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Surviving in
Another World
as a Villainess
Fox Girl!

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Surviving in Another World as a Villainess Fox Girl! Volume 1

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Surviving in Another World as a Villainess Fox Girl!

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Chapter 1 | Fox Twins

I soar gently through the sky.

Floating on the breeze like this is such an amazing feeling. With a burst of power, wings of light sprout from my back, taking me wherever my heart desires. The way the wind feels as it caresses my long hair, large ears, and tail is something I will never get tired of. When my silver fur glistens in the sun's rays, it fills me with pride.

Winged Fox. That's my race. There are plenty of other fox demi-humans out there, with each race differing slightly depending on the magical trait bestowed on them from birth. My ability to fly is the rarest trait of all. A lot of my friends are jealous of my flight, but honestly, I'm also a little jealous of those who can so easily bend water and fire to their will, like my sister. The grass is always greener on the other side, or so they say.

"Miku! Get over here this instant!"

My twin sister, a Red Fox, calls out to me. She's a cutie with soft orange fur, spotted here and there with patches of bright red. Despite being twins, we're nothing alike, but we're inseparable! ...But now's not the time for idle chatter. Today's the day *they* come to our village. I hurriedly alighted by her side.

"I can't believe you! How many times have I told you how important today is?"

"I'm sorry, Claire, but stretching my wings is part of my daily routine."

She looks adorable with her cheeks puffed out in annoyance and her hands on her hips, as she only responds with her laughter. She narrows her big, red eyes at me before embracing me tightly. She's always been a hugger. Her peach-colored ears, twitching this and that way, tickle my face.

"I'm going to protect you, Miku! No matter what!"

"Not this again."

Those same words, spoken so seriously, followed by the same response I always give. I've heard this story so many times at this point, I'm at a loss for words.

"Miku, you know you can't tell a single soul about this. It has to stay our secret."

When was the first time she told me about it? Probably back before I could even understand what was going on around me. Back when Claire was stringing words together with ease and I was struggling to speak at all, she would regale me with this same tale, over and over.

You see, Claire is a genius whose mastery of reading and magic goes far beyond her years, and definitely beyond the others in our village, who all look up to her. They were primarily amazed that she was so young and yet knew enough words to weave together a story like that. It's pretty amazing, right? It's true, though. There's an outlandish reason why she can tell this specific story.

"I have these memories of a past life. I lived on a planet called 'Earth' in a country called 'Japan', where I spent all my time playing this 'otome' game! I was really into it. The world in the game I played wasn't so different from ours, and it was so exhilarating! My number one favorite character in the game..."

She could go on and on for hours. The way her eyes sparkled with delight as she told me all about this game, I couldn't help but get excited right along with her, always nodding along and encouraging her to continue. To be fair, it *is* a pretty enthralling story. A few years ago, though, the way she talked about her so-called past life grew tenser.

"I think... No! I'm sure of it! This world we live in *is* the game I used to play! Ugh! It sounds so far-fetched, though, right?! What's wrong with me?!"

She began to grow disheartened. I encouraged her to hone her fighting and magic skills to get strong enough to take on anyone in battle, hoping it would take her mind off things. Up until then, Claire had been doing the best she could for the both of us, but she started encouraging me to train harder alongside her.

For someone as uncoordinated as myself, it was pretty tough, but seeing Claire trying her hardest was all the encouragement I needed. I mean, I'd heard

her story so many times by that point that I probably could have recited it from memory. There was one part in particular, however, that I couldn't seem to wrap my mind around no matter how hard I tried.

"Around the time of the harvest festival, a group of handsome boys will arrive at our village, and Miku, you'll fall in love with one of them at first sight. Suddenly, a horde of monsters will descend upon us, and the two of us will be the only ones to escape the total annihilation of our village, thanks to the help of those boys, who then proceed to escort us to the capital. That's the basic premise leading up to the start of the game! There's no way I would ever willingly let you head down a path to your own doom! There's no way I'd ever let the village be destroyed in the first place! I'll protect you, no matter what!"

A group of handsome boys? And I fall in love with one of them? A path leading to my doom? Honestly, it doesn't make a lick of sense. But she always speaks of it with an ice-cold, deadly serious tone. Despite being an outlandish tale, I believe her.

And today is the day those handsome boys are supposedly coming to our village. It's our yearly harvest festival and our fifteenth birthday, so there's no doubt about it. If something is going to happen, it'll be today. That's why Claire's almond-shaped, bright red eyes seem clouded with worry, more so than usual.

"Please. We just have to get through today," she says. "Once they arrive, the boys will continue on to the Northern Wood, where they have business. At that point, the horde of monsters will attack from the Southern Wood. Since everyone will be preoccupied with the festival, the village will be overrun in no time. You're the only one who believes me, Miku. We have to protect the village, together!"

Of course, Claire warned the villagers. She even warned our chief. Everyone dismissed her completely, telling her to stop spouting ridiculous conspiracies and to instead use that energy to help prepare for the festival. A part of me knew from the beginning that they wouldn't believe a child, but their reactions were still pretty frustrating.

...Do I believe it? Well, not entirely. It's impossible to imagine a vicious attack

on our village when everything seems so peaceful. But watching the way Claire talks about it, those eyes of hers focused on the ground and her body shaking with fear, I can't sit by and do nothing. Deep in my heart, I know I will do whatever it takes to help my sister. I trust Claire completely, which means I also believe that she is telling the truth!

"Okay. I'm not sure how much help I'll *actually* be, but I'll do my best to help in whatever way I can. I won't let you face this alone, okay?"

"Daaaw... Miku...! I love you so much!"

"Whoa!"

With tears in her eyes, she suddenly wraps her arms around me tightly, and I almost fall backward in surprise. Managing to keep my balance, I reassuringly hug her back, stroking her hair gently.



"TH-THEY'RE really here..."

"You didn't believe me, did you?"

It's a little before noon, and as the village is hustling to prepare for tonight's festival, a group of handsome boys arrive. I can't help but gawk at the sight of them!

Don't look at me like that, Claire! I'm sorry for doubting you!

"Try not to stare. No matter the path we choose, they're going to talk to us anyway. Okay? I didn't realize they were going to be this good-looking. You can have butterflies, but nothing beyond that! You can look all you want, but no falling in love! Repeat after me!"

"N-No falling in love..."

"Good!"

How many times will this back and forth continue?

Look at her, acting all triumphant with her arms crossed. Hard to stay annoyed at her, though. I know she's only looking out for me.

"I just worry about you a lot since you're such a pushover."

“...So, in other words, slow and dumb.”

“That’s what makes you so charming!”

“You’re not even gonna say I’m wrong?!”

I know that I’m not always the brightest, but she doesn’t have to state it so matter-of-factly! Sure, I might have believed Claire’s wild stories because she’s my sister, but generally speaking, I’m not so easily duped!

“Oh-ho! What’s going on over here? Are you two ladies fighting?”

“Huh?”

Suddenly, I hear an unfamiliar voice coming from right behind me, and I whirl around. I think I hear Claire squeal, but it’s too late. The face of the boy who spoke a moment ago is right in front of me. He has long eyelashes and a high, well-defined nose. Green eyes sparkle from within soft, smooth skin.

I’ve never seen anyone this gorgeous before...!

“Ah! Aaah!”

“Whoa! S-Sorry!”

Caught completely off guard, I yelp in surprise and stumble backward. The owner of the voice likewise takes a few hurried steps back, probably just as surprised as I am.

“I wasn’t expecting you to turn around so quickly...” he says. “You startled me! Apologies for being far too close so suddenly.”

“D-Don’t worry. It’s f-furkay.”

I’m too startled to speak correctly. How embarrassing! I feel my cheeks heating up, almost too hot to touch!



“I’m sorry, but I think one of my mates is calling me. My name’s Ektor, by the way. May I have the honor of knowing yours?”

“M-Miku...”

“Miku? What a charming name. I hope to bump into you again. See you around!”

And with that, the young man with golden hair named Ektor runs off. All I can do is stand there, staring at him.

“Miku...?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

That chilling voice, muttering my name as if breathing directly down my neck, from right behind me! She scared me half to death! But I knew the unspoken words in her voice, and everything was fine in that regard.

“I’m not in love!”

“Hmph. Good!”

I bow formally as I speak, and she answers in a huff, crossing her arms in front of her. There’s a brief pause before we both burst into laughter.

“Are you sure, though? You didn’t feel even a twinge?”

“Well, he *was* extraordinarily handsome, and I can’t deny I’m a sucker for a sweet face. But still...”

“Hee-hee! Thank you for being honest. Don’t worry. I can tell just by looking at you that you haven’t fallen for him. And thank goodness! Even I’m shocked by how closely reality is mirroring the story in my head. Maybe even down to the two of you falling in love...”

Claire sticks her tongue out at me playfully, before giggling like a naughty kid.

Is Claire a bit smitten as well? I can’t blame her, though. He was too good-looking to be real!

“Now then... The main problem starts from here,” she reminds me.

“Mm-hm. I know.”

She looks stressed as she clenches her fists. That's right, this is when everything takes a turn for the worse.

"Have you noticed it yet?" she asks.

"Mm-hm. I wouldn't have noticed at all if not for your intense training sessions."

A foul presence is emanating from the direction of the Southern Wood. It means a swarm of monsters really is approaching...!

"All right, let's go. We have business to take care of before they arrive."

"Okay!"

We sprint out of the village, Claire holding a ball of fire in her hand and wings of light shining from my back. The arrival of the handsome young men, and now this ominous presence... I begin to feel an almost crippling fear take hold of me as I realize everything Claire endlessly told me about over the years is finally coming true. But everything will be okay. We'd prepared for this. Now is not the time to be afraid!

I shoot up into the sky, keeping a close eye on Claire, who is sprinting across the ground. As I try to desperately suppress the fear that threatens to consume me, my body shuddering, I look in the direction of the evil aura.

"A swarm of monsters!"

"Where?!"

"Right in front of us! We've almost reached the vanguard!"

At that instant, Claire's entire body became engulfed in flames. Suddenly, she takes off even faster than before, and it isn't long before her fiery flames attract the attention of the monsters. She swings her fist with all her might toward the horde, and I notice her tail is thicker than usual, swollen with concentrated magical power.

"TAKE THIS!" she shouts.

I watch as the fire from her hand bursts out toward the monsters. The flames swirl into a twirling vortex, quickly growing in size, and engulfs the first row of monsters.

It's impressive, no matter how many times I've seen it!

I hear their howls of pain as the flames consume them. It pains me to see and hear the suffering of *any* creature... No, I can't think that way. After all, if we were to hesitate for even a moment, they would not hesitate to set us on fire. I learned a lot from Claire's harsh training, including what to do when faced with a dangerous situation.

I can't let Claire face this alone!

"Miku!"

"On it!"

I'm up! I have to make it easier for Claire to attack! I fly over the swarm of monsters, focusing my power while clasping my hands together, almost as if in prayer. I can feel magic gathering in my tail. I use a spell to create a light veil that will trap the monsters within a glowing shell for a short period of time.

Unfortunately, I only have access to non-offensive light magic. Although I can't attack, I can still offer support in a multitude of ways. With that said, I still have a ways to go in knowing how to properly wield my magic, making the radius of my light veil still fairly small. Plus, I can't hold it up for very long. Honestly, I was surprised when Claire initially told me her plan of using the veil on the monsters and not *us*.

"If we use your veil of light on the monsters instead of us, we can hold them in one place, right?"

I gasped in surprise when she mentioned her plan during one of our training sessions. I'd always viewed my veil as a bubble of protection, but I could also use it as an impenetrable prison, trapping the monsters in place. The fact that Claire could come up with this sort of backwards approach was part of what made her so amazing in my eyes. Honestly, she has always been amazing in all *sorts* of ways! Since I couldn't attack, my job was to trap the monsters in place and blind them. Then, once they couldn't move...

"Flame Spin! Fox Fire!"

Claire would use the might of her fire power to take care of the horde all at once. She looks beautiful as she twirls in place, as if dancing. It almost looks like

the flames engulfing her body are gracefully dancing along with her.

The monsters are unable to escape her ferocious storm of fire and I feel my heart break at the sight of such immense suffering as they burn alive, but such is the price to pay to ensure survival. Remember, these monsters mercilessly slaughter any and all living things! I shake my head before lightly slapping my cheek in an attempt to snap myself out of it.

“Fox Fire! Fox Fire!”

All that’s left is to rinse and repeat. Her straightforward strategy slowly eliminates the monsters, one by one. Although she has the potential to unleash fairly powerful magic attacks, these two techniques are all she can actually use right now. That’s right, we didn’t have a lot of options.

Being primarily self-taught, our magical abilities are still developing, and our power is limited in effectiveness. To be fair, there aren’t many others who can wield even *this* much magic. The other villagers only use as much as necessary to get by or to slay monsters. Most are satisfied with one or two basic attack spells, just in case.

“*Haa, haa...* Gosh!” she pants. “How many of them are there? They never stop! Fox Fire!”

“Claire, please don’t push yourself too hard!” I call out to her.

She’s breathing heavily. She’d been constantly twirling to keep her magic going and is clearly nearing her limit. Meanwhile, I’d been floating above everything, simply keeping the horde trapped in one spot. I can’t leave her here, exhausted and spent from continuously casting spells.

“It’s no good!” she shouts. “There’s still so many of them... Ah...”

“Claire? Oh...”

Clearly not ready to give up just yet, I follow her gaze only to find myself staring at a hopeless atrocity spreading out before me. The horde of monsters is only growing in size, spreading out as far as the eye can see.

“Th-There’s just...too many of them,” she says. “I’ve never heard of a horde this size before!”

“Should we head back, Claire? We have to get the villagers away from here as quickly as possible!”

It’s clearly evident that my sister, who is always so strong and full of energy, has lost hope. There’s no way the two of us alone can take on a horde of this size. We had planned on doing what we could, but this was like pouring a cup of water on a volcano to extinguish the flames. The only thing left to do now is to warn the villagers, so they have time to escape. The village has a high possibility of ending up in shambles, but it’s a much better prospect than everyone dying instead!

“I’m not sure if we’ll both make it in time. Miku, *you* have to warn them! I’ll stay here and try to buy you some time...!”

“Don’t be absurd!”

“I’ll be fine! I promise I’ll escape if I get an opening, but you won’t make it in time otherwise! Go on! Go!”

I stare back into Claire’s deep red eyes and watch as one emotion after another flashes through them; determination, and then fear. I bite my lower lip, balling my hands into tight fists before wings of light spread from my back and I shoot off into the sky. Before I leave, I place a simple ward around the monsters that will hopefully give Claire brief respite. It will only last for less than a minute, but it’s better than nothing.

“I’ll come back for you; I promise.”

“Mm-hm. I’ll be here.”

We lightly bump fists before I fly off without a backward glance.

I’ll make it.

When I go all out, I’m incredibly fast! We did train pretty hard, after all! I can’t help but worry, though, and that’s why I have to hurry. I’m shy, slow, and not really good at anything. Will the villagers really believe someone like me...? Yes. They have to. More than anything, Claire’s life depends on it. I channel more magic than usual into my outspread wings and zip along at full speed toward the village. Just then...

“Huh...?”

Almost immediately after I take off, I spot someone. They’re quite a distance outside the village, and I’m confused why there might be anyone out here alone, in the middle of nowhere. Yet, here they are. Three of them, in fact. Among them, I can’t help but recognize that soft, silky blonde hair and those gorgeous facial features.

“Hey. Seems we meet again. I’ve got a lot of questions, but mainly: what brings you out here?” he asks.

“Wh-What brings *ME*...?” I stutter.

I hover in the air, puzzled, and he extends a hand out toward me.

“Let’s just say I have a bad feeling about something that I would prefer not to come true. Time is of the essence, huh? And now, you need our help. Is that about right, Miku?”

All I can do is nod, dumbfounded, as he says my name with a soft smile on his lips.

“So, you were right, huh?”

A shorter guy with black hair mutters sourly under his breath, almost incredulously, as I lead the trio of men, including Ektor, onward.

“Seems like Ektor’s arrogance is spot on once again, Macro! And you said he’s out of his mind!”

“You said the same, Rinny!”

“You both need a lesson in manners.”

All I can do is watch on, flustered, as the three men exchange snide remarks, laughing merrily all the while, despite the severity of the situation. I have a feeling the three of them are our only chance of successfully holding the monster horde at bay. They clearly wield considerable power by the way all the hairs on my body are standing on end.

On top of that, despite being demi-humans, they have the appearance of normal humans. Normally, demi-humans retain some features of their main race even while in humanoid form, but that doesn’t seem to be the case for

them. The fact that they can disguise themselves so perfectly is further proof of the power they hold.

“You’re surprisingly useful, aren’t ya, little silver Foxie?”

“Bwah?!” I squeak.

“Rinny, knock it off! You’re talking like some sort of ruffian. I’m sorry, Miku. Rinny’s a harmless goof. He’s simply confirming the scope of your abilities, so no need to worry, okay?”

“Really?”

“He’s right, my bad. Could tell you possessed some sort of power, that’s all.”

The taller, muscular young man with tousled red hair speaks so roughly that it unconsciously puts me on edge. He corrects himself in a softer tone of voice, making me realize he isn’t such a bad guy after all. Still...with a guy so big and a voice so deep, I can’t help but be a little frightened!

“H-How do you know that?”

As I went to speak, my voice wavers. Ugh!

“You’ve scared her half to death! Rinny, you’re a barbarian.”

“Shut your pessimistic pie hole!”

“When all you do is yell, the words that come out lack intelligence.”

“You...!”

Both the redhead, who is quick to anger, and the shorter, black-haired boy, who constantly eggs him on, are terrifying!

This isn’t the time for any of this!

“Settle down, both of you. At least until we make it to the monster horde—What?!”

“Claire!”

Just as Ektor chides the two boys, a huge explosion erupts somewhere ahead of us, and we all look toward the source of the noise. My eyes sweep the sky for any signs of Claire, my body moving before I realize what’s happening.

Claire must have caused the explosion herself. She could have used the force of the explosion to send herself flying, as a means of escape.

It's a dangerous tactic, though, as she could just as easily hurt herself in the process, and I can't see her body anywhere!

She can only use offensive magic, meaning she won't be able to break her fall, and the fall itself would be from too high up to land gracefully without any sort of help! I have to try and catch her before she hits the ground, but I'm not sure I can make it in time.

I immediately morph into my pure beast form, something I hardly ever do. As a fox, my body is bigger and stronger, meaning I might still have a chance. Wings of light sprout from my vulpine back and the wind sweeps my silver fur back as I shoot off into the sky.

"Wow... She's gorgeous."

"We don't have time for you to stand around gawking, dummy Rinny!"

"Shut up! I'm moving!"

I can vaguely make out voices shouting from behind me as the trio begin to engage in battle with the horde. Speaking of which, Claire always warned me to never let anyone see my true beast form because of how sacred it is. Bad people with bad intentions might do unspeakable things to me. I can't believe I went back on my word...but helping Claire right now is my top priority. There's no way I can live without her!

"Claaaaaaire!!"

I spot Claire plummeting from the sky motionless, and I manage to snatch her torn clothing out of mid-air. Changing direction, I land on the ground some distance from the monster horde.

"Mi...ku...?"

"Claire! Claire! Hang on...! I'm gonna help you!"

This isn't the time for tears, and yet I can't stop them from pouring down my face. I ignore them, wrapping myself around her body, cradling her, before casting my light magic.

“Aah... It’s so warm. Miku...thank you.”

“Ugh... I’m sorry for leaving you, Claire. But I found help, so everything’s gonna be okay now.”

“Help...?”

As her wounds slowly begin fading away, I explain everything that happened. About bumping into Ektor and his friends on my way back to the village. About feeling an immensely strong power from the three and somehow knowing that they would be able to handle the monsters.

“Huh? Uh? The Handsome Trio...? I don’t understand...”

“Wait! You shouldn’t move.”

I warn her as she abruptly tries to sit up upon hearing my words, but she brushes me aside. Her eyes are wide in shock as she stares at the three boys.

“But wh-why? They said they were going to the Northern Wood! And also... Ah! Ow, ow...”

“Claire! You need to calm down!”

I try to keep Claire from getting to her feet and running back into the fray. When suddenly, she snaps, clearly panicked.

“The story has changed!”

That’s right, the story.

The situation has deviated from Claire’s story. The three boys are supposed to head toward the Northern Wood on business, and by the time they return, the village is in shambles and the monsters have already gone on their way. That’s why they couldn’t help us and why we’ve been training so hard so we could fight the monsters ourselves. Claire’s wound-riddled body is proof of all that. I just assumed they happened to meander off in this direction by chance, but it’s clear that Claire doesn’t think this is a mere coincidence.

“The only reason I tried so hard to change the original story is because I knew about *THIS* future. If I hadn’t told you, Miku, we wouldn’t have trained so hard, and you’d still be back at the village.”

“That’s true...”

It’s frightening to think about. I’d probably be back at the village helping get ready for the festival, and I’d be excited for my birthday, all the while being completely ignorant of the imminent danger.

“Perhaps it’s just a coincidence, but there’s also a high chance that’s not the case,” Claire says ominously.

“Not the case?”

“Yes.”

Upon saying this, Claire slowly gets to her feet. Any sense of painful or stiff movement is now completely gone, and she seems almost completely healed, so I stand up alongside her. I look over at Claire, only slightly taller than me in my true beast form, and notice the way her red eyes blaze with fury and the desire to kill the horde before us.

“I wonder if one of those three is a Reborn like me. He *must* know about the game!” she declares. “We have to figure out if that’s true, and if so, then we must figure out which one it is!” she shouts, her gaze unwavering.

“Huh? Really?” I blink at her.

To tell you the truth, nothing Claire is saying right now makes any sense. It’s not that I doubt her when it comes to this story she keeps bringing up, or this other world, or her memories. I wanted to believe her from the very beginning, and besides, the monsters showed up just like she said they would...

Well, I can’t deny that even I had my doubts about it! But now I believe her completely!

But the idea that there might be another person like Claire, and that person might be one of those three guys?

For being such an odd phenomenon, I wonder how many others exist that are like Claire, retaining memories of a different world and a past life? Still, with that said...

“Ektor was the one who decided to come here.”

“Ektor?” Hearing my words, she turns to face me. Suddenly, her eyes grow

wide and she shouts in anger. “Hold on! Miku?! I just realized you’re in your true beast form! Change back! Right this instant!!”

“What? You just noticed *NOW*?!”

To be fair, she’d been badly hurt when I found her, so it’d be an understatement to say that she was preoccupied and may not have noticed. Still...there’s no denying those three definitely saw me in this form, which is why Claire is so upset. I revert to my normal half-beast body; a demi-human. I’m not as strong as those three, so I still have my fox ears and tail.

“I wanted us to be able to change completely into human form before we ever met that trio...” Claire sighs. “I guess it’s all a matter of training and not having enough time.”

“Suppressing your magical abilities to that degree is pretty difficult,” I agree.

As demi-humans, we can take three different forms. This kind of half-beast form is the easiest to get around in, which is why it’s so common. We’re born like this, and that’s probably why it feels the most natural. It’s incredibly easy to accidentally slip into true beast form when overwhelmed by emotion, whether it be anger, sadness, or joy. Some say those who succumb to their emotions easily are still children. Once you grow older, it becomes easier to control, which is where Claire and I currently stand.

The final form is a true human form, like the three boys currently fighting the monster horde. Being able to control your magical ability to that extent is incredibly difficult, and only doable by advanced practitioners. The upside is being recognized as a demi-human who can take on a true human form, which in turn means better jobs with fewer oddballs, plus the ability to handle very potent magical spells.

Although the human and monster continents are fairly disconnected, there are humans who make the trek over to get their hands on fur, horns, and claws in order to sell them for high prices on the human continent, where they are very rare and valuable. Monsters, on the other hand, oftentimes abduct children for slave labor on this continent. The first time I heard about that, I was too afraid to sleep.

Our village is fairly peaceful, at least. By the way, half-monsters do not have

any power, making especially rare breeds basically sitting ducks for evil folks with evil intentions. Regardless of the rarity of their race and even if they can fully transform into human form, those with considerable skill can see through any disguise. Personally, humans who attack half-monsters because they have no way to defend themselves are truly despicable.

“Those three are demi-humans. I don’t think they would do anything bad...but throwing a Reborn into the mix changes things! I don’t think we can say with certainty they’re not up to something!”

Claire was on maximum alert. Considering, however, that they’re all in full human form and still able to fight, we wouldn’t stand a chance against them.

“They’re all so strong...” I say.

“Th-That’s a different matter entirely!”

They seem to be having a blast as they casually mop up the monster horde, one after the other. It’s honestly kind of terrifying, even if they *are* helping us out!

“Do you think Ektor is hiding something?” Claire asks.

“Oh, yeah. Um... The other two didn’t seem to believe monsters were out here. They said he was crazy, or something like that...”

“Th-That settles it, then! So, Ektor is the Reborn, huh?” Claire concludes.

Although we still don’t know for sure, there’s a very high probability that the Reborn is him.

“So, what do we do now?” I ask hesitantly. Claire simply stands there, arms crossed and a concerned look on her face, before she opens her mouth.

“We’re not going to do anything. The village should be safe now, and since the story played out differently than it should have, there’s no reason for those three to take us with them. We’ll say our goodbyes and go our separate ways. The end.”

She suddenly grabs me by both shoulders, her eyes wide. Claire’s gaze is deadly serious.

“I will always protect you, Miku! But, just in case... If that Ektor guy

approached you on purpose, then there's a chance this was all a trap. Don't be taken in by him, okay? Don't fall in love! Say it!"

"D-Don't fall...in love...!"

"Good!"

Everything's getting a little too complicated for me, though I can't help but laugh at how serious she is. And like that, the tension between us is gone!

"It seems like they're finishing up..." she says.

"Huh? N-No way... The three of them, alone, were able to vanquish all those monsters that quickly?!"

"Based on their stats, it's not that surprising. Oh, look. Here they come."

Completely taken aback by her deduction, I can't help but blurt out: "How would you know something like that?!"

"I'm well versed in the game's mechanics!"

Oh, of course. Not like that makes any sense whatsoever...

Claire said she would always protect me, and I believe her. That's why I trust her and put my confusion aside for now.

"Hey, you girls okay?" Ektor asks as he steps forward, away from his companions. The wind ruffles his blonde hair, the golden strands sparkling underneath the rays of the setting sun. He looks breathtakingly gorgeous...

"Yeah, we're fine," Claire says. "Thanks for the help. Um, you guys... I'm pretty sure I saw you earlier at the village, right?"

"That's right. I had a brief chat with Miku there. I'm pretty sure you were accompanying her."

"Miku is my younger twin. I'm Claire."

"Claire, huh? I'm Ektor. But for now...nice to meet you?"

Upon saying that, he extends his hand out toward her, and Claire grasps it with a smile. Actually, they're both smiling, and yet...am I imagining things, or do I see sparks flying from both of them?!

“I could’ve sworn you were heading toward the Northern Wood, so why are you here?” Claire asks.

“I had a bad feeling. Call it a hunch. Besides, I could ask the same of you two. Why are you here instead of preparing for tonight’s festival?”

“Call it the same hunch.”

They spoke while locked in their handshake, big smiles plastered on their faces. It was kind of creepy, actually.

“What’s their deal?”

“Beats me.”

Rinny, watching on in exasperation, and Macro, with a look of pure, unadulterated boredom on his face, stood just behind Ektor, refusing to get involved.

U-Um... What should I do?

This is awkward. With their conversation at a standstill, silence descends on all of us, when suddenly...

Grrrrumble...

Unable to read the room, my stomach lets out a loud grumble. I’m mortified, my tail and ears drooping in sheer embarrassment. I quickly grab my stomach with both arms, trying to stifle the sound, but it’s too late. Everyone is staring at me.

My cheeks are probably just as bright as Claire’s hair!

“S-Sorry...! I guess I’m hungry.”

At the sound of my straightforward confession, Ektor bursts into laughter.

Aww! Now he’s laughing at me!

I want to curl into a ball, but instead, Claire hugs me tight.

“You did so good, Miku. Thank you for saving my life,” she whispers, and my heart fills with love.

That was my line!

I hug her back and speak quietly enough so only she can hear. "You, too. Nice job."

"So, you're hungry?"

"Hee-hee. Yes."

My stomach gave the perfect lead, and she followed it amazingly. That's why I love her! We giggle together before a sudden loud harumph interrupts us. We turn to see Ektor watching us, a wry smile on his face.

Oh, I forgot about him. Oops?

"At any rate...let's head back to the village together, shall we?" he suggests.

"...Sure, let's do that," Claire says.

Why was their supposed first meeting so fraught with clear disdain? Are they simply incompatible? Is it like the opposite of falling in love at first sight? Of course, I know about Claire's suspicions, but if she continues acting so openly distrustful, I worry he might put his guard up and act suspicious of us too.

"U-Um! With the festival tonight, there will be tons of food...so please stick around and enjoy yourself!" I pipe up, hoping desperately to lighten the mood.

"Are you sure?" Ektor quickly responds.

"Of course!" Claire says in my stead while pushing him lightly toward the village.

Is she pushing him away from me? I already told her I wasn't in love with him! She's such a worrywart.

"Uhhh? Are we allowed to come, too?" The muscular, redheaded Rinny speaks up awkwardly...

That reminds me!

"We owe our lives to you! And the continued safety of our village. I wish to thank you formally!" I say.

"That won't be necessary."

"That's right. We don't need thanks!"

I hurried to stand in front of them to offer my formal thanks for what they had done, but the short, black-haired Macro interrupts me, speaking without hesitation, before turning away. As if in agreement, Rinny waves his hand as if shoos my thanks away... Hmph!

“That’s not right!” I protest.

I can’t stand it!

I puff my cheeks out, clearly annoyed, the fur on my tail sticking out in all directions. I wasn’t really angry, though. I just want them to take my feelings into consideration.

“PLEASE accept my thanks. I know what you did was insignificant to you, but you saved our lives and the lives of everyone in our village. You saved all of us. I have to say SOMETHING!”

“Ngh...”

“Ugh...”

They seem taken aback by my words.

“To not say anything...it just seems...” I trail off. I don’t blame them. When it comes to apologies, it’s up to the recipient whether they want to listen and accept those words or not. But I want to thank them, somehow... “...Wrong. And rude.”

I lower my head, dejected. I guess I’m kind of forcing my thanks onto them, which is pretty rude in itself, thinking about it. I immediately feel bad for what I’ve done. I’ve gone too far.

“I’m r-really sorry. I forced my feelings onto you and that was not my intention,” I apologize right away, and immediately worry that might make them feel bad!

Argh! Why am I so frustratingly annoying sometimes?! Claire never worries about silly stuff like this! Ugh! There’s no way I can look them in the eye now!

As I fall deeper inside my head, my anxiety swirling in circles, I feel something soft on the top of my head.

“Hey, come on. We were in the wrong, too. But we accept your apology and

your gratitude.”

Hesitantly, I look up, only to see it was Rinny who patted my head. His eyes are focused on something far off in the sky, clearly feeling awkward.

“Mm...fine. I’m sorry as well. It was just a little embarrassing, is all. And you’re welcome.”

Macro crosses his arms over his chest with a scowl and quickly averts his gaze... What’s this? These guys are actually pretty nice. I guess I shouldn’t be so quick to judge people by the way they look. But to be fair, they look pretty intimidating!

Chapter 2 | Setting Out on a Journey

[Ektor]

TO tell you the truth, I was shocked. Seriously dumbfounded.

Huh? What? How did Miku escape from the monster horde?! Why is she even coming from that direction and not in the village?!

That's not how the story goes. I hope I was successful in masking my true feelings. I feel like I did the best I could, putting on a facade of politeness, like always. It took a lot of work to reach this moment in order to protect her. All so I could follow the story perfectly.

That's right. I'm Ektor...in *this* world, at least. In my past life, I was a normal Japanese university student, but now, I'm Ektor. I might not be quite as polite and soft-spoken as the character I play, but I have to do my best to play nice so as not to deviate from the original script. My mask is only lowered when I'm alone with Rinny and Macro.

"Hey, you girls okay?"

I know! I know already! So, stop staring at me like that, you two, I mentally respond to my friends' judgmental looks.

One part cool indifference and one part dumbfounded shock. I know this is completely out of character for me! I have to force myself to pretend the person before me doesn't mean the world to me.

Honestly, I want nothing more than to drop the act and be *myself* in front of Miku. But I can't, for the sake of the story! I've grown used to my friends calling me a weirdo anyway. The reason why is because I had to convince them a horde of monsters was actually coming from the Southern Wood, directly contradicting the information we were previously given. When I explained I just had a hunch about it, they remained skeptical, although they ultimately followed my lead. That's not really important, though. For what it's worth, I was right, and the horde really was coming out of the Southern Wood.

But then, the unexpected happened.

Those fox twins...

In the original story, they should have been back in the village, preparing for the festival. I was completely caught off guard. The original story said nothing about the twins being out here, fighting the pack of monsters on their own. In fact, the story would be over and done if they died here... And then there's...

"I could've sworn you were heading toward the Northern Wood, so why are you here?"

She's got a grip on her!

I'm pretty sure the older sister's name is Claire. She seems pretty hostile for some reason. I can't help but notice the glare hidden behind her obviously fake smile. Or Miku, fidgeting nervously behind her sister. She's adorable, just as cute as ever. No wonder she's my favorite. It's odd, though. Claire shouldn't be acting this hostile toward me, according to the original story. She's the type of girl who's strong-willed with a bubbly and energetic personality...

It seems like we're veering further off course...

As we stood there, our smiles growing increasingly strained, Miku's stomach let out a loud rumble.

Aww! She's too cute! Even her tummy rumbling is adorable! I wish I was her grumbly tummy! Just look at her with her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, hugging her silvery tail in her arms, her ears drooping... My god, she's an angel!

I couldn't stifle an odd noise of endearment.

As if following her sister's lead, Claire gave Miku a hug. The two stood huddled together, talking quietly and giggling.

What a sight. You are a blessing from the heavens...

I can't say that, though. We have to move on to the next plot point now that we've *saved* the village, just like in the game.

"At any rate...let's head back to the village together, shall we?"

"...Sure, let's do that."

Huh? Why did Claire respond? I was asking Miku! And then she had the nerve to casually push me forward! H-Hey! I want to get close to Miku, not you!

She is pretty strong, though. You'd never think she grew up in a normal village like this one. There's no doubt about it; Claire definitely works out. And not only that, her magical ability seems stronger than it should be as well. Miku, too. It's a casual observation since I can't see their stats directly, but in the original story, when we first meet, neither girl knows the first thing about battle. Although they're not quite on the same level as us, their fighting prowess is still considerably higher than it should be.

There's something weird going on for sure. This isn't the world I know. Well, the names are the same, and so are their looks and character traits. I'm well aware that the end product is oftentimes not quite the same as the planned material, but the various races, the towns and villages, the locations, even Rinny and Macro, are all as they should be according to the game manual. But not me. If I'm an exception...

...Could it be? Are these two girls the same as me?

Yeah... That has to be it. If I'm a Reborn, then it makes sense there would be others like me. No point in getting all smug about feeling special.

Yeah, that makes perfect sense.

It's clear as day that these two are here when they shouldn't be, and they possess personalities and abilities that they shouldn't have according to the game manual. I have a feeling Claire was reincarnated like I was. Call it another hunch.

Miku's mental capabilities seem to align with the guide, though. Being sisters, I'm sure Claire filled Miku in on everything she could. Claire's the one who's acting completely out of character, after all. She should be falling for Rinny, but instead, she's falling for me. Claire should be the rival character for Rinny's story route.

Is it possible that she's suddenly my rival on this route? Or is she into my character that much that she's ignoring the original story?

I can't get too overly optimistic about this. After all, I'd be a real dummy to

think she'd have any interest in me at all, considering her clear hostility. So, what then? There's only one answer. Judging from how much she seems to dote on Miku, it's clear Claire is an overprotective older sister! And she doesn't want to simply hand Miku over to me! Yep, that makes sense! That's why she didn't bat an eye at Rinny or Macro, but instead honed in on me. I get it, but...

"You're both so sweet," Miku says in her angelic voice.

What?! That's what she's supposed to say to me! Rinny, Macro... How could you?! If only Claire hadn't messed things up! Well, fine. If that's what she wants, then I'll play her game. There's no way I'll lose. I will get Miku to fall in love with me and give her eternal happiness, no matter what! And I'll make sure she doesn't go down the path to her own doom. I refuse to fall for the heroine. I might be Ektor, but I'm not that Ektor. My future is in my hands. I'm still not exactly sure what Claire's endgame is, so I'll happily observe for now and bide my time. I'll come up with a better plan once I figure out what's going on.

I slap my cheeks lightly as newfound confidence surges through my body.

[Miku]

WE'RE heading back to the village when I suddenly realize something. The mountain of monster corpses we're about to leave behind!

Why didn't I think of it sooner?

"Uh, shouldn't we do something about those corpses?" Frazzled, I mention it to the others, only to be met with Rinny's nonchalant response.

"Our job was to take care of the monster horde—we made sure to clean up after ourselves. We're professionals, after all."

"You mean I cleaned up after us, you oaf. You didn't lift a finger," Macro interjects moodily.

"Don't get so hung up on the details, you snarky brat."

"You're the one trying to mooch off the hard work of other people."

"You wanna fight?!"

And those two are at it again.

“But when did you have the time to clean up?” Trying to stop their argument before it gets too heated, I quickly pipe up, inquiring about the mess. “We started back toward the village as soon as we took out the horde, and there were a lot of corpses!”

“Well, it’s not really a secret, but...wanna hear something neat?” Macro asks.

Thank goodness! They stopped fighting to answer me. I’m sure they’ll be picking on each other again before long, but at least for now, their attention is focused on me. Although that, in itself, is a little terrifying.

