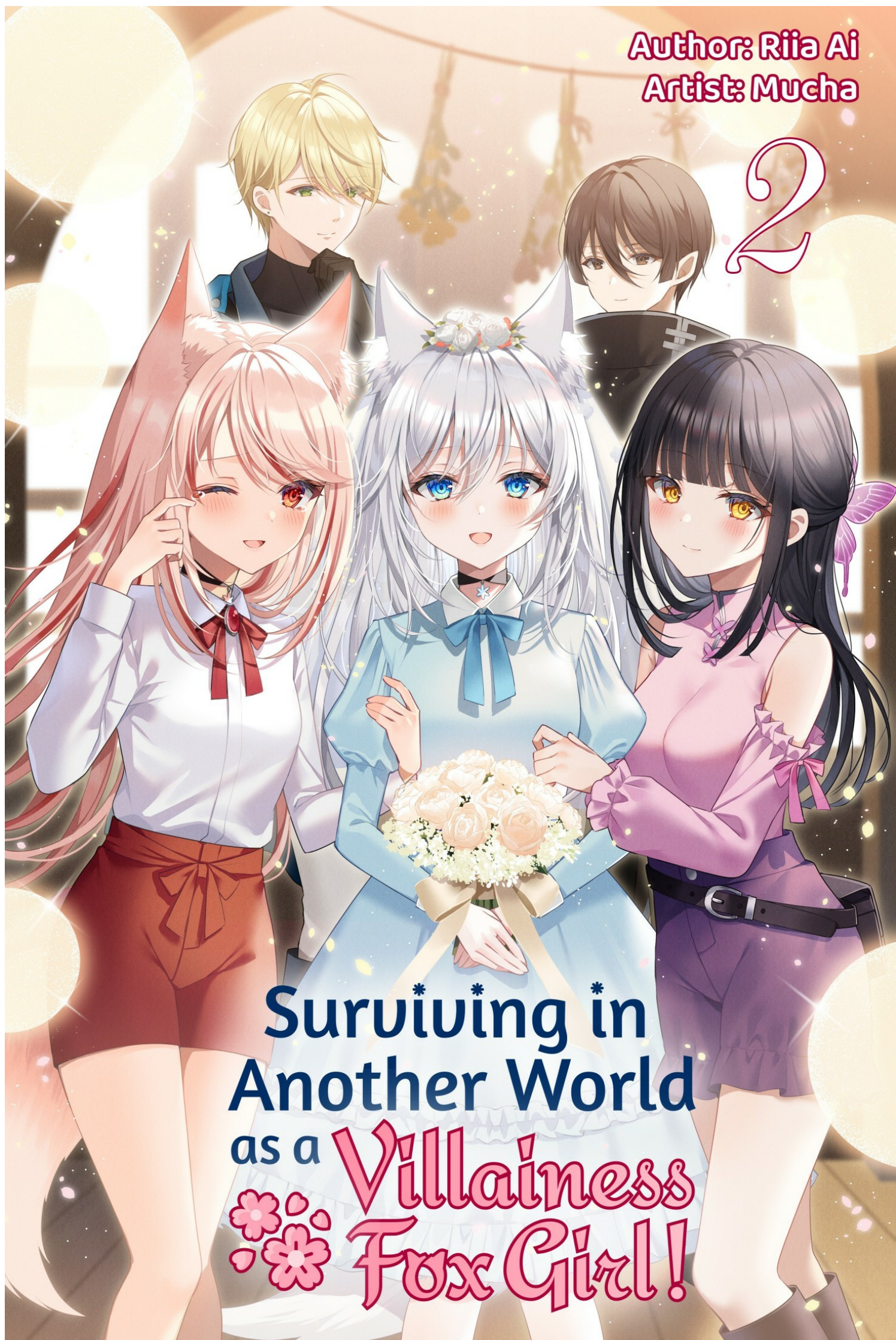




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Surviving in  
Another World  
as a Villainess  
Fox Girl!





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# Surviving in Another World as a Villainess Fox Girl! Volume 2

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Surviving in Another World as a Villainess Fox Girl!

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# Chapter 1 | Trouble Appears Along with a New Friend

**SEVERAL** days have passed since our party celebrated Lanakiller's promotion to high-ranking guild. I mean, having everyone here was so much fun, it seems like it happened only yesterday.

"Miku. It's time."

"Oh, sorry, Macro! Just give me a second to finish hanging these towels!"

Now that I've gotten used to my new life here, it's almost like I've been here my entire life. The way time seems to move faster or slower depending on the situation is quite odd, isn't it?

After quickly hanging up the rest of the towels to dry, I rush over to the entrance of the guild, where Macro is patiently waiting, and the two of us set out through the sun-dappled streets of the city for work.

*Heheh!*

To tell you the truth, recently I've been using my light magic to take on cleaning jobs around town! Folks who can use light magic are few and far between, and those who can don't tend to use it in quite the same way I do. Purification is used primarily for cleansing souls, curing poison, or lifting spells, not eliminating dirt.

I've always taken my skills for granted, so I never saw them as anything special. These clean-up jobs are pretty tough, even with the help of water spells. It's often impossible to make things spotless, especially when your only tools are your hands. Which is partly why rumors of my magical cleaning ability have seemingly spread like wildfire...

Honestly, I've become a little overwhelmed with the amount of work being thrown my way. It's kind of embarrassing, but I'm also pretty happy about it. After all, I feel like I'm actually being helpful for once!

My work is technically a one-person job since my magic is powerful enough

that I don't really need any help, but I'm not allowed to go anywhere by myself. Why, you might be wondering? Well...

"Oh! Miku! I accidentally burned the bottom of the pot..."

"The actual pot? That's gonna leave a mark... Do you need me to—"

"...*take care of that for you?*" is what I was going to say before Macro stepped in front of me, cutting me off.

*Oops, that's right. I can't.*

"She can't right now. We already have another job to do."

"W-Well, in that case... Before you leave, could you just take a look at this? See? This should only take a second, right?"

"The reason she *can* take care of it so easily is because of the time and effort she's poured into honing her abilities. And all of that requires suitable compensation. Even if it only takes a second, work is work. Send a formal request and we'll be happy to help."

"O-Okay! Will do!"

I've been warned to stop doing favors for people, no matter how simple it may seem. As someone who grew up in a small village, it's hard not to agree to help someone. It's a pretty bad habit, and it's caused a lot of problems. The main problem is that, as a member of a high-ranking guild like ours, it's a bad look to be doing so many favors for folks around town. Which is why, at least for the time being, Ektor decided that I'm not allowed to go anywhere by myself.

*I feel like such a burden on everyone!*

"I'm s-sorry, Macro. I'm still not used to turning folks down..."

"Mm-hm. That's pretty obvious."

*Ouch! Macro could stand to learn a thing or two about being a little too blunt!*

But he's right. There's no denying I'm the one who's at fault here. I should be able to say "no" when I need to. It's kind of depressing that I can't.

"If everyone could grasp new things quickly, the world would be a better

place, right? Of course, it would be. But no one is perfect. Everyone has their weaknesses. There's no point letting it get to you."

"Yeah. Y-You're right."

Macro's always right. Wasn't it Ektor who once told me folks tend to misunderstand Macro since he's so straightforward about everything? Not like they can argue with him since he always tends to be correct, which leads to folks disliking him.

Claire says his honesty comes off as pessimism, and I kind of get it. But also, the way he talks can be really harsh, and it makes him seem like he doesn't consider the feelings of whoever he's talking to. I'm pretty sure he meant what he said in an encouraging way... That he saw I was feeling down, so that was his attempt at cheering me up.

"You're really nice, Macro."

"...What?"

Which is why I want to make sure he knows I'm grateful. I still find it impossible to set boundaries even when I know I should. It tears me apart just thinking about turning people down. But at least I can thank him for looking out for me. Macro helped me out today, and I want him to know I'm grateful.

"What exactly was nice about what I just said?"

But Macro just seems completely confused, his expression puzzled.

*Huh? Did I say something weird?*

"I appreciate the words of encouragement, telling me I shouldn't worry about not being perfect, and that it's okay to learn at my own pace. Did I misunderstand you?"

Macro seems to be at a loss for words for some reason.

*I guess I did misunderstand him. I only heard what I wanted to. I'm kind of embarrassed, but oh well! That's the way I took it!*

"You're such a weirdo..."

"Huh? I'm weird? I'm sorry."



He seems exasperated. Or at least, that's the feeling I get from the puzzled look he shoots my way.

*Did I misunderstand something else?*

"What are you apologizing for? Quit it."

"Huh? What? Because."

"Talking to you sometimes makes me want to rip my hair out."

Macro seems even more bewildered than before.

*Huh? Why?! Wh-What should I do? I have no idea what he's trying to say anymore!*

"Ugh... I'm sorry..."

"Why are you still apologizing?! I told you to stop that!"

I find myself instinctively apologizing, despite Macro's orders.

*The bar here seems way too high!*

Feeling like I'm only digging myself deeper into a hole with each word that comes out of my mouth, I decide to keep my mouth shut for the time being while Macro averts his gaze.

*Huh? Are his ears slightly red, or am I seeing things?*

"You didn't do anything wrong. I'm just not used to folks talking to me like that."

"Y-Yeah? Oh! W-Wait up!"

Without another word, he suddenly picks up his pace, quickly leaving me behind.

*Is he embarrassed? I don't think I said anything that would embarrass him, though. Hmm... He's still so hard for me to read. At least he doesn't hate me!*

Without any weird vibes lingering between us, I'm quickly able to get my work done as quickly and efficiently as always. With magic at my fingertips, I finish up in seemingly no time at all. Which is how I'm usually able to fit in two or even three jobs before noon.

*Heehee! I love being this busy!*

“Okay! That’s it for today! Thanks for coming with me, Macro.”

“We’re not home yet, so don’t get too relaxed. You tend to be even more of a pushover after finishing your work for the day.”

“Of c-course!”

As we head back to the Lanakiller guild following my last job, Macro gives me an earful as I lazily stretch my arms over my head.

*He sounds like my mom. Heheh!*

“You really have been doing a good job lately. The fact you can make this much money without needing to fight is pretty impressive.”

“Huh?”

His unexpected compliment makes me stop in my tracks.

*Wh-What?! I mean, I don’t think I’ve ever heard Macro offer up a good word about anyone, let alone so directly! To be fair, he’s not a big talker even on his best days...*

“What?”

“Oh! Uh, it’s just that...I’m not used to hearing any kind of compliment from you...”

He probably thought I stopped walking because I noticed something suspicious. I find myself stammering out the truth in response to his question.

*Could I really not think of a better answer than that?! He doesn’t seem offended, though.*

Instead, he cocks his head to the side, as if in thought.

“I didn’t mean it as a compliment. I just said what I was thinking.”

*Oh, I see. He didn’t realize he said something nice.*

“Well, it made me really happy regardless. So, thank you, Macro.”

For better or worse, Macro doesn’t beat around the bush when it comes to his feelings. I think that’s why it’s so easy to misunderstand what he’s trying to

say. The more time we spend together, the better I get at deciphering his words. He's not a bad guy. He's actually really kind. Though he does tend to get pretty grouchy when Rinny's around...

*I'm sure the f-feeling's mutual!*

"It made you happy? Do you like getting compliments?"

"Huh? I just meant getting praised feels much better than getting scolded for being annoying. Doesn't everyone feel that way?"

It makes me feel like he's recognizing the hard work I've done. Which is exactly what I say, causing Macro to once again look at me with a puzzled expression, as if processing what I'm trying to tell him.

*I wonder what's wrong?*

As we continue walking together, he suddenly says the last thing I was expecting to hear.

"You're cute, Miku."

"What?!"

I can feel all the fur on my body stand on end, my tail sticking straight up.

*Huh? Did he just call me cute?!*

I can feel all the heat in my body rush to my cheeks. I look over at Macro, my mouth hanging open. There's a faint blush on his cheeks as he quietly murmurs.

"Now *that* was intended as a compliment. Your over-the-top reactions are making me self-conscious about that decision, though."

With that, he picks up his pace so he can create distance between us.

*I see. So, he meant it as a compliment, after all. Seems like he has no idea why what he said caused me to blush. And I feel kind of bad. Any girl would get embarrassed if a guy suddenly called her cute out of nowhere!*

"Hey. Um... Th-Than... Eep!"

As I hurry to catch up so I can thank him properly, a wall suddenly materializes in my way, and I jump back in surprise. Or at least, I'm about to, but there appears to be a wall behind me as well.



*What's going on?*

Frazzled, I look up only to realize it's not a wall, but a very large man.

"Are you Lanakiller's cleaner? Well, aren't you the cutest little thing."

The man grabs my shoulders from behind, looking down at me as he speaks.

*I have a pretty bad feeling about this. Those eyes don't seem especially friendly...*

"What are you doing?! Get away from Miku!"

I'm relieved to hear Macro's voice amidst the chaos. Though the feeling is short-lived, as I suddenly find myself floating. I can't help but cry out from a sensation of pressure against my stomach. It takes me a moment before I realize the guy behind me picked me up and is running away with me under his arm.

*What?! Am I being kidnapped?! This can't be happening! And in broad daylight no less!*

"Miku!"

"Whose dumb idea was it to have this shrimp be a bodyguard?! Let's see what you got, tough guy!"

There's another man blocking Macro's path near the building we just left.

He stands in the middle of the path, swaying from side to side, and suddenly three more of his friends appear from seemingly out of nowhere, quickly surrounding Macro.

*H-Hey! This was a set-up! One against three is playing dirty! This is bad.*

I begin squirming frantically in an attempt to escape from the big guy's grip, but his muscles are like immovable rocks!

*He's just as strong as he is big!*

"There's no use fighting, little lady. But I'm pretty exhausted, so if you keep fussing, I'll have to hurt you, and we wouldn't want *that*, right?"

I hear a low growl and then a barely audible hissing noise. My body stiffens and I can't move a muscle.

*I'm s-so scared!*

The next thing I know, we're somewhere far away from town, Macro's nowhere in sight, and there's nothing I can do.

*I'm completely powerless... I have no idea what I'm supposed to do in a situation like this. Which is why I have to think. I might not be able to do anything now, but my chance to escape will show itself at some point. Isn't that what Claire always said when we went out fighting monsters? Having no offensive skills meant making up for it by focusing extra hard on boosting my ability to escape from any situation.*

*I've been training for this moment all my life! All I need to do is wait for the right moment and then slip away. I g-got this. I just gotta try and calm down! With that said, wh-where are we even going? I'm starting to feel sick from all this running around! Everything is spinning.*

I'm not sure how far we end up going, but suddenly he dumps me unceremoniously on the ground. The impact alone temporarily knocks the wind right out of me, and I find myself gasping for air as the world goes dark and I lose consciousness.



**WHERE** am I?

I go to sit up in the dimly lit environment and immediately realize something's wrong.

*I c-can't move my arms or legs!*

With my hands tied behind my back, I'm having trouble sitting up.

*Oh gosh! Oh no! How did I get here?*

I wrack my brain and almost immediately remember everything.

*That's right. I got kidnapped on my way home from work. I wonder if Macro's okay. Last time I saw him, he was surrounded by a group of mean-looking thugs. No, wait. I have to worry about myself right now. Macro can take care of himself. I don't have the luxury of worrying about other people right now. If Macro was here, I'm sure he would tell me to put myself first for once. O-Okay.*

*I'm absolutely going to make a break for it the first chance I get!*

Having made up my mind, I struggle to sit up.

"Is someone there?"

"Hm!"

Assuming I was all by myself, the unexpected voice startled me.

*I'm pretty sure that's a girl's voice. She sounded pretty scared.*

As I try to find the owner of the voice, I make out the vague outline of a small figure crouched in the corner, though it's too dark to see more than that. It seems the voice came from this shadow. There doesn't seem to be any other shapes around, at least.

"E-Excuse me. Who are you? My name is Miku."

I try to sound friendly so as not to frighten her any more than she already is. I decide not to bring up the topic of kidnapping for the time being.

"I'm so glad you're not a bad guy! I was out for a walk when suddenly, I passed out... When I came to, I was in here. I feel bad saying this, but I'm glad I'm not alone."

She sounds far more cheerful than she did a moment ago.

*From the rhythmic vibrations, I have a feeling we're in the back of some kind of carriage, though I'm worried about where exactly they're taking us. To be fair, I was already worried to begin with!*

"It's okay. And I feel the same way. I'm glad I'm not alone."

"Haha! Guess that makes us friends now! What are we going to do? If we don't do *something*, I have a feeling we're going to be in big trouble. Any ideas?"

*She's clearly forcing herself to sound cheerful. I'm sure she's so scared that she's on the verge of tears. I feel the same way. But if we start bawling and making a fuss, the bad guys will take notice for sure. I think my presence helps give her the strength to stay calm as well. She's such a sweet, strong girl. I can't keep counting on others to clean up my messes. I'm a member of a high-ranking*



*guild, after all. O-Okay. Get it together! I have to make her feel safe.*

The constant shaking makes things difficult, but I'm able to make my way over to where the other girl is. Then, after taking a deep breath, I force myself to speak in the calmest voice I can muster.

"I can fly. And I'm strong enough to carry someone else for a short distance as well."

"Really? That's amazing... Oh! That would actually pair well with *my* magic."

She then goes on to explain how she's great at using wind spells.

*What a perfect coincidence! With our magic combined, we might actually be able to make a break for it.*

"We just have to wait for an opening. Oh, and we need to figure out a way to untie these ropes."

The hope that we might actually make it out of here gives us a burst of courage. Having calmed down considerably, I suddenly remember something. The all-purpose pocket knife I have for situations just like this one.

*B-But I can't reach it in this position!*

"I have a knife in my pocket, just under my jacket. I don't think they took it from me... Think you can reach it?"

"You do? I'll give it a shot, but also, sorry in advance."

Almost immediately after she says that, she twists her body around while leaning backwards, using her bound hands to search under my jacket.

*It's kind of ticklish! But I can't laugh! I have to be quiet!*

A moment later, I hear her silent cry of, "I found it!" before her hand pulls back.

*Whew!*

"Miku, was it? Lean this way. I'll cut the rope for you. I'll t-try my best not to cut you as well, but if I do, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I know how to use healing magic, so if you nick me, it's no big deal."

“You can heal? You really are amazing, Miku.”

Slicing through the rope is far more difficult than I imagined. Between the two of us being worried about not hurting the other and the constant rocking of the carriage, it ends up taking quite a while. But we whisper words of encouragement back and forth the whole time, and before I know it, I manage to slip my hands free without getting hurt.

*Thank goodness!*

“Thank you. It’ll be much easier this time. Let’s get you free.”

Taking the knife back, I easily slice through the rope binding her hands and feet. Finally free, the two of us look at each other, giggling quietly.

“I can’t believe you carry a knife on you. You’re no ordinary girl.”

“I could say the same about you. Anyone else would be panicking right now, but you’re as calm as a cucumber.”

Once I regain my bearings, I give a simple introduction. That I’m a member of a high-ranking guild, and that unfortunately she can’t count on me to fight since I only know defensive spells. Hearing that, the girl shakes my apology off. With her eyes sparkling so brightly that I can see them even in the dark, she grabs my hand with both of hers.

“That’s amazing you’re in a high-ranking guild. I actually come from a small village in the countryside. I moved here to find work in the big city. And then something like this has to happen... ‘Just my luck,’ I thought to myself, but I guess I really *am* lucky, huh?”

*Lucky? What does she mean by that?*

As I look at her, puzzled, she gives me the biggest smile I have ever seen.

“I haven’t told you my name yet. I’m Laura! Maybe if we get out of here in one piece you can introduce me to your guild? I heard high-ranking guilds rake in the most money!”

As she looks me straight in the eyes, her determination for her bright future shining unwaveringly bright, she squeezes both my hands with hers before shaking them firmly, up and down.

*T-This girl sure is positive!*

“Let’s figure out a way to get out of here first,” I tell Laura to try and calm her down.

I can’t promise I’ll be able to get her into the guild. Introducing her to the others shouldn’t be a problem, which seems to make her happy enough since she thanks me joyfully in response.

“If we’re going to make a break for it, we should go while we’re en route. I know it’s more dangerous that way, but once we stop, the bad guys will shift their attention to us.”

“W-Wait, Laura! We should scout things out first before we do anything. If a guy is going to snatch up a girl off the street, they probably aren’t alone. Whoever’s driving us probably has some friends with him.”

Laura, who seems in high spirits due to the promise I made her, quickly throws open the carriage’s canopy and looks like she’s about to jump out. I rush over to stop her, which turns out to be the right move. Glancing outside, I realize we’re surrounded by several guys on horseback.

*Whew! That was close!*

“Heehee! Sorry. There’s a lot of them, huh... This carriage seems way too big for just the two of us, though. Maybe they were planning on kidnapping more people?”

While apologizing for her hastiness, Laura calmly rationalizes the situation.

*That’s a good point! It would be weird to use such a big carriage for just two small girls. These guys must be frequent kidnapppers! And from a big organization by the looks of it. Actually, I remember Ektor and the guys talking about a big case they were working on. All I know is it involved a big organization, but could this be the group in question?*

*If that’s true, then I can’t let these guys keep running amok and kidnapping people. But with Laura here, my first priority should be escaping. Still, if we don’t do something, more people will be kidnapped. Ugh... What do I do? Escaping for now is probably our best bet, and then we can sound the alarm once we’re free. We can’t do anything else if we can’t get out of here first.*

“If we jump out of here with enough force, we should be able to fly out of here. Laura, can you use your wind magic to give us a boost?”

“Hmm... They definitely won’t be able to stop us if we suddenly fly away. Let’s do it! Leave the boosting to me!”

I stand behind Laura and wrap my arms around her upper body just under her armpits.

*This is the only way I can get a firm grip. I really need to workout more.*

“Okay, here we go!”

As I give the signal, I spread my wings of light like always. As soon as we’re outside, Laura kicks off the carriage, and as she propels us forward, she uses her wind magic to boost us even further upward.

*Yes! Perfect timing!*

In the blink of an eye, the carriage we’d been in moments before looks like a toy. Seeing the bandits in an uproar at our unexpected escape, I finally heave a huge sigh of relief.





“Wow! This is so cool! We’re actually flying!”

“Ack! Don’t flail around like that! I’m not very strong, and my grip is already slipping!”

“Eep! Sorry! Oh! I can see lights coming from over there, Miku! Is that your town?”

Laura, who immediately calms down, points to a glow that’s coming from a short distance ahead of us. Though I still can’t make it out clearly, I definitely recognize the sight of that all-too-familiar gate.

*Maybe someone will notice us from here? After all, Macro knows I was kidnapped, and Claire will definitely be out looking for me, considering it’s after dark and I’m not home yet.*

“Laura, close your eyes! I’m going to flash a really bright light!”

“Huh? Oh! S-Sure!”

I pray that someone notices us as I force a surge of magic power into my wings, causing them to shine brightly. The light should be able to travel a fairly significant distance in the dark. And then, I make the light blink off and on. Back in my village, this was the signal I used to communicate with Claire.

*She’ll notice it for sure!*

“Rr... Ngh! I can’t h-hold on! I’m gonna rest on that tree over there.”

“O-Okay!”

Using my magic for the signal left me exhausted. We’re still pretty high up, so I land on a sturdy tree’s thick branch to ensure Laura doesn’t fall.

*My light show from earlier might’ve temporarily blinded the kidnappers. Maybe I was able to buy us some time.*

“You’re really something, Miku. You look like a fox, but you can fly!”

“Huh? Oh, right. I’m a rare breed even within my own village. They call us Winged Foxes, but we’re so rare that you probably never heard of it, huh?” I ask while sitting there, leaning back against the trunk of the tree opposite Laura, who is sitting astride the branch.

“Nope!” She agrees that she’s never heard of my breed before while smiling happily.

*I figured as much.*

“But you were able to help us thanks to your wings. I appreciate it!”

It’s kind of embarrassing to have her thank me so earnestly and with such a genuine smile. She looks at me, puzzled, causing her silky black hair, which flows just past her shoulders, to flutter in the wind, making it look even prettier. She has it tied back in a half ponytail, and coupled with her smile, she looks very mature. I’d been viewing her as an innocent young girl until now, but she seems much older in this light.

*She’s so mysterious...*

As I gaze at her, enchanted, I feel my heart skip a beat when I notice the way the corners of her lips curl up when she smiles.

*Wh-What’s wrong with me? It’s a pretty seductive gesture. I can’t believe I’m getting this flustered just from looking at another girl!*

“Is it kind of a secret that you’re a rare breed of fox?”

I find myself at a loss for words upon hearing her quiet question. Claire always told me that I should never talk about who I really am... But I feel so comfortable and safe around Laura, that I let it slip out without meaning to.

“Well, actually...”

As I sit there, stammering, Laura giggles and scooches closer to me.

*T-Too close! She’s even cuter from this angle. Her eyelashes are so long, and her skin is so smooth...*

“There’s no need to be worried. It’s okay. I understand. I know it can be hard when you’re a rare race.”

I reach out and pat her cheek. She lets out an involuntary squeal of surprise at my sudden action.

*There we go. Her reaction makes her look more like the innocent young girl I pictured back in the carriage.*



“To tell you the truth, I’m also kind of a rare breed. And since you spilled your secret, it’s only fair for me to spill mine,” she says with a laugh.

*I’ve never met anyone with a vibe as weird as hers! She constantly flits from acting childlike to mature. It’s hard for me to keep up.*

“I’m a type of Sound Butterfly. Have you heard of us?”

“N-No. Never.”

She laughs at my honest answer, proclaiming that we’re even.

“Y-Yeah, I guess we are.”

In short, they’re a rare breed of demi-human butterflies who can wield sound magic.

*The world really is full of all types of demi-humans, huh...? Wait a minute. Did she say she was a butterfly?*

“Oh, you just noticed? You’re wondering why I can’t fly then, right?”

*Exactly. Butterflies fly, it’s literally in the name. But from what I can tell, Laura can’t. Or at least, she gave the impression she’d never flown before when we were airborne.*

“Despite being a butterfly, I can’t actually fly. It’s not a *me* problem, but more that Sound Butterflies can’t fly at all. There are other types of butterflies that can’t fly...but I know how weird it sounds.”

*I see... She sounds cheerful enough, but I still detect a hint of sadness buried behind her words. I guess it bothers her, at least a little.*

“A fox that can fly and a butterfly that can’t. It’s kind of funny, huh?”

She giggles, clearly amused, but I can’t bring myself to join in. As if sensing my discomfort, she quickly quiets down, her eyebrows furrowed in concern.

“I’m s-sorry. I shouldn’t have laughed. You really don’t have to worry about me, okay? I might not be able to fly, but I have the power of sound and wind. I always end up making things awkward,” Laura says sadly, burying her head in her hands.

*Oh gosh! Oh no! I can tell this is something that bothers her a lot. But she puts*

*on a cheerful smile so that others don't worry about her, which only ends up making them even more concerned.*

“Sound is a special subclass of magic, right? That’s amazing, Laura! I’m impressed you can use a type of magic that not many others can!”

“Miku...”

*Everyone has stuff they're self-conscious about. You can't help how you feel, and it's impossible to stop worrying about it. I was born with the curse of light magic, and I've constantly agonized over only being able to wield one type of magic unlike most other people. So, in other words, I understand, at least a little, how she feels.*

“As demi-humans...no...as people, there is stuff we can do, and stuff we can't. Stuff we're suited for, and stuff we're not. But regardless, that doesn't change what an amazing young girl you are, Laura!”

*Macro said the same thing to me. We have to do what we can and rely on others for what we can't. I mean, it's not like we can survive on our own, right? That's why we make friends, so we can help each other out. I'm sure it's strange to think this way after only having just met, but I want Laura to be my friend more than anything. I hope we can be.*

“You’re an amazing young girl, too. I feel so much better! Thanks, Miku!”

*Whew! She's smiling again. Good. That innocent smile of hers suits her perfectly. Though the more mature Laura was charming in her own way.*

As the two of us giggle together, I suddenly hear a commotion coming from the base of the tree. I immediately freeze, holding my breath, wondering if the kidnappers found us.

*Huh? Hang on a minute. That voice sounds awfully familiar.*

“Mikuuu! Hey, you guys over there! Where did you take Miku?!”

“Claire!”

*That's definitely Claire's voice, though she sounds slightly panicked. She must have come running as soon as she saw my signal! Thank goodness! She didn't have to come running that fast, though! All I want is to rush down to her, but I*

*should probably wait. If I go down now, I'll get burned by a blast of Fox Fire.*

"There you are..."

"Eek?!"

I'd been so focused on Claire being below us that the sudden voice next to my ear causes me to jump in surprise. I almost fell out of the tree! Pinwheeling my arms wildly for balance, the owner of the voice reaches out and steadies me.

"Macro! You're okay... Whah?!"

I turn to see Macro, who'd been by my side for most of the day.

*I'm relieved to see that he's safe, especially since the last time I saw him, he'd been surrounded by bandits. With that said...I wasn't expecting him to suddenly hug me like that! What's going on?! Is this really Macro? Wh-What's wrong?!*

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Miku. I was right there, and I couldn't protect you."

*Ooh, I get it now. Macro was with me all day as my bodyguard. I'm sure he must feel guilty that I was abducted right in front of him. It's not his fault, though. I'm sure he feels awful about it because he felt responsible for me and my safety. I feel really bad.*

"Don't worry. It's my fault for not being more aware of my surroundings. I'm really sorry, Macro."

"This time, it was actually all my fault."

"D-Don't say that! It's *my* fault!"

We go back and forth several more times, each of us trying to take the blame for what happened while attempting to calm the other one down.

"I'm sorry to interrupt...but can you two finish this riveting conversation after we get down? I mean, all's well that ends well, right?" Laura pipes up slightly awkwardly.

*Oh, right. I completely forgot about her! And she saw Macro hug me a moment ago... Oh, gosh! It's not what you think! It's not like that!*

We hurriedly jump back from each other, Macro seemingly just as uncomfortable as me. Once I regain my composure, I wrap my arms around

Laura again and spread my wings of light before gliding down to the ground from the top of the tree. Laura gently alights, and I immediately leap straight into Claire's outstretched arms.

"I was so scared!" she cries out on the verge of tears as I gently rub her back.

"I'm sorry, Claire. I didn't mean to worry you. But thank you for rescuing me!" I repeat those words over and over.

"Mngh... I wanted to be the first person to hug you! Stupid Macro..."

"Uh... You s-saw that?"

*I kind of wish she hadn't brought that up. It's making me embarrassed all over again!*

"I also want to make sure Miku is okay, Claire."

Ektor comes running up from behind Claire. Rinny and Angela are right behind him.

*Everyone came to get me... They must have been so worried.*

"Don't even *think* about hugging her, Ektor."

"But *Macro* can?! I won't forget this, Macro!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

*Oh, gosh. Stop bringing up the hug incident already! It's only making me more self-conscious! At any rate, I should probably thank everyone!*

I turn to face my friends before bowing deeply.

"I'm so sorry! This only happened because I'm not careful enough... I'm sorry for being such a burden all the time."

*I know they all have things they should be doing instead of running around looking for me, and I hate that I inconvenienced everyone. I want to try and be more helpful moving forward. I've still got a lot to learn, though.*

"What are you babbling about, Miku? The only people who did anything wrong are the ones who kidnapped you. You're the victim here, and you did nothing to deserve it."

“Angela’s right! You did absolutely nothing wrong, Miku. Plus, those guys are part of the criminal organization we’ve been tracking down this whole time. If anyone’s to blame, it’s *us* for not catching them before something like this happened. Which is why I’m so sorry, Miku...”

*So, they really are members of the organization they’ve been tracking down recently. My hunch was correct then. I never thought for one second I’d end up getting directly involved, though!*

“Angela, Ektor...thank you. But by Angela’s logic, it’s not your fault either, Ektor, okay? So please don’t apologize.”

“I g-guess you’re right...”

*This is quickly turning into an apology battle.*

Just as the thought crosses my mind, Rinny’s cheerful voice rings out, instantly lightening the mood.

“By that reasoning, we actually have Miku to thank for leading to their capture, right? You not getting kidnapped would’ve been preferable...but we caught them in the end. Thank you, Miku!”

“Rinny... You’re the best!”

He keeps us from getting too gloomy.

*It’s all thanks to Rinny’s upbeat personality! Plus, everyone’s smiling now. I’m so grateful that everyone in the guild are good people.*

As the tension drains from my shoulders, one of the thugs suddenly cries out and I turn around in surprise. I see Macro kicking one of the kidnappers, who’s tied up and lying on the ground.

*Wh-What’s going on?!*

“I really don’t know anything!”

“I know you’re lying. One of you has to be in charge.”

“Ow! That hurts! I swear! I told you, I don’t know!”

Apparently, they’re questioning him about something. And Macro’s not holding back.

*I know it's necessary in this situation, but it's still kind of scary. It's almost like Macro's a different person from a moment ago... Forget about that! What we need now is information! Who's the guy pulling the strings?*

As I watch, Claire leans closer and whispers softly in my ear, filling me in. After I was captured, Macro felt frozen in place, as if trapped by some kind of spell. He couldn't even move a single finger. It was bizarre.

*Huh? That really happened? How scary...*

"It's not that simple for a strong man like Macro to become completely immobilized. Which is why there has to be an incredibly powerful member within the organization. Yet all we ever seem to talk to are fall guys. There's been no one who fits the bill or even comes close to it."

*I can't believe someone like that exists. And it's terrifying to think they can manipulate people like that. If there's no one like that among the captured members, then maybe he escaped? Does that mean he's still on the loose somewhere? Which also means this isn't over just yet.*

"For now, I'm just glad you're safe, Miku! Was there anyone else with you?"

*Oh, right!*

I call Laura over, who's been waiting patiently a few steps away. I did promise I'd introduce her.

"Let me introduce you to Laura. She helped me escape from the bad guys. Laura, this is my twin sister, Claire. She's also in the same guild as me."

"What...?" Claire cries out in surprise as I finish up my introduction.

Curious, I turn to face Claire. Laura opens her mouth at the same time, her cheeks bright red.

"Um, hi. My name's Laura. I know this is sudden, and I apologize..."

*Wh-What? Why's Claire frozen in place? Huh? What's wrong?*

"But can I join your guild?"

In the midst of the confusion, Laura speaks clearly with a carefree smile on her face.

*She really doesn't waste any time. She looks more innocent and sweeter than ever. I'm confused about Claire's reaction, though. What exactly's going on here?*

"E-Ektor..."

Claire seems dazed for a moment before she quietly calls Ektor's name. It's incredibly unusual for Claire to ask Ektor for help with anything. I watch her curiously as questions fill my mind. When I call her name, she jerks her face up, as if snapping back to reality. Then she smiles and says, "If Laura wants to join our guild, she'll have to talk to the guild leader."

*Oh, right. Of course. But why did she get so weirdly flustered?*

"H-Hold on one sec! I'll go get him!"

And with that, she rushes over to where Ektor's standing. The two of us stand there, exchanging almost twin expressions of surprise. Realizing the hilarity of the situation, we begin giggling.

"I guess I came on a bit too strong, huh? I'm really sorry." Laura chirps.

"Maybe a little. But it's okay! I'm not sure what's going on, but I have a feeling we'll all head back to the guildhall before making any decisions."

"You have a guildhall? Are there beds?!"

Laura's over-enthusiastic question catches me off guard, and as I tell her that yes, we have beds, I wonder how long it's been since she's slept in one. Laura beams happily in response.

*She must have been kidnapped by those guys long before me. I'm sure she'll enjoy getting a good night's sleep finally.*

Shortly after, Claire brings Ektor over. With a smile, Laura tells Ektor everything she said to Claire a moment ago.

*Her positive attitude is impressive! Though for reasons I still don't understand, Ektor has the same reaction as Claire. Maybe she really is coming on too strong?*

While I'm really curious about what exactly is going on, before I can get any answers, we decide to head home since we've all had a long day.

*I knew Ektor wouldn't leave her behind, but hearing him say so is still a relief.*  
*Whew!*

"Thanks, Miku."

"Huh? Oh, that was honestly the least I could do." Feeling relieved, I suddenly jerk in surprise when Laura leans in, whispering in my ear. For a moment, she looks like the mysteriously charming, more mature version of herself I glimpsed earlier. It really is a little bizarre how she can look so different from one moment to the next. That doesn't make her any less sweet, though.

"I'm going to stay here and make sure the guards get this mess under control. I'm used to this sort of thing, so don't worry about me. You should head back with everyone else."

"If you're staying, then so will I. You'll get bored all by yourself."

"Of course Rinny volunteered to help kill time. Figures. Though I'd prefer someone I can actually talk with."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?! You got a problem with my conversation skills?!"

It sounds like Angela and Rinny are going to stick around here for now. They're poking each other but smiling at the same time, so it's clear they're just teasing. They seem to get along really well.

Angela might be used to dealing with the town guards, but I can't help but worry about her being here all by herself, so I'm glad that Rinny volunteered to keep her company. I have a feeling there won't be any problems with both of them here. Which is why everyone is so quick to get on board with the plan, and after a quick goodbye, we escort Laura back to the guildhall.

Everyone piles into a carriage pulled by Ektor's Rinos, Popo. The familiar sight of his pure white body and cute, round eyes makes me feel warm and fuzzy. I gently pet Popo's cheek while quietly thanking him for carrying us. His eyes crinkle up in response, making him look even cuter.

