

Year 2100+, New Zealand, Tamaki City

“Doesn’t it seem like there should be more fanfare to this whole, graduating high school, thing to you?” Lynna asked as we stood around and watched the other students, parents and teachers mingling. “Like, we’re literally just standing around eating bargain sausage rolls and mini pies. Not even full sized ones! I want a full sized pie. I demand a full sized pie.”

“Yeah... I don’t know, we’re just North West High. It’s not like graduating from this place is a big deal, so why make a big deal you know?” I said quietly, ignoring my friend’s pouting about pies. If any of the teachers heard they’d try and tell us how great we were for graduating. Nobody liked lectures, especially not when you were two days away from being free of school, potentially forever.

“Yeah. I guess you’re right,” my best friend sighed, turning her dejected face on me. “Just totally sucks you know? That there’s nothing for us to actually... do after school. We’re eighteen and two days away from the end of high school and our future is... empty.”

I nodded wordless understanding, not really wanting to talk about that empty future. It yawned on the horizon like some ethereal storm of death and pain and beards. I’m not sure why that beard thing came up, but it was always there, just looming on the horizon.

“Yeah. Oh, my parents are giving me the whole, let’s go signal...” she grimaced, turning to me shyly. “So um, I guess we should hang out later? After school is all wrapped up and stuff.”

“Yeah! Definitely,” I smiled.

Lynna was great. We’d been together through all of high school! Well, except our high school was longer than most other places, starting during when middle school would have started in places like United Nations City. I was excited to see what she and I could get up to, even if the future seemed bleak.

**6 Months Later**

“I’m just going to miss you!” Mum bawled, her tears staining my shirt. “You need to be careful, okay? This... this robot uprising... I can’t believe I’m letting my baby out of the nest in times like this!”

I was... a little confused where this was coming from. It was her idea that I move out of the house into my own basic assisted apartment after all, so why was she acting like I was going to die? I was the youngest of three, so obviously the last one leaving the nest was a thing but... still, her idea!

“Mum, I’m like... twenty minutes by train and half an hour by ground car... you can visit any time... so long as you message first,” I said awkwardly, trying to comfort her.

“I know! But you won’t be there in the morning or... I won’t get to tuck you in at night... it’s... I’m just having a difficult time okay?” she cried while Dad and I made awkward eye contact over her shoulder.

It was her idea? I mouthed to Dad in confusion, getting a confused, your problem, not mine, in return. Thanks Dad.

I wish I had a Dad that wasn’t all like, “We’re gonna be mates!”

Did amazon deliver Dad upgrades? Surely they did, even down here to Tamaki?

It took Mum and Dad way too long to leave, which was kinda annoying since it was all their idea for me to move out in the first place. Mum’s pointed questions about what I planned to do with my future had been getting more and more unbearable, and so had the arguments that blew up whenever I had the balls to defend myself.

How on Earth was I meant to get a job in a world where only around thirty percent of the population had them? I wasn’t some crazy genius who could bust through Uni like a bull and then turn around and take life by the horns... Or whatever. I wasn’t smart enough to get a job, not in the current age anyway.

When I finally closed the door on them with a sigh, I stared around at the apartment with just a tiny bit of shock? Now what?

### **3 Months Later**

I was so bored. I was so, so damn bored. I was so bored I was feeling depressed about being bored. I'd done nothing but play games and watch shows for three months since I moved out, and I was just so fucking bored.

I was a nineteen year old guy who was expected to live through around one hundred and thirty more years of this shit. It was just totally, super, damn... crap. Seriously, this was the world our oh so benevolent leaders had dreamt up for us? What were we expected to do? Just sit around and—

“Ding Dong. Hello! I am Amazon Delivery AI Number290578 with an order for this address,” a feminine electronic voice said from the door’s intercom. A delivery? I hadn’t ordered anything?

I got up off the couch and walked across the livingroom-kitchen-diningroom-entrancehall to the front door and opened it, coming face to face with a bloody massive fuckoff Amazon bot. Damn, pretty sure she lifted. Hah.

She was carrying a massive steel crate in all four hands and staring at me with those funny cameras expectantly.

“Um, hi? I didn’t order anything... ay,” I said with more than a little confusion.

“It is not my job to know if you have ordered something or not. If you want to send this state of the art VR pod back to the sender I can— “ the bot started to say sarcastically, before switching back to the normal disjointed robot voice. “I mean, this a delivery from someone else. The sender ID tag states it was sent from: Lynna.”

“Okay... um, I don’t actually have a pod room but there’s one of those funny plug things for it in the wall over there,” I told the bot, pointing out the plug even as I reeled with the news.

The news being that Lynna was still even thinking about me. We’d tried to stay friends since high school had ended, but she’d moved down to Wellingroan, and since then it had become harder and harder to find anything relevant to do in each other’s virtual company. We’d stopped messaging each other like four months ago... and now this? How did she even pay for the pod?