“Sure, I would love to hear about it if you’ll tell me,” I say.

Seeing how earnest I appeared to be in wanting to hear what he had to say, Macro turns his attention away from Rinny.

Whew!

As Macro slowly walks forward, the soil begins moving around his feet, almost as if it was alive!

“I made a pact with the earth spirits, which means I can use the power of the earth to return dead bodies back to the soil. Everything will be cleaned up before you know it.”

“Wow... But what do you mean by spirits?”

He explained it all in a matter-of-fact way, but what are these spirits?

I don’t have a clue. Confused, I look to Rinny, silently pleading for help with my eyes. As if able to pick up on my unspoken thoughts, he adds a bit more information.

“Macro’s a dwarf. Each race has their own specific magical abilities, and in his case, dwarves are able to use this type of natural magic because of a pact made between them and the earth spirits. You’ve never heard about it before?”

“He’s a dw-dwarf?!”

I’m more surprised about him being a dwarf than the spirit stuff. I’ve only ever heard about dwarves in stories. Claire mentioned them to me at some point, but I hadn’t realized they were an entire race. I wonder if Claire realized Macro’s a dwarf.

“Rinny, you talk too much,” Macro said in a low voice.

“Oh, sorry, but it’s not that big of a deal for you, right? You dwarves are a rare race, but you’re strong enough to fend for yourself if anybody gets any funny ideas.”

Oh, right... Rare races are usually targeted more often by good-for-nothing humans. Although demi-human trafficking is, for the most part, not allowed, there are rumors of it happening often in the shadows of society. That’s why Claire always warns me to be careful.

“U-Um... I promise I won’t tell anyone about you. So, I’d be grateful i-if you wouldn’t tell anyone about me, either. Let’s keep this between us,” I say but feel the words drying up in my mouth.

After all, the two of them are pretty gruff looking. Rinny is pretty rough and tumble, while Macro is a man of few words but is always, somehow, in a mood... A part of me knows that neither are really bad guys. They are living proof to me that I should not judge others based on appearances alone. Still, it’s impossible to completely ignore their overt abrasiveness!

I wait for an answer, growing more anxious by the moment, before Macro finally speaks up, expressionless as always. “Fine. A shared secret. That good with you?”

“Oh. Uh, yeah.”

What a relief!

I’m glad I had the courage to ask. I can move forward now without any regrets, and as a bonus, the tension between us seems to have lifted as well.

“You’re pretty quiet, but you can speak your mind when you need to!”

“Ow!”

“Uh, sorry.”

Rinny slapped my back without warning, and my tail stuck straight up in surprise! I guess he doesn’t fully understand how strong he is. Still, oddly enough, I don’t feel anxious at all, perhaps because the tension in the air is gone. I wonder why?

Perhaps they'd simply been wary of us? It was odd that we'd gone after the monsters all by ourselves. Anyone would be suspicious! Knowing they finally let their guard down around me makes me happy, although I still don't fully understand why they suddenly feel more comfortable around us.

"You're not a very good liar, are you?" Rinny asks with a grin while I'm trying to figure out the reason for the shift in the atmosphere between us.

"Huh? Why do you say that?"

I look at them quizzically while Rinny tries to hold back a laugh in response.

What's with the odd question? How can he tell?!

As my mind struggles with this seemingly nonsensical conversation, Rinny throws his head back and laughs, unable to hold back his merriment any longer.

"Ahahaha! It's written all over your face! That's why we don't have to act so cagey around you."

Oh! So that's why!

I'm suddenly overcome with embarrassment over how transparent my emotions are. Written all over my face? Argh, my cheeks are heating up again! Still, I'm pretty happy they feel comfortable around me... But also unbelievably embarrassed!



AFTER arriving back at the village, the three guys split off, saying something about going to pay a visit to the village elder. They have to tell the elder about the monster horde, which is why they came here in the first place. Before heading off, they promise us, however, that they'll only reveal the full details of what happened to the village elder.

"We don't want to make everyone worry needlessly," Ektor proclaims while giving a hardy chuckle. And I can't help but feel truly grateful for his concern. It will ultimately be up to the elder whether to evacuate the village or not, but I'm sure he'll arrive at the same conclusion I did: Ektor really cares about our village and the people in it!

"Hey, Claire? You know how we killed a bunch of monsters, right? About the

cleanup..." I say in a hushed tone now that we're alone together again.

She seemed worried that the story was going off course, so I wanted to give her whatever information I could. Of course, I'm not planning on going back on my promise to Macro! Still, Claire's next words surprise me.

"Macro took care of it, right?"

"Huh? You know?!"

I'm shocked. She figured it out so swiftly.

Claire grins at my blatant astonishment before explaining, "I don't remember all the details, but I remember stuff like which characters can wield what sort of magic in battle. Macro stuck out in my memory since his name is such an obvious contradiction to his race."

So, in other words, she had known all along Macro was a dwarf? This storybook really is amazing if it lets you know secrets about others around you.

"What exactly do you mean by his name being a contradiction to his race?" I ask curiously and she giggles.

"Well, macro is a word that means something that's large, but he's pretty small, right? That's all."

My mouth falls open in awe as I gasp in amazement.

I get it now!

That's what was contradictory. Claire's past world sounds so exciting! I'd been listening to all of her stories since I was very young, and I suddenly realize even the parts I thought were too ridiculous to be true probably are. Except for the flying machine that can supposedly transport people and objects through the sky, of course. Still, I wonder if I can tell Macro that Claire knew he was a dwarf from the very beginning? I haven't *really* broken my promise, so it's probably fine. I decide to tell Claire more about our earlier conversation.

"Hmm... I see. So, I have to pretend like I don't know he's a dwarf? Honestly, that was my plan all along, but I'll have to be extra careful not to let anything slip. At least while we're here, in the village. Don't worry!"

According to Claire, the story has changed since the village is now safe, which

also means we won't have to go off with the three guys to the capital... Which also means the time for goodbyes is rapidly approaching. We've all grown fairly close in the short time we've known each other, and a part of me feels sad to see them go so soon.

"We were able to change the future, after all. This was by far the best possible outcome. What a relief! We can continue living a peaceful and quiet life, Miku," she says with a smile, clearly relieved.

Being able to overcome adversity is good, but preventing it from happening in the first place is even better! Still, I feel a touch of uneasiness.



THE festival started as soon as we returned. The village elder also ended up inviting the three guys to stay for the festival, and they all seem to be enjoying it in their own way. I'm glad we could repay them, somehow, although Claire and I try to keep a considerable distance between them and us.

Claire warned me about getting too close, so I do my best to stay away as nonchalantly as possible. She worries too much. Still, the festival is so much fun! As usual, we indulge in so many tasty treats, dance until our feet are sore, and laugh with the other villagers. We're overjoyed by the sense of peace that lays over the village. There's such an air of joviality, you'd never have thought the village had been on the brink of destruction earlier that day.

I love our village. I love seeing the large bonfires set up all around the town. I enjoy dancing the legendary Fox Trot, and occasionally, someone stops by to wish Claire and me a happy birthday. That's right! We're celebrating our coming of age this year. The well wishes from everyone, more so than usual, filled me with joy.

"You two are adults now, huh? Are you gonna stick around this village forever?"

"Of course! That's the plan."

The question comes from our neighbor, an older lady, and Claire answers without hesitation. Leaving the village is completely unthinkable. Claire's story follows us as we leave the village, but with the story diverting onto a different

path, that's no longer happening.

We'd spent so much time and effort into our training, however, it didn't make sense to stop. It only makes sense to keep training and growing stronger, so the next time danger threatens our village, we'll chase it away ourselves. We wanted nothing more than to give back to the people who'd raised us.

The sun begins to quietly set, and the adults are beginning to get rowdy. Some folks will continue drinking to their heart's content until the sun rises the next morning, most likely, while others who want to get some sleep will head home, prepared to clean things up tomorrow.

We're usually part of the going home crowd, but before we can leave, our parents appear in front of us, asking to talk. They both look uncomfortable. Did they prepare some speech for us now that we're adults? We both straighten up and turn to face them.

"First of all, welcome to adulthood. I can't believe how grown up you both are."

"Thank you, father."

"Thanks, dad!"

Both our mom and dad smile gently at our words before nodding. Our parents are both hardworking and kind. However, their smiles quickly fade. What's wrong? It seems serious, whatever it is. I feel worry begin to gnaw at me as I wait. Our dad looks at Claire and then at me before speaking once more.

"It seems the both of you have grown quite strong recently."

"Y-You noticed?"

"Of course."

We both gasp in surprise at his words. I glance over at mom, who's simply watching, smiling quietly.

"We're your parents, right? We're always watching you. How could we not notice?"

"Mom..."

We thought we'd been so careful, not wanting to make them worry, and yet they knew everything anyway. Not only that, but they'd watched over us from a distance without saying a word. I feel a lump rise in my throat. This is the first time I've felt such overwhelming love for them.

"We heard what happened from the village elder. That you helped exterminate the monster horde."

"Huh? Uh? H-How...?!"

Did Ektor and his friends tell our parents what happened? Even after promising not to say anything...

The two of us begin combing the crowd for Ektor and his friends.

"Calm down. Don't blame those three. They came here for work, and as such, they had an obligation to tell the elder what happened, and he decided to tell us himself."

Ugh. So that's what happened.

I instantly feel bad for doubting Ektor and the other two guys for even a second! They really had kept their word and only talked to the elder. Catching the guilty look on Claire's face, I know she had the same thought I did.

"With that said, we were in the wrong for not believing you when you warned us of what might happen. We deeply regret it, and we're very sorry," Dad apologizes.

I'm flustered seeing them both look so dejected, especially dad, whose gaze is lowered in shame.

"Don't worry about it, I know what I said was pretty unbelievable," Claire responds while waving her hand awkwardly in the air as if to punctuate her statement.

I understand how she feels. Having our parents stand before us, staring at the ground sadly, is a little too much. But the fact they're able to apologize for their mistakes proves how trustworthy and reliable they are. I feel proud to have them as parents.

"With that said...", Dad continues. "Why don't the two of you take a break

from the village for a while?”

Both Claire and I freeze at that suggestion. *Did he really just say what I think he did?*

“This strength of yours is going to waste in a peaceful place like this. If you go out into the wide world, you’ll have a greater opportunity to put your newfound abilities to use.”

Abilities? But we hadn’t trained this hard for an unseen future! We’d been training to protect the village so we could stay here...

“Huh? W-Wait a minute. You want us to leave the village?” Claire asks in shock.

“We’re not saying forever,” Mom says, backing Dad up. “Of course, you can come back anytime you want. But the two of you are still so young, and all we’re saying is it’d be nice for you to experience things outside of the village. If you’re strong enough to protect yourselves, then it shouldn’t be a problem. Plus...”

We’re both struck speechless by what mom says next.

“Those three young men who helped take care of the monsters? They asked if you two would like to join their guild. I’d feel much better knowing you’re out there with them. This is an amazing opportunity for you both!”

Those nice young men? I’m not sure if that’s how I’d describe them. They didn’t say anything about wanting us to leave with them or join their guild. What’s going on? I glance over at Claire only to see her standing there, her mouth gaping open.

Say something, Claire!

“It’s a mid-tier guild, meaning your reputation would be secured, and you’d be able to make some money as well. You’d be able to make a decent living,” Dad says.

“I want you both to explore what the world has to offer and come back with marvelous stories to tell!” Mom exclaims. “It’ll give us all something to look forward to, since we hardly ever leave the village.”

“There’s so much out there,” Dad continues. “A world totally different from a quiet country life.”

“Plenty of delicious food, too,” Mom adds.

“Maybe you could bring us some back.” Dad winks.

It’s almost as if they forgot we were there as they continue talking. *Wh-What?* A part of me had been so relieved knowing our time with those three guys was coming to an end... I suddenly feel intense pressure coming from right next to me. I slowly turn my head to find Claire’s face twisted into a fearsome mask of anger!

“Ektor, huh? Clearing away the obstacles impeding our departure... He really knows what he’s doing!”

“C-Claire, you’re scaring me...”



I feel trapped between my parents' delighted chatter and my sister's terrifying aura.

Wh-What should I do?

The situation's quickly devolving in a way I never could have imagined. Are we really going to leave the village?! There's no way we can say no now that our parents are completely onboard. It's always been like this with our parents. And since I know their intentions are good, it's easy enough for me and Claire to get swept away in their plans.

Ahaha... I wonder what will happen next?



"PLEASE take care of yourselves. And try not to cause any trouble!"

"Make sure to get in touch with us from time to time. Come back for the next festival!"

And so, here we are. I'm standing next to Claire as we say goodbye to our parents. A part of me feels sad... Although a part of me is too preoccupied with Claire, standing next to me with her cheeks puffed out in annoyance!

"Leave everything to us. We'll be sure to take great care of your little princesses."

The source of her annoyance is Ektor, beaming happily and cheerfully promising our parents he'll watch out for us. According to Claire, this is all a deviously crafted plan by Ektor to get us to follow the original story.

Having successfully saved the village from destruction and diverted the story onto a different path, she's clearly disgruntled at not knowing exactly what Ektor is up to. Is it possible he has no ulterior motives at all? If she just calms down, she'd realize this is a pretty nice deal.

For starters, it's not every day that someone from a small village like ours can just head off to a large city like we're about to. Without enough money saved up, you'd quickly become lost, homeless, and hungry. If you can't defend yourself, you'll quickly become monster chow.

Although Claire and I are, more or less, strong enough together, we don't

have any savings. Without the guarantee of a stable source of income in the city, there's no reason to go. It'd be one thing if we were so poor that we had to go off looking for work, but that isn't the case here.

Still, as long as you have food, clothing, and shelter, then you have much better prospects in the city than in a small village. The best thing of all is the endless opportunities that await us. I was willing to give it a shot, considering I can get over my fear of big city life... Or at least, that's what I accidentally told Claire yesterday. Knowing my careless choice of words might've partially led to her present grumpiness makes my stomach turn just thinking about it.



“YOU really want to go, Miku? Ugh!” Claire sighed when I told her yesterday. “Fine. Okay. The story's different enough now, I guess. Yep, it'll be fine, I'm sure. I'm coming, too! Ugh, for gosh sakes! Ektor, you jerk!”

Claire finally decided to do the exact thing she'd been fighting so hard to avoid. How could I not feel guilty?!

“I-It'll be okay, Claire. I promise I'm only thinking about myself! I'm not in love! Okay?”

I hoped my words might help calm her down, but...

“You're such a doofus, Miku. You're so sweet and the type of person anyone would fall for. Which is why I can't let my guard down, not even for a second!”

Ugh! She doesn't trust me at all! I know I'm oblivious, but still!



AS I remember our conversation from the night before, I sneak a peek at Ektor and our eyes lock. He caught me looking! He smiles at me, and I once again can't help but notice how perfectly chiseled his features are. He's just so gorgeous! Suddenly, several strands of pink hair float in front of my eyes. It's Claire's long, silky hair.

“Now that that's out of the way, let's hurry up and get a move on,” she urges.

“...She's right,” Ektor says after a pause. “Everyone ready?”

Claire's trying to block my view. Her tone is cold, as if trying to pick a fight.

The sparks aren't just flying from Claire alone, either; they seem to be coming from Ektor as well. What's with those two? Are they just fundamentally incompatible? It seems pretty rude to treat him like that after he went out of his way to help us. I know she's simply protecting me in her own way, but I just wish she wasn't quite as harsh.

"Er... Well, then. Dad, Mom, we'll be back!" I say to our parents.

This might be the most awkward departure ever, but since we probably won't see our parents for a while, it's important we say our goodbyes. Our parents wave as they watch us head off, smiling softly. I feel a little sad, but neither my parents nor I ever stop smiling.

"So, are we going to just walk all the way there?"

"Of course not, we'll be taking a Beast Buggy."

The question slips from my mouth, which is quickly met with Macro's immediate answer. He then goes on to describe what a Beast Buggy is. I feel myself grow excited at the mere idea of riding on something I've never heard of before. According to Macro, a Beast Buggy is basically a carriage, where we sit with our luggage, while a creature of some sort pulls us. Up until then, all I'd ever seen were carriages pulled by horses.

My heart pounds with excitement as we continue east on foot, and it's not long before the road opens up into a meadow. Sitting underneath a large tree is an abandoned passenger carriage.

But where's the beast?

Just as the thought crosses my mind, Ektor puts his fingers to his lips and releases a loud whistle. *Fweep!* The shrill sound resonates loudly, carried by the wind to the other side of the meadow.

"It'll just be a moment," Ektor says with a gentle smile.

Less than a minute passes before a pure white Rinos gallops into the meadow. His body is about the same size as the carriage, and a magnificent horn rises from the tip of his nose. Despite his muscular and tough appearance, his eyes hold a glint of kindness.

“A rhino...” Claire mutters.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Oh! Never mind. It’s nothing. It’s just that I’ve never seen a Rinos up close before.”

It seems I’m not the only one taken aback by this magnificent beast; Claire is equally as taken by him. Meanwhile, Ektor walks over to the Rinos, quickly throwing a saddle over his back and reins over his head with the practiced air of someone who’s done this countless times before.

“This guy’s name is Popo,” he explains. “He’s my personal Rinos. He used to be wild once upon a time, but he’s far too beautiful for that, so we became friends.”

“Animals just can’t get enough of you, huh?” Rinny says.

Ektor runs his hand over the Rinos’ hide, seemingly pleased by the comment. It definitely does seem as if animals love Ektor, like Rinny said, but it probably helps that Ektor likes them right back. You attract more flies with honey, as they say.

“Thanks for helping us.” Ektor gives his thanks to Popo, before hitching the passenger carriage to his body. Seeing Popo listen to Ektor and follow his commands without fuss is too adorable for words alone. “Hop on board, ladies. Sorry, Rinny and Macro, but you two will have to walk.” Ektor speaks to his companions as we scramble on board.

“It’s fine. Sheesh. You sound like you’ve lost your mind, talking all sweet like that... Yeah, yeah. I know, I know. Shut my trap before you shut it for me,” Rinny says grumpily.

“Huh? Is there really not enough room for anyone else?” I ask.

“Popo can easily carry more weight, but the carriage is only so big,” Ektor explains. “Rinny is a worg demi-human, and pretty big for one, too, so he can easily carry Macro in his beast form.”

“It’s not actually that far, so don’t worry! Or would you two like a piggyback ride as well?”

He's not joking?! I realize it's probably okay by the way he laughs it off, as if it's no big deal. Still, I can't help but feel a little bad for him...and Macro, too.

"I don't really know how to ride! I'm sorry!" I say.

I'm really bad at anything involving coordinated movement, and it's the only thing I can think to say in response to such a kind offer. I really should have trained harder when I was working on my magic!

"I could probably do it, but I don't want to leave Miku by herself," Claire says.

"She won't be alone," Ektor remarks back.

"Over my dead body," Claire blurts out under her breath, low enough that only I can hear her. Haha...haaa. I feel myself break out into a nervous sweat.

"I'm only joking," Rinny laughs. "You're so funny, taking me seriously, Miku! Now then, let's get moving! Macro, get up there!"

"Ugh... He smells so bad, but I guess I have no choice."

"You have a big mouth for someone with such a small body! Don't make me toss you!"

"Go ahead and try."

"Gosh! Give it a rest, you two!"

They really make quite a racket. I'm prepared to do whatever I can to get along with the three of them. Hard not to be at least a little worried, but with Claire by my side, I know everything will work out in the end. I squeeze her hand in mine, determined to try my best.



OUR trip to the city is relatively uneventful. We do, of course, run into a few monsters along the way, but Rinny and Macro take care of all of them. They truly are amazing. Rinny looks especially cool in his beast form, with his bright red fur, triangular ears, and big, fluffy tail, so similar to our own. Worgs and foxes used to be pretty similar, I tell Claire, who immediately snaps back about how wrong I am.

Wolves, worgs, whatever!

Claire's occasional use of these mysterious-sounding words from her previous life usually leaves me scratching my head in confusion.

"We're almost there," Ektor says. "We're going to get off right before the city, though."

"In a big city like this, beasts and domesticated monsters can only enter if they're properly registered," Claire says. "I'm assuming the Rinos isn't?"

"Popo is registered, right?" I ask.

I assume demi-humans can't enter the city in beast form, either. All the rules are in place to keep the city safe. Our village is so small that everyone knows each other, and it's very easy to spot strangers or wild beasts. In a city this large, however, things could quickly get out of hand without proper rules and regulations. But surely Popo, who dutifully carried us all the way here, is registered, right?

Ektor grins in response to my question before answering.

"Popo is definitely registered, so he's allowed in without any issue. However, he can't enter the city while pulling a carriage filled with passengers. That privilege is reserved for the royal family and emergency situations only."

"It's probably so they can properly document exactly who's entering the city. If someone was hidden or riding and an unforeseen situation occurred, it might be harder to deal with later." Claire speaks up after hearing Ektor's response.

I guess she's right. It makes sense no one can ride into the city, aside from emergencies or the royal family. I mean, there'd be a huge ruckus if the king was seen walking around town. And folks in emergencies need to get where they're going, fast.

"Rinny needs to return to his demi-human form before we arrive as well, right?" Claire asks.

"You're right. It's kind of a shame, though. He's so beautiful," I say dreamily.

Rinny's beast form really is breathtaking. It was charming the way the wind blew through and over his shiny red fur, ruffling it.

"Hmph... The only beautiful one around here is you, Miku."

“M-Me?!”

So entranced by Rinny’s appearance, Ektor’s words completely catch me off guard, and I’m unable to hide the surprise in my voice!

B-Beautiful? Does he mean my fur?

He said the same thing when he saw my beast form earlier. A part of me was thrilled at the time, my silver fur being my pride and joy, but hearing him call me beautiful directly to my face makes me even happier. I’ve heard the same compliment from others in our village, but to hear it from Ektor, who is, himself, spectacular, makes my cheeks blaze with warmth!

“Hey! Stop flirting with Miku!”

“C-Claire...” I babble frantically.

She’s way too direct!

Claire slings an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close, before snapping at Ektor. “You’re going to give her the wrong idea, saying things like that.”

“You’re making me look like the bad guy when I’m only saying exactly what I think,” Ektor counters.

“Oh, really? Well, I won’t deny my Miku is both beautiful and adorable!” Claire proclaims.

“Exactly. I agree with you completely,” Ektor says.

“But you aren’t allowed to ever say it out loud!” she snaps at him.

“You’re being ridiculous!”

Eep! What sort of argument is this anyway?! They’re both quickly holding back less and less. How can two people get along this badly? And on that note, is something different about the way Ektor speaks, or is it just me? Maybe this is the real him.

Perhaps he’d gone specifically out of his way to act extra polite and kind around us before? I guess it makes sense. After all, the three of them are part of a mid-tier guild, which means they must take on a wide variety of jobs. Being able to communicate well with others is important, especially for Ektor, the

leader. He's amazing, especially for someone relatively young.

"...We're almost there. Stop flirting and get down," Macro says from on top of Rinny.

"We're not flirting!"

"We're totally not flirting!"

Claire and Ektor snap at Macro at the exact same time. It seems as if the two have, at some point, become friends over their mutual annoyance with Macro. I burst out laughing, wondering if they're friends or enemies.

"Miku? This isn't funny!" Claire says to me.

"B-But it's hilarious!" I giggle.

"It's not hilarious! Urgh! But seeing you laugh makes me feel better... All right, time to get down."

She climbs down from the carriage, her cheeks puffed out in clear annoyance, and I follow right behind her. Honestly, Claire acting all sulky is one of the cutest things ever. Granted, as her younger sister, I'm probably biased.

"What's wrong with you, Ektor? Finally stopped putting on airs?"

"You—! Rinny?!"

Rinny, back to his human form, stands and watches Ektor get down from the carriage, his hands laced behind his head, clearly amused. Ektor, meanwhile, seems annoyed.

So, he really was putting on an act of politeness when around us earlier.

"Well, well! You *were* putting on airs, huh? And now the mask is finally slipping, and your true colors shine forth!" Claire teases.

"Rgh! No! It's just..."

Gosh. Why would Claire say something like that? Assuming anything about someone, even her suspicions that he might be Reborn like herself, isn't great. I notice Ektor sneaking apologetic glances in my direction.

"Thank you for treating us kindly and making sure we weren't afraid, but please don't go out of your way for us. Treat us like you would anyone else,

okay?" I tell him with a smile.

"M-Miku... You truly are an angel..."

An angel?! That's going a little too far!

My cheeks are so flushed, I feel like someone lit my face on fire!

"Stop flirting with her!" Claire shouts angrily, shaking her fists in the air. Unsure exactly how to respond, I simply stand there, wordless.

At the very least, could you two please stop fighting? Pretty please?

Chapter 3 | Finzia City and Lanakiller Guild

“**WELL**, we made it. Welcome to Finzia, our home!” Ektor tells us as he leads us through the main gates, Popo’s reins in hand. It’s not just Ektor who seems in good spirits. Rinny and Macro seem happier than usual as well. It’s clear how proud they are of their city.

Finzia, huh? I guess this is our new home, too, starting today.

“Oh! Welcome back, Guild Lanakiller,” the guard at the gate speaks up, looking over at us. “Who are your new friends?”

Lanakiller?

“That’s the name of our guild.” Seeing my confusion, Rinny quickly tells me that.

Oh, so THAT’S what they’re called. I’ll keep that in mind.

“They hail from that fox village,” Ektor explains to the guard. “We’ll get them registered once we’re settled in, but this should cover them for now.”

“That’s four silver coins for two folks. Thanks a lot.”

Huh? You have to pay to get in? And why did Ektor pay for us?! Claire seems unusually calm, contrary to my inner turmoil. Wait, is she actually...smiling?

“Don’t worry, Miku. It’s only a temporary charge. Once both of us are official guild members, they’ll get the deposit back, since then we’ll be official residents here! We owe them, but for now, they’ll have to make do with a simple thank you since we wouldn’t have been able to get in otherwise,” Claire snorts like having to thank Ektor is the worst thing in the world.

Those two get along like oil and water. It’s hard for me not to crack a wry smile at how poorly they get along. I know full well I shouldn’t fall in love with Ektor, but there’s nothing wrong with simply being friends, right? Claire’s attitude is a bit much, but at least she seems to be showing gratitude...I think? I’m not sure if that got across to him, though.

“Thank you, Ektor,” I say, to make sure he knows we’re grateful. “I’m still not familiar with the rules here.”

I made sure to thank him myself and to let him know we’re ignorant of how things are done here. I don’t want to stay in the dark about stuff if I don’t have to. Ektor went to the trouble of befriending us and bringing us here, so the least I can do is learn more about my new home.

“You can learn as things come up. I’ll be sure to teach you what you need to know too!” Ektor’s lighthearted smile as he answers me is simply too cool. His silky, smooth golden locks make him look like a prince from a far-off country, although, to be fair, I’ve only ever seen princes in books.

I suddenly notice how all the young women around us are looking at Ektor.

His sparkling personality can’t help but draw everyone’s attention! I, more than anyone, know how true that is!

Preoccupied with that thought, I realized we were suddenly in the heart of the city. The bustling streets, so full of shops and houses, causes me to gasp in surprise, my tail wagging from side to side in excitement.

There are just so many people! It seems like such an obvious statement, but I’ve never seen this many people before in one spot, and so many different races, too! How could I not be excited? We’d grown up living in a small village, surrounded by folks just like us. Although I’m not a stranger to other races, there are certainly some I’d never seen with my own eyes until this moment.

“Hey, Ektor. Is it okay if we head on home?” Rinny asks.

“Sure. I have to get Popo settled, so why don’t you take these two with you?”

Ektor goes on to tell us that the stables aren’t too far off and that he’ll be back soon. With a wave goodbye, he heads off with Popo while we start in the opposite direction with Rinny and Macro.

But wait, didn’t Rinny ask to go home?

“Does that mean you all live together in one house?” I turn to ask Rinny, confused.

“Yeah, we’re heading back to the guild. That’s where we live, so that makes it

our home, right?”

“Your guild is also your home? Neat,” I respond.

So, they really do all live together. It probably has a lot of advantages. Everyone’s always around in case you need to talk about anything important, and being able to communicate quickly and efficiently is pretty convenient. Plus, I’m sure it’s easier to bond with someone you spend most of your time around.

“Yep. Although, the way you’re talking, you’re acting like this isn’t going to be your home, too,” Rinny points out.

“Oh, yeah? My ho— Wait! WHAT?!” I yelp in surprise, blindsided by his words. As I struggle to keep my voice down, Rinny, temporarily surprised by my outburst, suddenly erupts in peals of laughter.

Huh? Wait! You don’t have to laugh THAT hard!

“Rinny! Stop laughing and explain.” Macro, who’d been silent until now, watches Rinny through eyes tinged with annoyance.

I wish I could look at him the same way. He’s laughing way too hard!

But all he can do is apologize between giggles, his explanation quickly going nowhere. I huff, puffing my cheeks in frustration, and with a disgruntled sigh, Macro takes over.

“Our guild is actually fairly spacious. In other words, we have plenty of rooms. More than enough to accommodate the two of you.”

“Haha! Right, right! There are a couple of common areas where we can spend time together, but also private rooms with locks, so there’s no need to worry,” Rinny finishes, a bit teary-eyed from all the laughter.

I see. When they’d mentioned home, I’d envisioned the house I’d lived in until now. Our house only had two bedrooms and a living room. We didn’t even have locks on our front door, much less our rooms! Country and city life really are very different. I guess that’s partly why I’d been so flustered by the idea of us all living together in one home.

As I idly begin imagining what it might be like to live with three men, none of

whom I know that well...

Ugh! I'm blushing again!

"Don't worry. If anyone tries to sneak in, we'll get 'em!" Rinny boasts. "The folks 'round here aren't stupid enough to mess with us anyway."

So, there's no need to worry about outsiders? Still, this will be the first time I'll be living together with strangers, let alone of the opposite sex, and I can't help worrying a little.

I can't bring myself to say anything about that, though, as Rinny chatters on about how he'll keep us safe with a carefree smile, patting my head all the while.

Be a little gentler, Rinny!

"You really are a thick-headed oaf, Rinny. At any rate, feel free to use any of the gadgets we have in the house," Macro speaks up as he slips past us without making eye contact. I glance over at Claire and we grin at each other.

"Despite his unfriendly display, Macro really is a nice person deep down," Claire says.

This must be something else related to the game. I guess Macro is supposed to be kind and considerate. His aloofness is pretty off-putting, but I'd already told myself not to judge people by how they initially appear. Granted, I'm not about to believe everything Claire tells me about these so-called game mechanics and character profiles, but making unfair assumptions about others isn't great either. I have to be more careful.

"And here we are," Rinny says. "Hey, wait! Where are you two going? That's one house too far!"

"Come back a few steps," Macro calls out to us.

"Huh?"

"What?!"

If not for Macro grabbing hold of our shirts and yanking us back, we might have walked right past the house.

This can't possibly be it... This place?!

"This is our guild! Welcome to our home and the Lanakiller guild!" Rinny says with a lot of pomp and gusto.

This is more like a giant mansion than a home!

I stand beside Claire, my mouth gaping open in shock as I stare at the house before me.

Wh-Who are these guys?! What kind of mid-tier guild can afford a place this large?!

I snap back to reality and quickly look over at Claire. She has the same dumbfounded expression on her own face. I guess this is a shock to her as well. Was it not in her so-called game?

"You seem really surprised, Claire," I whisper to her. "I thought you knew all about them?"

"I can't remember every little detail..." she whispers back. "Regardless, it's impressive. I wasn't expecting anything like this!"

After finally calming down, we step inside the mansion, following Rinny and Macro while whispering quietly to each other.

So, Claire only remembers general information about the game, the general mechanics, the character profiles, and the story. I hadn't realized she didn't know everything about it.

I can't help but giggle as she stares in wide-eyed amazement while looking around the inside of the mansion. She's muttering to herself under her breath, and I catch snippets like, "I remember seeing this place before!" and "I get it now! I didn't realize it looked like this!" as if this wasn't her first time here. It was odd, considering we'd never been in this city before.

"With all that said...it's pretty dusty," Claire remarks loud enough for the other two to hear.

"Because of how big it is, cleaning is a chore and a half," Rinny says.

"We usually stick to just cleaning the kitchen and living room, plus our individual bedrooms," Macro explains.

Dust coats everything like a thick blanket, from the main entrance to the living room. The space seems fairly well ventilated, but I quickly understand what Rinny meant when he said cleaning was a chore. The sheer size of the mansion means they have their work cut out for them. Considering they have to keep the guild running as well, it's clear there's simply not enough time in the day to get things done and keep the place clean. I make a mental note that this should be one of the first jobs we do for them.

"At the very least, you should try and get this main hallway into a more presentable state, you know?" Claire says. "First impressions are pretty important, after all."

Seeing Claire's look of anguish at the mountains of dust, Rinny scratches his head awkwardly, chuckling. "That's true...although most job requests are sent through the mail. Honestly, it got this bad mainly because we never get visitors. No one sees this mess but us."

Considering we lack the necessary power to fully transform into humans, I know all this dust will end up getting trapped in our fur, making it grimy and gross. Both me and Claire prefer to stay as clean as possible. Claire's ears are laid back in frustration and resignation. I cling to my tail, hugging it close to my body, as we continue further into the mysterious unknown.

I don't want a dusty tail!

"Fine, fine! I guess the first order of business for us is to clean this all up!" Claire declares. "And I won't take no for an answer!"

"That'd be great, actually. A huge help," Rinny says with a grin.

"We're all pretty lousy at tidying up," Macro agrees.

It seems like Claire and I had the same idea!

We exchange glances before nodding emphatically.

We'll do our best! There's no reason for us not to, especially knowing how much it'll help everyone out. I'm sure Ektor won't care, and considering how much they've done for us already, it's the least we can do. By the time I'm done, the entire mansion will be sparkling clean!

We pass through the main hall and open the door to the living room. The living room, in comparison, is neat, tidy, and, more importantly, dust free. I breathe an audible sigh of relief. I really can't stand dust!

"You were right. The living room looks great," Claire observes.

"This is my spot!" Just as we enter the room, Rinny suddenly throws himself onto one of the large couch cushions.

There's a loud thump, and for a moment, I wonder if he accidentally toppled onto the floor.

Whoa! That was loud!

"You dumb ginger! You've got no manners!" Macro chides him.

"What's your problem, you whiny brunette bum! Everything's got a protection spell on it, so it's not like I can break anything. And we all live together now, which means I don't have to act polite anymore."

"It's like you purposefully try to get on my nerves as much as possible."

"I feel the same way about you. All you do is complain and complain!"

"Air-headed jerk!"

"Angsty gloomy gus!"

And they're fighting again. I can't tell if they like or hate each other. Those two are truly something else!

Claire massages her temples, sighing. She glares at the two of them before suddenly speaking up. "I'm going to make us some tea."

With that said, she passes by the two guys, still fighting, leaving our stuff behind, and disappears into the kitchen.

Hey, wait! What about me?!

I'm left standing there, hugging my tail to my chest tightly.

Should I follow Claire to the kitchen? Or should I try to break up their argument? Wh-What should I do?

"Sorry for taking so long, Miku. Those two are a handful, huh? Come on, you

guys! Quit it! You're scaring Miku!"

"Oh! Ektor!"

My savior arrives in the nick of time, sparkling in front of me with his glowingly golden hair!

Thank you...although the way he yells is kind of scary. It doesn't match his appearance at all!

"I'm really sorry. They're always carrying on like this, so try not to let it bother you, okay? Let's put your stuff away and get you settled in. I brought you a surprise."

A moment later, he's smiling down at me, looking nothing short of warm and welcoming. The discrepancy between his mannerisms and his appearance is a bit too much... He escorts me to a chair with a seemingly practiced air. The gesture suits him, making him appear truly dashing. Then he turns to me and hands me a gift bag with a big smile on his face.

He really is prince charming!

"Hey! Get away from Miku!" Claire hisses from the doorway.

"There's no need to get upset. I'm merely trying to make her comfortable. Thank you for the tea, Claire," Ektor says with a sweet smile.

"...Don't get the wrong idea. I made it for me."

"Oh? And yet you made enough for all of us."

"It's a coincidence!"

Now Claire's blushing. She might sound annoyed, but her cheeks are bright red.

Hee-hee! She's so cute. She's even more adorable when she's trying to hide her true feelings.

Even Ektor can't help but chuckle at her obvious reaction.

Good! I was worried about the two of them getting along, but if they can laugh together like this, then maybe everything will be okay, despite Claire's obvious reluctance.

We all take a seat at the table, lined with cups of tea and the bakery treats Ektor brought back with him. Only Rinny remains on his spot on the couch.



“It’s a refreshing sight to see the table surrounded by this many people,” Ektor says, his words warm and sincere.

I guess there’s usually only the three of them. With a table this large, there’s plenty of space to go around.

Rinny and Macro nod in agreement.

Can’t help but think about how lonely my parents must feel, looking at their own kitchen table and seeing the opposite... I should write to them soon and tell them how things are going.

“Since we’re all gathered here, we might as well use this time to talk,” Ektor suggests as we sip our tea. “First of all, I want to explain why we asked you to join our guild.”

“Oh? I assumed it was because you needed more guild members. Plus, you know exactly how powerful we are after that monster incident back at the village,” I say.

Or at least, that was the impression I got from our parents back home. Everything had moved so fast that there’s a very possible chance I missed something, though.

Claire scrutinizes Ektor to see how he reacts to my question.

Don’t glare at him like that! I know Claire assumes, as another Reborn, Ektor wants to follow the story exactly, but we don’t know anything for sure!

