

Chillin' in Another World

WITH LV 2

SUPER CHEAT POWERS



14



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

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Characters

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Flio

Former Hero Candidate and
General Store Proprietor.



Rys

Flio's wife, a lupine demon.



Wyne (Human Form)

Freeloader with high stats
and a big appetite.



Tanya

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



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-goddess who
was exiled from the Celestial Plane.
Lodging with Hokh'hokton.

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Ghozal

Once known as the mightiest
Dark One in history.



Uliminas

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



Balirossa

A former knight of Klyrode
and wife of Ghozal.



Folmina

Ghozal and
Uliminas's daughter.



Ghoro

Ghozal and Balirossa's son.



Calsi'im

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



Charun

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



Rabbitz

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



Greanyl

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



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.



Second Princess

Laid-back princess who
handles foreign diplomacy.



Third Princess

Bright-eyed princess who
handles domestic affairs.



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: Flio's Family Vacation

The world of Klyrode is a world of swords and sorcery, home to demons and demihumans of all kinds. It is a world where humans and demons had waged war since time immemorial—until, that is, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, greatest of the human kingdoms, signed a treaty with the Dark Army, the largest and most venerable institution among demonkind, bringing peace to the land.

The Dark One Dawkson, having successfully reestablished cooperative relations between the demon clans, has been applying himself to the development of his territory in spite of the misgivings of those demons who cling to the credo that might makes right. Some have even begun to liken him to his predecessor Dark One Calsi'im and the former Dark One Gholl. This newfound prestige seems to be matched by a renewed interest in the marital prospects of the Dark One, who has still yet to take a queen.

The Maiden Queen of Klyrode, meanwhile, has been working hard to establish diplomatic relations with faraway lands who had the luxury of ignoring the war with the Dark Army thanks to their distance from the Dark One's domain, part of her ongoing project to build bonds of friendship between the kingdoms of humanity. With the Queen pulling one all-nighter after another both at home and abroad, however, many have come to worry for the health of their sovereign.

The merchant Flio, meanwhile, has been putting no less effort into his management of his own Fli-o'-Rys General Store, expanding his markets both in human lands and in the territory controlled by the Dark One and his Dark Army. Along with his wife Rys, and everyone who had come to call his house their home, Flio's been keeping himself busy.

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

◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

One day, Flio paid a visit to Klyrode Castle.

Flio was a merchant who hailed from another world entirely, originally summoned to Klyrode as a candidate for the position of Hero. The blessing he had received on his summoning gave him mastery over every skill and every magic spell that existed in the entire world. Since his arrival he had taken Rys as his wife—a demon and former soldier in the Dark Army—and became the proprietor of a general store by the name of Fli-o'-Rys and a proud father of one son and three daughters. Currently, he was in the presence of the Maiden Queen of Klyrode, who was sitting upon her throne, but in spite of that he stood there smiling his usual easygoing smile.

The Maiden Queen of Klyrode was the reigning monarch of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Her full name was Elizabeth Klyrode, but those closest to her knew her as Ellie. She had taken reign of the kingdom when her father, the former King Klyrode, was banished for his many crimes. She was so obsessed with statecraft that she had never taken a lover in spite of being around thirty years of age.

In contrast to Flio's relaxed demeanor, the Maiden Queen wore a distinctly guilty expression. "I really am terribly sorry for all of the outrageous requests I keep making of you and the Fli-o'-Rys General Store..." she said.

"Not at all!" Flio reassured her, good-naturedly shaking his head. "We're always happy for the business, you know."

"I am very grateful to hear those words, make no mistake..." the Maiden Queen said, a conflicted look coming over her face.

As word had spread about the peace treaty she'd signed with the Dark Army, she had received countless requests from the neighboring human kingdoms. The Maiden Queen had done her best to handle those requests herself as the representative of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, but given that a majority of the requests had something to do with the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, time and time again she'd found she had no recourse but to request Flio's presence at the castle in order to handle some particulars.

"However," she continued, "I truly feel I must apologize for requesting you come all this way yet again..." She stood up from her seat and lowered her head.

Flio held up his hand, waving off the apology. “There’s no need to apologize on our account,” he said. “It’s a profitable arrangement for our store after all, and you’ve been very accommodating of our requests as well on many occasions—not to imply that this is some sort of exchange of favors, of course.” So saying, Flio lowered his own head towards the Queen. At his side, his wife Rys followed suit, bowing her head with slow elegance. She was wearing an extravagant dress, suitable for an audience with a queen, which she lifted in a graceful curtsy.

Rys was a lupine demon and a powerful warrior, formerly of the Dark Army. After she had once been defeated by Flio, she made the choice to walk alongside him as his wife. She loved her husband Flio somewhat past the point of rationality, and served as a mother figure for everyone who resided in his household. Her presence seemed to have caused a stir among the various ministers gathered in the throne room.

“Th-That woman, Mister Flio’s wife...” one of them whispered. “Am I correct in hearing that she is in fact a d-demon...?”

“That’s right...” another whispered back. “A lupine demon, whose strength made her a match for the old Infernal Four, they say...”

“Can you believe it? A demon like that, performing such an elegant curtsy...”

Rys’s ears perked up at the ministers’ whispered conversation. *Hee hee!* she laughed to herself, a haughty smile on her face even as she lowered her head. *True, I am a daughter of the proud lupine demons, but above that I am my lord husband’s wife—and his secretary! Of course I’m not above treating his business partners with respect!*

“You know...” a minister said, continuing their whispered conversation. “When she came here before, that woman would always stand with her arms folded like some aloof king...”

“Didn’t she tell Her Majesty that she refused to lower her head for anyone other than her lord husband?”

“I seem to recall she made the guards pass out cold with a single glance...”

The ministers kept on whispering, stealing furtive glances in Rys’s direction, as

the lupine demon in question scrunched up her cheek muscles, struggling to keep the smile on her face. *I-I must endure it...* she thought. *If I let my emotions get the better of me and raise my voice again, it will only reflect poorly on my lord husband! Endure it... Endure it...*

Flio glanced at Rys out of the corner of his eye, giving her a knowing smile.

The Maiden Queen looked over from her throne, silencing the ministers with a glance before turning her gaze back towards Flio and Rys. She cleared her throat. "I must apologize for the grave disrespect shown towards you by my ministers." Once again she rose from her throne, bowing deeply towards her guests. The ministers too seemed to suddenly remember where they were and bowed their heads low as well.

"It's quite all right," Flio said, glancing around the room with a somewhat perturbed smile. "You haven't troubled myself or my wife in the slightest, so please do lift your heads back up."

Next to him, Rys nodded her agreement. Her expression, however, seemed a bit more pointed. It appeared to be saying, "If that is my lord husband's will, then I have no choice but to accept."

◇Later—Klyrode Castle, Maiden Queen's Chambers◇

After concluding their audience in the throne room, the Maiden Queen led Flio and Rys back to her private chambers. "Now, to continue our conversation from earlier..." she said. "Per your request, I've arranged for permission for an inspection of the new magic beast racing hall in Naneewa Town for the Naneewa Town mayor, who has jurisdiction over the area. I've signed a letter of introduction for you, so please present it to the mayor when you go to meet with them. I've also obtained permission for your new large-scale construction project in Houghtow City." As she spoke, she produced a number of documents, handing them over to Flio.

"Thank you for going to all those lengths for our sake," Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile as he graciously accepted the documents from the Queen. "With this, we'll be able to move on the next phase of our project."

"That's all well and good," Rys said, "but something's been bothering me ever since we were in the throne room..." She brought her face right up close to the

Queen's, studying her closely from mere inches away.

"U-Um..." the Maiden Queen said, distressed by Rys's sudden change in behavior. "What exactly are you—"

Rys grabbed the Queen's face with both hands, squeezing it tight. "Elizabeth."

"Y-Yes?!" the Maiden Queen squeaked back.

"Have you been sleeping properly?" Rys asked.

"Huh?" The Maiden Queen's eyes went wide at the unexpected question, a pang of guilt coming over her face, which Rys did not fail to notice.

"I knew it," Rys said. "You're using makeup to hide it, but there are dark circles under your eyes—rather bad ones, at that. Plus..." she leaned in with her nose against the Maiden Queen's mouth, sniffing at her breath like a dog. "You've been abusing healing potions, haven't you? I can smell them on your breath."

"I-Is it that obvious...?" the Maiden Queen asked, beginning to panic.

At this, the Second Princess stepped up to join the conversation. The Second Princess, Leusoc Klyrode, was the Queen's next youngest sister and one of her most invaluable allies. She had been serving the kingdom as a diplomat since the reign of their father, King Klyrode, when the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode was still at war with the Dark Army, conducting talks with the other human kingdoms of the land. She was an unreserved individual who always spoke frankly, even to her sister the Queen.

"You're right on the money as always, Madame Rys," she said with a sigh, theatrically slumping her shoulders. "I swear, I've told this one to take a rest time and time again, but she hasn't listened to me once. Lately I hear she hasn't even been going to that bridal training of hers, which at least seemed to have *some recuperative* effect."

"I see..." Rys nodded, as if suddenly understanding something. "I've been wondering why she hasn't been by our house lately..."

"Oh?" the Second Princess asked. "My elder sister was paying visits to your house?"

“Yes,” said Rys. “She’d been coming regularly under the pretext of improving her culinary abilities. But lately she’s been canceling every time for one reason or another.”

“I see, I see...” the Second Princess grinned in understanding. “So she’s been coming over to *your* house for her bridal training, then...” The two turned in unison to look over at the Maiden Queen, whose face very quickly turned bright red.

“Wah! Wah! Waaah!!!” the Queen cried, springing to her feet and crossing her arms above her head. “N-N-N-No!” she protested. “You have it wrong! O-Or rather, you’re not wrong, exactly, but, well, that is, you see...” The Maiden Queen searched desperately for the right words. By now it wasn’t just her face that was red, but her neck and shoulders as well. It was a display of emotion that seemed unimaginable from the regal figure who had been sitting on her throne just moments earlier, and Flio couldn’t help smiling in amusement. The atmosphere in this room was much more at ease.

“I’ve actually prepared something for you today as a present to help Your Majesty relax on occasion,” Flio said, producing a bottle from the Bottomless Bag he wore on his belt and handing it to the Maiden Queen.

“Is this...a healing potion?” the Maiden Queen asked, a puzzled look coming over her face.

Next to her, the Second Princess furrowed her brow in consternation. “Mister Flio,” she said. “We appreciate the gift, but my sister the Queen has been taking so many healing potions these days that they’ve stopped having as strong of an effect.”

Flio smiled his usual smile and waved his hand. “That’s right,” he said. “Your typical healing potion is good for curing external wounds, but their effect on mental fatigue is temporary at best, and that declines even further if you take them repeatedly in a short period of time, as I can see you’ve discovered for yourself. But that’s exactly when it’s *this* potion’s time to shine.” He gestured towards the bottle now held in the Maiden Queen’s hand. “That is a new magic potion of ours, created from a unique medicinal concoction made with some very special ingredients that happened to come into my possession recently on

one of our excursions. I believe you'll find it to have a full effect even on someone whose body has become used to ordinary healing potions, such as Your Majesty."

"G-Goodness!" the Maiden Queen said, staring wide-eyed. "A-And you would give such a precious item to me?"

The Second Princess stared hard at the bottle in her sister's hands. "There's no way I'd let my sister the Queen drink some strange unknown potion...is what I'd usually say," she said, frowning seriously for a moment before suddenly breaking into a smile. "But if it's a present from the one and only Mister Flio, I say we accept it with gratitude!"

"But I can't simply accept such a valuable potion without giving you something in return!" the Maiden Queen said. "I must at least offer you payment for your services!" She hurried over to her desk to draft a promissory note, only for Flio to stop her with one of his smiles.

"There's really no need," he said. "You've helped us out in so many ways. Consider this one on the house."

"B-But..." the Maiden Queen protested with a frown.

"I know!" said Rys, her face lighting up in a bright smile. "Why don't we agree to an exchange?"

"An exchange?" the Maiden Queen asked.

"That's right!" Rys said. "Why don't you join our family for a vacation? We can work in some cooking lessons if you like as well and kill two birds with one stone." Here, she wrapped her arms around one of Flio's, pressing herself close. "And I can't help but notice that my lord husband has been working nonstop without any rest himself lately as well. Perhaps you'll join us and bring our birds-per-stone count up to three?"

"H-Hold up, Rys!" Flio said, distress coming over his face. "I-I admit I've been far busier than I'd like with work lately, but I can't just suddenly go on break! And Her Majesty has all sorts of state affairs to deal with..."

"Th-That's right!" the Maiden Queen said, looking no less distressed herself. "I certainly appreciate the offer, but I'm afraid I really can't..."

“It would be no trouble at all!” Just then, the doors to the room burst open as the Third Princess made her way inside.

The Third Princess, named Swann Klyrode, was the younger sister of the Second Princess and Maiden Queen. If the Second Princess was the Maiden Queen’s right arm, the Third Princess was her left. She had graduated from an academy that educated the children of the nobility and set immediately to assisting her sister full time, focusing mainly on domestic affairs. She was hopelessly infatuated with her oldest sister, to the point of developing something of a complex.

“Th-Third Princess?” the Maiden Queen said, taken aback by the sudden entry of another party into the conversation.

Without waiting for an invitation or permission of any sort, the Third Princess came right up to her beloved sister. “It’s just like I keep saying!” she insisted, pointing up at the Maiden Queen. The Third Princess was a woman of slight stature, and had to angle her head upwards to look at her sister’s face. “My sister, Your Majesty the Queen, you’ve been working much, much, *much* too hard! And so, I must ask, would you leave everything here to myself and the Second Princess and get some much needed relaxation please?”

The Maiden Queen was stunned into silence to hear the Third Princess put it in such plain terms as a wry smirk came over the Second Princess’s face. “Oh, Swann,” the Second Princess said. “You’re as straightforward as ever, I see. But you’ve never had a care for appearances when it comes to our older sister’s sake, have you?”

“D-Don’t you make fun of me!” the Third Princess objected, puffing out her cheeks in a pout and standing on her tiptoes as she turned to glower at the Second Princess. “I-I’ll be the first to admit I can be somewhat excessive when our sister the Queen is involved. I *do* have a modicum of self-awareness, you know! B-But that is neither here nor there!”



The Second Princess pressed her younger sister back with both arms, smirking all the while. “Ah, yes, of course,” she said. “Our little sister understands her own personality perfectly well and chooses to act out regardless. It’s honestly admirable in a way. And in this case I’m grateful for that bluntness of yours. After all, in this case, you and I are in complete agreement.” She turned her eyes away from the Third Princess, back towards the Maiden Queen. “Of course, realistically we can’t just send you off on vacation first thing tomorrow. We can, however, hurry and wrap up her official duties as soon as we can, and send her merrily on her way.”

“I-I do appreciate the sentiment...” the Maiden Queen said, glancing worriedly between everyone in the room. “But...”

“You know...” the Second Princess said, leaning in to whisper in the Maiden Queen’s ear. “If it’s a vacation with all of Mister Flio’s family, that mean’s Garyl’s gonna be there too...”

At that, the Maiden Queen’s face turned beet red. She mutely opened and shut her mouth, whatever protest she had dying on her lips. Flio smiled his usual easygoing smile at the sight, as the Maiden Queen glanced at everyone in the room in turn, blushing furiously all the while, embarrassed to have become the center of attention.

“W-Well, I suppose if we set everything in order first, maybe...” the Maiden Queen said, reaching out desperately for a way to change the subject. “Although, considering what happened the last time, perhaps we should discuss this emergency Teleportation Portal, just in case...”

The conversation carried on in that vein for a while longer.

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

It was evening, the light of the setting sun falling on the three story structure of Flio’s house when Flio and Rys arrived back home, materializing from nowhere in a magic circle that appeared not far away.

Flio sighed, the magic circle vanishing behind the couple as they stepped out onto the ground outside the house. “Finally, we’re done with another day’s work.”

“This is what I’ve been telling you, my lord husband,” Rys said, wrapping her arm tight around his. “You’ve been far too busy! I can’t believe we even had more errands after our trip to Klyrode Castle. Visiting the mayor of Houghtow City and delivering that letter to the mayor of Naneewa Town... You know you have people standing by ready to do these things for you at a moment’s notice, if you’d only just ask...” She puffed out her cheeks in a cute pout, looking up at her husband with upturned puppy dog eyes.

“Well...” Flio said, wincing at Rys’s words, “in this case, we were the ones making the request. I couldn’t just hand it off to someone else...”

“I suppose I can’t disagree with that...” Rys admitted, leaning in forward to peer directly at Flio’s face. “But you *did* make a promise! I’ll be holding you to that vacation with the Maiden Queen you agreed to today!” The earlike tufts of hair on the top of her head twitched in excitement as clung to him.

“U-Um, well...a-all right...” Flio said, wincing once again. *I want to take time off as much as anyone, but there’s just so much work...*

Flio began to lose himself in his own worries when he felt something soft press against his arm that made his cheeks flush red—Rys’s chest. “You really are just like the Maiden Queen, aren’t you, my lord husband?” she said, sulking. “You both put your work above everything else, far beyond the point of reason. It’s not that I dislike that industrious side of yours, but I do wish you would give yourself the rest you need as well!”

“I...I see...” Flio said, finding himself suddenly at a loss for words. “I-I’ll see what I can do.”

A great big smile spread over Rys’s face. “I’m counting on it! I, for one, certainly can’t wait!”

Just then, however, something caught Flio’s attention. “Huh?” An array of magic circles appeared around him as he suddenly turned to look up at something high in the sky.

“My lord husband! What’s going on?” Rys asked as she transformed her arms and legs into their lupine demon forms, wasting no time in preparing for a fight as well. “Has some uncouth miscreant come here to try and steal you away from me?”

“No, Rys,” Flio said, smirking in amusement as he turned back towards his wife. “I thought I sensed something strange, but it seems like it was just my mind playing tricks.” *I saw there was someone up in the air casting some sort of magic, but on closer inspection, it was just an ordinary Search spell*, he thought, pulling Rys, who was still standing on guard, into a gentle hug. *I didn’t sense any kind of hostility, so it’s probably fine to just leave them alone...*

“Are you sure?” Rys asked. “If there’s nothing there, then I’m glad. But if someone *is* thinking of harming my lord husband, I will strike them down without fail!” In spite of her violent words, however, she let herself relax from her combat stance, returning to her usual ladylike demeanor with a smile.

“Dada! Mama!” As Flio and Rys were talking, a girl with a pair of dragon wings on her back came flying from the hills on the other side of Flio’s house. She ascended high in the air and then dived straight towards them, coming in at precipitous speeds. “Welcome-welcome home-home!” she chirped, grinning from ear to ear as she collided with Flio and wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

“Oof!” Flio caught the girl with a smirk, holding her in place. “Hello, Wyne! We’re home!”

Wyne was a dragonewt, said to be the greatest warrior among all of dragonkind. Flio and Rys had once saved her when they found her collapsed at the side of the road, and adopted her into the family where she served as a doting older sister for their other children, who came later.

As Flio held his adoptive daughter in his arms, multiple interlocking magic circles appeared around him. Wyne had once been the pride of the Dark Army’s legion of dragons, which was said to be the strongest division under the Dark One’s command. Her innocent dive into Flio’s arms carried enough force to level the entire area. An ordinary human would very likely have been killed instantaneously from such a collision, but Flio was able to catch her straight on with a smile on his face. This was due in part because of the suite of defensive magic that activated automatically in response to Wyne’s superpowered attack, including powerful spells with names like Absorb Impact, Antigravity, and Null Pressure.

Rys, incidentally, had transformed her limbs back into their lupine state, fully intending to catch Wyne herself. Even her fluffy wolf tail had materialized in her excitement as she stood, bracing for impact. Alas, it had been Flio who caught her instead, leaving Rys to look on with a chagrined pout.

“Are you done-done with work today?” Wyne asked, beaming as she nuzzled her cheeks against Flio and then Rys in turn.

“That’s right,” Flio said, smiling as he petted the girl on the head. “We’re all finished.”

“Then, then...” Wyne said. “We get to eat-eat together today!”

“Sure, that won’t be a problem,” said Flio.

“Yaaaay!” Wyne cheered, her smile growing even brighter than before. “I can’t wait-wait!”

Now that I think about it, I’ve been so busy lately I’ve been missing more dinners than not... Flio reflected as he looked back at Wyne’s smiling face.

“Papa! Mama!” Flio’s thoughts were interrupted by the voice of a young girl, calling to him from a distance away. The young girl in question was riding atop a psychobear’s back, racing towards them from the hills. It was Rynàsze, Flio and Rys’s youngest daughter, together with Sybe, the family pet.

Rynàsze possessed exceptional talent as a tamer, enabling her to befriend magic beasts of all shapes and sizes. Thanks to her abilities, she was made a full staff member of the Houghtow College of Magic’s magic beast pasture despite still being too young to enroll in classes. Flio had originally found Sybe, her current mount, in a random encounter. Realizing that he had no hope of victory, Sybe surrendered on the spot and lived as a pet at Flio’s house ever since. He spent most of his time in his unicorn rabbit form, ever since Flio used his magic to give him the ability to freely change between the two.

Rynàsze waved cheerfully. Shebe—Sybe’s mate—was perched in front of her, while their children, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, were sitting atop her back and shoulders. Shebe was a wild unicorn rabbit who had taken a liking to Sybe and came to live with him at the house. Among their children, Sube and Sobe took more after their mother’s unicorn rabbit features, while Sebe more closely

resembled a psychobear.

That wasn't all, though. Behind Sybe came another ursine magic beast, a full size bigger than Sybe himself. This was Tybe, a Bear of Misfortune cub who had become attached to Rylnàsze during one of the group's trips to Dogorogma. It ended up accompanying them back to the world of Klyrode where it now served as part of Rylnàsze's small army of familiars.

Noticing Rylnàsze and her companions approaching, Rys turned to wave with a smile on her face. "Why, hello, Rylnàsze!" she said. "We're back!"

"Bwor! Bwor!" Sybe cried, jumping up to rest his paws on Rys's shoulders and cheerfully licking her face. It was behavior that many would have thought completely impossible from a psychobear—S-rank magic beasts known for their overwhelming power and their love of battle, such that they were known to leap fearlessly into the fray even against magic beasts larger than themselves, to say nothing of a mere human. This, perhaps, was a testament to Rys's abilities as a fighter, which put her far above an ordinary S-rank beast.

Rylnàsze hopped down from Sybe's back, followed by Shebe, as Sube, Sebe, and Sobe nimbly managed to keep their perches on Rylnàsze's shoulders. She adjusted her hat and gave Flio and Rys a great big hug. At this distance it was obvious that both she and Wyne were covered in mud, no doubt from playing with Sybe and his family in the forest. Flio cast a quick Cleanse spell as he hugged the two of them, leaving their outfits (and the magic beasts' fur) sparkling clean.

Next, the front door of the house swung slowly open, revealing Tanya, the next person to welcome Flio and Rys home. Tanya had once gone by Tanyalina, an angel and disciple of the Celestial Plane who boasted tremendous magic power even among her peers. She had been sent to observe Flio by her superiors in the Celestial Plane, but after a freak midair collision with Wyne, she lost part of her memory and now lived in the house with Flio and the others, where she worked as the household maid. Today, like always, she was wearing a traditional maid outfit, with a slit in the skirt to enable ease of motion.

Tanya greeted Flio with a formal bow. "Welcome home, Master."

"Thank you, Tanya," said Flio. "Did anything out of the ordinary happen while

I was away?”

Ordinarily, when Flio was away, Rys was left in charge of managing the affairs of the house. Today, however, Rys had been out accompanying Flio, leaving the house in Tanya’s capable hands.

“We received a number of guests with business relating to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store,” Tanya reported. “I directed them to the storefront, per your instructions. Other than that...” Her eyes narrowed and turned towards Wyne, who even now was carrying on nuzzling her cheeks against Flio’s. “I was required to fetch new undergarments for young mistress Wyne on no less than I believe eight separate occasions.”

As a dragonewt, Wyne’s body included an organ meant to facilitate a dragon’s famous fire breath. As a result, however, her body temperature was always high. She preferred to dress in poncho style outfits for their high level of airflow, but even with that allowance, she exhibited an intense dislike of wearing underwear, which clung unpleasantly to her body.

“I tell you,” Tanya continued, “Young mistress Wyne is the daughter of the master of the house! She must learn to present herself properly!”

“No way, no way!” Wyne protested loudly, still clinging tight to Flio’s shoulders. “I wanna have fun and play-play!”

Tanya and Wyne glared defiantly at each other, with Flio caught in the middle. “N-Now, now,” he said, looking between the two. “You both have good points. Wyne’s right that it’s important to play and have a good time...but Tanya’s right to think about appearances too.”

“Hmph,” Wyne pouted, puffing out her cheeks before reluctantly nodding her head. “If you say so, dada...”

“That’s right,” said Tanya. “Please do as the master says.” She gave another formal bow, apparently satisfied with Wyne’s assent. “Now, Master Flio, will you perhaps be staying for dinner? I have everything ready to prepare at a moment’s notice.”

“I will, thank you, although first I’d like to wash up after the day’s work,” Flio said. “Maybe we could have dinner once I’ve finished?”

“Understood,” said Tanya.

As they spoke, Flio opened the door and stepped inside the house. Right away, Elinàsze came running up, her oversized slippers flopping with every step. “Papa! Welcome home!”



Elinàsze was one of Flio's children with Rys, the older of the two twins. She was a serious-minded girl with a natural genius for magic who loved her father to a somewhat excessive degree.

"I'm home, Elinàsze!" Flio said, smiling as Elinàsze beamed and hugged him tight. "Have you been working on your research again today?"

"That's right!" Elinàsze said. "I managed to improve the efficacy of our potions...and, of course, I've been certain not to neglect my schoolwork as well!"

◇Meanwhile—Houghtow College of Magic◇

"Hm?" In a classroom in the Houghtow College of Magic, a girl wearing a miniskirt with a large ribbon in her hair paused in the middle of getting everything ready to go home for the day and looked around, tilting her head in innocent confusion. "Wherever did Elinàsze get to?"

This was Salina, a girl in the same class as Garyl and Elinàsze. The daughter of a wealthy family, she had come across as haughty and condescending when she first entered school, but over time her admiration for Garyl had made her a much more amicable individual. Her specialty was magical song, which she could even use in combat by charging her voice with magic power.

"Is something the matter, Salina?" asked a girl in a frilly dress.

"Ah! Snow Little!" Salina said. "Have you seen Elinàsze anywhere, by chance?"

Snow Little was another of the children's classmates. She was a member of the fable folk, a rare demon species, and a specialist in summoning magic. Like Salina, she too harbored distant romantic aspirations for Garyl.

"Oh?" Snow Little said, joining Salina in looking around the room. "That is peculiar, isn't it? I'm certain she was in her seat just a moment ago..."

"It's very peculiar," Salina agreed. "And I had been hoping to speak with her after class too! I wanted to ask how Lord Garyl has been since returning from his exchange study program at the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education..."

"Yes, I would very much like to ask her that as well," said Snow Little.

As the two kept looking around the room with mystified expressions, a girl in

a black dress holding a plush cat doll in front of her face came up to join their conversation. This was Irystiel, another of their classmates. She was part devil and very shy, incapable of holding a conversation without using a stuffed animal as an intermediary. Unbeknownst to her classmates, she was in fact the younger sister of Belianna, one of the current members of the Dark Army's Infernal Four. And of course, it should go without saying that she, too, was one of the many rivals for Garyl's heart.

Irystiel spoke through the plush cat using ventriloquism like always, skillfully manipulating its mouth to open and close in time with her words. Her own mouth remained shut all the while. "Irystiel wanted to ask about Garyl too!" the cat complained. "Mreowr!"

"I see..." said Salina.

"I wonder where she could have gone..." said Snow Little.

"Hurry!" said Irystiel's cat. "Let's find her! Mreowr!"

Rislei watched from nearby as the three gathered around the desk where Elinàsze had been just moments earlier, looking up and down and every which way. Rislei was the daughter of Sleip and Byleri, making her half lichsteed and half human. She was a diligent worker and something of a leader for the younger cohort of children living in Flio's house.

I'm pretty sure the Eli who came to class was just a projection she made of herself with one of her spells... Although she really could have waited just a moment longer before dismissing the spell, Rislei thought, smirking knowingly to herself as she tidied up her things. Although, with everything Hiya, Damalynas, Maglion, and Ghozal have been teaching her, I'm certain Eli knows more (about) magic than any of the teachers at school. And I think she records everything her projection sees and hears, so it's probably fine. Really, though, Eli's something else, isn't she?



"Oh, that's right!" Elinàsze, who had been holding her father's hand as they stepped into the living room, suddenly paused, remembering something. "Tanya," she said, turning to look at the maid, "did Zofina stop by today, by any chance?"

“Miss Zofina is the disciple of the Celestial Plane, correct?” Tanya asked.

“That’s right,” said Elinàsze. “She sent me an Arcane Epistle yesterday saying there was something she wanted to ask me about concerning the magic medicine I’ve been working on, and I’m still waiting for her to come by. Normally, when I receive a message like that from her, I can count on her to arrive the following morning...”

Tanya gave Elinàsze’s question a bit of thought before replying. “No,” she said with a bow. “I’m afraid I do not recall any visit from Miss Zofina.”

“Oh well, so it goes,” said Elinàsze, nodding cheerfully. “It’s probably for the best that she didn’t come today, to be honest. Every time we see her outside of her regular visits to pick up more doses of medicine for the Celestial Plane she has some sort of tedious errand she wants us to run, doesn’t she? And today was an especially important day for my research...”

Tanya watched Elinàsze from behind as she stepped into the house. *Yes, she thought. That was my judgment as well. I suppose I was correct in thinking that Young Mistress Elinàsze was not to be disturbed today.* In fact, Tanya had been using magic throughout the entire course of the conversation, holding her right hand gracefully behind her back to conceal the magic circle floating around it. Thanks to her Concealment spell, even Elinàsze didn’t notice its presence. Flio, on the other hand...

What is Tanya doing with that spell, I wonder... he thought. *She’s using Concealment as well, so she must be trying to keep it secret. From the looks of things it’s some kind of Teleportation blocker, but it didn’t interfere with the Teleportation spell I used to get here. Who could she be stopping from Teleporting, then? Well...I’m sure whatever it is, Tanya has the house’s best interests at heart.* Flio nodded in spite of his misgivings, apparently content as he allowed Elinàsze to lead him farther into the house.

◇Meanwhile—The Celestial Plane◇

In the very middle of the Celestial Plane stood an enormous and grand tower. There, among its many halls, were the headquarters of the Planetoid World Observation Center, where the goddesses who resided on the Celestial Plane watched over the planetoid worlds under their purview, including the one

inhabited by Flio and his friends.

In the corner of one of the offices was a room in which a vast array of magic circles all hummed with energy, each ready to produce a portal leading from the Celestial Plane to the planetoid world of its users choosing.

The figure of an angel appeared from one of the portals in the room: Zofina, disciple of the Celestial Plane serving the goddess in charge of overseeing the world of Klyrode. “What is going on today?” Zofina scoffed, clicking her tongue in irritation. “I just can’t get the Klyrode portal to connect! I’ve tried time and time again, and it just keeps sending me to some other planetoid world!”

“It’s very strange...” said the angel who managed the portals as she came running up beside Zofina. “All of the other gates are operating free of obstruction. I wonder why it’s only the Klyrode portal that isn’t working right...” She cocked her head in puzzlement at the semitransparent operation panel, which came floating in midair after her.

“The other portals are working, Pelia?” Zofina asked.

“They are,” the angel confirmed. “Every gate besides that one seems to be in perfect working order, but for whatever reason we just can’t seem to connect to Planetoid World Klyrode...”

“What in the worlds could that mean?” Zofina wondered. “And right after I sent that message to my contact Miss Elinàsze too. I had been hoping to ask her about the rumors that the Fli-o’-Rys General Store has been developing a new kind of medicine...” Clicking her tongue in irritation once again, she looked over her shoulder at the portal she had just come out of, when suddenly something struck her. *That’s the world where Tanya is... she thought. It can’t be her...can it...?*

◇Fli-o’-Rys General Store, Dark Citadel Branch◇

The Dark Citadel Branch of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store was located right in front of the main gate of the Dark One’s stronghold itself. Today Belianna was there shopping. “It was damned good of our last Dark One Lord Calsi’im to invite the damned Fli-o’-Rys General Store to open a branch outside the Dark Citadel, wasn’t it?” she said as she made her way around the store in high spirits, shopping basket in her arms.

The devil Belianna was one of the members of the new Infernal Four, famed for her skill with the scythe, and Irystiel's older sister. Thanks to her work, she was always setting off to some far-flung league of the Dark Army's territory. At this moment, however, her work was finished for the day. Maybe that was why instead of the traditional devil attire she wore for her usual outfit, she was dressed in a simple shirt and sweatpants and wearing big round glasses on her face. At a glance in her current outfit, most would not recognize her as a member of the Infernal Four.

As Belianna did her shopping, Calsi'im, who happened to be manning the register, gave her a friendly wave. "Ho there, little Belianna!" the old skeleton said. "You've come to do a bit of shopping after work again, I take it?"

Calsi'im was a humble skeleton who nonetheless served for a time as Dark Regent in place of the missing Dark One, and the husband of the magic doll Charun. He had in fact already passed away once, but was returned to life thanks to Flio. Now he lived with the others at Flio's house.

"What was that?" one of the customers looked up in surprise. "Did he say 'Belianna'?"

"Lady Belianna's in this shop?" asked another.

"H-Hey! L-Lord Calsi'im!" Belianna ran up to the counter in a tremendous hurry, clapping a hand over his jawbone to stop him from talking and leaning in to whisper quietly. "Y-Y'know...what I do after work is my own damned private business. I keep telling you not to call me by my real damned name, don't I?"

"Oh, that's right! Of course!" Calsi'im whispered back, his jawbone rattling with laughter. "You'll have to forgive me—I see you in here so often, I suppose I forgot!"

At this Charun stepped up, dressed in a maid outfit. Calsi'im's wife Charun was a magic doll created by a mage who served the Dark Army in the distant past. Calsi'im found her in a broken and discarded state and had her repaired. The two had been inseparable ever since, and they lived together in Flio's house as a family.

"My! If it isn't Miss Belilian Anna!" Charun said, lifting the hem of her skirt in an elegant curtsy. "We are ever so grateful for your continued patronage!"

Seemingly relieved by Charun's words, the other customers all returned to their shopping.

"Oh, so it wasn't Lady Belianna after all?"

"Just someone with a similar name, I guess..."

Belianna sighed with relief as well when she saw she had escaped detection. "Thanks a damned bunch, Lady Charun."

