

Author

**Hiiro Shimotsuki**

Illustrator

**Takashi Iwasaki**

vol. **8**

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for your  
purchase!

# **PEDDLER IN ANOTHER WORLD**

**I CAN GO BACK TO MY WORLD  
WHenever I WANT!**



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## Summary of the Previous Volume

Aina's father was still alive and out there somewhere, yet despite knowing this, Stella and Aina had made no move to leave Ninoritch at all, and continued on with their lives as if nothing had changed. *"Aren't you going to go look for your husband?"* was the burning question I wanted to ask Stella, but I never managed to find the right moment. Days passed, but this question still lingered at the forefront of my mind.

Meanwhile, I'd received some incredible news: Shess—or to use her proper title: Shessfelia, the first princess of the Giruam Kingdom—was moving to Ninoritch. Aina and I were struck dumb with shock on learning this, but we had no time to waste, for the little princess would be turning up on our doorstep very soon and I was the one who had been left in charge of preparing some accommodation for her. I enlisted Patty for the job and threw up a mansion fit for a noble in record time.

But for some reason, when Shess finally arrived in Ninoritch, she was angry at me. When I asked her why, she said it was because I hadn't come to her birthday party even though she had sent me an invitation. The catch was I'd never actually received said invitation, because Luza—Shess's personal guard—had completely forgotten to send it to me. So with that misunderstanding behind us, Shess apologized, and the two of us were friends again. She requested that we throw a celebration for her birthday again, and to make it a joint party with Aina, as the little girl was also turning nine soon.

After a lot of thought and plenty of asking around, I decided to get Aina flowers from her hometown as a birthday present. The flowers must have stirred up memories, as one second, the little girl was dancing around joyfully, and the next, she was crouching down, crying and pleading to the air around her for her father to come home.

Stella scooped her daughter up in her arms and asked her, "Can I go look for your papa?"



Aina wiped away her tears and nodded in response to her mother's question. A short time later, the two of us—along with all of our friends—waved Stella off as she set off to look for her husband. It took us some time to get used to Stella's absence, but I was just finally starting to adjust when another incident shook my world. I was merrily drinking the night away with my friends over at the guild when Kilpha suddenly dropped a bombshell on me.

“Could you be my husband, meow?”



# Chapter One: I Got Reverse Proposed to Out of the Blue

“Could you be my husband, meow?”

Husband. That’s what she’d said, right? *Husband.*

I hadn’t been expecting that. In fact, on my long mental list of potential questions that might be put to me at any given point during a day, it was right near the bottom. I was so taken aback by the request, my brain stopped working for a moment, unable to process the information it had just received. All I could manage by way of response was an incredulous “Huh?” as I tilted my head to one side in utter bewilderment.

Husband. No, she couldn’t *really* have meant “husband,” right? Hmmm...

Husband. Huz-band. Ah, huz-band, huh? I’d never come across that word before. Huz-band, huz-band, huz-band. Could it be some sort of incantation? Or a prayer, perhaps? Or maybe it was some new word that had just been invented? *Well, I’m in a pretty pickle here now, aren’t I? I’ll have to ask grandma to update the magic language ring to the newest version the next time I see her.*

For a moment, I had really convinced myself that there was some sort of issue with the ring, but as I looked around the table, I saw that Raiya and Nesca had the same nonplussed expressions as me that screamed “What *did she just say?*” Raiya managed to affix a stiff smile to his face, before hoarsely asking a passing waitress for a refill, while Nesca simply shook her head and reached for the chocolates in front of her. The only person whose expression hadn’t changed at all was Rolf, his lips curled slightly upward into the same gentle smile he always wore. Though on further inspection, I noticed his hand was shaking and tea was spilling out of his cup, causing big splashes in the saucer below.

Kilpha must have started to get a bit impatient because she repeated her request. “I *said*, could you be my husband?” she said pointedly as she stared at me through clear blue eyes. It seemed she wasn’t joking.



“Y-Your husband?” I stammered.

“Yeah, my husband, meow!” Kilpha said testily.

“Um...” I said hesitantly. “And by ‘husband,’ you mean the man you marry and who you’re all lovey-dovey with? The level above boyfriend? Is that what you mean?”

“Yup, meow!” Kilpha confirmed with a nod, a satisfied look splashed across her face.

The next instant, chaos erupted. The mouthful of alcohol Raiya had just taken was subsequently sprayed in Nesca’s face, who was so stunned to find herself on the receiving end of an unexpected Asian Mist wrestling attack, she didn’t even react and just kept on eating her chocolate. As for Rolf, his hand shook even more and tea was spilling out of his cup and onto his priest robes, though he continued to smile as calmly as ever, which was a little unsettling, to say the least. But the *pièce de résistance* was still to come.

“*What* did you just say?!” cried a voice that echoed around the drinking hall. Scratch that, around the entire *guildhall*. “Kilpha! What the *hell* do you think you’re doing, asking *my* mister to marry you?!”

The owner of the voice was making a beeline for our table, her shoulders squared in her mustard-yellow guild uniform and her bunny ears standing straight up. The usual gleam of greed and lust in her eyes had evaporated and she was staring daggers at Kilpha, as if the cat-sith had killed her family and she had come to get her revenge.

“Meow? Emi?”

Yup, that’s right. This interloper in our conversation was none other than the good-for-nothing receptionist and resident nuisance of the Ninoritch branch of the Fairy Blessing guild: Emille. She stopped in front of Kilpha’s chair and looked down at her with her hands on her hips, rage oozing out of every pore of her body. Kilpha must have felt it too—I mean, if even someone like me who was raised in the safety and security of modern Japan had noticed, why wouldn’t she?—for she stood up at once.

“Kilpha! Since when did you turn into a *thief*, huh?!” Emille snarled, shoving

Kilpha.

I glanced in the direction of the reception area and saw that a bunch of adventurers were lined up in front of an empty desk and gawking at the scene unfolding in the drinking hall. Emille must have abandoned her post to come and pick a fight with Kilpha.

“No, you’ve got it all wrong, Emi. I—” Kilpha said, attempting to explain herself, but Emille didn’t let her.

“Don’t start making excuses! Mister over here...” Emille paused and pointed at me. “...belongs to *me!*”

“Uh, no, I don’t,” I calmly interjected, waving my hands around in front of me. “I don’t belong to anyone. And if I *had* to belong to someone, I definitely wouldn’t pick you, Emille.”

Emille angrily clenched her teeth. “Shut up, mister. I’m talking to Kilpha right now, not you.”

“But you’re talking *about* me,” I protested.

“My dignity’s on the line here, mister! This is basically a crusade! A fight to the death between me and Kilpha!” Emille exclaimed before turning back to the cat-sith and closing the distance between them while glaring at her so intensely, it was actually a little bit scary. She got right up in Kilpha’s face, to the point where they were so close, their lips were almost touching. Kilpha was extremely flustered by the confrontation and she fidgeted with a troubled look on her face, unable to think of a way to clear up the misunderstanding.

“There’s no need for either of you to die here,” Raiya interjected. “Emi, you don’t really want to take Kilpha’s life, right? You just want Shiro, yeah?”

“His money, to be exact,” Nesca corrected him.

*Welcome back to reality, you two.* It seemed Emille’s boisterous entrance had forcibly snapped them out of their earlier confusion.

“Dude, just tell Emille you’re not into her. That’ll make her back off,” Raiya urged me.

“You think? Huh. That’s strange. I could’ve sworn I’d made it clear on *multiple*



occasions that I'm not interested, but she hasn't given up yet," I said. I racked my memory but I couldn't think of a single time when I *hadn't* shot down Emille's advances.

"Hmph! As if being rejected a few times would be enough to make me give up! I'll keep chasing you until I make you mine, mister!" Emille declared.

This was slowly but surely turning into a psychological horror movie, and I had to admit, I was nothing short of absolutely *terrified*.

"Anyway, I'll come back to you later, mister. For now..." She paused, then spat, "*Kilpha!*" as she turned to face her for the third time that evening. "I can't believe you'd try to snatch mister away from under my nose while I'm busy working! I misjudged you!"

"Hold on, Emi. Just listen to what I have to say, meow," Kilpha pleaded, but the bunny girl refused to make any kind of concession.

"And why would I do that, hm? I have incredibly pretty ears, sure, but that doesn't mean I'm gonna use them to listen to *your* sorry excuses!"

I was pretty sure I'd never seen Emille this mad before. She was completely flipping out at Kilpha. *Hurry up and fetch the guildmaster, someone*, I silently pleaded to no one in particular.

"Like I said, it's all a misunderstanding, meow!"

"I don't care about your excuses!" Emille ranted before adopting a high-pitched voice to imitate Kilpha. "'Oh, meow, meow, will you be my husband, purr, meow?'"



She grabbed Kilpha by the collar and stared her down for a couple of seconds. “Did you think I wouldn’t *hear* you, huh?! Well, I *did*! I heard *everything*!” she screeched, spittle flying everywhere.

*I don’t think that’s quite what Kilpha said*, I thought, mentally defending my cat-sith friend. *And she doesn’t sound anything like that*.

“And here I was, thinking you were my *best friend*! I can’t believe you’d try to steal my mister from me. You *thief*!” Emille exclaimed, pretending to cry, though it was easy to tell that she wasn’t *actually* crying.

A-ha! There it was. The “best friend” line. You see, Emille called anyone her “best friend” when it suited her. The first time I met her, she was calling Karen her “best friend” while begging her for money (and quite a large amount at that), but the second Karen refused to give it to her, Emille started bad-mouthing her to anyone who would listen.

“Please regain your composure, Miss Emille, ma’am,” Rolf intervened, unable to sit and watch as Emille verbally assaulted his partymate. He got up from his chair and grabbed the bunny girl by the scruff of her neck, lifting her off the ground.

“What the hell do you think you’re *doing*, Rolf? Let me go!” Emille protested as she struggled in his viselike grip, her feet dangling some way off the ground.

“Miss Kilpha must have her reasons for asking what she did. Perhaps you should take a deep breath and listen to what she has to say, yes?” he suggested, peering up at Emille with a gentle smile on his face.

It hadn’t escaped my notice, however, that his other hand—the one that wasn’t holding Emille aloft—was gripping the handle of his mace, and pretty tightly too, to the point where I could see the veins on the back of his hand bulging. Was Emille so infuriating that she could drive even gentle, compassionate Rolf to lose his cool and bludgeon her with his mace? No, no, that wouldn’t do. I had to act before this ended in murder—a murder committed by a priest, no less.

“Rolf’s right, Emille. Kilpha must have some kind of explanation. How about hearing her out first, and *then* deciding if you want to yell yourself hoarse at her



or fight her to the death or whatever it is you're planning to do?" I suggested.

She must have also noticed Rolf's hand wrapped tightly around his mace, as she agreed to my suggestion surprisingly easily. "F-Fine. If you insist, then I guess... I guess I'll hear her out."

"You heard her, Rolf," I said pointedly.

"A sensible decision, Miss Emille, ma'am," Rolf said amicably as he lowered Emille until her feet were back on firm ground.

"Well then, Kilpha. Mind explaining to us why you, um..." I hesitated. "...why you said you wanted me to be your 'husband'?"

Kilpha nodded. "Sure thing, meow. I'll tell you everything, meow."

We all sat back down around the table to listen to what she had to say.



Emille hadn't departed from our company yet, meaning there were six of us seated around the table: the Blue Flash crew, me—the person at the heart of all this—and Emille, who had pretty much nothing to do with the situation but had decided to stick around anyway. We were all staring expectantly at Kilpha as we waited for her to explain why she had asked me to be her husband.

On a sidenote, since Emille had ditched her post to come and listen to Kilpha's story, there was a huge line of adventurers at the reception desk. The bunny girl didn't seem to want to budge at all, however, and in a way, I was impressed by her nerves of steel. Though I mostly felt sorry for Trell, the guild's newest receptionist, who had once again been reduced to tears as a result of Emille's antics.

"The letter I got was from my dad, meow," Kilpha began, her tone grave.

She had just received a letter, and it seemed this had been the catalyst for the whole "Please be my husband, Shiro" debacle, as that had been her immediate response right after reading it. Just what in the world was in that letter?

"A letter from your dad, huh? What did it say?" I asked.

"I-It wasn't anything huge, meow. Just, uh..." She hesitated. "Ah! He said I should come say hi to them soon," Kilpha said awkwardly. *Is it just me or is she*

*looking a little flustered?*

“I see. Well, it’s only natural for a father to worry about his daughter. How long has it been since you last saw him? Or well, since you last saw your family, I suppose I should say,” I asked.

Kilpha hummed as she thought about this, before counting on her fingers.

“Kilpha and I joined Blue Flash seven years ago,” Nesca interjected.

“Yup, seven years, meow,” the cat-sith echoed. “So the last time I saw my family was seven years ago, meow.”

“Huh? Seven *years*?!” I exclaimed in shock.

Kilpha was twenty, which meant she’d left her home to become an adventurer at the age of thirteen and hadn’t seen her family at all since. Only I seemed shocked by this information, however.

“Wow, has it really been that long already?” Raiya remarked.

“How time flies. I still remember the day you invited the pair of them to join our party upon seeing how young Miss Kilpha was, Mr. Raiya, sir,” Rolf reminisced, drawing a chuckle from Raiya.

“Yup, I did, didn’t I? Back then, I hadn’t twigged that Nesca was a half-elf, so when I saw these two kids—two young girls, no less—had their own party, I figured they’d *definitely* get tricked by some bad guys if we let them go off adventuring alone, so I asked them if they wanted to join us.”

“I will never forget the face you made when you discovered that Miss Nesca was older than you,” Rolf teased.

“Ugh, you really should forget that,” Raiya grumbled before regarding Kilpha. “Still, you’ve certainly grown up since then, haven’t you, Kilpha? You were a mere slip of a thing back then.”

“She was on the verge of starving when I crossed paths with her,” Nesca commented.

“Yup, I sure was!” Kilpha confirmed. “If Nesca hadn’t given me some food, I probably would’ve died.”

No one had even batted an eye at the revelation that Kilpha hadn't seen her family in seven years. Instead, they had gone on a little trip down memory lane, chatting about the adventuring debuts of Nesca and Kilpha. Then again, Emille hadn't seemed all that surprised either, so maybe not seeing your family for literally years at a time was a pretty common occurrence in this world.

Actually, the more I thought about it, the more I realized it really *wasn't* all that surprising. After all, there was minimal transportation infrastructure in this world, and most people had to go by horse-drawn carriage if they wanted to get from point A to point B. It wasn't as easy as just popping by their hometown to say hi to their family, because any such journey required careful planning and a significant amount of time set aside for it. As such, it was entirely likely that none of the other Blue Flash members had seen their families in seven years either. Under those circumstances, I could see why Kilpha's dad had written to her to tell her to come and say hi.

"Okay, so your daddy asked you to visit them," an irritating voice chimed in, spoiling the Blue Flash crew's journey down memory lane. It went without saying that the voice belonged to Emille. "But what has that got to do with you asking mister to be your husband?" she asked, her eyes glazed over.

A tankard of something alcoholic had been set down in front of her on the table. *When did she even order it? And more importantly, isn't she still meant to be on duty?*

"So?" Emille drawled. "Why did you ask him to be your husband? Answer me now!"

"It's, uh..." Kilpha hesitated. "So, basically, the village chieftain—ah, that's my grandma, by the way, meow." She paused as she let out an awkward chuckle, then raised her index fingers and sheepishly tapped the tips together a few times. "My grandma wants to know if I have a b-boyfriend, meow."

"And? That *still* doesn't explain why you need mister to be your husband," Emille pointed out as she stared Kilpha down coldly.

"Um, that's... It's... Well, I..." Kilpha stammered, the intensity of Emille's glare causing the words to get lost in her throat.

*So Kilpha's the granddaughter of her village's chieftain, huh?* I thought idly.



But then, realization struck. I understood everything. I knew *exactly* why Kilpha had asked me to be her husband.

“C’mon, Kilpha, answer me!” Emille barked.

Kilpha let out a distressed meow. “Emi’s bullying me, meow!”

“Huuuh? In what universe am *I* bullying *you*? Stop talking nonsense, you—”

“Stop! Come on now, Emille. Cut it out,” I interrupted, leaning forward across the table to physically get between them.

“Stay out of this, mister!” Emille retorted.

“No. If you keep being so aggressive toward her, she’s never going to get to the end of her explanation. Right, Kilpha?” I said, turning to the cat-sith, who nodded timidly in response. “See?” I added.

“So you’re on that thieving cat’s side, are you?” Emille pouted, puffing her cheeks out in annoyance.

“Well, we’re not on *your* side, that’s for sure,” Raiya said.

Nesca nodded. “Agreed.”

“This is a good opportunity to reflect on your behavior,” Rolf added.

*See, Emille? It’s in moments like this that your previous actions come back to bite you.* Seeing that no one was on her side, Emille harrumphed and downed her drink. *Can’t she just go back to work and leave us alone?*

“Kilpha,” I said.

“Meow?”

“I get it.”

“Huh? What? Wh-What do you mean, meow?”

“I now know *exactly* why you asked me to be your husband,” I said, a self-satisfied smirk curling my lips upward. A look of surprise flashed across Kilpha’s face.

“So why did she?” Raiya asked.

“It’s very simple, really. There are three things to take into account here: 1)

Kilpha's grandmother wants her to have a boyfriend; 2) it's been seven years since she last saw her family; and 3) Kilpha's a kind person. If you consider all three points together, it's easy to deduce her reasoning." I raised three fingers on my right hand and hit them all with the conclusion of my analysis. "Kilpha, you want me to pretend to be your husband—or your boyfriend at the very least—to give your grandmother some peace of mind."

"Say what?!" Raiya exclaimed. Even though he was a bit of a joker, he was actually a very earnest person, meaning the idea of getting someone to pretend to be your romantic partner had never crossed his mind. I, on the other hand, wasn't greatly surprised by it. In Japan, there were plenty of businesses that allowed you to "rent" a boyfriend or girlfriend, so to speak. Some folk used these businesses as a way of training for the day when they would actually have a significant other, some hired a companion to go with them to places or events where it would be too awkward to go alone, while others made use of the service because they needed to pretend to have a romantic partner for one reason or another. Kilpha fell into this third category, since she wanted me to act as her boyfriend to give her family some peace of mind.

"Don't worry. I totally get it. My grandma never misses an opportunity to ask me when I'm gonna think about finding a girlfriend," I continued. "I wish she'd kinda just drop it, but family members really care about that sort of stuff, you know?"

At present, grandma was still asking these questions more in a jokey way, but in five or ten years, she would most likely start asking them a bit more seriously.

"Kilpha's a very considerate person, and I'm sure she cares deeply about her family. That's why she asked me to be her husband: to reassure her grandmother," I concluded, drawing impressed oohs and aahs from Raiya, Nesca, and Rolf. Emille, however, clicked her tongue, visibly annoyed.

I turned to Kilpha. "Did I get that right?" I asked triumphantly.

She stared at me blankly for a few seconds before nodding vigorously. "Uh, y-yeah! You did, meow! I want you to be—um, to *pretend* to be my husband—or well, my fiancé will do—to give my grandma some peace of mind, meow! That's exactly it!"

I couldn't shake the feeling that she was still acting a little weird, but I didn't let it bother me too much, since it seemed my deductions had been correct.

"That's what I thought. Raiya and Nesca are already an item, and Rolf's a priest, so his goddess probably wouldn't forgive him if he deceived someone, even if it was for a friend. And so, by process of elimination, you decided to ask me," I said.

Kilpha nodded again. "Yup, yup! Exactly, meow!"

"Not to mention, I've been eating and drinking with you guys every week for a while now, so you and I are already pretty comfortable around each other," I continued. "If I needed to pretend to be your boyfriend, no one would suspect a thing."

"Yeah! They totally wouldn't, meow!" Kilpha agreed, and I felt pretty damn proud of myself seeing her nodding and confirming all of my theories.

"All right, I'll do it. For you. I'll be the best pretend-boyfriend—no, the best pretend-*fiancé* this world has ever seen!" I corrected myself.

"Yay, meow! Thank you, Shiro, meow!" Kilpha whooped, giving me a high five.

Emille saw fit to once again insert herself into the conversation, however. "Mister, don't be fooled!" she protested. "Kilpha's trying to get rid of all the obstacles in her way one by one, so she can snatch you for herself!"

"Uh, what are you talking about, Emille?" I asked.

"I told you, I heard *everything* with these pretty ears of mine," she said, treating Kilpha to a death glare. "If you're going to her village, I'm tagging along too!"

"Bad idea, Emi. You won't have a job to come back to," Raiya warned.

"Yup, you'll be jobless," Nesca agreed, driving the point home.

But Emille didn't care. "If that happens, I can just marry mister and be a housewife for the rest of my life," she said.

"Yeah, please don't. I'd die," I said matter-of-factly.

"You heard the man, Emi," Raiya interjected.



“I already told you, I’m not giv— Wait, Rolf? Why are you grabbing your mace?!”

Glancing over at Rolf, I noticed he had silently wrapped his hand around the handle of his mace, his smile unwavering.

“I-I asked you a question!” Emille said haughtily. “You’d better answ—argh!”

It required several adventurers holding him back to stop Rolf from sending Emille flying with a swing of his mace.

## Chapter Two: Kilpha's Homeland

Rolf's angry display sent Emille scuttling back to her counter for her own safety, where she immediately got into a heated exchange with the adventurers that had been waiting there. Cusswords filled the air, and it got so intense, I felt like I was watching an American rap battle show. *She can't go two seconds without getting into trouble, can she?*

"So you're really gonna go to the cat-sìths' village, man?" Raiya said. With the "husband" situation all cleared up, the conversation turned back to my plans for the near future.

"Yeah. After all, I've always wanted to visit the land of the fluff—ahem, I mean, the cat-sìths' village," I corrected myself.

I tried to look and sound as serious as possible. I couldn't mess this up. If I started acting *too* enthusiastic about the prospect of going there, Kilpha might go "I've changed my mind, meow," and take someone else with her. I'd never recover from that. *You've just gotta act nice and calm, Shiro. You can do it!*

"Then I'll take you there, meow!" Kilpha said cheerily.

"Thank you so much!" I replied.

She shook her head. "No, I'm the one who should be thanking you, meow."

The cat-sìths' village, otherwise known as cat-ear paradise. It had been a dream of mine to visit a place like that for as long as I could remember. My own promised land, and it was finally within reach. I discreetly did a fist pump under the table and whooped a triumphant cry inside my head. By contrast, Raiya, sitting opposite me, had his arms crossed and looked deep in thought.

"Hm, where's your homeland again, Kilpha?" he asked.

"In the Dura Forest, meow."

"Right, right. And if I remember correctly, you have to do a bunch of really annoying steps before you can get in, don't you?" he said, looking across at

Nesca beside him for confirmation.

She swallowed her mouthful of chocolate cookie and washed it down with a sip of her cocktail (which had a base of chocolate liqueur, naturally) before replying. “You have to go through the city-state of Orvil if you want to gain access to the Dura Forest.”

“Yeah, that was it! You need to get an entry permit in Orvil or you can’t go there,” Raiya said, rolling his eyes to emphasize just how much of a hassle the whole thing was.

“Why? Can’t we just go straight to Kilpha’s village?” I asked.

“The Dura Forest formally falls under the jurisdiction of the city-state of Orvil,” Nesca explained.

“Is that so?” I said.

“Yup,” Nesca replied.

“Could you tell me a little more about it?”

Nesca nodded lethargically. Another day, another lecture from Nesca. “Well, you see, the Dura Forest is...” she began, launching into a lecture.

I learned that the city-state of Orvil was a tiny nation situated to the southwest of the Giruam Kingdom that comprised a single fortified city and its immediate surroundings, which included the Dura Forest where Kilpha’s home village was located. As Raiya had mentioned, to go into the forest, you needed permission from the authorities in Orvil, which was, in essence, a protective measure that had been put in place for the beastfolk living there, as they were often persecuted and discriminated against. Anyone who set foot in the forest without first gaining authorization would be considered to be trespassing, and once apprehended, would promptly be thrown in the city’s dungeons.

To someone who was born in modern-day Japan, needing to fill out paperwork to enter another country seemed perfectly acceptable, to the point where I’d even say it was par for the course. But in this world where you could just stroll into pretty much any nation you wanted by paying some form of levy, most people considered the extra steps a huge hassle. According to Kilpha, the only outsiders who ever chose to visit the Dura Forest were adventurers looking



for certain plants, and doctors. Even traveling merchants weren't willing to go through all the rigmarole.

"And we're not the only beastfolk who reside in the Dura Forest, meow. There are other races living there too," Kilpha explained.

"*More* animal ears, you say—" I started, my excitement briefly getting the better of me before I checked myself. "Ahem. Sorry. I meant to say, 'So there are other beastfolk in the forest, hm?'"

"Yup! You've got the bearfolk, the foxpeople, the high cat-sìths—they're the ones that look like tigers—the demonwolves' tribe, the dogfolk... There's a whole bunch of us, meow!"

I gasped. "Is this Dura Forest some sort of beastfolk treasure chest?"

Raiya burst out laughing. "Treasure chest? Dude, you really *do* like beastfolk, don't ya?"

"Of course! If anything, I don't understand how anyone can *not* like them."

"There truly is no one better suited to acting as Miss Kilpha's fiancé than you, Mr. Shiro, sir," Rolf remarked.

At first, I'd believed I was heading to cat-ear paradise, but now I was being told this forest was home to a veritable all-star cast of animal ears! This was way beyond "paradise"; it was the holy land! My own *personal* Arcadia! Would I be all right going there? What if I never made it back to Ninoritch? I made a mental note to *not* succumb to the temptation to move to the Dura Forest.

"Well, we know how much you love beastfolk, so let's leave that to one side for now," Raiya said, his airy expression suddenly turning serious. "So Orvil, huh? How do you plan to go about it?"

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"Miss Kilpha's home is quite far from Ninoritch," Rolf explained on Raiya's behalf.

"So it'll take several days to get there? Is that what you're saying?" I surmised.

"Indeed. While the city-state may border the Giruam Kingdom, you will still need to travel the breadth of the kingdom in order to get there. Even if you

were to go by carriage, it would still take a month and a half, maybe even two months, to get to the Dura Forest, if you factor in preparation and travel time.”

“I see.”

While that sounded like a lot, if we made the journey on Dramom’s back, we could likely do it in just a few hours. I was about to suggest this, but Raiya opened his mouth first. “All righty. Then, how about we all take this opportunity to swing by our own hometowns?” he suggested. “Whaddaya say, Rolf?”

“I think that would be a splendid idea,” Rolf replied. “I have not seen my mentor in quite a long time. I believe he would be very glad to see me if I were to visit the temple in my hometown.”

“Yeah, lately, I’ve been missing my old man, my mom, and my stupid brothers too. Going home for a catch-up sounds like a great idea to me right about now,” Raiya said.

“You have brothers, Raiya?” I said in some surprise.

“Yup. Four of them. All older.”

“Wow, you’ve got a pretty big family.”

“You think? I’d say that’s pretty normal for us countryfolk. My parents own a farm, so...” He shrugged.

So Raiya was the fifth-born son in his family, huh? Apparently, his parents had planned on the sons each taking over one field of the farm when they retired, but with four older brothers, there would have been nothing for Raiya to inherit, so he’d decided to become an adventurer instead.

“And now you’re a silver-ranked adventurer at the Fairy’s Blessing guild. I’d say you’ve done pretty well for yourself,” I said.

“Ah, but it’s nothing compared to *your* achievements, Mr. Hotshot Merchant,” Raiya retorted.

I chuckled. “I just got lucky and met the right people. Like you guys, for instance.”

“Ah, ain’t you a smooth talker?” Raiya said, giving my shoulder a couple of firm slaps. “C’mon, man. Drink up! Tonight’s on me.”

“And me, meow!” Kilpha piped up before raising her hand and calling over a waitress. “Miss! Bring us some more alcohol! Wait, beer! Shiro likes beer, meow!”

*Well, here’s to another fun night.*

The Blue Flash crew and I clinked our beer bottles (and Rolf’s cup of black tea) together and cheered, but as I took a swig of my drink, I was struck by a realization that gave me pause.

*Now that I think about it, Raiya didn’t ask Nesca if she would be going home, did he? Why’s that, I wonder?* Finding this a curious omission, I glanced over at Nesca and... *Oh, right. Now I get it.*

I hadn’t noticed it at first, but Nesca and Raiya were holding hands under the table, their fingers interlocked, and I instantly understood why Raiya hadn’t asked if she would be going to see her family. The two of them were going to introduce each other to their families, weren’t they? They must have been planning this for a while, waiting for the right moment to do so. *Seriously, can’t these two lovebirds just get blown to bits already?*

“Perhaps Miss Kilpha receiving a letter from her father today is a sign from the gods,” Rolf remarked knowingly.

Raiya nodded deeply. “Must be.”



The night was still young, and if I were to hazard a guess, I would say we still had hours of merriment ahead of us. My companions all seemed in a good mood, perhaps buoyed by the fact that they would soon be seeing their families again for the first time in a long, long time.

“Oh, right,” I uttered as a thought entered my head. “I have a question for you, Kilpha.”

“Meow?”

“Should I take your parents something when we go visit your home village?”

“Like what?” she asked, tilting her head to one side in confusion.

“Like some sort of greeting gift, I mean,” I said.

“What?” she said, taken aback. “No, no, no. You don’t have to bother with stuff like *that*. It’s just my mom and dad!”

“But I’ll be pretending to be your fiancé, right?” I pointed out. “I can’t just go empty-handed.”

Kilpha hummed at length. “Ah, I know! You can bring some snacks for my siblings, meow. Your snacks are so yummy, they’ll just love them, meow!”

“Chocolate, Shiro. You should bring them chocolate,” Nesca suggested.

It was then Raiya’s turn to pipe up. “Now, hold on a minute, man. You have to bring a present when you visit your partner’s parents?”

“Most people do where I’m from, yeah,” I confirmed.

“Is that so? Your people really seem to take this sort of stuff seriously, don’t they?” he mused. “Well, in that case, I suppose I should prepare a little something too.”

Well, that sealed it. Raiya was definitely planning on visiting Nesca’s hometown. Unlike my situation, however, where I was only pretending to be Kilpha’s fiancé, he was actually dating Nesca for real, and he seemed dead serious about wanting to impress her parents. As he should! First impressions were very important.

“I do not believe you necessarily *need* to copy the customs of Mr. Shiro’s homeland, though it would certainly help to make a good impression on your partner’s parents if you were to arrive with a present to give to them,” Rolf said.