According to Claire, in the original story, our village is wiped out and we’re taken in by the Lanakiller guild. In reality, though, we successfully protected our village from destruction. Afterward, Ektor convinced our parents to allow us to join them. I *know* that’s what happened! The night before we left, Claire made a huge fuss about it. I had a rough time calming her down. But why did Ektor do that?

“That’s about right. Well, we originally had no plans of expanding membership past the three of us. We’ve never run into any issues thus far, and everything is simply easier with fewer folks around.” Ektor stares right back into Claire’s distrustful gaze as he speaks.

It's clear the three of them have no trouble finding enough work. They're all incredibly strong and competent. Perhaps the only real difficulty was in keeping the mansion clean, which is an incredibly easy problem to solve. Which means...

"In other words, you must have a specific reason for wanting more guild members, right?" Claire asks the question that's running through my mind.

"Correct," Ektor says in response, beaming with joy, causing her glare to deepen even more.

What's her problem?!

"We're a mid-tier guild now. However, the League of Guilds recently gave us the opportunity to rank up."

"Huh? That's great...!" I can't help but blurt out after hearing Ektor say that.

The fact he'd managed to grow his guild to mid-tier was, in itself, impressive. Establishing a guild is pretty easy, so a lot of folks do, but most end up never advancing past beginner rank. Guilds can't advance to mid-tier without completing a specified number of jobs within a specified time limit. Plus, not all jobs count in the same way; you need legitimate jobs from reputable sources. Add in the guild's reputation over the course of the year and any achievements worth mentioning, and they can finally rank up.

I heard the requirements for making it as a renowned guild are exceptionally rough. At least, that's what the shop owners in town say, so who knows how reliable their word is... Generally speaking, only those guilds deemed reputable by others can advance to mid-tier or beyond, so I assume crossing that barrier must have been really tough. This is why most people tend to join pre-existing guilds instead of forming their own. There's less at risk personally, and it's a lot easier.

However! That's neither here nor there. To get a personal invitation to rank up from the League of Guilds themselves! They must have proven themselves in a variety of ways as a mid-tier guild, making it all the more impressive!

"Although, there's one requirement to ranking up that we're missing. Something we've never done before." Ektor rests his chin in his hands, a vague smile playing on his lips as he speaks.

“Only one?” I ask.

They’d met all the other requirements, leaving only one obstacle blocking their way to top-tier status.

“I don’t really care about leveling up myself,” Rinny tosses out there.

“Huh? You dumb ginger!” Macro snaps at him. “How can someone who loves money as much as you do say something like that? The rewards we’ll get from high-ranking jobs will be significantly better. You’d seriously turn your nose up at that?”

“The only penny-pincher around here is you.”

“Shut up, you irresponsible slob.”

Rinny and Macro are at it again.

S-So, in other words, higher ranking guilds get higher ranking rewards? The jobs themselves will probably get more difficult as well, but they all seem strong enough to take on anything.

“We’ve already talked about this,” Ektor says, stopping their fight. “With Miku and Claire joining our guild, we’re going to need more money. This invitation comes at the perfect time.”

“Um...so this is kind of our fault?” I ask, my tail drooping.

They would naturally need more money to cover our expenses. We were planning on working anyway, since we’d need money no matter what, but hearing him say it like that makes me feel a little guilty.

“No, that’s not it!” Ektor hurriedly denies it. “Like I said, this invitation comes at literally the perfect time. In other words...”

Perfect timing for what?

He waves his hand in front of his face, as if shooing away my concerns, before delving into an explanation. “The only requirement holding us back is our lack of members. There’s only the three of us, right? In order to rank up, we need at least ten members. In that sense, having the two of you join our guild will help a lot toward finally meeting our goal,” he says with a smile.

I see. They don't have enough guild members. This really is perfect timing, then. Plus, we can use the extra money to cover our share of the expenses! We can thank them for helping save our village by joining their guild. Granted, everything depends on our actions from here on out, but I'll do the best that I can!

"With us on board, you only need five more members, right? Did you have anyone in mind?" Claire asks as she sets her teacup down on the table.

Oh, that's right. Even with the two of us, we still need to find five more to make the total ten.

"Yep. There are some folks I've been meaning to ask, but haven't yet."

"Is there still enough time for that...?" Claire cocks an eyebrow at him.

He still hasn't asked yet? How can I not be a little worried?

Rinny, who's been watching us from his favorite spot on the couch with his legs crossed, suddenly pipes up, laughing. "Don't worry! It'll be fine! We won't take no for an answer!"

"You're going to force them?!"

"Rinny, don't say it like that..." Ektor face-palms while muttering under his breath while Claire flinches in response to Rinny's words.

What'll we do with him? He really is crude in a variety of ways, and yet, at the same time, strangely persuasive. Still, he won't ACTUALLY intimidate anyone into joining the guild...right?

"We know their weaknesses and can use them against them."

"Macro, I didn't ask for a follow-up on his statement," Ektor sighs.

Macro is the scariest one here! What the heck do they mean by "weaknesses"?! These two are a bit too much for me sometimes! Or is this how most people think?

I begin worrying about my ability to make it in this city.

"Just ignore them. Let me explain who we're planning on inviting." Ektor clears his throat noisily, trying to get the conversation back on track.

That's right. It would be nice to know who's potentially joining us. We can figure out the specifics later. Honestly, the more I think about it, the more worried I get!

Claire has her usual scowl on her face, but Ektor ignores it as he continues, "Basically, I'd planned on recruiting the remaining five members from people who already live here in the city and are currently guildless. Everyone has their own personal prerogatives and businesses, so I'm willing to let them continue doing whatever they want."

"Huh? Are you sure that's okay?" Claire asks.

"Of course, as long as they're available to help us out when we need them. Whenever we require extra help, we renegotiate the reward. Considering more advanced jobs will net advanced-level pay, they'd be pretty dumb passing up an opportunity like this one."

Since pay from guild jobs alone wouldn't be enough to support someone, it explains why Ektor is fine with them continuing their side businesses. In my opinion, it seems like a lot to work two jobs simultaneously, but if he doesn't always need help, then it shouldn't be too bad.

"Everyone on my list has helped us before, so our working relationship shouldn't change too much from how it is already," Ektor continues. "That's why I doubt we'll have to worry about them saying no."

From the way he puts it, it sounds like these are old friends of theirs. It should be fine, I guess.

"So, instead of forcing them to lend a hand, you'll simply get more money to pay them for helping out..." Claire summarizes. "Is that about, right?"

"More or less."

He really thought this through. It sounds like a win-win situation in theory, but I can't help but feel weird about forcing people to work when we need them.

"We've been acting pretty recklessly lately. I have a feeling a lot of folks will balk at the thought of stepping up to help us out."

I'm about to nod in agreement when Rinny pipes up, increasing my worries

with his lighthearted laughter.

Acting recklessly?! What sort of jobs have they accepted recently? Will this really be, okay? I have to believe it will be, somehow!

After listening to exactly what sort of people the mystery five are, we end our impromptu meeting for the day. The three guys want to head back into the city to report on the monsters they took down and gather supplies. They seem pretty busy for having just arrived home. Rinny lazily gets to his feet, clearly annoyed at having work to do. Oh, and of course, Macro is right there next to him, scowling angrily.

Are they about to fight again? I hope not!

“Miku and Claire, please try and relax. I’m sure you’re both exhausted from traveling such a long way, and to a strange city, no less. Aside from our bedrooms, the mansion is yours to explore. Make yourselves at home. Our home is your home.”

Rinny and Macro left together, shooting angry glares at each other the whole time. Ektor spoke to us briefly on his way out, before leaving Claire and I alone in the mansion.

“That’s all well and good...”

“But there’s no way we can sit around doing nothing.”

Claire giggles as I finish her sentence. It’s clear we’re on the same page.

“They took us in, so the least we can do is clean the place up,” I say.

“That’s right. And start on making dinner, too. For all the help and kindness they’ve shown us, this is the least we can do. Plus, I hate feeling like I owe anyone anything.”

Claire has a stern tone to her voice, but I know a part of her wants to cheer them up after they come home, tired and worn out.

Come on, Claire—be more honest with yourself!

“Hey, Claire?” I glance at Claire as I speak. “Those three aren’t that bad. Rinny and Macro might fight constantly, but it’s clear they’re good people at heart, and I know Ektor is looking out for us. I’m not in love with him, so you don’t

have to worry... I just wish you were a little more friendly with them. It's kind of a shame that you're so standoffish all the time."

They went out of their way to take us in, so the least we can do is be a little friendlier.

"I know that," she says, pouting. "I know they're all good people, and, in fact, I know exactly what type of people they are—if they really match their profiles down to a T. However, knowing that Ektor might be a Reborn means I have a hard time letting my guard down around him. If he really is one, then why is he so intent on following the original storyline? It doesn't make sense. It feels like he wants to protect us...but I don't understand why he wants to take us down the path that'll lead to our doom."

Now I get it. Claire's suspicions are all based on her memories from her previous life. It's easy for me to be so carefree since I don't have any preconceived notions, while Claire is left to bear the brunt of the worrying. I wish I could help. I want to support her in some way, as she struggles to take this all on by herself. If only I could lighten her load.

"We can't think of a logical explanation yet for any of this, but we shouldn't assume anything bad either, right? For now, we should try to get used to our new life here. Can we really fit in as members of a mid-tier guild? That should be our main worry for the moment," I try to convince her. "Maybe, after spending time with the three of them, we'll learn things we wouldn't have otherwise."

Our everyday life has changed along with our surroundings. Throw in all this "otherworldly game" mumbo-jumbo, and she's just asking for a mental breakdown. I gently clasp Claire's hand in both of mine.

"And if anything goes wrong, we'll get through it together. Okay?"

That's how we've dealt with all our problems up until now. We always have each other, and together, I believe we can deal with any problem thrown at us. As it was, as it always will be.

"Yeah... Yeah, you're right, Miku. Thanks."

Her ears, folded back against her head, and her droopy tail, suddenly perk up.

She even laughs!

Good! A smile suits you much better than a frown, Claire!

“Okay. With that out of the way, let’s start cleaning!”

“Yeah!”

She raises her fists to the sky with a shout of encouragement, and I copy her before we burst into giggles. Claire seems to be in a pretty good mood.

“Don’t worry! I’ll always be here to protect you, Miku!”

“Huh? We don’t have to worry about that for now...”

“I’ll protect you from the dusty mansion and from the game story! I’ll take care of everything!”

Huh? She doesn’t seem to get it at all! We’re supposed to put that aside for now, but she isn’t! Come on, Claire! You’re still taking this all on by yourself! I guess I’m a little too dumb to help in any way, but I wish my opinion meant something, anything! ...I guess all I can do is keep an eye on her and try to stop her if she gets out of control.

With my tail all bushy from renewed determination, I get ready to eliminate every speck of dust in the house!

It really will be sparkling clean if I have anything to say about it!

Claire heads off to start with our bedroom, leaving me in charge of the main hall.

“I don’t want to sleep covered in dust, so our room is top priority!” she shouts triumphantly before dashing off. I agree completely, which is why I’m content to leave it in her capable hands.

There’s a reason why I’ve taken on the largest task, the halls. You see, I can use magic to help me out!

“Light magic! Cleanse!”

My magic is light based. This type of magic, originally intended for purifying evil spirits and impurities, is also helpful in cleaning stuff. I’m sure I’d get a lot of strange looks for using my magic like this, but it’s incredibly helpful. If you’ve

got it, flaunt it!

Wings of light spread from my back as I fold my arms in front of my body. *Let's get every nook and cranny of this hall spotless!* A ball of light forms in my chest before spreading out to fill every corner of the hall. Light can easily get around any physical obstacle! It can find any speck of dust, no matter how small or tucked away it is!

"Yep. Looking good!"

Just as expected, every last speck of dirt and dust that covered the hall moments ago is gone, and everything is clean! Even the window glass sparkles! Hee-hee! Now I just have to do the same in every room. Our bedroom can wait until Claire finishes moving the furniture in and arranging our stuff the way she likes. For now, I'll focus on the living room and bathroom. Considering Ektor had said we could go wherever we wanted besides their bedrooms, I skip them for now. If they want me to clean their rooms, I can always do it later.

"Too bad my magic doesn't help with organizing things. Ugh...there's so much stuff," I groan.

I can use magic to clean, but I have to use my own hands to put stuff away. I have no idea what belongs to who or where it goes, and to make things worse, I'm super uncoordinated. The best I can do is separate everything into piles and wait for the three of them to come back so they can take over.

After planning everything in my head, I get myself pumped up again. I fold my arms in front of my chest and fly through the mansion. After all, flying is faster than walking! I can't fly around in the middle of the city, but it should be fine in here where no one can see me. Plus, the mansion is so big!

I start with the bathroom, then the living room, and finally, every empty room I pass by, cleansing each, one by one. Finally finished, I head toward our bedroom.

Maybe Claire's all done?

I fly up the stairs and knock on the door to the immediate left while calling her name. "Claire?"

"Come on in!" Claire answers almost immediately.

“How’s it going? Whoa! It’s so big!”

“Right? I was surprised, too! I never expected a room this big! It’s definitely big enough for both of us.”

Ektor had said there were enough rooms for us each to have our own, but honestly, one room here is more than big enough for two people to fit comfortably. There’s more than enough space for another bed, too. I would definitely feel weird staying in a room this big all by myself.

“You brought the cabinet in by yourself? Wasn’t it heavy?” I ask.

“It wasn’t a problem. I brought it in from the room next door, and it’s empty, so it was pretty light. We just need to bring in one more bed, but I can’t do that by myself.”

“Okay, I’ll help. But first... Light magic! Cleanse!”

With the room nicely organized, it’s so clean, it seems brand new! Even Claire seems overjoyed, complimenting my magic skills as her ears twitch happily. She’s so cute!

“Okay, Claire. Time to get the bed!”

“Once we do that, we can start getting dinner ready.”

Giggling to each other, we step into the neighboring room. I’d already cleansed this room, so the bed’s all fluffy and ready to go. There’s nothing better than a clean bed to sleep in. Cheering each other on, we manage to get the bed into our room before breathing a sigh of relief. The room seems a little smaller with two beds in it, but the lack of empty space makes me feel a little better.

“Perhaps I have too much of a tendency to worry about money?” I say.

“That’s normal for commoners,” Claire responds while laughing.

“You can say that again!”

We sit in the room for a moment before heading back downstairs toward the kitchen.

“The bathtub is pretty big, too,” I tell her.

“Really? I guess we can use it at the same time, then.”

“It might be big, but I’m not a kid anymore!”

Claire still likes to take baths with me. For being so mature and grown-up most of the time, she still acts like a little kid sometimes, but that’s what makes her so adorable. Considering we’d just arrived and how worried she’s been this whole time, the least I can do is take a bath with her.

Honestly, I was, and still am, a little worried myself. If nothing else, I can always ask her to join me in the bath. Actually, now that I think about it, is it normal to take baths here? Claire started the practice in our small village, and now everyone does it there. But maybe Ektor and the other guys might get weirded out if I start filling the tub with hot water.

“I’m sure it’ll be no problem!” Claire suddenly holds up her index finger, as if struck by something.

Huh? What is it? I cock my head to the side quizzically as she snickers almost evilly. C-Claire...

“I have a feeling Ektor is used to taking baths. Maybe we can use that information to determine if he’s a Reborn from the same place as me!”

Taking a bath was normal in Claire’s past life. If Ektor has the same habit as Claire, that could mean they’re both Reborns, and possibly from the same country.

“If we’re both familiar with the same game, that makes the possibility even higher. There’s a lot of worlds out there, so it’s impossible to know for sure, but maybe...”

“If Ektor is the same as you, then wouldn’t he also assume we’re like him?” I ask.

“Oh...”

“Wouldn’t he be equally suspicious of us? And yet, he doesn’t act like he suspects anything,” I point out, and Claire folds her arms in thought.

“I really want to take a bath, though...” she mutters to herself under her breath. “If anyone asks, we can say it’s a thing everyone does in our village, or

something like that.”

“I guess that’s true...but Claire, you’re the one who started that trend.”

“He doesn’t have to know that!”

I guess so... It’s just like Claire to take a risk because of her love of baths. And it’s not necessarily a lie. I hate to do it, but sometimes white lies are important.

We continue chatting together happily as we begin prepping ingredients for dinner.



“WHOA! Everything looks so clean!”

We’re busy making dinner when we hear a shocked cry coming from the front door. It’s Rinny.

Hee-hee! All that hard work was worth it!

“It really is amazing... Like a brand-new house! Did you two do all this?” Ektor calls out to us as he enters the living room.

Macro’s eyes are wide open in obvious surprise as he scours every inch of the house.

He’s definitely shocked!

“Is this really our house?” Macro’s reaction is the most amusing of all. I can’t help but snort with laughter.

I’m so happy!

“And what’s that amazing smell?”

“Huh? Did you two even make us dinner?!”

Rinny sniffs the air loudly as he laughs wholeheartedly, while Ektor seems flustered and apologetic. They’re both so easy to read.

“Yeah! We wanted to eat together. Oh! Unless you all had plans already? Or maybe you have allergies?” I ask, worried.

We assumed no one was allergic to any of the ingredients we used, since we found them in the house. But we did make dinner without asking, and I

immediately begin to worry we did something wrong. I cling to my tail anxiously, and the formerly flustered Ektor speaks up immediately.

“We don’t have any plans at all! And we aren’t allergic to anything! I just assumed making all this food would be a huge hassle and was prepared to take you two out somewhere. The fact you already made dinner for us... It makes me really happy! Thank you!”

I feel a huge sense of relief seeing his sparkling prince-like smile. Good! He’s happy. But I’m not the one he should be thanking.

“Um, actually, Claire made most of the food. I’m not that good at cooking...” I admit.

It’s not that I can’t cook at all, but I’m not very good at preparing the ingredients, and I can never get my food to taste the same way twice. I’ve never made any big mistakes, but since I make a lot of small mistakes, it’s easier for Claire or Mom to take over. Claire has a huge repertoire of recipes, and since she’s so good at cooking, she quickly took on the role of chef for our entire family. She claims it’s all based on knowledge from her other life, but just knowing is half the battle, which is why I think she’s so amazing.

“Claire made all this...?” Ektor asks in disbelief.

“What? You didn’t think I could? Just so you know, I’m a better cook than Miku,” Claire snaps at Ektor in response.

Come on! He’s not trying to insult you!

I’m about to open my mouth to try and smooth things over when...

“I never thought that. I was just truly impressed by your skill!”

Before I can, Ektor speaks up, complimenting her.

He doesn’t need my help, after all. Ektor really is warm and caring.

Claire stands there, her mouth hanging open in shock for a moment, before she abruptly turns away and goes back to her cooking.

“I don’t know about that,” she says simply in response.

Come on, Claire! You could at least say thanks or something! Gosh! This isn’t

going well at all. Ektor doesn't seem to mind, but I can't help but be on edge. There's still an uneasy air between the two of them.

"Come on! My stomach's about to eat itself!"

Just as I begin worrying about the situation, Rinny cries out and lightens the mood instantly. And now everyone's ready to eat!

Thank you, Rinny!

As we sit down at the table, the three boys continue talking about how shockingly clean the mansion is now. I'm embarrassed by all the compliments! But Claire only responds with a triumphant "Of course!" her eyes sparkling with glee. I can't get over how much of a cutie she is!

"Miku was amazing!" she gushes. "You wouldn't normally think you could use light magic for something like cleaning, right? Our house is always clean thanks to her! She even helps make the beds and futons all fluffy!"

Claire seems so proud of me, her ears twitching this way and that as she speaks, but I honestly didn't do anything that amazing. All I did was fly around and use some magic. Besides, anyone with light magic can do what I did. I'm so embarrassed...

"Wow. So, the rooms are all clean thanks to Miku's magic?" Ektor asks, sounding really stunned. "That's amazing! The entire mansion is sparkling clean!"

"Uh! Um! I'm really glad you're so happy."

Both Claire and Ektor tend to give straightforward compliments. I'm used to hearing them from Claire, since she gives them to me every day, but hearing those same words from someone I still don't know very well makes me blush. I hug my tail tighter, and Claire and Ektor laugh in response. They're making me feel super uncomfortable! In that regard, they're both pretty similar!

"S-Speaking of which, we cleaned the bathroom, too! So, um, is it okay if we use the tub later?" I try to change the subject in an attempt to escape my discomfort. As soon as I do, Claire turns to me, clearly shocked.

Huh? What...? Oh, no! We talked about this earlier! I wasn't supposed to bring

up the bath at all! I'm s-sorry, Claire!

"Of course, it's fine. Have yourself a nice, long soak," Ektor responds casually, completely ignoring our apparent awkwardness.

"Huh? It's fine? Really?"

Claire, in fact, seems even more confused than before. She stares at him, flabbergasted. I'm sure I look the same way. Not only did he not seem to care, but he also followed it up with, "Have a nice soak." I guess that means he *is* used to taking baths after all.

"It's only fair, considering how much work you put into making this place sparkle. Plus, it's your house, too, so start treating it like one," Ektor chuckles as he speaks, perhaps misunderstanding our confusion as reluctance. Am I relieved? A part of me is, but a part of me is worried, too.

"Well...thank you. But I'm a little surprised," Claire comments.

"Surprised? About what?"

Claire is on edge, but I guess I'm the only one who recognizes that. After all, her stress doesn't show through her words or her actions, but her tail tends to twist around her own thigh. Maybe she's simply trying to figure out what's going on. Ugh... A part of me wants to know, while another doesn't want them to fight! It makes me so edgy!

"I was expecting you all to look more surprised," she continues. "Everyone in our village does it, but sometimes when travelers pass through, they seem confused by the very idea. You guys acted like it was no big deal."

Oh, wow! She straight-up asked them! She even casually brought up how taking a bath is normal where we come from, and she didn't sound awkward at all. She's amazing.

"I get it now. I hate to disappoint, but taking baths is normal for us, too, so it's not weird in the slightest." He answers without sounding even a little upset.

I see. Everyone in this house takes baths, too... Still, what an amazing coincidence!

Claire continues watching Ektor suspiciously.

Hey! Come on! You're being a little too obvious, Claire!

It's blatant enough that even Rinny picks up on it, and he jumps into the conversation.

"When I first heard about him taking a bath, I was like, what the heck are you talking about?!"

So, in other words, baths aren't normal for Rinny? Which means that someone here must have started the household custom.

Claire quickly turns on Rinny, practically biting his head off. "Right?! Who did you first hear about it from, Rinny?"

Probably Ektor, right?

I feel my heart pounding in my chest anxiously, but the answer is not what I expect at all.

"Who? From Macro. Dwarves usually live near volcanoes, which means there are tons of hot springs, right? It's because of him that we *had* to find a house with a bathtub."

"Huh? Macro?"

We're both taken aback. After all, we'd assumed it was Ektor. I didn't realize dwarves took baths!

"Shut up! You're the one with the barbaric habit of eating raw meat. Dwarven habits are far superior."

"What?! Guys like you, sulking around in dank places and acting all high and mighty, are way weirder!"

"Shut up, you air-headed barbarian!"

Aaand they're at it again. They really do fight all the time.

"So, who was the person who started the habit in *your* village, Claire?" Ektor asks. Either he wants to shut the two of them up, or the question just came to mind, but either way, it catches us off-guard. He has both elbows propped on the table, his chin resting in his hands, a soft smile on his lips.

"G-Gee, I'm not sure," Claire says with a swish of her tail. "It just sort of

naturally developed over time!”

“Oh, really?”

“Wh-What?! Don’t gimme that silly grin!”

“Ouch.”

Huh? Things are once again getting heated between the two of them. Macro and Rinny are engrossed in a heated argument, while Claire and Ektor look like they’re about to go head-to-head. And then, there’s me. What am I supposed to do? At a complete loss, I heave a huge sigh and give up, continuing to eat the food in front of me.

It would be a shame to let such good food go to waste after managing to get everyone to sit down for a meal together! I just want everyone to start getting along! We should be friends, right?!

Chapter 4 | The Decisions We Make

[Claire]

I was two years old when memories of my previous life flooded back.

Being just a baby, I barely had any memories of my own. I remember the confusion I felt, finding myself in the body of a toddler. Still having yet to develop a sense of identity, perhaps it's no great loss that I don't remember much from those first two years of life. For all intents and purposes, I was simply a normal two-year-old who'd just begun learning how to speak.

Something happened at the time that sparked those memories. Due to some overzealous frolicking during the harvest festival, I took a tumble and smacked my head on the ground. The earliest memory I have is of the world spinning around me. I remember laying there, face up on the ground, watching the clouds float by through a blue sky and the colorful, fluttering pieces of fabric strung up all around. Our usually bleak village was festooned with color thanks to the festival. I remember seeing the colorful fabric and thinking how much they reminded me of Sports Day flags.

What the heck was a Sports Day flag, to begin with? The rest of my memories quickly followed in one big flood of information, the force of which made me feel as if my head might explode. I passed out, and when I still hadn't awoken the next morning, my parents began to worry.

When I did finally come to, I was far from what I remembered as home. Why was I a toddler? Why did I have fox ears? Everything was a befuddled mess. My parents assumed my confused babbling was due to me falling and bumping my head. Thinking back, I consider it a blessing in disguise that no one thought I was crazy, considering the outrageous things coming from my mouth.

While a part of me was glad my memories had returned, my mind was still that of a two-year-old. It'd still be some time before I could begin to understand anything. I told my parents and Miku about my fragmented memories, and I

tried reenacting the various things I remembered enjoying once upon a time. We had fun taking baths together, and we tried making pudding because I wanted to eat some.

My parents would always say what a strange child I was, but they never scolded me or made me feel bad about any of it. They simply watched over me. Thanks to their almost saintly patience and parental love, I had a comfortable upbringing where I looked forward to every single day.

The next year, I turned three, and my brain had developed enough that I finally remembered everything. Or rather, I had a life-altering revelation.

Not only was this world the same one from the otome game I used to play in my previous life, but my twin sister, Miku, and I were actually rival characters in that game!

I was shocked, but also a little bit sad. I didn't care about my own fate that much. But the heroine gets together with the love of Miku's life, causing her to sink into a deep depression from a broken heart... And thus, leading her to live out the rest of her life alone.

I really don't like that ending, but I know I can change it depending on my actions. To begin with, I don't *have* to fall in love with that guy. Now that I see the world as a game, I don't even view him as a potential love interest. I know that sounds cold, but that's how it goes sometimes. Besides, he's a pretty two-dimensional character. And I was always the kind of gamer who could separate her game love interests from real men!

At any rate!

I'm not important. It's Miku I'm worried about. If Miku doesn't get together with her beloved Ektor...all that awaits her is death. Pretty unbelievable, right? Why is love the requisite for avoiding certain death? I remember screaming in frustration when I first read about it.

The cause of her death is a curse. You see, unlike most people, Miku can only use one type of magic: light. Most people in this world can control multiple elements, but those, like Miku, who can wield only one, are cursed at birth. To be fair, some consider it more of a blessing than a curse.

Because the Goddess of Light loved her a little too much, her power is far stronger than normal. The downside is that she can't learn any other type of magic, and she's cursed with a negative character trait. You know how jealous gods can be. They want solitary devotion more than anything. Loving parents should want what is best for their children, but that's not how the gods and goddesses think. This jealousy between gods is the reason why some *unlucky* few are born with the ability to only use one type of magic.

Miku was born with an extra blessing from the Goddess of Light, and as such, she's cursed with the tendency to get single-mindedly fixated on things. In this case, to love only one person for her entire life. It sounds pretty romantic at first, right? Or at least that's how I saw it in my previous life. Living out your life beside your soulmate sounds great! But what if things don't work out? That's when the curse begins to take effect.

The gods say it's better to die in peace than live in suffering, but that doesn't sit right with me! Especially since it results in Miku potentially losing her love and dying in agony. At the end of the Ektor route, even if the heroine gets the happy ending, Miku still dies of a broken heart. Ektor's route is the only route where Miku's death is absolutely guaranteed! How tragic. Since Ektor's route is the easiest one, most people end up taking it, but there was always an uproar among fans concerning Miku's death.

There's no way I'm letting an innocent young girl like Miku, who has the literal smile of an angel, meet such a devastating fate! I will prevent her death, no matter what it takes.

You see, I'm actually a huge Miku stan! I loved the precious silver-furred fox girl even more than the supposed love interest. And now that I find myself living in that previously imaginary world, it makes even less sense to die over something as stupid as love.

Even now, I can't stop agonizing over it. Being here in the game world means I can't simply sit back and let this injustice happen without a fight. I had just turned three, and here I was, filling Miku's head with all sorts of wild ideas when she still didn't fully understand who she was.

In order to avoid this future, we trained our bodies and our minds and pushed

our magic abilities to their limits. It was like a form of brainwashing...of self-discovery. All I wanted was for Miku to live and be happy. The more we learned about our magic and what we could do with it, the more I realized the true seriousness of the situation. I quickly realized the game was real, and so was god's so-called blessing in the form of a curse.

I was determined to stop it at all costs.

As a last-ditch effort, I even tried getting Miku to learn how to use something other than light magic in the hopes that knowing two types of magic might help in some way. It didn't go well, as you might expect. I realized the only thing left to do was tell Miku of the danger she was in.

Granted, if Ektor never falls in love with anyone else, then the problem's solved, but throw a *perfect* heroine into the mix, and there's no telling what might happen. I can't do anything without knowing which route we're on, but I'll feel better once all elements of uncertainty are eliminated. Which is why I believe, as long as Miku doesn't fall in love, she can avoid an untimely death. Or, at the very least, she could settle down with a nice local fellow. Since the people in our village hardly leave, I wouldn't have to worry about her partner cheating on her or anything like that. But my perfect plans have been ruined, and all thanks to that stupid Ektor!!

Well, there's no use crying over spilled milk. I kept her from falling in love at first sight, at least, so things aren't going horribly wrong. We saved the village, and we changed enough of the story that I believe there's still time to change the ending. For Miku, "love" is what will directly lead to her destruction. And now that we're part of the Lanakiller Guild, I can't let my guard down, even for a second! I have to protect Miku at all costs!

"There's always a chance she could end up with Rinny or Macro..."

"Hrm? Did you say something?"

"No, it's nothing. Forget about it."

I'd been speaking out loud to myself without realizing it, and Rinny's outrageously good hearing had picked it up.

I have to stay focused! Ektor's been testing me this entire time. I know he's a

Reborn, just like me. I'm sure of it. I also know that he knows I'm a Reborn as well. That stupid smirk of his is a sure give away! He must be laughing at how clearly flustered we are! He drives me up the wall!

Ektor in the game is so pure of heart, that even the thought of him with so much as a devilish smirk would be absurd! Okay, calm down. Let's think about this rationally. If Ektor really *is* a Reborn, then he must have a reason behind wanting us to join his guild. I have to figure out what that is!

There are three love interests in the game, and they're the ones who are with us right now: Ektor, Rinny, and Macro. By changing the story, we'd end up completely avoiding these three characters, which is probably why Ektor wanted to stick to the original plot. So, who will he end up with? The heroine? Miku? All I can do is watch and wait, but he seems to have his sights set on Miku. I have no idea if his interest is innocent or if he intends on leading her to her doom... I can't figure him out.

There might also be a completely different reason that I can't even begin to fathom!

Without knowing how he'll react when the heroine shows up, it's dangerous for Miku to get close to Ektor, regardless of how he feels for her right now. Since my original plan was to keep them apart, I guess that's the best I can do for now.

Sigh... I can't change anything I don't understand, no matter how hard I agonize over it. Calm down. Maybe I'll take a nice, relaxing bath and see if I can remember anything useful. It'd be nice if I knew what major events were coming up, but I can't remember them. It's a rather involved game, and unfortunately, I've forgotten a large part of it due to living life as Claire. But as long as I have a plan in place, there's no need to rush into anything.

"I'm done," I declare as I get up from the table. While carrying my utensils and plate to the kitchen, I tell everyone I'm going to draw a bath before heading into the living room.

[Ektor]

IT'S only recently that I realized I was living in a fictional world.

Up until now, I lived life as a simple child. I was an attractive orphan with a promising future, who knew their way around a sword and had a few tricks up their sleeve... Not that I'm that big of a narcissist to think that about myself. It's merely what I've heard from others. As a ten-year-old kid who'd never laid eyes on a mirror, how could I possibly know that about myself? But you're so good-looking, Ektor!

That's right, I've been reborn as the male protagonist in a *bishōjo* game—a game focused on romancing the attractive *female* characters! When I learned that, my heart leaped for joy. Give me a break, I'm still a guy, after all. Having countless attractive women throwing themselves at you is basically a dream come true. There's no man alive who hasn't fantasized about it at least once. Probably.

I learned all about that and more when I turned ten. It was also the first time I'd ever caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror. Long, flowing golden locks and dazzlingly emerald eyes. I looked like a prince out of some fairy tale, and it took some time before I realized that reflection was me.

As soon as I saw myself, all of my memories came flooding back so violently that my head felt like someone had smashed it in half. The pain was so bad, I passed out, crumpling to the ground. When I came to, I was in my bed in the orphanage. Seeing the worried looks on Rinny and Macro's faces left no doubt in my mind. I'm in the fictional world of the game. I've been reborn as the character Ektor, and the game has already begun.

I frantically struggled to grasp the situation I was in. How long have I been "Ektor"? Since I was born? A part of me wondered if I'd somehow hijacked Ektor's consciousness. After thinking about it long and hard, I came to the conclusion that it was probably the former, mainly because after the return of my memories, my personality hadn't seemed to have changed that much.

In the game, Ektor is kindhearted and princely. I, on the other hand, am simple, stupid, and I hate to lose more than anything. In short, I'm a mischievous troublemaker. There's no way that a guy who was constantly running around and pulling pranks alongside Rinny and Macro could possibly be Ektor.

The fact that I hadn't hoisted someone else's consciousness from their body was a relief, at least. I mean, that'd be pretty awful for the original Ektor, right? Knowing that made it easier to bask in the glory of my new life. Even if I had kicked the real Ektor's consciousness out, there'd be no point in moping about it. You gotta live your life to the fullest.

The next thing my mind jumped to was the world itself. Was this really the world of the game? I desperately tried to remember anything about my previous life, comparing whatever memories I still held from the game to the world around me. As far as I can recall, it started off as a simple otome game, which steadily worked its way up through the ranks.

As soon as the rival characters suddenly skyrocketed in popularity, the game devs quickly put out a spin-off sexy *bishōjo* game for guys. I was, of course, more into the dating sim version of the game, but as a die-hard fan, I played the original version for girls as well. Consequently, I was incredibly familiar with both the male and female characters. It's just a hunch, but Claire seems like the type who would've preferred the original otome game.

There was a side quest in the spin-off version of the game that had players working to first create and then level up their guild. This game mechanic became so popular that people started playing for this reason alone. They ignored the main premise of the game, having no interest in wooing anyone, and instead built up their guild membership, made friends, completed various missions, and even battled against other guilds via the online multiplayer feature.

I'm not exaggerating when I say I spent the majority of my adolescence playing this game. It's not like I was a loner or anything; my friends from real life played right alongside me!

But let's leave my adolescence in the past for now. Being reincarnated in this world means there's one thing I absolutely cannot forget about, and that's advancing the spin-off's story. The main protagonist, Ektor, will always be faced with an important decision at some point along his journey. Being a dating sim, this decision is choosing who to date. Once you beat the game, you have the option of a harem route, where you can date multiple women at once, but for me, there's only ever been one girl. Everyone else is just a bonus.

I played through the game countless times, and the girl I fall for every single time is, of course, Miku! What's better than a silver-furred, innocent, shy fox girl?! Some of my friends preferred Miku's twin, the cheerful, spunky, on-again, off-again Claire. Others preferred Laura, the heroine of the otome game, who had a charmingly devilish naivety about her. Still others favored the spoiled and bratty Candice or the cool and stylish Angela. But for me, I only had eyes for Miku. I've never given a thought to anyone else. Being able to date her in real life would be a dream come true!

And apparently, now it has, thank the gods! And that's why I'm doing whatever I can to make sure everything follows the bishōjo game's story perfectly. I've worked so hard to make sure I'm as close as possible to both Rinny and Macro and that we're all at peak performance levels. Actually, it wasn't really all that difficult.

Having grown up in the same orphanage, they're basically like brothers to me. Rinny's the oldest by a year, but that doesn't stop him and Macro from constantly fighting like cats and dogs, putting me in charge of babysitting them. The three of us are inseparable and basically like a real family.

Both Rinny and I have never known our parents. Macro chose to live in the orphanage to provide for his family, so he still has an actual home. We traveled to the dwarven mountains once for a visit and even took a dip in the hot springs. It was pretty fun. I'd love to take Miku sometime. I know she'd absolutely love it!

...Sorry, I'm getting side-tracked. In order to start a relationship with Miku, there's one thing you can't forget, and that's Miku's character flaw. In a world where almost everyone can use all sorts of magic spells, Miku can only use light magic. Because of that, whomever she falls in love with will become her soulmate for life. Sounds great, right? That's what makes her all the more endearing!

But there's a huge pitfall hidden in there as well. If she falls in love with someone else, for example...perhaps she's already met the love of her life in her own village? The thought alone makes me sick. I worked so hard to get strong and to build up my guild, following the story perfectly! I had to trust that she simply wouldn't fall in love with anyone before meeting me.

That's why I was so nervous when I initially met Miku in her village. I decided to act just like the game Ektor would. Seeing Miku blushing right in front of me was almost too much to handle! According to the otome game story, she should've fallen in love with me right on the spot, but for some reason, she didn't, although she did seem quite charmed. I was a little disappointed, but not a big deal.

Why not? Because in the bishōjo version of the game, she doesn't fall in love with the protagonist at the beginning. It wouldn't be much of a dating sim if the girl falls for you with zero effort, after all. So, perhaps the world we're in isn't the otome version, but the bishōjo spin-off? The difficulty goes up knowing I'll have to do my best to win her over, but that only spurs me to greater efforts. A part of me is pretty pleased by these developments. However! This is no time to let my guard down.