"Not at all!" said Charun. "We're always happy to help!" Then, leaning in to whisper in Belianna's ear, she added, "Protecting our customers' privacy is part of our service at the Fli-o'-Rys General store, Lady Belianna of the Infernal Four. Now, would you perhaps be interested in a new item of ours, newly in stock as of today?" Moving surreptitiously, the magic doll produced something from inside her skirt, holding it carefully so that only Belianna could see. The item in question was a shirt, featuring a dynamic illustration of the Wolf of Justice printed on the fabric.

The Wolf of Justice was none other than an alter ego of Flio himself, created during the war between the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode as part of his efforts to put a stop to the fighting. Donning a wolf mask to hide his identity from the world, the mild-mannered shopkeeper put his overwhelming power on full display. As an unintended consequence, however, the Wolf of Justice became a legend among demonkind, whose culture held a place of reverence especially for the strong. Now, with the war in the past, merchandise featuring the likeness of the Wolf of Justice had become a top seller at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

Belianna's eyes snapped open as she seized the shirt without hesitation. "I'll damned take it!" she said, nodding fervently.

Like many other demons, Belianna had developed a formidable respect for the Wolf of Justice, bordering on religious fervor. In fact, the shirt and sweatpants she was wearing for her off duty ensemble both bore depictions of the Wolf of Justice as well.

Belianna finished paying for the goods she had purchased and exited the shop, leaving Calsi'im and Charun to see her off.

“Now then, Calsi’im,” Charun said. “Shall we turn the store over to the night shift and return home for the day?”

“That’s right!” Calsi’im nodded. “It’s about time for dinner, if I’m not mistaken!”

At that, Calsi’im and Charun’s daughter Rabbitz let out a great cheer and hurried over to join her parents. “Work done!” she said.

As the daughter of a skeleton and a magic doll, Rabbitz was an exceptionally uncommon sort of being. That aside, she was a cheerful girl who always seemed to have a great big smile on her face. Her favorite place in the world was atop her father Calsi’im’s head, where she loved to perch.

Rabbitz bounded through the air like the animal that was her namesake, straight for Calsi’im’s cranium. Unlike her father and mother, who were both short of stature, Rabbitz had already grown quite large in spite of her young age. She was already half as tall as both of her parents. Even so, she held nothing back, leaping without hesitation onto Calsi’im’s head. The old skeleton teetered under the weight, doing his level best to keep himself upright.

“C-Calsi’im!” Charun exclaimed, rushing to lend a hand to keep him upright. Somehow, with both of their efforts combined, they were able to hold him steady. The couple let out a synchronized sigh of relief. “Now, Rabbitz!” Charun chided her. “I’m very proud of you for waiting in the back room like a good girl until we were done with work, but I’ve told you many times not to jump up on your father’s head like that, have I not?”

Rabbitz, however, gleefully rubbed her head up against Calsi’im’s skull, seemingly unperturbed by the scolding finger Charun was pointing her way. “Yah!” she chirped, giving a quick nod with her smiling face before resuming.

“I swear, this child is simply incorrigible!” Charun declared. “She really does love you, Calsi’im, doesn’t she?”

“Oh ho ho!” Calsi’im laughed. “I’m just glad to see our little girl having a good time. But perhaps that’s enough of that for today, hm?”

“Yes, perhaps...” Charun said with a bemused smile. “If you say so, Calsi’im, then I suppose it’s all right.”

With that, the three stepped into the back of the shop, where a portal was waiting to take them home.

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

Evening had come, and it was nearly time for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store main branch in Houghtow City to close its doors for the night, yet the shop remained packed with customers even at this late hour.

“Mreowhhh...” the hellcat Uliminas sighed as she took stock of the crowd from behind the register. “Business is booming as ever, I see...”

Back when Ghozal had reigned as Dark One, Uliminas had been his closest confederate, and when he abdicated his position, Uliminas quit the Dark Army to follow him and ended up working at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store in the guise of a common demihuman. Since then, she became one of Ghozal's two wives, and the mother of his daughter Folmina.

Ghozal had left the throne to his younger brother Yuigarde and gone off to live at Flio's house, taking on a human identity. During the time he had resided there, he and Flio had come to be something along the line of best friends.

As Uliminas grumbled at the register, Ghozal appeared behind her, arriving from the back of the store with a hefty wooden crate balanced on his shoulder. “You know something, Uliminas? I'd say it looks like the human realms are well and truly at peace.”

“Meow yeah?” said Uliminas.

“Hrm,” Ghozal grunted in affirmation. “There was a time when we mostly just sold combat gear, even after the peace treaty with the Dark Army. These days, though, it seems like our best sellers are things like carriage ornaments or items from our new fashion line. If there was still tension between the Magical Kingdom and the Dark Army, you'd think people would want weapons more than ornaments and armor more than fashion. I'd say it's a sign that the peace treaty's gonna stick.” In fact, the box Ghozal was carrying on his shoulder was full of the very carriage ornaments he had mentioned, which had been selling so well that the shop was due for a restock.

“I suppose, now that mew meowntion it...” Uliminas said with a smile, resting

her elbow on the counter and her chin on her hand. “If mew had told me what meowr lives now would be like back when I was meowr confederate in the Dark Army—back when we were at war with the humans—I wouldn’t have believed it fur a second.”

“Hrm.” Ghozal nodded. “Me neither. Back then I would have never dreamed that one day I’d take you as a wife or that we’d even have a kid together! Ha ha ha!”

“E-Excuse me?!” Uliminas exclaimed, her face turning bright red. Without missing a beat, she smacked her husband Ghozal hard. “That’s dirty, taking advantage of the meowment to say something like *that*! You meowron!”

“Ha ha ha!” Ghozal said, laughing off Uliminas’s blow. “Well, it’s true, isn’t it? If I were still the Dark One and you were still my subordinate, there would be all sorts of reasons why we wouldn’t be able to get married.”

“M-Maybe!” Uliminas admitted. “But at least look at me when mew say that stuff!” Uliminas struck Ghozal on the back again and again, blushing furiously all the while. She was putting her full power behind every blow too, her arms changed into their natural hellcat form.

From the back of the shop, Ghozal’s children, Folmina and Ghoros, watched as Uliminas unleashed a stunning display of violence against their father.

Folmina was Ghozal’s daughter with Uliminas, making her half hellcat and half demon royal, while Ghoros was his son with Balirossa, making him half demon royal and half human. Both of the children, however, were equally attached to Uliminas and Balirossa. Folmina was very fond of Garyl, while Ghoros, a boy of few words, was equally fond of Folmina.

“Papa Ghozal and Mama Uliminas get along so well, don’t they?” said Folmina.

“They do...?” Ghoros asked.

“Of course they do, Ghoros!” Folmina replied. “Just look at Mama Uliminas! She’s turned her arms back into their demon form to hit Papa Ghozal! That means she must be hitting him with full power, right?”

“Uh-huh...” Ghoros concurred.

“And that means that they *must* get along!” Folmina concluded, nodding with great satisfaction.

“Uh...huh?” Ghoros said, this time tilting his head in confusion. *Hitting someone with full power...means you get along...?* He looked between Folmina, Ghozal, and Uliminas, thoroughly befuddled.

At this point, their mother Balirossa emerged from behind the two with a look of distress on her face.

Balirossa had originally been the leader of a knightly company in service to Klyrode Castle, but she ended up leaving the knighthood. Now she lived at Flio’s house and worked at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. She was also one of Ghozal’s two wives, and the mother of Ghoros.

“No, no, no...that’s not at all right, you two!” Balirossa said, hastening to interrupt the children’s conversation. “Hitting someone with full power doesn’t mean you get along!”

“It doesn’t?” Folmina asked. “But Papa Ghozal and Mama Uliminas always look like they’re having so much fun hitting each other!”

“No, well, that is...” Balirossa stammered out. “Your father doesn’t do that with me, does he?”

“He doesn’t?” said Folmina. “But you and Papa Ghozal hit each other at night, don’t you?”

“Wh-What did you say?!”

“Well...” Folmina began. “The other night, I wanted to sleep with Papa Ghozal, so I came into your bedroom and—”

Balirossa, whose face had been growing redder and redder for a while now, quickly clapped a hand over Folmina’s mouth. “A-Awawah!” she cried. “N-Not another word!”

Ghoros looked up at his mother, cocking his head in confusion once again. “Mama Balirossa...you’ve been hitting Papa Ghozal too...?” he asked.

“N-No, Ghoros! F-Folmina is talking about something else entirely...” Balirossa

said, flapping her arms as she tried to find the words. Try as she might, however, there was no way for her to adequately explain her nightly activities with Ghozal. Instead she simply stood there, red-faced and panicking.

From a short distance away, Greanyl sighed as she watched the scene play out. “More trouble with Lord Ghozal’s family, I see...” she said to herself. “They always seem like they’re having such fun...”

Greanyl was a member of the Silent Listeners, the Dark Army’s former intelligence apparatus. Now she served as the head of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store’s supply team, along with being both the manager of the Enchanted Frigate fleet and a pilot. From time to time she kept shop as well, always with an eye towards helping the newer recruits.

“But regardless, it’s nearly time for us to close shop,” Greanyl said, taking a step towards the member of the family closest to her—the panicking Balirossa. “I suppose I had better go and stop them...”

◇Some Time Later—Flio’s House◇

In Flio’s living room, there was a table big enough for the entire household to have a meal together. The whole interior of the room had been expanded, while the house’s exterior remained the same, thanks to Flio’s Expand Dimension spell. Otherwise, a table that big would have never fit inside the space. And yet, the enlarged spaces created by Flio’s magic were so natural that no one in the house felt the slightest sense of discomfort.

That night, like many others, the various members of Flio’s household were gathered in the living room relaxing after dinner, the obligations of work and school finished for the day.

“By the by...” Ura started, getting Flio’s attention he finished off his after-dinner drink. “We’ve been thinking over at the oni village about maybe setting up a night market this next weekend. Might we have your permission, Lord Flio?”

Ura was the chief of an oni village Flio had transplanted to be next to the house. Ever since the death of his fairy folk wife, he had spent his time raising their daughter Kora as a single father, while looking after a group of demon ruffians he had picked up. He was a man of unimpeachable character and deep

sentiment, whose raw physical power had made him a candidate for a position on the Infernal Four back during the reign of Dark One Gholl.

“A night market?” Flio asked.

“That’s right,” Ura said. “We used to set up stalls during weekend nights every summer back in the day. I mean, I call them stalls, but really every family would just set up whatever products they had on the verandas of their houses. It’s just a way for us to enjoy a summer night, but now that we owe you our vassalage, Lord Flio, I thought it would be best if we got your approval first.”

“You don’t owe us!” Flio said, taken aback by Ura’s turn of phrase. “In fact, we’re very grateful to have you nearby and for all your help at Blossom’s farm and Byleri’s ranch, not to mention working on the transportation teams with Greanyl and the other shadow demons. You even help out around the house!”

This time it was Ura who was taken aback. “B-But, my lord!” he protested, furiously shaking his head. “The fact that we can do that is entirely thanks to you!”

At this point, Blossom leaned in between Flio and Ura, joining the conversation. “Look,” she said, “let’s just call our arrangement good old-fashioned quid pro quo. Now, Mister Flio, do we have your permission for the night market?”

Blossom was one of the knights from Klyrode Castle who once served in Balirossa’s company, now residing at Flio’s house. Of the group, she was Balirossa’s closest friend, and fought as a heavy knight back in the day. She came from a farming family and had a real knack for agriculture, one she had employed to turn a patch of land near Flio’s house into an expansive and productive farmland.

“Sure!” Flio said. “Of course that’s okay!”

“Is a night market a kind of festival?” Rynàsze asked, inserting herself into the conversation with a great big smile on her face.

Next came Wyne, flying in after Rynàsze. “A festival? I love-love festivals!” she said, her cheeks stuffed full of the lembon pie the family had been eating for dessert.

“Wyne!” Rys scolded her. “That’s poor table manners, you know!”

“But, mama!” said Wyne. “Your pie is just too good!”

“O-Oh!” said Rys, her expression softening from the praise for her handiwork. She beamed, resting her cheek on her hand. “W-Well, in that case, I suppose it can’t be helped.” It seemed she just couldn’t stay angry at the sight of Wyne grinning as she enjoyed the pie she herself had made.

Flio looked over towards Rynàsze and Wyne, watching their antics with his usual easygoing smile, until an idea seemed to strike him. “Hmm...” he said, pensively touching his chin. “A night market, huh?”

“Yes?” Ura asked. “What is it, Lord Flio?”

“Oh,” Flio said. “I was just thinking—the only summer festivals I’ve been to have been large-scale affairs like the one they hold on the Calgosi Coast every year. I hadn’t heard of a festival set up like this night market before.”

“It’s nothing on the scale of the Calgosi Coast festival to be sure!” Ura said with a smile. “But it’s good to have things like the night market for everyone up at the village to enjoy too!”

“A...night market?” Kora asked, looking up at Ura with a puzzled expression from the seat next to him.

Kora was Ura’s daughter, a hybrid of her mother’s fairy folk and her father’s oni blood. She was excruciatingly shy, but had come a long way towards opening up her heart to the household.

“That’s right!” Ura said with a smile, patting his daughter gently on the head. “Now that I think about it, you’ve never seen a night market before, have you, Kora? For the past few years now we’d been stretched thin trying to protect the village from the chaos of the war between the demons and the humans. We didn’t have much time for things like night markets.”

From the opposite side, Blossom placed her own hand atop Ura’s on Kora’s head. “Funny thing,” she said. “Y’know, my hometown had a festival back in the day that we haven’t been able to do for years and years ourself.”

“That’s right.” Balirossa nodded. “The last one to be held happened when we

were children, I believe...”

Balirossa, it happened, came from the same village as Blossom, making the two childhood friends.

I see... Flio thought, glancing over the conversation happening at the table. Humans and demons in this world have been at war for so long that some places have had to give up on their festivals...

Flio, of course, was a visitor from another world. His own world of origin certainly had its issues, such as the intense discrimination faced by demihumans, but it was nonetheless a peaceful world centered around the grand metropolis of its capital city. There wasn't a region in the world that didn't have its own lavish set of seasonal festivals.

Flio thought back to life in his home world as the members of his household began to reminisce about the festivals of the past. “I guess this means the world is at peace now, like the one I came from,” he said.

“I would certainly say so,” said Rys, coming up to wrap her arms around him from behind, pulling him close in a loving embrace. “And every last bit of it is entirely due to your strenuous efforts, my lord husband.” She closed her eyes, pressing her cheek fondly against his.

“It wasn't just me,” Flio insisted, closing his own eyes and nuzzling back affectionately. “It's thanks to you, and Ghozal, and everyone here with us now. And not only that—this peace is thanks to everyone living in this world.”

“Well, here we go again...” Elinàsze said with a wry smirk, her voice full of exasperation. “Papa and mama really can't keep their hands off each other, can they?”

Startled back to reality by their daughter's voice, the couple opened their eyes to find everyone in the living room looking their way. “Ha ha ha!” Ghozal laughed. “They make a good couple, don't they?”

“Meow kidding!” said Uliminas. “I never thought I'd live to see our formidable Rys meowll weak-kneed and swooning!”

“On the contrary,” said Hiya, spreading their arms wide in a theatrical gesture. “It is a splendid thing to partake of such intimate sentiment when the moment

is right. I, Hiya, remain ever in awe.”

Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and dark, was a being possessing enough magic power to destroy the entire world if the mood should take them, but after their defeat to Flio, they took to revering the merchant as the so-called Exalted One, taking up residence with the others at Flio’s house.

“Of course,” added Damalynas, who was floating upside down in midair behind Hiya’s shoulder, “I have no interest in anything aside from my pursuit of the Midnight Arts. Love or romance don’t mean anything to me in the slightest.” Smirking, she rested her head back against her hands, lacing the fingers together.

Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight, was a master of the way of black magic. She had long since cast off her flesh, existing now solely as a psychic construct. Ever since her own defeat by Hiya, however, she had found herself residing inside Hiya’s own mindscape, where she served as the djinn’s beloved training partner.

“Oh?” Hiya said. “Is that how you feel, Damalynas? And yet I seem to recall you crying out with a lovely voice indeed during our training last night, when I —”

“Wah! Wah! Wah!” Damalynas cried, red in the face, interrupting whatever it was Hiya had been about to recount. “D-Don’t say things like that in front of the whole house, you...you jerk!”

“Ah ha ha!” Hiya chuckled, artfully dodging Damalynas’s attempts to shut their mouth by force with their own graceful midair movements. “I speak only the truth.”

“Th-That’s not the issue here!” protested Damalynas.

Thanks to the scene Hiya and Damalynas were making, however, the people in the living room had turned their attention away from Flio and Rys’s public display of affection, and towards them. Flio and Rys exchanged a knowing smirk.

“Haaah...” Rys sighed. “I suppose we can thank Hiya and Damalynas for that.”

“No kidding,” Flio agreed.

The living room echoed with the sound of laughter, as the assembled crowd gathered to watch Hiya and Damalynas fly after each other all about the room.

◇Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education—Student Dormitory◇

The Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education was located within the walls of Klyrode Castle itself. There, students of exceptional talent were invited from near and far—not just from the Magical Kingdom but lands abroad as well—all in order to provide the individuals who would be responsible for the well-being of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode in the next generation with a proper education. The student dormitory was built to house students from other parts of the world during their studies.

One of the dorm rooms belonged to Garyl. Garyl was the son of Flio and Rys, and was Elinàsze’s younger twin brother. His easy smile and good humor had won him no small amount of popularity at the Houghtow College of Magic. His physical abilities, meanwhile, had to be seen to be believed.

“Fwah!” Garyl exclaimed, smiling as he rinsed the sweat off his body in the shower attached to his room. “Today’s lesson was a blast!”

Ordinarily, dormitory rooms were shared between multiple students at the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education. For Garyl, who had been specially invited from the Houghtow College of Magic, however, the school had seen fit to provide a private room.

“For a short-term exchange program, the classes here have been something else!” Garyl said. “I’m learning all sorts of stuff!”

As Garyl washed his hair, lathering it with both hands, a cloud of mist appeared in the space behind him.

“Are you, truly?” asked Ben’ne, stepping out of the mist to take solid form. “I must confess, I cannot understand what it is you see in them. Not one of the students here is a worthy opponent for you, my master.”

Ben’ne, like Damalynas, was a psychic construct left behind by a famed swordmaster from Hi Izuru, the Land of the Rising Sun. Garyl had once defeated her in single combat, and thus she had chosen to become his familiar in admiration of his strength.

“That’s not true at all!” Garyl said with a smile, closing his eyes as he rinsed the shampoo from his hair. “We’re studying lots of things they never taught us at the Houghtow College of Magic, like how to fight an enemy while escorting someone to safety!”

“Perhaps...” Ben’ne admitted, resting her chin in her hand as she stared at Garyl’s back. “But in your case, could you not simply dispatch the enemy before they were ever able to attack your escort? I struggle to see how such a thing would be necessary...”

“Of course it’s necessary!” Garyl said. “I’ll need to know that if I wanna meet the qualifications to be a knight of Klyrode!” He turned off the shower, draping the towel around his head in order to dry his hair. When he turned around, however, he suddenly recoiled in shock at the sight of Ben’ne, fully materialized behind him. “Gwah!”

“Oho?” Ben’ne said. “Could it be that you failed to notice that I had materialized, my master?”

“Well, I mean, you were trying to hide your presence on purpose, weren’t you?” objected Garyl.

“Ah ha ha...” A smile played on Ben’ne’s lips as she looked over Garyl’s body from head to toe in its present state of undress. “There is no need to bring up such a trivial detail, is there? But I must say, your body is as exquisite as always. The musculature is not heavy and overlarge, but strong and supple. Truly, it is the body of a warrior.” She took a slow, deliberate step forward.

“H-Hey...” Garyl grimaced, doing his best to be casual as he repositioned the towel to conceal his lower body. “It’s kinda embarrassing to have you staring at me like that...”

“There is no need to feel ashamed,” said Ben’ne, reaching out with her right hand. “I regard it as one of my duties as your familiar to perform regular checks on the condition of my master’s body. And, of course, should the desire ever take you, I would be more than happy to serve in your bedchambers as well...”

“I-I’m telling you!” Garyl said. “That’s—”

Just then, however, they were interrupted when the closet door in Garyl’s

dormitory burst open. “Garyl!” said a woman, barging out of the closet and into the room. “Are you all right?! I heard shouting! What’s going on?” She cast open the door to the shower and peered inside.

Garyl and Ben’ne both jumped in surprise. “O-Oh! It’s nothing, I’m okay, Ellie!” Garyl said, wincing. “Ben’ne just showed up out of the blue and gave me a bit of a shock, that’s all.”

The woman who had intruded on Garyl’s room through the closet, it happened, was none other than Elizabeth Klyrode, the Maiden Queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode herself. Those closest to her called her Ellie for short.

Ellie looked into the shower room and froze stiff on the spot. After all, there before her eyes was Garyl, naked, with Ben’ne’s hand placed on his shoulder. “A-Ah! E-Erm...G-Garyl!” she choked out. “I-I... That is... Am I intruding, by any chance?” She was blushing so furiously that she was red all the way down to her shoulders.

“Oh, um, well, uh, I...” Garyl said, no less flustered than Ellie. It was a sudden change from the way he had been acting just moments earlier.

“My, my,” Ben’ne said, hiding her mouth behind her fingertips to conceal an amused chuckle as she looked between the two. “My master seems completely unaffected by my voluptuous figure, but you, at least, seem able to elicit a splendid reaction, Your Majesty.”

“N-No, Ben’ne!” Garyl protested. “I just can’t help but worry about if something were to happen to her, you know! I need to look out for her!”

“Moreover,” Ben’ne continued unabated, “installing a Teleportation Portal in the closet so you can easily come and go at any time was a particular masterstroke. I find myself once more at a disadvantage.”

“Ben’ne, that’s not it at all!” said Ellie. “I-I had this Teleportation Portal created as an emergency escape route, just in case of some unforeseen disaster! It’s simply a coincidence that it just happens to lead to the closet in Garyl’s room! I-I certainly didn’t go out of my way to set it up just so I would have a way to meet with him in private...”

Of course, for all Ellie's insistence that her emergency escape portal "just happened" to have its exit in Garyl's closet, she had in fact made sure to arrange for Garyl to be placed in this specific room during his stay at the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education well ahead of time. It was, in fact, premeditated as far back as when she first commissioned the castle mages to create the portal.

Ben'ne watched mirthfully as Garyl and Ellie both panicked for all they were worth—behavior that only made the two of them ever more frantic.

◇Meanwhile—A Room in the Student Dormitory◇

While Garyl, Ellie, and Ben'ne carried on, in the room next door a girl with purple hair done up in pigtails sat alone with her ear pressed up against the adjoining wall, eavesdropping on the conversation. There was a magic circle active around the area where her ear met the wall, casting a spell to enhance her hearing.

The girl adjusted her false glasses with her left index finger. "Wh-What in the world could possibly be happening in that room?" she wondered, a furrow forming on her brow. "As president of the student council, I thought I should check to see if our precious exchange student Garyl was in some sort of trouble, but I don't know what to make of this..."

This girl was Lullun, student council president of the senior high school section of the student body—the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education taught students of all ages. She had succubus ancestry, lending her a particular aptitude for the charm magics.

"Unless I'm very mistaken, Garyl should be in a private room," Lullun muttered to herself. "But then, why did I hear a woman's voice? And more than one, if I'm not mistaken. Of course, he *is* very attractive, even by the standards of the Klyrode Institute for Chivalric Education... The girls among the student body certainly do all seem to love him... B-But whenever some impudent girl has tried to sneak into Garyl's room, I've been sure to send them back the way they came using my charm magic! So then, where could these girls possibly have come from?"

Gritting her teeth, Lullun pressed her hands up against the wall, straining to

listen. She was so preoccupied she didn't even notice that her glasses had begun to slip down her face.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

That night after dinner in Flio's living room, Sybe in his psychobear form and Tybe the Bear of Misfortune lay side by side in the large hutch Flio had built for them by the window, their stomachs sticking up proudly into the air with Sybe's mate Shebe and the couple's kids lying down all around them. On the very top of Sybe's stomach was Rynàsze, as comfortably asleep as the magic beasts surrounding her.

Flio smiled his usual easygoing smile as he looked over at his youngest daughter and her inseparable companions. "It seems like Rynàsze winds up sleeping in the magic beast hutch more often than her own room," he said. "I guess it's just become her usual spot."

"Quite correct," said Tanya, looking up from her where she had been cleaning the table nearby. "Young Mistress Rynàsze scarcely uses her room at all for any purpose other than changing clothes. And not only her..." she pointed to the thin space where Sybe and Tybe's bodies were pressed up against each other. Looking closely, they could see Wyne sandwiched between them, snoring in sync with magic beasts. "Young Mistress Wyne joins her in the magic beast hutch quite often as well. And even after I have told her time and time again that she *must* wear her nightclothes..." Tanya sighed.

In fact, Wyne truly did not seem to be wearing a single scrap of clothing as she slept soundly wedged between the two bears.

"Still," Tanya said, "as long as she remains inside the house, I see no need to broach the subject. Unless, of course, it is your desire for me to administer guidance on the subject of her clothing, Master Flio."

"No, that's all right," Flio said. "Thank you for all you do to look out for everyone, Tanya."

"It does not bear mentioning," said Tanya. "Then, I shall leave the issue of Wyne's sleeping attire alone." She gave Flio a formal bow and returned to her cleaning.

Just as Tanya stepped away, Rys emerged from the kitchen. “My lord husband!” she said. “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting!”

“No, I’m sorry,” Flio said. “I should have helped you clean up!”

“Not at all, and don’t even mention it!” said Rys. “There’s no need to trouble yourself over such things. Keeping the kitchen in order is an important part of my wifely duties!” Grinning from ear to ear, she went to take Flio’s arms in hers.

As Rys fawned over her beloved lord husband, Byleri watched from inside the kitchen. Byleri was the archer of Balirossa’s old company of knights. Like the others, she left the knighthood to come live at Flio’s house. Byleri had a natural gift for working with horses, and had settled into a role looking after equine magic beasts. She spent her days living with a smile on her face together with her common-law husband Sleip and their daughter Rislei.

But like... Byleri thought, frowning to herself. *I was here too, working hard in the kitchen with Lady Rys...* She scratched at her cheek in frustration, but sensing that the mood in the room wasn’t right for her to say anything, she quietly departed from the back entrance.

Byleri, Sleip, and Rislei nominally made their residence in the two-story stable building located on the ranch in front of the house. However, they ate meals and took baths at Flio’s house together with everyone else, and Rislei even chose to continue using the room Flio had made for her in the main house when she was just an infant. In practice, the stable only seemed to serve as a place for Sleip and Byleri to sleep.

Inside the house, Rys held Flio’s arm close. “Now, my lord husband...would you like to continue our conversation? Or perhaps...” she looked at him with upturned, coquettish eyes, making Flio’s heart skip a beat in his chest.

“Th-That sounds lovely!” he said. “But...one second...” Frowning just slightly, he glanced up in the direction of the ceiling. *That presence...* he thought. *It looks like they still haven’t left...*

◇Meanwhile—The Skies above Flio’s House◇

Outside, it was early enough in the evening that light from magic lanterns

could be seen here and there through the windows of Flio's house. Anyone watching could clearly see Byleri running quickly down the road from Flio's house to the stable building.

In fact, on this night in particular, there was such an observer—a woman wearing a black suit jacket and matching pencil skirt floating in midair, glancing between the documents she was carrying and Flio's house below from behind her narrow-rimmed eyeglasses.

“The woman who left the house just now seems like an ordinary human. I guess it's probably safe to assume that that man in the first story of that building is the one,” she said, holding out her right hand to manipulate a transparent window that appeared in front of her. The window displayed an image of Flio accompanied by scrolling text explaining the results of the woman's Search spell. “But it's strange... I can tell he has an incredible amount of magic power, but for some reason, my spell won't display it properly...” Furrowing her brow, she placed her hand on the window, casting the spell once again to no avail. All the window would show, aside from the image of Flio's appearance, was an endless series of ∞ symbols.

In this case, the ∞ symbol appeared to indicate that the subject's abilities could not be properly displayed, as they had exceeded the maximum bounds of the system. For Flio, who had mastered all magic not only in the world of Klyrode but the Celestial Plane as well, such a result was only to be expected, but this woman had never seen that symbol before and made the incorrect assumption that her spell was malfunctioning.

The mysterious woman continued to wordlessly stare at the window, probing Flio with her Search spell, but the text on the screen remained as it was.

“And another thing...” she muttered. “If the blurry parts of the image are any indication, this man must have altered his form using the spell Shapeshift. But even my magic won't show me what his original form looked like, and I used to be a disciple of the Celestial Plane! There's something strange going on here, or my name isn't Mephilla.”

The woman—Mephilla—rested her chin on her hand as she stared intently at the window in front of her. After a minute of silence, she sighed quietly to

herself. “But what really interests me is *this* part.” Her eyes had fallen on a line towards a phrase on the bottom of the screen, mixed in with all the data her Search spell had failed to process: *Former Hero Candidate*. “If a human with this much power isn’t even the Hero... Well, I can only wonder how strong the actual Hero of this world might possibly be. Just thinking about it has me shivering with anticipation...” She didn’t seem to be exaggerating either; a licentious smile played on her lips as Mephilla’s cheeks flushed hot at the thought. “There’s still a Dark One running around in this world, but it looks like humans and demons have managed to establish friendly relations with each other. I think we can safely conclude that this world has no more need for someone to play the role of Hero. In that case, I can’t let this chance slip through my fingers...”

“Oh?” came a voice from somewhere nearby. “Then you mean to say, you did *not* come to this world with the intention of opposing the Exalted One, correct?”

“The Exalted One?” Mephilla began. “Who in all the hells is—” Suddenly realizing someone had been addressing her, the former angel stopped mid sentence, quickly turning to look in the direction the voice had come from to see none other than Hiya floating in the air beside her. *Th-This human!* she thought, smiling cheerfully to affect an air of calm even as their mind scrambled to catch up. *Or rather, according to my magic they seem to be a djinn... But how long have they been standing behind me? I wasn’t able to detect their presence at all!*

Hiya, for their part, smiled as placidly as a stone statue as they regarded Mephilla through their ever-narrowed eyes. “I will tell you,” they began, “if you seek to make an enemy of the Exalted One, I, Hiya, his humble servant, shall oppose you with the whole of my power.” They held out their hands, preparing an offensive magic circle, ready to attack at any time.

“Hey!” protested Damalynas, appearing suddenly right behind Mephilla. “There’s no need to do this yourself, Your Divinity! The great Damalynas will blast this intruder away with a single spell!” She pointed her magic rod, charged with dark magic energy, straight at Mephilla.

Mephilla glanced between Hiya and Damalynas. *Even a former disciple of the*

Celestial Plane like myself couldn't expect to get away unscathed from that djinn's attack magic...not to mention taking the full power of a Grand Magus of Midnight at such short range... she thought. *And moreover...* Her eyes glanced towards the roof of Flio's house, where she could see another magic circle of titanic scale, also ready to launch an assault at a moment's notice. *That magic circle doesn't look like the work of that man they call Flio, but no human could cast a spell like that unless they had magic power on par with a Hero...* "Ahem!" she cleared her throat. "Would I be correct in assuming that this Exalted One you speak of is Mister Flio, the master of that house down there?"

"Indeed," Hiya intoned. "You would do well to think of him as such."

"Well then, since we're on the same page..." Mephilla paused. "I promise you, I will not involve myself in Mister Flio's affairs any further."

"I see. In that case..." Hiya lowered their hands, dismissing their magic circle. "So long as you keep your distance from the Exalted One, I, his humble servant Hiya, likewise promise not to lay my hands upon you." Holding their hand to their chest, Hiya performed a somber bow.

"Tch," Damalynas snapped her tongue in disappointment. "And here I thought I'd get to blow something up for a change..." With that, she vanished from sight.

Seemingly in response, the magic circle on Flio's roof vanished as well.

Seeing that she was safe for the time being, Mephilla turned back towards Hiya and returned their bow. "Yes, of course, you have my word," she said. "I'll just be leaving, then. Excuse me..." And so, she flew away into the night sky as fast as she could.

"Hmm..." Hiya mused as they watched Mephilla go. "A fallen angel, is it? I would much rather have them as a training partner than that drunkard of a former goddess living in the goblins' house..."

"*Your Divinity!*" came Damalynas's psychic voice in response—the dark witch had returned to Hiya's mindscape. "*Hang on! You weren't thinking of adding someone else to your disciples, were you?!*"

"Ah ha ha..." Hiya chuckled. "I am simply considering the possibility, from the

perspective of increasing the fighting strength available to the Exalted One.”

“Well, that’s all right, I guess...” Damalynas said. *“But still...”*

“What’s this, Damalynas?” Hiya teased her. “Are you worried you will have fewer opportunities to be my partner as the numbers of your fellow disciples increase?”

“N-No way!” Damalynas protested.

“There is no need for you to be so shy,” Hiya told her. “Perhaps the two of us and Maglion should end the night with some strenuous training...”

◇Meanwhile—Not Far from Flio’s House◇

Past Sleip and Byleri’s ranch, which stood in front of Flio’s house, on a corner of the vast farmland managed by Blossom, stood the cottage where the goblins who worked the fields made their residence. A cottage was what they called it, at least, but in fact it was a three-story building of fine wooden construction, every bit as palatial as the Flio family main house.

“Kachoo...! Kachoo!” Lying in bed in one room of the cottage, Telbyress sneezed loudly, exactly twice.

Telbyress had once been a goddess, but one day she had been exiled from the Celestial Plane for shirking her divine duties. After that, she moved into Hokh’hokton’s lodgings without ever bothering to ask permission. She was helping out at Blossom’s farm, sort of, but due to her excessive love of liquor and lifelong indolence, she found herself at the receiving end of Hokh’hokton’s anger more often than not.

“Bwahhh...” Telbyress sat up, sleepily rubbing her eyes. “What was that about...?” She held the large, empty bottle she’d been sleeping with in both arms, yawning loudly.

Awoken by Telbyress’s sneeze, Hokh’hokton groggily rose from the bed as well.

Hokh’hokton used to be a goblin foot soldier in the Dark Army. These days he worked hard as one of the chief farmhands of Blossom Acres. Unfortunately, however, he now found himself afflicted by Telbyress, who he had taken to

calling the no-gooddess.

“Mrhf...” Hokh’hokton mumbled. “Telbyress...did something happen?”

“Bwahhh...” Telbyress repeated as she looked around the room, still rubbing her eyes. “I dunno... It feels like someone was just insulting me...like they were calling me a drunkard of a former goddess...”

“Hah...” Hokh’hokton rolled back over to his side and closed his eyes. “Listen to yourself, would you? That’s not an insult—that’s just the truth!”

