humans and demihumans from Houghtow City as well, who had heard about the festival and taken an Enchanted Frigate flight to the village to see for themselves. Stalls had been set up all over the slopes of the oni mountain, and everywhere you looked you could find crowds of excited festivalgoers.



A large number of stalls had been set up along the road leading up the mountain. Most of them were set up by the residents of the oni village themselves, but some were being operated by humans from Houghtow City, or students and faculty from the Houghtow College of Magic, or even people from other towns who had heard rumors about the festival, all packed together with hardly an inch to spare between them.

Operating one of the many stalls was Belano from the Houghtow College of Magic, selling magic potions and magic gems. *They're just basic potions and magic gems whose only property is casting light... Common items you can buy anywhere...* she thought to herself as she went about preparing the stall for business. *But I did my best making them, after all. It would be nice if I could sell at least a couple...*

Soon, however, a throng of shoppers had gathered in front of Belano's humble stall, much to the witch's disbelief. "H-Huh?!" she exclaimed, going stiff at the sight. *Wh-Why are there so many people here? I-I'm not selling anything particularly uncommon...*

In spite of her confusion, Belano did her best to meet her customers'

demands, one after another. Her husband Minilio and her child Belalio stood to her left and right, helping her operate the stall.

At the time Belano had yet to realize it, but for the past several days, Minilio and Belalio had been enhancing the effect of Belano's merchandise every night after she had gone to sleep, tired from a long evening working hard to produce goods to sell at the festival. Her customers were scarcely able to believe their eyes when they saw the results of their effort.

"H-Hey! This stall's selling high-level potions for the price of basic ones!"

"Check this out! This magic gem's light effect is powerful enough to last an entire decade! And it's so cheap!"

Soon, rumors had spread of the stall selling quality magic items for next to nothing, and more and more customers came to shop at Belano's stall.

I-I can't for the life of me understand why they're selling so well... Belano thought, smiling happily as she did her best to keep up with the flurry of customers. But I'm glad to see so many people buying the items I worked so hard to make...

Minilio and Belalio almost looked like they had happy smiles on their expressionless faces at the sight of how much Belano was enjoying herself as well.

And on the festival continued...

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Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers: Volume 12

by Miya Kinojo

Translated by Meteora Edited by Samantha J. Moore

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