Regardless of what I know about the game, this is our reality now, which introduces the possibility of fluctuations and changes to the main story. Everything would be for nothing if the girls stayed in their village and didn't end up joining my guild. Besides, if that happened, Miku might fall in love with someone in her village, and I absolutely cannot let that happen! She's *mine*!

Which is why I had to keep her village from getting destroyed. The village is completely decimated in the original otome game, but due to overwhelmingly negative criticism, there's a chance to save the village in the bishōjo game version. That's the first choice you make in the game, which is also how you can easily determine what version of the game you're playing.

The choice is dependent on the player's actions. We had to slaughter the attacking monsters. Failure was not an option. Most guys do it because they want cute girls fawning over them, which is pretty sleazy, in my opinion! I just don't want the cute and innocent Miku to be sad!

Besides, since she didn't fall in love with me at first sight, the only way to get together with her is to force things to follow the plot of the *bishōjo* game. I'll have no idea what's in store for us if we break off course from the original story. If I want to save her life, then I need her to fall in love with me!

It took everything I had and a bit more to get Rinny and Macro to follow my

lead. After all, we needed to go in the opposite direction from where we were told. Of course, they were resistant. The village was about to be destroyed! They suggested splitting up into two groups, which seemed perfectly reasonable, but I knew better. Taking down that horde of monsters without all three of us would be tough. Plus, we had to go straight there without any detours. It was a race against time.

“The monster horde will come from the Southern Wood. Please, I need you to believe me!”

There’s no way I could tell them I knew this because of my memories from a previous life. I’m sure they’d believe me at some point, but to spring something like that on them without warning would be a bit too much. I haven’t told anyone about my past life in order to avoid the inevitably resulting chaos, and in that moment, I regretted it deeply. All I could do was hope they trusted me. I basically forced them into doing so.

“Stop groveling like that! You sound like you’ve lost your flipping mind!”

“It just doesn’t make any sense. You know we’re the only ones who would ever believe you on your spoken word alone, with not one ounce of proof to back you up.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. But if we’re wrong, the village will be destroyed. I know that they’re coming from the south!”

They finally came around at the very last possible second. They were right, though. If we went south and the monsters weren’t there, the village would be done for.

“I’ll take full responsibility for what happens. Please!”

But I knew I wasn’t wrong. I couldn’t be wrong. I’d played through both versions of the game enough times to know one of the most important scenes in the story. And if the scene played out as it should...

“Idiot. All our butts will be toast if you’re wrong.”

“Stop talking out your butt and let’s go. We don’t have time.”

“Rinny... Macro...”

They ultimately believed me. Well, I'm not sure if they actually believed me or not, but they listened. In the end, the monsters came from the south, as I said. We could feel their evil presence growing stronger as we got closer. Honestly speaking, it was an immense relief. All that was left was the battle itself, which honestly was a piece of cake considering how hard we'd been training until then. Not to toot my own horn, but I was more than capable of taking down a few monsters by myself at that point.

To be fair, I'd been fairly anxious ever since the fox twins headed off on their own. I'm just glad we made it in time!

In the end, I guessed that Claire was a Reborn like me, and that Claire is the reason why so many things are so oddly off. But there's one miscalculation I made that I'm grateful for, and that's how unusually powerful Miku and Claire are. In both versions of the game, the twins are still pretty useless at this stage of the story. I'm still worried about what lies in wait for us thanks in part to these story deviations, but for now, I think we can make this work.

I was able to convince their parents that their powers would simply go to waste in a peaceful village like theirs. I had to get rid of any obstacle in the way of the twins joining us on our journey. I could feel Claire's death glare from afar, but her parents were surprisingly grateful, and thus, the story was back on track! The village was saved, and we'd befriended both girls! The game was progressing in our favor, and now I could take my time wooing Miku. Granted, there's still the problem of other girls potentially falling for me, but I'll be fine as long as I can keep a level head, and I know I can. Never underestimate a Miku stan!

Still, I can't forget that this is the real world and not the game. In other words, you never know when a mature young lady like Miku might suddenly find herself falling in love. Rinny and Macro are here, and the city being so much bigger than her village means there are plenty of eligible bachelors I have to be wary of. It's only a matter of time. After all, she's stupidly adorable. I have to get her to fall in love with me while simultaneously keeping other guys away. This is like a dating sim on hard mode! The danger keeps things exciting!

Besides, Miku will be safest in my arms. If she falls in love with someone else, the chance of her death only rises alongside the danger of infidelity. We're truly

meant to be! My love for her is real! There's no way I'll let you fall for anyone else! As long as our love is mutual, then I can save her.

I absolutely won't let you down, Miku! I'll make you fall in love with me if it's the last thing I do!

[Miku]

“WHEW! Baths really *are* cozy!”

“You got that right. The tub is really big, so there's more than enough space for both of us.”



As soon as the water started boiling, Ektor suggested that Claire and I enjoy the first bath. I felt bad being the first ones in, especially seeing as we're guests here, but he refused to back down.

"Ladies always go first, so don't worry about it."

Unable to turn down Ektor's kindness, we happily enjoyed the freshly poured bath without guilt.

"Miku, I've been thinking..." Claire says as the hot water bubbles around us. "Can I tell you something? It's about the game."

"Yeah, sure."

She keeps emphasizing how the game hasn't started yet, but I thought our village getting attacked was the event that starts the game? How could we have passed that point without the game starting?

"The incident in our village happens before the main story," she explains. "It's like an introduction to our characters, and that's where you meet Ektor for the first time. The monsters swarm our village on our birthday, and everyone is slaughtered except for us. Pretty cruel, right? It's way too sad! Actually, a lot of players absolutely hated it, mainly because we're so popular."

Okay. Well, I don't really understand anything other than we still haven't yet reached the starting point of the game. What the heck is a "player" anyway?

"All the pieces are falling into place, though. The game starts as soon as we find all the members of the guild."

We've got our three main suitors: Ektor, Rinny, and Macro. I've heard this so many times, I could recite it from memory.

"Each has their predestined partner. For Ektor, that's you, Miku. I'm with Rinny. And then Macro is paired with Candice, a girl younger than us."

Yep, yep. None of this is news to me. Then there's the NPCs: an older lady who's rather skilled with a sword, a blacksmith, a fellow who specializes in magical gadgets, and a go-between, the lady with all the connections.

"They said we need five more members to rank up, right? I know, without a doubt, it will be those people. The numbers match perfectly."

The other girl character, Candice, plus the four NPCs for a total of five members. The numbers DO match up. So, Claire already knows who will be joining us. It's kind of reassuring. Maybe it'll be easier for us all to be friends if we know beforehand what type of people they are.

"The key player is missing from that list, though."

"Key player...?" I ask.

I thought we only needed five more folks?

Seeing my obvious confusion, Claire's ears twitch this way and that in excitement as she waves her fist in the air. "The heroine! The game's main protagonist, Laura! The game officially starts once she becomes our friend and joins the guild! But! I have no idea when that will happen."

I see. Claire's frustrated because she doesn't know when the game will start. Hrm... I still don't fully understand, though. Without knowing who the rest of our soon-to-be friends are, I can't really do anything to help.

"With the stage already set, it's a little too late to keep talking about destroying the narrative. Us joining their guild the way we did is proof that I've given up on that front. The way we joined the guild was different enough that it might have some unintended side effects...although we won't find out until later. After all, this might be the game world, but we're playing through it for real, which adds some elements of surprise and uncertainty!"

"If I remember correctly, in the original story, the village is destroyed and they take us under their wing, right?" I confirm with her.

I'm glad we were able to stop that from happening. If not, I wouldn't be here right now taking an amazing bath with my sister. Instead, I'd be inconsolable after losing my family and everyone I knew in the village. I'm so glad Ektor and the rest of the boys were there. Our village owes them their lives. There are not enough thanks in the world.

"Yep. Also, it's a pretty big deal that neither of us have fallen in love with anyone yet, especially you," Claire says. "I have a feeling the heroine won't make an appearance for another two years. I'm already in a serious relationship with Rinny by then, so it'd be weird if we didn't have enough time to develop

feelings for each other. But it does say we fall in love, so maybe it's faster than that? I honestly have no idea how game Claire feels about anything!" she shouts, frustrated, her tail churning up the bath water. "If we'd stayed in the village, none of this would matter!"

Hey, Claire! You're splashing me in the face!

"You don't think there's a chance you might fall for Rinny?" I ask, lifting my tail up to protect my face.

"Nope."

That was quick! I assumed she'd give it some thought first, although I guess I expected that answer. She seems pretty indifferent when it comes to herself, which is what makes me so worried sometimes.

"Actually, if I had to pick a type, it would be Ektor. But don't get me wrong. I'd never actually fall in love with some two-dimensional character, and especially not *this* Ektor, who's nothing like the one in the original game!"

This is the first time she's even mentioned her preferred type of guy. She waves her hand in front of her face as she talks, as if further negating her interest. Love in the game and love in the real world are different, apparently. The type of guy she might fall for in real life is different from who she might like in the game world. Is that how it works?

"For starters, I'm a completely different person from game Claire. We might share a few similarities, but that doesn't change who I am. I have no interest in falling in love, not in the past, not now."

I see...that only makes our future even more uncertain than ever. At least now I know Claire has absolutely no interest in falling in love.

"Hey, Claire. We absolutely can't rush this," I say gently. "I know we talked about this when we were cleaning, but we have to try and ease into this new life. I want to get along with everyone."

I know I'm Claire's biggest motivation for doing her best, and that she's always looking out for me. Still, there are many moments in life that are simply uncontrollable, and running around like a chicken with its head cut off, worrying night and day, will only tire you out. Besides, all I really want is for everyone to

get along. Those three guys went out of their way to bring us all the way to the big city. Why can't we enjoy our time here? Isn't it better to work together?

"Miku...! You really are an angel!"

"Ack! Eep!"

As if moved by my words, Claire suddenly embraces me in a bear hug. It's so out of nowhere that I don't have time to brace myself, and the next thing I know, we're both underwater. *Glub-glub...splash!* We both pop our heads up at the same time, water flying everywhere. Our eyes meet and we burst into laughter. I love being able to laugh with her like this. Being alive means dealing with difficult situations. But no matter what happens, we'll always get through it together. I know everything will always be okay with Claire by my side. That's how it's been, and that's how it always will be.

"You're right! No matter what happens, we'll get through it!" Claire says with a bright smile.

"Yep. I'll always be on your side, Claire. You can count on me, no matter what."

"And I'll always be on your side, Miku. I'll be right here, through thick and thin."

We've been together since the day we were born. Claire's always been a little bit different, what with her being born retaining memories from her past life, but in her heart, she's the warmest girl I know...even though she can be a real brat sometimes.

Is Ektor really a Reborn, too? And what of this mysterious heroine? Who will fall in love with who? No one can say what the future might hold, however, the only thing I do know is that I'll always support Claire, no matter what. After all, she's my sister and the only one I've got.

"Let's go dry our hair," Claire says, and I answer with a smile as we step out of the tub. I hope this small moment of happiness lasts forever and ever.

Chapter 5 | Kiefer & Candice

IT'S been ten days since we joined the Lanakiller guild. I've slowly grown used to my new life, including enjoying breakfast together every morning in the dining room, which is where we are now. Claire naturally took over cooking duties, which means she's usually in charge of the breakfast menu. I help out too, of course.

Rinny looks ready to dive into the spread of delicious-looking soups and fluffy homemade bread on the table, but Macro stops him. "We should wait until everyone's here."

I expect this might start off yet another quarrel between them, but Rinny uncharacteristically agrees with the dwarf, waiting patiently while drooling with anticipation.

J-Just give me a minute! I'm almost done setting the table!

The guys are always showering us with praise for the delicious food, but Claire is awful at accepting compliments. However, it seems as if everyone has grown accustomed to Claire's unique mannerisms over the course of the past ten days, so none of them take her rudeness to heart. It's just her way of expressing her shyness!

With everyone seated and the food ready, Ektor addresses all of us as we dig in. "I think today's the day to try and convince some fresh meat to join our guild."

So, it's finally time for our group of friends to grow a little bigger. Ever since we arrived in this city, we've been busy keeping the mansion clean and organized and becoming familiar with the streets around the guild. We even registered as official Lanakiller guild members! That's right! Now both Claire and I can call ourselves members of the Lanakiller guild!

Of course, Claire ended up dragging her feet until the last minute, muttering something about still being able to unravel the original story. I understand her

reluctance, but at the same time, I can't hide my excitement over our new life!

"I'm sorry, Claire. There are so many things I've never seen or experienced, and every day is practically bursting with excitement! Plus, we have new friends to look forward to, right?" My honest words helped sway Claire, and she eventually registered alongside me!

"I guess it's been p-pretty nice here," she said. *"I'm sure if we'd stayed in the village, we'd be bored out of our minds by now. I've been so caught up in training for that fateful monster attack that I didn't have time to think about anything else."*

Up until now, a part of me was worried I'd forced Claire into a situation she didn't want to be in, but hearing her words made me realize I'd been worried over nothing. Well! Deep down, I'd known as much! Hee-hee... As her twin sister, I can easily tell how much she's enjoying her new life!

"You mean Candice, right?" Rinny responds while resting his chin in his hand, grinning at him teasingly.

Oh! I've heard that name before. Isn't she Macro's rival romance?

"N-No," Ektor sputters. "Not her...although I am considering asking her."

"Kiefer then?" Macro interjects as he brings his coffee cup to his lips, his eyes focused on the clearly flustered Ektor.

Kiefer? I've never heard that name before. And why does Ektor seem so uncomfortable? What's wrong?

"Err... Ahem!" he clears his throat. "Yes. The enchanter, Kiefer. He's who we usually go to for all our magical knickknacks. He's the best in the business! Although he has a tendency to whip up weird prototypes and force them onto his customers in an attempt to figure out if they work well or not..."

An enchanter? As someone who's never touched so much as a magic wand in their life, that title doesn't ring any bells, although I know there are plenty of useful magic gadgets out there. I'd love to see them and learn how they're made. Maybe if we become friends, he'll let me watch him work his magic.

"Honestly, we get more free experimental prototypes than things we actually

need...but getting to play with nonsensical gadgets is pretty fun,” Rinny says with a laugh.

“Fun? I think you mean dangerous and terrifying,” Macro corrects him.

I quickly change my mind after hearing how Macro put it.

If it's dangerous, then I'm out. I put my curiosity to the side for a moment, listening to what they have to say.

“There’s no denying his talent, though,” Ektor interjects. “He’s never created a bad product...although plenty of ones that don’t seem to serve any purpose. At any rate! He’s incredibly trustworthy!”

If Ektor trusts him, then I’m sure he’s a good choice. He sounds a little weird, but I’m willing to put in the effort to become friends.

“I’m sure Kiefer will be completely on board,” Rinny says, “and as soon as he agrees, then Candice’s guaranteed to join as well.”

I realize Rinny’s had the same goofy grin on his face this whole time.

Also, why did Candice’s name come up when we’re talking about Kiefer?

“Excuse me, but who’s Candice? Is she another guild candidate?” Claire asks the question that’s been bugging me this whole time, and Rinny excitedly jumps in to answer her before Ektor can even open his mouth.

Why does he look so happy?

“I can explain! You see, Kiefer and Candice are cousins. Their mothers are twins.”

“That’s not part of the story,” Claire mutters under her breath. I guess this is yet another deviation from the original story. Just as it dawns on me why the two seem to come as a set, Rinny excitedly drops a literal bombshell.

“Also! Candice is completely head over heels for Ektor!”

“Shush, Rinny! No one needs to know that!”

Hrm? Uh...what did he just say? Head over heels...in love? Is that so? That's odd, though. I could have sworn Claire said Candice is supposed to be in love with Macro...right? If she's in love with Ektor, then... I glance over at Claire and

see the same surprise on her face. Yet another unexpected twist.

“All right! This conversation’s over!” Ektor declares with a clap of his hands. “You’ll know everything when you meet them! Let’s finish eating and get ready to go, okay?”

It seems like Ektor doesn’t want to talk about it. Hrm... Maybe he’s embarrassed that this girl likes him? He is pretty popular with the girls, so this must happen a lot. Oh! Is it possible he likes Candice? My curiosity is killing me, but I feel like it’s better if I don’t pry any further. All I can do for now is wait and see.

“Huh...? This might be a case of accidental flirtation. Ektor messed up big time. It’s too bad he’s not more like the actual character in the story...”

I try my best to pretend like I can’t hear Claire, who’s muttering to herself right beside me. Besides, I feel bad for poor Ektor! As I sip my post-breakfast tea, I send Ektor a silent apology. I’m sorry my sister’s always such a handful!

Once we finish breakfast and get everything cleared up and put away, I head toward the front door along with Claire. Kiefer apparently lives nearby, and since we don’t really need to bring anything, we’re ready to go in no time at all.

“All right, then. Shall we?”

Ektor, Rinny, and Macro are already at the door, waiting for us. Huh? I thought we’d certainly be ready first, but actually, we were the slowest. I apologize and thank them at the same time for waiting, to which Ektor answers by thanking me for cleaning up the breakfast mess. He really is very kind.

“I feel really anxious for some reason. Do you really think we can become friends?” I ask, worried.

It’s finally time. My heart’s beating out of my chest with both nervousness and excitement. I can feel my tail wagging behind me, and from time to time, I catch my silvery gray fur sparkling in the light from out of the corner of my eye.

“Ugh! Miku, you’re too cu—!”

“Yes, yes, we know. Let’s go.”

Claire cuts Ektor off before he can finish what he wants to say. I wonder what

it was? It seems as if she cut him off on purpose. Ektor looks slightly annoyed, as if realizing the same thing I did.

S-Sorry! Claire is just really dedicated to making sure I don't fall in love!



WE step out of the guild and begin making our way to the center of the city. Kiefer's store is located in the far back of the main shopping district, nestled among the other workshops. I'm sure he'd get far more business if his shop was located along the main street, but the others tell me he prefers it this way.

"For someone with his level of talent, it's a wasted opportunity for sure, being all the way out here," Rinny mutters, his arms folded in front of him.

I agree. I'm sure there must be a reason, though.

"Um... Is his shop really down here?" I ask.

Once we turn off the bustling main street that runs through the shopping district and onto a narrow alleyway, I start to worry about exactly where we're going. After walking and walking with seemingly no end in sight, I voice my concerns. I mean, we're on a road that's more like a lane, with no other people in sight, and flanked on all sides by tall buildings. The path is so narrow, we're forced to walk single file, making me concerned over what might happen if we accidentally encounter someone coming from the opposite direction.

"Hahaha! I know how it looks, but I promise this is really the way," Ektor immediately answers me with a bright smile. "Now you understand why we're all so confused about where he chooses to conduct business."

"We'll get there right at the point where you start to worry if we really *have* gone the wrong way... Yep! There it is." Macro's description is worryingly spot on, but I can't help but breathe a huge sigh of relief.

I really was beginning to worry that we'd never find it! I can see smoke rising into the air from somewhere in front of us, although I can't see the building yet. When we finally arrive, I'm faced with an open space, much wider than I expected. There are two buildings standing side by side: a smaller round hut with a red brick roof, and next to it, a much larger, solidly built building.

I guess the smaller one is the workshop?

Directly behind both buildings is a dense forest that seems to spread out in all directions...

Wait? A forest? Here?

“We’re still in the middle of the city, right?” I hesitantly ask Ektor, faced with the improbable scene before me. It wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest if Ektor told me we were actually in the middle of the woods. But I swear we walked down a city street to get here... Honestly, I’d believe it if he said we’d been magically transported here.

“Oh, right. We’re so used to seeing this that it doesn’t seem weird anymore. I guess it’s a little odd, huh?” He scratches the back of his head awkwardly, a wry smile on his face, as if he clearly understands how I feel.

He explains how the forest is man-made. Although it looks impressive, it’s only as big as a simple town square, which still seems fairly large to me. Kiefer made this space specifically because he found it annoying to constantly have to travel to the nearby forest for supplies. The forest here is filled with medicinal herbs, flowers, and specific trees that he uses often for work.

While I understand how he feels, creating an entire forest simply so he doesn’t have to walk that far seems like more trouble than it’s worth. I guess we all have our own priorities in life, though. Still, knowing all this is enough to convince me Kiefer is certainly more than a little odd.

“I wonder what it looks like from the sky. Like a forest in the middle of the city? You could see it from up there if you wanted to, Miku,” Claire says, envy in her voice.

“Hee-hee... I kind of want to take a look! But I need a special permit to fly within the city limits.”

Without the proper documentation, I’m not allowed to fly within city limits, and these documents are usually only provided for work-related purposes or other specified reasons. We had no such rule in the small village where Claire and I are from...but I guess that’s just one more thing to be careful about for those who can fly, like me. Not being able to float on the breeze, for no

particular reason, makes me kind of sad. It's fine as long as I'm outside the city, but it seems silly to leave the city gates simply for a jaunt through the clouds... *Oh, well.*

"As soon as we rank up, we'll be able to get flying permission for all our members. Our credibility rises alongside our rank, meaning we don't need to ask for permission every single time, plus the permit is good for other cities and countries as well."

"Huh? Really?!"

I could fly anywhere I wanted, whenever I wanted, enjoying the breeze on my fur. Now I really can't wait until we rank up! Is that too selfish of a motive? Especially since I haven't really helped the guild in any way... I really need to work a little harder in that respect! At any rate, once we become a high-ranking guild, I'll be able to soar through the skies without needing to worry about applying for permission beforehand. How neat! We still have a ways to go though, so for now, my dream is still just a dream.

As my mind skips from one thought to another, I notice Rinny has already jogged over to the larger of the two buildings and is knocking loudly on the front door.

He really needs to tone it down a bit...!

"Hellooo! Kiefer! Are you awake?!"

If he's sleeping, maybe we should leave him alone?

As I stand there, silently worrying to myself, the door to the smaller building suddenly flies open with a loud bam, causing my entire body to tremble in surprise as I hug my tail to my chest.

"I thought that was you! Ektor!"

"Whah! Candice!"

A petite girl comes flying out of the door, propelling herself across the yard and into Ektor's arms. Her bright orange hair is divided into two pigtails, out of which peek two cat ears, twitching excitedly this way and that.

Wow! She's really cute!



“The last thing I wanted to deal with right now was that barbarian, but then I realized you were probably with him, so I rushed out to see! And wouldn’t you know it... I was right!”

“Hey! Come on! I mean it! Give me a little space, Candice!”

Candice is enthusiastically embracing Ektor, delight shining in her eyes. There’s an aura around her that reminds me of sweet candy.

She really IS adorable! I want to hug her!

Meanwhile, Ektor seems to be struggling to extract himself from her enthusiastic grip. He’s not making very good progress since he’s also trying not to hurt her at the same time.

Why does he look so uncomfortable? If I had an adorable girl like her in my arms, I’d be overjoyed!

“Hmph! Who are those two? I’ve never seen them before.” Candice finally notices us, probably because I was staring a bit too hard. She glares at Claire and me suspiciously, her cheeks puffed out in annoyance.

She looks so cute even like this, but I don’t want her to view us as a threat! I want to be her friend!

“Oh, yeah. Let me introduce you. But first, could you get Kiefer out here? Then I’ll explain everything.”

“What?! There’s no way I’m leaving you alone with these two *vixens* nearby! I’ll only go get him if you come with me.”

“For goodness’ sake! Fine! And I told you to give me some space! You’re completely underfoot!”

Vixens? I mean, I guess we are, but we’re on YOUR side! I haven’t even done anything! Maybe she’s just extra cautious? For being so standoffish, she seems awfully friendly with Ektor. I wonder how they became so close.

Candice reluctantly loosens her embrace before enthusiastically reattaching herself to his arm.

“Should I come, too?”

“No barbarians allowed!”

She seems extra cold towards Rinny, who’s been watching everything with a big grin on his face, clearly amused. Even her voice is low and threatening. She’s incredibly easy to read. I can tell by Rinny’s response that he knows she detests his teasing.

You know, Rinny, just because she’s an adorable button of a girl doesn’t mean you can’t get on her bad side!

“Aww! What exactly do you like about him anyway?”

The teasing continues.

You really don’t learn, do you? Gosh!

“His good looks!”

Although Candice’s quick reply to his question leaves me speechless.

“.....”

As everyone stands there in complete silence, Candice begins dragging Ektor toward the larger of the two buildings before they disappear inside.

His looks?! I mean, I can’t deny his face is beautifully sculpted, but that is quite a bold answer!

“She clung to him, just like that, the first time they met, too,” Macro says dryly.

“Oh, r-really?” I ask.

So he didn’t do anything to earn her affection first?

“There’s no way she would be this affectionate if he didn’t encourage it...” Claire mutters under her breath as I stand there, smiling awkwardly at Macro’s simple explanation. “I think we’re going to be best friends.”

Why would you be?! Are we talking about the same girl?! I’m completely at a loss here, but I guess Claire knows something I don’t. All I can do is worry...and hope we get along somehow!



“AWW! Come on... What is it? It’s way too early for this...”

“This won’t take long! Gosh, you really aren’t a morning person, are you, Kiefer? It’s not even that early!”

After a moment, a very sleepy and very tall guy exits the larger building, rubbing his eyes. His golden locks stick out in every direction, and his bangs are brushed to the side in a very bizarre style. Clearly, he just woke up. I feel bad for dragging him out of bed. Directly behind him is Ektor, forcing him forward with a disgruntled look on his face. It seems they know each other well.

“You should be sleeping in your *bed* anyway!”

“It’s no good, Ektor. I tell him all the time, and he never listens to me! I’ve basically made the main house my personal bedroom. Honestly, it’s been five days since he last left his workshop!” Candice complains.

Uh...what? The bigger building isn’t the house? It’s the workshop...? The smaller building is where they live? There must be a lot of research going on if he needs a space that large. How impressive.

“Sounds pretty bad to me. I’m sure if Candice wasn’t around, you’d have died in your workshop a long time ago!”

“I’ll never let that happen! There’s no way he’ll die under MY expert care.” Candice giggles, puffing her chest out with pride, only succeeding in looking more adorable. The way her soft orange hair sways in the breeze and the way her tail curls this way and that are too cute for words.

She’s truly the epitome of everything girly. Even her clothes are cute!

“Perhaps, but he needs more than food. He doesn’t get nearly enough exercise!” Ektor points out.

“I definitely can’t help him with that all by myself. Th-That’s why I need everyone’s help!”

“We don’t have time for that.”

“Hmph! You’re such a mean little brat!” Candice pouts in response to Macro’s cold response.

He really needs to work on his delivery... Both of them do, actually. It’s odd,

though. According to Claire, Candice ends up in love with Macro. She certainly doesn't seem like she's in love with him.

I glance over to see Claire watching them with a look of bewilderment plastered on her face.

"Mmm... If you don't actually need me for anything, I'm going back to bed," Kiefer says, stifling a yawn. "I didn't get any sleep yesterday... Or the day before that. Or the day before that."

How many days has it been since he slept? As I stare at him in shock, completely overwhelmed by the thought, Kiefer notices my intense stare and turns his attention toward me.

"Oh-ho? And who are these lovely little ladies? Did you bring them here to join my harem of wives?"

"Stop joking around, you creepy jerk. Don't get ahead of yourself."

"Hahaha! You're scary, Ektor."

He's a far more laid-back guy than I originally imagined him to be. I can tell right away that he's joking.

"You sure seem like fun to be around, Kiefer," I blurt out.

Ektor shaking him by the lapels of his shirt, though, is pretty scary.

"Don't be too mad at him, Ektor," I say as Kiefer cries out between shakes, telling Ektor to calm down, Ektor finally does, releasing Kiefer's shirt from his grip.

"Miku, you really are an angel..." Ektor says.

"You're not joking. She possesses an angelic kindness as well. You pursuing her? If not, can I?"

Ektor looks on the verge of exploding as he once again grabs Kiefer by the front of his shirt. With such a flat, almost serious delivery, it's impossible for me to tell whether Kiefer's joking or not! It's impressive to see him laughing aloud in pure delight, even while Ektor shakes him vigorously, back and forth.

"What a conniving jerk... And I can't read him at all!" I barely catch Claire's

words as she mutters under her breath, although I can't understand them.

Conniving...? What's that mean?

"Um... Should we get to the reason why we're here in the first place?"

Ektor's got a firm grip on Kiefer while Candice watches on, clearly annoyed, Rinny is laughing his butt off, and Macro is watching it all, stoic and silent as always. That leaves the two of us, although it's ultimately Claire who speaks up in an attempt to intervene and get us back on track.

Th-Thank you, Claire! I almost forgot why we came here in the first place!

"Ugh. Sorry. You're right. We came with a request for you, Kiefer," Ektor finally says.

"You're giving me permission to wed these beautiful ladies?"

"Ab!So!Lute!Ly!Not! This is serious! Stop joking around!"

"Whoa! Ow! Ow! Stop grinding me in the skull when I'm sleep-deprived!"

I see now. Kiefer's the one who keeps throwing us off track. He's so straight-faced that it's hard to tell how he truly feels. Maybe that's what Claire meant by "conniving"?

"Come on, let's cut to the chase. Kiefer, we'd like you to..."

"I'll do it."

"Uh... Huh?"

Kiefer answers immediately, a big smile on his face, without even waiting to hear what Ektor has to say. I can see a vein throbbing angrily from Ektor's forehead, the strained smile on his face almost frightening in its intensity.

"You have no idea what I'm about to say..."

"You want to make Lanakiller a high-ranking guild, and to do so, you need more members, so you're here in an attempt to ask me to join. I'm right, aren't I?"

"....."

What? What?! Huh?! How did he know?

Even Ektor's eyes are wide in surprise, but only for a moment. "You're really quite something, Kiefer. I always forget you tend to be one step ahead of everyone..."

"I'm not sure why you're complaining when I said I'll do it."

Ektor hangs his head in surrender. Hmm... I don't understand what's going on at all. It seems Kiefer knew why we'd be here before we even arrived. That's why he was able to give such a fast response, because he'd already thought it over.

"And now you're going to tell me that I can continue living here as long as I want, right?" Kiefer continues, saying what Ektor should be. "That I'm associated with the guild on paper only. It'll be a huge hassle if there's ever an emergency, but business seems to be booming, and I have no good reason to turn you down. So, there you go."

"That's the part of your personality that reeeally pisses me off!" Ektor snaps.

"Am I wrong?"

"The fact you're right is what's so frustrating! Thanks! You're such a big help!!"

He really is a weird fellow. I can tell Ektor's not really mad... No, actually, he is really mad, but there still seems to be an air of friendship between them. I can't help but giggle at how amusing their interactions are.

"I can join, too, right? Ektor?" Candice, still clinging to Ektor's arm, suddenly pipes up, her cat ears twitching this way and that.

I'm glad she volunteered to join us!

"Huh? Well, I dunno..."

Although Ektor's reply catches me off guard.

What?!

"Wait... You weren't going to ask me to join?" she asks in a whimper.

Oh, no! I can see the tears gleaming in her eyes!

"Of course, we want you to join our guild, Candice." I find myself speaking up,

unable to stay silent a moment longer. “I want you to join! And I’m sure Ektor does, too...right?”

“M-Miku!”

I ball my hands into fists and hold them up as I look toward Ektor, an expression of confusion stamped on his face.

We need more members, right? And Candice joins our guild in the main story... Oh! I forgot we don’t want to follow the original story anymore... But she seems to really adore Ektor, which isn’t even in the story to begin with! Argh! I don’t understand any of this! To hell with the story! We can’t leave Candice out!

“You’re Miku?”

“Huh? Um...yes, I am. Nice to meet you, Candice.”

I’m thrown off guard by her suspicious tone of voice. I haven’t even introduced myself yet!

“I’m so sorry, but I hope we can get along!” I try to say at the same time while holding my hand out in her direction. Perhaps due to her being overly cautious, she merely looks at it without taking it. My hand feels so lonely hanging in the air like this!

“Why do you want me to join? Especially when we might very well become rivals.”

“Rivals?” I ask, dumbfounded, as she glares at me suspiciously.

Rivals? What is she talking about? I cock my head to the side quizzically before Ektor rushes to my side. *Wh-What’s going on?*

“Th-That’s enough of that! We’re all going to be great friends, so let’s put aside our differences and...”

“You be quiet, Ektor! This is between me and Miku!” Candice is clearly angry at Ektor’s attempt to break us up, and a flash of light bursts into existence, blinding me briefly but not causing any harm.

Was that light magic?

“Come on! Answer me, Miku! Do you have feelings for Ektor?”

“You’re a light magic user, too, Candice? I’m so happy! We’re the same!” I exclaim.

“...What?”

Wow! I’m overjoyed! There’s no one back in our village who can wield light magic other than me, but it seems like I finally found someone else!

“Can you use other magic as well?” I ask, all excited.

“Uh. Yeah. Um...water, too...”

“Wow, really? I can only use light magic, so I’m pretty jealous! But since we’re both light magic users, I’m sure we’ll be best friends!”

“Huh? You can only use light?! Uh... Huh...? What?”

I grab her hands, shaking them enthusiastically up and down.

Oh, no! I got a little too carried away in my excitement, and now she’s annoyed! I can tell by the way her ears are flattened back against her head. Ugh! I’m sorrryyy!

“I’m s-sorry! I got a little carried away. Um... What did you say again?” I hesitantly ask, knowing it’s far too late now. I feel like she had asked me something, but I hadn’t been paying attention. I feel so bad.

“Miku... You’re a natural airhead, aren’t you?” Candice asks through narrowed eyes.

“She is...but isn’t she just adorable?” Claire answers for me. “That’s my twin sister Miku. I’m Claire. I promise you have nothing to worry about when it comes to us. I just want us to be friends.”

“Hmm... I think I get it! Well...fine! I’ll be your friend!” Candice says.

Huh? A natural airhead? I might be a little slow, but that’s a little rude! Claire agreed pretty readily, though. It seems like they’re both getting along, at least. Hey! No fair! I want to shake hands, too!

It only takes a little begging before she finally accepts my handshake as well.

“I hope we get along,” she says, and I’m relieved that we somehow ended up on friendly terms after all! But why are both Candice and Claire patting my

head? Aren't I older than Candice?

"Th-They eliminated every obstacle in the way of her joining..." Ektor sighs.

"Give it up, Ektor!" Rinny elbows him. "You originally wanted Candice to join our guild anyways, right?"

"I did, but I don't want any misunderstandings, either. Seriously."

I can't help but overhear the conversation between Ektor and Rinny.

What does he mean by misunderstandings? It seems pretty obvious how much Candice adores Ektor. Does he find it more annoying than cute? I have no idea how.

As our conversation winds to a close, Kiefer folds his arms, musing aloud, "So, now what? How many others do you have? I'm sure we're not the only ones you've asked."

It really seems like nothing gets past him...

"Yeah, we just need three more, and then we'll have enough members," Ektor answers, sounding somewhat exhausted.

"Three more, huh? Who were you thinking of asking?"

"Angela, Wells, and Marino."

"Wowie... Throwing me into a pack of real weirdos."

"You're just as weird, so I think you'll fit in just fine."

It sounds like Kiefer is familiar with the remaining three. All weirdos, huh? Hahaha... Will everyone really be able to get along? Oh! There's one small detail I really want to know the answer to, though.

"Will Kiefer and Candice move into the guild hall with us?" I ask.

The mansion is so huge that there's more than enough space for all five of us. Since Claire and I are sharing a room, that means ten people can live there comfortably. Still, Kiefer has his workshop here, so it's not like he needs a place to stay.

"Oh? You really want me to live with you that badly?"

“What?”

He grins at me as he takes a step closer. I can tell Ektor and Claire are instantly put off, the air practically bristling with electricity, but I don't see why everyone's so upset. I just want everyone to calm down.

“Of course! I want to get to know you better. And Candice, too,” I say, smiling at Candice.

It's only natural you'd spend time together in order to get to know your new friends better. So why is everyone looking at me like I grew a second head?

I tilt my head to the side, clearly confused.

“Oof...”

“Uh-oh! I think Ektor's dead.”

I'm startled when Ektor suddenly falls to his knees as Macro watches on coolly, only the corners of his mouth twitching in amusement.

Did something happen...?

Completely at a loss, I look over at Claire, only for her to tell me not to worry about it.

It's too late for that! I'm worried!

“Ektor?!”

“Hahaha! This is quickly becoming far more hilarious than I could ever have imagined! Ahhhhahaha!”

I watch on as Candice rushes over to Ektor while Kiefer doubles over with laughter, clearly amused by something. Rinny is also holding his belly as he laughs out loud, and I feel myself growing more and more frustrated, having missed the joke!

“My Miku is the cutest girl in the entire world!”

And to make matters worse, Claire busts out that statement, practically bursting with pride. I have no idea what's going on anymore. I guess it's fine, though! Claire's compliments always cheer me up!

“Back to the topic at hand,” Kiefer says, trying to get us back on point. “I'm

really happy to hear you say that, Miku, but I can't spend too much time away from my workshop. I have no intention of ever leaving. Regardless, I'd still love to be your friend. Feel free to stop by whenever the mood strikes!"

"Really?! Thank you so much, Kiefer! I'd love that! I hope we can be great friends!"

"Hahaha! I hope so, too. You truly are a cutie, Miku."

I take his hand in both of mine, shaking it up and down vigorously, as he laughs delightedly. I guess it is kind of childish, but he seems incredibly friendly, like everyone's big brother.

"You've been telling us to swing by for ages, but every single time we do, you just push your new-fangled prototypes on us!" Macro complains.

"Ahhaha! That doesn't change the sentiment behind the invitation, though. Besides, you can't deny that my gadgets are pretty useful."