“Oh, huh...” Telbyress looked sleepily over at Hokh’hokton. “So it wasn’t an insult after all?” she grumbled, lying back down and clinging tightly to her bottle. “Well, then, that’s all right...”

◇Also Meanwhile—The Roof of Flio’s House◇

As Hiya floated in the sky above Flio’s house, Elinàsze stood on the roof looking up. Like Hiya, she too had taken note of Mephilla’s presence. Through magically eavesdropping on the woman’s conversation with Hiya, Elinàsze had realized that Mephilla most likely meant her father no harm, but by that time she had already Teleported to the roof and prepared a magic circle ready to attack with offensive magic any moment.

“If only Hiya hadn’t been there, I would have blasted that Mephilla lady away with a single shot!” Elinàsze pouted as she watched Mephilla fly off into the distance. “It’s what she deserves for sticking her nose into papa’s business.”

Elinàsze loved her father so very much that she was more than ready to annihilate an intruder at a moment’s notice if it was for his sake. As ever, it seemed she continued to live up to her vaunted position as the world’s most excessive daddy’s girl.

Muttering to herself, Elinàsze produced a pair of glasses from one of her pockets. “Regardless, this new Tsunchinorko of Tragedy my father acquired really is incredible. Using it as materials, I might be able to produce a recovery potion with nearly ten times the medicinal effect of our previous recipe! I must see what more I can learn...”

The subject of her fixation abruptly returning to the medicine she had been working to synthesize just moments earlier, Elinàsze waved her hand once,

casting the spell Teleportation and vanishing back to her room. And so, the night sky above Flio's house fell silent once again.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

In the throne room of the Dark Citadel stood a magnificent throne, on which none other than the Dark One were permitted to sit. The current Dark One Dawkson, however, didn't sit *on* his throne but in front of it, right there on the floor.

Dawkson, the younger brother of the former Dark One Gholl, was the current Dark One. Once upon a time he had gone by the name of Yuigarde and reigned as a supremely self-centered tyrant with no regard for anyone's opinion but his own. He had since changed his attitude and name alike, and now walked the path of a virtuous king.

Phufun the succubus glanced over at the Dark One from where she stood, pressing her glasses up the ridge of her nose. "Excuse me..." she said. "Master Dawkson?"

Phufun had been Dawkson's minion since before he had ascended to the throne. At first glance she appeared to be a knowledgeable and canny character, but in fact she was more than a bit of an airhead, as well an inveterate masochist.

"Yeah?" Dawkson asked. "What's up, Phufun?"

"I know it is not my place to say this, Master, but thanks to your latest efforts, our plan to reorganize the Dark Army is well underway. Not only that, but you've succeeded in establishing friendly relations with the neighboring demon clans. Under your reign, demonkind has seen prosperity unlike anything that has come before..." Adjusting her glasses once again, Phufun looked up from the documents she had been reading back towards Dark One Dawkson. "With such illustrious achievements to your name, don't you think the time has come for you to finally sit upon your throne?"

"Ah, so that's what this is about..." Dawkson said. "Just don't worry about it, okay? Anyway, compared to my brother Gholl from back in the day, and Calsi'im when he was Dark One before me, I don't even measure up to their feet."

“That isn’t—” Phufun began, only to be quickly interrupted.

“Look, don’t let it bother you,” Dawkson said. “Just let me do things this way until I feel like I’ve properly paid my dues. Please.”

“If it really means that much to you, Master, then very well...” Phufun frowned, clearly unhappy with Dawkson’s decision, but obediently withdrew the issue. *Ah, if only he would just shout, “Quit yer jabberin’!!!” and slug me across the room like he used to...* she thought, heat rising to her cheeks and her breath quickening as she recalled the memory. *Master has become so much less rough lately. I’m beginning to feel a little neglected! Oh, how I miss those fists...!*

To Phufun, masochist that she was, there was no greater pleasure in life than to be struck by Dark One Dawkson.

“So, Phufun,” Dawkson said. “Any of my subjects requestin’ an audience today?”

“O-Oh! Audiences!” said Phufun, a crease forming in her brow. “Y-Yes...”

Sensing what might have Phufun acting like this, Dawkson heaved a heavy sigh. “This again, huh?”

“Yes, this again,” Phufun confirmed. “Most of our requests are about *that...*” She paused, sighing herself as well, just as heavily. “It’s the usual three: Lady Selinaphott of the western demons, Princess Nerona of the dark elves, and Princess Snow White of the fable folk. They’ve all been requesting audiences seeking your hand in marriage. And others as well...”

“They never give up, do they...?” Dawkson grumbled.

“I understand how you feel,” said Phufun. “But they’ve gone through all the appropriate channels. You have no basis to refuse them an audience.”

Dawkson and Phufun shared a glance and a long sigh.

“Dark One Dawkson.” At this, Zanzibar stepped forward from where he had been standing by to the side of the room. Zanzibar the devil noble was one of the current members of the Infernal Four. In the past, he had raised a rebellion against Dark One Yuigarde’s heavy-handed tyranny. His rebellion was suppressed, but in light of his undeniable spirit and initiative, as well as the

knowledge he had acquired as a member of the nobility, he ended up being made a member of the Infernal Four.

“Zanzibar,” Dawkson said. “You got some kinda brilliant plan?”

“Perhaps,” Zanzibar said, stroking his goatee. “Pardon my boldness, but there is one plan that may yet prove efficacious...” Zanzibar cleared his throat and continued. “The greater number of the petitioners seeking your hand in marriage, Dark One, have come here to vie for the position of first wife. While demonic law permits a single individual to take as many as three wives, whoever becomes the first wife of the wise and benevolent ruler you have shown yourself to be will surely earn an elevated status for their people among demonkind.”

“Yeah, I get that...” Dawkson said. “So what’s your brilliant plan?”

“It is quite simple, Dark One,” Zanzibar said, grinning cleverly. “You must choose a first wife for yourself posthaste.”

“Hwah?!” both Dawkson and Phufun exclaimed at once, taken aback by Zanzibar’s suggestion.

“I mean, you’ve been listening, haven’t you, Zanzibar?” Dawkson asked, plainly distressed. “It’s easy enough to say I should pick a first wife, but which one do I—”

“Excuse me?!” Coqueshtti suddenly darted forward from her position behind Zanzibar. “Dark One, are you saying you still don’t know who to pick?!” The look on her face was nothing short of astonished.

Coqueshtti was a little mad scientist girl and a member of the current Infernal Four. Dark One Dawkson had selected her for the position in recognition of her many achievements saving demons’ lives with her healing magic, but as she was a shy and cheerful girl, somehow she never quite seemed to fit the part.

“Wh-Whaddaya mean by that?” Dawkson demanded. “Who are you sayin’ I should pick, Coqueshtti?”

“Why!” Coqueshtti declared. “Lady Phufun, of course!” Behind her, Zanzibar nodded in agreement.

“Hawahhh?!?!?!” Dawkson and Phufun once again both cried out in near-simultaneous alarm.

“Why are you acting so surprised, anyway?” Zanzibar asked, blinking in confusion at the pair’s outburst. “It has become a well-known fact among demonkind that Lady Phufun defeated all three of Lady Selinaphott, Princess Nerona, and Princess Snow White in our last bridal competition. It is because the two of you have shown no sign that you intend to marry that we are in our current predicament. You understand that, do you not?”

“Y-Yeah, you’ve got the right of it...” Dawkson admitted, stammering out a half-formed objection. “B-But still...”

Seeing that Dawkson was in no state to act, Phufun strode forward, pressing her false glasses up the ridge of her nose before stepping up right in front of her master. “Master Dawkson!” she said, raising her voice.

“Wh-What’s up, Phufun...?” Dawkson asked, shrinking back from Phufun’s sudden display of fervor.

Phufun faced Dawkson directly. “Please, make your decision boldly, like a Dark One should! I, Phufun, shall neither run away nor hide from your answer!”

“M-Mrf...” Dawkson choked out, his face turning a splendid shade of red as he waved his arms in panicked confusion. “B-But—I mean...s-somethin’ like this should be handled delicately, right...?”

Phufun furrowed her brow. *Before, Master would have slugged me across the room with a bold “I told ya to shaddup!!!” she thought. Ahhhh... How I miss those manly fists of his...*

Phufun’s body began to tremble at the memory, reliving the thrill of being struck with Dawkson’s fists at full power. She was, after all, a masochist to the core.

Chapter 2: The Fli-o'-Rys Magic Beast Racing Hall

◇Naneewa Town◇

West of Klyrode Castle, on the road leading to Houghtow City, was the great capital of merchants, Naneewa Town. Since antiquity it had been one of the great cities of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, built in a spot where the highways of Klyrode happened to converge as a center of trade. In one corner of the bustling metropolis stood an enormous racing hall—the biggest magic beast racing hall in the whole of the kingdom.

That day, Flio had come to pay a visit to the Naneewa Town Magic Beast Racing Hall. “This place is quite different from the Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park Magic Beast Racing Hall!” he remarked as he and Rys walked along the staff-only hallway.

“It certainly is,” Rys agreed, nuzzling up to her husband like always. “The race track there was built into the natural cliff face, I recall.” As they walked, Rys kept looking out at the racetrack through the hallway window.

“Ha ha ha!” laughed the slender man who had been leading them on a tour of the establishment. “Their race track is an obstacle course, see? That ain’t proper racing. I tell ya, the real heart of racing is right here, on the level tracks of the Naneewa Racing Hall!” This man, nodding exuberantly as he fanned himself with a Hi Izuran folding fan, was Sidemount, the mayor of Naneewa town.

“Oh?” Rys said with a frown. “I’m not sure I can agree.” Rys, it happened, had participated in the obstacle course races of Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park as both a demon and a magic beast, and was inordinately fond of the venue. “Obstacle races are not some backward uncivilized pastime!” she declared, holding up the index finger of her right hand as she launched into a lecture. “They are splendid races, where competitors find diversion in testing each other’s many abilities! To outrun your opponent, you will need to be able to come out of uneven ground ahead of your adversary—to seize the

advantageous terrain for yourself—to find kinship amid competition! It's a very enjoyable diversion."

Sidemount kept fanning himself as Rys finished her speech, a boastful look on her face. *W-Well, whaddaya know!* he thought. *I never had any interest in obstacle course races, but listening to this lady talk about 'em it sounds like they might be kinda fun after all! B-But wait, hang on! I need to bring her around to my way of thinking!* "Ah, but, madame," he said aloud. "Here at the Naneewa Magic Beast Racing Hall, the texture of the course is different with every race! We have four different course lengths, with grassy turf or sandy terrain—races under all sorts of conditions, every one a battle of pure and simple speed! Don'tcha think it's thrilling to see how fast different creatures can run?"

Rys blinked in confusion, dumbfounded at Sidemount's proud expression. "Is it?"

Rys was a woman of traditional demonic values, including the notion that might, as it were, made right. She found that obstacle races, where opponents had to vie with each other physically, accorded well with those values. The level racing tracks of Naneewa Town, however, went against her way of thinking in a way she found herself unable to understand.

Sidemount slumped his shoulders in an exaggerated gesture of disappointment at Rys's tepid reply. "Whaddaya mean, 'is it'?!" he demanded. "After I went on and on about how great our races are, and all..."

"I suppose I just don't see what's so exciting about it..." Rys said.

"N-Now, now," Flio said, stepping in between Rys and Sidemount before their argument got any further. "We didn't come here today to decide whether Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park or Naneewa Town has the best magic beast racing hall, did we?" he asked, looking pointedly at Rys. It was mainly his wife, after all, who he was concerned about keeping pacified here.

At that moment, a woman came running up to the group from behind. "I left the guests to you at your request, sir, but I was beginning to wonder whether you were coming or not!" she complained. "Mayor Sidemount, what are you doing in a place like this?!"

"Mende!" said the mayor. "Whatcha doin' here?"

“Don’t you ‘whatcha doin’ here’ me!” Mende snapped. Mende was the mayor’s secretary, a tall and slender woman with round glasses that gleamed in the light of the room as she glared daggers at Sidemount. “Dignitaries from the Fli-o’-Rys General Store have paid us a visit, bearing a letter of introduction from the Maiden Queen of Klyrode herself, and you are meant to be giving them a tour of the racing hall facilities, are you not?”

“Well, ya don’t gotta lecture *me* about it!” Sidemount huffed, squaring his shoulders in plain irritation. “I was just enjoying a leisurely conversation with our guests as we moseyed on down to the races!”

“Yes, I understand that much...” Mende said, her eyebrows shooting up making her face look suddenly warlike as she squared off with the mayor. “However! How many times have I made sure to tell you leading up to today?” As she spoke, she produced a thick bundle of paper folded in a wave pattern—one of Naneewa Town’s famous paper fans—and thrust it menacingly against Sidemount’s cheek.

“Gweh...” Sidemount squeaked. “Mende! Wh-What’s with ya all of a sudden?!”

“As I said...” Mende growled, jabbing at Sidemount’s cheek with the fan. “I told you, very politely: ‘We are expecting special guests bearing a letter of introduction from Her Majesty the Queen, so *would you please mind your language?*’”

Sidemount’s cocky demeanor seemed to fold immediately in the face of Mende in this state. And no wonder—she looked like she might cut him down at any moment if she could. “M-Mende! Mind *yourself*, would you? You’ve got a big old vein popping all the way out of your forehead!”

“I told you! Mind your language!” Mende said, thrusting the fan closer against his face. “These are important visitors, vouched for by the Queen—representatives of the very same Fli-o’-Rys General Store that has made so many generous contributions to our city! Personages such as these expect a reception of class and elegance! I’ve asked you over, and over, and over again, haven’t I? So, why are you jabbering away at them like a drunk in a local pub?! Are you too stupid to understand basic instructions? Do you want me to end

your sorry life? Well? Speak up!”

“I-I get it!” Sidemount said, begging for forgiveness as Mende pressed the paper fan up against his face. “I get it! S-So please, Mende, no more!” Sidemount, it seemed, had a pronounced aversion to violence.

“My!” Rys exclaimed, her face lighting up with admiration as she watched the exchange. “This Mende human is rather good at this, isn’t she?”

“R-Rys...” Flio grimaced. “I’m not sure you should be taking inspiration from that sort of behavior...” He hurried forward, interposing himself between Sidemount and Mende. “E-Excuse me!” he said, waving his arms for attention. “It’s true that I came here with a letter of introduction from the Maiden Queen, but I myself am nothing more than a humble merchant. It’s no trouble at all if you’d rather speak how you usually do...”

The moment Flio said those words, Sidemount’s weak-kneed attitude vanished on the spot. “Ya see?!” he said, pushing Mende’s fan aside. “The guests say they like it this way too! I’m tellin’ ya, Mende, you’re too serious by half! Bein’ all friendly-like is the best way to put guests at ease!”

“B-But...!” Mende protested, still glaring defiantly back at her boss.

“Well, that all aside, let’s hurry this show along, shall we? The race track’s all the way over yonder!” Sidemount hurried up beside Flio, wrapping his arm around the merchant’s shoulder as he led him quickly down the hallway.

Th-This mayor might just be a little too friendly... Flio thought, forcing a smile at Sidemount’s behavior as they hurried down the hallway at a half jog, Rys following close behind.

“That man...” Mende said, furrowing her brow. “If only it weren’t for his coarse habits of speech, he would make for an excellent mayor.” She sighed, idly smacking the paper fan against her own shoulder as she started down the hallway after them. “Although...that candor of his is a strength as much as a weakness, I suppose. If only he would just pay more heed to my concerns...”

Sidemount led Flio and Rys through the Naneewa Town Racing Hall until they reached the VIP box in the very center of the hall, built so that the guests had

an unbroken view of the entire track.

“The Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park race track was built into the natural cliff face, so the building had to be equipped with large crystal projection displays for the audience to see what was happening in the race. With the circular level racetrack here, though, we can see everything right from our seats,” Flio observed as he looked out the window down at the track below.

“Darn straight!” said Sidemount, proudly fanning himself with his Hi Izuran folding fan as Flio nodded along. “That way you can experience the action live and in person!”

“Look!” said Rys, her voice rising with excitement. “A race is about to start, I believe!”

On the race track, a number of magic beasts made their way to the starting line as the live orchestra ensconced in one corner of the hall played a rousing fanfare. The contestants each took their place behind the gate.

“There’s quite a number of equine magic beasts participating, I see,” Flio said.

“Of course!” Sidemount agreed, nodding excitedly. “It’s a contest of speed, after all! You’re bound to see magic beasts of the sort built for running! I suppose in some parts they have underwater or flying races, but here in the Naneewa Town Racing Hall we do things the old-fashioned way!”

“How curious...” said Rys, looking over at Sidemount. “Wouldn’t a wolf be a stronger competitor than a horse?” Her expression was dead serious.

“A wolf?!” Sidemount exclaimed, scowling with distaste for the idea. “No way, no how!” he said. “We’ve had wolves in the races here before, and I’ll tell you one thing—when wolves think they’re about to lose a race, that’s when they start biting! I couldn’t tell you how many races have ended prematurely thanks to that nasty habit of theirs...”

“You must not have properly taught them the rules of the race,” Rys insisted, pointing a chiding finger at Sidemount as she very seriously explained the ins and outs of wolf-type magic beasts. “All wolf-type magic beasts hate losing and will employ any means at their disposal for the sake of victory. That’s why you need to treat them with special care!”

“But...well...I mean...” Sidemount protested, fanning himself with clear irritation. It seemed neither Rys nor Sidemount were willing to give up on their perspective.

“I see...” Rys said, placing a hand on the fabric of her dress. “My lord husband often says that evidence is better than theory. In that case, allow me to demonstrate in person how incredible a wolf type can be!”

Incidentally, while it was public knowledge that Rys was a demon, only a small number of individuals knew that she numbered among the wolf-type lupine demons herself. Sidemount, for what it’s worth, had no idea.

“Bold words!” he said, squaring his shoulders in anger. “Show me, then, if you think you can!” He seemed, if nothing else, confident in victory.

The two brought their faces so close they were nearly touching, palpable sparks between them as they glared fiercely at each other.

This time it was both Flio and Mende who got between them, stopping the fight from carrying on any further. “N-Now, now, you two,” Flio said “We’re here today to *watch* the races, right?”

“Quite right,” Mende agreed. “We’re only here to watch today, sir mayor, so please do settle down.”

Even with Flio and Mende doing what they could to calm them down, Rys and Sidemount kept glaring at each other for a while more before they finally relented.

“If my lord husband says so, I suppose I can only obey...” Rys said. “My apologies for my behavior.”

“Th-That’s right...” said Sidemount. “I guess I got a bit too heated there, huh! Terribly sorry.”

As the two lowered their heads in apology, Flio breathed a sigh of relief. *Still, though, he thought, Mister Sidemount seems to have some serious negative feelings around wolf types, doesn’t he...*

“Oh, look!” said Mende, putting on a bright and cheerful voice in a desperate attempt to change the mood of the VIP box. “The race is starting!” She pointed

towards the track, and the rest of the party turned to watch.

The instant the race began, Sidemount sprang up from his seat, pressing his face all the way up against the window as he cheered for all he was worth. “Yeehaw! Giddyap! Go! Go!” he cried, heedless of the way his black-rimmed eyeglasses had begun to slip down his face in the excitement as he shouted and hollered at the horses galloping along the track.

Sidemount watched as the magic beasts turned the final corner, putting on one last burst of speed as they came to the final straight section of the race. There were four magic beasts in the lead, nearly neck and neck.

“Ride! Ride!” Sidemount cheered, raising his voice as loud as he could. “Ride like the wiiiiind!”

I wonder which magic beast Mister Sidemount is cheering for... Flio thought. It must be one of the four in the lead...

Sidemount’s next words, however, dispelled that notion completely. “They’re just ten horse-lengths ahead! Pass them! Leave them in the dust!”

“Huh?” Flio’s eyes blinked open in surprise. Sensing what he must be thinking, Mende stepped up from behind to whisper quietly in his ear.

“Mayor Sidemount is cheering for the dire rabbit named Honor of Providence...currently in last place.”

Flio recalled the informational pamphlet he had been given before the race, which gave Honor of Providence the longest odds of any of the magical beasts participating. Of the last ten races it had run in, the rabbit had come in last place in every one. And just as might be expected, Honor of Providence was in last place once again, lagging far beyond the pack. Sidemount, however, kept cheering it on like his life depended on it.

“H-He’s rather fond of that magic beast, isn’t he...?” Flio said, giving Mende a particularly awkward smile.

“Hah...” Mende sighed, smiling awkwardly back. “You’re right, of course. Mayor Sidemount has adored dire rabbits since he was a child, so much so that he took to raising them himself. Honor of Providence is his particular favorite—he was the one who gave it its name, you see.”

“I see...” Flio said. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Incidentally,” Mende went on, “the reason Mayor Sidemount was so quick to speak ill of wolf-type magic beasts is that they are the natural enemies of dire rabbits. If wolf types and dire rabbits take the field together, the rabbits will be frightened and unable to race properly. It’s caused us no end of trouble. The Naneewa Town Magic Beast Racing Hall is a public work, you know, and yet we have to contend with the mayor’s personal foibles. Ah ha ha...” she laughed, with a distinct note of self deprecation.

It seems Miss Mende certainly has her work cut out for her... Flio thought. Unsure what to say, he settled instead for giving Mende a knowing smile.

“Dire rabbits are fairly fast as far as magic beasts go...” Rys said, nodding in understanding as she watched the race progress. “This time, the competition was just too steep. Those four horses in the lead all belong to exceptionally fast species, even among equine magic beasts...”

The four of them watched as the race came to its conclusion. The four horses in the lead all passed the finish line at once, as a single horizontal line. As a result, the order of the first four places could not be determined, and the race committee went into deliberation. At the moment, the only name appearing on the board was the contestant in fifth place: Felursine Rider, with the magic beast’s species listed as “catbear.”

Contestants placing lower than fifth place did not appear on the board.

“Deliberation, eh?” Sidemount said, folding his arms and nodding sagely as he looked up at the board. “Yes, yes, I understand. My little Honor of Providence put in a real burst of speed at the end there—why, I wouldn’t be surprised if we ended up all the way in fourth place!”

Despite Sidemount’s words, no one present had any doubt that Honor of Providence was clearly in last place. Even Sidemount seemed well aware of that fact, if the tears streaming down his cheeks were any indication.

“I do think that man is taking things a little bit too far...” Rys whispered, smirking at the mayor’s behavior. “But I will admit, I did find myself moved by his insistence on cheering for his favorite all the way to the bitter end.”

“True enough,” said Flio, smiling his usual easygoing smile as he nodded in agreement. “I’m sure the dire rabbit was happy to have someone cheering for it so intently.”

Some time later, the committee finished their deliberations and agreed on a proper ranking for the magic beasts in the four-way tie for first place. The rider of the winning beast—a woman named Stoleanna dressed in a man’s formal wear, including a bright red cape—ascended the winner’s podium, waving her hand to the cheers of the crowd.

Mixed in with the cries of adulation, Stoleanna overheard a conversation from the spectator stands.

“Stoleanna’s something else, isn’t she?”

“How many consecutive wins is this again?”

“To be honest, I don’t think I’ve ever seen her lose...”

“And from what I’ve heard, beast riding isn’t even her main profession!”

“That’s right... Wasn’t she a magic beast researcher?”

A smile crossed Stoleanna’s face. *It might be more accurate to say I’m a magic beast fanatic, rather than a researcher...* she thought. *But I have been researching the innate abilities of magic beasts, in order to put them on display at their greatest possible potential. It’s just something I’ve been pursuing for my own gratification...but I must say...*

Stoleanna stole a glance back over her shoulder, where the magic beast she had been riding in the race was waiting. Its features were a mix of horse and dragon, and although the race had been over for some time now, it was still breathing hard from its earlier exertion.

I had high hopes for this dragon horse, rare specimen that it was...but its top running speed falls far short of what I had been expecting, and worse, its stamina is woefully lacking. I managed to ride it to victory in spite of everything, but I’m honestly disappointed... This one is nothing but a failure. She let out a sigh, her eyes changing color to reflect her disappointment in the creature. *Still...* she corrected herself. *It did its best out there. I should thank it for helping*

me hold on to my winning streak. Maybe I'll treat it to a proper feast when we're done here. Stoleanna put the thought from her mind for the time being and went back to waving for the audience.

“And now,” came a voice, “we present the winning rider, Miss Stoleanna, with a grand trophy to commemorate her victory!” This announcement was being broadcast over the same magic speaker that had been used just earlier to commentate on the race, loud enough that it felt like the entire racing hall was about to come apart at the seams. “The prize for this race was kindly provided by our sponsor, the Cloth Conglomerate Silkfleece! Madame Fetabetz, the head of the conglomerate herself, will be making an appearance shortly to present Miss Stoleanna with her trophy and winnings.”

As the announcement said, Fetabetz stepped up to the podium where Stoleanna waited. She was dressed in a kimono from Hi Izuru, one shoulder coquettishly exposed. Behind her came Lil-Lil, head clerk of Silkfleece, carrying the trophy in her arms. Lil-Lil was a small woman, and the trophy itself was nearly twice her height, but she carried it as if it weighed nothing at all.

“You all right back there, Lil-Lil?” Fetabetz asked, looking back at her companion with a hint of worry.

“Oh, you mean with the trophy?” Lil-Lil said, smiling brightly. “Don’t worry—I could carry this thing all day! It’s not nearly as heavy as the crates of cloth I carry around at the store!”

“You really are a dependable one, aren’t you?” Fetabetz remarked.

“Oh?” Lil-Lil teased. “Are you only now realizing this?”

“Of course not!” said Fetabetz. “I’ve known that all along!” Then, clearing her throat, she turned to the business at hand. “Well then!” she said, smiling and bowing to Stoleanna. “Congrats on another first, Stoleanna!” Lil-Lil held up the trophy for the winner to take.

“But of course!” Stoleanna said, accepting the trophy with a smile. “It’s me, of course—it’s not like I was about to lose!” As she took the trophy, she conjured a magic circle with both hands to make the object float in midair, keeping her hands on the base so it looked as if she had hefted the trophy above her head with nothing but her own strength.

The cheers from the audience grew even louder as the crowd erupted into a round of earsplitting applause.

“Holy crap! She’s holding up that enormous trophy like it’s nothing!”

“Stoleanna’s something else, for real!”

“Congratulations, Stoleanna!”

Stoleanna’s eyes took on a cool color as she looked out at the stands. *Personally, she thought, I just wish I could have a more thrilling, more heart-pounding race against even stronger magic beasts... Although I’m certainly not desperate enough to take part in something so unfashionable as an obstacle course race...*

After the award ceremony, Stoleanna found herself walking alone down the staff-only hallway after changing out of her race costume. “Now then... Which inn should I stay at tonight?”

Stoleanna, the self-proclaimed magic beast fanatic, was in fact a specialist in healing magic who traveled the land offering medical care to people in need, occasionally selling the potions she synthesized for her own personal whims to local adventurers’ guilds or shops for a bit of spending money as well. Her travels had taken her all over the wide world of Klyrode, during which time she had come to regard lodging at various inns as an everyday part of life.

The racing hall here in Naneewa Town has been a good source of income, as well as an opportunity to encounter new kinds of magic beasts...but thanks to that, I’ve ended up staying in one place for longer than my usual habit...

Stoleanna thought with a sigh, her eyes reflecting her boredom with the current situation. *It’s been a while since I’ve seen any properly rare magic beasts, though. Maybe the time’s come for me to think about moving on...*

“Stoleanna! Over here!” Stoleanna was snapped out of her thoughts by the sound of a woman calling to her from the hallway ahead. The moment she saw who it was, however, her eyes turned a distinct shade of distaste.

Haaah... she thought. Her again...

Instead of Stoleanna showing emotions on her face, the color of her eyes

would actually change color to show her emotions. However, since she kept her eyes half closed at all times, no one around her had noticed this quirk of her anatomy.

The woman in the hallway hurried up to Stoleanna as if the two of them were old friends, holding out her hand for a shake. “That was another good race today, huh!” she said. “And on that note, have you given any thought to that talk we had the other day?”

“I turned you down, I seem to recall,” Stoleanna said, batting the woman’s hand away with one of her magic circles. “As I did the time before and the time before that.” The distaste in her eyes grew a shade deeper. She turned her back to the woman and began to walk away the direction she had come, only for yet another woman to appear to block her path.

“One moment!” she said, stifling a yip and awkwardly changing the vocalization to a more human-sounding cough. “Y-Yahem! Th-There’s no need for this hostility, is there?”

Seeing that she had been surrounded, Stoleanna sighed quietly and went to conjure a magic circle.

“Hey, time out,” said the first of the two women, holding out her hands and producing a magic circle of her own, a devious grin on her face. “It wouldn’t be in your best interest to do something that showy in a place with so many people around, would it?”

“You might have made yourselves look human, but you are demons, are you not?” Stoleanna said. “In that case, you should be able to tell which of us has the greater magic power at a glance.”

“Oh, certainly!” the woman said. “It’s obvious your magic power is considerable, indeed! I would be a fool to try and pick a fight with you! However...” she pointed off to the side, where a group of bystanders were making their own way down the staff-only hallway. “What do you think is going to happen if you start blasting off magic spells left and right? Wouldn’t it be a better idea to simply listen to what we have to say?” She chuckled triumphantly, as did the second woman who had appeared to cut off Stoleanna’s exit.

“And it never occurred to you that you might be the ones in trouble if it came to that?” Stoleanna asked, sighing yet again. Her eyes changed color to reflect her growing exasperation.

“Well, anyway,” said the woman. “How about you just agree to our offer already?”

“It isn’t a bad deal, I should think,” her partner piped in. “Not for you, and not for us.”

Stoleanna took a moment to compose her thoughts. “I’ll admit the idea of being provided with rare magic beasts to ride is tempting...but there’s no way I’m giving you half of my winnings from the races.”

“It should be an attractive offer to a magic beast fanatic such as yourself, no?” the first woman said.

“Sure, I saw what you had on the table,” Stoleanna said. “All kinds of magic beasts the likes of which you could ordinarily never see. A very attractive offer indeed. But...” She paused. Despite her words, her eyes betrayed not a glimmer of interest as she regarded the pair. “These magic beasts you’ve listed in this catalog of yours...every last one of them is registered as a protected endangered species! How could the likes of you be in a position to offer them to passing racers? Wouldn’t that mean you’ve been poaching endangered magic beasts?!”

The two women faltered, their composure rattled by the woman’s words. “W-Well...” the first one said. “That’s...”

“The thing is...” the second added. “Y-You see...”

I can’t deny that I’d love to be able to conduct research on those rare magic beasts to my heart’s content... thought Stoleanna, a complicated mix of colors playing in the depths of her eyes as she watched the two women flail their arms in panic. In spite of the temptation, however, she remained resolute.

Just then...

All of a sudden, another woman burst onto the scene, arriving from behind the first woman who had called out to Stoleanna.

“Yip?!” the woman exclaimed.

“Yip-yip?!” cried her partner.

The newcomer hadn’t wasted a second—she aimed a blow with her right arm, transformed into a bestial state, straight for the first of the pair. It was obvious at a glance that the woman’s magic beast arm packed a considerable punch.

“Y-Yiip!” the first woman exclaimed, leaping backwards just in time to see the deadly claw tear into the spot she had been only moments before. A shiver ran down her spine in terror of the destructive power of the attack she had narrowly avoided. “O-Oh, what is it *now*...?”

The woman who had nearly hit her with that devastating blow fixed her with a piercing look. “I see you’ve been using the spell Concealment to mask your presence,” she said, “but no demon fox sisters are about to fool the nose of Rys!” Indeed, it was Rys, her arms changed to their magic beast forms. She leaped towards the demon fox sisters, attacking furiously.

These two were once chieftains of the fox demons and powerful figures in the Dark Army, until they met with their downfall, after which they joined forces with the Shadow King and his Shadow Conglomerate. Kintsuno the Gold, the older sister, favored the color gold, while the younger sister Gintsuno the Silver, as might be expected, was partial to silver.

The two sisters stood there, clutching at each other and trembling in fear. “Wh-What gave us away?” yipped Kintsuno.

“W-We’ve got to get out of here!” Gintsuno cried.

The two transformed from their disguise as merchants into magic beasts—a pair of demon foxes—and ran away as fast as their legs could carry them.

“You wait right there!” said Rys, changing her legs into their magic beast forms as she chased after them. Soon, all three were out of sight.

“Th-That woman...” Stoleanna said, her eyes going wide, shining with amazement as she watched them vanish into the distance. “Rys, she said her name was? Those legs of hers... Is she...a lupine demon?”

Flio and Rys materialized back in front of their house, arriving in a magic circle by the light of the setting sun. “I can’t believe myself...” Rys muttered, her teeth gritted tight and her hand clenched in a fist. “How could I have let the demon fox sisters get away like that?”

“It’s my fault, really,” Flio insisted, a genuinely apologetic look on his face. “I was so focused on our conversation with Mister Sidemount that I didn’t notice they were there...”

“N-No, my lord husband! You mustn’t blame yourself!” Rys said, hurriedly shaking her head. “They were hiding their presence with a Concealment spell, and quite an advanced one at that. I only noticed them myself since we happened to be passing by in the same corridor—if not for my keen sense of smell, they would have given me the slip entirely!”

That’s right, Flio thought. Lupine demons like Rys have a sense of smell dozens of times stronger than a human’s. I remember it was Hiya who said that someone using magic to hide their presence can’t ever fully get rid of their scent... “But even so,” he said, “I’m very sorry to have exposed my beloved wife to danger. It’s a bit of a sharp reminder of some of my own shortcomings...”

“A-Ah!” Rys exclaimed in a panic. “No, my lord husband, it’s nothing of the sort! You’re really nothing short of extraordinary, s-so please! I wish you wouldn’t say such things!” She was so worked up that her lupine demon tail appeared, quivering with fierce intensity. “But enough of the demon fox sisters! You really are wonderful, my lord husband, make no mistake about that. N-Now, let’s get indoors and set about recovering from today’s fatigue...”

Flio couldn’t help smirking fondly at Rys’s behavior. “Thank you, Rys.”

“N-Now come along, let’s go home,” Rys said, wrapping her arms around his as the two made their way inside.

Just as the couple stepped inside the house, there came a tremendous clatter of hooves from the ranch out front. Inside the fence, Sleip and Rislei were galloping down the pasture together, as fast as the wind.

Sleip was a former member of the Infernal Four and a champion of a lichsteed. After parting ways with the Dark Army, he found his way to Flio’s house together with his old band of horse demons. Now the lot of them had

found employment with the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. Sleip was Byleri's common-law husband, and somewhat excessively doted on their daughter Rislei.

The two of them—Sleip the lichsteed and Rislei the half lichsteed, half human—were running along in centaur form, human above the waist and lichsteed below. Sleip was keeping pace with Rislei, just a few stride lengths behind.

“Good running, Rislei!” Sleip said, grinning from ear to ear. “Well done!”

