

## LET'S OMAKE DEAL

### Part One: Back in My Little Town...

The town of Feldingford lay sprawled out in a small river valley below the hill from which two horses and four riders sat regarding it. Well, actually the two horses couldn't have cared less – they were busy munching on some convenient grass – but the riders were looking at the town with some interest and a variety of emotions. Darkling, on one horse along with Kana, was interested in the fact that the town purportedly had a school with a library that held a selection of arcane books – at least according to Anna, who sat behind Wolfson on the other horse, and who had purportedly attended said school before being sold into slavery. But more immediately, Darkling was trying to wrap his mind around the name of the school.

“It's called *what?*” he asked in disbelief. Darkling was dressed in his usual loose-fitting black shirt and breeches, a wide sash holding the long shirt in place. His katana was thrust through the sash. A gentle breeze ruffled his short, dark hair.

“The Feldingford School for Magical Girls,” Anna repeated brightly. Like Kana, she was wearing a leather vest that laced loosely up the front, and a short leather skirt. Her long brown hair hung down her back, and she looked at the town with large, wistful brown eyes.

“You mean that they train girls to be magic-users?” Darkling inquired.

“No, silly, they train them to be magical girls,” Anna replied, giving him an exasperated look.

“Magical girls,” said Darkling, blankly.

“You know,” Wolfson explained, “ordinary girls who transform into super-powered vehicles of justice.” Wolfson was clad in his black-and-silver shirt and doublet, along with black trousers. He wore his longsword at his hip. His hair was lighter and longer than Darkling's, and he sported a mustache and goatee.

“Uh... yeah,” agreed Anna, a little hesitantly. “I was going to be ‘Magical Girl Apple Blossom’,” she added.

“‘Magical Girl Apple Blossom’,” Darkling repeated.

“Yep!”

“So you think that they'll let us use their library, Chiisai-chan?” Wolfson interjected.

“Hai, Oukami-sama!” Anna replied brightly. “*Onna Shujin* Prescott can be stuffy, but she's basically nice.”

Wolfson looked over to Darkling. “Well, there's nothing for it, then. This is the closest library that we know of, and possibly the easiest to access that might contain the type of lore we're looking for.”

Darkling looked a little unconvinced, but said, “Yeah, I suppose it can't hurt to go look...”

As they started the horses forward and down toward the town, Kana, her long, brown hair adorned with a small braid at either temple, held onto Darkling, a slightly concerned expression in her violet eyes at her private misgivings about going to an all girls' school.

Evening was falling by the time the quartet (sextet if you counted the horses) reached the town itself. They made their way through the narrow streets as the local shops were beginning to close their doors and shutters for the day. It wasn't long, however, before the smell of something cooking slowly tickled their noses.

“I'm hungry, Oukami-sama,” Anna suddenly said.

“Hmmm...” pondered Wolfson as his stomach growled. “Come to think of it, it's been a while since I've eaten, too. What do you think, Dark?”

Darkling paused to consider for a moment. “Well, it's unlikely that we could get something to eat at the school – even if they let us in at this late hour. And whatever's cooking right now *does* smell good.” He glanced at Kana, who was looking back and forth at the adjoining side streets in concern. “What's wrong?” he asked.

Kana lowered her eyes with a blush. “Um... nothing. Just a little *déjà vu*, that’s all.”

Darkling gave her a perplexed look, shrugged, and turned to Wolfson and Anna. “Okay, let’s go eat.”

Anna let out a little cry of delight, and the group started out in search of the source of the savory smell. A short time later, they found themselves in front of a tavern called *The Goblin Belch*. Dismounting, they tethered the horses and went in.

It was packed to the gills. A couple of serving wenches bustled about the place, dropping off food and drinks to the motley assortment of customers, while the barkeep took heed of the orders that were called off to him. The only place to sit was a table that was only occupied by a lone dwarf. Wolfson led the others in that direction.

“Pardon me, Master Dwarf...” he began.

“Oleg,” grunted the dwarf.

“Excuse me?” Wolfson asked in a little confusion.

“Name’s Oleg,” clarified the dwarf.

“Ah,” Wolfson replied. Then he continued, “Well, Oleg, do you mind if we sit here?”

Oleg glanced at Wolfson and Darkling with a frown, noticed the two girls, and immediately recanted his initial reaction. “Go ahead.”

The group sat around the table and Wolfson inquired of Oleg, “Do you come here often?”

“Yep.” Oleg took a pull off of his mug.

“What do you recommend for good eating?”

“Minced wallaby pie.”

“Minced... wallaby... pie,” Darkling said, trying to be sure that he had heard correctly.

“Ask for extra radish pâté,” Oleg explained. “You’ll hardly taste the wallaby.”

“Right,” said Wolfson. “Beef stew it is.”

Catching the attention of one of the wenches, Wolfson ordered for the group, asking for an extra mug of ale for Oleg.

Anna finally asked, “Oleg-san, why are you so short?”

Oleg gave her a funny look. “I’m a dwarf.”

“Really?” Anna’s brown eyes were as big as saucers.

“No,” said Oleg in exasperation. “I’m an elf.”

“Really?” Anna’s eyes got even bigger, if that were possible.

“Is she for real?” Oleg asked Wolfson.

“He’s a dwarf,” Wolfson clarified to Anna.

“Wow! I’ve never seen a real live dwarf before!” Anna enthused.

“Still haven’t,” Oleg commented. “I’m dead.”

Anna gave him a cross look. “You’re picking on me, aren’t you.”

“It’s unusual to see one of the Mountain Folk away from their halls,” Darkling interjected. “What brings you here?”

“Had to leave,” explained the dwarf.

“Slew some kin, or something like that?” asked Darkling.

“Nope. Stripper fell in love with me,” Oleg replied.

“Huh? What’s so bad about that?”

“Ever seen a naked dwarf woman?” asked Oleg.

“Uh... no...” Darkling admitted.

“Scary.” Oleg gave a shudder.

“Uh... then, how do you guys... you know... reproduce?” Darkling inquired.

“Very dark rooms and lots of fumbling around,” explained the dwarf.

The serving wench showed up with the food and drink, and everyone fell to eating. Wolfson finally spoke up. “Where’s a good place to stay the night?” he asked Oleg.

“Inside,” Oleg replied.

“Eh?” Wolfson said in confusion.

“Feldingford’s got a slasher cutting people up at night. Ain’t safe to be out after dark,” Oleg explained. The two girls let out soft little cries and huddled up close to their respective masters. “Three dead so far in the last month,” the dwarf went on.

“Great,” said the two heroes.

“Well,” commented Darkling to Wolfson, “I guess that *definitely* rules out going and chatting up Mistress Prescott tonight.”

“Be kinda hard anyway.” Oleg finished off his drink. “She was the first victim.”

**Next: Funny Meeting You Here...**

## Part Two: Funny Meeting You Here...

Many of the evening's diners at *The Goblin Belch* had already finished their meals and quit the place, so it had quieted down considerably. Which was not to say that it was quiet – just not as noisy as when Wolfson, Darkling, Kana and Anna had entered the place. At the moment, however, all of their attention was fixed on the expatriate dwarf, Oleg, and what he had to say.

Oleg wiped his mouth with his sleeve, opened it, and belched loudly.

Silence fell upon the table again.

Finally, Wolfson inquired, “Are you sure we’re talking about the same person? *The Mistress Prescott* that runs the Feldingford School for Magical Girls?”

“Yep,” Oleg confirmed. “Used to come in all the time. Liked to knock back shots of whiskey. Quite a drinker.”

Anna let out a little whimper, and Wolfson put his arm around her shoulder.

“Came in about a month back,” the dwarf continued. “Same as usual. Never made it home. Found her the next morning...” He cast an eye at Anna, who was wide-eyed, with big tears streaming down her cheeks. “Uh... I’ll skip the details,” he finished.

“Damn!” Darkling said. “That’s going to put a crimp in our plans, I’m sure.”

“No, it won’t,” Wolfson said, reasonably. “We’re no worse off than we were before. We’ll just do as we were, and go to the school in the morning to ask if we can borrow the use of their library.”

“But we have no connection now,” protested Darkling. “At least Anna knew—” He noticed that Wolfson was looking at him rather levelly. “Right. I’m shutting my mouth now.”

“The immediate problem,” continued Wolfson, “is where to stay the night. Oleg... do they have any rooms in this place, by any chance?”

“Might,” answered the dwarf. “I camp here. Stay in the cellar, though. Kinda reminds me of home.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” Wolfson decided. He gave Anna a small kiss on the forehead and got up to go speak with the barkeep.

“Are *you* okay?” Darkling asked Kana.

“Yes, oniichan,” she told him.

Oleg stared at them. “Your *sister’s* your slave?” he asked Darkling, dubiously.

“Uh... no... It’s not like that at all,” Darkling stammered. He hissed quietly to Kana, “You’re not supposed to call me that in public!”

She blushed and looked down. “I’m sorry, Kurai-sama.”

“Ain’t gonna ask,” Oleg sighed. “Bed time for me. Thanks for the brew.” He got up and tromped off toward the back of the tavern.

A moment later, Wolfson returned and informed the rest of the group that they could indeed stay there, but that the only available place was a loft up in the attic. On the bright side, they wouldn’t be charged, seeing as they were paying customers. That was all that was necessary to convince Darkling, and so the four of them made their way upstairs, and then up a rickety ladder to the attic loft.

The four slept fitfully, dreams filled with shadows lurking in the night. More than once, Anna’s squirming and softly crying out in her sleep awakened Wolfson. She was curled up against him, and would only calm down after he stroked her hair for a while and spoke quietly and soothingly to her. Darkling, snuggled up with Kana, noted that she seemed restless. But in those moments when he was awakened by her movements, and he was sure that she was awake, she didn’t say anything, and they would eventually drift back into uneasy sleep.

The horses, on the other hand, having been tended to by the tavern’s staff, slept soundly, and only dreamt of large buckets of oats.

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The next morning found them standing in front of a large mansion that was fronted by a gilt-lettered sign proclaiming it to be ‘The Feldingford School for Magical Girls’. Ornate brass knockers adorned the mansion’s double doors. Wolfson and Darkling stood staring at the huge, oaken doors, Anna behind Wolfson and Kana behind Darkling.

“Well,” Wolfson said as he reached for one of the knockers, “nothing for it but to try.” He rapped loudly on the door.

After several minutes, one of the doors opened to reveal a lovely girl, perhaps a little older than Kana, dressed in a French maid’s outfit. It certainly did nothing to hinder the curves of her body, or hide the pleasing shape of her legs. Her long, auburn hair hung freely down to the small of her back, and she regarded Wolfson and Darkling for the barest of moments with pretty brown eyes before saying, “I’m sorry, we don’t give to charities.”

“Uh... Well, actually—” Wolfson began.

“Ohayou, Misao!” Anna interrupted brightly, poking her head out from behind Wolfson’s back.

“Anna-chan?” Misao said in surprise. “What are *you* doing here? I thought you were sold into slavery, or something.”

“Hai!” Anna confirmed. “But my new master, Oukami-sama – he’s *real* cool, and he’s awful nice, too – he wants to use your library.”

“Uh...” Misao was still a little bewildered.

“Oh,” Anna added. “And his friend, Kurai-sama, wants to use it, too.”

Misao appraised the two adventurers. “Well, it’s usually not open to the public...”

Anna put her hands together and looked at Misao with puppy dog eyes. “Ple-e-e-ase!”

Misao smiled and said, “Well, since they’re kinda cute, I’m game. But I’ll have to ask the headmistress.”

There were four looks of confusion, and Darkling said, “But I thought the Headmistress was... uh...”

“They just hired a new one a week ago. Please wait here.” And she closed the door.

As they waited, Darkling felt Kana’s eyes on his back. He turned around and saw her frowning at him. “What?” he asked in confusion.

“Couldn’t we find *another* library, oniichan?” she suggested.

“Why?” Darkling inquired.

“Maybe in a logging camp or some place like that?” she tried.

“Huh?”

Kana sighed. “Never mind.” But she continued looking at him as if he’d just kicked a dog, or something.

*Women*, Darkling thought. *I’ll never understand them*. He gave up and went back to watching the doors.

More time passed, and Wolfson, who had been thinking, turned to Anna. “Chiisai-chan...”

“Hai, Oukami-sama?”

“Wasn’t Misao in the same bishoujo game that you were in?” he asked.

“Hai, Oukami-sama!”

“Uh... How did that come about?” Wolfson inquired.

“Oh, that’s easy,” Anna answered brightly. “See—”

At that moment, the door opened up again and Misao said, “The Mistress says that she’ll speak with you.”

Misao led the four of them into a lavishly appointed foyer. It was plain to see that the school had plenty of money invested in it. Darkling wondered idly why they didn’t bother contributing to charities. As they

crossed the foyer, a large, fat, orange tabby cat looked up at them lazily from a plush cushion on a mahogany chair. The tabby's green eyes clearly indicated that all this noise had disturbed its sleep.

