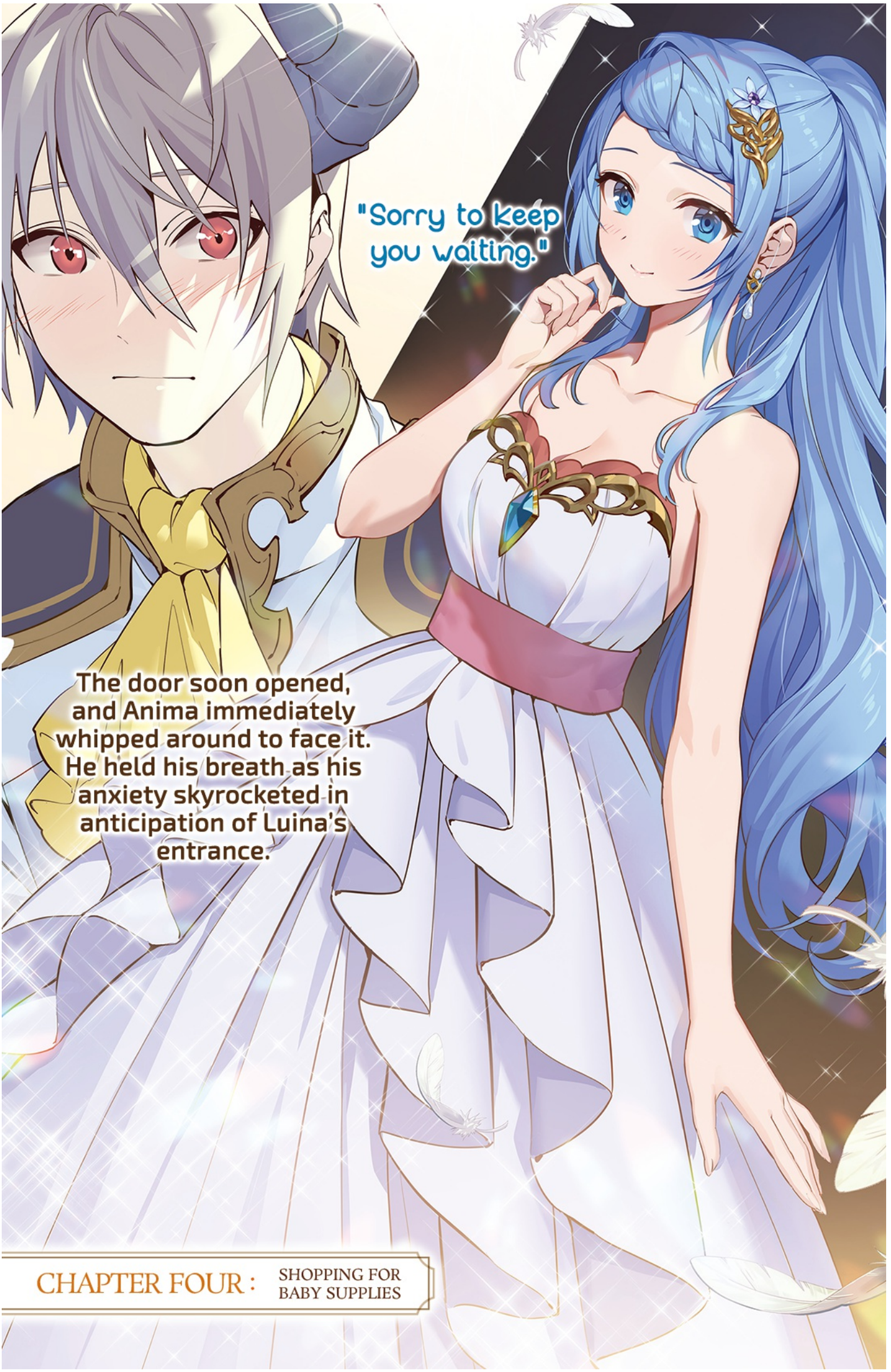

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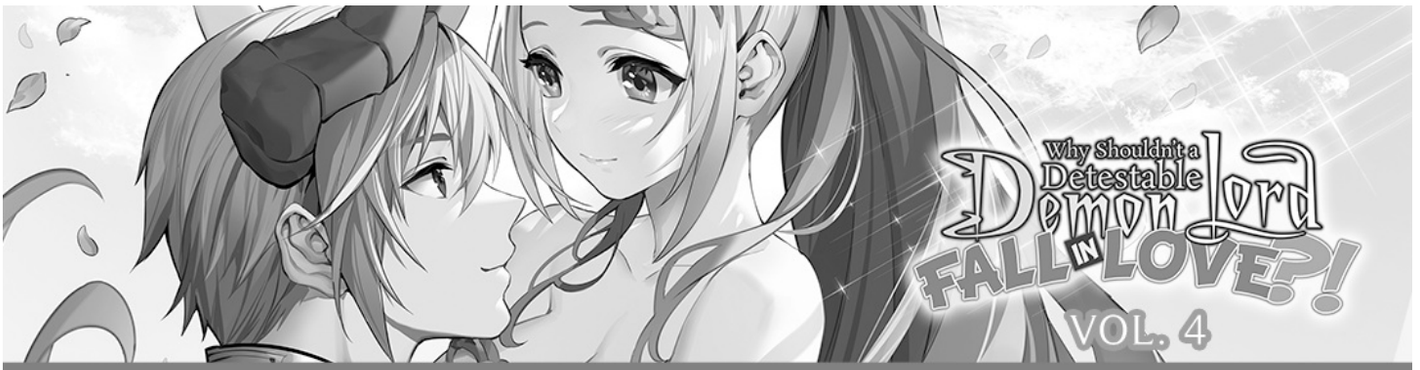
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Why Shouldn't a Detestable Demon Lord Fall in Love?!

VOL. 4

Original Story by Nekomata Nuko

Illlustrations by teffish



ORIGINAL STORY: **Nekomata Nuko** | ILLUSTRATION: **teffish**

SOL PRESS

TRANSLATION:
David Prileszky

EDITING:
Adam Haffen

TYPESETTING:
Brandon Imber

PROOFREADING:
Simon Engmann
Mary Borsellino

MEDIA PRODUCTION:
Dan "Macaran"

PRODUCTION MGR:
Adam Haffen

PUBLISHING MGR:
Adam Haffen

CEO:
Michael Valdez

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Prologue: The Girls Get Excited for Winter

Nature relentlessly dominated the area surrounding the Scarlett household. Mornings were cold, and the evenings even colder. The fields were coated by a thin layer of frost, and the bare forest nearby quivered helplessly in the howling winter winds. Not even the house's barriers could offer complete protection; the closed doors and windows weren't enough to entirely prevent the cold from sneaking into the bedroom. Despite the chilly air infiltrating their space, however, life was moving forward under the gentle lamplight.

"Look, Marie! It's beautiful outside!"

"Wooow! Issall white!"

"And look, the snow's still coming down!"

"I wanna touss it!"

Myuke and Marie snuggled up together at the windowsill. Awestruck, their white breath clouded the glass as they watched the pure-white snow, twinkling in the moonlight, flutter down onto the ground.

"Are you cold?" asked Anima, a white-haired, crimson-eyed young man. The girls were dressed in warm clothes, but with the chilly wind raging outside, it had to have been cold so close to the window. They could easily catch a cold.

"You're such a worrywart—it's not even that cold. Besides, I wanna see the first snowfall of the year!"

Myuke's excitement showed on her face, with her cheeks slowly taking on the same red as her hair. Her excitement even infected Marie, prompting her to confidently turn around.

"Y'know, y'know, snow's cold!" she announced, her ground-breaking revelation leaving Anima agape.

"Is it now? Goodness, you're so smart, Marie. Now I want to go touch it so I can see just how cold it is."

Ecstatic from being praised by her daddy, she continued to present her mind-boggling facts with a beaming smile.

“But, but, it dis’pears when you touss it!”

“Oh, then I’ll have to be careful so it doesn’t melt. Regardless, you girls seem to be really excited. Do you like the snow that much?”

“You don’t get it, Daddy! It *never* snows here, especially not this much! And from the looks of it, this is gonna stick!”

“‘Sdick’?” Marie asked with twinkling eyes.

According to Myuke, snowfall was a rather rare occurrence at their house, so it wouldn’t have been strange if Marie had never seen snow on the ground. That meant only one thing: even at the risk of catching a cold, they couldn’t afford *not* to spend a day playing in the snow. It was sure to be a completely unforgettable experience for them.

“It’s amazing when it doesn’t melt! Everything you look at is covered in white!”

“I love white!”

Their excitement was starting to rub off on Anima.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself, Anima.”

A gentle voice called his name as he gazed out the window, picturing the fun times they were going to have tomorrow. He turned around to see a beautiful blue-haired woman with warm azure eyes: his wife, Luina. She was sitting on the bed, wearing a fluffy coat that Anima had bought for her not long ago. It was meant to be worn outside, but as the weather got colder, she began to take a liking to wearing it inside as well.

“Are you cold?” he asked, sitting down next to her.

“No, not at all,” she answered, turning to him with a smile. “This coat is very warm.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but we can’t be too careful. Why don’t you put on one more layer under that coat?”

“Please, I’ll suffocate if I put anything else on,” she joked, but Anima’s suggestion was entirely serious.

Luina was pregnant. She was only in her second month, so she wasn’t showing yet, but there was undoubtedly a life growing within her. The mere possibility of something happening to her made him want to vomit.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m sure. Actually, *I* should be asking *you* that question. You look pale.”

“I’m fine, I’m just worried about you. Are you a hundred percent sure you’re not cold?”

“You worry too much. I appreciate your concern, but I’m completely fine. Ah, but…”

“What do you need?! Just say the word and I’ll make it happen!”

“My hands are a bit cold,” she said with a warm smile.

He immediately took her hand and entwined his fingers with hers.

“Is this better?”

“Yes. Much better.”

A sweet, gentle fragrance filled Anima’s nostrils as Luina leaned against his shoulder, washing away all of his worries. It was the sort of quiet moment when his love burned the brightest. He swore to himself to eliminate any and all threats to Luina’s health to make sure she had a comfortable life and safe childbirth.

“Warm me up too, m’kay?”

That demand had come from a high-pitched voice behind them. They turned to look at it, and found a mysterious lump on the bed creep closer to them.

“Come on out of there; you’ll breathe in all the dust trapped in the blanket.”

“But it’s cold out, m’kay?”

Luina let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Well, that certainly is a shame.”

“What is? Tell me, m’kay?”

“I can’t see your adorable face like this.”

“Aww, jeez. Only ’cause you asked so nicely though, m’kay?”

Bram, Anima’s middle daughter, stuck her head out of the blanket. Her thick, silver hair, perfectly contrasting with her dark skin, flowed down onto the bed. Having been born in a warm country, she struggled to cope with Garaat’s biting-cold winter. Following its arrival, most of her days were spent sitting right in front of the fireplace, and she made sure to snuggle up under the blanket every night.



“I’m really happy I got to see your beautiful face.”

“I’m really happy too,” Anima added.

“You’re making me blush, m’kay?” she told them as her cheeks got increasingly more flushed.

“Ah, Bram! Now that you’re out of your little fortress, look outside! It’s snowing!”

“Iss pitty! White!”

“Whoa! Look how much is piled up over there! It’s gonna look amazing tomorrow!”

“Cool. I’ll be spending the day next to the fireplace, m’kay?”

“Are you out of your mind?! That’d be a total waste! We barely ever get this much snow!”

“That’s the best news I’ve heard all day. Now tell it to take this cold weather and get lost, m’kay?”

Myuke sighed at Bram’s insistence on staying cooped up in the blanket.

“You really hate cold, huh? Guess you won’t be playing with us in the snow.”

“Playing in the snow… Brrr, just thinking about it’s making me shiver, m’kay?”

“It won’t be cold, trust me. You’ll warm up in no time from all the running!”

“You’re really pumped up about this, m’kay? Is playing in the snow that much fun?”

“Oh man, you have *no* idea! The snowball fights are awesome, but the best part is definitely building snowmen! We’ll see who can build the cutest one!”

“We see! I make cute snowman! Brum, you make snowman too!”

“Yeah, play with us! You seriously don’t know what you’re missing! Skipping out on this is like skipping out on going to the river on a hot summer day!”

“That *would* be a waste, m’kay?”

Marie’s invitation and Myuke’s pestering were finally starting to take hold of Bram.

“I’m happy you girls are looking forward to tomorrow, but shouldn’t we get to bed soon?” Anima asked. Bram ran the biggest risk of catching a cold, but he was worried for the others’ health as well. They would probably be fine as long as they took a warm milk break every so often, though, so he didn’t think too much of it.

“Good idea. The snow might melt by the time you wake up if you don’t go to bed early.”

Myuke and Marie panicked. They whipped around and scurried to bed, cuddling up with Bram. With Anima and Luina lying next to them, the bed was cramped, and the blanket was a bit small for the family of five—it didn’t cover Anima’s back.

“Aren’t you cold, Anima? You could snuggle closer.”

“I don’t want to accidentally hurt you.”

He wanted to fall asleep cuddling with his wife, but he feared that putting extra pressure on her stomach would hurt their baby.

“It’ll be okay. My stomach getting cold would be a much bigger issue.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I want to feel your warmth.”

Bewitched by Luina’s enchanting whispers, Anima wrapped his arms around his wife from behind. Enveloped by the warmth of one another, the Scarlett family slowly but surely drifted to sleep.

Chapter One: The Demon Lord's Worst Nightmare

The next morning, Anima was awoken by lively chatter. He turned toward the voices and opened his eyes to see Myuke and Marie excitedly jumping up and down at the windowsill.

"Myukey, look! Iss white!"

"Sure is! Wow, look! It's even snowy over there!"

"Ah! There too!"

"Whoooa! The whole world's white!"

"Ehehehe!"

The two were not-so-quietly enjoying the snow-covered spectacle. Curious, Anima silently got out of the bed, snuck up behind them, and looked out the window. The snowfield was slightly illuminated by a dim light. It may have been dim because of the clouds, but since Luina was still sleeping, Anima figured it must've been really early in the morning.

"You girls are up early," Anima whispered, being careful not to wake Luina.

"Ah, did we wake you up?"

"Don't worry about it. You do have to be quiet, though. Mommy's still sleeping."

Myuke nodded, and Marie covered her mouth with her hands in response to Anima's gentle warning.

"I can quiet," she whispered.

"Thank you, my big girl."

He stroked her still-disheveled hair, much to her enjoyment. Then, as if she'd just remembered something, she turned right back toward the window and pointed outside.

"Daddy, look! Lossa snow!"

“Hmm, let me see… Wow, you’re right!”

The vegetable field was draped in a white blanket, with the cabbages looking like they were wearing little hats. The nearby forest had also gotten a complete makeover; the once-bare branches were covered in snow, and the ground foliage was nowhere to be seen. In a single night, the scenery they knew had been changed completely, resembling something from a different world. It made perfect sense that the girls—especially Marie, who had never seen snow before—would be excited.

“I’m happy to see that it survived overnight.”

“I wanna play!” Marie chirped, fidgeting from the excitement. She was so ready to rush outside at a moment’s notice that the call to do so was likely the only thing that would get her to pry her eyes away from the window.

Snow was nothing new to Anima, but to the four-year-old girl, it must have been a brand-new world to explore. He must’ve experienced his first snowfall with the same excitement over a hundred years ago. It was an early hour, but there was no way to put Marie back to bed with the winter wonderland waiting for her outside, so Anima decided to instead dress her up.

“You need to have breakfast before heading out. Would anyone like to help me make it?”

“Meee! I bring water!”

“You’ve gotten very good at bringing glasses of water to the table. Do you want to help us too, Myuke?”

“’Course I do, but I’ll need to borrow Luina’s stone.”

Luina was in charge of cooking for the family, with Anima and Myuke always there to help her out and even take up the cooking itself every once a while. Unfortunately, however, they each only knew how to make a single dish, so with the main task almost always in Luina’s hands, she kept the ring that housed the fire lizard stone on her finger at all times. It pained him to wake his slumbering wife, but they needed the stone if they wanted to actually make anything.

“Luina, can I borrow the magic stone?”

“The magic stone?”

Her long eyelashes shook as she slowly opened her eyes at Anima’s whisper. She had been the first to rise for as long as he could remember, but she’d taken a liking to spending more time in bed since getting pregnant.

“We want to cook something.”

“It’s that late already? Give me a little bit, I’ll be downstairs soon.”

“Go back to sleep, Mommy. We’ll take care of breakfast.”

“I can do breakfast! I’m big girl now!”

“Just give it to ’em so you can stay in bed and snuggle me, m’kay?” Bram sleepily proposed before letting out a big yawn.

“What’re you saying?” Myuke responded with a sigh. “You’re coming down to help too.”

“But it’s cold, m’kay?”

“Get used to it now and it’ll be much easier to go outside.”

“Brum, Brum! Get up!”

“Haah… I can’t say no to you, Marie, m’kay?” Bram reluctantly climbed out from under the blankets, got out of bed, and immediately hugged Anima. “Daddy’s warm. I wanna walk like this, m’kay?”

“Jeez, just how much do you hate the cold? Don’t you think it’ll be hard for Daddy to walk like that?”

“I don’t mind. I can walk perfectly fine with a little readjustment.” Anima picked up Bram, who comfortably rested her head on his shoulder. He then turned his attention back to Luina. “We’ll call you when breakfast’s ready.”

“Make sure to keep your stomach warm!”

They said goodbye to Luina and made their way down the stairs. Once they got to the dining room, Bram climbed down from Anima’s arms and stopped in front of the cold fireplace.

“We can still use this wood. Myuke, do your thing, m’kay?”

Myuke nodded, then stopped for a moment. She had only ever used the stone a handful of times, so she must have been worried that something could go wrong.

“Maybe we should get some water ready. Just in case.”

“There’s no need; you did it perfectly last time. You’re great at handling magic stones, so just go for it, m’kay?”

Bram’s words of encouragement seemed to have worked. Myuke cleared her throat, then got ready to use the magic stone.

Every time a monster was killed, it left behind a crystal. Channelling mana into that crystal would call forth that monster’s powers, albeit at the cost of a minor physical alteration in the form of temporarily inheriting one of the monster’s characteristics. In the case of the fire lizard stone, that characteristic was its tail. Anima had noticed that neither of the girls enjoyed that part of using the stone, as both Myuke and Luina became incredibly self-conscious after lighting fires. Regardless, Myuke did as she was asked, then proudly turned toward Bram.

“No need to thank me.”

“Awesome! You’re the best, m’kay?!”

Bram hurriedly warmed her hands in front of the flame, letting out a comfortable moan as she did. While the room was still cold, the warmth of the fireplace from up close was enough to give her a moment’s bliss.

“How are you planning to help us work in the kitchen from all the way in here?”

“I’ll give you moral support, m’kay?”

“You gotta be kidding me… Whatever, it’s fine. Daddy and I are gonna knock this breakfast out of the park! Marie, can you cheer us on?”

“Good luck, Myukey! Good luck, Daddy!”

“I’m going to make something super yummy for you.”

Energized by Marie’s cheers, Anima and Myuke made their way into the kitchen. The cold winter winds blowing in through the lattice vents made the room just as cold as the outside.

“It’s pretty cold, not gonna lie. I can barely touch the utensils.”

“Would you like a hug?”

“A hug? Hmm…” Myuke glanced around. Apparently, getting pampered in front of her sisters was embarrassing for her, as she latched onto Anima the moment she confirmed that the door was closed. “Nice and warm…”

“I’m glad to hear that. Take all the time you want to warm up.”

“Thanks, but I’m good. I don’t wanna fall asleep in your arms.” She stepped back, then looked up at Anima. “So, what are we making? I can do vegetable soup, but that’s about it.”

“We’re in the same boat, then. In which case we’ll need the large pot to make it.”

Anima reached for the pot, which, to his surprise, had leftover stew inside of it. Luina had probably made extra the night before as a way of lessening her chores for the morning.

“Here, let’s warm this up.”

Myuke used the fire lizard stone once more, lighting the stove. She then picked up the ladle and started stirring the stew to keep it from burning. In the meantime, Anima set the table, filled the jug with water, and… that was it. His work was done.

“Do you want to switch?” he asked, ready to take on another job.

“Just sit back and watch, Daddy. When I made the vegetable soup with Bram and Marie, I realized that I love cooking. It’d be awesome if I could help Mommy in the kitchen every day.”

“Good girl.”

“This isn’t about being good. I’m the oldest, so helping Mommy out is my job. Plus, I’ll learn more and more recipes from watching her up close.”

“Maybe it’s time to get you your own personal magic stone.”

“Really?!” she asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement. She knew a lot about magic stones, but the only one she held was a splurting slime stone.

Anima had never seen her use it before, so he thought it safe to assume that it didn't have any real-world applications.

"Really really. You help us around the house all the time, so you more than deserve it. I'll get you one the next time we're around there."

"Woo-hoo! I love you, Daddy!" Myuke hugged him tightly, putting a big smile on his face. He had no idea how much a fire-type stone would cost, but her hug was priceless. "I've wanted a fire rabbit stone for the longest time! I wouldn't mind a fire lizard stone either, though the tail's a bit… y'know. Fire rabbit stones are super common; you can get them at any magic stone shop, so now we just have to figure what to put it in. I was thinking a ring or a bracelet, 'cause I'd need to take off a necklace to take a bath."

If it's a common stone, it probably doesn't cost too much, Anima thought to himself.

"Why didn't you say anything if you wanted one so much?"

"I was gonna ask for one for my birthday! Aaahhhhh, I'm so happy! I'll be able to do so much stuff once I get my own stone!"

Myuke hummed a merry tune as she stirred the stew, and soon enough, its sweet smell began to permeate the room. Anima put the flame out and ladled the stew into five bowls, then the two of them carried breakfast into the dining room that had been warmed by the fireplace.

Bram was sitting in a chair, her head drooped over the table. Marie was fast asleep, though strangely, her mouth was moving. She was articulating 'Good luck! Good luck!' Apparently, she was cheering Anima and Myuke on even in her dreams.

"C'mon, let's go!" Myuke clapped after they put the plates down on the table. "Pull yourselves together!"

They both sprang up instantly.

"It smells yummy, m'kay?"

"Nummy!"

"When did you get so good at cooking? This stew looks just like Mommy's,

m’kay?”

“’Course it does. This is yesterday’s leftovers.”

“That’s still incredible, m’kay?! I totally woulda messed it up, but you warmed it up no problem!”

“Myukey’s imcebible!”

“I didn’t do anything special,” Myuke replied, blushing after hearing her sisters compliment her breakfast-making. “This is only natural for someone my age.”

“You’re helping out a lot, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. I’ll go get Mommy. In the meantime, can you bring the cups and jug in here?”

“Of course!”

Myuke hurried back to the kitchen, and Anima went upstairs. A couple moments later, the family was finally gathered at the table for breakfast.

“Thanks for the meal!”

Following Marie’s example, they all said their thanks and started eating. The thick, sticky sweet potato and carrot stew danced across Anima’s tongue. The soft, bite-sized vegetables practically melted in his mouth as the wonderful taste overtook his senses.

“Is it too hot, Mommy?”

“No, it’s perfect. You’re really good at gauging how much things need to be heated.”

“Thank goodness; I was afraid you might burn yourself. Anyway, get this: Daddy said he’s gonna buy a fire rabbit stone for me!”

“Did he now? I’m so happy for you. Make sure you give him a big thank you.”

“I’ll wash your back today!”

“Me too! I like rubbity-rub!”

“You can rubbity-rub me, m’kay? Whaddaya think?”

“’Kaaay!”

“I swear, you’re getting lazier by the day.”

“I bloom in the heat. You’re doing a lot for me now, but I’ll pay you back a hundredfold in the summer, m’kay?”

“I can’t wait.”

Another idyllic day was waiting for the Scarlett household. Listening to his family’s cheerful conversation, Anima quietly enjoyed the mellow taste of his stew.

◆◆◆

After breakfast, Anima immediately began cleaning off the table. Luina was quick to jump in and help, but he shot that idea down right away. He couldn’t let his pregnant wife work in the cold kitchen.

“It’s okay, let me handle the dishes. I’m good at washing things. Which reminds me, leave the laundry to me, too.”

“I’d feel bad if I had you do all the work.”

“Don’t worry about it; I could do this all day. The most important thing right now is that you relax.”

Myuke strongly nodded.

“I’ll have those dishes sparkling clean in a flash!”

“I do sparkly too!”

“I’m glad my sisters are so reliable, m’kay? Gives me time to chat with Mommy.”

“You should help out around the house too.”

“But it’s cold, m’kay…?”

“C’mon, chop chop. All of us gotta help with the chores or we’ll never get to play in the snow.”

