
Why Shouldn't a Detestable Demon Lord Fall in Love?!
3
STORY:
Nekomata Nuko
ILLUSTRATION:
teffish
SOL PRESS


CHAPTER ONE : THE DEMON LORD'S FRANTIC GIFT HUNT
"Daddy! Daddy, lookie! I dawed Myukey 'n Brum!"
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"All right, tell me all about this 'something', m'kay?"
"I wanna talk about what we're gonna do for them for presents."



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Prologue: The Demon Lord in Dismay

Cute giggles escaped the lone bedroom of the large, two-story house on the outskirts of Garaat. They filled the quiet, starry night as the nearby forest went to sleep, when only the rustling of leaves and the orchestra of crickets and cicadas should have been heard. The Scarlett children should have been long asleep, but this night was different than most.

"'Gain! Do the spinny 'gain!"

"You really love this dance, huh? All right, coming right up! Ready, Bram?"

"Let's do it! Hold my hand tight, m'kay?"

The girls were having fun under the gentle light of the bedroom's lamp. Looking over them with a mellow gaze was a white-haired, red-eyed young man—Anima.

"Here goes!"

"Time for the spinny, m'kay?"

"Kyahaha! So funny!"

His oldest daughter, Myuke; his middle daughter, Bram; and his youngest daughter, Marie. Simply watching over them was enough to put a smile on his face. His only wish was to keep watching them, always and forever. Unfortunately, however, life wasn't quite so kind.

Luina had asked him to put the girls to bed while she brushed her hair. She was his wife, and he'd sworn to do anything and everything she requested of him. He'd sworn it, but he found himself enamored by the girls' innocent smiles and cheerful giggles.

All good things must come to an end. Anima understood that the girls were excited because the next day was an important one,

but nevertheless, it was time for them to rest. If they didn't, the lack of sleep had the potential to pose a threat to their growing bodies. For their sakes, he had to bear the pain and put them to bed.

"Okay, girls. It's bedti—"

"Daddy, come pay!"

"Of course! What are we playing?"

He broke. His resolution was wiped away by a single request. He couldn't say no to the adorable little Marie asking him to play with her. He took her tiny hand, Myuke took his other, and just as they started dancing, the bedroom door opened.

"Oh, Anima…"

A beautiful woman with straight blue hair and gentle azure eyes entered the room. Anima's wife, Luina, had walked in to discover her husband playing around with their kids instead of putting them to bed like he'd promised. At the sight of it, she merely smiled.

"Sorry," Anima said with an apologetic look. "I couldn't fulfill my promise. I wanted to put them to bed, I really did, but—"

"It's okay. I'm not mad."

"You're not? Why? You have every right to be; I didn't keep my promise."

"I appreciate how much you love the girls," she answered, still smiling. "It makes me very happy to know that you're always so willing to play with them. I never want that to change."

"It won't. I'll always be here."

Time spent with his family was more valuable to Anima than anything else, so that was a promise he would definitely keep.

"Mommy pay too!"

“I’d love to! But this is the last time, okay?” Luina stepped forward and took the girls’ hands. They started dancing, and after a few full circles, they slowly came to a stop. “That was a lot of fun.”

“Uh-huh! You know, I did loootsa spinny with Myukey ’n Brum!”

“I’m glad you were able to play with them so much.”

“You’re a lucky girl to have such kind sisters.”

In response to Anima’s statement, Bram proudly puffed out her chest, her thick, silver hair fluttering as she did.

“Go on, let me hear those compliments, m’kay?”

“How ’bout you show some humility instead?” Myuke commented wearily, to which Bram cracked with a cheeky smile.

“Who, me? You’re the one who’s standing there all red and fidgety, m’kay?”

“I-I am not!”

“You totally are, m’kay?”

“Nuh-uh! What part of ‘I am not’ don’t you get?!”

“Uh-oh, she’s mad! I’m off to bed now, m’kay?!”

“You won’t get away from me! I’ll make you pay for mouthing off to your big sister!”

Myuke jumped on the bed after Bram and started tickling her. They both seemed to have been enjoying their little bicker-battle.

“Me too! Me too!”

Marie traipsed over to the bed to play with her sisters.

“Come here first,” Luina told her. “Let me comb your hair.”

“’Kaaay!”

Her hair had become ruffled and disheveled from all her playing just after getting out of the bath. Luckily, she loved having her hair combed by Luina just as much as she loved playing with her sisters, so she happily turned around and trotted up to her.

“Feels good!” she cooed with a contented smile. The soft brush gently gliding through her hair felt like it was petting her head.

“There you go, all done!”

“I’m pitty now?”

“Very pretty, just like a big girl.”

Marie burst into a big smile.

“I’m big girl!”

She rushed off to report the breaking news to Anima, who gently pet her head and confirmed that she most certainly was a big girl. The reason for her excitement was also what made the next day so important: it was Marie’s birthday. When she awoke the next morning, she would be four years old.

She had grown a lot since the first time Anima had met her. Moreover, her speech had become much clearer, even if there were still words she couldn’t pronounce correctly. It actually scared him somewhat to see how quickly she was growing. If she didn’t stop soon, she was going to grow up, get married, and the fateful day where she left Anima’s side would arrive before he had time to blink.

It was a sad future to come, but its shadow didn’t outshine the happiness of seeing her grow. Waiting for the next day to come filled him with excitement. After all, he and his family were going to celebrate the occasion by throwing Marie a birthday party.

A birthday party, huh? What a wonderful idea.

There was no tradition of celebrating one's birthday in the world Anima was from, and even if there had been, not a soul would have celebrated the birthday of the tyrannical Demon Lord. If anything, the day he died would have been named a worldwide holiday. As a matter of fact, he'd lived half of his life without anyone who had so much as considered being happy that it was his birthday.

But things had changed. He'd found a family that loved him, and he wasn't going to pass on the chance to celebrate his beloved daughter's birthday. He was going to make Marie's fourth birthday a memorable one, no matter what it took.

"I wanna pay s'more!" Marie sang just as he made that silent vow. Hearing that, Bram sprung up on the bed.

"I wanna play too, but we gotta go to sleep now," Bram told her. "We don't want you falling asleep in the middle of your party tomorrow, m'kay?"

"That's right," Myuke added. "What happens if you decide to take a nap and accidentally sleep in? You'll miss all your presents! And you *do* want presents, don't you?"

"I dooo!"

"Then will you be a good girl and go to sleep?"

"Uh-huh! I go night-night! Look!"

Luina and the girls watched as she hurriedly snuggled under the sheets and put her head down on the pillow, then commended her with a round of applause.

"Look at you, already able to tuck yourself in!" Luina praised. "You know, Marie, I got you a present for being such a good, smart girl!"

"Don't worry, I got something for you too!"

“It’s okay to be excited for mine, m’kay?”

“Yaaay! I’m ’cited!”

Listening to them, Anima quickly went pale.

“Are you okay, Anima?” Luina asked. “You look sick.”

“I’m not.”

“Are you sure?”

“Completely. I cannot get sick.”

He smiled gently at her, but deep down, he was panicking like he’d never panicked before.

Presents?! What presents?! I don’t have any presents! He’d never known that he was supposed to get her presents, and the party was dangerously soon. His mind was racing; he couldn’t let himself go to bed for the night without first securing a present for Marie. *I have to get something for her, and soon! B-But what should I get?!*

He had to avoid disappointing Marie at all costs. Hurting her was something he simply couldn’t allow himself to do. He desperately wanted to find out what everyone had gotten for her, but asking them outright was out of the question. If he were to do that—or worse, show up empty-handed—his failure as a father would be revealed to the world.

“Seriously? You don’t have a present for her? Pathetic.”

“Daddy hasses me?”

I don’t want that…

He’d gone all the way to the capital and met the king himself to gain pardon for his run-in with Malshan. It had taken an incredible amount of work, but at last, there was nothing standing in the way of a peaceful life with his beloved family, and he wasn’t about to lose

that. He had to get Marie a present—something that would make her happy. But what would he be able to find on such short notice?

There's nothing I can do about it now; I have to get to bed.

As painful as it was, he had to fall asleep right away, lest the worst happen. If he overslept, he would miss his chance to act before the party.

"Goodnight, everyone."

"Night!"

"Sleep tight, m'kay?"

"Night-night!"

"Y-Yeah. Goodnight."

Anima pushed his troubles to the back of his mind and went to sleep.

Chapter One: The Demon Lord's Frantic Gift Hunt

Anima found himself shrouded by a veil of darkness. In it, there were no light sources, no sounds, nothing. What was he doing in such a place? Not even he could recall.

"Ah, of course. How could I have forgotten?"

Opening the door that would lead him to his goal, he set out for Garaat in search of a birthday present for Marie. What was meant to be a quick errand, however, took more time than expected. Even so, he didn't let it bother him. He'd found the perfect gift, and when he finally arrived back home with it, he was welcomed by the pitter-patter of tiny footsteps trotting his way.

"Daddy home!"

Anima smiled as the little Marie rushed over to welcome him. It was her birthday, so to celebrate, she wore a beautiful dress and a dandelion crown. She looked just like a princess.

"I'm home, Marie."

He pet her head, careful not to crumble her crown, and was answered with an adorable giggle. Following her, Luina and the girls came out to the entrance too.

"Welcome back, Anima."

"What took you so long? We were really getting worried, m'kay?"

"Where did you even go?"

"I took a walk."

He didn't want to risk letting them find out that he had actually taken until the last minute to get a present for Marie. Admittedly,

he'd forgotten what he'd bought, but the lump in his pocket was enough to remind him that she was sure to be ecstatic when she saw it. He couldn't wait to see the huge smile it put on her face.

"Daddy, lookie! I getted this pesent!"

Marie proudly presented a box to him. It was decorated with various shiny stones, giving it the appearance of a jewelry box.

"You should've seen Marie smile when she got that."

"She was super excited to show it to you, m'kay?"

"You're a very lucky girl to have such caring sisters."

"Uh-huh! I love my sissers lots!"

Marie's radiant smile made their house all the brighter, but it also gave birth to a new kind of worry in Anima's heart. He had managed to secure a present for her, but what if she didn't like it? The thought that he could very well ruin his gleeful little angel's birthday gave him the chills.

"Now then, Anima, I'm so happy you're back. Marie's been trying to guess what you got her all morning. She's really excited."

"I'm 'cited!"

"It's from Daddy; I'm sure it'll be incredible!"

"It's totally gonna blow your mind, m'kay?"

If anything, the expectations they had for his gift were blowing *his* mind. He could only hope that it—and he—was able to live up to those expectations.

"Ah, but what're we standing around for? Let's go eat!"

The girls took Anima's hands and dragged him into the dining room. The table was already set, but the plates were empty. There were no delicious smells wafting in from the kitchen, either.

“You haven’t started making breakfast?”

“Not yet, no. It’s yummiest when it’s fresh out of the pan, so I wanted to wait until you came home.”

“Well, now that I’m home, let me help out.”

“I appreciate the gesture, but I think you should start by giving Marie her gift.”

“Definitely! You’re the only one who didn’t give her a present yet.”

“We’ll have breakfast after that, m’kay?”

“I bet you’re excited to see what Daddy got you, huh, Marie?”

“I’m ’cited!”

As Marie looked up at him with stars in her eyes, the pressure on Anima to live up to everyone’s expectations grew more and more immense. The girls’ eyes all began to gather on him, sending his anxiety level through the roof. So as not to worry the girls, he crouched down, doing his best to keep a straight face.

“I wanna know what you got her, m’kay?”

“C’mon, show us!”

Amidst all the pressure, he reached into his pocket and pulled out… nothing.

“No way…”

Anima froze. His pocket was empty. The gift he’d gone all the way to Garaat to purchase had vanished. The only explanation he could come up with was that he’d dropped it somewhere after he’d gotten home.

That’s it! Everything’s fine, it’s somewhere in the house!

He rushed out of the dining room and scanned the hallway with bloodshot eyes. But it was nowhere to be found.

“Is everything okay, Anima?” Anima whipped around, turning toward the voice. It had come from Luina, who had a heavy look on her face. “Don’t tell me you don’t have anything to give Marie. That’s just mean.”

“I hope you didn’t lie about getting her a present, m’kay?”

“No pesent?”

Marie looked up at him, distraught. Seeing her lose hope sent him into a panic.

“N-No, I have your present! I *had* your present! B-But it vanished from my pocket somehow, I swear…”

He watched as tears began to gather in Marie’s little eyes. A moment later, they began streaming down her adorable, round cheeks.

“No pesent from Daddy? Does Daddy hasses me?”

“No, I love you! I love you so much, and I did have a present for you. I got you the best present money could buy, believe me! Please… You have to believe me!”

Anima tried his absolute best to cheer her up, but to no avail. Her tears just wouldn’t dry up.

“Daddy won’t give pesent! He hasses me!”

“Please don’t cry, my little angel. Please…”

“I love Daddy!” The bawling Marie ran over to Luina, who crouched down, hugged her tightly, and then gently rubbed her head. “I love Daddy and Daddy hasses me!”



Luina shot a glare at Anima.

“What kind of man doesn’t get their little girl a birthday gift? I’ll never give you another kiss.”

“I’m not taking a bath with you ever again!”

“Don’t even *try* to get into the same bed as me, m’kay?”

“Please…”

The disappointed glares from his loving family pierced straight through his heart. He was getting dizzy from the pain. Darkness began taking his vision, and Marie’s sobs grew ever quieter…

◆◆◆

“Gh!”

Anima’s eyes flew open. He sprung up from the bed he lay on and looked around—he was in his bedroom. It was quiet. He could hear his heart racing. Light was shining in through the window, which immediately made him realize that he’d overslept. He raised his hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead just as a chill shot up his spine.

“A nightmare…”

The thought of making his little girl cry and disappointing his family terrified him more than anything. He was glad that it had only been a dream, yet he couldn’t quell his terror, for that dream still held the potential to become a sinister reality. He had to act quickly if he was to avoid that dark future.

I’ll have to think of what to get her after I help Luina with the chores.

With that plan in mind he got up, put on his robe, and left the room. The moment he stepped out, he heard someone trotting toward him.

“Ah! Daddy’s ’wake!”

The footsteps belonged to Marie, who rushed over to Anima and jumped into his arms. He caught the little girl and gently hugged her.

“You’re up early, Marie.”

“’Cause I’m a big girl! Daddy, know how big I am?”

“No, how big are you?”

As if she’d been waiting for him to ask that question, Marie proudly looked up at Anima.

“I’m four!”

“Wooow, you’re already four years old? You really are a big girl!”

Anima squeezed Marie’s cheeks as a huge smile grew on her face.

“Ehehe! Y’know, y’know, Mommy telled me to go here! She telled me to wake Daddy up!”

“Wow, Mommy trusted you with such an important job? I guess it’s only fitting for a big girl like you.”

“Yep! But, y’know, I didn’t wake you up, ’cause you doed it on your own! ’Cause you’s a biiig boy!”

Anima smiled warmly as Marie pet his head.

“Thank you, Marie, but you’re much more impressive than I am.”

“I am?”

“You are. You woke me right up.”

“I did? I waked you up?”

“You sure did. I was still half-asleep before you got here, but now I’m wide awake. Thank you, Marie.”

“You welcome! Ah, bekfiss! Lessgo eat bekfiss!”

Big girl that she was, Marie may have found hugging too childish, as she hopped down from Anima’s arms and pulled him toward the dining room. When they arrived, he immediately noticed that breakfast was ready and waiting to be eaten. A deep wooden bowl filled to the brim with a delicious vegetable soup sat in the center of the table, with a plate of ham and cheese sandwiches off to one side. Luina was presumably still working in the kitchen, while Myuke and Bram, already in their seats, celebrated Anima’s and Marie’s arrival with applause.

“Wow, you actually managed to drag Daddy out of bed!”

“Only big girls can wake him up, m’kay?”

“You welcome!” Marie boasted smugly. She was so proud of herself that there was practically a visible puff of steam coming out of her nose.

“Whatcha sleeping in for, Anima?” Bram asked in a worried tone. “I hope it’s not ’cause of all the stuff you do around here, m’kay?”

Bram had become part of their family two months earlier, yet she still hadn’t called Anima “Daddy”. She didn’t dislike him by any means—she was clearly worried about him, they took baths together, and she trusted him like her father—she simply wasn’t ready to take that step. No matter how much he wanted her to, Anima knew that he had to think of her feelings; he wasn’t going to force her to call him that if she didn’t want to. The day the magic happened would come naturally, so until then, he would simply treat her like his daughter and shower her with love, just as he did with Myuke and Marie.

“I’m as healthy as ever. I have all the energy in the world. There’s nothing for you to worry about; we can still play together just as much as we have been.”

“Woo-hoo! I love playing outside with you, so that’s awesome to hear, m’kay?”

Bram couldn’t contain her excitement. Her parents hadn’t been able to play outside with her due to their poor health, so spending time out in the garden with her new family was her absolute favorite thing to do.

“Good morning, Anima,” Luina said as she walked into the dining room.

“Good morning. Sorry I didn’t help with breakfast.”

“Don’t worry about it. You always help with everything, so you’re more than welcome to take it easy every once in a while.”

“Mommy, Mommy! I waked Daddy up!” Marie chirped, fishing for compliments. After putting the water jug on the table, Luina pet her head.

“Well done, my big girl!”

“Marie, tell me how old you are, m’kay?”

“Um, um, I’m four!”

Bram knew exactly how old Marie was, but she also knew that asking her directly would make her very happy. As proof, Marie proudly held out a hand with four fingers extended, a wide smile on her face.

She’s a wonderful sister. I’m so proud of her.

Silently praising his daughter, Anima sat down. He and the rest of his family did their pre-meal ritual, and he started his breakfast with a bite from one of Luina’s sandwiches.

“How is it?” she asked.

“Incredible. Eating your heavenly food makes me the happiest man in the whole wide world.”

“Oh jeez, there you go again,” she said, flushed but smiling.

“Ugh, guess we should’ve seen *this* coming now that both of the lovebirds are up.”

“We’re reaching dangerous levels of secondhand embarrassment here. Tone it down, m’kay?”

Myuke and Bram teased the couple with playful smirks, which only made Luina turn even redder.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full. You’ll bite your tongue.”

“Look at her blush.”

“She’s really cute when she’s being shy, m’kay? Don’tcha think, Anima?”

“She’s really cute no matter what.”

“Please stop teasing me…” she complained, but her smile wouldn’t fade.

Enamored by his beautiful wife, wishing he could stare at her until the end of time, Anima filled his spoon with soup and carried it to his mouth. There were all kinds of vegetables in it, finely diced so they wouldn’t get caught in Marie’s throat. The vegetables’ gentle flavors were enhanced with a mild seasoning, and Luina had added a touch of ginger to really bring it all together. The result was a dish that was nothing short of extraordinary; a single spoonful was enough to keep a person warm on the coldest of nights.

“How’s the soup?”

“It’s fantastic. Your soup is always delicious, but this one is something else. The ginger adds a whole new level of flavor to it. It’s truly amazing.”

“Phew, I’m so glad to hear that. It seemed like you weren’t sleeping well, so I was afraid you’d gotten sick. Ginger’s really good when you’re sick, which is why I put some into today’s soup.”

The thoughtfulness almost made Anima cry. Her words warmed him all the way to his core.

“Thank you, but I’m fine. I’m not sick at all.”

“Anima’s sturdy as a rock, m’kay?”

“But then why did you sleep so poorly?”

“I was having a nightmare.”

“Tell us all about it, m’kay?”

“I already forgot what happened, sorry.”

He hadn’t actually forgotten, but telling them about it would have revealed that he still needed to get Marie a birthday present.

“Hmm… Maybe he said something in his dream, m’kay? Did you hear anything, Mommy?”

Bram turned to Luina to help her learn more about Anima’s nightmare, but she just shook her head.

“I watched him for a bit while he was sleeping, but he didn’t say anything.”

“You watched him sleep, hmm? You’re crazy in love, m’kay?”

“Oh, I certainly am. I love Anima very much. Plus he’s cute when he’s asleep.”

“Daddy cute!”

“You’re cute too, Marie.”

“I’m cute! Daddy said I’m cute!”

Luina watched with a smile as Marie merrily reported the results of their brief conversation. She really was just an adorable ball of happiness that could cure any illness with her lively giggle—which was exactly why Anima couldn’t allow himself to let her down the way he had in his dream. He had to find her the best present Garaat had to offer. He had to finish his breakfast first, though, so he ate until he’d cleared his plate and then some.

“Thank you for the meeeaaal!” Marie cooed.

“Wow, great job, Marie, m’kay?! You ate your whole breakfast!” Bram applauded. “All right, as a reward, I’ll play with you all day. And you can pick the games, m’kay?”

“Yaaay! Y’know, y’know, I like dawing! I like dawing with Myukey ’n Brum!”

“Okay, let’s do some drawing,” Myuke said. “But we gotta clean up first.”

“That’s okay, I’ll clean up. You girls go play.”

“Are you sure? Aren’t you tired?”

“Not at all!” Luina struck a show-offish pose, flexing her biceps. “I could do this all day!”

“Let me know if you need any help, okay?” Myuke requested.

“I will. Thank you.”

“I’ll help too, m’kay?”

“Me too, me too! I’m big girl now!”

“Thank you so much, girls. You’re always looking out for me. Now get going! Have fun!”

“’Kaaay! Lessgo!”

Marie took the girls’ hands and led them out of the room.

“I’ll help you clean up,” Anima offered.

“Thank you. Would you like to hold hands as well?”

“How can I say no to that?” The endearing offer made him smile as he reached out and linked hands with her. The softness of her skin and the way her thin fingers interlocked with his filled him with warmth. “Though now that I think about it, we probably just made clean-up a hundred times more difficult.”

“So we did. What a bummer…” she said, her cheeks red. She wanted to hold hands with Anima so badly that the consequences had completely escaped her. “Should we hold hands later, then?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“Promise me?”

“I promise.”

They reluctantly let go of each other’s hands, then spent the next half hour or so cleaning the table and washing the dishes.

“We finished so quickly! Thank you for helping out.”

“You’re welcome. I’m happy I could be of help.”

“I’m going to do some sewing now, so you can spend your time with the girls or relaxing.”

“I see…” Anima wasn’t great at doing intricate, detail-oriented work. He’d gotten used to washing the dishes, but if he tried to help Luina with the sewing he would only slow her down. “What are you going to sew?”

“One of Marie’s favorite dresses got torn, so I’m going to fix it.”

It wasn't the first time Marie's favorite pieces of clothing had to be patched up. Playing with her sisters, rolling on the ground, and running around was sure to wear down even the strongest of cloth. They could have easily freed up Luina's time by using some of the fortune Anima had made to replace the ripped dress, but as it was one of her favorites, repairing it was the way to go.

"I'll fix your clothes whenever they get torn too," Luina added. "Just let me know."

"Thank you. You're very good with needles, so I'm sure it will look as good as new."

"And you're very good with compliments. I'll make you a scarf for when it gets cold, so be on the lookout for that!"

"Really?! You will?! Thank you!"

His lovely wife was going to knit him a scarf. Just the thought of wrapping it around his neck warmed his heart. While longingly thinking about the cold days that awaited him, a question popped into his head. "Wait, are you giving Marie a scarf for her birthday?"

"Nope. I made her one last fall, and even if I made her a new one, she wouldn't be able to use it since it's still warm outside. I tried making her a bunny plushie for her birthday."

"Wow, that's amazing. I'm sure she'll love having a homemade plushie."

He had figured as much, but he'd finally gotten confirmation that Luina had a present for Marie. Not just any present, either, but a bunny plushie that she'd made herself. It was sure to put a smile on Marie's adorable little face. As her father, it was his duty to get her something she would love just as much. If he didn't, she could take it as a sign that he didn't love her. That was the one thing he had to make absolutely sure to avoid.

“Oh, and I’m also going to bake a cake. You like apple cakes, right?”

“I love them. Everything you make is wonderful.”

Anima had a very deep emotional connection to apple cakes. Their mere mention was enough to flood him with sweet memories—the first time he’d had one was the day he and Luina had shared their first kiss. It quickly became apparent that he wasn’t the only one who had that connection, as Luina was looking at him even more lovingly than she usually did.