I get it now. It seems like he lives in his workshop. He gets so absorbed in his work that he has a hard time tearing himself away from it. It makes sense.

"Well then, I'll just have to make time to come visit *you* then. How about it?" I offer.

"How sweet of you! You're always welcome anytime. Come on over whenever you want. I almost never leave the place!"

"There you go making promises you can't keep! He never steps foot outside his door when he's busy with work, and when he's not working, he's usually asleep!" Candice chimes in.

I thought maybe the solution might be for me to visit him, but it seems like that won't work after all. Speaking of which, didn't they basically have to drag him out of the house earlier? Hrm... Maybe it's a miracle I got to meet him at all.

"In short, this bozo is like a brother to me, and he will die if I leave him be, which also means I can't leave, either. I gotta watch out for him! But you're always welcome to visit whenever you want, Miku, and maybe I can visit you from time to time!"

“You’re a really thoughtful cousin, Candice. It’s very sister-like of you to care for him. I’m looking forward to hanging out with you! I hope we can be great friends!”

I have a feeling I’m going to get along great with both Kiefer and Candice. It looks like I suddenly have two new friends! Hee-hee... Next time I come, I’ll be sure to bring some treats with me!

Chapter 6 | The way to a Woman's Heart is Through her Stomach

“OH! Right! Take this with you.”

Just as we're about to head back, Kiefer calls out to us while handing Ektor a beautiful golden bracelet embedded with a green stone.

“You're giving me a bracelet?” Ektor asks.

“That's right. And lookie here, I've got one, too. Now we match!” As he answers Ektor's question, Kiefer shows us the bracelet on his own wrist. It's a similar design to Ektor's, although the color is different—his bracelet is yellow-green with a sparkling yellow gem.

“Gross...” Ektor seems clearly disturbed by it but accepts the bracelet anyway.

“You don't know how to take a joke, Ektor. Hahaha!” Kiefer laughs. “If I'm going to be matching with anyone, I'd rather it be with a cute girl myself!”

This must be one of Kiefer's famous magical gadgets!

“What is it this time?” Ektor asks, suspicious. “Does it show your emotions in a rainbow of colors? Or perhaps it makes high-pitched sounds whenever you nudge it just right?”

“That's the one I gave you last time, right? Truly a genius piece of craftsmanship. I'm happy you remembered!” Kiefer nods enthusiastically while he talks.

Ektor's expression is one of clear annoyance.

Rainbow colors? A high-pitched sound? In what situation would you use those kinds of things? I'm impressed he can even make stuff like that.

“This one's just as amazing as the rest!” Kiefer chuckles as he holds up his index finger.

“He always says that,” Rinny whispers to me.

Oh, I get it...maybe? He must be really proud of his work!

“This bracelet has the ability to let you talk to anyone, no matter how far away they are! I call it the Long-Distance Babbling Bangle!”

“Why do you insist on naming everything you create?” Macro sighs.

It is quite the name... Still, a gadget that lets you talk to someone far away seems neat! I’ve heard of people using incredibly specialized magical techniques to do that, but if the power is embedded in a bracelet, then anyone can do it!

“Are you serious?!” Ektor exclaims. “Kiefer, it’s been a while since you made something *actually* good!” He seems incredibly excited.

“What are you babbling about, Ektor? All my gadgets are actually good!” Kiefer protests.

“That really is impressive,” Claire says to herself, muttering something about communication capabilities and long-distance calls.

Huh? She’s seen this before? It must be similar to something she used in her past life. I’ve thought about this often, but it seems as if Claire’s other world has a lot of amazingly useful stuff. For example, mechanical objects that transport folks long distances or objects that fly through the sky... I almost couldn’t believe my ears when she first mentioned them.

“This is just a prototype, so I’d appreciate it if you could test it out for me,” Kiefer says, tapping his bracelet. “I’ve programmed it to let Ektor and I communicate flawlessly, but I plan on making more for everyone else.”

“This is great! Really great! What’s the range, by the way?” Ektor asks.

“It’s based on the user’s magical ability. Knowing your power, Ektor, I bet you could reach the next town over or the outskirts of the forest. I’m not as powerful as you, though, so I’m limited to the confines of the city.”

“I see. So, the range is dependent on whoever’s the weakest,” Ektor summarizes.

“Since it runs on magic, you shouldn’t have to make too many minor adjustments,” Kiefer explains.

This seems like something that could make everyone's lives ten times easier!
Kiefer, you're a genius!

"You having this on hand today seems too convenient," Macro says, suspicious. "You threw this together knowing we'd stop by, didn't you?"

"Of course, Macro. I just didn't know how many of you were visiting. But now I know how many more I need to make."

He'd known from the beginning that we were coming and was preparing the bracelets for us.

"That explains the lack of sleep!" I say in awe.

Seeing my surprise, Candice explains, "Forgoing sleep for work is a bad habit of his."

"Really?"

I guess he does seem like the type who gets so wrapped up in his work, he forgets where he is.

"But make sure you don't go overboard, okay, Kiefer?" I say to him. "You'll collapse from exhaustion at this rate. I'm sure Candice is worried sick about you."

Just because nothing really bad's happened yet doesn't mean it'll always be that way. And just because Candice is always here to take care of him, doesn't mean he should take advantage of her kindness!

"That's right, Kiefer," Claire joins in, supporting my opinion. "You really have to take better care of yourself. Just saying 'I'll be fine!' doesn't instill me with much confidence that you will be. You should think more about how your actions affect those around you, especially that one special someone who'll be extra distraught the day your body finally has enough."

"Your name's Claire, right? You're not the type to hold back, huh? Even on first meetings. Strong-willed girls are a-okay in my book."

"Are you trying to avoid the topic?" Claire asks, hands on her hips.

She's right, even if her delivery was a bit harsh. Still, Kiefer is mature enough to laugh it off, clearly understanding her kindhearted intentions.

“Sorry, sorry. The truth is a hard pill to swallow sometimes. I promise to keep that in mind. And Candice, thank you for everything.”

It seems she got through to him. I can tell by the anxious look in his eyes and the awkward way he scratches his cheek that he understands what he’s doing isn’t great. It seems he has the ability to accept honest criticism. Candice, who’d suddenly been dragged into the conversation, blushes bright red.

“You b-better, mister! Not that I think it’ll make one ounce of difference.”

“I said I’ll do better, and I meant it.”

“Sigh... I know you, and I know you’ll never stop being totally engrossed in your work. But at the very least, listen to me when I’m talking to you!”

“Of course! Thanks for always being my rock, Candice.”

They seem to trust each other a lot. It’s clear the deep bond they share has grown over a long period of time. Maybe this is simply the nature of their relationship. I glance over at Claire, and we share a smile.

“Now, we really need to get going. Thanks a lot, Kiefer. I’ll be in touch once we secure the other guild members. But before we leave...how the heck do I use this?” Ektor peers quizzically at the bracelet on his wrist, which I’m jealous that he gets to use right away.

There’s so much I want to talk to Kiefer about, but I guess I’ll have to wait until my next visit.

“One moment. It’s fairly intuitive. The jewel glows when magic is flowing through it and begins blinking when your partner is connected. When you see it blinking, that means you can start talking. I hope.”

“What do you mean, ‘I hope’?”

“I haven’t had a chance to test it properly!”

It seems easy enough to use, and all it takes is a little magic. It’s probably similar to a gadget that spits out fire. I’m impressed that Kiefer can make a complex gadget like this one, connecting folks via the power of their own magic.

“I’ll try it out later tonight...so stay tuned,” Ektor says.

“Hahaha! We’ll see!”

Does that mean Kiefer might be too busy with work to answer or possibly sound asleep? Maybe... I’ve only just met him, and I already know him pretty well. I still can’t figure out whether he’s joking around or being serious half the time... But I’m sure it’ll be fine! After all, we have plenty of time to get to know each other.



“I was hoping to pay a visit to Angela next,” Ektor says after we say goodbye to Kiefer and Candice and head toward a specific tavern in town. He went on to explain about the tavern and Angela.

During the day, the tavern serves food as well as drinks. Mercenaries tend to gather there, and various guilds use the space to advertise for odd jobs. That’s where Ektor and Angela originally met. It sounds like the two have worked together many times before. One could say she’s a regular part-timer for the guild.

“Angela’s pretty good at what she does, so there’s a chance she won’t be interested in being tied to a single guild,” Macro points out.

She sounds like the type of person you can always count on to get the job done, which probably means she’s high in demand. As a mercenary, she’s got a certain degree of freedom and the potential to make a lot of money, so it’s no wonder she might not be interested in giving all of that up.

“We’ve only got one chance! Claire!” Rinny turns to her.

“Huh? Me? What?”

As the three boys exchange worried glances, Rinny suddenly barks out Claire’s name as if he’d just remembered something. “Why me?” she seems to say while pointing at herself, confused, her ears standing straight up.

“Do you know why Angela makes so much money?” Rinny asks, smirking.

“Oh, I get it now.” Ektor claps his hands together, clearly understanding Rinny’s thought process.

Let us in on it, too!

“Angela’s a foodie, meaning she’s willing to spend boatloads of money on food,” Macro explains simply for us.

We’re going to try and win her over with food?

The three boys are well aware of how delicious Claire’s cooking is, which is probably how this plan came together. If Claire makes a feast for Angela, flexing her culinary muscles, then perhaps Angela will be more willing to join us so she can eat Claire’s cooking every day. Or something like that...

Will it really work? I mean, Claire’s cooking really is delicious!

“Isn’t this putting a lot of pressure on me?” Claire sighs.

“It won’t fall completely on you, of course,” Ektor says to encourage her. “Instead of asking her straight up, we’ll invite her over for dinner first. We’ll wine and dine her with your amazing cooking, and then, when she’s stuffed and satisfied, we’ll get to the real reason why she’s there... Perfect, right?”

A plan that involves everyone enjoying a nice meal together and getting along? I’m down for that! This way, she’ll get to try Claire’s cooking without us forcing it down her throat, and we can have a calm conversation in a relaxed environment. Which means the plan’s success relies entirely on Claire cooking up something amazing, though...

“I don’t care one way or another... I just never thought of using food as a method of persuasion. I don’t think one meal alone will do the trick, either. Do you have anything else up your sleeve if it fails?” Claire asks with her arms crossed.

“Absolutely! The plan’s set, then! Thanks a bunch, Claire!”

“It’s n-nothing... Besides, I make dinner for us all the time, anyway...”

What a relief! With Claire on board, everything will turn out just fine, despite her lack of self-confidence. But also...was she blushing just now? She looks so adorable when she does! I can tell she’s in good spirits by the way her tail’s swishing from side to side. Her easy-to-read emotions are too cute!

“It’s settled, then! Let’s try and find her!” Rinny exclaims. “You really think she’s at the tavern?”

“Wherever there’s work, there’s Angela,” Macro says dryly. “Besides, Rinny, you know Angela slinks around there all the time if she’s not out on a job. Or did you forget, like the airhead you usually are?”

“You can’t talk to anyone without insulting them, huh? You gloomy jerk!”

“I’m merely saying it like I see it, doofus.”

I can’t believe those two are fighting at a time like this!

Ektor shrugs his shoulders and sighs tiredly while Claire appears to be ignoring them.

Err... What should I do? I can’t just leave them like this. I’m used to them fighting all the time, but I still wish they could put aside their grievances and get along!

I take a deep breath and step between them. I grab each by the arm, linking us together.

“Come on, let’s go, you guys!” I say cheerily.

I was a little scared to get between them while they were fighting, but at the same time, I knew nothing bad would happen since neither of them have any ill will toward me. In their hearts, they’re good folks. I look at both of them in turn, smiling. They still seem annoyed, but quickly quiet down.



“Huh? What?! No fair, you two!” Ektor says, trying to join us. “Let me join in with you!!”

“Come on! Let’s go, Ektor!” Claire says, pushing him ahead of her. “Lead the way.”

“Seriously?! You getting in my way too, Claire?!” Ektor cries.

Claire manages to redirect Ektor away from the boys before they can fight.

Thanks, Claire! I guess our job from now on is to help keep everyone from biting each other’s heads off. For being friends, they sure don’t act like it sometimes.

Still firmly entwined with Rinny and Macro, we follow along behind Ektor and Claire. Occasionally, Rinny mutters under his breath about how I can let go now, while Macro tries to silently shake me off, but I hold firm, a big smile on my face.

Sorry, boys, but this is what you get for acting up.

I try to show them how annoyed I can get when they fight all the time, with no regard to where they are. I think I’m finally getting through to them by the way they merely trudge silently along either side of me, even though they could easily shake me off if they wanted to.

That’s right. Think about what you’ve done! At any rate, you’re stuck like this with me until we get where we’re going.

“Miku’s the type of girl who looks calm on the outside but is actually a mini powder keg waiting to explode, huh?” Rinny remarks.

“Shut up, you blunderhead,” Macro hisses.

You two might be whispering over my head, but I can still hear you! Sheesh.

“Dang it! I’m sooo jealous! I’ll get you guys for this later!!”

“What, you want to know what it’s like for Miku to get mad at you? Are you some kind of masochist, Ektor? Gross.”

“Please don’t say that like you mean it, Claire. Even I’ll get depressed, and you know that’s not what I’m envious of anyway.”

I can hear Claire and Ektor having a conversation in front of us, but not what they're saying.

Are they fighting...? They're not shouting at least, so I hope it's fine.

At any rate, walking with all this awkward tension is making me feel extra uncomfortable, so I try to start a conversation with Rinny and Macro.

"What's Angela like?" I ask. "Since she's a successful mercenary, she must be pretty strong and great at her job, right?"

I heard her name back at Kiefer and Candice's place, but otherwise, she's a complete mystery to me. I'm sure I'll know everything once I meet her, but I'd like to know something about her before then.

"Hmm... Angela's pretty cool, actually," Rinny immediately answers my question. He scratches the back of his ginger head absently with his free hand while looking up at the sky. "She's got almond-shaped eyes that always seem angry, which puts people off and gives the impression that she's difficult to get along with. Yet whenever food's involved, her eyes always light up, and she's surprisingly friendly. She's also really tall, maybe about the same height as Ektor."

A tall swordswoman? With a cool yet thorny exterior... None of that matters to me. Her love of food, on the other hand, makes me feel like we might get along. I hope so, at least. I'm sure we'll win her over easily with Claire's cooking.

"She's got a rough way of speaking, and she doesn't hold back. Honestly, makes sense, though, since she's surrounded by gruff men most of the time."

"I guess most mercenaries are men, right?" I ask.

"Yeah, but there are plenty of women too. Most magic users are women, making Angela unique since she relies on her steel more than her magic. She's really something."

Any woman who can wield a sword well is impressive to me. I'm sure there are plenty of folks who see how far she's come and strive to do better themselves. Men tend to have a clear advantage over women when it comes to physical activities due to their natural body type. The same goes for certain races as well...

Regardless, it's clear she's worked hard to get where she is. She sounds truly amazing. I suddenly worry over whether I can really be friends with someone like her, since I have nothing of value to give back. There isn't much I'm good at.

"Come on, we're almost there. You can let go already."

"Huh? Oh! Sorry, Macro."

I look up and notice a sign advertising the tavern in question, which sits just a bit ahead of us. I hurriedly release both their arms, and Macro immediately pulls away, rubbing his arm.

D-Did he really hate it that much? I feel really bad... And yet he was silent this whole time, so maybe he finally came to understand the error of his ways. His expression never changes, so it's hard to read him. I don't want him to hate me, so I'll try to be more careful in the future.

As I watch Macro hurry ahead, I reflect back on our walk over here while stepping through the entrance of the tavern.

"Oh! There she is. Heeey! Angela!"

Just as we step inside, Rinny glances around the room quickly before immediately finding the lady of the hour. Being so big and tall, Rinny's great at finding people in crowded spaces like this. He waves a giant hand while calling out her name, and she turns to him, as if recognizing his voice.

As soon as I see her, I know it's Angela. I would know even if she hadn't turned. She definitely stands out in a crowd! She's a tall woman with light blue hair pulled back in a ponytail, with an aura of quiet elegance surrounding her. She almost seems to exude this overwhelming presence that fills the room. It's clear she's quite a powerful person. Can we really become friends with someone like her? I guess it's still up in the air.

"What's up? Got a job for me?"

Angela immediately strides over to us. I can tell they're more than mere acquaintances by the familiar way they interact with each other. From up close, she's definitely an imposing lady. She's slender, stylish, and...

"So cool..."

“Hm?”

Ack! I said it out loud!

I slap both hands over my mouth, but it's too late. She glances over at me and her eyes narrow slightly.

Wow, she's gorgeous!

“U-Um! I'm s-sorry! I j-just...!”

It's far too late to take it back. I bow my head in earnest apology. We're already off to a bad start.

“Why are you apologizing? It was a compliment, right? Honestly, I should be thanking YOU!”

“Um...!”

I can't believe she's being so nice to me. She's such a good person!

“You never change, Angela.” With a chuckle, Ektor joins us. “That's why you're so popular with the ladies.”

“Whaddya mean ‘that's why’? I don't do anything special!”

“Yeah, whatever. You're a natural sweet-talker.”

Is she really popular with other girls? I guess it makes sense, considering how amazingly sweet she is.

As I nod along with Ektor's words, agreeing with everything, it seems he's already started putting his plan into motion.

That's right! We have to invite her over for dinner.

“Hey, Angela. There's something I wanted to discuss with you. Would you care to drop by tonight for dinner at the guildhall?”

“What's wrong with talkin' here?”

“Hmm... It's a delicate matter that requires a more private setting. Somewhere we can take our time without other folks listening in.”

Angela seems dubious. I guess Ektor's never proposed something like this to her before, making her wary.

“I’ve had people invite me over to their homes, and then once I’m inside, try to have their way with me...”

“What?!” I’m so shocked by her words that I can’t help but cry out.

I’m sure my ears and tail are sticking straight up! This kind of danger is unfortunately something you have to be careful about as a woman. I hope nothing horrible happened to her...

Consumed with worry, my ears and tail immediately droop.

“Oof. My condolences. That sounds rough for them.” Rinny’s response seems to completely miss the mark, considering the gravity of her words.

Maybe I’m the one who misheard her? Maybe she was talking about someone else?

“Don’t worry, Miku,” Ektor consoles me. “Angela’s as strong as an ox, with brains coming out her ears, and she can hold her drink to boot. The only one who could possibly take her down is the Demon King himself. She can easily take care of herself.”

“Oh? You were worried about me? Well, Ektor’s right. Anyone who tries to take me on has another thing coming.”

Wow... She really is amazing. And so strong. I’m falling in love with her more and more with each passing moment!

“But just ‘cause I can handle myself doesn’t mean I like gettin’ myself into messes. It’s more annoying than anything. I trust you, but it seems to happen so much that I hope you’ll forgive me for being more cautious recently.”

She has a good point. No one wants to jump headfirst into a trap. Hmm... How can we put her at ease and make her feel safe? I got it!

“U-Um... Angela? My name’s Miku. I, along with my twin sister, Claire, recently joined Ektor’s guild.”

I struggle to speak as loudly and clearly as I can. First, I tell her my name. I have to crane my neck back to look up at her, towering above me, and her eyes quickly soften as she extends a hand in my direction. I grasp it in both of mine and am immediately surprised by how soft her skin is. Yet it’s a big hand as well,

clearly able to firmly grasp the handle of a blade.

“Also, Claire is an incredibly skilled chef,” I continue bashfully. “Not only can she make tasty meals, but she’s an amazing baker as well! We’ve been stuck in our village until now, so the only people who’ve gotten to taste her fantastic feasts are the folks we grew up with, plus Ektor and his friends, and well... now...”

Huh? I’ve somehow managed to talk myself into a corner. The words were spilling from my mouth so quickly, I lost my train of thought. Where exactly was I going with this? I can’t stop now! I have to finish!

“I know you’re worried, and you have every right to be. I know I can’t force you to trust us immediately, but I was really hoping you could try some of Claire’s cooking, too! It’s just so yummy!”

Ugh! The plan sounds so obvious coming from me. I should have just kept my big mouth shut.

I immediately regret everything, when suddenly Angela grabs me with both hands. I look up to see her eyes practically sparkling with delight.

Huh? What?

“Her food’s really that delicious?” Angela asks. “D-Does she cook m-meat, too?”

“She’s hooked.”

“She sure is. Thanks, Miku. Your charming innocence saved the day.”

My ears pick up on Macro and Ektor’s furtive whispers and dry chuckles. I guess she really does love food. I never expected such girlish glee from someone as cool as her. As I stand there, temporarily bewildered, Claire slips to my side, smiling wryly.

“I’m the aforementioned Claire. Nice to meet you, Angela. You love meat, huh? I’ve got an idea for the main entree that’ll be right up your alley.”

“Really?! Then I’m definitely coming over for dinner!!”

I’m baffled by Angela’s immediate acceptance of Claire’s invitation. Ektor and the others nod to each other, satisfied smiles on their faces, clearly pleased

they've managed to break down the initial obstacle in their way.

Maybe things will work out after all? It's still too early to say. If she loves food this much, though, then I know she'll fall in love with Claire's cooking. Despite her initial concern, she was pretty quick to agree to come over as soon as she realized food was involved. That doesn't mean she'll definitely agree to join the guild, but maybe a nice conversation on top of the meal will help.

"I've got some things to take care of, so I'll see you tonight," Angela says as she bounces off, clearly in good spirits.

She seems so excited! I can tell from her body language alone. It's kind of cute. At any rate, she agreed to meet with us in private, which means our plan is off to a solid start! We still have a ways to go, but at least we're moving in the right direction. Now we just need to make sure Angela has a great evening!

After leaving the tavern, we split into two groups to pick up everything we need for tonight's feast before returning to the guildhall to prepare for Angela's arrival!



THE entire mansion smells delicious. The table is already set, with plenty of salad and bread on standby, ready to welcome our guest whenever she arrives.

"Here, take this."

"Sure! Mmm... This is my favorite stew!"

The gigantic bowl contains a huge portion of brown stew, filled with copious amounts of vegetables and tons of juicy meat.

It smells so good!

It's a hearty soup with plenty of meat and goes very well with bread.

Don't even think about it! You'll get your share soon enough! I tell myself.

Drooling in anticipation, I carefully cradle the bowl in my arms when I suddenly hear a loud noise from the hallway.

Is Angela here already?

Several seconds later, Ektor escorts Angela into the living room.

“Thanks for inviting me over. Wow! It smells simply divine!”

She just arrived and already she’s drooling. I know how she feels! Seated at the dinner table, she squirms in anticipation of the feast laid out before her. Her cool elegance has been completely replaced with girlish glee. It’s truly adorable.

“Rinny! Give me a hand here!”

“Oh? What do you need?”

I hear Claire yell out Rinny’s name from the kitchen. It sounds as if the main dish is ready to go.

“Hey, you guys! The main dish looks so friggin’ delicious! I gotta have a taste!”

“Holy smokes!”

Rinny bounces out of the kitchen, carrying an entire roast chicken. It’s quite large, definitely not something Claire could carry by herself, but Rinny’s strong enough that he can easily hold it in one hand.

“I stuffed the inside with lots of soft and fluffy pilaf,” Claire explains. “I heard you have a huge appetite, so I hope you’re hungry! I used some herbs to give it a more appetizing smell... I guess I went a little overboard. I feel like I made enough food for an entire battalion!”

The table is packed full of an assortment of dishes. There are three kinds of salad, plenty of bread, brown stew with crackers topped with cheese and ham, fried potatoes, and various kebabs. Plus, we’ve got dessert waiting for us in the fridge. It really does look like a feast! It brings back memories of the joyous festivals in our village.

“This seems like a lot for just the six of us,” Angela remarks.

“I forgot to mention, there are two more coming,” Ektor tells her. “And speaking of which, here they are.”

That’s right! Angela isn’t the only person we invited over for dinner.

“Sorry for running late! Wow! Something smells good!”

“Ugh! I was right in the middle of something...”

Candice bounces in, as lively as ever, dragging her grumbling cousin, Kiefer,

behind her. Ektor had used the communication gadget earlier to invite them over. Of course, Kiefer refused at first, but Candice, who'd been eavesdropping, wanted to come so badly, they ended up accepting the invitation after all.

"It's good to get out of the house sometimes!" Candice says. "Plus, you found out your little gadget works, and now you can talk all about it with Ektor in person!"

"I didn't need to come all the way over here to do that..." Kiefer whines. "Although the spread looks amazing. I guess I'm kind of glad we came after all. I'm feeling a bit famished for once."

Wow! Claire's cooking is so good, it makes even Kiefer forget about work! I hope Angela feels the same way.

I glance over at her to see her eyes practically glued to the food in front of her. I feel bad making her wait any longer. I want her to fill up her plate and her stomach right away! However, we have to wait for everyone to take their seats.

Just as Claire settles down, Ektor opens his mouth to speak. "Before we dig in, I've got one thing to say!"

"You're killing me, Ektor!"

Ektor whistles loudly, getting everyone's attention, causing Angela who's been fidgeting in her seat and drooling, to glare at him angrily.

"The reason we invited you over here tonight, Angela, was to extend an invitation to join our guild. Everyone here is already a part of the team."

"Huh? You mean the Lanakiller guild? I thought it was just the three of you. Since when did you get four new members?" she asks, her eyes shifting anxiously between Ektor and the food on the table.

Ektor offers a quick explanation as to why they need more members, leaving out how he got the four of us on board. It's clear her mind is full of food, so I doubt she'd remember even if he mentioned it.

She looks so hungry; I feel bad for her.

"So, you just need me to fill some kind of roster, right?"

"To put it bluntly, yes. But we don't want just anyone on the guild list. We

need people we can depend on, with considerable skill, and who are friendly and easy to get along with. We have a reputation to keep, after all.”

A reputation to keep?

His words are like a dagger in my heart.

That’s right. This isn’t just some friend group. This is an advanced-level guild, with members to match, and it’s important to keep that in mind at all times.

“I know joining our guild doesn’t offer much, considering how well you’re doing on our own. I don’t think you’ll see a decrease in your profit margin, however, and you’ll always have a place to stay if you’re interested. Plus...” he trails off while waving both hands over the food spread out on the table before us. “We might not always have extravagant feasts like this, but if you join us, you’ll get to eat Claire’s delicious cooking whenever you want! I don’t think that’s such a bad deal, right? What do you say?”

He really is reeling her in with food! And he’s not even trying to hide it, which makes me feel better! Honestly, this is the best chance they’ve got. It’s the only thing Angela seems to really care about.

Everyone watches her silently, waiting for her reply.

“This was a trap all along, huh?”

“You knew it was a trap when you came.”

Angela peers at Ektor from the corner of her eye, and for a moment, I worry she’s angry. However, she quickly bursts into laughter.

“I won’t make my decision until after I’ve had my fill. I can’t commit to anything without having a taste first.”

“Haha! Fair enough! I’m sure you’ll love it, though!”

Phew! She’s not angry after all.

With Angela promising to give us her answer after the meal is over, we finally dig into Claire’s amazing feast, ready to eat ourselves into a food-induced coma.

Mmm! Everything is just sooo delicious! I’m gonna stuff myself silly!

As we all begin eating, the conversation doesn’t turn to boring stuff like

introductions or work, but exciting stuff like what everyone did today or their most interesting or bizarre jobs. Mixed between each tale, all of us shout out compliments to Claire for her marvelous cooking. She gets so flustered each time, and it's so adorable! She pretends like she doesn't care, and yet I can tell she's pleased by the way her ears flick this way and that and her enthusiastically wagging tail!

"You learned how to cook while living at home, huh? You're amazing, Claire!" Angela says.

"I don't think it's all that impressive," Claire shakes her head. "I just like to do it, so I got better at it. Honestly, you being such a skilled swordswoman is far more impressive to me."

"I feel the same way you do. I just like swinging a blade, so I got better naturally. I guess that's simply what happens with anything you truly enjoy doing."

Cooking and swordsmanship are two entirely different things, and yet it seems they have something in common after all. When you like something enough, you end up doing it all the time, and in turn, naturally get better at it. The better you are, the more you enjoy doing it. It's a never-ending cycle.

"Don't forget about me!" Kiefer interjects. "I love making magical gadgets, and so I make them all the time, and in turn, am the master of gadgetry!"

"For someone who crushes on girls all the time, you're pretty unpopular, Kiefer," Candice remarks.

"Ouch! Come on, Candice! It's not that I'm not popular! It's just that my inventions take up too much of my time!"

I love hearing their back and forth. I get the feeling Kiefer cares more about Candice than he lets on, although I think he's far more popular than she realizes. He's funny, he seems considerate of others, and very kind. I'm sure if he actually met someone whose company he enjoyed, he'd quickly sweep them off their feet.

"It's your awful attitude that makes you so unpopular," Rinny suddenly barges into their conversation. He chuckles to himself between huge bites of chicken.

“Wow, Rinny! You’re one to talk about awful attitudes,” Kiefer shoots back.

Kiefer has an awful attitude? Really? Granted, he tends to get so lost in his work that he neglects everything else in his life, so maybe he should work on that...

“It’s not awful, just...weird,” Rinny says hesitantly.

“So, I’m a weirdo then? Is that supposed to be a compliment? Because I take it as one!” Kiefer laughs.

“You’re the weirdest weirdo I know.”

I see. It’s not that his attitude is bad, it’s that he’s a bit odd. Still, I’m not sure if calling someone a weirdo is exactly a compliment.

I listen in as everyone chats together happily while enjoying a delicious meal. This is one of my favorite types of moments. I could join in with the conversations, but I prefer listening to everyone instead. I love learning about everyone’s hobbies and interests and the types of things they like. It fills me with joy to see everyone enjoying themselves so much.

However, I can’t help but notice one person who’s eating silently, all by himself. His face is a blank slate, and I begin to worry that he’s not enjoying himself, but perhaps maybe that’s just how he is. Debating with myself whether or not I should say something, I gather up my courage, pick up my cup, and approach him.

“Can I sit next to you, Macro?”

The only person who doesn’t seem to be in high spirits is Macro, who’s sitting off to the side, as far away from everyone as possible. Maybe this is just how he is, and he’s actually having a great time, but he keeps his joy hidden away?

“Why?”

“Err... I don’t really have any specific reason. I just thought...”

I hover anxiously, unsure what to do since he hasn’t actually given me permission to sit. I clearly didn’t think this through.

What do I do now?

“...You can sit if you want to?” he says quietly.

“Oh! Uh! You’re sure?”

“...You’re free to do whatever you want.”

And with that, he goes back to eating. If I continue standing here, it’ll be weird, so I settle myself down next to Macro. The silence deepens. It’s clear Macro will continue eating his food whether I’m here or not. I glance over at him out of the corner of my eye only to see him completely invested in his meal. I’m surprised by how much he can stuff in his mouth, one bite after another. He doesn’t look like he’d be able to eat a lot, but his appetite seems larger than anyone else here. I guess he really loves to eat.

After a moment, he finally finishes the food on his plate and stands up, empty plate in hand.

“Oh! Are you done? Want another serving? I’m happy to get it for you,” I offer.

“Huh?”

“I’d be happy to bring you a bowl of stew if you want?” I clarify.

“Uh...”

I grab the plate from his hand, his eyes wide with surprise, and shout “I’ll be right back!” over my shoulder as I hurry to the kitchen.

Ugh! Sitting there in silence was just too awkward! But I can’t let him sit there all by himself. I’m going to try talking to him about something!

Filled with renewed determination, I fill a bowl with stew and carry it back to him.

“Here you are.”

“Thanks...”

I place the bowl down gently in front of Macro, and he utters a brief word of thanks before digging in. Based on the number of plates surrounding him, he’d been snacking on a bunch of side dishes while I was gone.

He really eats a lot! Just watching him makes me feel full.

“I’m surprised by what a huge appetite you have, Macro.”

“It’s a normal amount, honestly.”

It’s definitely not normal! At any rate, I can’t let the conversation die now after successfully starting it. Since we’re on the topic of food, might as well keep it going!

“What’s your favorite dish?”

“...Everything’s delicious.”

He’s not wrong, but our conversation is rapidly dying! He’s been chowing down a seemingly endless amount of salad and meat, so it’s hard to tell if there’s anything he especially likes or dislikes. *Oh, no. What now?*

“What’s your favorite food?”

At least I can find out what he likes! And in turn learn a little more about him. I guess I can be a bit stubborn sometimes, refusing to give up no matter what.

“Why do you want to know?”

Ugh! I thought he might give me that answer. I guess I’m being a little pushy.

I suddenly notice I’m hugging my tail.

I’m a failure.

“Sweets...”

“Huh?”

Hearing his hesitant answer pulls me from my gloomy introspection, and I look over at him. He’s still completely engrossed in his food, but his cheeks are now bright pink.

Could it be...?

“My favorite food. You asked me. So, I told you.”

Is he embarrassed? I never expected Macro to like something as cute as sweets and desserts. He has such an unfriendly air about him, and he’s impossible to read, but hearing that about him makes me see him in a slightly different light.

“I see! Hee-hee... Thanks for telling me! I love sweets, too.”

I can't get anything else out of him, but I'm still glad I tried my best. And I'll have something to talk about next time!

“At long last!” Rinny declares. “The dessert everyone's been waiting for! It looks amazing! Just like something from a store window! Where did you learn how to make something like this, Claire?”

Once the copious amounts of food had been consumed, Rinny rushed to the kitchen to bring forth an enormous strawberry shortcake, topped with strawberry jam, of course. I understand exactly how Rinny feels. Her cakes really are magnificently fluffy!

“You're exaggerating, Rinny,” Claire says. “It's not any better than the cakes everyone else makes.”

“Oh, really? Well, *I'm* impressed. Oh! But I hate to say, I'm not actually a huge fan of sweets,” he admits.

“Don't feel like you have to eat it if you don't want it,” Claire says, unbothered. “I'm sure someone else will gladly adopt your piece, so it's no problem.”

I didn't realize Rinny doesn't like sweets. Come to think of it, he didn't eat any vegetables, either, just meat. I guess he's a pretty picky eater.

My gaze slides over to Macro, whose eyes are sparkling with delight. His expression is, otherwise, just as blank as ever, but I can tell he's thrilled. Perhaps I'm reading too much into it, since I have insider information.

I'm sure he'd love to eat Rinny's slice of cake.

“You bake, too?” Angela asks. “This looks sublime! You're truly amazing, Claire!”

“Haha... I'm glad you like it.”

I turn from Macro to the guest of honor, Angela, who seems delighted. They only just met, but I have a feeling Angela and Claire have already become best friends. The aura between them is warm and friendly.

“All right, Angela. It's time to get back to the reason why you're here.”

With everyone enjoying their cake with a cup of tea to wash it down, Ektor speaks up, bringing us back to the topic at hand. I was having so much fun, I completely forgot why we were having this party, to begin with. Everyone turns to look at Angela. She folds her arms on top of the table before speaking.

“I have three conditions.”

Conditions? Meaning she'll only join us if those conditions are met? Ugh, I'm so nervous!

“Number one,” she goes on at Ektor’s urging, “I want to be able to live here. I’m always on the go, so I’ve never had a place to call my own. If I’m settling down here, then I need food and board accounted for. I’ll gladly cover my share of expenses.”

That’s what we were hoping for, so that’s not a problem!

“Second, I need to be able to take whatever jobs come my way. I’ve been working as a mercenary for so long that I have plenty of long-time acquaintances besides you who I can’t leave in the lurch because I suddenly joined a guild.”

Of course. She’s an incredibly prolific swordswoman, making her quite in demand when it comes to acting as a bodyguard or slaying monsters. If she starts passing off jobs to the guild, her long-time clients might get confused.

“Third, if I join you, you have to swear you’ll never betray me. If even one person does something sneaky...that’s it. As long as you can promise to meet those three conditions, then I’ll join your guild.”

The air in the room was so tense, you could almost see sparks flying, and yet I knew she meant every word she said. Her conditions might be a little harsh, but she’s about to join a group of strangers. Setting clear boundaries before joining an official group like this only seems fair. This isn’t just a rag-tag bunch of friends...although we do all get along!

Angela stares directly at Ektor, silent and unmoving. In response, Ektor grins and begins answering her conditions, one by one.

“As far as living here, I was ready to invite you to stay with us regardless. We have plenty of rooms, and food is no issue. Of course, we won’t have feasts of

this caliber every day, and Claire doesn't make every single meal..."

"But I'll do my best to cook whenever I can," Claire adds. "I love to cook, after all."

Ektor goes on to say we'll discuss the payment system, a very important process, at a different time. Ektor and the rest of them have been paying for us ever since we arrived, and I want to be able to pay them back finally!

"Your second condition is also not a problem. All I ask is that, when accepting a job, you make sure they know you're a member of the Lanakiller guild. I'd like to start getting the word out. You can take on whatever jobs you want, as long as they know which guild you belong to."

Finally, Ektor stands up. He walks over to Angela before extending his right hand.

"I promise I'll never betray you. I wouldn't dream of it! This guild is held together by the bond of friendship, of trust! Welcome aboard, Angela."

No one seems to have any objections to what he says. In fact, everyone's smiling happily as they watch Ektor and Angela. She chuckles at Ektor's words before grasping his hand in hers and giving it a hearty shake.

"Thanks for having me!"

Hooray! Angela's finally one of us!

I turn to Claire and give her a high-five.

Chapter 7 | Wells, the Smooth-talking Master Blacksmith

ANGELA had left after dinner to head back to the inn she was staying at. She'd already paid for her room and felt bad inconveniencing the owner, especially since she'd been staying in the same room in the same inn for so long. She promised she'd be back as soon as she had a word with the innkeeper.

Kiefer and Candice ended up staying overnight instead due to Kiefer's complaints that heading back so late was too big of a pain. Of course, Candice couldn't leave without him, but that didn't stop her from complaining about the situation nonstop.