To the side of the foyer was a sturdy door with a bronze plaque that read 'Headmistress'. Misao knocked lightly on the door, and then opened it, indicating that the group should enter. She gave Anna a friendly smile as they went in. "See you later," she whispered to her.

The Headmistress' office was plush, but not so lavishly done as the foyer. Heavy velvet drapes were pulled back to allow light to seep in through the huge bay window at the back of the room. A moderate-sized oak desk was in front of the window, and the Headmistress was seated behind the desk on a comfortable, overstuffed chair.

The Headmistress was dressed in a rather provocative, blue, renaissance-style gown that showed plenty of cleavage. Needless to say, she was young enough and attractive enough to wear it well. Her brown hair framed her face and fell loosely around her shoulders as she regarded the group with expressive blue eyes.

Wolfson, Darkling, Anna and Kana stared. Kana began to feel the rest of her personal ghosts materialize. Darkling was astounded at what seemed to be an impossibility to him. Wolfson was amazed at the way fate sometimes played its hand. Anna was just confused.

Kana gripped the back of Darkling's shirt as the headmistress smiled and said, "How interesting to see you all again."

"Yumi?" all four exclaimed.

**Next: Like Lambs to the Slaughter...**

### Part Three: Like Lambs to the Slaughter...

For a moment, nothing stirred in the headmistress's office. Yumi sat behind her desk, smiling at the four travelers. Wolfson stood with his arms folded across his chest and an ironic smile of his own, while Anna perched just to the side of him with her head slightly cocked to one side. Kana hovered behind Darkling, clutching at the back of his shirt, wearing a worried expression. Darkling stood frowning at Yumi for a moment, and was the first one to break the tableau as his hand moved to the hilt of his katana, his eyes darting narrowly about the room.

"Right," he said. "Where's Yuta, then? I've got a score to settle with that prick."

Yumi lost her smile for a moment. "Why would I have anything to do with *that* disgusting cockroach?"

Darkling gave her an accusing look. "But you—"

"Yumi had a change of heart," Wolfson interjected. "I guess I forgot to mention that bit."

Darkling scowled at Wolfson. "Uh... yes. That would have been a good thing to know. Dare I ask how *that* came about?"

"I saw Yuta for what he was," Yumi explained. "Besides, your Wolfson has *far* more charm."

"And he's *cooler*, too," added Anna.

"Uh... yes, I suppose so," Yumi agreed.

"But then how did you end up *here*?" Darkling asked, still not quite convinced.

"Public Transit," Yumi replied. "Carriages are a *very* convenient way to travel."

"No," said Darkling, with some exasperation. "I mean, how did you end up in charge of this school?"

"Oh. Well, when I arrived here a couple of weeks ago, I heard that there had been an incident involving the former headmistress, and that the position was currently unfilled. So I submitted my résumé to the Board of Trustees, and managed to convince them that I could do the job. I've been Headmistress for a week now."

"It only took a week for them to decide?" Darkling exclaimed in disbelief. "Committees and bureaucracies *never* move that quickly."

"Well, this *is* a fantasy setting," Wolfson reminded him.

"Ah," Darkling replied.

"But Misao tells me that you wish to use the school's library," Yumi said, changing the topic to business.

"Yes," Wolfson admitted. "That's pretty much why we're here."

"I'm afraid," sighed Yumi, "that the library is not supposed to be for public use."

"Awww!" Anna groaned.

"However," interrupted Yumi, "I *am* willing to make you a deal."

"What *kind* of deal?" asked Darkling, suspiciously.

"Right after I started here," Yumi explained, "the school's guardian, Master Totman, went out looking for the Feldingford Slasher. I gather that the old guy was rather fond of the late Mistress Prescott, and wanted to exact a little vigilante justice."

"And...?"

"I guess he found his man," Yumi continued. "We found what was left of Master Totman just outside the school grounds the next morning. From what I understand, he was the third victim. It was bad timing, because the girls have become spooked... They've reported that they've heard noises at night and seen something moving outside of their windows."

"So what are you proposing?" asked Wolfson.

“That you two act as security to the school for the duration of the crisis. That way, you’ll technically be ‘employees’ of the school, and can therefore access the library without breaking any rules.”

Darkling and Wolfson looked at each other, and then looked back at Yumi. “What’s the catch?” Darkling asked.

“You have to reside at the school,” Yumi pointed out.

Darkling and Wolfson looked at each other, and then looked back at Yumi. “Not much of a problem there,” Wolfson stated. “Anything else?”

“The girls have to stay in a separate room,” she said.

“*What?*” cried Anna and Kana.

“That sucks,” pouted Anna.

“Those are the rules,” Yumi explained. “Men and women aren’t allowed to share rooms within the school.”

Kana was shaking, and cried, “No! You just want to get my Kurai-sama alone!”

Yumi glared at her. “Oh, don’t bust a kidney, Kana. It wouldn’t be good for you. Besides, I find Wolfson more interesting than your Darkling. Now, are you going to play ball so that they can use the library, or are you going to turn this into a catfight?”

Kana was still infuriated, but Darkling pulled her off to the side. Embarrassed by her outburst, Kana looked down at the floor. Darkling lifted her chin up with his hand so that he could look her in the eyes.

“You don’t have anything to worry about, Kana-chan. I’m not too keen on Yumi, either,” he told her.

“I’m sorry, oniichan,” she whispered.

“Just try not to stress, okay? Hopefully this won’t take very long, and we can be back on the road, where things will be more or less normal.”

“Yes, oniichan,” she replied.

They returned to the group, and Darkling nodded to Wolfson. Wolfson turned back to Yumi and said, “All right. We’ll do it.”

“Oh! Oh! *Onna Shujin!*” cried Anna, raising her hand.

“Huh?” Yumi was a little startled. “What is it?”

Anna put her hands behind her back and looked at Yumi with big eyes. “Um... While we’re here, could I sit in on the classes?”

“Uh... In order to attend classes here, you must be registered as a student,” Yumi explained.

“But I *am!*” Anna insisted. “I was a student here before my parents sold me.”

“Oh. But the rules require that you have to have the appropriate attire for—”

“I bet Misao still has my stuff!” Anna chimed in, brightly.

“Oh.” Yumi seemed a little bewildered by Anna’s assault. “Well, as long as I can find your file, and you can find your clothes, then I suppose that there’s no real problem...”

Anna smiled. “Thank you, *Onna Shujin!*” Then she turned and grabbed Kana’s hand and started dragging her out of the room. “Come on, Kana-chan! Let’s find Misao so we can find our room and my stuff!”

Mildly protesting, Kana was pulled out of the room. Yumi stood up and approached Wolfson and Darkling.

“Now,” she said, “I suppose I’d better introduce you to the students and faculty, so that there will be no surprises. This way, please...”

The three of them walked back through the foyer, which hadn’t changed much – except that the tabby appeared to have gone off to some other place – and then went down a long gallery which was filled with



paintings. They mostly appeared to be of previous Headmistresses. The gallery ended at a series of doors, one of which Yumi stopped at and opened.

As they entered the room, a rather pretty brunette with winsome green eyes was addressing a class of nine teenage girls. She was dressed conservatively in a lavender tunic with white trousers tucked into leather boots. The students, on the other hand, were uniformly dressed in short-sleeved white blouses with red bows at the neck, and short plaid skirts that seemed barely capable of covering any panties that they might be wearing. Wolfson and Darkling immediately sensed where they might begin having problems.

“And does anyone know the proper protocol for dealing with a Mysterious Masked *Bishounen*, should one show up?” the instructor was asking.

Nine pairs of eyes had already drifted in the direction of the doorway where Yumi, Wolfson and Darkling had entered. “Excuse me, Mizuho-sensei,” Yumi said, “but I need to interrupt for a moment in order to introduce a couple of people.”

“Of course, *Onna Shujin*.” Mizuho deferred to Yumi.

Yumi proceeded to introduce Wolfson and Darkling to the girls as the new guardians of the school. For the most part, the two heroes felt very much like a pair of salamis hung out in a delicatessen that had just opened in a famine-ridden corner of the world. *Well, perhaps I'm overreacting*, thought Wolfson, as eighteen eyeballs bounced back and forth between him and Darkling. *Maybe I feel more like a science experiment...*

After the brief spectacle was over, Yumi said to the pair, “Now, let me show you around the rest of the facilities, so you'll know where you'll be staying, and where to find things.”

As they exited the classroom, Yumi leaned over to Wolfson and whispered, “And if you have sex with *any* of the other girls, you'd *better* have sex with *me*...”

**Next: Let the Games Begin...**

## Part Four: Let the Games Begin...

The afternoon sunlight streamed through the brocade curtains that hung over the window of the comfortably furnished room that would serve as home for Darkling and Wolfson for the next little while. Wolfson sat on an ornately carved, dark wood chair, and applied a whetstone to his longsword. Darkling stood and regarded a painting of a wooded landscape.

“Well, what do you think?” Wolfson asked.

“The auburn-haired girl sitting in the front was pretty cute,” Darkling replied.

“Sanae.” Wolfson filled in the girl’s name.

“Oh, that’s right... I guess all of these girls were in that one game.”

“It seems so,” Wolfson agreed. “But I was actually asking about the current situation.”

“Ah,” Darkling replied. “Well, Yumi aside, I suppose things could be worse... I mean, what are the odds of the Feldingford Slasher actually breaking *in* here, or something?”

Wolfson cocked an eyebrow and looked at his younger companion. “It’s us, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. I suppose that means if he comes lurking around outside, we’ll be out in the dark chasing after him.”

“Oh, well,” sighed Wolfson. “At least we can check out the library and see what we can find.”

There came a knock at the door, and it suddenly flew open to admit an excited Anna and, a moment later, a somewhat less-enthused Kana. Anna had traded in her leather outfit for the school’s uniform: blouse, bow and exceedingly short skirt, although she still wore the leather collar that marked her as a slave.

She stopped in front of Wolfson, and posed with outstretched arms. “How do I look, Oukami-sama?”

Wolfson thought she looked cute, although his eyes kept being drawn to the portion of legs between the knee-high socks and the skirt that barely passed the panties he hoped she was wearing. He swallowed hard and said, “Uh... you look great, Chiisai-chan!”

Anna hopped up and down, clapping her hands, which afforded Wolfson (and anybody else who cared to notice) a brief glimpse and a confirmation that she was indeed wearing a pair of white panties. “This is going to be so *fun*!”

“This is going to be so *boring*,” Kana said unenthusiastically. “I have absolutely nothing to do.”

“Oh!” Anna looked at Kana.

“Actually,” interjected Wolfson, “you could probably help us research in the library.”

“Really?” Kana’s violet eyes shone. “You mean read? The books?”

“That’s probably not a bad idea,” Darkling agreed. “There’s going to be a lot of information to sift through just to find the sort of thing we’re looking for.”

Kana smiled. “This *is* going to be fun.”

“*Nyan!*”

Everyone looked at Anna. “‘Nyan’?” Wolfson inquired. “Are you okay?”

“That wasn’t me.” Anna pointed behind her. “It was Futotta.”

Wolfson looked and saw the large orange tabby sitting behind Anna and looking back at him with bright green eyes. Apparently it had followed the girls into the room. “The cat is named Futotta?”

“That’s what Misao said,” Anna told him.

“Ah,” Wolfson replied. “Well, we’ve got a little time before we have to start patrolling the halls... Shall we start our research?”

With degrees of motivation ranging from high (Darkling and Kana) to low (Anna), the group set off to the library.

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Night was falling, and the four investigators had met with little success. For one thing, the library was huge. For another, there didn't seem to be any pattern as to how the books were organized. Anna wasn't contributing much. She was sitting at one of the tables with her head resting on her hand, while watching Wolfson with a rather bored expression. Her legs were swinging restlessly under the large chair. Kana, on the other hand, was enjoying herself immensely, although the book that she was immersed in had nothing to do with amulets or Zarstat – both of which were what Wolfson and Darkling were really after. Those two, for their part, had been pulling out books, skimming the contents, and then returning them to the shelves if they seemed impertinent, which pretty much accounted for all the books that they had examined so far. Futotta just slept on one of the tables.

As it became too dark to read, Darkling complained, “This is going to take forever.”

“Well, it's not like we have to accomplish it in one day,” Wolfson said, reasonably. “We're likely to be here for a little while.”

“I suppose. And I also suppose we should grab something to eat and start our watch.”

“True enough,” Wolfson agreed. “Chiisai-chan, make sure you two get something to eat, and then stay in your room, where it's hopefully safe.”

“Hai, Oukami-sama!” Anna replied, and pulled the reluctant Kana out of the library, saying, “Let's eat, Kana-chan!”

“What do you think?” Wolfson asked, turning to Darkling. “Patrol together or separately?”