Though he was never great at reading women, it had already been over half a year since he’d moved into the orphanage with Luina and the girls. He knew exactly what she was waiting for. He put his hands on her petite shoulders, leaned in, and gently kissed her lips.

“…Can we do that again?” she asked as he leaned back.

“Of course we can,” he replied, and they shared a long, sweet kiss. “How’s that?”

“Umm… One more please.”

“I’ll shower you with kisses if that’s what you want.”

Standing in the middle of the kitchen, they shared no fewer than eight kisses.

“That was a lot of kisses, and after such a long time since our last one. It feels like my lips could swell up at any moment. How do yours feel?”

“I’m fine.”

“Thank goodness. I’ll get to sewing now, but I’m looking forward to sharing many more kisses with you.”

“I’m looking forward to that just the same. I’ll go play with the kids now, so, um… would you like to hold hands on the way?”

“Oh, you remembered our promise.”

Hand in hand, they left the kitchen. They went up to the second floor, where they parted ways. Luina went into the bedroom to sew, while Anima made his way to the sunny room at the end of the hallway that was the girls’ designated playroom.

In the wake of her parents’ passing, Luina had had to sell almost everything she owned, so the room sat empty for a long time. With the family’s recent influx of wealth thanks to Anima’s and Myuke’s hard work, however, they had no trouble refurbishing much of the house, including the playroom.

Not wanting to interrupt the girls’ fun, Anima peeked through the door to check on them. Inside, the three of them were sitting around a table, merrily chatting with each other.

“Myuke, gimme the red when you’re done with it, m’kay?”

“Uh, sure, but now I’m curious… Are you drawing me?”

“Sure am! I’m drawing a picture of the time we went to the beach. I hope it’s not too bad, m’kay?”

“No, not at all! It looks great!”

“You’ve got an eye for art, m’kay?”

“Me too! I’m dawing Myukey too!”

“Wow, look at that! It’s really cute, Marie.”

“Only big girls can draw so well, Marie. Be proud of yourself, m’kay?”

“Ehehe! I’m gonna daw Brum too!”

“I can’t wait to see it, m’kay?”

Each of them was holding a crayon from the set they'd bought the day before. They were drawing, just as they'd decided at breakfast.

"You girls seem to be enjoying yourselves."

Hearing Anima's voice, the girls quickly lifted their heads up.

"Daddy! Daddy, lookie! I dawed Myukey 'n Brum!"

"That's great, Marie. Is this when you were playing in the field?"

"It iiis! Lookie, this the dadelins! And you 'n Mommy!"

"Yes, there we are. Come and show me again when it's all done, okay?"

"'Kaaay! I show you!"

Full of smiles thanks to Anima's compliment, she went back to working on her masterpiece. The colors she'd used for drawing were all over her fingers, and her face must have itched at some point, because they were all over her cheeks as well. She was a very colorful little girl; Anima couldn't help but smile at her cute "makeup".

"How's my drawing? It's the time we went to the beach, m'kay?"

"It's very good. Everyone's splashing around so happily. How lovely."

"It was super fun! Let's go again sometime, m'kay?!"

"We can do that."

"Yaaay! It's a promise, m'kay?"

"Daddy, how's my drawing?"

"Let's see… Is this when we crossed the rope bridge?"

“Yep! Bram wasn’t with us then, so, like, I wanted to show her how cool that place was!”

“Wow, that’s really nice of you,” Bram said as she bashfully cast her eyes down.

“It’s the least I can do for my little sis— Whoa, what?!” Myuke yelped as Bram snuggled up to her and rubbed their cheeks together.

“I just got an urge to snuggle you because I love you so, so, sooo much, m’kay?!”

“Still, don’t just jump on me like that! You scared me half to death!”

“It’s snuggle time, mmm’kay?” Despite Myuke’s protests, the smile on her face didn’t lie. And Marie, who would normally have been quick to jump into a family snuggle, was too preoccupied with her drawing to notice. It was only a few moments before Bram pulled herself off of Myuke. “I gotta get back to my drawing. I’ll show it to you again once I’m done, Anima. Prepare to be amazed, m’kay?!”

“I will.” That was when Anima got a brilliant idea. The girls loved drawing, and that went double for Marie, so he could draw something for her as her birthday present. She was sure to love to get something that he’d drawn himself. “May I join you girls?”

“Sure! C’mon, sit next to me.”

“Here’s some paper, m’kay?”

“Thank you.”

He sat down next to Myuke and picked up a crayon. He was going to draw the most beautiful drawing to give as a birthday present for his precious daughter. The only problem was that, in the more than a hundred years he’d been alive, he’d never done so much as a single drawing. Doubt clouded his mind and his muscles

grew tense from anxiety, but he had to overcome it. He would devastate the girls if he were to snap one of their crayons in half.

He turned his attention to the paper and planned out his drawing. The theme of his piece had popped into his brain the moment he'd sat down: his beloved family. He would draw all five of them, holding hands and dancing in a circle, bathed in the gentle moonlight that seeped in through the window. Knowing that it would make for the perfect gift, he focused all of his energy on creating the most beautiful piece of art his family had ever seen and began to draw.

"It's done!"

It had taken some time, but his very first drawing was complete. Myuke and Bram leaned toward him, curiosity gleaming in their eyes, and shared their impressions.

"What's it supposed to be, exactly?"

"Looks like a ball of yarn, m'kay?"

He had been too lost in the process of drawing to notice, but they were absolutely right. The idyllic family picture he'd intended to put on paper looked more like a ball of yarn.

Ouch…

Anima wanted to shut his eyes so that he didn't have to look at his failure any longer. Being the first time he'd ever drawn, he hadn't expected to create a masterpiece worthy of a place in the king's personal gallery, but what he had created was far below his expectations. Aware of his sadness, Bram scooted next to him and patted him on the shoulder.

"Cheer up! I'll always be here to help you draw, just say the word, m'kay?"

"Yeah. We're here to help, so turn that frown upside down!"

“Bram… Myuke…” Their kind words made him blush. He had wanted to give Marie a drawing, but his family gave him warmth instead. “Thank you, girls. I’ll do my best.”

Starting the next day, he would do just that. Before then, however, he had something much more important to attend to. He couldn’t possibly give his drawing to Marie, and to his knowledge, there were no magic potions that would make him a great artist, so he had to find something else. Luckily for him, Marie was too focused on her own drawing to pay attention to his, so he still had time to ensure that his creation never saw the light of day. But that meant it was back to the drawing board for him. He had to get a present for Marie, but what?

I can’t cook, sew, or draw, so…

He had to head into Garaat and buy something, and he had no time to waste. Springing up from the table, he got himself ready to leave.

“Where ya goin’?”

“Don’t worry about it. Can you two look after Marie for a while?”

The girls nodded and smiled at him.

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“And I’ll keep an eye on Myuke, m’kay?”

“I can keep an eye on myself.”

“I’ll watch you watching Marie, m’kay?”

“I told you that’s pointless!”

“Anyway, I’ll be going now.”

With a pet of the girls' heads, Anima left the room. He grabbed his money pouch on his way out of the house and headed off for Garaat.

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The moment Anima arrived at Garaat, he made his way to the main road, dotted with various shops and stalls. He scanned the area, looking for a family—any family—that had a daughter about the same age as Marie. He wanted to ask them for help understanding what girls that age liked, but his search wasn't going very well. He couldn't focus on his task at all, and he quickly realized why that was.

He was alone. After meeting Myuke, all of his trips to Garaat had been with his family. They'd been by his side each and every time. It was unimaginable to him that he'd have to walk the streets by himself, yet there he was, tortured by loneliness. He wanted nothing more than to go home to hug his beloved daughters and kiss his gorgeous wife, so he had to find a family with a young daughter. With his determination rekindled, he looked around the street once more.

"Hmm?"

A small girl was standing next to the entrance to an alleyway. She was around the same age as Marie, maybe a bit younger. Glancing around nervously while sucking on her thumb, she caught Anima's attention mainly because her parents were nowhere in sight. She was probably lost and scared. Anima couldn't ignore her.

He began walking toward her, but stopped just as quickly. A couple years earlier, he had been faced with the same situation. At that time, the girl had started bawling the moment she spotted him. The image of her terrified face, the sound of her soul-shattering scream were burned into his mind.

Fortunately, any horrible rumors about him were only circulating in his previous world, but even then, kids were taught not to engage with adults they didn't know. There was a chance that he'd complicate things by talking to her, but she was just standing there, scared and all alone. Imagining her pain tugged at Anima's heartstrings. He started walking toward her once more, putting on the warmest smile he could muster.

"Are you okay?" She looked up at Anima, who crouched down and looked into her eyes. "Did you get separated from your parents?"

"I seed a kitty…" she said quietly, practically whispering. Anima nodded understandingly in response.

"It must've been a very cute kitty. Tell me, what's your name?"

"I'm Ena. The kitty was really cute, but I lookeded up and Mommy was gone…"

"I see, I see. Did you go after the kitty?"

"Mm-hmm. But it runned away… It went in there…"

She pointed toward the dark, narrow alleyway next to her, but refused to look at it. It must have been a scary place in the eyes of such a little girl. Anima looked at her again and smiled.

"Don't worry. Mommy must be somewhere around here."

"Really?!" she asked, her eyes twinkling with hope.

"Really really."

That wasn't a lie meant to cheer her up. Anima reasoned that Ena had chased the cat through the alleyway, during which time her mother must've noticed that she was missing. Hoping that her daughter would make her way to a place she knew, she probably went to Ena's favorite place in town. In other words…

“Ena, do you like toys?”

“Mm-hmm! I love toys!”

“Then what if I told you that your mommy was right in there?!” Anima pointed to a two-story building on the other side of the alley—the toy store. There weren’t any other shops nearby that a girl her age would enjoy, so her mother would almost certainly have gone to that one. “Should we go see Mommy?”

“Lessgo!”

Anima reached a hand out, which Ena tightly grabbed, and they entered the shop together. It was filled to the brim with toys, but Ena completely ignored them. She was frantically looking around the space in search of her mom.

“Ena!”

It wasn’t long before a young woman rushed up to them.

“Mommy! Mommy!”

The woman crouched down and hugged the little girl, who started bawling, tightly in her arms, gently stroking her back.

“I was so worried… where did you go?”

“I sorry! I seed a kitty, and then… you wasn’t there, and… and then Mishter bringed me here…”

Through sobs, Ena recounted the events of the past ten minutes. Her mom gently pet her head, then stood up and looked at Anima. There wasn’t a hint of sadness or anger in her eyes; they were filled purely with gratitude.

“Thank you so much, Anima!” she exclaimed, taking Ena’s hand. “I don’t even know what to say, I’m just… Thank you.”



“How do you know my name?”

“I work at a pub where Krain was a notorious troublemaker. He was terrible, but ever since you chased him out of town I’ve been able to work in peace.”

“Ah, I see.”

Thanks to his golem stone, Krain had been the most powerful man in Garaat. He’d picked a fight with Anima about six months earlier, but he’d also tried to drag Myuke into it, which resulted in him getting a taste of Anima’s wrath. He was given a thorough beatdown, and the passersby all lauded Anima for giving him what he so deserved.

The townsfolk had a deep hatred of Krain, as Anima had learned from how they’d praised him. He didn’t particularly care about the reasons behind their hatred, but it seemed that Ena’s mother had suffered greatly by Krain’s hand.

“Thank you, Mishter!”

Ena had managed to calm down while in her mother’s embrace. She turned toward Anima with a big, bright smile and thanked him for saving her.

“You’re welcome. Make sure to always stay with Mommy, okay?”

“Uh-huh!”

Anima smiled seeing how she immediately clasped her mother’s hand.

“Again, thank you so much for taking care of my daughter. I’d love to repay you, but— Ah, I know! It’s just about lunchtime, so why don’t you visit our pub? Everything’s on me!”

“I’m honored, but I’m sure my lovely wife has already made lunch back at home, so I’m going to have to decline. There’s not a meal in this world or any other that can compare to the ones she makes.”

“Oh, okay then…” she replied in a dejected tone, but Anima still had a question to ask.

“This may sound strange,” he told her, “but would you tell me some of the things your daughter likes?”

“I like Mommy and Daddy!” Ena answered. “And I like Mommy’s food!”

“She eats everything I cook. There are barely any crumbs on the plate when she’s done with it.”

“’Cause it’s yum-yum!”

“Thank you, Ena. I’ll keep cooking for you so you can grow up big and strong, okay?”

Ena’s stomach growled just as her mother pet her head.

“I’m hungy!”

“Me too. I’ll whip something up as soon as we get home, okay?”

“Yum-yums!”

The woman hugged her daughter before bowing to Anima.

“Thank you again, Anima.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Bye-bye, Mishter!”

“Take care!”

Saying their goodbyes, the girls took their leave, while Anima took some time to browse the toy store. He immediately noticed

that it was full of families; parents wore warm smiles as they watched their children get lost in the sea of toys. Amongst all those families, however, he noticed a man browsing toys all by himself, wearing a grave expression as if he were marching into battle. The man shuffled through the toys one after another, but didn't actually select any of them. Then, as he was moving to the next set of shelves, he noticed Anima. He looked away for a split second, then looked back. His jaw practically hit the floor, but he quickly pulled himself together and walked over to Anima.

"I'm terribly sorry, but your white hair and red eyes caught my attention. Are you Anima, by any chance?"

"Yes, I am."

The man flashed a relieved smile.

"I'm a five-star Hunter, and I'd be honored to go questing alongside you."

"Why me?"

"Oh, I think it's only natural for a Hunter like myself to try to party with such an esteemed man as yourself—not many people can claim they've been offered a contract from the king, after all. We could tackle the most difficult of quests, and watching you fight is sure to help me hone my own skills."

"How do you know about the contract?"

"Most of the people in this town know about it. I mean, your daughters were running up and down the streets, screaming at the top of their lungs that their daddy is the strongest and that he turned down a contract from the king to care for his family."

That had probably been Myuke and Bram's doing. Those two often went on errands for Luina while she and Anima were busy

working the field, so they would have had ample time to boast about their father.

A contract offer from the king was rare in and of itself, but turning one down was completely unheard of. No one in Garaat would have taken their claim seriously if not for the fact that Anima had unilaterally overpowered Krain right in front of their faces. Because of that, the girls' wild tale was taken as fact, but that was beside the point.

"Sorry, but you'd be better off finding someone else to do quests with. I won't be doing any work for the foreseeable future."

The only reason he'd become a Hunter was to protect Myuke while making a little bit of money. Having amassed a sizable sum of money between the golem stone they'd sold and the reward they'd gotten from the king, there was no reason for any of them to put themselves in danger.

"I understand. I'll work hard to one day become as strong as you are," he said, bowing to Anima before going back to browsing the toys. He was looking through them very intently for someone who didn't have a child with him. There was only one reason for that.

"Um, excuse me, but…"

"Yes?"

"I see you're looking for a toy. Might you be trying to find a gift for someone?"

"I am, yes. Are you here to do the same?"

"I am, but honestly, I have no idea what to get."

"Oh, really?!" The man flashed a relieved smile. "This is a bit strange to admit, but I may have been blinded by your exploits. It hadn't even crossed my mind that you could be struggling with

something. Still, it makes a lot of sense that you're having trouble with this. Choosing the perfect present is difficult."

Anima nodded in agreement.

"This is more nerve-racking than my audience with His Majesty was. The possibility of choosing something she won't like fills me with a primal, existential dread."

"You clearly love your daughters very much."

"You as well." The man was incredibly serious about finding the perfect gift for his child; he must have loved them very deeply. "How old is yours?"

"He turns six next week, the little rascal."

"He must have a lot of energy."

"Oh yes, very much so."

"Might I ask what you got him for his fourth birthday?"

Anima jumped straight to the point.

"As a Hunter, I'm often away from my family. Because of that, I chose to get him something that he could enjoy by himself. I spent a long time picking out the perfect gift, and I ended up settling on building blocks."

"Building blocks, huh? Did he like them?"

"He loved them. That said, I've never actually seen him play with them."

"Why not?"

"He always plays with me when I'm home," the man chuckled.

"I see. That sounds very nice."

“It most certainly is. I usually arrive back home completely exhausted, but his lively smile is an amazing pick-me-up.”

“I understand that very well,” Anima said with a nod. “My girls love playing late into the night. I really shouldn’t let them, but seeing their cheerful smiles makes me want to play with them until the sun comes up. Just yesterday, we were holding hands and dancing around in circles well past their bedtime. It was wonderful.”

“I’m sure your daughters had just as much fun as you did. Everyone can tell that they absolutely adore you, so I think they’ll love anything you get for them. They’ll know that it came from your heart, and that’s what matters most.”

“From my heart…”

The man was right. The fear of disappointing Marie and his terrible nightmare had gotten to Anima, but they never should have bothered him in the first place. His family was the kindest, most welcoming group of people he’d ever met. They would never hate him for not getting Marie a birthday present, nor could he get her a present she didn’t like.

Even so, he didn’t want to abuse his family’s kindness by not giving her anything. After all, he loved Marie from the bottom of his heart; he wanted to get her a gift that would portray that love. He needed to take his time and choose his present carefully if he wanted to achieve that goal and be rewarded with an adorable, heartwarming smile and small yet ever-so-precious hug.

“Umm, is everything all right?”

Anima snapped back to reality. They had been talking for a long time—it was fun for him to share the blissful experience of fatherhood with another man—and he’d also spent quite some time mulling over his present ideas, or lack thereof. It was time for him to act.

“Thank you. Your advice is invaluable.”

“I’m happy I could help, and it was really fun talking with you about our kids. Best of luck on your gift hunt.”

“Good luck to you as well.”

Their chat helped to finally calm his nerves. He spent a bit more time in the shop, but left it soon after parting ways with the man; nothing there had managed to catch his attention. He was undaunted, though. He was certain that the perfect present was waiting for him in one of Garaat’s myriad shops, all he needed to do was find it.

He walked the streets and perused the stores until the sun reached its highest point in the sky. He had to find something very soon and head home in order to keep his lovely wife from worrying. He racked his brain before making a last-second decision: crayons. The girls loved to draw, and the craft store was nearby, so he would definitely make it there before they closed.

As he made his way toward the town plaza, he noticed that there were more and more people the closer he got. In the plaza itself he found a sizable crowd gathered around what was likely the merchants who would occasionally set up shop there. Perhaps they were offering rare trinkets from faraway lands, but things like that held no meaning to Marie, so he forged on, pushing his way through the crowd. When he made it to the front, he found a burly man sitting at a table, with a much thinner man leaning against the side of a cart behind him. While their builds were polar opposites, their faces were rather similar; they were likely brothers. Anima walked up to a man standing in the crowd.

“What’s going on here?” he asked.

“Oh, if it isn’t Anima. These guys rolled up to the plaza earlier today. If you beat the brawny-looking dude in an arm wrestle, you

win an item of your choice from their cart. The entry fee is only one copper, so folks are eager to give it a shot. As you can see, it's turned into quite the attraction."

The man was acting surprisingly friendly towards Anima and even knew his name, but he decided to ignore that. Instead, he took a look at the men's cart, which housed countless baubles and curios. Rings, bracelets, ornaments, cosmetics, liquor cups made from various precious metals, decorated vases, wall scrolls, and various magic stones were all being offered as prizes. It was like a collection of odds and ends, and even Anima could tell that each and every item was worth far more than a single copper piece.

Within the hoard of treasures, a single item caught his eyes. It was a small, inconspicuous thing hidden in the corner of the cart, but he knew it would make the perfect gift the moment he spotted it. He absolutely had to get it, and the only way to do that was to win their game. He prepared his copper coin, and waited his turn.

"Aghhh!"

The challenger's hand slammed against the table. Anima could tell that the burly man was on an impressive winning streak based on the disappointed sighs from the onlookers, but that didn't discourage the hopeful challengers. With a little luck, they could make their money back a hundredfold. Anima, however, was eyeing an item that likely had little monetary value; one that would sell for a couple copper pieces at best, yet would bring immense joy to his little birthday girl. That alone made it more valuable to him than any of the other treasures being offered.

"Well, that was unfortunate, but it's all in good fun!" the slender man announced. "Now, gather 'round, everyone, gather 'round! Does anyone have the strength to overcome our challenge? We're closing shop soon, so let's speed things along, shall we? Who's next?"

“Me.” Anima walked up to the table and slammed his copper piece down.

“Step right up, step ri— Oh, I’m terribly sorry, good sir, but I’ll have to ask that you stop using that minotaur stone. My brother may be strong, but not even he can best a beast.”

The thin man, who was the brawny man’s brother like Anima had guessed, was looking at his horns. Everyone outside his family mistook them as a side-effect of him using a minotaur stone to bolster his physical abilities, but he wasn’t using any such thing. He wouldn’t have minded ripping the horns right out of his head if it meant he could make Marie happy, but doing so would have likely had the opposite effect; she would definitely sob uncontrollably if she found out his horns were no more because of her. He had to find another way to get the man to agree to his challenge.

“Have your brother use a minotaur stone as well, then.”

“And why might you want that?”

“Because that way it’s a fair fight. I’ll even get one for him, just give me a few minutes.”

Anima turned around, but the man stopped him before he could take a step.

“Hang on! No need to go running off on us! We’ve already got a minotaur stone here; you don’t have to buy one!” The burly man obviously prided himself on his strength, and as such, a minotaur stone was the perfect match for him. It was no surprise that he had one of his own. “If I might ask, good sir, are you perhaps a Hunter?”

“I am.”

“And what rank might you be?”

“One-star.”

“Great, then that’s enough out of me! Let’s get this show on the road!”

It was easy to see why that didn’t raise any issues with the brothers. Hunters were divided into eight ranks, and were given the ability to rise through them by completing quests and tagging along with higher-ranked Hunters. A one-star Hunter was one who hadn’t done anything of major significance and likely had very little mana at their disposal. Such a person using a minotaur stone would be about on par with a trained and experienced Hunter who’d completed half of their warm-up routine.

Anima sat down and placed his elbow on the table, while the burly man concentrated his mana into his minotaur stone, invoking its power. As advertised, a pair of horns strikingly similar to Anima’s sprouted from his temples. It was Anima’s first time seeing someone use that particular magic stone, but it clearly illustrated the reason everyone assumed he was constantly using one.

With both participants ready to do battle, the slender man cleared his throat.

“All right, on the count of three!” he announced. “One, two… three!”

WHAM!

A slight push later, the table was no more; it was broken in half. The burly man, whose hand had met the unfortunate fate of wrecking the table, was lying atop of its remains. Anima, realizing what he had done, went into a panic. He may have unintentionally put more power into his arm just then than he had into the kick that had sent Malshan flying through the woods.

“S-Sorry, I think I went a bit too far. Are you okay?”

“Owww…”

He was still breathing. Knowing that was enough to let Anima relax again.

“Ahhh, guess we’ll have to close shop for a while,” the slender man sighed upon confirming Anima’s victory.

“I apologize.”

“It’s fine,” he replied with a wry smile, “this is what arm wrestling’s all about; half the fun’s in the risk. Still, I never expected that my brother would get knocked out cold. Say, are you really a one-star?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, with one-stars like you around, I pity the fool who dares wrong this place. Anyway, you won! Choose whatever you’d like, good sir.”

Anima didn’t hesitate in making his selection, leaving the slender man thoroughly confused.

“You sure about that? I mean, if that’s what you want then by all means, it’s yours. But that’s the cheapest piece in the pile. It’s worth more than one copper, sure, but you can score a substantial sum if you do a little digging.”

“That’s fine; this one is perfect. It’s for my daughter.”

The man let out a hearty laugh.

“Well, that makes it priceless indeed! Thanks for stopping, good sir!”

Anima quickly pocketed his present and hurried straight back home.

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“Daddy! You home!”

After rushing through the streets, Anima had arrived home in the blink of an eye. The moment he opened the door, Marie, wearing a huge smile, trotted up to the entrance and tightly hugged his legs. Anima's heart started to race. Whether or not that adorable smile would stay on her equally adorable face hinged solely on his present.

"Daddy, you sad?" Marie asked worriedly. "Did you getted a boo-boo?"