She didn't seem that upset about getting to spend extra time with Ektor, though. Hee-hee... She's so cute.

"I'll make sure everything gets cleared up, so feel free to use the bath," Ektor says after carrying all the cutlery and plates into the kitchen. Still, there are so many dirty dishes, I feel bad dumping it all on him.

"It seems like a lot, though," I protest.

"I can handle it!" he insists. "You two did so much tonight, you deserve a nice, relaxing soak in the tub. Go on."

Candice seems entranced by his sweet voice and gentle smile. To be fair, he is pretty cool. I don't know why Claire seems to be rubbing her own arms.

...I still feel bad about taking advantage of his kindness.

In the end, I can't help but feel bad, mainly because housework is the only thing I'm good at.

"Good idea! I'm more than happy to take it easy."

"Not *you*, Rinny! You're helping! And you, too, Macro!" Ektor snaps.

"Tch..." Rinny clicks his tongue.

It makes me feel a little better to see Rinny and Macro goofing off whenever they feel like it, but I don't want to make them do anything they'd rather not do at all.

"Ektor, there's no point in trying to make that ginger dummy do *anything*," Macro says dryly. "He's so useless, he'll end up breaking all the dishes anyway."

"What?! I can handle washing a couple of dishes! Leave me alone, you angsty pipsqueak!"

"Make me, you ex-convict!"

"Grr!"

I stand there, flabbergasted, as I watch yet another fight break out between them.

Sheesh, how does this always happen?

"You go on ahead, Claire," I say with a strained smile. "You can spend some time with Candice, and I'll join you after I finish cleaning up."

"Ugh... Fine. I had a feeling you'd say that."

She knows me better than anyone.

"Just one thing first!" Claire whispers urgently under her breath. "I'm worried about leaving you alone with Ektor. If he tries anything, just holler, okay?"

T-Try something? He's such a nice guy, I don't think I really have anything to worry about. She worries way too much.

"Okay..." It seems easier to simply promise her I'll be careful, even if I think she's exaggerating.

"I'm seriously worried..." she lets out a deep sigh, repeating how worried she is about me.

Why?

I send Claire and Candice off to the bathroom before hurrying to the kitchen, where I'm greeted by Ektor, who seems truly apologetic.

"I wanted to give you a break, and you ended up helping out anyway. I'm sorry."

“Don’t worry about it!” I say with a big smile. “Claire did pretty much all of the cooking while I stood around doing nothing. That’s why it makes me feel a little better to help clean up.”

I had a feeling that just saying “Don’t worry about it!” wouldn’t convince him, which is why I elaborated a little. That seemed to do the trick.

Ektor falls silent, his cheeks turning slightly pink.

“Hey, Ektor?” I say. “I really appreciate you looking out for us, but I want to help out more around here. I mean...we’re all friends now, right?”

It’s been a while since I could talk to Ektor alone like this, and so I decide to open up about something that’s been weighing on my mind recently. Sometimes I feel as if he’s going out of his way to be extra kind to me. Maybe it’s my imagination. To be fair, there’s still a lot about him I don’t know, but he seems to treat Claire way differently. Maybe it’s because of how she treats him, too? But it actually seems like they’re both being real with each other. Sure, seeing them fight constantly makes me super anxious. I just want everyone to get along, of course.

Also, it’s perhaps a little weird, but I’m kind of envious of his relationship with Claire and all his friends. It makes sense he’d be super close with Rinny and Macro, considering they’ve been his friends since they were kids, but then he’s also just really casual and friendly with Angela, who we just met today, as well as Kiefer and Candice. And I’m sure he’ll be just as friendly with everyone else we ask to join the guild, since they’re all already Ektor’s friends.

It’s just me he treats this way! He only dotes on me, and it makes me feel a little sad. Don’t get the wrong idea—it’s not that I hate it! It just feels like there’s this wall between Ektor and me. Of course, there’s no way I can bring it up directly.

My ears and tail droop sadly, as I struggle to express myself, and as if able to read my thoughts, I notice him looking concerned, which only makes me feel worse.

I’m so sorry!

“You’re probably right. I’m sorry. Honestly...I’m a little lost.”

“Lost? How?”

What is he worried about?

When I ask him what he means, he simply smiles at me before continuing.

“We only met for the first time not that long ago, right? A part of me feels bad that I basically talked you into coming along with us, dragging you away from the small yet safe village you grew up in.”

I can see tears in his eyes as he speaks, as if he really is conflicted, and so I wait for him to finish. As he continues to talk, he focuses on his hands, and I follow suit, my ears straining to pick out his voice through the clatter of dishes and utensils being washed.

“It seems like Claire’s really been trying to get on my nerves lately, and so I merely give her the same attitude she gives me. I feel bad about it, but she’s just so grouchy sometimes, I can’t help myself. You must think I’m a real jerk.”

I see. He’s simply treating Claire the same way she treats him. Claire knows about the game, and she has a hunch Ektor does too... I’m sure she’s just being hypersensitive. Perhaps Ektor’s getting caught up in Claire’s annoyance because he’s just as aware of the game as she is... Although, to be fair, we still have no idea if he knows anything about the game to begin with.

“That’s not true. I like how real and true to yourself you are with Claire.”

“You do?”

I begin drying the clean dishes with a cloth, too embarrassed to look anywhere but at my hands. I can feel the weight of his gaze on me, though.

“And not just when you’re dealing with Claire. I feel the same way, even when you’re with Rinny and Macro, too. I know that’s who you really are...and I wish you’d stop being someone you’re not with me. I want you to be yourself, not this guy who goes out of his way to treat me nicer than everyone else.”

I try to sound as natural and unconcerned as possible, although I feel embarrassed bringing it up at all. I sound like a child.

“I don’t know. When I’m myself, people say I’m pretty argumentative and sullen, completely opposite from how I look... It doesn’t bother you at all?”

Who says *that*? He has a tendency to speak his mind, but I don't think that's a bad thing. He does have some princely physical features. I admit, I was charmed the first time I laid eyes on him, and his sweet, gentle smile definitely suits him. Still, he looks just as sweet, even when he's joking around with his friends, complaining, causing a fuss, or being completely serious. I don't want to be judged by how I look, and I wish he wouldn't care so much about what other people think about him.

"Nope. Not in the slightest. That's part of what makes you, you. I like you the way you are, Ektor."

"Miku..."

I'm still embarrassed, but I force myself to look up from my hands and into Ektor's eyes. His cheeks are still very red, but I think he's happy. And if he is, I am too.

"You don't need to baby me, okay? I want you to treat me like everyone else," I stress.

That last part was a little selfish, but oh well. I just feel so awkward when he treats me differently than everyone else! I want him to see me the same as the others!

His eyes widen in surprise at my determination in bringing up an issue I care strongly about before he smiles, almost shyly.

"Miku... If that's how you feel, then I'll try to do better."

His smile is so radiant and pure, I feel myself melting. He really is very handsome. I understand why Candice immediately said his looks were his best asset.

Hee-hee... I won't tell Claire how I feel, as she'll just get angry...although I promise I'm totally not in love!

"Thanks for being my friend, Ektor."

"Of course! And thanks for being mine."

His face is still bright red, as if he's still embarrassed, but I feel a lot closer to him, which makes me happy. I hope each day brings all of us a little closer.

Once all the dishes are dried and put back into place, I feel a warm coziness inside my heart.



THE next day, I quietly gather my belongings, trying not to wake Claire or Candice, and sneak out of the bedroom. Seeing the two of them sound asleep together in the same bed was adorable. Last night, Candice showed up at our door, clutching her pillow and wanting to chat. The two had been sitting on Claire's bed, and they must have fallen asleep like that. I'd been chatting with them from my own bed, but I must have drifted off at some point, which is why I have no idea when they fell asleep. Considering how dead to the world they are now, it's clear they probably stayed up pretty late.

It was the first time we'd ever spent the night chatting with a friend, which was a lot of fun! Candice seemed to be enjoying herself as well, and I hope we'll have more days and nights like that one. At the very least, I'll let the two of them sleep in a little longer.

Which means, I'm in charge of making breakfast! It'll be f-fine. I can do that much, at least. I'm not completely useless! As long as I stick to the basics, I can do this. Toast and eggs should be good, right?

I descend the stairs to the first floor as I plan breakfast out in my head.

"Well, well. You're up early, Miku."

"Eeep! R-R-Rinny?!"

I turn the corner, all pumped up over my breakfast menu, when I immediately come face to face with a very unexpected sight. Hearing my name, I turn to greet him but instead let out a surprised yelp. Right there, in front of my eyes, is Rinny, dressed in nothing but a towel!

Oh my gosh! I have no idea where to look!

"Hrm? What's wrong, Miku? You look flustered."

I feel myself panicking at the sight of his half-naked body, but he seems completely unconcerned. In fact, he begins approaching me without a care in the world, causing me to let out another squeak.

“Eep! P-P-Please put some clothes on! And don’t come any closer until you dooooo!” I cry.

“Huh?”

I purposefully look away, flailing my arms in front of me in an attempt to keep him back. He seems genuinely surprised by my outburst.

I’m still a girl, so at least have a little decency!

“Oops. Right, right. Sorry. I’m so used to living with only dudes, that I guess I forgot. Not even a good morning, though? Am I that terrible looking? Wow, I’m kinda hurt here...”

“I’m j-just not used to it!”

He’s clearly teasing me as he walks off, chuckling to himself.

He’s probably heading back to his room. This isn’t funny at all!

I glance in the direction he went, but he’s already gone.

Whew! He’s going to give me a heart attack this early in the morning!

Rubbing my flaming red cheeks vigorously with both hands, I get myself back together and start making breakfast.

I decide to scramble some eggs and fry up some bacon, along with a couple of slices of thick-cut bread and a simple salad.

It might not be enough for someone like Macro...but this is the best I can do. I’m not very good at making stuff from scratch, like soup. And anything with a knife is out! Paring knives are fine, but anything bigger than that is too scary for me. The more I think about it, the more amazing Claire is in my eyes. Honestly, I admire *anyone* who can handle any sort of knife or sword.

“Wow! Something smells good.”

“Rinny!”

My ears swivel in his direction as he once again calls out in his loud, jovial voice. I’m on edge because of what happened earlier, but when I turn, I see he’s dressed in his usual clothes, and I feel my body instantly relax.

Whew!

“Can I have some? I’m starvin’.”

“Of course. What about everyone else? Are they still asleep?” I ask Rinny, who’s beaming happily as he carries a plate piled high with food to the table.

“Macro usually sleeps in until noon, when he’s got nothing planned,” he explains. “And Ektor takes his time in the morning.”

“Hmm... I see. They’re usually awake and out of bed really early when they have work to do.”

It’s interesting to see this different side to them.

Hearing me say that, Rinny screws his face up in annoyance. “That’s not how they are at all. Getting them up in the morning is a huge pain! You gotta practically smack them awake! You should help me drag them outta bed sometime, and then you’ll *really* understand how I feel.”

“Seriously? I think I’ll pass, then.” I automatically turn down his offer after hearing the seriousness in his voice.

“Awww!” Rinny cries out in frustration, causing me to giggle as I pour myself a cup of coffee.

“Oh, Rinny! Do you want some coffee, too?” I ask.

“Ooh! Thanks! Black’s fine.”

“Sure thing.”

So, Rinny takes his coffee black, huh? He did say he doesn’t like sweets. I should try and remember that. I love coffee, but I can’t drink it without a bit of sugar and milk.

He watches as I add three cubes of sugar to my cup.

“Do you want some coffee with that sugar?” he asks, teasingly. “But yours will still probably taste like coffee, unlike Macro, who takes five cubes!” With coffee in hand, he begins digging into his food.

Wow, Macro has a serious sweet tooth!

“Are you always up this early, Rinny?”

Wanting to learn more about Rinny, I start asking him questions about

himself. Nothing too serious, just your run-of-the-mill icebreakers, like morning routines or favorite things. The more things I know about him, the easier it'll be to live together. I'm pretty useless on the job front, but I can make sure everyone's comfortable while they're at home!

"I usually go for a jog around the neighborhood every morning to keep in shape. The day hasn't officially started until I've worked up a sweat first!"

He's got a surprisingly normal lifestyle. He's always lounging around on the couch, and he's just so rough and tumble in general that I assumed he acted the same in his day-to-day activities. Assuming anything is no good. I need to do better.

"Does that surprise you?"

"What?! Err! No! It's just...!"

He's right on the mark, and I can't help but get flustered in response.

Oh, shoot! Did I say what I was thinking out loud?

I desperately try to come up with an excuse, but nothing comes out of my mouth, and all I do is sit there, waving my arms around. Rinny, clearly amused, roars with laughter.

"You're so easy to read, Miku. I always know exactly how you feel!"

"Ugh... Yeah, you're right... I'm sorry, Rinny. It's not that I think badly of you or anything..."

"I get it, I get it. You didn't think I was like that, right? I get that a lot. I'm used to it, so it doesn't really bother me."

Just yesterday, I learned making assumptions based on appearances was bad during my conversation with Ektor, and yet, here I am, doing the same thing all over again! You just can't help your initial impressions!

"Come on, don't look so sad!" Rinny says. "Besides, we've only known each other for a short while. These mistakes happen when you're getting to know someone. Besides, I always thought you were a quiet girl who does what she's told, but you're actually pretty stubborn and you hate to lose."

My eyes open wide in surprise at his words. All of what he said is true. I nod

silently as I listen to him talk.

“I’ve picked up on some things just by talking with you, but there’s so much I still don’t know. There’s no need to get so worked up about it. Besides, it’s kind of fun when you realize someone you thought you knew has a different side to them.”

Yeah, he’s right. You can learn some things by asking them directly, but that won’t tell you everything there is to know about someone. You can only truly learn who someone is by spending time with them... That really does sound like fun!

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll just have to watch all of you, including you, Rinny, like a hawk so I can learn everything about you!”

“Hahaha! You don’t need to watch us *that* closely. You’ll make me blush!”

“Hee-hee... My piercing gaze will cut a hole right through you!” I tease.

I love talking with Rinny. His jokes are so easy to understand, making it easy to joke around with him. He’s the type of person who can really lighten a room. Having such fun together so early in the morning sets the perfect tone for the rest of the day!

Just as we finish eating breakfast, Claire and Candice stumble down the stairs. They still seem pretty sleepy. Knowing Claire’s tendency to be grumpy in the morning makes me think they really did stay up pretty late last night.

“Good morning, you two!” I greet them. “Want me to make you some plates? I cooked breakfast!”

“Mmm... Morning, Miku,” Claire says. “I feel bad asking, but I’d love some food.”

“It’s no problem at all. Sit! You too, Candice.”

Candice yawns in response, mumbling a sleepy “Thanks.”

The way her cat ears twitch this way and that is so cute! Hee-hee... It’s my pleasure!

“Ektor and Macro are sleeping in today, but we should really get to Wells’ place before noon!” Rinny folds his hands behind his head as he complains

about the missing two guys while watching the sleepy girls.

“Wells? Is that the next person we’re asking to join our guild?” I ask as I dish out the food.

“Yeah. We could probably head over to see him without needing to wait for Macro and Ektor. I’m an adult, I can handle a little chit-chat!” Rinny mutters as if that possibility just hit him.

“Huh? But if we want him to join our guild, then it’s a little more important than simple chit-chat, right?” I ask. “We should probably wait until everyone’s ready. At the very least, the guild leader should definitely be there.”

Rinny laughs my worried words off by telling me it’ll be fine and to trust him. “I’m sure Wells would prefer it if we didn’t all come at once, not being a fan of formal affairs and all. Yep, I know how he is. All right! I’m heading over there!”

It seems like Wells is the early to bed, early to rise type. It’s easier for him to get work done in the morning, and I know how hard it can be to break old habits. With that in mind, he probably would get grumpy being disturbed in the afternoon, which means it makes far more sense to go now when he’s awake and in high spirits. I get it, but still!

“Wait! Hold on, Rinny! Come on... At least let me come, too.”

Rinny’s the type who acts right away without stopping to think about it. One minute he’s standing up from the table, and the next, he’s about ready to step out the front door, and I yelp after him struggling to catch up.

“In that case, I’m coming, too!” Hearing me call out to Rinny, Claire cries out, frazzled. Rinny stands there, clearly annoyed, with his arms crossed.

“Why? I can tell it’s gonna take you a while to get ready. Miku can come since she’s ready to go. We don’t have time to wait around if we’re going to get there before his shop opens for the day.”

That’s a fair point, plus I want Claire to enjoy her breakfast as well. There’s only one reasonable option here.

I smile at Claire. “Don’t worry, Claire. I’ll go with Rinny. Just tell Ektor and Macro where we went when they wake up, okay?”

Claire grumbles under her breath, but it's clear she knows this is for the best. She doesn't harp on the issue, so I guess she's accepted my decision to accompany Rinny by myself, for better or worse.

"Ugh... Okay. Fine. Rinny! You better not take your eyes off Miku for even a second! She's a very cute and oblivious kid, making her an easy target for all sorts of weirdos."

With her mind made up, she points a finger at Rinny as she lectures him.

Don't point at people, Claire! It's rude! Plus, don't you think you're being a bit harsh?

"Haha! I got it! I'll take good care of her. Okay, let's go, Miku!"

"Okay! Thanks for letting me tag along."

We smile at each other as we leave the guild, Claire's shouts of anger at Rinny's supposed lack of ability and know-how ringing out behind us.

She really needs to try and lighten up a little!

As I follow Rinny, I try to learn more about this Wells guy. I can't just show up unprepared!

"You said you wanted to see him before he opens up shop. What sort of shop does he run? Will he be okay joining our guild with a shop?" I ask.

"Ah, you don't know anything about him yet, huh? Wells sells armor and weapons. He runs the entire operation himself."

A weapons and armor store? It's not really something I'm familiar with. After all, our village is so peaceful, we have no need for either of those things. We have plenty of farming tools, but that's completely different.

"We want him to join the guild, but honestly, just having his name associated with ours is good enough," Rinny explains. "We don't really need help taking care of the jobs we get, meaning anyone in the guild is allowed to carry on as they see fit. As long as he works under the Lanakiller guild banner, he can continue making and mending weapons and armor to his heart's content. He'll maintain our weapons for us and he gets to use our name, it's a win-win."

So, Wells is a merchant, huh? He must have a lot of customers. It sounds like

he's skilled enough to build a name for himself, although Rinny and the others think he's wasting his time and talents. Once word gets out that he's a blacksmith in a high-tier guild, his clientele will triple overnight, and we'll be able to raise our fees since he'll be so well known. That's what they want to use as a bargaining chip. I get it. By joining the guild, he'll gain prestige.

"He always complains how big of a pain it is. He wants more work to make more money, but he hates selling himself. Advertising and getting word out about his store is a waste of time, he says. Guys like him and Kiefer are so focused on their craft, they don't have time for anything else."

Hee-hee! I guess that's how it goes. They put so much into their craft that they can't think about anything else. With that in mind, joining a high-ranking guild like Lanakiller would offer him a lot of benefits. I hope he agrees!

We finally make it to the heart of the city. We pass a large water fountain and head down a small alley beside the bustling market, which is getting ready to open for the day. We're once again stepping off the beaten path, just like when we went to see Kiefer.

"The rent for shops out in the main plaza is too expensive," Rinny tells me. "Renting land is pretty tough. You can't get a store on the main street unless you're already doing well for yourself."

That makes sense. Although I'm surprised he runs his own business but can't afford to rent space in the main plaza. Honestly, though, just being able to open a store at all is pretty impressive to me.

"His store's almost worryingly small and shabby, but not as shifty as Kiefer's."

So, we're using Kiefer's workshop as a basis of comparison? Well, okay. A broken-down shack is a little concerning, but I'm sure everything will make sense once we arrive. Besides, what's really important is his personality!

Since it's still so early, there's almost no one around. I've heard rumors of a morning market that happens once a month. It's spread out around the main fountain, drawing the types of crowds you wouldn't normally see at this time of day. I don't really like crowds that much, but I'd still love to see it at least once. I'll have to make a mental note to come back!

“You should be able to see it now. And it looks like he’s out front!” Rinny suddenly speaks up after we’ve been walking down a small alley for a bit and I look in the direction where he’s pointing.

“What? Really?”

He wasn’t kidding when he said the store was run-down and shabby. It doesn’t even have any windows, and the door is falling off its hinges! Plus, it looks like parts of the building have been glued together! I wonder how someone so good at making weapons and armor could be so bad at basic home repair. It can’t be that different, right? He’s definitely a weirdo.

“Hey! Wells! How’s it going?” Rinny greets the man out front.

He’s currently placing a sign on the entrance to the building. His deep-brown tail, covered in scales, is pretty impressive... He seems to be a lizard demi-human. He turns at the sound of Rinny’s voice, and I notice his long hair, swept back from his face, is the same shade of brown as his tail. He’s puffing on a cigarette with a pair of goggles hanging around his neck, and his sharp gaze swings in our direction.

“Hrm? Well, if it isn’t Rinny. What are you doing here so bright and early in the morning, and with a cutie, no less? On a hot date?”

As soon as he spots Rinny, he breaks out into a smile, puffing merrily on his cigarette. His bulky build makes him seem pretty tough, but the smile makes him look sweet. Although it clashes with his piercing gaze!

Wait a minute. Did he just ask if we’re on a date?

“We’re d-d-definitely NOT on a date!” I correct him at once. “My name’s Miku! I recently joined the Lanakiller guild!”

I have to make sure he knows he’s wrong right away! Otherwise, Claire will get angry. To think we’re on a date, just because we’re walking together... Although, to be fair, if I saw a boy and a girl walking somewhere together, I’d assume they were on a date, too. Ugh, I’m no good at this kind of stuff.

“Bwahahaha! You’ve got a mouth on you, girlie. Your tail’s all puffed up! How adorable!”

“Don’t tease her too much. She got freaked out this morning just seeing me half naked!

“R-Rinny!”

Wells has an air of maturity about him. Although he teased me when he first saw me, for some reason, it didn’t make me feel uncomfortable. Honestly, the real jerk is Rinny, bringing up that incident from earlier! And with everyone looking at me, my face is redder than ever! Ugh!

“Oh, really? How cute! You’ve got a real sweetie on your hands. She’s a rare find nowadays. Take good care of her, Rinny.”

“Oh, I’m well aware. Her sister’s been nagging me to make sure I keep an eye on her, and I’m doing just that.”

Wells smiles cheerfully at me while taking a puff from his cigarette.

I was worried at first, seeing the dismal state of his store, but Wells seems really cheerful and energetic. I’m not sure how that relates to his skill, but based on a first meeting alone, I too, agree that his talent is going to waste, hidden away here.

“Well, forget about that for now. There’s something I wanted to discuss with you before you open shop,” Rinny says.

“You’re saying you didn’t come out here just to see me? You’re killing me.”

“Haha! Don’t say things you don’t mean. Besides, you *know* what brings us here.”

There’s a camaraderie between them that reminds me of old drinking buddies. It’s clear they’re on good terms. However, all they do is constantly tease each other, making it difficult to tell if they’re actually joking or being serious. It seems like the people who seem the friendliest and are the easiest to get along with are the ones you need to watch out for the most. They’re good at putting you off your guard. I believe Claire referred to folks like that as con artists.

“Wells isn’t one of the love interests, but I like him. Watch out, though, ’cause he’ll pull a fast one on you if you’re not careful!”

That's what Claire told me once while telling me about her game, but I'm not worried. He might like to take advantage of people, but I know he would never do anything to hurt those close to him. I'm not sure if this Wells is the same as the one she knows, but based on what I've learned so far, I don't think I need to be worried about anything.

Just as the thought crosses my mind, Wells suddenly slaps his forehead and shakes his head, as if in shock. The look on his face is one of deep sadness.

"Now, why would you go and say a thing like that? I really thought my friends were coming all this way just to pay me a social visit! Aww... I've got feelings too, you know? And they hurt like anyone else's! Thanks for ruining my day... I'm not in the mood to talk to anyone anymore..."

As I gasp in surprise, Rinny whispers in my ear, "He's saying he'll only listen to what we have to say depending on how we go about it. He can be a real pain like that..."

Oh, I get it. He's like a small child. I thought as much. But wh-what do we do?

At a loss, I watch as Wells turns around and, with shoulders slumped, trudges back into the store. We can't let him go without talking about what we came here for! I suddenly call out to him.

"Um! Excuse me! Wells?"

"Hmm?"

Having not thought this far ahead, I have no idea what to say next.

I mean, we just met! I don't know anything about him! I don't know what he likes to talk about, or more importantly, what topics to avoid. I don't know anything! Part of how you get to know people is through conversation, so... Oh, wait! That's perfect.

"I want to know more about you!"

"Ack! Miku?!"

That's right! In order to become friends with someone, you have to learn more about them! Which is why I said what I did, but...huh? Why is Rinny so flustered? Did I say something wrong?

“Pfft! Bwahahahaha! She really is quite something! That’s the most passionate and direct pickup line I’ve ever heard! I can really feel the love!”

Seeing my obvious confusion, Wells, who’d been so sad just a moment ago, bursts into peals of laughter. That’s when I realize my misstep.

“Eep! I wasn’t trying to hit on you!” My cheeks are flaming red and just as hot. It seems all I’m doing today is blushing like crazy.

So, he was just messing with us the whole time!

“Oh? But I was so psyched to have a girl as cute as you flirt with me! You didn’t mean it, huh? Oh, well.”

“I DID mean it! I really do want to know more about you, Wells! Truly! I just didn’t mean it like *that!*”

“Hrm? Then how *did* you mean it? Tell me.”

He lifts my chin with the tip of his finger, bringing his face close to mine, before grinning with devilish delight.

That look in his eyes is so enchanting! Oh, gosh! What do I do?! Claaaire!



“Okay, break it up, you two. If you go any further, Ektor’s gonna be mad.”

“I wouldn’t want THAT.”

Just as I was on the verge of panicking, Rinny swiftly steps in between us.

Whew! But why did he mention Ektor? If anyone’s getting angry here, it’s Claire. Well, whatever. Wells seems far less upset than before. Although, there’s no way I’m trusting him ever again after a stunt like that!

“Sorry about that. Don’t get all fluffed up! You look too cute when you’re angry.”

“Wells!”

He doesn’t seem to care, even with my fur all puffed up with anger, waving off my cry of annoyance playfully.

He doesn’t feel bad at all! In fact, he seems to enjoy making me upset! Rrgh!

“Thanks to the little missy here, I’m feeling much better. Now! What was it you came here to talk to me about?”

“Seriously? Great!”

According to Rinny, Wells is very moody. Once he gets all pouty, he won’t listen to anything you have to say, which is why Rinny had been ready to call it quits for today and try again later.

“Thanks,” he says while ruffling my hair.

Oh, really? Then I guess my embarrassment was ultimately for a good cause.

“Tee-hee! I’m glad I helped in some way.”

“...She’s so unbelievably honest and straightforward. She’s a real good kid, huh?” Wells says.

“She really is. Which is why I can’t take my eyes off her for even a second,” Rinny agrees.

“I can see why.”

His sudden compliment in such a serious tone is a little worrisome, and yet I can’t complain. Although I don’t know how to feel about them thinking I’m

going to get into trouble. And why are they both patting my head like that? When I ask why, all they tell me is to stay just the way I am. Ugh. I never understand anything!

“Sorry about the mess. Feel free to sit wherever there’s space. Oh! Care for some tea?”

After a bit of back and forth, Wells invites us into his store to listen to what we have to say. While he did tell us to sit wherever we pleased, I can’t seem to find a chair without at least one broken leg and that isn’t covered in a blanket of dust.

Hmm...

“Wells, would you mind if I tidied up the room a bit?” I ask.

“Hrm? You want to clean? I’m not going to turn you down, but it might take a while...”

“Thanks! It’ll just take a sec! Light magic! Cleanse!”

Although all I’m doing is cleaning up the place, I still need to get permission first. I just couldn’t stand one more second in this dust-covered room, and so, before the words had even left his lips, I was already conjuring up my light magic. My tail attracts dust like no other!

“Ooh! How neat!”

“She cleaned the guildhall in the same way!” Rinny says. “She’s amazing!”

In a blink of an eye, the room is clean and tidy, and the two men are drowning me in praise.

“I’m sure lots of people can do much better than me,” I say, embarrassed.

“There are not that many folks nowadays who can wield light magic, and even less who use it for cleaning,” Wells replies. “You really are one of a kind!”

I’m well aware there are far less light magic users than any other elemental, and he’s right about the cleaning. The only reason I do it is because Claire brought up the idea. I still don’t think it’s exactly praiseworthy. It made me smile to see Claire act so embarrassed the other day when everyone thanked her for her cooking, but now that it’s happening to me, I just feel weird. I never

know what to say in response!

“You’ve got a very delicate touch when it comes to wielding your magic, too. That takes a lot of training and skill. You should be more confident in yourself, Miku!”

Rinny’s praise only makes my face redder.

Sheesh! Will I ever stop blushing today?!

“We didn’t come here just to talk about me, right? Let’s change the subject!” I try to get us back on track while righting a chair that had toppled over. It’s a little wobbly, but it should work. After making sure it can hold my weight, I carefully sit down.

Wells watches me, chuckling softly, before speaking up. “I already have a good idea of what you’re about to say. Rinny doesn’t usually wander around with lovely ladies in tow, especially ladies who happen to also be members of the Lanakiller guild.”

Huh? Really? He figured it out? I knew this guy was no ordinary blacksmith. He gives an air of nonchalance, but his mind is constantly spinning, picking up on every word and action, no matter how minute.

“You’re pretty quick! In that case, let’s get down to business.” Rinny doesn’t seem particularly bothered by his words, but he knows him well. Grinning as he folds his hands behind his head, he seems to be in a pretty good mood.

Please let this work out and make Wells join us!

“We’ve been considering climbing up the ranks as a guild,” Rinny says, getting straight to the point.

“I see. And you need more members, right?”

“Right. Of course, Lanakiller is pretty selective in its membership.”

Wells nods to show he’s listening as he flips a new cigarette out from a pack, using the tip of his finger to light it before taking a deep puff. He holds the smoke in his lungs before letting it out slowly. As he does, I can tell he’s thinking about something, his gaze distant.

“Who else did you invite?” he asks after a long moment of silence. Rinny

answers his question readily. Aside from Claire and me, Wells seems to know everyone else by name. “A very sensible list. So, that leaves just me and Marino to get to your ten, huh?”

“Yep. You can build a new workshop on the guildhall property, or you can stay here. You’ll be free to carry on, business as usual. We just need you on the roster, and of course, the prestige of your name itself. In return...”

“Further recognition and a stable income, huh? Doesn’t sound like a bad deal to me.”

It seems to be going well. He takes another puff from his cigarette, as if mulling it over. There seems to be something that’s bothering him.

“I need some time to think it over. There’s something I need to confirm first.”

“That’s fine, but when do you think you’ll have an answer?”

He needs to check something? I was right, there is something bothering him. I don’t want to pry...

Meanwhile, Rinny’s good spirits have vanished, replaced by an annoyed scowl. He seems concerned about when he’ll come up with an answer. Seeing Rinny’s reaction, Wells laughs, reassuring him he won’t make him wait too long.

“I’ll stop by the guildhall tomorrow night. I’ll have an answer for you then.”

“That soon, huh? That works for me. It better be good news!”

Tomorrow evening? Maybe we can host another big dinner again. I should warn Claire ahead of time. I really hope he has a good answer for us. He doesn’t seem put off by the idea, so maybe that’s a good sign.

“Yeah, see you then,” Wells says, getting up and walking away from us.

“We’ll finish up this conversation then,” Rinny says.

That’s right, he has a shop to run. If we stay here any longer, we’ll get in his way.

“See you tomorrow, Wells!” I say.

As I scramble out of my seat and head out of the store, he calls out to me with a sly grin on his lips. “Yep! It was a pleasure to meet you, Little Miss Novice.”

Who's he calling a novice?! I can't believe he had to get one last parting shot as we're leaving. He better call me by my name the next time we meet.

"Let's get back home," Rinny says. "I wonder if those guys are still asleep."

"Good question," I say. "Ektor's probably awake, but Macro and Kiefer might still be out cold. At least, that's the feeling I get!"

"Haha! You're definitely right! It's almost impossible to get Macro out of bed on his days off! And it's pretty rare to see Kiefer up and about during the day if he's not working on something."

We start heading back the same way we came. Although we left the guild pretty early in the morning, it's still not yet afternoon. However, with the sun a little higher in the sky, there are far more people milling about.

"Do you really think Wells will join us?" I mutter the thought to myself after we get back to the main road. I have a good feeling about it, but a part of me is worried, too. Hearing my quiet mumbling, Rinny grunts noncommittedly.

"He'll probably take the deal. But it all depends on this so-called thing he needs to check."

"Do you have any idea what that might be? What does he have to check?" I'm really interested to know why he couldn't give us an answer right away. I glance up at Rinny, who folds his hands behind his head.

"He's probably going to talk to Marino, the last name on our list."

Marino... The last name of potential members, and the only person I still haven't met yet. I assume they're another acquaintance but know nothing other than that.

"Marino's his partner, which means they're a two-fer," Rinny quickly continues, seeing my look of clear confusion. "You can't have one without the other."

"Partners? Like...boyfriend and girlfriend?!"

He mentions it in such an off-hand and matter-of-fact way, but I can't help but be shocked by something so unexpected.

I'd have never seen that coming... I've never spent time around a young couple

in love before. To be fair, Wells is an adult, so it's not that weird he'd be in a relationship. It explains why he seems so used to being around women.

“Pfft! You really are a novice, Miku. You're like some precious cinnamon bun, too pure for this world.”

“S-Stop teasing me!”

But no matter what I do, I can't keep my cheeks from blazing.

You just caught me off guard, that's all! S-Stop staring at me!

Chapter 8 | Ranking Up the Lanakiller Guild

“WE'RE home!”

The entire way back to the guild, I kept fanning my face in a desperate attempt to make my cheeks less noticeably red. It helped a little. Rinny threw open the door to the living room, loudly announcing our arrival, before immediately flopping onto the couch, ready to relax.

He really does whatever he wants, whenever the mood strikes him.

“Welcome back, Miku! How was it?! Did anything weird happen?!” Claire immediately rushes over to me before throwing her arms around me.

I'm not sure why she's so worried!

As I hug Claire back, who has an almost death-grip hold on me, Ektor comes running over, equally as frazzled.

“You went to see Wells all by yourselves?! What were you thinking?! Did he say anything weird to you? That creep flirts with any woman he lays eyes on... It's a joke to him, but he's got so much dang sex appeal, he's constantly getting himself in trouble with women who get the wrong idea.”

Huh? Really? While he did have a refined charm to him, I have no idea about the rest of that. I wonder if Claire knows what Ektor's talking about.

The thought crosses my mind that if she had known, she definitely wouldn't have let me go by myself. I turn to Claire.

“Oh.” It looks like she just remembered. Her mouth suddenly drops open as the color drains from her face.

Wait, she knew all along?! She just forgot? Claire, the girl who worries about every single possible scenario, forgot something?!

“Ugh! I totally forgot that Wells is one of the most popular characters...!” she mutters angrily to herself.

Popular characters? What the heck does that mean?

“But more importantly! What happened? Did he hit on you? Did he say anything weird?!” Still completely confused, I watch as Claire snaps back to her usual self with a vengeance.

Eep!

She grabs the fabric of my shirt in both hands, almost shouting in my face.

C-Calm down!

“Nothing went wrong. All that happened is we discovered Miku’s more of a precious, innocent cinnamon bun than I ever realized!” Rinny, who’s still sprawled on the couch, casually interrupts the fuss happening in the entrance to the living room.

“Hey! Rinny!” I whirl toward him. “I thought I told you to stop saying stuff like that!” All the heat that finally left my cheeks has come back with a vengeance!

“Wh-Why are you so embarrassed and flushed...?” Claire asks.

“Don’t tell me Wells sank his poisonous fangs into you?!” Ektor cries.

Why do they look so scary?! Before I can even process what’s happening, both Ektor and Claire close the distance between us and bombard me with questions.

“Ack! Eep! Wait! Calm down already! What’s gotten into you two?!”

They interrogate me until I tell them, in detail, what happened at Wells’ place and what we talked about.

It’s like they’ve been possessed! I kind of understand why Claire’s so worried, but there’s no way I’d fall for a man who’s THAT much older than I am.

“And besides, he has a g-g-girlfriend, so there’s absolutely nothing to worry about on that front,” I say.

Ektor and Claire respond at the same time, shouting, “You’re too naïve!”

They finally let me go, and I slump onto an empty spot on the couch next to Candice, who watched the whole thing in dumbfounded shock. She immediately begins comforting me from my exhausting ordeal. “The two of

them are very similar,” Candice says. “I can tell. They’re both overprotective.”

She’s too sweet! So far, my morning’s been one heart-pounding shock after another, and it’s not even noon yet!

“Anyway, will things work out like this?” Candice asks. “If Wells and Marino don’t join us, we’ll have to look for two more people, right? I’m worried!”

I almost forgot until she mentioned it! That wasn’t even the most important part of all. I’ll fill Macro and Kiefer in on what happened after they wake up, but for now, I need to hear Ektor’s opinion, since he’s the official guild leader.

“Hm? There’s nothing to worry about on that front,” he says. “I already talked to Marino about it.”

“Huh? What?! Why am I only hearing this now?!” Claire, Candice, and even Rinny cry out in surprise. The others make sense, but how is even Rinny clueless?

“I can’t believe you talked to her without telling us, Ektor!” Rinny says. “There was absolutely *no* point in me going to see Wells then!”

“Sorry about that. I didn’t hear back from Marino until last night, right before bed. Besides, I’d still been planning on talking to Wells directly, so it wasn’t a complete waste.”