“We can keep an eye on more ground if we separate,” Darkling decided. “I'm pretty sure both of us can yell plenty loud if there's a real problem.”

“Fair enough,” agreed Wolfson. “Then let's go eat as well, and then hope it's a quiet night.”

It was night, and all was quiet in the Feldingford School for Magical Girls. A few oil lamps burned in the hallways to provide a slight amount of illumination, so Darkling could see where he was going, although the eerie shadows played tricks on his eyes. On the other hand, the thick carpet allowed him to move quietly with no effort. Occasionally he passed a window that allowed the moonlight to bathe him in its faint glow.

The girls had all retired to their rooms for the night, and Misao had finished with her work, so the hallways were empty. Apparently each student had her own room, so there wasn't even the sound of girls chatting, although Darkling supposed that occasionally they visited each other. He idly wondered what room Kana was staying in. *It might be kind of nice to drop in and see her*, he thought.

One of the doors abruptly opened, and Darkling instinctively stepped back into a shadow. A cute girl stepped out of the room. She was only about ten centimeters shorter than Darkling, and her hair was dark – apparently dyed a deep hue of red that made it look almost purple – and hung just to her shoulders. She was wearing a white linen shift, and appeared to be carrying something heavy in her right hand. Darkling relaxed a bit and resumed walking.

At Darkling's sudden appearance, the girl noticed him with a start and let out a little squeal. She swung the object that she was carrying with a fury, and it impacted Darkling on the side of the head with a loud *spang!* It appeared to be a bed-warmer with a long handle.

“Ow!” Darkling grimaced at the sudden pain.

“Fiend!” the girl cried, punctuating it with another blow from the bed-warmer. *Spang!*

“Ow!” repeated Darkling. “Hey!”

“Pervert!” *Spang!* “Molester!” *Spang!* “Peep—”

Darkling managed to grab the errant bed-warmer before the next impact. “Stop it!” he interjected. Several doors had already opened up, curious faces peering out to see what was going on. “I'm supposed to be here to *protect* you!”

“Then why are you jumping out at girls in the dark?” the girl asked indignantly, trying to wrestle the bed-warmer away from Darkling’s unrelenting grip.

“That’s not what I was *trying* to do. And *you’re* just jumpy. What are you doing carrying this thing around for, anyway?” The other girls went back into their rooms.

“Just in case I run into someone nasty while I’m trying to go to the privy.” She glared at Darkling.

“Oh, for crying out loud. Put it back under your bed, and I’ll escort you to the ladies’,” he said in annoyance.

She looked at him suspiciously. “You aren’t planning on trying something *weird*, are you?”

“Like what?”

“Like watching me pee.”

Darkling sighed. “I’m not into that sort of thing,” he said in exasperation. “Hurry up.”

As she deposited her implement of destruction, Darkling rubbed the new bruises on his head. Then they quietly walked down the hallway to where the nearest guarderobe was located, and Darkling waited while she took care of business.

On the way back, however, she suddenly said, “You’re the one that *Onna Shujin* said was ‘Kurai-san’, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Darkling replied. “And I’m guessing that you’re Kazumi.”

She stopped up short in surprise. “How did you know?”

“I played the bishoujo game that you were in.”

Her purple eyes opened wide, and her hands flew up to her mouth, which also opened wide. “Oh my god!” she cried. “That means you’ve seen me—” She suddenly turned and ran down the hallway, disappearing into her room. Darkling heard the door slam shut.

Darkling sighed and rubbed his head again. *This is going to be a long gig*, he thought. *But she is cute...*

Downstairs, Wolfson prowled through other silent hallways. He knew that the students had their rooms upstairs, and that only Misao and Yumi kept quarters down here, so he expected things to be relatively quiet, although he suspected that Kana and Anna were also down here somewhere, since they weren’t students – at least officially. The thought of Anna in her school uniform sent a little thrill through him. *Better keep my mind on business*, Wolfson thought.

The sound of a door opening and closing reached Wolfson’s ears. As he moved to investigate, he was somewhat surprised to see an attractive girl coming toward him down the dimly lit hallway. She was perhaps half a head shorter than Wolfson, and was toweling off her long, honey-colored hair, which hung in damp locks down to the small of her back. Her green satin nightshirt clung to her shapely body and left her long, tan legs bare.

Wolfson stopped, moonlight shining through a window illuminating the side of his face, as the girl drew abreast of him and spoke. “*Konban wa*, Oukami-san.”

Thinking back a bit, Wolfson responded. “If memory serves me correct, you are Kanami?”

She stopped and tilted her head a little to the side. Wolfson could just make out the golden color of her eyes in the moonlight. “How did you know that?” she asked.

“You were in a game with Anna-chan,” he explained.

“Oh, yeah.” Kanami looked thoughtful. “I heard she’s your slave, or something.”

“Well... yes. That’s how it’s ended up working out.”

Kanami regarded Wolfson for a moment and then asked, “Do you have sex with her?”

“Huh?” Wolfson wasn’t sure how to respond to that one.

“I mean do you fuck her? Or does she give you blow jobs? That sorta thing.”

“Uh... I know what you *mean*,” Wolfson said, finding himself a little embarrassed. “I’m just surprised that you’d *ask* about something like that.”

“It was just something that I was kinda thinking about,” Kanami explained. “I mean, if *I* was your slave, *I’d* probably give you blow jobs.”

Wolfson found his body reacting to just the thought. “Uh... sure... That is... uh... Why were you thinking about that?”

Kanami looked a little wistful. “Well, the game we were in kinda got me interested in sex, you know? And then we came back here, and we never get to see any guys. But then you two showed up, and you’re kinda cute, so...”

“I see,” Wolfson said. *This could be a very interesting predicament*, he thought.

Kanami’s eyes drifted past him and she let out a little shriek. Suddenly, Wolfson found himself with a pleasant armful of slightly damp and rather curvy female. Although it felt good, he quickly looked over his shoulder to see what might have set Kanami off.

He caught just a glimpse of a shadowy figure darting out of sight from outside the moonlit window.

**Next: And for My Next Trick...**

## Part Five: And for My Next Trick...

Try as they might, Wolfson and Darkling were unable to find any sign of the intruder with only the light of the moon to go by. It was as if he had vanished into the night. Of course, whoever he was, he had gotten plenty of a head start before the two of them were able to really get a search going. Wolfson decided he would have to go out by the light of day and look for potential clues.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully and, as dawn came around and the school began stirring, the two adventurers stumbled off to bed in order to catch a few hours of much-needed rest. Research in the library would just have to wait until the afternoon.

When they awoke, it was around lunch time, but they decided to bathe first, since the bath would be unoccupied at this time of day. Of course, it occurred to them that it might be more interesting to use the bath while it was occupied, but they figured that might just lead to problems.

The bath was a large sunken pool that was downstairs, with an adjoining fixture for showering off before stepping in. Judging by its size, it was obviously meant to be used by several people at once, after the fashion of public baths. Darkling and Wolfson soaped up, took turns rinsing off, and then stepped into the pool, finding that the water was a comfortable temperature.

“Oooh!” said Darkling.

“Ahhh!” agreed Wolfson.

At that moment, the door to the bath opened up and Misao came strolling in with a cheerful smile. “Do you two have everything you need?”

The two adventurers more or less gurgled incoherently as they covered their naughty bits.

“You should have said something. I could have come in and scrubbed your backs for you.” She thought for a moment. “Oh. But then I probably would have had to take *my* clothes off, too.” She smiled again. “But then I suppose one of you could have scrubbed *my* back. Well, just call if you need extra towels or anything.” And she breezily left the room, closing the door behind her.

Wolfson and Darkling stared at the door for a moment, and Wolfson finally asked, “Do you get the impression that guys just don’t come around this place often enough?”

Thinking back to the night before, Darkling replied, “I don’t know... Mostly I just seem to be getting impressions.”

“I’m thinking,” said Wolfson, after some thought, “that after we grab some food, you can go ahead and start in with the books. I’m going to go outside and have another look at the grounds to see if I can find anything that last night’s visitor may have left behind.”

“Sounds fine to me,” Darkling agreed. “I just hope we have better luck today.”

The courtyard to the rear of the mansion was lit by the afternoon sun but shaded by several trees. Shrubs and flowers were placed here and there in a manner intended to be pleasing to the eye. Wolfson examined the area that he estimated to be near the window where he and Kanami had been standing the night before, but still wasn’t able to find anything save a single boot imprint in the dirt. It didn’t tell him much except that someone had definitely been there.

The sound of a guitar producing a jarring chord suddenly broke the silence, causing Wolfson to start a bit. Looking back into the garden, Wolfson saw a girl with short black hair, wearing the school’s uniform and leaning against a tree. She had a guitar in her lap, and proceeded to wrench another jarring sound out of it.

He strode over to her. “Uh... Ayumu, right?”

She looked up at him with large, dark eyes. “Huh? Yeah. How did you know?”

Wolfson sighed. “I played the bishoujo game.”

“Oh. That. Well, it was a way to raise money, I guess.” Ayumu looked a little embarrassed.

“Uh... What are you doing?” Wolfson asked.

“Practicing.”

“I see,” Wolfson said, thinking that was definitely a good idea.

“I’m going to be a bard.”

“Ah,” Wolfson replied, thinking that was definitely a bad idea.

“I’ve got a song,” she went on. “Want to hear?”

For a moment, Wolfson wondered if he could find a diplomatic way to say “no”, and run away very quickly, but before he could come up with a plan, Ayumu started in with another jarring chord, and then began to sing with a voice that would have done credit to Bob Dylan:

*“Thou dissembling wretch, thou art a fucking asshole!  
Thou hast left mine heart as dead as road kill!  
Thou didst say thy love was mine most verily,  
But thou didst only want to take my cherry!”*

Then, in another tribute to Dylan, she stuck a kazoo into her mouth and started in with a cacophonous solo, accompanied by jarring strums on her guitar. When she was finished, she asked, “What do you think?”

“It brings tears to my eyes,” answered Wolfson, honestly.

“Cool,” Ayumu said, fortunately missing the point. “Can you play?”

“A little,” Wolfson admitted.

She nodded and held out the guitar to him. Wolfson sighed and sat down across from her as he took the instrument. Ayumu sat up on her knees, looking at him expectantly with her dark eyes.

“Your song *does* remind me of a little piece I once wrote,” Wolfson said as he checked the tuning on the guitar. “Here’s part of it, anyway.” He strummed a chord, and then began delicately picking out a melancholy tune. Then he sang, in a rough but pleasant tenor:

*“Come, fair lady, bind me in chains. Let me now feel passion’s sweet pain.  
Holdest thou mine heart in thine hand, to live or die at thy command.  
My heart cries for thy sighs; I could die in thine eyes.  
I shall be ever thy fool.  
Come, fair lady, bind me in chains. Let me now feel passion’s sweet pain.”*

As he finished, Ayumu’s eyes were shining. “Wow!” she breathed. “And you can use a sword, too?”

“Uh... yeah.” Wolfson handed the guitar back to Ayumu, and she cradled it in her arms.

“I bet you can do magic, too, huh?”

“Well...” Wolfson hedged. “I don’t know if I’d call it ‘magic’, *per se*...”

“Oh my god!” she enthused. “You’re an actual bard!”

“Uh... I don’t know if I’d go *that* far...”

“Teach me, sensei!” Ayumu pleaded.

Wolfson gave her a funny look. “Aren’t you supposed to be studying to become a magical girl?”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “*Everyone* is doing that. I mean, I’ve got a cool name and all – ‘Magical Girl Lotus Blossom’ – but no one’s going to get *anywhere* unless they get an animal companion.”

“Huh?”

“In order to become a magical girl,” Ayumu explained, “you have to have an animal who tells you what to do.” A bell chimed in the mansion, and she looked disappointed. “I’ve got to go back for afternoon class. But you’ve *got* to teach me, sensei.” She jumped up and ran back inside with her guitar and kazoo.

“Oh, boy,” Wolfson sighed to himself.

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In the library, Darkling felt that he was on a futile search through endless books. Kana was nearby, happily reading after having finally escaped from doing chores with Misao all morning. Yumi had put her to work so that she'd be 'technically employed by the school' and therefore eligible to use the library. Kana hadn't liked that at all.

Suddenly, an energetic, short young girl, with strawberry-blonde hair that was tied up in ribbons, burst into the room, school uniform fluttering around her. "Kei-sama!" she exclaimed happily.

"Wha?" Darkling looked up in confusion.

"You're our protector, right?" She sat down across from Darkling.

"I suppose so..." he replied.

"So you're our Kei-sama!" she explained cheerfully.

"And *you've* got to be Nanase," Darkling guessed.

"Yep!" She gestured downward. "That's an interesting sword you've got, Kei-sama."

"Uh... it works for me." Darkling tried going back to his book.

"Do you use it often?"

"As often as necessary."