“Kch...” Rislei grumbled as she began to gradually reduce her speed. “You never seem to have trouble keeping up with me, papa, no matter how fast I run. It's a little aggravating, to be honest...” True to her words, while Rislei was breathing hard with exertion and dripping with sweat, Sleip's breathing was perfectly calm and his skin betrayed no hint of perspiration.

“Ha ha ha!” Sleip laughed merrily, patting his daughter on the head. “It's the result of my strenuous commitment to daily training, all so that I can protect my lovely Byleri and my darling Rislei.”

“Papa, quit it...” Rislei said, a serious little frown on her face. In spite of her protests, however, somehow she seemed to be enjoying the attention. “But just you wait!” she added, smiling up at her father. “One day I'll be strong enough that I'll be the one protecting you!”



Sleip's smile grew even wider at Rislei's words. "Oho! That's my girl, Rislei!" he said, grabbing her tight and lifting the smaller centaur up above his head.

"Hey!" Rislei exclaimed, her face turning bright red. "Wait! I told you not to embarrass me out of the blue like that!" She twisted her body every which way in a bid to escape, but she found her strength completely outmatched by her father's powerful arms.

Some distance away, a herd of demon horses watched as Sleip subjected Rislei to his doting parent routine. These were Sleip's old subordinates, some in their humanoid form and others fully equine.

"Look!" said one of the horses. "Lord Sleip has begun his usual game of lifting his daughter in the air!"

"Lord Sleip is quite fond of his daughter," said another. "And who can blame him! Lady Rislei is adorable—and she's quick, to boot!"

"Lady Rislei seems to be enjoying it as well... Truly, what a harmonious family!"

The demon horses smiled and swished their tails, watching their old boss intently. At some point one of them began to applaud, drawing the other horses in to join them. Before they knew it, Sleip and Rislei found themselves surrounded by a ring of demon horses, showering them with furious adulation.

"S-See, papa?!" Rislei complained, her face even redder than before as she flailed her arms against her father's chest. "This is why I told you to stop! Now everyone's come to look at us! Oh, I'm so embarrassed..."

Nothing Rislei did, however, could prevent Sleip's explosive celebrations. "Riiiiisleeeee!" he cried, holding his daughter tight. At some point he had begun weeping tears of parental joy. "I'm sooo proud of you!!!"

"It's hardly my first time thinking this, but Rislei's dad is something else..." said Reptor, who had been watching the action from a distance away. He smirked wryly as he watched Sleip carry on his antics.

Reptor was a lizardfolk boy, and a student at the Houghtow College of Magic. He was classmates with the children from Flio's house, and had grown

especially close with Rislei, a fact which had earned him the scrutiny of her father Sleip on many occasions.

That day, Reptor had accompanied Rislei home after school only to find Sleip's hand suddenly on his shoulder. "*Say, boy,*" Sleip had said. "*How about joining us for a run?*" And before Reptor knew it, he was going along with Sleip for his usual daily regimen. Eventually Rislei joined them as well, and the three spent some time running laps around the pasture. However...

"They left me in the dust from the word go..." Reptor recalled as he sat with his hands on his knees, desperately trying to catch his breath. "Next thing I knew, they started lapping me again and again and again. I've really got my work cut out for me, don't I...?"

◇Later—Flio's House◇

Later that evening, Flio and Rys were eating dinner in the living room, surrounded by the rest of the household.

"Hrm..." Ghozal grunted, taking a great big bite from a large chunk of meat. "So the Naneewa Town Racing Hall doesn't do obstacle course races?"

"Well, that doesn't sound like it would be meowch fun at all!" Uliminas declared, furrowing her brow in confusion as she ate her meal of fresh fish.

"I suppose it comes down to humans and demons having different ways of thinking about these things..." Balirossa between spoonfuls of soup. "Personally, I find the Naneewa Town Racing Hall's way of doing things somewhat more to my liking."

"Well, speaking for myself, I'm good with either!" said Blossom, happily slurping down a plate of pasta and stir-fried vegetables. "Simple running races are good fun, but seeing magic beasts duking it out in those obstacle courses really gets the blood pumping!"

"Mama..." said Kora from the seat beside her. "You spilled some pasta..." She produced a small handkerchief from her pocket and went to wipe the offending bit of food from Blossom's chest.

"Ha ha! Thanks, Kora!" Blossom said, patting the girl on the head with a great big grin on her face.

Kora shook her head from side as if to say no need for thanks, but there was no hiding the smile on her face. Her father Ura grinned happily at the sight.

“By the by, Lord Flio,” Ura said, looking over towards Flio’s seat. “You said you had some sort of request for the people living in our oni village?” Like Ghozal, Ura’s dinner was a large chunk of meat.

“That’s right,” Flio said. “About that...” He held out his hand, summoning a magic circle that projected a window in the air above the dinner table, displaying a three dimensional image of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store in Houghtow City. “As you can see, the space next to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store is occupied by our Enchanted Frigate boarding tower. Behind the shop, though, on the side facing away from the main road, there’s currently a large empty plot of land between the shop and the next street. Lately, we’ve been looking into the possibility of building a magic beast racing hall in that empty space.” Flio made precise movements with his hands as he spoke, the image displayed in the window changing along with his gestures to show a schematic of a large racing hall built in the vacant plot.

“Hrm...” said Ghozal, regarding the image with interest. “A racing hall there, huh?”

“Meow’re right that size wouldn’t be an issue...” Uliminas said. “But wouldn’t we need to get purrmission for a plan like that?”

“I got permission from the Maiden Queen just the other day,” Flio said. “And we got approval for the land use from the mayor of Houghtow City as well. We even agreed to a contract to purchase the plot.”

“Oho!” said Ghozal. “You already have full permission for the project, then? It isn’t often we see our ever-cautious Mister Flio move so fast!”

“I don’t know about that,” Flio said. “This plan’s been in the works since we first started doing regular Enchanted Frigate flights. Now that we have the network in place, I want to use that infrastructure to bring some excitement to Houghtow City.” He smiled his usual easygoing smile and continued, turning back towards Ura. “Now, from what I hear, you’ve been getting demon after demon arriving at the oni village thanks to all the rumors about the settlement going around. I thought this racing hall project might be a good way to give the

newcomers some steady work.”

“Well, I’ll be!” said Ura, springing up from his seat in surprise and grinning with delight. “That would be a tremendous help! Ever since the peace treaty, we’ve been getting more and more demons making their way to our village. I’ve had my hands full finding paying work for all those people! So it’s settled—I’ll let everyone know as soon as tomorrow and do whatever I can to help!”

“Perfect!” said Flio, giving Ura another of his famous smiles. “Thank you for the help in advance!”

“And now that that’s all decided, it’s time to think about the building itself!” Rys said, clapping her hands together with delight. “I say we should set up a bronze statue of my lord husband right in front of the entrance! It should be...let’s see...about as tall as the main gate of Klyrode Castle, perhaps...”

“Oh! Good idea, mama!” Elinàsze said, smiling and bobbing her head in approval. “I approve!”

“U-Um...” Flio protested, briefly at a loss for words. “W-Well, I appreciate the sentiment, but I’m not sure how I feel about that kind of self-aggrandizement...”

“Hang on, you two,” Ghozal said, smirking in amusement. “Aren’t you getting a bit ahead of yourselves? Before we worry about any statues, we should be thinking about the racing hall itself!”

“Yes.” Flio nodded, smirking as well. “I would prefer to hear everyone’s opinions on *that* subject, if you have any...”

The household carried on their discussion well into the night, spurred in no small part by Rys and Elinàsze’s rather extreme level of excitement for the project.

◇Several Days Later—Behind the Fli-o’-Rys General Store◇

Early one morning, Flio appeared in the lot behind the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. Fli-o’-Rys was situated some distance away from Houghtow City proper. When they had first set up shop in their current location, the area had been a vast empty field, but Flio had erected a large tower in one corner of the property to serve as a boarding platform for his fleet of Enchanted Frigates.

Now the area around the tower was full of various stalls catering to the needs of passengers.

Flio looked past the Enchanted Frigate boarding tower, towards the other side of the shop farther from the main road, which was still nothing but a grassy field, just like it had been when they first arrived.

“Thanks to everyone’s help, the racing hall plans are ready to go,” Flio said, holding out his hand to call up a window. Inside, he could see a detailed three-dimensional model of the magic beast racing hall. For the last several days, the household had been debating every evening about what would make for an ideal racing hall. This model was the fruit of all their long discussions.

“Everything looks to be in order,” Flio said with a nod. He took a deep breath, an enormous magic circle appearing at his feet. “No sign of any living creatures in the construction site...and the materials are all prepped and ready to go inside my mindscape. All right, let’s get started.”

Flio lifted his hands above his head and the magic circle around him rose into the air. A second circle appeared around the first, and then a third and a fourth. The magic circles rotated in midair, absorbing the schematic of the racing hall and growing brighter still. Flio closed his eyes, focusing his mind on the magic circle before him. A moment passed. The circles rotated silently, shining their light upon the land. Then, slowly, Flio opened his eyes.

“All right!” he said, stretching out his hands towards the empty plot in front of him. “Let’s get started!”

The magic circle above Flio’s head grew larger still, rising farther into the sky until it came to settle above the area, where it gently descended down to the earth. As it did, the materials Flio had previously stocked in his mindscape materialized one after another, shaping and assembling themselves with alarming speed in a true frenzy of construction. The whole thing was finished in a matter of minutes.

“Hah...” Flio let out his breath and lowered his hands, the magic circle he had been using vanishing into thin air. Before him was the product of his labor—an enormous racing hall. The empty field that had once existed behind the Fli-o’-Rys General Store was no more.

Flio held up his index finger, calling up another window in his field of view. This one displayed a bird's-eye view of the newly constructed racing hall. Flio gestured with his fingers, causing the image to zoom in, and set about checking every nook and cranny of the building.

"All right..." Flio said, nodding in satisfaction to himself. "Looks like everything's just like it was in the schematic." He allowed himself a moment to look in admiration at the fruits of his labor, glinting in the morning sun.

Not far away, Greanyl the shadow demon arrived for her morning shift, only to freeze where she stood, staring wide-eyed at the scene in front of her. "H-Huh...?" Greanyl was generally the first to arrive in the morning, and today was no exception. She had just been about to start her usual duties preparing the store to open, only to be confronted with something wholly unexpected. "Wh-What in the world is that?" she wondered, staring at the brand-new magic beast racing hall from behind the Enchanted Frigate boarding tower. "I-I am quite certain that just yesterday this was an empty field! Is this the magic beast racing hall Mister Flio has been planning? But...when did he build something so...enormous?"

Greanyl rubbed her eyes in disbelief, but the image of the racing hall stubbornly refused to vanish.

◇Later That Day—Inside the Magic Beast Racing Hall◇

The newly constructed magic beast racing hall was full of people busily running all about. Most of these were shadow demons in the employ of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store—the group formerly known as the Silent Listeners, who once served the Dark Army as spies. Their movements were extraordinarily fast, so much so that an ordinary human would never be able to make out what they were even doing.

"Good morning, Mister Flio." One of the shadow demons, Greanyl, appeared at Flio's feet with a burst of superhuman speed, but her breath betrayed no hint of exertion as she knelt down behind him.

"Good morning, Greanyl," Flio said. "Thank you and all the rest of the shadow demons for coming out to work so early."

"There is no need for thanks," Greanyl insisted. "I am merely performing my

duties. However, I must say...you gave me quite a surprise this morning when I arrived to find such an enormous building already complete.” A number of nearby shadow demons nodded in agreement.

“Ah, sorry, my bad,” said Flio, lowering his head in apology, his usual easygoing smile plastered on his face. “I should have let you know before I started construction.”

“N-Not at all!” Greanyl hastened to reassure him. “Please, lift your head! You did nothing wrong in your actions!” *T-To be honest*, she thought, *I’m just surprised that anyone could build a structure like that in a scant few minutes...* Greanyl came across as cool and composed most of the time, but at that moment her mind was still reeling with confusion. *S-Still*, she told herself, *if anyone were capable of it, it would be Mister Flio...* That thought calmed her down, and somehow she managed to regain her level head by the time Flio opened his mouth to continue.

“Well,” Flio said, “how are those tasks I asked you to do coming along?”

“Our inspections show no problems with your magic construction, Mister Flio,” Greanyl said. “Currently, we are cleaning the building and performing a check of some of the finer detailing. So far, we have found no flaws. Meanwhile, in the race hall, we are in the middle of conducting running tests to—”

Greanyl’s report was interrupted, however, when a demon in centaur form came trotting up to join the conversation. This was the nightmare Dalc Horst, former head of Infernal Sleip’s elite guard. Currently he worked for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store as leader of the transport and guard team, although depending on his schedule he found himself tending shop as well from time to time.

“Boss!” Dalc Horst grinned, his horse half prancing with excitement. “The track here is out of this world! I feel like I could run all day! The rest of the herd all seem like they’re having the time of their lives too, running around in there.”

Flio smiled his usual easygoing smile. “I thought demons would prefer an obstacle course race like the one in Dark Mountain,” he said. “But I’m glad to hear you all like it.”

“You have the right of it,” said Sleip, coming up from behind the much smaller

Dalc Horst. “Most demons prefer obstacle races, where you’re allowed to crash and tackle and kick. But there’s no shortage of folks who prefer a straightforward contest of speed—me and my old subordinates especially!”

“I see!” Flio said, nodding in understanding.

“Still...you really pulled out the stops this time, Mister Flio,” Sleip remarked, laughing as he looked back over Flio’s shoulders at the rest of the magic beast racing hall. “Hard to believe you built this whole gigantic racing hall just a few days after getting permission from the Maiden Queen!”

“That’s right!” said Flio. “It’s thanks to everyone working so hard to come up with ideas for the racing hall!”

It didn’t take a few days... Greanyl thought, unable to keep herself from internally contradicting Flio as she watched the exchange. It took a few days for Mister Flio to get everyone’s opinions, perhaps, but the actual construction was finished in a matter of minutes...

Suddenly, the conversation was interrupted by another voice, crying out in surprise from somewhere behind them. “Wh-What is this?!”

Flio turned to see Ura, apparently on his way to deliver vegetables from Blossom’s farm to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. He was pulling a wagon laden with veggies as he stared wide-eyed at the racing hall.

“L-Lord Flio!” Ura sputtered. “Th-This building!”

“Yes, that’s right!” said Flio. “This is the magic beast racing hall we’ve been discussing the past few days.”

“No...I mean...I can tell that much...” Ura said. “But I thought the people of the village were gonna be the ones building that thing...”

“Oh, no,” Flio corrected him. “The jobs I had in mind for the people from the oni village were helping operate this place now that it’s built, not construction.”

“A-Ah... So that’s how it is...” Ura breathed a sigh of relief, nodding his head. “Well then, what work is it you need people to do specifically?”

“I think I’ll have to hold interviews and discuss that with them one-on-one,” Flio said.

“All right, understood,” said Ura. “I’ll pass the message along to everyone at the village.”

As Flio and Ura were talking, though, once again the conversation was interrupted. This time it was Uliminas who arrived at work only to find herself staring wide-eyed at the complete magic beast racing hall. “Mreow?!” she exclaimed. “Wh-Where did that building come from?!”

This one’s on me... Flio thought, wincing to himself as he stepped up to explain the situation. *I really should have explained everything thoroughly before I started construction...*

Needless to say, Flio found himself explaining the sudden presence of a racing hall on the premises many more times to many more people before the day was through.

◇Days Later—Houghtow City Magic Beast Racing Hall◇

“Hmph...” Rys stood with her arms folded by the entrance to the magic beast racing hall, her cheeks puffed out in a dramatic pout.

“Um...Rys?” Flio asked, a troubled look coming over his face. “Is something the matter?”

“Something isn’t the *matter*,” Rys huffed, turning to face her husband. “Something is terribly, horribly *wrong*!” Here, she pointed towards the entryway of the racing hall. “*Why* is there no bronze statue of my lord husband?!” she demanded. “I won’t stand for it!”

“Huh...?” Flio blinked.

Rys, however, gave no mind to Flio’s confusion. “After all that time Elinàsze and I spent thoroughly considering what pose would be best...” she said, squeezing her fist tight. “And now there is no statue whatsoever? My lord husband! What is the meaning of this?!”

“Um, well...” Flio said, clearly unsure how to proceed. “W-We took everyone’s opinion into account, and that proposal was rejected...”

“Even so!” said Rys, looking up at Flio with tears in her puppy-dog eyes. “I had hoped that perhaps you might make one anyway, for my sake, and Elinàsze’s...”

Unsurprisingly, even Flio found himself at a loss before Rys's sudden intensity.

While Flio and his wife were busy working out their differences, inside the racing hall they were holding a trial race as part of the public opening of the venue. Sidemount, the mayor of Naneewa Town, had been invited as well. "Whoa, Nelly!" he exclaimed in awe as he looked all around. "This place is something else!"

"It's incredible to think that they managed to build such a splendid racing hall mere days after they came to observe our own in Naneewa Town..." his secretary Mende agreed, looking all over with eyes open wide in amazement.

Next to the pair from Naneewa Town was a woman wearing a jacket that looked like part of some sort of uniform, accompanied by a pencil skirt and knee high socks, all unified around a monochrome black color scheme. This was Peguilla, the manager of the demon amusement park, Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park. "I see they have opted against an obstacle course track like the one we have in Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park..." she said, looking around with great interest. "However, this place seems to be built well enough all the same..."

As the manager of Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park, Peguilla was also responsible for the magic beast racing track located on the premises. It was that connection that had secured her an invitation today.

Sidemount and Peguilla were both sitting in the VIP box, located a floor above the seating for the general public—an idea Flio had borrowed from his visit to the Naneewa Town Racing Hall. In the very center of the VIP box, was a private room where the Maiden Queen sat, looking out the window at the sights below. "Mister Flio consulted with me about this project, of course, and I gave him my permission...but who would have thought that he would complete such a magnificent structure in a matter of days!"

"My dad really is full of surprises, huh?" Garyl mused with a smirk. He was here today because Flio had entrusted him with the task of guiding the Maiden Queen and accompanying her to attend to her needs.

"But I'm surprised," the Maiden Queen said. "I wouldn't have expected the

racetrack hall to be open to the general public on its first day of operation.” Indeed, the stands stretching from their vantage point in the VIP box were positively packed with spectators.

“That’s right,” Garyl said. “From what I heard we’re doing free admission to celebrate the occasion too!”

“I see!” The Maiden Queen nodded.

“Look!” Garyl said, pointing towards the starting gate where they could see a group of contestants starting to gather. “The trial race should be starting any moment!”

“You know,” the Maiden Queen said, her eyes shining with excitement as she took her seat, “this is going to be my first time ever watching a magic beast race... I’m rather excited!”

“May I have the seat next to yours, Your Majesty?” Garyl asked. Perhaps it was because Flio had asked him to serve as the Maiden Queen’s guide, but he had been speaking more formally to her than usual today.

“Yes, of course!” the Maiden Queen said. “A-Although...if it’s not too much trouble...” She demurely looked up at Garyl, her cheeks blushing red. “M-My guards are all waiting outside... W-We’re the only ones in this room right now. W-Would you, um... Would you perhaps address me the way you usually do?” she requested, fidgeting awkwardly as she spoke.

“S-Sure, Ellie!” Garyl replied, blushing himself as he sat down next to the Queen.

“Now, my master,” came Ben’ne’s voice inside Garyl’s head. *“You must take this woman by the hand.”*

As Garyl’s familiar, Ben’ne spent most of her time lurking inside of Garyl’s shadow. When she chose to materialize physically, she would project a cloud of mist from which she would appear. Ben’ne, however, must have exercised a rare bit of delicacy and refrained from showing her form lest she risk ruining the mood of the scene.

“B-Ben’ne...” Garyl thought back. *“What are you...?”*

“Is it not obvious?” Ben’ne asked. “I am offering my master advice in order to best develop his intimacy with the woman of his desire. You do harbor amorous feelings for her, do you not?”

“A-Amorous...?” said Garyl. “I-I mean, I guess I do, but...”

“In that case, this is a prime opportunity!” Ben’ne insisted. “When the two of you meet at your family estate, there are others around at every moment, but at this moment you and she are completely alone. It would be folly to stand by and let a chance such as this slip away!”

“I-I dunno...” Garyl said, hesitating. “I mean, you aren’t wrong, but even so...”

“This argument is getting us nowhere...” Ben’ne said. “Here—like this!” A puff of mist appeared around Garyl’s body, from which Ben’ne’s hand—and only her hand—emerged. She grabbed Garyl’s hand in her own and forcibly placed it atop the Maiden Queen’s.

“H-Hey!” Garyl protested. “B-Ben’ne! Stop it!” Panicked, he turned towards the Maiden Queen in distress. *“E-Ellie!”* he said aloud, hastily going to pull back. *“I-I’m sorry! I just...”*

Ellie, however, squeezed his hand tight in both of hers. *“U-Um...”* she said, her face flushing bright bright red. *“M-May I? If it’s quite all right with you...”*

“O-Oh!” said Garyl, nodding his head just slightly. *“U-Uh... If it’s really okay...”*

Holding the Maiden Queen’s hand, Garyl turned to look down at the race track as the Maiden Queen did the same.

◇Inside the Racing Hall◇

“Dalc Horst!” said Sleip, turning to look at his former subordinate as the two of them waited behind the starting gate in their centaur forms. *“This may be a trial race, but don’t think I’ll go easy on you!”*

“The same goes for me!” Dalc Horst replied with a grin. *“Nothing gets me fired up like a chance to race alongside side you, Lord Sleip!”*

Aside from Sleip and Dalc Horst, the rest of Sleip’s former subordinate horse demons were also waiting on standby for the race to begin. Rislei was too, along with Rynàsze, who was riding atop Sybe in his psychobear form.

“I’m not planning on losing today!” Rislei declared, her eyes full of fighting spirit as she kicked at the turf with her hind legs. “Not even to papa!”

Next to her, Rynàsze sat cheerfully on Sybe’s back. Unlike the others, who were readying themselves for a serious race, she seemed to be treating the whole thing as just a bit of fun. “Looking forward to the footrace, Sybe?”

“*Bwurf!*” Sybe happily replied.

Ura, who had been standing beside the starting gate, held up a flag and waved it once with great vigor. On his signal, the gate was cast open and the assembled racers all came surging forth at once.

“Raaah!” cried Sleip, darting out the gate at the head of the pack. He immediately put on a great burst of speed, leaving everyone else in dust.

“Graaah!” Dalc Horst shouted as he pushed himself for all he was worth, but try as he might, he was unable to close the gap between himself and Sleip. Soon, Sleip and Dalc Horst were running far ahead of the others, with everyone else struggling for third place.

“Papa’s so fast...” Rislei cried. “I can’t catch up to him at all!” She had been running as fast as her legs could carry her, putting her at the head of the larger pack, but she couldn’t keep up with Dalc Horst, let alone her father Sleip.

“Come on, Sybe!” Rynàsze chirped as the psychobear ran alongside Rislei. “No need to push yourself yet! Let’s just run and have a good time!”

“*Bwurf!*” cheered Sybe.

In the stands, Sybe’s family, Shebe, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, all cried out in a cheerful clamor.

“*Shuff, shuff!*”

“*Snuffle!*”

“*Snuff, snuff, snuffle, snuff!*”

Suddenly, Wyne, who had been sitting beside them, sprung to her feet. “Nghaaah!” she cried. “I can’t take-take it anymore! I’ve gotta run-run too!” She had nearly made it past the railing when Tanya caught her from behind, holding her tight in a full nelson.

“Young Mistress Wyne!” Tanya scolded her. “You know Master Flio told you that today you were to spectate the race and nothing more!” Wyne’s raw dragonewt power was great enough that it took all of Tanya’s strength to hold her in place, even with her advantageous position.

“But I wanna-wanna!” Wyne complained as she strained against Tanya’s arms.

“Young Mistress Wyne!” Tanya repeated. “Desist from this course of action!”

“Mrf!” Wyne grunted. “I don’t know those words!”

Meanwhile, back on the race track, the contestants had made their way across the finish line. The display board showed the final results:

First Place: Sleip

Second Place: Rynàsze

Third Place: Dalc Horst

Dalc Horst’s chest heaved as he struggled to catch his breath. “N-No way...” he muttered, looking over at Rynàsze and Sybe.

Up until the very last stretch of the race, Sleip had been in first, and Dalc Horst had been in second. But mere moments before he crossed the goal, Sybe had put on an incredible burst of speed, barely overtaking him by the length of his nose.

“That was fun, wasn’t it, Sybe?” Rynàsze said, a bright smile on her face.

“*Bwor!*” Sybe cried happily in response.

Dalc Horst could only stare in disbelief at the psychobear and young girl combo who had defeated him.

“R-Rynàsze was incredible, huh...?” Rislei said, wincing as she looked over from beside Dalc Horst. “I couldn’t even make it into fifth place...”

Sleip, who had come in first, meanwhile, had already begun a leisurely victory lap to the applause of the crowd. He raised a hand high in the air, a smile on his face.

“Incredible, Sleip!”

“Nice run!”

“I’ll be sure to catch the next race too!”

In a corner of the stands, one woman in particular was staring at Sleip with particular intensity—Stoleanna, her eyes now pink and heart-shaped. “Wh-Who is that demon?” she muttered to herself as she looked out on his victory lap. “He seems to be a lichsteed, if I’m not mistaken...but the musculature on his horse half! That powerful start! And his overwhelming speed! He’s absolutely perfect in every way! The lupine demon I encountered the other day at the Naneewa Racing Hall was a female, but this one seems to be male, meaning that he could possibly grant my desire. Yes...my ultimate dream—to bear the child of a superb quality demon!”

Elsewhere in the stands, nearby to Tanya and the others, sat Byleri. She was applauding with the best of them, a great big grin on her face. “Oh my gosh!” she cried. “Lord Sleip! That was, like, totally amazing! And Rislei really did her best too! And Sybe and Rynàsze, and Dalc Horst... Everyone was like, super fantastic!”

Byleri was happily applauding, singing the praises of all the runners, when suddenly, an image flashed into her mind—Stoleanna, her heart-shaped pink eyes fixated on Sleip. “Hwah?!” Byleri exclaimed, feeling a sudden dark premonition that sent a jolt through her body. She looked all around every which way, but Stoleanna had already begun making her way out of the building. Byleri couldn’t find her anywhere.

L-Like, who the heck was that strange woman? Byleri thought as she glanced around with wide, worried eyes. For some reason, she totally gives me the creeps...

Sleip, meanwhile, carried on his victory lap. He seemed to be having the time of his life.



The entrance to the racing hall was a large arch-shaped doorway with a sign

at its apex reading: “Fli-o’-Rys Magic Beast Racing Hall.” Past the gate, leading to the stairway that took guests inside the building itself, was a large open area full of a great number of open air stalls selling various foodstuffs, each manned by residents from Ura’s oni village, loudly hawking their wares.

“How ’bout some freshly roasted skewered meat? The flavor’s outta this world!”

“Try one of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store’s famous lembon pies, right here! It’s a perfect way to commemorate the race!”

“Those meat skewers look pretty good!” said a guest. “I’ll take two!”

“And I’ll take three!” chimed in another.

Now that the race was over, the spectators found themselves funneled into the courtyard where they began forming lines to shop at the stalls, the excitement from the race still palpable in the air. After making their purchases, some of them headed towards the Enchanted Frigate boarding tower right next to the racing hall, while others headed for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store itself to do some further shopping, and still others chose to walk down the road to pay a visit to the Houghtow City markets. Soon, not just the Fli-o’-Rys General Store but all of Houghtow City was bustling with activity, with crowds of visitors making merry until late that night.

At the very top of the Fli-o’-Rys Magic Beast Racing Hall, above the VIP box, was an observation tower that was off-limits to all but Fli-o’-Rys staff. It was about as tall as the Enchanted Frigate boarding tower, giving anyone on top an unbroken view of all of Houghtow City. Flio and Rys stood alone on the top of the tower, looking out at the scenery below.

“It’s incredible, isn’t it?” mused Rys. “The preopening event is finished, but there are still so many people milling about all over town...” She shielded her eyes from the sun with the flat of her hand as she took in the view. “Did you expect this result, my lord husband?”

“I did, to an extent,” said Flio, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “But I certainly didn’t know it was going to be such an enormous success.”

“By the way...” Rys began. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you

for a while now...”

“What is it, Rys?”

Rys touched her right index finger against her cheek, quizzically cocking her head. “You’ve been selling Fli-o’-Rys General Store products wholesale to merchants all over the land for a while now, but surely we could simply open our own branch stores in every region of the world, could we not? And yet, you’ve chosen to open only two stores—one here in Houghtow City and the branch location in front of the Dark Citadel. You’ve built vending areas inside the Enchanted Frigate boarding towers as well, of course, but you left even those in the hands of local merchants from around the tower’s area... Surely, my lord husband, we could earn greater wealth if we increased the number of stores under our direct control. Is there some reason you’ve chosen not to do so?”

“You have a point,” Flio said, smiling fondly over at Rys. “With our current funds, it would be easy to open more stores under our direct management. But if we operate our business like that, the only ones to prosper would be us. That doesn’t appeal to me very much at all. I’d much rather share our prosperity with the merchants who have been working in the various regions all this time. I know you’ll probably call me softhearted for it, but that’s how I feel.”

“Absolutely,” Rys said with a wry smirk. “I can’t think of anything to call it *but* softhearted. But, my lord husband...” She sidled up close to her husband, taking his arm in hers. “I find myself very proud to stand at the side of such a softhearted man.”

“Thank you, Rys,” Flio said, smiling like always as he petted her on the head with his free hand.

The two spent some time cuddled up together on the observation tower, looking out on Houghtow City below.

◇Some Days Later—Naneewa Town◇

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What in tarnation?!” In the mayor’s office of Naneewa Town, Mayor Sidemount raised his voice in shock, a wide-eyed and flabbergasted expression on his face as his glass slipped halfway off his nose. “M-Mende!” he demanded. “What’s all this about?!” On the desk in front of

him was the newsletter his secretary Mende had brought to show him.

“I-It’s exactly what it looks like, I’m afraid...” Mende said. “This is a special edition of the newsletter distributed at the magic beast racing hall. According to the article, our most popular racer and many-times consecutive champion Stoleanna announced her intention to change venues to the Fli-o’-Rys Magic Beast Racing Hall, which opened just the other day.”

Sidemount nodded, his mouth hanging agape, and looked back at the newsletter. The headline read: “Racer Stoleanna to Challenge Fli-o’-Rys Magic Beast Racing Hall.” Printed beneath it in smaller letters was what seemed to be the text of an interview with Stoleanna.

“N-N-N-Now slow down a minute here, would ya?” Sidemount said. “That Stoleanna was the Naneewa Magic Beast Racing Hall’s biggest draw! Them folks didn’t poach her from right under our noses, did they?”

“Not as such,” said Mende. “In the interview, Stoleanna says she had a ‘fateful encounter’ at Fli-o’-Rys’s racing hall. From what I can tell, it seems she must have found an opponent she wished to challenge at the preopening event.”

As Mende spoke, Sidemount began pouring over the interview himself. For a while he sat there, reading the newsletter with an expression of consternation, until finally, he spoke. “Ah well,” he said, taking his folding fan out from his breast pocket. “That’s life, I reckon! If she’s decided she’d rather face the racers over yonder, all we can do is send her off in high spirits.’Sides which, we’ve still got plenty of racers who’ve been busy honing their mettle against Stoleanna herself.” He tapped the closed folding fan against his forehead and nodded to himself, apparently satisfied.

Eventually, Mende’s distressed expression softened in turn. “I suppose you’re right,” she said, nodding in agreement. “Stoleanna’s endeavors in Naneewa town helped make the racing hall into the popular venue it is now. We owe her a good-natured send-off, I suppose...”

“Well!” said Sidemount, grinning brightly. “Now that that hullabaloo’s all settled, shall we move on to other business? We’ve got a day full of business talks if I’m not mistaken!”

“Yes, quite right,” said Mende, taking out her handbook to look over the day’s

schedule. “First, we have a meeting with the representatives from the Calgosi Coast to discuss the prospect of a business partnership. Then we have your one-on-one with the president of the Naneewa Market Street Association, followed by...”

Sidemount nodded along to Mende’s words, until suddenly something occurred to him. “Oh!” he said, pointing his closed fan in Mende’s direction. “Mende!”

“Yes? What is it?” the secretary asked.

“Sounds like we got an extra full day ahead of us—you know what that means, right?”

“Of course,” Mende said with a chuckle. “You wish to take your lunch at the magic beast racing hall so that you may spectate the race as you eat, correct? Not to worry, I have already made the arrangements.”

“Darn tootin’!” Sidemount cheered, reaching into the pocket of his trousers to produce a wrapped hard candy. “That’s my Mende! Want a treat?”

Mende, who was well used to Sidemount’s behavior at this point, smiled as she graciously accepted the reward. “I do. Thank you.”

◇Somewhere—A Building◇

It was night in a city somewhere in the world. Inside one of the buildings in the city was an unlit room, illuminated only by starlight, where a man sat slumped down in an elaborate armchair, smoking a cigar as he clicked his tongue in irritation.

“Kintsuno! Gintsuno!” he snapped, breathing out a plume of smoke. “What’s the meaning of this? What happened to your plan to recruit this star racer Stoleanna from Naneewa Town and have her run races for us at racing halls all over the land?!”

In front of this man, bearing the brunt of his tirade, were two distressed-looking women dressed in short, matching cheongsam dresses with high slits cut along the legs, one gold and one silver.

“Sh-Shadow King!” protested the woman in the gold cheongsam. “W-We did

have that plan, it's true..."

"B-But!" the woman in the silver cheongsam added, "Well... That woman turned out to be somewhat more stubborn than we expected..."

The two smiled deferentially, wringing their hands together as they pleaded before the man in the chair. These, of course, were Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno this Silver, the same fox demons who had been harassing Stoleanna earlier only to be driven away by Rys. The man clicking his tongue in irritation from his armchair was none other than the Shadow King.

The Shadow King was once the king of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the father of the current Maiden Queen. When his many evil deeds came to light, however, he was driven from the kingdom. Ever since, he fully focused on the black market dealings he had engaged in back when he was the King, taking the name Shadow King as head of the so-called Shadow Conglomerate.

"Harumph..." the Shadow King grumbled, blowing another puff of smoke. "Opening stores across the land didn't go as planned... Making money on magic beast races was a bust... You two haven't been slacking off, have you?"

True to his words, the Shadow King had been trying to open stores across the land under the control of his own Shadow Conglomerate, only to be met with a string of failures. Most of the stores had been left with no option except to abandon the premises.

"But why have our branch stores been such utter failures, anyway?" the Shadow King wondered aloud. "Back when I was King of Klyrode, I made a killing using the exact same method..."