It seems as if Ektor found a letter waiting for him on his windowsill when he went up to his room last night. Marino has a magic ability that lets her send letters. If her response came late last night, it makes sense Ektor wouldn’t have had time to say anything until now.

“At any rate, that means we’ve got the members we need to rank up, right?” I hesitantly ask, only to be met by an equally vague answer, lacking any sort of excitement.

“Now that you’ve mentioned it, I guess we do?” Ektor says.

What’s wrong? Shouldn’t we be celebrating? I thought this was our goal?

“It just doesn’t seem real...”

That makes sense. Maybe he’ll feel more excited once his application is officially approved. To be fair, it doesn’t seem real to me, either.

“It was honestly a lot easier than we thought it’d be,” Rinny says. “We should throw a proper celebration once the paperwork goes through and we’re officially recognized as a high-tier guild.”

“That sounds great!” Candice cheers. “You actually think up decent stuff every once in a while, don’t you, Rinny? Let’s do it! I’m so excited!”

“Let’s have the party here,” Claire chimes in. “It’ll be easier than inconveniencing one of the local pubs or taverns. All right! Time to roll my sleeves up and put together another amazing feast!”

As everyone excitedly talks about plans for our party, I feel my own excitement steadily growing.

I’m so happy we did it!

“I can’t wait!” I exclaim.

The real work starts from here, which is why we should take the time now to celebrate. I can’t wait to tell Macro, Kiefer, and Angela! I feel like I’m toeing the starting line before a big race. My heart’s beating loudly with excitement. It’s a comforting feeling, far different than the heart-pounding excitement all morning. I can’t wait to see what tomorrow brings!



“**IS** everyone ready?” Ektor asks.

“You didn’t forget anything, Ektor?” Macro questions him.

“I triple-checked everything, plus I had Claire and Angela check the paperwork for themselves. And so did you, Macro!”

The day’s finally here, and it’s bright and sunny, to boot. That’s right! The day the mid-tier guild, Lanakiller, finally ranks up! The six of us: Ektor, Macro, Rinny, Angela, Claire, and myself, are lined up outside the League of Guild’s main building, mentally preparing to head inside.

Today’s the day. Ugh, I’m so nervous!

“It’s too bad we couldn’t have everyone here,” I say quietly, and Angela chuckles in response.

“That’s how it goes sometimes. Once a group gets big enough, it becomes impossible getting everyone together in one spot.”

“I know you’re right, but still...”

Angela’s bright blue ponytail swings side to side playfully as she laughs. Her posture, with her head held high, only makes her look cooler than ever. I can’t help but be charmed by her mannerisms.

“Tonight marks the first time we’ll have all our guild members together in one room! We gotta hustle to get ready for the party once we’re finished here!” Claire exclaims.

That’s right! There might be a couple of folks missing now, but we can celebrate with everyone later tonight. But before that can happen, we have to make sure the application is perfect, so there are no problems.

“How long are we going to stand here? I’m going in,” Macro snaps, breaking up our lively conversation, before striding inside the building. He sighs as he leaves, shrugging us off in annoyance.

He’s right, though. There’s no point in standing around out here. Rinny immediately follows him inside, shouting after him to not run off on his own. Ektor goes next, meekly telling Macro and Rinny to stop fighting. Claire, Angela, and I smile as our eyes meet before we follow the three guys inside.

Things are never quiet with those three!

Once inside, Macro and Rinny immediately quiet down. Or rather, Ektor forces them to be quiet... At any rate! This is an important moment! Ektor approaches the reception desk, with the five of us standing slightly behind him. He has a brief conversation with the male receptionist.

“...It seems like your paperwork is all in order. We need to register your guild members next, so gather everyone together.”

“Not all of our members are here right now, but I brought this magic stone with us that we imbued with their power beforehand. Does that work?” With that, Ektor reaches inside his bag and takes out a palm-sized transparent stone, holding it out to the man at the desk.

It's a stone able to record information. It currently holds samples of Kiefer, Candice, Wells, and Marino's magic. Since everyone's magic is different, it's a way to prove their unique identities.

"Yes, this will be fine," the receptionist says. "Since we have their magic fingerprints on file, it shouldn't take long for me to confirm their identities."

Anyone who works for a guild, even without becoming an official member, must register their magic fingerprints with the League of Guilds. Since the four of them have helped Lanakiller in the past, that means they've had to register at some point. Still, I'm impressed they can check something like that so quickly. Nothing like this exists in our small village, mainly because there aren't enough people for it to be necessary. You know you're in a proper city when you have something like this.

"Each of you will need to cast your magic into this crystal, one at a time," the receptionist says.

Following his directions, we each touch the crystal he holds in his hand. He tells me not to be nervous, to simply use the stone as if using a simple magical gadget.

Easier said than done! Besides, I'm still not used to using gadgets...

A part of me is glad I was able to try out some magic tools since joining Lanakiller, but I'm still pretty flustered.

Once Claire is done, I channel my magic into the crystal, when suddenly the receptionist lets out a surprised cry and grabs me by my shoulders, shaking me.

"Huh? This can't be...!"

"Eep?! D-Did I mess it up somehow? I didn't mean to..."

Isn't my magic the same as everyone else's? What should I do?!

As I stand there in shock, the man almost immediately snaps out of it, apologizing profusely. "Oh, gosh! I'm s-so sorry! I've just never seen that color before. I always get in trouble for letting my emotions get the best of me... Gosh, I don't know what came over me. There's no problem at all, so please don't worry."

Err... About that...how can I not be worried based on such an overreaction?! He says it's not a problem, but it seems like a huge problem!

My body's trembling all over, tears threatening to spill from my eyes, when I'm suddenly surprised by a low voice coming from just behind me. At the same time, I feel a large hand on my shoulder, only further ramping up my anxiety!

"Hey. Yeah, you. Didn't your parents teach you any manners? I won't stand by while you scare my sweet Miku half to death..."

I tentatively look over my left shoulder to see Ektor, a princely smile on his face.

His terrifyingly calm voice doesn't match his expression at all! And the intensity of his stare is terrifying! I want to know what caused the receptionist to react the way he did, but I'm not that angry about it!

Just as the thought crosses my mind, feeling more anxious than ever, I'm startled by a loud thwap of someone's hand slapping the receptionist's desk, and my head instinctively whips to the right. It's just one surprise after another!

"Are you for real? Don't you know anything about personal space? You're a real failure as a receptionist if you can't keep a professional attitude at work! I want to speak to your manager. You're going to pay for upsetting my sweet little sister!"

This time, it's Claire who's terrifyingly angry! There's no way I can get a word in edgewise. I freeze, feeling trapped between two furious hot heads.

Honestly, they're scarier than the receptionist, but I can't tell them that. All I want right now is for someone to calm them down!

"I'm terribly s-sorry about all of this!"

The poor receptionist grovels in the face of their overpowering rage. Unsure what to do, I suddenly feel a gentle hand on my shoulder, pulling me back. It's Angela.

"Th-Thanks for helping me out, Angela."

Ektor and Claire are still standing in front of the poor receptionist, lecturing him on his manners and unprofessional attitude with huge smiles plastered on

their faces.

M-My condolences... But at least I'm free from that awkward situation. Thanks, Angela.

"Ektor is usually pretty laid back, but woe to anyone who makes him mad. I'm kind of surprised to see Claire is the same way," Angela remarks.

"They really are alike in a lot of ways. I still don't understand why they're so angry, though. He didn't do anything to deserve it," I say while watching the two continue reprimanding the receptionist. Rinny and Macro react to my comment with wide eyes. I seem to be the only one who doesn't understand what's going on.

"He accidentally leaked private information about you. His behavior and reaction were both completely unacceptable for a position that requires a high level of confidentiality. That's why they're so angry," Macro tries to explain what happened, but it still doesn't make any sense to me.

"My personal information? What do you mean? I don't remember anything like that?" I tilt my head to the side.

From what I remember, he asked me to channel my magic into the crystal, and when I did, it reacted oddly. Speaking of which, what does that even mean? Did it react differently to my magic?

Macro's eyes only get wider when he sees my look of total incomprehension. The look of surprise, so different from his usual bored and slightly scary expression, is honestly kind of cute, although I'd never tell him that.

"Don't tell me, you don't know?" he asks.

"I honestly don't know anything right now."

I'm getting more and more confused by the second. Macro, Rinny, and Angela seem just as baffled, crossing their arms, worry painted on their faces.

I don't understand!

"I'm sorry, Miku, but this is something I can't tell you without getting permission from your sister first. If you really want to know, you should talk to Claire later," Angela speaks up for the three of them, sounding apologetic. I

don't want to force them to tell me what's going on, but their unexpectedly serious expressions are making me more worried than ever.

"Is it really that important?" I ask, concern lacing my voice.

"That's right. It concerns your very life, Miku," Angela says. "I had a feeling about it, as I'm sure Rinny and Macro did, too."

"It was probably too touchy of a subject for your parents or sister to ever feel comfortable bringing up," Rinny adds. "I understand how they feel."

I'm growing more and more concerned by the second.

What's going on? Something about my life?

As my heart pounds faster and faster, the blood rushes to my head. Huh? My hands are shaking. Just then, I feel the soft touch of a warm hand pressed against my back.

"Stop stressing her out, you two. Miku, it's going to be okay. Don't worry. There's no way those two over there will ever let anything bad happen to you."

It's Macro's hand. The warmth from his hand as he rubs my back slowly is calming, and I heave a huge sigh of relief.

Oops... I hadn't realized I was holding my breath.

"You're okay."

"Macro..."

I look into his face, but he's purposefully looking away, although I can feel a gentleness in his touch.

"Uh... Sorry, Miku," Rinny apologizes awkwardly.

"Me, too. I wasn't thinking," Angela follows suit.

"It's fine! Don't worry! I appreciate it. Really!" I wave off their almost frantic apologies. I know they're just worried about me! "Thank you, Macro. I'm better now."

"...Good."

I thank Macro once more, but he still refuses to meet my eyes with his own. I

can see a faint red glow in his cheeks. He's probably embarrassed. He's so much nicer than he appears to be. He immediately steps away from me, and I feel sad when his hand slips from my back, although the warmth lingers in my heart. I'm truly grateful for his comfort, feeling much better than a moment ago.

With that said and done, it's time to get those two off the poor receptionist's back!

I walk up to the two of them, still engrossed in scolding the receptionist, and put a hand on both their shoulders.

"Claire, Ektor. Come on. That's enough."

"Miku! But...!"

On hearing my voice, Claire turns toward me, clearly frustrated, and I can tell her anger isn't close to subsiding. Ektor, who I interrupted mid-sentence, also turns to me, troubled.

"You two are making a scene," I tell them. "Plus, he already apologized. I'm sure he'll be more careful from now on, right?"

"Yes! A-Absolutely!" the receptionist responds at once.

"See? So let him do his job. Don't let him ruin our exciting day, okay?"

We're supposed to be celebrating today, not being angry. I'm already over it, having accepted his apology.

"Ugh. Well, if Miku says it's fine, then we'll leave it at that. You're lucky she's so kind!" Claire exclaims, wiggling her finger in his face.

"That's right. She's an angel!" Ektor declares. "Just make sure this doesn't happen again, got it?"

Phew! It seems like I've managed to calm them down.

Claire's fur, which was puffed up with anger, is returning to normal.

Good, good!

"Um, Miku, is it?" the receptionist addresses me. "I'm really sorry about what happened. I will never forget the kindness you showed me today! I'll never make that same mistake ever again!"

I really think he's apologized enough. He doesn't need to be so serious about it still.

"Don't worry about it anymore," I answer with a smile, which the receptionist returns, almost bashfully.

Everyone looks better with a smile instead of a frown!



"**THAT** guy's definitely crushing on Miku..." Ektor says in a low voice.

"Without a doubt. Honestly... I can't let my guard down for a second! Not that you did anything wrong, Miku! Your naivety just seems to naturally attract people trying to take advantage of you."

We finish filing the rest of our paperwork without incident. Ektor and Claire immediately begin chattering away as soon as we step outside.

Crushing on me? That guy? There's no way. You can't fall in love with someone that quickly. They're really reading too much into this. Still...

"I'm glad you two seem to be getting along better," I say with a smile.

They're basically two peas in a pod. At first, I thought they were completely incompatible since both are so quick to anger, but it turns out their similarities actually bring them closer together.

"Th-That's not true at all! There's no way I'd ever get along with a guy like him," Claire shouts, pointing at Ektor's face. "He's got this look on his face that makes it seem like he's always up to something!"

"She's right, Miku...! Wait, Claire? Is that how you really see me? That hurts, you know!"

Both of them denied it outright.

"Don't you think you went a little too far with that comment, Claire?" I point out.

Upon hearing us, Rinny and Angela double over with laughter. Even Macro's shoulders are shaking from the force of his guffaws.

"So, this is how you all feel about me, huh? I'll never forget this! Ever!" Seeing

their reactions, Ektor crosses his arms, clearly annoyed.

Aww! No wonder he's sulking. Still, there's no denying the friendship between them all. At the end of the day, I know he'll happily forgive his friends. The bond between them is one of warmth. I want to be a part of it, too! I'll try teasing him just like everyone else is doing!

"Err... Let's see. Ektor definitely is a little weird sometimes, but that just makes him cooler!"

Oh, no. I said something weird!

I hesitantly look at him, worried he might be angry, but instead, he seems frozen in place, his cheeks bright red.

Huh? I wasn't expecting that kind of reaction!

My ears and tail suddenly stick straight up in surprise.

"I'm s-sorry, Ektor! I didn't really mean it. Um! Did I hurt your feelings?" I hurriedly try to apologize but receive no response from Ektor.

I glance over at Claire desperately, wanting her to save me from this situation, and her words catch me off guard. "Oh, gosh, Miku. Were you trying to tease him? That was too cute! You're such a good kid..."

Huh? A good kid? This is not how I expected this conversation to go.

"She was trying to insult him? But wasn't that a major compliment?!"

"Definitely a compliment."

Both Rinny and Macro are so surprised, they're agreeing with each other.

Huh? So, I was complimenting him instead of teasing him? I see. Well, that's a relief! I'm not used to any of this, so I was worried.

"Was that the best insult you could come up with, Miku? Further proof that you're too pure for this world." Angela nods along with the others.

"Urgh! I can't believe you're saying it, too, Angela! Look, I'm just glad I didn't make him feel bad!"

Angela seems honestly impressed. I don't think I did anything particularly admirable. I'm still confused, but I guess it's a compliment by the smile on her

face, so I accept it. Meanwhile, I'm more concerned for Ektor, who's still standing in the same place, his face redder than ever. Should I apologize once things have calmed down a bit? For now, it's time to go shopping for tonight's party!



WE ended up splitting up after that. Ektor and Macro had some other matters to deal with, and Angela had work to do. That leaves the food shopping to Claire and me, plus Rinny.

"Are you sure you don't need to go with Ektor and Macro?" I ask Rinny.

"I'd much rather carry your bags than deal with stiff formalities," he says.

"To be honest, I'm glad for your help because we're going to end up with a lot of heavy stuff!"

"Leave the heavy lifting to me! Besides, if I go with you, that means I can pick out some stuff I like, too."

"Hahaha! You're so sly, Rinny!" Claire laughs. "I'm down with that. Feel free to tell us what you like to eat."

Rinny seems overjoyed by Claire's response, which is pretty cute. Claire is equally excited for the party, so I know whatever she makes will be amazing! Hehe!

"I'm pretty nervous but also excited to meet Marino for the first time, too," I say. "What's she like?"

Although she agreed to join the guild, I still haven't had a chance to meet her. Plus, Claire hasn't met Wells in person, either. Because of her game knowledge, Claire knows all about them already. Still, we can't rely on her memories too much, considering the gaps I've noticed between what she says and how people actually are. Like Ektor, who might be a Reborn as well, and Candice, who clearly has her eyes set on a different partner than the person Claire said she ends up with.

In short, we need to take all of Claire's knowledge of this so-called game with a grain of salt. Plus, if she gets too caught up in trying to follow the story, she'll

end up worrying herself sick. I don't want that to happen to Claire.

"Marino's... Hmm...a little strange," Rinny says vaguely.

"There seems to be no shortage of weirdos among us," Claire sighs.

"Haha! So true! As far as weirdos go, I'd rank her higher than Kiefer."

Stranger than Kiefer? Now I'm getting nervous all over again, but in a different way than before!

As we shop for food, Rinny explains how Marino's a lady with expensive tastes who likes to dress up. She apparently has a very unique style, making me more excited than ever to meet her. Rinny goes on to say that both she and Wells don't act like a traditional couple, which I don't understand.

What does that mean?

"Remember what happened with Wells?" Rinny asks me. "He's a big flirt, right? He flirts with anything that wears a skirt. Most people would get jealous over that kinda stuff, but not Marino. Honestly, she doesn't seem to care. She's more amused by it than anything. She even asks him to regale her with stories of his exploits. She's a very strange lady, that's for sure."

And yet, they still consider themselves to be a couple. Hmm... It's very different from how I imagine two people in love might act. I assume most people are like Candice, who gets easily annoyed when they see the love of their life paying attention to anyone else. It's hard for me to imagine an open relationship like the one between Wells and Marino.

"There are all different types of relationships in the world," Claire says. "Love takes many forms, you know. This relationship works for them. Honestly, it's no one's business but theirs."

"Oh? Is that how you think, too, Claire? I'm of the same opinion!" Rinny says. "I have a feeling Candice wouldn't agree with us, though."

"Candice has more starry-eyed romantic views on love."

I see. The most important thing is that both people are on board. I'm impressed they were able to find someone else with the same viewpoint. I think their relationship is admirable. For now, I'll simply observe them silently from

afar and see what their relationship is like. Maybe I can learn something from them!

“You talk like you know all about it. Don’t tell me *you’ve* been in love, Claire?”

My thoughts are disrupted by Rinny, who’s grinning at Claire, teasing her.

Love?! Claire’s fallen in love with someone before?!

For some reason, I can feel my heart start beating excitedly in my chest as my cheeks turn red.

Claire’s warned me repeatedly not to fall in love, and yet here she is, ignoring her own words of caution! Well, perhaps it’s fine if she has a boyfriend. Maybe it’s only me who’s at risk of falling in love with someone. Still...I can’t even begin to imagine it.

“Wow...”

“Huh? How am I supposed to take that reaction?! Stop giving me that look of disgust, Claire!” Rinny complains.

It seems I’m the only one whose heart is fluttering.

Claire’s glaring at Rinny, clearly disgusted.

Huh? Wait, what? I’m so confused and yet so curious at the same time!

“I never thought I’d hear that line from the story coming from your mouth, and especially not at a time like this...” she mutters angrily under her breath, but I’m close enough to hear.

Oh, I get it. Rinny must say those exact words to her in the story. I remember hearing about Rinny’s route from Claire in the past.

Rinny says something super insensitive to Claire, causing her cheeks to glow red with embarrassment and anger. I only heard the story via Claire, but from what I remember, it was those exact words. The story is slightly different, and yet the words are somehow the same. I didn’t realize that was possible. Not like Claire’s in love with Rinny in real life, though. Maybe that’s why she reacted the way she did.

“All you ever do is mutter weird, incomprehensible things to yourself,” Rinny

says moodily. “What story are you talking about? You never make any sense.”

“You heard me? Ugh, your hearing is too good...” Claire groans. “Well, it doesn’t matter either way. At any rate! No, I’ve never been in love. That’s just my objective opinion based on stuff I’ve heard.”

Rinny really does have amazing hearing. But apparently, he only picks up on bits and pieces of what she says. It’s difficult to understand based on a word or two here or there. Rinny, who’s quickly grown bored with the topic, ends the conversation with a disinterested “Mm-hmm.”

“You really are just like Ektor, Claire,” he says. “Ektor mumbles about weird stuff all the time, too.”

“He does?!” Claire seems surprisingly interested in Rinny’s seemingly off-hand remark.

That’s right. There’s still a chance Ektor is a Reborn! He probably ends up talking to himself about the story from the other world, just like Claire does.

“What sort of things does he say?” she asks, leaning closer to Rinny.

“Hm? You’re actually interested? I never know what he’s talking about, so I can’t tell you much more than he often mutters under his breath sometimes like you do.”

I see. He might not have heard exactly what Ektor says. Or it’s possible he does know, but is choosing to keep it a secret, just like we do.

Rinny seems confused by Claire’s obvious disappointment.

“Do you know something I don’t about him? There must be a reason why you’re so curious.” His tone changes from playful to serious as he peers into Claire’s face questioningly.

He’s surprisingly perceptive, ignoring the details and zeroing in on what she really wanted to know!

There’s not much I can do to help. I just wait for Claire’s answer anxiously.

“No real reason at all. I just hate being lumped in with pretty-boy jerks like him. We’re nothing alike, and saying we are is an insult,” Claire says bluntly, looking completely unphased.

“You really enjoy picking on Ektor, don’t ya?” Rinny replies, seemingly satisfied with her response.

That’s Claire for you! She got through that easy. What a relief! I think I might’ve been the most worried. My heart was beating out of my chest!





“**WHEW!** We made it! Should I put everything in the kitchen, Claire?”

“Yes, please. I’ll take care of it from there.”

We finally return to the guild at just past noon, bags packed full of goodies. It took us longer than I expected to get everything, plus we stopped for a bite to eat at one of the local bakeries. Rinny also bought some meat for lunch. He really loves meat... And we bought so much stuff! I was impressed by how easily Rinny lugged everything around and equally impressed by how much food Claire bought. The shop owners, and even Rinny himself, were blown away by the sheer amount of stuff Claire shoved in her basket.

After helping put everything away, Rinny stepped out for an errand of his own.

We just got home, and he’s already off again. Maybe he had plans already. If that’s the case, I feel bad making him go shopping with us. Thank you so much for carrying everything, Rinny!

I silently thank him as he heads off.

“We better get to work! Will you help me, Miku?”

“Of course, Claire!”

Returning to the kitchen, we roll up our sleeves for a long afternoon of prep for tonight’s party. I diligently wash the vegetables and chop them up for a salad, following Claire’s directions exactly.

When it comes to cooking, it’s best to do everything she says! I’ve learned from experience how quickly things can go wrong when I do things my own way. I always end up creating more work for myself.

“Hey, Claire? Remember earlier today, when you and Ektor got really mad at that guy in the guild office? What was that about? Everyone told me you were angry because he leaked personal information about me that should be kept confidential.”

I scrounge up the courage to ask Claire a question that’s been bothering me all day, breaking the silence as we work. This seemed like the perfect time to

bring it up, as we're alone. Her hands freeze at my question before she continues, silently concentrating on the task at hand. I keep talking.

"It seemed like everyone understood what happened, but me. I want to know, too, Claire. It's about me, right? Please, will you tell me?"

I look over at Claire, refusing to drop my gaze. After a moment, she mutters "Ugh..." under her breath before heaving a huge sigh and turning to face me. She looks worried, or possibly exasperated.

"I can't keep quiet when you say it like that. But...I can tell you're curious. And I feel like you're old enough to be able to handle it." And with that, she gives a smile of resignation.

What does she mean I'm old enough now? We're both the same age! Does she feel older because of her memories from the other world? She is pretty mature for our age, so I guess I can accept that!

"But!" she says a lot louder. "Try not to be too shocked, okay? And don't forget, I'll always be here to protect you!"

"Okay. I promise I won't be surprised by anything you say. I'm ready!"

I've heard so many fantastical tales from Claire that I feel as if nothing could surprise me now. I watch Claire silently, squeezing my hands in front of my chest.

Please ignore how puffed up my tail is from nervousness, Claire!

"You know the elemental magic you control is light, right?" she begins. "And you know how most other people can control more than one element?"

"Yeah, I know. I'm always so jealous that I only have one."

I've actually never met anyone else like me. I hate to admit that I'm jealous, but those feelings have grown in me over time. Claire told me something once that cheered me up, and I remember those words to this day.

"You're one of the Beloveds. Err... In other words, it's a mark of how much the Goddess of Light cherishes you. She would be jealous if you used any other type of magic!"

Whenever I remember what she said, it fills me with joy for being favored by

the Goddess of Light. It gives me confidence. And it's all thanks to Claire that I can think like that.

"Well, there are others in the world like you, Miku," she continues. "Other Beloveds of the gods and the goddesses. Others who possess magic abilities far greater than those who know more than one type of magic. I told you when we were much younger, right? The Goddess of Light loves you more than anyone else."

"Yeah! I was just thinking about that."

She smiles almost sadly in response. And yet, there's a kindness shining in her eyes. I can tell she's about to tell me something very important. I nod silently, waiting for Claire to continue.

"A love that strong is based on jealousy. I teased you about it when we were kids, but it's true. In other words, while it's a blessing...it's also a curse."

A curse? That sounds scary...

I can tell that word holds a darker meaning behind it. That's why she tried to play it off when we were younger. She didn't want to scare me. And in turn, I was less anxious thanks to her kindness.

"For example, if I was blessed by the God of Fire, I'd have a curse as well. The curse of passion. They're often slaves to their emotions, and when their emotions run high, they can accidentally set themselves and their surroundings on fire. I've heard those with this specific curse tend to always keep water, warding, and healing amulets on them at all times, just in case."

Imagine being born with the power to control fire and then allowing your emotions to run so wild, you burn yourself with your own power. How scary! I guess that's why people who control fire are taught from an early age to clear their mind and the importance of always remaining calm. I see...that's why it's a curse. Because of the danger to themselves.

"Th-Then...what's my specific curse?"

I'm frightened, but I need to know.

My heart pounds anxiously in my chest as I wait, and before long, she opens

her mouth, her voice quiet.

“The curse of light is devotion. If you fall in love with someone, and they don’t feel the same...you’ll die of a literal broken heart.”

Chapter 9 | To Hell with the Story!

IF I fall in love with someone, and they don't feel the same, I'll die?! In other words, I'll die from a broken heart if I find myself in a one-sided relationship?!

"S-So, that's why it's so important for me not to fall in love with anyone..." I mutter.

It seems like a lot of people are aware of this curse that all Beloveds, or those who can only wield one type of magic, are burdened with. It's a sensitive issue, which must be why, even though people know about it, most understand not to pry into the specifics of the curse, as it's considered rude to do so. It makes sense...it's not something I'd feel comfortable talking about unless it was an emergency or I was talking with a close friend. That's why Claire and Ektor got so mad when the receptionist let that info slip a bit, completely unbecoming of his position.

"Miku, your life is at stake here," Claire says gravely. "I know I can be a real pain sometimes, but it's because you were born with this curse! Since you can only fall in love with one person, you have to think about it carefully! And teenagers aren't known for thinking about *anything* carefully!"

I get it. My first love will decide my fate. If I fall head over heels for the first cute guy I see, I'll be cursed to love them for the rest of my life. Not like I would know, since I've never been in love before.

"Game Miku instantly fell in love with Ektor the first time she met him. That love continued on, for the rest of her life... But you're just so kind, Miku, that when the heroine eventually showed up, you ultimately kept your feelings to yourself because you became friends. Ektor's not always the most observant guy, and in his storyline, he ultimately chooses the heroine over you. As the heroine, that's not so horrible, but seeing you get tossed to the side is too awful! I can't tell you how many times I've cursed him out for getting a little too carried away being the main hero and all!"

“That’s horrible, Claire. Don’t curse the real Ektor because you’re mad at game Ektor, though...”

As soon as Claire starts talking about the game, she gets over-excited and ends up talking way too fast. It’s like she forgets where she is! It seems very possible that we’re in the world that made up the game she played, but considering all the differences we’ve noticed between what she knows and what’s happening for real, I don’t think it’s a good idea to treat everyone based on the characters she thinks she knows.

“At any rate!” she huffs. “I won’t stand by and watch you die. And I absolutely won’t let you fall in love on MY watch! Since the route is decided by the heroine, I have no idea what will happen next or who her partner will be, but thinking about you falling in love with ANYONE at this point makes me anxious!”

Now I understand why Claire’s always so overprotective of me. I felt like she’s been worrying more than usual recently, but knowing the reason why makes me feel a lot better. It doesn’t bother me that she cares about me that much, but rather, I worry that she’s maybe a little too caught up in my problems. With me going out into the city and meeting so many new folks, it seems to have triggered Claire’s anxiety, bringing it to new heights. Although I understand why she’s like this now, that doesn’t make it any healthier.

“B-But, Claire. Knowing I have no plans of falling in love and that I’ve never even felt love before, just hear me out. What if, far in the future, I *do* fall in love with someone. What then?”

To be honest, I’m pretty worried about it myself. I can make promises until I’m blue in the face that I won’t fall in love with anyone, but that’s not how it works. There’s a chance I’ll fall in love with someone without even realizing it. And what then? Can I really only love one person for the rest of my life?

“When that happens, I’ll support you with all of my heart. I’ll make sure your love lasts forever!”

Claire’s answer is far different from what I expected.

I had no idea she felt that way. I mean, all she ever does is harp on me about how I can’t fall in love ever!

“I would prefer if you never fell in love... But they call it ‘falling’ for a reason. There’s not much you can do to prevent it, you know? And then it’s only natural to want to be in a relationship with that person.”

“You’d be okay with it, even if it’s Ektor?” I say with a grin.

“Urrrggghhh! I can’t stand that guy’s guts...but if you truly loved him, then I would support you. That’s how much you mean to me!” she declares. “Although I don’t trust that guy further than I can throw him, considering how easily he’s swayed by the heroine’s charms,” she mutters under her breath, furrowing her brow. She looks so funny, I can’t help but laugh, even after our serious conversation.

“You’re so silly, Claire. But okay. If I ever fall in love, I promise to tell you right away!”

“That would make me feel a lot better.”

With Claire by my side, I always feel like I can tackle anything. All my fears and worries vanish! She always scolds me for being so airheaded in the first place, but I can’t help who I am.

“But that means you have to tell me when you fall in love, too. Okay, Claire?”

“Huh? Me? That’s never going to happen! Ever! I know this is real life, but I just can’t seem to separate the people around us from their in-game characters!” she says, laughing.

I’m not sure if she can make that promise and keep it. People fall in love all the time without meaning to.

“You might fall in love with someone who wasn’t a character in the game,” I say. “Plus, what happens when the game ends and real life continues? So, please promise me! If you ever fall in love, you’ll tell me!”

“F-Fine! You’re really that worried about me?”

“Of course! Just like you’re always worried about me!”

I press the issue until Claire finally gives in and promises. Claire is so protective and perceptive of others, but treats herself like trash. As we return to the task at hand, I know I’m going to have to keep a closer eye on her from

now on!



IT'S finally time to celebrate Lanakiller becoming a high-tier guild! Claire and I have been hard at work since we arrived home in the early afternoon, and our efforts have paid off. While Claire was busy doing the actual cooking, I took care of decorating the rooms, tidying up, and setting the table! I made sure to pick the best flowers and the nicest tablecloth I could find!

"Hello, everyone! Wow! The decorations are gorgeous! Did you do this, Miku?"

"Everything looks so nice! And smells amazing! I'm so hungry!"

No sooner had I sat down to start waiting for our guests to arrive than who should turn up first but Kiefer and Candice. I'm honestly impressed!

"Yeah! Claire was in charge of the food, and I did everything else. I'm glad you like it! Honestly, I never thought you two would be the first ones here."

"That's only because I dragged him here! Hehe!"

"Yep! Haha! You were so loud and annoying... I walked faster just to get away from your irritating voice."

It's easy enough for me to imagine how excited she probably was about the party since the moment she woke up.

"Where's Ektor?" Candice asks. "I miss him so much!"

"He had to take care of something with Macro after we submitted the paperwork for the guild," Claire explains. "He said they'd be back before it gets dark, so I'm sure they'll be here soon."

Candice's cat ears, which had been flicking this way and that, suddenly droop upon hearing Claire's words.

She's got such a huge crush on him!

"You look so cute, Candice," I say to her. "Did you get all dressed up for the party?"

"You noticed! I did! This is my favorite dress! Doesn't it look great on me?"

She just looked so sad that I had to say something, and she immediately snapped back to her formerly cheerful self. She twirls in place, her frilly skirt fluttering out around her. The way her skirt seems to float like a cloud along with her fluffy, bright orange pigtails, only makes her look cuter.

“It took forever to help her get ready, which meant I had less time to get work done,” Kiefer grumbles.

“Maybe if you were more helpful, it wouldn’t have taken so long!” Candice snaps at him. “I guess girls just see the world differently! I’m starting to love having Miku around!”

I have a feeling we’ll be dealing with Kiefer, who already looks bored, and Candice, whose cheeks are puffed out in anger, for the rest of the evening, although a part of me realizes they only fight like this because of how close they are. They act like they can’t stand each other, but if that were the case, they wouldn’t live together, let alone be in the same room.

“I’m back! Wow, you guys showed up early. I didn’t think anyone would be here yet.”

“Ektor!”

“Whoa?! Hold on! Stop clinging to me!”

Just then, Macro and Ektor show up, followed shortly after by Rinny. Candice immediately throws herself into Ektor’s arms as soon as she catches sight of him. Macro and Rinny are arguing about something like always. I have no idea what they’re fighting about, but I’m sure it’s not important.

Break it up, you two!

“The party can start now.”

“Angela! Welcome!”

The next person through the door is Angela, her bright blue ponytail swinging merrily behind her, carrying a bunch of bags. I immediately rush over, instinctively wanting to help her with her stuff, but...

“Oof! This is heavy!” I groan.

What’s in this thing?! She’d been carrying it easily in one arm, but I can’t

seem to lift it with two! If this is how much her smallest bag weighs, I wonder how heavy her other bags are. Angela's so amazing!

As my tail droops sadly, I hear her delighted laughter coming from somewhere above me.

"Haha! Don't worry about it, Miku. Since I'm moving in, I decided to bring a bunch of my stuff with me. So, which room is mine?"

"I'm sorry I can't help carry more of your stuff... But I can show you to your room."

"That's more than enough. Thanks, Miku!"

I'd made sure her room was tidied up and ready for her whenever she felt like moving in! It's across the hall from our room, because us girls need to stick together! Plus, I wanted her to have a cozy room with plenty of natural light. I tell Claire where we're going before I lead Angela upstairs. Angela climbs up the stairs easily, which is amazing to me, considering how heavy all her stuff is! It's possible she's more buff than she looks.

"Is it really that weird that I can carry my bags so easily?" she asks me, giggling. She must have caught me sneaking peeks.

"Ugh! I'm sorry! I can't stop staring," I immediately apologize, but she laughs it off.

"I don't mind if you stare."

She's so sweet!

"I'm actually using a wind spell to help me, so they are lighter than they appear."

"Oh, really? I didn't know you could use wind magic."

"Yep. I specialize in both wind and dark magic. Being a woman requires having a couple of tricks up my sleeve so I can keep up with the men."

Confidence flows from every word she speaks. She understands her strengths and weaknesses and also knows ways to make up for them. The fact that Angela knows her best attributes and can be proud of them is impressive to me.

“Um... Remember what happened earlier today? What we talked about when Ektor and Claire were ragging on the receptionist? I asked Claire, and she told me about the light curse.”

We arrive at her room, and as I open the door and usher her inside, I begin telling her about what I learned. Her eyes widen briefly in surprise as she sets her bags down, but all she says is a simple “I see” in response, smiling gently at me.

“I want to live my life proudly, just like you, Angela. I’m a little worried about this curse...but I don’t want that to stop me from doing my best and keeping my head held high!”

“As you should. And you’ve already made so many new friends. With so many new experiences ahead of us, we should all try and live the best life we can! If there’s ever anything I can do to help, please don’t hesitate to ask,” she says with a smile, not mentioning my curse at all. I’m glad I was able to be so honest with her.

“And please let me know if there’s ever anything I can help you with, too, Angela! Not like I’m all that helpful to begin with...” I trail off.

“That’s not true at all, Miku. Just having you around cheers people up and makes them feel better about everything.”

“How? I don’t do anything special?” I blink up at her.

“You’d be surprised by how *much* you do for us,” she says mysteriously.

Is that so? Is there something good about me that I never knew about? Being helpful in any way makes me happy, although it’s a little odd I can’t figure out what it is. I hope someday I can see myself the way others do and have a bit more confidence in myself.

“Let’s head back,” Angela says, and I nod in response before we leave the room. I feel much lighter, as if a burden has been lifted.

Upon seeing us coming back down the stairs after leaving Angela’s luggage in her room, Claire calls out excitedly, “They’re back! And just in time to meet our final guest!”

Our final guest is here! Time to start the party!

Although there's still one person I've yet to meet.

As my eyes scour the room, Ektor suddenly appears, escorting two people into the living room. Wells, the laidback guy from the other day, walks into the room ahead of Ektor. He smiles as he struts in, one hand raised in a familiar gesture, promising to try and keep the teasing down to a minimum.

Moments later, in walks an incredibly flashy lady. She's not as tall as Angela, but she looks that way, thanks to her incredibly high heels. Her long dress, glittering in the light, clings to every curve of her body, showing it off and leaving nothing to the imagination. Her dress is so low cut that I'm worried her breasts might spill out at any moment. The slit that runs up through her skirt shows generous flashes of her thick thighs with each step, and I suddenly find myself with no idea where to look.

Why am I so nervous in front of another woman?!

"Hehe... What an adorable young lady we have here."

This gorgeous lady's eyes meet mine, having noticed how flustered I am from her grand entrance. The way her wavy, short hair, black with blue streaks running through it, and her long, dangling earrings bounce with each step is absolutely enchanting. I can't seem to look away! I can tell my cheeks are bright red! I unconsciously cling to my tail for comfort.

"Nice to meet you. My name's Marino. You must be Miku, right? I've heard so much about you. Now I understand why he kept referring to you as a precious cinnamon bun! The pleasure is mine."

"Uh! Err! N-N-Nice to meet you!"