Nanase tilted her head to one side. "It seems kind of long."

Darkling cast her a funny look. "It works for me."

"Why does Oukami-san's seem to be so much thicker than yours?"

There was a long pause as Darkling stared at her. "We *are* talking about my katana, right?"

Nanase giggled. "Oh, Kei-sama, you're so cute..."

Suddenly, Darkling realized that Kana had sidled up next to him and was snuggling against his arm. He looked at her and saw that she was gazing at him with doe-like violet eyes. "Oniichan?" she cooed.

"Eh?" Darkling responded in confusion.

"Huh?" Nanase added, also in confusion.

Still looking at Darkling with wide eyes, and running a finger back and forth along his arm, Kana said in her best 'helpless' voice, "I need some help getting a book down from a shelf, oniichan." She emphasized the word 'oniichan'.

"Is there something between the two of you?" Nanase asked.

Kana looked at her in wide-eyed innocence. "Oh, he's just my master." Then she gave Nanase a saccharine smile as she hugged Darkling, pressing her breasts up against his shoulder. Just then a bell chimed from somewhere in the mansion. "Oh! Does that mean you have to go to class?" Kana asked, all wide-eyed innocence again.

With brow furrowed, Nanase looked from Kana to Darkling, and then back to Kana again. "Yeah, I guess so," she said, and quickly left the room.

"Kana-chan?" Darkling said, as he looked at her.

"Yes, oniichan?" Kana replied, still the picture of innocence.

"I think you've been hanging around Yumi a bit too much."

Kana pouted and looked down at the floor. "That's mean."

Darkling laughed softly. "It's okay. She was a pest anyway." He stroked her hair and gave her a light kiss. Then, sitting side by side, the two of them went back to reading.

As evening was closing in around the Feldingford School for Magical Girls, Wolfson and Darkling stood in the downstairs hallway, making their battle plan.



“Same patrol as last night?” Wolfson asked.

Darkling gently rubbed at his head with a worried expression.

“Am I to take it that you’d prefer to trade floors?” inquired Wolfson.

Darkling sighed. “No... I think it’ll be all right. Hopefully any misunderstandings have been—”

Suddenly a scream came from the bath.

**Next: Oh, What Tangled Webs...**

## Part Six: Oh, What Tangled Webs...

Without thought or hesitation, Wolfson and Darkling drew their weapons and rushed to the bathroom, throwing open the door. They stopped up short at what they saw. The lovely auburn-haired girl, Sanae, was standing practically right in front of them in all her glory.

She turned as she heard the door open, and the two adventurers were confronted with her full, ripe breasts and their large pink nipples. Her auburn hair hung loose, halfway down the pale skin of her back, matched by the small patch that nestled between her thighs. Her chestnut eyes were wide. She screamed again.

So did Wolfson and Darkling.

Then they dove into the room, slamming the door behind them. Wolfson quickly grappled an armful of soft, supple female and clamped a hand over her mouth, while Darkling frantically searched for something to cover her up with.

As Darkling seized a nearby towel, Wolfson hissed, “Shhhh! We’re trying to *help* you. Calm down! Now, what made you scream? Other than us.”

Sanae pointed over to a dark corner of the room, where there were some storage shelves. A gleaming pair of eyes peered out of the darkness.

“*Nyan!*”

Darkling rolled his own eyes as he folded the towel around Sanae, who had stopped struggling. “Oh, for the love of Lambult. It’s just the damn cat!”

Sanae heaved a sigh and sagged in the heroes’ arms. Wolfson uncovered her mouth. “I’m so embarrassed,” she said, blushing. “But there have been so many things going on that it just scared me.”

“False alarm,” said Wolfson, gently. “It’s okay. Better safe than sorry.”

Sanae regained her feet, the two heroes reluctantly letting her go. “Still, I’m sorry to have caused such a panic.”

“No problem,” Darkling reassured her. “Uh... I guess we’ll be going now...”

The pair stepped out of the room and closed the door behind them. Darkling looked at Wolfson. “No problem at all.”

“Smart cat,” agreed Wolfson.

Wolfson trod through the quiet, dim hallways of the downstairs floor. He had seen a couple of the girls heading back upstairs, having finished with their baths, but beyond that, the place was devoid of life. Wolfson wasn’t sure whether he hoped it stayed so still, or whether he hoped something interesting actually happened.

As he passed one door, he suddenly heard the muffled sound of Anna’s giggle. *I wonder what she’s up to*, he thought, realizing that he hadn’t seen her in a while. He reached for the doorknob, figuring that it must be Anna’s room, when he heard the sound of another voice. It sounded like Misao. Wolfson hesitated.

“Oh, but Anna-chan,” Misao was saying, her voice somewhat muffled by the door, “you’re so cute!”

“But you’re so grown up,” Anna complained. “I sometimes wish I had breasts like yours.”

“But there are advantages to small breasts. Here...” A shuffling sound.

“What are you—” Anna began, and then gasped. “Ah!”

“See?” Misao asked.

There were more indistinct sounds, punctuated by Anna’s sweet, soft moans. “Misao,” she finally said, somewhat plaintively, “I think I’m getting all wet...”

“Oh my!” Misao replied. “Then you’d better get those panties off before they get soiled.” Then a few moments later, “I see... Yes, you *are* wet. Here, let me take care of that...”

Suddenly, Anna let out a little cry of pleasure. Wolfson recognized that sound, and found himself a little annoyed.

“Anna-chan?” Misao said after a few moments.

“Hai?” Anna gasped.

“Make me feel good, too.”

“Huh?”

“Just share with me, like I’m doing with you,” Misao explained.

“Hai, Misao...” Anna agreed.

As the sounds of the two girls indulging in their secret passions escalated behind the closed door, Wolfson walked away. He wasn’t sure if he was more disappointed that Anna had let herself be seduced by Misao, or that they hadn’t come and invited him to play along...

Darkling was edgy. He was actually less concerned with midnight prowlers than with the girls themselves. *These girls are downright dangerous*, he thought to himself. The fact of the matter was that he felt better about encountering a knife-wielding slasher than any of the girls he had bumped into so far. At least he had an idea about how to deal with the slasher.

As he rounded a corner near the stairwell, Darkling heard a door open from down the hallway, and Nanase’s cheerful voice cried out, “Kei-sama! Is that you?”

“Waah!” Darkling replied, and dove for cover out of sight down the stairwell. He promptly collided with something substantial in the semi-darkness that let out a squeal, and he went tumbling down the stairs in a tangle of clothing and limbs.

As his head stopped spinning, Darkling realized that he was lying on top of something rather soft. Lifting his head and turning it, he found himself confronted with a pair of purple eyes that stared straight into his from a distance that could be measured in centimeters. Putting the situation together, Darkling realized that he was tangled up with Kazumi, him on top, their arms wrapped around one another and him placed neatly between her legs in what could only be viewed as a rather compromising position. He could practically just pucker his lips and kiss her...

She apparently had also assessed the situation pretty well. Kazumi’s right fist came around and thumped Darkling solidly on the head. “I *knew* you were a pervert!”

“Ow! It’s not like that,” Darkling protested.

“Then why are you jumping on me in the dark?” Kazumi demanded.

“No... I was running away...”

“Oh... Fine protector *you* are, then,” she offered up snidely. “How are we supposed to feel safe if you’re *running* from intruders?”

“I *wasn’t* running from an intruder,” Darkling defended himself, angrily. “I was... uh... running from Nanase,” he added a little lamely.

Kazumi glared at him for a few moments. Finally she stiffly said, “If you’re *not* a pervert, how long do you plan on staying like this?”

“Gah!” Darkling quickly pushed himself to his feet. Kazumi sat up. Then she looked at Darkling.

“Well?” she asked.

“Well, what?” Darkling asked back.

“Aren’t you going to offer to help me stand up?” she demanded.

Darkling was glad that the lighting was bad so that she couldn't see him blush. He reached down and she took his hand as he helped her to her feet. Then she stood looking at him like she was going to say something, but then settled on "oyasumi nasai" and hurried up the flight of stairs.

*These girls are downright dangerous*, he thought to himself one more time.

In a small alcove of the main hallway, below a picture of Headmistress Applethorp, Wolfson sat on a small stool and smoked. He was trying not to think, but he wasn't doing a very good job of it. *Puff*. The fact of the matter, he realized, was that there actually were no parameters on the relationship between himself and Anna, other than the fact that she was his slave. *Puff*. And he had certainly never forbidden her to engage in sexual acts with anyone else. *Puff*.

It didn't alter the fact that he felt a little hurt. *Puff*. But Wolfson was mature enough and worldly enough to know that it would be a passing thing. *Puff*. He'd just have to sort it out as time permitted. *Puff*.

A figure moved down the lamplit hallway and into his line of sight. Wolfson glanced up to see who was there. Long, honey-colored hair and golden eyes told him that it was Kanami. She hadn't changed out of her school uniform, even though it was pretty late. She regarded him sitting there.

"Taking a break?" she asked.

"After a fashion," Wolfson replied. He emptied his pipe and began putting it away.

"You sound kinda bummed," she observed.

"Just some personal stuff I have to work out."

Kanami tilted her head slightly to one side. "Personal stuff?"

Wolfson chuckled a little. "I guess you could say it's some girl trouble. That sort of thing."

Kanami gave a knowing nod. "Anna's not treating you right, huh? Can't you just order her to behave?"

"I'm not really that way," Wolfson admitted. "If she wants to get her sex somewhere else, that's *her* business."

"Oh... I see." Kanami regarded Wolfson for a moment. "I think I can help."

Without warning, she kneeled down in front of Wolfson and undid his trousers, working his manhood out. Wolfson let out an exclamation of surprise, but his body reacted to Kanami's touch, and he was hard by the time she leaned over and began licking him while one hand held him in place, her golden hair falling softly around his lap.

"Uh... what are you doing?" Wolfson finally found his voice.

Kanami paused for a moment, and glanced up at him. "You can't tell?" And she went back to her self-appointed task.

"Well, yes... but..." Wolfson stammered.

She paused again, and began unbuttoning the buttons on her blouse as she explained. "Since there was no named hero in that game we did, all the sex was with stand-ins and stunt doubles. I learned a lot, but I've been wanting to do it with someone that *I* picked out." Her blouse fell open to reveal her pert, ripe breasts, the nipples already hard with anticipation. This time, when she leaned over, she took Wolfson's shaft all the way into her mouth.

Wolfson groaned in pleasure and leaned forward so that he could massage Kanami's firm breasts. She also moaned in pleasure, which reverberated around Wolfson, sending thrills of delight through him. As time passed, Wolfson came closer and closer to orgasm. While he would have been happy to just let things go at that, he figured that she should get something out of the experience, so he eventually stopped Kanami and stood her up.

She looked at him quizzically, but as he reached under her skirt and pulled down her panties, she gave him a silky smile. Kanami pulled one foot from the undergarments so she could spread her legs, and eagerly leaned forward as Wolfson reached out and began massaging the sensitive area between her thighs. From

that position, their faces were close, and they suddenly found themselves kissing passionately, hot tongues seeking each other out.

After a while, when Wolfson deemed her wet enough, he pulled Kanami's hips forward, and had her straddle his lap, lowering her down on his member. She let out a cry of pain and pleasure, and then began moving her hips in rhythm, losing herself in the moment. Her breasts were now in front of Wolfson's face, and he began licking and kissing them while he held Kanami's hips and moved his own to match her pace.

Their cries and groans increased in intensity, and soon Wolfson knew he was getting close. He held on until Kanami seemed about to climax, then he grabbed her head, pulling her down for another kiss to keep her from crying out in her passion, while the two of them exploded in their heat. Then Wolfson leaned back against the wall, Kanami collapsing against his chest in contentment.

Anna, on her way back to her own room from Misao's room, heard noises coming down the hallway and went to investigate.

Down the dimly lit hallway, it took her a moment to register what she was seeing, but as it sunk in, she felt a hollow feeling growing in the pit of her stomach. She watched for a while, but she couldn't believe that her Oukami-sama would be doing that with any girl besides her...

Anna's vision blurred, and she quietly ran back to her room, where she cried herself to sleep.

Futotta, sitting in a dark recess of the hallway, watched the proceedings with enigmatic feline interest.

**Next: Who Let the Cat Out of the Bag...**

## Part Seven: Who Let the Cat Out of the Bag...

The next afternoon, Darkling and Wolfson sat in the library and sifted through books, while the fat orange tabby slept on one of the chairs off to one side. Actually, it would be fairer to say that Darkling sifted through books, while Wolfson made a show of pulling them off the shelf, pacing around with them, and then putting them back on the shelf again after only a cursory glance.

Finally, Darkling heaved a sigh, and looked up at his older partner. "Right. So what are you going to do about it?"

"Hmmm?" Wolfson stopped his pacing to glance at Darkling.

"Anna. What are you going to do about her?"