Children were extraordinarily receptive of adults' feelings. Anima had to shrug off his worries; he wouldn't want to distress Marie, especially not on her birthday.

"No, I'm completely fine. I can even lift you up if you want. What do you say, want to go up?"

"Up! Up! I love up!"

"I can even rub your cheeks!"

"That's tickly! Daddy, I give pets! You goed out aaall alone, so you gets pets!"

Feeling her warm, tiny hand ruffle his hair cast all his worries aside. Just as he was enjoying that bliss, he heard several more sets of footsteps coming his way. Soon enough, Luina, Myuke, and Bram arrived at the entrance.

"Welcome back, Anima."

"You sure took a while."

"Where'd you even go? We were starting to get worried, m'kay?"

Relieved that Anima got home, they welcomed him with warm smiles. Strangely, that warmth only made his chest tighten up. A realization hit him: by leaving without a word, he'd put them through hell. No one knew where he'd gone, no one knew if he was okay, no

one knew when—or if—he'd come home. All they could do was believe that he'd return.

Marie's tight hug must have been because she'd been afraid that her beloved Daddy might never come home. The belief that he'd failed her welled up within him. Her precious birthday was supposed to be a happy occasion; he'd managed to get her a present, but at what cost? He was afraid of telling his family the truth, but that fear was nothing compared to the feeling of worrying them. He cleared his throat and opened his mouth.

"I have to tell you something, girls. I went to Garaat to… to buy a present for Marie."

It wasn't easy for him, but he'd finally opened up and told them what he'd done. In response, Myuke became visibly confused.

"You say that like it's some sort of crime."

"You're not mad…?"

He didn't understand why he wasn't being told off. He looked around, and it wasn't just Myuke who was confused by his somber tone. Luina, Bram, and even Marie were all looking at him like he had six horns. He needed to explain his thought process so that they could fully understand the gravity of the situation.

"I didn't want to be seen as a failure. I love Marie from the bottom of my heart, I really do, which is why I had no choice but to get her a birthday gift. The problem is that the first time I'd ever heard of this custom was yesterday…"

Anima opened his heart to them, prompting Myuke to grin.

"You seriously got all worked up about something like *that*?"

"Presents are not essential for birthdays, m'kay?" Bram explained as she placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Exactly,” Luina said. “It’s the thought that counts. We all know how much you love Marie, so the only thing that matters is that you’re here to celebrate with her.”

“R-Really?”

“Really really. And besides…” Luina paused and looked down at Marie with a warm smile. “The best gift you could ever give this little angel is the time you spend with her. You spend so much time playing with her every single night. Does that sound like a failure to you? Because it certainly doesn’t to me—to us. Isn’t that right, Marie?”

“Uh-huh! I love paying with Daddy!”

Those words freed him of any and all guilt. He was completely overcome with joy, as shown by the massive smile on his face.

“Me too, Marie! I love playing with you too! I’ll always play with you! Today, tomorrow, the day after that—I won’t miss a single day, okay?!”

“Yaaay!”

“I want to play with you too,” Luina added.

“Don’t even *think* I’m not gonna be there!”

“I’m in too, m’kay?! But I wanna eat first! I’m starving, m’kay?” Bram added, rubbing her stomach. That was all it took for them all to hold hands and move into the dining room together.

Luina had spent the better part of the day preparing a feast. Set beautifully on the table was an assortment of fruits, a hearty stew, and a mountain of vegetable salad—all of Marie’s favorite foods. To top off the special occasion, in the center of an already incredible birthday dinner sat its crown jewel: a decadent apple cake.

“This must have been difficult to make. I’m sorry I wasn’t here to help,” Anima lamented.

“Oh, it was, especially because I was so lonely without you.” Luina looked up at him with a pout. It wasn’t often that he got to see her acting childish. “I hope you’re planning to spend all day tomorrow with me.”

Anima took her playful demand very seriously.

“I will. We’ll even cook together. Promise.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” she answered cheerfully, then sat down. Once everyone else had also taken their seats, she cleared her throat to get their attention. “Before we eat, I have a little something for Marie. Do you want to see it?”

“I wanna! Lemme see, lemme see!”

“Ta-dah! This is for you!”

“Wow! Wooow! It’s a bun-bun!”

Marie’s eyes sparkled excitedly when she saw the palm-sized plush bunny in Luina’s hand. She jumped off her chair, trotted up to Luina, and tightly hugged her gift.

“Thank you, Mommy!”

“You’re welcome. Oh, and look, I think your sisters have something for you too.”

“Yaaay! Whassit?”

She turned toward Myuke and Bram with an expectant smile. The girls exchanged a quick glance, then looked at Marie.

“This is from me and Bram.”

“It’s our masterpiece, m’kay?”

Myuke pulled a sheet of paper from behind her back, which the two of them presented together to the birthday girl. It was a drawing they'd made in secret to surprise her. It was also the first time Anima had gotten to see it.

"Ah! It's me! Lookie, it's me!"

"It sure is," Luina said. "It's very nice."

"It's so pitty! Thank you, Myukey 'n Brum!"

"You're welcome."

"Treasure it, m'kay?"

"Uh-huh! I put it in seepy room!"

"That'd be awesome, m'kay?"

"We must've done a pretty good job if you wanna put it there!"

They couldn't have been happier that Marie liked their present. She liked it so much, in fact, that she waddled over to Anima to show it off.

"Daddy, lookie! It's me!"

"That's wonderful; I'm so happy for you. And look, I have something for you too."

"You does?"

"I do. I hope you like it." Anima reached into his pocket. Fortunately, his nightmare hadn't come true, as his present was still there. "Happy birthday, Marie."

"Cuuute!"

Marie smiled from ear to ear when she saw what Anima had placed in her hands. She hugged the gift to her chest and began hopping around in a circle. In her tiny hands were hair ties, but they

weren’t ordinary hair ties. What Anima had given her were bunny hair ties.



“Those are really cute, Anima. Well done.”

“They’ll look great on Marie!”

“You’re pretty good at finding presents, m’kay?”

His intuition was right; the hair ties made for an excellent gift.

“Go on, Marie. Isn’t there something you want to tell Daddy?”

Getting so many wonderful gifts made her the happiest little girl in the world. She hopped over to Anima and gave him a big hug.

“Thank you, Daddy! I love you!”

Seeing his daughter’s delighted smile made all his worries disappear.

Chapter Two: Small Hands, Big Presents

Two weeks after Marie's birthday, around midday, Anima, Luina, and the girls were all in one of the rooms on the second floor. In fact, they had been there since the moment they'd finished breakfast. Normally, they would have been playing outside, but they'd recently started spending more time indoors.

One factor behind them staying in the house was that the weather was slowly changing. It hadn't gotten so cold that they could see their own breath, but the morning dew had become a frequent guest in their garden. The lawn was often quite slippery when Luina and Anima would air out the laundry while the girls were sleeping. Luina had even slipped on it that very morning, but Anima had quickly caught her. He hadn't done anything special, but her body had suddenly gotten warmer in his arms and her cheeks had turned bright red.

The couple's early-morning exploits aside, while mornings and evenings were rather chilly, midday was still on the warm side. If dressed properly, spending time outside was actually rather pleasurable. Even so, they had spent the whole day inside.

The reason for that was simple: Marie had gotten hooked on drawing. She really liked spending time with her family, too, and not one of them could say no to a request from such an adorable little angel. As such, the five of them were sitting around a table, all of them drawing.

"I dawed hair!"

"Wow!" Luina exclaimed. "Mommy's hair looks very nice, Marie! What color will you be using next?"

"I do red now, 'cause I daw Myukey's hair! You watchin', Mommy?!"

"Mm-hmm, I'm watching."

Luina watched as the children put their sweet memories and fantasy worlds on paper with the help of their colorful crayons. Anima couldn't stop himself from smiling at the peaceful, idyllic scene.

"I think Daddy's broken."

"He's totally lost in Mommy's looks, m'kay?"

Anima immediately snapped back into reality as his two older girls teased him. On his one side, Myuke was looking at him with a playful gaze, and on his other, Bram was wearing a cheeky smile. The girls were helping him get better at drawing, just as they'd promised. It would have been rude of him to keep staring instead of giving it his full attention, so he turned his eyes back to his art and tried to focus on drawing.

On his paper was a uniquely shaped table with strange, colorful whirlpools on top. It was supposed to be the perfectly normal dinner table filled with Luina's delicious cooking, but it looked more like a bacterium that had been highlighted in random areas. It wasn't great by any stretch of the imagination.

Anima was beginning to lose hope that he would ever learn to draw. He had been optimistic during his first training session, but he was already on his third. The girls kept trying to give him tips and tricks, but he wasn't improving at all.

"Sorry, I'm hopeless…"

Myuke turned toward the defeated Anima and flashed him a warm smile.

"C'mon, Daddy, you can do it. Look, this is how you draw lines." Myuke scooted next to him and took his hand, which he relaxed to allow her to lead his movements. Guiding his hand, she drew the beautiful, defined lines of five people sitting around the table. "Like that, see? You just gotta relax and not smoosh the crayon against the paper. Your lines'll be perfect if you do it that way."

“Wow, thank you. You’re a very good teacher.”

“I-It’s nothing special,” she huffed proudly as her mouth curled into a smile and her cheeks flushed. Jealous of the praise she was getting, Bram grabbed Anima’s hand.

“I’ll help too, m’kay?”

“Do that later! It’s my turn right now!”

“Quit trying to hog all the compliments for yourself, m’kay?!”

“I-I’m not doing this just to get compliments!”

The girls started arguing with each other, with Anima caught in the middle of it. They were too good of friends to ever truly fight, but it was still difficult for Anima to watch his daughters get worked up over him.

“It’s okay, girls. I can draw with both hands. Myuke, you take my right, and Bram, you take my left.”

His idea seemed to have worked. They stopped glaring at each other, sat down, and placed their tiny hands over Anima’s much larger ones.

“And we’re done!”

“It looks great, m’kay?”

His piece was finally complete. What he’d drawn was a picture of his family sitting around the table, enjoying a feast and merrily chatting amongst themselves. It was a drawing of the birthday party they’d had for Marie a couple weeks earlier.

What a great drawing, Anima thought. While the drawing wasn’t able to convey just how tasty the birthday meal had been, everyone in the picture wore a broad smile, perfectly encapsulating the atmosphere around the table. Just looking at it filled him with happy memories of the event.

“It turned out really good, Daddy! Good job!”

“It doesn’t look like yarn anymore! I can tell what it is now, m’kay?!”

The girls looked at the finished drawing, satisfied. They’d done the bulk of the work, but they seemed happy for him. It wouldn’t have been right for him to bring it up.

“Thank you, girls. I would never have been able to make something so precious on my own.”

“You’re welcome! Just let me know if you wanna practice again, okay?”

“I love playing with you, so I’m always here to help, m’kay?”

Anima couldn’t get enough of their heart-warming smiles.

“I finissed too!” Marie announced, proudly presenting her picture. She’d drawn all five of them working in the field, merrily harvesting ripe vegetables from the ground.

“That’s awesome!”

“She’s got us all beat, m’kay?”

“You may have what it takes to become an artist when you grow up.”

“Hear that, Marie? Everyone loves your drawing. Well done.”

Hearing everyone’s compliments filled her with pride. She quickly jumped off her chair.

“I put it on wall!”

Drawing in hand, she hurried out of the playroom. The others got up and followed her into the sunny bedroom, where all four walls were already covered with various drawings. One such drawing was Anima’s “ball of yarn” that he’d wanted to throw out, but Marie liked it, so it ended up decorating the room.

“We have quite a few up there already,” Anima said. “We’re going to run out of space for pictures sooner or later.”

“It’s a good thing we have a lot of rooms in this house. We can start hanging our drawings in them once this one gets full,” Luina replied.

“You can take mine down if you want to put another one in here.”

“We’d never do that. Marie loves it, and it’s a fun little memory.”

As embarrassing as it may have been, that strange drawing held a lot of meaning for Anima. It reminded him of the panic that he’d beaten himself up over at the time, as well as the subsequent hijinks that he looked back on with a smile.

“Besides,” Luina continued, “I really enjoy that drawing. It has its own unique flavor.”

“Did Mommy tasted it?”

“No, silly,” Luina chuckled. “It means that I really love his drawing.”

“I love it too! It gots flabor!”

Anima put his hand on her head and ruffled her soft hair.

“Thank you. I love your drawing too, Marie.”

“I love it too! We should put this one in the best spot in the room!”

“I like this spot, m’kay?” Bram tapped the wall directly across from the bed. It would be the first thing they’d see every time they woke up.

“I like! I like there!”

“I suppose that settles it.”

Anima walked over to the closet to get some thumbtacks, which were kept at the very top of the closet so Marie couldn’t reach them. The moment he took the picture, Marie jumped excitedly to reach it.

“Me! Meee! Lemmeee!”

Though he loved nothing more than fulfilling his daughters’ every wish, letting Marie use thumbtacks was one request he simply couldn’t fulfill, as a simple mistake could lead to an injury. He didn’t want to put her at risk, but he didn’t want to upset her by telling her no either. Luckily, he had a brilliant idea in mind.

“Why don’t we hang it up together? You hold the picture, while I pin it to the wall. I know it’s difficult, but a big girl like you can do it, can’t you?”

“I can! Lookie!”

She pushed the paper against the wall with all her strength and looked up at Anima, waiting for him to compliment her.

“Wow! That’s incredible! Who knew you were so good at this?”

“You’re amazing at pushing!”

All the praise Anima and Myuke were giving her made Marie incredibly happy. Her big, bright smile was almost too distracting for Anima, but he managed to push through and secure the drawing with pins in each of the four corners.

“Wooow! Daddy doed it!”

“Thank you, Marie. I wouldn’t have been able to do it without your help.”

“You welcome! Lemme help s’more!”

Marie looked at Anima and Luina, hoping for more things to help with. As a four-year-old, she decided that it was time she got taste of the responsibilities a big girl would have.

“Hmm. I have something in mind, but it’s very difficult. Do you think you’re ready to take the laundry off the line with me?” Luina asked.

“Uh-huh! Lemme clean! I do laundy!”

She took Anima's and Luina's hands, ushering them outside.

"We'll clean up the crayons."

"You can do it, Marie, m'kay?"

Myuke and Bram watched them leave. They'd been trying to give Luina more private time, but not because they'd grown to dislike her. In fact, for the exact opposite reason: they'd been secretly working on a drawing for her. Only three weeks after Marie's birthday was Luina's; she would be turning twenty-one.

Familiarized with the concept of gifting, Anima had gotten something for her as well. He'd hidden it on the top shelf of one of the kitchen cabinets, and was excitedly awaiting the big day. Although an obvious place to hide a present, it would be practically impossible for Luina to find it on her own. The only conceivable way for her to reach it was to stand on a chair, and Anima made sure he was by her side every time she cooked, giving her no reason to overexert herself.

The lead-up to Marie's birthday had been nothing short of a disaster, but the lead-up to Luina's was going smoothly. No matter how much he was looking forward to his beloved wife's birthday, the blissful everydays he got to spend with his family would always be irreplaceable. Instead of worrying, he decided to simply live in the moment.

"Lessgo, Daddy!" Pulled along by Marie, the three of them left the room and headed to their peaceful garden. The early-autumn breeze carried the scent of nature as it fluttered the hanging clothes. "I want up!"

"Upsy-daisy!"

Anima lifted Marie into his arms so she could reach the laundry.

"I'll hold the basket," Luina said, "so can you put the clothes in there for me?"

“’Kaaay!”

Marie quickly reached out to the closest piece of laundry, which just happened to be Luina’s underwear. As Anima unclipped it, she raised it high into the air, proudly presenting it to him.

“Daddy, I taked it!” she announced. Luina quickly rushed over to them, flushed.

“Let’s just put everything into the basket, okay?”

Embarrassed by her underwear being shown off to Anima in such a triumphant manner, she guided Marie’s hands to the basket.

“’Kaaay!” She plopped Luina’s underwear into the basket and moved on to the next article. “I taked it! Lookie, Mommy! It’s big!”

She raised Anima’s underwear in front of Luina’s face, which only caused her to turn an even brighter red. Even though she dealt with it almost every day, it probably embarrassed her to have it so close to her face.

“Well done! Now tell me, what do we do with the laundry we took off?”

“We put in bastet!”

Just as she had with Luina’s, she plopped Anima’s underwear into the basket. After that, they got into a rhythm, with Anima unpinning the clothes as Marie reached out to them. Each time she got a new piece of clothing, Luina was there with the basket.

Even though it was only a day’s worth of laundry, it had come from a family of five, so there was still a substantial amount—enough to cause beads of sweat to start rolling down Marie’s face. She must have been happy to have been entrusted with doing something so essential, however, as she didn’t let it affect her. She forged on without so much as a short pause, working her hardest until they’d taken all the laundry down off the line.

“We finished very quickly thanks to you, Marie.”

“You did really well, Marie. Come, let’s have a glass of water together.”

Knowing Marie, she was going to offer to help until she collapsed, so Anima tried to sneak in a break.

“I bing water!” Marie offered excitedly. Anima was afraid that she was pushing herself too hard, but besides the sweat, she looked as energetic as ever. She always ate a lot and got a full night’s sleep every night, so her reserves must have been full.

“Then why don’t you help me bring water into the dining room?”

“I bing! Daddy, I bing water! You go in!”

“Sure. I can’t wait,” he answered, then went inside. Marie followed soon after with a cup of water in her hands. She approached him with small, quick steps, causing the water to splash against the sides of the cup. She lost a couple of drops here and there as she made the journey over to her loving father, but she reached her goal without any major issues.

“Daddy, here!”

“Thank you.” Marie watched excitedly as Anima took the cup, carried it to his mouth, and drank its refreshing contents. Finished with it, he lowered the cup to reveal a cheerful smile. “Ah, that was great. Very tasty.”

“You welcome!”

“Aren’t you happy Daddy liked it?” Luina asked.

“Uh-huh! I want water too!”

“There’s some right here for you. You can sit down and drink it, okay?”

“’Kaaay!”

Anima watched as his precious daughter gulped down her cup of water. At the same time, he could hear footsteps growing louder and louder. Myuke and Bram, the source of the footsteps, wore proud smiles as they entered the dining room. They were finished with their secret project.

“What are those lovely smiles for, girls?”

“We’re super excited for your birthday, m’kay?”

“You better look forward to it! We’ve got an *amazing* present for you!”

“Me too! I’m big girl now! I give pesent too!”

“I can’t wait to see it!”

“Yaaay! And then, and then I get pesents for Myukey ’n Brum ’n Daddy too!”

“That’ll be great, even though my birthday’s not for a looong time, m’kay?”

“It’s still sooner than mine, though.”

“Heeheehee, are you dreading the day I turn the same age as you? Don’t worry, I’ll try not to rub it in too much, m’kay?”

“Tch, whatever. It’ll only be a little while until I’m older than you again, though.”

“I’m excited for both of your birthdays,” Anima interjected. “We’re going to throw a huge party for each of you.”

“It can’t come soon enough. But speaking of birthdays… when did you say yours was?”

“Oh yeah, I don’t think you told me when it is, m’kay?”

“Actually, I don’t think you told *any* of us when it is. I hope we didn’t miss it.”

Anima shook his head.

“I don’t know if we missed it or not. I don’t know when I was born.”

“Don’t tell me it’s ’cause your world’s calendar is different than ours, m’kay?”

Not long after they took Bram in, Anima had explained everything to her. He didn’t want to hide anything from his family and, even if he did, it would have been extremely difficult to do so considering the horns on his head. He’d decided that it was better to clear things up before Bram asked why he was constantly using a minotaur stone, so he’d told her about his situation. She was surprised at first, but had quickly accepted what he’d told her. All in all, Anima’s birthplace had little to do with their relationship.

“No. I simply don’t know when I was born.”

Anima was despised by his family. He didn’t even know who his own mother was, so there was no way he could know when he was born.

“No pesents for Daddy?” Marie lamented. She really wanted to celebrate Anima’s birthday, and knowing as much made him all the happier. Unfortunately, however, they couldn’t celebrate his birthday without knowing when it was.

“I’ve got it!” Myuke announced. “Why don’t we celebrate it together with Mommy’s birthday?!”

“Ooh! That’s genius, m’kay?!”

“That truly is genius!”

Anima praised the idea. Having his family celebrate him was something straight out of a dream for him. He was already excited for Luina’s birthday, but now he was outright ecstatic for that day to come.

“I’ll bake the most delicious birthday cake for you!” Luina exclaimed.

“And I’ll get you the best present you could ever ask for,” Anima replied. He’d already gotten her present, but that was going to be a secret until her birthday. He wanted to see her beautiful smile when he gave it to her on the day she turned twenty-one. Imagining that magical moment the entire time, Anima sat at the table with his family as they talked all through the afternoon.

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After eating dinner, while Luina was busy warming the bathwater, Anima and the girls set off to wash the dishes. With a towel, a lamp, and the dirty plates nearby, Anima drew water from the well and they went to work on cleaning the dishes.

“Daddy, lookie! I maked it sparkly!”

“Wow! You’re really good at washing dishes. How does mine look?”

“Daddy’s sparkly too!”

“She’s not kidding! Those look brand new, Daddy!” Myuke praised his work. She was under the impression that he performed better when he got compliments, which might very well have been the case. When he was first summoned, he’d thought plates were disposable after a single use, but after half a year, he was cleaning them to near perfection.

“I’m done, m’kay?”

They finished cleaning up in no time, then carried the sparkling-clean dishes back to the kitchen and put them away. Once that was done, they all took a breather in the dining room until Luina arrived.

“The bath’s ready,” she told them, and Anima sprung up from his chair.

“Time for our big family bath!” he announced excitedly, but Myuke simply shook her head.

“I’m not taking a bath with you today.”

“Huh?”

His expression froze. He collapsed into the chair, his face distorted with dread. Myuke, not having expected the news to hit him so hard, panicked. She hadn’t expected her beloved Daddy to slump into his chair, his spirit broken.

“I-It’s not like that! It’s not because I don’t want to take a bath with you! I do! I really do!”

“You mean it?!”

“Thank goodness. Aren’t you happy, Anima?”

“I’m relieved, to say the least.”

Myuke let out a sigh upon Anima’s return from his momentary clinical death.

“For crying out loud, do you seriously think I’d single you out like that? You know I wouldn’t do that—I’m not taking a bath with Mommy either.”

“Huh?” Luina’s expression froze. Her eyes clouded over and began collecting moisture. “Do you hate me, Myuke?”

Both of her parents were devastated to hear those words come out of her. The fact that such a minor inconvenience crushed them showed just how much they loved her. That didn’t mean she could yield, though.

“Of course I don’t. This is just for today, okay?”

“Why won’t you bathe with me, then?”

“I just feel like having a girls’ bath night tonight.”

“I’m a girl too…”

“I-I mean, yeah, but, umm…” Myuke dug her thumbs into her temples, trying to come up with an excuse. “Ah, right! We want to practice swimming! We can’t really splash around in the bath if all five of us are in there, can we?”

“It’s dangerous to splash around in the tub.”

While Luina scolded her, Myuke watched Bram shrug her shoulders in confusion. She could feel her dignity as the older of the two slipping away. If she wanted to stop that, persuading Luina had to be her top priority; she could explain things to Bram later.

“I know. We’ll be careful. I promise there won’t be any problems. I’ll be there to keep an eye on these two.”

The seriousness of Myuke’s tone resonated with Luina. Letting out a small sigh, she nodded.

“Make sure to wash yourselves really well, okay?”

“We will.”

“Just say the word if you want me to join you,” Anima added.

“Got it. C’mon, it’s bath time!”

Taking her sisters’ hands, she dragged them toward the changing room. She and Bram quickly took off their clothes, then waited patiently for Marie to do the same before entering the bathroom. The three cut through the warm steam and slowly submerged themselves in the comfortably hot water.

“Okay, so…” Myuke said, addressing the others.

“I’m up for practicing either the backstroke or the breaststroke, m’kay?”

“Whassat?”

“You can choose whether you wanna face up or down when you’re swimming. But this water’s hot, so you should probably face up, m’kay?”

“We’re not *actually* gonna practice swimming. I made that up so we could get in here, just the three of us.”