“All right, all right.” Myuke’s excitement must have rubbed off on her, as she reluctantly got up and joined Myuke. “Just tell me what to do, m’kay?”

“Help Marie carry the laundry to the well, okay?”

“Lessgo, Brum!”

Marie was dying to go outside. She’d been brimming with excitement since the night before when Myuke had introduced the idea of playing in the snow to her tiny world.

“Marie, make sure that Bram stays with you and helps.”

“You stay, Brum!”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m staying, m’kay?”

Marie took Bram’s hand and dragged her toward the dressing room, which was where they kept the laundry. In the meantime, Anima and Myuke made their way into the kitchen and opened the back door.

“Wooow! It’s beautiful!”

Myuke was completely spellbound by the smooth layer of twinkling snow. Unable to contain herself, she started running through the garden, the snow crunching below her feet as it preserved each step. When Anima followed after her, he sank ankle-deep into the snow. The sun was shining brightly enough to make him squint, yet the weather was still quite cold. It seemed to him that the snow was going to hang around for a while.

“Ah, look!” Myuke shouted. “The bucket’s full of snow!”

“So it is. Try turning it upside down.”

She flipped the bucket over, gave it a couple whacks, then slowly lifted it up. Doing so left a perfect, bucket-shaped clump of snow on the ground. After taking a good look at the result of her hard work, she proudly glanced at Anima.

“Look! A baby snowman!”

“It’s very cute.”

“It’ll be even cuter once I make the eyes and arms!”

“I can’t wait to see it. But first, let’s go wash the dishes. Then your sisters can come out and play with you.”

Anima drew water while watching Myuke stick her finger into the snowman to make its eyes. He then dampened the washcloth, and the two of them

started doing the dishes.

“So mush white! Wooow!”

“Whoa! I gotta admit, this is breathtaking, m’kay?!”

Marie and Bram voiced their excitement as they stepped outside. They were wearing warm clothes and matching scarves.

“Daddy, Myukey! Snow! Lossa snow!”

Marie merrily trotted through the yard. Following behind her, Bram carried the basket of dirty laundry. Dressed warmly and completely taken aback by the wintry wonderland, neither of them so much as noticed the cold air.

“The roof’s completely covered too, m’kay? Ooh, did you make this, Myuke?”

“Iss cute!”

“Right?! It’s a snowman! If you think this is cool, just wait till I actually put in some effort into building one!”

“I build ’nowman too!”

“I’ll show you how to build them once we’re done with the chores.”

“I’m more excited about the snowball fight, m’kay?”

Even though the chores were nowhere near done, the girls were itching to play. Anima didn’t mind, though; he could finish washing the dishes and doing the laundry on his own.

“Let me take care of the chores. You girls go play.”

“But…”

“It’s okay, I love doing the dishes. How about you make it up to me by promising to wash my back tonight?”

Figuring that it would rid them of any sense of guilt, Anima gave the girls a way to pay him back. Myuke put on a beaming smile, telling him that his plan had worked like a charm, and the three of them began running happily through the snow, carefree as birds.

“Lossa foo’pints!”

“Aww, yours are so small. It’s adorable.”

“Hey, watch this, m’kay?! Nyah! Look how deep I sank!”

“Crazy that you were inside shivering just a few minutes ago.”

“I can’t feel the cold anymore, m’kay?”

“Just make sure you don’t *catch* a cold.”

“I’m fine! Running around’ll keep me warm, m’kay?”

The girls’ excited chirps made Anima want to join them, but he still had work to do. After finishing with the dishes, he moved on to doing the laundry. The heavier clothes didn’t need to be washed often, and letting them air out in the sun on occasion was enough to keep them feeling fresh for the most part. Thinner garments, however, had to be washed almost daily. Despite the cold weather outside, it was easy to work up a sweat in the warmth of the dining room, which would get underwear and other delicates dirty very quickly. The thin fabric required extra care to avoid any accidental tears, too. He wasn’t good at meticulous jobs like that, but he did his best at it because he knew it would make his family happy. Doing it for their smiles took all the tedium out of the work. More than that, though…

“I can draw with my footprints, m’kay?”

“Wow, that’s actually not bad.”

“Me too! I wanna daw too!”

…listening to the girls’ lively chatter gave him all the power he needed to finish his task.

“All right, the laundry is done.” he said, and glanced at the girls with a sense of accomplishment. The three of them were busy collecting snow, then tossing it into the air. They were creating artificial snowfall. “Make sure the snow doesn’t get into your clothes!”

After warning the girls to be careful, he picked up the laundry basket and made his way inside. He entered the dining room through the kitchen, where he found Luina peacefully snoozing at the table. He quietly passed his sleeping wife, but the wooden floor suddenly let out a loud creak.

“Nmhhh… Are you finished with the laundry?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Thank you. You must be cold; let me make you a cup of warm milk.”

“I’m okay. Let’s save the warm milk for after the girls are finished playing.”

“They’re loving the snow. I can hear their voices from in here.”

“Are you lonely?”

“I really want to play with them, but I can’t fool around in the snow while I’m pregnant. It’s not just my health I’d be putting at risk.”

Anima hugged his melancholic wife.

“The next time we have a day like this, be it next year, the year after, or a decade from now, I promise we’ll play all day in the snow together like the happy family we are.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” She looked into Anima’s eyes with a gentle smile as their daughters’ lively voices seeped in through the windows. “Thank you, I feel much better now. I’ll bring the laundry back, you should go out and look after the girls. We don’t want them to wander off into the forest.”

Hunters worked hard to keep monsters out of the town, but the forest was still dangerous. It wasn’t outlandish to think that excited children would wander off to explore their familiar surroundings painted in a new light, either. They would likely be okay, especially with Bram and her Jade Dragon stone by their side, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

“Make sure you don’t catch a cold.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine,” he reassured Luina, then headed outside.

Just as Anima was opening the door, Myuke crossed in front of it. She was rolling a giant snowball.

“Are you going to throw that?” he asked.

“No way, that’s dangerous. This is gonna be the body of our snowman. It still needs some work, though. We need to make it nice and smooth.”

“I’m sure it’ll be a great snowman.”

“You bet it will! Just you wait!”

Trying to impress Anima, she continued rolling the snowball until she could no longer control it. Anima considered offering his help, but he knew Myuke’s personality, so he decided to let her do her own thing; he would give her a hand if she came and asked for one. Until then, all he could do was send silent words of encouragement her way.

While watching Myuke wrestle with the work-in-progress snowman, another one of his daughters ran up to him.

“Daddy, we’re having a snowball fight, m’kay?!”

Bram stopped about fifteen steps before him and notified him of the incoming barrage, Marie right next to her making snowballs all the while. For a moment, he’d hoped she was making him lunch—similar to the time she’d fed him dirt pies—but that didn’t seem to be the case. She finished making one last snowball, then turned toward Anima.

“Daddy, run ’way!”

“All right, then! Whoever hits me gets a tour around the house in my arms!”

“Yaaay!”

Marie went in for the first throw. After drawing a small arc, her snowball plopped onto the ground several feet in front of him. Up after her was Bram, whose snowball would easily have reached him, if only it had gone in the right direction. They were genuinely trying to hit him, and he was genuinely trying to get hit, it simply wasn’t working out. Unfortunately, with Marie’s order to run, he couldn’t just stand by and wait for their next attempts. He turned around and started moving with large but dramatically slow steps.

“I’ll get away if you don’t hit me soon!”

“I’ll get you, m’kay?!”

“Wait! Wait!”

They ran circles in the garden while bombarding Anima with snowballs. Soon enough, one hit his back.

“Bullseye, m’kay?!”

“Wooow! Brum’s ’mazing! Me too!” She waddled up to Anima. “Nh!”

With a *poff!*, she scored a direct hit on him as well.

“Yaaay! I hit!”

“You’re like a master archer, m’kay?”

The girls high-fived, celebrating their success. They were thoroughly enjoying themselves, but hitting Anima apparently took more out of them than they’d expected. Their faces were completely flushed, and they were panting heavily. It was high time for a break.

To that end, Anima turned toward Myuke. She was glancing around the garden, standing next to her snowman. Standing at about the same height as Marie, both its head and body were round and slippery-smooth. Her masterpiece looked to be complete.

“That’s an impressive snowman if I’ve ever seen one!” Anima commended her cute creation.

“Thanks, but it’s not done yet. I still have to make the face and give it some arms. Do you see any pebbles or sticks lying around?”

“Maybe there are some under the snow.”

He could blast the snow away with a single step if he so chose, but that would completely ruin Myuke’s fun.

“I guess the forest is my best bet.”

“I’ll go and find some for you. You should stay here.”

Luina’s worries were right on the mark. Had he stayed with her instead of watching the girls, Myuke would have gone out into the woods searching for twigs and pebbles.

“Thanks. Grab two sticks that are around the size of Marie’s arms, and two small pebbles. Also, if you can find a reddish leaf, that’d be awesome. I can use it for the lips.”

Judging by her detailed list, she seemed to have already finished the snowman in her mind. Anima would have to work hard to help Myuke build her

perfect snowman.

“Wait here, I’ll be right back,” he said, then headed for the front entrance of their house.

The road leading to the forest was impossible to make out under the thick layer of snow, but that didn’t matter to him; he set his eyes on the treeline and walked straight toward it. Making his way into the woods, he noticed that the brown veins of the forest—the tree roots protruding from the ground—were covered in snow, turning them into dangerous hidden obstacles. He had to be careful not to trip and fall.

Choosing a random tree, Anima crouched and swept away some of the snow around it. Sure enough, underneath was a cluster of small pebbles and a red leaf. A few moments later, he happened upon two sticks around the length of Marie’s arms. His mission was complete. He was excited to see Myuke’s delighted smile, and made his way back in high spirits. However, his return didn’t go as expected.

“What are you doing?!” He wasn’t welcomed with the smile he’d wanted to see. Instead, an ear-splitting scream cut through the quiet winter wonderland as Myuke stomped on the ground, fuming. “I worked *so* hard on this!”

“What happened?”

Answering the confused Anima, Myuke pointed toward her snowman. He followed her finger until she spotted a terrible sight: the snowman’s perfectly round, smooth head had been the victim of a ruthless attack. It had clearly been hit with something.

“Bram did that!”

Myuke glared at the perpetrator.

“It wasn’t on purpose! I didn’t *mean* to throw the snowball at it, m’kay?!”

Anima was sure that Bram had apologized when the incident had occurred, but she’d presumably gotten irritated when her attempt to calm Myuke down had failed. As a result, both of them were glaring at each other.

“That doesn’t matter! You destroyed my snowman and that’s that! I was just

about to finish it, too!”

Myuke was ready to explode, and her rage was completely understandable. She’d worked extremely hard on her snowman, even opting out of the snowball fight to get it done.

At the same time, though, it was surely an accident. Bram wasn’t the kind of girl who would purposely destroy something Myuke cherished. She probably thought that after finishing her creation, Myuke would be raring to join in on their game.

“Look, Myuke, she clearly didn’t mean to hit your snowman. Why don’t you make up with her?”

“Huh?! You think *she’s* right?! You’re saying *I’m* wrong here?!”

“N-No, I didn’t mean that…”

“So you think Myuke’s right? M’kay.”

“I didn’t mean that, either…”

“So you’re on my side after all!”

“Yeah right, m’kay?! He’s clearly on my side! He likes me better, m’kay?!”

“What?! In what universe?! I help him around the house all the time! I love Daddy, and he loves me too!”

Anima was happy they both loved him so much, but he would rather they didn’t fight over him. The best outcome was for them to make up and hug it out, and the first step was to quell the fire.

“Why don’t we make a new one?” he suggested. “Together. All four of us.”

“No! I’m done! She’ll just destroy it again!”

“I told you! It was an accident, m’kay?!”

“No fight!”

They both immediately felt the weight of their words when Marie spoke up. It was impressive that the smallest of the three could quiet the others down with a single sentence. Even so, though things had quieted down, nothing fundamental had been solved.

“Listen, Marie, we aren’t fighting, okay? As the oldest, it’s my responsibility to tell someone when they do something wrong. That’s all I did to Bram.”

“That wasn’t a warning! You’re just mad, m’kay?!”

“I’m mad because you don’t understand what you did!”

“I already apologized, m’kay?!”

“Oh yeah?! And how did you do that, huh?! Going ‘Teehee, my bad, m’kay?!’ doesn’t *sound* sorry!”

“I didn’t know that I hit your snowman yet, m’kay?! I gave you a real apology right after, didn’t I?!”

“Why do you think everything in this world can be fixed with a simple apology?!”

“’TOOOOOP!”



Though it felt pathetic to leave mediation to the little Marie, her shout was definitely effective. She had once again silenced her bickering sisters. Anima quickly got between the two of them and tried to calm their emotions.

“Look, Myuke, I got everything you asked for. Once you two make up, we can build a new snowman, okay?”

“Thanks, but I’m good. Bram’s just gonna destroy it again.”

“Why’re you so stuck on that?! I finally came out in the freezing cold, but you’re ruining the whole day for me, m’kay?!”

“Good, then just go inside! Coop up in bed like you always do!”

“That’s *exactly* what I’m gonna do! I don’t wanna play with you anymore, m’kay?!”

Anima watched as Bram stormed back into the house. His anxiety was building at an alarming rate, as he had never seen the two of them argue before. He would have liked to help mediate the problem, but siding with one of the girls would inadvertently hurt the other. Beyond that fundamentally flawed method, he had no idea how to go about solving the situation.

They’ll make up soon. I hope…

According to Luina, such quarrels were a daily occurrence back when the house was full of children from different walks of life. Whenever she talked about those days, there was a sense of longing in her voice, which suggested that the kids had always made up sooner or later.

Myuke and Bram had a very good relationship. They’d never gotten into such an intense argument before, but small back-and-forths were a part of their everyday life, and those always reached quick resolutions. That wasn’t likely to change even with a bigger dispute.

“I make ’nowman!”

Marie interrupted his train of thought with a cheerful coo.

“Let’s build one together!”

“No! I build! You watch!”

She made a snowball with her tiny hands, then put it down on the ground and started rolling it. Slowly but surely, it plumped itself up.

“Wow, that’s a very nice body. Don’t you think, Myuke?”

“Yeah, sure. Mine was great too, though…”

While Anima pondered whether he should try to keep the conversation going, Marie stopped in her tracks and crouched down. She gathered another handful of snow, kneaded it into a ball, and started rolling it. After a minute or so, it was ready.

“Daddy, top!”

“Of course!”

He gently picked up the plump snowball and set it on top of the snowman’s body. Marie picked up the pebbles and sticks Anima had collected and used them to decorate the snowman.

“Done!”

“That’s a really cute snowman.”

“Thanks! I maked it for Myukey!”

Marie built that snowman to cheer Myuke up, but her act of kindness only tore at Myuke’s soul. Guilt was written all over her face.

“Thanks… We should build a wall around it so it doesn’t get destroyed.”

“Brum won’t! It wassa ashident!”

“Maybe, but… I’ll make a wall anyway. I don’t want the wind to knock it over.”

Myuke crouched down and started working on her wall. She had been having a lot of fun earlier in the morning; her cheerful voice had reached all the way into the kitchen. Watching her work in complete silence without even the slightest sign of a smile tugged at Anima’s heartstrings. Snow like this didn’t come often, so he wanted to make sure that she and Bram made up and made the most of it before it melted.

“You must be getting cold by now, and I’m sure Luina misses you. Why don’t we take a break?”

“Yeah. Let’s do that.”

“I thirssy!”

Anima made his way back inside with the two girls. When they opened the door, they were welcomed by a sweet aroma. Luina was standing in the kitchen, watching a pot of milk as it sat over a flame.

“Are you cold?” Anima asked her.

“If anything, the steam coming up into my face is making me hot. The milk is just about ready, would you help me carry it to the dining room?”

“Of course. We’ll bring everything in, you girls should wait at the table. We’ll be there in just a minute.”

“’Kaaay! Lessgo, Myukey!”

Reacting to Marie’s tugs, Myuke dragged her feet all the way into the dining room. As they made their way over, Anima turned toward Luina.

“Is Bram in there?”

“Yes, she’s at the table moping. I assume they had a fight.”

She seemed to have pieced together what had happened based on Bram’s grumbling. Not wanting to trouble his wife, Anima put on a confident look.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll make sure they make up.”

“Okay. I trust you,” she answered with a smile.

Her trust in him, and her extensive experience with quarrels between kids, calmed his nerves a bit. Everything was going to be okay, all he had to do was to get the others to follow Luina’s lead and show their beautiful smiles.

With a cup of hot milk in hand, he swore that he’d make things right between the two of them.

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Shortly after finishing her cup of warm milk, Marie began dozing off. Her head slowly bobbed back and forth until she could no longer fight gravity and laid it on her hands. It wasn’t even midday, but Anima had still expected that she would take an early nap—after all, she was the first one to rise, and had been

running around outside all morning.

Myuke and Bram were still mad at each other, but they wouldn't start arguing in front of the sleeping Marie. Instead, they were giving each other the silent treatment. Anima wanted to make things right between the two as soon as possible, but he had to do something about Marie first.

"Should I take her to bed?"

"Please do. Be careful not to wake her up."

"I will. Should I carry you up in my arms too?"

"Maybe next time. But I wonder, do you think I should rest with her?"

"Yes. We can't leave her all by herself."

"Mm, that's true. But please wake me up around noon. I'll make lunch."

They'd finished the leftover stew for breakfast, and Anima wasn't exactly cut out to be a royal chef; the most he could do was help Luina with vegetable chopping and other basic tasks. Myuke could make vegetable soup, but eating the same thing day in and day out wasn't very healthy. Moreover, she clearly wasn't in the right mindset to focus on cooking.

"Sure, I'll wake you up. That should be enough sleep for Marie, too." With that settled, Anima picked Marie up, gently walked up to the bedroom on the second floor, and laid her down. Luina lay down next to her and tucked both herself and Marie in. "Give me a shout if you need anything."

"I will. Good luck with the girls."

He nodded, then went back to the dining room. Luckily, they hadn't started arguing again in the brief time he was out, but they definitely hadn't made up either. The situation was tense. Even the smallest thing could spark an argument at any second.

I have to do something…

His fatherly instincts kicked in. He sat down and started thinking about his best course of action. Moments later, he cleared his throat and opened his mouth. He'd had an idea.

“Why don’t we all take a bath?”

The girls looked at him, which meant the first step of his plan—getting their attention—was a success.

“Right now?”

“It’s still early, m’kay?”

They must have hated the fact that they’d reacted at the same time, as they fiercely glared at each other for a second before whipping their heads around, pouting. Anima, however, continued without hesitation.

“You’ve been playing outside in the snow all morning. Let’s take a bath; it’ll warm you up.”

Warming them up was only an added benefit of his plan. His real goal was to get them to talk. He figured that since they always had a great time in the bath, they would naturally forget about their quarrel and enjoy themselves. If that worked out, making up was sure to follow.

“I’m not really doing anything else. Might as well take a bath.”

“A morning bath’s definitely nice every once in a while, m’kay?”

They both answered at the same time, giving Anima a serious sense of déjà vu.

“*I’m* the one taking a bath, m’kay?!”

“I said it first!”

“You can go outside and play, m’kay? That’s what you wanted to do, isn’t it?!”

“Yeah, until *someone* ruined my mood!”

“You really know how to push my buttons! I’m gonna get mad if you don’t cut it out real fast, m’kay?!”

“Oh, don’t even *try* to pretend you’re calm. Anyone within a hundred miles can tell you’re fuming! But whatever, go take your bath. Hope you like cold water, ’cause I sure won’t be heating it up for you!”

“You think I can’t light a flame without you?! I’m *way* better at magic than you are, m’kay?!”

“Just so you know, the fire lizard stone is super difficult to control! You’d burn the whole house down if you tried to use it!”

“All right, girls, let’s calm down. You’re going to wake Marie if you keep shouting.”

They both went quiet. Bram stood up, left the room, then returned a bit later with the fire lizard stone in her hands.

“I’ll warm the bath on my own, m’kay?”

“Daddy, make sure you watch her. We still need a place to live.”

“Hmph!”

Bram took Anima’s hand and left the house through the kitchen. She was shaking, which meant that the cold was definitely getting to her, yet she didn’t seek Anima’s warmth. She wasn’t in the mood to ask for comfort.

Once they’d gotten behind the bathroom, they crouched down in front of the ventilation opening. With Myuke’s comments running through her head, Bram nervously looked down at the magic stone.

“Do you want me to go and ask Myuke to light it instead?”

“N-No. I don’t want her help, m’kay?”

She took a moment to fight off her nerves before making her decision. Anima watched as her skirt lifted up slightly and a tail came wiggling out from under it. She had successfully used the fire lizard stone and lit a perfect, dainty little flame. She stood up and let out a cute sneeze, though Anima wasn’t sure if it was because of the cold or a sense of relief.

“I’ll watch the flame, so go and take your bath. And don’t forget, you can always call Myuke if you get lonely.”

“I-I’m not lonely, m’kay?!” She circled around the house and went back inside through the main entrance to avoid running into Myuke. “It’s only lukewarm, m’kay?”

“Wait a bit before you get in.”

“I already took my clothes off, and it’s warmer in the water than it is out of it,

m’kay?”

Anima heard her sink into the bath then let out a long, deep sigh.

“Hey, Daddy? I don’t want you to hate me, m’kay?” Bram said timidly.

“I don’t hate you. There’s no way I ever could. What makes you think I would?”

“Because I’m a bad girl, m’kay? I slacked all day, didn’t help at all, and even got into a fight with Myuke… Though she’s the one who started it, m’kay?”

“Don’t be silly; you’re not a bad girl. You helped out plenty when it was warmer. Cold weather like this is completely new to you, and I assume you struggle moving your body the same way you usually do. Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re right, m’kay? I can throw a snowball just fine, but I accidentally launched it at full force ’cause it was so cold.”

That’s exactly how Anima imagined the incident had played out. She’d wanted to hit Myuke, but she couldn’t accurately control her throw because of her inexperience with cold weather. Running around all morning had warmed her up enough that her sluggishness was mostly gone, so she’d accidentally thrown the snowball as hard as she could. It had still been too cold for her to finely control its direction, though, and it had hit the snowman instead of Myuke.

“Either way, no, I don’t hate you. I’m sure Myuke doesn’t either.”

“I… I don’t even care if she hates me, m’kay? She needs to learn some anger management. If only she took after Mommy…”

“Yes, Luina is kind, but I think you’re mistaken. Myuke is kind, too. Remember this morning? She filled your bowls to the brim and only kept a very little bit of stew for herself. She wanted to make sure that you two ate well, even at the cost of her own breakfast.”

“N-No one asked her to do that. And it doesn’t change the fact that she’s hot-headed, m’kay? I didn’t mean to ruin her snowman…”

“I know. You just wanted to have a snowball fight with her.”

“I did, but not anymore, m’kay? She’s always…”

Bram continued grumbling for ten minutes straight, and the only reason she stopped was because the water got too hot.

“It’s getting too hot in here, so I’m gonna get out and go nap with Mommy. You should come and take a bath so you don’t catch a cold, m’kay?”

Anima put out the flame after he heard her leave the bath. He went inside, only to find Myuke restlessly fidgeting in front of him.

“Where’s Bram?” she asked.

“She went up to bed.”

“Oh. Well, I’m glad we didn’t run into each other. I guess that since she went up so quietly, she didn’t burn herself… did she?”

“No, she didn’t. Are you worried about her?”

“N-No! I was just afraid she’d start screaming, ‘It huuurts’, and then it’d take hours to calm her down.” She hopped up from the chair and grabbed Anima’s hand. “C’mon, take a bath with me. I have a lot I wanna talk to you about.”

“I’d be happy to.”

Though he’d hoped Myuke would ask him how to make up with Bram, all he got was a long rant about her sister.

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In the end, they couldn’t resolve their quarrel before it was time to sleep. With Myuke staring out the window and Bram hiding under the blanket, they’d recreated the exact scene from yesterday, save for the happy cheers. Those had been replaced by a deafening silence.

Anima felt defeated. The only thing keeping his spirits up was Marie’s adorable humming as Luina combed her hair. If she were to join the fray, it would completely break him.

“There we go.”

“Yaaay! I’m pitty?”

“Yes, you’re very pretty.”

Marie stroked her hair with a big smile on her face. On any other night, she

would have gone to bed with ruffled hair because she had been playing with her sisters, but it was going to stay perfectly made if her sisters didn't want to play.

"Should we go to sleep?" Luina proposed, understanding the unfortunate situation between Myuke and Bram.

Anima was happy with the idea; they weren't going to make any progress until the next day. He could only hope that their rage would be soothed by morning and they would be ready to make up.

"Seep 'gether, Myukey!"

"Yeah, of course! Go on into bed, I'll be right there."