"Oh," Wolfson said, looking down sullenly at the book he was holding. "What *can* I do? She can make her own decisions. Realistically, we never set any parameters on our relationship..."

Darkling snorted. "Well, it *still* sucks."

"Maybe. But I'm just as guilty as *she* is." Wolfson looked a little wistful. "Not that I minded *that* much..."

"Well, there you go," Darkling told him. "Some guys are just that way. But girls are supposed to be faithful."

Wolfson looked at Darkling like his head was on sideways.

"What?" Darkling asked.

Wolfson resumed his pacing. "I don't know why I'm even letting it bother me."

"So *talk* to her."

It was Wolfson's turn to sigh. "I suppose I should."

Darkling watched his companion for a moment and then said, "There's just a couple of things I'm curious about."

"Hmmm?" Wolfson stopped and looked at him again.

"Who'd you guys make it with?"

Wolfson shook his head with an exasperated look and resumed pacing.

"Well, you know, inquiring minds want to know," Darkling offered lamely.

"What's the other thing?" Wolfson asked.

"Was it good?"

Wolfson stopped and fixed Darkling with a gimlet stare.

"Right," said Darkling. "I'm going back to the books now."

Wolfson glanced at the book that he'd been spacing out on. "I don't know if it's much use. There doesn't seem to be any information about Zarstat *or* his amulet here."

"That's because it's banned material, *nyan*," said a rather nasal alto voice.

Wolfson stopped again, and he and Darkling looked at each other. "What did you say?" they both asked.

"I didn't say anything," they both replied.

Slowly they both turned to look at the chair where Futotta was lying. The cat was gazing at them with intense green eyes. They looked back at each other. "No," they both said.

"Yes," came the voice again. "All written information concerning Zarstat was banned by the Church of Lambult in the twenty-third year of the Second Age, *nyan*."

They looked back at the cat.

“*You’re* the one talking?” asked Wolfson.

Futotta’s tail twitched a bit in annoyance. “It certainly wouldn’t be the chair, *nyan*.”

“You’re intelligent!” exclaimed Darkling.

“Arigatou, *nyan*,” Futotta replied, half-closing his eyes in apparent pleasure.

“No! I mean, you’re not an ordinary cat,” Darkling clarified.

“Oh. I thought that would be obvious, *nyan*.” Futotta’s tail twitched some more. “I was thinking that perhaps you were actually being observant, *nyan*.”

Darkling looked at the cat suspiciously. “Hey... you were in the bathroom on purpose...”

“Purely academic interest, *nyan*,” Futotta replied, taking a moment to groom himself.

“I’ll bet,” muttered Darkling.

“Why do you hang around here as an ordinary cat, then?” asked Wolfson.

Futotta turned his gaze on the older adventurer. “I’ve been looking for a proper candidate for a magical girl, *nyan*. But none of the girls who have been attending this school are really qualified, *nyan*.”

“That’s too bad,” Wolfson commiserated.

“It’s not necessarily a lost cause, *nyan*,” Futotta responded.

Wolfson narrowed his eyes a little and asked, “So why are you talking to *us*?”

Futotta looked at him for a moment, and then replied, “I believe my research is finished, and your arrival is what facilitated it, *nyan*. Consider it a favor, *nyan*.”

Darkling regarded the cat. “Did your research include hanging out in the bathroom?”

Futotta continued looking at Wolfson, but his tail flicked back and forth. “Is your friend *always* so impertinent?”

Responding to the sound of the knocker rapping against the door, Misao went to answer it. When she looked out, she had to adjust her gaze downward to find the caller – a rather unkempt-looking dwarf with a sheaf of rolled-up papers folded under his arm.

“I’m sorry,” she told him “We don’t give to charities.”

“Pity,” the dwarf replied. “Good tax write-off. Ain’t here for that, though.”

“Eh? Then what—”

“You got a couple of swordsmen here. With cute girls,” the dwarf explained.

“Well... uh... Yes, but—” Misao looked a little confused.

“Tell ‘em Oleg wants a word with ‘em.”

Wolfson and Darkling were interrupted when Misao suddenly entered the library to announce that a rather scruffy-looking dwarf named Oleg wanted to speak to them. She didn’t appear very happy. Futotta, for his part, resumed his role of simple cat, and jumped off the chair with a quiet “*nyan*” just before exiting the room. The two adventurers followed Misao toward the door.

“Anna’s upset with you,” she suddenly said quietly to Wolfson in a disapproving tone of voice.

“She’s upset with *me*?” Wolfson looked at Misao in amazement.

“She saw you in the hallway last night.”

“Ah,” Wolfson replied. With Darkling right there, he didn’t want to advertise the fact that it had been Misao that Anna had been keeping company with, so he just shut his mouth and walked along quietly. *I’m sorry that Anna’s feelings have been hurt, he thought, but I can’t believe that she’s holding me to such a double standard.*

They reached the doorway where Oleg stood waiting impatiently for their arrival. Misao left them there, returning to her duties. Turning his attention to the situation at hand, Wolfson greeted the dwarf. “Hey, Oleg. What’s up?”

“Me,” Oleg grunted. “Too damn early, too.”

“Uh... yes,” observed Wolfson. “So what do you want with us, then? For that matter, how did you know we were actually *staying* here?”

“Grapevine,” Oleg answered.

“Ah,” Wolfson replied.

“Geez,” Darkling added, “word of mouth must be pretty good for it to get around in a town this size.”

“No,” Oleg interjected. “*The Grapevine*.” He pulled the papers from under his arm and unrolled it to reveal a thick tabloid that was entitled *The Feldingford Grapevine*. Right below that was a large headline that read, “The Feldingford Slasher Strikes Again!”

“You mean we were in the local paper?” Darkling asked in disbelief.

“Interview with the new schoolmistress,” the dwarf explained. “Said she’d hired a couple of skilled swordsmen. Figured it was you two.”

“Swell,” muttered Darkling. “Leave it to Yumi to blab all over town about us being here.”

“A little free advertising never hurts,” Wolfson rationalized. Then to Oleg he said, “So why did you want to talk to us?”

“Plot device,” he replied. “I’m here for exposition. Same as parts one and two.”

“Ah,” Wolfson replied.

“So what’s the deal?” Darkling asked.

“Seemed you might want to know about the slasher,” Oleg explained. “School connection, and all that.”

“Alright... What happened?” Wolfson inquired, glancing down at the paper.

“Local priest named Father Caplan. Cut up in his church last night. Real mess.”

“Sounds bad,” admitted Wolfson. “But I don’t see that it really connects to the school.”

Oleg leveled his gaze at Wolfson. “Ready for more exposition?”

“Might as well hit us with it.”

“Caplan was confessor to Prescott and Totman,” grunted the dwarf.

“Prescott, Totman, Caplan... Who was the other victim?” Darkling suddenly asked.

“Old local named Warren,” the dwarf informed him.

Wolfson pondered for a moment and asked, “Any expository information we ought to know about Warren?”

“Nope.” Oleg rolled up his paper and turned to leave. “Got me on that one.”

Wolfson regarded him. “What are you going to do now?”

“Get drunk.” And the dwarf started down the path away from the school.

Wolfson stood and waited for the afternoon class to finish. As the girls filtered out of the room, he tried to catch Anna’s attention, but as soon as she saw him, her lower lip trembled, and an angry look flashed across her face.

“I don’t want to talk to you!” she cried, as she turned in a swirl of short skirt and began running down the hallway.



“Anna—” Wolfson tried to call out to her, but she hit the stairs and was gone. *For crying out loud*, he thought, *as mature as she wants to be, she can sure get childish sometimes*. Feeling a presence next to him, he looked over to find Kanami standing there, looking down the hallway.

“This is my fault, isn’t it,” she observed.

“Not really,” Wolfson assured her. “It’s too complicated to really blame anybody.” He reached out and stroked her hair, and she smiled a bit. Then she took his hand and squeezed it just before she also left. As Wolfson continued to stand there, he thought, *But there will probably be some serious fallout before this is over...*

**Next: I Just Happened to Be in the Neighborhood...**

## Part Eight: I Just Happened to Be in the Neighborhood...

All things considered, Darkling and Wolfson had decided that switching floors for the night might be a good idea. Darkling was worried about his encounters upstairs, and Wolfson wasn't sure that he might not run into Anna downstairs – something that he wanted, but obviously she didn't. He figured it would only lead to further strain at this point.

Darkling slipped quietly through the lower hallway, feeling very relieved, and much more confident, since he was unlikely to accidentally run into either Nanase or Kazumi. As usual, the area was dimly lit, and the occasional window let in the outside moonlight.

Suddenly, Darkling heard a door open, and he tensed.

“Oniichan?” came Kana's soft voice.

Darkling relaxed considerably and approached the open door, where Kana stood looking at him. He was somewhat taken aback to realize that she was naked except for her collar, her pale skin almost white in the moonlight and near darkness. Her long dark hair framed her face in shadow, and formed a stark contrast to her skin where it hung down over her body.

“Uh...” He wasn't sure what to say.

“Can we talk?” she asked, regarding him with her large violet eyes.

“Uh...”

“Anna told me that she's angry with Oukami-sama,” she said.

“Well, uh... yeah... So I've heard,” Darkling replied, more or less finding his tongue, although his eyes were still trying to find their way down to the swell of Kana's small pert breasts, or the inviting patch of dark hair at the mound between her legs.

“That's why I'm so afraid of this place.” Her violet eyes glistened as she spoke.

“Huh?”

“I don't want a girl to take you away,” she explained.

Darkling frowned. “That's not *about* to hap—”

She placed a finger to his lips, stopping him in mid-sentence. Then she threw her arms around his neck and pulled him down toward her, meeting his lips with hers in a passionate kiss, and pressing her body against his. After a few minutes, she stopped and looked into Darkling's eyes again. “Just love me. Then you won't *need* anyone else.”

*Why fight destiny?* Darkling thought. Glancing into the hallway to make sure that it still seemed secure, he stepped into Kana's room, and closed the door behind him.

Her room was rather dark, but Darkling could make out Kana's slim, pale form as she moved over toward the bed. He easily slipped out of his loose clothing and went over to her. After sitting next to each other for a few minutes, Darkling realized that Kana was still shy and awkward when it came to this sort of thing, so he reached over and pulled her to him and found her lips with his for another long kiss.

Once she was lost in the moment of the embrace, Darkling let his hand slide around to one of her soft breasts. Kana stiffened for a second in mixed surprise and excitement, and then relaxed again as Darkling worked on stimulating her nipple. She let out a little moan of pleasure. Darkling gently placed Kana's hand on his member, which was already growing erect, encouraging her to touch his body also. Slowly, but surely, they kissed and touched, working their way toward passion...

Wolfson stalked through the dim light of the upstairs hallway, trying his best to keep his mind on business. *I wish Anna would just settle down and talk*, he thought. *No... That's not business. Damn! I've got to keep my head clear; there's someone lurking around here, and he might be dangerous.*

A door opened up, and a cute red-headed girl poked her head out. “Kei-sama?” she inquired.

Wolfson, having been apprised of the situation, replied, “Uh... no. He’s in a conference with the *onna shujin*.”

“Oh,” she said with some disappointment. Then she went back into her room, closing the door.

*Nanase*, Wolfson thought. *What a single-minded person.*

He didn’t get much farther down the hallway before another door opened up and Kazumi stepped out in her linen shift. “Oh!” she said, looking a little surprised. “Oukami-san.”

Wolfson considered her for a moment, and then told her, “Darkling is patrolling downstairs tonight.”

“Good!” she replied angrily. “He’s such a pervert.”

“Uh... yeah.”

She turned to go back into her room, and Wolfson started onward down the hallway.

“Oukami-san?”

Wolfson turned back to look at Kazumi, who was in the doorway again, looking a little embarrassed.

“Hmmm?”

“What kind of girls does he like?” she asked.

“Huh?”

Kazumi’s face was now a brilliant shade of crimson. “Kurai-san. What kind of girls does he like.”

Wolfson thought for a bit, and then said, “I’d have to say that he likes assertive girls who know their own mind. But he likes them to be a little vulnerable, too. And cute, of course.”

Kazumi looked at the floor for a moment, then looked back at Wolfson and said, “Okay. Thanks.” This time, she shut the door behind her as she disappeared into her room.

*Hmmm*, thought Wolfson. *Dark sure seems to have gotten popular...*

Once again, Wolfson resumed his patrol of the upper floor. He made the mental observation that it seemed much busier up here than downstairs. As he heard another door open, he turned to see if he’d have to deal with another girl inquiring after Darkling.

Instead, he saw Kanami coming out of her room, her long honey-colored hair hanging loosely down her back. She was dressed in her green satin nightshirt, and her ripe breasts were straining a little at the flimsy fabric. Wolfson felt himself getting aroused in spite of himself.

“I thought I heard you out here,” she commented.