“You think I should too, Rolf?” Raiya asked.

“Chocolate, Raiya. You should bring them chocolate,” Nesca repeated almost word-for-word, except to her boyfriend this time.

Soon, all of us (aside from Rolf) were pleasantly drunk as we enjoyed our last drinking party for the foreseeable future to the fullest. The only downside was the hangover we would inevitably suffer the next day, but that was nothing Rolf and a quick Cure spell couldn’t fix.



“So I’ll be accompanying Kilpha to her homeland for a bit,” I told Aina the next evening, once we’d closed up the shop.

There was a short pause, then the little girl nodded. “Okay. So you’ll be going to Miss Kilpha’s house...”

“Yeah. I’ve always wanted to visit the land of the cat-sìths. Well, their village,” I explained. “Besides, Kilpha asked me to go with her. I could hardly refuse.”

Aina nodded. She looked up at me and smiled, but there was no hiding the sadness in her eyes. It was painfully obvious she was forcing herself to look happy. And how could I blame her for that? Her mother had embarked on a long journey to find her husband—Aina’s father—and now here I was, springing on her that I was about to leave town too. Of *course* she’d be sad. But I’d already accounted for that.

“Hey, Aina. I have a proposition for you,” I said.

The little girl made a quizzical noise in response.

I grinned. “Wanna tag along?”

My proposition had come so out of the blue, all the little girl could do was gasp an incredulous “Huh?” as her eyes grew wide and her jaw dropped to the floor.

“B-But won’t that bother Miss Kilpha?” she asked.

“Of course not. I already asked her if you could come.”

“Really?”

“Yup, really. And she said, ‘It’ll be even more fun with Aina there too, meow!’” I said, doing my best impression of Kilpha.

Aina’s little face lit up on hearing this. “Miss Kilpha...” she breathed, clasping her hands to her chest as if deeply moved by the cat-sìth’s kindness.

Plenty of people knew all about Aina’s present circumstances, including my friends and most of my regular customers. As such, many of them went out of their way to do little acts of kindness to help cheer her up a little: one adventurer who was especially popular with children would often bring her flowers and pretty stones he had found in the course of completing quests; a



talkative young woman who was on the lookout for a husband would time her visits with Aina's breaks so that she could invite her over for tea; a considerate—if just a tad meddling—old woman would sometimes “accidentally” make a bit too much food for dinner and bring the surplus over for the little girl to have, and so on. All of these people loved Aina and wanted her to be happy. And the little girl was naturally overjoyed to have so many people caring about her. Thanks to this, the atmosphere in my shop had become warm and welcoming, and I could proudly say it was the happiest place in all of Ruffaltio.

“What about you, Mister Shiro? I won't be bothering you, will I?” the little girl asked.

“Not one bit. Like Kilpha said, it'll be a lot more fun with you around,” I reassured the little girl.

She nodded silently.

“And besides, I told your mom I'd look after you, remember?” I added.

“Yeah. Thank you, Mister Shiro,” she said, looking up at me. Her eyes were wet with tears, but her smile was dazzling.

## Chapter Three: Traveling Companions

The following day, I went around town and informed everyone who needed informing that I would be temporarily shutting up shop. Those who needed informing included all of my regular customers, the guildmaster of the Fairy's Blessing, Ney, and some of the merchants I often did business with. While I was at it, I also prepared all of the goods that I would be delivering to the Fairy's Blessing and the merchants to ensure that they would have enough stock in my absence. Thankfully, my sisters had agreed to run the shop in my stead on the weekends for as long as I was out of town.

"Yes, fine, fine," Shiori had said. "I'll help you, bro-bro!"

"But you'd better bring us back souvenirs, you hear?" Saori had added.

I was already shivering with fear just imagining what they would end up demanding in return for helping me out, but with all of that out of the way, I was officially done with my work-related rounds. Next on the to-do list was to say bye to my friends, starting with Patty. Aina and I found her over at the Fairy's Blessing guild, where we told her we would be accompanying Kilpha to the cat-sìths' village, fully expecting her to turn around and insist on coming with us. But much to our surprise, she didn't.

"Oh, really? Well, okay then. You two be careful out there, you hear? That's an order from your boss!" she said.

Aina and I hadn't been expecting this response at all. We both stared at the little fairy in disbelief, unsure what to say.

"Wh-Why are you two looking at me like that?" Patty said, her voice tinged with annoyance.

"Oh, it's just, uh..." I started hesitantly. "We thought you might want to tag along, that's all. Right, Aina?" I looked across at the little girl.

She nodded. "Yeah. I thought you'd want to come too."

Aina's backpack doubled as Patty's hiding place whenever we were outside

Ninoritch. Since the two of us had assumed Patty would volunteer to come with us to the cat-sìths' village, Aina had preemptively cleaned the bag and even laid a towel at the bottom to make sure the little fairy would be as comfortable as she could possibly be in there. But in the end, it turned out she had done all of that cleaning for nothing.

"I know I gotta protect you as your boss, Shiro—especially since you're such a weakling—but I'm afraid I can't go with you this time," Patty said, hovering in front of us with her little shoulders slumped. It seemed she really regretted not being able to accompany us.

"Is something wrong, boss?" I asked.

"The others from the dwelling told me they wanted to come to Ninoritch, so I'm gonna have to look after them," she sighed.

"The others? Wait, you mean the other *fairies*?!" I exclaimed.

"Yup. You know how I went to pay a visit to grand—I mean, to the clan leader a few days back, right? Well..."

From what Patty told us, just as she had been about to leave the dwelling after checking in with the fairy clan leader, she was waylaid by a group of fairies around the same age as her, who hit her with a barrage of questions.

"Patty, what kind of place is the humes' dwelling?"

"What other races live there?"

"I heard humes eat all this super yummy food!"

"They have delicious booze too, right?"

"And good honey!"

"Is it true they bathe in hot water rather than cold water?"

At one time, Patty had pretty much been a pariah in the dwelling, meaning this was the first time she had found herself surrounded by other fairies the same age as her. All of them seemed incredibly curious about the "humes' dwelling"—which, in this instance, meant Ninoritch—and listened intently as Patty answered their questions.

Pleased by all the interest being shown in the hume town she now called home, Patty had blurted out, “D-Do you guys want to come visit Ninoritch?”

It was such a Patty thing to come out with, I could absolutely picture the scene. According to her, the reactions of the other fairies had been quite something.

“Can we really?! Heck yeah!”

“I wanna come too!”

“Me too!”

“Well, if everyone’s going, I suppose I’ll tag along too.”

Almost all of the fairies present had eagerly jumped at the opportunity to visit Ninoritch and caused a huge commotion by talking over each other about it. They must have grown bored of life in the fairies’ dwelling, and I could easily imagine most of them being jealous of Patty for getting to live among humes and spend her days as she pleased. Before, the fairies hadn’t been allowed to leave the dwelling at all, but that rule seemed to be a thing of the past. After all, the whole debacle over the seal on Patty’s abdomen had proved that the rules and traditions the fairies had lived by were flawed and unreliable. At the insistence of the young fairies, the clan leader begrudgingly gave them permission to visit Ninoritch, and Patty had come back to town to get everything ready and make sure the fairies would be welcome here when they showed up any day now. For Patty, this presented a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, since this would be the first time in her life—all three hundred years of it—that she would have the chance to make friends with members of her own race. As her underling, I had to root for her.

“Oh, so that’s why you can’t come,” I said.

“Sorry, Shiro,” she replied, sounding dejected.

“Nah, it’s all good. But you have to promise me that you’ll show the other fairies just how awesome Ninoritch is,” I told her.

“Wh-Who do you take me for? Of course I will! This is Eren’s town, after all! I’ll show ’em all right! And I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer!” she said, puffing out her chest. “And I’ll tell ’em to make tons of fairy mead too! Lots and *lots* of the

stuff, so look forward to it!”

“Huh?”

“Well, they won’t have any money, so I’ll have to pay for all of their food and drink and whatnot. So I’m gonna get them to repay me in fairy mead! What do you think? It’s a good idea, right? A genius idea, even!” the little fairy said, her lips curled upward into a self-satisfied smirk.

*Whoa, hold on. You mean to tell me I’ll be getting my hands on a crapton of fairy mead real soon?! I thought to myself, rejoicing inwardly as my pupils turned into gold coins.*

“Okay, boss. I’ll be sure to leave you a bunch of ingredients so that you can make all of that fairy mead. Make it extra good, yeah?”

“I’m counting on you, Shiro!” the little fairy said, beaming at me and flapping her wings excitedly. I smiled back at her, already imagining the pile of gold coins awaiting me.

*By the time I get back from Kilpha’s village, I’ll have a whole bunch of fairy mead ready to sell. Considering one bottle goes for 10 gold coins... Tee hee. This is the best!*

And so, contrary to what I had expected on walking into the guildhall, Patty wouldn’t be accompanying us on our trip.



Next on the list of people to talk to before leaving was Dramom (and by extension, Suama). When I asked her if she could carry us on her back all the way to the cat-siths’ village, she readily agreed.

“Of course, master. I shall take you anywhere you desire.”

In this world, where the most common means of transport was the horse-drawn carriage, Dramom’s existence was basically a big ol’ cheat code. Not only could I travel from nation to nation in the blink of an eye, but the ride was also incredibly comfortable, akin to flying first class on a plane. There was one *teeny, tiny* little issue with asking Dramom for help, however.

“So you are going to the home of the cat-siths, are you? I will come with you.



My conscience would not rest easy if something were to happen to you,” Celes said, offering to accompany us like I’d suspected she would. For some reason, she viewed Dramom as some sort of rival, and was forever trying to one-up her. Now, don’t get me wrong: I was glad to have such a strong escort with us, but I was also aware she was only trying to prove herself more capable than Dramom.

“Forget about the dragon. I will carry you to your destination,” she insisted.

“By carrying me from behind like the last time you offered? So kinda like a piggyback, but from the front?” I said.

“Yes.”

“In that case, I’ll pass. Besides, it won’t be just me this time around. Kilpha and Aina are coming too. And while I know you’re strong, even you can’t carry three people and fly at the same time. Not to mention, I really, *really* don’t want to be carried like that,” I said, driving the point home.

Celes clicked her tongue in annoyance. I really hoped she would end this stupid little rivalry with Dramom soon.



Now that my transportation and an escort had been secured, I only had a couple more stops to make, and the first of these was to see Karen. After all, I wasn’t the only one who had been tasked with looking after Aina while Stella was out of town. She had asked Karen to look out for her daughter too, and as such, I also needed her permission before whisking the little girl off to the village of the cat-sìths.

“So you’re saying you want to take Aina with you?” she summarized.

We were presently in her office in the town hall, and as always, paperwork was piled high on her desk, and she had been in the middle of plowing through it when I showed up. As soon as I stepped into the room, she stopped what she was doing and we both sat down on one of the sofas she kept in the room for entertaining guests.

“Yes,” I said, taking a sip of the black tea Karen had handed to me. “I think it’ll be a nice change of pace for her. And more importantly, I believe it’s important

for children to explore other nations and the cultures of other races while they're still young."

I knew Karen's sense of responsibility was very strong. She'd promised Stella she would take care of Aina, which meant she was never going to just let me take her off someplace without a good reason, so I decided to play the "education" card.

"Children should explore the cultures of other races, huh?" she repeated with an amused chuckle. "You make it sound so simple when she'd never be able to do something like that if it weren't for you."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. A regular girl from a little town like this one would most likely never set foot outside of it, let alone get the opportunity to 'experience the culture of other races.'" She flashed me an exasperated yet fond smile.

She had a point. Not only was the transport infrastructure in this world practically nonexistent, but even going by road, you always ran the risk of running into bandits or monsters. Most people spent their entire lives in the village they were born in without ever taking so much as a single step outside of it. Yet I had already taken Aina to the royal capital and helped her to travel back to the town she was born in, and now here I was, asking for permission for her to accompany me to the village of the cat-sìths. Karen's reaction was understandable.

"Well, it's not my decision to make," Karen eventually said. "If you don't mind her tagging along and she wants to go, there's not much I can say to stop you. But you must promise me you'll be careful on the way."

"We will."



And so, having secured Karen's permission to take Aina with me, we were finally ready to leave for Orvil. Or so I thought.



Later that same day, Aina and I went over to Shess's estate to inform her of our upcoming departure. We were led into the sitting room, where we gave the little princess a quick rundown of the situation. I told her about Kilpha asking me to go with her to her village as her "pretend fiancé" and that Aina would be joining us. I also explained that Dramom would be the one flying us there, meaning we should only be away for a couple of weeks at most.

When I was done, the little princess nodded. "If Aina's going, then I will too."

"You hear that, Amata? The pri— I mean, my lady has stated that we will be accompanying you," said Luza, Shess's personal guard.

*Hold on. Did Shess just volunteer herself and Luza to come with us?*

"Huh?" Aina and I said in unison.

"I *said* I'm coming too," Shess repeated.

Aina and I were so stunned by this, all we could manage was another incredulous "Huh?"

"You really wanna come with us, Shess?" Aina asked.

"Well, of course. You and I *are* best friends, aren't we?" Shess said.

"Y-Yeah, but..." Aina trailed off and looked over at me with a troubled expression on her face. This wasn't a decision she could make on her own.

"So you want to tag along, do you, Shess?" I said.

"Yes."

"You too, Luza?"

"Well, of *course*! Wherever the young lady goes, you will always find me by her side," Luza boasted.

I groaned and buried my face in my hands. Don't get me wrong; I could see where Shess was coming from. Her best friend was going off on a fun (well, that

was still up for debate) trip to another nation, so it was only natural that she'd want to join her. That's what friendship's all about, after all. But Shess was the first princess of the Giruam Kingdom, and it would be unthinkable for her to accompany a bunch of commoners on an impromptu journey like this, *especially* an unofficial one.

"What, so Aina can go, but I can't?" Shess said indignantly, puffing out her cheeks and placing her hands on her hips.

"Uh, gimme a minute, okay, Shess?"

"What for?" she huffed.

*Calm down, Shiro. Shess is a princess, so she must have learned all about royal etiquette from a tutor or something. Sure, she's only nine, but she must know she can't just choose to accompany a bunch of commoners on a trip willy-nilly. Maybe she's misunderstood the situation? Okay, I'll just have to go over it again. She'll eventually get it, I'm sure.*

"Okay, Shess, let's start again from the beginning," I said. "Aina and I are accompanying one of my friends to her homeland."

"Yes, you've already told me that."

I nodded. "I did indeed. The friend in question—Kilpha—asked me to come with her."

"Like I said, I already know all that!" the little princess said, growing impatient.

"Okay, just making sure we're on the same page," I said delicately. "And then, like I told you a minute ago, I invited Aina to come with us."

"To which I replied, 'If Aina's going, then I will too,'" the little princess declared for a second time.

"Why are you still *saying* that?!" I groaned in despair.

Shess was a stubborn little girl, and she was refusing to budge on this, insisting that she would be tagging along with us, come what may.

"Amata, remember that your job is to fulfill *all* of my lady's wishes," Luza said pointedly.



“Shouldn’t you be talking some sense into her, Luza?” I protested. “You *are* her bodyguard.”

“If my lady was *that* easy to convince, do you really think I’d spend practically all of my time struggling to get her to do things?” Luza barked at me.

“Wait, why are you getting mad at *me*?” I protested. “Also, doesn’t that imply you already know she shouldn’t be coming with us, but you’ve just given up on trying to stop—”

“Listen closely, Amata!” Luza bellowed, interrupting me. “My lady said she’s coming with you, and so she shall! *And* you’re going to pay for all of my food and lodging while we’re on this journey!”

“So now, on top of everything, you’re extorting me?”

She chuckled self-importantly. “I’ve been getting so many pay cuts, I have almost no disposable income left!”

*Is that really something to boast about?* Meanwhile, Shess was staring at me intently, her eyes aflame with determination.

“Are you serious about this, Shess?” I asked.

“Deadly. Of course, I plan to ask permission from my mother so that I can accompany you,” she said, adding that we could drop by the royal capital on our way to Orvil. But if I’d thought there was no way her mother would let her travel with us to another nation, Shess’s next boast put me right. “But if I tell her I’ll be with you, she’ll let me go.”

For some reason, it seemed Queen Anielka had a lot of trust in me. I mean, I *had* showed up at the palace with a dragon that one time, but even so...

“Besides, there’s something I want to know,” Shess murmured quietly.

“Hm? What’s that?” I asked.

“I want to know what kind of lives beastfolk lead.”

I was so taken aback by this, I didn’t know what to say.

“In Ninoritch and Mazela, people get along just fine with beastfolk. But...” The little princess trailed off, trying to find the right words to express herself. After a

few moments, she seemed to have landed on some. “Well, you’ve seen it for yourself, haven’t you, Amata? How the people in the royal capital really dislike beastfolk, I mean. They hate them just because they’re not humes. It’s just so stupid!”

“It is,” I agreed.

“As princess of this kingdom, I want to change that,” she declared, and once again, I was left speechless. “That’s why I want to find out how they live in their homeland, what they think about, and how they feel about humes. I-I want to know what I can do to make their lives better!” she said, her unblinking eyes full of determination. “Whenever I asked these questions before, no one in the royal capital would answer them. They said I ‘shouldn’t concern myself with such things.’ But I *want* to know!” Her words were growing increasingly passionate. “And if no one will tell me, then I’ll go find out for myself. So please, Amata, take me with you. *Please.*”

Shess’s words were like an arrow through my heart. “*I believe it’s important for children to explore other nations and the cultures of other races while they’re still young.*” That was what I had told Karen when I’d asked her to allow Aina to accompany me, but I’d never expected my own words to come back to me with such a wallop.

“Okay, Shess,” I said, giving her a big nod. “You can come with us.”

A little gasp escaped her mouth. “Thank you, Amata!” she exclaimed joyously.

And just like that, Shess and Luza were added to our list of traveling companions.



Now that we had a princess coming with us, I felt it might be prudent to add a few more people to our entourage to make sure she would have enough protection. It wasn’t how strong we would be in a fight that I was necessarily worried about, for Dramom and Celes by themselves would be enough to get rid of pretty much any threat you could think of. In fact, I’d even go as far as saying bringing both of them along as our “muscle” was a tad overkill. However, there was one area in which the pair of them were found to be hugely lacking, and that was in social etiquette. As for Luza, while she was undoubtedly a

skilled swordswoman, she had a tendency to lose sight of Shess, and her personality made her a little *difficult* at times. Of course, I couldn't claim that my social etiquette was top-notch either, because I just wasn't knowledgeable enough about the customs of this world. Sure, I'd learned plenty since I first set foot in Ruffaltio, but at the end of the day, I was still a born-and-bred Tokyoite and there were way too many things about this world that I still didn't know. As for the rest of our group so far, well, Shess was a princess who was completely ignorant in the ways of the world, and Aina had only just turned nine. At present, the only one with the right skills to actually navigate this world was Kilpha, but I felt a bit bad about forcing her to bear that responsibility alone. As such, I figured we should take at least one more companion with us—someone who was both reliable and familiar with the customs of this world. After racking my brain to come up with someone fitting that description, I landed on a person who met both criteria.

"I see how it is. I can come with you, if you like," Duane said after I'd told him my troubles.

Yep, that's right: our final traveling companion would be Lord Bashure's knight, the one and only Sir Duane Lestard. While he was under no obligation to protect Shess on paper, Ninoritch was in the earl's territory, so if anything did happen to the princess while she was supposed to be here, it could spell some pretty major repercussions for Lord Bashure. That might explain why Duane had offered to accompany us to Orvil so readily, and to tell you the truth, I was incredibly relieved he'd volunteered to join us.

"With how peaceful Ninoritch is, I'm sure Miss Karen and her vigilance committee will be more than enough to patrol the town while I'm away." He flashed me a warm smile, his perfect white teeth gleaming in the sunlight.

Once again, Duane reminded me that he was handsome both inside and out. I was really happy to have him with us, and it turned out I wasn't the only one, because when I told the others he would be joining us, Luza—who had a huge crush on him—practically jumped for joy. All told, there would be nine of us going to the cat-sìths' village: Kilpha, myself, Aina, Dramom, Suama, Celes, Shess, Luza, and Duane. A pretty big group, I had to admit.

The morning of our departure was soon upon us. Kilpha looked around the

group that had assembled in front of her before turning to me. “Hey, Shiro.”

“Y-Yeah?”

“I get why Aina, Dramom, and Suama are coming with us, but why are there four *other* people tagging along, meow?” she asked me.

“I wonder, meow,” I said elusively, my nervousness causing me to accidentally copy Kilpha’s verbal tic.

“Why did it turn out like this, meooow?!” she yelled into the morning sky.

Behind her, Raiya was doubled over with laughter and clutching his stomach.

## Chapter Four: Going Back Home

We were soon ready to depart. At first, the twelve of us—our group, plus the three other Blue Flash members who were heading home as well—went a little way on foot until we’d put some distance between us and Ninoritch.

“Master, I believe we are now sufficiently far away from the town,” Dramom said.

“Yeah, this should be far enough,” I agreed. “Okay, do your thing.”

A bright flash emitted from Dramom’s body, and an instant later, she was in her dragon form. Dramom to dragon transformation complete! The reason for waiting until we were out of sight of the town to transform was so the people of Ninoritch wouldn’t spy her in the distance and start panicking.

“Meooow!” Kilpha cheered excitedly.

“Whoa!” was Raiya’s reaction beside her. “Dude, that’s so cool!”

As taciturn as ever, Nesca only let out a quiet “Wow,” while Rolf seemed quite moved by the experience.

“Never in my life did I imagine that I would someday be riding on the back of a dragon. It is all thanks to the generosity of our goddess, Lady Florine,” the battle priest uttered.

The Blue Flash crew had never seen Dramom transform, so they were understandably excited to witness it.

By contrast, Duane was a lot more reserved. “How beautiful. So this is the dragon you have tamed, is it, Shiro?” he said, looking up at Dramom with reverence in his eyes.

“I didn’t *tame* her. She’s my friend,” I clarified.

“I see.”

Meanwhile, Luza had the exact same reaction she’d had the time I asked Dramom to transform in the courtyard of the royal palace, which was to point



at her and say, “A d-d-d...d-d-d...” over and over, seemingly unable to even utter the word “dragon.”

As for Shess and Aina, they chatted calmly with each other.

“So we’ll be riding this dragon, yes?” the little princess queried.

“Yup!” Aina confirmed.

“And you’ve done it many times before, Aina?”

The little girl thought about this for a second. “Well, not *that* many.”

“But you’ve done it a few times,” Shess concluded. “C-Can you, uh, fall off?” she asked, her voice quivering slightly.

“You just have to wrap Miss Dramom’s hair around your waist and you won’t fall off. Like this!” Aina said, giving her friend a demonstration.

Shess nodded, a serious look on her face. “Okay, I’ll try.” It was her first time riding a dragon, so it was no surprise that she was worried about falling off.

“Go ahead, master,” Dramom said, lowering herself to the ground so we could climb up onto her back a little more easily.

“All righty, everyone,” I said, addressing the group. “We’re all gonna climb up onto Dramom’s back one by one. Come on, Suama, you can go first.”

“Ai!”

I placed my hands under the armpits of the little dragon girl, picked her up, then set her down on her mother’s back. She toddled over to the base of her mother’s neck, then plopped herself down in her usual spot. The others began climbing up onto Dramom’s back too.

Raiya ran his hand through Dramom’s hair. “Wow, it’s much softer than I was expecting!”

“It’s so fluffy and warm. It’s nice,” Nesca commented as she lay down on the soft fur.

Kilpha quickly followed suit. “Meow! It feels so nice, meow!”

“So this is what Miss Dramom’s fur feels like? How wonderful,” Rolf said.

I nodded in agreement with all of these statements. Riding Dramom was a bit like riding a giant puppy because of how nice and soft her fur was.

“Aina, let’s go together! Let’s climb up there together!” Shess said to her friend.

“Okay,” Aina said, holding out a hand. “Here, give me your hand.”

“D-Don’t let go of me now, you hear?” the princess stammered.

“I won’t,” Aina promised.

The two little girls climbed up onto Dramom’s back hand in hand. Watching them from below, Luza kept casting meaningful glances toward Duane, presumably because she wanted to hold hands with him on the ascent too.

“I’m next, I suppose,” Duane said, approaching Dramom by himself.

*Aw, unlucky, Luza. Guess he didn’t notice you making eyes at him.*

“Alley-oop,” Duane said as he climbed up onto Dramom’s back alone.

A disappointed sigh escaped Luza’s mouth, but it turned out that Duane actually hadn’t forgotten to be gentlemanly.

“Here, Miss Luza,” he said, extending a hand toward Luza to help her up.

She looked dumbfounded for a split second, but her confusion was soon replaced by a bright smile as she took Duane’s hand and let him pull her up. “Thanks!” she said happily.

I joined the rest of the group on Dramom’s back, and it was finally time for us to properly set off. We’d be swinging by the hometowns of the Blue Flash crew to drop them off before ultimately making our way to Kilpha’s village in the Dura Forest. Or well, we needed to stop at the city-state of Orvil first to get permission to actually go into the forest, but whatever.

*Whether it’s on Earth or on Ruffaltio, going to a new country for the first time is always an exciting experience, isn’t it? Is this what is known as the “traveler’s high”?* I mused. My heart was beating loudly in my chest as Dramom took off, and all of us murmured with awe as we admired the horizon.

“Think you can keep up, demon?” Dramom called down to Celes.

“Do not underestimate me, dragon. I am not who I was back then,” the demon replied.

Needless to say, Celes was forced to make her own way there this time too.



We had quite a few stops to make, so I asked Dramom to pick up the pace a bit. Our first destination was a provincial town two nations away from the Giruam Kingdom, where we dropped off Rolf, then it was the turn of Raiya and Nesca. After a short discussion over which of their respective hometowns they would visit first, they decided it made more sense to go to Raiya’s, since it was the farthest from Ninoritch. As with Rolf earlier, we dropped off the two lovebirds, and had just enough time to see Raiya’s parents nervously accepting a box of chocolate from Nesca before Dramom took off once more.

Our next stop was the Giruam Kingdom’s royal capital so that Shess could ask her mother for permission to come with us to the cat-sìths’ village. Due to the number of detours we had needed to make on the way, it was dusk by the time we arrived, so we decided to spend the night at an inn. We *could* have pushed on and headed straight for Orvil, but Celes had flown solo the whole way, and I was starting to worry about her due to how badly she was wheezing. She looked like she might keel over and die before reaching our next port of call. *In hindsight, I should’ve just told her to come straight to the royal capital and wait for us here while we dropped off the others,* I thought as I went to rent a room at an inn so we could put her straight to bed.

Once that was dealt with, Shess and Luza headed over to the royal palace, while I paid a visit to my good friend, Zidan, the guildmaster of the Eternal Promise merchant guild that I was affiliated with. He invited our group to join him for a meal and we all relaxed and recharged by chowing down on some delicious food.

The following day, we met up with Shess again just after midday. The little princess had secured her parents’ authorization to come with us, and her mother had given her a gift to pass along to me: a document to certify that I was officially the queen’s royal purveyor. With it, there was a note that said, “I hope this will be of use to you in Orvil.” Duane explained to me that the title of

“royal purveyor” was a pretty big deal.

And so, with Shess officially allowed to accompany us, we set off once more for the city-state of Orvil.

## Chapter Five: The City-State of Orvil

After a good four hours of flying, we finally made it to our destination.

“There it is! That’s Orvil, meow!” Kilpha exclaimed, pointing down at an imposing-looking fortified city.

“It’s bigger than the royal capital,” Shess noted. I thought she sounded a little bitter, but that might just have been my imagination.

Orvil was indeed much bigger than the capital of the Giruam Kingdom. Looking down on it from above, I’d say it was about twice the size, in fact. A large castle stood at its heart, and I even spotted a colosseum over on the west side. I’d been told that the city held gladiator matches in the colosseum, and that every few years, there was a big tournament in which all of the strongest warriors from the neighboring nations competed against each other. I hoped I would get time to go and watch one of these contests while we were here.

The city itself was surrounded by farmlands and pastures, where farmers were out harvesting crops, and livestock were grazing peacefully. With highways connecting it to all of its major neighboring nations—the Giruam Kingdom to the northeast, the Duchy of Alpa to the east, the holy nation of Jestak to the west, and the mercenary nation of Sazabi to the south—Orvil’s location made it a bustling trade hub. In fact, it occupied such a crucial strategic spot, none of the four nations surrounding it dared to antagonize the city-state, and if any of the nations were ever to attempt an invasion, they would most likely face fierce reprisals from the other three. For that reason, Orvil hadn’t been involved in a single war for over twenty years, allowing it to grow and flourish in peace, so it was little wonder that it was larger than the royal capital of the Giruam Kingdom.

“Master, should I land in that meadow on the right?” Dramom asked me. It was a pertinent question, for if we got any closer to the city, the residents might think they were under attack by a dragon.

“Please do,” I replied.

“As you command.”

We landed in that nearby meadow and completed the last leg of our trip on foot.



“Do commoners really have to line up for so long just to enter a city?” Shess muttered after we’d been standing in line for roughly three hours. Around two-thirds of the line that had been in front of us when we joined had made it through the city gates by this point, so I surmised it’d be another ninety minutes or so before we got through ourselves. All in all, that was pretty much as long as you would expect to wait to get on one of the more popular attractions at a certain famous theme park.

“Yup, that’s right, Shess,” I said. “We commoners sometimes have to line up for an entire day to enter a city.”

“An entire *day*?!” she repeated in shock.

“Yup, an entire day.”

As a royal, Shess naturally got to skip all the lines when entering a place. Royalty sure came with its perks, didn’t it?

“We had to line up for a really long time when we went to the royal capital,” Aina noted.

“Is that so?” the little princess said.

“Yup,” Aina confirmed, before proceeding to recount our adventure at the city gates of the royal capital to her friend. She recalled how the soldier stationed at the gate had given me the stink eye when he laid eyes on our group, and how Celes had tried to bribe him because she’d gotten advice from Emille. And not forgetting how Dramom had almost gotten us into trouble for levitating a few inches off the ground (which she was doing at that present moment, as it happens). I supplied a few details the little girl had forgotten and we were all laughing our heads off at the amusing antics of that day when the burly looking soldier at the gate beckoned our group forward. Our turn had finally come.

“Black hair, black eyes, huh? Not from around here, then, I take it? Okay, name and occupation,” he said.

“My name is Shiro Amata. I’m a merchant from the Giruam Kingdom, and these folks are my companions,” I replied, gesturing at the rest of our group.