Kintsuno and Gintsuno just smiled with the same expression as before.

W-Well... Kintsuno thought. In those days, the Shadow Conglomerate was able to use its financial clout to force every competing store in the area to close, giving them total dominance of a city's market...

But these days, we don't have the funding to monopolize a market like that... thought Gintsuno, continuing on her sister's wavelength. *And not only that, with these new Enchanted Frigates around, it's easier than ever to ship goods from across the map. It's not as simple a matter as it used to be to take over a*

local market...

The sisters, however, dared not utter a word of that to the Shadow King.

“I believe Yanderena and Janderena are rushing between our regional stores as we speak to try and reorganize them into something more successful...” offered Kintsuno.

“The two of us should see what we can do to support those stores ourselves,” Gintsuno volunteered. “Maybe working together we can think of some new way to make money!”

The Shadow King furrowed his brow as he leered down at the two women bowing and scraping in front of him. *I swear... he thought. Nothing's gone the way I've planned ever since I was forced to abdicate my throne. What could have gone wrong to have caused all this...?*

As he sat stewing, an image came unbidden into the Shadow King's mind—that of a particular man.

Wait... Who was that man again? the Shadow King thought, blowing a puff of smoke as he strained to recall the man's identity. *I recognize that face from somewhere. Wasn't he that failed Hero Candidate I had exiled around the time we confirmed that golden-haired man as Hero...?*

Chapter 3: Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought *Hero Gold-Hair Gets Scouted*

◇Deep in a Forest◇

“Now, behave yourself and get caught in my threads!” Valentine’s voice echoed through the forest as she wove innumerable strands of her threads of darkness between the trees, projecting them from her fingertips with incredible speed. In front of her was a great herd of magic beasts running side by side in front of a rolling carriage.

The carriage looked like it was built to be pulled by a team of horses, but instead it seemed to be rattling through the forest entirely under its own power, without a horse in sight.

“Aryun Keeeats!” Tsuya cried, sticking her head out of the carriage window. “Keep chasing those magic beasts just like thaaat!”

“Yes *ma’am!*” came Aryun Keats’s voice, projecting from the carriage ceiling. The carriage, in fact, was none other than the carriage djinn Aryun Keats herself in one of her transformations.

“Lady Vaaalentine!” Tsuya continued. “Eeeveryone! Here are the waaanted magic beasts!” She was clutching a ream of papers in her hand, each one a bounty notice posted by the Adventurers’ Association of the nearby town. As the magic beasts ran alongside them, she had been busy comparing them to the posters to see which ones they could trade in for a reward.

“Excellent!” said Valentine. “Leave it to me!” Sensually running her tongue along her lips, she crossed her hands in front of her. Her array of threads moved in time with her gestures, ensnaring several magic beasts at once. Some of the herd, however, managed to avoid the thread and seemed to be making their escape.

“Hrmf!” came a man’s voice from in front of the fleeing magic beasts. “Nice try!” Mysteriously, however, the voice seemed to be coming from somewhere

underground.

“*Gra woo?*” the magic beasts chattered in confusion. “*Woo gra?*”

The next moment, however, the beasts disappeared from sight entirely. One minute there had been a group of magic beasts running free through the forest. The next, all of them were seemingly somehow gone.

With the forest silent once more, Aryun Keats pulled up beside the spot where the magic beasts had disappeared. There, right in front of her, was an enormous hole in the ground.

“Aaand... Hup!” Tsuya said, jumping down from the carriage to peer into the depths of the hole. Inside, the near escapees were lying on the ground where they had fallen, twitching and unconscious. “That’s aaall of them!” she chirped, a great big smile on her face. “Good job, Hero Gooold-Hair!”

Just then, another hole opened behind her and out popped Hero Gold-Hair, holding his legendary item the Drilldozer Shovel in his hands.

“Hero Gooold-Hair, you’re amaaazing!” Tsuya gushed, her eyes sparkling with admiration as she went to hug Hero Gold-Hair tight. “I can’t belieeeve you knew which way the magic beasts who got away from Lady Vaaalentine’s threads would run and set a piiitfall trap for them ahead of time! Thanks to you, we got aaall the magic beasts!”

Behind her, Wuha Gappoli stepped down from the carriage as well, rubbing her head. “Ouuuch...” she complained. “I know you were chasing those magic beasts and all, Aryun, but would it kill you to steer a bit more gently?”

“*I most certainly could not,*” shot back Aryun Keats’s voice from the carriage ceiling. “*How do you expect me to focus on something like that when I am driving at full speed to pursue a herd of magic beasts?*”

“I guess that makes sense...” conceded Wuha. “But Hero Gold-Hair, that trap was set with pinpoint accuracy! How did you know which way those magic beasts were going to run?”

“Hah... Isn’t it obvious?” Hero Gold-Hair replied, smoothing back his bangs with a look of supreme pride on his face. “My intuition, of course!”

“Your intuiiition!” Tsuya cheered, the sparkle in her eyes growing brighter still. “That’s our Hero Gooold-Hair!”

“Come on, Tsuya, don’t act impressed by that,” Wuha protested, rolling her eyes. “It’s ridiculous!” *Still...* she thought, leaning her head back against her hands with a smirk. *Hero Gold-Hair’s intuition really does seem to overcome any and all logic, doesn’t it...?*



Meanwhile, high up in the sky, a woman floated in midair looking down at Hero Gold-Hair's party.

"Hm..." The woman nodded to herself, writing something down in the pocketbook she had on hand. "He deployed his party to their maximum effect with precise instructions, then finished the job himself to ensure every magic beast was properly captured. I see, I see... This one's overall score is coming out to be quite impressive."

This was none other than Mephilla, the same woman who had faced off against Hiya and Elinàsze in the skies above Flio's house just the other day.

"When I examined that former Hero Candidate the other day, there was something wrong with the window that meant I couldn't properly determine his abilities..." Mephilla mused. "Now, I wonder what sort of abilities the proper Hero of this world might have. If that human was as strong as he appeared to be, I'm expecting great things indeed from the man who beat him out for the position..." She called up another window in front of her field of view, looking it up and down with great excitement. As she read, however, she found herself blinking in confusion. "Huh?"

Level: 268

Strength: 999

Defense: 999

Speed: 999

Magic: 999

HP: 999

Skills: Dig

"W-Well, that's strange..." Mephilla said, looking at the numbers in confusion. "These numbers would be outstanding for an ordinary human, but for a Hero they're on the low end of average...or even the high end of flat-out bad! And his only skill is listed as Dig? You'd expect a Hero to have skills like Sword Saint, or

Ultra Defense, or Hyper Magic...something that marks them out as obviously special...but *Dig?*”

Confused, Mephilla began quickly clicking through the window, looking through the detailed information on Hero Gold-Hair’s abilities until her hand stopped on one screen in particular.

“Wh-What’s this?” she said. “‘Luck: ∞’... ‘Intuition: ∞’... It’s that strange ∞ symbol again—the same one that came up when I tried to examine that Flio human the other night...” Mephilla fell silent for a moment, puzzling over the strange mark. “I see!” she finally concluded, clapping a hand against her fist in understanding. “It must be some kind of display error. These windows must have poor compatibility with this world. Why else would I be seeing this strange symbol over and over again since coming here, and never before?”

Nodding in satisfaction at a mystery solved, Mephilla continued. “Hero Gold-Hair...” she read. “Original name, Elizabeth? Well, that’s quite a feminine name for a man, isn’t it? Or at least, he certainly *looks* like a man...”

“Hey!”

“And let’s see...” Mephilla went on. “He certainly has a large number of social relations. I see he’s taken care to build friendly relations with tavern keepers all over the land, as well as other former Heroes...powerful demon nobility...and even the Dark Army’s Infernal Four and the current Dark One himself—the very person he would have been summoned to fight!”

“Hey!”

“Fascinating! His favored weapon is one of this world’s legendary items, the Drilldozer Shovel...and what’s this? A hidden skill that turns him into a giant golden shovel? And another hidden skill that lets him transform into a superpowered warrior of the Celestial Plane? RReally?”

“Hey! You there! Woman!”

“Hmm...” Mephilla considered. “Although, since this window seems to be having difficulty displaying basic abilities, perhaps I should take all of this information with a grain of salt...”

“You there! Woman! Can you hear me?!”

Suddenly, Mephilla noticed that a man's voice had been calling to her again and again the whole time she had been engrossed in reading through Hero Gold-Hair's abilities. "Who is it this time?" she snapped. "Someone trying to get in the way of my work?" She looked up from the window, glancing all around, but given that her current location was the sky high above a forest, it stood to reason that there was no one else nearby.

"That's strange..." Mephilla said, frowning as she looked out left and right. "I'm certain I heard a man's voice just now..."

"Down here, you nincompoop!" the voice called once again.

"Down...?" Mephilla said, finally noticing that the voice seemed to be coming from beneath her. She turned her eyes to the ground below, to see Hero Gold-Hair down in the forest, thrusting the Drilldozer Shovel skyward. "N-No way!" Mephilla exclaimed, her eyes going wide in shock. "I've been using the spell Concealment to hide my presence this whole time, just in case! How did that man know I was here?!"



"Get down here, you!" Hero Gold-Hair hollered, thrusting his Drilldozer Shovel up towards the sky. "You have some nerve!"

"U-Um... Hero Gooold-Hair?" Tsuya asked, tilting her head in confusion as she looked blankly between Hero Gold-Hair and the direction his shovel was pointing. "Is there something in the skyyy? I can't see aaanything..."

"There is!" Hero Gold-Hair declared, his face red with anger. "There's a very rude woman floating up above our heads!"

"A-A very rude womaaan?" Tsuya asked.

"That's right!" said Hero Gold-Hair, before turning his attention back towards the sky. "You get down here at once!" *How dare she mention my old name?!* he thought. *Unforgivable!*

Elizabeth was the name Hero Gold-Hair had been given at birth. In the world he came from, he had faced an unending string of ridicule for his distinctly unmasculine name, which is why, since being summoned to the world of Klyrode, he had never mentioned his original name to anyone, including Tsuya

and his other followers.

After some time, Mephilla appeared in front of Hero Gold-Hair and his party. There was no denying that Hero Gold-Hair had noticed her all the way from the ground below, after all, so she finally chose to respond to his increasingly incensed tirade and come down to earth.

“Who would this woman be, Hero Gold-Hair?” Valentine asked, folding her arms behind him. Her earlier bout of threads had drained her dry, leaving her in the body of a child as she looked suspiciously up at Mephilla. “And how did she just appear like that?”

Mephilla gave the tiny-sized Valentine a friendly smile before turning towards Hero Gold-Hair, whose own expression was nothing short of enraged. “Well, well...” she said, adding another note to her pocketbook. “I’m surprised you were able to notice me all the way up in the air, even with my presence concealed by magic! That’s going to increase your score a great deal...”

“Forget that nonsense!” Hero Gold-Hair snapped, bringing his face up close to Mephilla’s. “You called me by *that* name, didn’t you?!”

“Huh?” Mephilla asked.

“You know, *that* name!” Hero Gold-Hair repeated. “And how did you know about that name, anyway?!”

“U-Um...*that* name?” Mephilla said, folding her arms in thought until suddenly it hit her. “Oh!” she said, clapping her hand to her fist. “You mean your original name, Elizabhfffff...”

Hero Gold-Hair leaped through the air, frantically clapping a hand over Mephilla’s mouth before she could finish. “Say that name *one more time* and see what happens!” the ever more irate Hero Gold-Hair hissed in her ear as she squirmed to escape his grasp.

Struggling to breathe with her mouth obstructed, Mephilla hastily snapped her fingers. When she did, her body vanished, reappearing nearby.

“*Cough...hack...* Ordinarily, I would deduct points for an act of barbarism like that...” she said in an even voice, the smile returning to her face as she recovered from her coughing fit. “But given that in this case you were

responding to my own lack of propriety, I believe we can offset that.”

“Deduct points? Offset?” Hero Gold-Hair asked, crossing his arms and cocking his head. “What in the blazes are you talking about?”

“Eli— No, forgive me. I will address you by the name you have taken in this world. Hero Gold-Hair, I have come from another world to scout potential candidates for my group. Consider today to be a simple greeting, if you will. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” Without missing a beat, Mephilla snapped her fingers again, this time disappearing entirely.

“That woman must be quite skilled at magic...” Valentine said, frowning as she stared at the spot Mephilla had just been. “She didn’t leave any traces at all from her Teleportation spell...”

“What’s going ooon, Hero Gooold-Hair?” Tsuya asked, running up beside him.

“You certainly gave us a shock when you suddenly started shouting at someone in the sky!” said Aryun Keats, joining them as well. She had changed out of the carriage form she had been in moments ago, now appearing as a human.

“But what was that about your naaame, Hero Gold-Haaair?” Tsuya asked.

“N-Nothing!” Hero Gold-Hair blurted out a little too quickly. “Nothing at all!”

At this point, Wuha Gappoli and Riliangiu had finished their job making sure the magic beasts were ready to turn in and came over to join the rest of the party as well. “It sounded like that woman called you Eli-something, didn’t she?” said Wuha.

“Yes, that’s right, I heard that too,” agreed Riliangiu.

“Eli-something, is it?” asked Aryun Keats. “Why would she call Hero Gold-Hair that?”

As the three of them folded their arms in thought, Hero Gold-Hair’s panic began to build. *N-No!* He thought. *I-If I don’t do something soon, they’ll find out about my old name!* “W-Well!” he said, barging in to break up the group. “She’s gone now, isn’t she? S-So let’s hurry up and take these magic beasts we’ve captured back to the Adventurers’ Association! A-And then, maybe we can all

get some delicious food to eat!” Affecting an air of calm the best he could, Hero Gold-Hair desperately tried to change the subject.

His companions, however, all together fixed him with identical piercing stares. Alas, his suspicious behavior seemed to not have gone unnoticed.

Somewhere far away, Mephilla watched Hero Gold-Hair and his companions through one of her windows. After Hero Gold-Hair had discovered her in spite of her powerful Concealment spell, it seemed prudent to put as much distance as she could between him and her.

“The incident with his name aside, he seems to have earned the loyalty of one of the Twelve Evil Generals, her subordinate, and two members of a rare species of djinn. That gives him a high point total indeed...” she said, nodding her head as she watched. “Yes—this man is clearly a prime candidate for the Hero Employment Agency!”

◇That Night◇

A ways outside of the nearby town, mixed in among the trees that grew bountifully by the side of the road, was one tree in particular whose trunk seemed unnaturally large.

“Huh?” muttered a man, cocking his head as he passed by on his horse-drawn carriage. “Was that tree there before...?” In spite of his curiosity, though, this man had places to be, so he cracked his whip, urging the horses to speed up. “Probably just my imagination...” he told himself as he continued out of sight down the road.

Inside the tree, however, was a spacious room with a table set in the middle where Hero Gold-Hair and his party were busy celebrating their latest victory.

“I tell you, Wuha,” Hero Gold-Hair said as he took a good swig from the wooden beer stein in his left hand. “Those transformative abilities of yours leave me speechless every time!”

“*Heh...*” came the sound of Wuha Gappoli’s voice chuckling from the ceiling of the room. “*This is just what we manor djinn do!*”

A manor djinn, like Wuha Gappoli herself, was a rare djinn species possessing

the ability to transform into any building with which they had come into contact.

“Stiiill...” Tsuya said, frowning in discontent as she took a long swig of her own stein. “I’m glad Miss Teeelma paid so much money for those magic beeeasts we captured, but I can’t belieeeve all of the taverns in town were full uuup...”

“It’s a shame,” Valentine agreed. “But thanks to Aryun, we can enjoy all of this delicious food and drink even outside of town! All’s well that ends well, I say!” Valentine was sitting with her legs folded atop a large sofa, her body still in its child form in order to preserve her magic power as she greedily devoured an enormous hunk of meat nearly twice her current size. She finished it off in a heartbeat and grabbed hold of a nearby barrel, lifting the whole enormous thing with both arms and bringing it directly to her mouth, noisily washing down the meat. “Pwahhh!!!” she cried, grinning as she tossed the now empty barrel to the side. “Now *that* hits the spot!”

If anyone who wasn’t already familiar with Valentine’s true form had been present to witness the feat, no doubt they would have found the sight of a young girl draining a huge barrel many times the size of her own body to be more than a little surreal.

“Well, I’m just glad Telma’s happy,” Hero Gold-Hair declared, grinning himself. “And since we got more money than we expected for the job, we were able to afford this fantastic banquet!”

“With aaall the new magic beast raaacing halls that have been opening everywhere, I gueeeess she’s gonna be moving from town to town for a whiiile, huh!”

“Indeed,” Riliangiu confirmed, enjoying her own drink as coolly as ever. “The increased demand for magic beasts must mean ever more business opportunities for tamers such as her.”

Next to the two women, Aryun Keats slumped backwards in her seat, staring vacantly up at the ceiling with three bottles sticking out of her mouth. She seemed to be completely unconscious.

“There goes Aryun again!” Wuha’s laugh echoed from the ceiling. *“She sure hits the liquor hard for a total lightweight, doesn’t she?”* The rest of the party,

however, paid the djinn no mind. They went on merrily drinking and eating as if they hadn't heard her at all.

In the sky above, someone was watching as Hero Gold-Hair and company feasted away—Mephilla, the same woman who had visited them earlier that very day.

“I see...” she mused, jotting down a note in her pocketbook. “The manor djinn’s basic abilities are all quite low, but she has some interesting powers after all. This should reflect favorably in their overall score as well...”

Mephilla extended her arm in front of her face, calling up a window. She held the pocketbook she’d been writing in all day, transferring its contents from the page to the window in front of her.

“Hm, hm...” she mumbled as she scrolled through the window, looking through the data she had collected on Hero Gold-Hair and his followers. “Looking at it in total, this party seems to have a good overall balance. There’s the former Evil General with her immense magic power; the Realm of Evil disciple specializing in reconnaissance; the carriage djinn, whose powers let her employ a wide variety of methods of transportation; and the manor djinn, who can provide them with safe lodgings wherever they go...” A moment later, however, her hand stopped on an image of Tsuya. “Hm? But then...what do they have *this* woman for? She isn’t any kind of demihuman or demon—just a run-of-the-mill human. In fact, her physical strength is below average for a typical woman of this world. She doesn’t have any stamina or running ability...she doesn’t even have enough magic power to cast basic spells...and even her luck is below average! She doesn’t seem to be notable in any way. Her only strength is...her ability to manage the Hero’s party finances? What?”

Mephilla cocked her head to the side, confusion written on her face as she double checked the data again and again. Despite her thorough checking, however, she found nothing to challenge her understanding. “No matter how I look at it, this woman seems completely and utterly ordinary. No—she’s actually *weaker* than an ordinary human woman. What in the world is someone like that doing as a member in a Hero’s party?”

She stared at the window for a while longer, unwilling to accept her conclusion, before finally moving. “Well,” she said, nodding to herself as she closed the window, “I believe I understand the gist of this Hero’s achievements in this world.” She turned to look at the spot where Wuha Gappoli stood transformed into an enormous tree. “And now that that’s finally finished...I suppose it’s time to begin the practical examination.”

Mephilla extended her arms, muttering a short incantation. A magic circle appeared in front of her, growing larger and larger by stages, rising into the air until it loomed ominously over the ground below. An enormous magic beast appeared from within, materializing out of thin air. “Let’s see how this Hero responds when a Beast of Disaster—the Chucapabra of Carnage—suddenly appears. And, of course, I will be watching closely in order to appropriately score his performance.” Smiling cheerfully, she pointed towards the tree, ordering the Chucapabra of Carnage to charge.

The beast took one step, then another...but before it could take a third, the ground suddenly fell away from under its girth. “*Guwaaah!*” it cried in confusion as it vanished into the depths of the earth.

“U-Um?” For a while, Mephilla just floated up in the sky, staring wide-eyed as she struggled to understand what had just taken place. “Wait... Huh?” she said. “That’s...strange. The Chucapabra of Carnage had just begun charging towards the tree, hadn’t it? Th-Then...where could it have gone?”

Utterly confused, Mephilla floated down to the forest floor, following the path the Beast of Disaster had taken. After a few steps, however, she too found herself suddenly in free fall. “*Fwaaah?!*” she shrieked.

And once again, the forest was silent.



Meanwhile, inside Wuha Gappoli’s gigantic tree house form, Hero Gold-Hair took another drink.

“*Hey, Hero Gold-Hair?*” came Wuha Gappoli’s voice.

“Hm?” Hero Gold-Hair replied. “What is it, Wuha?”

“*Did you set up more of your usual around me again today?*”

“My usual? You mean pitfall traps for keeping away magic beasts? Of course I did!” Hero Gold-Hair said, turning his head up towards the ceiling with a boisterous laugh.

“Well,” said Wuha, “I think one of them might have just caught something.”

“Oh, did it now? Well, I suppose we’ll go fish it out once we wake up. If it’s a big one, we can take it to town to sell, and if it’s a small fry we can have it for tomorrow’s supper!”

“Hya ha ha!” Wuha cackled. *“More meat for us!”*

“Well said!” Hero Gold-Hair cheered. “And now that that’s settled, Wuha, you have a drink too!”

A small round hole opened up in the wall next to the sofa. Hero Gold-Hair grabbed a bottle from the table and stuck it into the opening. A second later, the contents of the bottle were drained away with incredible force, vanishing into the wall as Wuha Gappoli’s voice echoed cheerfully throughout the room. *“Glug glug glug... Mphah! Mmm... I love a good drink!”*

The rest of the party around Hero Gold-Hair was sprawled out in varying degrees of drunken stupor. Valentine was busy stuffing her cheeks with a hunk of roast meat nearly as large as her body, her eyes hazy from the alcohol. Riliangiu was sound asleep on the floor, her arms wrapped tight around an empty bottle. Aryun Keats, for her part, was still lying where she had passed out in her chair. As for Tsuya, she was sitting next to Hero Gold-Hair, leaning up close against him as she looked through the contents of the party’s coinpurse.

“Hee hee!” Tsuya giggled, smiling to herself as she took another drink of liquor. “We made sooo much today, we shouldn’t have to worry about money for a looong while!”

All in all, everyone seemed to be having a good time at the banquet inside Wuha Gappoli.



The next morning, Hero Gold-Hair stepped outside Wuha Gappoli, folding his arms as he peered into the pitfall trap he had dug the night before. It was open—a telltale sign that something had fallen the night before. “Well, well...” he

mused.

At the very bottom of the pit was a magic beast of immense size, lying unconscious on its back. Strangely enough, there was a woman lying on top of the magic beast as well, her head wedged uncomfortably in the magic beast's armpit.

"Is something wrooong, Hero Gooold-Hair?" Tsuya asked as she stepped out of the tree behind him, stretching her arms and yawning.

"Here, Tsuya..." Hero Gold-Hair said, pointing down into the hole. "Take a look down there."

"Down theeere?" Tsuya echoed, looking down where Hero Gold-Hair's finger was pointing. "Woow!" she said, her eyes opening wide at the sight. "We caught a pretty biiig one, huuuh? A magic beast thaaat size will sell for a looot!"

"N-No, not that!" Hero Gold-Hair said. "I mean...you're right, of course. But look at what's wedged in the magic beast's armpit!"

"There's something wedged in its aaarmpit?" Tsuya leaned in towards the hole to get a better look. "Huuuh?" she said, utterly confused as she stared into the depths.

"Look! Right there!" Hero Gold-Hair snapped in irritation. "There's a woman down there, stuck in the most ridiculous pose you've ever seen!" He pointed down into the hole once again, then blinked in confusion. "Wait...what?" At the bottom, the magic beast was still lying immobile, but now there was nothing at all wedged up in its armpit.

"There's nothing theeere..." said Tsuya, utterly perplexed.

"There isn't..." Hero Gold-Hair agreed, frowning as he looked up at Tsuya.

The two stood at the lip of the hole, sharing a look of confusion when suddenly they were interrupted by the sound of someone behind them clearing her throat. "Ahem!"

"Hwaaah?!" exclaimed Tsuya.

"Who's there?!" said Hero Gold-Hair.

The two turned to see Mephilla, a cheerful smile on her face. "Good morning,

both of you!” she said. “Lovely weather we’re having, isn’t it!” *Th-That was close!* she thought to herself, taking slow, deliberate breaths to try and calm her racing heart. *I’m supposed to be a board member of the Hero Employment Agency—how could I have fallen for a primitive trap like a pitfall?! And, to think, I was unconscious until just moments earlier! Fortunately I was able to Teleport out before these two residents of the local world noticed me...*

“You...” Hero Gold-Hair said, thrusting his finger towards Mephilla’s grinning face. “Mephilla, was it? Weren’t you down in that hole just now, stuck in that magic beast’s armpit with your underwear on full display?”

“I was not,” Mephilla replied flatly, maintaining her smile in the face of Hero Gold-Hair’s question.

“No, I’m certain!” Hero Gold-Hair insisted. “See? You’re wearing the exact same outfit as the woman I saw!”

“I am not,” Mephilla said.

“And look!” Hero Gold-Hair said. “You have a scale from that magic beast stuck in your hair!”

“I do not,” said Mephilla, peeking behind her shoulder and waving her hand to cast a cleaning spell to rid her hair of the offending scale. A second before she could finish casting, however, Tsuya snatched it up from right under her nose.

“You’re riiight!” Tsuya said, bobbing her head in understanding as she compared the scale in her hands to the ones on the magic beast down in the hole. “This must have come from that magic beeeast down there!”

“It did not,” Mephilla insisted. “It’s...a hair ornament.”

“A haaair ornament?” Tsuya repeated, squinting dubiously in Mephilla’s direction.

“Yes, a hair ornament,” Mephilla said, forcing herself to keep the smile on her face even as her lies became more and more strained.

“That’s straaange...” Tsuya said, as Mephilla began to sweat noticeably in the face of her persistent questioning. “It doesn’t *loook* much like a hair

ornament...”

And there’s Tsuya’s unshakable cross-examination... Hero Gold-Hair thought. *It reminds me of the time she got wind that I was planning on visiting an adult club and forced me to confess...* Remembering that bitter experience, he couldn’t help himself from sympathizing somewhat with Mephilla’s predicament.

The exchange continued on for some time, until Mephilla finally succumbed to Tsuya’s interrogation and tearfully confessed.

“W-Well, leaving that whole business aside...” Mephilla said, forcing herself to turn her attention away from Tsuya towards Hero Gold-Hair. “Hero Gold-Hair! I would like to make a proposition.”

“Me?” Hero Gold-Hair said, startled to hear his own name come up after so much time watching her exchange with Tsuya from the sidelines. “A proposition?”

Mephilla nodded her head. “Y-Yes, that’s right! I have been observing you since yesterday in your capacity as Hero of this world...” She extended her right arm, calling up a window in the space between herself and Hero Gold-Hair. Inside, Hero Gold-Hair could see an image of himself and his companions. “When it comes to your qualifications, your basic abilities are fairly impressive for a human, but speaking frankly it’s hard to imagine they would be enough to subjugate a Dark One...”

“W-Well, excuse me for that!” Hero Gold-Hair snapped, scowling in open irritation. *I-I swear... he thought. I trained as hard as I could, doing my level best to become a proper Hero—I really did! But for some reason, no matter how much I raised my level, my abilities wouldn’t increase by even a single point...*

Images of those old days training and training to no avail flashed through Hero Gold-Hair’s mind. Sparring with a former Hero at Klyrode Castle and finding himself utterly outclassed... Fleeing before a horde of psychobears without any hope of victory... Giving up on life altogether and secluding himself in a fortress to drink his days away... All of his bad memories came flooding back at once as he struggled valiantly against the crushing waves of despair.

“And yet...” Mephilla continued. “By using a legendary item and your own incredible luck, you and the party of powerful companions you assembled have stood up to one perilous threat after another even after the Dark Army of this world made peace with humanity.” She looked up at Hero Gold-Hair, giving him another of her cheerful smiles. “You pass with flying colors. I would very much like to recruit you for my organization: the Hero Employment Agency.”

“The...Hero Employment Agency?” Hero Gold-Hair repeated, raising his eyebrows.

Next to him, Tsuya blinked in confusion. “What’s thaaat?” she asked.

“Allow me to explain,” Mephilla said, looking between the two. “This world—Klyrode—is one of many planetoid worlds that exist around the root of the Celestial Plane. It goes without saying that not all of those worlds are currently at peace. There are many great evils in the cosmos, including other Dark Ones in other worlds. In many of those worlds, the people will call upon the power of a Hero to stand against that evil. However...” Here, Mephilla held up her index finger in a knowing gesture as she launched into the main point of her lecture. “Let’s say that one of those Heroes succeeds in their quest and vanquishes the evil they were summoned to fight. They would soon find themselves without a purpose, would they not? And if another great evil fails to appear in that world, all of that power of theirs will simply go to waste!”

Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya nodded along in understanding.

“And so!” Mephilla concluded proudly, straightening her back. “That is where we—the Hero Employment Agency—come into the picture. You see? We scout Heroes from worlds at peace, where their purpose has already been fulfilled, and dispatch them to other worlds that might be in need of a Hero!”

“U-Uuummm...” Tsuya said, timidly raising her hand. “I have a queeestion...”

“Of course!” said Mephilla. “What is it?”

“Weeell...” Tsuya ventured. “I was wooondering, what kind of worlds exaaactly are the ones that would need a Hero?”

“Good question,” Mephilla said. “One example would be a world where the great evil appears without any warning, before a Hero has a chance to appear.

Or there are cases where the evil is too powerful, and the Hero that *is* summoned can't stand up to it on their own."

"Ohhh!" Tsuya nodded. "I thiiink I get the idea!"

"Yes, I think we understand this Hero Employment Agency of yours," Hero Gold-Hair said. "So...you want to recruit me, then?"

"That's right!" Mephilla confirmed with a smile and a nod. "Or to be precise, I would like to recruit your party." She snapped her fingers and the image on the window changed, now displaying Valentine, Riliangiu, Aryun Keats, and Wuha Gappoli alongside Hero Gold-Hair himself. "In this world, Klyrode, the Dark Army has laid down their arms and established friendly relations with humanity. Given the circumstances, I think it's safe to say that your role as Hero is already concluded. With the Hero Employment Agency, we can utilize your power to its fullest extent. You would have to move your residence to a different planetary world, where the Agency has its home base—rent-free, of course. You'll be compensated on a per-job basis, but I assure you that the pay you will receive will be more than generous."

Mephilla touched the window with her right hand and a line of text appeared, reading, "Average compensation per successful mission..."

"A-Average compensaaation..." Tsuya read. Then, when she saw the number at the end, her eyes went wide. "H-Hwuuh?! You pay hooow much for one job?!"

"Not bad, huh?" Mephilla said, smiling brightly as Tsuya's face positively lit up. "Makes the reward you got for all those magic beasts you captured yesterday look like chump change!"

Hero Gold-Hair, however, stood there with his arms folded, frowning in thought.

"H-Hm?" Mephilla said, feeling a sudden sense of unease at Hero Gold-Hair's behavior. Her eyes began to twitch. "I-Is something the matter, Sir Hero?"

"Just one thing..." Hero Gold-Hair said, gesturing towards the window. "When you say you want to recruit my party, I assume you mean the members you had displayed in that window of yours. Is that right?"

“Yes, that’s correct,” said Mephilla.

“Hm. I see...” Hero Gold-Hair closed his eyes tight, keeping his arms sternly folded. “In that case, there’s only one choice I could make...”

“Certainly!” Mephilla said, taking a roll of vellum out of her own Bottomless Bag. “Now, if you would just sign this contract, we can—”

“I won’t be taking your deal!” Hero Gold-Hair said, holding up his hand to push the contract away.

“Sign right here,” Mephilla repeated, pointing to the bottom of the scroll, “and we can— Wait, what?” As she realized what Hero Gold-Hair had said, she froze on the spot, a dumbfounded expression coming over her face. “I-I’m sorry... Perhaps I heard you incorrectly?” she said, her smile returning but now looking more than a little strained. “I thought you said you wouldn’t be taking the deal...but that couldn’t be right, could it?”

“No, you heard me right,” Hero Gold-Hair said, pushing the contract back once again. “That’s what I said. I won’t be signing that contract.”

“U-Um...” Mephilla hesitated. “M-May I ask what precisely you find disagreeable about the arrangement? At the very least, I believe we are offering more than adequate compensation. Compared to the sum you wasted of the kingdom’s treasure back when you failed in your quest and cloistered yourself in that fortress—”

“N-Never mind that!” Hero Gold-Hair said, a furrow forming on his brow. *In fact, I’d be perfectly happy never thinking about that period of my life again!* “A-Anyway, the money isn’t the issue here!”

“If it isn’t the money, then might I ask why you would refuse our offer?” Mephilla asked, plainly baffled.

“If you have to ask, you’re an even bigger idiot than I took you for,” Hero Gold-Hair scoffed. “Anyway, I said no. We’re done here.” With that, he turned his back on Mephilla and returned to Wuha Gappoli. *And after she said she wanted to recruit my party...* he thought, looking back over his shoulder. *The nerve of that woman!*

“H-Hero Gooold-Hair?” Tsuya asked, cocking her head in confusion as she

followed after him. “Should you reeeally have turned her down?”

If she wanted to recruit my party... Hero Gold-Hair thought, *why would she leave her out?!* “Hmph...” he said. “Tsuya, I think you missed something important there.”

“Huuuh?!” Tsuya said. “Wh-What would thaaat be?”

“If you don’t know, then never mind,” Hero Gold-Hair told her, hurrying ahead. “Now let’s go wake up Valentine and the rest and get that magic beast out of that hole!”

“O-Oooh!!!” Tsuya said, jogging to keep up. “H-Hero Gooold-Hair, wait for meee!”

Mephilla was left staring in disbelief as the two disappeared into the tree. “Wh-What did I do wrong?”



A while later, Mephilla was floating by herself somewhere up in the air.

“Why would that Hero have refused me, I wonder. It doesn’t make any sense...” She closed her eyes, folding her arms in intense thought. “Could it be because I left that useless woman out of the party...?” she muttered to herself. “No, that can’t be right. After all, she had no utility whatsoever outside of managing the group’s finances...”

After a while, Mephilla finally opened her eyes. “Hahhh... Thinking about it isn’t any use. I just can’t figure it out.”

Sighing deeply, she held out her hand to once again call up the window displaying Hero Gold-Hair. She opened a text field, and entered the words “Delete All.” All of the text vanished instantly, along with the image.

“No use crying over spilled milk,” she said. “Now, I suppose I should look for another prospective Hero to scout in his place...”

Mephilla extended both her arms forward and an array of additional windows appeared in response to her gesture. In each of them was an image of another Hero in a different world. Mephilla looked over the display as she flew higher and higher, rising up above the clouds. Soon, she had left the world of Klyrode

behind entirely.