“Why’d you do that?” Bram shot a curious look at Myuke. “I love taking baths with everyone, m’kay?”

“I do too. I actually like it better that way, but this is something we can’t let them know about, so just deal with it for today, okay?”

“All right, tell me all about this ‘something’, m’kay?”

“I wanna talk about what we’re gonna do for them for presents.”

Everything was finally coming together in Bram’s mind.

“Ah, gotcha, m’kay? I was thinking of doing a drawing like we did for Mommy. Lemme know if you’ve got another idea, though, m’kay?”

“I’ll draw him a picture too, but I wanna do something else besides that. They’ve done a lot for me, y’know? It only seems fair.”

Anima and Luina took good care of every member of their family, but Myuke probably had more reasons to be thankful to them than anyone else. She’d been with Luina the longest, having arrived at the orphanage at a very young age, and Luina had been there with her through thick and thin, showering her with nonstop love and care. They were together even when the Scarlett family had fallen into ruin, but Luina had never stopped supporting her in everything she did.

The same was true of Anima, who had saved her more times than she could count. Ever since he’d become a part of their tiny family, Myuke had been having the time of her life. They were, for the first time in what felt like an eternity, financially stable, so she no longer had to try to make a living as a Hunter and suffer under the

tyrannical adults who ran the Guild. She could spend her time playing with her lovely little sisters instead.

She was full of gratitude for the happy, carefree life they provided to her. It was that gratitude that made her want to give something back—something that would make them happy. Her passion carried over to Bram, who nodded with a warm smile.

“I get you, Myuke. I love them to bits too, m’kay?”

“Me too!”

“Yay! Thank you! I’m sure we’ll come up with something amazing! Okay, so, let’s start with some ideas.”

Marie raised her hand the moment Myuke opened the brainstorming session.

“Yes?”

“Y’know, y’know, I tells them habby birday!”

“Oh, that’s a great idea! Let’s do that!”

“Yaaay!” Marie celebrated her success. Myuke was already planning to do that, though, so she needed a bit more to work with.

“Bram, do you have anything?”

“Hmm… Maybe we could cook something, m’kay?”

“Oh, that’s genius! But, uh… can you cook?”

“I can be the taste tester, m’kay?”

“That’s not what we need right now!”

Bram dejectedly hung her head.

“Believe me, I’d love to do some cooking, but I’ve never even held a knife before, m’kay? What about you, Myuke?”

“Nope, never.”

Both of them helped Luina in the kitchen fairly regularly, but they'd only ever been given the safest tasks such as washing vegetables and setting the table. They couldn't jump straight into cooking a birthday meal if they didn't know how to use a knife or operate the oven.

"Maybe we shouldn't cook after all, m'kay?"

"Yeah. It was a great idea, though! Keep 'em coming!"

Marie again raised her hand high into the air.

"I pet-pet them!"

"Awesome! Great idea!"

"You're on a roll, m'kay?!"

Delighted by all the praise, she happily kicked her legs around in the water. Unfortunately, however, that alone wouldn't cut it. Wishing them a happy birthday, petting their heads, giving them a drawing… it all seemed lackluster. They needed something special, something that would make them the happiest parents in the world.

"What should we do…?"

"That's a good question, m'kay?"

Myuke and Bram sat at the edge of the tub with their arms crossed, deep in thought. Catching on to the trend, Marie quickly assumed the same position. Then, out of nowhere, Myuke broke formation, almost jumping out of the water when she heard the door to the changing room open. She pressed a finger against her lips and gave her sisters a serious look. Bram nodded silently, and Marie pushed both of her hands against her lips.

"We brought you clean clothes!"

"Are you girls doing okay?"

Luina and Anima shouted from the changing room. In response, Marie took her hands off her mouth.

“My soulders is in!” she shouted back.

“They are?! That’s my girl!” Anima cheered. “Don’t be afraid to tell me if you want me to join you, okay?”

“It’s just the three of us today, sheesh!”

“I can curl up in the corner so you can splash around freely in the water,” he reasoned. Taking a bath with his family was obviously the highlight of his day. Myuke didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but she had to steel herself and stay vigilant. Their meeting was important for coming up with the best possible birthday present for him.

“We’re fine for today. You guys should go relax or something.”

Immediately after saying that, Myuke froze. She’d had an epiphany.

“You heard her,” Luina said. “Let’s go have a seat in the dining room.”

“I guess we can do that…”

A few moments after they left the changing room, Myuke turned to her sisters.

“I know that look. Please tell me you’ve got something, m’kay?”

“Yep. I just had an incredible idea.”

Proudly puffing out her chest, Myuke shared her plan. Once finished, the other two looked at her in awe.

“Wow, that’s genius! I’m sure that’ll work, m’kay?!”

“Myukey geenus!”

“What did you expect? I mean, I *am* the oldest.”

She was clearly enjoying all the admiration she was getting. Even more than that, though, she was going to enjoy Luina’s and Anima’s delighted smiles when they received their special birthday present.

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Some days later, Anima was in high spirits as he and Luina did the laundry, enjoying the gentle rays of the morning sun all the while. He was in such a wonderful mood because it was a very special day for him: his and Luina's birthday.

We're going to make this a day we'll never forget! he cheered to himself, bringing a fist in front of his face.

"Umm, Anima?" Luina nervously called out to him. Turning around, he noticed a slight flush in her cheeks. A tinge of worry propped up in Anima's mind.

"Your face is red. Are you okay?"

If she wasn't, then he would cancel their birthday celebration right away; her health was far more important than any sort of party. He would rush her into the bedroom and lay her down, then summon the best doctor in the town—no, the *country* to tend to her.

"No, I'm perfectly fine."

"Oh, okay. That's good, then."

While that was great news, it didn't answer his real question. If she wasn't sick, why did she have a tinge of pink on her cheeks?

"Would you please put down my underwear…?"

He took a good look at his hand and realized that he was indeed clutching her underwear, holding it inches from his face. To someone who didn't know better, it could have even been seen as him fulfilling a deviant, perverted desire. No matter how close he and Luina were, he would have to have been truly twisted to succumb to his lust in such a way on his significant other's birthday. The last thing he needed was for her to leave him because she thought he was some sort of hopeless freak.

"Th-This isn't what it looks like! I wasn't doing anything strange with your underwear, I swear! I swear…" he whimpered anguishedly.

Luina took a step forward and wrapped her hands around his with a smile.

“Don’t worry, I’m not mad.”

“R-Really?”

“Really really. So please, don’t be upset—smile. I love your beautiful smile, and it would be a shame to spend this special day moping around.”

“Luina…” She was right. Such a special occasion wasn’t meant for sadness or worry, it called for cheerful smiles and love. “Like this?”

He looked at Luina and slowly curled the edges of his mouth.

“It’s a bit stiff.”

“Then how about this?”

He put his whole face into smiling, and waited for Luina’s judgment. She was really cute when she smiled, but her serious, inquisitive look as she examined Anima’s face was adorable as well. Being so close to his wife put a natural smile on his face. Seeing that, Luina chuckled.

“That’s the one. It never gets old.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

Anima’s smile broadened even further. He’d have loved to keep talking with Luina, but they had to continue hanging the laundry out to dry. If they didn’t, they were going to end up having a late breakfast, leaving their precious daughters to starve.

After finishing with the laundry, they made their way back to the kitchen. While Anima was busy making ham and cheese sandwiches with lettuce, Luina prepared a pot of bean soup. Bearing witness to his wife’s mastery of the kitchen left him awestruck.

“Could you go wake the girls?” she requested. “I’ll set the table while you do.”

“Of course.”

He quietly entered the bedroom, stopping for a moment to appreciate his three little angels as they enjoyed their sweet dreams. He could have spent the entire day listening to the quiet symphony of their peaceful breathing, but breakfast was best served warm.

“Rise and shine, girls,” he whispered. “It’s morning.”

“Bwah!”

To his surprise, Myuke immediately sat up on the bed. While giving himself an imaginary pat on the back for the effectiveness of his morning greeting, Myuke turned toward Bram and started violently shaking her.

“Wake up!” she cried, her sharp voice filling the room.

“Hmmm’kay…”

“Hrmnrmnrm…”

Myuke turned toward her sisters, who were both awake, but only just barely.

“Today’s the day!”

Their eyes flew open and they scurried off the bed, rushing to the dresser to change.

“Umm, what are you girls doing?” Anima asked.

“I change ’lone! I’m big girl!”

“I-Impressive. Good girl…”

Anima was thoroughly confused, but all three of them had finished changing before he had time to guess at what was happening.

“Let’s go, Daddy!”

Myuke took his hand and dragged him out of the room. They quickly arrived at the dining room, where Luina had just finished setting the table and bringing out the food. Seeing Anima and the girls burst into the dining room caught her completely off-guard.

“Wh-What’s the rush, girls?”

“It’s morning, right?! And that’s our breakfast, right?!”

“It is, yes…”

“Phew, good…”

Myuke breathed a sigh of relief, then exchanged a quick glance with her sisters. They both nodded, then all three of them opened their mouths, and…

“Happy birthday, Mommy and Daddy!”

“We’ve got an awesome present for you, m’kay?”

“Eat your breakfast, and then go out on a date!”

The two of them were too shocked to move.

“A date?” Luina asked.

“You girls want to go out after breakfast? Fine by me.”

“Nope!” Myuke shook her head. “Just you and Mommy!”

“Stay out until tomorrow morning! It’s your birthday, so just go have fun, m’kay?!”

“Down! Down! I pet!”

Still confused, the couple crouched down to let Marie pet their heads. Bram and Myuke followed suit, ruffling their hair even further.

“Thank you for the wonderful present,” Luina said as she and Anima stood back up.

“Yes, thank you. You really went out of your way for this, and I appreciate that. I really do, it’s just…”

Anima cut himself off. He really didn’t want to say what was on his mind, though a quick glance at Luina’s troubled expression confirmed that she felt the same way.

“You don’t like our present?” Myuke asked with a worried look on her face, realizing that something was wrong. Anima, however, immediately shook his head.

“No, we love it! Right, Luina?”

“Yes, we’re both very happy with your incredibly thoughtful present. We’re just wondering… Are you going to be all right by yourselves?”

They were both worried about the girls. Going on a date was a dream come true for them, and they were overjoyed that the girls had figured out as much and offered them a chance to do so. Even so, leaving three children alone in the house wasn’t something they could agree to without a second thought.

“I can be ’lone! I’m four!”

“Let me borrow that fire lizard stone and I’ll have the bath warm in no time!”

“If any bad guys come here, I’ll send ’em packing with my Jade Dragon stone, m’kay?”

The girls tried to reason with them, but it didn’t seem to be having much of an effect; Anima and Luina were still extremely worried about them. Despite their concerns, however, they knew that declining their daughters’ kindness would deeply hurt them. They had to trust the girls’ resourcefulness. After a brief silence, Luina smiled warmly and nodded.

“Thank you, girls,” she said. “Daddy and I will be sure to have lots of fun on our date.”

“Yes, thank you. It means a lot.”

The happiness radiating from the girls’ huge smiles was almost blinding.

“Good! Now hurry up and eat!”

“Don’t even chew! You won’t have any time to spend together if you do, m’kay?”

They sat down at the table and had a rushed breakfast. The moment they were done, Myuke sprung off her chair and grabbed Luina’s hand, pulling her toward the bedroom.

“C’mon, let’s pick up the pace! You wanna dress up for your date, don’t you?!”

“But the dishes…”

“We’ll take care of them later!”

“I don’t have to change, so I can help wash them.”

“We do disses with Daddy!”

With Marie’s command given, they went to work on the dishes. Once they were all cleaned and dried, Anima put them back in the cabinet, quickly nabbing his present from the top shelf and hiding it in his robe as he did.

“We doed the disses!” Marie announced as loudly as she could. She and the others were probably trying to act livelier than usual to ease their parents’ worries.

Anima reached down and pet her head for a job well done. Just as he finished, Luina descended the stairs, wearing a loose white top and a long crimson skirt. It was an outfit that he’d seen her wear from time to time, but for some reason it made her look even more beautiful than it ever had before. Spellbound by his gorgeous wife, he was only snapped out of his trance by a shove from Myuke.

“I know she’s beautiful, but quit drooling and go! You’ve got places to be, remember?!”

“The longer you stay here, the less time you have to kiss, m’kay?!”

“Bye-bye!”

With all three of their daughters rushing them out the door, Anima and Luina set off on their first date.

Chapter Three: The Night Is Short, Stay With Me Girl

Hand in hand, Anima and Luina walked the road to Garaat, their house getting smaller and smaller behind them. Anima was anxious about leaving the girls there all by themselves to begin with, but that anxiety only got worse with every step they took.

The goblin attack that had led to his summoning aside, his daughters had never been in danger of being attacked, as the area was patrolled by Hunters around the clock to ensure the safety of its residents. He had seen them multiple times while going out and, so far, they'd been successful. It was almost unimaginable that monsters could penetrate the town's defenses. That was clearly not an issue. What *was* an issue, however, was everything else.

Would they be able to bring the laundry inside? Would they be able to make their own lunches? Would they be able to draw the bath? He and his wife finally had a day to enjoy as a couple, just the two of them, yet questions like that flooded his mind. He stared silently at the ground as he walked, unable to quell his fears.

"We're lucky the weather is so nice today," Luina said, breaking the silence.

He jerked his head up and nodded affirmatively.

"The laundry will dry very quickly in this warmth. Let's just hope they can reach it…"

"Don't worry. I took the laundry in all the time when I was Myuke's age, and she's even taller than I was. I'm sure they won't have any problems."

"Oh, okay… But with how sunny it is, they're bound to get thirsty. Myuke can't possibly draw water from the well…"

“It’s going to be okay. You drew enough water yesterday to last them two or three days even if they choose to wash even more laundry. There’s water in the tub, too; they just have to heat it up.”

“But they’ll have to make a fire to do that. They could hurt themselves with your fire lizard stone…”

“Anima, they’ll be fine.” Luina stopped and looked into Anima’s eyes with the understanding smile of a mother who was about to explain something very important to their child. “If someone as inexperienced as me can use the stone, there’s no way a Hunter like Myuke would hurt themselves with it. Food won’t be an issue either. You must have realized by now that they’re very skilled with their hands, right?”

“Right. They’re amazing artists, Myuke and Bram—even little Marie. Those hands can create such incredible art, so they should be more than capable of creating food that’s just as incredible. I suppose I shouldn’t worry that they could cut themselves with the knife…”

Luina chuckled. That cute smile of hers was enough to dispel all of Anima’s fears.

“They’re doing their best to make us happy. Nothing can stop them when they work together. Nothing is going to happen, so stop worrying. Trust me. I had to look after the house when I was little as well, and… I’m here with you now, am I not?”

“Weren’t you afraid to look after the house all by yourself?”

Luina shook her head. There was a twinkle of nostalgia in her eyes.

“I wasn’t by myself, and neither are the girls. It was a lot of fun for us to work together and accomplish things we normally wouldn’t be able to on our own. I still remember the taste of the stew we made. It was a little burnt, but that almost made it all the tastier.”

Anima felt relieved listening to her story.

“I see. Kids like to look after their house?”

“They do, so don’t worry about them. They’ll be fine.”

Luina’s warm words calmed Anima’s racing heart. Once he’d cooled down, he thought back on his behavior, which made him feel somewhat miserable. He had acted like a child who sought comfort in their mother’s skirt—a stark contrast from his usual can-do demeanor.

“I’m sorry you had to see me acting so pathetic…”

“You weren’t pathetic at all,” she answered in a serious tone, still wearing the same warm smile. “Parents always worry about their children, and being able to see just how much you care for them means more than you know. I fall in love with you all over again with each passing day, and I’m incredibly grateful that we finally have the chance to go on a date.”

“Luina…” Anima was breathless. A dazzling smile spread across his face as a surge of joy filled his entire being. “I feel the same way; words can’t express how happy I am that I get to go on a date with you! Let’s make this the best day of our lives!”

While his previous worries were gone, he had one more mental wall he had to break down. Their date was no ordinary date, it was the accumulation of their daughters’ efforts in the form of a heartfelt gift; he had to enjoy it to the fullest. He owed that not only to Luina, but to their three little angels as well.

“Yes! Let’s make some wonderful memories today!”

Taken by Anima’s wonderful smile, Luina linked her arm with his. The warm, squishy sensation and her lovely, gentle fragrance only broadened the grin on his face. Finally, he was getting into the right mindset for a date. He had been a pitiable slob just moments ago, but that was no more. He was ready to escort his beautiful wife with his head held high.

They took a light step forward, resuming their walk through Garaat. Hand in hand, they merrily walked the main street under the dazzling sunlight. They headed down the block with the instrument store, art supply store, restaurant, and tailor, then entered an alleyway. Passing by a cozy, hidden little pub, they quickly came out on the other side. They wandered around without any particular goal while Anima tried to think of somewhere fun to take her.



The pressure weighing on his shoulders was immense. It was their first date, a gift from their precious little daughters; some run-down pub wouldn't cut it. He needed someplace grandiose to make the best memories possible. It was a difficult task, especially so because his idea of walking by places she'd enjoyed in the past yielded no results. Her head resting against his shoulder, she simply walked with him wearing a silent smile. If he was going to take his wife somewhere special on such an important day, he was going to have to put his brain into overdrive.

Maybe we should stop by the fruit stall…? No, that isn't something you'd do on a date at all. Then maybe a nice inn? Oh, what am I thinking? It's way too early for that.

They would be spending the night in Garaat, so their date would definitely end at an inn. It was a rare opportunity for the two of them to be alone, and he was going to make the most of it—he wanted to kiss, hug, cuddle, and eventually make love to Luina. The only question was how he would go about it. Surely he couldn't just turn to her and say, "make love to me". That would be weird, and it might even scare her. Dropping subtle hints wasn't his style either, though, and there was always the danger of them getting lost in translation. Regardless, he had time to mull over his options. They wouldn't go to an inn until right around sunset, so for the time being, he had to focus on the rest of their date.

That, however, was no easier. He still hadn't managed to think of a place to take her. To make matters worse, neither of them had said a word in quite some time—Anima had been too lost in his thoughts to interact with his wife. He had to say something before Luina got bored, turned on her heels, and went home.

Oh, no… he thought. It may have already been too late.

He glanced at her, but to his surprise, she didn't seem bored at all. On the contrary, she was smiling, and seemed to be having the time of her life. But why?

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," he said.

"I am! This is a lot of fun."

"But we're just walking."

"Yes. We're walking, arms linked, carefree as birds. I find it very calming and pleasant, but maybe you don't? Your forehead has been crinkly for a while now, are you still worried about the girls?"

Anima shook his head.

"No. I mean, of course I am, but I believe in them."

"Then what're you worried about?"

"Well…" He'd wanted to be as suave as possible on their date, but that ship had sailed. He had to stop insisting on solving everything himself; his image meant nothing if his lovely wife didn't enjoy herself. No matter how lame it made him look, he had to ask for her help. "I don't know where to take you."

She took his grave confession with a smile.

"You're so incredibly kind. Not many people would worry so earnestly for others. I'm so lucky to be on a date with such a wonderful person."

"Are you enjoying our date?"

"Of course I am. Dates aren't about the places you visit, they're about the person you're with. Simply wandering the streets with you is enough to make me happy, so for all intents and purposes, this date has already been a big success."

"Oh, so… this is already a date."

“Yes, and a really fun one at that.”

Luina’s words lifted the weight off of Anima’s shoulders. He straightened his hunched back and looked around, letting a world of endless possibilities and the commotion of the busy town overtake his senses. In doing so, he realized that the town plaza was right nearby. That would be a good place for them to stop and take a breather after walking so long.

“Why don’t we visit the plaza? There could be some treasures hiding there. I told you where I got Marie’s bunny hair ties, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you won them in an arm-wrestling competition.”

“Their cart was filled with countless interesting things. You might find something you like if they’re still there. So what do you say? Should we go check it out?” Luina nodded, and they headed toward the plaza. They scanned the various stalls set up around the perimeter, but the arm-wrestling table was nowhere to be found. “Shame, it seems like we missed them… Oh, did you find something?”

Luina was looking across the street, at a building that had been moderately worn down by the wheels of time. A man and a woman, hand in hand, stopped at the entrance and read the signboard next to the door before entering. At the same time, another couple was taking their leave.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a theater.”

“Is it now? Do you happen to like plays?”

“Yes, I love them! I haven’t had the chance to go recently, but I went to watch plays with my parents a lot when I was little.”

“Then why don’t we go see one?”

“That would be great! I hope they still have tickets…”

They approached the theater. The play that was showing was a romance, which was a perfect fit for their date. Their midday showing was almost sold out, but the evening one had plenty of empty seats.

“Which one should we see?”

“I’d prefer the earlier one.”

They bought two of the few remaining tickets.

“We still have some time before the play, so why don’t we eat?” Anima suggested. “Are you hungry?”

“I’m starving, but we don’t really have the time for a proper lunch.”

“Then how about we get something from over there?”

Anima gestured toward the plaza, dotted with various stalls offering light snacks. There were already people enjoying the beautiful day on the benches, nibbling away at their favorite snacks from the vast selection the stalls offered. Luina agreed, and they began circling the stalls. Lost in the sweet ocean of baked goods, they spent some time looking around until Luina spotted something.

“Ah, look!” she exclaimed, excitedly pointing to one of the stalls. “Could we have that?”

“Which one?”

“The waffles! Have you had waffles yet?!”

“I can’t say that I have.” Anima was caught completely off-guard by Luina’s sheer excitement over waffles. “Are these… ‘waffles’ really that delicious?”

“They are! They’re very sweet, but more than that, I have a very precious memory tied to them. One time, when I was still little, I went to see a play with Mom and Dad. We had waffles while we

waited for the play to start. They were so incredibly fluffy and sweet; I still remember it to this day. They filled me right up—to the point that I couldn't help but doze off during the play."

"You must've been a very adorable little girl," Anima chuckled at his wife's cute anecdote. "Well, you've convinced me. Let's get waffles."

"Yes, let's."

With their eyes set on the prize, they approached the stall. They watched as the cook dusted the fishnet-patterned fried batter treats with powdered sugar. They looked really sweet and fluffy.

"Excuse me, two waffles please! One with chocolate sauce."

Luina's waffle, doused in sticky chocolate sauce, looked even sweeter. Anima was getting excited to try one for himself. Waffles seemed like a meal befitting a special occasion—he got the sense that they'd never forget sharing them on their first date.

"And for the gentleman?"

"Umm…" It didn't matter to him as long as he could share the experience with his wife. First, he thought of getting the same topping, but after seeing some others share their waffles with their significant others, he got a better idea. "I'll go with honey."

They took their waffles, wrapped in thin paper, and sat down at a nearby bench. The autumn breeze made Luina's beautiful blue hair flutter.

"Are you cold?"

"No, it's perfect. I have you to warm me up," Luina said, snuggling closer to the flushed Demon Lord.

"We should get you something to wear once the play is over. I don't want you to catch a cold."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes. We could enjoy another autumn date if we get you something warm.”

“That’s true,” Luina responded with a delighted chuckle. Her joyful smile completely enamored Anima. “Ah, the honey’s dripping onto your hands.”

“Oh. I was too taken by your beauty to realize.”

“There you go again…”

Anima was completely enthralled in his adorable, slightly flushed wife. He could have stared at her forever, but they had a play to attend.

“Shall we eat?”

“Yes. Let’s dig in.”

Anima brought the waffle to his mouth and bit into it. It had a nice, soft fluffiness to it, like spring clouds. Its sweet aroma hinted at the taste, but it couldn’t possibly have prepared him for the explosive sweetness of the sticky honey and powdered sugar that coated his mouth.

“It’s so sweet and yummy,” Luina said with innocent, childlike wonder. Anima’s stomach filled with butterflies as he watched his wife smile, her cheeks stuffed with waffle. It was a side of her he never really got to see at home. Luina glanced over at him and chuckled. “There’s some sugar stuck to your cheek.”

She grabbed her handkerchief and gently wiped it off.

“Thank you. Would you like a bite of my waffle?”

“Yes! Please, have one of mine, too.”