“Uh... yeah. Darkling and I traded floors for the night,” Wolfson explained.

“Cool.” She regarded him with her golden eyes. “So... uh... how’re you doing?”

“What do you mean?” Wolfson asked.

“You know... With you and Anna.”

“Oh. Well... uh...”

Suddenly a shriek came from one of the rooms down the hallway, and they both turned to look that direction.

“That came from Rinko’s room,” Kanami observed.

“Show me,” Wolfson commanded.

Kanami ran down the hallway with Wolfson right behind her, and then stopped, indicating a door. Wolfson drew his sword, opened the door, and rushed in.

Rinko was standing near her wardrobe, her copper hair tied back to leave a pair of long tresses framing her face. She was only wearing a pair of pink panties, and her pert breasts were only partially covered by the pink cotton nightshirt that she was holding up with one hand while she stared at the French doors of her room with wide, frightened eyes.

Barely glancing at Wolfson, she pointed at the doors, where the curtains were slightly pulled back, and stammered, “S–someone was out on the balcony!”

Without stopping, Wolfson moved across the room and threw open one of the doors. He leapt out onto the balcony with his sword at the ready, but there was no-one there. Quickly going to the edge of the balcony, Wolfson glanced out over the moonlit garden, but saw nothing unusual. However, when he looked down, he noticed a dark figure carefully making its way down the vine-covered trellis.

He looked back into the room and saw that Kanami had come inside. “Tell Darkling that someone is in the garden,” he told her. Then he sheathed his sword and climbed over the railing to pursue the prowler.

Darkling could make out Kana’s slender figure beneath him as he rode on top of her, his passion mounting. Her hands clung desperately to his back, and he could feel the sweat of their bodies mingling in their lovemaking. She occasionally let out little gasps that told him that she was keenly aware of his body touching hers.

At that moment, he heard someone out in the hallway frantically calling out, “Kurai-san! Kurai-san!”

*Shit*, he thought. *Not now!* But, knowing that he was supposed to be performing a job, he stopped and told Kana, “Hold that thought; I’ll be right back.”

Kana whimpered a little, her body trembling on the bed, as Darkling pulled out and quickly rolled off the bed to throw his clothes back on. A moment later, he was out the door – a little disheveled, but more or less together.

He saw a golden-haired girl, whose name he vaguely remembered to be Kanami, running down the hallway, and called out to her. “I’m here, I’m here. What’s up?”

She turned and ran back to him, and trying to catch her breath, panted, “Someone... in garden... Oukami-san... chasing...”

“Damn!” Without further thought, Darkling rushed to the doors that opened up onto the back grounds of the mansion. Shoving them open, he ran out and quickly looked around. He saw Wolfson just hitting the ground below an open balcony and, some ways from him, a dark figure running across the yard.

Darkling took off like a shot to intercept the fleeing prowler. Whoever the guy was, he was fast, but Darkling knew that he was faster. Within moments, Darkling was upon him from the left and behind. Darkling made a diving tackle, and the mysterious intruder went down with a loud grunt.

Although he struggled to get up and get away, Darkling held him in place long enough for Wolfson to get there. Between the two of them, the prowler was quickly subdued.

He was not very large – a little taller than Darkling, but much shorter than Wolfson – and had blonde hair. He was dressed in a black doublet and tights, a black cape, and a black domino mask. As the two adventurers regarded the strange get-up, they began to realize that the various residents of the school were starting to trickle out of the mansion and gather around.

Voicing what was pretty much on everybody’s mind, Darkling asked, “Who the hell are *you* supposed to be?”

“I’m Silk Doublet Masque,” the intruder replied, jutting his chin out a little bit.

“Say *what?*”

“Don’t tell me you’re supposed to be a Mysterious Masked Bishounen?” one of the girls, Shiina, asked.

“Yeah, that’s the ticket! I’m one of those!” Silk Doublet Masque replied brightly.

“Then what are you doing peeking in our windows?” asked Rinko.

“Uh... making sure you’re all safe. Yeah, that’s it!” he responded.

“If you’re a Mysterious Masked Bishounen,” intoned Kazumi, rather coolly, “show us some of your mystic power.”

“Er...” Silk Doublet Masque thought for a moment. “I can only use mystic powers against forces of Evil. Union rules. Yeah, I’m sure that’s right!”

“That sounds like a lot of crap,” observed Kanami.

“Kanami, watch your mouth,” chided Mizuho.

“Well, it does,” insisted Kanami.

Yumi, who had been watching all of this go on, finally said, “Why don’t we just unmask him and see who he is?”

There was a rousing round of agreement from all of the girls, so Wolfson reached over and pulled off the mask. There sat a rather plain-looking kid with gold eyes and blonde hair. He gave a cheesy grin. “Er... hi!”

“Takeaki?” the girls exclaimed in mixed surprise and consternation.

“Uh... I’m sure there’s a perfectly good explanation for all of this...” Takeaki suggested.

**Next: Allow Me to Introduce Myself...**

## Part Nine: Allow Me to Introduce Myself...

Chaos erupted amongst the members of the Feldingford School for Magical Girls. The emotions ranged from surprise to outrage, but they were all being vocalized at the same time. As Mizuho and Yumi tried to restore some semblance of order, Darkling turned to Wolfson. “Takeaki? Am I missing something?”

“He was in their bishoujo game,” Wolfson reminded him. “The kid who started up the club they were all in.”

“Oh yeah... Now I remember...”

As the pandemonium died down a bit, Mizuho asked Takeaki, “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Uh... I thought I’d drop by and say ‘hi’. For old times’ sake.” The girls all stared at him silently. “Er... I’m selling vacuum cleaners?” he tried.

Darkling grabbed him roughly and demanded, “Why the hell are you lurking around here and peeking in windows?”

Takeaki sighed. “All right. The fact of the matter is that I had a crappy part in that game. I was supposed to start up this cool club, but all the girls ignored me and went off to have sex with a protagonist that didn’t even really exist. Then the directors wouldn’t even let me do a bit as a stand-in for any of the sex scenes since the ‘hero’ was supposed to have dark hair, and I might accidentally be recognized in some of the shots. So basically, I was working with twelve girls and didn’t get squat. So I just wanted a chance to actually *see* some of them... er... You know...”

Kazumi angrily said, “You’re a creep, Takeaki!”

“But I’m a *charming* creep!” he replied with a cheesy grin.

“None of the girls wanted anything to do with you because you’re a perverted jerk. Only Ayumu was nice enough to give you a mercy date.”

“Don’t remind me,” Ayumu interjected, somewhat glumly.

“What should we do with him?” Wolfson asked Yumi.

“Well, unfortunately,” Yumi replied, “he hasn’t actually done much of anything criminal, so we can’t really hand him over to the guards. Give him to me... I want to have a little chat with him.”

“If you say so.” Darkling glowered.

“Alright girls... back to bed!” Yumi commanded. “You still have classes in the morning.” Then to Wolfson and Darkling she added, “You guys have pretty much taken care of what seems to have been the problem, so you can relax for the night. I’ll talk to you tomorrow morning.”

As the girls started to disperse, Wolfson caught a glimpse of Anna, but as soon as she saw him, she cast him a cold look. She turned her head sharply in a swirl of long hair and stalked off back to the mansion. *Geez*, thought Wolfson, *sometimes her stubbornness can really be a problem...*

Darkling and Wolfson tossed Takeaki down in front of Yumi, and they headed back inside themselves. Darkling was anxious to get back to Kana. Wolfson watched as his younger companion, with a smile, slipped into her room. He turned to go to their own room, and was surprised to find Kanami standing there.

“Hey,” she said.

“What’s up?” he asked.

She looked down, shyly. “I was kinda wondering... would you mind if I went back to your room with you?”

Wolfson’s brain did a number of flip-flops in an instant. *Would I just be making the situation worse?* he wondered to himself. *I don’t really want to hurt Anna any more... Of course, she seems to have already settled the issue in her mind. And I don’t really feel like being alone right now... but would it be fair to either of the girls?*

“Is there something wrong?” Kanami asked, looking a little worried.

Wolfson realized that he was just standing there and looking at her. “No... it’s just that—”

“You still like Anna.”

“Well, yes,” Wolfson admitted. “But I like you, too.”

Kanami searched Wolfson’s face for a moment. “It’s cool. Things just aren’t settled right now... I understand.”

Wolfson sighed, and Kanami leaned forward on her toes to kiss him on the cheek.

“You’re okay,” she told him. As she turned to go back down the hallway, she added, “I’ll be around.”

Wolfson sighed again and went into his room alone.

The next morning, Wolfson, Darkling, Kana and Anna went to Yumi’s office. No-one particularly noticed as Futotta slipped in with them. Yumi smiled up at the group.

“Well, it looks like everything is pretty much settled,” she said.

“What did you do with Takeaki?” asked Wolfson.

“I hired him,” Yumi replied.

“You *what?*” gawked Darkling. “That’s like setting the wolf among sheep!”

“If he’s in here, we’re in a better position to keep an eye on him than if he’s running around outside,” Yumi calmly explained. “Did you two find what you were looking for in the library?”

“No,” sighed Wolfson. “It’s apparently not there.”

“That’s too bad,” Yumi commiserated. “Well, if our business is concluded—”

“I don’t want to go!” Anna cried petulantly.

“*What?*” exclaimed everyone in surprise, except Wolfson, who wasn’t the least bit surprised.

“I want to stay here. Oukami-sama doesn’t like me anymore, anyway,” Anna declared.

“That’s ridiculous,” Wolfson told her.

“I’m not talking to you,” Anna said, turning her head away from him with a lift of her chin. “I don’t like *you*, either. You’d rather be with Kanami-chan.”

Yumi looked at Wolfson suspiciously. “Um... what’s *this* all about?”

“Eh-heh! Just a little misunderstanding...” Wolfson grinned sheepishly.

“They shouldn’t leave yet anyway, *nyan*,” said a slightly nasal alto voice from the corner of the room.

Everyone looked over to where Futotta was sitting on a chair and looking at the group.

“Wha!” exclaimed Yumi. “You can talk!”

“The human capacity to state the obvious has always astounded me, *nyan*,” Futotta observed with a flick of his tail.

“But why?” asked Kana.

Futotta’s tail lashed back and forth. “Because I’m a Magical Animal Companion, *nyan*. Magical Animal Companions can speak, *nyan*.”

“No,” said Kana. “Why shouldn’t we leave yet?”

“Oh, *nyan*.” Futotta sat for a moment in what must pass for feline embarrassment. “That should become apparent in a little while, *nyan*.”

“Fine,” said Yumi. Looking askance at Wolfson, she continued, “In the meantime, what’s this about Kanami?”

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Responding to the sound of the knocker rapping against the door, Misao went to answer it. When she looked out, she saw a rather unkempt old man in plain-looking clothes. He looked a little nervous as he stood waiting on the porch.

“I’m sorry,” she told him. “We don’t give to charities.”

“I’m not here for money,” he replied. “I want to speak to the Headmistress and the two swordsmen that you have working here.”

Misao regarded him for a moment. “Regarding what?”

“It’s a private matter.”

She regarded him a moment longer, and then said, “You’ll have to wait here, please.” Misao closed the door and went to Yumi’s office with the unusual request.

Misao’s arrival to announce the unexpected visitor saved Wolfson from a potentially awkward interrogation. Curiosity getting the better of everybody, Yumi had Misao bring the old man in.

Upon entering the room, he bowed slightly to Yumi and introduced himself. “My name is Delevan Swayne. I want to ask you for sanctuary and to hire these two” – indicating Wolfson and Darkling – “as bodyguards.”

“Why?” asked Yumi.

“Because I’m the slasher’s next victim.”

**Next: An Offer You Can't Refuse...**



## Part Ten: An Offer You Can't Refuse...

For a moment, silence reigned in the office of the Headmistress, as all eyes were upon the old man who called himself Delevan Swayne. Short, thin and not much to look at, he certainly didn't seem to be the sort who would attract the attention of a serial killer.

Wolfson cleared his throat. "Uh... what leads you to believe that *you're* going to be the slasher's next victim?"

Swayne shifted a little uncomfortably. "Because he's killed the rest of us."

"The rest of whom?" asked Wolfson.

The old man gave a sigh. "About forty years ago, Eliza— er... Miss Prescott, Harold Totman, Dean Warren, Father Caplan and I were an adventuring party. We roamed around, treasure hunting and exploring old ruins... that sort of thing."

Wolfson nodded, seeing that there was indeed a connection between the slasher's victims and Swayne. "Go on," he said.

"We accumulated a fair bit of loot," Swayne continued. "That's how Eliza was able to afford to open up this posh school. Not that she was a magical girl herself... but she was pretty wiz with the spells. But I've often wondered if getting all of that treasure wouldn't come back to haunt us some day."

"So you think that someone is exacting retribution over some looting you did in the past," Wolfson clarified.