We clamber into the carriage, much bigger than the one Popo was tethered to before, and sit down.



*Huh?*

I'm suddenly hit by a wave of exhaustion. My eyelids feel impossibly heavy.

"If you're tired, Miku, you should sleep."

"B-But we'll be back at the guildhall before long...\*yawn\*... P-Plus, Laura's here, too, and..."

I'm succumbing to the sleep that Macro, who's sitting next to me, suggested I give in to.

*But I promised Laura I'd introduce her to everyone, and I can't do that if I'm asleep! Ugh... But I'm so tired. And the way the carriage rocks back and forth sure is making me sleepy...*

"My goodness! Don't worry about me, Miku. You getting me out of there is more than enough, and I'm so grateful. But if you really want to do something for me, maybe we can chat some more tomorrow? Okay?"

Laura, who's sitting on the other side of me, puffs out her cheeks slightly before replacing her expression of annoyance with her usual carefree smile.

*She's always so thoughtful. I'm sure she's mentally and physically exhausted from her kidnapping ordeal, and yet she's still looking out for me.*

"Mm... But you should get some sleep, too, Laura..."

"I will. Everything's okay now. Stop trying to fight it. You really are a very curious girl, Miku."

I'm so exhausted that I feel like my head might fall off my body. And yet I find myself still struggling to speak when suddenly, with a heavy sigh, Macro reaches over and pulls me against him. I'm too exhausted to do anything but lean my head against his shoulder.

*Oh, no! In this position, I'm gonna fall asleep for sure!*

I can hear Ektor and Claire causing some kind of fuss across from me, but I decide to wait until later to ask what happened.

*I'm really sorry. Wake me up when we get home...*

## Chapter 2 | The Struggle of a Girl in Love

[Claire]

**“EKTOR.”**

“I know already.”

Being on the same wavelength for once, the two of us decide to hold an emergency meeting. The fact he already knew what I was going to say proves he’s also realized things are rapidly falling into place around us. I feel like my heart’s about to pound out of my chest! Why, you ask? Well, isn’t it obvious? Why did Miku have to be kidnapped alongside the heroine?! I had no idea this would happen!

The fact I had no clue this would happen means there’s a chance this plot point comes from the dating sim version of the game and not the original one. Which is why I reluctantly decided to get Ektor involved.

*I wish there was any other way! I have no intention of handing Miku over to him, making him essentially my enemy! But I can’t say that. I’ll do whatever is necessary to protect Miku, who is my number one priority!*

Once home, Macro carried Miku, who’d fallen fast asleep after her very long day, to her room. Macro may be small, but as a dwarf, he’s very strong. I tagged along and once Macro left, I changed Miku into her pajamas before tucking her into bed with a sigh of relief.

Right now, I’m just glad she’s okay. I’d been honestly scared to death. I regret blowing up at Macro when he first told us what happened. Though looking back, I know that if our roles had been reversed, there’s absolutely nothing I could have done differently. At least he was able to escape. I wouldn’t have been able to do that. An apology is certainly in order.

I really want to stay by her side until she wakes up...but I guess that’s what

friends are for. I'm sure if I ask Candice, she'll take over for me. Even Marino would probably be willing to help.

Miku will be more than safe with them keeping watch. She's able to use spatial magic to set up wards of protection around the room. Ektor already reached out, so it's only a matter of time until she arrives. Which means all I can do right now is wait. Once Miku wakes up, I'll tell her everything. With my mind made up, I make my way toward Ektor's room.

I knock on the door and he answers immediately, inviting me in. It's unusual for me to visit a guy's room so late at night. Regardless, there doesn't seem to be any awkwardness between us. Naturally.

"This is about Laura, right?"

"Thanks for being quick on the uptake."

He gets straight to the point without any meaningless small talk. Let's call this a strategy meeting of sorts. I figured we could quickly come up with a plan if I got Ektor involved.

Who would've guessed the developers would change the plot in the dating sim version of the game so Miku and the heroine get kidnapped *together*?

"I had no idea Miku was going to get kidnapped to begin with. And if I did, I absolutely would have taken steps to prevent it."

"I believe you. If there's one thing I can trust you to do, it's keeping Miku safe."

What happened tonight was very unusual. I'm at a loss as to what's going on. I know the story has already veered off course in a number of ways from the original plot...but to think that the story's changed *this* drastically is worrisome.

"Let's leave the whole kidnapping incident aside. We'll drive ourselves nuts if we waste any more time agonizing over it. The real question is, where do we go from here, right?"

He's right. Laura is already here, in the Lanakiller guildhall. We knew she was going to join us from the very start. If we're following the original plot now, then it was basically guaranteed.

“To be honest, I’d prefer to keep Laura and Miku separated. But from what I can tell, they’re already friends... So, it’s not like we can kick her out now...”

“You’re right. Not without good reason, at least. And to make matters worse, apparently, she has no home to return to... As a human with scruples, there’s no way I can treat her so heartlessly. Whether she becomes a member of the guild or not, it looks like we’re stuck with her for the time being.”

Not only is Laura the heroine, but her sound magic is incredibly helpful in many ways. Mostly with gathering intel! Combined with wind magic, she’s able to hear sounds from a great distance away, making her an invaluable resource when it comes to potential job opportunities.

Though she has no combat abilities, it’s only a matter of time before the other folks in the guild realize her potential as an ally. She might be here right now under the pretense of us protecting her, but it won’t be long before she becomes a full-fledged guild member.

“For what it’s worth, I’m absolutely planning on keeping my distance. If we’re going by the plot of the dating sim, she falls hopelessly in love with me.”

“I know that’s the nature of the game, but it still pisses me off.”

I mean, the point of dating sim games is for all the available female characters to fall in love with you, the protagonist, so it’s not really surprising. In the original *otome* version, you get to choose who falls in love with you, but considering Ektor is the love interest in the classic route, the chances of Laura falling for him are pretty high.

“Why not go for it? Win Laura over?”

“Don’t even joke! My heart belongs to Miku!”

I’d be perfectly okay if they ended up together. Miku’s not the type of person to go after someone who already has a partner. If she’s not the love interest, then she won’t give him a second thought.

“What’s your plan then, Mr. Popular?”

I know he has no intention of giving up on Miku. And I kind of respect that. If it was literally anyone else, I might have second thoughts on my no-dating

policy.

“All I know is that I have no intention of falling for Laura. No chance.”

“That’s a pretty bold claim...”

Invisible sparks are flying between us. I mean, he basically vowed to be with Miku till death do us part, right? That he would never cheat on her. Even I’m skeptical of that.

“You’re not giving up, are you?”

“Not a chance.”

We’re going in circles at this point. I heave a sigh before fixing my cold gaze on Ektor.

“Do you really think I’m going to accept such an outrageous proposal without some kind of guarantee? I need to hear exactly what your plan is. Just know that if you were hoping to play things by ear regarding hitting on my sister, I vow to be an ever-present nuisance.”

I see him falter momentarily upon hearing my words.

*Determination might be a virtue, but it’s certainly not enough when it comes to love!*

“I’ll do my best to avoid Laura as much as possible and make sure we’re never alone together.”

“Mm-hm... That’s not enough to guarantee you won’t be *thinking* about her.”

Though I guess that’s about as good as we’re going to get. At the very least, it’s the only plan we have. But there’s one very important detail that we can’t forget. I keep my voice low as I continue.

“By the way... Laura’s like *us*, right? She is, isn’t she?”

“Hm!”

And here we are. Considering Ektor and I still retain memories from our previous lives, it stands to reason there might be other folks out there like us. Someone like our spunky heroine, perhaps? It’s impossible to rule it out entirely. Of course, it’s also possible that the opposite is true, and she’s not like

us at all.

“I can’t say it’s out of the question. It stands to reason that such a captivatingly devilish character would, by nature, be a Reborn.”

“I’m sorry, did you just say *captivating*?”

There’s no way I can allow him to drop a word like that and not draw attention to it.

*Are we talking about the same girl? She certainly seems like the type who’d be prone to causing trouble, but she always struck me as fairly innocuous. A little bit of an airhead almost.*

Noticing my clear confusion, he offers an explanation.

“They tweaked her personality between game versions. She’s more of an innocent airhead in the original, but the devs ended up adding an alluringly devilish side to her in the dating sim since she was too similar to Miku’s character. That seductiveness of hers is central to the plot.”

“Isn’t that kind of chauvinistic?”

“To be fair, you’re kind of biased. You know guys are into that kind of stuff.”

*They changed her character so she’d be more interesting to a male audience? Isn’t that a horrible character trait to have? But if that’s true, then...*

“Which Laura did we bring back with us?”

“That’s what we’ll have to figure out...”

*I’d much prefer the innocent version. Though being an airhead comes with its own unique set of issues. With evil intentions thrown into the mix, it won’t really matter whether she acts innocent or not. And if Laura ends up being a Reborn, then her personality might end up being something else entirely. It’s not like Ektor’s anything like the dashing prince charming he is in the game.*

I heaved a sigh.

*I miss the days back when I assumed everything would be fine since I knew what was going to happen. I was so confident that knowing the future meant I could change it for the better. I was basically using the knowledge gained from*

*my previous life to cheat in this one. But then I came to realize this life I'm living now is still just as real. And nothing's gone the way I thought it would. But that's just life, right? And I have no intention of giving up.*

*All I can do for now is keep my guard up, make sure nothing bad happens to Miku, and deal with problems as they arise.*

*"At any rate, that's the plan moving forward! Do whatever it takes to never be alone with Laura. The others can deal with her... And I can, too, of course."*

*Upon hearing my plan, Ektor shoots me a slightly wounded look. I'm helping you, aren't I? You were expecting something more? If it were up to me, I would never stick my neck out for him. Idiot. Everything I do is for Miku, so don't get the wrong idea.*

*I give an annoyed "Hmph!" in response and Ektor idly scratches his cheek with his finger, slightly uncomfortable but accepting of the situation for what it is.*

*"Let's wrap this up. Otherwise, we won't be able to keep an eye on Laura."*

*"Good point. There's not much left to do from here. That band of bandits was pretty big, though. It's going to be a real pain in the butt to go through everyone's criminal history... Guess that means tomorrow's shot since I'll be busy all day doing that."*

*"You're taking this whole thing awfully lightly! Once Marino or Candice get here, let's head over to the main guardhouse right away. We'll work through the night, even if it means keeping everyone awake to get the information we need! I want to have this finished by tomorrow morning."*

*I prefer being by Miku's side for every waking moment of her life whenever possible. Hearing my words, Ektor's eyes once again grow wide in surprise.*

*I guess he didn't believe I'd actually help him. Come to think of it, if I leave most of the cleaning up in Ektor's more than capable hands, I'll be able to stay with Miku as long as I want. But if we don't wrap up this kidnapping business quickly, I'll be worried every time Miku walks out of the door.*

*I mean, she was kidnapped the first time despite having a trustworthy escort in Macro protecting her. I want to be able to put every last seed of worry to rest, and I like to get things taken care of as quickly as possible.*

“Thank you, Claire.”

“What are you babbling about? I haven’t done anything you should be thanking me for.”

*I’m doing this primarily for myself and Miku. That’s honestly the only reason why I do anything. By thanking me, he’s playing off the assumption that I’m partly doing this for him, and that’s absolutely false. That he thinks I’d do something like that at all is annoying as hell.*

“I meant it more as a word of encouragement. I know you’ll always get in the way of my love, but I’m still grateful that you care about Miku the same way I do and will do whatever you can to protect her.”

“Wh-What’s wrong with you? Everything I do is for Miku and *only* Miku! Stop thanking me!”

Though a part of me understands how Ektor feels, only adding an extra layer of frustration to this entire situation.



**[Miku]**

**“WH-WHAT’S** going on...?”

The sun is already shining brightly through my window when I finally wake up. Moreover, I’m dressed in my pajamas and, as far as I can tell, I’m in my bed in the room I share with Claire.

*I really messed up big time! Don’t tell me I dozed off in the carriage on the way back and was fast asleep this entire time?! Or was everything that happened a dream...? No, no, no, no, no! There’s no way!*

“Claire’s not in her bed...so she must already be awake. I can’t believe I slept in this late!”

The fact that Claire, a habitual oversleeper, isn’t in bed means it must be *really* late.

*Oh, gosh! This is the first time I’ve ever slept in this long!*



I jump out of bed and quickly get changed, giving myself a cursory look in the mirror before running out of the room.

*Waah! I feel so bad!*

“Oh, Miku! Morning!”

“Huh? Candice? And Marino? Good morning. What are you two doing here? It’s unusual to see you out and about.”

I rush downstairs to find Candice and Marino seated at the dining room table, casually sipping tea. The reason why I’m so surprised to see them is because Candice doesn’t live here and I hardly ever see Marino.

“Well, that’s certainly one way to greet a guest. I heard you had quite an experience last night, young lady. Which is why we came to see how you’re faring.”

“That’s right, Miku. We were so worried when we heard, we had to come see you for ourselves!”

*They came just to see me?*

Their kindness is so heartwarming that I find myself on the verge of tears.

“H-Hey! What’s wrong, Miku?! Was it really that bad?! Oh, gosh! You poor thing!”

“There, there. You look traumatized. Come over here and I’ll give you some much-needed care and attention.”

Being kidnapped was definitely no walk in the park. But their overwhelming kindness is so heartwarming! I find myself unable to speak through the tears flowing down my face. I end up crying tears of joy as I let the two of them shower me with attention. Though I am able to squeeze out a “thank you” at some point.

Candice and Marino quickly get my breakfast ready. I try to help as a means of thanking them, but they both insist that the bawling girl should sit instead. Already embarrassed enough but also thankful for their kindness, I find myself antsy for a different reason. I really do appreciate the gesture, though. The warm vegetable soup was clearly made with love from both of them.

After finally calming down, the two of them fill me in on what everyone's currently doing. Ektor, Macro, and Claire left early this morning to follow up on yesterday's kidnapping incident. Rinny and Angela went straight to the guardhouse last night, so considering they never returned, we're assuming they're still dealing with the aftermath of this messy situation.

*Oh, gosh! Don't tell me that they stayed up all night?! Ugh... And meanwhile, what was I doing?! Sleeping peacefully in my bed without a care in the world!*

"By the way, I heard everyone agreed to simply let you sleep after you passed out on the carriage ride home. They said Claire made extra sure not to wake you while she was changing you into your pajamas."

"Everyone wanted to make sure you got enough rest after your ordeal."

They quickly explain in an attempt to comfort me, my overwhelming feelings of guilt over the situation written plainly on my face.

*I see... They went out of their way to make sure I didn't wake up. I thought it was strange that I slept for as long as I did. No matter how mentally exhausted I might be, it's hard to believe I wouldn't wake up at all. Claire's usually the deep sleeper, able to snooze through anything.*

"Now then, about that girl you brought back with you..."

"Oh! That's right! How is Laura doing?"

It's not that I'd forgotten about her. I just wasn't sure how to broach the subject. But I guess the two of them already know all about Laura.

*Well, that's a relief.*

Marino tells me how Laura's been sound asleep ever since they put her to bed in one of the guild's empty rooms. Meaning they still haven't formally met yet.

"I ended up checking in on her around dawn because I was worried she might be feeling ill. She didn't have a fever, though. I think she was just tired."

"She must have been just as exhausted as me. But if she's sleeping that peacefully, then she must be okay. Thank you for checking on her, Marino."

*Hope she gets as much rest as she needs. Especially since they clearly snatched her up before getting me.*

Just as the thought crosses my mind...

“Well, speak of the devil.”

“Huh? Oh... Laura!”

Following Marino’s gaze, I turn to see Laura climbing down the stairs. Upon seeing me, Laura’s face immediately brightens, as if relieved to see a familiar face.

“Well, gosh. I didn’t mean to sleep that long,” she says awkwardly.

*I know exactly how you feel! I was basically thinking the same thing a minute ago!*

I go over to meet her, still standing at the bottom of the stairs, before leading her back over to the dining room table. After gesturing for her to sit down, I introduce her to Marino and Candice. And vice versa, of course.

“I’m sure there’s a lot you want to talk about, but how about we get you fed first? You must be starving, Laura.”

“Huh? Teehee! That sounds good to me!”

She looks so cute, sitting there seemingly embarrassed while still answering the question honestly. Marino and Candice smile in response.

Since the two of them had made my plate, I felt it was only right for me to make Laura’s. Though, to be fair, all I really had to do was reheat the food they’d already made. Warm vegetable soup, made with love, and bread to go with it. I decided to make her an omelet as well, with extra cheese to make the meal more filling.

“Wow, this looks so good! You r-really don’t mind me eating this? I don’t have anything I can give you in return.”

“You’re a bit like Miku, huh, Laura? There’s no need to be shy! If it makes you feel any better, you can help clean up the kitchen when you’re done!”

“That works for me! I promise to work hard in order to earn this meal! But for now, time to dig in!”

Laura responds cheerfully to Candice’s comment, and it’s clear she’s already

back to her usual upbeat and energetic self.

*Good! You won't be able to get your strength back without a hearty meal in your belly!*

Marino and Candice ask her questions from time to time while she eats. Like where she was going and where she has been. Come to think of it, I guess I never thought to ask her about any of those things.

“Considering I have no idea where I am right now, it's hard for me to talk about where I've been... I was born and raised in a village so small, it's not on any map. We were pretty poor, though we always managed to get food on the table. I always planned on leaving home to find work when I turned fifteen. So, the day after my birthday, I set out on my journey! I didn't leave without getting permission from my parents first, of course,” Laura chuckles after stating the last part.

She explains how her hometown and her family mean a lot to her, and her dream has always been to find a stable job in a big city to help support them and provide them with delicious food to eat. She's really devoted to her family. But then, she ended up getting kidnapped by that group of bandits along the way, which is what led to her ending up here.

*Ugh... That was pretty unfortunate.*

We must have all had the same expression of sympathy on our faces when we heard that. But she continues chattering away cheerfully, seemingly unmindful.

“It's because I got kidnapped that I was able to meet Miku. So, it must've been fate! I'm really happy we met! Well, also because...”

She once again states her desire to join our guild, and I notice a familiar faint glimmer of that more mature side in her eyes. Caught off guard, all we can do is exchange awkward glances, our smiles clearly forced.



**IT'S** been several days since Laura came to the Lanakiller guild.

The matter of Laura joining our guild, the question she posed the first day she arrived, is still pending. Mainly because when she initially asked, only myself,

Marino, and Candice were there. And although none of us objected to her joining, we didn't have the power to make that decision. Especially not without the other members or Ektor, the guild leader. And since the conversation couldn't go any further, we ended it there for the time being.

I felt bad, but she seemed pretty understanding, which was a relief. She also promised to talk to Ektor herself. Which is why she's still here, waiting for the right moment to bring it up... Actually, Laura still hasn't met Ektor or the rest of the guild members yet. I'm not sure if it's simply a matter of bad timing or what, but they always seem to just miss each other.

It seems unavoidable at the moment, unfortunately. Ektor and the rest of the guys have their hands full dealing with the aftermath from taking down that high-profile kidnapping ring. The case of our kidnapping might be solved, but there are still a lot of questions left unanswered.

I'm pretty much in the dark about most of it...but what it basically boils down to is that Ektor and the others stop by the guild from time to time, though never for very long. And that's why they still haven't formally met Laura yet. Well, to be fair, they've exchanged casual greetings here and there, but they have yet to sit down for an actual chat.

"I know they're really busy right now, so I feel bad bothering them with something like this. I plan on bringing it up once things settle down. I've got a place to stay and food to eat, so waiting around isn't an issue," she says with a laugh. Seemingly being okay with waiting for an answer.

*It's not like she's mooching off of us or anything, though! She's a great help around the house. She says she's used to helping out with chores and stuff every day back in her hometown, which is probably why she seems to do everything with ease. To be fair, it's a huge help! Honestly, the fact we share similar mindsets, mainly feeling obliged to help in whatever way we can to show our gratitude, is probably why I feel as close to her as I do.*

"It's also part of my plan. I mean, if I spend my time here helping out around the house, then it might increase my chances of getting accepted into the guild, right?" she says while wiping off the table before giggling, sticking her tongue out playfully. She refers to it as laying the groundwork for her success. As

expected from Laura. She's much more of a go-getter than I will ever be. I admire that part of her a lot.

*Now then, all of the chores for today are done, and it's not even the afternoon yet. With Laura's help, it didn't take very long at all.*

"How about we take a little rest, Laura?"

"Yay! I'll start getting some tea ready!"

Only the two of us are at home right now. Everyone else is either busy tying up the loose ends to the kidnapping case or working hard getting some work done and bringing in some money. Honestly...I kind of want to get back to work, too. The cleaning requests are piling up! But until they're able to put this kidnapping case to rest, I'm not really supposed to go out into town. It's for my own safety, of course.

Although they were able to catch my kidnappers, they still don't want me wandering around until they can figure out what the group's motive was or if any other members of the group are still out there.

Of course, Claire is the most worried. There's no way I can say anything when she's tearfully begging me to stay home, especially after making her worry as much as I did the first time. She asked me to be patient for the time being, at least until someone has time to escort me around town. It seemed easier to simply agree so as not to become a bigger burden than I already am.

"Here, Miku."

"Thanks!"

As I go to close the window I left open to help ventilate the room, Laura pours me a cup of tea and places it on the table. I take a seat in the chair in front of my cup and she takes a seat across from me.

"I'm sorry. You probably want to explore the city, huh?"

"Hrm? Well, of course I do, but I was kidnapped, too, you know! Honestly, I can't complain, considering how much I'm being pampered here."

Laura's unfortunately stuck here in the guild for the same reason as me. But to be honest, I'm kind of glad. It's a lot more fun to have someone else to keep

me company, and reassuring as well.

“Maybe you can show me around town once things settle down.”

“Of course, I will! There are still a lot of places I’m not familiar with, though, so I can’t entirely vouch for my thoroughness as a tour guide.”

“Hahaha! Then we can explore the city together. That sounds like a lot of fun!”

She’s always so upbeat. No matter how anxious or uncomfortable she might feel, she never lets it show. One of her strengths is her ability to see everything in a positive light, no matter what.

“Hey... Can I ask you something?”

We lapse into a companionable silence that stretches out for a few moments before Laura breaks it, speaking in a hushed tone. There’s no one home but us, so I’m not sure why she’s whispering, but I answer her while speaking quietly myself.

“I can’t promise an answer, but I’ll try.”

*Is it about something serious?*

I put my teacup down before giving Laura my full attention. What she proceeds to ask takes me completely by surprise.

“Is there any chance you’re in love, Miku?”

*Good thing I put my cup down, otherwise I might be choking right now! I mean, I’m so taken aback by her question I might’ve even spit out my tea! Huh? What? Wh-Why did she ask that?! Love? Me?! Of c-course not! There’s absolutely no chance!*

“Wh-What makes you think I am? D-Do I look like someone in love?”

I can’t hide how flustered I am. Mainly because falling in love is a life-or-death situation for me, so I’m exceptionally sensitive to the topic. Seeing me so frazzled, she begins giggling. I get the feeling she probably thinks my overreaction is for a far more adorable reason!

“You’re so cute, Miku. You can’t hide anything, huh?”



“Th-That’s not a lie, I guess. But I’m not in love! I mean it.”

Despite my immediate and firm denial, she twines a strand of her shoulder-length black hair around her finger while playfully egging me on.

*Wait. Does that mean she doesn’t believe me?*

“To be honest, you *do* look like you’re in love. But I figured this must be your first crush.”

*My first crush? Even though I’m not entirely aware of it, I can’t bring myself to deny it outright.*

This dilemma causes my face to immediately turn crimson red due to her teasing.

“You share a house with a bunch of guys, right? It’s not unusual to develop an innocent crush in that kind of scenario. Even I get butterflies from time to time with the right person. Don’t tell me you haven’t?”

She continues playfully while resting her chin in her hands. The gesture causes her to look more like the mature Laura than the innocent one.

*Ugh... I can’t resist her when she looks at me like that!*

“I’ve felt butterflies before... But that’s not the same thing as being in love, right?”

“Oh, you sweet summer child!”

“Ack?!”

She suddenly shouts in response to my innocent question, pointing her finger dramatically at me, and I’m so shocked that my chair almost tips over backwards.

*Sweet summer what?*

“Those butterflies are the *first* sign of love! You probably really *are* in love, Miku. Maybe you are just in denial.”

*I’m in denial about my feelings? Me? I guess it’s possible. But considering I don’t know the first thing about love, it’s impossible for me to know. And besides, me falling in love puts my very life in danger...*

In response to my silence, Laura leans forward before continuing.

“You might not love him *yet*, but maybe there’s someone you think is really great? Take Wells, for instance. I find mature men like that to be pretty attractive. Kiefer’s pretty sloppy appearance-wise, but you can always count on him to get the job done when he has to.”

To be honest, I’ve had similar thoughts. Everyone is pretty sweet and charming in their own unique ways.

“Ektor’s got his perfect good looks. Though it seems like Candice already marked her territory regarding him. Well, you’re always going to have a rival when it comes to love. I don’t know what it is about him, but his caring nature is kind of intriguing.”

She bluntly states her romantic interest in him while laughing enchantingly. Taking Candice on as a rival sounds like playing with fire. It sounds like she’s joking around, but I’m not sure how she expects to become friends with everyone while talking about fighting with one over a guy.

“Rinny’s not bad either. I mean, he’s a little dumb in some ways, but once you get to know him, he’ll protect you with his life. Mm-hm. I can see myself falling for him.”

“Huh? You can really love that many people?”

“Of course! You can crush on anyone special enough to give you butterflies! And from within that special group of guys, you’ll eventually find the one you love the most!”

Laura looks almost spellbound as she speaks. That’s when I finally understood. Love for Laura is a far more casual emotion. The feeling I have towards my friends who are special to me is what she equates to as love.

Perhaps we simply share different perspectives? Though it’s kind of a relief to hear her say that. Maybe I’m just hypersensitive to the word. It’s kind of refreshing to think of it in such a casual way, and a huge weight off my shoulders. Although my heart still skips a beat every time she mentions it so casually.

“I’ll pass on Macro, though. He’s pretty short and unfriendly, to boot. I bet it’s

really boring to hang out with him.”

“Huh...?”

“I’d like to be friends with him, but I doubt we’d ever be anything more than that,” she says with a smirk.

*What is this weird feeling...? It’s almost like I’m annoyed, but not quite. I’ve never felt anything like this before in my entire life.*

“Th-That’s not true at all! He can sometimes be difficult to read due to his bluntness, but he’s a really nice person. He’s just as tough on himself as he is on others, he’s very responsible, and he’s really cool!”

I suddenly realize I stood up at some point.

*That’s right. Macro is really cool. All of his amazing qualities almost seem to go to waste due to his inability to communicate well with others. I wish more people could get to know how great he is. I mean, he’s always acting with everyone else in mind. It’s really sad to me how misunderstood he is by most of the folks around us!*

“I s-see. I’m sorry. I feel like I misspoke out of ignorance...”

I glance over to see Laura looking at me in surprise.

*Oh, gosh! What have I done now?!*

“I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to be so mean about it. I just didn’t want you to have the wrong impression of him!”

“No, it’s okay. What I said was pretty mean. It’s only natural for you to have Macro’s best intentions in mind. Plus, it’s nice to hear you get excited about something for once,” she says, laughing.

*I-I’m sorry for shouting... Though I wonder why I came on that strong? She would have easily understood me even if I used an indoor talking voice. Was I angry about what she said? It’s no wonder that she got the wrong idea about Macro, but I feel like I blew the situation out of proportion.*

“And now I know him a little better, thanks to you! Heheh. I guess it’s not entirely out of the realm of possibility.”

“Huh? What isn’t?”

“Mm~m! Nothing! I think I’m going to do some exercise out in the garden.”

Contrary to how bad I feel over what just happened, Laura nods several times, as if satisfied about something.

*I wonder what? What did she figure out?*

My curiosity is killing me, but before I can say anything, she’s out of her seat and hurrying toward the garden.



**MARINO** and Candice stop by for a visit just past noon, the sun still high overhead. It’s reassuring to see them so often, something they promised to keep doing until this entire situation blows over! Just as we sit down to enjoy our usual afternoon tea together, Claire and Angela arrive, announcing their presence from the front door. Their voices sound far less energetic than usual. Concerned, I hurry over to greet them.

“Welcome back, you two. Is everything okay?”

“Miku! You’re a sweet sight for sore eyes!”

“W-Wah! What’s wrong, Claire?!” I ask, while closing the front door. Claire immediately pounces, wrapping me in a warm hug.

*Did something happen?*

I look over at Angela, searching for some sort of explanation. She smiles wryly at me, her expression just as exhausted as Claire’s, before she begins talking.

“Simply speaking, she’s just exhausted from putting that daunting task to bed. To be fair, I’m pretty tired, too.”

“Does that mean it’s all over? Finally?”

Wondering if the kidnapping case is finally closed, the two heave huge sighs at almost the same time.

*Wh-What? It’s still not over yet?*

“We’ve done as much as we can do for now. All that’s left is to wait and see.”

“I think we’ve managed to take down the kidnapping ring, at least. But we’re still in the dark regarding this mystery person the bandits keep talking about.”

According to the local guards, there should be no danger of any more kidnappings now that the ring’s been shut down and the guilty members arrested.

Although there are a couple of guys still on the run, the police should be able to track them down easily enough, and as members of a guild, they’ll get taken in sooner rather than later. But the reason for the long faces is because of a part of the case they can’t figure out.

“Apparently, someone told the bandits to kidnap you and Laura specifically. In other words, you weren’t the original targets.”

“Huh? But who would give that kind of order?”

“We have no idea. When we asked the kidnappers, they said they couldn’t remember.”

*That really is worrying... Though it explains why they sounded so glum about the case, for the most part, being wrapped up. Maybe it’s that guy Macro mentioned who can apparently manipulate people. Claire and the others seem to think that’s the case, though they’ve come to a roadblock in their investigation. Hmm... That’s really frustrating. It sounds like it’s going to take some time to find out who gave the order, and so with the threat of immediate danger gone, Claire and Angela came back home for the time being.*

“I hate to keep you and Laura locked up in the house forever.”

“Which is why we decided Claire will act as your personal bodyguard. Marino and Candice have their own stuff to do and can’t keep stopping by like they have been.”

*So, they’ve been visiting all the time recently because of me? They’re so sweet! I feel bad for all the trouble I’ve caused, but I’m glad they’ve been getting out of the house more than usual!*

“Does that mean we’ll get to go out finally? Hooray!”

Between the two of us, Laura is by far the happiest. She doesn’t seem all that

upset about not knowing why she was kidnapped or who ordered her abduction. Honestly, that innocent side of her is a part of what I like about her.

*We've been patiently waiting inside all this time. And I'm tired of it. I just want to go out!*

"Aren't we missing a couple of guild members? Are the guys still busy? I feel bad celebrating if they're still hard at work..."

And yet, she still worries about the people around her. She's such a sweet girl. I'm just as worried about Ektor and the other guys, too, of course.

"They'll be back later tonight. Though there's nothing else we can do for now, they apparently wanted to check in with the investigation one last time."

*That makes sense. Which means we'll get to have a big group dinner for the first time in a while.*

"I'll finally get to see Ektor after so long! I can't wait!"

"Gosh, Candice. He's all you ever talk about. Do you really like him that much?"

"I love him!"

Marino chuckles, amused at seeing Candice place her hands on both of her cheeks with glee. Candice's feelings for Ektor are so obvious that it even makes me smile.

*I understand how you feel, Marino!*

"I like Ektor, too."

Laura's simple words feel like she threw a bucket of cold water onto the warm and fuzzy atmosphere in the room. Everyone immediately freezes in place. Glancing around cautiously, I realize Claire's gone pale. She looks so serious that it's enough to make me forget all about Laura.

*Her declaration of her feelings for Ektor is kind of surprising, but not enough to warrant that kind of overreaction...right?*

I'm not exactly sure what might have caught Claire by surprise like that, though I'm used to her suddenly reacting oddly to situations for seemingly no

reason. It's usually due to memories from her previous life, which is probably what's going on right now. Unfortunately, there's not much I can do for her right now.

*It's so frustrating that I can't help her!*

"B-Back up a sec. This is the first I'm hearing of this!"

"Yep. Because I've never mentioned it before."

*Oof! Now someone else is reacting! Candice is the first to speak. Which makes sense. She wasn't expecting a rival to appear out of nowhere. There's no way she'd let Laura get away with saying something like that! A-Are they going to fight?*

But unable to bring myself to say something, I simply stand there helplessly.

"Oh my. What do we have here?"

"Shut up, Marino!"

Marino is watching this sudden development with a twinkle of excitement in her eyes. Angela quickly steps forward, telling her to hush up. Which is fair! Things are only going to get more heated if an unrelated party tries to get involved!

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What exactly do you mean by *that*?! Don't even think about it! Ektor fell in love with me first! You only just got here! Don't you dare try and get involved!"

"Why? What does it matter who was here first? It's ultimately up to Ektor who he wants to be with, right?"

"Why Ektor of all people?!"

"Because he's pretty cool."

"Well, you're certainly not wrong about that! Ektor is almost abnormally attractive, enough so that just seeing his face makes my heart dance with joy!"







Things are quickly heating up between the two girls! Candice is getting especially agitated! Laura has entered her more mature mode, facing down Candice with a look of exceptional calmness on her face.

“...I can’t tell which one she is.”

“Huh?”

As I stand there, confused, Claire mutters under her breath from beside me. I guess this really does have something to do with that game from the other world. But I still have no idea what she’s talking about. Once she gets like this, there’s no point in trying to talk to her.

*All I can do is wait and ask her about it later...though the situation unfolding before us is a huge problem! What should we do?!*

“Looking around, aren’t all the Lanakiller girls here in this room? We should take advantage of the moment for some girl talk!”

I’m so flustered that I can barely move an inch, unsure what to do. Which is when Laura tosses out that suggestion with an innocent smile on her face.

*Huh?*

The flirty look in her eyes is suddenly gone. Even Candice, who’d been glaring at her with open hostility, seems flabbergasted.

“That girl is the definition of two-faced...”

“Two-faced? Yeah, I get it. She usually looks so innocent, but sometimes this more mature expression crosses her face.”

I respond to Claire’s hushed comment with a murmured observation of my own. Not because I don’t want anyone to hear us, but because I find myself unconsciously matching Claire’s tone with my own.

“If she were open and honest, she’d be like the girl in the original game, and if she was more of a ‘pick me’ girl, then it’d clearly be the dating sim. There’s a chance that *everything* could be an act...”

“Um, err... Sorry, Claire. I have no idea what any of that means.”

“Sorry, sorry. I promise I’ll explain everything later.”

*This must have something to do with her memories of her previous life. She mentioned the game, which means Laura must be a character that Claire knows. But how exactly do they know each other? Is it possible that she's the final Lanakiller member we're waiting for...? Oh!*

"I-Is Laura the heroine?" I whisper into Claire's ear even quieter than before and a smirk crosses her face before she gives a slight nod.

*I see, so that's who Laura is. With that said, I still have no idea what exactly that means or why Claire seems so guarded around her. From the look she gives me, I can tell she wants me to continue acting oblivious. I'm pretty confident that even if I asked, I wouldn't understand. But I want to know! Maybe I'll ask her more about it later tonight.*

"So, um, do you wanna go out now?"

I don't want to end the day on such an awkward note. So, I try changing the topic. In response to my suggestion, Laura places her hands on both my cheeks, squishing my face, while laughing happily.

"I'd love to go out, but having some girl time while the boys are busy seems like a lot more fun! Plus, I get the feeling it's not often that the girls of the guild get to hang out together like this. We'll be able to go out into the city another time."

I guess she does have a point. Claire, myself, and Angela all live here, but Candice and Marino are almost never here, and it's even rarer that all of the guys are out of the house.

"That sounds fine with me. Fun, even."

"I'm also in! I'm not leaving until you drag me out kicking and screaming!"

Marino is the first to respond. She sits down on the couch with an amused grin on her face. Candice pipes up next, pointing her finger at Laura as if challenging her.

*L-Let's try and get along, okay?*

"Ugh... I guess that means I have no choice but to join in, huh?"

"I won't let you escape, Angela! It won't hurt you to participate in this kinda

thing from time to time.”

“Hey. Let go, Marino!”

Marino reaches out and grabs a hold of Angela, who looked like she’d been about to flee from the room at any moment. Marino, who’s resting her chin on the back of the couch, looks genuinely amused. And here I thought she only had eyes for the aloof Wells. She seems to get along well with Laura, who’s brimming with curiosity.

Angela lets herself get pulled again, and ends up sitting next to Marino on the couch. Her shoulders slump dejectedly, seemingly giving up on escaping the situation. She really doesn’t like doing stuff like this. I always saw her as someone who can do anything with ease, so it’s interesting to see a new side of her.

*M-Maybe we can stick to safe, fun topics? Though I’m pretty nervous about what we’re going to talk about.*

“Claire, was it? What about you?”

“Sorry. Hmm... I’ll join you under the pretense of gathering intel.”

“Gathering intel? Oh, right. I still haven’t gotten a chance to talk to most of you, huh? Ask me about anything! Let’s start girl talk!”

*W-Wait! I never said if I’d be joining in or not! Laura probably already knows there’s no way I’d be able to escape, though. Which is true.*

A wink and a smile in my direction is enough to make me forget about being grumpy. Plus, I’m really excited to be able to talk like this without any boys around.