They exchanged bites. Luina’s tasted sweeter than his, but that may have been because he was being fed by his lovely wife. He joyfully went back to eating his own, and just as he finished, he noticed that

Luina hadn't eaten any more of hers. She had loved the taste, which made her actions all the stranger.

He followed her gaze to find a couple sharing a kiss at a nearby bench. They freely expressed their love without fearing the judging eyes of the public. His heart began racing, and a wave of jealousy washed over him, but he couldn't do anything about it. The last thing he wanted was to put Luina in a situation that made her uncomfortable. In her mind, it was unimaginable to share a kiss in public. That was reserved to the privacy of their home.

Just as he was ready to let out a sigh of defeat, Luina tightly squeezed his hand. She looked at him with flushed cheeks and spellbound eyes. Even without words, he understood what she wanted to say: "It's okay. I'm ready."

Anima returned her grasp, looking deep into her watery eyes. There was no going back. He leaned in and shared a passionate kiss with his wife. After the magical moment passed and Anima leaned back, Luina looked at him with a mischievous smile.

"We did it in public…" she said bashfully.

"Yeah. We did."

The world ceased to exist for the two of them. There was nothing but them and their burning love for each other. After that tiny exchange, they both leaned in and shared another kiss.

"Ah, look! They're kissing!" a young voice cried. Luina immediately put distance between herself and Anima despite the other couples throughout the plaza who were kissing as well. The mere thought of someone teasing them made her redder than a ripe tomato.

"It's such a treat to see people that are so in love."

"I wish I were that young and passionate again."

"What a lovely couple. Bless their hearts."

Only one couple was being openly discussed in the middle of the busy plaza, and that was Anima and Luina. Anima was happy to hear that they were a “lovely couple”, but those words did nothing to soothe Luina’s embarrassment. She stood up in a huff and turned to Anima.

“I-Isn’t it time for the play?”

“No, we still have plenty—”

“We should really be waiting inside!”

Cutting him off, she took his hand and dragged him into the theater.

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While Anima and Luina were enjoying the play, back at home, the girls were having lunch.

What are we gonna do for dinner?

The gears in Myuke’s head were spinning at high speed while she watched her sisters stuff their cheeks full of warm, sweet bean soup. They were eating the last of Luina’s cooking, so she was going to have to make their dinner herself.

It was she who had warmed up their lunch, expertly using the fire lizard stone to the point of being praised by her sisters for her control over the flames she created, and while she loved being in the spotlight, it also put immense pressure on her. Making a tasty meal from scratch instead of relying on the magic of reheating leftovers presented quite the challenge. All she could do was hope that she would be able to live up to her sisters’ expectations.

“Why the long face, Myuke? Don’t be sad, m’kay?”

“I’m thinking about dinner.”

“Already? We just ate, m’kay? Are you still hungry?” Bram asked in a worried tone.

There had only been a little bit of bean soup left, so she'd given most of it to Bram and Marie. When combined with the fact that Myuke had finished her bowl in such a short time, there was more than enough reason for Bram to be concerned. Myuke couldn't have her sisters worrying for her, though; she had to stay strong. She turned toward Bram with a reassuring smile to try to calm her nerves.

"Nah, I'm stuffed."

She wasn't. In fact, she was starving, but she couldn't tell them that. Rubbing her stomach, she faked a delighted smile.

"Okay, that's good. It's a little weird to be thinking about what we're having for dinner this early, though, m'kay?"

"The sooner we figure it out, the better. Cooking isn't just 'add this, stir that, we're done'; it takes a lot of time. But don't worry, I'm sure it'll be ready before the sun goes down."

Myuke confidently shared what she knew about cooking. She didn't want Bram to realize that there was a non-zero chance they'd go to sleep with empty stomachs.

I've gotta make something amazing. I owe it to Bram, Marie, Daddy, and Mommy!

Making sure they had a good meal for the night was the most important mission she had ever been given. If she failed and Anima and Luina came home to find them starving, they were certain to be overcome with an overwhelming sense of guilt for having gone out. They'd regret having left them alone, and would never go on a date again. While those terrifying thoughts ate away at her, Bram shared an idea.

"We can just have some apples and bread if we gotta, m'kay?"

"No way! Eating right is really important! You're gonna regret it later if you don't eat healthy."

“You’re super nice, m’kay?”

“I-I’m not… I’m just the oldest, so it’s my job,” Myuke mumbled. Her cute little sisters deserved something yummy, and she was going to rise to the challenge.

“Thanks for the meal!” Marie sang just as Myuke’s determination returned.

“Wow, you ate everything! Good job, m’kay?”

“I help clean!”

She took her bowl and jumped down from her seat.

“Wait, Marie! We’ll wash the dishes in the kitchen this time, not out at the well.”

Myuke could draw water if she really wanted to, but she wanted to save her stamina for cooking. They headed into the kitchen, where a jug Anima had filled to the brim with water the night before was waiting for them.

“The water’ll get dirty if we wring the washcloth into the jug, so grab another bowl for that, m’kay?”

“Good call. Let’s see…” Myuke looked around and found a bucket suitable for the task. They ladled some water into it, then wet the cloth. “Ah, Marie, wait! You’ll get water all over the—”

She was too late. Marie wrung out the cloth, making a sizable puddle at her feet. Myuke quickly told her to stay where she was, then brought over a dry towel and cleaned up the floor so Marie wouldn’t slip.

“Wooow, isso sparkly! Myukey so ’mart!”

“Thank you.”

“I can do sparkly too!”

Marie was busy polishing the tableware to the best of her abilities. Since the soup was left over from the night before, they only had a handful of items to wash, and were done in a flash.

“Wow, really well done, Marie!” Myuke lauded. “We’ll use these for dinner too, so just put them on the table, okay?”

“’Kaaay!”

She watched Marie merrily trot into the dining room, then took a look around the kitchen. There were a dozen or so apples lying next to a bunch of bananas, along with bread, sausages, and some seasonings.

“We have a bunch of stuff, m’kay?”

“Yeah, but we’re missing the most important ingredient.”

“The *most* important one? M’kay…”

“Yep. Vegetables.”

Those who ate their vegetables every day didn’t have to worry about getting sick. Myuke had been raised that way for as long as she was in Luina’s care, and sure enough, she’d never gotten seriously ill.

“I pick veggies!”

“We’ll dig ’em up in no time, m’kay?”

“Whoa, slow down! Don’t run!”

Chasing after her enthusiastic sisters, Myuke bolted out of the house. The bright sunlight almost blinded her as she stepped outside.

“We’ll be back soon,” she reassured the empty house, then continued after her sisters, straw hats in hand. She handed them out, then looked at the field.

“Gimme the plan, m’kay?”

“Hmm, let’s see…”

She put her hands on her waist and scanned the field. Radishes, carrots, onions, bell peppers, and sweet potatoes were all ripe for the picking. There were other vegetables growing that weren't quite ready to be harvested, but they still had a decent selection at their disposal. They hadn't decided what to cook yet, but she figured she couldn't go wrong with picking their favorites.

"All right, you two, gimme your favorite vegetable."

"I like sweet 'tadoes! They's is sweet 'n nummy!"

"Ooh, good one! I love sweet potatoes!"

The potatoes they could buy in Garaat had a very simple, one-dimensional flavor, but the ones they grew themselves were sweet and had a much better texture to them. They had grown regular potatoes way back when, but after Luina's parents passed away and they could no longer afford sweets, she'd swapped them out with sweet potatoes.

"I love radishes, m'kay?"

"Radishes are great too!" All that remained was the issue of coming up with a meal that combined sweet potatoes and radishes. Sweet potatoes were great fried, but she'd never had fried radishes before. "Hmm… What if we boiled the potatoes and radishes together with sausage?"

She half-heartedly threw her idea out there, but the girls loved the idea.

"That sounds yummy, m'kay?"

"Less boideled it!"

Her sisters' enthusiasm immediately cheered her up. With the cooking method out of the way, they just had to pull the vegetables from the ground. First up were the potatoes.

“Lookie! I wants this one!” Marie shouted, pointing to a tall plant sticking out of the ground.

“Oh wow, that’s huge! I can’t wait to eat it, m’kay?”

“Well, we’ll first have to dig it out. Gimme a sec.”

Myuke crouched down and started digging around the plant with her bare hands. It would’ve been easier to use a shovel, but she didn’t want to damage the potatoes. Wanting to help, Bram and Marie also crouched down and started imitating her.

“Your hands are gonna get dirty,” she warned.

“It’s faster if we all help, m’kay?”

“Lemme dig! I’m big girl!”

“Bram… Marie…”

Their bright smiles dispelled all her worries, and gave her a rush of energy. They dug, dug, wiped their foreheads, then dug some more. After a while, they stood up and agreed that it was time for the potatoes to leave the soil’s loving embrace. The trio grabbed onto the plant and readied themselves to pull.

“On three! One, two, *three*!”

They gave the plant a strong yank, and three potatoes came flying out of the ground.

“Twee!”

“And they’re huge, m’kay?!”

“They look delicious!”

Just looking at the beautiful, perfectly round potatoes made Myuke hungry. She wanted to find a nice radish as quickly as possible so she could run to the kitchen and start cooking. To that end, the girls made their way to that section of the field and started looking

around for a promising radish. Marie quickly found one with big leaves and rushed over.

“I can pull! Lookie!”

She bent down and grabbed the plant. Under her sisters’ watchful eyes, she pulled, tugged, and with one last heave, the radish launched out of the earth, switching places with Marie, who went tumbling onto the ground.

“A-Are you okay?”

“Don’t hurt yourself, m’kay?”

“I finded a biiig rabish!”

The two older girls let out relieved sighs as she hopped up with a smile and proudly displayed her haul.

“Wow, that’s massive, m’kay?”

“Three potatoes and a giant radish… That should be enough for us, right? Can you guys bring ’em to the well?”

After giving her sisters their task, Myuke went into the kitchen, poured some water into a bucket, then returned to the garden. It was hard for her to carry the bucket, filled to the brim with water, all by herself, but knowing that her sisters were waiting for her gave her the strength she needed.

“Sorry I took so long! Let’s wash these veggies!”

Marie loved washing things. Playing with the water was dangerous in the kitchen, but she could splash around outside to her heart’s content. She stuck a potato into the water and merrily splish-splashed around.

“Issall sparkly!”

She raised the sparkling-clean potato high into the air with a beaming smile.

“Good job! I’m finished too, m’kay?”

“The radish is done too. Let’s take ’em to the kitchen!”

With the clean veggies and the emptied bucket in hand, they headed back toward the kitchen. Stepping into the stadium where the grand showdown was to take place, Myuke let out an anxious sigh.

Well… I guess it’s do-or-die time.

Her plan was to boil the potatoes, radish, and sausages, but she couldn’t just plop them into the water without some prep work. They had to be peeled and cut to fit in Marie’s small mouth, which meant one thing: she would have to use a knife. She was scared. Incredibly scared. But she couldn’t show it, lest she send her sisters into panic. She had to be a responsible and capable big sister and make sure the younger ones had fun house-sitting for the first time.

“All right, let’s get choppin’!” she said to encourage herself, then picked up the knife. She put the radish down on the cutting board and pressed the blade of the knife into it.

Whoa, talk about hard!

The knife got stuck in the radish. It sent her into a total panic, but she decided to take a deep breath and calm herself down. She began wiggling the knife back and forth until it slammed into the chopping board with a *bam!*, sending the two halves of the radish rolling.

“Good job, m’kay?”

“Wooow!”

The girls cheered her on, but she didn’t have the time to celebrate with them. She still had to cut the halves into thin slices. As the pieces got smaller, the risk of cutting herself got larger, but she forged on, and eventually managed to chop up the whole vegetable. That, however, was the easy part—she still had to peel off the skin. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and got herself mentally

prepared. She then picked up a radish slice and gingerly ran the blade of the knife along its edge.

“…”

“…”

The girls watched in complete silence as their sister peeled the radish with the utmost care and concentration.

“I-It’s done.”

Myuke was finished with the first slice, but it was far from perfect. The edge was grossly uneven, and peeling just the one had taken what had felt like an eternity. There were seven slices left to peel, and then three whole potatoes after that. At the rate she was going, their dinner wouldn’t be ready until Anima and Luina returned the next day.

Even in such a dire situation, though, she couldn’t ask for help. Knives were dangerous tools. She was at a complete loss, but her slow fall into despair was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Sounds like we’ve got a guest, m’kay?”

“Mommy ’n Daddy is home?”

“It’s way too early for them to be back. Plus, they wouldn’t knock,” Myuke reasoned as more knocks came. “I’ll go and check. You guys stay here.”

“Nope, let me do it! I’ll just use this if something goes wrong, m’kay?” Bram valiantly announced, touching her vibrant green earring. That earring, the Jade Dragon magic stone, was incredibly powerful; very few people could stand their ground against it. It was so powerful, in fact, that it wasn’t unlikely that there was only one person in the entire world who could hold their own against it: Anima.

“Lemme open!”

“All right, why don’t we all go, then?” For safety’s sake, Myuke took the lead as they approached the front door and opened it. “Oh, it’s you.”

A relieved smile appeared on Myuke’s face. Before them stood a gorgeous, young blonde woman—the leader of the Raiten Knights’ First Corps, Shaer.

“Saaaer!”

It had been three months since they’d last seen Shaer, but Marie still remembered her. She trotted up to the beautiful knight and clung onto her legs. Shaer leaned down, and returned the hug.

“I’m glad to see you’re still the lively little girl you were three months ago, Miss Marie. But oh, I cannot believe my own two eyes. Have you grown, little lady?”

“Uh-huh! Does you know how old I is?”

“Do tell me how old you are.”

“I’m four!”

“My, four already? That’s fantastic! I’m glad to see that you two are also doing well.”

“That’s thanks to Luina’s awesome cooking we get to eat every day, m’kay? Are you doing good too?”

“I couldn’t be better. Though I must admit that I’m a tad hungry. I was thinking of taking up Lady Luina’s offer to join you all for dinner, so I came by,” Shaer explained, excited to dig into Luina’s cooking. “Speaking of which, where might I find Lord Anima and the Lady?”

“Mommy ’n Daddy is on a date! Issour pesent!”

“Today’s their birthday, m’kay?”

“Mommy didn’t cook today, either.” Myuke paused. “Are you free now, by the way?”

“I have to be in the capital tomorrow afternoon, but I’m free today, yes.”

It would take her about half a day to get to the capital using her Pegasus stone, so she wouldn’t have to leave until later in the evening.

“Can you help us cook, then?”

In response, Shaer furrowed her brow and cast her eyes down.

“It’s embarrassing to admit, but as I’ve lived my life by the sword, I haven’t had the opportunity to learn the ways of the knife. However, I’d be happy to accompany you to Garaat if you so desire. I’ll treat you to anything you wish, be it a feast of sweets or otherwise!”

“That’s out of the question. What if we run into them?”

“Exactly. And we promised we’d watch the house, m’kay?”

“Hepp us sice!” Marie proposed while pulling Shaer inside by the hand. That must’ve been the final push she needed, as she looked down at Marie and carefully nodded.

“If you trust my inexperienced self, I would be more than happy to help!”

“Thanks so much!”

While she’d said she wasn’t well versed in the use of a knife, she did have years of sword training and practice under her belt. The odds were good that she would at least be able to cut and peel a few sweet potatoes.

“So, what are we preparing?”

“We’re boiling some radishes, sweet potatoes, and sausages. I’ll finish peeling the radish, so could you peel the sweet potatoes and cut them into bite-sized pieces?”

“It would be my pleasure!”

“Bram, could you get the pot ready please?”

“Will do, m’kay? How much water should I put in it?”

“Umm, fill it halfway, I guess? Marie, can you cheer us on?”

“Cook it! Cook it!”

After giving out the tasks, Myuke returned to peeling the radish.

“Oh no… I can’t bear to look at all this waste…” Shaer groaned in defeat. Glancing over, her potato had become much smaller, and a thick layer of perfectly edible meat was stuck to the peeled skin.

“Peel it, Saer! Peel it, Saer!”

“Mark my words, the next one will be perfect!”

Myuke focused even harder. She had to match Shaer’s determination.

“Done!” she cried.

“I am done as well!” At long last, all the cutting and peeling was finished. It was time for them to throw the veggies—and some delicious sausages—into the pot. “How would you like to season this?”

“Let’s see… I guess we can throw in some salt and pepper for now,” Myuke said, and added a dash of each to the soup.

“I don’t think that’s nearly enough, m’kay?”

“Want me to put in another pinch?”

“I don’t think it would hurt to add a bit more,” Shaer added.

“Okay… How’s this?”

“That might be enough, m’kay?” Bram noted, though she thought it still wasn’t enough.

“If you want more, just add it to your bowl once it’s all cooked.”

Though Bram would have liked a little more seasoning, Myuke went ahead and used the fire lizard stone to start warming the pot. The four of them watched as the water slowly started to boil.

“How long do you plan to let it boil?” Shaer asked.

“Until the radish slices get soft. Let me check.” Myuke grabbed a fork and tried to stick it into the radish. “Nope, still hard.”

She waited a while before trying again. When she finally did, the fork effortlessly punctured the radish slice, and she put out the fire.

“All right,” she said, “I think it’s done.”

Despite Myuke’s lack of enthusiasm, Marie looked up at her with a bright smile.

“Myukey, I’m hungy! My tummy goin’ ‘grrr’!”

“I’m hungry too! Let’s eat soon, m’kay?”

“‘Everything tastes better when you’re hungry’, as they say. I’m sure we will all enjoy your cooking, Miss Myuke!”

Hearing their thoughts cast out all of her worries.

“Yeah, you’re right! C’mon, let’s dig in while it’s hot!”

It had to taste good. It was the result of a joint effort between the four of them, after all. Myuke ladled everyone a bowl of soup, as the others set the table. She filled the jug in the kitchen with as much water as would fit in case it was terrible, then sat down.

“I can says thanks! Listen! Thanks for the meeeal!”

They all followed Marie's example, then submerged their spoons in the soup.

"Mm, this is good," Myuke said. "Let's see how the radish turned out… Oh, wow! Not bad at all!"

The soup was a bit too light, with only a couple pieces of each ingredient floating around, but it was well seasoned if nothing else.

"It's really good, m'kay?"

"Oh, I remember cutting this!"

"Saer so 'mart!"

"I could only accomplish such a feat thanks to your unrelenting cheering, Miss Marie. Of course, Miss Myuke's charismatic leadership and precise instructions were instrumental in the success as well."

"Thanks, Myuke, m'kay?"

"Thaaanks!"

"You're welcome!"

Myuke couldn't hide her happiness. She had successfully cooked her first meal, and was already planning to cook another one for Anima and Luina, who were sure to appreciate her effort and love the result. Imagining the day she would do so, she continued to eat the soup the four of them had made together until there was nothing left in her bowl.

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After watching and thoroughly enjoying the romantic play, Anima and Luina went on to have a filling, delicious lunch and buy some new clothes. By the time they finally sat down on a bench to rest, the sun had already begun to set below the horizon.

Anima was enjoying the scenery, taking in everything that had happened over the course of the day. He seemed composed on the outside, but on the inside, his heart was racing. The sun was disappearing from the vast sky, which meant he and his wife would soon be making their way to an inn. It was entirely impossible for him to stay calm when their first night alone was approaching at such a dangerously high speed.

"…ma? Anima? Are you okay?"

His mind had wandered incredibly far off, but came rushing back when Luina lightly tugged on his sleeve.

"Oh, sorry. Yes, I'm fine. Are you hungry?"

He tried to buy some time to calm himself down. A nice, relaxing dinner would surely give him that opportunity.

"No, not really, but I don't mind joining you if you are."

"I'm not hungry either."

It hadn't been long since they'd eaten lunch. Desperately wishing for just a little bit of time, Anima racked his brain in search of options, while Luina longingly looked up at him.

"It's getting dark," she noted.

"It is."

"Are you tired?"

"No, I'm perfectly fine. My stamina is effectively limitless."

"Oh. Okay…"

Anima noticed the dejected tone of her voice, but he couldn't figure out why she felt that way. Half a year into their marriage, he was able to read her to an extent, but a woman's heart was as vast and mysterious as the ocean. He couldn't possibly have hoped to comprehend everything about her in such a short time.

That didn’t mean he could disregard her feelings, though. Luina was hardly a stranger to spelling her feelings out to him, but that contrasted with the otherwise modest and refined personality of hers that lent her the gentle eyes he’d first fallen in love with. She wasn’t the type to give vague hints, and since she wasn’t telling him what was wrong, it meant that she was feeling something more than just dejection. There was only one emotion he could think of that would prompt her silence: embarrassment.

Based on the situation they were in, one thing that would definitely make her feel embarrassed was sharing a kiss. In other words, she wanted to kiss him, but she wanted to be in a more private location first—especially after what had happened that morning. An inn would be a safe place to kiss, and possibly even go further than that. While Anima still hadn’t figured out how to broach that topic, he was definitely not one to turn down a kiss.

“It’s getting cold,” Anima said. “Should we go to an inn?”

“Yes, let’s,” she answered with a dazzling smile, proving that his intuition had been spot-on. With that boost to his confidence as a husband, he took her hand, and they walked the cobble road until they reached an inn.

“What do you think of this place? Should we get a room here?” Anima asked.

“Yes. Anywhere is fine as long as I’m with you.”

They entered the inn and rented a room on the second floor for the night. The room itself was small, but it was cozy. Inside was only a bed and a small dresser, so after a quick look around, they sat down on the side of the bed.

Anima stole a glance at Luina, who was looking down at the ground. He didn’t catch her expression, but her delicate shoulders were

visibly shaking. Assuming that she was cold, he gently placed his hands on her shoulders to warm her up.

“Nh!”

She hung her head even lower. Her shoulders were surprisingly warm, which was a relief, but it also raised the question of why she was shaking. Anima spent a few moments thinking about it, but nothing came to mind, so he decided to ask.

“Umm, Luina?”

“Eep?!”

She jumped and bit her tongue. Her face as red as a tomato, tears began to gather in the corners of her eyes.

“Are you okay?”

“Ah-Ah’m haim.”

She clearly wasn’t fine.

“It’s okay, you can tell me if you’re cold. We just got you warm clo— That’s it! Why don’t you put on the clothes we bought? That’s sure to help!”

“I’m not cold. In fact, I’m a little hot.”

She lightly patted her cheeks.

“I see… Well, that’s good to hear,” he whispered, and they once again fell silent. The seconds slowly ticked by until the sun completely vanished from the sky. “Are you hungry?”

“No, I’m okay, thank you. Are you?”

They were repeating a previous discussion, but anything was better than the uncomfortable tranquility of silence. If nothing else, he was hoping that it would snowball into a full-blown conversation.

“No, I’m fine as well. We had a late lunch today, but I figured I would ask since it’s right around dinnertime. Honestly, it feels strange sitting here with you, just the two of us. Not strange in a bad way, of course, it’s just… strange.”

“I’m with you on that one,” Luina chuckled. “It’s weird, but I like it. We’ll have to thank the girls for giving us such a wonderful present.”

“Yes. Myuke, Bram, and Marie really went out of their way. I hope they ate a proper dinner.”

“I’m sure they made something delicious.”

“The only time I’ve eaten their cooking was when I ate Marie’s mud pies. I’d love to try an actual meal made by them.”

“Me too. Maybe we should ask them to cook something for our next birthday.”

“That’s a wonderful idea.”

Talking about the girls was enough for them to finally break the ice. Unable to contain their smiles, they quietly looked at each other. In that moment, under the quiet, starry sky, Anima found himself lost in Luina’s gentle azure eyes.

Those were the same eyes he’d fallen so deeply in love with. The two had gotten married within an hour of meeting, and half a year later, they were sitting together, just enjoying the other’s presence. His life had taken a miraculous turn from hatred and bloodshed to love and warmth, and he was immeasurably thankful for it.

“Anima…”

Luina’s eyes were ablaze with passion, and her warm breath gently passed between her charming lips as they twinkled in the moonlight. Spellbound, he stole a kiss, painting her cheeks pink like the summer sunset through the clouds.

“We could finally share a kiss,” Luina said meekly.

“Yes, I’m glad. To tell you the truth, I’ve wanted to kiss you ever since the play, but I couldn’t find a good opportunity. I’m really happy that we were able to now, though.”