"All that I'm sure of is that Eliza, Harold, Dean and the Padre are dead. Eliza was our spell-caster, Harold and Dean were our swords, and Caplan was our spiritual backup. If *they* didn't stand a chance against this guy, *I'm* not going to be able to do anything against him – I was just along to pick locks and disarm traps."

Wolfson and Darkling exchanged glances.

"Look," interjected Swayne. "I'll make you guys a deal."

"What kind of deal?" asked Darkling.

"A good portion of the treasure that we accumulated still hasn't been spent. The four of them obviously don't need their shares any more. Give me sanctuary and your swords, and you're welcome to what's left of their wealth."

Darkling gave Swayne a narrow look. "How do we know that you're not selling us a pig in a poke?"

The old man sighed. "I can actually *show* you the treasure, if you want."

Wolfson regarded him for a moment and then looked at Darkling. "I'm inclined to trust him." He looked at Yumi. "What do *you* think?"

Yumi sighed. "I'm not too thrilled with the idea of inviting danger into the school, off-hand. But we can *always* use the extra money... The job didn't come with Mistress Prescott's inheritance attached to it. I'll give it the go ahead if you two are going to defend him."

Wolfson looked at Darkling.

"We *definitely* need the money," Darkling said, a little reluctantly. Then he gave in. "What's one more enemy to face? I think the two of us can handle a knife-wielding slasher."

Wolfson looked back at Swayne. "All right," he said. "You've got yourself a deal."

Relief flooded over Delevan Swayne's features, and he replied, "Thank you very much!"

Wolfson sat under a tree in the back garden and smoked his pipe. There was not much he and Darkling could do until they resumed their night-time vigil, and he was doing his best to stay out of Yumi's way. She was all too interested in finding out about Kanami, and he didn't want to find himself wrangled into a session of sex

with yet another woman at this point in time. Things between Anna and him were bad enough as it was. Which was another reason that he was staying out of the way and in the garden.

He sighed and drew a long puff on his pipe. He saw a shadow approaching and vaguely wondered who would be coming out here at this time of day.

“Sensei?” he heard Ayumu inquire.

*Oh, geez*, he thought.

Ayumu stood in front of him and squatted down. Wolfson tried to ignore the fact that she was giving him a clear show of her panties when she sat that way in her short skirt.

“What are you doing?” she asked, gazing at him with her dark eyes.

Wolfson sighed again. “Just sitting and thinking,” he replied, and took another draw on his pipe.

“Oh. I thought that maybe you were composing a song, or something.”

“Heh. It’s been quite a while since I did anything like that,” Wolfson admitted.

“But you’re so *good!*” Ayumu cried in shock.

“That’s because I’ve had years of practice.”

“Years?” Ayumu asked with a look of dismay. “How many years?”

“More than you’ve been around,” Wolfson replied. “Look... if you want to be good at *anything*, you’ve got to dedicate yourself to it, and be prepared to spend a great deal of time learning and practicing. Nothing comes quickly or easily.”

Ayumu looked down at the ground. “I don’t know if I have the patience for that.”

“Then find something that will drive you long enough to *have* the patience.”

“I just want to do something *cool*,” Ayumu declared, looking up at Wolfson again.

Wolfson shook his head a little as he started to empty out his pipe. “Cool isn’t an act of doing, it’s a state of *being*.”

Ayumu stared at him in amazement. “Wow! That sounded so Zen! You *are* a sensei!”

Wolfson shrugged. “If you say so. Just be yourself, and do whatever comes naturally.”

“But I’m so... ordinary.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Wolfson told her. “You’ll find your niche.”

Ayumu smiled and stood up. “Okay. Thank you, sensei.”

As she turned and walked away, Wolfson rolled his eyes a little, and thought, *I suppose if everything else falls through, I could put on some sackcloth and move to a mountain top...*

Darkling sat in the library, brooding. *This has been all messed up from the start*, he thought. *There was no point in coming here... Nothing important was in the library, all that was accomplished was that Anna got pissed at Wolf, and now we’ve got this bodyguard assignment... And there’s just something about it that I don’t like. Well, at least Kana’s still happy with me... as long as we can get out of here soon...*

The library door opened and Darkling looked up. An older girl shyly entered the room, adjusting a pair of glasses that she wore. She had shoulder-length, sandy brown hair, and stood just a little shorter than Darkling.

“Sumimasen, Kurai-san...” she hesitantly said.

“Yeah?” Darkling recalled that her name was Mutsumi.

“May I talk to you?” she asked.

“Isn’t that what you’re doing now?” Darkling inquired.

“Uh...”

“What can I do for you?” Darkling decided that he had probably better keep the conversation moving.

“I was wondering... Is there something about my sister that you don't like?”

“Your sister.” Darkling gave Mutsumi a blank look.

“Nanase,” she clarified.

“Ah,” Darkling replied. *Aside from the fact that she's noisy and clingy?* he thought a little wryly. But he answered, “Not particularly. Why?”

“She says that you keep avoiding her,” Mutsumi pointed out.

“I see,” Darkling said. “Well, you see... I like someone else.”

Mutsumi blushed. “Oh. I see. She was a little vague about that. I'm sorry. I mean... I'm not sorry that you like someone else – I'm sorry to have bothered you...”

“It's okay. It's a sister thing,” Darkling responded, with a smile.

As Mutsumi turned to leave, Darkling suddenly observed, “Say... you're older than the other girls, aren't you.”

Mutsumi looked back at him. “Uh... yes.”

“When do you graduate?” he asked.

She looked a little nonplussed. “Um... as I understand it, when a Magical Animal Companion shows up and chooses me.”

Darkling raised an eyebrow. “Oh? How often does that happen?”

Mutsumi sighed. “Actually, I've only seen it happen once, and that was the first year that I was here. A girl named Momo was attending the school when an emu showed up and declared that he was her companion.”

“An emu.”

“Yes,” Mutsumi replied. “The whole place was in quite an uproar. Of course, it looked rather odd – her being rather small, and him being rather large. I'd always figured that a Magical Animal Companion would be of a slightly more handy size.”

“An emu.”

“Yes,” Mutsumi repeated. “Um... is there something wrong?”

“Er... no,” Darkling replied. “Well, if you'll excuse me, I've got to go get ready for watchdog duty.” Darkling stood up and, shaking his head slightly, left Mutsumi in the library.

Having no better plan to work with, Wolfson and Darkling sat in the downstairs hallway outside the room that had been designated for Delevan Swayne. Wolfson smoked his pipe, and Darkling sulked.

“How long are we going to have to keep this up?” Darkling asked, for the third time.

Wolfson shrugged. “Who knows. As long as Swayne stays inside, he's probably safe, though. Look at it *this* way... it's easy money.”

“Right,” snorted Darkling. “When do we collect? When the old guy finally kicks off from old age, or when the slasher drops us a postcard from Port Bostal that says the weather is great and he wishes we were there?”

“You're too tense,” Wolfson observed. “You should relax more. Maybe you should try meditating.”

“I'm *not* doing the ‘Mihiro’ mantra.”

“No, no, no,” Wolfson gently chided his younger companion. “The mantra has to fit the student. I'm thinking you might do better to think ‘Azumi’ or ‘Miko’.”

Darkling stared at Wolfson.

“Well, it’s just a *thought*,” Wolfson suggested.

“You’re trying to get me into something spiritual, aren’t you,” accused Darkling.

“Who knows? Next thing you know, you might be hurling a *Thunder Slash* or something.”

“Are you trying to tell me that thinking about Mihiro is what empowers your elemental blasts?” asked Darkling in disbelief.

“Well, actually—”

Suddenly, from behind the closed door came the sound of shattering glass, followed by a cry of terror from Swayne.

**Next: Mother Warned Me About Guys Like You...**

## Part Eleven: Mother Warned Me About Guys Like You...

Wolfson and Darkling jumped up, drew their weapons and burst into the room. They stopped up short at what they saw, however. Swayne had rolled off his bed and was cowering on the floor. The window above it was a shattered wreck, the curtains fluttering lazily in the night breeze. None of that was what startled the two adventurers, though.

The slasher was nothing at all like what they had been expecting. A lizard that stood head and shoulders over Wolfson loomed over the bed holding a naginata, the blade of which was currently buried in the mattress. The reptile wore a rotting leather harness with tarnished brass fittings, and its eyes glowed with the eerie green fire of the undead as it turned its attention to Wolfson and Darkling.

“Get out of here!” Wolfson ordered Swayne.

The old man didn’t need to be told twice, and scabbled on his hands and knees for the open door. The lizard pulled its naginata from the mattress and leapt over the bed, attempting to go after him.

“*Thunder Slash!*” Wolfson cried as he swung his longsword in the direction of the large reptile.

“*Zippo!*” Darkling shouted, out of force of habit.

As elemental energy lashed out of Wolfson’s blade and slammed into the beast with no apparent effect, Darkling cursed, remembering that Yuta had locked down the Amulet of Zarstat so that it was useless. The two of them sprang at the lizard with swinging swords in order to prevent it from chasing after Swayne.

Darkling, being the fastest, threw himself in front of the lizard and drove his katana across its belly. A yellowish pus oozed out, but the lizard didn’t seem to notice. It brought the haft of the naginata around, slamming it into Darkling’s face with unnatural strength and throwing him back against the wall.

Wolfson struck the reptile from behind, but it didn’t distract the beast from bringing its naginata around in the other direction to slash at Darkling. Only Darkling’s reflexes allowed him to roll to the side enough to keep the gash to his chest from being lethal. But he was feeling dazed and stunned.

All the same, Darkling stumbled to his feet as Wolfson struck at the lizard from behind one more time. But as Darkling readied his katana for another strike, the reptile, moving with preternatural speed, brought the naginata around for another blow.

Darkling felt a sharp pain in his right arm as the blade of the naginata bit. He reflexively let loose of his sword, and it clattered uselessly to the floor. A moment later, the naginata struck him on the side of the head, and Darkling’s world went black...

As Darkling tumbled to the floor, battered and bleeding from several nasty wounds, the lizard turned to face Wolfson. Pus seeped from the gashes that he and Darkling had inflicted upon it, but that didn’t seem to slow the reptile down any.

Wolfson took a step back, readied his sword again, and faced off with the monster.

Anna, in a long, pink cotton nightshirt, was attempting to sleep. She wasn’t having much luck, however. Thoughts kept running around in her head: how she was angry at Oukami-sama; and how she was angry that he hadn’t gone away today, and taken Kanami-chan with him. She was also vaguely surprised to find that Futotta could talk, and wondered why he was sleeping in her room, but those thoughts were pretty much quickly buried behind how she was angry at Oukami-sama.

Futotta, lying on a chair near the door to the room, suddenly twitched his ears and lifted his head, looking at the door. “I believe that your Wolf-san is in trouble, *nyan*.”

Without rolling over, Anna sulkily replied, “So? I hate him anyway.”

The cat looked back at Anna lying on the bed. “Really, *nyan*?”

“Yes,” Anna said adamantly.

“Why, *nyan*?”

“He was having sex with Kanami,” Anna wailed.

“But you were having sex with Misao, *nyan*,” Futotta pointed out.

Anna was silent for a moment. “That was different,” she reasoned. “We’re both girls.”

“Oh, *nyan*.” Futotta blinked at Anna’s back. “So if Wolf-san was having sex with a boy, it would be okay, *nyan*.”

“No!” Anna cried. “It’s... well... uh...”

“Besides,” Futotta continued, “he heard you and Misao, and I believe he was rather hurt, *nyan*.”

“Oh.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter, since you hate him, *nyan*,” Futotta said reasonably, as he laid his head back down and closed his eyes. “He’ll be dead in a minute anyway, *nyan*.”

“*What?*” Anna cried, bolting upright in her bed with wide eyes.

Futotta opened his eyes and raised his head again. “He can’t defeat the creature he’s fighting by himself, *nyan*.”

Anna jumped out of bed, threw open the door to her room and raced down the hallway, crying, “Oukami-sama!”

Futotta looked at the open door for a moment. She was young, cute, energetic, emotional, and prone to acting without thinking. Yes. She was absolutely perfect. He stood up, stretched, jumped off the chair and followed Anna out the open door.

Wolfson knew that his only hope lay in keeping his ki focused. He wasn’t sure how long it would take to wear down this thing, but it looked like it would have to be hacked into pieces in order to stop it. He was certain that it was undead.

The lizard brought its naginata around to slice at him, and he moved to block the attack.

“Oukami-sama!”

Anna’s cry startled Wolfson, and he lost his concentration. The naginata grazed his stomach and drew blood. *Great*, thought Wolfson wryly. *Now she’s trying to get me killed.*

He was vaguely aware of Anna appearing in the doorway as she let out a little squeal of surprise and fear. He tried to put her out of his mind as he deflected another blow, and brought his own sword down in a futile attempt to chop a piece off of the lizard.