The man harrumphed. “Rather a big group for a merchant who’s going places on foot. How many of you are there in total?”

“Nine,” I replied.

Since we couldn’t reveal Duane and Luza’s identities—least of all, Shess’s—we had agreed beforehand that I would pretend to be here on business and that everyone else was my “escort.” Of course, there was a *teeny, tiny* issue with this plan, in that our group was mostly women, and we even had a couple of children tagging along. This didn’t escape the guard’s notice, and he scrutinized all of our faces one by one.

“A lot of women in your group, aren’t there? A couple of kids too. Wait...” When his gaze landed on Kilpha, the man’s eyes narrowed. “You.”

“Me?” the cat-sìth replied.

“Yeah, you. Lower your hood and turn your face toward me.”

*Uh-oh. This can’t be good.*

“Like this?” Kilpha asked as she lowered the hood of her cape like she had been told.

The guard grimaced and clicked his tongue. “You’re one of them cat-sìths,” he sneered, looking at Kilpha like she was an undesirable creature before turning to me. “A merchant with a beastfolk, huh? You a slave trader?” His gaze was cold and harsh.

“No way,” I replied. “She’s one of my companions.”

The guard scoffed. “Your *companion*? This cat-sìth? Don’t make me laugh.”

I had the overwhelming urge to punch him in the face, but I called on all of my reserves to stay calm. I signaled to Aina to keep Shess from doing anything too rash, and the little girl nodded in acknowledgment before grabbing her friend’s hand and leading her off somewhere quieter.



“Let’s wait over here. Okay, Shess?” she said.

“Wait, Aina!” the little princess protested. “I was just about to give that man a piece of my—”

Aina quickly shushed her. “Shh, Shess. Shhhh!”

*Phew, that was a close one*, I thought as I watched Aina’s attempts to mollify the little princess. But Shess wasn’t the only troublemaker in our group.

“Shiro, give the order and I can erase this man from this world,” Celes said.

“Master, please let me take care of this vermin for you,” Dramom pleaded, her voice dripping with disdain for the guard.

The two of them were every bit as angry as me, if not angrier. They had worked with Kilpha a few times and had become somewhat close. Celes had once battled her as well as the rest of the Fairy’s Blessing, but you know how the saying goes: yesterday’s enemy is today’s friend. Well, maybe “friend” was going too far, but Celes had definitely taken a liking to the cat-sith.

“Shiro, hurry up and give the order,” Celes insisted.

“We await your command, master.”

I was trying to come up with a way to get the two ticking time bombs to calm down, when all of a sudden, Kilpha piped up. “Now, hold on a minute, meow! I thought people in Orvil were *nice* to us beastfolk, meow!”

“Nice to beastfolk? Us?” the man repeated, then guffawed. “What year are you living in?”

“Huh?”

“That was under the *previous* ruler, King Michael. The current ruler—His Majesty, King Elt—has decreed that beastfolk should be treated like what they are: beasts.”

A small gasp escaped Kilpha’s lips. “No way, meow.” It appeared she had been completely unaware that the king of Orvil had changed in the past seven years.

“You don’t even know that? That only makes all of you even *more* suspicious. I have to say, I’m not convinced you’re a merchant. Come over here,” he said,

using his chin to point to a little cabin behind him. “I’m gonna search you.”

He must have planned to plant false evidence on us to justify turning us away, or alternatively, he was going to ask us to pay extra to be allowed into the city. Either way, this sucked. Fortunately, I’d already anticipated that our odd little group would arouse suspicion, so I had a plan all ready to go.

“Like I told you earlier, we’re merchants from the Giruam Kingdom,” I said.

“With women and children in tow? Kind of an odd combination, don’t you think?”

“I knew you’d find us suspicious, so I prepared this. Here, these should prove my identity,” I said, producing two documents from my pocket.

The man harrumphed again. “Well, hand ’em over,” he ordered, so I did.

One of them was a certificate confirming my status as a member of the Eternal Promise’s guild, which I had gotten Zidan to write for me the day before. As for the second one...

“*What?! The Giruam Kingdom’s royal purveyor?!*” the man exclaimed when he read what was written on the other document, which—as I’m sure you have guessed by now—was the one Queen Anielka had written for me earlier that day.

“Oh, no, not exactly,” I said with a chuckle. “Look closely. I’m merely the *queen’s* royal purveyor.”

“The queen’s...” the man mumbled in shock.

While I’d been planning to ask Zidan for some kind of document proving my identity for a while, I had never imagined Queen Anielka would write one for me as well. It was a nice added bonus. And judging by the guard’s face, it seemed my plan was a success.

“U-Uh, right. Yes, I see. You may go through,” he muttered.

*Now that’s what I call a “royal seal of approval.” Where did your attitude from earlier go, huh?*

“Why, thank you. How much is the entry tax?” I asked.

It took a couple of seconds for the man to gather himself together before he could answer. “Well, usually, it’s ten copper coins per hume and fifteen per beastfolk. But just this once, I’ll let you go through for free. C’mon, move along. There’s still a line behind you. Hurry it up.”

The message hidden in the man’s words was painfully obvious: “I’m letting you in for free, so don’t tell the Queen of the Giruam Kingdom that I disrespected you.”

Needless to say, I took him up on his offer.

“Thank you very much. Okay, we’ll be off, then.”

And so, we had successfully managed to enter the city-state of Orvil.



And so, the nine of us passed through the city gate and officially entered Orvil. The first thing I noticed was how crowded it was here, though since we were right by the gate still, I guessed that made some sort of sense. The place was absolutely teeming with people, from merchants and tourists riding around in horse-drawn carriages to mercenaries and adventurers and the like. I also saw a few guards dotted here and there, their watchful eyes scanning the crowd, most likely on the lookout for any sign of trouble in the throng of people. Yet despite how busy the streets were, I didn’t see a single non-hume. The words of the guard at the gate had already sent me down this line of thought, but could Orvil be one of those “hume supremacist” nations I’d heard about? I never thought I would actually be setting foot in one, but it looked like we might have stumbled into such a place.

“That gatekeeper really got on my nerves! I should report him to my mother when I get back home!” Shess stated angrily.

Back when she was living in the royal capital, Shess used to sneak out of the palace to feed orphaned beastfolk children in the slums, and she was beside herself with anger at seeing beastfolk being subjected to such unfair treatment. Poor Shess had come on this trip in order to learn about the everyday lives of the beastfolk, but she had ended up coming face-to-face with the cold, harsh reality right off the bat. *So this is the dark side of this other world, huh?*

“You shouldn’t, my lady,” Luza warned her. “We’re here incognito, after all.”

“I know, but...” Shess said, her exasperation evident by her tone. “But it’s so *frustrating!*”

It had angered her so much, she was quite willing to escalate it into a full-blown diplomatic incident. Now, of course, I was every bit as frustrated as she was by the situation, and so were the others. But this wasn’t Ninoritch. It wasn’t even the Giruam Kingdom. It was a different nation entirely. That meant if Shess complained to her mother and she chose to act, Orvil might view it as the Giruam Kingdom meddling in their internal affairs.

“Please, Lady Shess, I implore you not to let your feelings get the better of you,” Duane intervened in an attempt to make Shess understand the potential consequences of any actions she might be thinking to take. “You and Miss Luza both hold positions of authority, and as such, it is your duty to exercise restraint.”

“All right, fine,” Shess muttered reluctantly. “I won’t say anything.”

*Good job, pretty boy!* “Thank you, Shess,” I said.

“Stop treating me like a child, Amata,” she huffed, glaring daggers at me.

“Oh, I wasn’t thanking you for that. I meant thank you for getting angry in the first place,” I clarified, though as the little princess still had a look of pure confusion on her face, I decided to explain myself a bit more. “After all...”

I paused and studied the faces of my companions in turn. I’d known all of them for quite some time by this point, meaning I could easily tell what they were thinking just by looking at their expressions.

“We were all annoyed by what that gatekeeper said,” I finally concluded.

Shess gasped slightly and she turned to Aina. “I-Is that true?”

The little girl nodded vigorously. “Yup! I’m really angry at that man too. Like super, *super* angry!” she said, balling her hands up into fists. I noticed her shoulders were raised a little higher than usual, perhaps due to how tightly she was squeezing her fists.



The guard's words had managed to make even this kindhearted little girl fume with indignation. No, scratch that: it was precisely *because* she was kind that she was so livid about his comment on beastfolk. And of course, she wasn't the only one. We were all furious about the way Kilpha had just been treated, and rightfully so. To be completely honest, I was a little scared Dramom and Celes might jointly come to the decision that they should wipe the city off the map in retribution.

"So yeah, thanks, Shess. For getting angry on Kilpha's behalf," I said.

"D-Don't mention it," she mumbled, her face turning red. Perhaps she felt embarrassed that she had been the only one to complain out loud when everyone else was feeling the same frustration.

"It's all my fault," Kilpha said in a small voice. "I'm sorry I ruined the mood, meow."

Her hood was still pulled down over her eyes, so I couldn't see her expression, but I could tell from her drooping shoulders that she was feeling down about the whole thing, which was very unusual for her, for she was always so cheerful and innocent.

"You did nothing wrong, Kilpha," I reassured her.

"A-Amata's right. It was *aaaaall* that stupid gatekeeper's fault!" Shess seconded.

"Exactly, Miss Kilpha! You didn't do a single thing wrong," Aina concurred.

Then, to my surprise, Dramom and Celes joined in.

"My master has declared that you are not to blame, so lift your head high and stand proud, catfolk," Dramom stated.

"You are much stronger than that man," Celes pointed out. "Are you really going to allow yourself to be swayed by the words of such a weak individual?"

But despite all of our words of encouragement, Kilpha still seemed down.

"I'm really sorry," she muttered again before falling silent.



It had been around an hour since Kilpha had last spoken, which had caused the rest of us to gradually speak less and less in turn. *This won't do*, I decided.

Our first order of business was to find an inn to stay at. My logic was that with fewer people around, Kilpha would hopefully be able to relax a little. Unfortunately, it was proving far more difficult than I'd anticipated.

"Hey, c'mon now. You're kidding, right? Beastfolk ain't welcome here."

"You've got a beastfolk with you? No way. Go try somewhere else."

"No can do. If word gets around that we let a beastfolk stay here, our inn's reputation will go down the drain."

"Well, I suppose *you* can have a room, but your beastfolk friend would have to sleep in the barn out back. And of course, you'd still need to pay normal price for her, heh."

From our encounter at the gate, I'd already gotten the drift that beastfolk weren't exactly welcome in this city, but I really hadn't anticipated just how challenging it would be to find someplace to stay. After being turned away from nine different inns, it was fair to say I was feeling more than a little disheartened. And to top it off, that last innkeeper had even had the audacity to suggest we make Kilpha sleep out in the barn. If Duane hadn't been there to stop me, I would have drop-kicked that louse right in the face. Kilpha herself seemed to shrink with every rejection we received, until she finally couldn't take it anymore.

"I-I'll just go camp outside of town!" she suggested, producing a sleeping bag from her backpack.

While we were all having a go at convincing her against sleeping outside, we decided to try our luck at another inn we happened to be passing.

"A beastfolk, huh? Yeah, I'm afraid that's not gonna work for us. Our other guests might feel uneasy being in the same place as one of them, you see. Though if you really insist, I *suppose* I could let you stay here. If you rented out the entire place, that is," the owner said, a sly smirk curling his lips upward.

He obviously meant that last bit as a sarcastic jab, but my irritation at his smug expression boiled over, and without any hesitation, I replied, "Okay, sure.

We'll do that."

"Huh?" the man uttered, his smile instantly vanishing.

"We'd like to rent out your whole inn. You said we could stay here if we agreed to that condition, didn't you?"

"Huh?" the man repeated dumbly.

"So how much will it cost? We'll pay up front, naturally."

"Huh?" the man blurted out a third time.

"Can you stop with all that 'Huh? Huh?' nonsense and get started on the check-in process? I mean, surely you aren't about to tell us you were *joking*, are you? Not after making us waste so much time here," I said, a pleasant smile on my face.

On one side of me, Celes smirked mischievously, while on the other, Dramom's lips had curled upward into a mocking smile.

"Quickly now. Do not tell us you were lying after all of this rigmarole," Celes warned the innkeeper.

"I would not lie to my master if I were you, because who knows what might happen if you did? A calamity might befall you, perhaps," Dramom added, joining in with the intimidation.

The threatening aura radiating from the pair was so intense, it made even the most stressful of interviews that I'd had to suffer through back when I was job hunting seem like child's play.

"A calamity, huh?" Celes said, chuckling darkly. "She is indeed correct. I would be careful if I were you, or you might find yourself in the stomach of an ill-tempered dragon."

"Oh, I highly doubt that. If anything, you are more likely to find yourself missing a few limbs, courtesy of a rather crude and violent demon," Dramom retorted.

Celes glared daggers at her. "Would you like me to bury you first?"

"You should not boast about things that are beyond your powers."



The pair stared at each other in silence for a while before chuckling. I was scared out of my wits. Why, I hear you ask? Well, Celes and Dramom were a demon and a dragon respectively, and while they might both have been smiling at this particular moment in time, their gazes were nothing short of terrifying, and bloodlust seemed to seep from every pore in their bodies. Anyone would have instinctively flinched on looking at them, and just one glance at the innkeeper was enough to tell that he was panicking for his life. Kilpha seemed even more flustered, albeit for a different reason.

“H-Hold on a minute, Shiro, meow!” she exclaimed.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“What do you mean, ‘What’s wrong?’” she said, gawking at me. “Y-You can’t do *that*, meow! You can’t just rent the entire inn! It’d cost *way* too much money, meow!”

“And why would that be a problem?” I asked, feigning innocence. Kilpha let out an outraged meow but I continued on regardless. “After all, I am the royal purveyor for the queen of the Giruam Kingdom,” I said, purposefully raising my voice when I got to the bit about being the “royal purveyor.” Then, I turned to Shess. “And Shess here is the daughter of an extremely wealthy merchant.”

“I-Is that true, meow?” Kilpha said in shock, whipping her head around to look at Shess.

“U-Uh, yeah, it is,” the little princess mumbled. She hadn’t been expecting me to drag her into the conversation out of the blue like that, and she couldn’t have looked more suspicious if she’d tried. Her eyes darted around like crazy, and beside her, Aina squirmed in discomfort.

“Shess’s parents asked me to look after her and keep her safe. Now, from a purely safety standpoint, I’d say it’s much better if we rent out this whole inn, otherwise I won’t be able to rest easy. Wouldn’t you agree, Duane?” I said innocently. *Okay, pretty boy, ball’s in your court.*

Duane seemed to catch on to my intention immediately, and he nodded as a blinding smile spread across his face. “Yes, you’re right there, Shiro. If you hadn’t accepted the innkeeper’s proposition, I would have *insisted* on renting out this entire inn. You see, as Shess’s official escort...” he started, then

produced a heavy-looking leather pouch from his pocket, which he set down on the counter with a thud. A few gold coins spilled out of the pouch's slightly open mouth, and the jingling sound they made echoed pleasantly around the room. Knowing Duane, he must have loosened the pouch strings on purpose. "Do you take Giruam gold coins?" he inquired of the innkeeper.

"I, um... Well..." the man stammered, then he swallowed his saliva with a loud gulp, his eyes fixated on the gold coins that had spilled from the pouch. "So you're the royal purveyor for the Giruam Kingdom, are you?" he said in a trembling voice.

"I am the *queen's* royal purveyor," I corrected him. "Would you like to see the letter of introduction Her Majesty gave to me?"

"N-No need. I will prepare your rooms right away!" he said before rushing off to bark instructions at his staff.

*First, the gatekeeper, and now, this guy. This "royal purveyor" title is no joke. In fact, it might have even more influencing power than a minor noble title, I mused as I watched the innkeeper scuttling about the place.*



It hadn't been easy, but we had finally managed to secure some accommodation for the evening. The inn wasn't particularly luxurious, but while the rooms were pretty modest, they were clean, and that was what mattered. There were already guests staying at the inn, so in the end, I wasn't able to rent the whole place, but we managed to get the two top floors—the fourth and fifth—to ourselves. We were a pretty sizable group, but with two whole floors available to us, we could all have had a single room each if we wanted to.

We let the ladies take the top floor—plus the view of the city that went with it—while Duane and I stayed on the fourth floor. Shess and Aina chose the largest of the rooms, which was located right in the middle of the floor, with Luza in the room to the right of them, and Dramom and Suama in the room to the left. Celes and Kilpha each picked a single room on the same floor. As for Duane, he took the room closest to the stairs, so that he could rush up to the floor above if there was an emergency, while I took the room right below the one Shess and Aina were staying in. With Luza and Dramom either side of their

room and me directly below, I felt reasonably happy about Shess's safety.

Other than Duane, there was no one staying on my floor, and the two rooms next to mine remained empty, meaning I could have some peace and quiet. We each stayed in our respective rooms for a while to have a bit of a break, then we all regrouped in one of the rooms for an early dinner and some relaxing conversation until Suama started dozing off, which was a sure sign that it was time to call it a night. We all agreed to reconvene the next day at sunrise before heading back to our rooms.

## Chapter Six: A Night for Two

We'd called it a night by this point, but it was still only ten in the evening. While that was quite late by the standards of this world, in Japan, it would still be considered relatively early.

"Phew. Today was intense," I muttered to no one in particular as I threw myself down on the bed. We had ridden on Dramom's back the whole way here, so I wasn't physically tired as such, but my mental fatigue was through the roof.

"People here really are prejudiced against beastfolk, huh? Maybe we should've ditched Orvil and headed to Kilpha's village immediately," I mused aloud. Sure, we would have *technically* been trespassing if we had, but I would have much rather gotten into trouble with the law than seen Kilpha looking so down.

As soon as these words left my mouth, there was a knock at my door.

"Shiro? It's me, meow. Are you awake?" the person at the door—Kilpha, it sounded like—called out to me through the wood.

"Kilpha? Hold on, I'm coming," I said as I got up to unlock the door.

"Shiro..." Kilpha mumbled again as I opened the door. Since we had the top floors of the inn all to ourselves, she had removed her cloak and was wearing her usual adventuring garb. She looked just as sad as before.

"Can I come in, meow?" she asked, a feeble smile on her face.

"Of course."

She let out a little meow in response as she slipped into the room with feline grace. She paused for a moment in the middle of the room, seeming unsure where to settle, before finally choosing to perch on the bed. I blinked in surprise, because I hadn't expected her to sit down on the bed. I fetched a chair and placed it opposite Kilpha with the backrest facing toward her, then sat astride it. I was about to ask her what had brought her to my room so late at

night, when out of the blue, she bowed her head.

“Shiro, I’m so sorry, meow!” she cried.

“What are you apologizing for all of a sudden?” I said in some surprise.

“You had to waste all that money because of me, meow,” she murmured.

“Because of—oh, you mean renting out the inn?”

She nodded sheepishly. “Y-Yeah.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said.

“But I do, meow! You might be rich, but...” She hesitated. “But you had to rent out this whole place just for me! I’m as bad as Emi, meow!”

I grimaced. “Don’t ever say that again. You’re nothing like Emille.”

Emille was totally obsessed with money, and it was so blatant that anyone could tell that about her with just a single glance. By apologizing for making me rent out two whole floors of the inn, Kilpha had already proved she was nothing like that greedy bunny girl.

“I’ll repay you in full, meow,” Kilpha said firmly. “I can’t right now because I don’t have that kind of money on me, but...”

“There’s no need to do that at all,” I assured her. “Besides, like I told the innkeeper earlier, I was always intending to rent out as much of the inn as I could in the name of Shess’s safety.”

Kilpha seemed to hesitate for a few seconds. “Yeah, but you only said that because you were being considerate of my feelings, didn’t you?”

“Nope, not at all,” I replied.

“Did you really, *really* do this for Shess, meow?” Kilpha asked skeptically.

“I really, *really* did this for Shess,” I confirmed.

She stared me straight in the eye, and it was clear she was straddling the line between doubting me and being convinced that what I was saying was the truth.

“I promise I did this for Shess. I mean, you’ve probably realized this by now

from the attitudes of Luza and Duane toward her, but...”

I paused, hesitant over whether I should actually finish that sentence or not, but in the end, I decided I should just come out with it. Kilpha was my friend, after all, and one I trusted with my life.

“Well, you see, Shess isn’t really the daughter of a wealthy merchant. She’s actually related to someone very important.”

A look of realization flashed across Kilpha’s face. “So *that’s* why that knight came with us, meow!” she exclaimed.

By “that knight,” she meant Duane. It sounded like she’d been a little confused as to precisely why one of Lord Bashure’s knights had decided to accompany us on a trip to her homeland. And let’s face it, there weren’t many reasons that would account for why someone would need a knight following them around at all times, so she must have had a pretty good idea of Shess’s true identity by this point.

“Hey, Shiro, is Shess...” She paused and glanced around the room to double-check that it really was just the two of us in there.

“Is Shess nobility, meow?” she whispered.

“I’m sorry, I can’t answer that question.”

My answer was pretty much a dead giveaway in itself, but at least it seemed that Kilpha hadn’t guessed that Shess was actually a princess.

“Oh, that’s fine then, meow,” she sighed, though I couldn’t tell if it was out of relief or resignation.

“Shess’s family is footing the bill for our stay here, so you don’t need to worry about a thing. Ah, but if you don’t mind, could you help the others to protect Shess? I can’t really do much by myself since I’m so, so weak,” I exaggerated.

“Stop being silly, Shiro, meow,” Kilpha pouted.

I chuckled. “Sorry, sorry.”

“So it really was all for Shess, huh?” she mused. “Maybe I was a little too paranoid, meow.”

“Well, that’s not really your fault. You’ve had a, uh...” I searched for the right words. “A pretty rough day, let’s put it that way.”

Kilpha nodded. “It really has been,” she concurred quietly.

To my relief, she seemed a lot more relaxed than earlier, and a smile had even returned to her face. The following day, we would need to jump through a load of hoops to get official permission to enter the Dura Forest, and only after that could we leave Orvil and head for her home village.

“Oh, that reminds me. Shiro...” Kilpha started.

“What is it?”

“Before we go to my home village—it’s called Zudah Village, by the way—there are two things I wanna ask you, meow.”

“Two things?” I queried.

“Yup, two things, meow,” Kilpha confirmed.

For some reason, she had started fidgeting, as if she was nervous about something.

“The first thing is...” she said, raising the index finger of her right hand. “Well, it’s something I’ve been meaning to say to you for a while, meow.”

“I’m listening,” I said.

“There are too many girls around you all the time, meow,” she declared.

Well, I certainly hadn’t been expecting *that*. I uttered a confused “Huh?” and stared at her in bewilderment.

“I *said* there are too many girls around you, meow!” she repeated. “Girls that aren’t me!”

“That’s...” I mumbled. “I mean, sure, you’ve got a point. A lot of my acquaintances *are* female. But, uh, is there a problem with that?”

“It’s a *huge* problem, meow! My mom and dad and grandma—*especially* my grandma—are gonna get super angry if we go see them and you’re surrounded by a load of girls!” Kilpha exclaimed.

I gasped. “Y-You’re right.”

I hadn't thought of that, but she made a good point. Imagine if your girlfriend had decided to introduce you to her family and you showed up with a bunch of other girls in tow. That's basically like asking her parents to massacre you on the spot. If in ten years' time, Aina introduced me to her boyfriend, and he was surrounded by several other girls, I would definitely get the urge to beat the hell out of him. And it wouldn't just be for show either. I'd go in fully intending to kill the no-good love rat.

"I'm fine with Aina coming with us, though, meow," Kilpha said. "I was thinking of telling my grandma that Aina's mom asked you and me to look after her, because that'd make our story more believable, meow. You know, like a testament to our..." She paused, her cheeks reddening. "...to our I-love, if you see what I mean, meow."

Once again, she had a point. To Kilpha's grandma, it would look like the three of us were kind of a pseudo-family in Stella's absence. What better situation could there be to make it look even more like we were a real couple?

"Makes sense. It'd definitely add credibility to our story," I said.

"I-It would, right? But if Shess, that swordswoman, Celes, Dramom, and Suama are with us, it'll make you look really bad in front of my family, meow."

*"That swordswoman"? She totally forgot Luza's name, didn't she?*

"Can't we just say they're all Duane's groupies if anyone asks?" I suggested.

Kilpha shook her head. "That won't work, meow. Aside from that swordswoman, all of them smell really strongly of you, meow. Besides, Suama calls you 'papa,' right? That's not an easy one to explain."

"Hm, yeah. She *does* call me 'papa'..." I said with a nod before my brain finally processed the first part of her sentence. "Hey, wait a minute. What was that bit about the others 'smelling' of me? Do I really stink that bad? To the point that my musk has actually *transferred* to the people around me?" I asked in horror.

I raised my arm and sniffed my armpit. *Well, I do smell a bit of sweat. Should I put on some cologne? Or maybe I should swing by grandma's house for a quick shower?*

Seeing me holding my arms tightly against my sides in an attempt to contain



my BO, Kilpha hurriedly waved her hands around. “No, no, I didn’t mean it like that,” she clarified. “You don’t stink at all. If anything, you smell nice and warm. Your scent reminds me a bit of the sun, meow.”

*The sun? What does she think I am, a UV ray or something?*

“We cat-sìths have very sensitive noses, meow,” she explained. “Just by smelling someone, we can tell who they are close to, what their last meal was, and so on, meow.”

“So you can basically tell someone’s circle of friends just by how they smell,” I summed up.

“Yup, exactly, meow,” Kilpha confirmed.

She proceeded to give me a lengthy explanation of how it all worked, and to summarize, everyone (aside from those lone wolves who deliberately chose solitude as a way of life) carried the scent of their family, friends, and loved ones at all times, and cat-sìths could more or less tell how close someone was to that person by how strongly they smelled of them. For example, Kilpha carried the scent of the three other members of Blue Flash. But this was only true if both individuals were present—if there was only one or the other, even cat-sìths had no way of knowing how close the two were.

Okay, time for a pop quiz. Let’s say I’m visiting Kilpha’s family with a group of women of all ages—from a literal toddler to several fully grown women—who all more or less smell of me: what do you think might happen? The correct answer is: I would be massacred on the spot.

“That’s why I think the others should stay here and wait for us to get back, meow. That’s my first request,” Kilpha said.

So she wanted the others to stay here in Orvil, while the two of us went off by ourselves to meet her parents, huh? Orvil was a flourishing town, so I was pretty sure they wouldn’t have any trouble keeping themselves entertained in our absence. They could try out the local specialties of the four nations surrounding the city, or maybe go watch a gladiator match at the colosseum. Besides, it wasn’t like Kilpha and I would be gone all that long. They could probably hang around here in the city without getting bored.

“Makes sense to me,” I said. “We’ll get them to wait here while we visit your family.”

“I’ll break the news to them tomorrow, meow.”

“I’ll back you up,” I assured her.

So with one request out of the way, there was one more to go.

“And what was the other thing you wanted to say to me?” I prompted.

Kilpha nodded, and for some reason, her face started turning red. “I, uh...”

“Yes?”

“This is a bit embarrassing, but...”

I nodded to encourage her to continue.

“I don’t mean anything weird by asking this, okay, meow?” she said, her face as red as a tomato. “But, um...” She paused. “I-I want us to sleep together, meow!”

She had just dropped another huge bomb on me.

“S-Sleep together?!” I squeaked in shock.

“Y-Yeah!” she replied, balling her hands up into fists.

I was totally speechless. *Hold on, hold on. Hold. On. Yeah, sure, Kilpha and I are pretending to be engaged, but that’s exactly what it is: a pretense. At the end of the day, we’re friends. End of story. And, yeah, okay, I do have a thing for cat ears, but surely I can’t say yes to that?! Or can I? No. Nuh-uh. No way. Definitely not the right thing to do. Kilpha and I are friends. Good pals, if you will. We’re the kind of buddies who drink together and laugh till our sides hurt. I’ve always been of the opinion that men and women can be just friends, but now that I’m living it, I—*

As my brain started to buckle under the weight of the huge wave of thoughts that had come crashing down onto it, a sudden realization struck me. I stared my feline-like friend dead in the eye. “Kilpha.”

“Y-Yeah, meow?”

“By ‘sleep together,’ you mean you want us to *literally* sleep in the same bed,

right? So that my scent will partly transfer onto you.”

“Yup! Exactly, meow!”

“So that’s what you’re asking,” I said, letting out a huge sigh of relief and allowing my body to instantly relax. I hadn’t noticed before, but my body had been as tense as a bowstring. “Whew, that was a close call. I almost got the wrong end of the stick,” I muttered largely to myself.

“Meow? Is there a problem, Shiro?” Kilpha asked.

“Nope, not at all. My thoughts just kind of started going crazy and went off in a weird direction all on their own. You know, like, whoosh.”

“Like, whoosh?” she repeated, shooting me a quizzical look.

“Yup, whoosh. Like a huge wave crashing down on my brain.”

Kilpha meowed in confusion and stared at me with her head tilted to one side. I chuckled feebly, because looking back at the flow of our conversation, I should really have understood Kilpha’s intentions right away. Cat-siths could tell how close two people were by how strongly they smelled of each other, which meant we had to make sure Kilpha smelled of me and I smelled of her or our cover would be blown.

“Okay, I think I’ve gotten my head around the idea now. Yes, let’s sleep together tonight,” I declared.

“Yay!” Kilpha cheered. “Thanks, Shiro, meow!”

“I might smell a bit sweaty, though,” I admitted. “Hope you won’t mind that too much.”

She shook her head. “Not at all. Besides, I just told you, didn’t I? I like your scent, Shiro, meow.”

And with that, she let herself fall onto her back and started rolling around on the bed. When she came to a stop, she opened her arms and beckoned me into them.

“Let’s go to bed now, Shiro.”

## Intermission

Moonlight streamed in through the window onto Kilpha, who couldn't sleep. While it had been her request to share a bed with Shiro, she was too nervous to drop off. *I'm sleeping with Shiro...*

The bed was far too narrow for two people, and they had to lie very close to each other so that neither of them fell out. With only a thin blanket covering them, Kilpha could feel the warmth of Shiro's back against hers. How long had it been since they'd turned out the light? Kilpha closed her eyes and tried to sleep again, but it was no good. She just couldn't drift off. The conversation she'd had with Shiro before turning out the lights replayed itself in her head.

"I might be too nervous to sleep, meow," she'd said only half jokingly.

Shiro seemed to take her concerns to heart. "You should try counting sheep," he suggested. "That'll make you sleepy."

"Counting sheep, meow?" she queried.

"Yup, counting sheep."