Myuke likely didn't want to sleep next to Bram, so she waited until Marie had gotten in, then snuggled up next to her. Marie, on the other hand, loved the idea of sleeping between her two beloved sisters. She was all smiles as Myuke got into the bed, followed by Luina and Anima.

Anima's back usually stayed outside the reach of the blanket, but because of Bram and Myuke's fight, he had to be extra careful not to fall off the bed entirely. The two of them seemed to be keeping as much distance from each other as they possibly could, which was why he had so little room. He didn't want to make things worse, though, so he decided to bear with it for the night.

"Is your back cold, Anima?"

"I'm fine. You warm me up."

"I'm happy to hear that."

"I can snuggle up closer if you want me to," Myuke said. Anima had a bad feeling about what was to come, but she continued talking before he could step in. "It must be pretty uncomfortable over there since a certain someone is hogging all the space."

"I hope you're not talking about me, m'kay?"

"Well, would you look at that. Do you finally have some self-awareness?"

They started fighting again. Not as intensely as they'd fought that morning, since the little Marie was wedged in between them, but a fight was a fight.

Seeing them at each other's throats wiped any sense of sleepiness from Anima.

"I'm going to be okay, girls."

"Don't just compromise like that. Bram needs to snuggle up tighter, end of story."

"I can feel Marie right on my back, so I can't get any tighter than this, m'kay? Isn't it you who needs to be more considerate?"

"We can't get any tighter either!"

"Oh, then I know what's wrong. We can't all fit on the bed because you got too fat, m'kay?"

"I'm not fat! Unlike you, I help out around the house every single day, so I couldn't have put on weight! Anyway, don't change the subject. Stop hogging so much of the bed. Understood?"

"I'm not hogging anything! You're the reason Daddy's back's cold every night, so why don't you just go sleep somewhere else, m'kay?!"

"That's a great idea! Daddy, can you do something for me?"

"…Sure?"

Anima didn't have a good feeling about what Myuke was going to ask for, but he couldn't just ignore her.

"I don't mind giving up on the fire rabbit stone for now, so can you buy me a bed instead?"

"You don't need to give up on the fire rabbit stone, but why do you want a bed?"

"I don't want to sleep with Bram anymore!"

"Myukey seep 'lone? But, but, I love seeping with Myukey!" Marie lamented. She'd been sleeping together with Myuke for as long as she could remember, so for them to suddenly be separated would be really hard on her.

"That's fine. You and I can sleep together."

"But, but, I love seeping with Brum, too!"

“It’s fine; you’ll get used to it. And it’s not like there’ll be a wall between us. It’s gonna be the same room, just different beds. What do you think?”

“It’s late. Let’s have this conversation tomorrow,” Anima suggested. He figured that neither Myuke or Bram wanted to continue fighting with Marie literally caught in the middle, and they indeed obliged. “Good night, everyone.”

The lack of results despite his best efforts kept Anima awake for a little bit, but he slowly drifted to sleep, hoping that everything would be back to normal when he woke up.

Chapter Two: A Family of Snow

Anima woke up to a familiar scene as the first rays of the morning sun illuminated the bedroom.

“’Nooow!”

“Phew, thank goodness it’s not raining. Rain would’ve made the top of the snow into super-slippery ice.”

“I like sippery!”

“It’s fun, but it’s really easy to fall. This one time, when I was little, I fell really hard. It hurt a lot.”

“Pain, pain, fye ’way!”

“Thank you! I feel much better now!”

Myuke and Marie were marveling at the beautiful white scenery outside. As it was still her first experience with snow, Marie was especially excited.

“I wanna ’nowball fight!”

“Sure, I’m down!”

“I wanna make ’nowman, too!”

“We’ll make the best snowman this world has ever seen!”

Even though they’d played in the snow all morning the day before, their excitement hadn’t faded one bit. It was as if the day had never even happened.

Did I dream all of that?

Bram’s botched snowball throw had destroyed Myuke’s snowman, prompting a ferocious argument. If that had been nothing more than a dream, his brain had played an incredibly cruel joke on him. He still remembered just how frustrated it made him to watch his beloved daughters fight. That no longer mattered to him, though. A dream was a dream. There were no hurt feelings, and the girls hadn’t actually fought—that was the important thing.

He quietly got up trying not to wake his sleeping wife, and moved toward the window.

“Is it snowy outside?” he asked, hoping to confirm that the fight had truly been a dream.

“Uh-huh! I wanna pay in the ’now ’gain!”

“Again”. She’d said “again”, which meant that she’d played in the snow the day before.

I guess it wasn’t a dream.

Anima lamented the death of his short-lived hope. The excitement Myuke had for having a snowball fight and building a snowman only existed because Bram wasn’t in the conversation. She likely didn’t want to be a party pooper and ruin Marie’s fun.

Anima shook his head to shoo those thoughts away. The fight was a thing of the past. He’d woken up to Myuke’s beautiful smile, so he thought that maybe her rage had faded into nothingness overnight. Perhaps Bram had gone through a similar change, he hoped, and would apologize to Myuke with a big hug as soon as she woke up.

“Daddy, do you remember that thing we talked about yesterday?” Myuke asked, interrupting his fantasies about his daughters hugging out their problems.

“Umm… That you want a fire rabbit stone?”

Myuke shook her head.

“No, I asked you to buy a bed. Did you forget already?”

“I remember. How could I forget? But… Do you really want that? There’s no need to get a second bed if it’s just to make my nights better. I sleep very well, even if the blanket doesn’t reach all the way around my back.” Their bed was small, but Anima loved sleeping with his family more than anything else in the world. His back never got cold, as his soul was warmed by the presence of the people he loved the most. He wouldn’t complain even if he were to fall off one night. “If you’re only doing this for me, then there’s no need. We can just get

you that fire rabbit stone.”

Please, I’m begging you, say that you don’t want a bed.

He prayed to any and every deity he could think of while Myuke looked at the bed. Torn on the decision, she furrowed her eyebrows for a second before shaking her head and looking up at Anima. He could see in her eyes that she was fully determined to live with her choice.

“I want a new bed.”

“All right… When should we get it?”

He thought that maybe he could stall and give them time to make up. Myuke glanced out the window before she gave her answer.

“I don’t think it’ll rain today, but just to be safe, we should get it over with as soon as we can. Let’s go after we’re done with the morning chores.”

His idea was shot down instantly, leaving him on the ropes. Buying a bed was going to be the final nail in the coffin for sleeping together with everyone. Once bought, Myuke would use it even if she made up with Bram, lest she feel bad for wasting Anima’s time and money. His last chance was for Bram to come to his aid and somehow stifle Myuke’s rage.

“Bram is… still sleeping, I see.”

“Duh. She’s a slob; she’d sleep all day if she could.”

“I’m awake, m’kay?” Bram groaned from Luina’s bosom.

Glancing her way, Anima noticed that Luina was stroking her hair. Although silent about the quarrel itself, his wife was trying her best to calm Bram down.

“Oh, wow, you’re actually awake. That’s rare. Anyway, I hope it doesn’t rain today.”

“If you’re that worried about it, just go buy the bed already, m’kay?”

“Maybe I will. It’ll be the comfiest, most amazing bed you’ve ever seen. And I’m not gonna let you sleep in it even if you beg.”

“Never gonna happen, m’kay? Like I’d ever want to sleep with you. Just don’t get so caught up in getting back at me that you buy a bed that doesn’t fit

through the door. If you do that, you're gonna have to sleep in the hallway, m'kay?"

"I'm not that dumb!"

It was fortunate that they didn't get into an intense mouth-off like yesterday, but sparks were flying between them. Disheartened, Myuke took Anima's hand.

"Let's go get breakfast ready."

There was no need for her to ask Luina for the fire lizard stone; it already twinkled on her slender ring finger. She had asked for it the night before, just before they'd gone to bed.

"I help too!"

"I'm so proud of you, Marie. We can always rely on you. Can you come and be the taste tester for us?"

"Yaaay! I love tase tessing!" Marie cheered as if she had just been asked to perform her dream job. Lucky for her, the breakfast was guaranteed to be divine—they were going to reheat the previous night's dinner. Anima and Myuke had helped with a couple things, but the bulk of the work had undoubtedly been done by Luina.

They went downstairs, prepared breakfast, and called everyone down to eat. Once they were done, Anima, Myuke, and Marie went outside to air out the laundry.

"Daddy, I wanna pay in the 'now!" Marie excitedly cheered, but Anima had to betray her hopes.

"Sorry, Marie, but I have to go into town with Myuke."

"I wanna go too! I show my 'nowman to ev'yone!"

She wanted to show off her magnum opus, which, despite having been built a full day prior, hadn't given in to the rays of the sun or the evening breeze. It still stood proudly in the garden.

"Your hands will get really cold if you carry it around all day."

"And it'll melt when we go into the store. I'll play with you when we get

home, so just stay here, okay?”

“Once your sister and I finish shopping, I’ll play with you girls all day!”

“Yaaay!”

Anima picked Marie up and they returned to the house. They went in through the kitchen, dropped Marie off in the dining room, changed into their outside clothes, and left the house through the front door.

Some patches of ground were visible through the myriad footprints in the snow in front of the door. While the sun was strong enough to melt parts of the thin layers of snow beneath the prints, the road to Garaat was still covered entirely in white. Nothing had changed from the day before.

“Lossa foo’pints!” Marie cheered, peeking out from behind Anima. She’d come to see them off.

“I think these are yours, Marie.”

“Must be. They’re very small and cute.”

Following shortly behind Marie, Luina and Bram also came to the front door. Bram was visibly restless, fidgeting from being near Myuke after all that happened between them, but that she’d come to see her off must have meant that she had something to say.

“I’m good at foo’pints!” Marie ran out into the snow, but her fresh footsteps didn’t stand out from the countless others already covering the entranceway, so she stopped and looked off into the distance with twinkling eyes. “I wanna pay there!”

She looked at the road, still covered in fresh, untouched snow. Anima wasn’t keen on letting her play out front, though, as the beautiful scenery of the nearby forest seemed as though it would be very inviting to a little girl like her.

“Let’s just stick to the garden, okay? I don’t want you to wander into the forest and get lost.”

“There’s scary people in fowest?”

Marie clutched Anima’s robe in fear, and he gently stroked her hair.

“Don’t worry. If there are, I’ll beat them. That’s why you have to make sure that you never go in there without me. Can you promise me that?”

“I caaan!”

“Good girl! Now, stay with Bram until we come home, okay?”

“Uh-huh! I wanna pay, Brum!” Marie grabbed Bram’s hand, but she didn’t respond. “Brum?”

She was absentmindedly staring at Myuke, but Marie’s worried call snapped her out of her trance.

“I’m here, m’kay? Let’s go play! We’ll have a big snowball fight before Miss Grumpy Pants comes home!”

“Just make sure you don’t break any windows,” Myuke replied snarkily. In response, Bram simply turned around and headed to the garden with Marie.

“Be careful out there,” Luina warned. “The road is slippery.”

“Thank you, we will be. You should go inside. It’s cold.”

After saying goodbye to Luina, Anima and Myuke started walking the long, snowy road to Garaat. Myuke started off at a brisk pace, but the farther they got from the house, the heavier her footsteps became.

The feel of the snow had changed from the day before. Its top layer had melted and made it slippery, which may have caused her to slow down a bit, but her dejected expression hinted at a different reason. There was clearly something weighing on her mind, and Anima had a fairly good idea of what that was.

“Are you sure you want to buy a bed?”

Myuke whipped her head up.

“What a weird question. That’s the whole reason we left, isn’t it? Wait, are we getting short on coins and now a bed would cost too much?”

“No, we have money, don’t you worry about that. If you really want a bed, I’ll get you one that even the king would be jealous of.”

“Wouldn’t that be wasted on me?”

“Of course not.”

Their nights of family snuggles were numbered. Their current bed already felt small with the five of them in it, and with Marie growing bigger and a new family member on the way, they were going to need to buy another bed sooner or later if they wanted to fit everyone comfortably. Even if, by some miracle, they managed to fit all six of them in that one bed, once Myuke and Bram grew up, they would no doubt want separate beds, if not separate houses.

Anima lamented the impending loss of the tradition he loved so much, but there was nothing he could do about it. He would enjoy their nights together for as long as they lasted, and buying a bed in preparation for the inevitable was not a terrible idea. No matter what happened, for the time being, his only goal was to press Myuke about her decision.

“What kind of bed do you want?”

“‘What kind’? Umm…” Despite having an extremely detailed idea of what kind of magic stone she wanted, she went silent when it came to describing her dream bed. Anima had a fighting chance if he could just get her to admit that she only wanted the bed because she and Bram had a fight. “I’ll know once I see it.”

She clearly wanted to end that conversation there, so Anima didn’t pursue any further, which he was fine with. Carefully, silently, they continued their way along the slippery, snowy road to Garaat until they finally arrived at the town.

Even though it was still rather early in the morning, the streets were as lively as ever. Some shopkeepers were braving the cold breeze, enthusiastically inviting people into their stores, while others cooped up inside for shelter and tried to entertain the customers who walked through their doors of their own accord.

“Marie would lose her mind if she were here,” Myuke noted.

“She certainly would.” The innumerable footprints had made any snow all but disappear. What little was left had become a muddy slush and was piled up against building walls. “Do you want to do something while we’re here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like going to a café or something.”

“Oh. No, I’m not really hungry.”

“Okay…”

Myuke had practically begged to go to a café when they had been in town a couple of days earlier, but that was a different day, and her mood had changed drastically since then. It was proof that despite her cheerful demeanor when she’d woken up, she was deeply affected by her and her sister’s fight.

“Good morning, Anima!” Suddenly, the owner of a restaurant called out to him. “Sure is a chilly one today, huh? Why don’t you two come in and warm yourselves up?”

“We have something to take care of today, but we’ll come by sometime with the rest of the family.”

“Oh, is that so? Well, I’ll be waiting for you. My doors are always open!”

“Ah, Anima!” a shopkeeper called to him. “We just got some brand-new clothes in! Would you like to choose some for your wife?”

“I’ll come by with Luina one of these days and let her take a look.”

Several of the townsfolk cheerfully greeted Anima as he walked the streets. He was accepted by the people of this world—a stark contrast to his previous life. He got greeting after greeting as he and Myuke made their way to the furniture store, which was open despite how early in the day it was.

When they stepped into the shop, they were greeted by the refreshing smell of wood. Various wooden chairs, shelves, and tables were tightly packed next to each other in sets. The store was so full of display pieces that one had to be extra careful not to accidentally bump into anything.

Anima was, unfortunately, very familiar with the dangers of the store. The first time he’d bumped into something was when they’d come to buy a chair for Myuke. The second time was when they’d come to buy a chair for Bram. Both times, he had been charmed by his cute daughters as they excitedly tried out all the chairs in the store before moving on to cheerfully test if the beds were comfortable enough for them. As he looked over the store, he recalled his fond

memories of those days, and wished for them to return.

“Let’s see, where are the beds…? Ah, there they are.”

Anima pointed toward the beds. There were only four on display, but that was unsurprising for a general furniture store. He assumed the selection was small due to space concerns.

“So, which one do you like?” Anima asked as the two of them stepped closer to take a better look. “This single bed looks nice, but it would be smarter to get a double; it will last longer as you grow. Ah, wait, look! This one has a drawer at the bottom! You could store quite a bit in there! Ah, but this one has a railing. Gone are the days of worrying about rolling off the bed.”

“…”

Each of the beds had comfort features all its own, yet Myuke didn’t make so much as a peep. All of the excitement she’d had back at the house was gone. It was obvious that her mind was elsewhere.

“Did you not like any of them?”

“No. None.”

“What kind of bed would you like, then?”

“I don’t know, but… it’s not one of these.”

“I see.”

Anima had an inkling that they weren’t going to find a bed for her no matter how many shops they perused. Despite how adamant she’d been about buying a new bed the night before, deep down, she never truly wanted one. In fact, Anima suspected that she wanted to take back what she’d said—that all she wanted was to make up with her sister and sleep together in peace.

I have to do something.

He had to tread very carefully, as speaking for Bram could easily backfire on him. That didn’t mean he was completely powerless, though. He simply needed to give her a nudge in the direction of patching up their relationship.

“Do you want to come back another day?”

“Yeah. Sorry for wasting your time.”

“You don’t need to apologize; I love spending time with you. You know, since we’re here in town anyway, we may as well bring something home.”

“Yeah?” Her ears pricked in excitement. “Like what?”

“How about a cake? You like cake, right?”

“I love it.”

“A cake it is, then. Actually, let’s make it a miniature-cake set. That way we can enjoy all kinds of different flavors. Can you help me choose everyone’s favorites?”

“‘Everyone’s’… Does that include Bram’s?”

Anima answered her nervous question with a big smile.

“Of course it does. I hate to admit it, but I’m not very good at picking cakes. I don’t want to get anyone sick or anything. Could you help me?”

“Okay. I’ll even choose Bram’s.”

“Great, then let’s get going. We wouldn’t want them to sell out!”

Myuke cheerfully took Anima’s hand as they made their way to the patisserie. After careful deliberation, they picked out the best combination of cakes they could think of, then made their way back to home.

◆◆◆

“Welcome back,” Luina said as they entered the house.

“We’re home! Brr, it’s freezing out there!”

Myuke hung her scarf on the back of a chair and crouched in front of the fireplace. She had been very grumpy when she’d left the house, but the fresh outside air seemed to have cleared her mind. She was back to her regular self again.

Bram’s happy smile had probably popped into her mind while she was choosing cakes, making her realize how much she loved her. Once she apologized, Bram was sure to follow suit, and their relationship would be all but repaired.

Hoping that the carefree happiness he had gotten so used to would soon return, Anima addressed Luina.

“Something smells fantastic. Are you cooking?”

“Oh, you noticed? I thought the smell of the firewood would mask it.”

“I love the smell of your cooking almost as much as I love you. That’s why eating your meals is always the highlight of my day.”

“Why don’t we get to eat if it makes you so happy?” Luina chuckled.

“Say no more; I’m starving. How about you, Myuke?”

“I’m starving too. I guess we should save these for later, then, huh?” Myuke proposed, holding up the cake box.

“What did you buy?”

“Myuke picked out some miniature cakes for everyone.”

“I got you a chocolate cake and a fruit tart!”

“Oh, thank you so much! Those are my favorites!”

At the sight of Luina’s content smile, Myuke celebrated her successful cake-picking.

“You’re welcome! There’s two for everyone; we can have them after lunch or something.”

“They’ll be even tastier if we eat them later in the afternoon, when we’re a bit hungry. I’m sure the other two will be back soon, so we should get everything ready for lunch. Could you help me, Anima?”

“Of course, but where exactly are they? I haven’t even heard them since we got home. Oh, no! What if they wandered into the forest?!”

“Don’t worry, they’re upstairs.”

“Upstairs? Are they drawing?”

“No, they’re changing. We went outside to pick cabbages for lunch, and they both fell on their backs. Their clothes got completely soaked.”

“What good girls. I’m so proud of them.”

The moment Anima commended them, he heard the sound of Marie's swift footsteps. She burst into the dining room, followed sluggishly by Bram.

"You's hooome!" She rushed up to Anima and hugged him tightly. "I helped Mommy! I pulleded a cabbage, and, and, it was thiiis big!"

"Wow, that's incredible. I can't wait to eat the cabbage you picked. I'm proud of you, too, Bram."

Bram sheepishly looked at the ground. She felt awkward in front of Myuke, but Anima's compliment managed to put a slight smile on her face.

"O-Of course I'd help out, m'kay? Anyway, where's the bed? Did you ask them to deliver it?"

"We didn't get one."

"Oh… Well, doesn't make a difference to me, m'kay?"

She acted indifferent, but her face didn't lie. She looked relieved that she didn't have to stop sleeping with her beloved sister.

"Myukey, whassat?"

"Mini cakes."

"Cakes?! Woo-hoo! I love cakes!"

"And there's two for everyone!"

"Two for ev'yone?!"

Marie immediately jumped at the promise of cakes. She let Anima go and snuggled up to Myuke, looking up at her with puppy-dog eyes.

"We'll have them after lunch. We gotta go out and play in the snow first. It'll make them taste twice as good! I promise!"

"Yaaay!" Marie responded with a big smile, then sat down to wait for lunch.

With the girls in the dining room, Anima followed Luina into the kitchen. She had prepared fried cabbages, eggs, and bacon for lunch. The two of them got everyone's portions onto plates, sliced a loaf of bread, filled some glasses with milk, then brought the feast to the table.

“Thanks for the meal!” Marie sang before they started eating.

Though the room felt far less tense than it had earlier in the morning, Bram and Myuke still weren’t speaking to each other. Myuke likely felt too awkward to make up with her sister at the lunch table.

“It was nummy!”

Marie had to have been starving; she cleared her plate faster than anyone else. She wishfully glanced at the cake box sitting on the table, but she kept to her word and didn’t ask for any.

“Thank you, Luina. As always, that was delicious. All right, girls, let me take care of dishes. Go out and play in the snow; it’ll make you extra hungry for your cakes.”

“I’ll go out later,” Myuke said. “I wanna draw right now. Marie, do you wanna draw with me?”

“Uh-huh! I draw us payin’ in the ’now!”

“I can’t wait to see it!”

Myuke and Marie headed upstairs, while Bram started collecting the dishes.

“You can go and play with them,” Anima told her.

“I can’t just let you do all the work, m’kay? You go rest, Mommy. I’ll help Daddy, m’kay?”

Luina always wanted to do her fair share of the chores, but she couldn’t ignore Bram’s earnest request.

“That’s really kind of you, Bram. Thank you.”

Blushing from Luina’s praise, Bram took the plates and quickly made her way into the kitchen. Anima picked up the glasses and followed after her. They made their way out the back door and over to the well, where they proceeded to wash the dishes.

“Daddy, I need to talk to you about something, m’kay?” she said in a serious tone the moment they were alone.

“What is it?”

“I wanna make up with Myuke, m’kay?”

“Really?! You do?!” Anima cheered. Those were the very words he’d been waiting to hear. With Myuke and Bram both set on making up, their quarrel was sure to come to an end. “Let’s go tell Myuke right now!”

“I-I can’t do that, m’kay?”

“Why not? You want to make up, don’t you?”

“I do! I do, m’kay…?”

“Are you worried she won’t forgive you?”

Bram nodded meekly. It was incredibly tempting for him to come out and tell her how Myuke felt, but it would have been meaningless if she didn’t hear it straight from the horse’s mouth. Moreover, there was a chance—albeit an incredibly small one—that he was wrong about Myuke’s feelings. If that were the case, it would undoubtedly bring about disaster.

So long as Bram gives her an honest apology, I think she’d forgive her either way.

Anima was certain Myuke would forgive Bram. She’d put a lot of thought into her cake choices, and ultimately decided two flavors that Bram was sure to love, hoping that a heartfelt present like that was going to ease the tension. There was no doubt she wanted to make up.

The only thing left was for Bram to work up the courage to take the first step. First, though, she had to figure out where that courage would come from. If she had a present of her own to give Myuke, it would likely be enough to give her that final push.

“I was super mean to Myuke, m’kay? I destroyed her snowman, then got stubborn and said really bad stuff to her…”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself; everyone says mean things when they’re in an argument. Besides, it’s not like you *intended* to destroy her snowman.”

“That doesn’t matter, m’kay? I destroyed it and that’s that.”

“Then why don’t we build a snowman together?” Anima cheerfully proposed to try to drag her out of her slump.

“You think she’ll forgive me if we do? M’kay…”

“I’m sure she will if we build a nice snowman and give her a really good apology.”

Anima’s confidence had clearly rubbed off on Bram, as she immediately made a snowball and began rolling it along the ground.

“I’ll make the body. You focus on the head, m’kay?”

“Leave it to me! I’ll make the best snowman head this world has ever seen!”

Anima started working on his portion of the snowman, all the while keeping an eye on Bram’s so that the head wouldn’t end up being bigger than the body.

“This should do it, m’kay? Daddy, can you bring the head over here?”

Anima picked up his snowball, around the size of his own head, and put it on the body Bram had made. In doing so, he had completed their snowman—which was situated right next to the cute little snowman Marie had made the day before.

“I wanted to put them next to each other so they’re not lonely, m’kay?” Bram explained.

“They look like siblings.”

“Marie’s is the little sister and mine is the big sister. And a big sister has to look just as good as her younger siblings, m’kay?!”

Bram started rubbing the snowman with her palms. She was going to polish it until it was just as shiny as the one Myuke had made.

“Your hands are going to get cold.”

“It’s nothing, m’kay? While I finish this, could you find some pebbles and sticks for me?”

Agreeing to help her, Anima headed through the front gate and wandered into the forest. He quickly scavenged a couple pebbles, a leaf, and two sticks, then made his way back to the garden. When he returned, he saw Bram’s snowman proudly twinkling under the shining sun.