“Me too. And I’d be even happier if we kissed again.”

Answering her request, Anima leaned in for another kiss. He wanted to take the next step, but he couldn’t think of a way to go about doing so, and that was okay. He didn’t regret it. Sharing kisses was more than enough for him, as the sweet memories they’d spent the day making would live on in their hearts for the rest of their lives.

“You know,” Anima said, remembering something, “I have a present for you.”

“Oh, you didn’t have to get me anything.”

“Of course I did. You’re my beloved wife and today’s your birthday.”

“Thank you, but, umm… I’m sorry. I made you a scarf, but I left it at home…”

“Don’t be sorry. I can’t wait to try it on.”

“I’m glad you’re looking forward to it.”

“You bet I am. I just hope you’ll like my present too…”

Luina watched Anima reach into his pocket and took out his gift. The moment he did, tears began to well up in her eyes.

“Oh, Anima…!”

“I put a lot of thought into what to get for you, and decided that this would be the best present for your first birthday since we met. I know it took a while, but thank you for marrying me, Luina.”

He took her left hand and slid his present—a wedding ring—onto her ring finger.

“Thank goodness it fits,” he sighed in relief. “I was nervous about that.”

“Thank you, Anima,” she said, smiling cheerfully at the ring that crowned her finger. “I’m so happy. This might sound selfish, but the only thing that could make me happier is if you had a ring on as well.”

“I thought you’d say that,” he chuckled, “so I bought one for myself as well.”

Seeing him put a matching ring on his ring finger made her smile even brighter.

“Anima, meeting and getting married to you has been the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Words can’t describe how happy I am.”

“I feel the same way. Every day of my life has been full of joy ever since you summoned me. Thank you for being my wife, Luina.”

“It’s my pleasure. Let’s continue to make wonderful memories together.”

“Yes, let’s…”

They slowly leaned closer and closer together until their lips touched. They shared a long, passionate kiss, and Luina soon found herself lying on the bed as they continued to express their feelings for one another. That night, in a cozy room in one of Garaat’s many inns, the two of them made love.

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Anima and Luina walked the paved road back home, enjoying the refreshing morning breeze.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“Not at all,” she whispered, her head leaned against his shoulder. “Snuggling up to you makes this chilly morning very pleasant.”

Captivated by her lovely smile, Anima hugged her even more tightly. He'd fallen head over heels for her the second they'd met, but spending the night with her made him love her more than he thought was possible. He wanted to hold her with strength that matched that of his feelings as they exploded within him. He wanted to, but he couldn't.

"Tell me if it hurts, okay?"

Anima was incredibly powerful. He could very well have been hurting Luina with every single hug. No matter how tightly he wanted to hug her, he would never do it at the cost of hurting the love of his life.

"You can hug me tighter," she told him. It was a short, simple sentence, but it was enough to make butterflies flutter in his stomach.

"R-Really?"

"Really really. I can feel how much you love me when you do."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Reassured by her kind words, Anima squeezed Luina. Normally, she wouldn't show affection in public, but she was so overjoyed to be with Anima that she didn't seem to care. She must have been truly happy.

"What a wonderful birthday we had," she said.

"Yes, I'll never forget it. I can't wait to find out what they come up with next year."

"Me either. But first, we get to celebrate the girls' next birthday. We'll have to come up with something amazing to pay them back for this beautiful experience."

“Absolutely. Bram’s birthday is next, right? I can’t wait to do something incredible for her. Just imagine the smile she’ll have on her face.”

“I can’t wait either, but there are other things we have to look forward to before her birthday, too.”

“Like what?”

“Like the Costume Festival!”

Luina’s cheerful announcement made Anima’s heart stop.

“A festival, huh…?”

His eyes glossed over as he stared at the cold ground. A memory from the distant past rushed back to him, clouding his mind. It was a memory of his childhood, from before he was even Myuke’s age, when he was living as the black sheep of his family. A festival had been taking place near their home, and his family had left him behind, going out to have fun and enjoy the vibrant colors, unique tastes, and exciting buzz of the town. Anima, stricken with loneliness, had set out to follow them and have his fair share of fun, but not long after he’d left, his mean-looking eyes had provoked a man to slap him clean across the face.

Cheeks swollen, clothes torn, and money stolen, he’d scurried back home, only to be greeted by his siblings’ scornful gazes. He’d expected them to feel worry or sorrow for him, but they’d sided with the man who’d hit an innocent child. They’d called him names, told him, “learn how to act around others, you rabid dog!”, and closed themselves off from him even further. Suffice to say, he didn’t think highly of festivals after that.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just remembered something,” Anima answered with a reassuring smile. “I’m looking forward to going to a festival with you.”

More than a hundred years had passed since then, and in the six months he’d spent with Luina, he’d learned to deal with the ghosts of his past. Spending time with his beloved wife and adorable children brought him happiness much stronger than the measly pain of some childhood trauma. Thanks to them, he was genuinely excited for the event.

“So,” he continued, “can you tell me more about this ‘Costume Festival’?”

Anima’s cheerful voice put a huge smile on Luina’s face, and she excitedly told him everything there was to know. The Costume Festival was to start at the end of the next month, and as the name suggested, people would all wear costumes. According to Luina, the festival originated from a belief the people of Garaat held centuries ago that the spirits of their ancestors returned to the world of the living once a year to reconnect with their families.

The spirits’ return presented an opportunity for evil spirits to roam the world as well. They would influence people’s minds, and in response, the people would don all sorts of costumes to scare them away. Very few people still believed the tale, though. Everyone looked at it as an opportunity to have fun and put on creative costumes.

“That sounds like a great time.”

Anima felt that way from the bottom of his heart. He couldn’t wait to see his lovely daughters in whatever cute costumes they came up with.

“It’s lots of fun! We haven’t been able to attend the last couple years because of our financial hardships, but those are over thanks to you.”

“Be careful not to catch a cold before it starts.”

“I’ll make sure to keep cooking healthy, filling meals every day.”

“Just hearing you say that made me hungry.”

“Me too, and I’m sure the girls are hungry too. Let’s hurry home…” Luina’s voice trailed off, and she began sniffing the air. She’d caught a sweet scent coming from a nearby bakery that she instantly recognized. She and Anima had left the inn before sunrise, but that didn’t mean the town was sleeping. Garaat was just starting to wake up, and local businesses were setting up for the busy day ahead. “We should get something for the girls before heading home.”

“Yes,” Anima agreed wholeheartedly. It would be their reward for looking after the house.

The couple entered the bakery, where they bought a fresh-baked banana pound cake. Imagining the girls’ excited smiles as they laid their eyes on the cake that would hopefully still be warm when they arrived, they practically skipped out of the establishment.

Once outside, they moved quickly so they could see their three girls again as soon as possible. They arrived back home in no time, and Luina unlocked the door, opening it quietly so as not to wake the girls. In doing so, however, the sounds of a lively conversation being held escaped the house.

“They’re awake…” Luina said. “Do you think they were up all night?”

“They’re much too lively to have done that. And also, do you smell that?”

They snuck inside and followed the scent.

“Ah! Mommy ’n Daddy!”

Marie’s cheerful welcome boomed through the house as they stepped into the dining room. Arms outstretched, she raced over to Anima and Luina with a beaming smile, stopped right in front of them, and… that was it.

She dropped her gaze, but then looked right back up with her brow furrowed. Bopping her head left and right like a kitten infatuated by a dangling ball of yarn, she assessed the situation. A terrible dilemma had unfolded before her: who should she hug first?

“We’re home, Marie.”

“How was your day yesterday? Did everything go okay?”

Anima and Luina both pet her head, which immediately replaced her troubled expression with a delighted smile. At the same time, the door to the kitchen flew open, and Myuke and Bram rushed into the dining room.

“Welcome home, m’kay?!”

“You’re home so early! Did you have a good date?!”

“We had a *wonderful* date,” Luina said, smiling and nodding at them. “Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, it was incredible. Thank you for the thoughtful present, girls.”

The girls exchanged glances and smiled proudly.

“You welcome! Y’know, y’know, I lookeded af’er the house!”

“And get this: we cooked for ourselves two days in a row!”

“It was super yummy! We saved some for you guys too, so you better try it later, m’kay?!”

“And, and Sher comed to visit!”

“We gave her a warm welcome, m’kay?”

“Speaking of warm, we took a bath too!”

“It was all ’teamy!”

“It was sooo comfy, m’kay?”

“And then we had milk after our bath! Ahhh, it was so refreshing!”

They went on and on about their eventful day at home, but the bottom line was that they had lots of fun. It was their first time looking after the house, and it had gone swimmingly. They would never forget it.

“You girls did really well. I’m proud of you.”

“And because of that, *we* got *you* a present: a fresh banana pound cake! Should we eat it together after breakfast?”

The sight of the beautiful pound cake made the girls smile uncontrollably.

Chapter Four: The Demon Lord Gets Into the Festive Spirit

The lingering warmth of the days of early autumn was long gone, replaced by chilly winds and biting cold. The mornings and nights were especially cold, but it was brisk even during the daytime. The sun took less time to complete its daily march across the sky, which meant the girls had less time to play outside as well.

One day, however, around noontime, the weather was exceptionally pleasant at the Scarlett house. It was a perfect day for the girls to enjoy outside, yet all of them were cooped up in the dining room, drinking warm milk.

“It’s too cold, m’kay?”

Bram hated cold weather. She’d lived her life in a country where it was warm all year round, so she wasn’t used to the chilly winds of Garaat. She refused to get out of bed in the mornings, clinging to Anima for warmth, and would always challenge him to see who could stay in the bath longer because she never wanted to get out.

It must have been hard for her to deal with the rapidly dropping temperature. Even that day’s relatively gentle weather was too extreme for her, so she’d opted to stay inside and sip on warm milk. Anima didn’t mind it at all, of course, nor did the girls. They didn’t want to force her to go outside when she was cold.

“I’m done with my milk… I want one more, m’kay?”

“You’ll get a stomachache if you do that. Here, I’ll hold your hands and warm you up, okay?”

“You’re an angel, Myuke. Your hands are really warm, m’kay?”

“Me too! I warm too!”

“Mm-hmm, yours are too, Marie, m’kay?”

Myuke and Marie merrily snuggled up to Bram, happy that they got to help her. It didn't matter if they were inside or outside, the girls were sure to make their own fun.

Anima watched over them with a mellow smile. He didn't mind spending the whole day inside, but he also wanted to help Bram in any way he could. She was already wearing her warm, heavy winter clothes, but that was clearly not enough to keep out the cold. Just as he thought that there had to be something else he could do, his vision caught on an interesting part of the room.

"Can we use the fireplace?"

"Totally, m'kay?!"

Bram jumped on the idea. Lighting the fireplace would definitely warm the room up enough to stop Bram from shivering.

"Whassa 'fyepace'?"

"That."

Myuke pointed at the brick fireplace, which was covered with soot on the inside. Given that Luina always made sure that everything in the house was sparkling clean, it was unimaginable she had just ignored it. The bricks were likely just permanently dirty.

Luckily, the soot didn't render it useless; it was still fully functional. If anything, it proved that a fire could indeed be lit in there. Even so, judging from the fact that Marie wasn't familiar with it, they probably hadn't used it in a good while.

"Let's set it up and fry some potatoes!"

"Nummy!"

"Oh, that's making me hungry, m'kay?! The room'll smell so good! C'mon, let's get the wood out and start a fire, m'kay?!"

“We have wood out in the shed; just use some of what we heat the bath with,” Luina told them. “We’ll have to clean the chimney first, though.”

One of Myuke’s fingers suddenly shot up as if she’d just remembered something.

“The room got filled with smoke when we used it like three years ago, and we haven’t touched this thing ever since,” she explained.

Three years ago was when Luina’s father had passed away. With that in mind, it was understandable why she hadn’t immediately jumped in to sweep the chimney squeaky clean. Without anyone to go up there and do the job in the past few years, the fireplace was left uncleaned and unused.

“Is cleaning the chimney all we need to do before we can use the fireplace?” Anima asked.

“Mm-hmm. Once we clear out the thick layer of soot, we’ll have no problem using it.”

The soot buildup was restricting the passage of air through the chimney. As such, much of the smoke rising from the fireplace had nowhere to go except into the house. That was what had caused the incident three years prior.

“I’ll clean it,” Anima offered immediately. He was eager to do something for his family.

“Sorry to give you such a dangerous job.”

“Don’t worry about it, I’m happy to be of help. Instead of worrying, think you could tell me how to clean it?”

“You’ll need to go up on the roof and scrub it clean with a brush.” It sounded simple enough, which was great, because basic, laborious tasks were Anima’s bread and butter. “Could you wait for me outside? I’ll find the brush for you.”

Anima nodded and took off his comfy scarf.

“Shouldn’t you leave that on if you’re going outside?”

“I wouldn’t want to dirty the scarf you put so much care into making.”

He carefully placed his birthday present on the table. He’d worn that scarf every waking moment since he’d gotten it, the only exceptions being his time working in the field and eating as a means of making sure it remained spotless. Chimney cleaning was also exempt; even though it was cold outside, he couldn’t possibly wear it while scrubbing soot.

“We can always wash it if it gets dirty. Don’t be afraid to put it on if you’re cold.”

With that, Luina left the dining room. Anima took off his robe to avoid creating more laundry than necessary, which made Bram shudder.

“Just looking at you is making me shiver… There’s no way you’re warm, m’kay?”

“This is nothing. I told you before, I’m very sturdy.”

While he gave his explanation with a reassuring smile, Bram tightly hugged his waist.

“I’ll warm you up! Take all my heat, m’kay?!”

“I warm Daddy too!” Marie said as she latched onto his leg.



“For crying out loud,” Myuke sighed, “you know he’s gotta go outside, right? How’s he supposed to move when you guys are clinging to him like that?”

“That’s not an issue at all, see?” He lifted both Bram and Marie. “You’re free to join in as well.”

“I-I’m good, thanks. Uh, I mean, I wouldn’t mind if you carried me, y’know? I just don’t want you to get all tired before you start working, or something like that.” She was either trying to protect her dignity as the oldest, or was too embarrassed to ask for a lift. No matter which it was, she sheepishly walked to the door and opened it. “Look, I’ve got the door, so just take those two out to the garden, okay?”

“Yaaay! Lessgooo!”

Anima walked the girls out to the garden, then carefully put them down. Soon after, Luina arrived with a long brush.

“Thank you. I’ll get started on the cleaning, then. You three go on inside; it’s cold.”

“The girls and I will clean the fireplace.”

Anima knit his eyebrows.

“I thought that was already clean. Unless you’re talking about cleaning up the soot that falls in there?”

Getting the soot out of the chimney was the simplest of simple tasks for him. He had planned to clean out the fireplace once that was done, but it sounded like the girls were going to do that for him.

“Mm-hmm. We’ll clean up down here while you sweep up there.”

“I’ll try to keep as much as I can out of there, then,” Anima replied with an understanding nod.

“Don’t worry about us, clean however makes you most comfortable.”

“But I don’t want to create more work for you.”

“It’s okay. I’m just happy to know that we’re doing essentially the same work, even if we’re separated.”

“Sure is getting hot out here, m’kay?” Bram teased, turning Luina’s face beet red.

“T-Time to get to work, girls! Let’s hurry inside!”

Luina took the girls’ hands and led them into the house, and Anima hopped onto the roof and peeked down the chimney. It was too dark to see all the way down, but not so dark that he couldn’t see the soot buildup.

He stuck the brush down the chimney and, in hopes of keeping the dining room clean, tried to pull up as much of the soot as he could. In doing so, a thick black cloud rose from it, painting his upper body black. The silver lining was that it covered Anima instead of the dining room. Happy with his progress—and that he had covered himself rather than the inside of the house—he continued to sweep the chimney.

“That should do it.”

After cleaning all the soot he could see, Anima hopped down from the roof and washed up at the well before heading into the dining room.

“I’m done!” he shouted, and the girls all burst out laughing when they saw him.

“Daddy, you’s bwack!”

“You actually look good with black hair, m’kay?”

“I feel like we can’t really tease him about this,” Myuke said to her sisters, their faces also completely black. He’d tried really hard to pull the soot up and out, but it seemed his effort had been wasted.

“Can I help with anything?”

“Nope, we’re all done.”

“Oh, so you are! It looks great; well done, girls! By the way, where’s Luina?”

“She went to get the bath ready, but she should be back soon. Ah, speak of the devil.”

Luina entered the room, her face black with soot just like everyone else’s.

“I see the fireplace gave you some trouble,” Anima teased.

“You’re one to talk,” she retorted playfully. “You really got into that chimney and cleaned it as much as you could. Thank you so much, Anima, it really means a lot.”

“I’ll wash your back as a reward, m’kay?”

“Let’s all go hop in the bath.”

“Yaaay!”

The five of them went to the changing room and started undressing. Having already been half-naked, Anima was done in a heartbeat, so he helped Marie get her clothes off as well. He then brought her into the bathroom so they could wash themselves off and have a nice soak.

Anima wanted to jump straight to the soaking, but he first had to wash the soot off his head and chest. He filled a bucket with water, poured it over his head, and watched as the soot flowed down onto the ground, forming a black puddle beneath him. Meanwhile, the

other three girls had finished taking their clothes off and entered after them.

“Wow, you even got it all over your back?!” Myuke shouted. “That’s crazy!”

“That’s why I offered to wash it, m’kay?”

“We’ll be there to wash it off in a moment,” Luina said, “so make yourself comfortable, okay?”

“Me too! I make Daddy sparkly!”

“Of course! We’ll all help make sure Daddy is squeaky clean.”

The girls cheered when Luina said that, then they all started working. Luina poured water over Anima’s back, while the kids used washcloths to scrub him clean.

“Sparkly!”

“Thank you. I feel like a whole new man now.”

“You’re welcome, m’kay?”

“And washing you got us all cleaned off too!”

“Shall we get into the tub, then?”

They entered the bath upon Luina’s suggestion.

“Pfwahhh… It’s so nice and warm, m’kay?” Bram said as she melted into the warm bath.

“Make sure you warm yourselves up; we can’t have you girls catching a cold before the Festival,” Luina told them with a warm smile, causing Myuke to leap up from the water.

“We get to go to the Festival this year?!” she asked, practically screaming in excitement. While she must have known that the Festival was approaching, she probably wasn’t sure if they were going to take part in it, which wasn’t surprising considering her

personality. She had begun to open up a lot more, and in doing so showed that she was an understanding girl who wasn't a stranger to making sacrifices. She wasn't going to pester Luina about going to the Festival while they were down on their luck.

"There's gonna be a festival?! M'kay!"

"It's not just any festival, it's the Costume Festival!"

"Whassa 'Cossume Pestibal'?"

"I wanna know all about it, m'kay?!"

Enjoying the attention, Myuke cheerfully shared everything she knew about the event. Her sisters wore big, bright smiles as they listened attentively to her every word.

Luina was right, Anima thought. She'd warned him that he should keep the Festival a secret from the girls. She was afraid that if they learned they were going, they would get too excited and exhaust all their energy before the Festival had actually rolled around. Lo and behold, she was exactly right. Fortunately, though, the Festival wasn't far away; if they'd found out about it months prior, they would have either gotten bored or collapsed from the continuous hype.

"I love Pestibal!"

"This'll be my first time there! I'm super excited, m'kay?!"

Anima hadn't expected them to get quite as excited as they were—especially not Bram. She had likely never gotten to participate in a festival due to her parents' poor health, and she definitely wasn't old enough to go out alone.

To make matters worse, never having gotten the chance to participate in a festival was likely the best-case scenario for her. It was entirely possible that her family had tried to participate in one, but it would have been a tragedy if something had happened in the

middle of it. If her father were to have collapsed while surrounded by cheering festivalgoers, she would have held herself responsible and wouldn't have wanted to hear about festivals ever again.

None of that mattered, though. The Costume Festival was for welcoming spirits that were returning to their families to bring them warmth. Anima wanted to make sure Bram had a wonderful time so that her late parents could rest peacefully.

"It'd be cool if we could wear whatever costume we want, m'kay?"

"You can! You're free to wear whatever you'd like!"

"I wanna be bun-bun!"

Marie expressed her undying love for bunnies.

"Does that mean you're gonna wear the PJs Daddy got you?"

"Uh-huh! They's is 'dorbable!"

She was correct, that onesie was incredibly cute on her. She genuinely looked like a little bunny whenever she nestled up in her bed to go to sleep. It had been half a year since she'd gotten it, but Anima still found it just as adorable as he had on day one.

Traditionally, the goal of the costumes was to scare away evil spirits, but the Festival had more or less become just an excuse for everyone to have fun. Even so, if evil spirits *were* to descend like they did in the legend, they were sure to be threatened by Marie's sheer cuteness.

"You really are just *so* adorable in those pajamas…"

Myuke listened to Anima's murmur with a wry smile.

"You know you see them every day, right? I swear, sometimes it's like you're in love with us."

"He is," Luina chimed in, "and that's one of the things I love about him."

“I love Daddy!”

Praised by his wife and daughter, Anima smiled.

“I’m excited to see what you all dress up as.”

“Less all be bun-buns!”

Both Myuke and Bram had their curiosity piqued by Marie’s proposal.

“That’s actually an awesome idea! It’d be super fun to pick a theme, m’kay?”

“Wearing a bunny costume outside would be kinda embarrassing, but I guess it *is* a festival. All right, yeah! Let’s do this!”

“I’m not too sure about wearing a bunny costume,” Luina said coyly. “It would certainly be embarrassing…”

“It’ll be fine, m’kay?”

“I’m sure it’ll look great on you!”

“Mommy cute!”

“Yes, that would look really cute…”

Just imagining his wife wearing a bunny costume put a smile on Anima’s face. Seeing that in real life would’ve probably made his eyes pop out of their sockets.

“Well, if you all think so, then I suppose I could join in,” Luina decided.

“Yaaaay!”

“I can’t wait!”

“It’s gonna be great, m’kay?!”

“Hang on, you guys! We gotta calm down! We don’t wanna tire ourselves out before the Festival!” Myuke warned, but she was just

as excited as everyone else. She looked at Anima and Luina with an expectant gaze. “When’re we gonna go and buy the costumes?”

“We’ll go and buy them tomorrow, but that means we’re going to bed early tonight, okay?”

“Yaaay!”

The girls’ cheers echoed through the bathroom.

◆◆◆

The next morning, Anima and his family sat in the dining room, watching a flame as it danced in the fireplace. They were planning to head out right after breakfast, but the quiet crackling of the fire quickly put the girls, who had been sipping on cups of warm milk, to sleep.

“I’ll take care of the laundry. You can stay here and relax,” Anima whispered, trying his best not to wake the girls up. It was cold, and he didn’t want to risk Luina getting sick while working outside, so while she protested at first, she agreed to let Anima take care of the chores outside at least until the end of the festival.

“Okay. I’ll look after the girls and the fire.”

He stepped outside, hurried to the well, and quickly did the laundry. Making his way back into the dining room, he picked up on some lively chatter.

“Oh no, we fell asleep! We gotta go, quick! We’ve got shopping to do, m’kay?!”

“They might run out of bunny costumes if we don’t hurry up!”

“Bun-buns! Bun-buns!”

As if the previous silence was but an illusion, the girls were awake, running all over the house to get themselves ready for their outing.

Their excitement was contagious, however; Anima couldn't wait to head into the town with them.

"All right, we're off!" Anima told the girls.

"Let's go!"

He quickly put the fire out, wrapped his scarf around his neck, and left the house with the girls. Bram shuddered under the cold air the moment she stepped out. Leaving the warm room behind must've been especially tough on her.

"Midder Leaf! Wait!" Marie cried, chasing after a fallen leaf as it got carried away by the wind.

"Come back, m'kay?!"

"Jeez, don't just start running like that."

Bram, figuring that going for a run would warm her up, chased after Marie, while Myuke chased after the two of them. Behind them, Luina took Anima's hand as they walked, keeping an eye on the girls until, before long, they arrived at Garaat. Bram had warmed up well enough, judging by the beads of sweat rolling down her forehead. That was all well and good, but they had to find their costumes quickly to keep her from getting sick. Thus, they decided to make a beeline to the tailor.