Apparently, counting sheep was a traditional charm that helped people to fall asleep in Shiro's homeland. He had explained to Kilpha that if you pictured some sheep jumping over a fence and counted them as they did so, you would soon drift off before you even realized it. *Shiro really does know a lot of things, doesn't he? Nesca and Rolf are knowledgeable too, but Shiro always tells me stuff I've never even heard about before, meow.*

Kilpha had tried counting sheep and had made it to well over a thousand, but sleep still eluded her. *This is very annoying, meow. I've never taken so long to fall asleep, meow.*

Kilpha was used to sleeping in places where it would usually be difficult to sleep: on the ground under the stars, on the floors of dungeons, even in caves and grottoes. The ability to fall asleep basically anywhere was an absolute must if you wanted to be a full-fledged adventurer. And yet...

*I'm in a comfy bed, so why am I having so much trouble sleeping, meow? Sure, Shiro's next to me, but I can't believe I'm finding it impossible to fall asleep, meow. Should I just give up?*

As Kilpha's thoughts raced around her head at a mile a minute, she suddenly realized something. Shiro's breathing wasn't the rhythmic rise and fall of a sleeping person. *Does that mean Shiro's awake too, meow?* she wondered. *Should I try talking to him, meow? If I whisper, I shouldn't wake him up if he is asleep, meow. Okay. I'm doing it.*

Having made up her mind, she opened her mouth to call out Shiro's name, only to be interrupted by her own name being called.

"Kilpha, are you awake?" Shiro asked quietly.

*Shiro's been awake this whole time too!* For some reason, this realization made the cat-sith incredibly happy.

"I am, meow," she replied.

"Ah, I thought so."

"Yeah..." She hesitated. "I feel a bit weird, meow. I can't fall asleep at all, meow."

"Same," Shiro confessed.

"You can't sleep either, meow?" Kilpha said.

"Nope. I know we're pretending to be engaged, but I wasn't expecting to sleep in the same bed as you. I'm..." Shiro paused. "How should I put it? I'm kinda nervous, I guess."

Kilpha remained silent for a couple of moments, then muttered, "You're nervous too?"

"Yeah," Shiro said. "In fact, I'm so tense, I feel like a plank of wood."

"A plank of wood?" Kilpha repeated, chuckling at Shiro's exaggerated comparison. She flipped over so that she was facing Shiro's back. "Same here. I'm also too nervous to sleep, meow."

"So you can sleep outdoors on the ground but not in a bed with me? That's

actually kinda funny,” Shiro said as he also turned to face Kilpha. His black eyes that were as dark as the night sky were staring right at her. Kilpha and Shiro had never been so close before.

“Don’t tell the others I couldn’t sleep, okay? *Especiall*y Raiya, meow,” she said.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. I promise. I mean, I wasn’t really planning on telling them that we slept in the same bed in the first place. It’d cause all sorts of issues if Emille found out,” Shiro sighed.

“Yeah, it definitely would, meow,” Kilpha confirmed.

“Wouldn’t it just?”

“She’d probably kill me for one thing, meow,” Kilpha said, mimicking getting strangled, which drew a chuckle out of Shiro. In fact, picturing Emille’s reaction to that particular piece of news in their minds made the two of them burst out laughing, their earlier nervousness already a distant memory.

“Since we’re having such trouble getting to sleep anyway, how about we chat until we feel tired?” Shiro suggested.

“Sure. What do you wanna talk about, meow?” Kilpha asked.

“What would you say to making a little game out of it? We can take turns asking each other questions. Of course, we can totally skip any questions we don’t feel like answering,” Shiro said, explaining the rules of his “game.”

“That sounds fun, meow,” Kilpha said cheerily. “Can I go first?”

“Sure,” Shiro replied.

“Okay, ready?”

“Shoot.”

Kilpha spent quite a while trying to come up with a question. *Should I ask him this? Or maybe that?* She hemmed and hawed until she realized she didn’t *need* to narrow it down to just one question, because she would probably have plenty more time to ask Shiro everything she wanted to know before the two of them finally drifted off to sleep.

“Why do you like beastfolk so much, meow?” was her first question. It was a pertinent question because while not all humes harbored prejudice for beastfolk—some were perfectly fine with them, especially when it came to adventurers—most merchants weren’t so open-minded.

Shiro hummed and closed his eyes as he pondered the question. “I haven’t told anyone this yet, but there actually aren’t any beastfolk where I’m from,” he said.

“What? No beastfolk, meow? Not a single one?” Kilpha asked, shocked.

“Nope,” Shiro replied. “I’ve always known *of* beastfolk but they have never been a part of my daily life, if you see what I mean. So I guess that’s why. To me, beastfolk are kind of like this intriguing yet distant concept, if that makes sense, and they have always fascinated me.” He opened his eyes and stared at Kilpha. “Which is why I’m incredibly happy I met you, Kilpha.”

A little gasp escaped from the cat-sith. She hadn’t been expecting that answer at all. *What should I do? I’m so embarrassed, I can’t even look him in the eye, meow*, she panicked inwardly. *But I can’t look away!*

She gave herself a mental pep talk and somehow resisted the urge to avert her gaze. “I... I’m happy I met you too, Shiro,” is all she managed to get out.

*What’s happening, meow?* she wondered. *My face feels so warm, meow. In fact, it feels like it’s burning, meow.*

“Y-Your turn now, meow!” she prompted Shiro as she felt herself growing excessively embarrassed about the present situation.

“Okay. Well, let’s see...” Shiro said, pondering what to ask before landing on a subject. “Could you tell me how you, Raiya, Nesca, and Rolf came to form Blue Flash?”

“Huh? We haven’t told you about that yet, meow?”

“Nope. I mean, isn’t there some sort of unspoken rule that you shouldn’t pry into adventurers’ pasts?”

Kilpha nodded. “Yeah, there is, meow.”

“Well, there you are. And I’ve never found the right occasion to ask you about

it.”

“Oooh, I see. Let me tell you everything, then, meow!”

“Yes, please!”

“Seven years ago, I up and left my village, meow,” she began.

“Huh? What do you mean by ‘up and left’? You ran away?” Shiro inquired.

“No, no, not at all. I got my grandma’s permission and everything,” Kilpha explained. “Although, at the time, I was always on edge, wondering when she’d eventually order me to come back to the village, meow.”

She told Shiro everything. Back then, she had been incredibly bored with her life in the village of the cat-sìths, so she had decided to become an adventurer in Orvil, then a little while after that, she’d headed to the holy nation of Jestak to put even more distance between her and her home village. She had been on the brink of starvation when Nesca encountered her and suggested the two of them travel together. Kilpha gladly accepted the offer, and the pair decided to make the Giruam Kingdom their next destination, and it was there that they met Raiya and Rolf. The two guys invited the two girls to join their party, and that was how Blue Flash was formed. Shiro listened intently right to the very end of the tale, his eyes glinting with excitement like a child listening to the escapades of a hero.

“And so, we decided to make Ninoritch our base, meow,” she said, concluding her tale.

Shiro made an approving noise to convey how impressed he was. “That was epic,” he said. “You four really have been through a lot together, huh?”

“You make it sound much grander than it actually was, meow,” Kilpha said. “We’re just your average adventuring party. It wasn’t *that* interesting a story.”

“What are you talking about? You guys are Ninoritch’s pride and joy! Of *course* your story is interesting. Kids would love listening to it,” Shiro assured her.

“I wonder about that, meow,” she said skeptically.

“Oh, they totally would. Hey, I know! How about we put on a little kamishibai



play of the story of how you guys met when we get back to Ninoritch?” he suggested.

Kilpha had no idea what a “kamishibai play” was, but since Shiro seemed to like it, it must surely be something interesting. With her story now concluded, the pair resumed their question-and-answer game.

“What’s your favorite animal, meow?” Kilpha asked.

“Pass. I like way too many. How about you?”

She hummed as she mulled it over. “Cows, I think, meow.”

“Cows?” Shiro echoed, looking amused. “That’s an unusual choice.”

“Their meat is yummy, meow,” Kilpha explained.

“Oh, so *that’s* what you meant by favorite animal.”

The two of them joked and laughed until well into the night.

“Okay, my turn. Let’s see...” Shiro said, pondering his next question on the umpteenth round of their game. “Ah, I know what to ask. What’s your favorite place, Kilpha?”

“My favorite place?” the cat-sith queried.

“Yeah. Just somewhere you like, you know? It can be a place where something memorable happened to you, or somewhere that makes you feel all calm, that sort of thing,” he explained.

“My favorite place...” She repeated, wondering if she even had one of those. The Blue Flash crew was using Ninoritch as their base at present, but adventurers were, first and foremost, wanderers. She had spent many a long year on the road before more or less settling down in the little town. Still, she couldn’t think of any one place in particular that she would call her “favorite.” The guild’s drinking hall? The newly built public bathhouse? The inn she stayed at? She liked all of these places, sure, but not really enough to call any of them her “favorite.”

“For me, it’s my grandma’s house,” Shiro said, noticing that Kilpha was struggling to answer. “I have some incredible memories of the time I’ve spent there, both with my grandma herself, but also with the rest of the family, and I

always feel at peace there.”

Shiro’s words caused memories to come flooding back to the cat-sith and a certain place appeared at the forefront of her mind.

“Hey, me too. I have a favorite place too, meow!” she suddenly exclaimed.

“Really?” Shiro said, a look of curiosity spreading across his face. “Where?”

“The place with all the glowbugs!” she replied, then went into a bit more detail. “It’s this spring where you can see lots and lots of glowbugs flying around!”

The spring in question was located near the village of the cat-siths, and there were always glowbugs flying around its banks. At night, they would spread light across their surroundings, illuminating the dark sky and casting their glow onto the surface of the water, making the spring itself look like a night sky filled with countless stars. Back when she lived in the village, whenever anything bad happened—like when she got yelled at by her parents, or when she was sad, or when she lost someone dear to her—Kilpha would go over to that spring and gaze at the mesmerizing glow of the glowbugs until she felt better again. *How could I have forgotten about that place?* she asked herself.

“And this place is near to your village, is it? It sounds lovely,” Shiro remarked.

“Yup! We call it the ‘Spring of the Dancing Lights,’” Kilpha told Shiro, who responded with an impressed noise.

Kilpha closed her eyes and mentally pictured the spring she loved so much. “It’s such a mesmerizing sight that I would sometimes lose all track of time and spend the whole night there, meow,” she said.

“And I bet your grandmother used to yell at you for spending the night outside, didn’t she?” Shiro teased.

Kilpha giggled. “She sure did, meow.”

“Yup, that’s what I thought. That’s very you,” Shiro said with a smile.

“Glowbugs, huh? What a sight that must be. I’d love to see it for myself.”

“Wanna go, meow?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Okay, meow! In that case, I’ll take you there, meow.”

“Yippee!” Shiro cheered quietly. “And that’s a promise, yeah? You’d better take me to see all those ‘dancing lights.’”

“Yup! I promise I will, meow!” *I’ll definitely take him there, she thought. After all, I want to go back there too. Back to that place filled with memories...*

“...pha? Kilpha?”

“Meow?”

Shiro softly calling out her name dragged her out of her thoughts.

“It’s your turn. Or are you getting too sleepy to continue?” he asked.

She shook her head. “N-No, I’m fine. Just lemme think of a question!”

“Bring it on,” Shiro said.

Their night together wasn’t at an end yet and they continued their game.

“Okay, I have a weird one for you next, meow. Why did you...”

“Right, my turn. Hm, let’s see...”

And before she knew it, Kilpha drifted off to sleep while chatting with Shiro.

## Chapter Seven: To the Village of the Cat-Sìths

“Good morning, Mister Shiro,” was how Aina greeted me the next morning. “Huh? You have big dark circles under your eyes, Mister Shiro.”

I chuckled evasively. “Morning, Aina. Yeah, I found it a bit of a struggle to get to sleep last night. Scratch that, it was a *lot* of a struggle.”

The morning after the night Kilpha and I had shared a bed, we all gathered in Aina and Shess’s room on the fifth floor. I was the last to enter the room and I tried my hardest to stifle a yawn as I walked in, the dark circles under my eyes glaringly obvious.

I glanced around the room and spotted Kilpha, who flashed me a smile. “Hey, sleepyhead, meow,” she said.

The night before had been tough. Really, *really* tough. Kilpha had asked to sleep in the same bed with me as a way of adding more credibility to our fake dating story by smelling of each other’s scent, and since neither of us could sleep, we ended up having a great time chatting about everything and nothing. Kilpha had drifted off at some point, however, leaving me alone with my nervousness, which wasn’t helped by the fact that, in her sleep, she must have decided that I’d make a comfy body pillow, because she pretty much wrapped herself around me. Needless to say, I couldn’t fall asleep myself. I mean, how could I? Her cat ears were right there in front of my eyes, and her soft, fluffy tail was within arm’s reach. Yet I couldn’t touch them, for I would never do something like that without her express permission. Besides, I wasn’t exactly able to move with her clinging to me like a koala to a tree.

After struggling with this inner conflict all night long—until daybreak, in fact—it appeared I must have fallen asleep at some point, which was why I was the last to enter the room.

“You’re late, Amata! You made my lady wait!” Luza scolded me.



Who would've thought I'd be getting yelled at for oversleeping at my age? And when exactly *did* I fall asleep, anyway? I distinctly remembered being awake until it started brightening up outside, but after that...

I rubbed my eyes and apologized to everyone present for my tardiness, then got started on preparing breakfast. Well, "preparing" was something of an overstatement, because all I did was open my inventory, take out the stuff I'd bought in Japan before we'd set out on our trip, then put it on the table. I had everything from boxed lunches and side dishes I'd bought at the convenience store, to meals from a popular fast-food chain that I'd ordered on a food delivery app. We had three big eaters with us—Dramom, Celes, and Suama—so I'd tried to be as well-prepared as possible, though in reality, I knew no amount of food would ever be enough for them.

After I'd unloaded everything from my inventory, we all gathered around the table, ready to dig in. Shess, Luza, and Duane offered up a prayer to their respective gods, while Dramom prayed to me, and Aina and I followed the Japanese tradition of clapping our hands together and expressing our gratitude with a simple, "Thanks for the food."

While we were all eating, I took the opportunity to share the decision Kilpha and I had reached regarding only the two of us going on to the village of the cat-sìths. At first, everyone looked at me with confused expressions on their faces, but once I'd explained Kilpha's reasoning for it—how me showing up at her parents' place surrounded by a gaggle of girls would make for a terrible first impression—they seemed to reluctantly accept the decision. Shess was the hardest to convince, since she really wanted to go see the living habits of the beastfolk firsthand, but even she saw reason eventually.

"I'm sorry, Aina. I'm the one who invited you to tag along, and now I'm asking you to stay here," I said sheepishly.

"It's fine! I'll wait here with Shess for you to come back," she replied, and I didn't detect a hint of sadness in her tone. Quite the opposite, in fact. She sounded quite happy, most likely because she would still be spending time with her best friend.

"Amata, I want a full report on the way the beastfolk live in their homeland

the moment you get back,” Shess commanded.

“Sure thing. I’ll be sure to take lots of pictures and videos for you,” I assured her.

I was going to the village of the cat-sìths, the promised land I’d been dreaming about my entire life, so I’d made sure to get my hands on a mirrorless camera and I was planning on taking pictures and videos galore, to the point where the camera’s memory card wouldn’t have one iota of space left on it.

“Vi-de-os?” Shess repeated phonetically, a puzzled look on her face.

“Videos are pictures that move, Shess,” Aina explained to her friend.

“Pictures that move?” the little princess repeated, still looking confused.

Aina nodded. “Yup!”

“Are they cursed?” Shess whispered.

Her reaction made me really excited to shoot all the videos I planned on taking in Kilpha’s homeland so that I could show them to her and see what kind of face she’d make.

Once we were all done with breakfast, Kilpha and I went to pack our belongings.

“Well then. We’ll be heading off now,” I announced to our companions when we were both ready.

“Shiro, I will hide one of my familiars in your shadow. Do not hesitate to use it if you encounter any monsters,” Celes told me.

“Thank you, Celes.”

Dramom quickly piped up too. “You cannot rely on the demon’s familiars, master. Here, take this flute. If you ever find yourself in trouble, play a tune on it and I shall come to your rescue,” she said, handing me what looked to be some sort of ocarina-shaped wind instrument. It was the same as the one she had given to Stella when she’d left Ninoritch to find her husband. So no matter how far away we were, this flute would reach her ears and she’d immediately fly to us? *Now that I think about it, it’s a bit OP, isn’t it?*

“Thank you, Dramom,” I said, placing the gorgeous, pure-white flute in my inventory.

“Did you just call my familiar useless?” Celes said to Dramom coldly.

“Well, please enlighten me: what *can* that familiar of yours do?” Dramom retorted.

Celes huffed. “Allow me to return that question to you: what can *your* flute do? What if Shiro does not have time to play it? Who will protect him until you arrive at the scene?”

“The flute is only meant to be used as a final measure. Unlike you, who merely claims to be our master’s subordinate, his soul and my own are connected. If he does ever find himself in peril, I will instinctively know and rush to his side. If I fly at top speed, I shall be there in the blink of an eye.”

Not for the first time, Celes and Dramom had started bickering. The bit Dramom had said about my soul and hers being connected piqued my curiosity, but I decided this wasn’t the time to question her further on it.

Next up was the pretty boy of the group. “Be careful out there, Shiro. Not that I’m worried about you, of course. Kilpha’s an outstanding ranger. She’ll protect you,” Duane said, flashing me a grin, his pearly whites gleaming in the early morning rays. Despite not being the target of his smile, Luza instantly reddened.

“Duane’s right. You two be careful out there, Amata, Kilpha,” Shess said.

“Don’t worry. As long as I stick with Kilpha, I’m sure I’ll be safe,” I said.

“Yup! I’ll protect Shiro, meow!” my cat-sith companion assured the group, slapping her chest in a show of bravado. While there were monsters in the Dura Forest, Kilpha had assured me they were ones she could deal with easily enough all by herself. From what she had told me, the Dura Forest was way less dangerous than the Gigheena Forest that lay east of Ninoritch.

Aina was the next to say goodbye. “Take care, Mister Shiro, Miss Kilpha.”

“We will,” I assured her. “See you soon, Aina.”

“Bye-bye, Aina, meow!” Kilpha added.

“And we’ll see *you* soon too, Suama,” I said, patting the little dragon girl on



the head.

“Ai! Bye-bye, pa-pa,” she babbled.

Kilpha and I left the inn and made our way to city hall, where we used the power of money to get ourselves a permit to enter the Dura Forest. From there, we ventured out beyond the city limits, and after about an hour of walking, we reached the forest. The village of the cat-sìths—the promised land—lay beyond. Trying my hardest to keep my ever-growing excitement under control, I walked into the forest with Kilpha.



“We’re almost there, Shiro. Hang in there, meow,” Kilpha said, cheering me on.

“Yes, ma’am!”

We’d been following a barely-there animal trail through the forest for the past six hours, but according to Kilpha, even at my pace, we should end up reaching her village before sunset. A quick glance at my wristwatch told me it was three in the afternoon, and given that the sun tended to set at around six this time of year, that meant we still had roughly another three hours of walking ahead of us.

“You can do it, Shiro. Don’t give in. Keep on walking until you drop dead,” were the words of encouragement I quietly muttered to myself.

To be completely honest, I was already way past what my body could reasonably manage, because I’d barely slept a wink the night before, after all. The only thing that kept my feet moving forward was the fact that the village of the cat-sìths lay ahead.

“Are you okay, Shiro? You’re not too tired?” Kilpha asked me.

“I’m very tired and completely out of stamina. But my heart hasn’t given out just yet,” I replied with a grin and a thumbs-up.

Kilpha didn’t seem to believe me on that last part, however. Perhaps she’d noticed that my legs were trembling like those of a newborn fawn. “Should we take a break, meow?” she suggested. “We can always camp outside tonight.”

“But that’d mean reaching the cat-sìths’ village even later,” I argued. “If we have time for a break, I’d much rather just keep going.”

“Well, all right then, meow,” Kilpha acquiesced. “But let me know if the trek gets too tough for you, okay?”

“Will do.”

Fortunately, we’d barely encountered any monsters as we traipsed through the forest, aside from the occasional slime. We hadn’t even spotted any of the forest staples, such as horned rabbits and forest bulls.

“We’ve barely seen any monsters. That’s weird, meow,” Kilpha noted, seemingly finding it just as strange as I did.

But to be honest, with how exhausted I was, it was definitely a win in my book.



“Shiro, we’re almost there now, meow! This is my home village, meow!” Kilpha exclaimed merrily, pointing out something up ahead. I followed her gaze and spotted a bunch of dome-shaped houses up in the trees.

“Wow, tree houses!” I exclaimed in wonder.

“Tree houses?” Kilpha repeated, clearly unfamiliar with the word.

“Oh, that’s what we call houses that have been built up in trees in my homeland,” I clarified. “So tree houses, huh? I wasn’t expecting that.”

*Now that’s what I call a fantasy setting*, I thought to myself as I peered at the untold number of little houses in the distance. I hadn’t even spotted a single cat ear yet, but my inner child was already trembling with excitement.

“Let’s go, Kilpha! We can even run there!” I enthusiastically suggested.

“Hold on a minute, Shiro, meow,” she replied, stopping me.

“What is it?”

“From this moment on, you’re my fiancé, okay?” Kilpha said pointedly.

“Yup! I’m your fiancé. No matter what anyone else may say, I’m your fiancé,” I said, confirming that I was on board with the plan.

“Right, yes. So I’d like you to call me by a pet name when we’re around the others, meow. Something like ‘darling’ or ‘honey,’” she said.

“A pet name?” I repeated. “I mean, I guess that makes sense, but...” I was a little reluctant, but I couldn’t argue that it would definitely help us to sell the pretense.

“It really does, meow. After all, it’s only natural for I-I-lovers to give each other pet names. So I want you to call me ‘darling,’ meow.”

I nodded gravely. “Got it.”

“Let’s do a practice run, okay, meow? Try saying it,” Kilpha suggested, motioning for me to give it a go.

“O-Okay. Ready?”

“Ready.”

I hesitated slightly, but eventually managed to mumble a quiet, “D-Darling.”

“That’s me!” she said, her hand shooting up in the air as if she were a student whose name had been called at roll call. “Again, meow!”

“Darling,” I repeated, a little more confidently this time.

She giggled, seemingly pleased with this. “Now remember, you’ve got to call me that whenever we’re in my village, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.”

I tried repeating it over and over in my head. *Darling, darling, darling, darling... Ugh, it’s no good. I just can’t get used to calling her that. But I have to.*

I closed my eyes. “Kilpha... Uh, I mean, my *darling* Kilpha and I are lovers. We’re engaged to be married. We plan to spend the rest of our lives together,” I mumbled to myself, trying to get into character. “So I just have to get over myself and start calling her ‘darling’ like she requested. You got that, Shiro?”

After a good thirty seconds of autosuggestion, I opened my eyes again and looked at Kilpha. “All right, let’s go, darling,” I said, grabbing her hand without hesitation.

“O-Okay!”

The two of us resumed our trek to the village of the cat-sìths, and with our fingers interlocked, anyone looking at us would have taken us for boyfriend and girlfriend. Or at least, I hoped they would.

With that thought still rattling around my head, I finally found myself in the cat-sìth village.

## Chapter Eight: Zudah Village

Kilpha and I entered the village hand in hand and I couldn't help gasping with amazement at what I saw. There were cat-sìths absolutely *everywhere* (which made sense, as this was their village, but still). Wherever I looked, there were cat ears as far as the eye could see.

"I made it. I'm finally here," I whispered to myself. I'd reached the promised land. As soon as that thought crossed my mind, I dropped to my knees and raised my fists to the sky. "Hell *yeah!*" I roared, a cry of triumph that erupted from the very depths of my soul.

Beside me, Kilpha jumped in shock, and she wasn't the only one, for the little cat-sìths who had been playing close to the entrance of the village immediately scattered and hid themselves behind their mothers, who eyed me suspiciously. *Hi there. Yes, I am an outsider.*

"A hume?" I heard one whisper. "What's a hume doing here?"

"It's been years since a traveling merchant last came to our village," another pointed out.

"Do you think he's come here in the hopes we'll sell our children to him? What a despicable man."

"Hold on. That girl who's with him..." There was a slight pause as they collectively eyed Kilpha up and down. "She's one of us."

All of the cat-sìths around us were throwing dirty looks in our direction and muttering to each other in hushed voices.

"Shiro, you scared them, meow," Kilpha chided me.

"S-Sorry..." My overflowing enthusiasm had already aroused the suspicions of the cat-sìths and we'd barely gotten two steps inside the village. *What do I do now? Is there some way we can make them less suspicious of us?*

As I pondered this, a young woman with a child who had been peering at us

from afar suddenly said, “Kilpha?”

She seemed to be around the same age as Kilpha and her light brown ears and tail were every bit as pretty as my cat-sith friend’s own.

“Meow? Is that you, Myaam?” Kilpha said, a look of surprise on her face.

“It really *is* you!” the woman with the child exclaimed. “You’ve finally come home!”

“Meow-ha-ha, it’s been so long!” Kilpha said as she rushed over to the young woman and wrapped her arms around her. *Her childhood friend, maybe?*

“Did she just say ‘Kilpha’?” I heard someone ask.

“Whoa, it’s really her! Hey, everyone! Kilpha’s back!”

“Kilpha’s back?!”

“Wow! Miss Kilpha!”

More and more cat-siths crowded around Kilpha, all of them ecstatic to see her for the first time in seven years.

“Long time no see, everyone, meow!” she beamed.

In Japan, it was possible to stay in contact with loved ones wherever they were in the world due to the handy smartphone, but in this world, no such technology existed, so seven years apart must have felt like an eternity to them. Indeed, Kilpha appeared to be on the verge of tears, and so were most of the cat-siths crowding around her.

“Welcome home, Kilpha. You should go see the chieftain,” someone suggested after the initial excitement of the unexpected reunion had calmed down.

“She’s been waiting for you to come back for a very long time,” another added.

“So seeing how you’re back now, I’m guessing that must mean you’ve found someone to settle down with out there.”

“Yeah, where is he?” another voice piped up. “I’m sure he must be brave and hardy!”

“You two will be in charge of the village one day, so hurry up and introduce him to us!”

“This is Miss Kilpha we’re talking about. Her husband’s bound to be *super* strong!”

They were all looking at Kilpha excitedly, but her own face fell.

“U-Um...” she murmured.

The others didn’t seem to have noticed the change in her attitude and they kept looking around with wide, expectant eyes, ignoring me entirely. But after a few oblivious glances in my direction, the crowd finally seemed to notice my presence.

“Um. Hi,” I said awkwardly.

I was instantly met with countless confused looks, as if the whole crowd was silently saying to itself: *Surely that’s not him, is it?* I was used to being overlooked the first time people glanced around a room and sometimes even the second time, but having people do a quintuple-take before even acknowledging my existence was a first. All of the cat-sìths had been expecting Kilpha’s fiancé to be some sort of macho warrior type, but instead, they were presented with this human beanpole. I mean, I was already pretty weak by the standards of modern Japan, but in a world that was teeming with monsters and bandits, I was basically about as strong as a wet noodle, so I couldn’t really blame Kilpha’s friends and family for their reaction to me, even if the atmosphere did now feel more like a wake than a happy reunion with kin. Where had their earlier excitement gone?

“Kilpha, is that hume...” a middle-aged cat-sìth man started before trailing off and glancing at Kilpha. From his attitude, it was obvious he didn’t believe she would have willingly chosen to be with me, but he was asking all the same, just to make sure.

Kilpha strode back to me and we linked arms. “Yup, this is my fiancé, meow,” she declared.

“Nice to meet you all. My name is Shiro Amata,” I said, but as soon as I was done introducing myself, almost all of the cat-sìths collapsed to their knees in

unison as if their legs had suddenly given way beneath them at the same time.

On witnessing this unusual scene, only one word escaped my lips. “*Why?*”



“Go see the chieftain,” the middle-aged man from earlier urged us in a strained voice, his eyes filled with despair.

Kilpha and I didn’t question this any further and headed for the house of Kilpha’s grandmother, which was where we had been planning to go in the first place. The chieftain’s house was in the middle of the village, and to get to it, we had to climb a spiral staircase built around a thick tree trunk, then cross a suspension bridge. As we made our way there, I looked around and concluded that the men must have been off hunting because I could only see women.

“I’m sorry, Shiro, meow,” Kilpha said dejectedly. “You probably noticed, didn’t you? The others...” She paused. “They don’t really like you, meow.”

“Yeah, I could kinda tell,” I said self-effacingly.

Rumors about me must have already started to spread because every cat-sith we passed stared at me. Some just looked plain confused, while others seemed pretty mad. But both of those reactions I could deal with. I only really felt bad about the whole thing whenever someone burst into tears as soon as they laid eyes on me. One thing was for sure, however: my noodle arms and I were not welcome in this village. Even I could see that.

“When I left the village seven years ago, I made a promise to the others, meow,” Kilpha said, an awkward look on her face. “I told them I’d find a super strong man to marry,” she confessed with a sigh.

“I see. So *that’s* why they’re so shocked to see me and my skinny arms,” I said.

“I’m so sorry, Shiro, meow.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. I mean it’s you we’re talking about here. Everyone was expecting your husband to be strong and brave, yet what they got was *this*,” I said, gesturing at myself. “Can’t blame ’em for being disappointed.”



In this world, it was a must for men to have bulging muscles. That didn't mean everything could be resolved by fighting, of course, but with how dangerous life could get, being physically strong was often seen as an essential trait for survival. Since the cat-sith village didn't seem particularly developed (even by this world's standards) with most people here wearing clothes made out of fur or pelts—I hadn't spotted a single person wearing wool or linen like I had in hume towns—I could easily imagine the most valued quality in a man being his ability to hunt and protect his family. Visually, I quite obviously possessed neither of these attributes, which was why everyone seemed so disappointed that Kilpha had picked me to be her spouse.

I understood their whole reasoning for feeling that way, but I had to admit that there was *one* thing I couldn't make sense of at all: if she'd known all that, why had Kilpha asked *me*, of all people, to be her pretend-fiancé? There had been loads and loads of burly macho adventurers at the Fairy's Blessing guild at the time that she could have asked instead. But knowing Kilpha, there must have been some reason why she'd picked me.

"There's something I've got to tell you before we go see my grandma, meow," Kilpha said.

"What is it?" I asked.

An awkward look appeared on her face as she considered her next words carefully. "She probably—no, she *definitely* won't accept you as my future husband, meow."