*O-Okay then! Since we’re all here, we may as well have a good time and try to keep things from getting awkward!*

## Chapter 3 | The Mark of the Curse

**CLAIRE** and I sit together across from Marino and the others on the couch while Candice relaxes in a nearby armchair. Laura sits down in her own chair before immediately beginning to speak.

“Let’s get straight to the point! Who here is in love?” she asks cheerfully while raising her hand, answering her own question. Candice glares at her pointedly, her own hand shooting up into the air. Her enthusiasm is impressive.

“Huh? No one else? Are you sure you’re alive out there? Are you gals okay?”

Only two people ended up raising their hands. Laura lowers her hand, her former gusto replaced with bewilderment.

“Hrm? What about you, Marino?” Angela asks from amidst the silence.

*That’s right, Marino and Wells are dating.*

I look over at Marino, clearly confused. She places a finger against her lips before opening her mouth to answer.

“You mean Wells, right? I’m not sure how to put this, but the spark that I once felt is gone. If you were to ask me if I’m still in love with him, I’m not sure I could answer.”

“You love him, but you’re not *in* love with him? I didn’t realize that was possible...” Puzzled by her statement, I find myself asking before I can stop myself.

*I mean, loving someone means you’re in love with them, right? What she said doesn’t make sense!*

“Is this what they refer to as going through a rough patch in a relationship?”

“I’m surprised you know about that, Laura. But I think it’s a little different. Love as a word can have a lot of meanings. You’re still too young to understand all of them.”

“Wow... Spoken like a true adult.”

Laura’s made me realize that there are all kinds of different types of love. Though I’m not sure how Marino and Wells’ relationship fits in with what I know. If you ask me, it seems like they enjoyed each other’s presence in their own ways. Maybe it’s nothing more than a time problem? But the last time I saw them together, I felt a strong connection between them. I know they care about each other deeply, a fact that will never change. And though it’s not on the same level as love, I still think that kind of relationship is truly special.

“I get why Marino kept her hand down. But Miku, too? Why didn’t you raise your hand? You’re in love, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“What?!”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Well, my, my. Is that so?”

I was only half-listening to the conversation when I suddenly realize everyone’s talking about me.

*W-Wait a second! What’s going on?!*

“Miku! Is it true?! Are you really in love with someone?! Who?! Tell me!”

“Isn’t this actually kind of a big deal?”

Claire is the most distraught by Laura’s statement.

*Even Angela is taking it seriously, and all off of the assumption that Laura is telling the truth! I have to nip this in the bud!*

“Everyone, please c-calm down. I’m not in love or anything like that. Laura just got the wrong idea about something I said.”

That’s right. It has to be some kind of mistake. It probably stemmed from that conversation we had about love the other day. Though I’m not sure how she could’ve come to that conclusion.

“You’re wrong. It’s just that Miku hasn’t realized it herself yet! I guarantee that Miku is 100% in love! And her reaction proves it! She’s far more serious

about it than my playful teasing lets on!”

But Laura confidently says otherwise. Despite being wrong! How can she possibly think she knows me better than I know myself?

“So you just admitted to toying with people’s hearts? Specifically Ektor’s? Don’t toss around the word ‘love’ so lightly!”

“Wh-What’s your problem? I thought you might be a good person, but clearly I was an idiot! You’re awful, Laura! You won’t have any friends at the rate you’re going!”

“That’s harsh! The only one with an awful personality is *you*, Candice!”

Amidst the confusion, Laura and Candice begin fighting! And just when I thought they were on the verge of making up and getting along again.

*Wh-What should I do?*

Just as I begin to panic, Ektor and the others pick that exact moment to walk in, their voices echoing down the hall.

*Why now?! Why couldn’t they have come back a little later?!*

Candice is out of her chair before most of us realize what’s going on. Midway through their argument, she rushes for the door. Laura hurriedly scampers after her, trying to catch up. The thump of their footsteps echoes loudly, followed by their excited voices a few seconds later.

*Looks like Ektor and the others are getting dragged into this messy situation whether they want to or not... I hope they’ll be okay.*

“I knew this would happen. Well then, let’s head on over and see how they’re making out, Angela!”

“D-Don’t get me involved in this! You’re the only one amused by what’s going on! I’m going back to my room!”

Marino, who seems thrilled by all the commotion, jumps to her feet, her hand still firmly on Angela’s arm. She then proceeds to drag her, kicking and screaming, toward the front door.

*Knowing how strong Angela is, I’m impressed anyone can force her anywhere*

*against her will... This is no time to be impressed by feats of strength! I have to go after them. I feel really bad for Ektor and the others who must be exhausted only to come home to this.*

“Miku.”

“Claire?”

But before I can take more than one step forward, I feel Claire’s hand on my arm, pulling me back. She looks serious.

*Oh, it’s probably about our conversation a few moments ago.*

“Everything’s okay, Claire. I’m not actually in love.”

“It’s not about that. Well, I mean it *is* about that, but not in the way you’re thinking!”

She takes a deep breath, as if trying to calm herself down. Then she brings her face close to mine, speaking in a hushed voice.

“What’s happening now? It’s part of the plot. But it’s supposed to happen *after* Laura joins the guild.”

“Part of what plot? Oh, you mean the game? But Laura hasn’t officially joined Lanakiller yet, right?”

“That’s true, but there’s no mistaking this is the same cutscene,” she says.

Claire goes on to explain that just when you think everyone in the guild is getting along, Laura steps forward, announces the name of the boy she likes, and states that she wants to be in a relationship with him. When she makes that grandiose announcement in front of everyone, it starts a huge fight with whoever her rival is. That’s basically what happens in the game, at least.

“Originally, that big fight you witnessed was supposed to happen with you and Laura. But this time, it was Candice. In the original game, Candice is in love with Macro... The scenarios are all messed up in different ways, thus causing the events of the plot to change slightly and leaving me with a bad feeling. Which is why I’m worried.”

Claire grips both of my shoulders tightly. Her serious crimson eyes stare straight into mine.



“Are you sure you’re not in love? I’m not saying you can’t be. Ugh... I wish you weren’t, but if you are, I don’t want you to hide it from me, okay? All I want is to be able to protect you!”

She seems on the verge of tears. I can practically feel her desperation. She’s always looking out for me, worrying over me, and helps me out in so many ways. And I just sort of let it happen without saying anything.

*Should I really go along with whatever she wants just because she said so? I don’t think that’s a good way to live my life. I mean, I don’t want to be protected all the time. Which is why I want to answer her as honestly as I can. Even though I don’t fully understand my own feelings. For starters, I don’t know the first thing about love.*

“I’m pretty sure I’m not in love. But I’m not positive. I mean, right now, I only see Macro as a very dear friend of mine, but...”

“You’re in love with *Macro*?!”

“Huh? Um...”

Seeing Claire standing there with her mouth hanging open, speechless, I finally realize I mentioned Macro’s name without any intention of doing so. Neither Claire nor Laura asked for a name, and yet I gave one unprompted.

“D-Do you really think that I...and Macro...?”

“What about me?”

“Huh? Eeep?! M-Macro?!”

The moment I murmur his name, I hear his voice right behind me and let out a yip of surprise. What perfect timing, that the person I’m talking about suddenly appears.

*I feel like my heart’s jumped into my throat!*

“I didn’t mean to scare you like that. Sorry.”

As I desperately try to calm my racing heart, I turn toward Macro, who’s apologizing.

*You don’t have to apologize! I’m the one who should be apologizing! I want to*

*say that to him so badly, and yet...!*

“Hm?!”

For some reason, I can't bring myself to look him in the face. I feel so incredibly embarrassed right now.

*I can't stay here even one moment longer!*

I immediately race upstairs without saying another word.

*I feel like I'm suffocating. I'm so embarrassed. What should I do? This is painful.*

After slamming my door shut, I slump down on the floor against the wall. I don't have the strength to stand.

*What's wrong with me? Am I sick? I've never felt this way before. My heart's pounding, I'm having trouble breathing, and I don't know what to do. My thoughts are all over the place. I don't understand what's going on, and I want to scream at the top of my lungs! It's a truly bizarre feeling.*

“Ugh... Nngghh!”

But if I start screaming, I'll just scare everyone in the house. I jump to my feet, leap into bed, and pull the covers up over my head. And then I howl in frustration.

“Miku, I'm coming in.”

That's when I hear Claire's quiet voice coming from the other side of the door. Oh, right. I just left her behind. I try to tell her how truly sorry I am, but no words come out of my mouth. I don't trust myself not to start screaming once I open my mouth. Instead of waiting for a response, she walks in and sits on the side of my bed. Then she pats my head over the top of the covers.

“You're in love with Macro, huh?” she says warmly.

“Hm!”

*Love? This feeling is love? Th-Then that must mean...?!*

I throw back the blankets and wrap my arms around Claire, clinging to her.

“I'm s-sorry...! I d-didn't mean to, Claire! What do I *do*?!”

“Calm down, Miku. Everything’s okay.”

But I could die if I fall in love with someone. Which is why Claire’s been so desperate to prevent it from happening to begin with.

*I honestly never dreamed I’d fall in love with anyone. It always seemed like something that would never happen to me...*

“I promised you, didn’t I? That if you did fall in love, I’d do everything in my power to back you up. Which is why you need to be honest with me. Did you forget?”

“I d-didn’t forget.”

Th-That’s right. She did promise. She told me that she wouldn’t let me die. And that in return, I should be open and honest with her. We both promised.

I sit up straight and turn to face her. I’ve always relied on Claire, and I’m sure I will continue to do so. But I refuse to give up. Now’s not the time to feel discouraged.

“Claire, can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“Whenever I’m with Macro, my heart feels so full. All I want is to listen to him talk. And to learn all about him.”

“I see...”

He’s a little awkward and is often misunderstood, but he is incredibly dependable and very kind. He’s pretty hard to read and he doesn’t say much, but I can always count on him to be straightforward about his feelings in any situation.

“I think Macro doesn’t see me as anything other than a fellow guild member, though. Honestly, I’m not even sure if he considers me a friend, considering I can’t offer much in terms of fighting power.”

“That’s not true!”

I smile at Claire as she objects to what I said. Maybe that’s not true. Maybe he does see me as a friend, but it doesn’t matter. I know I’m being self-centered,

but I don't care.

"That's not important. All I know is that I don't want to give up on this feeling. I want him to know I care about him, and if possible, I hope he feels the same way."

But for some reason, I can't bring myself to face him. My heart races just thinking about it, to the point where I have no idea what I should say. Like a moment ago.

*Oh gosh, what am I going to do? I can't even remember what kind of stuff I talked to him about up until now. Which reminds me... Macro hugged me, didn't he? Aaaaaaah! Why did I have to remember that now?!*

"Come on, Miku. You're blushing bright red. What are you thinking about? You know what, never mind. Ready to confess?"

"R-Right now...?"

Chuckling, Claire urges me to continue.

*Urgh... I'm going to say it. I will! I take three deep breaths, in and out, before opening my mouth.*

"I really, really like Macro...!"

Putting my feelings into words makes me feel even more embarrassed. But it's true. This is how it feels to like someone. To fall in love with someone.

*When I think of him, my heart aches, but in a happy way. I get angry whenever someone says something bad about him or makes him feel sad. I go through more mood swings over him than I do about myself. To the point where I feel like I can't control my own emotions.*

*I'm definitely sick with something. I feel in pain, even now. It's all too easy for me to imagine how much more painful it'll be if my feelings go only one way. I want him to know the truth so badly. But what if he doesn't feel the same way? I...I don't think I'd ever recover! Just thinking about it makes my chest hurt.*

The faster my thoughts race, the tighter my chest gets.

*Huh? Am I actually having trouble breathing, or is it my imagination?*

“Miku?!”

“Claire...”

*It feels like my heart is throbbing. Like needles are piercing my skin. And I’m burning up! What’s going on?*

The next thing I know, my body is enveloped in a flash of light.

*Huh? Light?! What is happening to me?!*

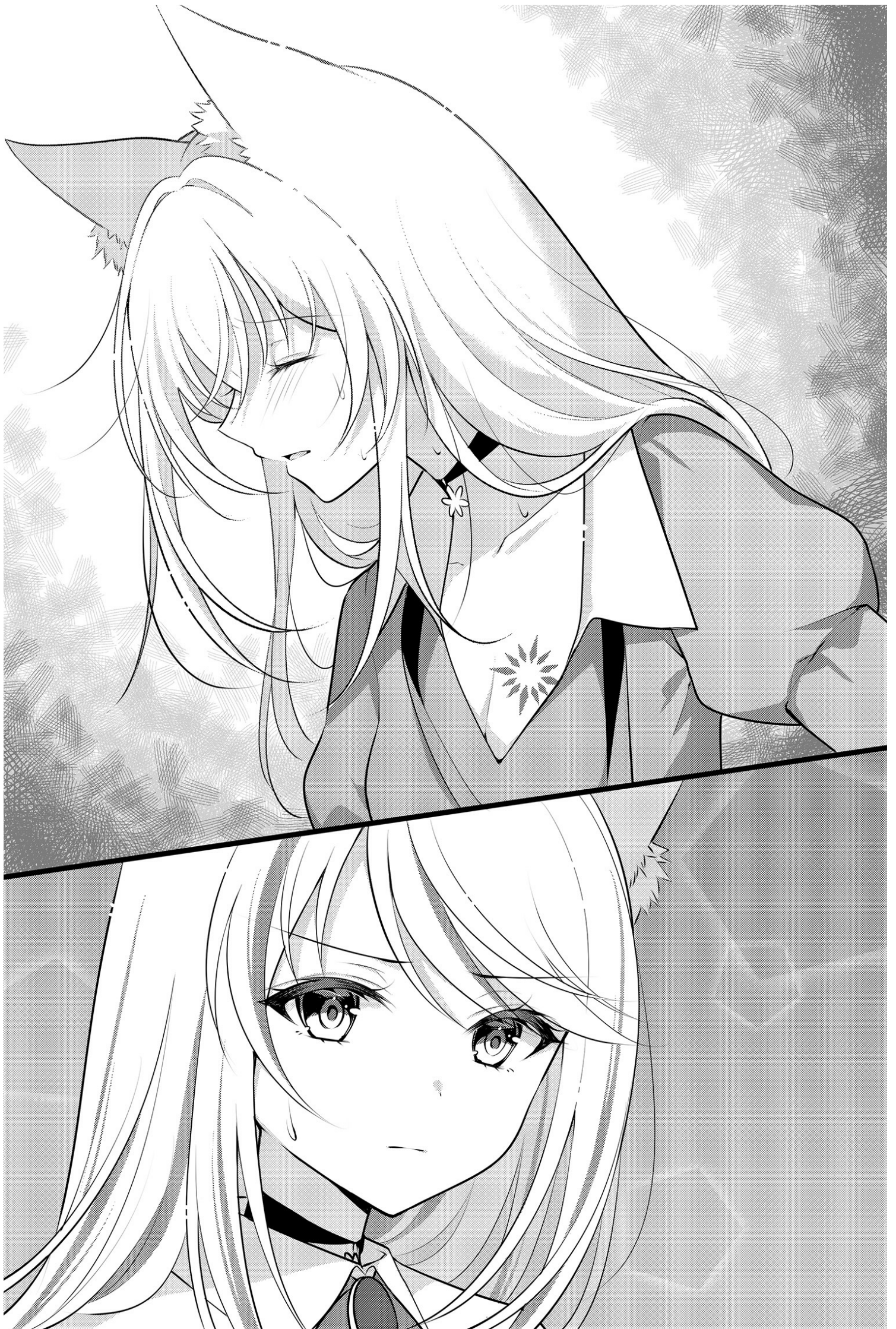
But the light almost immediately fades away.

“Miku! Show me your chest!”

“Huh?”

As soon as I start to glow, she cries out in shock before yanking on the front of my shirt, panicking. Then she gasps. Worried about this sudden and troubling development, I look down at myself.





“Is that a mark? I’ve never seen it before... Ngh!”

“Miku!”

I notice a glowing mark on my chest in the shape of a star or a sun. I’ve never seen it before in my life.

*How did it get there...? It seems pretty painful. And I’m having a hard time breathing.*

“Claire. Do you know what this is...?”

Claire wraps her arms around me, looking miserable. Which is proof enough that she clearly knows what’s going on. I stay silent as I wait for Claire to speak.

“Yes... This is the mark of your curse. It must have appeared when you realized you were in love,” she says, looking grim.

*A cursed mark... And yet, I feel surprisingly calm. Which seems to help me start to breathe easier despite the horrendous pain. The mark is still there, but I’m going to be okay.*

I take several deep breaths to steady myself before turning to Claire once more.

“I think I’m okay now. Can you tell me everything you know about this mark?”

“Of course...”

She nods, her expression gloomy, before inviting me to lean against her. I feel better than a moment ago, but I am pretty tired, and it’s nice to be coddled sometimes. I rest my head gently on Claire’s shoulder, and as I lean against her, she gently strokes my hair. It’s been a while since we cuddled like this.

“It’s said that the mark will vanish once you successfully match with the love of your life. But since that never happens in the original game, I don’t know if it’s true or not.”

*I see. So it disappears...*

I run my finger lightly over the mark. It seems fine now, though it was very hot and painful a moment ago.

*I hope it doesn’t continue to hurt as my love grows.*



“I do know, unfortunately, what happens when your relationship *doesn't* work out. Each time your heart aches, the mark grows hot to the touch and begins slowly spreading over your entire body. Feelings of joy related to your love reverse the effects.”

*I figured as much, though it sounds horrible. I wonder if I'll be able to handle it? I'll become a huge burden on everyone in the guild if I react like that every time something bad happens. And just after finally getting to the point where I could start going outside again.*

*I really want to go back to cleaning for other people in the city. But to do that, I need to feel happiness through love. That sounds awfully difficult... I have no idea where to start. All I can see is more suffering ahead. Maybe I should just learn how to endure the pain? Huh? Hang on. If I do that, then...*

“If my love is never returned...what happens to me?”

“The mark will eventually cover your entire body, and you'll die an agonizing death.”

*That same pain but over my entire body...?*

I can't help but shudder at the thought. I remember the feeling of being unable to breathe earlier. If it got much worse than that, it's not hard to imagine my death as a result.

*So, the curse she told me about is true. Not that I ever doubted her. But it's different to experience it firsthand. Now that I'm aware of my love and the pain it causes, I understand. The more I suffer from lovesickness, the closer I get to death's doorstep.*

*I'm scared. Really scared. I can't help but wonder why this curse exists at all. Laura and Candice seem to enjoy being in love, so why is it that only I have to suffer? But it's not their fault. That's right, it's no one's fault. I was just born with this illness. I'm not going to die anytime soon, which means I'm going to have to learn how to live with the mark. I have no intention of giving up without a fight.*

“I won't let you die, Miku! Not on my watch!” she says, her voice quivering.

*Claire is scared, too! That's right. She's always worried about me more than*

*anyone else. She always put me first, doing everything in her power to make sure I'm safe!*

“The story we’re in is completely different from the original plot! It never occurred to me that you might fall in love with Macro... So maybe there’s a chance you can change your fate! I’ve speedrun that game more times than I can count. If I can just remember Macro’s route, I’m sure we can get you two together. So, please...!”

She moans while holding her head in her hands. She’s clearly not about to give up on me. I’m the one suffering because of my own feelings of love. And yet she still wants to help me in whatever way she can.

“I won’t let you die. I promise you’ll be happy, Miku!”

She turns to me before hugging me tightly. I can feel her pink hair and fluffy ears tickling my cheeks. It’s evidence that her body is shaking...and the tension in my shoulders immediately drops as soon as I realize. There’s something calming about being next to someone who’s scared on your behalf. For being cursed, I’m taking it pretty well.

*But I’m glad. Glad that Claire is still doing everything she can for me. She didn’t try to deny my feelings, that I’m falling in love for the first time in my life. In fact, she promised to help me. Not only is that incredibly reassuring, but now I feel like I have to keep living, for Claire’s sake. I can’t stay the same person as before. I have to grow. I’m not good at asserting myself, but I can’t just follow Claire around, doing everything she tells me to. I need to start acting on my own!*

“Thank you, Claire. I won’t give up!”

“M-Miku...!”

I make that vow to her as I hug her back, just as tight. “There, there,” I say as I stroke her hair, and she immediately bursts into tears.

“But also, I really want to cherish this feeling. My love for Macro.”

If Claire hadn’t started sobbing like this, I’d probably still be afraid of the pain and suffering that awaits me. I would have bottled up my own emotions and never faced them. I might have died while keeping my feelings locked up inside

me. But I have Claire by my side, who would do anything to help me. Which means I have to fight as hard as I can as well.

*Besides, being in love has to be fun, right? Laura wouldn't smile so much about it otherwise. I don't want my love for Macro to be tainted by suffering. Not if I can help it.*



I must have fallen asleep at some point. By the time I wake up, the sky outside my window is dyed shades of sunset orange, deepening into midnight blue. Claire, who should've been next to me, is gone, meaning she's probably already awake.

*sigh... It was supposed to be a girls' night, but things got weird near the end. I ran out halfway through. I hope I didn't bother anyone. I wonder what happened after I left? A part of me wants to know, but I'm also afraid at the same time.*

It's probably time to start getting dinner ready.

*I wonder if everyone's here? Ektor, Rinny...and Macro. It's going to be hard to face them.*

I sigh, squishing my cheeks with both hands.

"Huh? Are you awake, Miku?"

"Laura!"

As I sit there, my head hung down, Laura suddenly calls out to me, apparently having snuck inside without my notice.

"Claire told me everything. That you suddenly weren't feeling very well. Are you okay?"

"Claire said that?"

Apparently, her excuse worked. Claire covered up for me once again. The whole situation was pretty awkward, though, so I appreciate it. Smiling, I open my mouth to answer her.

"I was able to get some sleep and I feel fine now. I'm sorry for running off like

that.”

“Thank goodness! And don’t worry about it! You should always listen to your body when you’re feeling ill.”

I come up with an answer that matches Claire’s excuse, and Laura seems relieved when she hears I’m okay.

*She really is kind. But what I really want to know is what happened after I left. Sh-Should I ask her?*

“I can tell you’re curious about what happened after you left, huh?”

“Um!”

She must have been able to guess from my awkward fidgeting.

*Am I really that easy to read?*

Smiling brightly, she waves her hand in front of her as if to say, it’s no big deal.

“I got a bit too carried away and ended up apologizing to Candice afterward. I did point out that it’s impossible to control who you fall in love with, though.”

“D-Didn’t you reassure me there’s nothing to worry about?”

*But it sounds like everything’s okay now. Candice declared that she’d never give up her fight over Ektor, no matter what, but that it’s better to have a fair rivalry that’s out in the open than to hide it in weird, uncomfortable ways. Her passion and go-get-em attitude is really admirable. Is this the power of love at work?*

“I have to do my best, too!”

“Hrm? About what? Oh! You mean with your crush?”

Laura grins and prods me for more information when she sees me murmuring quietly to myself, my fist clenched in determination. I’m still pretty self-conscious about it, but it’s too late to back down now.

“Yes...I won’t fool myself into thinking my feelings mean something else, or that they’re not real.”

“Ooh...”

*I'm scared, but I refuse to give up. For Claire, and also for myself.*

I jump up from bed, readjust my clothes, and then turn to face Laura.

"I'm not afraid of love!"

"Yeah? Well...good!"

She seems surprised at first, but after hearing my firm declaration, she laughs happily and clings to my arm.

"We'll fight for our love together," she answers.

And with that, the two of us head downstairs.

*I know Macro's down there...but it will be okay. It'll be just like always!*

"The fun's just starting..."

"What?"

She whispers under her breath as we climb down the stairs. The words don't seem strange in and of themselves, but her tone of voice sounds more mature than a moment before, causing me to glance over at her.

"Hrm? Love is fun, right? And now we can talk all about our love lives! That's all I meant."

"Okay, sure. I get it..."

The smile I catch on her face has an alluring lilt to it that makes her seem more mature and quickly sucks up the joy I'd been feeling. I wonder why? She didn't say anything that weird, and yet I feel oddly anxious for some reason.

"Hm!"

"Huh? Miku? What's wrong?"

Just then, I feel the mark on my skin start to ache, and my face screws up in pain.

*Does the anxiety I'm feeling now count as anxiety caused by love? Ugh! This is hard! I need to calm down. Everything's okay. There's nothing to be worried about.*

"I'm f-fine!"

She doesn't know about my situation, and I don't want to worry her. Laura seems to truly enjoy being in love, and I don't want to put a damper on that enjoyment. I'd feel awful if she couldn't have fun thanks to me.

"Yeah? Tell me right away if you start to feel bad, okay? I mean, I'm your friend, right?"

She flashes me her usual bright smile and is instantly transformed back into the Laura I know well. Seeing that innocent smile of hers fills me with a huge sense of relief. I know that the more mature Laura is still a part of her, but I prefer this side better.

"Of course. Thank you."

I take the hand she offers me and the two of us continue going downstairs, hand in hand. That's right, we *are* friends. There's nothing to be anxious about. I'm sure it was just my imagination.

*I'm sorry for letting my anxiety get the best of me.*

I apologize to myself, and it helps calm my racing heart.

Once we reach the main room, I find my heartbeat speeding up yet again on noticing Macro straight away. Although Ektor and Claire are the first to ask if I'm feeling okay, my eyes go straight for Macro. The moment I realize this, I feel so embarrassed that I want to run back into my room.

*B-But of course, I can't do that!*

"Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes. I'm fine now, Ektor. I'm sorry for making you worry about me."

"Don't worry about that. Come, sit down! We just finished getting dinner ready!"

Hearing those words, I gasp and look over at Ektor and Claire. Claire must have taken care of dinner all by herself tonight. I thank her from the bottom of my heart...while hoping my smile doesn't look awkward. I don't look weird, right? I'm sure I look fine! Everything's okay!

"Huh? Where's Candice, Marino, and the others?"

Glancing around, I notice everyone's gone except for Ektor, Rinny, Macro, and Claire. I soon learn that Marino said she had work to do and went home, while Angela, who was feeling out of sorts, went to the local tavern. Candice wanted to stay, but when Rinny mentioned Kiefer would probably starve if she didn't get home, she reluctantly left.

"She did have a request on her way out, though. That we don't leave Ektor and Laura alone."

"Hehe! Sounds about right."

Claire whispers that last bit of information in my ear. I giggle, easily picturing Candice saying that. Though now I kind of understand her feelings a little better. All I can do is try and put myself in her shoes since I don't have a love rival, but if I did, I'd worry myself sick thinking about the two of them spending time together without me. It's easy enough for me to sympathize even if I'm not going through the same situation. The realization makes me feel kind of selfish. It's like I've noticed a bad part of myself, and I don't like it at all.

"Sit down."

"M-Macro? Okay..."

I would have stood there forever if Macro hadn't called out to me.

*Just his voice makes me feel really happy. I'm so easy to please, I guess. But where am I going to sit? There's an empty seat next to Macro, so I may as well sit there, right? He did tell me to sit down, after all. Though I don't think he necessarily meant next to him. Oh, gosh! I'm too nervous! Now that I know how I feel, I'm not sure my heart can handle sitting right next to him!*

"Don't mind if I do!"

"Ah..."

As I stand there, agonizing over what to do, Laura takes my seat. I feel both relieved and disappointed at the same time! No, that's not right. Mainly just relieved. I'm still too self-conscious to sit next to him. I take the empty chair across from them, trying not to show how flustered I am.

"Hey, Macro. Let's talk!"

That's when I hear Laura's cheerful voice. They're sitting right in front of me, so I have no choice but to look at them.

*That's right, I can't help listening in on their conversation when they're right there!*

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'?" I want to know more about you! I want to be friends with everyone in the Lanakiller guild. And I still haven't got a chance to talk with you yet."

"There's nothing I want you to know."

"Huh? That's harsh!"

She leans forward, practically looming over him as she continues to ask him questions.

*Sh-She's too close! I'm second-hand embarrassed. Love really is a disease. A serious one.*

"You know, Miku told me the other day that no one ever sees how sweet you truly are. Is it true? I want to see for myself!"

"L-Laura!"

Hearing her drop that bombshell, I feel all the fur on my body stand straight up into the air.

*S-Stop that! It's embarrassing!*

Hearing Laura's words, Macro glances over at me, surprised. As soon as our eyes meet, my heart begins hammering wildly.

"She's exaggerating."

"N-No I'm not! I truly feel that way!"

His expression and tone are as unreadable as always, and yet I can tell he sounds slightly embarrassed. All the warmth in my body seems to shoot into my face, and I find myself babbling something in response.

*Oh gosh! Just a simple look is enough to leave me frazzled! But at least I was able to say something. Macro really is very kind. I wasn't exaggerating! It's true!*



*Which is why I feel the way I do. Why I l-l-luh...*

“Hrm... I see. I guess I’ll just have to keep an eye on you for a little longer.”

“You’re too close. Give me some space.”

I feel the mark begin to heat up, and the next thing I know, it feels like my chest is on fire as Laura sidles closer to Macro.

*Huh? Wh-Why?*

I instinctively grab my chest and moan in pain. It hurts so bad!

“What’s wrong?”

“M-Macro...”

I guess it would be shocking to see someone suddenly bend over in pain right in front of you for no apparent reason. He jumps up from his chair and rushes to my side.

*Ugh! I feel so bad! I can’t control the pain. I just have to deal with it somehow. I told myself that I’d handle it. So, can I try and bear it for at least a little bit longer?*

“Miku!”

“Claire...”

“For her to suddenly be in pain like this... She has to be sick with something.”

“Macro... You’re right. But it’s a little complicated.”

Claire comes running over to my side next. I’m glad Claire figured out what’s going on, at least. She can cover for me.

“Miku, don’t tell me...”

“I’m really sorry, Ektor, but all you have to do is put the food on the table. I’m going to take Miku back up to her room.”

“Oh, sure. I can handle that...”

After making it all the way downstairs, it looks like I’m going back to bed. After promising myself I was going to face him... I wish I could eat dinner with him. I feel a twinge in my eyes, but there’s no way I’m going to let myself cry. I

refuse.

As I make my way back up the stairs to the second floor while leaning on Claire for support, I notice Macro sneaking glances at me. That alone seems to ease the pain a bit.

“I’ll make you a plate and bring it to you later. If they start doubting my excuse, I’ll explain what’s happening if I feel it’s the right thing to do. On a need-to-know basis, of course.”

“Okay. I trust you, Claire. But also, if you could let me know who you tell, that would be great.”

“Of course. All right then, I’ll be back in a little bit, okay?”

By the time we get back to my room, the pain has mostly subsided. Still, Claire seems worried enough that she tells me to rest for the remainder of the night. I absolutely don’t want to worry her again, but also I really don’t want to go back downstairs right now either. Though at the rate things are going, I’ll end up being stuck in my room forever. If just seeing Macro makes me suffer, then maybe it’s better I avoid him for now.

*...Ow. I see. It’s almost like the mark is telling me what I should and shouldn’t do. So what am I supposed to do then? You stupid old cursed mark.*

As I lean against the windowsill, looking up into the night sky, I try to calm my racing thoughts.

*Maybe I should never have left my village?*

The thought makes my heart ache in a way that feels different than the pain from the mark.

## Chapter 4 | The Witch Doctor

**HOW** long have I been lying here in a daze? When I hear a knock on the door, I tell them to come in without moving. I'm sure it's just Claire who's bringing me some food. I try to turn to face her so I can thank her properly, but I can't muster the energy to actually do so.

I hear the door quietly open, followed by Claire's soft footsteps inside our room. She puts the tray of food down on a nearby table with a soft clack. Stop being silly and just turn around and face her, I think to myself. But just as I'm about to...

"Miku."

"Huh?"

The person who says my name isn't Claire, and my shoulders tense up in surprise. I'd recognize that voice anywhere!

"M-Macro?!"

Wh-Why is Macro here?! I'm even more surprised because I thought it was Claire this whole time! So surprised, I feel like my heart's about to pound right out of my chest!

"Claire's busy cleaning, so she asked me to bring your food up."

"O-Oh yeah? Th-Thanks."

So Claire's behind this... She probably wants me to talk to Macro. She wanted to give me a chance to talk with him, alone. But I'm so caught off guard that I don't know what to say. If I don't speak up soon, though, he'll leave right away since he's already finished what he came here to do. I have to think of something! Think...!

"So, um..."

"Hey..."

We both speak up at the same time, cutting each other off. Did we have the same thought at the same time? Caught off guard, I look over at Macro and our eyes meet. He looks surprised, and I realize I probably have a similar expression on my face. Unable to hold it in, I burst into laughter, and Macro quickly joins me, chuckling quietly.

“We get along in the weirdest way.”

“Yeah. Miku, how are you feeling? You seem to be doing better.”

“Thanks. I’m actually back to normal.”

Once we start talking, the words continue flowing out of my mouth naturally. Thank goodness! I guess it’s still possible to talk normally while still being aware of my feelings for him.

“Claire told me a little bit about what’s going on. That sometimes your chest hurts because of a curse.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

I see. So she came up with an excuse to explain why I was in pain the other night. I give a silent thank-you to Claire, who always seems to be watching out for me. If I’m ever in pain again, everyone will know it’s just my curse. I won’t have to come up with a new excuse every time or be forced to call a doctor I don’t need. I hate that they’re worried about me, but...

Hearing my affirmation, Macro frowns slightly, his brow furrowed. I feel like he’s choosing his next words carefully. I feel bad for making him worry about me... But what he actually ends up saying catches me off guard.

“I might not be able to help break the curse, but I can at least help alleviate the pain.”

“Huh?!”

There’s a way to alleviate my pain? Really? I’m so surprised to hear those words that I can’t speak. As I sit there, dumbfounded, Macro explains everything.

Dwarves are able to use magic thanks to the pact they’ve made as a race with the natural spirits of the world around us.

So, when he heard about my curse, he consulted these same spirits. The wood spirits, who he has direct contact with, reached out to the wind spirits, who then talked to the flower spirits, and among the three of them, they were able to come up with a type of medicine that could be used as a painkiller.

W-Wow... I had no idea he'd come up with a plan like that in such a short amount of time.

"Hopefully, Kiefer can help us by making the magic gadget we need for this to work. But we'll also need the help of a witch doctor alongside it."

Unfortunately, that means you'll have to be in pain for a little while longer, at least until we can get everything together, he mumbles somewhat apologetically. Don't worry about that! I mean, I assumed I was stuck dealing with this pain on my own for the rest of my life. But I'm so surprised and grateful that I find myself at a loss for words, unable to express my emotions out loud.

"U-Um, Macro...I don't know what to say."

I feel bad that that's the best I can come up with after such a long pause. It's so frustrating! Just saying "thank you" isn't enough, considering everything he's done. Just then, I feel the warmth of his hand on the top of my head. I freeze, my heart pounding loudly.

"I'll need you to come along with me tomorrow. We can't make the medicine without you there."

"You w-want me to come with you?"

With his hand still on my head, my heart beats faster at the realization of how close he is. As I remain face down on my bed, Macro moves his hand slightly, his fingers grazing one of my ears. *Eeep!*

"I'm the only one who knows exactly what we need and how to make it."

"I s-see."

M-Maybe he doesn't realize what he's doing? Macro, your fingers keep brushing my ear! Not only is it ticklish, but I'm kind of embarrassed. Also...I kind of just want him to keep his hand on my head like that forever. I wonder why I

feel this way? Despite my best intentions, my body begins trembling. Noticing, Macro hurriedly pulls his hand back.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.”

“N-No. It’s fine...!”

This is awkward. So awkward. But I don’t hate it. I’ve never had anyone touch my ear like that before... If it was anyone else, I’d be mad, but I don’t mind if Macro does it. Ugh! I’m so embarrassed!

“Do you like soft and fluffy things, Macro?”

I ask suddenly, the silence between us unbearable. I glance over at him and see that he’s looking off toward the side of the room, his face half-buried in his hands. Is it just my imagination, or are his ears redder than usual?

“I’m really sorry. But yeah. I do.”

My heart aches seeing him look so frazzled. He’s so c-cute! It may be a strange thing to say about a boy, but oh well. My heart grows warmer from that thought alone. Oh, gosh! I like Macro so much!

“It’s okay. You managed to discover this painkiller for me, right? And I really appreciate it. Which is why I want to thank you in some way, because it means a lot to me. So don’t worry about it, okay?”

“You promise you won’t tell anyone else?”

“Heheh. I promise.”

I end up only giving him a simple thank you this time. But our little shared secret means the world to me.



**TODAY**, I’m heading off first thing in the morning to get painkillers. Just Macro and me.

*Nnnngghhhh! That’s right! We’re going out, just the two of us! I’ve been so focused on being able to finally get some relief from the random pain I keep feeling that I completely forgot all about that part of the plan. Can my heart make it?*

*I've always been able to hang out with him without a care in the world. Now I can't remember how to act normal. Love really is a scary sickness!*

*At least the mark on my chest doesn't hurt. In fact, I think it's fading. Do I really need painkillers after all? Or at least, those are the excuses I keep coming up with, but there's no fooling myself into believing it will disappear on its own. I really do need this medicine. And I'm going to do whatever it takes to get it... But still! I have an entirely different problem on my hands! Mainly, how am I going to handle spending all this time alone with Macro?!*

"Miku!"

"Eeep?!"

A voice suddenly shouts my name from directly behind me, and as I feel hands grab my shoulders, I cry out in surprise. It feels like my fur is sticking straight up! I turn to see Claire standing there, laughing, her shoulders shaking with amusement. For crying out loud!