“That’s beautiful; well done. And look, here’s everything you need.”

“Thanks, m’kay?”

Bram used the pebbles as its eyes, made its mouth out of the leaf, and stuck a stick into each side for its arms. With those features added, her snowman was finally complete. It radiated with the energy of a reliable older sister.

“Wow! It turned out great!”

“It’s a masterpiece, m’kay?”

“Did you make that?” a voice asked from behind, marveling at their creation.

Bram turned around and tensed up as she faced the source of the voice: Myuke. She must’ve been nervous, but she couldn’t afford to lose this chance. She took a step forward as Anima lightly pushed on her back.

“I’m sorry about your snowman, m’kay?!”

“I’m really sorry about yesterday!”

The two of them shouted at each other simultaneously. Myuke then held out a drawing, offering it to the utterly confused Bram.

“I-Is this…”

“I drew us having a snowball fight. I didn’t play with you yesterday, so I figured I could at least draw me playing with you. I’d be really happy to have a snowball fight with you… If you’re okay with it after all that happened.”

“Of course I am! I totally wanna have a snowball fight with you, m’kay?!”

Seeing Bram happily bob her head up and down put a big smile on Myuke’s face. She then looked at the newly created snowman.

“So, did you build this?”

“Daddy and I built it together. I destroyed the one you made yesterday, and this one’s probably not as good as that one was, but… we tried, m’kay?”

“No way; yours is super cute! Much cuter than mine was!”

“Really?! Th-Then, umm… Please say you forgive me, m’kay?”

“Yes, of course I do! I honestly don’t know what was wrong with me yesterday. No, not just yesterday; I was super rude to you this morning, too.

And I’m supposed to be the mature one… What a joke.”

“D-Don’t say that! You’re an amazing sister, m’kay?!”

“Bram… Thank you. I’m so happy you became my sister.”

A radiant smile spread across Bram’s face as those words left Myuke’s mouth. Watching on from the sidelines, a powerful sense of relief washed over Anima.

Thank goodness!

It had taken him a hundred years of grueling training and battles to be named the Demon Lord, yet never in his life had he felt such a strong sense of danger as he had watching his daughters fight. At one point he had no idea how it would end which filled him with a primal dread, but luckily, his carefree family life was about to return.

While Anima was enjoying his moment of pure bliss, Myuke seemed to have come up with an idea.

“Since there’s already two of them here, why don’t we make a third snowman? Three sisters, just like the three of us!”

“That’s a great idea, m’kay?! We still have pebbles and sticks, so we can start right now! Daddy, can you hold this for me?”

“I’ll protect it with my life.”

He took Myuke’s drawing from Bram and held onto it, watching the girls work on the third snowman. With the both of them working on it, it didn’t take long for them to finish.

“It’s done! This is the biggest one yet, so it’s you, Myuke, m’kay?”

“Yep, that’s me. Now all three of us are snowmen!”

“They all look very impressive; well done. Would you like to make ones for me and Mommy, too?”

“That’d be awesome, m’kay?!”

“Yeah, let’s do it!”

They immediately jumped into building yet another snowman, enjoying every moment of working together. While they were busy doing that, Marie came

running out of the house.

“Daddy! Myukey! Brum! Lesseat cakes!”

“Oh, right! You got us cakes! I almost forgot about them, m’kay?”

“I picked your favorites!”

“You got me Mont Blanc?! M’kay!”

“You bet I did! I got you a cheesecake, too.”

“You know me like the back of your hand, m’kay?!” Bram tightly hugged Myuke. “I love you so much!”

“Me too! I love Myukey too!”

Marie hugged the both of them. She didn’t know what had transpired while she was inside, but seeing her sisters share a hug, she couldn’t help but to join in.



When they eventually stopped hugging, they made their way through the back door, where a sweet scent welcomed them in from the bitter cold. Luina was standing in front of a pot, warming something.

“You’re just in time for some delicious warm milk.”

“I helped!” Marie exclaimed.

Bram and Myuke pet the proud little girl.

“You’re a very good girl, m’kay?”

“Yep, she sure is! But she wasn’t the only one helping out around the house today, was she? You’re a very good girl too, Bram.”

“Oh, knock it off. I’ve got nothing on you, m’kay?”

Luina watched with a soft smile as her eldest two daughters complimented each other. She had never shown a single sign of worry during the two days they’d fought, and had probably known all along how it would end.

I’ll have to become a calm and collected parent like she is, Anima thought to himself while carrying glasses of warm milk to the dining room. The girls had sat down, but their excitement hadn’t settled in the slightest.

“Let’s drink this milk, eat our cakes, and get back to building snowmen, m’kay?!”

“We’re making you and Daddy!”

“I help too!”

“I’d like to help, too.”

Luina wanted to play with the girls. It was freezing cold outside, but that didn’t matter to her; she had been cooped up in the house for the past several weeks. Getting some fresh air was sure to be good for her, and playing in the snow with the girls would be a wonderful memory for her.

“We’ll have to make Luina’s snowman incredibly beautiful,” Anima said.

“And we’ll have to make Anima’s incredibly cool,” Luina added.

“Just leave it to us! There’s nothing we can’t do when we work together! Isn’t

that right, girls?”

Marie and Bram happily nodded. All three sisters were looking forward to taking on the challenge as a team.

Chapter Three: Cooking Together

Two weeks had passed since the resolution of the fight between Myuke and Bram. The days were still cold, but miraculously, not one member of the Scarlett family had fallen ill. Anima never faced such a risk, for no illness could penetrate his body; Myuke, a veteran Hunter, wasn't going to let a little cold weather take her down; Marie ate well, and had more than enough energy to run around both inside the house and out from dawn until dusk; Bram hated the cold, yet had become surprisingly lively despite it; and Luina usually sat back and relaxed, smiling gently while she watched her children play. Anima hoped that their carefree, problem-free days would continue forever, but deep down, he knew that such a future was unlikely. Everyone was as healthy as an ox, but he was worried that that would change, especially for Luina.

In the past, Luina had managed to run the orphanage on her own, which was no small feat. The average person definitely wouldn't have been able to do what she did—she clearly had exceptional stamina and spirit. It was unlikely that she would catch a cold, and if she did, she would shrug it off in a couple of days.

Things were no longer that simple, though. Luina was pregnant. Even if she did shrug off a cold, there was no guarantee that it wouldn't have grave, lasting effects on the child growing inside her. That, combined with the fact that her doctor had warned her that her immune system was weakened and she should take extra care to avoid catching a cold, made it easy to see why Anima was worried.

In spite of his internal struggles, however, he made a point to always wear a smile. He didn't want to unnecessarily rile his family up. After the fight between the girls, Anima had promised himself to abandon his overly anxious demeanor and become a more levelheaded father. He had to act calm to ease everyone else's minds.

"Anima?"

“Ah!”

Moments after reconfirming his pledge to be calm and collected, Anima was dragged back into the real world by someone calling his name. He turned around to find that it was exactly who he’d expected: Luina. Out in the garden to help take down the laundry that Anima had hung up to dry that morning, she was wearing her favorite fluffy coat and a scarf to keep herself warm, yet was visibly shaking as her white breath dissipated in the cold winter air.

“Is something the matter?” he asked her.

“Not really, you just didn’t react to me. I was wondering why.”

“Sorry, I got caught up thinking about something.” He looked around and noticed that the once-blue sky had started to take on a pinkish hue. The fact that he’d only just realized that meant that he’d been out of it for quite a while, so it was no wonder that Luina was concerned. She seemed to have calmed down after making sure her husband was okay, but just to be safe, he turned to her with a kind proposal. “I can do the rest; you should go in and lay down.”

“I want to help now that I’m outside. We’ll finish in no time if we work together.”

She didn’t want to take Anima up on his offer, but rather stay and keep working with him. Given that she was much more lively and talkative than she was when she was locked up inside the house, she had to have been enjoying herself. Anima couldn’t bring himself to force her inside.

“Are you cold?”

Regardless of her decision, he was still worried about her.

The snow they’d had two weeks prior had eventually melted away, revealing the cold ground underneath, and none had since replaced it. If there had been any snowfall while they were asleep at night, it had completely disappeared by daybreak. Even the five snowmen the girls had put all their effort into had given in to the relentless rays of the sun and melted away into nothingness.

Anima had feared that Marie’s crying when she’d realized that their snowmen had disappeared would tear him apart, but Myuke and Bram were quick to cheer her up.

“They didn’t melt away, they just left on a trip!”

“We’ll make them again next time there’s snow, m’kay?”

Their kind words had put a smile right back on her face. After the addition of Luina’s cooking and a ride on Anima’s shoulders, she had completely forgotten about the snowmen and regained her big, beautiful smile.

Either way, despite the lack of snow, the air was still extremely cold. The freezing wind cut straight through the bald forest to relentlessly assault their garden, yet Luina was braving it with a warm smile.

“I’m okay. The cold has never really bothered me.”

“Never? That’s incredible. All right, then would you care to help me?”

No matter how much he wished for her to stay warm and cozy all day long, he couldn’t lock her up and forbid her from doing the things she wanted to do. Were he to do that, not only would she get angry with him, but it was also sure to stress her out, which was the last thing he wanted. Luckily, she was doing well. She didn’t need to push herself like she had before marrying Anima.

“I’d love to,” Luina chirped back, then skillfully unpinned the clothes and put them into the basket.

Doing laundry had been one of Anima’s daily chores for the past few months, so he figured he had gotten pretty decent at it. In watching Luina, however, he quickly realized that he still had plenty of room to grow.

Ah, I should work as well.

Anima started taking the clothes down, glancing at Luina every couple of seconds to make sure she didn’t slip on the grass. Before long, their basket was piled high with clothes for five, and they were finished taking down the laundry.

“See? I told you we’d be done in a heartbeat.”

“Only because you’re good at this. I’m surprised you’re so swift in this cold.”

“I can do anything when you’re by my side.”

“I feel the same about you, but please, don’t overexert yourself.”

“You’re such a worrywart.”

“Of course I am. I love you, after all.”

“I love you too!”

Luina hugged him tightly as her face lit up. Anima wanted to stay calm, but he couldn’t possibly resist the butterflies in his stomach left by his wife’s hug. He locked his arms around her waist and hugged her back, to which she buried her face into his chest.

“You’re very cuddly today,” he commented.

“It’s because you spoil me every day. I might end up becoming needier than our little baby will be.” Her words reassured him that he was indeed helpful. Knowing that he lessened someone’s burden was enough to make him happy, but when that someone was his lovely wife, looking up at him with a mellow smile while snuggling up in his arms, it made him absolutely giddy. “I love your smile. It’s very cute.”

“You’re much cuter than I’ll ever be.”

“You’re making me blush.”

“Good. You’re extra cute when you blush.”

Anima fought to keep his feelings in check—as did Luina, who was looking up at him with her enchanting eyes—but his love was too powerful to fight off. He couldn’t resist the allure of his wife’s small lips, which remained moist and inviting even in the dry winter air.

He leaned in, and the two of them shared a kiss. When he finally drew his lips back, she fidgeted bashfully.

“I want more…” she whispered, looking deep into his eyes.

Time lost all meaning as Anima planted another kiss on Luina’s lips. It was just the two of them out in the garden—nothing else. Their lips drew apart once more, but Luina remained dazed for several moments.

“Anima… I love you.”

“I love you too. I would spend all day kissing you if I could, but we can’t have you catch a cold. Shall we go inside?”

“I suppose…”

Reluctantly, she let go of Anima. He picked up the laundry basket, and they made their way inside the house.

“We need to be quiet,” Luina warned as she slowly opened the door. “The girls are sleeping in the dining room.”

When he’d first gone outside, the girls had been sitting around the table drawing. Some time had passed since he’d left, though; they had apparently finished drawing and fallen asleep in that time.

Carefully, quietly, the two of them stepped into the kitchen. Luina had clearly stopped cooking to check up on Anima, as there was chopped cabbage sitting on the cutting board.

“Are you making a cabbage soup?”

“Yes, with sausages. Meat is important for a balanced diet.”

“I’m salivating already. Here, let me get the pot ready for you.”

After she’d given him her thanks, he poured water from the jug he’d filled at the well that morning into the pot.

“Oh no!”

Just as he set the pot on the stove, Luina let out a yelp. She looked a bit frazzled.

“What happened?!”

“We only have four sausages…”

Anima let out a sigh of relief. He was afraid she’d cut herself or something.

“I don’t need any in my portion,” he told her.

“You do!” she commanded. “You work a lot and need meat to fuel your stamina. A single sausage isn’t enough for the girls, either. They’re still growing; they need to eat well to stay healthy!”

Luina was absolutely right. While Anima didn’t care much about his own portion, he couldn’t let the girls starve. They loved meat, and they weren’t going to go without it on his watch.

“I’ll run to the town and buy some. The butcher should still be open.”

“Thank you so much.”

Grabbing both his copper coin-filled leather pouch and a basket, Anima promptly left for Garaat.

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The butcher was situated right behind the row of restaurants in Garaat’s commercial district. In order to get there, under the light of the setting sun, Anima had to walk the so-called “road of temptation”, named for the incredible aroma of freshly cooked food and the allure of beautiful women inviting passersby into nearby pubs that made detours incredibly difficult to resist. In fact, as if to demonstrate just how few and far between those able to conquer the road of temptation were, the crowd around him thinned out at an alarming rate as he walked.

Anima’s resolution was unshakable, though. He had places to go and things to do, and no worldly desire would stop him from reaching his goal. He also had the best food he’d ever eaten and the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen waiting for him at home. The women calling out to potential customers were beautiful, but they couldn’t hold a candle to Luina.

After walking the road of temptation for a couple of minutes, he hung a right at the intersection where most foodstuff shops were located—an area quite busy with people buying ingredients for dinner. He made a beeline to the butcher, who had dozens of salted hams, bacon strips, and sausages hanging on display.

“Welcome, Anima! What can I get for you today?”

A heavy-set man—the owner of the shop—peeked out from behind the curtain of meat. His mouth curled into a smile beneath his moustache, and his friendly tone reverberated through the building. As Luina had been buying meat from him ever since she was a little girl, and as the two of them had visited the area together countless times after getting married, he, like most other shop owners in Garaat, knew the both of them by name.

“I’d like this, please.”

Anima pointed at the rope sausages, each one long enough for around ten thick sausages.

“Just the one?” the man asked as he began coiling one up.

“Umm… Make it three, please.”

“Comin’ right up!”

He figured three ropes would be perfect. While it may have looked like a lot from an outside perspective, for a family of five, that meant each person would get about six sausages. Given that they ate sausage every day, they had enough to last a week.

At first he’d thought that it would have been better to buy more, as the more he bought the longer it would last, but he’d remembered something. By purchasing only a week’s worth, they would run out of milk at around the time they finished the sausages. Once that happened, they could simply purchase more of both at the same time and have them fresh.

While Anima was arranging his next shopping trip, the butcher finished coiling up his sausages, which he paid for and put into his basket.

“How’s Luina doing, by the way?” the man asked just as Anima was about to turn and head out. It wasn’t a surprising question, as he looked after Luina like his own daughter.

The news of her pregnancy had spread through the town like wildfire after she’d told the woman at the fruit stall about it. Just about every food seller knew about it, including the butcher. Anima appreciated that everyone was so concerned about her health, so he answered with a warm smile.

“She’s doing well.”

“Ahhh, that’s good. Great, even. Here, hold on a minute!” He grabbed a whole ham and handed it to Anima. “This is for Luina!”

“How much is it?”

“C’mon, now, I don’t need money. Luina’s like a daughter to me. Just have her come around one of these days to show that she’s doing well—that’s more than payment enough. Oh, and maybe you could let me hold the little one after

they’re born. That’d make me the happiest man in the whole town!”

“Thank you,” Anima said, accepting the generous gift. “I’ll make sure to give it to her.”

“Good! Have her scarf it all down; this ham’ll bring her good health for the winter!”

“Maybe you should think twice before having her eat the whole damn thing,” a well-built lady chimed in. She was the owner of the fruit stall.

“Huh?” The butcher furrowed his thick eyebrows. “Are you tryin’ to say there’s something wrong with my ham?”

“Don’t be silly, I know perfectly well how delicious your cuts are.” The butcher’s scowl immediately became a smile. “Thing is, I don’t know about stuffing a pregnant woman full a’ ham that’s saltier than the ocean. You should give my sweetie some of my apples instead!”

The woman pushed a basket full of apples into Anima’s hands.

“You’ve given her enough apples to last a lifetime! And giving her food that’ll rot’s only gonna upset her stomach!”

“An apple a day keeps the doctor away!”

“Eat enough meat and know no defeat!”



Anima was grateful that they were looking out for his wife, but he didn't want to witness a fight over which one of them got to feed her.

"Calm down, please. She can have anything in moderation. I'm sure that both the ham and apples will be great for her."

"See, you're speaking the truth. Her little stomach can only hold so much. Best fill it with somethin' healthy every chance you get."

"'Something healthy', huh?"

Her statement made sense. Of course, Luina was making sure to eat a balanced diet of vegetables and meat, and thanks to that, she and everyone else in the family was in good health. However, there was a chance her dietary needs had changed since becoming pregnant. If that was the case, then Anima would need to make sure she had the best food not only for herself, but for the baby growing inside her as well.

"Hello, dearie," a hoarse voice from behind them said, interrupting Anima's thoughts. It belonged to an older lady, who was pointing at one of the rope sausages. "Would you please get me one of those?"

That older lady was Luina's doctor. The fruit stall had started to get busy just as she'd arrived at the butcher's, drawing its owner back to it. Thanks to that, the shop owners' little quarrel naturally fizzled out, making it easier for the butcher to help his newly arrived customer.

"Shopping alone, are we?" she asked Anima while waiting for her sausage.

"Yes. I'm helping Luina."

"How chivalrous of you. Luina sure snagged herself a good man."

Though he was enjoying her praise, Anima wanted to move the conversation forward and ask about Luina's diet.

"Can I ask you something?"

"If you can walk and talk. I need to get home and sort out some things."

"Of course." They started walking toward the doctor's house, which was on the opposite side of town from his own. It would take Anima a while to get back

if they spent a while talking, but fortunately, his question was rather simple. “Do you have any recommendations for a pregnant woman’s diet?”

“Don’t you worry about that, dearie. I know Luina’s cooking first hand, so trust me when I tell you she’ll be fine. You’ve got yourself a great woman, you lucky dog.”

Luina treated her to a meal when she came to check on her the other day.

“So all she has to do is continue what she’s been doing and everything will be fine?”

“That’s all. Trust me, dearie, I’ve been doing this for decades. If I say she’s going to be okay, then there’s nothing to worry about. You just need to wait for the little scamp’s arrival.”

The doctor had successfully dispelled all of Anima’s worries. So long as Luina continued to cook much the same as she always had, everything would be all right.

“It’s always a good idea to pay attention to what you eat,” she continued while he internalized what she’d told him, “but the most important thing right now is to lessen her load. Don’t you dare make her run laps around the house. Understood?”

“I understand it very well. I do what I can already, but you see, there have been a couple of times where she’s gotten bored of sitting around all day. I couldn’t stop her from doing some of the chores.”

“That’s perfectly fine. She should be doing light exercises; it never hurts to move around a bit. But be warned that after she gives birth, she won’t have the strength to do anything for a little while. You must completely take her place so that she can rest for as long as she needs to. Speaking of which, can you cook?”

“Not really.”

“Better learn it while you can, young man. You’ll need to eat while she’s bedridden.”

He’d been meaning to learn to cook for the longest time, and Luina’s pregnancy seemed to be his golden opportunity.

“Is there a place where I can learn how to cook?”

“Yes. At home. Luina will teach you all you need to know.”

“Our kitchen is cold, and I don’t want to give her more work.”

“Hmm, that is a good point…” She went silent for a second to think. “Perhaps I can help. Come visit me tomorrow around midday.”

“Thank you very much!”

Right after expressing his gratitude to the doctor, Anima began his walk back to the house while the sun slowly made its way below the horizon. Though the road was dark, his mood was incredibly bright. He tried and tried to make the trip at a normal walking pace—he feared that the ham and apples would fall out of the basket if he started running—but his giddiness simply wouldn’t let him. His steps continued to get faster as his movements transposed into a jog, and then finally into a full sprint.

His mind had been clouded with worries about Luina’s health for the past couple of weeks, but those days were behind him. Not only that, but he had also found the perfect reason to learn how to cook—the final obstacle that stood between him and complete mastery of the household chores. Once he’d learned that skill, he would be able to lift every burden off Luina’s shoulders. He could even surprise her with something delicious, which was sure to put a beautiful smile on her face. Imagining that moment over and over again, he practically skipped home.

“I’m home.”

He carefully opened the door and quietly announced himself. He didn’t want to wake anyone who had already gone to sleep. His worries were for naught, however, as the girls were very much awake and came rushing out to welcome him. Them had been waiting for his return.

“Daddy back!”

“I’m back indeed. Sorry I took so long.”

“Welcome home.” Luina stood up and took the basket from his hands. “Thank you for going out so late.”

“You sure got a lot,” Myuke said as she marveled at the contents of the basket. Her amazement piqued Bram’s curiosity, prompting her to peek into it as well. She then looked up at Anima with pure wonder in her eyes.

“Wooow! You got so much meat! It looks *super* yummy, m’kay?”

“Abbles too!”

The girls listed their favorite items.

“How come you came home with so much? You even got us another ham…”

Luina was understandably taken aback by Anima’s shopping spree--the kitchen was already full of ham and apples.

“I got them as gifts from the butcher and the fruit stall lady. They sent you their regards.”

“I see.” Luina smiled understandingly. “We’ll have to go and thank them later.”

“Me too! I go say thanks!”

“I’m sure they’d love to see you. They might even offer to pick you up!”

“Yaaay! I love up!”

Marie would have rushed out and thanked them right then and there if she could have.

“All right, I’ll go get started on the cooking,” Luina said as she picked up the basket of food.

“Let me help!” Myuke offered.

“Thank you! Can you help me cut the cabbage?”

“You bet!” she answered with a strong nod. “I’m great with knives!”

Just a couple months earlier, she would get nervous whenever she had to cut something like vegetables or fruit. After helping Luina cook every day, though, both her skill and confidence levels had been bolstered at an incredible rate. Because she was so interested in it, Anima was thinking of inviting her to learn with him. It would be a lot of fun for the both of them, as well as a good bonding experience.

“I wanna help too, m’kay?”

“I help too!”

“Then would you please clean off the table, Bram? Marie, can you help her?”

The table was full of crayons and paper. They had apparently fallen asleep while they’d been drawing, as while Anima’s head had been put on paper, his body had not.

I can’t wait to see how wonderful these look when they’re finished.

While he fantasized about petting the girls’ heads after seeing their superb art, Bram began putting the crayons away. His praise would need to wait one more day.

“Keep it up, girls!” he commended, then joined Myuke and Luina in the kitchen, which was in the exact same state as when he’d left. They seemed to have been waiting for him to return from the dining room.

“So, what’re we having tonight?” Myuke asked.

“Cabbage and sausage soup.”

“That means we gotta chop up some cabbage, right?”

“Yes we do. Just be careful not to cut yourself.”

“C’mon, you know I won’t. Watch!”

She quickly started preparing the cabbages. Keeping the knife far away from her fingers, she used the large knife to chop away at a brisk pace. While she was doing that, Luina lit the stove with her magic stone, and Anima worked on putting away the items he’d brought home from Garaat.

“Could you get some more firewood?” Luina asked just as Anima finished putting the apples into the fruit basket. The stove didn’t have quite enough.

Per her request, he went outside, picked up several pieces of firewood, and carried them back to the kitchen. The pieces that didn’t get used for the stove he put in the corner of the room.

“Let me do the sausages,” he offered.

“Oh, would you? Two for everyone, please.”

He took one of the rope sausages hanging from a rod above their heads and started chopping it up. Luina and Myuke were working quietly next to him, so he decided to strike up a conversation.

“By the way, I met your doctor while I was out. She offered to teach me how to cook.”

“She did?” Luina’s hands stopped. She slowly turned toward Anima. “At her place?”

“I assume so.” While cutting up the sausage, he explained what had happened. He told her about how they’d discussed her diet, that it was important to lessen the burden on her, and that childbirth would completely drain her for a time. “I don’t want a situation where you’re cursed to eat nothing but vegetable soup every day after you give birth. I want to learn how to cook so that I can be there when you need me the most.”

“You’re doing it all for me… Thank you so much,” she said with a warm smile.

“Don’t even mention it. I’d do anything for you.”

“I wanna learn how to cook too!” Myuke protested. She’d fallen more and more in love with cooking each day, so it was no wonder she wanted to learn and improve.

“Would you like to come and learn with me?”