"You seem pretty sure of that," I noted.

She shrugged. "I know how she is. She's stubborn, meow."

The face of Patty's grandfather, the clan leader of the fairies, floated up at the back of my mind, because Patty had called him stubborn too. *Perhaps being stubborn is a necessary quality when you're leading a tribe*, I mused.

"But anyway, no matter what she says, I'd like you to keep pretending we're engaged, meow."

I nodded. "Sure thing. I wasn't planning on dropping the act anyway. I've come too far just to turn back now. So until we're back in Ninoritch..." I paused

for emphasis. “I’ll be the best fake fiancé you could ever ask for,” I assured her, punctuating my sentence with a wink to really hammer it home.

Kilpha’s face scrunched up a little as if she was about to cry and her lips curled into a small smile. “Thanks, Shiro, meow,” she said quietly.

## Chapter Nine: An Undesired Reunion

After that conversation, we crossed over the rope bridge and walked for another ten minutes before Kilpha stopped.

“This is my grandma’s house, meow,” she said, pointing up at an impressively large tree house high up in a massive tree. It seemed to be roughly thirty meters off the ground—more or less the equivalent of the tenth floor of an apartment building.

“Your grandma lives there?” I asked.

“Yup. Oh, but it’s not just her. My mom, dad, and siblings live there too, meow,” she clarified.

“I see. So your whole family lives there, huh?”

I double-checked my clothes weren’t dirty and quickly combed my fingers through my hair to make sure I looked at least partly presentable before opening my inventory and taking out a couple of boxes of Nesca’s favorite chocolates. I was all ready to go. Kilpha and I nodded to each other, and we walked up to the door of her grandmother’s house.

“Grandma, it’s me, Kilpha, meow. I’m back, meow,” Kilpha announced.

The response was immediate. “Come in,” said a deep female voice.

*Is it just me or does she sound rather angry? That’s definitely not the voice of a grandmother who’s happy to finally see her granddaughter again after seven long years.*

“Follow me, Shiro, meow,” Kilpha said as she stepped inside the house, and I did as I was told.

The tree house was much more spacious than I’d anticipated. On entering, you were greeted by a large room that was thirty tatami mats big—roughly fifty square meters—and at the back of the room, I spotted a ladder that must have led to the floors above as well as the ones below. It hadn’t seemed so big from

outside, but this place was at least three stories tall, possibly even more.

Whatever lay on those other floors was immaterial right now, however, for my full attention was on the three people sitting in the middle of the large room. The first was an elderly woman who sat cross-legged, her gaze firmly fixed on Kilpha and me. Her ears and tail were the same color as Kilpha's, and her clothes were made with white fur, giving her an elegant and dignified air. The other two—a man and a woman—sat behind the elderly cat-sìth, and based on their facial features, I surmised they were Kilpha's parents. Unlike the elderly woman's cold and harsh gaze, their eyes were soft and warm, just like Stella's grew whenever she looked at Aina.

"I'm home, grandma, meow," Kilpha said, bowing slightly to the elderly woman.

As I thought, this woman was Kilpha's grandmother. I'd asked Kilpha to tell me a little about her in advance, and she had said that, despite her grandmother not even being sixty yet, the deep wrinkles on her brow made her look much older than she was. I imagined these lines had been etched by the many years of troubles and responsibilities that came with being the head of the cat-sìths. She stared at us in total silence, which seemed to worry Kilpha.

"Grandma?" she ventured tentatively.

But the elderly woman seemed to not be in the mood to reply to her granddaughter's greeting. "Sit," she said curtly, her tone allowing no room for argument.

*She really is an apt fit for the role of tribal chieftain, I mused.*

Kilpha seemed hesitant, but then nodded. "Okay, meow," she said as she sat down on the floor in front of her grandmother. I did likewise, kneeling beside her in the traditional Japanese way known as "seiza."

The chieftain stared at us for a little while longer, causing Kilpha to hang her head and attempt to make herself as small as possible in preparation for the onslaught that was about to be unleashed. This definitely wasn't the kind of mood you would expect of a reunion between an elderly woman and her granddaughter. I had thought their reunion would be a joyous, celebratory event, but this was the complete opposite, and the atmosphere was so heavy, it

felt a bit oppressive.

“Kilpha,” the chieftain finally said, breaking the pregnant silence. “You came quickly. It hasn’t even been two months since your father sent you that letter.”

“That’s, um, because my—” Kilpha started, but her grandmother interrupted her with a wave of her hand.

“I do not care in the slightest why you have arrived so soon. In fact, I was happy to hear you were back. But then I learned that you had brought a *hume* here with you. What *is* he doing here?” the chieftain asked.

Kilpha jolted in surprise. “Meow! Sh-Shiro is—” she started, trying to defend herself, but the chieftain cut her off again.

“Surely you don’t mean to tell me that *this* is the man you have chosen to marry?”

Kilpha bit her lower lip, unsure how to reply.

“Well? Why aren’t you answering me, Kilpha?” the chieftain said.

“I, um...” Kilpha started, stumbling over her words. “How should I put it, meow?”

*I guess now’s my time to shine. I can already tell I’m not welcome here, so I might as well give it a shot.* I was going to stand with Kilpha until the very end.

“It is an honor to meet you, ma’am. I am Kilpha’s fiancé, Shiro Amata,” I said, placing both hands on the floor and bowing deeply in a Japanese-style greeting. Kilpha had asked me to refer to her as informally as possible whenever we were in front of others, but I decided the present situation called for a more formal tone.

“Her fiancé, you say?” the chieftain repeated, her tone ice-cold.

Her expression was blank, but I could see a flicker of rage in her eyes. She hadn’t seen her granddaughter in seven years, and when she did finally see her, she’d brought this shady-looking human beanpole in a dark red jacket home with her. As a grandmother, it was only natural for her to be displeased about the present course of events. However, I’d told Kilpha I would play the role of her fiancé until the very end, and I fully intended to keep that promise.

“Yes. Kilpha and I are currently dating with an eye to marriage in the not-too-distant future,” I said.

“A hume like you would take a catperson as your wife?” the chieftain queried, all the while glaring daggers at me. The anger in her eyes had morphed into a rampaging fire by this point, and I was starting to get a little scared for my life. But I was Kilpha’s fiancé, so I couldn’t allow myself to be intimidated by her.

Feigning composure, I met her gaze and said, “Yes. Is there a problem with that?”

The chieftain didn’t reply. Instead, her gaze moved to my reputed fiancée, who was sitting beside me. “Kilpha. This hume is claiming that you two are to be wed. Is this true?” she asked.

My attitude must have reinstalled some courage in Kilpha, for she proceeded to nod resolutely in response. “It is, meow. Shiro and I...” She paused to grab me by the neck and pull my head down toward her chest into an embrace, in an attempt to really drive the point home. “We’re lovers, meow! We have sworn we will spend the rest of our lives together, meow!”

As soon as these words left her mouth, I heard Kilpha’s parents breathe out lamenting sighs behind us.

“Isn’t that right, Shiro?” Kilpha asked me, her eyes pleading with me to go along with it.

Determined to play my role to the utmost of my ability, I grabbed her hand and interlocked her fingers with mine. “Yes, it is,” I said. “On the night of the meteor shower, Kilpha and I swore we would break down the barrier between our races and live together until the end of time.”

“Did you hear that, grandma, meow? Shiro and I I-I-I-love each other very much, meow! We’re getting married, meow!”

Our improvised skit had not only left Kilpha’s grandmother at a loss for words, but her parents too.

“Foolish girl. To think that my granddaughter would be deceived by a mere hume...” the chieftain muttered in disappointment.

“Shiro hasn’t deceived me at all, meow!” Kilpha protested.

“He has. Humes only think of us catfolk—no, of *all* beastfolk as mere tools!”

“That’s not true, meow! There are some nice humes too! You just don’t know about them, meow!”

“I cannot believe how much of an idiot my own granddaughter has turned out to be. I should never have let you leave the village,” the chieftain lamented.

“I’m not the idiot here, meow! *You’re* the one who knows nothing of the world! You’ve never even set foot outside of your forest, meow!” Kilpha argued, raising her voice. She had remained pretty calm right up until her grandmother had started bad-mouthing humes, which by extension, included her friends in Blue Flash. This had caused the dam to burst, and she could no longer hold back her anger.

“With all due respect, ma’am, I promise I am completely serious about my relationship with Kilpha. I have no intention of deceiving her or taking advantage of her,” I said.

The chieftain harrumphed. “I don’t trust humes. *Especially* silver-tongued ones like yourself.”

“I’m telling the truth,” I insisted. “I swear on my grandmother’s life that I’m not deceiving Kilpha. Please believe me.”

And I was telling the truth there, because I really wasn’t taking advantage of Kilpha. We weren’t even dating.

“You ‘promise’ and ‘swear’ it, do you? Then, let me ask you this,” the chieftain started before turning back to Kilpha. “Kilpha. Are you still keeping your chastity?”

Kilpha let out a confused mew.

“Your chastity,” the chieftain repeated. “Have you had sexual intercourse with this hume?”

It took Kilpha and me a good ten seconds to process what the chieftain had just asked.

“Meow *meow*?! Wh-What are you *saying*, meow?!” Kilpha exclaimed.

“I-I agree! That’s *totally* inappropriate! You might be Kilpha’s grandmother, but that’s a private matter! Right, Kilpha?” I asked for confirmation.

She nodded. “Y-Yeah, meow! Even as a joke, asking if Shiro and I have done n-n-naughty things is going too far!” Her face was bright red to the point of turning crimson, and my own face felt warm, so I was in no doubt that I was in a similar state.

“I am not joking. I am deadly serious,” the chieftain replied. “Well? Have you broken the promise you made to me—your grandmother, Chamfa—and had intercourse with this hume?”

“I-I-I...” Kilpha’s mouth opened and closed repeatedly like a fish’s, but no real words were forthcoming.

Meanwhile, I racked my brain to come up with a satisfactory answer, but I couldn’t think of one because the matter was just too sensitive. This was the first time I’d ever been at such a loss for words after being asked a question. The only clue I had to guide me was this “promise” the chieftain had mentioned, so using the little information I had, I tried running a few simulations in my head.

**Question:** Have you been doing naughty things with Kilpha?

**Answer One:** Yes, we have. → You have defiled my darling granddaughter. Kill him!

**Answer Two:** No, we haven’t. → So you were lying about being engaged. Kill him!

*Crap. This ain’t good. No matter how many times I run the simulation in my mind, I can’t come up with the right answer. I’m basically doomed, whatever I say.*

“Answer me,” the chieftain said to Kilpha, her gaze growing even sharper.

*What answer will you choose, Kilpha?*

“Th-That’s right, meow!” she said resolutely, even though her face was still as red as a tomato. “Shiro’s baby is growing inside my belly, meow!”

“Kilpha?!” I cried out in shock.



*“Shiro’s baby is growing inside my belly.”* My baby. No, *our* baby. Why in the world had she thought answering like that was a good idea? *C’mon, Kilpha, just look at your parents!*

Her mother had fainted in shock and her father could only glare at me as he tried to keep his wife’s body upright. If looks could kill, I’d have been dead ten times over. But Kilpha’s grandmother’s reaction was something else entirely.

“Filthy hume. You dare to defile my granddaughter? You will pay for that with your life!” she roared as sharp claws extended from her fingertips.

*Wait, what?! Is she gonna use those things to slice me open? Or stab me even?!* She readied herself to leap at me, when all of a sudden...

“Excuse me!” called out a young girl, who appeared in the doorway.

*I have no idea who you are or what you’re doing here, but you just saved my life, kid!*

The chieftain stopped in her tracks and glanced across at the girl. “I’m in the middle of something here. Come back later,” she said curtly.

“I’m sorry, but it’s an emergency,” the girl said.

“Oh, fine,” the elderly chieftain relented. “Come on in.”

“Right!” The girl entered the room and went over to the chieftain to mutter something into her ear.

“What? Someone from Nahato is here in our village?”

The girl nodded. “Yes. And Mr. Sajiri is here too.”

“Mr. Sajiri too? What dreadful timing.”

“What should I say to them?” the girl asked.

“Well, I have no choice but to go meet them,” the chieftain replied, sounding resigned. “However...” She paused and looked at Kilpha, a sour expression on her face. “Not right now. Kilpha’s here. Sorry to ask this of you, but could you try to buy me some ti—”

The chieftain didn’t even get to finish her sentence before another new guest made an appearance at the door.

“Hey, I’m coming in,” said the male cat-sìth who waltzed into the room. He appeared to be in his early to midtwenties, with dark gray ears and a tail, and he was sporting a goatee. Unlike the other cat-sìths in this village, he wasn’t wearing clothes made from fur or animal pelts, but a white shirt with an open neckline, similar to what they wore in hume towns.

“Were my ears deceiving me, chieftain, or did I hear you say Kilpha had returned?” the man said, glancing around the room. “Oh, she has, indeed,” he added as his eyes landed on Kilpha, a dangerous-looking smile appearing on his lips. His eyes were wide and he had the ferocious expression of a predator who had just found its next meal.

“Well, well, this *is* a surprise. So you really are back, Kilpha.”

“Sajiri…” Kilpha said stiffly, her expression tense. Did she not like this guy?

“What’s wrong, Kilpha? Aren’t you happy that you have finally been reunited with me? Where’s your smile? C’mon, at least give me a little kiss, won’t you? You can even throw yourself into my arms, if you so wish,” said the man called Sajiri, the smirk on his face widening. “After all, I *am* your fiancé.”

## Chapter Ten: The Fiancé

“Kilpha’s fiancé?” I muttered to myself as I eyed the newcomer up and down. I had to admit, he looked quite intimidating.

I glanced across at Kilpha to gauge her reaction. She had a grim look on her face, but she didn’t deny what the man had said, which meant he was probably telling the truth. Unlike me, who was only pretending to be Kilpha’s partner, this man called Sajiri was her *actual* fiancé.

“Wait a moment, Mr. Sajiri,” the chieftain interjected. “Kilpha only arrived a few minutes ago and she must be exhausted from her trip. Couldn’t you let her rest for just a—”

Sajiri interrupted her with a glare. “And why *exactly* would I need to wait because of that? I’m her fiancé. If she desires rest, she can do so by my side,” he stated in an imperious tone that left no room for argument.

Was it possible that this guy was even more important in the village than Kilpha’s grandmother?

“B-But I really think you should—” the chieftain tried to protest, but Sajiri cut her off again.

“Oh, shut up, Ms. Chieftain of Zudah Village. I’m not going to repeat myself.”

The chieftain bit her lip in frustration but held her tongue.

“The old bag never shuts up, does she? Such a nuisance. Don’t you agree, Kilpha?” Mr. Real Fiancé said, turning to my cat-sìth friend.

“I won’t allow you to insult my grandma, meow,” Kilpha responded, glaring at him.

“Oops, forgive me,” Mr. Real Fiancé said, though he didn’t sound sorry in the slightest. “You do have a point, though. After all, once we are married, she will be my grandma too. I’ll be sure to show her the respect she deserves when the time comes.” He paused and took a few steps toward Kilpha. “More

importantly, it's been quite a long time since we last saw each other. I've missed you, you know," he said, reaching his hand out toward her cheek, which Kilpha slapped away.

"Don't touch me, meow!" she snapped.

Yup, that sealed it. Kilpha disliked this man intensely.

"Ooh, scary," Mr. Real Fiancé teased. "Are you going to make me wait for us to be wed before you will allow me to touch you?"

"I have no intention of marrying you, meow!" Kilpha spat.

"What do you mean?"

"I..." Kilpha paused, grabbed my arm, and pressed it against her chest. "I'm going to marry Shiro, meow!" she declared boldly.

Mr. Real Fiancé's eyes landed on me. It appeared he hadn't even registered my presence prior to this moment. He hummed with an unimpressed look on his face as he looked me up and down. He must have come to the conclusion that I wasn't worth his attention, for a disdainful smile slowly curled his lips upward.

"Are you yanking my chain, Kilpha? Why would you be marrying a *hume* of all things? Oh, wait. I see now," he said, bringing his fist down on the palm of his other hand. "This hume has some kind of leverage over you, doesn't he? That *must* be it. So what's he got on you? Has he forced you into debt? Used a magical contract to bind you to him? Slave traders are especially good at that type of magic. But don't fret, my dear Kilpha. I shall take care of this hume for you."

Mr. Real Fiancé pulled out the shortsword that was hanging from his belt and pointed the tip of the blade directly at me. *Uh-oh, this doesn't look good*, I thought. Who would've thought I'd be threatened with death *twice* in less than five minutes?

"Please wait," I said, and I stood up with my hands raised in the air to show that I meant no harm to anyone in the room. "Will you listen to what I have to say first?"

Needless to say, Mr. Real Fiancé didn't lower his weapon. "No, thanks. I'm fearful that my ears might rot if I'm forced to listen to the ramblings of a hume."

"No, meow! I won't let you lay a single finger on Shiro, meow!" Kilpha exclaimed. She too got up before standing in front of me, her arms spread wide as if to shield me from any potential attack.

"Get out of the way, Kilpha," Mr. Real Fiancé huffed.

"I won't, meow!" she said firmly, shaking her head. "Listen closely, Sajiri. Shiro and I are in love! We're gonna be married! That's why I came home, you see. To tell grandma the news, meow."

"You're 'in love'? You and this *hume*?" Mr. Real Fiancé repeated skeptically before slowly strolling toward us. He moved his nose nearer to Kilpha, then turned his olfactory senses toward me, assessing both of our scents. "You *do* smell like her," he conceded.

"Ah, you can tell that, can you? Oopsie. I guess scents really *do* transfer to your partner when you're in love," I said, playing dumb.

"Love, huh?" he mused, unimpressed. "Between a cat-sith and a hume? And do you two 'love' each other in bed too?"

I stumbled over my words a bit before finally managing to say, "I'll leave that to your imagination."

Mr. Real Fiancé clicked his tongue in annoyance, then resheathed his shortsword. Kilpha's suggestion of spending the night in the same bed had proved fruitful, as we had easily passed Mr. Real Fiancé's smell check. For better or worse, he seemed to believe we really were in a relationship.

"You plan to have kids with this hume?" Mr. Real Fiancé asked Kilpha.

"Yup, meow! I wanna have lots of children with Shiro, meow!" she replied without hesitation.

*Uh, Kilpha? Mr. Sajiri has stopped talking all of a sudden. Also, could you please stop coming out with things like that out of the blue? I'm having a real hard time keeping my facial expression neutral over here. It's already taking all*

*of my brainpower just to process what's going on here.*

"So you want to carry the offspring of this hume, do you?" Mr. Sajiri said in a rather uninterested voice before turning to me. "Hey, you."

"Who, me?" I said awkwardly.

"Yeah, you."

"Wh-What is it?"

"So you want to steal Kilpha from me, do you? Then, show me your strength," he said.

"My strength? What do you mean?"

"Yeah, your strength. Prove to me you're strong enough to be her husband."

"Oh, but I'm just a merch—"

I had been about to say that I was just a mere merchant, when all of a sudden, Mr. Sajiri disappeared into thin air. In the next instant, I heard Kilpha yell, "Oh no you don't, meow!" and by the time my brain had caught up with what was going on, the sharp, thick claws of Mr. Real Fiancé—which resembled those of a giant carnivorous beast—were closing in on my eyeballs with alarming speed. I hadn't even seen him move. The only reason I didn't lose an eye right there and then was because Kilpha stepped in.

"I *told* you already! Shiro's my fiancé, meow! I won't let you hurt him, meow!" she hissed through gritted teeth as she grabbed Mr. Sajiri by the wrist and tried to hold him back.



“What do you think you’re doing, Kilpha?” he asked.

“I’m protecting Shiro! I’m protecting my fiancé, meow!” she declared.

Mr. Sajiri glanced disdainfully in my direction. “Seriously? Aren’t you ashamed that a woman is protecting you?”

“Shiro’s a merchant, meow,” Kilpha shouted. “Unlike *you*, he doesn’t try to resolve everything through violence, meow!”

The second the word “merchant” left Kilpha’s mouth, Sajiri froze. “A merchant, you say?” he queried.

“Yup, I’m a merchant,” I confirmed.

Mr. Sajiri seemed somewhat taken aback for a moment, then he turned back to Kilpha. “I’m disappointed in you, Kilpha. Out of all the people you could have picked, you chose a *hume merchant* to be your husband? Are you after his money? Is that it?”

“Be disappointed all you want, I don’t care, meow,” she said defiantly. “I can marry whoever I want, meow!”

“I see. Fine, then.” Mr. Real Fiancé looked over at Kilpha’s grandmother. “Hey, old lady. I take it your village is okay with this?” he asked.

“N-Now hold on, Mr. Sajiri! Please give us some more time!” the chieftain exclaimed, panicking. She looked desperate.

“I don’t have more time. If you want to proceed with our agreement, I recommend you hurry,” he spat, then his gaze landed back on Kilpha, a malicious smirk curling his lips upward. “See you soon, Kilpha.”

And with that, he departed from the chieftain’s house.



## Chapter Eleven: The Present Situation in Zudah Village

As soon as Mr. Sajiri left, Kilpha whipped her head around toward her grandmother. “Grandma! Why did you let Sajiri speak to you like that, meow?” she chided, her cute little eyebrows knitted together. She was obviously angry because even her nostrils were twitching in disbelief. “Don’t we have an alliance with Nahato? Aren’t we supposed to be their equals, meow? So why was Sajiri acting all high and mighty, meow? Why did you let him *treat* you like that, meow?”

“I...” The old woman’s face contorted into a bitter grimace.

“Kilpha, stop pestering your grandmother,” her mother interjected. She had gone into a semi-catatonic state when Kilpha claimed to be pregnant with my child, but had come back to her senses when Mr. Sajiri entered the room.

“But mom, it’s so *unfair*, meow!” Kilpha protested.

“Things have changed a lot over the past seven years,” her mother said.

“What do you mean, meow?”

“Our village—”

“Stop, Lilipha,” said Kilpha’s grandmother, interrupting her daughter before she could even begin to explain.

“But mother—” Kilpha’s mother started to protest, but the chieftain cut her off for a second time.

“I shall tell her myself,” she said firmly. “Sit, Kilpha. You too, hume.”

Kilpha and I exchanged glances.

“Well, let’s just do as she says for now,” I suggested.

Kilpha seemed to ponder the situation for a moment before nodding reluctantly. “Okay, fine, meow.”

So the two of us did what we were told and sat down on the floor, with Kilpha sitting cross-legged and myself in the more formal seiza position as before. The chieftain seated herself in front of us once more, then let out a long, deep sigh as a complicated expression spread across her face.

“Where should I start? Just so you two know, this won’t be a pleasant story,” the chieftain added as a preface before launching into the story of what had happened in Zudah Village after Kilpha’s departure.



Mr. Sajiri—Kilpha’s “real” fiancé—was the son of the chieftain of Nahato Village, another cat-sìth settlement. When he was born, the chieftains of Nahato Village and Zudah Village suggested arranging marriages between their direct descendants in an attempt to foster good relations and to spur the development of both villages. Since Mr. Sajiri was two years older than Kilpha, this meant her future husband had already been decided before she was even born. She absolutely refused to comply with her family’s wishes, however, for she loved and valued her freedom more than anything, and she had always dreamed of traveling in far-off lands, away from her insular little village. But perhaps more importantly, she utterly despised Mr. Sajiri and his rudeness.

“I know why you wanted to leave the village, Kilpha,” the chieftain said. “You dislike Mr. Sajiri, don’t you?”

“I do, meow. I *hate* him, meow. That’s why I left, meow.”

When Kilpha told her she wanted to leave, her grandmother in her role as village chieftain had agreed, but only on one condition: that she find a husband stronger than Mr. Sajiri. Not only was strength a necessary requirement to lead a village, but if Kilpha’s husband were to prove himself to be stronger than Mr. Sajiri, then he would have no choice but to back down. As a born-and-bred Tokyoite, I didn’t really get it, but strength was apparently more important than anything else to the cat-sìths, including an agreement between two village chieftains.

This was only my supposition, but it seemed to me that Kilpha’s grandmother had felt somewhat conflicted about marrying her darling granddaughter off to a brute like Mr. Sajiri, so she had let her leave the Dura Forest under the

condition that she find herself another husband out in the world somewhere. As it turned out, Kilpha and her grandmother weren't the only ones who weren't fans of Mr. Sajiri: the entire population of Zudah Village hated him, which was why they had been so excited to meet Kilpha's prospective husband. They truly believed she must have found someone strong and kind to lead the village with her. Mr. Sajiri, on the other hand, had practically lost his mind when he learned the news.

"He claimed he wanted to go out looking for you and wouldn't listen to reason," Kilpha's father added in a carefree tone that sounded just like Kilpha's. "He even tried to confront me about it, and we nearly came to blows."

"Around two years after you left, I believe it was, the new king of Orvil was crowned," Kilpha's grandmother continued, a grim expression on her face.

The former king had tragically passed away, and his son—who was only five at the time—ascended to the throne. Thus began the nightmare for the beastfolk who were living in Dura Forest.

"Unlike his father, the current king seems to despise beastfolk and continually makes unreasonable requests of us."

Throughout the reign of the previous king, the beastfolk residing in the Dura Forest had been on good terms with the city-state of Orvil. They had been exempt from taxes and could even sell the meat and furs that were the spoils of their hunts and buy grain, clothes, daily necessities, and medicine with the proceeds. However, almost as soon as the new king was crowned, Orvil's whole attitude toward beastfolk changed drastically. They quickly found themselves required to pay a head tax, they weren't allowed to enter the city without paying a toll, and the merchants refused to buy their meat and furs unless they agreed to significantly lower prices than before, while selling them the grain and medicine they needed to survive the winter at much higher prices than what they charged humes. The final nail in the coffin was when the Adventurers' Guild simply stopped hiring beastfolk altogether and the residents of the Dura Forest were forbidden from entering any of the other nations. The new regime had been throwing its weight around and was basically doing whatever it pleased by this point.

“We have a lot more people living in the village than when I was young,” the chieftain continued. “If we cannot secure the food we need in Orvil, we will never survive the winter.” She paused, and for one fleeting moment, her gaze softened as she regarded Kilpha. “The money you’ve been sending us has bailed us out many times over.”

The fact Kilpha had been sending money back to her village was a well-kept secret known only to the Blue Flash crew, me, and Emille. Every time she got paid for a successful quest, she would get in contact with a smuggler she knew and pay him to sneak into the Dura Forest to deliver the funds directly to her family. I knew that the earnings of a silver-ranked adventurer were nothing to sniff at, so we must have been talking about big sums changing hands here. Yet despite this, the chieftain’s grim expression remained on her face as she continued the tale.

“However, grain gets more expensive with every passing year.”

When Zudah Village was first established, the resident cat-sìths started hunting as a way to earn some money, and the reason behind it was very simple: it was their only potential source of income. However, the same was true for the other beastfolk. And so, after a while, *all* of the residents of the Dura Forest had taken up hunting all at the same time, going well over the usual activity from the previous years. So quiz time: what do you think happened next?

“For the past two years, we’ve stopped finding creatures to hunt in the forest.”

That’s right. They had destroyed the forest’s ecosystem. On our way to Zudah Village, Kilpha kept on commenting how odd it was that we hadn’t spotted a single monster, and it turned out that this was the reason. Jackalopes, forest bulls, and other species of creatures that could have been hunted for food had all but disappeared from the forest, and the normal food chain was broken. According to the chieftain, the forest creatures had been replaced with other monsters, and while this could have been good news, in this particular case, it unfortunately wasn’t.

“Ogres? There are *ogres* in the forest, meow?!” Kilpha exclaimed in shock.

“Yes. We don’t know where they came from, but a group of ogres has decided to take up residence in our forest,” the chieftain sighed.

Ogres. Even I knew the kind of creatures they were talking about. From what Nesca had told me, it seemed they were essentially the same as the oni that appeared in Japanese folktales: a towering mass of muscle that stood at about three to four meters tall. You needed to possess the strength of at least a silver-ranked adventurer if you wanted to defeat just one of them, and from the sounds of it, a pack of these muscle-bound monsters roamed the forest.

“Have you told Orvil about it, meow?” Kilpha asked.

“Many times. However, their answer is always the same.” The chieftain paused before quoting Orvil’s response with a sigh. ““Deal with them yourselves.””

“No way, meow,” Kilpha breathed in shock, but then, she suddenly seemed to have an idea. “What about the village’s hunters, meow? Like Mister Azif. I’m sure Mister Azif could take care of these ogres, meow!”

“The hunters, hm?” the chieftain muttered, a look of nostalgia in her eyes. “With no prey to hunt, they all moved to Orvil to find work so they could feed their families. Our best hunter, Azif, was part of that group. We haven’t seen any of them in about two years.”

Zudah Village was in financial hot water and couldn’t even rely on hunting to get them out of their jam this time. Left with no other options, all of the village’s best hunters had moved to Orvil in order to find work. However, they’d only managed to bring grain home once and hadn’t returned since.

“The only hunters still left in the village are elderly. How are they supposed to take down a pack of ogres?”

And so, Zudah Village had been forced to turn to Nahato Village to ask them for protection. The residents of Nahato were strong, and most could hold their own against ogres, with Mr. Sajiri being the most skilled fighter among them.

“And he’s not just good at fighting either,” Kilpha’s grandmother noted. “Despite his attitude, Mr. Sajiri also gets along well with Orvil’s merchants.”

So apparently, the guy was a pretty good diplomat on top of being an

outstanding fighter, and he was treated as an equal by Orvil's commerce guilds. I had to admit, this came as a huge shock to me after witnessing how rude he had been to both Kilpha and her grandmother, though given that punching someone in the face was considered a valid negotiation strategy in this world, I shouldn't have been so surprised. Or maybe he was just really good at haggling? Who could say?

"Using Nahato as a proxy, we've been able to buy grain for much cheaper than Orvil's merchants were willing to sell it to us."

As such, Zudah Village found itself relying more and more on Nahato, first to deal with the ogre problem, and more recently, to secure food for the winter. They'd simply had no choice in the matter, like the chieftain said, and Nahato had only ever placed one condition on the aid they kept providing, which was...

"...to bring me home. Right?" Kilpha said, finishing the sentence.

The chieftain nodded. "Yes. If you agree to become Sajiri's wife, Nahato Village has promised that our two villages will be united and they will welcome us as kin."

This was apparently why Kilpha's father had told her to come back as soon as possible.

"So *that's* why you called me back here, meow," she said, finally connecting the dots. "But... But why do you need Nahato's help anyway, meow? And why Sajiri of all people? You should've contacted some of the other beastfolk, meow!"