"S-Sorry! I didn't think you'd be that surprised."

"Claire...?!"

I glare at her with tears in my eyes as she sits on my bed, apologizing yet again. She then pats the mattress next to her, inviting me to sit with a soft smile. I sigh quietly to myself before settling down next to her.

"Miku! You look like a young girl in love."

"Do I look weird...?" I ask timidly, and she laughs merrily in response.

"Not in the slightest," she says while patting my back gently. "You look very cute! I never thought I'd see you like this in the real world."

It's embarrassing to hear her compliment me like that... I sit there, my gaze firmly on the ground in front of me, fumbling over excuses, when I realize Claire's hunched over as well, her face obscured.

*What's wrong?*

I try to get a better look and notice she seems sad.

"I'm the one who let this happen... Seeing you in pain like this, I can't help but

blame myself for everything.”

*I’m shocked. Claire has always been the confident one. The one who always led the way, charging forward while dragging me along behind her. I’ve almost never seen her look so miserable and be so down on herself. I guess she’s acting this way because of me, huh? I’m the reason why she’s had to be so strong this entire time, and I’m the reason why she’s blaming herself right now...*

“I’m still worried, you know? I have no idea when you’ll die. I live with that fear every day. But you know what?”

I’m still rattled from seeing her like this, but she takes both my hands in hers with a huge smile. Her grip is warm and so strong. The intensity of her smile makes her sadness from only a moment before seem like a lie.

“I’m really happy to see you so much in love, and enjoying every minute of it! That’s why, moving forward, I want you to be honest with your emotions, to embrace them, and forget all my nagging up until now. That’s all.”

“It’s like, too late for that now anyway,” she says with a cheerful giggle. But I can tell right away that she’s forcing it. I’m your sister, after all. You don’t have to hide things from me, Claire. I know she’s trying to protect me, but as her sister, I feel the same way. I want to protect you, too, Claire.

I hug Claire tightly. She lets out a surprised yelp, which I pretend not to hear, only squeezing her tighter.

“You’re the reason I’ve come this far, Claire! Every day is so much fun! And I’m forever grateful that you care about me as much as you do! I’m the one who betrayed you by falling in love. You’ve been protecting me ever since I can remember! And then I had to go and...!”

“No, Miku. You’re wrong.”

Claire quietly interrupts my rapid-fire succession of thoughts. She pats me on the back gently, trying to calm me down.

“We just care about each other too much,” she says.

*How can you care about someone too much?* Her words pierce my heart with surprising ease.



*So then, neither of us are at fault here. We're just sisters who love each other very much. I mean, we came into this world together and spent all of our lives together. So it makes sense, right?* My shoulders immediately slump with relief.

"Now then, let's not talk about this anymore, okay?"

"Sounds good to me. It's not getting us anywhere."

We look at each other and immediately start laughing. Knowing how stubborn both of us can get at times, this argument over who gets to take all the blame could very well go on forever.

"I'll do whatever I can to be in your corner moving forward, Miku. That's why I sent Macro to your room yesterday."

"You *sent* him...?!"

I knew Claire was behind him suddenly showing up! Looking back, I'm grateful, but I still wish she'd given me a heads-up or something. His sudden appearance really shaved a couple of years from my life...!

*Though, to be fair, if I'd known, I'd have been even more nervous than I already was and probably would have panicked. I guess not telling me was the best move. I owe her so much!*

"Thank you. I'll keep doing my best!"

"Good! And with things the way they are, make sure to have fun! On your date!"

"S-Stop that! I'm t-trying my best to calm down, not get more worked up!"

Talking to Claire helped ease my nerves somewhat, but now my heart's racing once again. Don't remind me! I squish my red-hot cheeks between both hands. Urgh! How do I stop feeling this way?!

"Should I keep an eye on her today? I don't think she'll be a problem, but..."

"Huh?"

"It's not important. You look so cute today, Miku! Have fun!"

*Does Claire have something she needs to do today, too? A job or something? She's such a hard worker. I'm kind of jealous. Once I get my painkillers, I'll be*

*able to get back to work, too! That's right. Today's mission is to get my medicine! It's n-not a date!*



**“S-SORRY,** Macro! Were you waiting long?”

I somehow manage to calm my racing heart and make it downstairs, only to find Macro already eaten breakfast and drinking his post-meal tea. Eeep! He's taking it a little *too* easy!

“Nope. Not at all.”

*Come to think of it, Macro's not a morning person, is he? And yet he got up bright and early because we have plans together. Knowing that, there's no way I can enjoy a leisurely breakfast now!*

“I'm all ready to go, so let's hit the road!”

“Actually...”

“Oh. Kiefer and the witch doctor still aren't ready yet? I guess we don't want to show up too early, huh?”

“No...”

I'm clearly panicking. And I can't seem to calm down, either. But! But! I spent all that time getting myself ready, and now all I want to do is get moving. Besides, I won't be able to calm down unless I can talk about something.

Seeing me so frazzled, Macro heaves a sigh and gets to his feet. Standing behind me, he grabs my shoulders and gently pushes me down into a chair. Wh-What's going on?

“Sit. You haven't eaten breakfast yet.”

“Huh? But...”

“You have to eat, or you won't have any energy. Eating a proper meal is important. It's not good to skip them.”

“Okay...” I'm usually the one telling Claire that line. With the roles kind of reversed, I have no choice but to listen. All right, let's hurry up and get this over with.

“And don’t gulp it down either. Eat your food like a normal person.”

“Ugh... O-Okay.” He beat me to it.

*H-How did he know?! I feel myself curling up into a ball of shame knowing he saw right through me. I feel like an overexcited child. I’m so embarrassed!*

He disappears into the kitchen to scrounge me up some food. I find it so embarrassing how good he is at taking care of me!

I thank him, still hunched over, and he gives a slight nod before sitting back down in his seat and picking up his cup of tea. I’m sure he’ll only get more annoyed if I try to scarf it down anyways. So, I begin eating my breakfast at my usual pace.

Claire steps out of the kitchen and when our eyes meet, she gives me a wink. It’s like she’s cheering me on! She’s also the one who made the breakfast we’re enjoying. I smile back at her, silently thanking her for both the food and the encouragement.

She waves it off before leaving us alone at the table without another word. She’s clearly giving us some alone time. If I get too self-conscious, I’ll end up taking way too long to eat breakfast. Trying to calm myself down, I pick up the bowl of warm corn soup. It’s so creamy, and as the sweetness fills my mouth, it likewise has a soothing effect on my heart.

*Thank you so much, Claire!*





I glance over at Macro, who's sitting across from me and notice he's started reading a book. He looks so cool, leaning back comfortably in his chair with his legs crossed, book in hand. Which is funny, considering I've seen him in this exact position many times before.

With no one else around but us, and Macro focused on his book, the only sound in the quiet room is the rattle of my utensils against my plate. And yet, the space feels cozy and comforting. The silence between us doesn't bother me at all. In fact, it's pretty nice.

After taking my time and finishing my meal, I once again tell Macro I'm ready to go. "You don't want any tea?" he asks me, but there's no way I can sit here much longer.

"No, I'm full," I tell him, and he doesn't push it any further.

"Let's go then."

"O-Okay!"

We leave the guild and head off into town, walking side by side. I'm used to him escorting me to jobs around the city, but this time, I'm hyper-aware of the distance between us. Though it's not like I'm any closer or further apart than usual. I know I'm overthinking this, but I can't seem to stop...

"We'll stop by the witch doctor's place first."

"Okay. She lives nearby, huh? What is she like?"

"Like a shifty old grandma."

Shifty? So she's kind of mysterious, then? He's as tight-lipped as usual, meaning that's all the information I'm going to get. I'll probably understand better once I meet her... But considering the silence throughout breakfast, I wish we could talk a little more now that we actually have a potential topic of conversation.

*W-Well then! If he won't talk, I'll have to take the reins!*

"Have you met her before, Macro? Are you friends?"

"She's more of a business acquaintance. I don't commission her often, and

when I do see her, our conversations are always transactional in nature.”

“I s-see. That’s how it is sometimes, huh?”

*Ugh! That ended way too quickly! What do I do now? Oh, gosh! Mmm... What else should I ask him about...? Oh, right!*

“So, um, you mentioned something about needing some kind of magic gadget for the medicine. Does Kiefer have experience making stuff like that?”

“Not that I’ve seen personally, but I’m pretty sure he’s talked about crafting something similar before.”

*Uh-huh. And the conversation is over again!* I ask several more questions, though his answers are so thorough, I can only follow up with a simple “uh-huh” or “I see.” He speaks in a way that’s concise and easy to understand, making any further questions redundant. I can’t bring myself to ask about previous work he’s commissioned her for, and there’s no way he’d bring any of that up unprompted.

Ugh... Talking is hard! But... I want to talk with him so badly. I want to hear his voice just a little more.

“U-Um...!”

“Hey.”

I try to start yet another topic of conversation when he suddenly cuts me off. *He actually wants to talk about something?!* I glance over at him, surprised, only to realize he’s watching me. I’d kept my gaze straight ahead this entire time, and when our eyes suddenly meet, I feel my heart leap into my throat. He looks at me curiously, his head slightly tilted to the side, before asking me a question.

“Do you *want* to talk with me?”

“Huh? Uh...”

I can feel my eyes moving this way and that restlessly, completely caught off guard by his overly direct question. But there’s no way I’m going to talk my way out of this one. So I answer him honestly.

“Yes!” And as soon as he hears that, I hear him chuckle softly in amusement.

“Just like before, huh? That time when you started asking me about my favorite food.”

“Oh... Right.”

It was back when we held a dinner party in hopes of convincing Angela to join the guild. Back then, I was desperate to find out as much as I could about my fellow guildmates. I remember him telling me he liked sweets. That’s also when I learned what a big appetite he has.

“At the time, I thought you were just a weird girl making meaningless conversation.”

“Ngh!”

He thought I was strange... I almost feel overwhelmed by the sheer weight of my embarrassment and shock at hearing that. Does he still feel that way about me? But he quickly continues.

“I don’t feel that way now. You don’t tend to babble on and on. And it’s kind of fun.”

“Y-Yeah? Good then. Great!”

He thinks talking with me is *fun*! His expression is as unreadable as ever, but I’m super relieved to know that he doesn’t find me annoying in the slightest. My tail begins wagging without me realizing it, and I break out into a huge smile. I mean, I’m so happy, I can’t help it!

“I always assumed you prefer peace and quiet,” I tell him, and he agrees with a chuckle.

“But that doesn’t mean I hate talking with people,” he says. “Depending on who I’m talking to, of course.”

That he considers me to be a fun person to talk to makes me so happy!

“Can we keep talking then?” I ask.

“I never said we had to stop.”

“But you didn’t say we could keep going either.”

Am I pushing my luck? I think to myself, but when I glance over at him



curiously, I notice his lips pursed in a frown before he finally answers.

“...Go ahead.”

“Whew! Thanks, Macro.”

I’m so relieved and so happy. My heart feels all warm and fuzzy! I wonder if the mark on my chest is a little smaller and a little fainter? Maybe love’s not so bad if it leaves me feeling this wonderful. It can be painful sometimes, but moments like this make me forget all about that. I’m sure I have the most ridiculous expression on my face right now. Tee hee!

“Are you feeling any better today?” Macro questions about my health.

“Yes. Thanks to you.”

“I haven’t done anything.”

You’ve done more than you realize! Though of course I can’t tell him that right now. I wish this peaceful moment between us would last forever and ever.



**WE** finally make it to the top of a tiny hill on the outskirts of town. There’s a small house near the entrance to the forest, which is where the witch doctor lives. Everything is bathed in shadows despite being on top of a hill thanks to the overhanging branches from the trees in the nearby forest. I wonder why she chose to live somewhere not many people pass by without reason to? Does she prefer peace and quiet?

Despite walking for quite some time to get here, it didn’t seem to take that long at all. It’s funny how time seems to move differently when you’re with someone you like. I was so happy to get some one-on-one time with him that I kind of wish it lasted a little longer.

“She has a tendency to make folks uncomfortable... Just be careful.”

*Oof. That’s right. We’re here with a specific purpose in mind, so I shouldn’t get too over-excited. I have to be careful. But what exactly did he mean by “uncomfortable”? “Shifty” doesn’t give me a lot to go off of. I’ll need to be extra careful not to accidentally offend her or anything.*

I let Macro go ahead of me, staying half a step behind. I watch nervously as he

knocks on the door. But there's no response. Just as I begin to wonder if maybe she's not here, he reaches forward without an ounce of hesitation and opens the door. Huh? Can we just go inside?!

"She flips this sign around when she's not at home. That knock was just a formality to let her know someone's here."

"Oh y-yeah?"

"If we wait for her to meet us at the door, we'll be here forever."

I see... Does she not want to be bothered? I'm getting more anxious. I'm just glad Macro's here with me. If I was here by myself, I'd end up waiting out here for the rest of my life.

"Well, well...I thought it might be you."

As we slowly make our way deeper inside the house, an older lady in a loose-fitting wine-red dress appears, cane in one hand. Did she injure her leg? It looks like she's having a hard time walking. Oh...maybe that's why she doesn't like going all the way to the front door to greet potential customers?

"I figured you'd be expecting me."

"Sheesh! As socially inept as always, huh, kid? Not even a 'hello' or a 'how ya doin'...'"

"I'm not socially inept. I just assumed those niceties were unnecessary since, as a witch doctor, you'd already know it was me to begin with."

*Wait, she knew? And despite Macro not telling her ahead of time? Witch doctors are amazing. I'm not about to open my mouth and make things worse, though. I can see how annoyed she seems already. I-Is she mad?*

"sigh... As boring as always. How about at least trying to create a more friendly atmosphere for the sake of the nice-looking young lady here?"

She settles down in a chair while grumbling about Macro not knowing how to give a proper greeting.

*Wait, she's not angry? I'm sure she's just looking out for me. I went into this thinking she'd be some terrifying witch, but that doesn't seem to be the case.*

“Well, go ahead and take a seat. I know why you’re here.”

“Does that mean we’re done with the whole creating a friendly atmosphere stuff?”

“It’s a bit late for that, in my opinion. No point in wasting my time any more than you already have.”

It doesn’t look like the two of them get along. It seems less about clashing personalities and more about their communication rhythm being completely off. Able to sympathize with both of them, all I can do is stand there and smile awkwardly.

*Oh! I realize belatedly. I never introduced myself!* I hurriedly bow my head politely before heading over to the couch she gestured for me to sit on.

“N-Nice to meet you! My name is Miku. Um, thanks for helping us out today!”

Both the old lady and Macro seem caught off guard by my maybe too abrupt introduction, both of them looking at me wide-eyed. Aaaah! I’m just as socially inept as Macro! I can feel myself blushing again.

“Heh heh...! Miku, is it? I like you, kid. Hey, you. I wasn’t planning on helping you out, but if it’s for her, then I changed my mind.”

“Just as sarcastic as ever, I see. But we appreciate the help. Thanks.”

*I guess she’s been bad-mouthing Macro this whole time? Well, he wasn’t wrong with his previous description of her. She seems like a nice person at heart, but... A-At any rate! I’m still not sure what exactly motivated her to help us out, but I feel a huge sense of relief knowing that step one is complete!* And with that, I finally sit down on the couch.

“Well, that’s out of the way. Let’s get down to business.”

She leans forward slightly before looking me straight in the eyes. Gone is the seeming indifference from earlier, her gaze suddenly piercingly sharp. The atmosphere in the room changes instantly and I feel my shoulders tense up in response.

“You were born with the curse of light, Miku. Which was recently put into motion, is that correct?”

“Y-Yes. That’s correct.”

She grunts in response before looking me up and down, as if scanning for something. Then she taps me lightly at the very top of my stomach, right where my mark is. I can feel my heartbeat start to speed up, partly from what she said, but also surprised that she somehow knew where it was.

“Yep, that’s the spot,” she mutters to herself, either because of my reaction or because she already knew. Then she closes her eyes and begins to meditate. *Oh, gosh! I’m so nervous!* After a few moments of silence, she opens her mouth once more, a mysterious look on her face.

“I won’t be able to break the curse, which isn’t surprising. Though I can cast a similar curse on someone else if you want... Heehee!”

“Don’t waste our time trying to scare us, granny.”

My entire body is trembling after hearing that, but I can tell from Macro’s annoyed expression that he’s trying to help me out.

*Ugh... Thanks. I’m at a clear disadvantage here since I have a hard time with sarcasm.*

“Just an old lady’s attempt at humor. Don’t take it seriously, hun. Now then, it seems I’ve made a mistake, Miku.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t know, huh?” she asks in response before settling back in her seat. After making herself comfortable, she says something that takes my breath away.

“I know how to break the curse.”

“What? Really?!”

I’m shocked. I assumed I’d be stuck with the curse for the rest of my life. I look over at Macro, who seems as surprised as I am.

“The thing about curses is there’s always a way to break ‘em. By their very nature. Even magical curses can be lifted, you know.”

“Though if you were to ask the Gods themselves,” she continues, “they’d tell

you it's a mark of their love and not a curse at all."

"It's often said that there is a God for each type of magic, and that those who can wield only one type of magic are especially cherished by that deity."

*Claire always told me that I was adored by the light, but I didn't realize that by "light" she was referring to a goddess... So I guess that means the Goddess of Light loves me a lot, right?*

The story I grew up with is quickly becoming far more epic than I realized, though being a legend of sorts, I'm not sure how much of it is true. Still, the witch doctor has a way of speaking that's oddly convincing.

She goes on to say that their love is also a curse. If it harms someone, then it's most certainly a curse, she huffs, an expression of distaste clearly evident on her face.

"I've personally never met any of these so-called Gods. But I wouldn't pass it off as a simple fairy tale either. I think the Gods and Goddesses exist. I've just never seen them for myself, but I believe those who said they have, and they are the people that'll be able to help you. They can lift the curse."

That she doesn't seem God-fearing in the slightest is a little scary, but hearing her say that makes me slightly hopeful. I mean, she's basically implying that I won't have to suffer anymore.

"S-So that means we can break the curse, right? B-But how do we do that?"

Which is the first problem. If the curse can be broken, then that's what I want to do. I feel bad for basically turning down the Goddess of Light's show of love... but it's pretty scary falling in love with someone when you can die as a result. The old lady just shrugs her shoulders and cackles in response.

"These Gods of ours are a jealous bunch, and anxiety prone to boot. Especially the Goddess of Light. All you need to break the curse is find someone who will love you more than the Goddess of Light does. Just prove this person can care for you better than the deity of light itself."

"Stop messing with us and just tell us what to do. No need for theatrics."

Macro grumbles at the old lady, who's sitting there, grinning from ear to ear.

You always know just what buttons to push to get on my last nerve, she snaps at him before turning her gaze back to me, her smile quickly returning.

“All you have to do is kiss the person who loves you. Heehee! Just like in the fairy tales. But in this case, it’s no tale. True love’s kiss has been used to break countless curses placed on poor princesses all throughout history.”

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

My body temperature shoots up so fast that I’m momentarily afraid my face will burst into flame. How else am I supposed to react when she tells me I have to *kiss* someone?! *And I didn’t mishear her, either. She definitely said the K word! Eeep!* All the fur on my tail is sticking straight up!

“Of course it won’t work if they don’t love you back, Miku. And it can’t be no puppy love, either. It’s gotta be the real deal! The true love part is the trickiest bit.”

“Wh-What do you mean?” I ask her nervously, unable to calm down my racing heart. Her expression suddenly changes from amused to serious as she opens her mouth to explain.

“By ‘true love,’ I mean someone who can vow to love you for the rest of their and your life. The Gods are tough customers, meaning it’s not enough to just kiss someone because you think you like them a little. If the person you fall in love with doesn’t reciprocate, then the Goddess of Light will release you from your suffering. And by that, I mean through death. Their logic is pretty out there, but no point trying to argue with actual deities, am I right?”

I’m starting to feel hopeless about *ever* breaking this curse... There’s no way I can do something like that on my own. I’d do anything to get him to like me, and I have no intention of ever giving up! But I’m nowhere near confident enough to ask someone to love me for the rest of my life! Though there’s no denying I’d be pretty happy if someone said that to me...

At a loss for words, I glance over at the person who’s front and center in my thoughts. Macro seems lost in thought, and a few moments later, he asks the old lady a question.

“Let’s backtrack slightly. That whole story about the Curse of Light is true? I

thought it was only a rumor.”

“Huh? You came all the way out here to see me without knowing that much...? Aah. Aha. Yep. I see. I thought I knew why the two of you came out here. That you’d be in and out in no time. But of course, it’s never that simple, huh? How annoying.”

“Huh? I have no idea what you’re talking about. Just answer my question.”

*Hang on... I just realized something. I have a feeling I’ve misunderstood something kind of important. I assumed all this time that Macro knew nothing about my curse. But I just learned the legend concerning the grace of the gods and my own blessing is common knowledge. I always figured it was something only the folks in my village knew about. But that would mean... Suddenly, all the fur on my body stands straight up as I’m overcome by embarrassment.*

“You’re talking about the commonly known legend? It’s true, give or take a few small details here and there.”

“I see... So that means Miku must be in love with someone, correct?”

*It’s true! Aaah! He even knows that the curse is activated once I fall in love with someone! And there’s no way I’d ever be able to admit it’s with him! Wh-What do I do?!*

“You’re pretty dumb, kid. Considering how emotionally stunted you are, I’m surprised you made it this far in life. This is something that’s personal to Miku, and I’m sure she’s sensitive about it. How can you ask something like that so lightly? You have no tact whatsoever!”

“I’m not dumb. But that was pretty rude of me. I’m sorry Miku.”

“I-It’s fine! D-Don’t worry about it...!”

*Thank you for sticking up for me, granny! Though based on Macro’s reaction, it looks like we have a long journey ahead of us. He clearly knows I’m in love with someone, but he clearly doesn’t realize it’s with him. In fact, he seems completely clueless... Ngh! My mark is starting to hurt. I have to grin and bear it as best I can!*

“sigh... Well, this is a pickle. I’m sure you agree, Miku.”

I think she's already figured it out. That the person I love is Macro. She's talking to me knowing full well Macro doesn't understand. I find myself unable to do anything other than nod in agreement. I send a silent thank you to the old lady from the bottom of my heart.

"I get it. Miku, feel free to stop by from time to time. Let's say once every ten days or so? But let me help get rid of some of that pain first. Hang on a minute."

She slowly gets up before shuffling over to the back of the room. I'm so grateful that she picked up on what's going on without needing me to explain in detail. That's incredibly reassuring. As I watch her from afar, lost in thought, Macro leans closer, speaking in a hushed tone.

"I'm really sorry about what I said."

"What?! It's f-fine, really. Don't worry, really. I know you didn't mean anything by it."

*I guess it's still bothering him. He must be worried if he's bringing it up... My emotions are a jumbled mess right now. I'm not really sure why, though I don't think it's anyone's fault.*

"I was just surprised, and the words slipped out. I knew about your Curse of Light, and I had a feeling this recent development was somehow related, but I wasn't sure."

My heart beats faster as he continues talking. *I s-see. So then he did know how my curse is activated...* I'm so embarrassed that I find myself at a loss for words, my cheeks flamingly hot.

"This only started recently, right? It made me think that the person you love is probably a member of the Lanakiller guild, which could...complicate things."

"Mm-hm! Y-You're right!"

Aaaaah! I can't believe he figured out that much! He somehow pieced most of the puzzle together! But if that's the case, then who exactly does he think I'm in love with? I would die of embarrassment if he figured out it's him, but it's even worse knowing he thinks it's someone else...

"Sorry. You probably don't want to talk about it, right? I'm always sticking my



nose into stuff that's none of my business."

Macro apologizes yet again, probably due to how red my face is right now. *Please, don't apologize! What am I going to do? He's going to feel uncomfortable either way! I don't want to make him sad, but I don't want to annoy him either...*

"Don't worry about it. I mean it! It's really okay, so... Ngh!"

"Miku!"

The mark on my chest throbs with pain. *You're joking. Just that is enough to make it burn? So, you're saying I need to be honest about my feelings? But I'm just going to put him in an awkward position if I do. I don't know what to do! The mark hurts, but my heart hurts more.* It hurts so much that I can't even stand. I curl up into a ball, cradling my chest in pain.

"Hold on, I'll go get the witch."

I hear his frazzled voice next to my ear. *There I go again, causing more problems and making people worry about me.* My eyes are beginning to well up with tears. *No, I'll only make him worry more if I start crying.* I somehow manage to hold back my tears while I struggle to deal with my pain.

Macro returns moments later with the old lady in tow. She barely glances at me before figuring out what's going on. With a quick nod, she turns to Macro.

"Hug her."

"I'm sorry...?"

His dubious reply seems to echo loudly in the room. To be fair, I'm pretty taken aback by what the old lady just told him to do, too. *Did she really just tell him to...to hug me?!*

Ignoring our flabbergasted expressions, she turns to start shuffling back to where she was before and Macro hurriedly grabs her before she can get away.

"Tell me what's going on," he snaps. In response, the old lady shakes him off with a grumpy look. She heaves an exasperated sigh before explaining further.

"The most effective method of shaking off the effects of a curse is another person's warmth. So, if she's ever in pain, hug her. Stop dilly-dallying and just

do it already. I've still got stuff to take care of, and it's only going to take longer if you keep bothering me."

*H-How much of that is actually the truth, granny?! More importantly, what kind of advice was that?! I guess I really didn't mishear her after all!* But I find myself suffocating under the effects of the curse, meaning I have no breath to argue with.

Macro seems completely baffled. *I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, Macro! I can put up with this much, at least! I wish it would let up already!*

"Miku, I'm sorry. But here I come."

"Huh?"

Curled up into a tighter ball than before, I suddenly find my entire body enveloped in warmth. It takes me a moment to realize Macro is holding me in his arms. *Yeeep!* He hugged me before, but it feels far different this time around, now that I'm aware of my feelings for him! I'm such a nervous wreck that my entire body stiffens in response.

"It's going to be okay. Let me help take your pain away."

I'm so embarrassed, I don't know what to do. But...I feel so comfortable in his arms. I feel his hand on my trembling back, rubbing it gently. The position I'm in means my ear is pressed up against Macro's chest. I can clearly hear his heart beating, just as fast as mine.

"Your ear's twitching..."

"Oh! S-Sorry..."

"It's fine. But it's making me want to touch it, so I'll just close my eyes."

It's kind of amusing that he would say something like that at a time like this. But that's right. Macro really likes fuzzy things.

*Oh gosh, I feel so safe right now...* Feeling his arms tighten around me makes my heart skip a beat. *I'm so happy, I could cry.* Is it weird that all I want is to stay like this forever?

My mark still stings, and I'm so nervous that I feel like my heart might burst... Actually no. Now that I think about it, the pain is gone, and all I'm left with is

the warmth of Macro's embrace and the sound of his heart thumping in his chest.

I guess I have a sneaky side. Why's that, you might ask? Because I didn't tell him I felt better right away, instead wanting him to hold me a little while longer.

## Chapter 5 | Jealousy and Discord

**“FEELING** better?”

“Y-Yeah. Um...thanks.”

“It’s fine. Literally the least I could do...”

*How long have we been here like this? It feels like so much time has passed, but also like practically no time has passed at all.*

Macro refuses to make eye contact with me as he slowly lets go.

*Are his cheeks slightly red, or is it just me?*

I send a silent apology for making him feel uncomfortable.

“Feeling better, are we? You didn’t have to stop, you know. Heehee!”

“You don’t have a nice bone in your body, do you?”

Her timing seems almost too perfect as she picks just that moment to shuffle back over.

*Honestly, I think she was watching us and waiting. H-How embarrassing!*

She approaches me before holding something out in my direction. I notice a black, lumpy stone in the palm of her hand.

“This is a stone that will protect you against the pain born from that curse. It’s a magical stone infused with pain-soothing effects. I put a spell on it, making it especially effective against the Curse of Light. However, you will need to use a certain amount of magic in order for it to work. Which isn’t something you can necessarily do while you’re in pain.”

*Sh-She’s right. It’s hard to concentrate on anything, let alone casting spells, when you’re doubled over in agony.*

“Mm-hm. Which is why you’ll need a different way to get it started. I’m sure you can ask that crafting friend of yours.”

“Thanks for helping us with this so quickly.”

That explains why they mentioned Kiefer earlier. He’s a pro when it comes to magical gadgets and should be able to rig something up.

*No, I’m sure he can! He’s always making such amazing inventions!*

After handing me the stone, she clasps my hands in hers before looking me straight in the eyes, her gaze unwavering.

“Just be aware that it’s nothing more than a soother. If your pain is great enough, that stone will be nothing more than a paperweight.”

“I understand...”

At the end of the day, it’s nothing more than a simple painkiller. I know that, and yet hearing her say it out loud is discomfoting... Still, she needs to make sure I know the truth.

“If you don’t want to lose your life, you have to get rid of the curse. Think you can do it?”

She pats my hand lightly, grinning. I can tell she’s trying to cheer me up. Which is why I’m able to look right back at her while answering.

“Yes. I won’t give up.”

“You seem confident enough, at least. I like you more and more, kid. Keep your chin up.”

Honestly, I don’t think I can do it. I’m scared, and I just want to run away. But there’s no point in wasting my breath by whining about it. I don’t want her to worry, but I also don’t want to look weak, even to myself.

*I won’t let the curse win. I refuse!* There’s no guarantee I’ll be okay in the end, but my love means too much for me to just give up on it so easily.

I glance over at Macro out of the corner of my eye and see he’s watching me, an expression of concern on his face.

*Ugh, I’m so easy to please! All it takes to warm my heart back up is a simple look. Thanks, Macro. I’m glad I fell in love with you.* Unable to tell him how I feel just yet, I smile warmly at him in hopes that maybe my love for him will shine

through, even just a little.

After leaving the witch doctor's house, we walk along in silence for a while. I mean, Macro's usually quiet, so it's not that weird...but the reason why I'm not talking either is because I feel overwhelmingly self-conscious by that hug from earlier.

*Nrgh... I'm so embarrassed! But also so happy. I wish I had the power to freeze time so I could've enjoyed it a little longer. I have to stop thinking about it! The more I think about it, the redder my cheeks get!*

"Um, Miku...?"

"Yeeep!"

Which is why I can't help but yelp in surprise when Macro suddenly says my name.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. Were you thinking about something?"

"Y-Yeah, kind of. B-But it's okay!"

It feels sort of like a lie, but it looks like I managed to get away with it. I'm awful when it comes to making up believable lies, so I really need to try and calm down. He'll never want to be with me if he only sees me as some weird kid!

"It makes sense, all things considered."

*Aaaah! The guilt is killing me! He thinks I'm worried about the curse. I can't tell him I'm actually thinking about our hug earlier! I'm s-so sorry, Macro...! His overwhelming kindness is almost unbearable.*

"Th-Thank you, Macro! But I should probably try and find something to distract myself with." I try to follow through by forcing a heartfelt smile to my lips, and his eyes briefly widen in surprise.

"You really are strong, Miku. You're so small and yet there's a look of determination in your eyes."

"Y-Yeah?"

I'm aware of how small and weak I look. I absolutely can't protect myself in a

fight. Which is why I'm surprised when he calls me strong. When I tell him I'm not all that strong, he chuckles softly before saying he didn't mean physically strong.

"I felt the same way the first time we met, Miku. You have a strong spirit. I remember you did everything you could to help your sister, Claire."

"Of c-course I did! She was in danger...!"

*A strong spirit?* I find myself puzzled, having never been told that before. I don't think that's necessarily true. Suddenly Macro stops and turns to face me. Seeing such a serious look in his eyes only makes my heart start to race again.

"But you can't keep everything bottled up inside, Miku. People who have strong spirits like you do find it difficult to complain or ask for help. Ektor's the same way. I'm worried about you," he says while hanging his head.

His concern is written plain as day on his face. Macro is so very kind and caring. Which only makes things more difficult, because I understand him so well.

Macro is the type of guy who seems cold and emotionless at first but is actually the kindest, most thoughtful person I know. He would never abandon someone in trouble.

*What would he do if I told him how I felt? I'm sure he wouldn't abandon me. In fact, I bet he'd listen to me and accept my feelings for what they are. He would never let me die on his watch, and a part of me is worried that might mean he'd go so far as to feign his own feelings for me to do so. I absolutely can't let that happen.*

Which is the exact moment when I realized I can't tell him how I truly feel about him.



**WE** continue walking along in silence. I have a lot on my mind. I have to keep trying as hard as I can, but at the same time, I don't want to force my love for Macro on him if he doesn't feel the same way. Gosh, being in love is hard.

Along the way to Kiefer's workshop, I suddenly hear someone call my name.

Macro and I exchange glances before searching around for the owner of the voice. We don't have to wait long before she comes running up to us. Huh? Laura?!

"I went out for a walk and then realized belatedly that I had no idea how to get back to the guild. Teehee! I'm glad I bumped into you two!"

Wh-What's Laura doing here all by herself?! We're not supposed to go out into town on our own while the guy behind the kidnapping, who apparently can manipulate people, is still on the loose! *Did she forget?!*

As I point that out, completely taken aback, she answers with a simple, "Oopsie!" Come on, Laura! You have to be more careful, or else you'll get in trouble again! It's already happened once!

"Gosh, I'm sorry. You're right. I was really only planning on taking a short walk around the guild! But then my curiosity got the better of me..."

As I scold her, hands on hips in frustration, Laura's shoulders slump more and more. Oh no! I don't want to make her sad! I'm sure Laura just wanted a little break from being cooped up in the guild all day!

"As long as you understand why you need to stay inside, it's fine. But I was really worried! Next time you want to go for a walk, just ask Claire, Angela, or whoever's around to go with you, okay?"

"Okay, I will! I'm really sorry for making you worry, but I appreciate the concern!"

After apologizing, she beams at me with her usual cheerful smile. Yep, that smile suits her much better! But what are we going to do now? The two of us are on our way to Kiefer's place, and I don't want to drag her along with us. Besides, Claire and the others are probably looking for her, wondering where she went. After giving it some thought, I turn to Macro.

"Can you escort Laura back to the guild, Macro? Kiefer's place is just around the corner, so I should be able to make it on my own."

"But..."

I already have the stone the old lady gave me. All I need to do is give Kiefer a



simple explanation of what's going on and I'm sure he'll know what to do. And Laura can't make it back by herself.

"I'm r-really sorry! But I appreciate it! Can you take me back, Macro?"

Look, she's even asking you herself, so... Huh? I just felt a twinge from the mark on my chest. Why? I watch as Laura peers into Macro's face. He takes a step back, as if unsure what to do. He's such a nice guy that there's no way he'd just leave her here.

Should we all walk over to Kiefer's place together, and then the two of them can head back home? Just as the thought crosses my mind...

"Huh? I thought I recognized you. What are you guys doing in the middle of the road?"

"Kiefer!"

With impeccable timing, Kiefer walks over to us, most likely on his way back home. He's got that same drawling voice as always, with his usual smile and tousled hair that looks like he just woke up. This might be the first time I've seen him out in public!

"Come on. Don't look that surprised to see me. I'll have you know I leave the house on occasion to go shopping. There are some special ingredients that are a little too difficult for Candice to get on her own."

It sounds like he'd been engrossed in work when he realized he was missing something, so he'd gone out in the same clothes he'd been wearing at home and was now on his way back. That outfit of his has definitely seen better days. He should at least try to do the bare minimum when it comes to his appearance if he doesn't want to make Candice angry. Still, I'm glad to see him. Now our problem is solved!

"Kiefer's right here. Meaning we should really get Laura back home."

"What's that? You need me for something? I don't know what's going on, but I'm sure I can handle it! I can't fight, but I have a plethora of protection devices at my disposal."

After hearing my back and forth with Kiefer, Macro heaves a sigh as if finally

convinced that I'll be okay. Well, *mostly* convinced.

"I'll be back as soon as I drop Laura off at the guild. Make sure you stay with Kiefer, okay?"

"Okay, got it. Thanks."

With that, he turns to Laura, telling her to come along. I watch as the two of them head off in the direction of the guild. A part of me feels a little sad to see him go. But he's coming right back! Stop being so selfish.

"You're a little too close. It makes it hard to walk."

"What'll I do if we get separated? Here, let's link arms at least!"

*"sigh"*

Ugh... My mark hurts! I know Laura really likes physical contact. Her affectionate friendliness is something I really love about her. Which is why I shouldn't feel jealous or bitter seeing her act that way. I know I shouldn't! And yet I find myself squeezing my eyes shut, not wanting to see another second more.

"Now then! Shall we be off? We'll only get in everyone's way standing out here in the middle of the road."

"Oops! Y-You're right! Sorry, Kiefer."

His words snap me back to reality. *Oh gosh! If I let myself zone out like that, I'll quickly get overwhelmed by negative emotions. I gotta focus on what I need to do right now!*

After slapping my cheek lightly to center myself, the two of us head back to Kiefer's workshop. I give Kiefer a brief explanation of the stone and my curse along the way, and he nods in understanding. He always catches on so quickly.

"I see. So you need something that'll activate the stone whenever you're in pain, right? Sounds easy enough. I should be able to finagle something together before Macro gets back."

"Huh? Is it really that simple?"

"Hehe! Did you forget who I am? The man who spends his days and nights on

research and development?”