“Yeah! I wanna get really good at it and cook something delicious for Mommy!”

“I can’t wait to taste your creations.”

Luina’s excitement fueled Anima’s and Myuke’s eagerness to learn even further.

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The next day, just before midday, Anima and Myuke stood in the doorway. They had already eaten lunch and were ready to depart. Behind them, Luina and the girls were there to see them off.

“Be careful around fire and knives,” Luina advised them. “Don’t hurt yourselves.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be very careful. You should take it easy today. I’ll bring in the laundry after I get home, so just rest and play with the girls.”

“Hope you’re looking forward to our awesome new cooking skills!”

“I can’t wait to eat your cooking again, m’kay?”

“Daddy! Up!” Marie pestered Anima, reluctant to say goodbye. He did as he was told right away, and she rubbed her squishy cheek against his. “Come home ’fore night-night! I want bath with you and Myukey!”

“Don’t worry, we won’t stay too late. When exactly we get home will depend on what we’ll be making, but we should definitely be back before dinner.”

“We’ll draw something together once we get home, okay? You can play with Bram while we’re gone. Bram, please keep an eye on her.”

“Got it! Marie, do you want to finish yesterday’s drawing? Daddy still needs a body, m’kay?”

Reminded of her unfinished drawing, Marie hopped down from Anima’s arms and grabbed Bram’s hand.

“All right, we’re off,” Anima announced.

“See you later!”

After saying goodbye, the two headed for Garaat. Once there, they followed the main road for a bit, but quickly took a turn down a quiet, almost deserted side street.

“Umm, where are we going?” Myuke asked soon after they took the turn. “Isn’t the doctor’s house right behind the Hunters’ Guild?”

Sure enough, the route they were taking was not the route to the Guild, and Anima was more than aware of that. It had been six months since he’d married Luina, and they’d walked the streets of Garaat together countless times. He didn’t know every nook and cranny of the town, but he knew more than enough of it to not get lost on his way to the Guild.

“I was thinking of popping into a shop with you. We still have time before our lesson starts.”

“What are we looking for?”

Anima turned to her and answered with a broad smile.

“Your very own knife.”

Myuke’s face lit up. Unable to contain her excitement, she pressed Anima further.

“Are you really gonna get one for me?! I mean, we have knives at home.”

“We only have two knives at home. That’s not enough if all three of us are going to be cooking.”

“Not everyone needs a knife if we split up the work the right way. Are you sure you want to get one anyway?”

“I’m sure. Besides, wouldn’t it be more fun to have your own knife?”

“Oh, it definitely would! Gives me another reason to get good at cooking!”

The promise of her very own knife had Myuke overjoyed. She skipped all the way until they arrived at the trusted, long-established general store. Having stood in Garaat for decades, the snug little store run by a kind older gentleman had a certain charm to it, and sold anything and everything a household might need. Pots, plates, cutting boards, cups, cutlery, and even potted plants were all available for purchase. It was a cornucopia of useful items.

“Let’s see, the knives are…”

“Ah, look! There they are!” Myuke gestured toward a shelf full of kitchen knives, her eyes sparkling as though she’d found ancient treasure that had been buried for thousands of years. She was so excited that she was practically squealing. “There’s so many! Ahhh, I don’t know which one to choose! Daddy, how much time do we have?!”

“Don’t worry about it; take as much time as you need. Make sure you get a feel for the knife you pick.”

“Help me choose!”

Together, they browsed the vast selection of knives.

“A big knife would be difficult to handle, so I think you should look for

something that's fairly small. How about this one?"

"That's a fillet knife. I can't cut vegetables with that."

"Oh, they each have their own uses? How about this one, then?"

"That's for slicing meat. What I want is an all-purpose knife like what we've got at home. They're not as good at each individual task as these specialized knives are, but you can do pretty much anything with them!" An all-purpose knife would be perfect for Myuke, who wanted to cook all sorts of different dishes. "The question is, which all-purpose knife should I—"

She started straight ahead of herself, completely silent. Following her gaze, Anima saw that she had found a very unique knife from among the bunch. In terms of size and shape, it was quite bland, but there was something special about that knife in particular. The blade was engraved with carvings of cute animals, which put the knife on the more expensive side, but also made it impossible to mistake it for either of the other two they had back at home.

"This one! I want this one!"

Anima's intuition was right; Myuke had fallen in love with that knife the moment she saw it. He picked it up, took it to the counter, and paid for it. Once the elderly shop owner had put it in a case, the transaction was complete.

"I'm happy you found a nice knife."

"Me too! I'll learn how to handle it like a master chef and then make you something super mouthwatering!"

"I can't wait."

Myuke happily skipped alongside Anima as they were talking on the quiet street, but before long, she noticed something.

"Umm, Daddy? This still isn't the way to the Guild."

"I know. We have one more place to stop first."

"Where are we going?" she asked with a bright smile, excited to see what awaited her.

"To the magic stone shop."

“The magic stone shop?!” Myuke stopped in her tracks. Her mouth left hanging open, she wore an expression that combined both thorough confusion and overwhelming joy. “Umm, you *do* know it’s not my birthday yet, right?”

“I do, but did you forget? I promised to get you a fire rabbit stone.”

“Y-You did, but are you sure? Getting me this knife was already more than enough. Buying a magic stone on top of that is…”

“Don’t be shy. You need these to cook, so let’s go. We want to get there before they sell out.”

“R-Right! Let’s go!”

Myuke was clearly delighted. She hummed a happy tune all the way to the store.

“We’re here!”

Upon their arrival, Myuke quickly opened the door and went into the shop filled with all sorts of magic stones—both loose and inlaid into accessories—with Anima following behind her. They were specifically interested in bracelets and rings, and though the shop likely had some rarer, more exclusive stones on display, Myuke wasn’t at all interested in them. She ran straight to the back of the store and started scanning the display for a fire rabbit stone.

“Welco— Oh, if it isn’t Anima!” The merchant’s face lit up the moment he recognized who had just walked into his shop. Anima had only ever visited it once, but it was when he’d sold the golem stone, which was clearly such a rare stone that it made him a memorable customer. “What can I do for you today?”

“We’re here to buy a fire rabbit stone. Do you have one?”

“Of course, of course! Please, follow—”

“Daddy! I found it!” Myuke’s voice boomed through the store. Anima couldn’t distinguish between different magic stones, but she was an expert at it. She ran up to him, holding a ring in her hand. “It fits perfectly! Can we get it?! Can we?! Can we pleeease?!”

“Of course. Think of it as a thank you for always helping with the chores.”

She happily nodded. They went up to the counter, paid, and headed for the

exit.

“You know where to find me when you get your hands on a rare magic stone!” the shopkeeper shouted after them.

“I do, thank you.”

“Thank *you* for your purchase! Please, come again!”

With that, they left the store.

“Yaaay!” Myuke cheered. “My very own magic stone!”

She reached up at the sky and watched as her ring twinkled under the bright winter sun. Her smile didn’t fade in the slightest during their walk to the doctor’s house. She couldn’t wait to put her brand-new fire rabbit stone to use.

“It’s good to see you, dearie! Come in, come in! You too, Myuke!”

The doctor welcomed them with an especially warm, loving smile—much more so than she had when she’d run into Anima the previous day. The reason behind that was simple: she loved children.

She was all over the girls whenever she visited to check up on Luina. Anima and Luina both trusted her, and they loved the idea of her being the doctor of their newborn once they’d actually been born. She was sure to be kind and caring toward them.

“Good afternoon! I came with Daddy to learn how to cook!”

Myuke enthusiastically explained her reason for coming, eager to get cooking.

“I’m sure Luina would be delighted to eat your cooking.”

“I want to be useful to Luina too, so please, teach me how to cook. Can you show us to the kitchen?”

“We won’t be going into my kitchen, dearie,” the doctor replied, shaking her head. “Nor am I going to teach you how to cook.”

Anima was thoroughly confused. He didn’t think she’d lied to him, but he felt a bit led astray.

“Didn’t you say yesterday that you’d help me?”

“Oh, no, I did. But I never said that *I* would be the one teaching you, did I?”

“Then who’s going to teach us?”

“My granddaughter. Oh, she was so excited to teach you after I told her about you. She’s a very good girl, I promise.” Her tone and expression radiated pure, unadulterated love for her granddaughter. She must have trusted Anima deeply if she were going to introduce him to someone so precious to her, much less let that person teach him to cook. “Unless you were hoping that I was going to teach you?”

“Honestly, I’m grateful to whoever takes us under their wing.”

He had been under the impression that the doctor would be the one to teach them, but what mattered at the end of the day was that they were given the knowledge they needed. The doctor’s vouching for her granddaughter was enough to convince Anima that she was a decent cook, and he was ready to learn all the intricacies of the culinary world from her.

“I have work today, dearie, so I couldn’t teach you even if I wanted to. Go to my granddaughter—five houses down to the right. She’s waiting for you.”

“Five houses down to the right. Got it. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Luina is like a second granddaughter to me, and I want to aid her as much as I can.”

They thanked her again and left her house, following the directions she’d given in search of her granddaughter’s house.

“Teaching someone takes a lot of effort,” Myuke said as they walked. “Not a lot of people are willing to do it. Does she owe you or something?”

“I don’t think I ever did anything that would make someone indebted to me. Though perhaps it has something to do with Krain?”

“Hmm, yeah, that would make sense. The whole town cheered for you when you took him down.”

Krain had been a noble in possession of a golem stone, and had ruled the town with an iron fist. An accomplished Hunter who was rotten to the core, he’d made life a nightmare for numerous townsfolk, so his defeat at Anima’s

hands had been celebrated all across town. It wouldn't have been outlandish to think that the doctor's granddaughter had been one of his many victims.

They arrived at the house while Anima was thinking about Krain. One knock, and the door immediately swung open.

"Welcome, Anima!"

The woman before him couldn't have been more than five or six years older than Luina. She had blonde hair, and wore a kind smile. Anima thought for a second, then realized that he had seen her before.

"So you're the doctor's granddaughter?"

"Yes! Thank you again for helping Ena."



“Do you know her?” Myuke asked, feeling a bit awkward about being left out of the conversation. She pushed Anima to quickly introduce her.

“Remember when I went out to get Marie her birthday present? I ran into, umm…”

“Camilla.”

“I ran into Camilla when I escorted her daughter Ena back to her.”

“You’re helping people even when we’re not there, huh?”

Myuke was impressed with his good deed. Earning his daughter’s respect filled Anima with a sense of pride.

“And Camilla, this is Myuke.”

Myuke bowed slightly to her.

“I want to learn how to cook so I can help Mommy out! I’m not very good yet, but I’ll work super hard on everything you show us, so please be patient while I learn everything I can!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll try to teach you everything you need to know. I really like cooking, and the more the merrier. We’ll have plenty of fun in the kitchen, okay?”

Myuke happily nodded to Camilla’s encouraging reply. They seemed to have finished their introductions, which gave Anima the chance to ask something that has been on his mind.

“Is Ena inside?”

The house was really quiet, so if she was home, she was probably sleeping.

“She’s out with my husband.”

“Oh, they went out? Sorry to make you stay behind.”

“Ah, no, it’s not like that! I was planning to stay home today anyway.” She smiled at Anima. “Today is actually my birthday.”

“I see. Well then, happy birthday.”

“Happy birthday!”

“Thank you. You know, that little rascal was practically screaming in the kitchen to my husband about how she’s going to surprise me.”

Ena had gone out with her Dad to buy a present for Camilla, which explained why Camilla had been happy to stay at home. Anima would have done exactly the same if his girls did that for him.

“She sounds like a great little girl!”

“She really is! I can’t wait for her to get home, but she’s so incredibly curious that there’s no such thing as a short outing with her. She has to look at every last thing, and asks you about all the things that are around her! I wouldn’t expect her to get home until the evening, so I’m all yours until then. Ah, but don’t worry, I’ll help you even after she gets home. You don’t understand how grateful I am to you for bringing her back to me, Anima.”

“That’s incredible, thank you. We’d like to come three times a week, if that works for you.”

“That’d be perfect.”

Anima was worried that she would find his request to be too burdensome, so he was incredibly relieved when she accepted it with a smile. Even so, he didn’t want to trouble her for too long. He wanted to learn to cook as quickly as possible so that he could help Luina out in the kitchen.

“Can we get started?”

“Of course! Grandma told me that you’re looking into making healthy food, is that right?”

Anima nodded.

“My wife, Luina, is pregnant. I don’t want to overwhelm her with heavy food.”

Camilla had a daughter, so she surely understood what Anima was going for. She likely had experience in that style of cooking.

“Okay. Follow me to the kitchen.”

He and Myuke followed her through the immaculate hallway and into the kitchen, the room farthest back in the house. It was smaller than what they were used to, with the table and kitchen range taking up around half the space,

but it was at least as clean as if not cleaner than the hallway.

“I probably should have asked earlier, but what are we doing about ingredients?”

“You can use anything you find in here.”

“That’s too much. You’re already sacrificing your free time to teach us; we can’t possibly use up your ingredients.”

“Please, it’s completely fine. Grandma always brings over so many ingredients that we don’t know what to do with them—especially pumpkin. We have a lot of pumpkin, but since Ena doesn’t really like it, we don’t use it very often.” Anima suddenly got a strong urge to boast about how Marie would eat anything, but he quietly fought it off. Not only would it have been rude to bring that up, but Ena was younger than Marie, so it was possible that she would grow to like pumpkin in a year or two. “It’s funny, she started hating pumpkin because she saw me cut myself once while I was preparing one. She’s been refusing to eat it ever since.”

Camilla’s boasting about how kind her daughter was reignited Anima’s urge to boast about Marie, but he once again repressed it. He wanted to start cooking as soon as possible.

“Cutting pumpkins is actually really difficult, but once you learn how to deal with them, you can deal with pretty much anything else.”

“Ah, I wanna try cutting a pumpkin! I wanna see if the knife I got is comfortable!”

“Be careful not to cut yourself.”

Myuke put the case down on the table and took the knife from it. Camilla praised her on the cute design, which made her even more excited to use it.

“How big should I cut it?”

“Cut it into small, bite-sized pieces. We’ll be frying them in butter later. We’ll also be making pork and beans today, so we’re going to be busy.”

“Fried pumpkin is one thing, but isn’t pork and beans kinda tough to make?”

“Is it that difficult?” Anima asked.

“I don’t exactly know how to make it, but steaming soybeans takes like half a day. Or, well, *steaming* them doesn’t take that long, but you have to soak them in water for that long before you can start working with them.”

Unfortunately, they didn’t have that much time. Anima had promised the girls that they would be home by dinner, and he was set on keeping that promise.

“Do you know how to steam the beans?” Camilla asked Myuke.

“Yeah, of course. That’s easy.”

“Perfect. I’ve already soaked them, so could you steam them for me? It should be simple for you.” That crisis was averted. Plus, since Myuke knew how to steam soybeans, Anima could always ask her about it given that he had no idea. “Now, let’s get to it! Remember, slow and steady wins the race. There’s no rush, so be careful not to cut yourselves.”

With that, their first cooking lesson had officially begun.

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Anima and Myuke had gotten the fried pumpkin down very quickly, but the pork and beans had proven to be way above their skill level. Camillia had had to walk them through every single step, so it had taken them a while to finish making it. On the upside, though, it had tasted great, and they’d even been offered to take home the leftovers despite Camilla having provided the ingredients. She really was like a saint, and while Anima understood that she felt indebted to him, he was going to make it a point to get her a small token of his thanks to give to her at their next lesson.

“See you in two days!” Camilla called out to them as they headed out the door.

The sun was already partially hidden below the horizon by the time they left. They had to make it home quickly to avoid letting the laundry go damp and the girls go hungry for the night. They put the food in their basket, said their goodbyes, and started their walk home.

“I gotta say, this knife is super sharp!”

“You picked a great one for sure, but your tools are only partially responsible

for your success. It takes a good bit of skill to cut such perfect cubes of pumpkin."

"I can't wait to make all kinds of food with this!"

"I'll work hard to keep up with you."

They continued their idle chit-chat until they made it back home.

"Welcome home, Anima, Myuke."

Luina came to greet them as they entered the warm dining room. Marie and Bram were both lying down on the table, but while Marie bolted upright the second she heard Luina's greeting, Bram didn't even budge. She glanced at the two and acknowledged them with the tiniest of nods.

"Welcome back, m'kay?" she mumbled. Playing with Marie all day seemed to have taken a lot out of her.

"I dawed a pishure!"

Anima put the basket down on the table and looked at the picture Marie proudly presented to him. It was a drawing of them eating sweets at the town plaza.

"It's beautiful; well done! Hmm, based on the pattern, are those waffles we're eating?"

"Uh-huh! I like wapples!"

"Do you? Okay then, we'll have some once the weather gets warmer."

"Yaaay! Then, then, I payed tag with Brum!"

"Oh, really? Did you have fun?"

"Uh-huh! I winned!"

"Wow, you won against Bram? That's incredible; you must have a real talent for tag! Ah, I know! Do you want to play tag with me tomorrow?"

"I dooo!"

Marie instantly became so excited that she started running around in circles. She hadn't gotten to play with Anima at all that day, and Anima fully intended

to make up for it the next. While she was busy celebrating, Bram suddenly perked up.

“Something smells awesome, m’kay?”

“Daddy and I made fried pumpkin and pork and beans today!” Myuke explained as she proudly turned toward Bram. She had clearly been waiting for someone to make a comment. “It’s gonna blow your minds! It was sooo hard not to eat it all before we got home!”

“Ooh, I wanna try it, m’kay?!”

Bram struggled to keep herself from jumping in and rummaging through the basket, but managed to restrain herself while Myuke pulled two plates out of it. She was moving deliberately slow, giving the other a chance to notice her ring.

“What’s that? Looks like a magic stone, m’kay?”

Myuke smirked as Bram noticed her treasured magic stone.

“Yep, it’s a fire rabbit stone! Daddy got it for me!”

“That was very nice of him,” Luina said. “Did you make sure to thank him?”

“Of course I did! Ah, and look! He also got me a knife! How cute is this?!”

Myuke opened the case and showed off her knife.

“Iss cuuute!”

“I really like the engraving, m’kay?”

“Right?! I’m gonna make *so* many dishes with this! I can’t wait for our next lesson!”

“When is your next lesson?”

“The day after tomorrow!”

“That’s sooner than I thought…” Luina was a bit confused. She had expected there to be a much longer break between lessons. “How long are you going to be learning there?”

“Until we get good! Right, Daddy?!”

“Yes, exactly. We’ll be there three times a week.”

“That’s a lot… Won’t that interfere with the doctor’s work?”

“Actually, we’re being taught by her granddaughter. Do you know Camilla? She must be about five or six years older than you.”

“I feel like I saw her once or twice when I went for check-ups years ago, but I’ve never spoken to her before. I don’t know what kind of person she is.”

“She’s awesome! Super nice, really helpful, and an amazing cook!”

“Don’t you fall for her just ’cause she’s nice, Daddy, m’kay?” Bram said teasingly, but Anima took that comment extremely seriously.

“I won’t fall for her. There’s only one woman in this world for me, and that’s Luina. I love her from the bottom of my heart, and that’s exactly why I want to learn to cook as quickly as possible. I’ve chosen to train hard so that I can be there for you when you need me.”

“I’m very happy to hear that.”

Luina expressed her gratitude toward Anima’s efforts with a warm smile, just like she had the day before, but something felt off. She sounded a bit stiff, possibly even sad. She’d happily sent them off that morning, but she’d had no idea that the two of them were going to end up going over there so frequently. The idea of Anima being gone for the day three times a week must have been terrifying to her.

Putting himself in her position, Anima realized just how sad it would be to not see his family for half the week. In his fervent quest to lighten Luina’s physical burden, he had accidentally increased her psychological burden tenfold. In realizing that, he came to understand what he had to do.

“Daddy, did you notice?” Myuke whispered, having caught on as well. Anima nodded and looked into Luina’s eyes.

“I don’t mind cooking at Camilla’s place, but I feel like we’d be giving her a lot of trouble.”

“Yep! We should train at home!”

“I agree. Let’s go and tell her about it tomorrow. Luina, would you be so kind as to—”

“Yes! I’ll teach you!”

Clearly having been waiting for them to ask, Luina answered with a beaming smile. She hadn’t wanted to undermine Anima’s enthusiasm from the day before, so she’d let him follow through with his plan, but all she’d wanted was to teach them how to cook.

“I can’t wait to learn from you! I’ll show off all the skills I learned today! Your jaw’s gonna drop, I guarantee it!”

“I learned a thing or two that I’m excited to show off as well.”

“Then let’s start tomorrow!” Luina cheerfully proposed.

“I’m happy to listen to you guys talk about what you’re gonna do tomorrow,” Bram interrupted, “but let’s get eating, m’kay? All this delicious food is sitting right in front of me and I can’t even touch it yet. It’s like torture. I’m starving, mkay?”

“My tummy goin’ ‘Grrr’ too!” Marie exclaimed.

“I’m hungry myself!” Luina chimed in. “And this all looks very yummy!”

Anima wanted to dig in as well, so the five of them quickly set the table and started eating. Amidst the cozy family dinner, Anima and Myuke’s creations were met with nothing but the highest praise.

Chapter Four: Shopping for Baby Supplies

Anima awoke to an enjoyable morning. Stepping outside, it wasn't too cold, but it wasn't too warm either. It was the very definition of pleasant.

Maybe we can eat outside today.

He planned a picnic in his head while hanging the laundry to dry under the clear blue sky. Going to some faraway field would only tire Luina out, so he figured that the garden would suffice.

With the laundry finished, he took his idea into the house. Marie was still lying in bed, half-asleep and barely listening, but the moment the word "picnic" left his mouth, her eyes sprang open. Bram, lying next to her, leaped off the bed when she heard that magic word.

"Yaaay! I love pinnic!"

"I wanna roll around on the blanket, m'kay?!"

They went down to the dining room, where Myuke and Luina were setting the table for breakfast. On the morning menu was ham and eggs, salad, and bunny-shaped apples, all of which were being prepared by Myuke while Luina kept an eye on her to make sure she was safe. Based on the apple slices, though, her knife skills had improved quite a bit.

"Bun-buns!" Marie cheered, standing on her toes to see atop the table. Seeing how excited she was, Myuke couldn't help but to smile.

"Better eat 'em up before they run away!"

"I eat! I's hungy!"

Luina watched with a smile as Marie sat down, waiting to dig in.

"You're in a good mood this morning. Did you have a nice dream?"

"We pinnic!"

"'Picnic'?" Luina asked, tiling her head.

“It’s nice outside, so I was thinking we could have a picnic. Or, I suppose just a normal lunch outside.”

“Oh, that sounds lovely! Let’s do it!”

It had been getting warmer with each passing day, so they took whatever chances they got to bask in the sun and enjoy the warmth after months of cold. Despite that, they always ate inside, so Luina really seemed to enjoy the idea of a picnic as a change of pace.

“I wanna have a picnic right now, m’kay? When are we doing it?”

“The doctor will be coming to visit this afternoon, so we’ll have it before then.”

They had a big day ahead of them, and Anima was incredibly nervous. About a month earlier, the doctor had said that both Luina and the child were perfectly healthy and that there were no signs of any complications. As such, Anima and Luina tried to stay calm and collected on the outside, but worries over what-ifs ran through their minds more and more often as the next check-up approached, which was exactly why he had proposed the picnic. He wanted to take everyone’s minds off of that, even if only for a couple hours.

“We’re gonna have to start making lunch right after breakfast! Time to show off my skills!”

“I’ll take care of it; you should go play.”

“I can play during and after the picnic!”

Myuke was excited to make lunch.

During her daily practice, she’d learned to make all sorts of food, and enjoyed cooking even more than when she’d first begun. Anima liked to think that he could make any dish taste just as delicious as she could, but he was the first to admit that her technical skills had already surpassed his.

“Why don’t we make it together, then?”

“Sure! We have to figure out what to make, though.”

“I’m happy you’re all excited for the picnic, but we should start eating. Your eggs will get cold.”

“You’re right. Marie, would you do the honors?”

Marie nodded, then clapped her hands together.

“Thanks for the meal!”

The other four mimicked her, then they all started eating. After they finished and cleaned up, Myuke and Anima got to work on lunch. Normally, Luina would supervise their meal-making, but since Marie was playing outside, she’d gone out to the garden with her and Bram. Bram had found a perfect spot on the grass to lay the blanket the moment she’d stepped outside, so she was sure to have already started basking in the sun.

Back in the kitchen, Anima and Myuke mulled over what would make for the perfect picnic meal. The absence of Luina severely restricted their options, and they couldn’t default to making soup since they were going to be eating outside, which left them with only one option.

“Should we make sandwiches?” Anima suggested.

“That’s a great idea! I’ve made them before—they’re easy, and perfect for outside!”