The road to the tailor was filled with families who had likely come into town to buy costumes of their own. Watching the moms and dads as they were dragged left and right by their children put a wry smile on Anima's face as he too was dragged along by his girls. The stores dotting the streets tried to take advantage of the busy day, attempting to entice the children with the sweet scent of baked goods, the moms with all kinds of discounts, and the dads with beautiful women promising them a good time. Unfazed by their efforts, Anima and his family forged ahead, not taking so much as a single step off their path.

“We here!”

Marie rushed into the store. The normally quiet, relatively empty tailor was filled with families browsing through their displayed costumes. Children were running around with stars in their eyes, and adults were browsing the wares with childlike wonder. Seeing the buzz in the store made Anima all the more excited for the festival.

“Wooow, so many!” Marie gasped at the incredible display laid out before her. “Daddy, lookie! Lossa cossumes! Wooow!”

The store had an incredible variety that kept urging its customers to explore. All kinds of costumes could be found—from clowns to witches, bees, butterflies, cows, and even cats, the selection was truly nothing to scoff at. They even had various masks and other types of headgear for those who truly wanted to embrace their costumed identities.

“Ah! I found a dragon costume, m’kay?!”



Bram pointed at one of the display pieces. As she'd said, it was a dragon costume, complete with a hood and a tail. It seemed to be popular with boys, and as a matter of fact, a little boy was excitedly jumping up and down in front of it while reasoning with his parents.

"Boys'll be all over me if I use my Jade Dragon stone, m'kay?"

"I'd prefer if you got something cute," Anima said, hoping to talk her out of it. He wasn't practically worried about her gaining popularity with the boys and getting a boyfriend—well, he was, but there was more to it.

The main issue was that the Jade Dragon was huge and dangerous. She could accidentally hurt people with its sharp talons, and its sheer size would no doubt strike fear in people's hearts. He wanted to protect her from blaming herself for injuring innocents. She picked up on Anima's worries and answered with a smile.

"I'm just kidding. I'll only ever use this stone to protect my family, m'kay?"

"Good girl."

Bram giggled as Anima ruffled her hair. He had no intention of letting Bram fight ever again, and would personally obliterate anyone who dared threaten his family.

"We should really start looking around," Myuke reminded the group of their original goal, putting Marie back on track from marveling at the fancy dresses on display.

"Where bun-buns?" Holding Luina's hand, Anima started looking through the store, but he couldn't find a bunny costume anywhere nearby. It seemed like bunny costumes weren't a hot item, so they didn't have them displayed near the entrance. "No bun-buns…"

“It’s okay, there are sure to be some in the back,” Luina said. They walked to the back of the store, and just as she’d claimed, found a row of bunny costumes.

“There! Bun-buns!”

Marie had finally found her holy grail: a fluffy, adorable bunny costume that easily doubled as pajamas during the cold months. Thanks to that, Anima would be able to enjoy the adorable sight long after the Festival had ended.

“He’e! Fow you!”

Marie handed Myuke one of the costumes. It was a red bunny costume with a white belly. It matched perfectly with her red hair.

“Thanks, Marie! Wow, the size’s perfect, too!”

“You welcome! Fow you, Brum!”

She handed Bram a black bunny costume, which would contrast well against her silver hair.

“Thanks, m’kay?!”

“You welcome! Fow Mommy!”

Luina received an all-white costume, the same size as Marie’s pajamas.

“Thank you, but I think this’ll be a bit too small for me.”

“A bit” was an understatement. Marie put the costume back where she’d found it and started looking for one in Luina’s size.

“No bun-bun for Mommy…”

“There might be more over there.”

“Lessee!” Marie wanted to get everyone their matching outfits quickly, so they marched over to the adults’ section. Unfortunately, it

proved fruitless; there were no adult bunny costumes in sight. “No bun-buns…”

“It doesn’t seem like it.”

“Mommy won’t be bun-bun?”

She began to tear up. She really wanted to hop around with everyone in bunny costumes. Anima couldn’t let his precious little Marie be disappointed; he had to find a way to cheer her up.

“I’ll go check other stores.”

“I think we should all go, then.”

“No, it’s cold outside. Just wait here, I’ll be back in a minute.”

Anima dashed out of the store, and began looking around. Rushing at full speed through the busy streets would no doubt blow some innocent passersby away, so he took to the rooftops. In only a couple of minutes, he’d checked every last clothing store in Garaat, but with no luck. Disappointed, he returned to his family.

“Tell us whatcha found, m’kay?”

Anima merely shook his head, but he spotted Bram’s earring in doing so, which gave him a brilliant idea.

“Say, Myuke. Is there a stone that makes you look like a bunny?”

Using a Dragon stone turned the user into a dragon, and using a fire lizard stone made the user grow a tail, so if they had some sort of bunny stone, it was sure to provide its user with some bunny-like characteristics.

“There is,” Myuke answered with a slow nod. “It makes you jump, like, *super* high. The only problem is that you can’t get one anywhere.”

“Are they that popular?”

“No, the exact opposite. They’re too dangerous. They make you jump so high that you’re pretty much guaranteed to hurt your legs when you land, maybe even break them.”

That makes sense, Anima thought to himself. Why would a shop owner replace a more popular stone with something so dangerous it was difficult to sell?

“I guess you might be able to find one somewhere in the capital,” she continued.

“Then I’ll run all the way there.”

It would take a normal person about two weeks to make the trip there and back, but Anima was able to do it in just two days. The only problem was that he didn’t want to spend two full days away from his family, so ideally, he wanted to be back later that evening.

“You don’t have to go that far.”

“I’m more than happy to go that far. I want to see you look like a bunny.”

“No, I mean… I wouldn’t have enough mana to maintain the stone’s effects. Even if you’d found one, any physical traits would vanish halfway through the Festival. Besides, none of it matters if we don’t have a costume for you as well.”

“I see…”

Anima couldn’t use magic stones. While he had an unbelievable amount of mana, it was of a different kind since he was from a different world.

“Iss’kay!” Marie tried to cheer him up with her bright smile. “I’m big girl! Iss’kay if we’s not all bun-buns!”

She was the one to propose the idea, and she probably wanted to see her family in matching bunny costumes more than anything, yet

was ready to throw all that away to make him happy. Moved by her kind heart, Anima nearly began to cry.

“I’ve got it! Wait here, m’kay?!” Bram excitedly shouted, then rushed off. She returned some time later, panting. “Just put this on and you’re set, m’kay?!”

Bram presented each of them with a bunny-ear headband. While they were technically child-sized, they could fit an adult’s head as well.

“Oh, that’s a great idea!” Myuke lauded. “C’mon, try ’em on!”

Anima and Luina put the headbands on.

“How does it look?” Luina asked.

“Do I look like a bunny?” Anima followed up.

“Bun-buns!” Marie cheered, hopping up and down with twinkling eyes.

“They look great on you!”

“Our bunny family’s complete, m’kay?”

The kids were overjoyed that their bunny family was finally complete. They purchased the headbands and costumes, then left the store.

“I can’t wait for the Festival!”

“I be a bun-bun soon!”

“We’re totally gonna hop around, m’kay?!”

Making their way back toward their home, they merrily discussed the fun times ahead of them when Luina suddenly stumbled.

“Luina?!” Anima rushed to her side. “Wh-What’s wrong?!”

“What happened?!”

“Please tell us you’re okay, m’kay?”

“Mommy sick?”

“I’m fine,” Luina replied, dispelling their worries with a warm smile. “I just tripped on something.”

The girls all sighed in relief, but something bothered Anima. The roads of Garaat were constantly maintained; there shouldn’t have been anything to trip on. She must have been feeling dizzy, but didn’t want to distress the kids. Fortunately, she didn’t look pale or otherwise different than usual, but Anima wasn’t going to take any risks.

“Hyanh!” she cried as he picked her up. “Wh-Why are you doing this?”

“I figured that you’re exhausted, so I’ll carry you back home.”

“I appreciate the thought, but this is really embarrassing…”

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Isn’t that right, girls?”

The kids immediately nodded in agreement.

“You look like a princess!”

“Pincess! Mommy a cute pincess!”

“Ah, look! She’s turning red! No need to be shy, m’kay?!”

Bram’s teasing only made her turn an even brighter red.

“Umm, I’m not really tired. If anything, you’re the one who should be tired. I’m worried about you, Anima.”

“You don’t need to be, I can do this all day. Holding you in my arms only gives me more strength.”

“B-But I must be heavy…”

“No, not at all. Unless you don’t like it when I carry you?”

“It’s not that…”

“Then please. Let me carry you home.”

“O-Okay… Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

With Luina in his arms, Anima and the girls slowly made their way back to their house.

Chapter Five: An Unexpected Peril

On the day of the annual Costume Festival, the Scarlett household was filled with giggles and excitement. The girls were running in circles around the dining table, wearing their bunny costumes.

“Does anyone know what day it is?”

“I dooo! It’s the Fesibal!”

“Ding-ding-ding! Smart girl!”

“Ahhh, I can’t wait for it to start, m’kay?!”

The girls had gone to sleep early the night before, so they’d awoken equally as early. From the moment their little eyes had popped open, their excitement was palpable. They’d managed to have a normal, relatively quiet breakfast, but they broke loose right after cleaning up. Excited to go out, they began hopping around the table in their costumes.

It was like a festival without being at the actual, ongoing one. Anima couldn’t even imagine how excited they would get when they arrived at the Festival itself, but suffice to say, he was looking forward to experiencing it with them.

“Festival! Festival! Dress-up festival!”

“Fesibal! Fesibal!”

“Woooo! I can’t wait, m’kay?!”

Watching them put a smile on his face. It was definitely going to be a fun day.

“Such adorable little angels,” Anima murmured, to which Luina giggled while staring at the top of his head.

“You’re adorable too. That bunny hairband looks great on you.”

Luina praised his looks, but he was rather indifferent about it. Checking himself out in the mirror, he concluded that the accessory wasn't going to become a part of his usual getup.

Luina, on the other hand, wore it gracefully. She was charming beyond words, as if bunny headbands had been created with the sole intent that she might one day wear one. The sight of such a beautiful, smart young woman wearing something so childishly innocent and cute had an indescribable appeal to it.



“It looks great on you, too. Maybe you should wear it more often.”

“I couldn’t possibly…” She stroked her bunny ears, then sheepishly looked down at the ground. “It’s too childish.”

“You’re just so lovely. Anything looks great on you, no matter how childish.”

“There you go again… I’ll wear it for the next Festival too, but you’ll have to wait until then.”

“That gives me one more reason to look forward to it.” He was already excited for the next year’s Festival, but for the time being, he was going to enjoy the current one. Anima clapped to gather everyone’s attention. “Is everyone about ready to get going?”

The girls excitedly hopped over to Anima.

“Look at us! We’re ready to go right now!”

“I’m ready to take on the cold, too! This costume’s nice and warm, m’kay?”

“Lessgooo!”

The girls were ready to roll, but Anima made sure to check everyone’s costumes, just in case. The wind howling outside made the day ahead look to be a cold one, but their snug, warm costumes seemed like they would be more than enough to mitigate that. He picked up his money pouch and extinguished the fire dancing in the fireplace, and they were ready to go.

“Are you okay?”

Luina was leaning against the table, her hands pressed against her mouth. She turned toward Anima, quickly put her hands down, and flashed a warm smile to dispel all his worries.

“I was about to sneeze, but it went away.”

“Do you want to put on something warmer? It looks cold outside.”

“This coat you bought me is plenty.”

Luina gently stroked the coat he’d bought for her during their date. They’d gone into a clothing store, where Anima had asked for their warmest item, and that coat was what they’d handed them. It was heavy, warm, and comfortable—sure to keep Luina warm even on the coldest of days.

“That’s good to hear, but aren’t your hands cold?”

“They are. Do you think you could warm them up for me?”

“With pleasure!”

Anima took her dainty hand, checked the fireplace one last time, and then left the house with his family in tow. It was certainly cold out, but even Bram seemed able to weather it well from inside her warm bunny costume.

“Which way is the Festival? I wonder if anyone knows, m’kay?”

“Umm, issober there!”

“Good job! You’re super perceptive, m’kay?”

“Lessgooo!”

“Quit running! It’s dangerous!”

“Try to catch me, m’kay?!”

“I’ll make you eat those words! I’m *way* faster than you!”

Joining in on the fun, Myuke started running and caught her almost immediately. Seeing her sisters having fun, Marie cantered over and hugged them.

Watching as the girls played, Anima, smiling happily, heard some unfamiliar sounds. Even over the sound of the girls playing, he could hear the sounds of the Festival despite being so far away, which only

fueled his expectations. Excited for what was to come, they headed for Garaat.

They entered the familiar town painted in an unfamiliar light. Colorful will-o'-the-wisp plush toys hung from the buildings, while people in colorful costumes walked the streets. It was still early in the morning, but the streets were packed. Anima couldn't even imagine how the streets would look like later in the day, but he was excited to find out.

"Hi, Wiwwy! I'm Marie!"

Marie waved at the will-o'-the-wisps, which represented the returning souls of the dead. Acting cheerful and kind to them was a form of reassuring them that everything was fine. Luina had decorated their dining room with her own plush will-o'-the-wisps, and naturally, the girls loved them.

While enjoying the buzz of the town, Marie started sniffing the air.

"I smell sweet!"

Myuke and Bram immediately switched their attention from the plushes to the mysterious smell.

"Oh yeah, I smell it too. I think it's pastries."

"Hmm… It's coming from that way! Let's go and check it out, m'kay?!"

"Lessgooo!"

"N-No, stop! You'll get lost if you wander off on your own!"

Myuke was just as excited as they were about the prospect of baked goods, but she was reserved enough to not act rashly. She took her sisters' hands and turned toward the source of the smell.

"I'm really glad that Myuke is so responsible," Luina noted.

"Yes. She is definitely the oldest of the three."

“I-It’s not a big deal,” Myuke replied meekly. “I’ll look after these two; you guys just stay here and kiss or something!”

Luina immediately went bright red.

“I can’t kiss him here!”

They’d shared a kiss in the plaza while on their date, but she still wasn’t fond of being intimate in public. If nothing else, the comment fueled Anima’s excitement for a kiss later, but first he had to fill his daughters’ stomachs.

“Okay, tell me, which one of you wants a treat?”

“Meee!”

“Let’s go, let’s go! I don’t want them to run out of pastries, m’kay?!”

“And I don’t want you to run out there and get lost, jeez!” Myuke protested, but maybe only ostensibly. Either the two excited girls had easily overpowered her, or she’d simply given in and only pretended to hold them back. Regardless, with her being pulled behind Bram and Marie, the family set off toward the source of the smell.

They soon arrived at a familiar bakery, which had a stall set up out front to do business from instead of making use of the full building like usual. The first thing that caught Anima’s eye was the dozens upon dozens of small, bite-sized pancakes they had prepared, and as he looked around, he found that people were enjoying eating them off of skewers.

“Nummy…”

“Look at them, they’re so small and cute! Mmm, I just wanna eat ’em all up, m’kay?!”

“Don’t just stand right in front of the stall like that! It’s rude!” Myuke chided as she wiped the drool off her face. She stood proudly,

basking in her sisters' respect for the eldest after confirming that they hadn't caught her slip-up.

Though Bram and Marie had missed it, Anima hadn't. The way his lovely daughters were drooling over the pancakes made him feel obliged to treat them. He took out his money pouch and approached the stall.

"Let me have as much as this can afford, please."

The vendor went wide-eyed at the gold coin Anima tossed him.

"I'm sorry, Anima, but this is a fortune. We won't be able to complete your order even if you give us the whole day. You're a family of five, correct?"

"Yes."

"Do you have five copper?"

"I do, give me a moment."

He fished out five copper pieces and watched as the man skewered the pancakes.

"Here you go. I hope you enjoy them."

He took the five skewers and passed them out until all five of them had one. The girls' broad smiles as they marveled at the sweet treats were priceless.

"Thanks, Daddy!"

"Thanks, m'kay?!"

"Thank you, Daddy!"

"You're welcome," Anima answered with a delighted smile. "It's better to not walk with those, though, so let's find a place to eat them."

With the girls fixated on their pancakes, they all slowly moved to a quiet area where they wouldn't be a bother to the stall. There, they started stuffing their cheeks.

"Yum! These are ultra delicious, m'kay?!"

"Yeah, I gotta admit, they're great!"

"Sweet 'n nummy!"

"Be careful, girls," Luina told them. "If you put too much in your mouth, it'll get stuck in your throat."

"But it's so good! C'mon, try it!"

"All right, don't mind if I do… Mmm, wow! You're right, these are very tasty."

Luina happily munched on her pancakes, one after another. Anima had noticed it while they were eating waffles on their date, but the pancakes fully convinced him that his wife had a sweet tooth.

"You can have mine too," he told her.

"Do you not like sweets, Daddy?" Myuke asked.

"No, I do."

"Then go ahead and eat up! They're super sweet and tasty!"

"I agree, you should try it," Luina added. "Here, let me help you. Say 'Ahhh', here comes the carriage!"

"Ahhh…" He reflexively opened his mouth. "Omnom… I have to admit, they're very good."

"Right?! It wouldn't be a festival without some awesome food, that's for sure!"

"I love fesibals!"

"Let's find another place to stop at once we finish eating, m'kay?"

They devoured the rest of their pancakes in a flash, then threw the skewers into the garbage can placed next to the stall.

“What’re we gonna have next?” Myuke asked. She had been so hung up on acting like an adult, but was completely overtaken by the festive spirit. Seeing her loosen up a bit made Anima even more excited for the Festival.

The five of them took each others’ hands and started walking the busy streets. A couple moments into their journey for more unforgettable culinary experiences, loud roars, barks, and howls boomed through the streets. They only got louder and louder as the family made their way towards the plaza.

“Is there a fight?”

If there was, it would’ve been for the best to take the girls somewhere else. Getting wrapped up in a fight was neither fun nor festive.

“That’s actually the shouting contest,” Luina explained.

“What’s that?”

According to her, the shouting contest asked its participants to imitate the voices of the creatures they were dressed as to the best of their abilities. The idea was that fierce roars and screams would scare away the evil spirits.

“That sounds fun.”

“It’s lots of fun, and everyone who takes part gets a treat.”

The mention of treats immediately caught the attention of the girls.

“I ’gream suuuper loud!”

“I’m sure everyone would be amazed by your screaming, Marie. Should we enter?”

“I wanna!”

Marie was immediately on board, but Bram and Myuke seemed strangely worried.

“You girls are being awfully quiet. Do your tummies hurt?”

Bram shook her head.

“I just don’t know what bunnies say, m’kay?”

“Yeah, I don’t know either. Do you, Mommy?”

“You know, now that you mention it, I don’t think I’ve ever heard a bunny make noise.”

While the girls discussed the issue, Anima remained silent, trying his hardest to figure out what bunnies sounded like. While he was doing so, Myuke seemed to have gotten an idea. She looked down at the ground and started muttering to herself.

“*Bun!* …Maybe? Wh-What’s with the smirks?!” she cried, her face as red as her hair.

“That was very cute; I like it a lot. *Bun!”*

“I like it too, m’kay? *Bun!”*

“Me too! I like *bun!”*

“*Bun!* What a wonderful suggestion.”

Myuke was basking in praise. With the mystery solved, they headed to the plaza and lined up as participants. The line moved quickly, and they soon found themselves at the front. Hand in hand, the five of them walked onto the stage and lined up, where they shouted from the top of their lungs.

“Bun!”

They had no idea if the sound they’d made was correct, but they had certainly been loud enough. The audience sent them off with a round of applause as the announcer gave each and every one of them a

small piece of candy, complimenting the girls on their wonderful performance.

Enjoying the sweet candy, they stayed for a bit to listen to the participants who came after them, joining in the applause as each one finished. It didn't take them long to finish their candies, after which the girls began excitedly looking for their next adventure.

"Let's go somewhere, m'kay?"

"Why don't we walk through the whole town? We might find something cool!"

"Good idea! Let's walk everywhere and eat all the yummy snacks we can find, m'kay?!"

"Smacks!"

They started their march through the town—led by Myuke, Bram, and Marie—to discover all the treats the Festival had to offer. They were unbearably excited for the tastes and smells that they would find.

"Nh!"

Suddenly, Luina started to stagger. She fell to her knees and pressed her hands over her mouth.

"Wh-What's wrong?!" Anima asked, terrified. He couldn't bear to hear his lovely wife groan in agony, unable to stand up.

"Wait, what's going on?!"

"Don't tell me you're sick, m'kay?!"

"Pain, pain, fye 'way!"

Catching on to what was happening, the girls began to freak out as well. Panicking in front of the girls would only make the situation worse, but he couldn't help it. It was impossible for him to keep his composure when his wife was suffering.

“Don’t worry, I’m okay,” Luina said in her usual, calm tone, reassuring everyone with a warm smile.

Anima was very familiar with Luina’s heartfelt, genuine smiles. Because of that, however, he knew right away that she was forcing one in hopes of calming everyone down, and he couldn’t think of any reason for her to do so than that she was feeling sick. He slowly calmed himself down; he needed to help her, and he couldn’t do that properly if he was panicked. No matter the issue, he couldn’t allow Luina to push herself even further. Her safety was his number-one priority.

“So, where are we going next?” Luina stood up and asked, acting cheerful as if nothing had happened. She knew how much everyone had been looking forward to the Festival and that there wouldn’t be another chance to experience such a high level of excitement until the following year.

The girls had been completely fascinated by the Festival ever since they’d learned about it. Making plans for it was a daily topic at the dinner table; it had been basically all Bram and Myuke talked about for the past several days, and Marie had even tried to blow away the clouds so they would have a nice day for it. Ruining such a day was sure to crush Luina. But that didn’t matter; there were things that were more important to them.

“We’re going home,” Anima said in a firm tone, leaving no room for argument.

Simply having vertigo would have been more than enough reason to go home, but Luina had shown similar symptoms the week prior. He now understood that she hadn’t been holding back a sneeze that morning either—she likely had experienced a bout of extreme nausea. It was far from ideal to have her parade around the town in her condition, and was sure the girls would take his side.

“Daddy’s right! You gotta lie down! You can’t push yourself when you’re sick!”

“But you girls were so excited for the Festival…” she apologized, but Marie shook her head at her. She walked up to Luina, took her hand, and looked up at her with a dazzling smile.

“Y’know, y’know, the Fesibal’s fun! There’s lossa nummies! And we doed the *bun!* too! But, but, it’s ’nough! We go home!”

“I’m so full,” Bram nodded in agreement as she rubbed her stomach. “I really wanna go home and relax, m’kay?”

The girls tried to cheer her up. For everyone in the family, Luina’s health was much more important than some festival.

“It’s really cold outside. Let’s go home and get warmed up.”

“I’m sorry…”

“Don’t apologize. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

All the support from her family made a faint smile appear on Luina’s face. Anima picked her up, and the five of them made their way back home.

◆◆◆

Anima took extra care to walk as smoothly as possible so that his wife had a comfortable ride home; jostling around in his arms would only worsen the situation. He slowly carried her into the bedroom, where he laid her down to rest. As he tucked her in, she smiled at him.

“Thank you, but I’m fine,” she said not only to Anima, but to their daughters as well. The three of them were standing beside the bed, worriedly watching over her.

“That’s great to hear. Still, stay in bed for today.”

“We’ll do all the chores so you don’t have to worry about anything, m’kay?”

“I help too! I’m four!”

Marie’s proud display of four fingers made Luina giggle. She felt relieved to be surrounded by her kind, beloved family.

“I’m so grateful to have you girls in my life. I’ll take it easy for the day. Promise.”

For a moment, a sense of relief radiated from the three girls, but it immediately transformed into burning determination. They realized that the tasks ahead of them would prove difficult, but were ready to overcome them to the best of their abilities. Meanwhile, Anima had to keep his senses sharp to make sure the girls didn’t get injured while they were hard at work.

“Should we move to the dining room once it warms up?” Anima asked.

“Yes, that would be nice. I’d like to stay close to you, otherwise it’ll get incredibly lonely and boring. Ah, I know! We could make dinner toge—”

“Forget it!” Myuke retorted, cutting her off. “You’d just start doing everything yourself!”