He’s very persuasive. I’m well aware of how good he is at what he does, but I still had no idea he’d be able to make what I need that quickly. “I’ll get started as soon as we get back,” he says, his cheerful smile incredibly encouraging. I really am lucky to have so many friends I can count on.

“And here we are! Welcome, Miku!”

We make it back to Kiefer’s place in one piece. Instead of heading toward the small house that acts as a living space, we go directly to his workshop. Though I guess he considers this place to be his home. I worry that by not sleeping in a proper bed, he’ll never get enough rest, though as Candice has said before, I’m glad he’s getting any sleep at all.

I’m really happy Candice is around to help take care of him. He’d have collapsed from malnutrition and exhaustion long ago without her.

“Where’s Candice?”

“I think she’s still asleep. She should be up soon, though. Surprisingly enough, that girl’s not a morning person.”

Come to think of it, I remember her sleeping in late with Claire when she spent the night that one time. I figured it was because the two of them were up pretty late, but I guess she’s just not a morning person. I’m a little surprised, considering the way she usually is.

“Take a seat wherever you can find space,” Kiefer says, and I settle myself down on a nearby chair.

The room is crammed full of mysterious tools and supplies scattered about here and there, the sight of which makes me scream internally, wanting nothing more than to tidy it all up. But I know I shouldn’t reorganize anything without permission, since it might make it more difficult for him to work.

“Hang tight. This should only take a moment.”

“Can I watch?”

“Hrm? Of course. Go right ahead.”

This is the first time he’s made one of his magical gadgets where I can see,

which is why I watch with wonder as he works. He always has this carefree attitude about him, but when he's focused on his work, he gets far more serious.

As expected from an artisan like him. His hands move deftly, as if he's done this many times before, and despite the delicate task at hand, he proceeds confidently, working on the stone without making any mistakes. I can only imagine how long something like this would take me if I had to do it myself.

As he fiddles with the pendant backing, he suddenly asks me a question.

"Hey, Miku. You haven't told him yet, have you? Macro, I mean."

"What?!"

I'm completely thrown off guard by his question, which seemingly comes out of nowhere. Wh-Wh-What brought that up?!

"Y-You know?"

"Your emotions are an open book, Miku. I'm pretty sure the only people who *don't* know at this point are Macro himself, Rinny, and maybe Angela."

I look over at him, clearly frazzled, and he answers with an easy smile without looking up from what he's doing. Am I really that easy to read? But I try so hard not to let my emotions show on my face!

*So he knows, huh? That's extremely embarrassing.* I can feel myself blushing in response. Unsure what to say, I just sit there with my head hung down. He chuckles lightly before repeating his question.

"So you haven't told him then? How you feel about him?"

"I h-haven't. He's just so nice. I feel like if he knew how I felt, he would put his own feelings aside to help me in whatever way he could. And even if that didn't happen, I don't want to do anything that might put him in an uncomfortable position..."

*I want to tell him so badly. I want him to know how much I care about him, and I want to put an end to this stupid curse. But my suffering pales in comparison to how bad I would feel making Macro suffer...*

"That's a good point. And something I can see him doing. You know him well,

Miku.”

He places the gadget down with a loud clunk before looking up at me, his usual smile on his face.

“That certainly sounds like the Macro I know. He might come off as cold and cantankerous, but there’s no denying how much he cares for the folks around him. Actually, Rinny’s much worse when it comes to that kind of stuff. That guy doesn’t care about anyone but his close friends,” he says, chuckling while resting his chin in his hand.

I get the feeling he’s trying to cheer me up. But his tone immediately turns serious, and he speaks quietly, as if trying to make me understand something very important. He sounds almost like a caring older brother. That carefree personality of his is gone in an instant.

“The thing about Macro is, despite all his bluster and concern, he’s not the type that would lie about his feelings...about anything. He’s stupidly honest, sometimes to a fault.”

“I d-dunno about that...”

“At the same time, I’m sure he’s also desperate to find a way to save you, Miku. This, in fact, might be the only way to do so! Who knows? We won’t until the end, but I know Macro hates giving up more than anything.” He pauses while looking into my eyes.

“Don’t you agree?” Kiefer asks with a smile, and he hands me the gadget he’d been working on.





“There you go, all done. I made it into a pendant so it’ll look stylish. Also... black is Macro’s favorite color.”

“K-Kiefer!”

*Macro likes the color black? That alone is enough to imbue this pendant with extra special meaning to me. I can’t believe you, Kiefer! And yet I’m also truly grateful. Both for the pendant and also for the advice.*

That’s right. Macro’s not the type to leave anything half-finished. He’s also not the type to lie about anything, and will always give you his honest opinion on whatever it might be.

*Maybe I should just go ahead and tell him after all...?* A part of me still feels it’s too early to make a decision. I need to give this whole situation a bit more thought, including whether I tell him or not.

“Thank you, Kiefer...”

“You’re more than welcome. I hope it helps lighten your pain, as well as your heart.”

Which is why I’m grateful in more ways than one. For both the pendant and the words of encouragement. I really shouldn’t rush into anything. And now that I have this magic device to help alleviate my pain, I can give this matter the time and attention it deserves.

I look down at the pendant lying in the palm of my hand. Whenever I’m in pain, apparently all I have to do is squeeze the stone. I’m truly impressed that he could make something like this so quickly.

He laughed off my amazement, explaining how it was an incredibly simple design, but I don’t think so. It’s only simple for someone as talented as Kiefer. I find myself bursting into laughter at the realization of how many friends I have by my side, all ready to help me in whatever way they can.

“Hrm? Huh? Is that Miku? What are you doing here?”

“Morning, Candice. Kiefer made this for me.”

With the pendant in hand, I was starting to think about heading back to the guild when Candice entered the workshop. Despite her initial surprise, she runs



over to me happily. Heehee! She's so cute.

"Is it something to help with the curse?"

"W-Wait, you know about that?"

I show her the pendant while filling her in and on what's happening, and she nods in understanding. H-How much does she know exactly?

"I didn't know all the details, but I basically got the gist. You love Macro, right? And if he doesn't love you back, then your very life is in danger."

"What?!"

"Bwahaha! Bullseye."

I'm surprised by how much she knows! I glance over at Kiefer and he shrugs his shoulders as if to say, *"Told you so."* I don't get the feeling she heard that from Kiefer... Ngh! Which means he was right when he said my feelings for Macro are obvious! I'm s-so embarrassed!

"I'm sure anything my brother's made will help you out! I don't think it'll be enough to cure you, but at least it'll give you peace of mind, right? And I'll help, too, in whatever way I can. I'm sure everything will work out! We'll get you and Macro together and you'll live happily ever after!"

"Th-That's very encouraging, but let's not rush into things, okay?"

I'm a little overwhelmed by Candice's enthusiasm, shaking her fist in the air triumphantly. Still, her cheerfulness and positive attitude is encouraging. I was starting to get down on myself, so I'm grateful for the push forward, no matter how small.

"So, um, I really should be heading back to the guild..."

"Hrm? Didn't Macro say he was coming back to get you? Which means you should sit tight until he does."

*T-To be fair, he did say that...* But Kiefer finished up his work so quickly. I feel bad that Macro has to come all the way out here just for me. *If I hurry, I might be able to meet him before he leaves.* Or so I thought, when suddenly...

"Huh? He is? Attaboy, Macro! You can't let a golden opportunity like this pass

you by, Miku! You should definitely wait for him!”

“F-Fine, fine! I get it, Candice!”

I get the feeling I’m stuck here even if I wanted to leave. If I tried to force my way out, they’d tie me down for sure. But I know they’re only doing so with good intentions, so I decide it’s easier to just listen to them.

“Though, if we’re being honest, Laura did sort of take him away...”

“Huh? I’m sorry... What did you just say?!”

Candice latches onto the information that Kiefer let slip. *W-Wasn’t there a better way of saying that?* “Taking him away” makes it sound like... At any rate, she was lost, so what else were we supposed to do?

“What’s she up to now? I’m getting weird vibes from this entire situation!”

Hearing what happened, Candice frowns suspiciously. She looks almost angry... Despite having called a truce of sorts, I’m worried that the two of them are still at odds with each other.

“What’s so weird about it?”

“Laura has an amazing memory! And the guild is well-known enough that she could’ve asked *anyone* for directions. For someone as friendly and outgoing as Laura to somehow get lost on one of the busiest streets in town seems very suspicious.”

Now that I think about it, it does sound kind of weird. I’m directionally challenged for sure, and I still managed to remember where the guild was fairly easily. If she was lost, she could have asked someone for help. Wait... Is she saying that Laura *lied* to us?

“B-But even if that’s true, why would she lie?”

“It should be obvious! She wanted to have Macro all to herself! Either that, or she wants to get in your way for some reason! What’s her problem? And after she made a big deal of saying she liked Ektor!”

My heart starts racing, making me feel sick to my stomach. So does that mean... Laura’s in love with Macro, too?

“Hm!”

“Huh? Oh, gosh! Miku!”

I squeeze the pendant tightly in my hand. As soon as I do, a warmth flows out of the black stone, filling my entire body. *W-Wow. I really do feel better...* I breathe a huge sigh of relief.

“S-Sorry, Miku. I shouldn’t have said what I did. I was just so upset that I blurted it out without thinking...”

“No, it’s fine. Plus, I got to test out my pendant for the first time. It worked just like you said, Kiefer. Thank you!” I say with a smile, which Kiefer returns, saying he’s glad to hear that...

*Why did Laura lie to us? No, we don’t know for sure that she lied...* Though now I’m worried about what exactly she’s planning on doing. I grip the pendant in my hand once more, squeezing it tightly.



**[Claire]**

“**I’M** heading back to Kiefer’s place.”

“Thanks so much, Macro! It was so nice of you to bring me all the way back here.”

“It’s no big deal. Besides, I told you I would.”

Seeing Macro enter the guild with Laura by his side instead of Miku, I froze, unsure what exactly was going on. *What is she doing with him? Why is Laura clinging to his arm?! Did she have a change of heart?!*

“Awww! He’s gone. I miss him already!”

She stood there, watching him go, until he was out of sight. She looks like a young girl in love. Come to think of it, I’m pretty sure I saw that exact scene as part of Macro’s route! In the game, Laura’s rival is Candice, and Macro originally goes to Kiefer’s place in order to see her. Realizing that Laura’s rival now is Miku causes a chill to race up my spine.

What is going on here? It's almost like Laura has somehow invaded Macro's route!

"I'm sorry, Claire."

Laura says without turning around. There's a lilt to her voice that's almost alluringly mature. I can't help but shudder in response.

"What are you apologizing for?" I ask cautiously. She turns and looks right at me, an air of coolness on her face and a smirk tugging at the corners of her lips. She tilts her head, and it turns her usually innocent expression into something enchantingly seductive.

"Isn't it obvious? Because I'm in love with Macro. The same person your adorable twin sister is in love with, right?"

All the fur on my body sticks straight up. I reflexively hug myself as a feeling of unimaginable despair washes over me.

"I only just realized it. I've met so many amazing guys since I arrived, and I originally thought Ektor was the one for me. But you know what? After seeing Macro, I realized how wrong I was... He makes my heart pound in a way no other guy can make me feel."

*Stop. Stop it!* Hearing the same line I've heard before makes me break out in a cold sweat. This has to be a joke, right? As the heroine, can she actually break free from the script?!

"This must be true love. I'm just not sure what to do! I know how Miku feels about him... I'm garbage, aren't I?"

There's no doubt about it now. She *does* remember. That's the exact same line she used in the game. It seems she's decided to go after Macro. How heartless...

"Though I wouldn't have known how amazing Macro was if it wasn't for Miku. She's the one who told me how kind he is, and so I wanted to see for myself. And before I knew what was happening..."

The only difference is that instead of thanking Candice, she's thanking Miku. But everything else is the same. I've played the game so many times, I know

every word she's about to say by heart.

"You couldn't take your eyes off him, right?"

"Huh? Yes, that's exactly what I was about to say! You're amazing, Claire!"

Her eyes widen in surprise for a moment before she bursts into laughter. That sultry look from before is gone, replaced once more by the innocent, adorable face I've come to know well.

"I know it's unfair to Miku, but there's no way I'm going to give up on these feelings I have for him."

And with a serious glint in her eyes, she officially declares war. You'll have to try and find a different way to break Miku's curse, she says off-handedly before heading back to her room. All I can do is watch her leave, trembling in silent fury.

*What? What did she say?! Just find another way, like it's that easy? She knows that's impossible! The heroine always ends up with the love of her life, crying over Miku's death as if there was not a thing she could have done to prevent it.*

In the game, she falls in love with Ektor, who hugs her close, comforting her, before kissing her. I'm sure the scene will stay the same regardless if she ends up with Macro.

I've raged about how amoral that scene was since the first time I played the game. That she easily takes the one thing that would've made Miku happy for her own pleasure while wanting peace of mind at the same time is downright evil!

So this is what's happening now, huh? Not on my freakin' watch! There's no way I'm going to relive that tragedy again, especially not in real life. I've worked as hard as I could since as far back as I can remember to avoid it, and in the end, none of it mattered. If Miku dies, I'll cast a blanket of Fox Fire over the entire town. And I'm confident that the flames would be unquenchable.

"I guess this isn't the Ektor route then, huh?"

When Laura first expressed interest in him, I'd been slightly anxious. Mainly because I knew he was Miku's original love interest. But in reality, her rival

ended up being Candice. I was guilty at the time for feeling relieved Miku wasn't going to be involved in any sort of love triangle. I guess I deserve this...

I don't have time to run away from the reality of the situation. If things continue the way they're going, Laura will end up with Macro. And if she can change this part of the story, there's no telling what else she might do. Even if Macro is leaning toward Miku right now, as the heroine, she has the power to do whatever she wants and get whoever she desires!

"I can't let this happen. Oh, gosh. I guess I'm going to have to pay Ektor another late-night visit."

Just a few moments ago, I had to comfort Ektor, who's currently nursing a broken heart. I remember how he looked, sobbing on his knees, saying how if she loves Macro, then he'll do whatever he can to make sure she's happy. I don't want to deal with that mess of a man anymore! But Miku means so much to me. I'll do whatever it takes to get him back on his feet!

My legs are shaking. Fear grips me as I realize how far we've come in the story. I thought I'd been so careful. I worked so hard to make sure this ending wouldn't happen...

A part of me wishes we'd never left the village. And yet, there's no denying that I like our new lives here in the city. No matter what I say, I enjoy the work I'm doing here, and I love living alongside my friends. And yet I feel like, somewhere along the way, Miku stopped being my number one priority. That I only protected her when it was convenient for me.

*...No! This is no time to feel sorry for yourself! Get a grip, Claire! There's still time to save her! I will protect her with my life!*

I smack my shaking legs as hard as possible before rushing to Ektor's room, desperately trying to remember every single detail from Macro's route in the game.

## Chapter 6 | Ready to Believe

[Miku]

I'VE had to deal with pain in my chest on multiple occasions ever since I got my magic pain-relieving stone. I shudder to think how much worse it would be without the gadget. I'm overwhelmingly grateful to both Macro and Kiefer. I need to do my best to stay calm. But every time I think that...

"Macro! You're going to work, right? Can I come with you? I'm pretty good at gathering information, so I could be super helpful!"

"You'll just get in my way. Also, you're not even in the guild yet. And I'm going to need you to take a few steps back."

"Someone's grouchy. Come on! Just this once won't hurt, right? You can make a decision after you see me at work. Please?"

"For crying out loud... I'll think about it if you promise not to get in my way."

"Yay! You're the best, Macro!"

"I haven't said yes yet."

It hurts every time I hear Laura's cheerful voice along with Macro's coming from the dining room. I guess I get jealous now, even when it's just two friends talking. But how can I not? She's always all over him! Ugh... I hate myself for thinking like that. I quickly slip out of the guild, taking care to make sure neither of them spots me.

I'm going back over to the witch doctor's house today. Macro was supposed to come with me... But after seeing the two of them together, I couldn't bring myself to face them, so I decided to go alone. I know I made a promise, and I feel awful about it...

"Miku!"

“Eep?!”

Just then, a voice calls my name from directly behind me, and surprised, I literally jump into the air. Wh-Who’s there? I turn to see Ektor, who’s far from his usual jovial self. His eyebrows are furrowed, but there’s a faint smile on his lips. Almost like he’s forcing himself to look happy... I wonder what’s wrong?

“Sorry. Did I scare you?”

N-No! I was lost in thought and didn’t realize I wasn’t alone. It’s okay.”

When he asks me if I’m heading over to the witch doctor’s place, I nod. I still feel so guilty about leaving Macro behind that I find myself unable to look him in the eyes...

“Can I come with you?”

“Huh?”

“All I’ve been doing lately is staring down mountains of paperwork. I figured it might be a nice change of pace to escort you around today.”

Does he not realize I’d been planning on going with Macro? Maybe I should ask him to come with me? I doubt I’ll get kidnapped again, but I feel so guilty about breaking my promise to Macro...

“Come on, let’s go.”

“Oh, uh... O-Okay.”

As I stand there, indecisive, Ektor lightly pushes me forward. I guess we’re going together after all. I still feel so bad!

“You were planning on going with Macro today, huh?”

“What?! H-How did you know?” Ektor randomly asks with a wry smile on his face after we’ve been walking together for a while. Is that why he asked to come with me? H-How does everyone always know...?

“I had a feeling. But he was busy flirting with Laura, right? I can’t stand it. And after stealing Miku away from me.”

He smirks, as if proud of some joke he’s made, but hearing him talk about Macro flirting with Laura only makes my chest ache. Noticing that I’m holding



my chest in pain, he hurriedly apologizes.

None of this is his fault, so it's not like he has to feel bad, and yet I can tell he clearly does as he seems even more upset than earlier. What happened? I'm not used to seeing him like this, and it's making me worried.

"I wasn't trying to be mean. Well, not to you, at least. To Macro, yes... I just wish he felt at least a *little* bad about what he's doing... No, I'm the selfish one with the grudge."

*Seriously, what's going on? He's not making any sense. Why does he want to be mean to Macro?* Seeing me watching him with a puzzled look on my face, he smiles vaguely. I guess he can tell I'm worried but doesn't want to go into any more detail. In that case, I should probably drop it for now. But I'm still worried...

"I can't help but think how adorable you are, Miku. After all, you're my very special...friend."

"Ektor..."

He suddenly squeezes his eyes shut. And then, as if having mentally prepared himself for something, he looks over at me with his usual smile.

"That's right! You're my very cute, very *special* friend, which is why I can't just abandon you if you're sad or hurting. So of course I'd get a little mad at Macro, who made you feel this way. It's a small price to pay for making myself feel better!"

"Come on, Ektor. Stop it already."

I can tell that he's pushing himself way too hard. He's clearly forcing himself to act cheerful to hide what's wrong, though I have no idea why. Which means I shouldn't push it, no matter how worried I am about him. Whatever's going on must mean a lot to him. It would be insensitive of me to poke my nose into places it doesn't belong.

"Why not go on a date with me after we finish up at the witch doctor's place? We'll have so much fun, and then you can brag about it later. Maybe that'll give you two the opportunity to talk, and he can go with you on your next visit?"

There's a hint of pain hidden among his words of encouragement.

*He's so kind, and he's an incredibly dependable leader. Heheh! A date with Ektor, huh? If it'll help cheer him up, then I'm happy to go on as many dates as he wants.*

"Thanks, Ektor. Okay, sounds like a plan."

And maybe it'll make him feel comfortable enough to open up about what's wrong. And then *I* can be the encouraging one for once. Even if he doesn't come right out and ask for help, I'm still going to do what I can to figure out what's wrong. It's decided.

After arriving at the witch doctor's house, the old lady greets me with a raised eyebrow, mumbling something about bringing the glow-boy this time. What does she mean by that? Ektor's hair is pretty blonde, and it does tend to sparkle rather magnificently in the sun!

"Hrm... It looks like it's been triggered several times already. This device is very well made. Whoever crafted it is clearly quite talented."

"Hehe! It's true. Kiefer is brilliant when it comes to gadgets."

I reply happily to her comment as she checks out the mark on my skin and the magical pendant, which only causes her already raised eyebrow to crawl further up her forehead.

"That lazy good-for-nothing? *sigh*... There's no denying his brilliance, though his personality is a different matter. Not sure why he went with such a plain design, though."

It sounds like she knows him quite well. And yet, her opinions on the folks I know seem to clash with mine! Macro's a good guy, and so is Ektor, so why does she act like they're not? Maybe it's that she actually likes them and this is her way of showing it?

"I'm just saying how I feel. Don't get the wrong idea, little fox girl."

*Ack! She knew what I was thinking! H-How does everyone always know?! It's so embarrassing. Is my face really that easy to read?*

"Now then, it looks like you haven't made any progress in breaking your

curse. Are you giving up or what?”

“Rgh... Um, well... I’m s-still working on it, but I’m just worried that if I confess my feelings to the person I love, it’ll make them suffer... Still, I don’t think I can live with this pain forever...”

“All I’m hearing is a bunch of excuses. If you’re not brave enough to do it, just say so.”

*Sh-She’s right! The thing about her is she speaks the truth without mincing matters, though right now I feel very much attacked!*

“Miku.”

“What’s up, Ektor?”

After that blow to my ego from the older woman, Ektor calls me over with an oddly serious expression on his face. *What’s wrong?* I look up at him, worried, when he suddenly breaks into his usual warm smile.

“I’ll help you every step of the way, so don’t worry! You’re the cutest girl in the whole wide world, Miku, so be more confident!”

“D-Don’t you think that’s a bit much?!”

*Wh-What is he talking about?! The sudden explosion of compliments is making me blush. Kn-Knock it off! I appreciate the encouragement, though. Okay, I have to get it together! There’s no way I’ll succeed if I’m this down on myself before I even start!*

“Hey, Granny... Is it okay that the situation is basically unchanged from before? Miku hasn’t gotten worse, has she?”

“Is it me, or are you sparkling more than usual, Glow-Boy?”

“J-Just answer the question!”

The old lady smirks as if having noticed something, causing Ektor to act unusually flustered in response. *What just happened? Though I guess if the two know each other, this type of exchange probably isn’t that unusual, right?*

“That’s right. She hasn’t gotten better or worse. She’s still stable, for now.”

“Great. In that case, I assume she’ll have to come back to see you for regular

check-ups then? And if she hasn't gotten worse, she's okay for the time being, correct?"

Basically, he's confirming that there's no need for us to really start worrying yet. There are times when I've inevitably felt overwhelmed and in pain, but nothing like how I felt in the beginning. I can live with it for now.

"Sure, but if you don't do anything, you'll only be postponing the inevitable. If you really want to help her, why not find some exciting way to get the ball rolling? Or would that be too much for you?"

"Rgh! N-No! I said I'll support her, and I meant it! I'll talk it over with the others and figure out some kind of plan."

"What ball are we trying to get rolling?" I ask him, and he explains how we'll need to figure out a way to get me and Macro alone together, or get Macro to figure out how I feel about him. Wow... I always thought those kinds of situations were spontaneous, not planned. Hang on...

"Huh? What?! Y-You don't have to do that! I d-don't need to be alone with Macro or anything!"

"Shut up if you want to live, fox girl!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

"She looks so cute blushing like that! I swear to God, if he doesn't pick her, I'll kill him myself!"

After that verbal slap in the face, I fall silent, leaving Ektor and the old lady to begin discussing a plan of action. Shouldn't I have a say, seeing as this is all about me?! Though I should be happy that this will lead to me getting some alone time with Macro, right?

*Rgh... I don't think my heart will ever be ready for this. Mmm! No! I have to take any chance I can. Especially with everyone going out of their way to help me... Rgh! But what am I going to do when we're alone?! As the two of them continue talking, I find myself lost in my own head, my cheeks ablaze with embarrassment.*



**ON** our way back to the Lanakiller guild after leaving the witch doctor's house, Ektor's communication gadget receives a call from Wells while we're walking, his voice sounding somewhat impatient.

"Ektor, Marino managed to stumble on some rather disturbing news. She's over at my place right now. Can you swing by?"

"On my way. Oh, but Miku's with me, so I'll drop her off first..."

"H-Hang on."

Whatever's going on sounds like it can't wait... He should probably get over there as quickly as possible. Dropping me off at the guild will only waste time. There's no way Ektor will let me walk back by myself, leaving us with only one choice!

"Can I come too?" I doubt I can help in any way. But it seems like the best option under the circumstances. Seeing the puzzled look on his face, I continue, "I know I'm not very helpful. But up until now, I've always let you handle everything... At the very least, I want to know what's going on, and if there's something I can do to help, no matter how small, I want to do so. At the end of the day, I'm a member of the Lanakiller guild, too! I promise not to get in anyone's way!"

I don't want him to waste time, but more importantly, I really *do* want to help, mainly because everyone's been going out of their way to help me all this time! I want to be able to do something to show my gratitude.

"Fine... Let's get going then."

"Okay!"

The troubled look on his face is quickly replaced by a smile as he agrees. *Whew! I promise to do my best!*

"Okay, great. But as a heads up, what we have to say might be a lot for the young lady, okay?"

Wells must have overheard our conversation through the device, and I can easily detect a note of worry in his voice. So, whatever he has to say might be a lot for me to handle? I don't care!

“I’ll be fine. I want to hear whatever it is you have to share!”

“Heh! Okay then. I figured as much.”

“We’ll be waiting for you,” Wells says before disconnecting. Despite not being able to see him, I can practically see that amused smile of his by the lilt in his voice.

Upon arriving at Wells’ store, I notice the “Temporarily closed” sign on his front door.

*He’s not open today?* As the thought crosses my mind, Ektor heads towards the back of the store and I hurry to follow.

“We’re allowed to go in using the back door?”

“Yep, it should be unlocked. I’ve always come in this way whenever I stop by to discuss guild stuff with him. Since he called me here himself, I have a feeling it should be unlocked.”

I see. So that’s how it usually works, huh? Ektor walks straight to the back door before opening it. I guess it really was unlocked.

“Oof! It’s a pigsty, as usual!”

“I want to tidy things up so badly...”

We step inside and are immediately overwhelmed by the sheer number of work tools, boxes crammed full of parts, and large scraps of metal strewn this way and that. The heavy layer of dust on all the boxes, along with the multitude of cobwebs lining the hallway, makes the entire place feel abandoned. I get the feeling it’s mainly used as some kind of storage room apart from Ektor’s infrequent visits.

*Ugh... My tail’s getting all dusty!*

“It reminds me of how the guild looked when I first showed up...”

“And I’m so grateful for everything you did to clean it up.”

“That’s not what I meant! You guys had no time to worry about keeping things tidy, what with your work and all! I have the feeling Wells is in a similar situation.”

“Oh, he has plenty of free time. He just can’t be bothered.”

The guild hall had a similar feeling of neglect when I first arrived. Me and Claire cleaned it up and did some reorganizing, and we’ve worked hard to keep it from falling into disarray ever since then. I don’t see it as a chore, though. I love cleaning, and being able to live in a nice, comfortable space makes me happy. I guess being surrounded by chaos doesn’t bother Wells.

As we walk further into the room, taking care not to trip over the objects scattered around the floor, I notice a door on my right. Ektor mentions that it leads into the store. Apparently, that’s where the two of them talk when he stops by for a visit.

“I’m coming in, Wells.”

He knocks in a familiar way before calling out. Getting no response, he opens the door. I go to follow him, but he suddenly stops and I end up running right into him, smashing my nose against his back. Ow!

“Ektor? What’s going on...?”

“A-Are you *serious*?! You two knew we were coming over! Put some clothes on! Right now!!”

I try to look around Ektor to see what’s going on, but Ektor slams the door shut firmly while shouting angrily.

*Huh? Wait, what? What’s going on? What’s this about clothes? Why are they naked?!*

“U-Um...”

“Did you see any of that, Miku?”

“No, not a thing.”

He asks me nervously, clearly frazzled, and when I answer honestly, he seems relieved. His face is beet red, all the way to his ears.

“What I just saw would have been way too shocking for someone as innocent as you, Miku. So I’m glad you didn’t see anything...”

“Wh-What exactly was going on?”

Now I'm kind of scared to go in there.

Moments later, the door swings open and out walks, not only Wells, but also...

"M-Marino?!"

"Heheh. Sorry about that. And for making you wait. Come on in."

I'm surprised to see Marino walk out wearing an incredibly revealing dress. The slit that runs up the side of her skirt doesn't leave much to the imagination.







“Don’t you have a robe or something you can use to cover up with?”

“Is someone having impure thoughts?”

“No! But certainly uncomfortable ones. I am still a man, you know.”

Ektor grumbles, still blushing. I understand how he feels, though. Even I’m getting a little frazzled seeing Marino dressed like that, and I’m a girl! She starts giggling, clearly not feeling bad about the situation in the slightest.

*Rgh... She’s teasing us!*

“I have something serious to tell them, so go put something on, Marino.”

“I guess I don’t have a choice. We’ll finish this up later, okay?”

“Heh... Don’t tease them anymore. Ektor looks like he might explode at any moment.”

“Ooh, I’m so scared!”

I have no idea what’s going on, but the vibe she’s giving off is so overwhelmingly adult in nature that it’s making my head spin. Ektor’s blushing even more furiously than before. Marino does what Wells asks her to, reaching for a man’s jacket draped over the back of a nearby seat before putting it on. It’s clearly way too big for her. I wonder if it belongs to Wells?

“I hope you don’t mind if we cut to the chase.”

“Please.”

With everyone’s attention focused on Wells, the atmosphere in the room quickly grows serious. It’s amazing how easily they can switch over to work mode. I find myself naturally straightening up.

“You know how that guy’s still running around loose? The one behind that entire kidnapping ring?”

“You’re saying there’s a development in the case?!”

So, the information he wanted to share is about the kidnapping ring? I’d been under the impression that everyone involved had been arrested, aside from the one guy who’d been pulling the strings. Did they finally find a lead?

“We’ve been getting nowhere questioning his lackeys. They seem to have collective amnesia or something. Which is why we’ve started wondering if perhaps this leader of theirs, along with being able to manipulate others, can brainwash folks as well.”

*The power of manipulation? Just knowing magic like that exists in the world is enough to leave me trembling in fear. And to not even remember being manipulated... Honestly, it’s probably better that way.*

After getting to that point, Wells props both feet up on a nearby table with a loud thud before sighing.

“Well, I can’t say for sure this guy is the mastermind behind the operations. But we do have proof that some unsavory character was in contact with those guys.”

“Unsavory character? Does that mean there’s a witness?!”

Considering the thoroughness of the ongoing investigation, how is it that something like this would only surface now? Faced with our combined surprise, Wells shoots Marino a look.

“There was. The information was surprisingly easy to come by.”

*Huh? Marino is the one who found out what’s going on?! I guess they did mention something about her being an informant. But I’m still impressed...*

“Usually, information like that doesn’t just fall into your lap. Not like I know where you usually get your information from... You’re a mystery wrapped in an enigma, Marino.”

“Heehee! A magician never tells their secrets. Never underestimate a professional informant and their ability to weasel out information,” she says with a carefree grin while looking over at Ektor, clearly amused. He raises his hands in front of himself, both in surrender and frustration.

“Let’s return to the topic at hand,” Ektor says, his expression immediately turning serious again. I already know how amazing you are at gathering information, but I want to know what that information is. I lean forward, not wanting to miss anything.

“Spill already. Tell me about this unsavory character.”

“*sigh* Usually this is the part where we negotiate how much my information is worth. Joining your guild has sucked all the fun from my life.”

She shrugs her shoulders in resignation, causing her curls to brush against her ears. The earrings she’s wearing today are decorated with jewels of varying sizes, glittering under the light. She’s always so stylish.

“It’s a woman. Or more accurately, a young girl. Perhaps about the same age as this young lady right here. She didn’t seem bothered at all to be surrounded by a bunch of no-good criminals either.”

“A woman? A young girl? That does seem suspicious.”

I definitely didn’t see that one coming! I never would have guessed the guy in charge was actually a girl. How is it that she wasn’t scared of those kidnappers at all? I don’t doubt Marino’s information, but I timidly pipe up, wanting to know how this girl managed to get involved with a group of dangerous criminals.

“Do you think there’s a chance she just happened to be there?”

“I was wondering the same thing at first. But the witness says they saw a similar interaction happen three different times. Also, after the young girl finished talking, the guys would all act like they were drunk. That’s pretty incriminating evidence, in my opinion.”

*They were moving around as if they were drunk? Sounds like a puppeteering power to me. There’s no doubt about it, then. But what would a girl my age be doing teaming up with a criminal organization like that? What circumstances would lead her down that path? She must be afraid of something, right?*

“There are many brave men in the world, and women. Though when it comes to courage, I feel like the women outweigh the men. And Marino is the most fearless out of all of them.”

“Oh gosh. I’ve honestly always seen myself as a bit of a fraidy cat.”

“Without a healthy amount of fear, you’ll be dead before you know it. But you don’t let that fear control you. You use it to stay safe while still doing what must

be done.”

Marino’s always facing down danger in order to gather information. She’s able to do her job despite her fear. I worry about her. *I know her job is important, but...* Marino giggles, almost as if she can read my thoughts, before booping my nose.

A-Ack!

“When I was much younger, being an informant was the only way to survive. It just so happened that I was quite good at it, so I decided to become a professional. And unlike when I first started out, I know when to quit while I’m ahead. Don’t look so worried about me, ‘kay?”

“M-Marino...”

“Heh! If you don’t stop looking that adorable, Marino here is going to pounce.”

“M-Marino? Eep!”

Her hand brushes my cheek before sliding down my arm, and then from my ears to my neck. She then proceeds to tickle my ribs until my tail bounces up and down from laughter. Oh gosh! I have goosebumps all over!

“Ma-ri-no?!”

“Heehee! I’m terrified, Ektor. Okay, okay. No more teasing.”

My heart’s beating so fast! Her snuggling me like that is bad for my heart! I hug my tail to my chest, trembling softly while Wells pats me on the back, calming me down. *Thank you...* Did she do that on purpose though? Perhaps it was her attempt at distracting me so I’d stop worrying. Marino really is very sweet.

“Now then. Here’s the problem. And the part that has the biggest effect on us. Miku, are you ready?”

“Ready? Y-Yes!”

Wells stops rubbing my back and pats me on the head instead. I look up and notice his expression is no longer amused but grim, giving me the impression that whatever he’s about to say is serious. Seeing him like that makes me kind

of scared.

*Can I really handle whatever he's about to tell me? Will it shock me that much?*

But there's no turning back now, so I take a deep breath and steel myself.

"The witness managed to remember what the girl looked like. I can't reveal who the witness was without putting them in danger, but just know that they're highly credible and trustworthy. Which is why I have no doubt what they told me is the truth."

He pauses and turns to Marino. Both Ektor and myself also turn our attention to her, and she heaves a sigh before delving into a matter-of-fact rundown of the girl's appearance.

"Shoulder-length silky-black hair. A cute face. A cheerful and innocent-sounding voice mixed with the occasional impish grin... Does that sound like anyone we know? That our paths crossed when they did is likewise suspicious. It makes me wonder if she truly was a victim after all."

There's no way it can be true. But as I picture the person who matches Marino's description, all I can see is her face. The face of my new friend who always strikes me as slightly naive, but kind and innocent, although with the occasional glimpse of a slightly more mature side.

"The girl is Laura?!" he says, his brows furrowed in concern.

*That's the name of the girl that popped into my own head. B-But! Laura was a victim of the kidnapping ring, right? She got snatched off the street before I did... Wait. Marino mentioned she saw Laura talking to the other kidnappers as if they knew each other. How is that possible? There must be some mistake...*

"The witness said the girl didn't look familiar, so there's a high chance it's Laura. But I'd like the witness to get a look for themselves from a distance if possible."

Basically, Marino wants the witness to see for themselves if Laura is the same person they saw talking to the criminals. But is that a good idea? *I hope it's not Laura. I don't want it to be her. But what if it is? What if Laura really is one of the bad guys?*

“Let’s double-check to be sure...but then what, Ektor?”

“What am I supposed to do? Should I try to look completely unconcerned by this entire situation? If Laura turns out to be the same girl they saw, then the first step would be to make sure she can’t get away before interrogating her about what’s going on,” Ektor says.

*Th-That’s probably a good idea. Maybe she has a perfectly good reason as to why she was there. That has to be it! There’s no way the kind, sweet Laura I know would do something like that! Mm-mm, I don’t want to think about it. It’s impossible for me to stay objective here, though I know I really should at least try.*

“It’s okay, Miku. Leave everything to us.”

“Huh?”

Seeing my drooping ears and tail, Ektor tries to cheer me up. *Is that really okay?*

“We’re used to this kind of stuff. Getting double-crossed, that is. I’ve met my fair share of folks who seemed like decent people but were actually up to no good. So naturally, we’ve grown to be suspicious of almost everyone. That’s our job. But you want to believe that she’s different, right? And that’s okay.”

“B-But...!”

Ektor smiles as he talks to me, but there’s a hint of sadness behind it. I notice a similar look on both Wells and Marino’s faces. Their shared expression of kindness is puzzling.

“To be fair, we’ve had our suspicions since the first moment we met. You have to be able to trust everyone in the guild, right? Which is why it’s so important to make sure they’re who they say they are.”

“He’s right. I saw the same suspicion in Rinny and Macro’s eyes, along with Angela. Candice and Claire, too. Well, Kiefer was maybe the only person who didn’t seem fazed at all.”