The pair began preparing plenty of sandwiches. Before long, they were all made and stacked on a plate, so the chef duo headed outside with their meal. When they opened the door, they were greeted by a gentle breeze and sunlight shining peacefully on the green lawn.

“Daddy! Myuke! We’re over here, m’kay?!”

Bram, lying flat on the blanket, waved at them. She’d put it just far enough from the house that it was completely out of the shadows. Marie looked their way with shimmering eyes as they arrived. She was barefoot, her shoes set aside so they wouldn’t dirty the blanket.

“Nummy!”

“I wanna eat, m’kay?!”

“First we have to wash our hands. Luina, how are you feeling?”

“I’m pretty hungry.”

He wasn't exactly asking if she was hungry, but it was a fact that she'd had quite the healthy appetite as of late. She'd barely wanted to eat in the first several months of her pregnancy due to the nausea and vertigo, but she was in the start of her fifth month, and her body seemed to have gotten well over that. Her appetite had returned to normal.

The family went to the well to wash their hands, and on Marie's signal, they gave their thanks and ate their second meal of the day.

"Buttafye!" Marie exclaimed as she started munching away at her third sandwich. The butterfly gracefully fluttered past them on its way toward the house. "I love buttafye!"

"All right! C'mon, Marie, we're gonna catch it, m'kay?"

"Make sure you don't wander too far."

"Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on them. Chase that butterfly all you want, Marie!"

Myuke, also excited to see the butterfly from up-close, quickly put her shoes on and chased after her sisters. The three of them chased the fluttering little bug all over the garden, marveling at its beauty. They still had some sandwiches left, but the girls were way too preoccupied to come back and finish them. Myuke would have been disappointed to see food go to waste, so Anima decided to eat them all. Just as he finished stuffing the last one into his mouth, a soft gust of wind fluttered Luina's long blue hair.

"This breeze feels really nice."

"It does. It's so peaceful out here—we should do this more often."

"The girls are loving it, too. They all love nature."

Anima and Luina snuggled up to each other under the sunlight. The light wind carried the comfortable smell of grass and greenery, enveloping them in the comforting embrace of nature. As they watched the girls chase the butterfly around the garden, Luina started to doze off. With his beloved wife resting against him, Anima was ready to doze off as well, but something caught his attention.

“Ah! Ena!”

Marie’s happy yelp boomed through the garden. Luina’s eyes flew open, and she looked toward the main entrance, where she noticed two people—Ena and the doctor—walking their way, hand in hand. They had probably knocked on the front door, but walked around back when there was no answer and they heard lively voices from the garden.

“Marie! I comed to pay!”

Marie and Ena had become friends about three months earlier. After discussing the future of their cooking lessons, Anima had brought Camilla a gift to thank her for her efforts, told her about what they’d been learning at home, and invited her to lunch. She’d brought Ena with her, and as she was about the same age as Marie, the two had immediately hit it off.

They both enjoyed playing with someone around their own age, so every time the doctor came to the Scarlett house to check up on Luina, she brought Ena with her. Ena let go of the doctor’s hand, and she and Marie trotted over to each other. Watching the two girls happily run toward one another warmed Anima’s heart.

“Please keep an eye on them,” Luina requested, which pulled Anima back to reality. The time had come: Luina was about to get the check-up they were so nervous about.

“I will, don’t worry.”

He watched the two of them disappear into the house, then turned back toward the girls, eager to join them in hopes of slowing his racing heart. Of course, that was only if the girls wanted him to join. If not, he would have to sit back and wrestle with his thoughts.

“Pay with us!”

Ena’s invitation came with a bright smile. Even though they only saw each other once a month, the fact that she remembered him put a smile on his face just as bright as—if not brighter than—Ena’s. Not many things in life rivaled the euphoric feeling of being loved by children.

“Are we going to chase the butterfly?”

“It flew away,” Myuke explained. “We’re gonna play tag now.”

“It’s the perfect game ’cause even if I lose, I get a hug from you, m’kay?”

“So yeah, that’s what we were thinking. What do you say, Ena? Are you okay with Daddy hugging you?”

“I love hugs!”

She wasn’t just okay with it, she outright loved the idea.

“Watch, Daddy!” Marie shouted. “I’s super fass!”

She dashed off and cheekily glanced back at Anima, fishing for compliments. It would only be a matter of time before she fell if he let her keep it up.

“Wow, you *are* fast!” She stopped after Anima’s compliment. “The rest of you had better start running too! If you don’t, I’ll catch you!”

Anima tried to scare the girls into running with his teasing tone, and it definitely worked. The girls scattered in all directions, and their game of tag officially began. While keeping an eye on the area so they wouldn’t go outside, he went after Bram.

“Eek! You caught me! Ooh, new rule, m’kay?! You’ll have to carry anyone you catch until you catch the next person, m’kay?!” Anima obliged, and helped Bram on his back. She energetically cheered him on as he went back on the hunt. “Full steam ahead! Ah, Daddy! Myuke has been spotted, m’kay?!”

He easily caught up to the sluggishly jogging Myuke and gently placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Caught you!”

“I know you got caught on purpose, m’kay? Are you that excited for Daddy to carry you?”

“N-No!” Myuke went bright red in response to Bram’s teasing. “I mean, there are days I want Daddy to hug me, but this time I wanted to get caught to make you feel better! I didn’t want you to start crying ’cause you’re the only one who got caught, understand? S-So, get down, I’m next.”

“Jeez… You should open up more, m’kay?”

Bram climbed down, and Anima, abiding by the rules, picked Myuke up. As soon as he did, Ena jogged up to him on her own and tugged at his sleeve.

“Amima! Up!”

“All right, come on up here! I caught you!”

“So tall! I love up!”

A bit farther away from them, Marie jealously watched as Anima lifted the happy girl high up into the air. Their eyes met, and she immediately made her way over to them.

“I want up too!”

“Well then, come here and I’ll— Sorry, Marie. You’ll have to wait a minute.” Anima swallowed his words as Luina and the doctor returned to the garden. He rushed straight over to them. “That was fast. How did it go?”

“There’s no need to worry, dearie. They’re both perfectly fine.”

“Thank goodness.”

He let out a sigh of relief, but the doctor wasn’t quite finished.

“However! She *must* take it easy. You mustn’t let her stand around for long periods or carry anything heavy. Make sure she has enough support to allow her to relax.”

“I will. Luina, you just focus on taking care of yourself. I enjoy doing the housework, so you can leave it all to me.”

“I know. Thank you.”

After his cooking lesson with Camilla, Anima had promised himself that he would never make Luina feel alone again. She was aware of his resolve, and that allowed her to trust him with anything and everything. He would do all the difficult chores by himself, only letting her help with the easy ones so that she didn’t put too much strain on her body.

“We’ll visit again next month. Ena, we’re going home.”

“Okieee! Bye-bye, Marie!”

“Bye-bye! Come ’gain soon!”

Even though they didn't get to play for very long, both of them seemed to have been satisfied with all the running they'd gotten in, and said goodbye to each other with beaming smiles.

"All right."

Anima switched gears. He looked around to find the deserted picnic blanket flapping in the wind, and the empty plates on top of it on the brink of flipping over. He had to put some weight on the blanket to stop it from flying away, and take the empty plates inside.

"Daddy, up! And piddybag! And tag! I wanna run!" Marie pleaded, looking up at him with puppy-dog eyes. He picked her up, raised her up high, then promptly put her down.

"I'll give you a piggyback ride later, okay? Go play with your sisters while I start cleaning up."

"I'll pick you up as much as you want!"

"My back was *made* for giving piggyback rides, m'kay?!"

Anima got to work while keeping an eye out on the girls. Myuke lifted Marie up as high as she could, then Bram gave her a piggyback ride. Once he'd secured the blanket to the ground, he brought the plates to the well, and he and Luina washed the dishes together.

Later, that evening, Anima was in the dressing room with Luina and Marie. Marie, in an attempt to impress her daddy, took her clothes off as fast as she could. She definitely deserved praise for her incredible display.

"When did you learn to take your clothes off so fast?! I'm amazed!"

"Watch! I do this too!"

Marie put her clothes on the floor, neatly folded them up, and set them in the clothes basket. Once done, she proudly looked up at Anima.

"Wow! You're full of surprises, aren't you?! Well done!"

"I help Daddy?"

Marie had secretly practiced folding clothes as a way of helping Anima, a

gesture that was sure to put a smile on any father's face. Anima pet her head, which prompted a cute giggle from the ticklish little girl.

"Of course! We'll do the laundry together tomorrow, okay?"

"Yaaaaay!" Marie cheered, her hands thrown high in the air.

While watching Marie's joyful smile, Anima took his clothes off, then waited for Luina to finish doing the same. She took her dress off, but started glancing around bashfully instead of removing her underwear.

"It's hard to take my clothes off when I'm being stared at so intently…" she pointed out with flushed cheeks. They saw each other naked on a daily basis, but something was apparently different.

"I'm worried you might trip on your underwear."

She looked Anima in the eyes and pouted her lips.

"I learned a long time ago how to take my clothes off! I'm twenty-one already! Bring Marie inside, we don't want her to catch a cold. I'll be with you in a moment."

She was absolutely right—Marie was standing in the chilly dressing room buck naked. He took Marie's hand, they stepped inside, and he immediately proceeded to check the water temperature with his hand. It was only lukewarm, but that was already much better than standing outside, so they got into the tub. Just as they submerged themselves, they heard voices coming through the window.

"I hope it's not too cold."

"They didn't scream, so I'd call that a win, m'kay? It definitely isn't boiling hot, at least."

The voices belonged to Myuke and Bram. Ever since Myuke had gotten her fire rabbit stone, she'd taken every chance she could get to use it. She'd taken over the lighting of the fireplace and stove, and even adjusting the temperature of the bathwater.

Ever since the resolution of their fight, Bram was closer to her sister than ever before. She loved watching her work tirelessly to help the family.

“Make sure you don’t burn yourself, m’kay?”

“Don’t worry, I’m an expert at this!”

However, she was also too afraid to leave her alone.

“Warm!”

“Give it two, maybe three more minutes!”

“Gotcha! Two, maybe three minutes!”

Myuke went completely silent after that. She was probably too focused on the flame to talk.

“Sorry for the wait.”

Just as Marie held onto the edge of the bath and started splashing around, Luina entered the bathroom. Even though she was pregnant, she still retained her slender arms and legs. Due to how far along she was, though, her breasts had started to get larger, and her stomach was clearly inflated.

“Can I pet?” Marie stopped her splashing and asked.

“Yes, you can. Pet it all you want.”

Marie gently stroked Luina’s stomach and whispered sweet nothings to the baby growing inside. She was going to be a great sister once the baby was born.

“Can I rub it too?”

“Of course.”

Anima touched her stomach. It felt very soft, but it wasn’t squishy. In fact, while it wasn’t about to burst, there was clearly some tension under her skin, as if she were flexing her muscles. The doctor had said that that could be dangerous if it went on for a long period of time, but it usually subsided rather quickly. The tension had only been temporary the day before, and the day before that, too.

“Your stomach has gotten pretty big.”

“It’s only going to get bigger.”

“My tummy big too!”

Marie stood up and smacked her stomach. Anima rubbed her full, round tummy, which prompted a ticklish giggle.

“Your tummy *is* big too. And it’s not just your tummy—you’ve grown a lot. Are your clothes still comfortable?”

“Uh-huh! I love the clofes you buyed me!”

“I’m glad to hear that. How about you, Luina? Do you feel your clothes have gotten too tight lately?”

“Hmm… Not yet, but I’ll definitely grow out of them soon.”

“Right. Then we should—” Anima cut himself off when he realized that Luina wasn’t in the warm water yet. “Come in first, then we’ll talk.”

“Thank you. Excuse me.”

She carefully lowered herself into the water and let out a comfortable moan.

“How’s the water?”

“It’s perfect. We should call the girls in soon.”

“Hear that, girls? Come on in!”

“Loud and clear, m’kay?!”

“We’re coming!”

The soothing crackle of the fire faded, and their lively conversation got quieter and quieter.

“What did you want to say before?”

“We should go out and buy you maternity clothes.”

Luina's wardrobe was nothing to scoff at, but all the clothes she had were from before she’d gotten pregnant. All she had that was still loose enough around the waist was the blue dress she’d worn the day she and Anima had met, but that had become too tight around her chest a couple of months prior. She definitely couldn’t wear it with the pregnancy making her even bigger; they had to get her some new clothes that didn’t suffocate her.

“What do pregnant women usually wear?”

“Clothes that hide—or at least don’t emphasize—your form. Loose dresses are quite common.”

“Dresses, huh? I fear you would be cold in a simple dress; is it okay if you put something on over it?”

“Of course. The coat you got me is very nice and warm. I could wear that over a dress.”

“I’m happy you like it, but that would be too hot.”

Even Bram, the most squeamish about the cold, had given up her winter clothes in recent weeks. If Luina were to wear that coat over a dress, she would likely boil alive. It was tucked away in their closet for a reason.

“Let’s go to the tailor tomorrow. Maybe we’ll find something nice.”

“We go out? I wanna go out!”

“Don’t worry, we won’t leave you behind. I didn’t get to give you a piggyback ride today, so I’ll carry you around all day tomorrow!”

“Yaaay! I love piddybag!”

Marie’s cheer resounded in the acoustic bathroom.

“Sorry we took so long!”

“We’re here, m’kay?!”

Myuke’s and Bram’s arrival was welcomed with another, even livelier cheer from Marie. They rinsed themselves down and entered the tub, causing the water overflow. By normal standards, their bathtub was quite large, but having five people in it at the same time certainly pushed its limits. Their days of full family baths were soon to be over, just like their nights of snuggling up together.

It was a bittersweet realization for Anima, because though it made him sad, it also proved that the girls were growing up nice and healthy. Seeing them grow and develop day by day, week by week, and month by month made him the happiest man in the whole wide world.

“We’re going out to buy Luina new clothes tomorrow. Do you girls want to

join us?”

His proposal was met with two excited nods.

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The next morning, the family set off for Garaat after a quick breakfast with, as promised, Marie riding on Anima’s shoulders. She’d walked the road countless times before, but seeing it from a new point of view was as if a brand-new world had laid itself out before her. She excitedly looked around, taking in the new experience to the fullest.

“You’ll get dizzy from whipping your head around like that.”

Myuke’s warning went in one ear and out the other. She was so absorbed in the new experience that her sister’s words didn’t even register. However, that wonder could only last so long. Bored of the unchanging forest road, she looked to a different activity.

“Daddy, run!”

“All right! Hold on tight!” Anima started running, answering Marie’s request. He kept it slow so she wouldn’t fly off his back, but for the little Marie, even his jogging speed was like using a magic stone that granted super speed. “We’re turning! Hold on tight!”

“Go, Daddy!”

Anima took a turn, kicking dust up in his wake, and returned to Luina and the others.

“Welcome back.”

“That looks super fun, m’kay?”

“Uh-huh, it was! Daddy suuuper fast! I wanna be fast like Daddy!”

“I’m sure you can be. You have a real talent for running. You’ll catch up to me in no time, that’s for sure.”

“I can? I wanna pactice tag!”

“You do? Does that mean you want to get down?” Anima asked with a hint of disappointment in his voice. He thoroughly enjoyed pampering Marie.

“Uh-huh! But, but, I want piddybag later!”

“Of course! I’ll give you a piggyback ride whenever you want!”

With that promise made, and with Myuke and Bram chasing after her so she wouldn’t be alone, Marie got down from Anima’s shoulders and immediately started running. She ran full speed ahead for a couple of seconds, then, copying Anima, turned around and ran back.

“I back!”

She buried her face in Anima’s stomach.

“I was right, you’re really fast.”

“So fast that your hair got ruffled in the wind.”

Luina fixed Marie’s hair with her fingers—to Marie’s absolute joy. Practical purpose or not, she loved having her head pet.

“Daddy, up!”

“Okay, here we go.”

She wanted to be carried in his arms for a change of pace, so Anima picked her up and they made their way to Garaat. Once there, they made a beeline to the tailor via the busy main road.

“What tailor are we going to? They better be pretty good, m’kay?”

“I was thinking we would go to our usual place. Unless, of course, Luina wants to go to a different one.”

“No, that sounds perfect. I know exactly what I’m looking for, so we probably won’t take long. I’m confident they’ll have a loose dress in stock.”

“How about we grab something to eat after we’re done shopping?” Anima proposed.

They had come into town with a specific goal in mind, but they’d had very few chances to go out as a family as of late. They were going to have some fun before going home.

“I want wapples!” Marie exclaimed, to the surprise of absolutely no one. She loved waffles to the point that they had even become a motif in many of her

drawings. Anima wasn't about to forego seeing her smile as she munched away at one.

"That sounds great to me. How about you, girls?"

"I'm totally in. Waffles are yummy!"

"I really like them too."

"I'm starving, m'kay?! Mine's gonna be doused in chocolate sauce!"

"Honey for me!"

"I'm, I'm, I'm, umm…"

There was no shortage of topping choices, which was making Marie panic.

"You don't have to pick right now."

"Anima is right. In fact, why don't we each get a different topping and then split them all into five pieces? That way, we get to try all kinds of different toppings."

"Uh-huh! I try aaall the nummies!"

They reached the familiar tailor just as Marie's conundrum was resolved. Inside, the shop was covered wall to wall with all kinds of colorful, mostly women's clothes. Anima had a hunch that finding maternity clothes wasn't going to be an issue, and sure enough, they dug out a nice-looking black one-piece mere seconds into their search. It was a bit larger in size than her usual clothes, which meant that it would likely fit her perfectly.

"What do you think of this?"

"I like it. It's really nice to the touch, and it looks thick. I probably won't need to wear anything above this to stay warm."

"I'm glad to hear that. We should get a couple more, just so you have options."

"Hmm, let's see…" Luina muttered as she went back to looking through the clothes.

"How 'bout this?" Myuke asked, holding up a dress.

“I love it, m’kay?”

“Cuuute!”

The girls rifled through clothes as well, and they definitely had an eye for fashion. Every single piece they suggested looked great, leaving only the question of whether they would fit Luina.

“These all look very comfortable, and I like the colors, too. The girls were kind enough to pick them out for me, so we should get them.”

“Sounds like a plan. Go try them on; we’ll wait here. Will you be okay by yourself?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t trip over my clothes.”

“That’s good to hear, but don’t be afraid to ask for help if you need it. Just say the word and I’ll be there in a flash.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I’ll go now; I shouldn’t be long.”

Luina took the clothes to the tailor and disappeared into the back of the shop. After a few minutes, she returned with the clothes in hand.

“They’re a bit baggy, but that’s okay because all of them are really comfortable.”

“Great! Let’s get them, then.”

Anima took the dresses from Luina and went to the counter to pay.

“Time for our well-deserved waffles, m’kay?!”

“Woo-hoo!”

Bram and Marie cheered for the upcoming treat the moment they stepped out of the store. Marie had even started to drool at the thought of them—Anima’s cue to hurry up.

Excited to see their smiles as they all got their hands on their waffles, he and the girls started making their way toward the plaza when they heard crying nearby. He looked around and found a woman panicking in front of a baby stroller. She was trying to calm her crying baby by dangling a rattle in front of them.

“Is something wrong?” Luina asked him.

“I was looking at that.”

Anima pointed at the baby crying in its stroller.

“The baby stroller? We’ll need one once our child is born.”

“Why don’t we get one now?”

“This early?”

She was surprised, and rightfully so. She still had about five months until childbirth, so there was no need for them to buy one so soon.

“I don’t want to drag you around town right after you give birth. And who knows, maybe there will be a baby boom right around the time of your delivery and the strollers will be sold out.”

It was highly unlikely, but there was a chance of that happening nonetheless. Leaving such an important purchase until right after delivery would only put unnecessary stress on them, so he wanted to get it out of the way as soon as possible.

“Seriously? C’mon, Daddy, that’ll never happen. But still, I agree with you. We should get everything as soon as we can. Having a bunch of baby supplies at home will really make it feel like the baby’s coming soon, which’ll help all of us prepare for it.”

Myuke’s sound argument managed to convince Luina.

“Okay, let’s go buy some supplies now.”

“Thank you. Sorry, girls, but you heard your mother. Waffles are going to have to wait a bit.”

“It’s fine, m’kay?”

Marie was a little bit sad, but Myuke and Bram readily agreed.

“Daddy, what we buy?”

The postponing of the waffles must have temporarily blocked Marie’s hearing, as she apparently missed their conversation. Either that, or she didn’t understand what was happening.

“Clothes and toys for the baby.”

“We buy toys?”

“Yes, so we can cheer up the baby if they start crying.”

“I like toys! I choose!”

Anima had feared that she would be upset over the waffles, but the mention of toys took her mind right off of them.

“That would be perfect! You’re an expert on toys, after all! Do you think you can find the best ones for the baby?”

Marie’s eyes sparkled, set on rising to the challenge.

“I’m glad you guys’re excited, but I dunno where to buy baby stuff, m’kay? Do you?”

Anima’s drive was halted by that simple question.

“Good point; I have no idea. Do you?”

“Sorry, but I don’t know either…”

Luina was stuck as well. Anima had figured that running an orphanage would have prepared her for situations like these, but it was likely that her parents had furnished the place before she’d taken it over.

“It’s okay, I’ll show you where it is,” Myuke said.

“Way to go, Myuke! You’re like a walking map, m’kay?!”

“Myukey ’mazing!”

“Aw, jeez. It’s nothing.”

She tried to play it off, but her flushed cheeks betrayed her.

“I don’t know what we’d do without you, Myuke.”

“You always come through when we need you the most.”

“S-Seriously, you guys…”

Myuke went bright red as they kept piling on the praise, then started guiding them through the town with a big smile on her face.

“It’s right there.”

The baby supplies store was right behind the tailor’s. While they didn’t visit the area very often, they were sure to have walked past the place a handful of times. Anima had definitely passed by when he was hunting for Marie’s birthday present and ran into the lost Ena. He had escorted her to the toy store, which happened to be right next to the baby supplies store.

Following Myuke’s lead, they entered the store. Anima was immediately taken aback by the sheer quantity of goods he had never seen at any point in his life.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“It’s a baby blanket,” Luina responded. “You wrap the baby up in it.”

“So it’s baby clothes?”

“No, it’s for keeping them warm. It also helps keep their head upright when they can’t hold it up themselves.”

“You’re surprisingly knowledgeable about all this.”

“My parents told me about most of it years ago, and there were even times when I would change Marie’s diapers.”

“That’s reassuring. All right, what about this?”

“That’s a cloth diaper. You need to keep babies clean, so you have to change it every time it gets dirty. I remember we’d have to change Marie’s fifteen times a day sometimes!”

“They get dirty that quickly? In that case, we’ll need at least thirty, assuming we can wash them every day. Maybe we should buy forty instead—that way we’re covered for rainy days, too.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“I’ll count out forty of ’em, m’kay?!” Bram offered.

“I’ll count bibs!” Myuke jumped in to help, using her knowledge from the time Marie was still little. “We need a bunch of those too, right?”

“That would be great. Could you count out thirty, please?”

Anima and Luina left the two of them to get them the necessary number of diapers and bibs, and started walking through the store until Anima finally found something he was familiar with.

“These are clothes, right?”

“Yes, they are. Some can be opened at the front, which makes changing the baby much easier, so I think we should get those. Seven should be enough to start.”

“Seven of those, a baby stroller… ah, and perhaps a rattle to calm them down when they start crying?”

“Hmm… Sure, I don’t see why not. It never hurts to have one.”

Anima set off in search of a rattle, pulling a baby stroller he’d found behind him. By the time he found one, Myuke and Bram had finished their quests of gathering the necessary supplies.

“Well done, girls. It must’ve been difficult to count out so many.”

“It was a walk in the park!”

“I can’t wait to learn how to change a diaper, m’kay?!”

“Me too. I think we’re ready to pay and go get waffles. Do we need anything else?”

“Nope,” Luina answered, “we’re all set.”

“Yummy waffles, m’kay?!”

Seeing the excitement in his daughters’ eyes made his heart dance, but it quickly tensed up with shock as he came to a grave realization.

“Where’s Marie?”

Marie hadn’t answered the call for waffles, and that definitely wasn’t normal. When he thought more about it, he noticed that he hadn’t heard her voice at all since they’d entered the shop. The girls also caught on, and immediately began scouring the building.

“Marie! Where are you?!”

“We’re going to get some waffles, m’kay?!”

“Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

No matter how much they looked, Marie wouldn’t come out, which only meant one thing: she wasn’t there.

“It’s my fault…”

Anima felt like a failure for not having caught on sooner.

“Don’t blame yourself. I didn’t notice that she was gone either…”

“No, it’s definitely my fault. She didn’t like that I made us wait to get waffles, so she ran off…”

“She would have run away from home countless times already if that was all it took. We don’t know why she disappeared, okay? The most important thing right now is finding her.”