“Can I just watch?” Luina tried to reason with Myuke, even deploying her sad puppy impression.

“Nope. It’s cold in the kitchen.” Myuke stood her ground, driving her point home with an exasperated sigh. “Seriously, didn’t you *just* say that you’d take it easy for the day? You gotta stop worrying; we’ll take care of everything today. You just focus on getting better, okay?”

“But I’m already feeling much better.”

She indeed seemed much better—her paleness was gone, and it didn't seem like she had a cold. It could've very well been random vertigo.

"Well, you don't seem to have a fever," Myuke stated, holding her hand against Luina's forehead.

"But if she doesn't have a fever, what was the issue? I just don't get it, m'kay?"

"She must've been exhausted."

"Not at all. How could I get exhausted when you're all here to help me?"

"It doesn't matter, you still need to rest today," Anima commanded. He had to be assertive or she'd get right back onto her feet and start working. She needed to take the day off and get some proper rest.

"Mommy, be good girl!"

Luina let out a small sigh.

"How could I say no to you, Marie? All right, I won't lift a finger today."

"Yaaay! Good girl!"

Marie pet her head, which soothed her soul. Her family's love was the best medicine she could have ever asked for.

"It's great that you're gonna rest up, but it's pretty cold. I can grab you your scarf and gloves if you want 'em, m'kay?"

"She won't be able to fall asleep with those on," Myuke said, "so… That's it! Let's make her a cup of warm milk! Mommy, lemme borrow the stone!"

"Be careful not to burn yourself."

“I’ll be fine! We made veggie soup all by ourselves, remember?” Myuke took the stone, then looked Luina straight in the eye, like a mother ready to give instructions to their child. “I’ll tell you when it’s ready, so you just wait here, okay?”

“Okay, I’ll wait.”

With Luina’s agreement, Myuke turned towards Marie.

“Marie, can you stay here with Mommy? She’d be lonely all by herself.”

“Uh-huh!”

Marie energetically nodded. Her eyes were twinkling with determination—just like everyone else, she was ready to do everything she could for Luina. Anima turned toward her and ruffled her hair.

“It’s cold in here; why don’t you get under the covers with Mommy?”

“’Kaaay!” She hopped into the bed and snuggled up next to Luina. “Mommy warm?”

“Yes, very warm.”

Smiling cheerfully, Marie nestled up even closer to Luina. With those two in bed, Anima glanced at Myuke, and they turned toward the door. He figured they could start by warming the dining room with the help of the fireplace, but there was one other thing he had to do first.

“Are you coming as well, Bram?”

“You bet! I’d do anything for Mommy, m’kay?”

“You’re a very kind, brave girl.”

There was a chance that a terrible accident could happen if someone wasn’t around to keep a constant watch over the fireplace, so they decided to prepare the milk first. The three of them headed into the

kitchen, which was kept just as cold as the outside by the chilly wind blowing in through the lattice kitchen vents.

“Thank goodness for this bunny costume. It’s nice and warm, m’kay?”

“You’re so strong.” Anima gently pet her silver hair to praise her for braving the cold so well. “Okay, let’s do our best to make a delicious cup of warm milk for Luina!”

“Let’s go, m’kay?!”

“Sorry to rain on your parade, but I can make warm milk on my own. I’m just warming up some milk, so could you cut up some apples instead, Daddy? Make sure they’re small and easy to eat.”

“I’ll cut the best apple pieces you’ve ever seen!”

“Awesome. Bram, get a plate, a fork, and a cup please.”

“Of course, m’kay?”

Everyone started working based on Myuke’s instructions. She herself used the fire lizard stone to start heating the pot, while Anima was busy choosing the most beautiful apple from the pile. He cut it into six slices and moved it to the plate Bram had chosen, marking the end of his task—or so he thought.

“Daddy, grab a cup off the shelf for me please, m’kay?”

Anima immediately jumped on her request and reached for a cup.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks, m’kay?”

“You’re welc—”

The cup slipped out of Anima’s grasp. Luckily, though, Bram was there to catch it.

“Phew, that was close, m’kay?”

“What happened?”

Myuke whipped around in surprise.

“Daddy dropped the cup, m’kay? But I managed to— Eep!”

Bram froze in place, her lips shaking, as Anima placed his hands on her shoulders. The cup fell from her hands, but fortunately for them, Myuke was quick on her feet.

“Phew, I just barely saved this.”

“Wow, I’m impressed, m’kay?! That was super fast, Myuke! But anyway, umm, what’s going on, m’kay?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. But, I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I don’t know, m’kay? What did I say?”

Bram tilted her head in confusion, and Anima took a deep breath to calm his raging emotions.

“Did you just… call me ‘Daddy’?”

“Oh, I guess I did… Huh, I didn’t even notice, m’kay?”

“Y-You didn’t notice?”

He could barely contain his happiness—Bram had unconsciously called him “Daddy”. She had been very conscious about it a couple weeks before, but she seemed to have completely accepted Anima as a father figure.

At last, the day has come.

He was ready to burst into tears. For a moment, he thought about running to the bedroom so he could celebrate with Luina, but he decided against it. She was lying in bed sick, and they were in the middle of making something to help her feel better. He couldn’t just

abandon his post and rile her up. He had to contain his happiness for the time being.

“Just look at that smile,” Myuke giggled. “Seems like Daddy loved that.”

“Yeah, it’s almost embarrassing how happy that made him, m’kay?”

Anima hid his broad smile. Bram was feeling shame, which meant that she was once again being conscious about calling him “Daddy”. If it got too bad, she wouldn’t repeat it.

“Don’t feel embarrassed! Please!”

“You’re just making it worse, m’kay?”

“L-Listen to me! There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, okay?!”

All he wanted was to hear that magic word come naturally out of Bram’s mouth once again. She knew quite well that that was an incredibly strong desire of his, as proven by the smile she was wearing.

“I’m just kidding. I’m not embarrassed to call you ‘Daddy’, m’kay?”

“R-Really?”

“Yes, really. I’ve been calling you that in my head for a while now, m’kay?”

“B-But then why didn’t you say it earlier?”

“I wanted to, I was just kinda scared to call you something different. I needed, I dunno, some special occasion to change it, m’kay?” Bram explained herself with a serious tone. “Then, when you told me about the Festival, I knew it was the perfect chance. Daddy’s spirit would return, and I wanted to show him that I found a good family, that he doesn’t have to worry, ’cause I’m happy, m’kay?”

Fearing that her dad’s spirit would think she didn’t feel like a part of Anima’s family, she wanted to reassure him that she had a good life,

and the best way for her to go about that was to admit to her feelings. She may have only just started calling him “Daddy”, but she’d thought of him as a father for a long time. Learning the truth that was hidden in her innocent smile, tears began rolling down his face.

“D-Don’t cry, m’kay?!” she said frantically.

“I’m so happy. Thank you, Bram. Thank you for becoming my daughter. I promise I’ll *always* be here for you!”

Anima got on his knees and embraced Bram. She cracked a joyful smile and hugged him back.

“You already do enough for me, m’kay?” Happiness filled the air. Strangely, it seemed that happiness smelled a lot like smoke. “I think something’s burning, m’kay?”

Myuke, who had been quietly watching the heartfelt moment between her dad and sister, quickly spun around to check on the milk.

“Oh no! I forgot all about this!”

She quickly put out the flame. The milk was boiling, and a thin layer around the edge of the pot had burned, but the rest of it seemed completely fine. They couldn’t serve it to Luina just like that, though; the milk was still boiling hot. They poured some into a cup, then brought it over to the dining table along with the sliced apple. After that, they lit a fire in the fireplace and sat down to take a breather.

“We got that taken care of quickly. Thank you, girls.”

“You did great too, m’kay?! Look at those apple slices! They’re perfect, m’kay?!”

“It really goes to show just how much you help Mommy.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” Anima’s face clouded over in the midst of their small chit-chat. “Maybe if I had done more, Luina wouldn’t have collapsed.”

“You’re doing more than enough, Daddy.” Myuke turned toward him with a smile. “We’d have a lot more to worry about every day if it wasn’t for you. I don’t know what happened to her, but one thing I can say for certain is that it wasn’t your fault. Plus, she got sick like this before. This is nothing new.”

“Wait, she did?”

Anima didn’t know anything about that.

“Yeah, once. Three years ago, give or take.”

“Three years ago…”

That timeframe sounded grimly familiar. Judging by Myuke’s grave expression, his intuition was, unfortunately, correct.

“She collapsed and slept for three whole days after learning about her father’s death.”

“I see…”

Luina enjoyed sharing memories from her past, and she always reminiscenced about them with the most beautiful smile on her face. She clearly loved and treasured her family more than anything else.

Losing her father must have been for her like what losing Luina would be for Anima. He couldn’t even comprehend the deep pain he would feel, but Luina had already walked that path once. Just thinking about what it must have felt like almost made him throw up.

“She didn’t collapse when her mom passed away, though. I think she tried to keep it together for our sakes.”

“Meaning you’re the best husband she could’ve ever asked for, m’kay?”

“That’s really kind of you, but why’s that?” Anima questioned as he tilted his head.

“We can always rely on you, and that leaves Mommy a lot more time to relax, m’kay?”

“She’s totally right. I’m not saying you shouldn’t be worried about her, but she’s in good hands. She wouldn’t have agreed to take things easy today if she wasn’t.”

“Exactly, so just keep doing what you’ve been doing, and don’t feel guilty about anything. Y’know, Mommy looks so happy every time you guys do the chores together that she’d probably get depressed if you did everything for her, m’kay?”

“Yep! I’m sure that’s what she wants too!”

Anima nodded deeply.

“Thank you for looking out for me, girls. I’ll keep doing the chores with her, I promise!”

“That’s what I like to hear!”

“I wanna keep seeing your passion, as piping hot as this milk! Oh, it’s cold now, m’kay?”

They had been talking for so long that the warm milk had gone back to being regular milk. Myuke touched the cup to check how cold it had gotten.

“It’s warm enough. Daddy, you should go get Mommy and bring her down here.”

Anima nodded, then went upstairs. As he entered the room, Marie whipped around with a big smile.

“I maked it warm!”

“I knew you could do it, big girl.”

“It’s really warm and cozy now. Thank you, Marie.”

Marie nodded proudly, enjoying all the praise she was getting.

“How are you feeling?” Anima asked, turning his attention to Luina.

“Great,” she stated confidently. Her short rest seemed to have helped a lot. Even so, Anima still insisted on carrying her down into the dining room, just in case. He made his way into the dining room with Luina in his arms and Marie by his side.

“Ah, you’re here! Look, here’s your warm milk and some apple slices. Eat up!”

“You’re going to bed after you finish eating! We don’t want you to collapse again, m’kay?!”

“Mommy, sit!”

Marie pulled out a chair, which Luina sat down in. Though she was embarrassed by everyone’s attention being gathered on her, she joyfully took a sip of the milk her family had prepared for her.

Epilogue: Warmth

Luina collapsed again the next day. The five of them had just finished cleaning up after breakfast when she suddenly went pale and stopped to lean herself against the table to support herself. Tears began gathering in her eyes and she held her hands over her mouth in an attempt to fight her nausea.

Although everyone was panicking, Anima managed to keep himself together enough to pour a glass of water for Luina. They had expected the previous day's symptoms to disappear with the first rays of the morning sun, but that clearly wasn't the case. Luina carefully sipped her water and took a couple of deep breaths to calm herself down.

"I'm sorry for making you worry."

"You don't have to apologize; I just want to make sure you're feeling okay. Do you still feel like you have to throw up?"

"No, I'm fine," Luina responded with a smile. Her nausea was apparently gone, but there was still the underlying issue of not knowing what was happening to her. The thought that she'd contracted some unknown, serious illness sent a chill up his spine.

"Are you sure you're fine?" Myuke asked. "Don't push yourself."

"Did you catch a cold?" Bram added. "We know you don't have a fever, but tell us if you get tired, m'kay?"

"I will."

Nothing had seemed off about Luina when she'd woken up. Everything was fine until the nausea had hit, so the chance that she was lying to keep the girls' spirits up was very slim, but that only worried Anima even more. His fear that some unknown illness had befallen her was gaining more traction, amplified by the knowledge

that her random bouts of nausea would keep happening until they found a cure.

“If it’s not a cold, I’m out of ideas, m’kay?”

“Maybe I ate something bad?” Luina hesitantly proposed. She must have expected her condition to be gone by morning, making it just as perplexing to her as it was to everyone else.

The girls were visibly worried, and Anima was ready to explode from frustration, but he had to calm himself down. Luina was already shaken by the situation, and him going berserk wouldn’t do any good for anyone. He had to stay calm and composed.

“The food wasn’t bad by any means. It was delicious, as always,” he told her.

“Yep, for sure. It was super yummy. I definitely don’t think that’s what it is.”

“You only got sick the other day, so maybe it’s ’cause it’s cold out, m’kay?”

“I make Mommy warm!”

Marie’s warm hug put a smile on Luina’s face.

“You’re very warm, Marie, but I’m not cold at all.”

It was pretty comfortable in the dining room thanks to the gently swaying flame in the fireplace. Even Bram seemed to be completely fine, so her condition couldn’t possibly have been caused by the weather. But if it wasn’t that, then Anima was pretty much out of ideas. Nothing came to mind no matter how much he ruminated over it, leaving them with only one option.

“We need to get you to a doctor.”

“Yeah,” Myuke nodded. “I don’t have any ideas either. We should definitely leave it to a professional.”

“That’s that, then. I’ll get you the best doctor in the country—no, the world! Just wait here!”

“Y-You don’t have to go that far.”

Luina hurriedly tried to stop him. He turned around to plead his case, but she seemed a bit annoyed. The only person who knew how she was feeling was herself, and she didn’t believe her condition called for a doctor.

While Anima understood how she felt, that didn’t change what he had to do. He was going to make sure they acted before it was too late, and not even Luina’s protests could stop him. If she was fighting some sort of terrible disease, putting off treatment for even a single day could jeopardize the happy, carefree lives they’d fought tooth and nail to be able to live. He would not give up after dealing with Malshan and asking the king himself to be pardoned for it. He would not lose his happiness, and he would crush anything that threatened it, human or otherwise.

“Who is the best doctor in this world and where can I find them?”

“No clue, but the best in the country is definitely gonna be in the capital.”

“Probably the one who helps the king, m’kay?”

It would have been nigh impossible for an ordinary man to set foot in the throne room, but Anima was no ordinary man. If he enlisted Shaer’s help, getting another audience with the king was very well possible.

“I’ll be off. Take care of Luina for me, girls.”

“W-Wait!” She stopped him once again. “There’s no need to go all the way to the capital.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ll get you the best doctor and the best medicine, no matter what it takes. If I have to tear a dragon’s fang from its mouth or drain the blood from a phoenix, then so be it.”

“That’ll probably give her food poisoning, m’kay?”

“I’ve never even *heard* of a phoenix.”

Dragon fangs and phoenix blood were two of the most effective medicines in his old world, but they might not even have existed in his new one, as evidenced by the girls’ jokes.

“Anima, listen. I know you only want the best for me, but there’s no need to go to the capital. I don’t want you to be away for days.”

Luina was completely right; bringing back a doctor would take him several days. He would have been able to make the trip in a day if he went by himself, but bringing someone along was another story. He got the sense that people weren’t built for near-supersonic travel, so he couldn’t exactly grab someone and run them back.

“I can’t just sit here and watch you suffer, though. Let me do something for you!”

Luina closed her eyes for a moment, then flashed a warm, loving smile.

“I’m so happy to have someone in my life who loves me so much.”

“I’m just as happy, and I don’t want this happiness to vanish from my life. I want to protect it at all costs, so please, tell me what I should do.”

“Okay, then can you do something for me?”

“Anything,” he stated without a moment’s hesitation. He was ready to do anything for his wife, and he was going to prove it. “Whatever you need, I *will* make it happen.”

“I don’t want you to go to the capital, but I *do* want to visit the doctor in Garaat. Would you come with me?”

“Of course I will! We’re going right now!”

“That’s all well and good,” Myuke interjected, “but Mommy needs to rest now. It’d be better if you got them to come here.”

“Why don’t we do that, then?” Anima was ready to do anything Luina asked of him, but Myuke’s solution seemed much better. Luina thought for a moment, nodded, then sat down. “So, where is this doctor?”

“They live right behind the Hunter’s Guild. It’s a one-story building with a red roof. You can’t miss it.”

“Red roof right behind the Guild. Okay, I’m off!”

He bolted out of the house and set off toward Garaat. As if he were an ancient dragon taking to the skies, the trees in his path trembled violently, shedding branches and leaves in the wake of the powerful blasts of air created by his incredible speed. He arrived at Garaat in the blink of an eye, and immediately took to the rooftops to avoid injuring the passersby.

“There it is!” The Hunter’s Guild was the tallest building in the town. Leaping over it, he landed on a red roof—the doctor’s roof. He hopped down and started banging on the building’s wooden door. “Doctor! Doctor, are you there?!”

A couple moments later, the door slowly opened, pulled by an old lady.

“All right, all right! For goodness’ sake, keep it down! We’re out of hangover cure; you have to go to the pharmacy down the main street!” she grumbled, looking at Anima with tired eyes. She seemed to have been dealing with hangover patients lately, and while Luina did have nausea, she certainly didn’t have a hangover.

“I need you to come and see my wife! She didn’t have any alcohol, but she’s been having fits of nausea since yesterday. Come, I’ll take you to the orphanage.”

“‘The orphanage’?” The woman raised an eyebrow. “Are you talking about the Scarletts’ house?”

“Yes, it’s Luina’s home. Do you know her?”

“Everyone knows the Scarletts, dearie. I assume you’re Luina’s husband?”

“I’m Anima, but let’s skip the small talk. I need you to come with me right away.”

“I’m going, I’m going. Give me a moment.”

She went inside her house and picked up her bag.

“Can you run?” Anima asked.

“I was swift on my feet when I was younger, but those days are long gone. I can surely muster up some strength if you want me to run with you, but don’t expect a miracle.”

“No, that’s fine. I don’t want you to push yourself. I’m already beyond grateful that you’re willing to see her on such short notice.”

“My, what a gentleman you are, dearie. I’d make you get down on one knee and propose to me right here and now were I ten years younger.”

“Sorry, but those feelings will never be mutual. Luina is the only woman I love.”

“I’m joking, dearie. Lighten up a little,” she giggled to herself. It almost felt like she already knew what kind of man Anima was.

Regardless, Anima was relieved. The doctor seemed like a very kind, gentle woman who would take good care of Luina. All he needed now was for them to hurry things up. He was grateful for her swift

response, but at the rate they were going, it was going to take hours for them to get back.

“Can you get on my back? I’ll run us back home, but I’ll go at a reasonable speed so you don’t get hurt.”

“Of course. I’m always happy to feel up the youngsters.”

While she was much older than Anima, he got the sense she wasn’t joking.

“Let me know if I start going too fast for you,” he said, then put the woman on his back, took to the rooftops, and set off toward his home.



The trip took only a couple of minutes, and he immediately headed into the dining room. There was no one there, and the fire in the fireplace had been put out, so the girls had presumably moved Luina to the bedroom. He went up, still carrying the doctor on his back, and quietly opened the door. The girls immediately turned and rushed over to him, which meant Luina was likely still awake.

“That was quite impressive. Thank you, dearie.”

Anima put the doctor down and bowed to her.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again,” Luina said to her. “Sorry to make you come all the way out here in this weather.”

“Don’t be silly, darling. You’re like a granddaughter to me; I’d come running to help you in the strongest hailstorm or the longest drought.”

“Do you know each other?” Anima inquired.

“Yes, she’s been my doctor ever since I was around Marie’s age. We’ve spent a lot of time together—I was a sickly little girl.”

Anima only knew about one case of Luina falling sick, which he’d heard about from Myuke. Apparently, though, that wasn’t the only time it had happened, and she had fallen sick often before starting the orphanage. Gaining a new, loving family member with every child saved must’ve helped her get over her sickly phase.

She could no longer allow herself to be bedridden. The first time she’d collapsed, she’d assumed that Anima had given her the freedom to show some weakness. After several instances of it, however, it was clear that there was something much more serious behind it. She could only hope the doctor would be able to diagnose her.

“Please, you gotta help Mommy!”

“Tell us what she needs to get better and we’ll get it for her as fast as we can, m’kay?!”

“Peeease!”

The three girls bowed before the lady.

“Well, now, would you look at that. You raised your girls very well, Luina. There, there, worry not. I’ll take a good look at your mother, okay? Go wait outside with your father, would you?”

“Please, find out what’s wrong with her!”

Anima bowed deeply before herding the kids out of the room. They could hear Luina’s and the doctor’s voices coming from inside, but couldn’t make out what they were saying.

What if the doctor was sharing terrible news with her? What if she had contracted some incurable illness? Dark thoughts like that clouded Anima’s mind, but he couldn’t let his concerns show in front of his daughters. He had to stand strong for them.

“Are you girls cold?” he asked, trying to mask his troubles.

“This is nothing, m’kay?!” Bram answered with a broad smile. “Why? Are you cold, Daddy?”

“I’m fine.”

“But you just came home, and it’s really cold outside. Don’t worry, I’ll warm you up!”

“Me too! I can do the warm!”

The three of them tightly hugged him. The warmth of their small bodies enveloped him, chasing away his fears.

“Thank you, it’s really nice and warm now. Though it’s only fair for me to return the favor.”

The girls squealed as Anima returned their hug. They held each other until the bedroom door slowly drifted open.

“We’re done. Do come in.”

The doctor invited them in with a slight grin. Luina, sitting on the bed, was also smiling, hinting at the fact that she likely didn’t have any sort of serious condition.

“So, do you know what’s making her sick?” he asked in the most deadpan tone possible, and was given his answer alongside a warm smile.

“Congratulations, dearie. Luina’s pregnant.”

Her words didn’t register in Anima’s brain. He just stood there, staring at the doctor, unable to speak so much as a word. A long pause later, he managed to pull himself out of his daze just enough to ask a simple question.

“…Come again?”

“I’m pregnant!” Luina excitedly declared with the most dazzling smile he’d ever seen. Finally, the doctor’s statement was starting to make sense to him.

“You’re… pregnant?”

“Yes! We’re going to have a child!”

“I-I see… A child…”

He repeated his wife’s words with a dumb smile. His worries vanished into thin air. The only thing he felt was overwhelming happiness. The girls watched as Anima’s smile got bigger by the second, and began cheering at the magnificent news.

“That’s amazing! Congrats, Mommy!”

“This is incredible, m’kay?!”

“What’s ‘peggant’?”

“They’re gonna have a baby!”

“You’ll be a big sister for real! You’re gonna have a little brother or sister, m’kay?!”

“Woooow! Good job, Mommy!”

“Thank you!”

“Congratulations, Luina!” Anima said, finally able to form full sentences. “This… This is incredible!”

“Thank you. Congratulations to you too, Anima!”

“Thank you! I’ll do every last thing I can do to become a great father! I promise!”

Luina giggled, then looked deep into Anima’s eyes.

“You’re already a great father. We all love you dearly. Isn’t that right, girls?”

The girls immediately broke into smiles and hugged Anima tightly, and Luina slowly got up from the bed to join their hug. Anima opened his arms and wrapped them around his loving family. While the weather outside was cold, the Scarletts’ bedroom was filled with a warmth that even the height of the summer would envy.

Afterword

Hello again, I'm Nekomata Nuko.

Thank you for reading *Why Shouldn't a Detestable Demon Lord Fall in Love?!* volume three. I hope you enjoyed this small peek into the wholesome lives of Demon Lord Anima and his loving family.

I'd like to use this chance to express my gratitude to my wonderful colleagues who made it possible to publish this book:

First, a big thank you to my editor, as well as everyone else working at HJ Bunko.

Thank you to teffish, who does the illustrations, as well as my proofreader, designer, and everyone else who helped make this book a reality. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

And of course, my heartfelt thanks to you, my dear reader. I hope we'll see each other again in the next volume. Until then.

A very hot day in 2019,

Nekomata Nuko.


Why Shouldn't a Detestable Demon Lord FALL IN LOVE?!
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