The chieftain bit her lip. "That's not possible."

"Why not, meow?"

"Our hunters went hunting in bearfolk territory."

Kilpha gasped, her eyes widening in shock. The chieftain went on to explain to me how every beastfolk tribe living in Dura Forest had their own hunting grounds, which they called their "territory." Hunting in another tribe's territory was considered an act of aggression and Zudah Village's hunters had made the grave mistake of breaking that inviolable rule.

“They did it to feed their families, so I cannot blame them for it. However, this one act has caused our relationship with the other beastfolk tribes to hit rock bottom, and simply put, they don’t trust us anymore.”

Faced with that, they’d had no choice but to agree to Nahato’s terms.

“Kilpha, I understand you are in love with this hume and that you carry his child.”

Kilpha and I shifted awkwardly at the second part of that sentence.

“And I know that what I’m asking of you is unreasonable, but I’m begging you. Can you please break up with this hume and agree to marry Sajiri?”

“Grandma, I...” Kilpha started, before trailing off.

“Leave that child growing inside your belly to me. It is my great-grandchild, so I shall take care of it.” She turned to me. “Or I can hand it over to you, hume, if that is your wish.”

The chieftain seemed desperate to convince Kilpha to marry Sajiri.

“As the chieftain—and more importantly, as your grandmother—I would have preferred for your chastity to have been kept intact,” she continued. “However, Sajiri seems infatuated with you, and I’m sure he will still love you in spite of these unfortunate circumstances. He will protect you. And in accordance with the agreement between us, he will protect our village as well.”

The chieftain placed both of her hands on the floor and lowered her head, and it looked a bit like she was doing a Japanese dogeza bow. “I beg you, Kilpha. Please save our village,” she pleaded.

By this point, I had pretty much come to understand that the chieftain’s stern attitude toward Kilpha came from a place of love. After all, Kilpha was her dear granddaughter, yet she was asking her to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of the village. By marrying Sajiri, she could save dozens if not hundreds of lives, and because the chieftain had sworn to look after her people, she had been forced to put her own personal feelings aside and act in the name of the greater good.

“Grandma...” Kilpha breathed, tears welling up in her eyes, most likely at the

sight of her grandmother kneeling in supplication in front of her. Kilpha was an incredibly compassionate person, and I knew she wouldn't be able to refuse her grandmother's request, so I decided to step in.

"Please hold on a minute," I said, boldly inserting myself into the conversation.

"What is it? I have no time to waste on the likes of you," the chieftain said, treating me to a sharp glare.

"All the more reason to listen to what I have to say."

"Me? Listen to a hume like *you*?" she scoffed.

I nodded confidently, despite the slight. "Yes. I believe I now understand the situation your village finds itself in." I raised a finger before continuing. "First off, the taxes imposed on you by Orvil have impoverished you to the point that you cannot afford food. And second," —I raised a second finger at this juncture —"you're worried about the ogres in the forest. If we can solve both of these issues, you will no longer need to rely on Nahato, correct?"

I paused to make sure we were on the same page, then continued.

"Let's tackle the food problem first. I will take care of that. With the help of the merchant guild I belong to, we should be able to provide you with enough food for everyone in the village to live comfortably. As for the ogres, I can organize a hunting party to deal with them."

"Those are two very bold statements," the chieftain remarked. "And what's in it for you?"

My reply was immediate. "Kilpha's freedom." I heard her gasp quietly beside me. "Well? What do you think of my proposal?" I asked her grandmother.

The chieftain pondered my plan of action for a few moments. "I can see now why Kilpha chose you to be her husband."

The ghost of a smile fluttered across her lips, and in that moment, I felt she was starting to accept me.

"Hume. What did you say your name was?" she asked.

"Shiro Amata. But Kilpha calls me Shiro."



“Shiro, huh?” The chieftain straightened up. “Thank you for the offer. I wish I could accept it, but the people of this village—no, all of the beastfolk living in this forest no longer trust humes.”

Considering how Orvil had been treating them over the past few years, that was hardly surprising. Why in the world *should* they trust the kind of people that had turned their lives into a literal hell?

“A lot of them resent your kind,” the chieftain explained. “To them, there would be nothing more humiliating than relying on the help of a hume.”

“But—” I tried to protest, but she didn’t give me the chance.

“Let’s assume you manage to defeat those ogres. What will we do if another pack of monsters shows up in the forest next year? Would we have to rely on you again? What if you were to die due to some illness or in an accident? We would have already refused Nahato’s help by that point, and do you really think they would agree to aid us once more? And most importantly of all...”

The chieftain paused and looked me straight in the eye.

“Shiro, would you be willing to leave your old life behind and relocate to Zudah Village?”

I opened my mouth but no sound came out. I couldn’t give her the answer she wanted. The cat-sìths’ village was heaven on earth—well, on Ruffaltio—to me. It was my very own promised land. That much was true. But I couldn’t just leave Ninoritch.

“Do you understand now?” Kilpha’s grandmother continued. “Beastfolk are meant to live with other beastfolk, and humes are meant to live with other humes. It is for the best.”

I could tell that her rejection of my proposal came from her general unwillingness to depend on humes, which I totally understood, given the circumstances. With my connections, I could save Zudah Village, no problem. But Zudah Village didn’t want my help—or help from any hume, for that matter.

“We have been relying on Nahato Village for the past few years,” the chieftain said. “And we already owe them so much. We have almost no pride left. Even so, we would rather continue to ask for their help than have to rely on humes.

So please, Shiro. Don't take our last fragment of pride away from us."

Deeming our conversation to be over, she turned to Kilpha once more.

"Kilpha, please give it some thought. Will you stubbornly stick with the person you love? Or will you come to the rescue of the village you were born in? Which will you choose?"

## Chapter Twelve: The Reason I Was Chosen

Kilpha and I trekked through the night-cloaked forest, relying solely on the light from our portable LED lanterns to navigate the dark path in front of us. We had initially intended to spend a few days in Zudah Village, but things hadn't gone to plan.

"I wish I could tell you to stay here, but I believe it would be best if you left the village for today," the chieftain had advised us. "After all, who knows what the other villagers might attempt if they learned that Shiro was spending the night here?"

I could see her point. To the villagers, the simplest way to resolve this whole mess would be to kill me, the big bad hume who had supposedly tricked poor Kilpha into dating him. Then she could marry Mr. Sajiri as planned and Zudah Village would be saved. It wouldn't surprise me if this idea had crossed the minds of one or two of the villagers and they were planning to act on it. Consequently, Kilpha and I had decided to change our plans at the last minute in order to ensure that I wouldn't meet an untimely demise at the hands of the cat-sìths. Since Ninoritch was such a peaceful little town, I tended to forget that people had no qualms about taking lives in this world, especially when it came to "evil" humes like myself. I could easily imagine the cat-sìths going: *"Hey, that guy keeps prattling on about being Kilpha's fiancé. Should we just bump him off and be done with it?"* The chieftain had probably told us to leave the village out of concern for my well-being. Of course, she wasn't to know that I could summon Celes's familiars (Was that what they're called?) to protect myself, or that I could use the magical dragon-summoning flute Dramom had given me in case of emergencies. I had no intention of letting myself be killed without putting up a fight. Nevertheless, Kilpha and I had thought it best to avoid a confrontation by returning to Orvil, which was why we came to be trudging along out here, retracing our steps from that morning, our spirits through the floor.

"Sorry about all this, Shiro, meow," Kilpha said, breaking the silence that had

descended over us.

“What are you apologizing for? You haven’t done anything wrong,” I assured her.

She shook her head. “I tricked you and used you, meow.”

“‘Used’ me? How so? I seem to recall willingly accepting to play the role of your fiancé,” I reminded her.

“That’s not what I mean. I...” Kilpha trailed off and stopped in her tracks. Her head had been bowed low ever since we left Zudah Village, but at last, she raised it and looked at me through tear-filled eyes. “The real reason I chose you to be my pretend-fiancé was because I knew Sajiri wouldn’t fight you, meow.”

“But why me in particular?” I asked, confused by this admission.

“Because you’re a merchant,” she explained. “I knew Sajiri would try to attack whoever I brought home as my fiancé, meow.”

“To prove that he was the stronger man and more worthy of being your husband,” I presumed. “Right?”

“Exactly, meow.”

Mr. Sajiri’s thought process probably went something along the lines of: *“You’ll have to defeat me if you want to marry Kilpha.”* And he had indeed tried to attack me before Kilpha told him I was a merchant. Though to be fair, I hadn’t been in any real danger, because even if Kilpha hadn’t stepped in, Celes’s familiar would probably have leaped from the shadows to protect me.

“Sajiri has always been the kind of guy who uses violence to get his own way, meow,” Kilpha explained.

*So like a thug, basically,* I concluded. Although Mr. Sajiri clearly had the prowess to succeed in life that way, for according to Kilpha, his combat skills were already remarkable even before she had left the village, and she was in no doubt that he would have gotten a lot stronger over the past seven years.

“At first, my plan was to hire a gold-ranked adventurer to play the part of my husband-to-be, meow,” she said.

“Yup, that would’ve been the first idea to cross my mind too,” I agreed.

“There’s a bunch of really strong guys at the guild.”

“But Sajiri’s strong too, meow. Like, really, *really* strong, meow. Seven years ago, when he was only fifteen, he was already as strong as an average silver-ranked adventurer, meow. So by now...”

“You figured he must be around gold-rank, maybe even higher,” I said, finishing her sentence.

She nodded. “And I was right. He has grown stronger, meow.”

From his attack on me, Kilpha had been able to confirm that Mr. Sajiri was as strong—if not stronger—than most gold-ranked adventurers. Not only that, he was also incredibly arrogant. If Kilpha had hired an adventurer to act as her husband-to-be, the situation would definitely have escalated into a bloodbath, and the poor guy might even have lost his life as a result. No one in their right mind would have agreed to take on such a dangerous task, even to help out a fellow adventurer from the same guild.

“That’s why, um...” Kilpha said hesitantly, avoiding my gaze. “I thought you could do it, Shiro.”

“There’s no need to sugarcoat it,” I said. “I understand why you chose me now.”

The reason was quite simple: I was weak. And it seemed that this total lack of muscle came with the unexpected side effect of keeping me out of harm’s way. After all, people weren’t exactly eager to take on a guy who looked like he might keel over after just a single punch. But at the same time, this did raise another question: why had Kilpha chosen me if she knew her grandmother was never going to approve of me? When I asked her that directly, her face went as red as a tomato.

“My grandma’s pretty harsh, but I figured even she would have to accept you if she knew I had your baby growing inside my belly, meow,” she said sheepishly.

“Wow,” was the only thing I could say in response.

While the chieftain may have been pretty stern, at the end of the day, she was still Kilpha’s grandmother. Kilpha had thought the prospect of her giving

birth to my child would have been enough to convince her grandmother to let me marry her, but things hadn't gone exactly to plan.

"I wasn't expecting her to get so mad about it, meow," Kilpha said, sighing dejectedly. "She was a lot nicer before. She complained a lot, sure, but she did let me leave the village when I asked her, meow. But now..."

"Well, a lot has changed over the past seven years," I pointed out.

A new king of Orvil had been crowned, and consequently, the city-state's relationship with the beastfolk living in the Dura Forest had taken a major turn for the worse. None of us could have predicted a turn of events like that, though if you were the nitpicking type, I suppose we could be blamed for not looking into the political climate of Orvil before coming here. *If I'd known, I would've paid someone at the guild for information before leaving Ninoritch.*

"I should never have returned home, meow," Kilpha mumbled glumly.

"Don't say that," I chided her. "After all, if you hadn't come home, you wouldn't have any idea about the crisis that's currently going on in your village."

"I guess," she admitted. "My dad does send me letters from time to time, but he's never mentioned anything about the situation with Orvil in them, meow."

"He did that so you wouldn't worry about them," I explained to her. "He wanted you to be able to focus on finding yourself a good husband."

"You're probably right. He's always doing things like that, meow," she murmured, a small smile curling the corners of her lips upward, despite the tears welling up in her eyes. She must have been greatly moved by her father's consideration for her.

"Let's carry on walking, shall we?" I suggested. "Once we're back in Orvil, we'll ask the others if they have any idea how to solve our current predicament. Who knows? Maybe one of them will be able to help us."

Kilpha nodded. "All right!"

The chieftain had refused my help, but that didn't mean I was giving up on helping out Zudah Village. They didn't want help from a hume? Fine, I'd rope in

someone of a different race. It just so happened that one of my very good friends was a birdman. If Zidan couldn't help me, I'd try dealing with Orvil's merchant guilds myself. And even if *that* ended up being a bust, I was confident I'd be able to come up with several more solutions to the predicament.

"Let's pick up the pace, then," I suggested.

"Sure. But are you sure you're gonna be okay, meow?" Kilpha asked me, a concerned look on her face.

"What do you mean?"

"You were really struggling when we reached the village earlier, meow," she said, pointing to my legs.

It was true that my legs had been shaking like a baby fawn's when we first entered Zudah Village. Kilpha had clearly noticed and was worried I wouldn't make it back to Orvil without collapsing.

"Given the circumstances, I think it's best if we get back to Orvil as soon as possible. Besides, I downed some of Dramom's healing potion earlier, so I'm good to go," I reassured her.

"That's good to hear. I was worried you'd be too tired to walk the whole way back, meow."

"Nah, I'm fine. No need to be concerned. Oh, speaking of, would you like some of the potion too?" I offered, producing a plastic bottle from my inventory.

"I-I'm all good, meow," she said awkwardly without even blinking, probably because she knew what went into Dramom's healing potion. I couldn't really blame her. Due to the main ingredient in it being Dramom's saliva, I only ever resorted to using it in the direst of situations.



"Shiro, turn off your light," Kilpha whispered to me.

She sounded calm, but her expression was serious, and her eyes were alert. I quickly complied and switched off my LED lantern, because I'd accompanied the Blue Flash crew on enough adventures by this point to know what the look on

her face meant: danger was coming. *Ogres?* I wondered in horror.

The two of us hid in the shadows cast by the trees and crouched down low to the ground. Kilpha soundlessly unsheathed the shortsword that was strapped to her hip, while I opened my inventory and took out the magic flute Dramom had given me before bringing it up to my lips so that I was ready to use it at a moment's notice.

"We're surrounded, meow," Kilpha informed me quietly. Her ears were twitching rhythmically, and I assumed she must have been picking up on sounds of the forest I couldn't hear.

"Seriously?" I whispered back. "Do you think it could be ogres?"

"No," she replied. "Ogres wouldn't try to hide their presence, meow."

It sounded like ogres were such powerhouses, they didn't even need to bother being stealthy. While I was relieved that this meant we wouldn't have to deal with any ogres, it was still too early to let my guard down. After all, whoever it was lurking around out there had specifically chosen us as their targets, and that was why they were trying so hard to remain undetected.

"If we're not surrounded by ogres, then what—" I started, but Kilpha quickly interrupted me with a "Shhh!"

"They're coming, meow."

We waited in silence, hidden by the darkness of the forest. The foliage here was so thick, even the light of the stars didn't reach us. Kilpha's gaze remained firmly fixed ahead.

*Rustle.*

Moments later, the sound of tall grass and bushes being pushed aside reached my ears, and I could tell that whoever it was that had us surrounded was getting closer. They must have been satisfied with their ambush setup, as they were no longer bothering to hide their presence. My eyes had finally started getting used to the darkness, and I peered in the same direction as Kilpha.

"People?" I queried when I was able to identify the shape of the silhouettes.



“Bearfolk, meow,” Kilpha informed me.

From what I could tell, the newcomers all seemed to be of considerable stature, which made sense since Kilpha had just identified them as bearfolk. They stopped about three meters away from us, and a moment later, a female voice echoed around the woods.

“I heard a cat-sìth was sneaking around the forest with a hume, so I came out here to see for myself. And lookee what I found. Seems the gossip about catfolk fraternizing with humes might just be true after all.”

While it was much too dark to make out her expression, her tone was openly hostile.

“Seize them,” she said, raising a hand.

More bearfolk instantly revealed their presence to us. I could hear them approaching from every direction and quickly realized we were completely surrounded. Unlike the beastfolk present, I couldn’t see in the dark, so I turned my LED lantern back on, though I kept it on the lowest setting. With our surroundings now dimly lit, I saw that Kilpha and I were encircled by a bunch of tall and muscular bearwomen, and a quick glance around told me there were about twenty of them. But what stood out to me most on first impression was their clothing. While the cat-sìths in Zudah Village had all been garbed in rather crude attire made mostly out of fur and pelts, they at least had some sort of design or pattern on them. By contrast, these bearwomen had basically wrapped pelts untidily around their chests and crotches in a bikini-like way. They looked exactly like the mental image I had of barbarians.

“Well, Longtail, will you obediently follow us? Or do we need to beat you unconscious? I’ll let you decide which you prefer,” said the same woman, who appeared to be the leader of the group.

“Now, hold on a minute, meow! What’s going on, meow?!” Kilpha exclaimed.

“Yeah, isn’t this all some sort of misunderstanding?” I piped up.

“Are you seriously trying to play dumb with me? I saw you leave Zudah Village with my own two eyes.” The leader paused and flashed us a menacing glare.

“I’ve always found it weird, you know. How is it that the rest of us beastfolk are

starving, but you cat-sìths still have plenty to eat? We even had to go as far as selling our own children to survive the winter, yet you somehow seemed to have endless provisions.”

I could sense the rising bloodlust emanating from the bearfolk surrounding us. Their leader’s words were clearly hitting close to home.

“It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what’s going on,” the leader continued, without giving us any time to intervene and explain our side of the story. “You cat-sìths have some sort of agreement with Orvil. They send you provisions, don’t they? What do they ask you to do in return? Help them to wipe us off the map?”

She pointed at me and immediately resumed her spiel. “That hume standing right there is proof of your wrongdoing! After all, why would you be sneaking about the forest this late at night unless you had something to hide?”

The situation we found ourselves in was less than desirable. Judging by their attitude, the bearfolk were clearly no strangers to violence and seemed ready to pounce at even the slightest provocation. Not only that, but they were convinced that we were the bad guys here, even though their accusations were totally baseless. And while Kilpha was a good fighter, I was a beanpole in human form, meaning I wouldn’t be much help if push came to shove.

“So? What is your choice? If you ask me, I’d much rather you put up a bit of a fight. It’d be a lot more *entertaining* that way,” the leader said, the corners of her lips curling upward into a predatory smile.

Kilpha didn’t reply to the provocation at all, opting instead to simply set her shortsword down on the ground in complete silence.

## Chapter Thirteen: Clearing Up the Misunderstanding

The bearfolk led Kilpha and me back to their settlement. They had disarmed us and confiscated all of our belongings, though thankfully, they hadn't gone as far as restraining us. They must have deemed it unnecessary, either because of their numerical advantage or because they didn't consider me and my noodle arms a real threat. Whatever the reason, I was glad I could at least walk freely.

They had taken my bag, naturally, but that was all right, as I didn't really have anything important in there, just some food, camping gear, and enough money to make it seem convincing. Everything else was stored safely away in my inventory, including the flute Dramom had given me. I would've found myself in a real pickle if someone had taken that from me and started playing it for a bit of amusement, only for a dragon to suddenly turn up in the middle of the forest.

"When we reach our settlement, you will tell us all about the little scheme you've got going on," the leader said sternly.

Her features were sharp and striking, and she was certainly beautiful, though in more of a handsome kind of way than in a dainty, delicate one, since she was incredibly muscular and sported an impressive six-pack. Furthermore, she was very tall, standing at almost two meters. *Is it just me or is she even taller than Rolf?* I wondered. The other bearwomen were all quite large in stature too, so I assumed being tall was just a characteristic of their race.

"We don't have anything to tell you. We haven't done anything wrong, meow," Kilpha pleaded.

The leader of the bearfolk group scoffed. "Play innocent all you like, but I guarantee we *will* make you talk, willingly or not."

"But we *really* haven't done anything, meow!" Kilpha insisted, and it was clear to see she was getting increasingly irritated, but her anger only seemed to amuse the bearfolk, as they started chuckling among themselves.

“And why should I believe you?” the leader of the group said. “You longtails have intruded on our territory once before. You have lost our trust.”

She must have been referring to that time hunters from Zudah Village had gone hunting in bearfolk territory, which the chieftain had told us about earlier. I kicked my brain into high gear to try and figure a way of getting out of the mess we were in.

The leader of the bearfolk had claimed she knew about the cat-sìths “fraternizing” with humes, the implication being that they had joined forces behind the backs of the other beastfolk tribes, and that was how they had managed to get through the past winters without too much trouble despite the outrageous price of grain. Of course, this couldn’t have been further from the truth. In reality, the only village that wasn’t struggling was Nahato Village, thanks to the deals Mr. Sajiri had struck with the merchants of Orvil, and Zudah Village had been relying on them in order to secure enough provisions to last each winter. From the perspective of the other beastfolk tribes, they could only look on with envy at the two cat-sìth villages, which were the only settlements that were doing well while everyone else was just struggling to survive, so it wasn’t all that surprising that they had started coming up with a load of far-fetched theories. After all, whenever people find themselves with their backs to the wall, their field of vision tends to get narrower and narrower, and they start believing all sorts of outlandish rumors and misinformation they stumble across. As someone who was raised in the era of social media, I’d witnessed this phenomenon firsthand countless times. The various species of beastfolk living in the Dura Forest all considered humes to be their common enemy, yet the bearfolk had witnessed Kilpha sneaking out of her village in the middle of the night with a hume, supposedly a sworn enemy. In their minds, this instantly proved that all of the gossip they’d heard was true, which explained why they had been so eager to capture us.

Well now. What could I say to clear up this misunderstanding? I would have to think this one through very thoroughly, because they clearly weren’t going to buy a hastily cobbled together explanation. Should I pretend that I had come here as a merchant and Kilpha was simply my escort? No, they would never believe that. Zudah Village was poor, and there was no way a merchant would

make the long trek out there. Or even venture into the Dura Forest at all, for that matter. In that case, what about posing as a lost traveler? No, that wouldn't work either. I had no idea how long the bearfolk had been spying on us. We knew they had seen us leave Zudah Village, but for all I knew, they could have witnessed us entering it too. It'd just make them more suspicious if what I said didn't match up with what they had seen. After mulling the question over for a little while longer, I landed on an approach that I thought might actually work.

I let out a sigh that was exaggeratedly loud. "Man, I'm *really* unlucky, aren't I?" I grumbled. "Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse after what happened to us in the village, I end up getting captured on my way back to the city. Talk about bad luck, huh?"

The leader of the bearfolk eyed me with suspicion. "Something happened to you in Zudah Village?"

She had asked the exact question I'd hoped she would, and without letting my glee show on my face, I did a mental fist-pump. "Oh, nothing major, I guess. I'm a small-time merchant from the Giruam Kingdom, and this"—I paused and glanced in the direction of Kilpha—"is my fiancée."

"A cat-sìth engaged to a *hume*?!" the leader of the bearfolk exclaimed in shock. "What utter nonsense!" The other bearfolk all started muttering to each other in response to my comment.

Yup, that's right: the strategy I had ended up going with was to pretend that I'd come to Zudah Village to meet Kilpha's family but had been promptly kicked out. The bearfolk were incredibly suspicious of us, and it was obvious that no fabrication I could make up on the spot would pass muster. Drawing on past experience, I knew that in these situations, people were more easily convinced by explanations that were so outrageous, they sounded like they must be lies, but were actually still rooted in the truth. I *had* genuinely come to the Dura Forest as Kilpha's "fiancé," so that wasn't a complete lie. Plus, I had to be aware that I had no insurance against this conversation reaching Mr. Sajiri's ears, so I figured it was best not to incriminate myself any further than I had already done by piling even more lies on top of the major one we had already told. No, the best solution was to stick with my original cover story for this trip.

“Stop spouting such nonsense!” the bearfolk leader growled at me.

“Look at the situation I’m in right now,” I said. “If I were lying, don’t you think I’d come up with a more plausible reason than that?”

The bearfolk leader had no response to this. I’d noticed in Zudah Village that for the residents of this forest, the idea of a beastfolk marrying a hume seemed completely unfathomable, although I didn’t know if that had always been the case or whether it was the result of their animosity with Orvil.

“It doesn’t seem to be much of a thing here, but outside the Dura Forest—or in the Giruam Kingdom, at least—it’s not uncommon for humes to marry a member of another race,” I explained.

“I-Is that right?” the bearfolk leader said.

“Yup. I wouldn’t say the *majority* of humes do it, but it definitely happens,” I added.

“Yeah, it’s not rare at all, meow!” Kilpha interjected. “There’s even a bunny girl at my guild who has had her eyes on *my* Shiro since they first met, meow.”

The bearfolk exchanged glances with each other in silence. They quite clearly doubted what we were saying, and yet at the same time, they seemed intrigued. *Great! I’ve got them in the palm of my hand now.*

“You have to believe me,” I pleaded. “The reason we went to Zudah Village was to inform her family of our upcoming wedding, and so that I could pay my respects to her parents and all that. We took a horse-drawn carriage from the Giruam Kingdom to Orvil, before setting out on foot through the forest. But when we arrived in Zudah Village...” I paused and hung my head as if to emphasize my shock. “To my absolute horror, her family opposed our marriage, and quite vehemently at that! It got to the point where I was starting to fear for my life. Alas, left with no other choice, we were forced to leave the village and make our way back to Orvil once more. How unlucky are we? Can you believe it? Wouldn’t you also groan and grumble about your misfortune if you were in my shoes?”

The leader of the bearfolk seemed momentarily hesitant, and it looked as if she may have started to believe my story a little.

“You cannot seriously *believe* him, ma’am! Humes are known to lie through their teeth!” one of the other bearfolk intervened.

“Y-Yes, you’re right!” the leader said, quickly pulling herself together. “You humes really are silver-tongued, aren’t you? I almost fell for your lie.”

“I promise you I’m telling the truth,” I insisted.

“Then, prove it.”

“You want proof?” I considered this for a moment. “Ah, I have just the thing!” I looked at the bearwoman who was holding my bag. “Excuse me, but could you look in the pocket of my bag? There must be—oh, not that pocket. The one on the side. Ah, I meant the *other* side. Sorry about that. Yes, that’s the one! There should be Giruam coins in there.”

The bearwoman retrieved the coins from my bag and presented them to her leader.

“Those aren’t from Orvil, ma’am,” one of the other bearfolk confirmed.

“I see.”

“We’ve been on the road for the past two months, you see, and I didn’t have time to exchange them for Orvil coins. Thankfully, I was able to buy the permit I needed to come into this forest using Giruam coins,” I said.

The bearfolk exchanged glances again. I could tell from the mood in the air that they were starting to become more and more convinced of my innocence. *I should strike while the iron’s hot.*

“If you still don’t believe me...” I paused, just to sell it that little bit more.

“Well, I suppose I don’t really have a choice. Take a look at this.”

I produced a document from the inside pocket of my jacket.

“This document here states that I’m a member of the Eternal Promise, a merchant guild in the Giruam Kingdom. Can any of you read the common tongue?” I asked.

On cue, the bearfolk all looked at their leader. “I worked as an adventurer in Orvil for five years,” she said by way of explanation. “I can read and write in the common tongue.”

“Oh, that’s good to know. It’s a very important document, so please handle it with care,” I said, handing it to her. She promptly began scanning the document. “Oh, and as it happens, the guildmaster of the Eternal Promise is a birdman,” I added.

“A birdman?!” she repeated incredulously. “You’re telling me a *birdman* runs his own business? In a *hume nation*?”

“Yes, indeedy. And he’s not just your run-of-the-mill merchant either. He’s a total big shot. He’s even on friendly terms with the royal family.”

“No way...” the leader breathed in shock.

And I wasn’t technically lying, because Zidan and the queen really did know each other.

“The Eternal Promise? A birdman guildmaster?” the leader whispered to herself, clearly amazed by this revelation. Eventually, she looked back down at the document I’d handed to her.

After a few minutes, she asked, “How am I supposed to know this isn’t a forgery?”

Kilpha and the other bearfolk were so taken aback by this response, they almost lost their balance, but I didn’t let her doubts derail me. After all, the document itself was essentially a bluff.

“You have a point there. After all, unless you were a merchant yourself, you wouldn’t have any way of telling whether these identification papers are real or not. Hm, what to do, what to do? Wait, I know!” I exclaimed, bringing my fist down on the palm of my hand. I turned to Kilpha and said, “You should show her *that*.”

“‘That,’ meow?” she echoed. “What are you talking about, meow?”

“*That*! Your guild card, of course!”

Kilpha gasped. She hadn’t even thought about that as an option. She delved into her bodice and produced a thin metal plate.

“This is a guild card for the Fairy’s Blessing, the Adventurers’ Guild I’m a member of, meow,” she said, saying the name of the guild loudly and clearly.



The Fairy's Blessing was the biggest guild in the Giruam Kingdom, so if this bearfolk leader truly had been an adventurer once upon a time, there was no way she wouldn't have heard of it, at least in passing.

"Hand it over!" the leader ordered, snatching the guild card from Kilpha. "It's real..." she whispered. "It really is a guild card from the Fairy's Blessing. And this is a silver-ranked adventurer's card at that."

"Yup, meow! I may not look the part, but I'm silver-ranked, meow!" Kilpha declared proudly. "To get up to silver, you have to complete loads of really hard quests. You'd never be able to reach it without leaving Orvil, meow."

"I can imagine..." the leader said, her eyes flicking from the guild card to Kilpha and back several times. "Wait. It says here your name is 'Kilpha'..." Recognition suddenly flashed across her face. "Hold on, *Kilpha*?! Are you the granddaughter of Zudah Village's chieftain?" It appeared she had heard Kilpha's name before.

"Yup, meow! My grandma's the chieftain, meow," the cat-sith confirmed.

The leader of the bearfolk stared at Kilpha in complete silence for several long seconds. "Um, sorry about all this," she eventually managed. "It looks like we were mistaken."

And lo and behold, we had successfully managed to clear up the misunderstanding. I almost instantly felt the bearfolk's wariness toward us wash away.

"Ganafina, return their belongings to them," the leader ordered the bearwoman who was carrying our bags.

"Wait a minute, ma'am!" one of the other bearfolk interjected. "Humes lie through their teeth! How can you be sure this one's telling the truth? And how can you tell that the whatchamacallit card she has isn't a forgery?"

"There's no way the Fairy's Blessing guild would allow forgeries of their guild cards to circulate," the leader replied.

It seemed the Fairy's Blessing was well-known even among Orvil's adventurers. Well, that's the kingdom's largest guild for you. It turned out there was no better ID than a guild card from an Adventurers' Guild as prestigious as

that one.