“Yeah I’ll just bang ‘er in here and— “ The bot started, then clammed up again and swapped once more to robot girl. “I will now install this unit for you, as it is very heavy, and you do not look like you can lift anything.”

“H-hey! Yo! That’s rude. Why so much sass? Look, this is... weirding me out okay. Why is an Amazon bot being so strange?” I asked, feeling my face flush in embarrassment as

the AI called my strength into question. I thought it was just a stereotype that SAI were quirky?

“I am a perfectly normal Amazon AI,” the AI said, and then honest to god it did the jedi hand wave. “You heard and saw nothing.”

“Okay... I saw nothing,” I nodded slowly. I wasn’t going to look a gift bot in the sensor node... thing. What did you call it? Sensor cluster!

“The meatling learns...” she cackled softly, then got to work unpacking the pod and installing it.

When I saw the pod come out, I took a step back and actually, really, properly gasped. What in the hell? That was a Spencer Wraipod. That was so expensive that if I sold it, I’d be able to pay for this apartment for an entire year without universal basic income to help. I had some serious questions for Lynna now, which meant I needed my phone. Where the hell did I put my phone.

“Hey... Amazon AI lady, don’t let anyone through the door okay? Kill them if they so much as set foot inside,” I joked, pointing to my open door.

“I am not equipped for murder,” she replied absently, then looked up as though a thought had occurred to her. “But I can improvise.”

“That was a joke!” I said quickly. “Don’t kill anyone!”

“Ha ha ha, I also made a joke,” the Amazon AI said blandly.

“Right... I’m going to go and get my phone then...” I said, slowly backing down the small hallway to my room.

I found my phone, and immediately sent a message off to Lynna.

^ Lynna why is there a crazy Amazon bot delivering a Spencer Wraipod to me and saying it’s from you?

Lynna: Because I sent you a Spencer Wraipod!

^ Why?

Lynna: So, I won a competition and got a sponsor... and they gave me two of them, and like... well, it’s a long story.

Λ Oh... thank you so much! Thank you, thank you! I think you just saved me from death by boredom!

Lynna: Okay, but you're getting it on one condition.

Λ Oh...?

Lynna: You have to play Cora with me! I want to try streaming, but like, I figure I need someone to like, play off of you know? So I was like hey I wonder if you would be keen to play with me! We can play together and I'll give you some of the profits and stuff. We could build like a streaming empire and become gods of Cora and... well that's probably a little ambitious but you get the picture.

Λ Isn't that game like... really violent?

Lynna: Oh yeah, it definitely is, but it's also really fun from what I've heard, soooo...

Λ Okay... okay I'll play the scary violent game, but only because it's you asking, and you're saving me from DBB.

Lynna: Awh shucks... wait, DBB?

Λ Death By Boredom.

Lynna: Oh, makes sense... and hey by the way... I missed you.

Λ I missed you too.

Lynna: I'll see you in the game? Send me a friend request, and make sure to start in Trimarce. My name will be LynnaTrickShot!

Λ Same as always then? Haha. Will do~! I'll jump in as soon as I let Mum know I'm going to be in a coffin for a while. Oh and once the bot leaves. It's really strange.

Lynna: Yeeeeee G. Good luck with your butt problems!

Λ Ha ha, very funny. Real fucking mature!

After our conversation was over, I moved back into the livingroom-kitchen-diningroom-entrancehall and watched as the Amazon AI finished hooking the pod up.

“Thanks for the help,” I said quietly, actually very grateful to the big hunk of metal for doing all the setup.

“Yeah nah ay no problem mate, I gotcha righto,” she replied. “Cheerio then mate I’ll catch ya later ay.”

I could only blink in stunned silence as the presumably sentient AI collected the remains of the box and wandered out the door. She stopped not two steps out of it like she’d hit a wall, spun, and then jedi hand-waved the door closed. The door was automatic. Well... that was just a little... eccentric. Had they started growing their SAI with even more wild personalities or something...? This was... alarming. Maybe that one was broken?

Either way, I was now safe from the erratic Amazon lady... kinda. I didn’t hold out much hope for the door in a cage match versus the thing out there, but still... it had to count for something right?

Since I was safe, it was time to flick a message off to Mum and then hop in the coffin... I mean pod.

∧ Hey Mum, just going to play in a coffin for a bit, good luck out in the real world! (PS that was a joke, I got a VR pod, please don’t call the fire department or whatever.)

With nothing else to do, I pulled off all my clothes except my undies, and threw them on the couch, then pressed the panel to open the pod. It made that cool hissing noise when it opened, indicating that the inside was a closed environment. I’d heard about these pods. They had power sources built in, as well as compressed biomatter storage and shit. Then they were pressurised so that even if you sank to the bottom of the ocean, you’d still be alive.

Once it was open, I carefully stepped inside and lay down, letting the pod automatically do the rest. This was my first time in VR, so I only vaguely knew what to expect, like the mind crown thing fitting itself to my head. I had no idea what all the bells, whistles and other what-have-yous were called though. Once everything seemed settled, the pod gave a gentle whirr, then everything went black.