It sounds like almost everyone in the guild was suspicious of Laura’s motives from the very beginning, except for me. It kind of makes me feel naive for



believing that there's no possible way she's a bad person, like she managed to pull the wool over my eyes...

And yet, after everything I've heard, I still can't bring myself to doubt her. I don't want to believe what they're saying is true. It's my ego that refuses to believe I made a mistake in trusting Laura and becoming her friend. But I also know that people like me are easily tricked and dragged into situations we wouldn't have joined willingly.

*I'm sure Ektor and the others are well aware of that. And yet, it's still okay for me to continue to trust Laura?*

"Having a different viewpoint from the rest of the group is actually incredibly helpful, Miku. We're just worried that if Laura does turn out to be a traitor, you'll be hurt far more than anyone else since you trusted her."

*I appreciate him saying that. Ektor and the others want me to continue believing in her. Is that really okay...? I don't care if I get hurt or not! I'm a little scared, but more than anything, I'm afraid of causing trouble for the rest of the guild. Still...*

I close my eyes and Laura's face appears in my mind. The way she smiles so innocently and yet acts surprisingly mature for her age. She's always so honest and yet sometimes says things that creep me out. And then there's the look she gets when she's hanging out with Macro...

I feel the mark on my skin throb with pain, and I squeeze the pendant. Yes, regardless of her actions. Even if we're in love with the same guy, I still want to believe that she's not a bad person.

"I'll be okay. I still trust her, and I will until proven otherwise. I promise not to be sad. That's what I've decided."

I speak exactly what's on my mind, clearly and concisely. I look directly into Ektor's eyes. He seems surprised by my reaction. I see the tension visibly drain from his shoulders and he chuckles.

"That's so like you, Miku!"

"You're a treasure, Miku. Truly. But even if it turns out that she was tricking us all along, I promise that we'll be here, right by your side, to cheer you up."

“You can leave that part to me. I’m always running my mouth to the delight of others.”

The three seem to accept my decision, making the mood in the room considerably lighter. Thanks guys. I have to toughen up a bit if I don’t want to worry them any more than I already have.

We then begin discussing our plan moving forward. Marino will continue gathering information, with Wells providing backup. Ektor agrees to talk to each guild member individually in order to fill them in on the situation. If he tried having a group meeting to tell everyone at once, it might tip Laura off.

“Miku, we’re counting on you to continue acting normally. But try not to ever be alone with her. Make sure that at least Claire or Angela are nearby. Or get Rinny to keep you company if he’s around.”

“Okay, got it.”

He then asks me to try and get Claire and Angela to come to my room for a private chat. I’m sure if I ask, Laura won’t think twice about it. But wouldn’t it be better if he talked to them separately? If Laura overhears me saying that Ektor wants to talk to them about something, she won’t think twice about it.

After all, he is the guild leader, right? So it’s not weird that he might need to talk to them about something.

“Let’s get back to the guild for now. And if I can manage to slip away unnoticed, I’ll head over to Kiefer’s place.”

If he stops by Kiefer’s workshop, he’ll be able to fill Candice in on the plan as well. Having this entire operation going into full swing is making me nervous. I’m so bad at lying. I’m going to have to be extra careful not to let on that I know anything.

“Come now. Don’t look so tense! We need you to be able to talk to Laura as if nothing’s changed.”

“And don’t get too upset if you mess up. As long as you keep us informed, Ektor will be able to handle any situation that crops up.”

“Leaving it all up to me, huh? But of course I’ll handle it! If it’s Miku, I’m more

than happy to do whatever it takes!”

*Oh, gosh! Everyone’s giving me so much support! But I know I can rely on them. So there’s no reason to be sad! I’ve never done anything like this before, so of course I’d be a little nervous. I just have to try and not get too dependent on my friends!*

*What are you up to, Laura? You’re not really working against us...right?*

## Chapter 7 | The Butterfly's Wings

**WE** immediately begin putting Ektor's plan into motion. Macro's already gone by the time we get back, with only Claire and Laura in the dining room.

After checking in on them, Ektor says he's going to pay Kiefer a visit and heads back out the door. As he turns to go, our eyes meet, and he gives a tiny nod, imperceptible by anyone other than myself. I guess that's my sign to keep an eye on Claire and Laura. Leave it to me!

"Welcome back, Miku! Ektor seems busy."

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure he got a call almost as soon as we got back."

Laura begins chattering away with her usual enthusiasm as soon as she spots me walking over to the dining room table, and I try to answer as non-committedly as possible. I have no idea if Ektor actually got a call, but I'm okay with small lies like that...! Though honestly, it's enough to make me kind of anxious. I'm so bad at this!

"D-Did everyone head out for work?"

This time Claire answers my question as I try to change the subject. I won't last much longer if we continue talking about things I need to lie about.

"Rinny had a job to do, but said he'll be back later tonight. Angela went for a training session and should be home sometime in the afternoon."

*I see. In that case, I'll have to wait for Angela to come back before I can tell her that Ektor wants to talk to her. I might be able to give Claire a brief overview if we end up being alone together... Wait, what about Macro? He must have left the guild, too, right? Which reminds me... I promised that we'd go to the witch doctor's place together, but then I left him behind... I hope he's not mad. What'll I do if he hates me now?!*

"Which leaves Macro, who went to his room. We were having a really great conversation, too! But as soon as he realized you'd left, he got all flustered. I

tried cheering him up, but he was so upset, he went straight to his room without another word. I guess you planned on going out together, huh? And you went and left him behind.”

“Ngh...”

Laura managed to solidify my thoughts into words. *He looked upset? Oh, no. I really did make him mad! Wh-What kind of excuse can I come up with?! As I desperately wrack my brain for ideas, Claire gently bonks Laura on the head.*

“This is all your fault for talking his ears off. Miku didn’t want to be late, which is understandable. And Macro wasn’t upset, just grumpy and sad. No need for nasty remarks.”

*I see. Macro’s not angry, just sad...which isn’t much better, honestly! I’m such a dummy! This is still all my fault, not Laura’s.*

“Teehee! Sorry. Miku just looks so cute when I tease her, I can’t help it!”

She sticks her tongue out while giggling, and seeing her like that only further solidifies my feelings that she’s not a bad person. Though I wish she’d knock it off with the teasing!

“This whole situation is definitely my fault for talking Macro’s ear off. Miku went on ahead, causing Macro to get upset over the entire situation. I’m sorry.” Laura apologized.

“It’s f-fine! Really. Don’t worry about it!” was my nervous reply. *See? Her honest apology proves that she’s not a bad person. She just likes to joke around because she’s so friendly and outgoing.*

“It’s just that I have the *biggest* crush on Macro, and I really wanted to chat with him.”

“What?”

Despite how much I care for Laura and the pendant around my neck, pain rips through my chest from the mark on my skin. Why? Because she said she has a crush on Macro?

“I’m sorry. I know you like Macro, too...but it looks like I developed my own feelings for him.”

“Laura! Why did you feel the need to tell her that?!”

Laura likes Macro, too...? My chest throbs relentlessly. D-Didn't Claire mention something about a fight between rival characters over a guy? That was around the time Laura and Candice started bickering.

According to what Claire remembers of the original plot, Candice is the rival character for Macro's route in the game. In other words, I guess this isn't Ektor's route after all, but Macro's...

“I'd feel like a big ole liar if I didn't say anything at all. I'm really sorry, Miku. But I refuse to compromise on love. W-With that said! I know we'll find another way to break your curse! I'm sure of it!”

I figured as much. Laura's been acting incredibly touchy-feely with Macro lately. I didn't want to admit that she liked him... I didn't want to believe it, so I didn't push it because I didn't want her to prove my fears were real.

I buried my head in the sand and ignored it. But that doesn't solve anything, does it? All I ever do is avoid painful realities instead of facing them. I always run away. But I have to face facts. Laura is my rival now.

Wh-What do I do? How can I compete against someone as sweet, innocent, but also alluringly charming as her? My self-confidence is embarrassingly low, I have a hard time making decisions, and I have so few things I'm good at... There's no way I can even hope to win... My chest feels so tight, the pain almost unbearable.

“Come on... The way you're talking, it sounds like you've already got your wedding date planned.”

With my head down and my pendant gripped tightly in my fist, I didn't notice Claire stand up and walk over to my side. She places her hand gently on my back, her warmth a huge comfort. I look up to see her shooting daggers at Laura, a sharp glint in her glare.

*W-Wait, Claire! Laura's not a bad person! It's just that she likes Macro, too. That we like the same person doesn't make her the bad guy here... And yet, I can't bring myself to say any of that out loud. Why? I really do believe that Laura isn't doing anything wrong, and yet I can't bring myself to say it out loud. I*

*can't believe what a horrible person I've become. I'm such a coward. I hate this ugly side of me.*

"Well, I mean, the heroine always gets the guy, right?"

"H-Heroine...?"

Just as I find myself about to get dragged into a spiral of self-loathing, her words snap me back to reality. Heroine...? It sounds like a word straight out of Claire's game. Wait... What's going on?

Is she just like Claire, in that she knows the plot of the game? N-No way! I'm jumping to conclusions!

"*yaaawn* I'm suddenly sleepy. Macro probably won't come out any time soon. I'm gonna take a nap! Goodnight."

"Hey! Who said you could leave?!"

Clearly not wanting to continue this conversation any longer, Laura suddenly gets up and wanders off in the direction of her room, pretending like she can't hear Claire, who's shouting after her angrily.

To be fair, that is pretty suspicious... That she has ties to a criminal organization is one thing, and a fact I still don't believe is true, but there's no doubt she's aware of the unfolding story...

I guess this means she's not *my* rival. *I'm* the *heroine's* rival...right? So in other words, things are happening exactly the way Claire said they would. The moment I realize what's going on, the world around me gets fuzzy.

"Let's try and relax for now, okay? I'll go get you a hot cup of tea."

"Th-Thanks."

Claire looks like she's seconds away from chasing Laura down and giving her a piece of her mind, but after seeing how pale I am, she immediately begins fussing over me instead, clearly worried.

"S-sorry for being such a disappointing younger sister." I mumble out of earshot of Claire while she leads me over to a nearby chair before I can topple over and I thank her when she brings me a cup of relaxing herb tea. The two of us sit there in silence, and after a few moments, I realize my fingertips are

slowly starting to warm back up, thanks to the hot beverage. I'm feeling a bit better.

"Claire? I hate to change the subject, but..."

I should take advantage of us having some alone time to fill her in on what happened earlier and our plan moving forward. I really want to talk about this "heroine" business, but I should get this out of the way first.

Claire's expression only grows more grim the more I talk. Once I finish, she crosses her arms, slumps back in her chair, and heaves a huge exasperated sigh.

"An unsavory character, huh? Makes sense. She could be far worse, I guess. Especially considering she remembers her past life."

"S-So Laura really is just like you, Claire?"

"Yes. Without a doubt." She speaks without a moment of hesitation. "I've never heard anyone mention the word heroine outside of myself and Ektor. I doubt most folks here are even familiar with what it means."

The only reason I know it is because Claire's been using that word since as far back as I can remember. That seems to be the deciding factor to Claire, who is convinced beyond a doubt that Laura is another Reborn. Their shared circumstances makes it a certainty.

"So we know for sure that Laura has memories from her previous life, right? But that doesn't necessarily mean she's a bad person."

"Wh-What are you talking about?! Didn't you see what she just did? She was obviously trying to antagonize you, Miku!" She looks at me, seemingly in disbelief, her eyes wide with shock.

"Huh? She was trying to start a fight with me just now? I don't think so," I murmur quietly. Claire simply stares at me incredulously. But I have the right to share how I feel, too!

"Even if what you're saying is true... Falling in love with someone isn't something you can necessarily help. There's no point in getting mad about it..."

"Love is just something that happens, right?" I ask timidly. Claire looks like she's about to say something before stopping herself. This happens several



more times. “D-Did I say something wrong? I’m sorry.”

Claire finally heaves a huge sigh and begins to speak, her tone weary. “I doubt that Laura is actually in love with Macro, despite what she’s said. I respect your opinion, Miku, but I still think Laura is a big fat liar! That’s just the way she is. And this isn’t the first time you’ve been ridiculously nice to someone, to the point of idiocy!”

“D-Don’t you think that’s a bit harsh?”

It’s such a blunt statement that it feels almost like a slap in the face.

“I mean, your niceness is one of your good points, too!” she says, trying to comfort me, but it’s a little too late for that!

“Look, Ektor was right when he said it’s our job to be suspicious of everyone. I’m not one for complimenting that jerk, but I agree with him. It’s okay that you see the good side of Laura. It comes with the territory of being an angel, after all.”

“I’m n-not really an angel.”

Claire calls me that from time to time. But if we’re twins, then wouldn’t that make her an angel, too? She’s always quick to say otherwise. Why am I the only angel?!

“Leave everything to me. So, what are you going to do now?”

“W-Well, Ektor told me to keep an eye on Laura.”

*I feel like I’m being shoved to the side, though now’s not the time to worry about that.* Claire suddenly snaps me out of my thoughts.

“Wrong! You need to march upstairs and apologize to Macro!”

“Hm!”

*I hadn’t been expecting such an enthusiastic response.* Then she flicks my forehead with her index finger. *Ow! Wait, what? I should go see Macro?* I feel my face growing red at her unexpected words.

“Now I’m actually angry. For crying out loud! I’m grateful that Ektor noticed what was going on and followed you. I can’t believe you were about to head out

by yourself!”

“I’m s-sorry!”

*Uh-oh, she’s starting to lecture me for real. She’s right, though. I almost did head into town on my own. It’s only because Ektor suddenly appeared that I didn’t. After getting kidnapped, I promised not to go out anywhere without an escort.*

“I’m not the one you should be apologizing to! Even if you don’t have romantic feelings for him, you should go say you’re sorry for leaving him behind and breaking your promise!”

“You’re right. I will.”

Claire’s right. There’s no doubt I’m to blame for this entire situation. Ugh... How am I going to face him feeling like this? No, this isn’t the time to start feeling sorry for myself!

“I’ll keep an eye on Laura. Though I guess I’m off duty while she’s up in her room.”

“Okay. I’m sorry... But I appreciate everything, Claire.”

*Thanks for making me aware of the situation. If she hadn’t said what she did, things would probably have stayed awkward between me and Macro for a while longer. I’m embarrassed, I feel so bad, and I’m really scared about what Macro might say... But if you do something wrong, you should apologize.*

I squeeze the pendant in my hand, black like Macro’s favorite color, square my shoulders, and head over to his room.



**INHALE.** Exhale... I take several deep breaths. And yet, I still can’t find the courage to make a move. *I’m such a big dummy! But I promised Claire I’d apologize. Okay. Just knock on his door.* I take one more deep breath before reaching forward and knocking... Or at least, I was about to.

When suddenly his door swings open and Macro pokes his head out, looking annoyed. I think my heart stopped for a minute there.

“M-M-M-Macro...!”

“Sorry... But you’ve been standing there for a while now, so I wanted to know why.”

“You n-n-noticed me standing here?!”

He somehow heard me fidgeting outside his room like some kind of burglar! My face is beet red from embarrassment. My ears and tail are sticking straight up, the fur all puffed out. Eeeeeep!

An awkward silence deepens between us. Macro is the first one to break it, unable to stand it a moment more.

“Come in, I guess,” he says, seeing me seemingly frozen in place while hugging my tail to my chest.

*Ugh! I really can’t do anything right! But there’s nothing I can do out here, and I promised I’d apologize.*

After stepping inside, I immediately hear the sound of Macro closing the door behind us. O-Okay. I whirl around on the spot and bow in Macro’s direction.

“I’m s-so sorry!”

“Um...”

He sounds clearly puzzled. I immediately stand up straight, only to see his clearly baffled expression. He seems slightly put off. *D-Don’t give up just yet! You can do this!*

“I know I p-promised that we’d go together, and then I ended up leaving by myself. Which is why...I’m r-really sorry. I heard from Laura that you were upset when you found out.”

My apology flies out in a burst of words as he stands there, stock still with bewilderment. Saying it out loud really brings home how awful I acted. I feel so bad about it. The silence between us deepens for a moment longer, and I realize that the tension in Macro’s body is gone. He finally opens his mouth to speak.

“I was worried.”

“I know...”

I feel so bad... But he really is kind, considering he wasn't angry at me at all, just worried for my safety. Hearing him say that only makes my love for him grow stronger, and I feel my heart ache. It's not painful, though. I remain silent and before long, he asks me a question.

"Did you go by yourself?"

"Well, Ektor appeared almost immediately after I left the house. So he went with me."

"You went with Ektor?"

I answer his question honestly in my attempt at putting him at ease... There's a pause. Then he brings his hand to his mouth, his fingers curled into a fist, as if troubled by something. Huh? Did I say something wrong?

"I see. Good for you," he finally says after a long pause, refusing to look me in the eyes. The expression on his face seems at odds with his words. There's clearly something bothering him.

"Um... Is s-something wrong?" I ask timidly. It might just be my imagination, but Macro seems more on edge than when I first got here. It's probably nothing, but if he's still upset about something, I want to know so I can apologize properly. What he says next, which he offers without more than a glance in my direction, takes me completely by surprise.

"Nope. I just didn't realize Ektor is the guy you liked. He is, right? So...good for you."

"Huh? Whaaat?!"

*Wh-Where is this coming from?! Why does he think I like Ektor?! I'm so startled that my ears and tail immediately stand straight up again! Not expecting my shout of surprise, he turns to face me, his eyes wide in confusion. It's a look I've grown used to over the past few minutes. N-No! This is not the time for random observations!*

"You've got it all wrong."

"Huh?"

Now it's my turn to set things straight. I don't want there to be any more

confusion. Especially because the person I like isn't Ektor...it's Macro.

"Don't tell me it's Rinny?"

"A-A-Absolutely not!"

He tosses out another name, his nose wrinkled in disgust, and I immediately shoot it down. An expression of relief crosses his face as the tension leaves his shoulders. D-Does he really dislike Rinny that much?

"So then, who can it be? Kiefer? No, right? It can't be Wells, meaning the only one left is..."

He strokes his chin in confusion as he tries to work out the answer. Huh? Hold on. It's only a matter of time before he realizes that...

"Huh? That can't be. Can it...?"

He suddenly freezes before speaking gibberish, sounding increasingly more confused. He shoots me a look of blank amazement, and I immediately feel all the blood in my body rush to my cheeks.

*Eeeep!* A few moments pass in silence. It could have been several hours, for all I know. It's not long before Macro's face turns bright red...

*Wh-What do I do?!*

"M-Miku..."

"Um! Haha! L-Look! I'm sorry! I just w-wanted to apologize! Th-That's why I came here! A-And now I'm leaving! Goodbye!"

He's about to say something, but I've reached my limit. I c-can't handle even one moment more! Nope! It's impossible! I'm so flustered that I have no idea what I'm even saying, only that I need to get out of here as quickly as possible. I turn to run out the door when he stops me.

"Wait."

"?!"

The moment I turn to look back at him, he grabs my wrist and pulls me close. My heart's beating so loudly, it sounds like it's inside my ears. I freeze, unable to move. His grip on my wrist feels strangely hot.

“I need you to say it.”

“S-Say what?” I croak, barely able to speak. There’s no way I can look him in the face now! The silence stretches out between us once more. Wh-What does he want me to say? It’s only a few seconds, but it feels like an eternity.

Just as I’m about to open my mouth, Macro does first.

“Actually, n-never mind. I’m sorry.”

“O-Okay.”

And with that, he releases his grip on my wrist. I’m half-relieved but also sad at the same time. “See you,” I murmur quietly before leaving his room for real. I close the door behind me and slump to the ground, my face buried in my hands.

“I love you, Macro...”

My emotions are too strong to keep bottled inside me any longer. But my voice is so quiet, that my words are immediately sucked into the hallway carpet, inaudible to anyone but me.



I head back over to where Claire is, and she immediately starts grilling me after seeing how furiously I’m blushing. “You should have come clean and told him the truth,” she says. I know she’s right, and yet that simple act seemed impossible at the time...

“I just couldn’t do it, Claire! I was panicking and my heart was beating so loud. I had no idea what to do!”

“Oh gosh... You’re so cute. You’re *too cute*, Miku! I’m sorry!”

When she says that with a straight face, though, it makes her sound more angry... *sigh... My face is still hot. He figured it out, didn’t he? He must have! What do I do? How can I ever face him again now that he knows?!*

“Aah!”

“Huh? What’s wrong, Miku?”

*I forgot something super important. I didn’t mention anything to Macro about Ektor’s plan regarding Laura. I can’t go back and tell him now! There’s no way I*

*can face him again after what happened, at least not today!* I begin begging Claire for help before I realize what's happening.

"I should have seen this coming. Look, don't worry. I'll go tell him. Laura's still locked in her room, and Angela should be back soon. I doubt it'll take long, so just wait right here, Miku!"

"Claire! Thank you so much! I love you!"

I can always depend on her for anything! I hug her tightly and she hugs me back. She looks so cute when her pink tail wags side to side. I can tell she's happy!

"Okay, I'll be right back. Oh, but in case Laura comes downstairs, don't feel like you need to talk to her. In fact...go make her tea or something. Okay?"

"G-Got it!"

Laura is one of my best friends. So there's really nothing to be worried about...but I understand everyone's concern, which complicates things. Especially since I get the feeling that Laura is hiding something from me. Though it's only natural that people have one or two things about them they prefer to keep secret.

Still, it seems like whatever it is she's hiding, she's doing it in a way where she wants me to notice what she's doing. She has a secret treasure squirreled away, and she's trying to get me to find it, whatever that may be

"Miku."

"Laura..."

Laura comes up behind me mere seconds after Claire disappears from the room. Her timing is almost too perfect to be a coincidence. Even a slow person like me can tell she planned this so we'd be alone together.

"I'm sorry. I don't get along well with Claire. I mean, how can I when she hates me so much?"

Laura chuckles while scratching absently at her cheek with her index finger, looking kind of sad.

*She's right. She can tell the others are suspicious of her. I mean, it's written on*

*Claire's face every time they're together.*

"I'm sorry," I say, my head bowed, but she simply sits down in the chair next to mine as if it doesn't bother her. She rests her elbow on the table and her chin in her hand before glancing over at me.

"So, Macro seems to be in a good mood, huh?" she says while grinning at me, the joy on her face seemingly genuine. It catches me off guard so much that I yelp in surprise.

"What?!"

*But how? How does she know that? And why is she so happy about it? I mean, I thought she liked Macro?*

"I'm happy for you. Actually, I've been waiting for this. Because I like you so much, Miku. I want you to be happy, from the bottom of my heart. Truly."

"Wait, what? But..."

I don't get the sense that she's forcing the cheerful smile that's on her face. If she's lying, I certainly can't tell... But I have a hunch she's telling the truth.

"I really, truly mean it. I want nothing more than for you to be happy. And yet no matter how much I pray, it never happens. Because I'm the heroine."

"Huh?"

I find myself at a loss for words, feeling as if we're suddenly touching on the heart of the matter. She really did refer to herself as the heroine. My heart starts to race.

"It's called 'rewriting the script'. It's pretty tricky to do, and yet no matter how much I tried, it never worked. Because the heroine is destined to be with the hero. But their love is conditional, and that condition is the existence of a rival the heroine has to fight in order to win over the object of their desire. It's an absolute necessity for a happy ending."

"Wh-What are you saying...?"

She continues, seemingly ignoring my confusion. *The heroine is destined to be with the hero? She means in the story of the game Claire always talks about?* I'm getting so confused, it's hard to think straight.



“Hmm... How do I put this? Basically, in order for the heroine to get together with the hero, there has to be conflict, which in this case is where the rival comes in. Which is why...I feel so bad saying this, considering how much I adore you, Miku, but it's only going to get worse from here. That's just the nature of the story.”

“T-To hell with the story...”

“Now that's not nice. We need the story. Or rather, it's not something you can run from. You're nothing more than a character in it, just like me.”

*There's no doubt about it now. Laura is a Reborn, just like Claire! Her gaze suddenly turns cold, and I feel nervous sweat dripping down my back. Oh, no! Not yet! There's still time! I have to tell her how I feel!*

“I'm not just a character! I'm a living being! And I don't care about the game! I have free will and I can choose my path in life! The story is nothing... To hell with the story!”

The more scared I feel, the louder my voice gets. She suddenly reaches forward, placing her index finger against my lips, shutting me up. With a giggle, she tells me to keep my voice down. The coldness in that finger causes my eyes to widen in shock.

“I'm sorry. I just want to get this over with as quickly as possible. I want to see the ending, you see. It'll be okay. You might have to deal with a lot of pain, but you won't die. I promise.”

Suddenly, butterfly wings seem to unfurl from her back, spreading out to either side of her. That's right, she mentioned she's a Sound Butterfly. Fine dust begins drifting through the air from her wings, sparkling in the light. It's so beautiful, it takes my breath away. They look almost like scales... They're gorgeous.





As I watch in awe, Laura creeps closer before wrapping her arms around me. Then she whispers in my ear.

“Listen well, Miku. Go into the forest by yourself. For no reason in particular. Just don’t come back. Stay in the forest until tomorrow. Got it?”

“I understand...”

My head feels so fuzzy that I find it hard to think straight. Wh-What’s wrong with me? Oh, right. The forest. I have to go to the forest. Right now. I stand up and immediately walk out the door.

## Chapter 8 | The Story's Climax

[Claire]

**AFTER** explaining the situation to Macro, I was suddenly overcome by a very bad feeling. Noticing something was off, he asked what was wrong.

“Honestly, I’ve been having this feeling for a while now... As if something very bad is about to happen.”

“When strong people like you have a hunch, they’re usually right. Something probably *is* about to happen. I’ve been having that bad feeling ever since you got here.”

*I don’t like it. I wish my hunches weren’t always right. But if Macro’s feeling the same way, then there must be some truth to it. That he caught on quickly means I can head back to Miku without wasting too much extra time. I’m worried about her.*

“At any rate, Angela should be back soon, so let’s all get together in the dining room. We’ll let Laura come to us when she’s ready.”

“Sounds good.”

In agreement on what to do next, the two of us head back to the dining room. I know Miku might feel uncomfortable being in the same room as him...but she’ll just have to deal with it.

Meanwhile, Macro looks the same as always. I wish he’d gotten at least a little upset after hearing what Miku’s dealing with right now. Don’t tell me he’s not interested in her?! No... That’s impossible. He’s just the type of guy who’s impossible to read. That has to be it.

Upon arriving in the dining room, we notice there’s already someone there. When did they get here?! It’s Angela, sneaking in without anyone noticing. It’s probably a habit she picked up through her line of work.

“I didn’t realize you were back yet. Welcome home.”

“Well, well. Claire and Macro. Hey there.”

She seems to have already entered post-work relaxation mode, leaning back comfortably in a chair while sipping a glass of water. Huh? I told Miku to make some tea.

A chill races up my spine. My tail puffs straight up. She’s not here.

“Miku? Where’s Miku?!”

“Miku? She wasn’t here when I got back.”

This is the worst way to get such a terrifying premonition... Macro and I exchange glances upon hearing her say that.

“Th-Then what about Laura? Where is she?!”

“Hold on, just calm down, Claire. I’m sure she’s in her room. Or at least, that’s the impression I got. But Miku’s not here.”

“What do you mean, she’s not here?!”

My heart’s pounding frantically. *What’s going on? I was only gone for a few moments! No, I can’t let myself panic. I need to calm down.* I squeeze my eyes shut before slowly opening them.

“She wasn’t planning on going out somewhere?”

“No. She had no other plans taking her out of the house for the rest of the day. Besides, she just promised me she wouldn’t go out anywhere by herself.”

Angela, who must have realized something weird was going on, straightens up in her seat while scanning her surroundings with a sharp eye. She’s taking a calm approach to the problem. I should follow her example and not let my emotions run away from me. Though right now all I feel like doing is screaming at the top of my lungs!

“She’s not the type of girl who goes around breaking promises. I went to talk to Macro about something and was only gone for a few moments... There’s no way she would have slipped out for no reason.”

Something happened. I feel confident enough despite the lack of evidence.

Squeezing my hands into fists, I'm about to head out in an attempt to track her down when Angela stops me.

"Claire, you need to calm down. I'll go out and see if I can find her, okay?"

"B-But you just got back."

"What are you babbling about? This is an emergency, right? And tracking down missing people is my specialty. Leave it to me."

"Angela... Thank you!"

She immediately runs out of the guild, promising to get in touch with us using the magic devices Kiefer made for us as soon as she found Miku. Angela's always so helpful.

Okay, time to figure out what we can do to find her from here. Just as the thought crosses my mind, I hear surprised voices coming from the front door. It sounds like Rinny and Ektor.

"Hey, you guys. What's all the commotion? Rinny's here to save the day!"

"Rinny, you idiot! Clearly *something's* wrong based on how Angela looked rushing out of here! Macro, Claire! What happened?!"

Having managed to come back at the perfect time, the two rush into the dining room to meet us. *Great! Now we can work together to find Miku.* I briefly tell the guys about the situation we're dealing with.

"Also, Ektor? Miku told me a little about what's going on. And I told Macro. Angela left before I could say anything to her, though."

"I see. That's good enough for now. I already filled Kiefer, Candice, and Rinny in."

I have no idea when Laura will show up again, but I decide to throw caution to the wind by dropping that piece of information. Ektor is quickly able to guess what I'm talking about from just that. Not that I'm surprised.

*Now then, let's think about this rationally. Why would Miku suddenly take off? I feel like I'm missing some important piece of the puzzle... Or story, perhaps. Yes, that has to be it. The reason why I've had this bad feeling for so long. Everything bad that's happened has been directly connected to the main*

*storyline.*

“We can, by all means, go running around without a plan, but I have a hunch there’s something going on here.”

“Yeah, I feel the same way.”

Ektor, who knows the plot as well as I do, seems to be in agreement. Which leaves us with the question of which plot are we working off of?

“This is a cutscene from the game. You don’t recognize it?”

A cheerful voice suddenly cuts us off. The fur on my tail puffs out, and I whirl around to confront the owner of the voice. I glance over and see Ektor is likewise ready to start a fight.

“Laura...!”

“You’re scaring me, you guys. The way you’re looking at me makes me think you want to kill me.”

She sounds pretty amused for someone who’s apparently terrified. What’s wrong with her?

As she slowly approaches us, she begins speaking while glancing between Ektor and myself.

“So, you’re wondering which route the heroine, myself, has decided on? The game is fast approaching its conclusion, you know. And the climax usually involves the heroine getting out of a sticky situation. Or did you forget that, Ektor? Claire?”

There’s no doubt about it. Laura’s a Reborn.

Th-That’s fine, I expected as much. But how did she know me and Ektor are the same? I’ve never been this scared in my life. Meanwhile, Ektor continues glaring at Laura, his defenses on high alert.

“You can’t change the story, you know. You’re stuck with the plot the way it is, all the way up till the end.”

She suddenly turns deadly serious. *We can’t change the story? Don’t be silly. I’ve done everything I can up until now to do exactly that! And I won’t let Laura*



*have her way if I can help it.*

“I have no idea how familiar you two are with the game, but regardless, you’re no match for me.”

*What? Just because she’s the heroine? And that the heroine always gets what she wants? Don’t be ridiculous!* But what she says next catches me completely off guard.

“Because I’m the one who wrote it. I *made* this world. For all intents and purposes, I’m God.”

That look on her face, her smile nothing more than a perfectly curved half-circle with no reflection of mirth in her eyes, is nothing like the Laura I know... She looks more like your stereotypical final boss in your average run-of-the-mill RPG.

“What are you guys even talking about? All this stuff about stories and gods. It’s like you’ve all lost your minds at the same time!”

Rinny ends up breaking the tense silence between us. Seeing him standing there with his arms crossed, his usual expression of total incomprehension on his face, causes me to giggle.

“Heehee! You and Macro must be completely lost, huh? Which makes sense.”

“I have no idea what that means, but I can tell you’re making fun of me!”

His remark doesn’t seem to have any effect on Laura, though. The way she seems to look down on him rubs me the wrong way. I’m personally grateful Rinny’s here right now. Though he probably could have picked a better time to interject.

Still, if what Laura says is right, then we’re in big trouble. But I don’t fully understand what she means. Is she implying that she’s played the game so many times that her knowledge is comparable to that of a god? Or that she really *is* a god? No, that makes even less sense than before! There’s no God in the original story!

“Rinny, Macro...I’ve told you about this before. Since we were kids, in fact. That this world we live in is part of a game. You never believed me, though.”

Ektor speaks to his friends without taking his eyes off Laura. “I told you! I was telling the truth!” The tone in his voice makes it sound like Rinny and Macro wrote off Ektor’s ramblings as nothing more than fantastical ramblings. Meanwhile, Miku believed everything I said right from the start.

“Huh? Everything you said was true? Come on, there’s no way you can expect us to believe that...”

Even now they’re finding it hard to swallow. Which makes sense. And under normal circumstances, it wouldn’t be that weird for them to get upset about being fed what sounds like a bunch of outrageous lies. But we can’t move forward without them believing us. So I guess it’s up to me. I’ll put aside my feelings to help him out.

“Rinny, he’s telling the truth. I also have memories from my past life. I know about the game, too.”

“Everything he said was true?”

Macro mutters quietly under his breath. It’s easy to ignore something as ridiculous if only one person says it, but it’s much harder with another person backing them up, giving their words weight.

Faced with the current situation, Rinny and Macro find themselves starting to believe what we’ve been telling them. It’ll be close to impossible to make them believe everything, but this is good enough for now.

“Why didn’t you believe me when I said it? You know what? It doesn’t matter... As long as you’re on board, we can keep going.”

*I understand why he’s upset, but maybe this isn’t the best time to start yelling at your friends!* Meanwhile, Laura’s simply standing there with a relaxed smile on her face. Almost like she’s waiting for us to finish our conversation. I can’t figure her out at all!

And that she looks so laid-back and unconcerned is freaking me out!

“So all we need to do is get Laura, then?”

“Pfft! Hahaha! You’re so dumb, Rinny. I made you up myself, and yet I’m still blown away by the truly idiotic things you say sometimes.”

Hearing Rinny's suggestion, Laura immediately loses it, literally doubled over with laughter. But that doesn't matter! What was that she said about making Rinny herself?! And if it's true, then that would make her...!

The moment my mouth snaps shut, the amusement on Laura's face instantly vanishes, causing all of us to tense up once more.

"You can try to catch me all you want. But there are probably better ways to spend what little time you have left."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You said so yourself a moment ago, Ektor. About the cutscene."

*We can figure this all out later! We need to make sure Miku's okay first! Laura dropping hints is one thing, but we can't make a move until we figure out which story we're following first!*

*Think hard. Let's see... If she picked Macro's route, then that means the climactic plot point is...* I suddenly turn pale when I realize. It can't be!

"Miku gets attacked by a monster..."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Rinny raises an eyebrow in my direction out of confused frustration, but I'm too overwhelmed to answer. That's right. Near the end of Macro's route, the heroine is attacked by a monster in the forest. After finding out Laura, the heroine, has gone into the woods by herself, Macro rushes over, managing to save her in the nick of time.

This immediately leads to the confession scene, where he realizes he loves her. Or at least, that's what happens in the *good* ending. If you don't make it in time, the monster kills her, leading to the *bad* ending. I can feel sweat trickling down my back at the thought.

"B-But the person who gets attacked is the heroine. Which should be *you*, Laura!" Ektor accuses pointing right at Laura.

*H-He's right. It's not time to panic just yet. The heroine is the one who gets attacked in the original scenario. Meaning Miku shouldn't be in danger... Plus, she'd never just wander into the forest by herself. It's just one implausible*

*scenario after another!*

“Hahaha! I never actually intended to become the heroine you know. In fact, I never wanted that role. Which is why I did what I did.”

She spreads her wings while she speaks. They’re beautiful black butterfly wings, the same color as her hair, and covered in glittering scales. *Ugh... Looking at it is making my head feel fuzzy. Those scales must have some kind of mind-control effect... Mind control? Wait a second...?! That the kidnappers were being controlled by a mysterious third party randomly flashes through my head.*

“I relinquished the title of heroine to Miku.”

Ektor and the others must have come to the same conclusion as soon as they saw the scales. In other words, they’ve figured out that Laura was the mastermind behind Miku’s original kidnapping.

Everyone, including myself, covers their mouths with their arms to try and avoid inhaling the scales fluttering from her wings. There’s a piercing look of concentration in their eyes as they all go pale. I’m sure I look just as bad as they do.

“You forced Miku to go into the woods, didn’t you? S-So she could get attacked by that monster...”

Before I can finish talking, Macro runs out of the room. *W-Wait, what?! I’ve seen this exact scene before! I know this isn’t the time or place, and yet I can’t stop my mind from replaying the cutscene in horrifying detail! It’s painful to watch, and yet it’s the motivation I need to get moving!*

“Yep, yep. It’s pretty neat seeing the heroic rescue scene play out right in front of you! Though, in this case, Miku’s the heroine, not me.”

“What’s wrong with you?!”

“Are you sure you shouldn’t follow him? After all, in the original story...”

*She’s right. In the original story, everyone goes with Macro in order to save the heroine, though it’s only Macro who saves her in the nick of time. And when I say she’s a hair’s breadth away from death, I’m not exaggerating! In the context of the game, it’s exciting, but I don’t want to experience that sort of*

*excitement in real life! Especially since there's a chance we might not make it in time. Getting a bad ending with the implication being you die for real is no joke!*

We quickly chase after Macro, who's heading in the direction of the nearby forest. For some reason, Laura joins us. What's her problem?!