She calmed Anima down with a gentle tone.

“You’re right.” Luina was just as anxious as Anima, and it was his duty to calm her down, not the other way around. Letting her get worked up probably wasn’t good for the baby. “I’ll go look around, you stay here.”

“I’ll go too, m’kay?”

“Okay. Bram, you’re with me. Myuke, you stay here with Luina, okay? It’ll be all right; we’ll find her.”

“Good luck, Anima.”

“Please don’t get mad at her when you find her. She isn’t doing this to upset anyone. There must be a reason she ran off.”

“I know. I won’t get mad.”

With that, Anima and Bram left the store. They glanced around the area, but couldn’t see her anywhere.

“I wanna use the Jade Dragon stone, m’kay?”

“Why?”

“’Cause it stands out, m’kay? Marie’ll totally notice the ruckus outside, and finding a huge dragon in the middle of the street isn’t exactly a hard thing to

do.”

“Oh, I see. That’s not a bad idea, but we shouldn’t go that far unless we absolutely have to. The whole town is enjoying their day outside, doing some shopping. We can’t terrorize them all just to find Marie.”

The dragon costume had been popular during the Costume Festival, but a real dragon appearing out of nowhere was an entirely different thing. People would be terrified of her, and Anima knew the repercussions of being viewed as a monster better than anyone else. He wouldn’t wish that on his worst enemy, let alone one of his beloved daughters.

“I can get on the roof and look, m’kay?”

“It *would* be easier to scan the area from the rooftops, but I don’t want you to slide off and hurt yourself.” He could have gone up there himself, but that didn’t eliminate the danger. Another option was for them to split up, but he wasn’t a fan of that idea either. Were Bram to disappear from his sight while looking for Marie, any remaining doubts about him being a failure as a father would be gone. “Marie couldn’t have gone far. Let’s try calling her name for now.”

“I agree, m’kay?”

Anima and Bram each took a deep breath and screamed at the top of their lungs.

“Marie! Where are you?!”

“We’re going for waffles, m’kay?!”

There was no answer, but they both came to the same sudden conclusion.

“Maybe she went to get waffles.”

“Exactly! Let’s go to the plaza, m’kay?!”

Hand in hand, they rushed to the plaza, but there was no sign of Marie. Anima was starting to get extremely worried. Where could she have possibly gone?

“Amima!”

Ena was jogging up to them with a big smile on her face and a waffle in her

hands.

“Hello, Anima. Are you out with your girls?”

Camilla followed shortly behind her, though her husband wasn’t with them. Perhaps it was his birthday, and they’d gone out to buy him a present.

“Have you seen Marie?”

“Marie? No, I haven’t…”

“Oh…”

“Did she run off somewhere?” Camilla asked in a worried tone.

Ena had disappeared on her in much the same fashion just a couple months earlier, so she understood how Anima felt. However, upon thinking about that incident, he came up with another idea.

Ah, right.

He remembered the concept he’d used to find where Camilla had been waiting. Upon finding Ena, his first instinct was to check her absolute favorite place in town. That was the logic by which he was able to reunite the two at the toy store—which just so happened to be right next to the baby supplies store.

“Yeah, m’kay?! Marie just—”

“Let’s go, Bram.”

“Huh? Tell me what’s going on, m’kay? Where are we going?”

“To Marie.”

“You know where she is?! M’kay!”

“Yes! I know exactly where she is!”

Anima took Bram’s hand and they rushed into the toy store. Just like he’d though, she was right there, rifling through toys with a serious look on her face.



“Marie!” She whipped her head around when she heard Anima’s voice, and he immediately ran up to her and hugged her tightly. “Thank goodness…”

“Daddy?”

“We looked all over for you, m’kay? How’d you end up here?”

Marie was clearly waiting for this question.

“I choose toys!”

“Oh, you want a new toy?”

“Nuh-uh,” she replied, shaking her head. “I choose toys for baby!”

“For the baby? Ah, I see. You came here to help me.”

Before they made their way over to the baby supplies store, he’d asked Marie to help them pick out toys for the baby. Taking that request to heart, she’d made her way into none other than the toy store.

“But, but, I didn’t finded fun toys…”

“Oh, I see. Thank you anyway, Marie. I think you deserve a reward for your hard work. Who likes waffles?”

“Meee! I love wapples!”

“I want some too. I’m starving, m’kay?”

“I am as well. But first, let’s get back to Luina and Myuke.”

Anima took Marie’s and Bram’s hands, and the trio made their way back to their patiently waiting family.

Chapter Five: One-Year Anniversary

By her seventh month of pregnancy, Luina's stomach had gotten big enough to lift even her maternity clothes. She no longer insisted on doing her part in the chores, which was difficult on her considering how active she'd been all her life, but it was impossible for her to properly lean over.

Having nothing to do, Luina spent the majority of each day in the safety of the bed. So too, however, did Anima and the girls, as keeping her company was one of their highest priorities.

They'd gotten a new table and sofa for the bedroom so the girls could draw and play while also spending time with their mommy, but with the weather getting warmer every day, both Anima and Luina were starting to feel bad for them.

Even the doctor, who was visiting Luina every other week, had suggested that she take a light walk outside every once in a while. Per that advice, short family walks around the garden had become a daily activity, and they even visited the town once a week.

Anima and the girls were currently taking their daily walk in their garden, planning their exciting weekly outing to Garaat, which was coming up tomorrow.

"I kinda wanna go to a café," Myuke proposed, pushing the baby stroller as exercise for when the baby was born.

The day prior had been Bram's day to push the stroller, which she'd managed without any issues, and the next day would be Marie's chance to try to rise to the challenge. They'd been practicing ever since they'd bought the stroller, and while Myuke and Bram had gotten a good handle of it, Marie was clearly struggling with the task. She could barely reach the handle, and couldn't see inside the stroller at all when the sun cover was down.

Anima was worried about her, but he was even more worried about what

would happen if the baby was in the stroller while she was trying to push it. Even so, despite the difficulties, Marie was actively looking forward to walking with the baby, and he didn't want to spoil her enthusiasm. She would likely be fine if they were on a well-kept road and he paid extra attention to them.

"You look super comfortable with the stroller, m'kay?"

"It's easy. I can't wait to walk with the baby."

"Me too!" Marie exclaimed from right next to Anima's ear. He had expected her to ask if she could ride in the stroller, but that didn't happen. Her favorite spot was still Anima's back, and piggyback rides had become her most common method of transport when they went out on walks. "I can rattle!"

"I'm sure the baby'll stop crying right away if they see you rattling."

Marie really liked the rattle they'd bought, and had recently started to practice calming the baby down with the help of her sisters. A real baby definitely wouldn't be as easy to calm down as Myuke and Bram, but everyone was convinced that her enthusiasm would be enough to make it work.

The five of them enjoyed the gentle rays of the sun as they strolled across the lush green lawn. Toward the end of their daily walk, as they passed by the well, Luina suddenly stopped and longingly looked its way. Anima followed her gaze, but didn't see anything worthy of note. All that was there was the lawn, the small wooden fence, and the nearby forest.

"Why did you stop? Are you hurt?"

Hearing that, the girls were struck with a tinge of worry as well. She turned back towards her family and shook her head, looking at them with a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, I'm perfectly fine."

"Then how come you spaced out?" Myuke asked, utterly lost.

"I was just remembering what happened last year."

A sudden breeze blew through the garden and fluttered Luina's hair, the sight of which completely spellbound Anima. Her gentle eyes and adorable smile took his breath away, filling him with a sense of warmth, admiration, and awe

as butterflies took flight in his stomach. In that moment, he realized what she was referring to.

“It’s already been a year since we met, huh…?”

“Yes. In just two days, we’ll have met exactly one year ago, making it our first anniversary.”

Anima was enamored by Luina’s soft yet excited words.

“It’s been a whole year…”

Their first year together felt to Anima like it had flown by. Every day since their marriage had been filled with joy and happiness, and there had never been a boring second with his family by his side. Days felt like they lasted twenty-four minutes rather than twenty-four hours.

“Oh wow, has it really been that long? I remember coming home and all of a sudden Mommy was married. That was a shocker. …Wait, Daddy, did you really forget your one-year anniversary?”

Myuke was in disbelief, and Anima had no defense. He did forget about it until Luina brought it up.

“I’m sorry…”

“Oh, no, it’s okay. I only remembered it as we were walking past this spot,” Luina confessed, which prompted an exasperated sigh from Myuke.

“Jeez, you two really were made for each other. Like, for real, how can you *both* forget about your very first anniversary?! We’ll have to have a big celebration—at least as big as the one we had for your birthdays!”

“I cebebate too!”

“I’ll help too, m’kay? We’ll make your anniversary even better than your wedding ceremony was!”

“We didn’t have a ceremony.”

Bram couldn’t believe her ears.

“Why not?! You two’re so lovey-dovey around each other that it makes *me* blush, m’kay?! I figured you woulda had a super cute ceremony! Unless you

weren't that close back then?"

"No, that's not it. We were head over heels for each other from the moment we saw each other. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, head over heels indeed."

It had taken them a few days after getting married to share their first kiss, but they had undoubtedly loved each other from the very first moment.

"Then it makes no sense, m'kay?! Are marriage ceremonies not a thing here?!"

"No, they are," Myuke explained. "Most couples have them. Rich people usually have huge parties with dozens if not hundreds of guests, while poorer people have small ceremonies with their families."

When they'd gotten married, Luina had had no money or family besides Myuke and Marie. She'd never brought up the idea of a ceremony, either. As for Anima, he'd had a completely different reason.

"I was just so happy about our marriage that the idea of a ceremony never so much as crossed my mind."

"Honestly, Daddy, that doesn't surprise me at all. I am surprised that Mommy didn't bring it up, though."

"I didn't bring it up for the very same reason. Listening to Mom talk about her wedding made me want to have one as well, but marrying and being together with Anima was fulfilling enough for me."

Hearing Luina's reasoning thrilled Anima, and the fact that he hadn't been the reason they didn't have a ceremony was the icing on the cake.

"I'm glad neither of you thinks it's a big deal, but you missed an amazing chance, Daddy, m'kay?"

"What chance?"

"You can only ever see Mommy wear her wedding dress once in your life, m'kay? It's supposed to be the most beautiful moment in a person's life. 'Sides, a girl's cutest when she says you-know-what while wearing that dress."

“Luina, we’re having a ceremony.”

Anima didn’t need to hear more, and Luina’s sweet giggle suggested that she was on board with the idea as well.

“That sounds lovely.”

The thought of having a real wedding ceremony was getting Anima visibly excited. He wanted to hold it in two days’ time, so they would need to plan the event quickly. It was a daunting task, but he was up to it.

“We can’t just jump right into this, though. We don’t nearly have enough time to plan a ceremony for your anniversary. I mean, maybe if we do it in a super-tight circle with just us it’s possible, but don’t forget that Mommy’s pregnant. We can’t let her get worked up and do a lot of work.”

Myuke’s warning pulled Anima back to reality. She was completely right; he didn’t want to force Luina to overexert herself, and he also didn’t want to rush the preparations. Luina was probably just as excited for the ceremony as he was, which meant that they had to make sure the once-in-a-lifetime event was absolutely perfect.

“It seems like we’ll have to wait to have our wedding ceremony,” Luina said.

“I think that’s for the best. Even if we do hold off on it, we still have our anniversary coming up. I like the idea of dressing up for the occasion.”

Luina must’ve thought the same thing as she immediately nodded to his proposal.

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The next day was the day of the family’s weekly outing to Garaat. After having breakfast, they all put on their outside clothes and left the house. It was a warm day, with the occasional gentle breeze making the weather perfect for a walk through the town.

“Hold on tight! You don’t want to fall off!” Anima warned Marie, riding on his back, as a gust of wind fluttered her hair. She tightly wrapped her arms around his neck--so much so that someone with less physical prowess than him would likely have suffocated.

“I like wind! It’s nice ’n cool!”

She clearly wasn’t scared of being blown off. On the contrary, she was enjoying being on Anima’s back.

“There’s something in my eyes, m’kay?”

Bram’s complaint was accompanied by rapid blinking. The wind had probably blown some dirt into her eyes. Even though they were walking on a paved road, the dust and dirt particles that had accumulated in the gaps between the stones were easily kicked up by the wind, turning them into tiny weapons of mass frustration. On top of that, Bram was an easy target, as she had much larger eyes than the others, who had yet to suffer at the hands of the wind.

“Hide behind me,” Anima offered.

“It’d look super weird if we all walked in a straight line behind you.”

“Exactly. It’d make it really hard to talk, too. Let’s just hurry to the store, m’kay?”

“That’s a good idea. Myuke, where can we buy a wedding dress?”

He trusted Myuke’s knowledge of the town, but even she looked unsure.

“I’d guess at the tailor on the main road? It’s the biggest one in town, so that’s gonna be our best shot, but I’m not exactly sure.”

“So there’s no wedding clothes specialist?” Anima asked.

“There might be one in Barjyo or in the capital, but not here. There’s not enough weddings around here that we need one.”

As long as there was at least one wedding in Garaat ever, there should’ve been a merchant selling wedding clothes. They simply had to find them, and the biggest tailor in town was definitely a good starting point.

“I bought a wedding dress in Barjyo, so I can take you to that store, m’kay? I’ll use the Jade Dragon stone, then you hop on my back and we can be there in just a couple hours!”

“Nope, you’d freak out the entire town. Plus, what if we *do* get one and it doesn’t even fit? We can’t exactly carry Mommy with us.”

“I thought I was onto something, m’kay?”

“Thank you, Bram. I appreciate the thought.”

Luina’s thanks and head-petting made Bram giggle, but not even that could solve their wedding dress problem.

“I don’t think there’s more than a couple dresses around here, m’kay? What if none of them fit you?”

“That’s a good question,” Myuke replied. “Her height’s pretty average, but her chest sure isn’t.”

“Right? It’s gotten even bigger recently, too, m’kay?”

“I like Mommy’s chest! It’s soff ’n cuddly!”

“It *is* pretty great, m’kay?”

“I love it as well, but her bust size limits our options. I’m sure none of you want her to be uncomfortable in her wedding dress. We’re going to have to find one that’s loose and easily adjustable.”

“Can we not talk about my chest in the middle of the street, please?!”

Luina was staring at the ground, trying to avoid eye contact with everyone in an attempt to hide her embarrassment.

“Let’s head over to the tailor.”

On Anima’s suggestion, they followed the main street over to the shop that was packed full of both clothes and people. Such a large store was sure to have a dress for Luina—or so it should have.

“Not even one…”

“Not a single wedding dress…”

They’d explored the entirety of the shop, but weren’t able to find the snow-white dress they were looking for. Imitating Anima’s disappointed head-hang, Marie slumped onto his back.

“If this place didn’t have one, I kinda doubt anywhere else will,” Myuke said defeatedly.

Visiting every single tailor in town was an option, but Anima didn't want to drag Luina around all day. It wouldn't be good for her health. "Still, we should probably check at least one more shop, and I think I know which one. If we take the long way there, we'll even pass by two others."

Anima could have rushed off to Barjyo to pick up a dress for Luina, but getting back before the next morning would have proven difficult. If something were to happen along the way, he could miss his anniversary, which was obviously off the table for him. Moreover, he couldn't in good conscience leave Luina and the kids alone for a whole day. Not only would they miss him, but he also had to be with them in case any issues arose. As such, they were going to have to make do with whatever Garaat had to offer.

"We know there are none at our usual tailor," Anima noted, "so I agree, we should check somewhere else."

"The closest one's about five minutes from here. It's tiny and old, but it might be worth a shot. Whaddaya think?"

"I don't mind. How about you, Luina?"

Luina was spacing out, completely silent. She only pulled herself together after Anima called her name a few times.

"Sorry, what were you saying?"

"We were thinking about looking at another store, but… are you okay?"

"Oh, I was thinking about the wedding dress. Would you come with me? There's a place I'd like to visit."

"Of course. Just as long as it's not in Barjyo or the capital."

"No, we're not going that far. There's a place around here that I really want to check, though there's a good chance they won't have it anymore."

"Why not? Have you seen people buying wedding dresses there?"

"What place are you talking about?" Myuke chimed in to ask.

Luina struggled to talk as all eyes gathered on her. It was almost like she felt wrong even suggesting her idea.

“…A second-hand store,” she finally managed to say. When she did, Anima immediately realized just what she was hoping to find.

“Do you want to look for your Mom’s wedding dress?”

She cast her eyes downward and slowly opened her mouth.

“Do you remember how I told you we had to sell most of our possessions to survive? Unfortunately, one of those things was Mom’s wedding dress…”

A wedding dress was more like a memento than anything else. It was meant to be worn only once, then kept as a treasure. Luina had had a great relationship with her mother before she passed, so selling something of such importance out of necessity had to have been incredibly difficult for her. There was no doubt she blamed herself for having to get rid of it.

“It’s not your fault; you only did it because you had to. If you hadn’t sold it, the children wouldn’t have had a place to live. I’m sure your mother would be proud of you for raising the girls with everything you had and teaching them to always be kind.”

Anima tried to console her while Marie reached out and pet her head.

“It’s ’kay, Mommy!”

“Cheer up! I’m super grateful for everything you did for us.”

“You’re the best mommy ever, m’kay?”

Luina started to tear up in response to her family’s kind words.

“All right, let’s go to the second-hand store!” Anima proposed in a cheerful tone.

It was a tiny store on one of the back streets. Upon entering, the family was hit with the thick smell of the old clothes hung up in rows all around the store and against the walls, creating a network of artificial aisles. As they browsed, they found that around a fifth of their inventory didn’t even seem to be able to fulfill its duty of covering body parts and providing warmth. At best, those pieces could be repurposed as rags.

“Does this store buy *literally* anything?” Myuke asked in a hushed voice so she didn’t accidentally insult the owner.

“They take most things, and apparently they don’t pay for clothes that are in terrible condition.”

“So it’s basically a big garbage can, huh? And look, they’re even trying to make a profit off the unusable clothes.”

“Are we gonna try to find the wedding dress in all this? It’s gonna take a while, m’kay?”

“It’ll be fun! It’s like a treasure hunt!” Myuke cheerfully exclaimed to hype everyone up. It seemed to have worked, as Marie quickly hopped off Anima’s back and started her treasure hunt.

“This iiit?”

She quickly found something interesting, and proudly presented a shirt with animal patterns sewn into it. She’d either missed a prompt or had no idea what a wedding dress looked like.

“It’s a very cute shirt, but it’s not a wedding dress.”

“Marie, listen to me, m’kay? Do you remember the clothes I wore at the farm?”

“Uh-huh! It was white, ’n big, ’n super cute!”

“I’m glad you liked it, m’kay? We’re looking for something just like it. My wedding dress is back at home, but it’s too small for Mommy, m’kay?”

Marie, finally understanding the objective, reluctantly put the shirt back on the rack. She stepped back, took one final look at it, waved goodbye, and slowly turned back around.

“It’s okay, Marie. We’ll buy you a brand-new one,” Anima told her.

That was all it took for Marie to cheer up, as she joyfully began looking for a wedding dress. With her leading the charge, the others got to work as well. Though it was effectively a labyrinth of clothes, the store was small enough that they didn’t have to worry about someone getting lost—but Anima decided to stay with Marie just in case.

“Ah!” Luina gasped, leading Anima, Myuke, and Bram to rush over to her. In doing so, they found that she was clutching a white article of clothing. It looked

more like Anima’s robe than a wedding dress, but it filled Luina with joy nonetheless, her wide smile freshening up the store full of old clothes. “This was Dad’s robe!”



Anima finally understood why she was so happy. After all this time, she found her Dad's clothes she painfully parted with out of desperation.

"It looks brand-new!"

"This has gotta be the crown jewel of this store, m'kay? Actually, I'm surprised they haven't sold i— Oh…"

Bram cut herself off when she noticed how much they were asking for it. People who frequented second-hand stores usually weren't looking for high-end clothes, especially not ones with that sort of price tag.

"Anima, would you wear this tomorrow?"

"I would love to."

Anima happily took the robe. He hadn't even tried it on, but it looked like it would be a perfect fit.

"I never thought I'd see Dad's robe again. I'm so happy we came here."

"It's great; I'm so happy for you. Now we just need to find your mother's wedding dress."

With an energetic nod, they went back to scouring the store again. Just as they got started, though, Marie trotted up to them with a wide smile, pulling something behind her.

"Mommy, lookie!"

"Ah!"

Luina's eyes popped wide open, which wasn't that surprising, considering that Marie was pulling a wedding dress behind her.

"I finded it! I finded white, and big, and, and, I pulleded it!"

"Great job, Marie!"

"That's awesome, m'kay? So, was this your mommy's, Mommy?"

"Yes, this was Mom's." Luina couldn't contain her smile as it spread across her face, tears welling up in her eyes. Her smile widened even further as she took the dress from Marie and hugged it tightly to her chest. "I'm so happy we found

it. Shall we see if it fits?”

They spread it out and held it up next to her. The length couldn’t have been more perfect, and with the waistline set just below the bust, there was plenty of room for her stomach—though none of that really mattered. Regardless of the dress’ practicality, they were going to buy it. It held a lot of importance to Luina, and it would have been a crime to let it collect dust in a second-hand store.

They went up to the counter, bought the two clothes, and left the store. As they walked the paved street in high spirits, Anima held the clothes to his chest, listening attentively to Marie’s passionate tale of finding the wedding dress within the maze that was the store. Amidst their cheerful conversation, they spotted a familiar face walking toward them with a warm smile.

“Oh, if it isn’t my little Luina.”

The lady from the fruit stall greeted them, carrying a basket full of vegetables. She was likely out shopping for her dinner.

“I finded the wenning dess!” Marie boasted, looking up at the lady with a smug expression. She was clearly fishing for compliments, which the woman was more than happy to provide.

“That’s very impressive; you’re such a big girl. But hmm, a wedding dress? Are you holding a ceremony?”

“No, nothing like that,” Luina explained. “Tomorrow is our first anniversary. We’re just going to spend a nice, relaxing day at home, but we wanted something special to wear to celebrate.”

“That sounds like a grand ol’ time! Come with me, I’ve got somethi—”

“Eek!” Bram shuddered as a sudden gust of wind blew past them. “Rghhh, I hate sand, m’kay?! Why does it always have to get in my eyes?!”

“Haha, I guess the sand’s in love with you.”

“I wish it would leave me alone, m’kay?!”

Once again, Bram struggled to rub the sand out of her eyes. They’d gotten what they’d come for, and with Bram being tortured by nature, it was high time

they headed home. Staying any longer would only make her more upset, not to mention tire Luina out.

“Thank you. We’ll be sure to visit next time.”

“Good, good. C’mon by any time, I’ll give you a discount! Take care getting home!”

They said goodbye to the woman and made their way home while chatting about all kinds of things.

That night, after taking a warm, relaxing bath, Bram, Myuke, and Marie headed into the dressing room. Luina and Anima stayed for a bit longer so as not to overcrowd it.

“Come to the playroom when you’re done changing, m’kay?” Bram whispered.

“’Kaaay,” Marie agreed in a hushed voice, but Myuke wasn’t so keen on the idea.

“You want to play this late? I still need to think about what to make for breakfast tomorrow, just so you know.”

“I just wanna talk. It won’t take long, m’kay?”

Bram’s serious tone managed to convince her.

“All right, but let’s finish changing for now. We don’t wanna make Mommy and Daddy wait too long.”

They quickly changed into their pajamas and headed into the hallway, which was brightly illuminated thanks to the lamp Anima had affixed to the wall. He’d gotten it specifically because he was worried that Luina could trip as she walked the dark hallway at night, and Myuke had been tasked with lighting it every night before dusk, using a chair to reach it. Bram also played a part in the job, as it was her duty to make sure Myuke didn’t fall off the chair.

After easily navigating the bright hallway, they made it to the pitch-black playroom.

“Myuke, turn on the lights please, m’kay?”

She found a lamp using what little light was seeping in from the hall, used a magic stone to light it, and set it in front of the mirror so the reflected light would illuminate the whole room.

“So, you wanted to talk about something?”

Myuke and Marie stood before the lamp, waiting for Bram to start. She closed the door and turned toward them.

“I wanna talk about Mommy and Daddy’s anniversary celebration, m’kay?”

The two girls immediately got what was going on. She wanted to plan something for them, just like they had for their birthdays.

“I can watch house!”

“That’s very impressive, but I think we should come up with something else this time. Mommy was already tired after today’s trip into town; I don’t think she’d wanna go out for the entire day. Besides, she really wants to wear her wedding dress.”

“Walking around in a wedding dress sounds hard, and the wind’ll get it all dusty. We need something else, m’kay?”

Bram started to think while looking at her sisters.