A large man was walking through the forest when suddenly he paused, turning to look upwards. “Huh?” he said, stroking his chin and cocking his head. “I coulda sworn I felt someone make a Teleportation Portal just now, all the way up in the sky... Am I imagining things?”

The man stared up into the clouds for a while, searching left and right. “Hrmmmmm... It must be my imagination after all. All this peace must be messin’ with my head!” he said, smirking wryly as he looked back at the road in front of him. “Well, never mind that. First things first, I gotta go meet up with my brother! I can’t think of anyone better than him to talk to about this sorta stuff...”

Hefting the enormous barrel he had been carrying on his shoulder, the man continued on his way down the forest road. The rays of sunlight filtering through the canopy cast a shadow behind him much larger than his apparent human frame—a telltale sign that this man was, in fact, a demon.

Chapter 4: The Maiden Queen's Day Off

◇Klyrode Castle—The Maiden Queen's Chambers◇

It was morning, the sunlight streaming through the gaps in the chamber curtains and falling on the Maiden Queen's face as she lay sleeping in her bed.

"Mnhhh..." the Maiden Queen mumbled, opening her eyes. She groggily sat up in bed, holding her hand up to her forehead to shield her eyes from the sun. "Morning already..." she said, glancing beside her at her desk, piled high with a veritable mountain of paperwork.

I worked so hard yesterday, and there's still so much to do... she thought, sighing quietly as she got out of the bed. "It's been days since I told Mister Flio I'd let him know as soon as my work lets up, but there's still no sign of it happening anytime soon..." she muttered to herself, sighing once again as she stepped over to her desk. *Well, for now, I should focus on getting this done...*

Just then, the door to the Maiden Queen's chambers flew open. "Good morning, my sister the Queen!" said the Third Princess, smiling from ear to ear as she stepped into the room.

"G-Good morning, Third Princess!" the Maiden Queen replied, somewhat startled by the Third Princess's abrupt greeting.

The Third Princess walked up to the Maiden Queen's desk, smiling all the way, and scooped up the mountain of papers into her arms. "Oh, my sister... How many times have I told you—I can handle all of these for you myself!"

"U-Um... Third Princess?" the Maiden Queen said, flummoxed.

"I will be taking this work for myself, understand?" the Third Princess insisted, her smile unfaltering.

"T-Taking it for yourself?" said the Maiden Queen. She took a step towards the Third Princess, but before she could interfere, the door opened once again.

"You heard our sister, Your Majesty," said the Second Princess, clapping a

hand on the Maiden Queen's shoulder as she stepped into the room herself. "Now, kindly leave the rest of the work to the two of us and go on this vacation of yours already!"

"B-But!" The Maiden Queen protested looking in distress between her two younger sisters.

"Besides..." the Second Princess whispered, pressing her lips up against the Maiden Queen's ear. "Don't you need to hurry up and get changed?"

"B-But...my work!" the Queen said, "I have to—"

"No, you don't," the Second Princess insisted. "Besides, it looks like someone's come to meet you," she added, gesturing out the door she had just come through. "You wouldn't want to greet him dressed like *that*, would you?"

The Maiden Queen stole a glance out the door herself to see a young man standing on the other side. "H-Huh?" She froze, her eyes going wide when she realized who it was. "G-Garyl?" She quickly glanced down at her own body, dressed only in a thin negligee. She wasn't even wearing underwear beneath her night clothes, meaning that anyone looking could see her naked body through the semitransparent cloth. As she realized she had been standing right in front of Garyl in such inappropriate attire, the Maiden Queen's face turned a brilliant shade of scarlet. "H-Hyaaaah?!" she cried, covering up her chest with her hands as she ducked behind the Second Princess.

"U-Um..." Garyl said, averting his eyes from the room. "P-Princess Leusoc told me I should come to meet you, b-but I guess it's a bit too early in the day, huh...?"

At those words, the Second and Third Princesses both glanced the Maiden Queen's way, giving their sister a matching pair of suggestive smiles. The Maiden Queen looked between them and Garyl, her face growing redder by the moment. "N-No!" she cried, finally remembering herself. "N-Not at all! I'll get ready at once!" With that, she hurried to the back of her room.



The Second Princess smirked as she watched her sister go, then turned back towards Garyl on the other side of the door. “And there you have it,” she said. “My sister has been working incredibly hard for this day, so you’d better give her a proper escort, okay?”

“Of course!” Garyl said with a determined nod. “I’ll do my best!”

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

It had only been a short while since the Fli-o’-Rys General Store had opened its doors for the day, but the inside of the shop was as packed with customers as ever. Outside, two women were standing in front of the doorway peering in. This pair was dressed not in the adventurer style clothing or mage’s robes typical of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, but in green military uniforms cut like men’s formal wear. It was clear from their attire that they were not from this land.

One of them, a tall woman with long blonde hair, turned to the other. “You’re certain this is the place, Marc?” she asked. “The shop that has become a topic of conversation as far away as our homeland, home to a magus who has succeeded in synthesizing artificial djinn? The Fli-o’-Rys General Store?”

“Yes, Graf, I’m certain,” the other woman answered. She was nearly as tall as her partner, but her own blonde hair was cut short. “According to Scharn’s account from when they visited the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, there are djinn working at this very store.”

“Our mission,” Graf said, “is to make contact with those djinn and ascertain their abilities.”

“And, circumstances permitting, we are to extend an invitation to the djinn and the shop employees to visit our homeland of Gramania to assist us in our own djinn production operations,” Marc confirmed.

The two women nodded.

“Now, let us enter the shop,” said Graf.

“Yes, let’s,” agreed Marc, and the two stepped through the door.

Inside, the shop was packed full of customers. Here and there, Graf and Marc

could hear many of them holding lively conversations as they shopped. Graf frowned with distaste at the commotion and sighed. “This is a fine store, I am sure, but it seems to be a shopping destination for the masses. Can we really find djinn in an establishment like this?”

Marc, however, wasn’t listening to her partner’s complaints. “C-Can it be?” she said, excitedly hurrying over to a nearby display case. “Are those...?”

“Marc, wait! What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong!” Marc said, returning with a potion bottle she had picked up from the shelf. “Graf! Look at this!”

“It seems to be a recovery potion...” Graf said, peering at the bottle skeptically for a moment before suddenly, her eyes opened wide in realization. “Wait... What?!”

“Do you see it now?” Marc asked.

“See it? M-Marc, what is this?! I’ve never seen such a high-level potion before in my life!” Graf said, gazing at the bottle in Marc’s hands with palpable excitement.

“And that’s not the only one!” Marc said, looking over at the case of potions in awe. “There are potions of all sorts in that case—recovery potions, water breathing potions, clairvoyance potions, ability enhancement potions...all refined to a truly abnormal degree of purity! And at such affordable prices too! It’s simply incredible!”

Graf followed Marc’s gaze, bringing her own face right up next to hers as she too looked over the rows of potions with wide eyes. “I can’t believe it... They’re selling these highly refined potions as if they were common merchandise! Wh-What *is* this shop?”

“W-We can worry about that later!” Marc said. “We can’t let a chance to acquire such excellent potions slip through our fingers, can we?”

“Y-You’re right!” Graf agreed. “First things first, we should buy as many of these as we can!”

The two began snatching up bottle after bottle from the display case shelves.

Soon, both of them were clutching an unwieldy bundle of potions tight in their arms, but even then they still tried to grab more.

At that point, Minilio and Belalio stepped up to the women.

Minilio was a magic doll Flio had once created as a test. In terms of appearance he resembled a child-sized version of Flio himself, which was why he was given his name. He spent most of his time assisting Belano with her work as a teacher at the Houghtow College of Magic. The two had grown close over the course of their time working together, eventually becoming married and having a child—Belalio.

As the child of a human and a magic doll, Belalio was an extremely rare sort of being. Like their father Minilio, they looked like a younger version of Flio, but Belalio preferred to dress in an androgynous manner, keeping their gender ambiguous.

Right now the two were dressed in the uniform worn by the Fli-o'-Rys General Store staff, complete with aprons, smiling brightly as they handed Graf and Marc a pair of shopping baskets.

“Ah! Thank you, shopkeep.”

“Thank you!”

Graf and Marc thanked the magic dolls and began transferring the potions into the baskets. Then, picking the baskets up, they returned to the case of potions.

“Graf, let’s take all of these as well,” said Marc as she took more from the shelf one at a time and placed them in her basket.

“Very well, Marc,” said Graf, following suit.

In no time at all, their first set of baskets was completely full, necessitating a second. They entrusted their first baskets to Minilio and Belalio, who were standing by to assist the women. Soon, the second set of baskets was full as well, leaving Graf and Marc with two shopping baskets full of potions apiece, for a total of four.

“There’s more I’d like to buy, to be honest...” Graf remarked, smiling happily

as the two brought their items up to the shop counter for checkout.

“Unfortunately, I believe we’ve reached the limits of our carrying capacity,” said Marc, nodding in agreement.

Today, it happened, was Belano’s turn working the register.

Belano was a witch, and one of the former members of Balirossa’s company of knights. She was a small skittish woman who was only capable of using defensive magic. After leaving the knighthood, she had come to live at Flio’s house and found a job teaching at the Houghtow College of Magic. She was also, as noted earlier, the wife of Minilio and the mother of Belalio.

The checkout process itself went astonishingly fast. Belano placed the first shopping basket atop a rectangular platform that identified their contents via magic, immediately calculating the total sum owed with a cheerful “*Beep!*” She repeated this with the other baskets, and three short beeps later, it was finished.

“That was far easier than I expected!” Graf marveled as she watched.

“What a convenient device!” Marc agreed.

The women paid the quoted amount, and Belano handed them their bounty of potions in a complimentary Bottomless Bag.

“Thank you,” said Graf.

“How lovely!” said Marc. “We got some shopping done!”

The two left the store satisfied customers. Tomorrow they would face a severe tongue-lashing from their commanding officer for neglecting their actual mission, but at that moment such concerns were the furthest thing from their minds.

“Th-Thank you for your business...” Belano said, bowing as the two made their way out the store. Since her usual job was teaching at the Houghtow College of Magic, she wasn’t quite used to dealing with customers. Nonetheless, she was doing her best in spite of her shyness.

Thud!

Unfortunately, Belano had bowed with a bit too much force, hitting her head

hard on the register. “Hwaaah!” she cried, her eyes spinning as she clutched at the bruised area. Without missing a beat, Minilio and Belalio ran up to her from either side, pressing close with worried looks in their eyes. “Awawahhh... A-Ahhh... I-I’m okay! I’m okay!” Still befuddled by her collision, she hurriedly thanked her husband and child.

“Goodness!” said a girl stepping up to Belano and her family. “Miss Belano? You’re behind the register today?” It was Salina, one of the students in Belano’s class at the Houghtow College of Magic, accompanied by her classmates Irystiel and Snow Little.

“That’s right,” Belano said. “It’s a school holiday today, so I’m helping out here instead. Everyone else is off helping set up the night market, you see...”

“Oh! The thing in that poster?” Snow Little said, pointing towards one corner of the shop where there was a poster on display.

The poster featured an image of the Kora dressed in a yukata set against the scenery of the oni mountain. Its text read: “Night Market Starting Today in Houghtow Mountain Village: Featuring the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.”

“Well, in that case, Miss Belano, I have a favor to ask!” said Salina, eagerly leaning in towards her teacher, so forcefully that Belano flinched back in alarm.

Before Salina could say her piece, however, Irystiel beat her to the punch, leaning in right next to her and shoving her stuffed cat doll towards Belano’s face. Irystiel was too shy to speak normally, and had taken to using her stuffed animals as an intermediary in conversation, projecting her voice with her excellent ventriloquism technique. “Irystiel wants to wear a yukata like the girl in the poster! Mreowr!” said the plush cat, Irystiel making its mouth open and close in time with the words.

“Don’t forget about me!” said Snow Little, joining the other two in leaning over the counter towards Belano. “I would very much like to purchase a yukata as well!”

“Eee...” Belano squeaked. “Y-Yes, um... We have a special display set up right now, if you’re looking for yukata...” She did her best to keep a smile on her face as she pointed to a shelf across the way from the register, where rows of yukata were on display. Minilio and Belalio helpfully waved the girls over, smiling.

“How lovely! Thank you so much!” said Salina, hurrying over to the display.

“Let’s find one quick! Mrewor!” said Irystiel’s cat.

“There’s so many!” said Snow Little. “Which should I pick, do you think...?”

Privately however, the three girls were all thinking the same thing—they were imagining Garyl accompanying them as they strolled through the night market dressed in a gorgeous yukata.

Imagine it... Salina thought. A nighttime date with Lord Garyl, dressed in one of these lovely yukata...

With this yukata, Lord Garyl’s heart will be mine! thought Irystiel.

Hee hee hee... thought Snow Little. I hope Lord Garyl enjoys the sight of me dressed in a yukata!

◇Meanwhile, Outside Houghtow City—Atop a Mountain◇

On a mountain peak not far from Houghtow City, Wyne sat perched in her wyvern form, her wings folded behind her. At her feet sat Garyl, and next to him was Ellie—the Maiden Queen. Rather than her usual dignified attire, Ellie was wearing a simple white dress, sleeping peacefully on the ground beside Garyl.

That day, Garyl had taken Ellie out of the castle for a break from her duties, at the request of her sisters the Second and Third Princesses. Garyl enlisted Wyne’s assistance, thinking it would be fun to take a journey through the skies, flying all over the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode...but within a few short minutes of setting out, Ellie had fallen fast asleep.

“Ellie must be really tired...” Garyl said, wincing sympathetically as he watched her snore next to him, glasses still on her face.

“Wanna go somewhere, Gare-Gare?” Wyne asked, transforming back to her humanoid form. “With my wings, I can take you anywhere-anywhere!” The dragonewt flexed her arms, clearly brimming with energy.

“Thanks, big sis Wyne...” Garyl said, looking up at her and then back down at Ellie. “But I think we should probably let Ellie rest for a while.”

Ellie was lying on Garyl’s jacket as an impromptu bed, unconsciously holding

tight to the jacket's arm. From time to time she would murmur Garyl's name, still fast asleep, before going right back to snoring.

A cloud of mist appeared behind Garyl as he sat next to Ellie, heralding Ben'ne's arrival to the conversation. "To think this woman would sleep so peacefully on a tryst with her lover..." she remarked. "She must have an extraordinary degree of trust in you, my master."

"You think so?" Garyl asked.

"Of course," said Ben'ne. "Otherwise, she would never have let you see her in so vulnerable a state."

"That makes sense," Garyl said, nodding. "I guess she must!" He smiled happily at the thought.

Ben'ne smirked wryly at Garyl's words, looking down at him with folded arms. "Forgive me for saying so, my master, but while your physical prowess is truly formidable, your knowledge of how to treat the women who find themselves charmed by you is woefully lacking. I have never seen a more perfect example of a late bloomer."

"Hah, yeah..." said Garyl, fidgeting awkwardly. "I've been thinking that a lot myself lately. Sorry..."

"It is not something that warrants apology," Ben'ne told him. "Rather, is it not a sign that you truly love this woman from the bottom of your heart?"

"I-I mean..." Garyl said. "I guess you could think of it that way..."

"Doubtless this woman is aware of the feelings you have for her as well," said Ben'ne. "However, my master...you would do well to speak your feelings into words from time to time as well."

Garyl sat in silence for a while, considering Ben'ne's words before finally lifting his head. "All right, I will," he said with a smile and nod. "Thanks, Ben'ne."

"Now then, my master," said Ben'ne, abruptly opening the front of her yukata, "if you feel you lack confidence in making love to a woman, you must not hesitate to impose on me for assistance. It would be my honor to serve as your partner in training." Her bare chest exposed, she took a step towards

Garyl.

Garyl leaped backwards, his face turning bright red. “W-Wait! B-Ben’ne, stop it! I keep telling you that I don’t need that kind of help!”

“So you say...” Ben’ne replied, lasciviously exposing her legs as well as she rushed forward to keep pace with Garyl as he fled. “However, in all the time you have been seeing this woman, your relationship has only just reached the point of holding hands. I cannot help but think that your lack of experience may be an influence in this delay...”

“N-No!” Garyl insisted, falling back farther still. “I-I just care a lot about Ellie, that’s all! Doing something like that would be—”

“Hey-hey!” said Wyne, coming up from beside him. “What are you two talk-talking about?”

“Wah!” Garyl exclaimed. “B-Big sis Wyne! W-We were just...um...”

“Ah! Young Madame Wyne!” said Ben’ne. “Allow me to explain.”

“W-Wait!” said Garyl. “B-Ben’ne! You can’t tell her something like that!”

“Huh?” Wyne asked. “Tell me what-what? I wanna know-know!”

“L-Look...” Garyl said, fidgeting awkwardly. “D-Don’t worry about it, all right?”

As the others continued their antics around her, Ellie lay peacefully, holding tight to Garyl’s jacket sleeve and snoring softly in her sleep. She seemed to be enjoying a much needed rest.

◇Houghtow City—Oni Village◇

In addition to Flio’s house itself, the area of the estate featured a number of other notable locations. One was the ranch where Sleip and Byleri made their home. Another was the sprawling farmland under Blossom’s management. And finally, there was Ura’s village of demons, located atop a nearby mountain. That day, the village was full of figures busily going this way and that.

“All right, everyone!” Blossom said. “Today’s the first day of the night festival! Let’s put some backbone into it, y’hear?!” Grinning, she raised a fist into the air to the cheers of the people around her as they continued their work.

“You got it, boss!”

“Let’s make this a good one!”

“Time to give it our all!”

Some villagers were busy assembling stalls in front of their houses. Others were lining the streets with rows of paper lanterns, while still others were hauling hefty logs of wood. They all worked with smiles on their faces in the lively atmosphere of the village.

“By the way, boss,” one of the men said, addressing Blossom. “Are the folks from Houghtow City gonna come by the festival this time?”

“They’re welcome to join in!” Blossom said with a grin. “We’ve got no idea how many of ’em will actually show up, but we’ll do our best to make sure everyone has a good time!”

“Mom...” said Kora, tugging on Blossom’s sleeve.

“Mm? What is it, Kora?” Blossom asked.

“Did you have night markets in the village you came from?” asked the small girl, curiously looking up at Blossom.

“Well, we had a summer festival...” Blossom said. “But we only did that once every several years. This’ll be my first time doing something like the night market we have here, where the festival keeps going weekend after weekend!”

“Oh, I see...” Kora said, nodding along shyly as she listened. “I hope someday I get to visit the village you came from, mom...”

“Would you, now!” Blossom said. “Well, I guess I gotta take you there one of these days!”

Kora’s face lit up in response. “I love you, mom!” she said, hugging Blossom’s leg and nuzzling her cheek up against her.

Blossom smiled as she looked down at the little girl. *Th-This girl has gotta be the cutest thing I’ve ever seen...* she thought, her shoulders trembling with emotion. *But y’know, I left town to go become a knight. I wonder how my family and everyone back home will take it when I show up with my oni husband and the girl we’re raising together...*

As Blossom stood there reminiscing about her hometown, next to her in front of the road leading into the village, two banners were being set up, hanging from long poles. One read, “Houghtow Mountain Village Festival,” and the other, “Houghtow Mountain Night Market.”

Up on the mountain peak, Telbyress looked down on the newly erected banners. She was sitting in a tree, drinking straight out of a bottle. Looking closely, one could see there seemed to be an opening in the trunk of the tree, concealing a large stash of barrels and bottles of liquor.

“Heh heh heh... If I hid my stash in the housh, ol’ Hokey would jus’ find it and take it away! But he’ll *never* find my liquor all the way over here!” Telbyress declared, a happy drunken smile on her face. “Sho...” she remarked, turning her attention to the banners. “I guesh they shettled on Houghtow Mountain Village ash the village’sh new name after all. I fell ashleep halfway through the reshident ashsembly, sho I don’t remember what happened...”

Telbyress had surmised correctly in spite of her inebriation. The village of demons who made their home on the mountain had once called their settlement the oni village, but now that Flio had transplanted the village—mountain included—to the area nearby Houghtow City, a majority of them had voted in the latest assembly to change the village’s name to Houghtow Mountain Village.

“Mfahhh...” Telbyress let out a happy sigh as she took another drink from the bottle, a drunken smile plastered on her face. “Nothin’ beatsh a hard drink after a long day workin’ the fieldsh...”

“...ey! Telbyress!” Just then, the fallen goddess heard a voice calling her name.

“Huh?” Telbyress said, furrowing her brow. “Who’s there? Ish shomeone trying to interfere with my precioush private drinking time?!” Puffing out her cheeks in a childish pout, she looked down at the ground beneath her tree to see a goblin making his way up the road towards the mountain peak. “Well whaddaya know! It’sh Hokey!”

“Drat that no-gooddess...” Hokh’hokton muttered darkly to himself as he

looked all around for the woman currently drinking away her time up in a tree. “I suppose I can see why they elected her to play the role of the Night Market Goddess, seeing as how she *was* a goddess herself in spite of everything... But now she’s vanished from the festival preparations and gone wandering off somewhere! We’ll find her in one of her hiding spots with a bottle of liquor again, mark my words...”

“Oh!” Telbyress clapped her hand to her fist in realization, her eyes snapping open. “Right! That’s right! I wash shupposed to be the goddess! It completely shlipped my mind!” With a wave of her hand she vanished from the tree, appearing back in front of Hokh’hokton.

“Hrmph! There you are!” Hokh’hokton snapped, grabbing Telbyress by the arm the very second she appeared. “Come now, quickly!”

“Ah ha ha, shorry!” Telbyress started, before suddenly realizing she had been grabbed. “H-Hey, wait! Whatcha doin’ grabbin’ me outta the blue for?!”

“Keep your comments to yourself!” Hokh’hokton said as he dragged the much taller fallen goddess along by force in a comically stooped-over posture. “Everyone’s finished their preparations! Now they’re just waiting for you!”

“I-I get it, I get it!” Telbyress said. “I’m heading there right now, promish!”

Suddenly, Hokh’hokton stopped dead in his tracks.

“Ah ha ha!” Telbyress laughed, nearly tumbling over but managing to catch herself at the last second. “You shtopped!”

Hokh’hokton turned ponderously to face Telbyress. “So, no-gooddess...”

“Hey! Rude!” Telbyress protested, pouting dramatically. “I told you—you gotta call me Telbyresh the Divine Goddess!!!”

“Yes, yes, but more importantly...” Hokh’hokton said, ignoring Telbyress’s words and pointing to the object in her right hand. “Tell me, where exactly did you get that bottle?”

“G-Gheek...” Telbyress froze up, as it dawned on her that she was still carrying the empty bottle from earlier.

“Gheek?” Hokh’hokton repeated. “What sort of word is that meant to be...?”

He shook his head. “Well? What do you think you were doing? You know you’re limited to a single cup of alcohol and only at dinnertime!”

“U-Um... I wash jush havin’ a quick drink *before* dinner?” Telbyress ventured. “Shomething like that?”

“A drink before dinner, hm?” said Hokh’hokton. “I don’t recall allowing you to have something like that!”

“Come on, Hokey!” Telbyress pleaded. “There’sh no reashon to get sho bent outta shape about it!”

“Quiet! That’s enough nonsense out of you!” Hokh’hokton huffed, sternly folding his arms. “Now, we can discuss your drinking once we’re done with the night market, so for now you had better hurry up and—hey!” Right before his eyes, Telbyress took a final swig from the bottle, drinking up what was left of its contents.

“Ah ha ha!” Telbyress laughed, completely unashamed. “It’d be a washte not to drink all of it! Now, the liquor’s all gone, sho let’sh get to work!” With that, she began to quickly stagger and sway her way down the stairs.

“You’ll get a lecture and a half about this drinking habit of yours later, I promise you that!” Hokh’hokton said. “H-Hey! Wait! Are you quite all right on those steps, staggering around like that?!”

“Ah ha ha! Don’t worry! I’m fine!” Telbyress said, wavering precariously back and forth as she made her way down.

Hokh’hokton hurried after the drunken fallen goddess, and soon the two vanished from sight down the mountain.

◇Evening—Houghtow Mountain◇

The road leading from Houghtow City to Flio’s house continued past the ranch and farmland and on to Houghtow Mountain. That evening, Elinàsze was walking down the path, both hands extended outwards to maintain a magic circle on either side. As she walked, round paper lanterns appeared to the left and right of the road at set intervals, floating in midair, their gentle light illuminating the way to the mountain as the night began to grow dark.

“The villagers have their own lanterns set up on Houghtow Mountain, so I should only need to go as far as the entrance,” Elinàsze remarked as she made her way leisurely down the road, summoning and placing the lanterns as she went. Behind her, the lights stretched all the way back to the gates of Houghtow City.

As Elinàsze worked her magic, Salina came running up from behind. “My! If it isn’t Elinàsze!”

“Good evening, Salina,” Elinàsze said. “Is that a yukata you’re wearing?”

“I purchased it at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store!” Salina said, doing a single twirl on the spot to show off the sky blue yukata she was wearing. “The color is so calming, and the design is absolutely adorable! I simply love it!”

Irystiel and Snow Little arrived next, running to catch up to Salina. They were both dressed in yukata as well—Irystiel’s was black, while Snow Little’s was white.

“You all look lovely in your yukata!” Elinàsze said, looking around at her classmates with a bright smile on her face.

“E-Erm...” Salina began, fidgeting distinctly as she looked shyly up at Elinàsze. “B-By the by, Elinàsze...”

“Yes, Salina? What is it?” Elinàsze asked.

“Well, I was just wondering...” Salina said. “I-Is Lord Garyl going to be...?”

“Oh, Garyl?” Elinàsze said. “He should be arriving soon, I think. From the sky.”

“From the sky?” all three of her classmates echoed at once, their eyes opening wide. Just then, Wyne in her wyvern form came flying high up in the sky, straight for Houghtow Mountain.

“And there he is!” said Elinàsze.

“What?” Salina gasped. “L-Lord Garyl is riding on that dragon?!”

“Let’s go!” said the plush cat clutched tight in Irystiel’s arms, its mouth opening and closing thanks to its owner’s skillful ventriloquism even as she dashed on ahead.

“Ah! No fair!” cried Salina, hurrying to catch up.

“Wait for me!” said Snow Little, joining the chase as well.

Elinàsze smirked to herself as the other girls left her behind. “So hasty, those three...” she remarked. She thrust her arms out, summoning a great number of paper lanterns all at once along the path ahead, illuminating their way as they ran. Before long, the two lines of lanterns stretched all the way to the base of the mountain.

◇Houghtow Mountain—Night Market◇

The village assembly hall was located halfway up Houghtow Mountain. In front of it was a large open plaza, featuring a watchtower built in the style of a Hi Izuran castle. Ura stood in front of the crowd, dressed in the traditional festival happi coat and headband. “Tonight’s the start of the Night Market!” he roared. “Let’s make this a first-class festival, and bring some business to the village!”

“Hrm!” said Ghozal, raising his fist in response. “Leave it to us!” He was dressed in the same happi coat and headband combo as Ura.

Ura glanced over at Ghozal, a complicated expression coming over his face. “I do appreciate the sentiment, Lord Ghozal, but really, *you* should be the one giving *us* orders...” Ura didn’t seem to be alone in that sentiment either. All of the assembled villagers seemed to be behaving somewhat stiffly in Ghozal’s overwhelming presence.

“Nonsense!” Ghozal said. “These days I’m just another freeloader living at Mister Flio’s house. There’s no need for you to defer to me!” He laughed heartily, looking around at Ura and the assembled crowd. “And don’t worry! I’ve been practicing this bon odori dance of yours! I’m ready to dance up a storm like you won’t believe!” With that, he began a farcical dance, eliciting a bout of raucous laughter from all present.

Uliminas watched the spectacle from off to the side, thinking back to her time as the confederate of Dark One Gholl. Compared to how he was in those days, Uliminas couldn’t help finding something heartwarming in the carefree smile on Ghozal’s face. *Ghozal was purretty cool back when he was the Dark Meown*, she thought, *but it’s kinda nice to see him just having a good time with everymeown*

like this.

“Mrewr!” Uliminas said, psyching herself up. “Meow that that’s all settled, I’d better get to meownaging our stall!” With that, she hurried off.

“All right, everyone!” Ura said, taking another shot at rallying the group. “Ready to light up the night?”

This time, the crowd all raised their fists at once, calling out a spirited response.

“Huff...” Dressed in her yukata, Kora climbed to the top of the watchtower, holding a flute in her hand. Ura was already there, waiting next to the large taiko drum set in the middle of the tower’s upper floor.

“Okay, Kora, let’s do this!” Ura said.

“Yes, papa!” Kora began playing a slow, lilting melody on her flute, accompanied by the beats of Ura’s drum. Once again, like in the summer festival they had held not long before, the sound of the father and daughter’s music could be heard across the mountain.

This song was an iconic part of the village’s traditional night market, which they held every weekend during the summer months. On the first and last day of the night market, the village would perform a grand bon odori dance, but every day of the festival would feature rows and rows of stalls doing business late into the night. The village used to hold their night market festival every summer, but as the conflict between the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode grew in intensity, there had been less and less time for such activities until soon they had been forced to abandon it entirely.

I never thought we’d be able to have a night market like this again... Ura thought, a look of deep emotion crossing his face as he hit the drum, Kora playing cheerfully on her flute beside him.

“Hup!” Just then, Blossom came up from the side, scooping Kora into her arms and perching the small girl up on her shoulder. Kora blushed happily. Even the notes of her flute seemed to take on a more cheerful tone. “You’re amazing with that flute, Kora!” Blossom said, looking over at Kora with a great big smile

on her face. “I could listen to you play all day!”

As Blossom headed down the tower and returned to the ring of bon odori dancers, Kora’s flute melody sounded happier than ever.

Out in the plaza, the bon odori dance was in full swing as a group of men hefted a portable shrine on their shoulders, at the very top of which was perched none other than Telbyress, grinning from ear to ear.

“The night market was originally intended to entertain the goddess of this world, in order to pray for peace and bountiful harvest in the year to come!” Telbyress remarked. “And who better to play the role of the goddess at this festival than yours truly! After all, I was a genuine goddess in charge of a world myself!”

Some of the demon men bearing the palanquin, however, seemed less than overjoyed by the state of affairs.

“Hey...” one of them said. “Is this woman really fit to play the goddess?”

“I know what you mean,” said another. “I’ve never seen her do anything but skip work and drink...”

“Feels like we might be inviting divine retribution, putting a woman like that in the role of goddess...”

“Hey!” Telbyress snapped. “I’ve had quite enough of your rudeness! Come on—march! March!”

“Geh! She heard us...” said one of the demon men.

“O-Oh, well...” said another. “Let’s go, everyone!”

“Right! Let’s go!”

The portable shrine set off down the road, obeying Telbyress’s haughty commands. “Good, good!” Telbyress said, grinning as she looked all around at the merchant stalls below. “Looks like everyone’s having a grand old time!” After a while, however, the shrine passed by one stall in particular that made Telbyress go stiff. “Wait...what? What?!”

There, before her eyes, was a stall manned by the goblin Hokh’hokton. He

was dressed in a festival happi, with a headband above his usual pair of goggles. “Come one, come all! Fine goods for a low price!” he cried, grinning and clapping his hands as he called passing shoppers over to his stall. “Come buy rare liquors from all over the land at a special discounted price, only at the night market!” True to Hokh’hokton’s word, there was a great number of casks and bottles on display in the stall behind him. Telbyress could only stare, a shiver coming over her body at the sight.

“Ah! Madame Telbyress!” Hokh’hokton said, noting the fallen goddess’s presence with a smile and a cheery wave. “Most gracious of you to play the role of goddess for our festival!”

Telbyress, however, didn’t spare Hokh’hokton even a single glance in return. Her eyes were fixed on one thing only—the merchandise on display in Hokh’hokton’s stall. “I-I know those bottles...” she said, pointing a trembling finger at one bottle after the next. “That’s my collection of famous liquors! The ones I had hidden in my secret tree! That’s my bottle of Oni White from Sojieya! And right next to it, that’s Dadasai, a famous Hi Izuran sake all the way from Yamuguchi! I had to practically *beg* the shadow demons to buy them for me on their Enchanted Frigate trips...”

“Yes, it was quite the feat, acquiring all this fine liquor!” Hokh’hokton replied, his cheerful smile unflinching. “Our Madame Telbyress assembled this collection of fine liquors from every corner of Klyrode, all for the sake of this year’s night market! Why, I must say I am deeply moved by her generosity. And that’s why I, Hokh’hokton, will make certain to play my part and see to it that every last bottle finds its way into the hands of our customers!”

“Noooooooo!!!” Telbyress wailed, tears of despair flowing from her eyes like waterfalls. Cruelly, however, the portable shrine began to move once again, carrying her only farther away from the precious liquor. “A-Ah?! N-No! Waaaait! Take me back! I need to get my liquor! My life depends on it! Pleaaaase!!!” she begged, desperately reaching out towards Hokh’hokton’s stall.

“I see you have more duties to attend to!” Hokh’hokton said, waving Telbyress goodbye as she vanished into the distance. “Make sure you see your job through to the end!”

“Oho!” said Ghozal, stepping up to Hokh’hokton’s stall and picking up one of the bottles to take a closer look. “This is some rare liquor you have here!”

“My, if it isn’t Lord Ghozal!” Hokh’hokton said, shuffling over and wringing his hands. “I see you have a good eye, sir!”

More and more customers came by Hokh’hokton’s stall until it became a small crowd, and in no time at all, the liquor completely sold out.



In a secluded spot some distance away from the night market stalls, Garyl, Ellie, and Wyne waited outside the festival.

“I-I’m truly, truly sorry!” Ellie said, bowing so deep in apology to Garyl that her back formed a perfect ninety degree angle with her legs. *I-I can’t believe myself...* she thought, her forehead clammy with cold sweat. *After the Second Princess and Third Princess took such pains to see me out of the castle bright and early, I ended up spending nearly the entire day fast asleep! How could I have only woken up just at this very moment?!*

“It’s okay, Ellie,” Garyl said. “Please, don’t worry about it!”

Ellie, however, refused to lift her head. “It most certainly is not okay!” she insisted. “How could I not worry about something like this?!”

“Ellie...” Garyl gave a tight-lipped smile, grabbing hold of Ellie by the shoulders and pulling her back up to eye level.

“Wah?!” Ellie exclaimed, startled to find herself suddenly straightened back out.

“How are you feeling?” Garyl asked.

Ellie blinked in confusion. “Wh-Why do you ask?”

“Well, you know...” Garyl said. “Do you feel any better after taking a nice long rest?”

“W-Well...I-I suppose I do feel less exhausted...” said Ellie.

“Then it’s a good thing you fell asleep!” Garyl declared, giving her a good cheerful smile.

“I-It is?” Ellie asked, freezing up as if she couldn’t bring herself to understand what Garyl was saying.