"M-Miku! Calm down! You're being too obvious, even though I understand where you're coming from!!" I can hear Claire frantically whispering at me to calm down, but it's impossible.

I catch a whiff of Marino's perfume, which only grows stronger the closer she gets, and immediately feel dizzy. I've never met anyone in the entire world with a presence as overwhelming as hers!

“Awww! She’s too cute!”

“Eep!”

Suddenly, before I know what’s happening, this gorgeous woman stops in front of me and wraps her arms around me, hugging me tightly. Because of our height difference, I vaguely realize my legs are no longer touching the ground.

“My gosh! She’s so sweet! Like a little angel! Aww! And her tail and ears are sooo fluffy!”

“Ah! Eep! D-Don’t touch me there... Ack!”

She cuddles my ears and tail as she hugs me in her arms. I’m so embarrassed by what she’s saying and how she’s touching me, as if we’ve known each other all our lives, and so ticklish, that I can’t help yelping in surprise.

Please stopppppp!

“Hey, Marino! Cut it out already!”

As I begin to panic, I feel someone pull me from Marino’s embrace.

Whew! Thank you!

“Awww! But she’s just too cute for words! It seems your prince has arrived. Too bad.”

My prince?

I take stock of my current situation and realize Ektor’s left arm is wrapped tightly around my shoulders.

Eep! I’m glad he rescued me, but this is a little too close for comfort.

Wanting him to let go just a little, I hesitantly look up at Ektor’s face only to notice a stern, almost angry look in his eyes I’ve never seen before, making me gulp nervously.



“Come on, Marino. You know you gotta be more careful,” Wells warns her. “Ektor doesn’t joke around.”

“I’m well aware. If looks could kill, I’d be dead!”

Marino seems oddly amused for someone faced with such a deadly stare. Far from flustered, she seems to be teasing him. Even Wells seems a bit put off by her attitude. She really is something.

“Don’t look at me like that, Ektor,” she says. “I promise I’ll mend my evil ways. She was just too cute for me to resist! I won’t do it again.”

“You promise?”

“I swear. I love all of you too much! How can I be sad when there are so many cute girls for me to dote on? Besides, I wouldn’t *dream* of doing anything to make you hate me.”

Ektor finally relaxes at her seemingly sincere words.

Whew! It would be a shame if we worked so hard to put this party together and it was ruined before it began by some hurt feelings. Which also means, maybe he can finally let go of me...

“Um...Ektor? If you could let me go, that would be great...” I quietly say.

“Huh? Oh! Ack! S-Sorry!”

I’m so embarrassed that he’s still hugging me! It’s not that I hate him! Urgh! I’m just too anxious.

After calming down, everyone takes a seat around the table while Claire and I head into the kitchen to get the food. The salad and bread were already lined up on the table, but we wanted to wait to bring out the rest of the food, such as the hot soup and meats, to make sure they were still warm. I was about to reach for a tray piled high with individual bowls of soup when another pair of hands beat me to it. Looking up in surprise, I’m met by Marino’s eyes and her gorgeous smile.

“I’m sorry about earlier. I didn’t mean to startle you,” she says in that silky voice of hers.

“Uh! It’s fine! You just caught me off guard.”

“Let me help you as a way of apology,” she says with a soft smile. And with that, she walks off with the tray of soup bowls.

She’s so nice!

“Don’t worry about her, Miku,” Claire whispers to me as she slices the meat. “She can be scary when she’s angry, but once she’s taken someone in as a friend, she’s the nicest person you’ll ever meet.”

“Do you know this because of the game? I see. When it happens in real life, it’s a little frightening...but I think I understand a bit better now.”

She’s scary when she’s angry? I guess that kind of makes sense. Generally good-natured folks tend to get the angriest when pushed too far. Kiefer seems the same way... I experienced it myself!

Claire arranges the sliced meat on another tray, which I carry to the table. I put it down carefully in front of Candice, and she immediately latches onto me.

Huh? What’s wrong?

“You’re so mean, Miku. Letting Ektor hug you like that...”

She’s glaring at me, her cheeks puffed out with anger. My heart’s ready to burst with how cute she is! I gently pat her cheek.

“Don’t worry about it. He was just rescuing me. He’s very reliable, you know. I can tell you really like him a lot.”

“Ugh... It’s true! I can’t seem to stay angry at you!”

“You’re such a sweet girl,” I repeat over and over while petting her. I can tell she enjoys it by the way she keeps her ears pulled back, giving me better access to the top of her head, and how her tail is wrapped around my leg.

Hee-hee... She’s so easy to read! I love how no matter what emotion she’s feeling: happy, annoyed, or anything, I can always tell right away.

Since I’m here, I decide to sit next to Candice.

“She’s such a player...”

“You noticed it, too, Macro? It’s true. She’s always like that. She’s just

completely oblivious to it.” Claire sits down next to Macro just as he mutters to himself.

Come on, you two! Don't badmouth people when they can hear you! You make it sound as if I'm going around flirting with everyone! I'm just being nice!

“Hahaha! That’s what I love about Miku! She’s just so innocent, it’s a deadly weapon!”

Even Kiefer's teasing me... I don't think I'm that dangerous. I just want to be friends with everyone! And even I understand that kind of thinking might be a bit naïve.

“Can we dig in yet? I’m not sure how much longer I can stand staring at this amazing feast without eating it.” Angela interrupts our conversation, her eyes glued to the main course and drooling in anticipation. I guess she’s pretty hungry. I feel like I’ve seen a similar scene before! She really loves food!

“Hahaha! So true! We should start eating before the food gets cold. Okay, everyone! Raise your glasses!” At Ektor’s signal, everyone raises their glasses in their hands. Aside from Claire, Candice, and myself, who are drinking fruit juice, everyone’s glasses are overflowing with ice-cold ale.

They must all have a high tolerance for alcohol.

“For the first time, we’ve managed to get everyone together in one place! It’s thanks to each and every one of you that we were able to rank up to the highest tier! I’m sure we’ll have more work than we can handle soon, but for now, let’s celebrate our success!” Ektor exclaims.

“Wow! What fine words from such a big-mouthed, bratty kid. It brings tears to this old man’s eyes!”

“If you don’t have anything nice to say, Wells, don’t say anything at all.”

Wells is clearly making fun of Ektor’s speech, although a part of him seems touched by his words. Even *I’m* touched!

Just as the thought crosses my mind, Wells lets out a loud “Oof!”

“No one wants to hear what you have to say, old man. If we don’t finish this toast soon, we’re going to drown in a sea of drool from both Angela *and* Rinny,”

Marino warns him.

“Sheesh! How many times have I told you to watch where you’re throwing those things!” Wells cries. “Those heels of yours are like deadly weapons in your hands...er, feet.”

“Would you like another?”

“I’m fine for now, dearest princess.”

It seems as if Marino stamped down on Wells’ foot under the table.

That sounds painful! Are they really a couple? The way they’re acting doesn’t make it seem that way.

“Ektor, hurry up!”

“Seriously! Another two seconds and I’m going in.”

“Meat... Give me the meat...”

“Hahaha! The three carnivores are about to break!”

Macro, Rinny, and Angela look like they’re about to dive into the feast spread out before them. Candice is laughing heartily, but I’m starting to feel bad!

“All right, all right! Fine! Okay, everyone! I’ll be counting on you in the days ahead! Cheers!”

Ektor’s greeted by a chorus of cheers from everyone around the table. Angela, Macro, and Rinny immediately gulp down their ale before reaching for the meat. Their enthusiasm is something else! But this kind of thing is nice. The party feels so different from anything I ever experienced back in my village, and my heart fills with warmth and excitement as I sip my juice.

Hee-hee... Yummy!

[Claire]

THE party was a great success, with everyone enjoying both the food and the company. I also had a great time, mingling and getting to know everyone. I was able to see how each person compares to the image I’ve formed in my head of them based on my in-game knowledge. There’s so much you can only learn through conversation. Most of them were exactly the same as I expected,

except for one guy. I haven't had a chance to talk with Ektor yet. There's a lot I dislike about him, but I won't get anywhere without having a heart-to-heart with him. You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, as they say.

It's almost obvious how much I dislike him. And the way he hugged Miku without thinking about it earlier, his emotions as clear as day, really pissed me off. But I know how important it is to Miku that we all get along, and we won't be able to work together if I constantly distrust him. I don't think Ektor is *trying* to hurt Miku. I can tell he's honestly trying to protect her. None of his actions make any sense, though, and I know they won't until we have a chance to sit down and talk.

I'm done dancing around the subject! Let's lay it all out on the table!

By the time we'd finished cleaning everything up, Rinny and Wells, who'd both drunk way too much, were splayed out on the couch, snoring loudly. The only two left sitting at the table were Marino and Angela, who hadn't yet had their fill of ale. Ektor and Miku had both helped clear off the table, and Candice was nodding off. Macro and Kiefer had immediately retired to their rooms after stuffing their faces.

"I'll take care of the rest, Miku, so could you get Candice up to her room?" I tell Miku. "You should get to bed as well."

"But what about you, Claire?"

"I'll be up after I have a cup of tea. I need some time to myself."

I feel bad for making Miku take care of Candice, but I need to clear the room somehow. Oblivious to my intentions, Miku cheerfully says goodnight before going over to Candice's side. She's so sweet and adorable.

Thanks, Miku! I love you!

After watching the two head upstairs, I start boiling some water while getting myself mentally ready.

"Ektor... There's something I need to talk to you about."

I set two cups down and silently brew tea for both of us. Ektor shrugs his shoulders with a wry smile, as if knowing what I'm about to say.

“Sure. We haven’t had a chance to talk like this, just the two of us. Why don’t we take this outside? The night air’s refreshing,” he says while placing our cups on a tray. He’s a gentleman at the oddest of times. I grumble, annoyed, but follow him out into the backyard.

I immediately spot a small table with two rattan chairs on either side. It’s the perfect spot to enjoy a cup of tea or read a book. With no one around, the quiet atmosphere makes it the perfect place for a private chat. After settling down, I take a sip of tea. The hot tea pouring down my throat contrasts sharply with the cool night air, causing me to shiver. Or am I merely trembling with excitement?

“Allow me to cut straight to the point,” I say curtly. “You’re a Reborn...and you know all about the game, don’t you?”

He sets his teacup down with a loud clack. He doesn’t seem rattled by my question. Maybe he knew what was coming.

“...I am. I’m assuming you are as well?”

“You’d be correct.”

That went easier than expected. I guess we’d both assumed the same about the other for a while now. We’d have known this long ago if we hadn’t been so busy trying to feel out each other’s motives instead of talking about it, point blank.

“What do you want?” I ask through narrowed eyes.

“Most likely the same thing you do.”

Once I know what motivates him, I won’t have to tiptoe around him anymore, which is why I decided to ask him directly. I wasn’t expecting him to answer like that, though. There’s no way I can be on board with anything after hearing such a wishy-washy answer.

“What I want is for Miku to be happy,” I say firmly. “There’s no way I’ll ever let her succumb to such a tragic ending, like in the game. I’ll protect her with my life!”

“Which is all I want as well. I would also protect Miku with my life.”

“Liar! If you really meant it, you would keep your distance from her! You

know that once she falls in love, her life is over!"

I know I promised I would support Miku wholeheartedly if and when she ever fell in love, but it would be even better if that never happened. Her very life being in danger is something that haunts every waking moment of my day.

"She will eventually fall in love with someone, someday," he says coolly. "This world may resemble the game we know, but it's also very different. Everyone has the freedom to live their own life the way they see fit. They're real people, not characters, Claire."

I don't need him to tell me that.

"If she's going to fall for someone, it's better off being me," he continues. "As someone who knows everything, I can swear I'll never look at another and break her heart."

Knowing what he does? It sounds as if he feels he can protect her by being her partner, instead of letting her go and watching passively as someone else potentially breaks her heart and leaves her to die. He would know himself better than anyone. He says he would never do anything to hurt her. But it's still hard for me to swallow.

"How can I trust you when you could be saying anything simply to throw me off my game?" I ask. "The story's different now, which means you have no idea what's in store for us, or how you'll react. Besides, there's nothing more unbelievable than a man promising he'll never fall for anyone else!"

"It sounds like you have some serious baggage from your past life. And whatever it was, it must've been pretty bad," he mutters under his breath as he looks at me, a mess of emotions caught in my throat.

Don't bother sympathizing! You don't know me! And I'm not who matters right now, anyway!

"I understand where you're coming from, Claire, but you know I can't promise something like that. And it's clear this conversation is going nowhere."

With my cheeks blazing with fiery warmth, Ektor simply apologizes, saying he's done discussing this with me. He's pretty good at keeping others at arm's length, which only succeeds in pissing me off more. I begin stroking my light

pink tail in an attempt to calm myself down, my fur sticking straight up in obvious anger. I've become more accustomed to this body than I realized...

"I meant it when I said I want to save Miku, no matter what," he says. "Which is why I think it's in our best interests to cooperate."

"I've got nothing to share with the likes of you..." I hiss back at him.

He's serious. He might sound flippant, but I can tell he's deadly serious. Thinking back, I realize he didn't put down or make light of the situation this whole time. I can see that now that my mind is clear. Still, it's not enough. Emotions are fickle. Those seemingly genuine feelings you have today might be gone tomorrow. That's why you can never trust them.

"I'm assuming you're only familiar with the version aimed at girls, right? Well, there was actually a *bishōjo* game spin-off released after."

"What are you talking about?!"

Just as I feel myself sinking into despair, I'm snapped back to reality by this surprising information. You can't just drop something like that so casually! The color drains from my face as he explains about that game.

I had no idea anything like that existed! So, in this other version of the game, the male protagonist saves our village? The original story hadn't changed... We were playing through different versions of the same game...

"So, that's why Candice has such a huge crush on you?" I ask.

"Yeah. Since I'm the male protagonist in the *bishōjo* dating sim version, it makes sense that might happen."

Ugh! So, we weren't able to divert the story after all!

"Hang on a second, I don't feel *anything* for you, Ektor. In fact, I don't feel anything toward anyone. And neither does Miku."

Ektor only nods in response. "There's a high chance the world we're in is made up of the two different game scenarios. Then there's the two of us to consider, the wild cards of the bunch. All of these factors mean, we have absolutely no idea which direction the story will go from here on out."

"You're right. We can't let our guard down for even a second. Especially since

the main heroine hasn't shown up yet."

The look Ektor throws me is almost piercingly powerful.

That's right. Whether this is a game for girls or the racier male version, the heroine is still a constant variable.

"That naively devilish girl, Laura!!" we say in unison, our words exactly the same.

She has to show up, sooner or later, and there's no doubt all of our fates rest on her shoulders. I glance over at Ektor and notice he's still staring at me. Maybe this will work out after all. Although the forces that drive us may differ, our end goal, that of protecting Miku, is the same. Besides, it's better to have as many allies as possible that you can call on whenever you need them.

"While I'll never agree with what you hope to do, I still think we should work together," I say.

"I agree. I'll never give up on her, but I'm happy to help in whatever way I can."

Rivals, working together toward similar goals. The dry clap of our hands slapping together echoes loudly in the quiet night air.

I'll make sure you live happily ever after, Miku, and to hell with the story!

Bonus Short Story

“CLAIRE? *sob*...Claire! Hang on...!”

I was so scared. And sad. A mix of emotions poured from my eyes. I was afraid Claire was leaving me, going somewhere far away. Almost paralyzed with fear, I refused to leave her bedside.

I can't believe how long ago that feels now. Those long-ago days feel almost like a dream, although I can't deny how truly scared I was back then. I mean, it was our birthday and we were having so much fun, and then Claire fell down and hit her head, and the next thing I knew, she was deep asleep with a high fever. I was only a little girl! I kept sobbing, thinking Claire was going to die.

My parents laugh about it now, saying that's the only time they've seen me so upset, but why wouldn't I be? Claire and I have been together since we were born! I was prepared to take care of her for the rest of our lives if she never woke up, and if she died, then I would, too! I might have still been just a young girl, but I meant it.

“Ugh... Miku...? Huh? What? *Miku?!?*”

Despite my fears and anxieties, Claire eventually opened her eyes. I guess I'm not surprised she was completely fine, considering how strong and healthy she's been her entire life. Still, ever since that day when she opened her eyes, she's been...well...a little...*different*. In fact, from that day forward, she pretty much acted like a completely different person.

“Oh, right! We have to get water from the river or the well here. Ugh... I miss tap water...”

“What are you talking about, Claire? This is how we've always done it.”

There were many situations like this where she'd utter strange words I'd never heard before. Sometimes I'd ask our parents about it later, but they never seemed to know what she was talking about. Where could she have possibly learned words like those? It got to the point where I was so worried, I'd

start bawling my eyes out right there in front of her.

“You’re not Claire at all! You’re *scary*! You *look* like Claire, but...but...”

“Aaaah! Miku! I’m sorry! I’m not trying to scare you on purpose! Please don’t cry!”

She’d get all flustered, trying to calm me down. Once my sobs were reduced to sniffles, she’d say: “I know. I’ll tell you my secret, Miku! But you have to keep it a secret, okay? And you might not believe any of it.”

“I’ll believe you! I trust you completely, Claire, because you’re my sister!”

I think I was about three years old at the time, but I still remember that moment clearly. I don’t remember much of what she actually said due to my young age, but it wasn’t a big deal because, according to Claire, she’s been repeating those same words ever since. Although she always talks about how cute I looked at the time, all upset and pouty, and I’m a little miffed I can’t remember!

What I *do* remember, though, is believing every word that left her lips. I never doubted anything she said, not even for a moment. Honestly, I don’t think I’ve ever hated her, and we’ve never fought in our entire lives. We get angry or annoyed from time to time, but it usually doesn’t last long. No matter what happens, we’re always quick to apologize. We’re very close! And I know we always will be.

We were about five years old when she first told me the world we’re in is the same world from a game she used to play in her past life. At that point, I had grown enough, both physically and mentally, that I was more or less able to understand. The grown-ups in our village, thinking she was merely playing a game of make-believe, mostly ignored her. To be fair, when faced with a precocious five-year-old girl who’s suddenly talking about a horde of monsters someday attacking our village all because it happened in a game she loved in another life, most people would assume she was merely playing make-believe. I understand how they feel now, but at the time, we were always so annoyed!

“Why won’t they believe us?” we’d say. “It’s the truth!”

“They’ll HAVE to believe us if we can actually put together some of the useful

objects I remember from my past life,” Claire said eventually. “Although I don’t know how they work exactly... If I had been a bit more selective in my studies, maybe I could’ve hacked this world and made my life easier. This is really important, though, so I guess I’m gonna have to switch my strategy up!”

Although I didn’t understand half of what Claire said at the time, and sometimes still don’t, I looked forward to a bright future together, not worried in the slightest. I trusted her completely, believing everything she told me. Besides, all of her stories were so interesting and exciting, especially when we were kids! I was always grateful, constantly thanking her for sharing her secret with me.

“Everything’s going to be okay, Miku. I’ll always protect you, no matter what! So, never leave me, okay?”

“Okay! I’ll always be here with you, Claire.”

I’d noticed she’d become far more overprotective of me since she started saying these weird things, and it worried me. Even as a kid, I could sense the disquiet deep in her heart. Now that I know the whole story, I understand why she is the way she is, although that doesn’t make me worry any less. I want to continue to be here for her, no matter what. Although Claire ends up helping me out far more than the other way around, I’ll always do whatever I can for her!

Oh, right! It was around that time when we took our first bath together. I remember begging the carpenter in our village to make us a bathtub. He seemed completely baffled by what we were going to do with a big wooden box. Imagine how surprised he was when we told him the whole thing was to be filled with water so we could soak in it! All the adults looked at each other like we’d lost our minds. Honestly, I’m sure I had the same look of incomprehension on my face.

“I can’t stand not being able to take a bath! My inner Japanese soul cries out for it!” Claire had whined. “I know none of what I’m saying makes sense, but soaking in a nice, hot bath is good for you! And I’ll prove it.”

Claire had been right, and it wasn’t long before everyone in our village began taking baths. I was a little nervous at first. I’d gone swimming in rivers countless

times before but had never dipped even a toe into steaming hot water. I remember how nervous everyone in our tiny village was at the very idea, seeing it as akin to stepping into a pot of water to boil themselves alive! But Claire looked so comfortable and warm in the bath that, one by one, the other villagers, began copying her.

Of course, I followed her into the bath right away! I was nervous at first, but I'll never forget how I felt that first time. The water was so warm, enveloping my body in a comforting, cozy feeling! I never wanted to get out! Although Claire warned me that staying in the bath too long wasn't good, either, explaining how if I didn't drink enough water or step out from time to time, I'd get dizzy and feel bad.

Honestly, I've seen my fair share of folks who didn't listen to her and got pretty lightheaded. She'd laugh every time, saying, "I told you so!" That's when it really hit me. Claire really *is* a Reborn, with memories from her previous life. She shouldn't know about any of these things, and yet she does. The story she'd been filling my head with since we were very young finally began to make sense, and it was all because of that silly bathtub.

"Hey, Claire? You're Claire...right?"

"What's wrong, Miku? Of course, I am. Who else would I be?"

For a while following that incident, I'd always ask her that question before bed. I asked her so many times that I'm sure she must have grown tired of it, and yet she always answered in the same way, with a warm smile. And every time, it helped ease my anxiety. At some point, I stopped asking her if she was Claire and instead began asking...

"You're happy, right?"

"Yes. Today, we're both happy."

I guess that's not something you can really confirm with words; it's something you feel inside yourself. I had come to accept Claire the way she was now, little by little, ever since that day. Claire was Claire, even with those memories from a past life. Nothing would change what she meant to me. It took me time to naturally come to grips with this new reality, but it happened.

Hee-hee... Thinking back to our childhood fills me with warm, fuzzy feelings.



“MM... Hehe...”

“Oh? You’re awake, Miku? Morning! Haha! You were smiling in your sleep.”

I open my eyes to see Claire giggling at me, already dressed and ready to go.

What?! Nooo! I was smiling and talking in my sleep? How embarrassing!

“Morning, Claire. Mmm... I had a dream about when we were kids.”

“Oh, yeah? Was there something funny enough to laugh about in your sleep?”

Claire asks, gazing off into the distance, as if lost in thought. I’m sure this is just the start of another day for her, but I can’t help but wake up every morning, excited for what surprises lie just around the corner!

“More importantly, the guys promised to take us to their favorite restaurant today, right?” Claire reminds me. “Which means we have to make sure we get our work done first!”

“That’s right!”

Remembering our plans for the day, I immediately sit up in bed. Claire’s been so busy filling our bellies with so much delicious food lately that Ektor wanted to treat us to a fancy meal for once.

“Tired of my cooking already?” Claire had asked, slightly annoyed, although the slight blush on her cheeks gave me the feeling she knew it was his attempt at giving her a break. Ektor was in such a hurry, I’m sure he didn’t notice, which is a shame. I felt so bad! Claire has trouble being honest with herself. I wanted to explain how she acts grumpy to hide her embarrassment and discomfort, but it was too late.

“Let’s do this!” Claire says, firing us both up.

“Okay!”

We’re still limited to keeping the house in order and running simple errands, but we do what we can, one thing at a time. Maybe later I should ask for some

tips on expanding our repertoire.

We spend the morning tidying up the Lanakiller guildhall and then head off to complete a simple fetch quest in the afternoon. We've been tasked with completing some of the jobs assigned to the guild since we joined...basically, all of the really easy ones.

With the guild already having built up a reputation of dependability with the folks here in the city, I'm grateful they trust us, despite being so new here. There's no way we'd be able to find as much work without the name of a mid-tier guild behind us, which is a huge advantage. Granted, we wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for Ektor and the Lanakiller guild. It's been an overall invaluable experience that I'm constantly grateful for!

"...We might have gotten a tad carried away," Claire sighs.

"We went a bit overboard, huh?" I echo the sentiment.

And now, we've managed to get lost in the forest. Out on a mission to gather medicinal nuts, we stumbled on a huge cluster, quickly picking more than enough, which was great at first, but...

"I didn't think they'd be this heavy..."

After filling our bags full of the nuts in question, we went to head back only to find them almost too heavy to carry. I felt bad tossing away some of the nuts we'd gathered after working so hard to get them, so we decided to head back to the entrance of the woods while taking plenty of breaks to rest along the way. We ended up slumped in the shadow of a tree, exhausted, which is when I looked up and realized I had no idea where we were.

"What should we do? Call for help? You could use your wings to fly over to Ektor and the other guys while I wait here," Claire suggests.

"But won't it be dangerous for you to be here all alone?"

"Don't worry! I can take care of myself."

It's true that Claire is much stronger than me, especially when it comes to combat. With my ability to fly, I can move faster than she can on foot, so it makes sense for me to get help... But a part of me worries about the monster

horde that attacked our village and if there are any stragglers still around.

If I hurry, maybe it'll be fine, right?

Just at that moment...

"There you are."

"Huh? Err... Macro? What are you doing here?" Claire asks.

We're both still sitting on the ground, and we immediately look up in the direction of the voice to find Macro looking down at us, clearly annoyed, his arms folded. In response to Claire's surprised question, Macro explains how we were late coming back from our errand, and since they couldn't leave for the restaurant without us, the three guys decided to split up and see where we might be.

Now that he mentioned it, the sun's already starting to sink... I hadn't realized how late it was.

"I'm so sorry," Claire apologizes. "We came out here to get some nuts, and we ended up getting so worn out from carrying them that we got lost."

"Sorry, Macro. We got a little carried away..."

He glances over at our bags, which are practically overflowing with nuts, and heaves a huge sigh. Claire's ears droop sadly, and I'm sure mine do the same.

I guess there's no point in feeling bad about it. We'll get back to the city faster if we just ask for help!

As I jump to my feet, Macro, who seems to be one step ahead, is already in front of us, reaching for both bags of nuts.

"W-Wait, Macro! Those are really heavy..." Panicked, I hurriedly call out to him, but he swings both bags over each shoulder as if they weigh nothing.

What?!

"It's no problem at all. Now, let's hurry back."

"W-Wow..."

Macro immediately stomps off, as if carrying two bags of feathers. I'm really impressed! Completely enchanted by his show of strength, Claire whispers

quietly in my ear.

“Macro’s a dwarf, remember? They’re renowned for their strength. He might be short, but he’s probably more powerful than any of us.”

“Really?! That’s a little hard to believe...”

I definitely have a hard time doing so! Although thinking back to the monster attack on our village, I vaguely remember Macro relying more on physical attacks over magical ones. Watching him send monsters that were double his size flying with his fists and his feet was truly a sight to see. At the time, I’d been so overwhelmed by the entire situation that I’d simply been impressed by everything.

He’s apparently great at hand-to-hand combat, huh? That’s good to know!

“Thank you for carrying our stuff, Macro,” I say. “We really appreciate it.”

“...It’s fine.”

His response is blunt, and he refuses to look at either of us, but I can tell he’s only covering up his embarrassment. I look over at Claire, and we share a secret smile.



AS we head back down the path that leads from the forest to the city, we bump into Rinny, who’s been out looking for us as well. Upon seeing Macro lugging two huge sacks full of nuts, he breaks down laughing, immediately understanding what happened.

Ugh! It’s not THAT funny! You can’t learn without making a few mistakes along the way!

“Sorry, sorry,” he laughs. “I’ve just never found myself in that kinda predicament before. I’m still blown away by how weak and fragile you two young ladies are!”

“Who are you calling weak and fragile?!” Claire snaps at him. “I work out all the time! I bet I’m stronger than most girls! It’s just that you guys are all overpowered chowder-heads!”

“Seriously? How do the princesses of the world even live their daily lives?”

What does he think most girls do?

I quickly realize his look of befuddlement is genuine, and I can't help but giggle at how ridiculous the situation is.

"Oh, right," he suddenly says. "I told Ektor I'd let him know right away once we found you two, so I'll go on ahead."

"What? Ektor was looking for us, too? Won't it be difficult to track him down?" I ask.

It's our fault they ended up running around town, trying to track us down. With that in mind, I feel bad having to rely on Rinny to go further out of his way. However, Rinny responds to my question while pointing to himself proudly.

"There's no nose better than mine! I'll be able to pick up Ektor's scent right away, so don't worry your pretty little head over it! It's faster this way, too!"

I see. I guess his race has a very strong sense of smell. I didn't realize that was even a thing! And despite his size, he's very fast. My mind flashes back to the monster attack on our village and how he'd been a ginger blur, zipping from one ogre to the next. It was pretty amazing watching him at work, taking down one monster after another. It's funny how the two guys' appearances don't seem to match their strengths at all. Macro is small but strong, and Rinny is large but quick. It's almost as if their abilities were swapped. Maybe they're more alike than I give them credit for.

"It's 'cause he's a wild animal," Macro says dryly.

"What?! What did you just say, you pouty jerk?!"

Maybe the reason why they fight all the time is because of how similar they are?

Claire and I both share a laugh and entrust locating Ektor to Rinny.

Once those two start fighting, they never seem to stop! I wish there was something I could do, but apparently, this is how they've been since they were kids. Still, enough is enough!

After saying goodbye to Rinny, the three of us head straight back home. By the time we arrive, it's already dusk, although I'm relieved we managed to get

back before nightfall, mainly thanks to Macro's expert escort.

"Miku! Claire! I'm glad you're back, safe and sound!"

Rinny and Ektor must have been waiting for us in front of the guild. Upon seeing us, Ektor rushes forward, clearly relieved, a huge smile on his face. He must have been really worried. I apologize immediately before thanking them for looking for us, and Ektor laughs it off, saying it was no problem at all.

He's so sweet!

"What's most important is that you're safe. And Claire, too, of course."

"Am I chopped liver or something?"

Flustered as I usually am when faced with kind words, Claire immediately stomps in between us, destroying the mood.

I can see the sparks flying between them! All she does lately is try to start fights over everything he says!

"That's not what I meant! Are you jealous or something?" Ektor provokes her.

"Seriously? I think your good looks have gone to your head."

"I have feelings, too, you know. And you hurt them when you say stuff like that."

Those two really can't get along, huh? They only just met not that long ago, so there's still time for them to maybe someday overcome their differences. I pray that day comes sooner rather than later. Come on! I wish they'd just get along!

"Bwahaha! Nothing gets past you, Claire!" Rinny laughs.

"I know first impressions can be deceptive," she responds.

"You're spot on when it comes to Ektor and his big head," Macro points out.

"Come on, Rinny... Macro... Even you guys are picking on me?" Ektor groans.

The teasing seems to be good-natured. Although I can't tell if Claire is amused or annoyed, it's clear the three guys are very close friends. I can tell their teasing is based on mutual trust and not anger.

How neat! I wish I had a friendship like that.

“Both Claire and I know Ektor’s a really good guy, though,” I say with a smile.

“M-Miku! Miku’s heart is like some pure oasis...!” Ektor gushes. “She’s so incredibly sweet! She’s an angel! No, a goddess!”

Don’t you think you’re exaggerating just a bit?! Being complimented that much is really embarrassing!

Rinny and Macro are staring at Ektor with looks of annoyed disgust on their faces.

Wh-What should I do?!

“I, of all people, know just how angelic Miku is,” Claire cuts in. “But that’s enough of that. Let’s go get something to eat! Please lead the way.”

“H-Hey! Don’t shove me! It hurts! You’re seriously strong when you want to be—ow, ow, ow, ow! Okay, okay, I’m going!!”

Claire stepped past me and started shoving Ektor from behind, forcing him to walk ahead.

Isn’t she hitting him a little too hard there? I wonder if he’s okay... But I think she saved me from an awkward situation! My face would’ve turned beet red if he kept on praising me like that! It makes me happy and embarrassed at the same time, after all. My face is still a little hot even now.

“Let’s get going, Miku,” Rinny says to me. “Everything they serve there is tasty!”

“Okay! I’m looking forward to it!” I say, running to catch up with the others. There’s nothing better than good food!



WE arrive in front of a small wooden building with a homely, almost cozy feel to it. It seems to be a popular spot in town for folks who want a place to relax and enjoy some incredibly delicious and equally affordable food. So popular, in fact, that they have a limit on the number of customers they serve per day, requiring reservations days in advance. I can’t believe this is where we’re eating!

“Was it hard getting a reservation?” I ask, to which Ektor winks at me.

“The owner set aside a table just for us.”

“Lanakiller’s helped me out a lot in the past! When I heard they got a couple of new recruits on their hands, I said to myself, I can’t pass up the chance to give back to the guild! The least I can do is get you a table!” the owner tells me with a broad smile. He’s a very pleasant and jovial fellow, and I realize he’s probably one of the main reasons the restaurant is so popular.

“Then it’s thanks to Ektor, Rinny, and Macro that we’re here? I’m so grateful!” I say, not hiding my excitement.

The owner reaches over and pats my head while saying, “You’re such a good kid, huh?”

Wh-Wh-What? Why?

“Let’s start off with a toast,” Ektor says. “To Claire and Miku! Thanks for joining the guild and becoming our friends!”

“Thanks for helping us out! I’m always happy to answer any questions you got!” Rinny offers.

“You should probably ask me,” Macro interjects. “This ginger dummy never knows what he’s talking about.”

“What the heck does THAT mean?!”

I don’t know how a simple toast triggered another fight. Smirking, Ektor forces the toast past their fighting by raising his glass. Rinny and Macro are still glaring at each other, but they reluctantly raise their glasses anyway. Claire and I exchange glances before raising our own glasses.

“We look forward to working with you all! Now that we’re all in this together, I hope you’ll come to rely on us too,” Claire says.

“M-Me too,” I chime in. “I’ll do the best I can to be there for everyone! Cheers!”

Smiles appear on all our faces as we speak up in turn. I had no idea I could be this happy, being welcomed into a community outside of the village we grew up in. I’ve never experienced anything like this before!

I let the three guys choose from the menu, and every dish that came out was

so yummy. I especially enjoyed the stir-fry meat and veggies with a sweet and spicy sauce. Claire loved the restaurant's signature soup, seasoned with a myriad of spices. So much so, she asked the owner how to make it. I'm content to simply enjoy my food, but Claire's always looking for a new recipe to add to her collection. That's how much she loves to cook! Maybe the soup will make an appearance on the Lanakiller guild table in the near future. I wonder if she could learn how to make this amazing stir-fry, too!

"Miku, you should try this next," Ektor says. "It's my number one recommendation! Hey, Rinny! I got that for Miku, don't go eating it on her!"

"What the heck, you cheapskate! Let's order another plate!" Rinny blurts out.

Every piece of meat recommended by Ektor, so different from anything I've ever seen in my home village, is delicious! I can sense Macro staring hungrily at the meat on my plate...! Does he want some? I place a hunk of my meat on his plate, and his eyes widen in surprise before he quietly thanks me. His expression and tone of voice remain just as flat and expressionless as always, but I can tell by the twinkle in his eyes that he's happy. Watching him enjoy his meal makes me so happy that all I want to do is keep his plate full. I'm really glad he loves it so much!

I feel like I've discovered so many new things today. Not just the amazing food in front of us, but through the mistakes we made earlier in the day out in the forest, and even just learning more about our three new friends. Being able to see them and this city in a new light while meeting new people, like the owner here, and discovering new places, like this restaurant.

My brain's almost overwhelmed by the recent flood of new information, and I wonder if I'll really be able to remember it all. With still more things to learn in the future, I worry about being able to keep up. I'm not sure if I can...but at least Claire is here with me. And my new friends. I'm sure there'll be many bumps along the way, but I'll work as hard as I can so I can enjoy more moments like this one.

"Miku? You look like you're having a lot of fun... Not that there's anything wrong with that, but make sure you don't let your feelings get the best of you."

As we're eating, laughing, and having a great time, Claire leans over and

whispers in my ear.

Hee-hee! I know exactly what she's trying to say.

"Don't mistake your happiness for love!" We both speak at the same time, and Claire's eyes widen in surprise. A moment later, she bursts into laughter.

"Good! I'm glad you understand. Now then, have yourself a great time!"

"I will! And you should too, Claire."

"I'm not enjoying this! Not even one bit! I have to make sure Ektor doesn't try anything." With that said, Claire reaches for more food.

Why can't you just be honest for once? Even I can easily tell she's having a great time!

There's no ignoring the way her tail wags happily from side to side... I'm sure my tail's doing the same.

I'm sure we'll stumble into our fair share of difficulties in both life and work in the future. We may even end up fighting with our friends over who knows what. But I think that, together, we'll be able to get through anything. In fact, I know it! I'll keep doing the best I can!

May this happiness last forever and ever.

As I watch the warm scene around me, I say a silent prayer deep inside my heart.



Afterword

HELLO everyone, I'm Riia Ai, a Japanese novelist. Thank you very much for reading my novel!

I started writing this story out of the casual desire to write about cute fox girls and filled it with all my favorite elements from there, such as fluffy creatures, transformations, and girls who are the epitome of adorable pureness. So you can imagine I never dreamed this work would get a translated, published release...! I'd be thrilled if you enjoyed what you read!

If it was you, would you believe your family member if they one day suddenly said: "I have memories of my past life" and "This is a video game world!"? I'm sure the level of trust you already have in that person would affect its impact, but I get the feeling I probably wouldn't be able to believe them anyway. But Miku decides to believe her sister to the very end, even though she's doubtful at times. I feel like I learned through Miku that it's important to "decide for yourself what you believe in." It might sound strange for the author to learn from their characters, but I often learn a lot from them.

I write with the sense that the story has a world of its own and the characters really live there. I plan to continue seeing where their lives go and putting it down on paper as I learn from them.

Last but not least, I would like to thank everyone who worked on the English translation and the illustrator who drew the gorgeous illustrations. I'm very grateful to every last one of you. Thanks to you, I was able to put out this lovely story. I also extend my deepest gratitude to everyone who took an interest in this story and read it! Thank you!

I hope I was able to entertain you for a few hours.



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