"Come on, why aren't you getting in touch with the other guild members? The story won't work without them!"

Cackling gleefully, she keeps offering advice on what we should do next. I know already! I want to change the story, but I have to follow it for now if I don't want to put Miku in any further danger. *Aaah! This is so frustrating!*

"Shut up! All you keep talking about is the story this and the story that! I don't care about your freakin' story!"

Just as I'm about to give Laura a piece of my mind, Macro beats me to it. He shouts back from the head of the pack, more audibly upset than I've ever heard him before. No way. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen Macro get angry even once in the game. Seeing Ektor and Rinny's eyes widen in surprise, I guess this is a first for them, too.

"I'm going to save Miku, and I'm doing so of my own free will!"

He shouts before speeding up. *Y-You're going too fast!* It doesn't seem to matter to Rinny, who's always bragging about how fast he is, but I'm quickly left behind, and moments later, they disappear from view. I know how dire this situation is, but a part of me is relieved that Macro is taking this so seriously.

Because I'm finally feeling hopeful for the first time. Maybe Macro and Miku really *will* end up together?

The way things are going, it's very possible. There's a high chance that Miku, as the heroine, will get her happy ending. I know I shouldn't get my hopes up, but I can't help it.



**[Miku]**

**THE** sun is setting and the forest is getting dark. *Huh? What am I doing here? I*

*had to come here alone for some reason, which is why I literally flew here. But why? I have no reason to be here. Gosh, I have no idea! My head feels all fuzzy. At any rate, I guess I'll just keep going. Maybe I'll figure it out as I go. There's too many trees in the forest, making it difficult to fly. It might be easier if I walk.*

With that decided, I fold my wings of light, land on the ground, and head deeper into the forest, which grows darker and darker.

*I have to spend the night here, right? That's kind of scary. It's dark and I'm scared of being here by myself. Did I really have something I needed to do out here?*

I can feel the presence of some vague memory, but it leaves me feeling nervous and uncomfortable. *If only I could remember something...!*

Once I'm pretty deep in the woods, alarm bells start going off in my head, and I stop. I shouldn't go any further. It's dangerous. Wait, *why* is it dangerous?

"Ow..."

My head hurts, and I press my hand against my forehead. *Should I go back? Am I allowed to leave the forest?* My instincts are screaming at me that it's dangerous to go any further, but the moment I turn to head back, I feel something seething with murderous rage running straight at me, and I dive to the side, panicked.

"Oh... Oh no."

I hear the rustling of grass before a loud roaring sound echoes loudly through the trees, like something being torn apart. Startled, I fall backwards onto my butt, only to see a large monster plunge its claws into the trunk of a tree before ripping it to shreds.

*If I hadn't jumped aside when I did, those claws would be tearing my body apart instead of the poor tree.* The moment I realize that, a chill races through my entire body.

*I haven't seen a monster this large aside from when that horde of monsters attacked our village.* This is certainly the first time I've seen one this close, and my legs are shaking too hard for me to stand back up.

Though if it wasn't for all those intense training sessions Claire made me do since we were kids, I wouldn't have been able to instinctively dodge as well as I did. Good job, me... *Wait! This isn't the time for a pat on the back!*

"The fog in my head is clearing up...! I was *tricked* into coming here!"

But by who...? I know the answer to that. Laura did it. It all started when I inhaled those scales fluttering from Laura's wings. But why did she do it? Even young kids know the forest is full of dangerous monsters. It's especially dangerous at night. So why would she make me go into the forest by myself?

*Coming to a place like this without any idea of where I am or what I'm doing here is a recipe for disaster, no matter how many lives I might have. Does Laura really hate me that much? Because I like the same guy she does?*

I'm sad at first. *I guess she really did betray us, huh? No, I can't let myself think that way. I still believe she's a good person until I hear her say otherwise. I promised myself I would always trust her. I won't cry. And I'll believe in Laura until the very end!*

I smack myself as hard as possible in the leg, somehow managing to squash my fear. I have to figure out a way to deal with this situation. The monsters will get me for sure if I just sit here, too scared to move!

I manage to get to my feet despite my trembling legs. Maybe sensing my magic potential, the monster seems to be waiting to see what my next move will be.

*I'm sure I'll be able to escape. It's going to be okay.*

"I need to tell Macro how I feel!"

I ran away without telling him how I truly felt, and there's no way I'm going to let things end like this! If I'm going to die anyway, I want it to be from the curse. No matter how painful that might be.

With a low growl, the monster focuses on me. It seems to have made up its mind while I was standing there, wasting time.

*Gosh, I'm so slow, even at the worst of times! But I refuse to give up. I know Claire will notice I'm gone right away. I'm sure she's out looking for me right*

*now. And in that case, it should be easy for her to find me. I have to give her a sign!*

“Right, just like when I was kidnapped!”

“Grawh?!”

I let out the brightest flash of light I can muster. The forest is so dark that it'd be impossible for anyone nearby *not* to notice. It's so dazzling, that it temporarily blinds the monster, distracting it. The monster stumbles back in surprise and I immediately take off running.

*Yes, this is good. Legs, don't fail me now!* I think to myself as I try putting distance between myself and the beast. I just need to get to a spot where the trees start to thin out. But I can't get too close to town either. The light I'm emitting is so bright that it'll attract monsters from all over, and I don't want to put the town in danger.

I'm scared. I can tell the monster is right behind me. All I want is to soar high up into the sky, but the trees are still so thick that my wings will only end up getting caught in the branches. Worst case scenario, I'll fall and that'll be the end of me. If I can just find some sort of clearing, I can escape into the sky.

*There's no one nearby, so it'll be some time before help can reach me. I know someone's coming for me, but I'm not sure how long that will take. All I want to do right now is burst into tears.*

“——Miku!”

I hear someone call my name. I glance around in panic, my ears twitching this way and that, but I don't see anyone. Still, I could have sworn I heard a voice...

“Miku!!”

This time, I hear it more clearly. I desperately try to find the owner of the voice. There's no mistake. I'd recognize that voice anywhere! It's...!

“Macro!!”

I know for sure that voice belongs to Macro. It's absolutely Macro's voice. Tears start rolling down my cheeks. *He came to save me...*

The moment that voice I was hoping to hear more than any other reaches my



ears, I let my guard down completely. It's the one thing I shouldn't have done under any circumstances. And especially in the middle of a fight, letting one's guard down equals death. I did it anyway.

Which is exactly when I was hit by a surprise attack from right in front of me.

I'm not really sure what happened. But whatever the monster did, it sends me flying. I slam into the trunk of a large tree with a loud *wham* before slumping down to the ground.

"Wh-What's going on?"

By all rights, I should be dead right now. But even more miraculously, I'm not even in any pain, despite flying through the air and smashing into a tree.

*D-Does that mean I'm dead?! Hold on a minute. That can't be true. Just calm down. My magic light might have switched off automatically due to the impact of my body hitting the tree, but I know I'm still alive!*

I slowly sit up before patting my face, checking to make sure I'm still in one piece... There's no pain anywhere, even after being thrown that large distance. That's when I finally notice I'm surrounded by a shield of some sort.

"Is this protection magic? B-But how?"

*Who cast this spell?* As I try to sense where the caster is, I realize it's coming from the pocket of my skirt. I immediately reach into my pocket. There's something in here...

"A magic stone? It seems to be some kind of ward. But when did I get this?"

I have no idea, but there's no denying that it literally saved my life. And it still has a lot of magic left inside. It's small enough that it can only cast a spell of protection over whoever's carrying it, which is exactly what happened when the monster sent me flying.

*I don't think I can get hurt while it's switched on, but I'm also not sure how long it'll last.*

The first step is to stand back up. Just as I'm about to... I realize my legs are way too wobbly to hold my weight. *I don't think I can do it. This can't be happening... B-But to be fair, I was really scared! I thought I was dead!*

*What do I do? Should I try and fight the monster while relying on the stone's power to protect me?* On the verge of giving up, a shadowy figure races past me with tremendous speed.

I watch as the figure runs up to the monster before punching it square in the face, sending it flying. The blow is so powerful that it completely knocks the monster out.

"Macro..."

"Miku?!"

I cry out faintly to the powerful presence so much bigger than his actual size, and he whirls around. He immediately rushes over to me, clearly upset. As soon as he notices the magical barrier surrounding my body, he heaves a huge sigh of relief before dropping to his knees.

"I thought I was too late..." he murmurs, his voice trailing off into silence as he hangs his head. I can tell he was really worried about me. Looking closer, I notice he's shaking. He's such a sweet guy. I take his hand in mine, squeezing it tightly. *Hahaha... my hand's shaking, too.* But I can't let that stop me this time.

"U-Um, I'm really sorry for worrying you. But I'm really happy you ca... Ack?!"

Before I finish thanking him, Macro pulls me into his arms. He's hugging me so tightly, I'm having trouble breathing, but I let him do so without complaint, understanding how clearly worried he was about me.

"You really are going to give me a heart attack at this rate."

"I'm s-sorry."

"I'm glad you're okay."

"Me too... Thank you, Macro."

I can feel the tension drain from his shoulders. Having his arms wrapped around me like this feels so comforting. *I wish we could stay like this forever.* A part of me knows that the only place I ever feel safe like this is in his arms.

"I don't ever want to lose you, Miku," he murmurs quietly as he clings to me, his eyes closed. "But more than that, I don't want you to get hurt."

“M-Me neither...”

“And I don’t want you to suffer.”

“...”

“I was so scared. When I saw you go flying through the air like that...I thought you were dead for sure...I felt so helpless. Don’t leave me. Please.”

That last line, sounding so much like a spoiled kid, throws me for a loop. It’s unusual for the always cool and collected Macro to talk this much. Overwhelmed with love for him, I realize that, despite this not being the most ideal spot for a confession, I can’t hold it in any longer.

“Smile for me.”

“Huh?”

He suddenly releases me from his embrace before holding my shoulders in both hands and looking deep into my eyes. They shine with such earnestness that I can’t look away.

“I want that smile of yours by my side forever. Without you, there’s no point in living.”

“...!”

*Wh-What does he mean? D-Don’t tell me that he’s...?* I feel my face flush with heat. I stare at Macro in disbelief.

“You r-really want to be with me?”

“Yes. And only you.”

“U-Um... Closer than anyone else?”

“Yes, the closest.”

“F-Forever?”

“Yes. Forever. I want to be with you for the rest of my life.”

He answers each question I timidly throw his way. And after digesting every word, I find myself so overwhelmed with emotion that I burst into tears. Is this what happiness feels like?

“Macro! Mm... Macro! Macro...!”

“Yes, Miku?”

I can't seem to speak under the onslaught of emotions that have been building up inside me. But more than anything, I'm filled with pure joy from hearing my favorite person in the world say they want to be with me forever. I find myself adoring those kind eyes and sweet voice more than ever.

“I... I love you... *sniffle* I love you so much, Macro!”

“I do, too.”

“Waaah... Waaaah!”





As I burst into tears like a baby, Macro wraps his arms around me once more. He's gentler this time, though there's still a feeling of power in his embrace.

"Everything's okay now. I'll always protect you, from curses or anyone who tries to get you. Because you mean so much to me, and I love you."

I was finally able to tell him how I felt, and it turned out that he shared those feelings. *Can miracles like this exist in real life? Is this really happening? Am I allowed to feel this happy?*

This should be a joyful moment, and yet I'm sobbing so hard that I'm sure I look awful. Macro continues hugging me regardless, as if waiting patiently for me to calm down.

"You're so cute, Miku."

"Mmm..."

He keeps raining kisses down on my forehead, and cheeks. I'm so embarrassed that my face feels as hot as one of Claire's Fox Fire attacks, and yet I'm so very happy...

All I want is to be wrapped in Macro's warmth forever and ever.



"**BREAK** it up, you two! I guess it's about time for some serious spoilers, huh?"

The sound of that unmistakably cheerful voice causes Macro to immediately tense up. Huh? What's going on? Is that Laura?!

"Wow, you really can't read the room, can you?"

"No, actually, I kind of appreciate it..."

"Heeheehee! You're welcome, Ektor."

And Claire, Ektor, and Rinny are here, too?! And Angela and Candice are right behind them... Wait a minute. What are the Lanakiller guild members doing here?!

"It's rude to watch."

"Hahaha! We didn't mean to. But you guys started getting all lovey-dovey

right in front of us.”

*Everyone saw that? Oh gosh! I’m so embarrassed, I want to crawl into a hole and disappear!* I try to pull away from Macro, but he only tightens his grip on me, pulling me closer. E-Eep...!

“What are you guys doing here? You didn’t all have to come.” With his arms wrapped around me almost protectively, Macro asks in his usual completely emotionless voice. Meanwhile, I’m over here on the verge of panicking. How does he always stay so calm?!

“I’m glad you asked, Macro. I was worried we wouldn’t have time to get everyone from the guild together. I’m not sure if it would have made a difference toward the outcome of the story, but I didn’t want any regrets if Miku met an unfortunate fate.”

“I’m really starting to hate this stupid story... Though I understand wanting everyone to be together for the ending!”

“I see. So in other words, this forest is the setting for a scene in the game, right?” I ask, and both Claire and Ektor nod.

Claire then goes on to explain how, in the happy ending, everyone in the guild shows up in the forest together. She made sure everyone made it here to ensure my safety. She was worried that if someone was missing, it would mess with the story, or in other words, lead to the bad ending, and she didn’t want anything to happen to me.

“Did you forget about something? Before we get to your happy ending, you still have a big problem to solve.”

“Right. Like who put *you* in charge, Laura? Is there some kind of spoiler you can tell us to convince us you’re telling the truth?”

Oh! That’s right! There’s no doubt in my mind that Laura made me go to the forest. I want to believe otherwise, but there’s no denying the facts... In the blink of an eye, everyone’s gathered around me in a protective huddle, all glaring angrily at Laura. I’m grateful they care about me so much, and they have every right to be angry, but m-maybe tone it down just a little. Okay?

“I’m not sure if there’s anything I can tell you that you’ll believe. But there’s



no reason to 'get' me, considering I didn't do anything wrong."

"Are you serious? You're the one who put Miku in danger by making her come here!"

Despite the wave of hostility directed at her, Laura remains cool as always. She doesn't even flinch when Rinny lashes out at her. *Sh-She's so strong...* But after hearing Ektor's words, she raises both hands placatingly in front of her, as if in surrender.

"Don't worry. I have no plans of doing anything else... It's all over."

And with that, a look of relief crosses her face as she smiles. It's a look that's not innocent and not sexy, either, but one full of compassion...and for some reason, I can't seem to look away.

"You've only thought about yourself this entire time. Why should we trust you *now?!?*"

But no one else seems to feel the same way I do. Claire seems especially angry, clearly about to start something, as I realize she's surrounded by several balls of Fox Fire. *W-Wait! Calm down!* Realizing what a bad spot she's in, Laura raises both arms higher as she starts to panic.

"W-Wait! This is no joke! Butterflies are weak to fire! Very, very weak! Let me talk! I promise I'll explain everything! I have no fighting abilities to begin with, so if you wanted to catch me, it wouldn't be very hard," she adds.

Even if she was strong, she'd have no chance of escaping while being surrounded by this many people. Hearing how desperate she truly is causes everyone to calm down somewhat. Claire's Fox Fires vanish. *Thank goodness!*

"You can tell us your story, but only if you let us tie you up first."

"If it'll make you feel better. I have no intention of resisting. Oh, actually, if you're worried, why not cast some kind of restraint spell? That will keep the scales from flying off my wings."

I guess even Laura realizes no one will believe her no matter what she says. Ektor nods before placing a magical device around Laura's neck and tying both her hands together. It's clear that she really does have no intention of resisting

by the way she simply stands there, allowing him to do so.

“I have no idea if there are any other monsters lurking nearby, and Miku needs a rest after that ordeal. So let’s head back to the guild for now.”

Everyone agrees with Ektor’s suggestion, and we start heading in the direction of home...however...

“I’m sorry, Macro.”

Still unable to stand, Macro ends up carrying me on his back. *I’m s-s-so embarrassed!* He seems completely unfazed, but I’m so self-conscious that my cheeks are bright red.

“I can’t stand it! She’s so cute!!”

“Of course, she is, Ektor. My Miku is an angel, after all.”

That everyone is looking at me so kindly is only making it worse! Then Ektor comments on my cuteness, and Claire calls me an angel without a second thought!

“Don’t get any ideas, Ektor. Miku’s mine.”

“Stop pouring salt in the wound, Macro!”

*I c-can’t believe Macro said something like that! He c-called me his! I’m such a mess of emotions that all I can do is bury my face against his back. Rrgghh! But I’m so happy...*



**ONCE** we get back to the guild, we all gather in the dining room. Laura sits in a chair furthest from the door, with Ektor and Claire to either side. Rinny stands behind her. Macro and I are sitting across from her, with Angela standing behind us.

“This feels like a pretty ironclad defense!”

“We don’t want you getting away.”

“I already told you, I’m not going to run. Especially with my magic under lock and key.”

Laura chuckles in exasperation, causing Rinny to snort in disgust. To be

honest, I think they've gone a little overboard. But I understand how they feel. I'm glad that Laura doesn't seem to mind. Though I feel bad for her.

"So? Hurry up and spit it out."

Ektor snaps as soon as everyone else has settled down on the nearby couch. "Okay," Laura responds, and she begins talking, her bound hands clasped lightly on top of the table in front of her.

"It's kind of long, unfortunately. And I'm going off the assumption you know I'm a Reborn and what that means. If you don't, well...tough luck!"

Those who seemed confused by Laura's use of the word "Reborn" included everyone who didn't know anything about the game or the story within it. To be fair, it would take a while to explain. First, you'd need to convince them that a fantastical story is actually true...

Kiefer is the first to break the awkward silence.

"Reborn? Did you really just say what I think you did?! Wow. Amazing. I didn't realize people like you actually existed. Hey, do you have memories of your own death? How much do you remember of your previous life?"

"K-Kiefer! Shush! This isn't the time for any of that!"

"Hahaha! Can't fault a guy for asking. I'm a curious fellow by nature."

Kiefer seems just as laid-back about this as Laura does! I cringe internally, but Laura simply turns her benevolent gaze on him. Her eyes seem so kind. *I know Laura didn't do anything bad. That's how I feel, at least.*

"Gosh! What does it matter? Not like I understand what's going on anyway. But I'm great at figuring things out on the fly, so just get on with it already."

"I agree with her. I'll come to my own conclusion and ask for more information later if need be."

"I should also be able to make a suitable decision based on the facts presented."

"Me, too."

W-Wow. Of course Kiefer wants to know every single detail of what's going

on, but I'm impressed by how flexible everyone is.

"Hahaha! I figured as much. You guys are making me all emotional. It's weird seeing characters you created acting with their own free will."

Laura smiles happily after hearing everyone's answer. She looks like she's about to cry, and I find myself piping up in response.

"Tell us what you need to, Laura."

"M-Miku..."

Angela calls my name, worried, but I just smile back at her.

"Don't look so concerned, guys. I promise I'm not hurt at all. I smile at Macro, who seems the most worried out of everyone here, before turning back to Laura once more.

"You always had us in mind with the decisions you made, right, Laura? That's how I feel, at least." I ask with a smile, only to be met by a chorus of groans from around the room.

*Wait, what? Why are they reacting like that? Why do they sound annoyed?* I see Claire bury her face in her hands before looking up at the ceiling.

"Oh gosh, Miku! You're *too* angelic sometimes... I know that's how you are, but this is really pushing it."

Everyone's nodding in agreement. *Uh oh... Does that mean they all disagree with me? It's kind of discouraging. But it's not like I'm blindly believing in her. I have my reasons.*

"B-But Claire! I really believe there's some misunderstanding here. I mean, Laura has this look in her eyes that's just really kind. Almost like how a mom looks at her kids."

"She's never looked at me with anything even resembling hostility, and even now, she emits a warmth that's hard to ignore. I know that her words and actions have made people angry, but I also know that she never meant for that to happen." My desperate pleas are met with a lukewarm reception. *Huh? No one agrees with me? Come on! I know I'm right!*

"Gosh. I give up. Miku is a hundred times more angelic than I ever imagined

she was. You're such a soft-hearted and gullible person that you're making your mom worried about you."

Laura shoots me a troubled look. Then she begins speaking, prefacing her story with the words, "I'm sure none of you will believe what I'm about to say, but Miku is right. I want nothing more than for all of you to be happy. Because all of you are my creations. So of course I see you as my children! And all I want is for all of you to have the happiest ending possible."

The toothy smile she shows us is less like the innocent Laura I've come to know and more like that of a close friend. Maybe this is the real Laura? Everyone still seems skeptical, but at least they seem a little less guarded. They must have realized she really doesn't mean anyone any harm.

"Th-Then that would mean that you really are..."

"Yes. I wrote the original story for the game. Which is how I know this world better than anyone. I'm sorry, but I had to figure out a way for all of us to get together in the end! That's what my boss told me to do! Desperate times call for desperate measures, as they say."

*I'm still not sure what she means, but based on everything else she's saying, I guess that means she helped create this game that Claire's always talking about. Wait... If that's true, she's really amazing!*

I glance over to see a mix of emotions on Claire's face, ranging from excitement to frustration, though I'm not sure if it's because of what Laura's saying or something else. I mean, she's told me so many times how much she loved the game. She's probably happy to be standing so close to someone involved with the game's creation, but also annoyed at all the trouble she caused.

Ektor seems to share her feelings, as he looks just as perplexed. The two of them really are very similar.

"But before I say anything else, come with me on a slight detour into my past," she chuckles briefly before getting serious once more.

## Chapter 9 | Our Story

**LAURA** takes us back to the exact moment when she realized she had memories of a previous life. It sounds very similar to Claire's experience, which I guess proves that Laura's a Reborn, too.

"I wasn't born with these memories. In fact, I didn't start remembering my previous life until around my seventh birthday. Though as soon as I remembered, I realized that, based on my race and name, I was in the game that I'd created. I never thought I'd be reincarnated as the heroine in my own story," she says, laughing. "The realization left me distraught," she continues.

*Huh? Why?! I've never seen her act anything close to hopeless!*

"I never wanted to become the heroine. Mainly because there's no way I could ever fall in love with my own creations. I'm not saying that writers who've placed themselves in the protagonist's position don't exist, but that's not me. I love my characters, but they're nothing more than my babies set in a miniature world I made for them. Falling in love with any of them is simply out of the question."

Which is why, she explained, if that was her fate no matter what, she realized it'd probably be better for her to stay in her village instead of leaving and joining the Lanakiller guild.

If she needed to leave for work, she could simply go somewhere else. The whole plan sounds similar to ours. Claire figured I'd stay safe as long as we simply lived out the rest of our lives in our small village.

"But the story always finds a way to continue in the manner it was designed. There was an incident that led me to realize I couldn't escape fate."

*The story always finds a way to continue? Oh, I remember hearing someone mention something similar before.*

*It's kind of scary if you think about it... In my case, no matter how hard I tried, I still ended up falling under the effects of my curse. Though the person I ended*

*up loving wasn't who we expected it to be.*

"An incident? I don't remember anything like that in the heroine's past." Claire questions.

"Well, you see, my village was swallowed up in a sea of flames. I was the sole survivor." Laura answers.

"What?!" our entire group gasped.

*Laura's entire village was destroyed?!* A somber silence falls over the room after our outburst as we struggle to digest such a grim past.

"A village filled with demi-butterflies meant everything and everyone quickly perished in the flames. We'd built our houses to withstand fire since we knew our kind was especially weak to it...but against five or six fire-breathing monsters, it was only a matter of time before everything was engulfed in a sea of flames." Laura says gazing off into the distance.

"The shelters we'd built to protect ourselves were meaningless in the face of such a destructive force. And my once peaceful life was instantly snatched away from me."

I shudder in response to her words. The same thing would have happened to our village, too, if we had been one step slower. I can't believe Laura actually experienced it first-hand.

Village destruction by monsters happens all over our world. Every village tends to have countermeasures in place for random attacks, but in the face of an entire horde or a natural disaster, it's simply not enough.

So why not move to the safety of a big city, you're probably asking, but there's so many people in the city that you might not be able to find a place to live, let alone afford housing. Besides, certain produce and other goods are often unique to a specific area. Uprooting one's life is never that easy.

"The scene was pure chaos, as you can imagine. I was so scared that I went into shock over the experience. I was a Japanese adult lulled into a false sense of security trapped in the body of a seven-year-old girl. There's no doubt I would've also burnt to a crisp if I'd stayed there."

She cradles her bound hands against her chest as she speaks openly about that horrible incident from her past, as if for comfort... My heart aches for her. I can't imagine how hard it must have been to lose, not only your family, but all of your friends and the life you once knew all in one blow.

"It's only thanks to the magic stone I had with me that I'm still alive right now. You see, my mom must have sensed her impending death and gave it to me. It was a small stone, strong enough to protect one person. I was so scared that all I could do was stand there with the stone while my village perished around me."

A stone...? Oh! I hurriedly reach into my pocket and pull it out. Seeing it in my hand, Laura smiles softly.

"Yes, that very stone. It protected you, too, didn't it?"

"You're the one who gave this to me..."

"Of course! I had no intention of letting you get hurt. I feel bad for putting you in that scary situation, though. I'm sorry."

*This is a very important object to Laura, a memento of her mom! As she smiles at me apologetically, I feel tears begin to well in my eyes as I realize she really was trying to protect us.*

Chuckling, she returns to her story once more.

"That's how I made it out alive. Which is how I came to understand. That I couldn't go on like this. Because if I acted like the story didn't matter, then I would doom not only myself, but the very characters I'd created. Including you, Miku. And after being the one to put the curse on you, to begin with!"

She cries out while burying her face in her hands. Ektor and Claire look coldly at the girl, knowing full well what she's talking about.

*C-Come on, guys! Don't kick someone when they're already down!*

"I had to! I mean, what's more heart-rending than watching someone so angelically pure meet such a cruel fate?! It's less that I enjoy stuff like that and more that if I'd known I'd have to experience it in real life, I'd never have written it into her character!"



“L-Look, we get it already, so calm down. What you enjoy reading or writing is a completely different conversation, but at any rate, I’m sorry.” Claire said.

“Sorry, but also, I know how you feel.”

“What?”

“Don’t fall for it, Claire!”

I’m not sure why, but suddenly everyone’s getting excited about this part of the story. Confused, I glance over at Macro, who’s sitting next to me, and he looks back. My heart skips a beat when our eyes meet. Rgh... Am I really going to be okay if this keeps happening every time he looks at me?

“I get the feeling that Laura’s actually harmless. It’s obvious just looking at her.”

“Y-Yeah!”

It seems like everyone is in agreement that Laura isn’t out to hurt anyone. As the tension slowly dissolves in the room, I hope that they’ll be able to forgive Laura for what she did.

“Back to what I mentioned earlier...about how the heroine never originally had such a gruesome backstory?” Laura gazes off into the distance not looking at anything.

“The heroines’ backstory was never publicly released, but it’s written in my notes. You know what that means, right? Honestly, the moment I realized, I was too scared to sleep.”

So basically, Laura knows more about the story than Claire and Ektor do, right? And that even the bonus information that never made it into the game is affecting the world we live in... Claire shudders, rubbing her arms for comfort.

“So you’re saying that this world and the story that controls it, includes information that wasn’t even made public? That’s terrifying...”

“Right?! Even scenarios that were rejected from the final product! Not only was the heroine’s backstory cut from the game because it had no impact on the gameflow, but testers found it too similar to the fox sisters’ backstory!”

“I had no idea that was your backstory... You were forced out of your home to

find work elsewhere! I'd never have guessed Laura had such a dark past behind that bright smile. If I had known, I would've been a much bigger fan!"

"Me too!"

*Claire's speaking so fast, it's hard for me to keep up. She gets this way whenever she talks about the game. But wait, aren't we getting off track here? It seems like the Lanakiller guild members are finally less tense around Laura, or at least on the way to being relaxed. Candice is even making tea! I'm glad that they don't suspect her of being a bad guy anymore, but maybe cool it with the alcohol, Wells!*

"We're getting off track again. What I'm telling you is serious, but...oh well. I knew that our lives here wouldn't match the original story perfectly, but I still found it hard to view the situation optimistically. As the creator, I wanted nothing more than to make sure everyone was happy. I felt guilty for being the one who cursed you with such a horrible fate. What if it actually happened? I couldn't just stand by without doing something about it."

Laura drops her gaze, her hands clasped in front of her chest. Claire always had me to confide in, but Laura was stuck bearing the weight of her secret all by herself for her entire life... And everything she did was for us. As I find myself moved to tears, Ektor asks her a question, still seemingly skeptical.

"I get that you really feel that way. But is that truly what motivated you?"

"Yes! I never wanted to be Laura the heroine! I was willing to do whatever it took to get the story over with as quickly as possible! Which is why I figured it'd be a win-win situation for me if I could get one of the rival characters to take over my spot as heroine!"

"Why did *you* have to be the one reborn as the heroine?!"

"Okay, so let's see... Laura never intended on ever falling in love with anyone, right?" Claire asked the group before rambling on.

"But the story couldn't end without the heroine, in this case, Laura, finding her true love. She decided it'd be easier if she could have someone else take her spot and follow whatever route would lead to the heroine's happy ending. I guess that someone else ended up being Miku, huh?" Claire finished while

glancing at me.

“There’s actually a lot more behind-the-scenes information that we wrote down during the story boarding stage that never made it to the public. Like that you can’t get to an ending without some kind of conflict, in this case the rival character is a must... Though if you’ve played the game, I’m sure you’re well aware of the different routes.”

Claire’s eyes widen in realization as she hears Laura’s muttering.

“So *that’s* what led you to take the role of Miku’s rival?!”

“Hahaha! Exactly! I was nervous at first since I figured we were following Ektor’s route for sure! But then suddenly we switched to Macro’s route, and I wasn’t sure if anyone would believe that I could change my mind that quickly. I guess it worked out since young, innocent girls are known for their fickleness, huh? Honestly, I’m pretty proud of my resourcefulness and adaptability!”

Everyone’s glaring at Laura, who’s giggling cheerfully. They’re no longer guarded around her, but I guess they’re pretty angry knowing she tricked them... I kind of want to run from the room in embarrassment!

“But what was that criminal organization that kidnapped Miku about? You were in cahoots with them, weren’t you?” Rinny asks while glaring at Laura.

He’s scaring me! My body trembles faintly in response, and as soon as he notices, Macro places his hand on mine to help calm me down. H-He’s so sweet! But that doesn’t stop Rinny from glaring at Laura!

“I wasn’t in ‘cahoots’ with them, to use your words. It was just a way to make contact with the Lanakiller guild. I figured Miku, more than anyone else, would believe me, which is why I had them kidnap her.”

“And because of that, you put her in danger!”

“If I’d actually been some kind of bad guy, you would have been in danger, sure. But Miku was never in any danger whatsoever. She might have been scared, but I was right there with her the entire time, and it’s thanks to me that you were able to take down the criminal ring you’d been struggling to catch for a while now, right? No one got hurt, and the damage was minimal. Honestly, you should be thanking me.”

I guess she has a point! Everyone gasps in surprise, their eyes wide in shock, but Rinny merely grunts in frustration. I understand how he feels. It's a complicated situation.

"Heh! I'm actually pretty useful, right? I might not be able to fight, but I'm great when it comes to carrying out clandestine tactics. I can manipulate folks like marionettes, eavesdrop, you name it!"

She giggles gleefully while talking about it, but all of that sounds pretty dangerous! *I had no idea Laura was capable of stuff like that.*

"Don't tell me you've been eavesdropping on us this whole time?"

"Hrm... Have I? You tell me."

Laura dodges Macro's muttered question, refusing to look him in the eyes.

*W-Wait, so she was listening in on us this whole time? Hold on! Does that mean she listened in on that conversation Macro and I had in his room?! Rrrgghh... I'm so embarrassed! Laura, how could you?! Even I'm angry now!*

Seeing how hurt I am, tears shining in my eyes, Laura groans in frustration.

"Of course, she did! That's probably how she figured out Claire and I are Reborn and how she always seemed one step ahead of us! For crying out loud! Kiefer, I'm going to need you to come up with a way for us to eavesdrop on people while also stopping other folks from eavesdropping on *us*!"

"Hrm, I should be able to whip something up. With Laura's help, of course."

"Of course she'll help. It's the least she can do after all the trouble she caused around here!"

Even Ektor's starting to shift from anger to frustration with Laura, though Kiefer's the same as always, somehow amused by what's going on. Candice is glaring furiously at Laura, though I get the feeling she's forgiven her.

Laura scratches her cheek with one finger awkwardly, seemingly puzzled.

"He's right. I'll be happy to help with anything I can, but...are you sure you *want* me to? After I tricked everyone the way I did, I assumed you wouldn't want me around."

*Wait, she's leaving? I assumed that, since everyone forgave her, she'd stay with us as a member of the guild. But I guess that's a little too overly optimistic.* The decision is ultimately in Ektor's hands, and everyone turns to look at him.

"In my opinion, it'd be useful to have her around. But what does everyone else think?"

With everyone's attention focused on him, Ektor crosses his arms over his chest before asking the rest of the group what they think. Huh? Maybe this will work out after all.

"Despite how much I really don't like her, there's no denying that we were able to take down that criminal organization thanks to her help. Though I hate admitting it!"

"I think her good points outweigh the bad ones, so long as this never happens again."

Both Rinny and Macro seem in agreement. It's frustrating that they refuse to forgive her, but at least they recognize what she's capable of.

"I'm fine with anything as long as it helps further my research."

"Gosh! It wouldn't hurt if you thought about something other than your gadgets for once! As for me, I don't care! Do whatever you want!"

Kiefer's answer doesn't surprise me. And I have a feeling Candice doesn't hate Laura as much as she seems to.

"As long as she promises to never betray the Lanakiller guild again, then I'm on board. Though you know what they say, the best way to fool one's enemies is to fool your friends first, in which case, well, she managed to do just that."

"How valiant, Angela! You're honestly far more chivalrous than I imagined when I created you..."

Angela brings up a good point. Still, it's hard to forgive someone who tricked you. I understand what Laura means by calling Angela valiant and chivalrous.

"Well, I, for one, think it's a great idea. She could be a huge help to the guild. I mean, she even managed to infiltrate Marino's network of information."

"It's true. How'd you like to help me with gathering intel? We'd make a killing

with you on board.”

“What? Really?! With Marino by my side, I feel like I could uncover every secret in the whole world!”

“The both of you sound way too insidious about this... Don’t even think about it.”

Wells and Marino seem to be in agreement, and are far more welcoming than the rest of the group. But Wells is right about maybe not trying to expose every secret in the world... Seeing Marino and Laura chuckle together almost conspiratorially is terrifying! Abort mission!

Which leaves only Claire and myself. Our eyes meet and we nod in agreement. Claire opens her mouth first.

“I just need you to promise one thing first.”

“Hrm? What’s that?”

Claire stares straight into Laura’s eyes, her expression serious, and Laura straightens up, matching Claire’s demeanor with her own.

“We’re not just characters, so stop treating us like we are. I know you can’t help thinking that way about us, but the story is over now... It’s over, right? There’s no side stories, additional notes, or sequels we’re not aware of?”

Her tone, which started off strong, falters near the end. Oh, good point. If there’s still a part of the story we don’t know about, then it’s a little too early to let our guard down completely.

“There’s no additional content. The entire story finishes alongside the happy ending. I basically wrapped it up by assuming everyone would then go on to follow their hopes and dreams.”

“Seems like a pretty great ending to me.”

“Heheh. Right? I just wanted everyone to live happily ever after, you know?”

Hearing that is a huge weight off my shoulders. Claire laughs, seemingly equally as relieved. Laura points a finger at herself before continuing.

“The truth is I didn’t start out seeing everyone only as characters in my story. I

only did so in my head. Instead, I see everyone almost like my own children that I creatively speaking gave birth to. However, once I started living the story, I came to see everyone as people with their own individual free will.”

She suddenly falls silent and turns her gaze on me. *Huh? What did I do?*

“At the end of the day, the story I created was nothing more than a sort of guideline. Just one of many possible futures. Sometimes things worked out the way I wrote that they should, but not even the story can control people’s feelings.”

Laura laughs happily, saying the proof can be seen in the people all around her in this very room. She’s right... Candice ended up falling in love with Ektor, while Claire didn’t fall in love with anyone. Also...I ended up with Macro.

Laura might have referred to us as characters, and said some pretty mean things, too, but at the end of the day, she sees us as individuals with our own free will.

Hearing that makes me really happy, and I find myself smiling in response. *Laura turned out to be a nice person after all. I’m glad I never stopped believing in her.*

I guess that just leaves me then. I meet her gaze once more, laughing happily. “I want Laura to stay with us, of course. I want to get to know everything about her!”

“Mmm! You’re such an angel, Miku! Far more angelic than anything I ever imagined! You’re such a sweet girl! I love you so much!”

“Ack!”

Laura jumps across the table and slides over to me before wrapping her arms around me. Which is pretty awkward, considering her hands are still tied together!

Sh-She really startled me! But I guess that’s just evidence of how happy she is.

“Get away from my Miku.”

“Give it a rest, Macro. Honestly, I never expected you to be the jealous type. I didn’t see it coming!”

Macro tries to pull me away from Laura, but she refuses to let go. Thus starting a fierce yet silent tug of war...!