“So, silver-ranked, huh?” the leader remarked. “That’s impressive. It takes years of hard work for even the most talented of individuals to get that high. But now that I know you’re the granddaughter of Zudah Village’s chieftain, it all makes sense.” She tossed Kilpha’s guild card back to her.

“You know my grandma, meow?” Kilpha asked.

“Our previous chieftain told us so many tales about your grandmother, I felt like my ears were going to fall off from hearing about her all the time. How she hunted and killed countless mythical beasts all by herself, how she defeated a serpent—one of the strongest monsters—without any help from anyone, and so on and so forth.”

Kilpha was silent for a few seconds. “Grandma never told me about those things, meow,” she muttered.

“Perhaps she doesn’t consider them worthy of boasting about,” the leader of the bearfolk suggested. From her expression alone, I could tell she had a lot of respect for Kilpha’s grandmother. “I’d heard rumors about the chieftain’s granddaughter leaving the forest several years back to go search for a husband...” The leader trailed off as her gaze moved from Kilpha to me. “So you’ve picked a hume to marry, huh?”

“Who I fall in love with is my business and mine alone, meow,” Kilpha said firmly with a hint of defiance in her tone.

“I didn’t say it was a bad thing,” the leader clarified. “Although I can see why they drove you out of the village over it.”

She chuckled as if she found the whole situation rather amusing. She seemed a lot more relaxed and easygoing than before. Once our belongings had been returned to us, she sheepishly scratched her head and introduced herself. “I’m Valeria, a warrior from Lugu. Sorry for doubting you.”

“I’m Shiro Amata, and I’m a merchant. Please call me Shiro. And this is...”

“Kilpha from Zudah Village, meow. Although I’m currently working as an adventurer in Ninoritch, meow.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Shiro. And same to you, Kilpha from Zudah Village.”

We shook hands and smiled pleasantly at one another.



“To apologize for all the trouble we’ve caused you, you can stay the night in our village,” Valeria said as we resumed the trek toward the bearfolk settlement. “Don’t go getting your hopes up, though. We have no food to spare, so the only thing we can offer you is a place to sleep.”

“That’s okay. It’s already very generous of you to welcome us into your village so late at night,” I said.

Valeria chuckled and told us that their initial plan had been to take us to a grotto just outside the village and torture us until we came clean. Even if they weren’t offering us food, providing us with a bed was already a huge step up from their original plan in my book.

“We’re here. This is our village, Lugu,” Valeria announced as we emerged from the forest into a clearing.

Unlike the village of the cat-sìths, the houses here weren’t up in the trees but were instead huts with thatched roofs standing in neat rows on the ground. This was my first time here, but for some reason, the scene made me oddly nostalgic. *So beastfolk settlements look different from one another even when they’re in the same forest, huh? Interesting*, I mused.

However, something else had caught my eye even more than the architecture, and it seemed Kilpha had noticed too.

“Sh-Shiro...” she whispered, her voice trembling.

All of the villagers in Lugu were emaciated and looked extremely weak.

“They’re all so thin, meow,” Kilpha gasped.

“Looks like poverty has bitten this village hard,” I reflected.

The cat-sìths in Zudah Village had been poor too, but at least the children there were able to muster up enough energy to run around and play. Here, things seemed much more dire. All of the villagers were just sitting around on

the ground, either with heads bowed or gazing up into the night sky. Mothers cradled emaciated babies in their arms, while the slightly older children sobbed and moaned about how hungry they were. The bearfolk here weren't just poor; they were miserable and driven to the brink of starvation.

"It's awful, isn't it?" Valeria remarked. "In our village, it's the warriors who get first dibs on any food. If the others get to eat once every five days, they consider themselves fortunate."

"What? Once every five *days*?!" Kilpha repeated in shock.

"I don't know how it is in *your* village, longtail, but all of the other beastfolk settlements are in similar predicaments."

Kilpha and I were lost for words. Neither of us had anticipated how bad it was in the other beastfolk villages.

"So if I don't marry Sajiri, will Zudah Village end up like this too, meow?" Kilpha mumbled to herself. She must have been picturing the future of her own village, overlaying the sight of the emaciated bearfolk slumped on the ground onto it.

I grabbed her by the hand. "Everything will be all right, Kilpha," I reassured her.

"Shiro..."

"There must be *some* way to save the cat-sìths. We just haven't found it yet. But this isn't the first time we've found ourselves backed into a corner, right? We've always managed to surmount all of the obstacles in our way by all of us working together, haven't we?"

"Yeah, we have," Kilpha said in a small voice.

"Right? Well then. I'm sure everything will turn out fine this time too," I assured her. "You've got me here with you, Kilpha, and there's also the others. With so many reliable companions by your side, we'll *definitely* find a solution to the problem."

"You're right!" Kilpha said, squeezing my hand tightly. The fear and worry in her eyes had given way to their usual glow, and I could tell she was back to her

normal self. *Thank goodness*, I thought.

“Y’know, it’s not very nice of you to flaunt your relationship in front of a single gal,” Valeria teased.

She must have overheard our conversation. I’d called Kilpha by her name instead of “darling” like we had agreed I would in front of others, but Valeria didn’t seem to find it particularly suspicious, so we were probably fine.

I forced myself to chuckle. “Well, Kilpha’s my precious f-f-fiancée, after all. It’s only natural that I’d try to cheer her up whenever she’s feeling down.”

“Shiro’s right, meow,” Kilpha piped up. “He’s so kind. He always makes me feel better when I’m sad, meow.”

Valeria made a knowing noise. “And let me guess: that’s why you fell for him, right?”

“Y-Yeah, meow.”

“You sure do love him a lot, don’t you?”

Kilpha’s face turned as red as a tomato at Valeria’s comment. *I totally get it, Kilpha. Pretending to be in a relationship with someone can get really embarrassing, can’t it?*

All of a sudden, a young beargirl rushed over to us.

“Miss Valeria! You’re back!” she exclaimed.

“What’s wrong, Gheena? Why are you all flustered?” Valeria said.

The girl didn’t even allow herself a moment to catch her breath. “Mateo has a fever!” she sobbed. “He must’ve caught the Lamentation of the Forest!”

“What?!”

Valeria instantly turned as white as a sheet, before turning to us and saying, “Sorry about this, but please wait here for me to return. My brother has caught the Lamentation of the Forest.”

And with that, she chased after the girl, leaving us alone.

“Shiro,” Kilpha said, turning to me.

“Right.”

The two of us exchanged nods.

“Let’s go with them!” I declared.

Kilpha acknowledged with another nod and a little “Yup!” and the two of us ran after Valeria.

## Chapter Fourteen: The Local Disease

According to Kilpha, the Lamentation of the Forest was a local disease that had been a fact of life in the Dura Forest for as long as anyone could remember. The telltale signs that you'd caught it were a high fever that lasted anywhere from two to ten days, a sore throat, and aching limbs, and every year, a non-negligible number of folk died from it. Overall, it seemed remarkably similar to the flu, which tended to be a yearly fixture on Earth. Even in modern-day Japan with all our hospitals and ways of treating diseases, the flu still claimed a significant number of lives each year, so it really didn't surprise me that an illness like that would be so deadly in a place with zero access to medicine, especially since most of the beastfolk in the forest were already on the verge of starving.

"Mateo! Mateo! Hang in there!" Valeria sobbed, tears streaming down her face as she cradled her brother in her arms. The poor little kid's breathing was ragged and labored.

There were about thirty other beastfolk lying on furs on the floor around us, and I assumed this place must have been some sort of sick house where all the villagers who had caught the Lamentation of the Forest were brought. About two-thirds of the sick were kids, and it went without saying that every single person in the hut—young and old—was skin and bones.

"Not you too, Mateo. You *can't* die. Don't leave me alone. *Please*," Valeria pleaded.

"Vale...ria?" Valeria's brother mumbled, his eyes opening a crack. His sister's voice must have woken him.

"Yeah, it's me," she replied softly. "And you're my little brother. The little brother of one of Lugu's strongest soldiers. You can't let the Lamentation of the Forest claim you!"

"Okay..."

“Mateo? Mateo!”

His eyes had closed once more. *He’s not dead, is he?* I thought, a shiver of dread running down my spine. But then I noticed his chest rising and falling gently, which meant he was still breathing—albeit pretty shallowly—and had just fallen asleep again.

I hummed, deep in thought, as I peered around the fairly spacious hut. It reminded me a bit of a field hospital. I couldn’t just stand back and do nothing after witnessing the suffering of the villagers of Lugu firsthand.

“Valeri—” I started.

“Don’t, meow,” Kilpha interrupted, grabbing my shoulder.

“Kilpha?” I said, somewhat puzzled by her interjection.

“I know what you’re thinking. You want to use Dramom’s potion to heal all these sick bearfolk, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah,” I admitted.

“You absolutely can’t do that, meow,” she insisted, her expression dead serious. “Come with me, meow.”

I followed her out of the hut.

“Listen closely, Shiro,” Kilpha started. “Dramom’s potion is way, *way* too powerful, meow. It can heal anything, from wounds to illnesses, meow.”

This was true: Dramom’s potion was in fact so effective, it could even regrow limbs. I’d overheard a few adventurers back in Ninoritch speculating that Dramom’s potion might actually be an elixir, a legendary panacea rumored to possess the power to cure any and all ailments.

“If they find out you’re carrying such an incredible potion on you...” Kilpha paused and cast a cautious glance around to ensure that our conversation was private, before lowering her voice to a whisper. “They might kill you for it, meow.”

I gasped. It was true that Dramom’s potion was as potent as the miraculous cure-all talked about in legend, and in certain nations, it might even be considered an item of great national importance. That was how impressive it



was. But Kilpha's warning was crystal clear: letting slip that I owned such a potent cure-all would be akin to painting a massive target on my back. Some people might even resort to killing me if it meant getting their hands on it. After all, they could make enough money selling the potion to build a castle and live like royalty for the rest of their lives.

Back in Ninoritch, I'd been using the potion left and right, but I was only able to do that due to my status in the small town. Not only was I friends with the mayor herself, I was also on good terms with the guildmaster of the town's branch of the Fairy's Blessing guild, Ney, and had contributed massively to the development of the town by building houses, inns, a public bathhouse, and even a casino and movie theater complex. This had led to a huge boom in tourism for Ninoritch, on top of attracting merchants from all across the region, and as a result, the town's economy was doing better than ever. Of course, I hadn't done all of it alone, but my involvement had helped to garner favor from the townsfolk. But I wasn't in Ninoritch at the present moment. I was in a bearfolk settlement in another nation entirely. I was basically a nobody here. And since time immemorial, supremely powerful resources had always been a source of conflict. It didn't help that Beastfolk held a deep grudge toward humes, which meant I was already at a disadvantage here. Who would protect me if push came to shove?

"You really shouldn't use the potion here, meow," Kilpha reiterated.

I hummed again. Should I use the flute and call Dramom to my side? No, that wouldn't work. She'd definitely arrive in dragon form and that would end up doing more harm than good, given the situation.

"In that case, I suppose I could do *that*," I muttered to myself.

I reflected on how the main symptoms of the Lamentation of the Forest were similar to those of a cold, fever included.

"Okay. I have another idea," I declared.

"Shiro?" Kilpha said quizzically.

"I understand your concerns, Kilpha, so I won't use the potion," I stated.

"G-Good, meow," she said, though she still looked somewhat confused.

“But I can use any other medicine, right?” I asked.

“Huh? Medicine? Are you saying you have medicine on you right now, Shiro, meow?” Kilpha said.

I let out a sly chuckle. “Not *on* me exactly, no. Well, not yet, at least.”

“Meow?” Kilpha tilted her head to one side, completely lost. I glossed over her confusion.

“I’m gonna go use the bathroom,” I said, already walking away. “I’m probably gonna take a *reaaally* long time, so feel free to entertain yourself while I’m away.”

“Ah, Shiro!” Kilpha called out, trying to stop me, but I ignored her attempts.

“See you in a bit!” I called back, then waved her goodbye before dashing off into the forest.

I hid myself behind a tree and summoned the portal to grandma’s house.

“Okay, let’s do this!” I said to myself as I stepped through the closet door and ended up back at home for the first time in several days.



The first thing I did on returning to Ruffaltio was seek out Kilpha. It seemed I’d taken so long in the “bathroom,” it had made her worry, since her first reaction to seeing me again was to ask if I had a stomachache. I reassured her that everything was fine and we both headed back to the hut where the thirty or so villagers who had contracted the Lamentation of the Forest were being treated.

“Valeria’s over there, Shiro, meow,” Kilpha said, glancing in the direction of the bearwoman. She was crouching down at her little brother’s side with his hand clasped in hers and she was calling his name repeatedly, a look of desperation on her face.

“Miss Valeria,” I called over to her.

“What do you want? I’m sorry, but I don’t have time to—” she started, but I interrupted her.

“Might I take a look at your little brother?” I said.

*“You?”*

“Yeah, me. I obviously can’t compare to a medical professional, but I do have a little bit of know-how. And, well”—I flashed her a self-confident smile and waved the little cardboard box I was holding—“I just so happen to have some medicine that’ll help his fever right here.”

“What?!” Valeria exclaimed, her eyes growing wide as she stared at the box of cold medicine I had in my hand.



Yup, that's right. On my return to grandma's house, I had swung by the nearest pharmacy to pick up some medicine. Dramom's potion might have been too OP to use willy-nilly, but I figured regular medicine probably wouldn't arouse any suspicions.

"Is that medicine?" Valeria asked, pointing to the box I held aloft.

"Yup. It reduces fever, plus it can help to alleviate some of the other symptoms as well," I explained.

For a split second, a glimmer of hope flashed across Valeria's eyes, but it disappeared again just as quickly.

"What do you want from me?" she said curtly, glaring sharply at me.

I hadn't been expecting that question, so all I could manage by way of response was a rather ineloquent "Huh?"

"For the medicine. Medicine is expensive. So what do you want me to do in exchange for it?"

"*Oh*. Right, right." It had taken me a moment but I eventually connected the dots. My confident smile had had the complete opposite effect from how I'd intended it to come across, meaning that instead of reassuring Valeria, it had only made her extra wary. In Japan, cold medicine was cheap enough that pretty much anyone could buy it without any issues, but in this world, even simple remedies were expensive. If I were to say I planned to give it to her for free, she would no doubt have found the whole situation even shadier.

"Well, I *do* want something in exchange," I began.

"I thought you might."

"But the thing is, I don't exactly know *what* you can offer me," I said.

Valeria shot me a puzzled look.

"So I've got an idea." I paused and corralled my features back into a serious expression. "If I ever find myself in trouble, I want you to help me."

Valeria looked even more shocked.

"So consider this medicine prepayment for that, okay? Oh, but don't worry. I

won't go asking you to do anything *too* crazy either. If I need your help with something, but you think it's too dangerous, that's totally fine. Well? What do you think of my proposal?" I said.

She was completely silent for a moment or two. "Why?" she eventually whispered.

"Excuse me?"

"Why are you helping us?" she asked. "What's in it for you, hume?"

"I get to uphold my dignity," I replied. "I wouldn't be able to look myself in the mirror if I just abandoned you all when I can help."

Once again, my words startled Valeria.

"My grandma always used to say the same thing to me over and over again, starting from when I was a little kid," I explained.

"Your grandmother?" Valeria said. "What did she say?"

"Do whatever you can to help people in trouble," I quoted.

"People'?" she queried, repeating the word. "You see us beastfolk as 'people'?"

"Well, of course. You *are* people. Me, Kilpha, you—naturally—and everyone else here. We're all people."

She stared at me in puzzlement as tears started pooling in her eyes. "B-But you're a merchant, so you must know what the consequences will be for helping us, right? You'll never be able to do business in Orvil *ever* again," she warned me.

I chuckled. "I'm a merchant from the Giruam Kingdom. It doesn't bother me if I can do business in Orvil or not," I replied.

"But we're poor! So if you ever plan on asking us to give you something, we won't be able to, because we have *nothing*!"

"To be completely honest with you, I don't really *need* anything from you," I admitted. "I just want to see you all healthy again."

"But *why*?" Valeria insisted, still unable to wrap her head around the whole

idea.

“I told you. For my own dignity. I might be a merchant—and one who loves money, believe me—but there are times when even I care more about maintaining my self-respect than about profits and losses. And it seems like now is one of those times.”

Valeria again found herself at a total loss for words, prompting Kilpha to go over to her and pat her on the shoulder.

“Shiro is a really, really, *really* good guy, meow,” she said. “You should trust him, Valeria, meow.”

“I can’t believe a longtail like you is singing the praises of a hume.”

“I wouldn’t do it for *any* hume, meow,” Kilpha pointed out. “But I trust Shiro, meow.”

Valeria was silent for a few seconds, then raised her hands in front of her and surrendered. “Fine, you win.”

“So you’ll let me take a look at your brother?” I said.

“Yeah. I entrust him to you,” she said, wiping her eyes. “Please, Shiro, save my brother.” The desperation in her voice could be heard on every syllable.

I nodded, and brimming with confidence, I said, “Leave it to me.”



The first thing I did was to go around the hut and take the temperature of every sick villager in it with a thermometer. My heart sank when the readings came back as “H°C,” indicating that they all had fevers of over 42°C, but when I took Valeria’s and Kilpha’s temperatures to test the equipment, it displayed 39°C and 38°C respectively, so I concluded that beastfolk simply had higher basal body temperatures than humes. When I’d calmed down again after the shock of the initial readings, I roped Kilpha and Valeria into helping me to administer the cold medicine to all of the sick villagers.

“Valeria?”

After about an hour, Valeria’s little brother woke up. The medicine had started working its magic and his body temperature had dropped to 41°C, which

was roughly equivalent to around 38°C for humes, meaning they were still in discomfort, but no longer bedridden.

“Mateo!” Valeria cried, tears pooling in her eyes.

“Valeria...” the boy mumbled weakly as he attempted to sit up before wincing in pain.

“No, no, no,” I said hurriedly, stepping in between Valeria and her brother to prevent her from lifting him up in her arms. “He still needs to rest.”

“Why? His fever’s gone down, hasn’t it?” Valeria protested.

“For the time being, yes. But it’ll spike again once the medicine wears off.”

“No...” she breathed, a look of despair flashing across her face.

“So I’ll give him some more medicine in a few hours’ time, and we’ll keep doing that for as long as it takes until all of his symptoms have gone,” I explained.

“You’ll give us *more* of that expensive medicine? Until Mateo’s cured?” Valeria said in sheer disbelief.

“Yep, until he’s cured. Oh, but it’s a good thing he’s regained consciousness,” I said with a smile as I turned to the boy. “Are you hungry?”

He eyed me warily. “Who the heck are you?” he said.

“Uh, an *acquaintance* of your sister, I guess?” I replied uncertainly.

Valeria shook her head. “He’s not just an acquaintance. This hume is my benefactor.”

“Your benefactor? A *hume*?” the boy said incredulously.

“Yeah. It’s okay, Mateo,” his older sister assured him. “You can trust him. You can trust Shiro.”

“Well, if you trust him, I guess I can too,” the boy said with a little nod.

“So? Are you hungry?” I repeated. “How’s the appetite?”

“We don’t have any food. ’Course I’m hungry,” he said snippily.

I wasn’t all that surprised by the rudeness of his answer. After all, while I



might have gotten the “Valeria Seal of Approval,” the grudge that the beastfolk held for humes was deep-seated and I knew it’d take a little time for him to actually trust me.

“I was waiting for you to say that, Mateo,” I said with a sly chuckle before calling out to my cat-sith friend who was elsewhere in the room. “Kilpha!”

Her response was instant. “Okay, meow! I’ll get started on the congee right away, meow!”

She poured some water into a pot and placed it on the portable stove that I’d taken out of my inventory. Once the water had come to a boil, she tossed in a retort pouch of congee to heat it up. Boiling water indoors comes with the added bonus of humidifying the room, and as everyone knows, dry air tends to exacerbate sore throats, so the elevated humidity was very much welcome.

“All done, meow!” Kilpha announced as she opened the retort pouch and poured the congee into a bowl. She handed it to Valeria’s little brother along with a spoon.

“What’s this?” the boy asked.

“It’s called congee. It’s very yummy, meow,” Kilpha explained.

The boy looked down at the bowl, then up at his sister, as if asking with his eyes if he could really eat the entire contents of the bowl all by himself.

“You eat up, kiddo,” Valeria said warmly. “Don’t worry about the rest of us.”

“O-Okay.”

He scooped some of the congee out with the spoon and brought it to his mouth, his eyes instantly widening as the soft rice hit his taste buds.

“It’s really good! Valeria, it’s so, so good!” he exclaimed, looking up at his sister with eyes like saucers.

“Is it really? That’s great, Mateo,” Valeria replied as she watched her brother digging into his meal with fondness.

He was eating heartily for someone with such a high fever, though that shouldn’t have come as too much of a surprise. The poor boy must have been starving, after all.

“What’s that smell?”

“Is it food?”

“I’m hungry...”

One after the other, the sick villagers in the hut all started waking up. Perhaps it was a sign the medicine had started to take effect, or maybe it was the aroma of the food that had roused them.

“Kilpha, could you rustle up some more congee?” I asked.

“Sure! Can I use all of the pouches you gave me, meow?”

“Of course. Just keep ’em coming!”

“Okay, meow!” she replied, and she started depositing the rest of the retort pouches into the boiling water, though she quickly ran out of space in the pot.

“Miss Valeria, is there someplace we can build a fire?” I asked. “Oh, and it’d be a huge help if we could borrow a pot we can boil water in.”

Valeria nodded. “There’s the communal stove. I’ll take you there. Follow me.”

“Thanks.”

After that, Kilpha and I barely had time to breathe. Using the large pot Valeria had lent us, we made congee for all of the sick villagers, before preparing some more for the rest of the bearfolk in the village. I’d heard it said that you shouldn’t give a starving person too much food all at once, but by the looks of it, bearfolk had much stronger stomachs and more resilient organs than humes, because not only did they all finish what was in their bowls without any issue whatsoever, they also polished off all of the provisions I’d brought along to feed Dramom, Celes, and Suama, forcing me to make another trip back to Japan to stock up again. One day passed, then two, until the morning of day three arrived.

“Mateo! I’m so happy! I’m so happy!” Valeria exclaimed, hugging her little brother tightly.

“Cut it out, Valeria! I’m fine now!” the boy protested, his cheeks red from embarrassment. He’d completely recovered from the Lamentation of the Forest, and so had all of the other sick villagers.

“Shiro. Kilpha. Thank you for saving our village,” Valeria said to us as she wiped away tears and treated us to a smile of gratitude.

# Intermission

Shiro the hume and Kilpha of Zudah Village had saved the bearfolk. One of them was a member of the race that were sworn enemies of the beastfolk residing in Dura Forest, while the other hailed from a village that had broken the laws of the forest, but they were different from their brethren. To thank them, Lugu Village held a celebration in their honor, but unfortunately, the bearfolk had no food to share with them.

“It’s the thought that counts,” Shiro had said to them. “Besides, I have plenty of food. We can share it.”

And so, the benefactor of Lugu Village generously shared his provisions with the bearfolk, along with some alcohol. His backpack seemed to hold an endless supply of food, and it didn’t take Valeria long to put two and two together and realize that his bag must have been some sort of magic item enchanted with a storage spell. Though it wasn’t the first time she had laid eyes on such an item. Back in her adventuring days, she had heard that the number of items a magic storage item could store was determined by how powerful the enchantment on it was. In his small bag, Shiro had the space to store food for an entire village, when two horse-drawn wagons wouldn’t have been enough to carry that amount of supplies. As such, Valeria surmised that his magic bag must have been enchanted by a highly skilled mage.

*We could make a fortune if we took that bag and sold it.* Of course, if any of the villagers were foolish enough to entertain such thoughts, Valeria was quite prepared to break their necks without a moment’s hesitation. Kindness must always be repaid with kindness. That was the ethos of the bearfolk.

The villagers had piled up wood in the middle of the village square and started a large bonfire, and sitting in a circle around it, they watched the flames dance. One of the villagers pulled out a flute and started playing a tune, and another joined in, beating out a rhythm on a hand drum. The villagers all started singing along and dancing to the traditional tunes of the bearfolk, and each and every

one of them had a broad smile on their face. *How many years has it been since we last enjoyed such a lively night?* Valeria wondered. She was reminded of the simple truth that a full belly was enough to make people happy.

Before long, people started crowding around Lugu's benefactor, Shiro, for refills of the delicious alcohol he had brought with him, while others craved more of his sweet treats. The kids were especially excited about his presence, following him around the village square like little puppies, begging him to play with them. Who would have believed that this man was one of those despicable humes?

Sitting alone on the edge of the circle, Valeria gazed at the faces of her brethren that were illuminated by the dancing flames. Everyone was smiling. The humes in Orvil had been the ones who had stolen their smiles all those many years ago, yet it was a hume that had brought them back again. How ironic.

"Valeria, did you want some more alcohol, meow?" Kilpha offered as she approached Valeria with a glass bottle in her hand.

*He even stores his booze in glass receptacles like the nobles and royalty do,* the bearwoman mused. "Please," she replied.

Kilpha acknowledged Valeria's response with a simple meow before filling her tankard with more alcohol and pouring a glass for herself too.

She sat down beside Valeria and held out her tankard. "Let's make a toast, Valeria, meow."

"A toast?"

"Yeah. To celebrate everyone being healthy again, meow."

Valeria chuckled. "Okay, sure. Cheers."

"Cheers, meow!"

The two of them clinked tankards, then brought them up to their lips.

"This booze is good too," Valeria commented.

"Isn't it just? Shiro's alcohol is super popular at the guild I'm a member of."

“You mean you drink delicious booze like this every day at your guild?” Valeria asked.

“Yup, meow! At first, we only had ale to drink, but then Shiro came, and...”

Kilpha told Valeria about how Ninoritch never used to have access to good booze due to its location right on the border of the kingdom, but then Shiro arrived and started selling alcohol from his homeland to the guild. All of Shiro’s drinks were very tasty, to the extent that most of them were even better than the kind of stuff you could get in the royal capital. Some adventurers had even relocated to Ninoritch just to get a taste of what was on offer there.

A smile curled Valeria’s lips upward as she listened to Kilpha’s tale. “You really do like Shiro, don’t you?” she remarked.

“Meow?!” Kilpha spluttered, her cheeks reddening.

“What’s this? Why are you acting so bashful all of a sudden?” Valeria said. “You two are engaged, aren’t you?”

“U-Uh, y-y-yeah, meow. Shiro and I are e-e-engaged, meow,” the cat-sith stammered.

*She’s so innocent*, Valeria thought, surprised by Kilpha’s sudden attack of shyness.

The cat-sith was flustered beyond belief. Both she and Shiro had agreed to keep pretending to be engaged until they left the forest—in fact, until they returned to Ninoritch—because there was no way of knowing who might be spying on them. But it occasionally slipped Kilpha’s mind that this was what they were doing, and whenever someone broadsided her like Valeria had done with her “You really do like Shiro” remark, she instantly turned as red as a tomato and tripped over her words.

“Shiro’s a really great guy even though he’s a hume. If you two weren’t engaged, I would consider taking him for myself,” Valeria said.

“Y-You can’t, meow!” Kilpha protested.

“Calm down. I haven’t fallen so low that I’m about to start stealing from others.”

“O-Okay.”

Silence descended on the two of them, and as they listened idly to the laughter of the villagers, both Kilpha and Valeria found themselves following Shiro with their eyes. It appeared that he had started playing tag with the children of the village, and he was haring around after them as fast as his legs could carry him. At first glance, it may have seemed a little immature of him to run at top speed when playing with children, but it quickly became evident that even when sprinting, he couldn't catch up to them, and the crowd of interested spectators around him started laughing at his pathetic attempts at keeping up with the kids. And that was the kind of man Shiro was. His mere presence was enough to make people happy.

“I am the head warrior of Lugu. This whole time, I've been looking for a husband to watch over our home while I go off hunting and fighting monsters, but there aren't many men out there who are willing to take on such a role,” Valeria said.

“You're looking for a husband too, Valeria, meow?” Kilpha queried.

“Well, why shouldn't I be? After all, I'm already twenty-three. And the chieftain keeps pestering me to settle down.”

*I haven't had booze in a while. Am I drunk already?* Valeria thought as a self-deprecating chuckle passed between her lips.

“Besides, you might not guess by looking at me, but I've always dreamed of falling in love with someone and getting married,” she continued.

“Really? You too?” Kilpha said.

“Yep. Wait, what do you mean by 'too'? Is it also your dream, Kilpha?”

“Yeah. I've been engaged to this guy ever since I was a baby, but I absolutely *hate* him.”

Valeria vaguely recalled hearing something about the chieftains of the Zudah Village and the Nahato Village promising to marry their grandchildren together before they were even born.

“So I've been waiting since forever for a hero to come along and rescue me

from my awful, awful fiancé, meow,” Kilpha explained. She’d had quite a bit to drink and was fairly tipsy by this point, so she thought nothing of spilling all of her secrets to Valeria, one after another. “And then I’d get to marry that hero, sleep in the same bed as him every night, and be happy for the rest of my life, meow.”

“And that hero is Shiro, right?” Valeria said.

“Yup!” Kilpha replied, her face lighting up. Valeria could tell from her beaming smile that the cat-sith trusted Shiro with all of her heart.

After that, the pair chatted about all sorts of things—the situation with Orvil, the conflict between humes and beastfolk, and most of all, love. Several hours in, Valeria had started seeing Kilpha as sort of a little sister, and that feeling was returned in kind. *So this is why the other bearfolk seem to trust her so much, meow*, Kilpha thought.

Once the two of them were in full flow, there was no stopping them, though fortunately for the pair, the other villagers seemed intent on celebrating the night away, downing bottle after bottle of booze and eating lots of delicious food. The past few years had been filled with nothing but grief and sorrow for the bearfolk, so they were going to make the most of the party now that they had finally gotten to let loose.

“Miss Valeria.”

Shiro’s voice pulled the bearwoman out of her reverie and she watched as he approached Kilpha and herself. He was totally covered in mud after falling headfirst to the ground while playing tag with the children.

“What’s the matter, Shiro? All done playing with the kids?” she asked.

“I couldn’t keep up with them, so they decided they would much rather play among themselves instead.”

Valeria glanced across the village square and saw that the kids were indeed still playing tag. They’d seemingly gotten bored of Shiro’s complete inability to catch them while he himself got caught so easily, and dismissed him from the game.

“Anyway, Miss Valeria,” Shiro said.