Another sudden lash of the naginata forced Wolfson back a step in order to avoid a severe wound, and the undead reptile’s supernatural strength and speed forced Wolfson to remain on the defensive. He found that he couldn’t get any solid blows in, and he started to worry.

The lizard impassively stared at Wolfson with its sickly glowing green eyes as it pressed its attack. Wolfson was forced to back another step as he continued to attempt to protect himself, knowing that any purely defensive fight was a battle that would eventually be lost.

Futotta ambled up next to where Anna stood in the doorway to Swayne’s room. She had her hands held to her mouth and was watching with anxiety written in her brown eyes as Wolfson was inexorably forced back across the room. Soon he’d run out of space, and then...

“You’d better help him, *nyan*,” Futotta pointed out.

“*Help* him?” Anna cried in perplexity. “*Me?*”

“Yes, *nyan*.”

“What could *I* do?” Anna asked plaintively.

“Think about it, *nyan*,” Futotta answered. “You’re Magical Girl Apple Blossom, aren’t you, *nyan?*”

“But...” Anna looked down at the cat.

Futotta was staring at her with intense green eyes.

“You mean...?” Anna hesitantly asked.

Futotta continued to stare at her with intense green eyes.

“But I don’t know what to *do!*” Anna cried.

Futotta looked into the room, where Wolfson had just been pushed against the bed and had stumbled backwards. The lizard’s naginata slashed him badly. “I think you had better figure it out quickly, *nyan.*”

Anna looked in the room and saw the situation. Tears of panic and frustration formed in her eyes. But she tried to recall what she could from the classes that she had taken before. She closed her eyes, lowered her head, and clasped her hands together.

“*By the power of the chthonic blossoms,*” Anna said, in a quavering voice which grew stronger as she progressed, “*I am driven by light and love to stem the tide of all things evil as I emerge through the veil as Magical Girl Apple Blossom!*”

As she spoke, a light formed, seemingly from within her chest, and suddenly flashed outward. Her nightshirt was shredded in the expenditure of energy, leaving her momentarily naked – had any interested party been available to observe – but then the light coalesced into another set of clothes: a short, pleated red skirt; a thin, green tube top with spaghetti straps that tied at the shoulders; and – where her slave collar had been – a red velvet choker with the image of a golden apple at the front.

Magical Girl Apple Blossom looked up with wide brown eyes to survey the scene.

Such was the nature of the light and energy released in Anna’s transformation that both Wolfson and the undead lizard were momentarily distracted. Wolfson was amazed to see Anna standing there as Magical Girl Apple Blossom, but he figured that he’d save those thoughts for later – no matter how cute she looked in that outfit.

He quickly rolled to the side and away from the reptile as the naginata once again buried itself in the bed. The distraction was over.

Anna looked down at Futotta, who was watching Wolfson’s deadly game of cat-and-mouse with the lizard.

“*Now* what do I do?” she asked.

“Think about Wolf-san, use your heart, and do whatever comes naturally, *nyan,*” the cat told her.

Anna blushed. “I don’t think we could do that right now.”

Futotta glanced up at her with an annoyed flick of his tail. “Look a little *deeper* into your heart, *nyan.*”

Anna looked back in at the fight, bouncing up and down in agitation as she frantically tried to come up with an idea. She was finding it difficult to concentrate in the face of Wolfson’s plight. All that she could really think about was the fact that he appeared to be losing, and she really didn’t have any idea of how to help him – even if she had a cat and a costume.

Suddenly the beast reversed its naginata and slammed Wolfson haft-first dead center in the chest. With a grunt, Wolfson landed against the wall near the door, doing his best to keep a grip on his sword. The lizard quickly followed through while Wolfson was stunned. Its naginata came around blade-first, tearing a deep gash in the warrior’s chest.

Anna shrieked, but Wolfson, in a sheer act of will, held onto his longsword and brought it to the ready. But it was obvious that he was weakened and in pain.

“Stop thinking as Anna, and think as Magical Girl Apple Blossom, *nyan,*” suggested Futotta.

Anna closed her tear filled eyes, and concentrated on... apple blossoms. Suddenly a thought came unbidden to her mind and she gasped. Opening her eyes, she held out her hand and cried, “*Mystical Apple of Purity!*”

An apple-shaped ball of golden energy materialized in her hand, and she hurled it at the reptile. As it impacted, streams of golden light enveloped the beast, binding it tightly. With its arms caught in mid-swing, the lizard's naginata flew impotently across the room and clattered uselessly on the floor.

Wolfson, realizing through his haze that something had happened, and that the undead monster was somehow paralyzed, summoned up his remaining strength. His blow decapitated the lizard, sending its head to join the naginata on the floor. Its body, held suspended by the golden bands of light, stood erect for a moment. Then, as the light dissipated, the body of the creature collapsed.

Wolfson stood there for a moment regarding the thing, and then he, too, collapsed.

"Oh no!" cried Anna, rushing in to where Wolfson had fallen.

"I think they could *both* use a doctor, *nyan*," Futotta recommended.

**Next: It's Been Real...**



## Part Twelve: It's Been Real...

Wolfson and Darkling lay in their room, convalescing. Aside from the aches of their wounds, they were essentially happy. Darkling was happy because the situation was over, they were now loaded with plenty of money, and their Adventurer's White Cross insurance would cover any expenses incurred during their recovery. Wolfson was just happy that things with Anna appeared to have been resolved.

As a matter of fact, Anna, once again in her school uniform, fussed over him, while Kana did much the same for Darkling. Despite protestations that they were fine, and that they'd suffered worse, the girls refused to let the two adventurers out of their sight during daylight hours. And, admittedly, Wolfson privately knew that the two of them had never been in quite so perilous a situation before as facing the lizard revenant.

"What now?" asked Darkling, suddenly.

"Eh?" Wolfson cocked an eyebrow and looked inquisitively at his companion.

"Aside from garnering us some money for the time being, this was a bust. We've got no information about the Amulet of Zarstat," Darkling explained. "So where do we go next?"

"Hmmm." Wolfson thought for a moment. "I'm really not too sure, since the information is apparently scarce..."

"There is lore about Zarstat at the Enchanters' Union in Tinker's Dam, *nyan*," said Futotta from where he was lying on a chair in the corner of the room. He didn't even bother to open his eyes.

All four of the travelers regarded the fat tabby. Finally, Wolfson said, "Well, I haven't got any better suggestions."

"No real objections here," agreed Darkling. "I guess we'll head to Tinker's Dam."

"Not until you're all better," admonished Kana.

"Yeah!" Anna agreed.

"No," said Wolfson with a chuckle. "We won't go rushing off *just* yet."

Several days later, the group finally prepared to leave. As Wolfson and Darkling gathered their things together, there came a light tap at the door.

"It's open," Wolfson called out.

Kazumi shyly poked her head in the room. "Kurai-san?"

Darkling involuntarily flinched. "Uh... Me?"

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" she asked.

"Er... I think I have to use the head," Wolfson said, and sidled past Kazumi and out of the room.

"Uh... what is it?" Darkling asked.

"I wanted to apologize for yelling at you so much."

"Oh. No problem," Darkling said.

"And I'm sorry for hitting you so much," Kazumi added.

"Ah. Well... I'll live."

"And I wanted to know..." Kazumi hesitated for a moment.

"What?" inquired Darkling.

"In the game... I was wondering what you thought..." She looked down, blushing.

"About what?" asked Darkling.

Kazumi looked up with a glare, still blushing. "What do you think?" she snapped.

“Uh... the plot?”

“Oooh... You’re hopeless!” she cried, and spun on her heel, opening the door.

“What?” Darkling asked in confusion.

Kazumi paused for a moment with her back to him, and then said quietly, “I hope you come back again someday.” Then she left, closing the door behind her.

As Wolfson waited in the hallway, Ayumu walked up to him and bowed. “Sensei.”

“Oh, cut that out!” Wolfson insisted.

“I just wanted to thank you for all of your advice,” she said, giving him an earnest look.

“Just be yourself,” Wolfson said. “It’s all good.”

She smiled. “Okay. I’ll try.”

Kazumi stalked out of the room, looking like a study in emotions. As she stalked down the hallway, Wolfson told Ayumu, “Well, I’ve got to finish getting ready to go.”

“Okay, sensei. Goodbye.” She stood on her toes and gave Wolfson a little kiss on the cheek. Then she ran off after Kazumi. Wolfson shook his head a little, and went back into the room.

After Wolfson and Darkling had almost finished packing up, there came another knock at the door. The pair looked at each other.

“It’s open,” Wolfson called out.

Kanami quietly came in. “Is it okay if we talk for a minute?”

“Uh... I’ll go see how the girls are doing,” Darkling decided, and hastened out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Wolfson regarded Kanami, many different feelings going through his mind. “What’s on your mind?”

Kanami cast her golden eyes toward the floor. “I hope I didn’t cause too many problems.”

Wolfson went over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “Hey. I *told* you... It wasn’t anybody’s fault. And it’s not like I did anything unwillingly.”

Kanami looked up at Wolfson and met his eyes. “You like her a lot, don’t you.”

“Yeah,” admitted Wolfson. “But I like you, too. And if things were different, I’d probably find an excuse to hang around here and get to know you.” He smiled. “Or I’d just drag you off kicking and screaming.”

Kanami smiled a little. “That woulda been fun. I wouldn’t have kicked and screamed *too* much.”

Wolfson shrugged. “Who knows. Relationships are funny, and sometimes things change. If they do, I’ll come see if you’re still interested.”

Kanami suddenly threw her arms around him and held him tightly. “Okay,” she said. Then after a moment, “I’d better get going before I try something bad.” She let go, and suddenly ran out of the room. Wolfson was pretty sure that she was crying.

He sighed. *Life is too complicated sometimes*, he thought to himself.

The four travelers were finally prepared to leave. Well, actually it was five, since it appeared that Futotta was going to be going along with them, as Anna was carrying the rotund feline in her slender arms. They stood in the foyer of the Feldingford School for Magical Girls, along with Yumi, and said their final farewells.

“I guess everything is square now,” Yumi said.

“Yeah,” agreed Wolfson. “You’ve caught your prowler; we’ve seen your library. Thanks, by the way.”

“No problem. You never *did* tell me what the deal was with Kanami, though...”

“Oh... nothing to worry about, I’m sure,” Wolfson responded, dodging the issue.

“What do you mean?” Anna cried. “You—”

“Well! Look at the time!” Darkling interrupted. “We’d better get going.” He started dragging Kana out the door.

“But—” Anna started in perplexity.

“Yep! Gotta go get the horses!” interjected Wolfson. “We’ll see you the next time around.” He began pulling Anna out the door behind Darkling and Kana.

“But—” Anna tried again.

“Bye!” finished Wolfson, and closed the door behind them.

“Trust me,” explained Wolfson. “It’s better if Yumi doesn’t know all about Kanami.”

They were walking up to *The Goblin Belch*, and Anna was still sulking over being so rudely interrupted. “If you say so.”

As they went in, Darkling said, “I’ll go fetch the horses.”

Wolfson saw a lone dwarf sitting at a table and told Darkling, “Okay. We’ll be over with Oleg.”

“Right.” Darkling went to talk to the barkeep.

Wolfson, Anna and Kana walked up to Oleg’s table. “Hey, Oleg... how’s it going?” Wolfson asked.

The dwarf looked up from his mug. “Hmph. Heard you two got the slasher.”

“Was it in the *Grapevine*?” Wolfson asked.

“Yeah. Heard it from Swayne, though. Has a big mouth.”

“Ah,” Wolfson replied.

“Figure he didn’t play as big a part as he says he did,” Oleg observed.

“Probably not,” agreed Wolfson. “But it *was* his treasure that lured the thing here.”

“Headin’ out?” asked the dwarf.

“Yeah. I guess we’re going to Tinker’s Dam.”

Oleg shuddered. “Wouldn’t take the shortcut through the Tiger Woods, if I was you.”

“Why not?” Wolfson asked.

“Fairies,” Oleg replied.

“Well, we’ll see.”

Darkling returned, having settled the bill for the horses, so the four travelers said their goodbyes to Oleg and made their way out of the tavern.

The horses, for their part, were a little disappointed to be off their vacation.

Two horses and four riders were on a hill that overlooked the town of Feldingford. They were considering the river that flowed away to the east and the forest that stretched off to the north. Actually, the horses couldn’t have cared less – they were munching on some convenient grass – but the riders had a decision to make on the best route to take them to Tinker’s Dam.

“The river will eventually get us there,” Wolfson pointed out. “But it’s the long way around. Going north through the Tiger Woods is the more direct route.”

“I’d rather take the shortcut,” Darkling decided.

“Oleg was worried about fairies,” Wolfson mentioned.

Darkling shrugged. “Dwarves and fairy folk don’t get along. I think we’ll be okay.”

The decision having been made, the group headed north into the wilderness.

**The End...?**