“There’s a lot you don’t know. Not just about me, but everyone.”

“You’re right. Heheh! I can’t wait to learn all I can!”

I get the feeling that she really means it. Yep! We’re going to be best friends moving forward.

“Then it’s decided! Welcome to Lanakiller, Laura. We welcome you in as a friend. Just don’t double-cross us again!” Ektor claps his hands together to get everyone’s attention before giving her that stern warning. She stammers while laughing merrily, although I can see a glimmer of tears in her eyes.

“Of c-course I won’t! Haha! Now that the story is over, there’s nothing stopping us from becoming *great* friends! I’m looking forward to what lies ahead more than I thought I would!”

The smile on her face is slightly contorted, as if she really is trying to hold back tears, which also makes it more charming than any of her other smiles I’ve seen thus far! She’s joining us as a friend, huh?

*Oh, right! Looks like I have a new friend!*

I know that, moving forward, we’ll be able to deal with any problem thrown our way as long as we work together. And I look forward to every day that lies ahead! That hope fills me with joy.



**[Claire]**

**THIS** is really the end, huh? A part of me is relieved, but a part of me is strangely sad as well. I mean, I’ve been fighting for Miku as hard as possible ever since I realized we were in the world of a game. That I had to save Miku was the only thing that kept me going.

Seeing Miku sitting peacefully next to Macro, whose face is bright red, makes me feel so happy and content. Of course, I also feel frustrated, sad, and lonely that Macro is taking her away from me... But more than that, I’m happy to see



her get the best ending possible.

“Don’t fall in love, huh? What a joke on my part.”

She ended up falling in love after all. I was really upset about it at first, but I’m glad it worked out. I think it’s because I’m finally okay with the story ending this way.

“Hey, Claire. You know there’s a happy ending for you, too, right?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

As I absent-mindedly watch Miku, Laura, who’s been untied, sits down next to me and starts talking. *Me? Fall in love with someone? That’s out of the question.*

“Huh? Are you saying you’re just like me? Are you also unable to fall in love with a character from a game?”

“I don’t think I’m exactly the same, but something like that. It’s far too late for me to change how I view everyone. And who am I going to fall for anyway? Based on what exactly?”

*I’ve passed the point where I think of everyone as merely characters in a game. And yet I can’t erase my background knowledge of them. I told Laura not to treat me like a character, and yet here I am, unable to stop doing just that. Which is why I doubt I’ll ever be able to find love in this world. I might not be the game’s creator, like Laura, and I’m sure I could change my point of view if I really tried, but...it seems too late for that.*

“I told you before, right? You can’t find love without a rival to create conflict.”

“Oh? What are we talking about? If it’s the game, then let me join in!”

As I continue talking with Laura, Ektor wanders over. He seems a little excited, probably due to the topic of conversation. I get it, though. Ever since I realized I had memories of a previous life, all I wanted to do was talk about it.

Miku was patient enough to listen, which was nice of her, but it feels entirely different to talk to someone who actually understands. And with all of our problems resolved, we can truly geek out. I still dislike him, but I don’t want to deprive him of that joy.

“All I’m saying is the Ektor route is primed to start whenever you want it to!”

“Huh? *My* route? What do you mean?”

“Candice is right here, isn’t she? She’s the rival character for Ektor’s route.”

“So what?”

But that’s all she’ll say. Ektor rolls his eyes in annoyance. He wanted to talk about the game, and instead, suddenly we’re talking about him... *Wait a minute. Hold on! She’s talking about Ektor’s route, right? B-But we were talking about me up until now. Is she really hinting at what I think she is?*

“I don’t think it’s *that* strange for you to follow the route that’ll lead to you ending up with Ektor, Claire.”

“Whaaat?!”

Both Ektor and I cry out at the same time. Absolutely not! No way!! Why *Ektor*, of all people?! To be fair, he’s the only guy I could maybe see myself with, and that’s a *big* maybe, considering he’s the last guy in existence I’d ever want to date!

“Why would I want a good-looking, superficial, womanizing creep like him?!”

“That’s harsh! But also, I have no interest in a stubborn, strong-willed, violent woman like you!”

“What did you call me?!”

“You heard what I said!”

I jump to my feet, yelling while pointing straight at Ektor. I’m so annoyed that my tail is sticking straight out behind me. Unwilling to back down, he shouts back just as loud as me. *That’s rich coming from a guy whose face is constantly glowing!*

“Huh? But you just said that there’s no way you could ever fall in love with one of the game’s characters, right? Ektor is a Reborn like you, making him different from everyone else in our world. I don’t think it’s that weird you’d fall for him, right?”

Her unexpected counterargument causes me to falter. *To be fair, she has a point. He looks like the character, but his soul is some former otaku geek from Japan. I can’t rightfully write him off as simply a character because of that. But*

*that doesn't make it okay!*

"I'm n-not saying I see him as a character in the game! B-But thinking about being with him is just weird, okay?! Plus, if I go after him, then Candice won't get her happy ending. She cares about him so much!"

*Th-That's right. He has Candice. If anyone's going to tie the knot with him, it should be her.* But both Ektor and Laura form x's with their hands while disagreeing vehemently with me. *Huh? Why?!*

"That whole thing with Candice is...well... Does it really look like it goes both ways?"

*It doesn't? It seems like love to me.* She's said as much.

"She's definitely very clingy, and she has no trouble dropping love bombs between every other word. But it strikes me as the type of reaction a fan would have toward their favorite idol. I mean, to be fair, there's no denying this face of mine is pretty handsome."

"You are very good-looking, but hearing you talk about it makes me want to vomit. Still... I guess you do have a point."

With that idea in my head, I can't see it any other way now. The jealousy she displays toward anyone who gets too close to Ektor seems very similar to the type of behavior I remember seeing in my previous life from fans of specific idols.

"Candice is still very much a mystery to me, but I could have sworn she was actually in love with you before. Though lately, it seems like she's turned her sights on someone a little closer to home."

"Who's that?"

As if waiting for her cue, we suddenly hear Candice shouting from her position on the couch, and we turn to see what's going on.

"Come on! I can't believe you're once again falling asleep here of all places! Go home already! Or at the very least, see if there's an empty bed you can use!"

"Mmm... But this seems like the perfect place for a light snooze..."

“Stop that! Don’t fall asleep! You’d be in trouble if I wasn’t around to look out for you!”

*I see...* I think to myself. Though I can tell even Candice isn’t aware of it yet.

“I’m also interested in seeing what happens with Rinny and Angela. I’m not sure if they’ll end up as partners, but they’re so similar that, at the very least, they’ll make close friends, right?”

“Yeah, I see what you mean. I have no idea how things will develop between the two of them, but there’s no denying how close they are already.”

“They both definitely tend to rush into things without thinking them through.”

*It’s kind of exciting talking about the potential love lives of the members in our guild.* Probably because of my previous knowledge of the game. It reminds me of my past life, when I’d feel a similar level of excitement talking about the game with my friends. It was so much fun... *I have no desire to go back to that world, though.*

“Which goes back to what I said before! I think you and Ektor belong together!”

“And just like I said, over my dead body!”

“But you two get along so well! You’re already friends! Just go one step further!”

She managed to rein us back onto the original topic. And I can tell by the smirk on her face that she did it on purpose! I might not love Ektor, but it’s nice to have someone I can get excited with over something like our past lives.

*It’s pretty fun, in fact. I hope I can continue to have conversations like this with him in the future. But that’s it! I have no intention of ever falling in love with him!*



[Miku]

**WE'VE** returned to our usual everyday lives. After going through the hassle of getting all the paperwork ready for Laura to join our guild, it's kind of nice to return to my previously peaceful life.

The mark from my curse vanished before I realized it was gone. I noticed one night when I went to take a bath. Though thinking back to how I acted when I noticed is mortifying!

*My face feels like it's on fire just thinking about it.*

What happened, you might ask? Well... I first noticed the mark was gone as I was getting ready to take a bath. I was so shocked and overjoyed that I ran right to Macro's room, forgetting that I wasn't wearing a shirt...

"Macro!"

"Miku? What is it? You can come in."

I remember banging frantically on his door and him sounding frazzled, worried that something bad had happened. As soon as he told me to come in, I did so. Still without a shirt!

"M-Miku, what are you...?"

"Look! The mark is gone! I wonder if that means the curse is gone, too!"

Completely oblivious to how flustered Macro was, his face beet-red, I jumped into his arms, crying happily. I mean, I was just so overcome with joy and relief that the curse was finally gone!

The curse was probably broken the moment we both expressed our love for each other. When he kept raining kisses down on my forehead and cheeks. The Goddess of Light must have taken that as proof of our love.

"It's r-really gone, right? I don't have to be afraid anymore, right? It's all thanks to you, Macro!"

"Miku..."

Noticing my panic, he wrapped his arms around me and held me tightly. Then he draped his jacket around my shoulders, covering me up, while comforting me.

“I’m so glad to hear that, truly. But maybe you shouldn’t run around half-naked.”

“Huh...? Oh. Aah... Eeeeeep?! I’m s-sorry!”

There are no words that can describe how I felt at that moment! Even just thinking about it makes me want to writhe on the floor in agony! What’s even worse is what he whispered in my ear next.

“Not that it bothers me or anything. But for your own safety. Because there’s a chance I might not be able to stop myself from pouncing.”

“P-Pouncing?!”

“I won’t. Oh gosh. You don’t have to panic... Actually, you look so cute right now, I really might pounce after all.”

“You think I’m *cute*?!”

I honestly don’t remember anything after that or how I got back to my room. I was sooo embarrassed, and so frustrated with myself! *My face is going to be red for days every time I remember. I wish I could just calm down!*

“Sorry for keeping you waiting, Miku.”

“Eeep!”

And today, I finally get to go back to work for the first time since all this trouble started. Macro’s coming with me since I’m still a little worried, which is why I was waiting out here when he called my name, startling me half to death. I’m p-pathetic...

“Still a little jumpy, huh?”

“I am when you scare me like that!”

“That might’ve been a bit too mean. Mm-hm... But I guess you’ll just have to get used to it since I’m not stopping any time soon.”

It’s his new attitude. He’s merciless in so many different ways! I’m not sure how much longer my heart can take how straightforward and direct he is.

“*sigh* Getting along as well as ever, I see. But if you don’t get going soon, you’re going to be late.”

“Th-That’s right! Let’s go, Macro!”

“Mm.”

I quickly head for the front door in an attempt to hide my embarrassment. Macro’s right on my heels, chuckling awkwardly after having been caught while being up to no good. *All he does is tease me! I want to get back at him...but what can I do? I wish I could muster up the courage to tease him back once in a while...*

Before opening the front door, I whirl around to face him. He looks at me, puzzled, wondering what’s up, and my heart immediately starts racing. No, I have to be strong! I can do this!

“U-Um, Macro?”

My heart feels like it might leap straight out of my chest. But it doesn’t hurt like it did under the curse. The way my heart’s pounding is nice, almost comforting.

*O-Okay, here goes nothing.*

“C-Can I hold your hand...?”

“Hm!”

*I s-said it! That was all me!*

The truth is, ever since we confessed our feelings to each other that one day, I’ve always wanted to walk through town with him while holding hands. But the only times we’re usually out and about is when I have work to do, and it’s never for very long, so I’ve always felt uncomfortable asking.

*I figured we could hold hands on a date, whenever that might happen, but... but...I want to be able to touch him so bad! Love is weird. It makes me greedier and greedier by the day.*

“I want more than just your hand.”

“Huh?”

I almost fall over as he grabs my arm, yanking me closer. Then he drapes his arm around my shoulders while using his other hand to turn my face toward

him...which is when I feel something warm and soft on my lips.

Uh... What? Whaaaat?!

“You had that coming, Miku. Teasing me every day with that cute face of yours.”

I look up in surprise only to see Macro’s bright red cheeks. His action caught me off guard and I’m so embarrassed, I don’t know what to do...! But I’m happy to see Macro feels the same way.

“You don’t have to hold back, you know,” I say while hugging him tightly, my heart overflowing with emotions. With my ear pressed up against his chest, I can hear the sound of his own heart racing. Hee hee! That makes two of us. That’s right, it’s not fair if I’m the only one with butterflies.

“In that case, I’ll just steal kisses whenever I want.”

“Good. I hope so.”

I look up once more, bringing my face closer to his. We both chuckle as we gently bump our foreheads together. My wistful expression, longing for more, is reflected in his dark eyes. Maybe I’m being a little greedy... But one more kiss won’t hurt, right?







I softly close my eyes and accept the joy he gives me. Our lips softly brush against each other before parting. We feel our breath intermingling before our lips touch again.

I almost forget to breathe as our kiss gradually deepens. I could stay lip-locked like this forever, but we really do need to go. We then bump foreheads once more, gazing into each other's eyes lovingly.



**MACRO** and I walk hand-in-hand through the pleasantly warm sunshine. I have no idea what awaits us in the future that lies ahead. But we have so many years left, and so many new experiences to look forward to. Some of it might be bad, or sad, or painful. But I know some of it will be happy and joyful as well.

It's a future full of mystery to even Claire, Ektor, and Laura. But that's how it should be, right? With Macro and my other friends by my side, I look forward to whatever surprises our future may bring.

Because from now on, the path we walk will lead to the creation of a brand-new story, all our own!

## Bonus Short Story

**ONE** night, I became a dress-up doll in my own room!

“You’re always so prim and proper, but it’s okay to show off your legs sometimes.”

“N-N-No way! She should look cute!”

“That’s why you dress her like that?”

Having already changed into ten different outfits, I sit on the edge of my bed, exhausted. Claire and Laura are starting to argue, quickly getting on each other’s nerves, but without the energy to break them up, all I can do is chuckle awkwardly.

“I’m coming in! Here! More clothes to try on!”

“Welcome back, Candice! Hmm... These look pretty nice.”

Which is when Candice bursts in with a few more outfits. Seeing the number of clothes draped over her arm makes me dizzy! Meanwhile, Laura and Claire’s eyes begin to sparkle as soon as they catch sight of them.

*I g-guess we’re not done yet, huh?*

The room I share with Claire feels very cramped with four people stuffed in it. And I feel even more squashed sitting here on the bed surrounded by piles of clothes.

“I’m s-starting to get tired!” I cry out after finally reaching my limit before promptly falling back onto the bed.

The reason this impromptu fashion show is happening at all is basically my fault. I accidentally mentioned to Claire and Laura I was going on my first date with Macro tomorrow.

“You have to get all dolled up for your first date!” they exclaimed cheerfully.

They looked at me, stunned, when I mentioned the only clothes I had were

the ones I brought from my village and what I usually wear every day. Claire backed me up, which is when Candice offered to borrow a bunch of clothes from her favorite store, and well...here we are.

*I'm really happy they're excited for me! B-But I didn't think they'd make me try this many clothes on! And I'm exhausted! But at least it's helped make me feel a little less nervous about my date tomorrow. I'm looking forward to it so much, there's no way I'll be able to sleep tonight!*

"Oh gosh. It's a little crowded in here."

"And there are so many clothes..."

That's when Marino and Angela show up. Meaning all the female members of Lanakiller are here in our room.

*I guess my date is a big deal!*

"Miku looks like she's about to collapse! How is it that y'all are more excited about this than she is?" Angela says, chuckling in amusement as she sits next to me on the bed.

*Thanks for noticing!*

Marino giggles before speaking up.

"I understand how they feel, though at the end of the day, I'm sure she's more excited about spending time with Macro than the outfit she's going to wear, right?"

In response to her words, Claire, Laura, and Candice exchange surprised glances.

*That's a pretty mature analysis.*

"W-We're sorry, Miku. We got a little carried away."

"I'm sorry, too. I just wanted to see you looking even cuter than normal!"

"I maybe went overboard with the clothing selection. Sorry!"

Their apologies cause me to hurriedly sit up.

*There's nothing to feel bad about!*

“You don’t need to apologize. It makes me really happy that you care this much about it! Honestly, I’m the one who should be apologizing for complaining when everyone is just trying to help.”

*They’re all working so hard so that I’ll have a good time. And yet, all I can do is complain that I’m tired!*

As I begin apologizing, feeling really bad about it, the three of them pounce on me at the same time, toppling me back down onto the bed.

*Eeep?!*

“You’re such an angel!”

“You really are such a sweet girl!”

“I’m pretty cute, but you’re super cute, Miku!”

*C-C-Compliment overload!*

My cheeks instantly turn red from feeling so embarrassed. Also, I can’t move with the three of them on top of me! Unable to stand by while I lay trapped beneath the three girls, Marino grabs Claire, and Angela grabs Laura and Candice, dragging them off of me.

*Th-They’re both so strong!*

“Now then, you’ll have a lousy time tomorrow if you’re sleep-deprived.”

“She’s right. Meaning we really need to wrap this up. Which outfit did you like the best, Miku? Don’t think about it too hard. Just think about the outfit you can imagine yourself wearing while being with him.”

Hrm, let’s see... I’m the one who has to make the final decision. And since everyone has work to do tomorrow, I don’t want to keep everyone up too late.

*What outfit can I see myself wearing while out on a date with Macro...? He always wears black clothes, and his hair and eyes are black, meaning I should probably wear a different color. And yet a part of me kind of likes the idea of a matching color scheme...*

“Oh...”

Suddenly, one article of clothing in particular catches my eye. It’s a light blue

dress with a thin, black ribbon around the waist. The flowing sleeves and hem are all decorated with the same ribbon, giving it a slightly more mature look.

“You have expensive tastes, little lady. The more grown-up design is really nice!”

“I think it’ll go really well with Macro’s outfit, too!”

“Now that I got a good look at it, I don’t think there’s really any other option. Yep, this is the perfect dress!”

Hearing Laura, Candice, and Claire each voice their own complimentary opinion, I find myself feeling embarrassed. It’s like they’re saying out loud how much I love Macro.

*Of course I do, but still!*

Marino and Angela seem to be in agreement as well, smiling charmingly as they chime in.

*I guess that settles it, then. Whew!*

“Thanks for helping me find the perfect outfit. Will this be enough to cover the cost of the dress?”

All the clothes strewn about the room are pieces that Candice borrowed from a store in town. I figured I should pay for the cost of the clothes we don’t return, but in response to my question, everyone simply exchanges amused glances.

*Huh? What did I do wrong?*

“This is our gift to you. So just accept it like a good girl and enjoy it!”

“A gift...? Huh? What?!”

Completely baffled by Laura’s words, Claire lightly pats me on the back. Everyone else seems to be nodding in agreement.

*Wh-What’s going on?*

“It’s our way of saying we’re happy you’re feeling better! Since the curse is gone now, right?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m really happy, but at the same time, I can’t accept

this!”

After all, I couldn’t have broken the curse if it wasn’t for everyone’s help and support! It’s because of my friends that I’m back to my usual self now. *I* should be the one buying *them* gifts!

“We figured you’d say something like that. But we already decided, so too bad! You have no choice but to take it!”

As I try to turn it down, Candice puffs out her cheeks in annoyance while telling me to accept it or else... I’m overjoyed that they care this much about me, but their kindness makes me feel really bad at the same time.

“If it bothers you that much, you can always bring us back some yummy sweets as a souvenir from your date!”

“I’d love that! I never say no to yummy treats.”

Which is when Marino and Angela pipe up with a compromise of sorts.

*Ooh, that doesn’t sound like a bad idea... And that way I can give them a gift of thanks in return!*

As everyone excitedly agrees with this suggestion, I finally feel comfortable accepting their gift.

“Okay! I’ll find something extra special for all of you. Thank you so much!” I say while hugging my dress to my chest, taking in everyone’s kind smiles.

*I really am the luckiest girl alive! Okay! Tomorrow, I’ll be on the hunt for some tasty sweets we can all enjoy together!*



**THE** next day, I’m all decked out in the dress everyone gave me and can’t stop checking my appearance in the mirror to make sure nothing’s out of place, and I look perfect. I’m so nervous about my date that’s about to start, that I don’t know if I can go! Unable to watch me looking so anxious, Claire ties back my hair for me. Seeing how different I look with my hair braided fills me with excitement.

All dressed up and ready to go, I head downstairs, where Macro is already waiting for me. Feeling him staring at me, I find myself starting to blush.



“G-Good morning, Macro.”

*Rgh! Do I look weird? Maybe I went a little overboard...*

“That look really suits you.”

“Th-Th-Thanks...!”

*He complimented me! I’m so happy I might blush even more. Wh-What do I do?! I don’t want him to see me with my cheeks this red! Plus, he’s not saying anything, just standing there staring at me. I d-d-don’t know what to do!*

“I think they’ve gotten a little too lost in their own little world. Hey, Macro! If you keep standing around like that, I’ll take Miku on a date myself!”

“Ektor!”

“Morning, Miku. You look super adorable!”

As the two of us stand there, shuffling our feet awkwardly, Ektor pops up between us, complimenting me cheerfully. It’s enough to get Macro moving, who immediately puts his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close.

“Nope. And no looking either.”

He then proceeds to drag me toward the door without another word.

*Wait, is it okay to leave just like that?*

I decide to at least shout out a “See you later!” behind us as we head down the hallway.

“Wow, someone’s possessive... Ugh, I’m so jealous of that guy. Getting to go on a date with Miku, who’s looking more adorable than usual!”

“I agree. Aww... I wish I could go on a date with Miku looking all dressed up!”

“What are you talking about?! You go out with her all the time!”

“Heehee! The perks of being her sister!”

Ektor and Claire seem to be getting along. Are they really, though? Honestly, most of the time it sounds more like they’re fighting, though they seem to be getting along more and more recently. Enough so that it’s starting to make me wonder if they’re falling in love.

Of course, I'd never say that to either of them! Because they'd both deny it. But, you know, it might happen! And if it does, I'll be right there by their side, doing whatever I can to help their feelings for each other blossom and grow stronger!

"This is a problem."

"Huh?"

We leave the guild and walk along in the fresh morning air before Macro mutters absently, almost to himself. I glance over and see his brows furrowed as if worried.

*I wonder what's wrong?*

"Why did you make yourself look cuter than usual, Miku?"

"What?"

I'm surprised by his question, which he asks while glancing at me out of the corner of his eye.

*What does he mean? Before he told me that it suits me, and just now he said I looked cute, which should be a compliment, right? But the way he said it makes me feel like maybe I overdressed.*

"Um... Should I have just worn my usual clothes?"

Having grown used to Macro's very direct way of speaking, I can usually figure out what he's trying to say most of the time, but right now, I'm completely stumped.

"That's not it. But also, it's making things difficult. You look so cute right now that I have a hard time looking at you."

"You think I'm that cute?!"

Having absolutely no idea what was wrong, to suddenly hear him say something like that is more than my poor heart can take. I didn't realize my heart could ache this much, even without the effects of the curse on me! But it's a happy kind of ache. It's the first time I experienced my heart aching from being too happy.

*O-Okay, I have to calm down. If I don't, our day will be cut short. I don't want him to not look at me, but to be fair, I haven't been able to look him in the face either, so I guess that makes us even. Time for a boost of courage!*

"M-Macro? So, um..."

Mustering up my courage, I take a step forward before looking squarely into his face. I can see my nervousness reflected in his dark eyes.

*Good! We're finally making eye contact for the first time today!*

"Will you please look at me? I dressed up just for you, Macro. I spent too much time and effort picking out this outfit yesterday for you *not* to look."

*Rrgh, I'm so embarrassed.*

I want to look away so badly. But I want him to look at me, so I force myself to maintain eye contact. I can feel the tears building up in the back of my eyes from the effort.

I wait for him to respond, my body trembling faintly. The tension seems to leave Macro's shoulders and he smiles warmly. It's a smile that's so much softer and happier than usual that I find myself overflowing with my love for him.

"I see. I'm sorry. That makes me really happy to hear. I won't take my eyes off of you."

He tends to always be fairly emotionless and quiet, and there are many times when I have no idea what's going through his mind. And yet, there he is, standing in front of me with a warm smile on his face. I guess that's proof that I make him happy, right?

"When I said this was a problem, I meant mainly because I want the whole world to see how cute my Miku is, but I also want to keep her all to myself."

*Th-That's what he was thinking about?! Because he's so hard to read, sometimes his words ambush me. Usually they're compliments, but they make my heart beat so fast that I feel like I might have a heart attack! Rrgh... Maybe I'll get used to it someday. Though not anytime soon, that's for sure...*

"I'm going to show off my cute girlfriend while also making sure everyone knows she's mine. So, on that note..."

He suddenly looks completely different from the sulking, quiet boy he was just a moment ago. As he smiles at me warmly, he offers his hand.

*D-Does that mean he wants to hold hands? Waah! This is my dream date! My dream of holding his hand is finally coming true!*

I gently place my hand in his and he squeezes it tightly. It's enough to fill my heart with love for him.

"Ready to go?"

"Yeah...!"

And just like that, our date has finally started!

*Teehee... I'm so happy!*



**I'M** more than happy simply walking along holding hands, which is probably proof of how easy to please I am. Sometimes our eyes would meet and we'd giggle. But there's something I need to do today while we're out. I bring it up as we sit together on a bench, eating breakfast from a nearby food stall.

"Sweets, huh? A gift for everyone back home?"

"Yeah. Actually...the dress I'm wearing was a gift from Claire and everyone else. They said it was a gift for breaking the curse, but I still felt bad accepting it. Which is why I want to get them something in return."

Hearing my explanation, he nods in understanding before telling me he'll take me to a store that he really likes.

*That's right. I forgot that Macro loves sweets! I can't wait.*

"I don't tell many people about it because the sweets there are so delicious, but you're so cute that I'll make an exception."

"Ack?! Kn-Knock it off! You're always saying stuff like that..."

I get flustered every single time he compliments me or says I'm cute, the words sliding easily from his mouth seemingly so naturally. Of course I'm flattered, but coming from someone I like as much as him, it also leaves me feeling embarrassed! Lately, he chuckles every time he says it, giving me the

impression he's saying this stuff on purpose to get a reaction from me.

*I'm no match for his teasing!*

After deciding to head to the sweet store after lunch, we set out for our first destination, which is a short walk outside of town. There's always the threat of monsters out here, but between the magic gadgets Kiefer made us and Macro's own earth magic, we should be safe. All I feel right now is excitement from wanting to know where he's taking me!

"I see it."

"Huh? Oh! Aaah!"

I follow Macro's gaze and immediately notice a patch of something light pink standing out from the field of green grass.

*Are those flowers? I've never seen a bunch of flowers all in full bloom like that before!*

"It's like a pink carpet! Wow! They're not always like this, right?"

"That's right, they're only in full bloom right now. And will be for roughly ten days, at which point you'll have to wait until next year."

"I see... It's so beautiful."

I want to run over to see them up close, but I've always been told that it's dangerous to wander off by myself outside of town, so I stay put. Still, I can't help fidgeting since I want to get closer so badly.

"Your ears and tail are twitching like nuts, Miku."

"Ulp."

It's impossible for me to hide my excitement.

*I'm s-so embarrassed!*

"Do you want to run over to see it?" he asks kindly.

"Can I?!"

In response, Macro gets down on one knee before holding one hand slightly above the ground. A film of light immediately appears over the entirety of the

field of flowers.

“Monsters won’t be able to get close while it’s up. So go ahead.”

“Thanks, Macro!”

Apparently, he knows how to cast a simple warding spell. The fact he can wield such powerful magic only further proves how amazing he is. With his permission, I immediately race over to the flowers. Well, at least until I reach the flower bed itself, which is when I start watching my step very carefully. I don’t want to crush the flowers by accident.

“The flowers are pretty sturdy, Miku, so you don’t have to be so cautious.”

“Oh y-yeah? They’re so pretty, though, that I feel bad stepping on them, even a little...”

Monsters usually wander around here, and I doubt they go out of their way to walk around the flowers, meaning I’m sure Macro’s telling the truth...but they look so beautiful in full bloom that I still do my best to tread carefully. Seeing me move so slowly anyway makes him chuckle softly. It seems like all he’s done today is laugh at me.

*I g-guess that’s not so bad, though...*

“Why don’t you sit under that tree? There’s nothing blooming in that spot, and then you can take your time looking at all the flowers.”

“Okay! But come with me, Macro.”

“Ack! Hey... Gosh. I’m coming, no need to pull.”

But since he’s the one who made the suggestion in the first place, he doesn’t actually seem that upset about it!

*Heehee! I love that side of him.*

As I pull him along behind me, he looks flustered for a minute before laughing.

*I’m so happy that he’s smiling so much today! Speaking of happiness...that reminds me of something.*

A warm memory from my childhood. A little dream that I’d love to make

come true. Finally reaching the tree in question, I sit down on the ground before looking up at Macro.

“Hey, Macro? There’s something I want to try...”

“What’s that?”

He looks down at me quizzically, and I suddenly feel super self-conscious, though it’s a little too late for that. Still, I already asked him. And I want my dream to come true. Without saying a word, I pat my lap.

“Huh? You want me to...?”

I can tell Macro’s figured out what I’m implying by the slight blush on his cheeks.

*That’s right. I want him to use my lap as a pillow!*

“Bad idea?”

“I didn’t say that...”

He looks off to the side for a moment as if feeling conflicted, but then he slowly sits down on the ground before lying down and resting his head on my thighs.

*Oh gosh! This is so much more embarrassing than I thought it would be!*

With his head resting on my lap, he closes his eyes as if in embarrassment.

“U-Um, so...back in my village, my parents used to do this kind of thing all the time. I always thought they were so in love... Which is why I wanted to try it, too.”

I explain why I wanted to do this to help hide my embarrassment, and Macro slowly opens his eyes. The corners of his lips curl up in a smile.

“I see. So, your parents were pretty close, huh?”

And with that, he looks at me lovingly before closing his eyes again. The peaceful expression on his face makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. It’s a strange feeling that seems to be a mixture of excitement and warmth.

“This is really nice. I feel so comfortable like this. But also, a little nervous.”

“Hehe! I feel the same way.”

I reach down and gently stroke his head. His black hair is silky and smooth. He lets me play with his hair without a word of complaint.







I'm so happy right now. I was really scared when that horde of monsters threatened our village, but I would have never met Macro if it hadn't happened. And if I had never ventured out from my village, I never would have fallen in love with him.

Perhaps it was partly because of that story from the game, but if so, then I guess I'm grateful it existed to begin with. Because it led to a future full of happiness. I'm so happy I met him. And for this experience of falling in love.

"I'm so happy I met you, Miku. I never thought I could love someone as much as I love you," he says quietly as I continue running my fingers through his hair, putting his thoughts into words. I find myself giggling unconsciously.

"I was just thinking the same thing. I guess we're on the same page, huh?"

Giggling happily, Macro opens his eyes and reaches up toward me. His fingers run through my hair softly before he strokes my cheek.

"Then is it safe to say you're in the mood for the same thing I am?"

"Macro..."

I have a feeling the answer is probably yes. I can feel his hot gaze on my lips. He sits up before putting his hand on the back of my head, pulling me close. I give in to his touch, allowing him to draw my face closer to his. The tips of our noses rub together, and I feel his breath against my lips as he murmurs quietly.

"I love you, Miku."

"I love you too, Macro..."

A fresh breeze blows past us, scattering flower petals through the air. It's as if the flowers themselves are giving us their blessing, filling my heart with joy.

*I wonder if there's a limit as to how much happiness one person can feel? I feel like I'm always breaking the limit with each passing day. No, that's not right. It's more like the happiness I do have grows stronger. I look forward to joyful moments that await in the days to come.*

That's what I think as the two of us shower each other with happiness, over and over.



**AFTER** spending a relaxing late morning together, we return to town for lunch and then have fun picking out gifts for everyone back at the guild. Everything in Macro's favorite sweets store looked so good, it's hard making up my mind!

After picking an appropriate gift for all of our friends, we each get a treat to enjoy at the store. We end up having such a hard time just picking out two that Macro gets us an extra sweet for fun.

*He's so nice!*

"This is the first time I've eaten here in the store."

"Really?"

Macro tells me as we sit down and set our cute mini cakes in front of us on the table. He goes on to explain how he always gets takeout and eats it at the guild. I can see how it might be uncomfortable for a guy to sit in a store as cute as this one all by himself.

"We should come here together more often! Like once a month!"

"I'd love that. It gives us more to look forward to."

Which means I'll have to work as hard as I can. The cakes here are fairly expensive, but they'll be a nice monthly treat for a job well done.

*Delicious sweets and Macro's eyes, sparkling with delight... Knowing that's what I have to look forward to is all the motivation I need! I hope Macro feels the same way.*

We take a leisurely stroll around town, getting back to the guild well before sunset. Upon entering the living room, we find Claire and Ektor having a passionate conversation at the dining room table. I have a feeling it's probably about the game. Or maybe the world from their previous lives.

The two of them, along with Laura, tend to get excited whenever they talk about stuff like that. Their conversations turn so heated sometimes that they sound more like arguments than friendly chats...

*I guess it means they're getting along, huh?*

“What? You’re back already?”

“Welcome back, you two. But I wasn’t expecting you guys until much later. The most romantic part of the day is just getting started.”

Noticing us, the two of them pipe up at practically the same time with similar comments.

*Gosh! We’ve only just arrived, and they’re already teasing us. Maybe I should give them a taste of their own medicine.*

“Are you guys upset that we got home too early and intruded on your alone time? Sorry.”

Hearing me say that with a big grin on my face, both Claire and Ektor noticeably freeze at the same time.

*Heehee! They really are good friends!*

“Th-There’s no intruding happening! In no way, shape, or form! I’d rather talk to you than Ektor anyway!”

“I f-feel the same way! We just have a couple of overlapping interests! D-Don’t get any weird ideas about it, Miku!”

*They’re acting increasingly suspicious... Though the more I poke them, the harder they dig their heels in.*

I exchange a knowing glance with Macro, grinning.

“We brought back gifts. Want to eat it now?”

They seem so flustered that I decide to help them out by changing the subject, and Claire immediately jumps up from her seat before going to get Laura while Ektor goes to get Rinny. I set aside some of the sweets for the members who aren’t in the guild right now.

*I’ll bring it to them tomorrow,* I think to myself as I start making tea.

“Let me help.”

“Thanks, Macro.”

We stand side by side in the kitchen, brewing tea. As he gets the plates, cups, and utensils ready, I tell him something that I haven’t said yet today.

“I had such a good time, Macro. Thanks.”

He stops for a brief moment, his eyes wide in surprise. Then he immediately smiles warmly at me, returning to the task at hand.

“Me, too. Today was so much fun, but hearing you say that makes me the happiest man alive.”

I remember Claire mentioning to me once that Macro’s name means big. It’s the opposite of Macro himself, who’s pretty short. But considering his huge heart and enormous ability, I think it suits him perfectly.

“Yay, yay! Did someone say gifts?”

“Is there something for me? I hate sweets!”

Laura and Rinny’s voices ring out from the living room.

*Sounds like everyone’s here.*

“So then don’t eat it, you picky ginger.”

“What did you just call me, you black-haired grouch?!”

“I m-made sure to pick out something that you would like, Rinny! So please don’t fight, okay?”

My friends being their usual selves in this snapshot from our day-to-day lives. There may be arguments from time to time, and we might even have to deal with another life-altering incident. But I know I can get through anything as long as I have my friends with me. This is where I belong, right here with them.

“Sheesh! Knocking heads like always, huh? Why don’t you two take on a job together sometime? It might help you get along better.”

“That’s absolutely out of the question!”

“Maybe when hell freezes over.”

“It happened once, actually, and it was a complete disaster. Wanna hear about it?”

The conversation only grows livelier as everyone takes their seat at the table.

*I love them. I love the Lanakiller guild members so much!*

“Let’s eat! Go ahead and take whichever one you like.”

Everyone immediately reaches for the sweet that calls to them the most. They settle into their usual chit-chat about their days while enjoying their sweets. I glance over at Macro out of the corner of my eye and catch him looking back. We both smile warmly at each other.

*I hope the joy I’m feeling right now lasts forever!*

# Afterword

**HELLO** everyone. It's me, Riia Ai. Thank you for reading my book!

What did you think about the struggles of the twin fox girls? They fought hard to escape their supposedly predestined fate, chose to follow a different path, and still somehow ended up following the story anyway. I hope I did a good job portraying characters who want to take control of their own lives instead of simply following the path set for them by someone else.

I saw the characters in this story much like Laura herself did. As the author, I adore all my characters. I often found myself conflicted over the challenges they faced. Part of me wanted them to have as peaceful a life as possible while writing them into tricky situations. Which is why I relate to Laura's character the best.

The story might be over, but their individual journeys are not. They'll continue working hard, and blossoming in their ever-growing relationships... And as they go about their normal, everyday lives, I hope that they're able to get their happily-ever-after no matter the mishaps and hardships they face along the way.

Finally, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to everyone who worked so hard helping to translate and publish my book. To the wonderful illustrator who once again created some truly magnificent illustrations, and to everyone else who was involved along the way. Thank you so much for helping to bring my story to life.

And of course, a big special thank you to all my lovely readers. I wish you all the best from the bottom of my heart. I hope my book brought you a moment of joy while reading it. It's my hope that we will meet again someday in the journeys to come!









## The Inconvenient Life of an Arousing Priestess

By Makino Maebaru Illustration: Hachi Uehara

What adventures await a priestess with the inconvenient power to rouse the baser instincts of others and the imperial prince who's unaffected by her?!



## The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor

By Sarasa Nagase Illustration: Mitsuya Fuji

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