“Look,” said Garyl, “the whole point of taking a day off is for you to get some rest, isn’t it? So don’t worry about it! Besides, the night market is only just starting!” He held out his hand, offering it to Ellie to hold.

“Garyl...” Ellie said, tears welling up in her eyes as she reached out to take Garyl’s hand. Garyl squeezed her hand tight in his, and began to lead the way towards the merchant stalls.

Just then, Garyl heard Salina’s voice calling from up ahead. “Lord Garyl!” she said, running his way as soon as she spotted him, with Irystiel and Snow Little hurrying along behind her. “There you are!” The three had been walking all around the night market, looking for Garyl everywhere.

“Oh, hey!” said Garyl, greeting the girls with a smile. “So you all came too! Oh, but...” A worried look crossed his face as he looked between Ellie and the others. “Ellie and I...”

When Ellie looked back at him, however, she was smiling happily. “It’s all right, Garyl!” she said. “Why don’t we all enjoy the night market together? That’s the best way to approach these sorts of events, is it not?” Leading him by the hand, she hurried over towards Salina, Irystiel, and Snow Little.

“Ellie...” Garyl said, smiling back at her.

And so, the five of them ended up touring the night festival as a group.



“Meowr! Furesh fish, grilled to purrfection! Meow about it?” Uliminas grabbed one of the skewered fish she had been grilling off of the charcoal grill and held it aloft, calling out to beckon customers to her stall up by the entrance to Houghtow Mountain Village. Around her was a cluster of other stalls, each managed by a member of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store staff.

Beside Uliminas, Charun was elegantly pouring a perfect cup of tea. “I have tea of all sorts!” she said, looking around at the elegant crowd with a pleasant smile on her face. “Hot tea, cold tea, sweet tea, fragrant tea... Whatever you desire, I would be happy to provide!”

While Charun was busy in the front of the stall, Calsi'im was sitting idle farther back. "Really, Charun," he said, rising from his seat, "are you certain there's nothing I can do to—"

"Rabbitz! Go!" said Charun.

"Yah!" Rabbitz cried in response, jumping up on top of Calsi'im's head without a moment's hesitation.

"M-Mrfff!!!" said Calsi'im, his daughter's added weight forcing him back down into the chair.

"Now, Calsi'im," Charun said, glancing over towards the skeleton. "All *you* must do is sit in that chair and look as dignified as you can manage. You may leave everything up to your Charun!" With an elegant smile, she turned back towards the crowd in front of the stall.

Elinàsze, meanwhile, was sitting far back from the front of her stall, deeply absorbed in the grimoire she was reading. At the stall front was a large number of magic potions arranged in a random jumble, but Elinàsze showed no sign of emerging from the depths of the stall anytime soon, let alone doing anything approaching customer service.

"U-Um..." A customer, curious about the potions on display, raised his voice in an attempt to get Elinàsze's attention. "About this potion..."

The voice that replied, however, came from the opposite direction. "You are a customer, then?" said Tanya, appearing behind the customer without warning.

"Wah?!" the customer exclaimed, wheeling around. "Y-You're the one staffing this stall, then?"

"Yes, that is correct," Tanya said. "But never mind me. Do you intend to purchase this potion?"

"Well, about that..." said the customer. "I can tell this potion is very highly refined, but what exactly does it do...?"

"For potion effects, please refer to this window," Tanya said, calling up a window before the customer's eyes. There, the ingredients, effect, dosage information, instructions for use and more for the potion, were all written out

in a truly extraordinary level of detail. Tanya, however, didn't miss a single beat as she launched into a stone-faced exposition. "First, with regards to the composition of the potion in question..." she began.

The customer, however, was completely overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information and failed to retain any of it from Tanya's lecture.

Dressed in their yukata, Byleri and Rislei passed in front of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store's cluster of stalls.

"Mama," Rislei asked, "How come we don't have a stall?"

"Oh, well, like, y'know," Byleri said, touching her index finger to her cheek. "I, like, talked about it with Lord Sleip and all, but in the end we decided that the ranch doesn't really have anything we can sell."

"I guess we don't, now that you mention it," Rislei admitted, nodding in understanding.

"So, like," Byleri continued with a grin, "that means we can spend all the time we want checking out the stalls! Ready to get to it?"

"Sure," Rislei nodded, looking all around. "But, um...where's papa?"

"Oh!" said Byleri. "Like, your papa said he wanted to do some training first. He'll be here once he's done!"

"Training?" Rislei asked. "For what? The magic beast races? But I thought no one could race against him, since he's the only one large enough for his weight class!"

"Like, he is?" Byleri asked, a look of confusion coming over her face.

I hope papa shows up soon... Rislei thought as they walked on down the road. *It's a little lonely without him...*

"Riiisleeiii!!!" Not a second after she had that thought, Sleip appeared right behind Rislei, hoisting her into the air with a great big grin on his face. "It's your papa!!!"

"Wah!" Rislei shouted, her face going bright red as she found herself in her father's arms. "P-Papa! You're embarrassing me!"

“Don’t say that, Rislei!” Sleip said. “I missed you so muuuch!!!”

“Wh-What do you mean you missed me?!” Rislei demanded. “We saw each other today at lunch!”

“I know! But I’ve been missing you this whole afternoon!” Ignoring Rislei’s protests, Sleip began his usual game of lifting her up into the air over and over again.

I-I take it back! Rislei thought. Go away, papa!

Whatever she told herself, however, there was a happy smile on Rislei’s face.



The sound of the flute and taiko drum could be heard all over Houghtow Mountain, mingling with the cheerful voices of the guests and villagers, and lending the whole mountain an atmosphere of celebration.

Flio looked out at the sight from the veranda of his house. Below him, the paper lanterns Elinàsze had conjured were shining bright along the road leading to the mountain. In their light he could see people making the journey from Houghtow City, their number only increasing as the night wore on.

As Flio watched, smiling his usual easygoing smile, Rys stepped out onto the veranda beside him, dressed in a yukata of her own. “My lord husband! I’m sorry for the wait!” she said, smiling. Flio and Rys had been busy in a town assembly in Houghtow City until late that day and had only recently gotten home. Flio had just been waiting for Rys to finish changing into her festival attire.

“What do you think?” Rys asked, doing a graceful spin to show the outfit off for her husband. “It doesn’t look strange on me, does it?”

“Not at all!” Flio said, nodding appreciatively and smiling back at her. “It looks great on you, Rys!”

Rys beamed happily at the compliment. “But really...” she went on to say, folding her arms with a dissatisfied pout. “How inconsiderate of those Houghtow City Merchants’ Guild people, holding their meeting on the same day as the start of the night market! And specifically requesting your attendance, no

less...”

“Well, they’re the ones giving us permission to operate the Fli-o’-Rys General Store in Houghtow City, after all,” Flio said, his smile growing strained in spite of himself. “We do have to attend their meetings.”

“Hmph... I suppose...” Rys huffed. “Well, at least it’s finished,” she added, the smile returning to her face as she took Flio by the arm. “Now then, my lord husband, shall we go and enjoy the night market ourselves?”

Just then, the couple heard Rynàsze’s voice coming from below. “Papa! Mama!” Flio and Rys looked down the veranda to see Rynàsze standing in front of the doorway, waving up to them with a bright smile on her face. Behind her was Sybe in his psychobear form and Tybe the Bear of Misfortune, as well as the rest of Sybe’s family, waving up at them just like Rynàsze. The magic beasts were all dressed in yukata as well, aside from Sybe and Tybe, who were somewhat too large.

“You were taking a while to show up, so we came to get you!” Rynàsze said.

Flio and Rys both smiled at the adorable sight. “Oh my!” Rys said. “You’re all dressed in your own little yukata! Hee hee, how very fetching!” Then, taking Flio by the hand, she added, “Now, my lord husband, let’s be off!” Without bothering to wait for a response, she leaped straight over the veranda railing, into the air.

“R-Rys!” Flio exclaimed. “Wait!” For a moment he stood there, startled by his wife’s sudden jump, but after just a second he gave a smile of fond exasperation and hurried off the ledge after her, pulling her close in midair and casting a spell that made them float gently down to the ground. When they landed, Rynàsze and her companions came running up. “Okay!” Flio said. “Ready for the night market?”

“Yeah!” Rynàsze answered, happily nodding her head and climbing up on Sybe’s back.

Sybe looked over his shoulder to make sure Rynàsze was secure and then set off at a leisurely walk in the direction of Houghtow Mountain, followed by the other magic beasts, with Flio and Rys taking up the rear. Ahead of them they could see the mountain, lit up with dazzling lights and full of excited voices and

joyful music.



◇Klyrode Castle—The Maiden Queen’s Chambers◇

It was late enough in the night that one day had already passed over into the next and the Maiden Queen was lying in bed in her night clothes, the yukata she had been wearing only a minute ago draped over the windowsill as an impromptu hanger.

The Maiden Queen looked away from the yukata and up at her left hand, now adorned with a silver ring. “What a lovely ring Garyl bought me at that festival stall...” It had been for sale at Elinàsze’s stall, and was enchanted with a spell that granted the Speed Up skill to its wearer. “Garyl...gave me a ring...” the Maiden Queen repeated, a blush creeping into her cheek as a smile came to her face unbidden.

Th-This is...our engagement ring... she thought, slipping it even farther down her ring finger.

At that very second, however, her chamber door burst open and in stepped the Third Princess, beaming from ear to ear. “My sister the Queen! I heard you had returned to the castle!”

Startled by her sister’s sudden entrance, the Maiden Queen quickly pulled the ring off her finger and hid it behind her back. “Th-Th-Th-Third Princess?!” she stammered. “U-U-U-Um... I’m home! Or, no, actually I’ve been home for a while now, haven’t I...?”

Unfortunately, the Maiden Queen’s faltering and confused response only made it more clear that there was something she was hiding. “My sister the Queen?” the Third Princess asked, tilting her head to the side in a puzzled expression. “Is something the matter?”

“N-No! Nothing! Nothing at all!” the Maiden Queen insisted.

“You’re sure?” the Third Princess asked. “Well, all right then. But more importantly, I would love to hear all about your day, if you would tell me!” she said, her eyes lighting up like a small child’s.

“You would, would you?” the Maiden Queen said, smirking in spite of herself at her sister’s behavior. “Very well, but it is quite late, so only a little bit.” She sat up in bed, smiling, and turned to face her younger sister.

Epilogue

◇Houghtow City—Fli-o’-Rys Magic Beast Racing Hall◇

A cheer went out from the packed crowd in the spectator stands as magic beasts thundered down the race track. At the head of the pack was Stoleanna, riding on an equine magic beast of her own, followed by Dalc Horst in his centaur form running in a close second, leaving the rest of the contestants far behind.

At the Fli-o’-Rys Magic Beast Racing Hall, demihumans, demons, and magic beast riders alike were all allowed to run, as long as their body mass fell within the range for their weight class. Stoleanna’s mount Granbacca was a magic beast, while Dalc Horst was a demon, but the two of them happened to be nearly the same size, and so they had found themselves competing against each other.

“Shit!” Dalc Horst cursed, beating his hooves on the track as he ran along at breakneck speed. “Why can’t I catch up to them?”

As fast as he ran, however, Stoleanna’s horse kept pulling ahead, bit by bit. *Dalc Horst is a splendid demon, to be sure... she thought. His speed and acceleration are both excellent. But as a racer, he’s far too rash! It’s only natural his stamina would be exhausted now, after he opened the race flying on ahead at full gallop!*

Stoleanna was correct, of course. At the start of the race, Dalc Horst had taken an early lead, but halfway through his speed had begun to wane until, as the racers approached the finish line, he found himself passed by Stoleanna, who was now pulling farther and farther ahead.



Flio watched from the far end of the stands as the final race of the day ended with Stoleanna’s decisive victory.

“I would hardly believe how many people come here to watch the races, if I

hadn't seen it with my own eyes!" Rys remarked, nuzzling up against Flio from the side. In fact, she had spent the race looking around at the crowd in wide-eyed disbelief.

Flio looked over at Rys, smiling his usual easygoing smile. "No kidding," he said. "It looks like the races are even more popular than I expected! It makes me happy to see."

"Mister Flio! There you are!" As the couple shared a loving smile, Blossom came running up to them, pushing her way through the crowd. "I've been looking all over for you! I thought for sure you'd be up in the VIP box!"

"Oh! Sorry about that!" Flio said. "I thought it would be good to get a feeling for the crowd's reactions, so I set myself up here this time."

"Makes sense!" Blossom said, nodding.

"So, Blossom," said Flio. "Did you need something from me?"

"Oh, right, right!" Blossom said, returning to the topic. "I've got a favor to ask on behalf of the villagers. Would it be all right if the folks you've got working the stalls at front have time off to help out with the night market while it's in season?"

"Sure, that's no problem," Flio answered.

"I had a feeling you'd say that!" Blossom replied with a grin. "I'll go and let 'em know right away!" With that, she turned around and went back the way she came.

"You know," Rys said, smiling up at her husband as she wrapped her arm around his. "This night market they've set up in the oni village has been the talk of the town. I expect it will be a major event for Houghtow City far into the future."

"It has been popular, hasn't it?" Flio said with a smile. "And everyone worked together to make it happen, just like the racing hall."

The two embraced, still giddy from the excitement of the final race of the day.

Ordinarily, once the racing hall closed for the night the spectators would

hurry to the Enchanted Frigate boarding tower to catch the final flight of the day back to their various places of residence. This day, however, happened to be a weekend, and most of the crowd was making their way to the Houghtow City shopping district.

A man in a simple food stall was calling out in a loud voice, beckoning customers to his shop. “Come one, come all, and try a bowl of ramoon noodles, Houghtow City’s local specialty! One bite of these smooth slippery noodles and you’ll be hooked for life—I promise you that!” His spiel seemed to be working well, if the crowd of customers chatting happily as they ate was any indication.

Rys looked over, smiling at the sight. “I see the weekend night markets have left quite an impression on the city already,” she said.

True enough, the paper lanterns the people of Houghtow City had first encountered at the night market in the mountain village were now all over the city’s central shopping district, complete with open-air stalls doing business by the lanterns’ lights. The road leading from the city to Houghtow Mountain itself, meanwhile, had become positively busy with customers shopping at stalls manned by merchants from Houghtow City. It was a far cry from the scenery when the night market first began, when the road was empty aside from the rows of paper lanterns lighting the way.

“Still, they’re quite mercenary, these Houghtow City merchants, aren’t they?” Rys complained, puffing out her cheeks in a pout. “Can you believe they started begging to be allowed to take part the very moment word got out that the night market was a success?”

Flio couldn’t help smirking wryly at his wife’s indignation. “Well, I suppose they’re not doing any harm,” he said. “And thanks to all the excitement, the Flio’s-Rys General Store has been busier than ever too!”

“I suppose...” Rys said, her expression softening just a little. “But still, I can’t quite bring myself to accept it.”

As their conversation reached a lull, a voice called out to them from behind. “Hi, dad! Hi, mom!” Flio and Rys turned around to see Garyl, accompanied by Ellie, the Maiden Queen. The two of them were dressed in casual clothing, with Ellie’s hair done up in a ponytail and a large pair of round glasses on her face to

camouflage her identity.

“Oh! If it isn’t Garyl and Your Maj—I mean, Ellie!” Rys said, hastily correcting herself. “Did you come to watch the race as well?”

“That’s right!” Garyl said.

“But Garyl...” Rys asked. “Didn’t you say you were going to visit Ulshimardo Beach today, now that it’s reopening for public use?”

“Oh, right... That *was* our plan, at first...” Garyl said, awkwardly scratching the back of his head.

Ellie, meanwhile, bowed her head low, an expression of guilt on her face. “Yes, I’m afraid I insisted on coming here instead...”

“You did, did you?” said Rys.

“I did,” said Ellie. “You invited me to the opening celebration some time ago, but I’ve heard so much since then about how popular the races had become! I wanted to see how it’s grown for myself, I suppose.”

◇Meanwhile—Ulshimardo Beach◇

The Ulshimardo beach had been closed off for years during the war against the Dark Army. With the peace treaty in place, however, the beach was once again allowing the public to swim in its waters, and a great number of people had come to visit the shore.

In among the crowded beach, three girls were searching diligently every which way.

First was Salina, dressed in a sky blue bikini. “How strange...” she said, furrowing her brow as she peered this way and that for any sign of Garyl. “I’m certain my information was correct—Garyl should be at this very beach!”

Next to her was Irystiel, wearing a black swimsuit with a gothic lolita design and holding her plush cat tight in her hands. She shoved the cat in Salina’s face, using her ventriloquism to make it speak. “Well, there’s no sign of him anywhere, is there, mreowr?!” the cat snapped. “Are you sure this information of yours is reliable? Mreowr!”

Snow Little looked around the beach from under the shade of her parasol. It

was clear she was taking no chances when it came to protection from the rays of the sun—in addition to the parasol, she was also sporting a wide-brimmed hat and a pair of dark sunglasses. “Perhaps Lord Garyl has simply yet to arrive,” she offered. “Should we wait for him just a little while longer?”

Mrr... Salina thought, grumbling to herself. I knew I should have just been honest and asked Garyl for an invitation...

The three kept looking around the beach for a while longer, but alas, Garyl was nowhere to be found.



“Achoo!” Garyl sneezed.

“Are you okay there, Garyl?” asked Flio.

“Yeah, sorry,” Garyl said. “I’m all right, dad.” *It feels like someone was just talking about me...* he thought, rubbing his nose. *Three separate someones, at that...*

Off to the side, Ellie was busy discussing business with Rys. “Perhaps we might remodel our old mounted combat training facility into something similar to the racing hall you’ve built here...” she mused, keeping her voice quiet to keep passersby from overhearing. “I will have to discuss the idea with my sisters.”

“Ellie,” Flio said, “if you’re done with your business here, why don’t you come by our house for some tea? Unless you’d rather not, of course.”

“N-Not at all! I would be delighted to come, as long as you will have me!” Ellie hastened to assure him.

Flio smiled, and simply waved his hand.

◇ Houghtow City—Flio’s House ◇

Flio’s Teleportation spell enveloped the group, who soon appeared in front of the entrance to Flio’s house. Now that there was no more need to mind their surroundings, Rys leaned in curiously towards Ellie. “Why is it that there’s nothing like a racing hall in the Klyrode Castle Town, when Naneewa Town has had one for a while?” she asked.

“Naneewa Town was quite some distance from the front lines in the war

against the Dark Army, so the racing hall was built there in part to give the people of the kingdom a way to relieve their stress,” Ellie said, counting off bullet point items on her fingers as she continued. “Now that we have achieved friendly relations with the Dark Army, however, we have been considering the prospect of scaling up our training grounds for mounted combat. The maintenance costs are higher than you might think, after all, and we’ve been looking into various ways we can put the space to a productive use. And on a similar note, I found this night market custom to be truly delightful when I attended one the other night. Perhaps we might discuss with the Castle Town merchants’ guild as to whether we might do something similar...”

Here, Rys cut Ellie off, squeezing her hands tight. “Yes, yes, I understand you have quite a lot to consider. For now, why don’t you leave it at that and come enjoy a cup of tea with Garyl? This is your day off, isn’t it?” She punctuated the statement with a playful smile and a poke of her index finger to the tip of Ellie’s nose.

“A-Ah! O-Oh!” Ellie said, her face turning bright red as her monologue tapered off into nonsensical sounds. “Th-That’s right... I can’t believe I let myself get carried away like that...”

“That’s Ellie for you!” Garyl said with a smirk. “She’s always getting sidetracked by her work.”

“Now, Garyl, you mustn’t say such things,” Rys chided him, shooting her son a severe glare. “After all, from now on it will be your job as her escort to stop her when she does such things, won’t it?”

“O-Oh, u-um...” Garyl winced apologetically, lowering his head. “Y-You’re right. I’m sorry...”

There was a beat of silence, and then everyone present began to laugh at once.

“I must say, though...” said Rys, struggling to suppress an amused smirk. “It feels quite strange to think that the Castle Town of Klyrode Castle, capital of the greatest of the human kingdoms, might soon be adopting the demonic custom of holding night markets...”

“I-It wouldn’t be *too* strange, would it?” Ellie said, a worried look suddenly

crossing her face.

“I don’t see anything wrong with it,” Flio assured her, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “It’s only natural that you’d want to introduce the Castle Town to night markets after experiencing one yourself. I think it’s important not to let prejudice stop you from seeing the good in things and taking on those good things for yourself.”

“You’re right, of course,” Ellie said, her expression complicated. “But now I’m finding myself worried as to whether I could make it happen. I suppose I couldn’t help blurting out my concerns...”

“Hrm,” said Ghozal, stepping up to join the conversation. “You’re not wrong to expect difficulty in making any kind of idea a reality...even more so when it comes to the state. I used to be the Dark One, you know, so I think I’ve got a pretty good idea of how it feels.”

Coming from Ghozal, the legendary former Dark One himself, those words certainly had weight. Ellie pursed up her lips and nodded, turning to face him.

Sensing Ellie’s anxiety, however, Ghozal gave a disarming smile. “Still,” he said, looking over at Flio. “You’ve already got a great role model and collaborator, don’t you? Mister Flio has accomplished plenty along exactly those lines. Bringing an end to the long history of conflict between demons and humans with that peace treaty...creating new relations based on friendly exchange...all of that would have just been an idle dream back when I was sitting on the throne as Dark One Gholl and Rys was a soldier in the Dark Army by the name of Fenrys. And the man who made it possible is right here by your side.”

“Quite right, Ghozal!” Rys said, nodding in agreement. “I couldn’t have said it better.”

The two turned to look towards Flio, who frowned and shook his head. “You’re giving me too much credit!” he protested. “If I had been on my own, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything. I probably wouldn’t even have made it out of Delaveza Forest. And even after that, the only reason a single individual like myself was able to handle so many different things is because I had you, Rys, and Ghozal, and everyone else in the house to listen to my concerns and

give me advice. I don't think I could have done it without help from a great number of people." He paused, giving the group one of his famous smiles. "I'm counting on all of you for your continued support going forward as well," he said, turning to face Ellie. "And since I'm asking you for your support, I would be happy to help *you* out. So remember, there's no need for you to struggle alone."

"And I might not be able to help as much as my dad and everyone, but I'll do my best too!" Garyl said, nodding emphatically. "I'd be happy to talk to you about anything that's on your mind."

Ellie hid her mouth behind her hand, tears welling up in her eyes at everyone's words of support. "Th-Thank you..." she said, smiling from ear to ear and bowing her head over and over again. "Thank you ever so much." She seemed much more relaxed than she had been just moments ago.

"Now, with that all being said..." said Rys, placing a firm hand on Ellie's shoulder from behind. "When it's time to rest, you *rest!* Do you understand?"

"A-Ah? Wh-What?" protested Ellie as Rys pushed her on into the house, ignoring her complaints.

"Hang on, mom!" Garyl said, wincing as he chased after them. "You're upsetting her!"

As they stepped inside, they were greeted by Charun, a cup of tea already in hand and a smile on her face. "Right this way," she said. "We have a variety of delicious teas and snacks prepared for you!"

Flio smirked as he watched the scene play out in front of him. "Ellie really does spend too much of her time working, doesn't she..." he remarked.

"And look who's talking!" said Rys, looking back over her shoulder at her husband. "My lord husband, you work yourself to the bone every single day of your life! And that's why both you *and* Ellie are going to do absolutely no work this entire day, and focus on getting some proper rest!"

"Huh? M-Me too?" Flio said, taken aback by his wife's words.

"Ha ha hah!" laughed Ghozal, smacking Flio on the shoulder with a great big smile. "I'm in full agreement there! Mister Flio needs rest as much as anyone!

Which is why I've gone ahead and gotten us permission to take a vacation down in Dogorogma! We can leave as soon as you're ready!" At some point, it seemed, Ghozal had begun wearing the straw hat he favored when the household went on vacations.

"Wait, what?" Flio said. "R-Right this moment?"

"Sorry, Mister Flio!" said Ghozal, as a troubled look came over Flio's face. "You don't get to say no to this one!" Wrapping his arm around Flio's shoulders, he forcefully pulled him into the house after the others.

Soon, Flio's house was full of voices and laughter as everyone got to preparing for their vacation as quickly as they could.

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 14

◇Houghtow College of Magic◇

Nyt sat in her chair in the headmaster's office at the Houghtow College of Magic, twirling her long blue hair around her finger as she looked over the papers Taclyde had handed her. "Well then..." she began. "What will be our ssschedule for today?"

Nyt's true identity was the Serpent Princess Yorminyt, one of Dark One Ghol's former Infernal Four, currently disguised as a human. Since her defection from the Dark Army, one thing had led to another, and before she knew it she had found herself appointed as headmaster of the Houghtow College of Magic.

"Today, is it?" Taclyde said, taking a look at his own copy of the papers in question. "Let's see..."

Taclyde, an ordinary-looking human dressed in work clothes, was the administrator of the Houghtow College of Magic. In addition to his administrative work, he also handled cleaning, repairs, interfacing with the parents and guardians of the younger students, and negotiating with outside organizations. In fact, he seemed to do nearly every task necessary to keep the school in operation.

"As you can see on the first page of our itinerary, today we are holding a miniature sports festival for our youngest students," Taclyde said, briskly leafing through the papers as he spoke. "Now, as for your schedule, Headmaster Nyt, we will need you to deliver an opening address to begin the festivities. You can find the speech you'll be delivering on the second page, so please take some time to look it over before the festival begins."

For sssomeone with no power to ssspeak of, thisss human certainly doesss keep himself busssy... Yorminyt reflected as she glanced from the papers in her hand up towards Taclyde, full of appreciation for the hardworking administrator. I never had anyone like him working for me when I wasss ssstill in the Dark Army...

“And so—” Taclyde went on, cutting himself off when he realized that Yorminyt had been staring at his face. “Hold on! Headmaster Nyt, are you sure you’re listening to my explanation?”

“Yesss, of coursse!” Yorminyt said, twirling her hair around her finger once more as she returned her attention to the papers. “But tell me...once our miniature sportsss festsstival is over, shall we perhapsss celebrate the event over drinksss?”

“Th-That certainly isn’t in the itinerary...” Taclyde said, clearly taken off guard by the question. “B-But regardless, I would appreciate it if you would try to refrain from doing anything that might cause problems. Lately we’ve been getting an absolute flood of complaints from the parents and guardians whenever the slightest thing goes wrong.”

“Yesss, yesss, I underssstand that much at leassst,” Nyt assured him with a smile and a wave of her hand.

“I really do hope so...” Taclyde said, a worried look coming over his face at Nyt’s dismissive attitude. “It’s such trouble to come up with excuses, you know...”

The grounds for the sports festival were set up in the middle of the school’s campus, surrounded by rows of spectator stands for the guardians of the competing elementary students attending class at Houghtow College of Magic.

Up in the stands, a woman with her curly hair done up with a bandanna sprung excitedly to her feet, turning to the boyish man beside her. “It’s going to be our children’s turn next, Hugi!”

“Cartha, we know, yes! Yes, we know already, so please sit down like you’re supposed to, yes!” the man said, speaking in two distinct overlapping voices. After all, this was none other than the Hugi-Mugi, whose true form was that of a fearsome doppeladler—a monstrous two-headed bird.

Cartha was the daughter of a farming family who fell in love with Hugi-Mugi the very first time she set eyes on their assumed human form, and after a long and hard battle she had finally secured the coveted position of *wife*. Since then, she had lived together with her avian husband in their cottage in the forest.

Hugi-Mugi, of course, was one of Dark One Ghol's Infernal Four. They had left the Dark Army to make a life for themselves deep in one of the world's forests, where they now lived a carefree life alongside their three loving wives.

"Yes, yes..." Cartha said as Hugi-Mugi admonished her for standing. "I was just so excited I couldn't help myself!" She pumped her arms energetically, as if to demonstrate just how excited she was.

"Cartha!" said a woman dressed in priestly vestments sitting beside her. "Would you please calm down just a little? It's embarrassing for all of us to have you acting like a child!"

This was Shino, another of Hugi-Mugi's wives. Shino was a priestess living in the same village as Cartha who, like her, had also fallen in love with Hugi-Mugi at first sight. Now she lived together with the rest of the family, although she spent most of her time in the village providing healing to the sick and injured.

"Excuse you!" Cartha shot back. "In just a moment, our children are going to be running in a practice race! You can hardly expect me not to get excited about something like that!"

"Well...I suppose I can understand how you feel..." Shino admitted, sighing heavily as Cartha continued her unabashed display of excitement next to her. "Honestly, though, I wish you would take a page out of Mato's book from time to time," she added, turning to look at the woman on her other side. "*She* has the good grace to watch silently, so as to not disturb the people around her."

Mato was Hugi-Mugi's third and final wife. Mato was a traveling merchant who had been attacked by bandits on her way through the forest where Hugi-Mugi lived, only for the doppeladler to come flying to her rescue. She came to live with Hugi-Mugi and the others in order to repay him for saving her life, and over time fell in love as well.

As Shino had said, Mato was sitting quietly in her seat as she watched the proceedings...but on closer inspection, they could see she was holding a Recording Crystal tight in her hands, hearts in her eyes, mouth hanging open, face flushed and breath ragged as she waited for the contestants to come onto the field. "Hahhh, hahhh... Any moment now..." she breathed. "Soon, our children will be down there, running as hard as they can... Hahhh, hahhh. O-Oh.

I can't wait much longer..." The other parents and guardians around her were leaning away, recoiling from her strange behavior.

"U-Um... That is..." Shino stammered as she took in the scene happening beside her.

"Oh my, Shino!" Cartha said, smirking triumphantly at her fellow wife. "Who was it you said is disturbing the people around her again?"

"N-No... Well, I mean..." Shino said, even more at a loss for words with Cartha berating her from the other side.

"What on Klyrode are you three doing, yes?!" Hugi-Mugi exclaimed, utterly exasperated. "Yes, what do you think you're doing?!"

Finally, down on the festival grounds, the race began. A great cheer rose up from the stands as the children started out, running in high spirits. Swept away by the excitement of the moment, Hugi-Mugi jumped to their feet, waving their arms. "Go, yes! Yes, go! A little more and you'll be in first, yes!"

"H-Hugi!" Cartha exclaimed, flinching back from the sudden outburst. "I-I'm glad you're cheering, but..."

"A-Aren't you getting a little carried away?" Shino agreed, joining Cartha in doing her best to placate their husband.

With the sight of their children running all out before their eyes, however, Hugi-Mugi could no longer contain their excitement. Then, as they cheered on and on, a straining sound came from the doppeladler's transformed body...

"H-Huh?" said Cartha, her eyes going wide. Suddenly she noticed that Hugi-Mugi had grown an entire head taller while she had been speaking. Their human form grew bigger and bigger until a pair of wings sprouted from their back, a second head sprouting from their shoulders. "W-Wait! Darling! Y-You aren't going to transform into your magic beast form *here*, are you?!"

Meanwhile, Mato, and Mato alone, remained completely focused on recording the race. "Th-They're running..." she said, her face just as flushed as before. "My beloved children are running! Hahhh, hahhh..."

It seemed she hadn't noticed her husband's transformation at all.

Over in the school staff seating area, Nyt watched with a furrowed brow as Hugi-Mugi's sudden transformation triggered a shock wave of chaos in the stands. "I *thought* there wasss sssomething happening in the ssstandsss..." she said. "To think it would be that birdbrain'sss fault!" Nyt, of course, was acquainted with the doppeladler from their time serving together in the Infernal Four. "How dare they cause a disturbance at *my* workplace?!" she said, her glasses slipping from her face as she rose to her feet, transforming back into her natural lamia body. "I mussst remind thisss imbecile what it isss to fear Lady Yorminyt!"

By now, Hugi-Mugi had transformed completely into their massive doppeladler form, and soon the festival grounds themselves had descended into a battleground between the monstrous bird on the one side and the fearsome serpent princess on the other.

Taclyde heaved a heavy sigh as he watched the events unfold. "I *told* her we've been facing stricter scrutiny from the parents and guardians lately, and asked her as firmly as I could not to do anything that could cause problems..." he said, frowning deeply and scratching his head as he glanced around the scene. "Maybe I can sweep this under the rug if I tell them it was all a staged performance to surprise the audience? No, that would be a bit hard to pull off. Let me think..." Folding his arms, the long-suffering administrator began to wrack his brains for a plausible enough excuse.

◇By the Side of a Forest Road◇

Around noon, on the day Mephilla left the world of Klyrode, Hero Gold-Hair and company were still in the same forest they had been staying in the previous night, with Wuha Gappoli still transformed into the house disguised as a giant tree. Inside, Hero Gold-Hair sat at a table in the living room, with Dawkson, the Dark One himself, sitting across from him.

Dawkson's human form was so convincing that even if he walked down a crowded city street, no one would notice his true identity. Hero Gold-Hair, however, could tell who it was at a single glance. After all, Dawkson had traveled with him all over the land in precisely this form.

“So, brother, that’s what’s up,” Dawkson said, finishing his story. “Tell me... Whaddaya think I should do?”

In the Dark Citadel Dawkson had cut an imposing figure as the Dark One, but right now he seemed strangely pitiable with his back hunched over, a look of miserable consternation on his face.

“Dawkson...” Hero Gold-Hair began. “I get that you’re worried about this marriage situation, but did you really need to come all this way just to talk to me?”

“I’m tellin’ you, there ain’t anyone I can talk to about this back at the Dark Citadel!” Dawkson said, tensing up his shoulders and looking pleadingly over at Hero Gold-Hair. “You’re the only one I can bare my soul to about anything, brother!”

“My, my...” said Valentine, still in her child form to conserve magic power, grinning mirthfully as she patted the Dark One on the shoulder. “You are a strange one, aren’t you, Dawkson. Who ever heard of a world where the Dark One comes to the Hero for love advice?!”

“C-Come on, Valentine, cut me some slack!” Dawkson said, bashfully pressing the tips of his index fingers together as he looked over at the former Evil General. “I’ve been worryin’ myself sick about this, until I finally decided to come here for some advice...”

“Thaaat’s right, Laaady Valentine!” Tsuya said with a smile as she strolled carrying a fresh round of wooden tankards. “I knooow you’re happy to see Dawkson again toooo! There’s no need to buuully him so much!” Chuckling, she distributed the drinks to everyone present. “Besiiides, he brought us all this nice booooze, so why don’t we heeeear him out?”

“Well said!” said Aryun Keats, taking the tankard Tsuya gave her and draining it dry in a single gulp.

“Of course, Tsuya, you’re exactly right,” Hero Gold-Hair agreed, accepting his own tankard as well before turning back towards Dawkson. “So, Dawkson. I suppose what’s got you so worried is figuring out how you’re going to propose to Phufun, then?”

“Pfffhhhwsrhhh!!!” Dawkson exclaimed, spitting out his entire mouthful of drink. “Ack...hack... Ahem! Wh-What in the hells, brother?! Where did *that* come from?!”