“I can co’gaturate!” Marie suggested.

“That’s a great idea!”

“Our first present is settled, m’kay?”

Marie celebrated her success before quickly restarting her search for ideas.

“Got anything, Myuke?”

“Hmm… I’m thinking we could make an anniversary feast for them.”

“That sounds great, but I won’t be able to help a lot, m’kay?”

“I can cheer!”

“Cheering would help a ton!”

“It’d make us work twice as fast, m’kay?! But I dunno if we can pull off a feast…”

“Yeah, you might be right. I learned how to make a few different things, but I don’t think I can do a full, anniversary-worthy meal all by myself. I could maybe pull something off with Daddy’s help, but we can’t really ask for his help.”

“We definitely gotta do it in secret, m’kay? It’s fine if they find out, but I really want it to be a surprise.”

They’d kept their birthday present a secret until the big day, and that approach had definitely worked. Luina’s and Anima's looks of astonishment and the genuine smiles that followed were still vivid in the girls’ minds. They wanted to replicate or even outdo that accomplishment with their anniversary present.

“Yeah, I want it to be a surprise too. The only problem is that we have to come up with a present, and if we don’t do it quick, we won’t have anything.”

“I wish we knew about this a couple days ago, m’kay? We coulda come up with something if we had more time. One day isn’t nearly enough time to— Ah!”

There, Bram had an epiphany.

“Ooh, I know that look. You thought of something, didn’t you?”

“Me! Tell me!”

Answering her sisters’ excitement, Bram presented her plan. The two looked at her in awe after she finished.

“I like!”

“I’m *sure* they’ll love it! Y’know, I actually feel kinda bad about today. Everyone was having so much fun, but then I had to come in and embarrass Mommy…”

“You only said that ’cause you wanted her dress to be perfect. Don’t beat yourself up over it, m’kay?”

“Thanks, I feel a lot better now.” Myuke nodded with a smile. “Anyway, now that we’ve got a plan, we—”

“Girls! Where are you?!”

Myuke was interrupted by Anima’s voice coming from downstairs. His call

marked the end of their meeting, as not answering him would either make him suspicious or give him a heart attack.

“Just make sure you don’t get found out, m’kay?”

“’Kaaay…” Marie yawned.

“Well, tomorrow’s the big day.”

“We’ve got lots to do, so let’s go to bed early, m’kay?”

With their plan set, they returned to the worried Anima and acted as though nothing had happened.

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The morning’s weather was beautiful—perfect for Anima and Luina’s anniversary. After finishing his morning routine, Anima sat down at the dining room table, wearing the white robe they had triumphantly found yesterday. He excitedly glanced at the door every few seconds, his heart racing. Luina was set to arrive at any moment, wearing the beautiful, snow-white wedding dress that had belonged to her late mother.

“Where Mommy?”

Marie, sitting next to him, was dying to see her as well, while Myuke and Bram were in the bedroom helping her get into her dress. Anima had offered to change in the same room so he could help, but Myuke told him off, saying that he wasn’t allowed to see her in it until she was ready. Seeing her daddy retreat from the bedroom with slumped shoulders must have been a sad sight for the little Marie, so she’d decided to go with him and cheer him up.

The door soon opened, and Anima immediately whipped around to face it. He held his breath as his anxiety skyrocketed in anticipation of Luina’s entrance.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

She’s an angel.

That was the first thought that crossed Anima’s mind as the sunlight shone on her beautiful white dress. The strapless bodice provided ample support for her breasts, and the long skirt elegantly spread out around her.

“You’re beautiful…”

Anima was so smitten with his wife’s wondrous beauty that he could barely mutter those words. Luina sheepishly giggled in response, then looked at him with a warm smile.

“The robe looks great on you. Is it comfortable?”

“It is. What about the dress?”

“It’s perfect. My stomach has enough space, and it isn’t tight around my chest, either.”

“We could make it part of your wardrobe.”

It’d be a shame to never witness this sight again. Anima hoped she would wear this every day from now on, heck, she could even use it as pajamas.

“This dress gets dirty very easily, and it’s not made to be worn from day to day. It’s also very difficult to wash. The next time I wear it will probably be at our wedding ceremony. Can you wait until then?”

“It’ll be hard, but I’ll try. I only wish it would come sooner!”

“I hope I get to see you in that robe again that day.”

After a strong nod of affirmation, they got lost in each other’s eyes. The girls took that as their cue to give them some alone time.

“Sh-Should we go, girls?” Myuke asked her sisters, embarrassed by her parents’ display of affection.

“We’ll come down for lunch, m’kay?”

“Leggo, Brum!”

The girls quickly headed up to the playroom, leaving Anima completely perplexed.

“I guess they wanted to play today?”

“There are days like that—you know how much they love spending time together. Anyway, now that we’re all alone, we have the perfect chance to do things the girls shouldn’t see.”

Anima wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her small, glossy lips. Her sweet fragrance overtook his senses as they shared a long, passionate kiss. He leaned back, but was immediately drawn in again by her gorgeous eyes, full of longing. Their second kiss was to be just as passionate as the first, but they were interrupted by a creak from the door.

“Ah, sorry! I guess this was the worst possible time for us to come down.”

“We go back?”

“We’ll go back once we’ve got what we need, m’kay?”

Luina leaned back as the girls entered the dining room. While she’d overcome some of the shame she felt about kissing in public, doing it in front of the girls was different. Her face went completely red as she tried to collect herself.

“Did you come to play with me?”

“No, no. You two just keep kissing. Pretend we’re not even here.”

The girls rushed into the kitchen, then came out moments later with glasses in their hands.

“What are those for?”

“It’s a secret!”

The three of them scurried back upstairs.

“I wonder what they’re doing.”

“I don’t know, but it must be something fun. Myuke is watching over them, though, so we don’t have to worry about them breaking those glasses.”

“That’s good. Now, where were we?”

“They might come back to return the cups, so let’s go up to the bedroom first.”

They went up to the bedroom and sat down on the sofa. They talked, shared some kisses, and, before they knew it, had spent an intimate couple of hours together. The only thing that reminded them of the passing of time was their growing hunger.

“I’ll get started on lunch.”

“Thank you.”

Sent off with Luina’s warm smile, Anima walked down the hall and over to the playroom, its door closed. He could hear their voices coming from inside, which confirmed that they were inside, but as he reached out to the doorknob, he spotted a sign on the door that read “DO NOT ENTER”. It was written in Myuke’s handwriting.

“Girls, are you in there? Can I come in?”

“Wait!” Myuke immediately shot down his attempted entry, her voice followed by a clearly audible, panicked shuffle. “What do you want?”

“I wanted to tell you that I’m going to be making lunch soon.”

“Cool, I’ll be there in a second. Just wait downstairs.”

“Okay, I’ll be in the kitchen.”

As someone who usually jumped at the idea of getting to cook, that she was taking her time to head down to the kitchen was definitely out of the ordinary. Unsure of why she was acting so distant all of a sudden, Anima slowly dragged himself to the kitchen.

“Sorry I took so long,” Myuke said when she arrived a few minutes later. “Let’s get cooking!”

She was definitely excited, so if nothing else her enthusiasm for cooking hadn’t diminished. Even so, there were lots of questions left unanswered.

“Say, what were you doing in there?”

“It’s a secret.”

“Oh, okay… Do you want to play together after lunch?”

“No, we’re busy today. And don’t come into the playroom! I repeat, do *not* come in!”

“I-I won’t…”

Anima was distraught. Not only was Myuke giving him the cold shoulder, but Marie and Bram were also secluding themselves from him. It seemed as though the difficult time he’d been dreading had finally come. He had no time to worry,

though. He and Myuke had to make lunch for their family.

They made some sandwiches, which the girls stuffed into their mouths at breakneck speed before rushing back up to the playroom. Bearing witness to their gluttony made Anima wonder if they were using the playroom as a workout room or something. Regardless of what they were doing, though, being left out of the fun and getting ignored by his three little angels dragged his spirit way down. He went outside to do the dishes, then slowly limped back inside and over to Luina.

“Is something wrong, Anima? Why the long face?” she asked in a worried tone. Anima looked at her, his eyes filled with despair as if the world were coming to an end.

“Luina… It’s over…”

“What is?”

“Everything! The girls have reached their rebellious phase!”

“No, they haven’t,” Luina giggled.

“But they’re so cold toward me! Myuke always helps with the dishes, but she ran off the moment she was done eating!”

“They probably came up with a new game, and she was just excited to go back to it.”

“Then why didn’t they invite me? Do they hate me?”

“They don’t hate you,” Luina answered in a gentle tone while looking right into his eyes. “They will never hate you—that’s a fact. You’re an incredible father, and they know that. I think they’re keeping their distance to let us enjoy each other’s company on our anniversary. It’s like a little date inside our own home.”

“Oh. That makes sense.” Anima calmed down after coming to understand what was happening. His mood became infinitely better, and he put on a wide smile. “Luina, let’s have a date in the bedroom!”

“That sounds lovely.”

They could have a date anywhere as long as they were together. It was time

for their daily walk, but they didn't want to dirty the beautiful white dress, so they decided to spend the whole day in the bedroom.

They went upstairs and sat down on the sofa. They snuggled, kissed, talked, kissed again, and then began anew until Luina started to doze off. At some point, her head had landed on Anima's shoulder, and looking at his beautiful wife's adorable sleeping face made Anima sleepy as well. Slowly but surely, his eyelids got heavier, and eventually, he could no longer lift them.

By the time he woke up, the sun had already begun to hide itself below the horizon. The rays of the setting sun painted the room orange, which told Anima that it was about time to make dinner.

"Luina… Luina…" he whispered to wake her up. She slowly opened her eyes and drowsily looked up at him.

"Good morning. It seems like I slept for quite a while."

"It's already sunset."

"It was sunset when we first met," Luina said as she looked out the window, a nostalgic smile on her face.

"The sun had just come up in my world around that time, so I was shocked to suddenly find myself looking at the sunset. Umm, how are you doing?"

"I'm doing great," she chuckled.

"Would you like to go outside?"

"I'd love to."

Anima took her hand and they left the room.

"Hurry up, the sun's already setting! Ah, Bram, you spelled that wrong!"

"You're being too stiff, m'kay? Let up a little and try to spread it around!"

"Go, Myukey! Go, Brum!"

The girls' cheerful voices were audible through the door to the playroom. Neither Anima nor Luina knew what they were doing, but it certainly sounded like they were having a lot of fun.

The cheerful voices faded as the couple made their way downstairs and went

outside. A light breeze rustled the nearby trees, carrying the refreshing smell of nature with it. They walked over to the well and stood in front of each other, just like they had the first time they'd met. At that time, Luina's expression had been one of primal dread, as a goblin had been threatening her and Marie's lives. Exactly one year later, she was looking at Anima with a gentle, warm smile as the rays of the setting sun painted her snow-white dress orange, lending her the look of a mystical fairy from a faraway land.

"You're even more beautiful than the first time we met."

"And you're even more handsome."

"I mean, you were breathtaking back then, too, but you're even more beautiful now. Oh, but don't worry, you'll look even more gorgeous tomorrow."

Luina giggled at his cute, panicked excuses. In turn, Anima giggled as well.

"Ah, there you are!" the woman from the fruit stall shouted when she spotted them in the garden. She started walking toward them, followed by a group of familiar faces. "Luina! Anima! Happy anniversary!"

"Happy anniversary!"

"We love you! Please accept this!"

"This is for the girls! Come visit us any time!"

"Let me see the baby once they're born!"

The florist walked over and handed Anima a beautiful bouquet of flowers, followed by the baker, who gave him a handful of fresh loaves of bread. Next, the butcher offered him a pair of rope sausages, and after him, the carpenter carried over a heavy-looking wooden cradle. Even the owner of the toy store and their trusted tailor were there with plush toys and new clothes.

"What is happening?" Anima asked, confused, his arms filled by the bouquet, bread, and sausages.

"You see, once we heard about your anniversary, everyone here decided they wanted to celebrate," the fruit stall lady explained with a hearty grin. "I went and gathered these folks once we closed up shop for the day, then we all came here with a couple gifts for good health and happiness!"

After informing Anima and Luina of the reason for their visit, she held out a basket overflowing with various fruits. Anima took the bouquet, sausages, bread, and fruits, and set them in the cradle. He then placed the plush toys and clothes inside it as well, filling the cradle up to the brim.

He truly was as happy as a clam. As he realized how, in just one year, his life of terror, hatred, and crushing solitude had been turned entirely on its head, he could barely keep his emotions in check. Weapons and magic had little effect on his body, but words and actions tore his soul apart, and it was only through the love and acceptance of Luina, the girls, the townsfolk, and just about every other person he'd met during the year after his summoning that he was able to piece it back together. Thanks to them, he was able to make it more whole than it had been for over a century.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"Thank you, everyone! We really appreciate all the lovely gifts!"

The townsfolk smiled back at the happy couple.

"Let's scurry on back home! Quick, now, y'hear?! We don't wanna disturb the lovebirds!"

"Come visit me sometime!"

"Bye, Luina and Anima!"

Anima and Luina couldn't help but to smile as they saw off the townsfolk, who were merrily talking amongst themselves.

"Garaat is a wonderful town."

"It really is. We'll have to thank them the next time we're there."

"Yes. Well, should we bring all this inside?"

Anima picked up the cradle full of gifts and went inside with Luina. The moment they entered the house, their three daughters came rushing over to them.

"Ah, there you are! Where were you?"

"Those look nice, m'kay? Where'd you get 'em?"

“Nummy!”

“They’re gifts from the townsfolk. They came over to wish us a happy anniversary.”

“The bouquet will be a perfect centerpiece for the table, and we can have some of the bread and fruit for dinner.”

The girls loved Luina’s suggestion. As they helped bring the cradle into the dining room and move the food onto the table, they couldn’t stop their nervous fidgeting. Anima’s eyes met with Bram’s as he tried to figure out what was happening. She took a step toward him and cleared her throat.

“We have something to show you, m’kay?!”

“Follow us!”

“Follow!”

Anima and Luina nodded at each other and followed after the girls, who led them to the playroom they had spent the day holed up in. With no idea what they were about to witness, the couple watched as their daughters slowly opened the door with the “DO NOT ENTER” sign.

“Anima… is this…?”

“I think so….”

The sight that welcomed them left them speechless. Several glasses with various flowers from the garden stood on the table, which was covered with a white cloth. The walls were decorated with drawings of flowers, and a row of drawing papers read, “Happy One-Year Anniversary, Mommy And Daddy! We Love You!”

“We worked super hard, but we only had one day, m’kay?”

“Bram planned the whole thing!”

“Daddy! Mommy! Happy ’vers’ry!”

Marie’s cheerful voice filled the room as she hugged Anima. He felt the thud on his leg, but he couldn’t see her or the other girls very well, as his vision was quickly blurring.

“I couldn’t have asked for a better anniversary.”

“Oh, girls! It’s like I’m dreaming!”

Upon hearing their parents’ impressions, the girls let out victorious cheers. Then, as Anima cleared his eyes, he found himself looking at the most heartwarming set of smiles he’d ever seen.

“Happy one-year anniversary, Mommy and Daddy!”

“You’re the best Mommy and Daddy I could ever ask for! I wanna stay with you forever, m’kay?!”

“I love you!”

This is the most incredible day of my life, Anima thought to himself. Even at dusk, his bright smile illuminated the entire house.

Epilogue: The Demon Lord Lives His Dream

It was cold outside. The refreshing morning air banished every bit of remaining sleepiness from Anima's eyes. Hand in hand, he and Luina walked the road to Garaat, their white breath dancing through the air and disappearing before their eyes. They arrived at the town's main road, but the usual bustle was nowhere to be seen. It was a quiet, strangely calming experience that they rarely got the chance to appreciate.

"It's so quiet," Luina said.

"Maybe we should have stayed at the inn a bit longer."

"I suppose we're just used to waking up early. While we're here, is there anything you wanted to do?"

"Let's see… The bakery should be open. Let's get something for the girls."

The girls were not with them. The previous day had marked their fourth birthday together, and their daughters had been nice enough to let them go out on a date. They hadn't been able to go out for their second, as they'd had to look after their one-year-old, Lyla, and a huge storm had ruined their plans for their third.

It was their first date in three years, but the wait had only made it that much sweeter. They went shopping, watched a great play at the theater, talked, and deepened their love for each other. They'd had enough fun to last them until their next shared birthday, and it was their turn to give back to the girls for their kindness. They wanted to bring something nice back for them—especially the little Lyla, who had been such a brave girl to spend a whole day without her parents.

"I hope Lyla hasn't been crying…"

"I don't think we have anything to worry about. She's two and a half years old already, which is younger than Marie was when she first did this, but Lyla has three amazing sisters to look after her. I'm sure they had a lot of fun yesterday."

Luina's encouragement put a smile on Anima's face, and she was completely right. The girls were extremely kind and dependable, so he had nothing to fear. They'd all grown so much since he'd first met them, not only in size, but in character as well. However, he was still their father. He couldn't help but to be worried about them, and he was likely to be that way forever.

"Let's get something they all love and hurry home. Ah, but I'm not bored of our date or anything. I wish it could last forever. I mean that."

"I know you do. And I don't want to end our date either, but I love spending time with the girls just as much as I love spending time with you."

Both of them on the same wavelength, they visited the bakery, bought a banana cake, and made their way home. The moment they stepped inside, they heard two sets of lively voices, one coming from the bedroom and the other from the kitchen. Heading toward the kitchen, they entered the dining room, where the delicious aroma of breakfast welcomed them.

"Myuke is up and about, at least."

"She probably woke up early to make breakfast."

Their appetites whetted by the promise of breakfast, they put the banana cake down on the dining room table. Just as they began walking toward the kitchen, the door opened.

"Ah! Daddy! Mommy!" It was Marie. Her long hair was tied into a ponytail—probably the work of one of her sisters. She set the plate she was carrying, which held an assortment of fruits, on the table and charged at Anima. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders as she joyfully rubbed her face against his stomach and looked up at him with a big smile. "Welcome home!"

"Thank you."

"Were you a good girl?"

"Uh-huh! I helped Myuke a lot! We sang Lyla a lullaby! Then, then, when Bram went to sleep early, Myuke joked that she's just like Lyla! Hahaha!"

She excitedly shared everything that had happened the day before. It seemed like looking after the house was still just as much fun as it had been three years

earlier.

“Oh, welcome back. You’re home early.”

The chatty Marie was followed into the dining room by her red-haired sister, Myuke. However, Myuke’s long, flowing hair was no more; she had it cut a year earlier so it wouldn’t get in her way while she was cooking. She hadn’t planned for it to be as short as it was, but Bram had accidentally gotten a little carried away with the scissors, which, of course, had led to a fight. That fight, however, was quickly resolved by everyone complimenting her on how great she looked with short hair.

“Hello, Myuke. That pie looks really good.”

“What kind of pie is it?”

“Meat. I tried to tell them a meat pie would be too heavy for breakfast, but Bram insisted on it. Plus, you know, you liked it a lot last time, Daddy, so I wanted to make another one anyway.”

She sheepishly put the pie on the table.

“Everything you make is incredible. We started learning at the same time, but you can cook circles around me.”

“Don’t feel too bad about it, Anima. She’s already better than me.”

Anima and Luina smiled as they complimented her.

“N-Not at all. I still have a ways to go before I’m as good as you.” She acted modestly, but her happy smile and slight blush told the truth. She shook off the daze from all the compliments and turned towards Anima and Luina. “You two just sit down; I’ll set the table. Marie, can you go get the other two?”

“Uh-huh!” She opened the dining room door slightly and took a deep breath. “Braaam! Lylaaa! Breakfaaast!”

They had thought she would go up and tell them, but she’d likely wanted to stay with her parents after a whole day of not seeing them. Regardless of her method, though, the footsteps coming from upstairs meant that she’d gotten results.

“I’m starving, m’kay?! Oh, you guys’re home! Welcome back, m’kay?!”

It was Bram. Thanks to her insatiable appetite and long, peaceful sleep cycle, she was already taller than Myuke.

“Daddy! Mommy!”



In Bram’s arms was a little girl with snow-white hair and azure eyes. She reached her tiny hands out toward Anima, leaning so far forward that she nearly fell.

“Careful, Lyla. You sure love having Daddy hold you, though, don’tcha? You’re making me jealous, m’kay?”

“Bam hug good!”

Lyla, to Bram’s absolute joy, planted a kiss on Bram’s cheek. Bram then slowly put her down on the ground, which was met with a very polite “Tanks!” before she trotted up to Luina and hugged her. Luina crouched down and pet her head until she was satisfied, at which point she clung onto Anima.

“You home!”

“We’re home. How was yesterday? Did you play a lot with your sisters?”

“Mm-hmm! We payed ousside!”

“Oh, did you now? That sounds wonderful.”

“Womferful! I pay wif Mommy too!”

“You want me to play outside? That’s so nice; thank you!”

“Aww. I wish I could play too.”

“Daddy come!”

“Hooray! We can go outside right after we eat breakfast!”

“That’s a great idea. It’s the perfect weather for a walk.”

“Walks is fun!”

Lyla’s blue eyes twinkled with excitement. Anima picked her up and sat her in the high chair.

“Mmm, that pie looks super yummy, m’kay? I’m ready to dig in!”

“I made it for you, so you’d better eat up!”

“You don’t have to worry about that, m’kay?”

“Come and help me first. Can you get the milk ready? And Marie, would you

grab us some forks?”

They started acting on Myuke’s orders, and soon enough, breakfast was ready. They all sat down and looked at Lyla, who loudly clapped her hands together.

“Tanks fo’ foob!”

They all followed her lead, and then their breakfast was finally ready.

“It’s so good, m’kay?!”

“Don’t scarf it down like that or you’ll choke! Just calm down and eat like a normal person; I’ll make more whenever you want.”

“Wass! I gupp!”

“Wow, amazing! Did you see that, Mommy?! She gulped it down in one go! Talk about a professional!”

“Yep, I saw it. Well done, Lyla. I’m proud of you.”

“Right? She’s got way better manners than a certain someone at the same table.”

“Just who do you think you’re talking about, m’kay?”

“You! Just look at yourself! You got crumbs all over the table! Do you have any idea how long it’ll take to clean all that?!”

“Get off my back, m’kay?! I’ll clean up after myself!”

“I’ll help!”

“Me! I hepp! We do ’gever, Ma’ie!”

“Uh-huh! Let’s do it together!”

Anima listened to the cute exchange over the table with a huge grin on his face. Every day was like a dream for him. He was surrounded by his family at the dinner table, enjoying his daughter’s delicious cooking, and the six of them were talking and laughing together. The idyllic family he had longed for for over a century had become his reality.

Every morning, Luina watched as he spaced out while he listened to his

family’s voices, yet she couldn’t get enough of it. The sight of Anima’s peaceful smile was just as contagious as it was the first time she saw it.

“Anima, your pie is getting cold. You shouldn’t let it go to waste; it’s very delicious.”

“Ah, you’re right. Thank you.”

Anima took his first bite of Myuke’s meat pie. To him, it tasted like a little slice of heaven.

Afterword

Hello again, I'm Nekomata Nuko.

Thank you for reading *Why Shouldn't a Detestable Demon Lord Fall in Love?!* volume four. I hope you enjoyed this small peek into the wholesome life of Demon Lord Anima and his loving family as they awaited the arrival of their newest family member.

Volume four marks the conclusion of the journey we started in September of 2018. In a world where series are so often canceled, I feel blessed to have had the chance to write everything I wanted to write for this series. Make no mistake, though, this accomplishment is hardly mine alone. It's only thanks to your continuous support that this conclusion was able to be reached.

I understand it's a bit early to be celebrating, but this November will mark the fifth year since my debut as an author, and the sixth since I started writing. I'll try to stay on this path for as long as possible, and I can only hope that you'll be there with me to cheer me along.

Now, a little bit of an announcement. The manga serialization of *Why Shouldn't a Detestable Demon Lord Fall in Love?!* debuted in Comp Ace last November. The manga will follow the story to its conclusion, so please check it out if you'd like to see the family's hijinks in manga format.

As always, I'd like to use this chance to express my gratitude to my wonderful colleagues who made it possible to publish this book:

First, I'd like to say thanks to my editor, as well as everyone working at HJ Bunko. I hope we can work together again. I'll work hard to write stories that meet your high standards.

teffish, I can't thank you enough for taking time out of your busy schedule to draw the wonderful illustrations that make this book all the more fun to read.

I'd also like to thank 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. Having you read and hopefully enjoy my book is the root of my happiness. If you had fun reading this book for even a second, I consider it a blessing. I hope we'll see each other again one day in another series.

A very cold day in 2019,

Nekomata Nuko.


Why Shouldn't a Detestable Demon Lord FALL IN LOVE?!
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