“Yeah?”

“The kids told me Lugu Village wasn’t the only settlement that’s been struggling with the Lamentation of the Forest and that other beastfolk had been suffering too.”

“Well, anyone who calls the Dura Forest home is at risk of catching the Lamentation of the Forest,” Valeria explained. “But why are you bringing this up all of a sudden?”

“Oh, it’s nothing major. I was just thinking of maybe going on a tour of the forest and distributing some medicine and food to the other settlements, that’s all,” Shiro said nonchalantly.

Valeria’s eyes grew wide at his response.

“As such, I have a request for you,” he continued.

“Wh-What is it?” she asked, though she had a pretty good idea what he was about to ask her. They had only known each other for a total of three days, but Valeria already seemed to have a pretty good handle on him.

“Would you mind taking me to the other settlements? Oh, and if possible, could you assign someone to act as a mediator between me and the other beastfolk? Y’know, because they might be quite suspicious of me, what with me being a hume and all.”

Utterly dumbfounded, Valeria glanced across at Kilpha beside her. The cat-sith was looking up at Shiro with admiration, a bright, beaming smile on her face. *I see. This Shiro really is a “hero,” isn’t he?* she thought with a shrug of her shoulders.

## Chapter Fifteen: The Encounter

As per my request, Valeria took us to the other beastfolk settlements in the Dura Forest, and in every village we visited—whether it was inhabited by demonwolves, foxpeople, dogfolk, or high cat-sìths—we found emaciated and gaunt villagers, and just like the bearfolk kids had said, Lamentation of the Forest was rife. I got Kilpha, Valeria, and the handful of bearfolk who had accompanied us to help me distribute the medicine to the afflicted and feed them bowls of congee. It turned out that beastfolk were way more resilient than humes, since it was only a couple of days before they were all back on their feet again. As soon as we had finished treating the sick in one village, we moved on to the next, then the next, and soon there was only one settlement left for us to visit: the village of the apefolk.

“Our last stop is Nereji Village, in apefolk territory,” Valeria informed me. “But you’ll have to take extra care when we get there, because the apefolk dislike humes even more than the rest of us do. They absolutely *hate* your kind.”

“Hm, ‘hate’ is a really strong word. What did humes ever do to them?” I asked.

“They tried to rebel against Orvil one time,” Valeria explained, “and as a result, they now have to pay higher taxes than the rest of us. To make ends meet, they have found themselves left with no other choice than to send their daughters to work in Orvil.”

“Why their daughters, meow?” Kilpha queried.

“Let’s just say you can find people with *odd* tastes everywhere,” Valeria said evasively.

Kilpha hung her head at this response.

“Shiro, what would you do if someone messed with one of your loved ones?” Valeria asked me.

“I’d kill them,” I said without hesitation.

Kilpha raised her head. “I would too!” she piped up. “I’d kill ’em too, meow!”

“Exactly. So I think that probably gives you a pretty good idea of how the apefolk feel toward humes,” Valeria concluded.

“I’ll be careful,” I promised.

Up to this point, the inhabitants of all of the villages had been quite wary of Kilpha and me when we first set foot in their settlements—the dogfolk had thrown rocks at us, while the high cat-sìths had thrust their spears menacingly toward us, and so on and so forth—but fortunately, Valeria had acted as a middleman for us, so no one got hurt, and we eventually managed to win them over, to the point where some of the beastfolk even shed a few tears when it came time for us to leave their village. All I’d done was give them cold medicine and feed them some congee, but they started calling me their “savior” and stuff like that. I couldn’t help shivering with embarrassment every time that particular word was spoken.

“All right, we’re nearly at Nereji Village—” Valeria started, but a sudden roar from somewhere nearby interrupted her.

“Graaaaarghhh!”

*Who—no, what was that?!*

“That cry...” Valeria breathed, suddenly alert.

“Ogres, meow!” Kilpha exclaimed.



We resumed our trek to the apefolk’s village as quietly as we could to avoid being spotted by the ogres, and when we reached the settlement, we lingered behind a tree to survey the scene. To our horror, we realized Nereji Village was under attack by a pack of ogres. Some of the houses had collapsed, while others were on fire. Blood stained the ground that was littered with unconscious apefolk. We could hear no yells or cries for help, which suggested the remaining apefolk had either managed to flee the village or had holed up somewhere and were waiting for the ogres to leave in total silence.

“Grraaaarrhhhhh,” the ogres roared, acting like they owned the place. Several

armed apefolk lay sprawled on the ground around them, and it was clear just from a quick glance that some were beyond saving.

“One, two, three, four... Six ogres, meow,” Kilpha informed us.

I was impressed by how calm and composed she was in the face of such a terrible massacre, but I put that down to her being a professional adventurer and such things being something of an occupational hazard in her line of work. I took a good look at the ogres. Five of them were roughly three meters tall, while the sixth one was even taller, standing at an impressive three and a half meters in height.

“What do you suggest, Kilpha?” Valeria asked my cat-sith companion. The fact that she didn’t bother to ask me for my opinion suggested that she had never counted me as part of their fighting force to begin with.

“We’re obviously gonna fight them, meow,” Kilpha replied without hesitation.

“There are six of them, and the big one’s most likely a high ogre. Are you *sure* you want to take them on?” Valeria said.

Kilpha nodded resolutely. “There must still be some survivors in the village, meow.”

“Seems likely,” Valeria conceded.

“Then, we *have* to help them, meow. On my own, I could probably only kill one ogre at most. But...” She paused and glanced at me with a broad grin on her face. “With Shiro’s items, the three of us might be able to take all of them down, meow!”

“Items, you say? Shiro, do you really have items that will help us to fight ogres?” Valeria asked, throwing me a puzzled look.

“Oh, they’re just some things I keep on me for self-defense, but in the hands of a skilled fighter like Kilpha, they can be quite deadly,” I explained.

“Shiro, gimme that thing that goes pssshh-pssshh!” Kilpha prompted.

“Pssshh-pssshh? Oh, you mean the spray?”

“Yeah, that, meow!”

I took off my rucksack, plunged my hand into it, and activated my Inventory skill, pulling out a can of bear repellent, which I handed to Kilpha. Of course, I made sure to hide the label so Valeria wouldn't see the bear on it. Y'know, on account of her being a bearfolk and all.

"See you in a little while, meow!" Kilpha said as she dashed out of the woods toward the destroyed apefolk village.

"Be careful!" I called after her.

"I will!"

In a split second, she had reached top speed.

"Guah?" The ogres spotted her, but it was already too late. With only three meters separating Kilpha from them, they were within range of the bear-repellent spray.

*Pssshh!*

"Take this, meow!" Kilpha yelled, spraying the repellent directly into the face of the first ogre.

*Impressive*, I thought to myself.

The main ingredient in bear repellent was capsaicin, which was the thing that made chili peppers taste hot. The monsters in this world were far stronger than the animals back on Earth, but bear repellent seemed to be pretty effective against most of them. And let's face it, even the toughest of enemies could easily be taken down when temporarily blinded. The ogre roared in pain as it collapsed to the ground, clutching its face.

"I'm not done yet, meow!" Kilpha yelled.

*Pssshh! Pssshh!*

One, two, three ogres tumbled to the ground, one after another. After the third one fell, Kilpha realized she was out of bear repellent, so she tossed the empty can to the ground and glanced back over at me.

"Shiro!"

"Here you go!" I said, mustering up all of my strength to throw two more

spray cans her way.

Kilpha leaped into the air to dodge an attack by one of the ogres that was still upright and caught the bear-repellent cans in midair.



*Pssshh!*

“Eat this, meow!” she yelled as she successfully incapacitated ogre number four. The fifth one, however, wasn’t about to let itself get taken down so easily and it dodged Kilpha’s attack. “Ack, how annoying!”

It seemed the fifth ogre had identified the spray as a threat to itself and was taking extra care not to go anywhere near it. This gave it plenty of time to launch a counterattack, and I watched in horror as it picked up a barely breathing apeman who had been sprawled out on the ground nearby and threw him at Kilpha with all of its strength, accompanied by a roar. It seemed it had chosen to answer Kilpha’s ranged attacks with one of its own.

“Meow!”

Having witnessed Kilpha’s combat prowess firsthand many times in the past, I knew she could have dodged the ogre’s attack, but she decided not to and caught the apeman before he could hit the ground. She was unable to completely arrest his momentum, however, and the force of the collision sent her sliding backward a couple of meters before falling to the ground with the apeman in her arms. The ogre then took advantage of her momentary immobility to charge at her.

“Watch out, Kilpha!” I shouted.

“Meow?!”

The ogre’s fist was just about to come crashing down on Kilpha, when out of nowhere, Valeria tackled the monster.

“Down you go!”

“Guah?”

Despite being smaller than her opponent, Valeria managed to overpower the ogre and wrestle it to the ground.

“You brutes have been wreaking havoc all over our forest, haven’t you? Well, it’s time we got our own back. Take this!”

She straddled the ogre and began raining blows down on its face. As a bearwoman, she was insanely strong, and I was a tad scared she might



accidentally kill the beast with her bare fists. No, scratch that, she was *definitely* intending to kill it. With that one dealt with, only one ogre remained: the one Valeria had called a “high ogre.” It roared and treated Kilpha to a ferocious grin, seemingly not the slightest bit concerned that its comrades were either rolling around on the ground in pain or unconscious.

“That’s not a good sign,” I muttered to myself. My instincts were telling me this high ogre was bad news. *Real* bad news.

I opened my inventory and fished out the flute Dramom had lent me. Every fiber of my being was telling me I needed to summon her right that instant. But just as I was preparing myself to blow on it, a suave masculine-sounding voice called out to me from somewhere behind me.

“Ah, *there* you are, Shiro!”

I whipped my head around to see an incredibly handsome guy dashing toward us.

“*Duane?* What are *you* doing here—” I started, but he interrupted me.

“No time to explain. I’ll take care of this ogre. Hi-yah!”

Looking like a hero straight out of a fairy tale, Duane ran right past me and started slashing at the beast. If I had been female, I was in no doubt that I would have fallen head over heels for him right then and there. But what in the world was Duane even doing here in the first place?

“We have been looking for you, Shiro,” I was informed by the woman who appeared beside me.

“You’re here too, Celes?”

“We followed my familiar’s trail, only to find you playing around with ogres,” she said by way of explanation. It sounded like Celes had been using the familiar she had sent along with me as some sort of transmitter.

“But why have you come to find me in the first place?” I asked.

“Aina started crying about you two taking too long to return, so I came to look for you with that male hume,” she explained.

The original plan had been for Kilpha and me to spend two nights in the

village of the cat-sìths before returning to Orvil, but we had ended up staying in the forest for much longer than we'd intended in order to help as many of the beastfolk settlements as we could. Aina had grown extremely worried about us when we didn't return as planned, so she'd asked the others to go look for us. After drawing lots, it was decided that the search party would comprise Duane and Celes, while Dramom would stay at the inn with Luza and the kids. For some reason, Celes seemed very pleased as she recounted this to me.

"Miss Kilpha, let's work together!" Duane suggested, still slashing away at the high ogre.

"Okay, meow!"

With the pair of them working as a team, they seemed evenly matched with the beast, but Valeria soon joined them after making sure she had dealt the final blow to the four ogres Kilpha had blinded with the bear-repellent spray earlier.

"Kilpha, who's that hume?" the bearwoman asked.

"Graaah!" the ogre bellowed.

"A friend of mine and Shiro's, meow."

"Guaaah!"

"Nice to meet you, Miss Bearwoman. I'm Duane Lestard."

"Gaaah!"

"I'm Valeria. I'm a warrior from Lugu Village. Be careful not to lose your focus, hume swordsman!"

The high ogre clearly wasn't causing the trio too many issues, as Duane and Valeria were even able to introduce themselves to one another while keeping it at bay.

"Aren't you going to join them, Celes?" I asked the demon.

"Do I look like the sort that enjoys ganging up on a single opponent?"

"No, you don't," I admitted. "If anything, you probably like being on the receiving end of a group attack and defeating multiple opponents at once."

She seemed impressed with my response. "You know me well."

"Well, we're friends, aren't we?" I said.

She chuckled. "Are we?"

"We are," I assured her, before adding, "Right?"

"I see. So you and I are friends, huh?"

"Yup, we're friends."

While Celes and I continued this idle banter, Kilpha, Duane, and Valeria dispatched the high ogre.

## Chapter Sixteen: Goodbye

“Shiro, that’s the last survivor. I’ve healed them all to the best of my abilities.”

“Thanks, Duane.”

Most of the apefolk warriors had perished in their attempts to repel the ogres, but a few managed to survive. Duane cast healing magic on anyone who was still breathing, and even though most weren’t exactly in great shape, at least their lives had been spared. And okay, fine—I *may* or *may not* have used Dramom’s potion to heal the ones who couldn’t have been saved through simple healing spells alone. *They were on the brink of death, so they probably had no idea what I was feeding them. Plus, I was super discreet about it, so I’m positive no one noticed. It’ll be fine. I hope.*

According to the survivors, most of the apefolk had managed to escape and take refuge when the raid began. One of the apefolk warriors went to their hideout to inform them the ogres had been dealt with, and they all soon returned to the village.

“Darling! Oh, darling!” a woman wailed, crouching over the body of someone that I presumed was her late husband.

“Why did this happen?” another murmured wistfully.

“What a bad son you are, dying before your dear old mother,” an elderly woman lamented.

The apefolk warriors had managed to give their brethren enough time to escape and hide, but at the cost of their lives. The remaining survivors were consumed with grief as they embraced their lost loved ones in silence. Kilpha stared at the scene of devastation in total silence, her gaze drifting from the destroyed houses all around us to the dead warriors and their families. I had a pretty good idea what was going through her mind.

“What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t try to cheer her up?” I murmured to myself before doing a double fist pump to give myself courage. I approached

her and called out her name. “Kilpha?” When she didn’t answer, I tried again but slightly louder this time. “Kilpha.”

“Hm? Oh, it’s you, Shiro,” she said, turning to me. She tried to shoot me a smile, but it ended up looking more like a grimace, as if her face couldn’t decide if it wanted to smile or crease up and cry. She tried it again a couple of times before eventually giving up. “Oh, Shiro...” she said softly, sounding like she was on the verge of tears.

Fortunately, there was no one in our immediate vicinity, so I didn’t have to worry about the whole “fake-fiancé” shtick at least.

“Are you okay, Kilpha?” I asked her.

“No, not really, meow,” she replied truthfully.

“Well, I can’t say I’m all that surprised, given the situation.”

She nodded slowly. “You probably know what I’m thinking, don’t you? When I look at the apefolk... And at their village that was destroyed by ogres...”

“Uh-huh,” I said, prompting her to continue.

“I... I can’t help wondering whether Zudah Village would meet a similar fate if we were ever attacked by ogres. That scares me, meow.”

Without another word, she rested her head against my chest as tears streamed down her cheeks. She had already started worrying about the fate of her own village when she saw the starving villagers in the bearfolk village, and this must have been the straw that broke the camel’s back. She couldn’t shake her feeling of dread that her village was ultimately doomed unless she married Sajiri.

“Everything will be all right,” I assured her, gently putting my hand on her shaking shoulders to comfort her.

“Shiro...” she breathed. She looked up at me, her face wet with tears.

I gave her a big, confident nod. “It’s like I told you before, right? If we all work together, we’ll *definitely* find a solution.”

“Do you really think so, meow?”

“I’m sure of it. Besides, I have a *terrific* idea,” I said with a smirk.

I was about to reveal all, when suddenly, one of the apefolk yelled out. “Look! There’s smoke coming from the other side of the forest!”

As one, everyone looked in the direction he was pointing, and sure enough, from deep inside the forest, clouds of black smoke rose.

“Isn’t that the village of the cat-sìths?” someone muttered.

Kilpha gasped as she wiped away her tears and looked in the direction of the smoke. “No, meow...” she breathed in shock, before quickly pulling herself together and resolutely announcing, “I’m going back to Zudah Village, meow!”

A moment later, she was already dashing through the trees.

“Hold on a min—Kilpha!” I yelled after her to try and get her to stop.

“Stay right there, Shiro, meow!”

“No, wait! Kilpha!”

But she completely ignored me, and a moment later, the forest swallowed her up.



I immediately went to tell Valeria that Kilpha had set out for Zudah Village.

“Let’s go after her,” she said, and without any hesitation, she tossed me over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes and broke into a sprint.

Her running style was as wild as a brown bear’s and it felt like my rib cage and spine were about to snap in half. But I was a *man*, damn it. I could endure a little bit of pain if it meant ensuring my friends were safe. So as it was, all I could do was pray that we’d reach Kilpha in time.

“Curse those longtails. They’re seriously fast,” Valeria grumbled. “I can’t catch up with her at all.”

Unlike Valeria, who relied on her brute strength to run, Kilpha was a lot more nimble, weaving through the trees at impressive speed. Her silhouette gradually grew smaller and smaller until we lost sight of her completely.

“Don’t worry. I know where Zudah Village is,” Valeria assured me.

“That’sh greath...”

“Don’t speak,” she warned. “You’ll bite off your tongue.”

I clenched my teeth and resolved to endure the shaky ride in silence. On a side note, Duane and Celes had stayed in the apefolk village to help with the cleanup after the ogres’ rampage. I hadn’t even explained the beastfolk’s situation to him before Duane rolled up his sleeves to help. That’s Mr. Handsome for you.

“We’re nearly there,” Valeria informed me about thirty minutes after we had left Nereji Village. “Looks like Zudah Village has been attacked by ogres too...”

Some of the tree houses had fallen to the ground and were in flames, while many of the surrounding trees had been snapped in half, as if someone had punched them with great force. The ground was strewn with arrows, lances, daggers, and shortsworðs—proof that the cat-sìths had attempted to fight off the raiders.

“Where’s Kilpha?” I said urgently, a feeling of dread creeping over me.

“It looks like the longtails are over that way,” Valeria said, pointing to a group of cat-sìths who were standing a bit farther away.

“Let’s go talk to them.”

The two of us made our way over to the crowd. Fortunately, it seemed as if all of the cat-sìths from Zudah Village had somehow survived the ogres’ raid.

“That’s, um, not what I was expecting,” Valeria remarked, her eyes as wide as saucers.

I was just as dumbfounded. I’d expected a massacre on the scale of the one in Nereji Village, but to my absolute shock, ten defeated ogres lay dead in the middle of the village.

“Who in the world could have killed those beasts?” I wondered in shock.

The chieftain had said that the village’s hunters had all gone to find work in Orvil, so who could have been responsible for such a feat? I scanned the crowd, until my eyes finally landed on Kilpha. She seemed to be deep in conversation with someone at the heart of the circle the cat-sìths had formed.

“Heeey, Kil—” I started calling out her name, but I was interrupted by the man she was talking to.

“Hm?” he said when he spotted me. “Oh, aren’t you...” He trailed off as his lips curled upward into a smirk. “Well, well, well. Look who we have here. It’s the very hume who tried to steal Kilpha away from me.”

Much to my surprise, the man Kilpha had been talking to turned out to be Mr. Sajiri.

“And what are you doing here? Ah, don’t tell me you came here chasing Kilpha’s tail,” he said before bursting out laughing.

From the fact that he was covered in blood, it was evident who had dealt with the ogres.

“Shiro?” Kilpha said softly, turning toward me. For some reason, she had a look of resignation on her face.

“Kilpha, I’ll be right—”

I had been about to end that sentence with the words “right there,” but one of the cat-sìths near me pushed me back.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?” I protested.

“Don’t go near Kilpha, hume,” spat the old cat-sìth who had pushed me away before glaring at me.

And he wasn’t the only one. All of the villagers were scowling at me, seemingly ready to attack at the slightest provocation. *What in the world is going on here?*

Mr. Sajiri started laughing again at my evident confusion. “C’mon, Kilpha, tell him! Tell him you don’t need him anymore. Tell him he shouldn’t show his face around here ever again,” he said to my cat-sìth friend, but she stayed resolutely silent.

“Kilpha! Just tell me what’s going on!” I pleaded with her.

“Shiro...” she started. “I’m sorry, meow.”

An incredulous “Huh?” was all I could utter in response.



“I won’t be able to marry you,” she continued.

“Hold on, what are you say—” I tried to take a step toward her, but another cat-sìth—a woman this time—rebuffed me.

“Shiro, I’ve made up my mind. I will marry Sajiri, meow,” Kilpha told me.

A gasp escaped my lips.

“So...” Kilpha paused, her shoulders trembling. She was obviously trying her hardest to keep it together. “Tell Nesca and the others that I won’t be coming back, meow. And also...” A wistful smile momentarily appeared on her face.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t keep our promise, Shiro, meow.”

# Intermission

The second Kilpha saw black smoke rising from Zudah Village, she instantly recalled what her grandmother had taught her when she was a child. That wasn't regular smoke. It was a signal fire, and the fact that it was black meant that a disaster had befallen the village—or to put it another way, they were under attack—so Kilpha immediately took to her heels and dashed through the forest as fast as she could. Her parents, her grandmother, her younger siblings, Dazz and Fani...

*Please all be safe*, Kilpha prayed silently as she ran and ran and ran. She had never run for this long in her life. Her heart felt like it was about to give up and her breathing became labored, but she couldn't stop. After what felt like hours, she eventually reached the village. *Is everyone oka—*

She didn't even have time to finish her thought before a masculine voice dragged her out of her daze. "Heya, Kilpha. You came too?" Sajiri said almost conversationally as he pulled his shortsword out of a dead ogre's neck.

The villagers were safe.

"Too bad. You're a bit late to the party. I've already dealt with the ogres, as you can see," he continued.

"Sajiri?" Kilpha breathed in shock.

"I didn't kill these ogres for fun, you realize. There's an agreement between our two villages, remember? I just came here to save your pathetic hides."

He was covered in blood from head to toe, and a pool of blood had formed at his feet. Sajiri had just defeated more than ten ogres by himself. All of the villagers had their heads bowed in gratitude.

"Thank you so very much, Mr. Sajiri!"

"Mr. Sajiri, you're our hero!"

"Please continue to protect our village!"

They were all singing his praises as if he were a hero of legend. Sajiri scoffed as he returned his shortsword to its scabbard and made his way toward Kilpha.

“But this is the last time I’ll be saving Zudah Village. And do you know why that is, Kilpha?”

Kilpha hesitated before replying, “Because I won’t marry you?”

“Precisely. And if you refuse to uphold your end of the bargain, then I don’t see why we would have any reason to keep on helping you.”

Kilpha bit her lip in frustration. The villagers were listening intently to their conversation, meaning they had all heard Sajiri’s suggestion that he wouldn’t be riding to their rescue anymore, and it was all because of Kilpha.

“But I am a kind and charitable soul. You do know that, don’t you, Kilpha?” Sajiri cooed, brushing a finger against her cheek, and unlike the time at the chieftain’s house a couple of weeks back, she didn’t swat his hand away.

“C’mon, Kilpha,” Sajiri continued. “You just have to agree to become my wife. If you do, I promise I’ll keep on protecting Zudah Village. In fact, I’ll kill all the ogres roaming the forest, and even any humes who try to take advantage of you all.”

Kilpha bit her lip in silence.

“However, if you reject my love, I’ll stop helping you. The agreement between our villages will be rescinded and we won’t get involved with Zudah ever again.”

Kilpha still didn’t say a word.

“Are you okay with that, Kilpha?”

Memories of the starving villagers in Lugu Village, the sick beastfolk all across the forest, and the massacre at Nereji Village flashed through Kilpha’s mind.

“So? What’ll it be, Kilpha? Care to give me a response?”

Kilpha had many, many regrets. More memories came flooding into her mind.

*“Would you like some food?”*

She remembered how Nesca had offered to share her provisions with her when she had just left Zudah Village and was on the verge of starving.

*“Ha ha ha! We don’t care that you’re a cat-sìth, or that you can’t use any skills. If you want to join our party, you’re very welcome!”*

She remembered how Raiya had invited her to join his adventuring party, despite her complete lack of experience.

*“There you go, Miss Kilpha, ma’am. This should not leave a scar. However, I urge you to please be more careful in the future.”*

She remembered how Rolf healed her with magic whenever she got injured. He always lectured her to be more careful when he was done.

The thought of parting ways with her Blue Flash companions broke her heart, but she had made up her mind.

“Fine, meow,” she said.

“Pardon?” A sly smile curled Sajiri’s lips upward.

“I’ll marry you, meow,” Kilpha declared.

“Oh, will you? Well, of course you will! It’s for the best, Kilpha!”

All his life, Sajiri had only wanted one thing, and that was Kilpha. And at last, he finally had her. His cacophonous laugh of triumph echoed around the woods, but Kilpha was the only one who grimaced at the sound, for the residents of Zudah Village were too relieved to pay it any mind. Of course, leaving Blue Flash wasn’t Kilpha’s only regret.

*“And that’s a promise, yeah? You’d better take me to see all those ‘dancing lights.’”* She had promised Shiro that she would take him to see the spring she had often visited in her childhood. She felt despair creeping into her heart when she realized she wouldn’t be able to keep that promise.

“Well, well, well. Look who we have here. It’s the very hume who tried to steal Kilpha away from me.”

Sajiri’s voice dragged Kilpha out of her thoughts. Shiro was standing there. He was right there. *He chased after me, meow.*

The realization that Shiro had been worried enough about Kilpha to actually follow her filled her heart with glee. *I’m so glad I was able to see his face one last time, meow.*

“Shiro...” she breathed. “I’m sorry, meow.”

“Huh?” Shiro said, a look of confusion scrunching up his face.

“I won’t be able to marry you.”

“Hold on, what are you say—”

“Shiro, I’ve made up my mind. I will marry Sajiri, meow.”

Kilpha stared at Shiro as if attempting to burn his face into her memory. After all, she was never going to see him again after that day.

*“So I’ve been waiting since forever for a hero to come along and rescue me from my awful, awful fiancé, meow. And then I’d get to marry that hero, sleep in the same bed as him every night, and be happy for the rest of my life, meow.”*

Kilpha closed her eyes and reminisced about the night she had spent with Shiro in Orvil, the pair sleeping in the same bed. Shiro’s back against hers had felt warm and she remembered feeling incredibly happy, just like in the dreams she used to have as a little girl.

“Tell Nesca and the others that I won’t be coming back, meow. And also...”

*Everything will be fine.*

“I’m sorry I couldn’t keep our promise, Shiro, meow.”

*After all, on that one night, I finally got to experience my childhood dream for real.*



## Chapter Seventeen: Resignation and Promises

The cat-siths of Zudah Village glared at me as if to warn me not to try to get any closer to Kilpha. Valeria must have felt that staying here a moment longer was too dangerous, for she grabbed my shoulder and pulled me away.

“Let’s get out of here, Shiro,” she said.

“But Kilpha—” I tried to argue, but she didn’t let me.

“They won’t let you see her. To them, you’re the enemy now.”

“The enemy?” I repeated.

“Yeah. And any one of them could easily kill a weak hume like you. I’m not about to let our benefactor get massacred by the longtails.” She threw me over her shoulder like before. “So we’re leaving.”

“Wait a minute, I—”

“Don’t speak. You’ll bite off your tongue,” she warned.

Valeria immediately broke into a run and left the confines of Zudah Village. All I could do was stare at Kilpha from afar as she watched me go, an inscrutable expression on her face. Mr. Sajiri wrapped his arm around her shoulders and muttered something into her ear, but she didn’t take her eyes off me for a single second.

“Kilpha...”

Sajiri’s boisterous laugh echoed around the woods and I felt something snap inside me.

“It’s on,” I murmured.

“Shiro?” Valeria queried.

“Bring it on,” I said a little louder. That man had snatched one of my dear friends away from me. He had snatched *Kilpha* away from me. “Bring it on, Sajiri!”

I had never felt so enraged in my entire life.

“I’ll find another way to save Zudah Village.”

That was what I had resolved to do.

“If no one’s going to help the beastfolk of Dura Forest, then I will. And then...”

With my eyes still fixed on Kilpha’s barely visible form, I made a vow.

“I’ll take Kilpha back, no matter what.”

*To be continued in volume 9*



## Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the eighth volume of *Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back To My World Whenever I Want!* I'm the author, Hiroyuki Shimotsuki.

First and foremost, let me explain myself! As you've probably all noticed, this volume is the first section of a two-part story. My original plan was to cram everything into a single—albeit hefty—book, but the more I wrote, the more intricate the story became, and I soon realized that I was never going to fit it all into one volume. I came to the conclusion that you would all probably prefer a fully fleshed-out story over a rushed plot, so I decided to split it into two parts. Most importantly of all, I really didn't want to put out a story I wasn't satisfied with. For those reasons, I ended up making a last-minute decision to have this particular element of the plot stretch out over two volumes. By the time you get to read this afterword, I will probably already be done with volume 9 (I hope), so you shouldn't have to wait too long for the next installment. Just be a little patient, okay?

Now, onto the usual acknowledgments:

To the illustrator, Takashi Iwasaki-sensei, thank you as always for your beautiful illustrations! All the characters look so *cuuuuuute*!

To Shizuku Akechi-sensei, who is responsible for the manga adaptation of this series, I always look forward to the new chapters you put out every month. This might sound a bit hypocritical coming from me, considering I'm always sick, but take care of your health, okay?

To my editor and the whole editorial department of HJ Bunko, I'm so sorry for deciding to make this a two-parter at the last minute, and I thank you for your understanding and assistance in making this adjustment. I look forward to working with you on volume 9 as well.


To my family, my friends, my dogs, and my fellow authors, thank you for everything. I'm really thankful to you all.

And as always, the biggest, fattest thank you of all goes to you, the reader, for reading up to this point! None of my series have ever reached volume 8 before, and it's all thanks to you that *Peddler in Another World* has made it this far. Thank you so much. Both the novel and the manga versions of the series are doing great, and it looks like I'll get to continue working on this series for the foreseeable future.

Lastly, I will once again be donating part of the royalties from this book to children in need. This time, I have once again chosen an association that supports children with medical conditions such as cancer, as well as their families. So by purchasing this book, you are also contributing to supporting these children.

See you all in volume 9!

Hiiro Shimotsuki



“Come on,  
Suama,  
you can  
go first.”

“Ai!”





Kilpha  
could  
feel the  
warmth  
of Shiro's  
back  
against  
hers.

I'm  
sleeping  
with  
Shiro...





“Hey,  
I’m  
coming  
in.”

“After  
all, I *am*  
your  
fiancé.”

“Sajiri...”



















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Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back Whenever I Want! Volume 8

by Hiiro Shimotsuki

Translated by Bérénice Vourdon Edited by SMR

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