“Am I wrong?” Hero Gold-Hair asked. “Phufun won that cooking contest you had a while back, didn’t she? I’m sure all of your subjects would accept the match.”

“I-I mean...” Dawkson said, “You’re right, I guess...but that ain’t the issue here...”

“No?” the miniature Valentine teased, smacking Dawkson on the back. “Isn’t it? If you ask me, you should just get out there and go for it!”

“I-I can’t do that!” Dawkson insisted. “Not without gettin’ the mood right first!”

“The mood, hm?” said Hero Gold-Hair. “So this *is* about how you should propose to her, then.”

“N-No, I’m tellin’ you, it’s not about that!” Dawkson said, fidgeting uncomfortably at Hero Gold-Hair’s words. “Or...erm...I guess in a way it sorta is...”

Tsuya smirked to herself as she watched Dawkson squirm under Hero Gold-Hair’s gaze. She giggled to herself. *I’m sure aaanyone could have figured thaaat out! I gueeeess I’ll let this go a liiittle longer before I give them a helping haaand...* Holding her tankard in both hands she brought it to her lips, stealing a glance at Hero Gold-Hair as he sat thinking seriously about Dawkson’s predicament. *Maaariage, hmmm?* she thought as her companions chatted cheerfully around her. *Sometimes I wooonder what I am to Hero Gooold-Hair anyway...*

◇Houghtow City—Fli-o’-Rys Magic Beast Racing Hall◇

The final race of the day was underway at the Fli-o’-Rys Racing Hall. The commentator’s voice thundered over the magic speakers, reporting on the state of the race. “And rounding the final corner, we have Dalc Horst in the lead! He’d better watch out, though, because Bravadan is right behind him and gaining fast! And riding that steed, of course, is the legendary Stoleanna!”

The crowd erupted into cheers.

“Raaaahhh!!!”

“Go! Go! Stoleanna!!!”

“Come on, Dalc Horst! Today’s the day you win!!!”

The atmosphere was positively electric in the racing hall as Dalc Horst ran on at the head of the pack amid the deafening roar of the crowd. “Today *is* the day!” he said, gritting his teeth as he strained to accelerate. “They won’t call me the silver collector after this!!!” Try as he might, however, Dalc Horst, who had been running all out from the very start of the race, found his energy gradually beginning to flag.

“In a normal race, that speed would have easily been enough to escape with the gold,” Stoleanna said as she closed the distance on the back of her magic beast. There was no doubt she was correct, of course—aside from Stoleanna and Dalc Horst, the other racers had been left long since in the dust. “Your only mistake was having *me* as an opponent!” Stoleanna cracked her whip, signaling for her steed Bravadan to pick up speed.

“*Wreeehhh!!!*” Bravadan cried, quickly darting forward. They sped ahead, and within moments they were neck and neck with Dalc Horst.

“And Bravadan’s overtaken the lead!” the commentator roared. “They’ve passed Dalc Horst in a single burst of speed!”

Ordinarily, this would be when Stoleanna’s magic beast would go on to pass the finish line and take first. Today, however, Dalc Horst suddenly felt another racer course past him, running after Bravadan with simply unbelievable speed.

“I knew it...” Stoleanna said, cracking her whip once more as she felt the presence coming up from behind. “He’s coming!” No matter how much she urged her steed onward, however, the new magic beast passed her in an instant.

“Ohhh!!!” said the commentator. “We have another contestant coming from behind to overtake first place! It’s the living legend himself—the lichsteed Sleip!!!”

Sleip, whose massive frame made it difficult to find opponents able to race in the same weight class as him, was only able to participate in the races in the occasional informal mixed league event. Today, however...

“Bwa ha ha ha haaah!” Sleip roared as he ran like the wind itself. “Riiisleeei!!! Watch closely as your papa races gallantly down the track! I’m still the best, even slimmed down like this!”

Up in the stands, Sleip’s daughter Rislei jumped up from her seat, her expression a mix of shock and joy. “W-Wah!” she cried. “For real? Holy crap! How can papa run that fast even when he’s all skin and bones?! This is totally unreal!”

“Bwa ha hah!” Sleip laughed again, apparently able to make out what Rislei was saying in spite of the distance. “That’s right, Rislei! Now get a load of *this!*” he said, speeding up still further.

As an aside, Sleip had decided on his strategy for that day’s race of overtaking everyone from behind at the very last moment for one reason and one reason alone—earlier that day he had overheard Rislei expressing her admiration for Stoleanna.

“The way Miss Stoleanna races is so cool!” Rislei had said. *“I love the way she always overtakes her opponent at the last moment!”*

Stoleanna watched as Sleip charged past, laughing all the while, staring from atop her mount as the lichsteed ahead picking up more and more speed as he went. He had shed all the weight he could afford from his body in order to participate, leaving him lean and slender. His running form, however, was a thing of beauty. A joyous grin spread over Stoleanna’s face at the sight...

The race finished with Sleip in a commanding first. “Ha ha ha!” he laughed, running up to the spectator stands and lifting Rislei up into the air. “How ’bout that, Rislei?!”

“P-Papa, wait!” protested Rislei, her face turning bright red from embarrassment. “W-Would you stop doing this in front of huge crowds? It’s embarrassing!”

Sleip, however, paid her protests no more mind than usual, holding his daughter high in the air as he began a victory lap around the course.

“P-Papa...” Rislei complained, looking away from the stands out of shame. *Even so... she thought, a happy smile coming to her face in spite of herself. Papa was really cool today...*

Stoleanna watched from behind as Sleip ran down the racing track to the adulation of the crowd, cheeks flushed and a vacant expression on her face. *Lord Sleip is just as magnificent as I imagined...or perhaps even more! I knew my eyes weren't mistaken... she thought, her eyes turning a vivid shade of delight. And he's a demon too, which means under their law he can have as many as three wives. In that case, I still have a chance!*

Elsewhere on the track, Dalc Horst cursed in frustration as he watched Sleip's victory lap. “Damn it! I finally managed to overtake Stoleanna, but I ended up in second place *again!*”

Stoleanna had been ahead of him at the last leg, but lost in her admiration for Sleip, she had inadvertently slowed down once again, letting Dalc Horst pass her right before the finish.

“Ah, well...” Dalc Horst sighed, a smile coming to his face as he watched Sleip run. “It's a dream come true to be able to race against my lord like this...”

Dalc Horst watched as Sleip trotted over to the staff seating area to scoop Byleri up in his arms as well, resuming his victory lap with his wife on one shoulder and daughter on the other.

“It's great to see how close he is with his family too...” Dalc Horst went on, talking to himself. “I wonder...if Greanyl and I got married, would we be like that too...?”

“...?!”

“Huh?” Suddenly feeling a presence behind him, Dalc Horst wheeled around only to find no one there. “That's strange...” he said, looking around with a puzzled frown on his face. “I'm sure there was someone right behind me just a second ago...”

Not far away, Greanyl the shadow demon hid behind the door leading to the staff hallway. She had come by the racing hall after her shift piloting an Enchanted Frigate to cheer on Dalc Horst, and once the race was over she had

come down to the track to bring him a towel. Now, however, she was crouched down, holding the towel she had meant for Dalc Horst over her own face.

D-D-D-D-Did he say “m-m-m-married”?! she thought, blushing furiously up to the tip of her ears, which were currently protruding from behind the towel. *D-D-Dalc Horst wants to m-m-m-marry me?! H-H-H-How could he say something so brazen?!*

It would be a while yet before Greanyl moved from that spot.

◇Naneewa Town—Magic Beast Racing Hall◇

Outside the Naneewa Town Magic Beast Racing Hall stood a smaller building known as the race center. There, race officials performed inspections on racers and their magic beasts, and magic beasts could be bought or sold for participation in the races.

As it happened, not every type of magic beast was permitted to participate in racing hall events. Depending on the race in question, there could be set limits on the weight or ability or species of the magic beasts taking part. For that reason, hopefuls would first have to have their beasts examined and certified at the race center. The center also performed inspections of the magic beasts being put on sale there free of charge, enabling racers to purchase one from the center and take it directly to the races.

Telma the tamer stood in front of the assemblage of magic beasts she had brought to the racing center, grinning from ear to ear. “Well, what do you think?” she asked. “Not a bad bunch of magic beasts, are they?”

The race center official responsible for purchasing magic beasts stared wide-eyed at the bounty Telma had on offer. “N-No kidding...” she said, swallowing in awe at the sight. “These are incredible...”

It was no wonder the official was as shocked as she was. Anyone looking could see that Telma’s magic beasts were in a different league than any of the other tamers’. All around them, other merchants were stealing glances their way, whispering furtively.

“H-Hey... Did you get a load of those magic beasts? Unbelievable, right?”

“That musculature is out of this world...”

“No kidding! Just *look* at those arms...”

Telma’s grin grew even wider as she listened to the merchants gossip about her magic beasts all around her. *Hee hee... I definitely owe Hero Gold-Hair big time for rounding up such high-quality magic beasts!* she thought. *If I can sell these for as much as they’re worth, I might have to pay him an extra gratuity...*

Telma watched, giddy with anticipation, as the staff performed her inspection of the magic beasts, jotting down the pertinent information on official forms.

“Incidentally, Miss Telma, you’re licensed to race as well, aren’t you?” asked the official in charge of her case.

“Oh, yes!” Telma replied, giggling bashfully. “I’m really just a tamer, but I’ve always wanted to try something more exciting... Hee hee!”

“From what I’ve heard,” the official said, “you performed fairly well on your racing qualification exam, didn’t you?”

“No, no, not at all!” Telma demurred. “I just got lucky, you know! Hee hee!”

“So, do you have any magic beasts ready to race right now?” the official asked.

“I-I do, in fact!” Telma told her. “Just a giant runningbird I’ve tamed by the name of Patamon! He’s quite fast, you know!”

“I see...” The official wrote something down on her paperwork before looking back up at Telma. “Well, in that case...”

A scant few hours later, a race was beginning in the Naneewa Town Magic Beast Racing Hall, the stands packed as full as ever with cheering fans.

“Beginning now, the fourth race of the day!” came the announcer’s voice, projected over the racing hall’s magic speakers. On cue, the magic beasts took their places at the starting line, Telma among them.

H-H-How did I end up here...?! Telma thought, her face pale with fright as she held tight to her giant runningbird. Giant runningbirds had wings, but were nonetheless wholly incapable of flight. Instead, they were adapted to run at tremendous speeds on their long and slender legs. *I-I-It doesn’t make any*

sense! I was just making small talk with that official while she performed her inspection, but before I knew it she ended up registering me for a race!

A racing hall assistant showed Patamon the giant runningbird to the starting line, with Telma still pale-faced and trembling on his back. *Fwaaaah...* she thought. *I-Is this really going to happen? I-I'm going to be in a race? B-But I've never done this before in my life!*

Tears welled up in her eyes from sheer stress as a loud bang signaled them to start. One race later, the results were in:

Naneewa Magic Beast Racing Hall, Race Number Four

Giant Runningbird Rider Telma (First Race): Sixteenth Place, of Sixteen

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

It hadn't been long since the Fli-o'-Rys General Store opened for business for the day, but once again the shop floor was full of customers practically as soon as they opened their doors. Today, two women stood outside the shop entrance, peering inside. These two were dressed not in the adventurer style garb typical of Houghtow, but in a military uniform and maid outfit respectively.

"Well, Rau, are you certain this is the place?" said the woman dressed in a soldier's uniform. She had blonde hair and glasses, and was short enough to be mistaken for a child at first glance. "This is the Fli-o'-Rys General Store that has been the topic of so much gossip in our homeland, home to a mage who has mastered the art of synthesizing artificial djinn?"

"Yes sir, Captain Eithutch!" said Rau, the woman dressed as a maid. She was slight of build, with dark brown skin, and had an earnest smile on her face as she held her right hand up in a smart salute. "This is the place, no ifs, ands, buts, sos, fors, or yets about it!"

"I don't think sos, fors, or yets are ordinarily part of that expression..." Eithutch said with a sigh.

"Ack?!" exclaimed Rau, theatrically scratching her head and sticking out her tongue. "Have I misspoken again?" In contrast to her subdued partner, Rau seemed to have a highly excitable personality.

Eithutch sighed once again at Rau's behavior. "You understand our mission, yes?" she said. "We are to make contact with these djinn and ascertain their abilities, without any foolishness, if we can possibly help it. I won't have us doing like Marc and Graf did and getting so distracted by the potions that we forget why we came here in the first place..."

"Yes ser, Captain Eithutch!" said Rau with another salute. "I will investigate this area thoroughly for the glory of the Magic-Industrial State of Gramania, leaving no stone, stain, or stein unturned!"

"What do stains or steins have to do with anything...?" Eithutch let out yet another sigh as she opened the door, heading into the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

"Ahhh!" Rau cried as she hurried along after her into the busy shop floor. "I can't believe I did it again!"

Inside, the shop was noisy with customers.

"Hm..." said Eithutch. "This place is as extraordinary as I've heard."

"They really do have an entire shelf packed full of incredibly refined potions, don't they!" marveled Rau. "It's no wonder or wonder those two forgot about their mission..."

"Rau..." Eithutch said, by this point utterly exasperated. "Enough of that."

"Ack! I keep forgetting!" Rau exclaimed. It seemed this was something of a routine for the two of them.

Eithutch began looking around the store, silent except for the occasional gasp of awe at the extraordinary items on display.

"Captain Eithutch!" Rau said. "May I have one of these roasted meat skewers?" Openly drooling, she was pointing at a stand by the shop window featuring a display of delicious-looking meat skewers.

"Only after we've completed our mission..." Eithutch said, furrowing her brow as she stepped up to the maid, wiping her mouth clean with the back of her hand. "And don't drool."

"Abhff!!!" Rau cried, clutching her head in shame.

Eithutch looked back over her shoulder at her partner as she returned to her examination of the shop. *Now then...* she thought. *Where might these djinn have gotten to?*

As Eithutch made her way through the shop, eventually she stumbled upon a corner in the back where the Fli-o'-Rys General Store stocked its tomes and grimoires. Out of idle curiosity, she took a volume from one of the shelves and began to read.

"Oh?" said Eithutch, looking over the contents with great interest. "What is this...?" After some time she turned the page and continued reading, nodding along to the contents. At first she had taken only a casual interest, but as she read on she found herself more and more fascinated.

Th-This grimoire is extraordinary! Eithutch thought. *I've never encountered this theory of magic before, but it is clearly written by someone with an advanced understanding of the subject, in language that makes it easy to understand. Who is the author? Elinàsze? This is the first I have heard of that name...*

Soon Eithutch was completely absorbed in her reading, until, before she knew it, she had reached the end of the volume. "H-Hm?" she said. "I-Is that it?"

"E-Excuse me...miss?" came a voice from behind her. Eithutch turned around to see Belano dressed in the Fli-o'-Rys staff uniform, complete with apron. "Th-That grimoire is the first in a series... Would you like to see the rest?" she managed, giving Eithutch her best customer service smile.

"Y-Yes!" Eithutch replied, nodding reflexively. "I would quite like that..."

No sooner had the words left her mouth than Belalio appeared at Belano's side, a stack of grimoires piled high in their arms, followed by Minilio carrying yet another stack. All three of them wore near identical polite smiles.

"U-Um..." Belano said. "Th-These are the rest of the series... We currently have up through the fourteenth volume on sale..."

Eithutch adjusted her glasses and reached out to accept the subsequent volume. "Excellent! These grimoires are simply fascinating..."

Several hours later, Eithutch and Rau were on board an Enchanted Frigate,

Eithutch pouring through the grimoires she had purchased with a gleeful smile on her face. “I must say, Rau, this operation was very fruitful.”

Rau, however, was too busy stuffing her face full with skewers of meat to formulate a proper response, instead simply nodding her fervent agreement.

“The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode...” Eithutch mused as she read through page after page of dense magical theory. “I had heard their magic technology was equal to ours in Gramania, but I never would have imagined that they were hiding grimoires like these! Ah ha ha... I will enjoy taking my time with these books once we return to our homeland...”

Hang on... Rau thought, as Eithutch rhapsodized next to her. *Why do I feel like we’re forgetting something important?* She racked her brains in confusion to no avail. “Well, either way, I have these delicious meat skewers, so whatever it was, it doesn’t bother me!” she said, starting on her twenty-first helping.

After returning home, both Eithutch and Rau would get an earful from their commanding officer, but that would be a problem for the next day.

◇Later On—Dogorogma◇

The world of Dogorogma existed far below the Celestial Plane, in a stratum of the cosmos lower in space than Klyrode and the other planetoid worlds that orbited its base. For that reason, it was referred to in cosmology as a “subaltern plane.” The angels and goddesses of the Celestial Plane put Dogorogma to use as a quarantine zone for holding the so-called Beasts of Disaster, a peculiar feature of the planetoid worlds that would appear from time to time, and which were notoriously difficult to permanently vanquish.

“I’m always surprised by how easy it is to connect a Teleportation Portal to Dogorogma,” Flio said, looking back at the magic circle he had stepped out of moments ago. “I suppose there’s only one passage down to the subaltern plane, after all.” *If only it were so easy to open a portal to the world of Palma, where I come from...* he thought to himself. *I would love to be able to show Rys and the children my hometown someday.*

The world of Klyrode was not Flio’s original world of residence, after all. He had been summoned to that world by the order of the former King Klyrode, as

part of his effort to find a human who could serve the role of Hero.

Flio stood on the spot for a moment, thinking to himself, until Rys arrived as well from the portal behind him. “My lord husband!” she said, visibly startling him out of his thoughts. “My lord husband?” Rys repeated. “Is something the matter?”

“O-Oh! No, nothing at all, Rys!” Flio said, smiling his usual easy going smile.

Rys peered searchingly at her husband’s face for a moment before letting the matter drop. “Nothing? Well, then, I’m glad to hear it!” she said, smiling brightly as she took his hand, pulling him forward at a run. “But come, my lord husband, we should hurry on ahead!”

“That’s right!” Flio agreed, jogging after his wife hand in hand. “Ghozal and everyone else will have Teleported on ahead of us. We shouldn’t keep them waiting!”

“By the by...” Rys said, smiling mirthfully as the couple ran. “Did you hear about the brawl Hugi-Mugi and Yorminyt had at the Houghtow College of Magic’s miniature sports festival the other day?”

“I did,” Flio said with a wry smirk. “Although if you believe the College’s official statement, it was only a live combat exhibition between volunteers...”

Belano, who had arrived at the rendezvous point ahead of Flio and Rys, emphatically shook her head. Even now, she seemed to be on the verge of tears.

I remember that day... Flio thought as he took in Belano’s miserable expression. *Not only Belano, but Belalio and Minilio as well all came back on the verge of magic exhaustion from the magic power they had used to keep everyone safe. Belano even lost consciousness entirely...* Smiling knowingly at the memory, he patted Belano gently on the head.

“Papa!” Just then, Flio heard a cheerful voice calling out to him. He turned to see Rylnàsze coming his way, riding on Sybe’s back in his psychobear form. Behind them came the rest of Sybe’s family—Shebe, Sube, Sebe, and Sobe, as well as Tybe, the Bear of Misfortune. Sybe ran up, coming to a stop beside Flio to let Rylnàsze hop down off his back and give Flio a great big hug.

“Hello, Rynàsze,” Flio said. “You made it here ahead of me, I see!”

“I did!” Rynàsze said. “I asked Mister Ghozal to take me along!”

As the two spoke, Tybe walked up to Flio, standing on his hind legs. Between his paws, he was holding on to a creature that resembled a snake.

“Good job, Tybe!” Flio said. “You caught another Tsunchinorko of Tragedy!”

The Tsunchinorko of Tragedy was an extreme rarity even among Beasts of Disaster, so few in number that it was thought to be merely a legend. Tybe, however, had the coveted creature in his arms. He presented it to Flio.

Flio held out his hand, conjuring a magic circle that enveloped the body of the Tsunchinorko of Tragedy before transforming into an impenetrable sphere and returning to Flio’s hand.

“Tybe’s amazing at catching magic beasts, isn’t he?” Rynàsze gushed, causing the Bear of Misfortune to stand up with his back straight, huffing happily at the words of praise.

Flio gave Tybe one of his usual easygoing smiles. “Thank you, Tybe,” he said. “This magic beast’s skin is an important component of our new medicine.”

This new medicine was the basis of the recovery potion he had given the Maiden Queen that was able to cure her even after ordinary potions had lost their effect from overuse. It was the same drug of which Zofina, the disciple of the Celestial Plane, had heard rumors of its development and tried to acquire for her superiors.

“Thanks to Sybe, we have a pretty good number of these,” Flio said, going to stash the sphere containing the Tsunchinorko of Tragedy in his Bottomless Bag. “At this rate, it won’t be long until we can start mass production.”

“No, papa!” Elinàsze objected, running up from behind. She reached out, taking the Tsunchinorko of Tragedy out of her father’s hands. “How many times must I tell you? I can handle the production of our medicine—you can just sit back and relax!”

“But, Elinàsze, you have a lot on your plate too, don’t you?”

“I have no problems with my workload,” Elinàsze declared proudly, resting

her hands on her hips. “After all, I haven’t been flying all over the land meeting with all sorts of people like you do, papa! Researching magic is all I do!”

“I would not boast of that so proudly, Madame Elinàsze,” Hiya said, floating down from the sky above the group. “In some planetoid worlds in the cosmos, women of such proclivities are known by such unkind terms as ‘shut-in,’ or ‘nerd’...”

“Are they?” Elinàsze scoffed. “Or rather, why should I care?”

“Because,” said Hiya, “there is more to a lady’s life than her studies...”

“It doesn’t make a difference whether I’m a lady or not,” Elinàsze replied, unfazed. “I just want to become a master of magic so I can help my papa around the store!”

A complicated expression came over Flio’s face at his daughter’s declaration. *As her father, though, I do wish she’d find a good partner and live a happy life...*

“After all!” Elinàsze continued, lecturing Hiya without a trace of irony. “I have no interest in anyone besides my papa! Understand?”

Truly, Elinàsze was the epitome of a daddy’s girl.

As Flio grimaced at his daughter’s words, Rys took his arm in hers once again. “Elinàsze is quite right, my lord husband,” she said. “You know you’ve been pushing yourself far too hard!”

“H-Have I?” Flio asked. “It isn’t *that* bad, is it?”

“You are! And it is!” Rys insisted, her words brooking no argument. “Today you are to put all of the troubles of Klyrode out of your mind and focus only on relaxing! That’s why we came to Dogorogma, isn’t it? You must at least try to enjoy your vacation as much as *him*.” She pointed towards the lake, where Ghozal sat fishing with his straw hat on his head.

At that very moment, Ghozal’s rod bent forward powerfully. “Hrm!” he grunted. “Look at that force! This one’s gonna be big, Uliminas!”

“I-I like big fish as meowch as the next cat, but look at that bend in meowr rod!” Uliminas said, looking on in distress. “That fish has got to be pawsitively enormeows!”

Ghozal's children Folmina and Ghoro jumped in circles around the couple, celebrating the imminent catch.

"Woow!" Folmina cheered. "It's gonna be big, big, big! Papa Ghozal, you're amazing!"

"Yeah...!" Ghoro concurred. "Papa's amazing...!"

Off to the rear, Balirossa was busy stoking the stone oven to cook Ghozal's catch. "C-Can you even cook a fish that size in this oven, I wonder?" she said, frowning in consternation as she tended diligently to the fire.

Flio gave a tight-lipped smile as he watched Ghozal's family enjoy their vacation. "Well...all right," he said. "I'll try, anyway."

"Don't just try!" Rys said, smiling happily as she pulled him along by the arm. "You must relax to the very best of your ability!"

They traveled on ahead to a spot where a large waterfall came pouring down the cliffs into the lake. On the other side of the fall was the stone mansion Flio had built into the cliff to use as a base on their trips to Dogorogma—their vacation home.

Up on the building's ramparts, they could see Damalynas with her arms outstretched, sending magic power to the gargoyle statues set up on the roof. "Gotta keep the gargoyles maintained or they won't work!" she exclaimed. It was the gargoyles, after all, that protected the building from damage while Flio and his family were away.

The parlor of the mansion was an ideal spot for relaxation, with tables and chairs set up in view of the waterfall from within. Ellie the Maiden Queen sat in one of those chairs, although she was slumped all the way back in her seat and seemed to be sound asleep, if the snores were any indication. Garyl sat next to her, smiling fondly as he watched.

"My, my!" Charun chuckled as she poured a cup of tea for her husband Calsi'im. "Miss Ellie must be very tired, indeed! She fell right to sleep the very moment the aroma of my tea hit her nostrils!"

"Oh ho ho!" Calsi'im laughed in the seat beside her. "Well, that's no surprise!"

Nothing calms the nerves like a cup of your tea, Charun! Why, look at how soundly Rabbitz is sleeping if you have any doubts!”

Rabbitz was indeed quite sound asleep, still holding tight to the top of Calsi'im's skull as she snoozed away, drooling on her father's head...

Flio took a seat at the table, and Rys sat down next to him and nuzzled up close.

“Now, my lord husband,” Rys said with a smile. “For the next two days, you must relax to your heart's content! And...” she added, leaning in to whisper in Flio's ear. “I would be more than delighted for you to take me to bed this evening...” She finished the statement with a playful grin and a kiss on her husband's cheek.

“O-Oh!” said Flio, flustered by the public display of affection. “O-Of course! I'll work hard to meet your expectations!” He shook his head. “Or, I mean...I'll work hard, to not work hard?”

The words elicited a round of amused laughter from the entire room, punctuated by the deafening sound of Ghozal finally landing the enormous fish he had managed to hook.

Afterword

Thank you once again for reading this book!

Level 2 Cheat has gone all the way to volume fourteen. This time, the summer festival from the previous volumes was extended into an entire night market, a sure sign that the world of Klyrode is well and truly at peace. Besides that, we had another magic beast racing hall episode, and finally, some promising developments with Garyl and the Maiden Queen. I hope you're excited to see where things are going between those two lovebirds!

Hero Gold-Hair's episode this time around also brought out his bonds with a certain character. I hope you're excited to see how their relationship continues to develop going forward. The story was chock-full of references to minor characters from past volumes as well. I wonder how many of them you were able to spot!

In other news, the manga adaptation of *Level 2 Cheat* will be releasing its seventh volume at the same time as this book. As the author of the original, I for one couldn't be more excited. My other original manga works, *Otherworld Izakaya: Sawako's Tale of Seizing Prosperity with Slender Arms* (Japanese: *Isekai Izakaya Sawako-san Hosoude Hanjouki*) and *Convenience Store Service in Another World* (Japanese: *Isekai Konbini Omotenashi*) have been going strong as well!

Finally, I would like to thank Katagiri once again for the splendid illustrations, the staff at Overlap Novels, everyone involved in the publication, and, of course, all of you who read this book from the bottom of my heart.

July 2022, Miya Kinojo

Chillin' in Another World

WITH **LV 2**

SUPER CHEAT POWERS


Story by Miya Kinojo

Illustrations by Katagiri

14







“You missed
the most
important
part, Tsuya.
Well, if you
don’t get it,
never mind.
Let’s get
going.”

Name | Tsuya | 8 *

“Hero
Gooold-Hair!
Waaait!”

Name | Hero Gold-Hair | 8 *

Bonus Short Stories

Elinàsze's Grimoire

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Flio's house stood in the outskirts of Houghtow City. It had once been a humble single-story cottage, but after all of the expansions Flio had made to the living space using his magic talents, it was now a large three-story structure, with two basement levels below ground. Not only that, but the interior was enchanted with a spell that permanently enlarged the area inside, making it much more spacious than anyone looking at the building from outside would ever dare suppose.

Behind the main house was a smaller two-story stonework building. It was there that Flio, Elinàsze, Hiya, and the rest performed the research, development, and mass production necessary to create ever more new products to sell at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

In the middle of one of the rooms of the two-story workshop, Elinàsze stood with her index finger pointed upwards. As per usual when she was busy with her research, her hair was done up in a messy ponytail, and she was dressed in plain, unfashionable clothes. A large magic circle was rotating before her eyes, speeding up and slowing down in time with the movement of her finger. She observed the circle for some time before writing something down on a piece of parchment floating in front of her.

"Yes, I see..." she said, nodding in apparent satisfaction. She lowered her hand, and the magic circle vanished. "By altering the influx of magic by twenty percent, we can observe a thirty percent increase in efficacy compared to typical barriers. Hardly a grand discovery, but worth recording, I suppose."

Elinàsze continued to write on the parchment, taking it over to a chair to sit down and review its contents. Then, she placed the parchment down on a nearby table and conjured a new magic circle in front of her. She reached her

hand into the circle itself and rummaged around inside, grabbing hold of a large stack of parchment.

Elinàsze looked down at the stack and let out a low whistle, surprised by how much she had already assembled. “I hadn’t realized I’d written this many pages of my magical research already!” she marveled, adding the newest parchment to the bottom of the stack. She waved a hand and the whole stack floated up into the air. The parchments were enveloped in a bright light, which faded to reveal that the stack had been transformed into a bound volume of text.

“This would be volume 135. I’ve ended up making quite a number of these things, haven’t I...?” Elinàsze mused as she leafed through the freshly made book, reading through the text inside, muttering to herself as she did. “If this book is to be sold, I should add an illustration here...and this section could do with a bit more exposition...”

Each time Elinàsze encountered such a point in the book she would simply wave her hand and the book would be enveloped by light once again, adding text and entire pages to the volume.

The grimoires Elinàsze had written summarizing her research had become the talk of the town not only among the mages of Klyrode Castle, but among demons as well. They were quickly becoming one of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store’s best-selling items. Elinàsze herself, however, didn’t quite understand what all the fuss was about.

“Most of this research is just something I did on my own random whims...” Elinàsze said, frowning to herself as she double checked her newest grimoire. “The idea of it being sold is a bit strange.”

The One Thing Flio Can’t Do

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

Flio’s house stood in the outskirts of Houghtow City. It had once been a humble single-story cottage, but after all of the expansions Flio had made to the living space using his magic talents it was now a large three-story structure, with two basement levels below ground. Not only that, but the interior was

enchanted with a spell that permanently enlarged the area inside, making it much more spacious than anyone looking at the building from outside would ever dare suppose.

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Flio sat in a chair in one of the rooms in the workshop, his arms outstretched. In front of him was a magic circle he had summoned, surrounding a bone sample from a magic beast. He moved his fingers, and with that simple gesture, a portion of it immediately disintegrated and turned into dust.

"A feat worthy of the Exalted One," Hiya remarked, admiration plain on their face as they watched Flio's hands at work. "Only you could fabricate medicinal powder from the bones of a Tsunchinorko of Tragedy with such ease."

"Not at all!" Flio replied, smiling his usual easygoing smile. "I'm sure you could handle this much on your own, couldn't you, Hiya?"

"I could break it apart, perhaps," Hiya said. "But it would be impossible for me to refine it into medicinal powder as you do, Exalted One."

"O-Oh, really...?" As they spoke, Flio gradually reduced all of the remaining bone to a fine powder and placed it in a magic bottle on the desk. "All right," he said, closing the lid of the bottle shut with a satisfied nod. "That should do it for today's portion." With that, he turned to face Hiya. "By the way, Hiya, I've been thinking about what we should call this medicine..."

"Oh?" said Hiya. "Have you at last thought of a suitable name?"

Flio glanced over at the bottle, now full of powdered medicine. "How about...*Super Ultra Extra Effective Healing Medicine Plus?*" he suggested, grinning earnestly. "I think that would make it clear how effective the medicine is, and it would project a friendly image to boot!"

Hiya's face immediately went stiff. *Th-The Exalted One's magical abilities are truly exceptional...* they thought. *But his naming sense can leave something to be desired...*

Hiya could only stare, stiff and unmoving, as Flio eagerly awaited their response with that bright earnest smile on his face. Needless to say, it would be some time yet before the Fli-o'-Rys General Store settled on a name for their newest medicine.

“E-Ellie?!”

◇Houghtow City Outskirts◇

One day, a small group came to the shore of a lake near Houghtow City. Among them was the Maiden Queen of Klyrode, dressed in a white cardigan. It was a private visit, so she was in her Ellie persona, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and a pair of thick-rimmed round glasses to hide her identity from onlookers. “I’ve heard this place was a watering hole for magic beasts...” she said, staring wide-eyed at the sight. “Wasn’t it meant to be a dangerous place to visit?”

“I guess it was at one point!” Garyl said, stepping up beside her and following her gaze to where Rylnàsze, his younger sister, was busy running about at high speed. Running along behind Rylnàsze was Sybe in his psychobear form, followed by the rest of his family, as well as Tybe, the Bear of Misfortune. And behind them, taking up the rear, was a train of magic beasts who lived in the nearby forest. The magic beasts showed no sign of aggression. In fact, it looked to all the world like the only desire in their hearts was to spend a pleasant afternoon playing with Rylnàsze.

“Come along, everyone!” Rylnàsze chirped. “Let’s have some fun!”

“The magic beasts used to be so afraid of my dad and mom that they wouldn’t come close,” Garyl said. “But lately, they’ve been coming by to play with Rylnàsze. Either way, it isn’t dangerous here at all.”

“Incredible...” Ellie said, watching on in disbelief. “I knew how extraordinary Rylnàsze’s taming abilities were, but seeing the evidence before my eyes like this truly beggars belief. I don’t know what else to say...”

“As her big brother, part of me wishes she’d act a bit more like a usual young girl,” Garyl said with a smirk, scratching the tip of his nose. “But running around

having fun with all those magic beasts suits Rynàsze a lot better, don't you think?"

"I suppose it does, when you put it that way," Ellie said, nodding in agreement.

Just then, Wyne leapt into the air, landing right behind Ellie with a huge grin on her face. "Whatcha think you're doing-doing?!" she demanded. "Ellie-Ellie, you gotta play-play too! You came all this way, right? Now hurry up and swim-swim!"

Wyne seized Ellie's cardigan and pulled it forcefully off her body. Fortunately for Ellie's modesty, she *had* come to the lake shore wearing a bikini style swimsuit under her top. Unfortunately, however, Wyne had pulled the cardigan off so forcefully that the straps fastening her bikini top came undone in the process, pulling it cleanly off as well...

?!?!?!?

Ellie mutely opened her mouth, crying out soundlessly as she moved quickly to cover her chest with her hands.

"I-I'm not looking! I'm not looking!" Garyl cried, looking off to the side as his face turned red from the sudden development. "Wyne!" he scolded his sister. "What the heck?!"

"Ah ha ha!" Wyne laughed, running for the lake waving the Cardigan like a flag. Poking out from beneath the fabric, they could just barely make out Ellie's bikini top as well. "Everybody swim-swim!"

It is said that the chase between Garyl and Wyne that followed was the stuff of legends.

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Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers: Volume 14

by Miya Kinojo

Translated by Meteora Edited by Samantha J. Moore

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