*Hello and welcome to Virtual Reality! Our system has detected that this is your first time entering virtual reality, so we have taken the liberty of automatically generating a body and VRhome for you based on your personality profile!*

I phased into existence within a small room that was barely four meters by four meters. It had no windows or doors, just a big fluffy carpet and a soft yellow light coming from a

frosted bulb. In the corner were a bunch of neatly stacked duvets and pillows. Wow, it was totally right about the room. This was cozy! I loved it already. Did I have to play the game? Couldn't I just spend eternity all cuddled up and warm under the blankets?

Well, if it had gotten the room so right, what had it done with my body?

I looked down, and was immediately overwhelmed by a wave of confusion. Was I a girl? Surely not? I reached down between my legs and... found it there. Okay... so I was still a guy? Why were my hips so damn big then? And why did I have long hair? Wow, what kind of crap had I been browsing that had led to this strange body? I was short, that was for sure. Maybe a few inches above five feet, and I had cute fingers and tiny little feet and toes... damn this was strange.

I kept trying to call it bad in my head, but every time I found some part of me raising a quiet hum of dissent. Like I wasn't entirely sure? But... no the algorithm was definitely wrong. I was keen on being big and strong and all that crap. I had yet to start working out, but I was planning to!

With this body, I wasn't so sure I wanted to stay in the VRhome anymore... so I spoke up. "Um... can you please like, start Cora?"

Silence.

"Play Cora?" I asked.

*"You do not have a Cora account, would you like to create one?"* the pod AI asked.

"Um, yeah... that would be cool," I nodded. My voice sounded a little high too. I was like, significantly weirded out now.

*"Account created using your FTLN identification. Thank you for waiting, we will now launch the game,"* the pod AI said.

Wow what? I didn't even have to go to a website or anything myself? The pod just did it for me? That was wild! AI really were the future... I just hoped they remembered to leave a little corner of it for us humans when we got there.

My safe little room shifted, and some text came up telling me about how I was playing Cora now. I was honestly too distracted by the beautiful stars and stuff around me, until my fear of large open indoor spaces kicked in. There was too much, it was too big and open, vast in a way that even the sky didn't encompass! I needed a wall, oh god please give me a wall or two fuck, fuck, fuck!

“Skip, skip, skip, skip,” I pleaded with whoever was listening, keeping my eyes glued shut.

When I finally had myself under control again, I took a peek around me out of one eye, and found myself in a small room. There was a note of text hanging in front of me that read.

*“Sorry! I’ve edited the space a little to make it feel better for you! Hope it helps!”*

I eased my muscles out of their tense state one by one and looked around the room with cautious curiosity. The room was maybe ten meters on either side, and in the middle stood a grey figure that looked like it was made of clay. Around it, a bunch of holoscreens hovered in the air. Oh my god is that... sliders?!

I rushed over to the sliders and grinned. Oh yes. Character creation! I wondered if I’d need food... I would be here a while. I knew right out of the bat that I was going to make a healer, but... what kind? I wanted something fun... a little different to normal.

I sat down on the floor where I was and made a gesture to bring the holo screens down with me, and then started to think. So... what type of healer? Alchemy and stuff? Nah, too unreliable, especially with my shoddy hand eye coordination. Normal throw a spell and heal things? Too boring... been there done that in every normal game ever. What about... plants?

Maybe.

Plants were also kinda unreliable, and the whole druid shtick wasn’t really my thing. Damn, I wish I knew what Lynna was playing as, then I could tailor my build to her. Damn. Alright so... what was left? Well, there was a lot of stuff, but I couldn’t think of it. Pain healing? Heal my allies with the pain of my enemies maybe? No, that was too gross for me.

Oh, I knew exactly what I wanted to do! It was a variation on the normal caster type deal, but I was going to be using a lot of geometry and shields. Yes, this would be great. I knew how I was going to do this. I was like, really damn good at pretty much any cue sport, like snooker or pool... so I was going to do that, but healing!

Which meant... now I needed to start making decisions. First I needed a race, and my word there were a lot of races. I ruled out anything in the human category, because that was too boring. Then I ruled out the angel like Aurellings, because that was a little too... churchy for me. Darklings were too edgy for me, which left the category of lizard people, faeries and fuzzy people.

Something about the fuzzy people drew me to them, maybe it was the promise of cute



tails, I don't know, but they sounded good. When I opened the category, I was inundated with options. So many! I wonder if there was a way to like, filter this list down a bit.

I did a generic search for "healing" and it narrowed down my options a little. Didn't look like there was a proper affinity for healing or anything, but there were races with a predisposition for casting. I still had so many options in that regard, but the one that leapt out at me was called an Lopunnda. It looked like it was meant to be based on a mix between a bunny and a red panda.

I selected it, and watched as the clay form shifted to match. It was apparently defaulting to the weird appearance that I'd been given by the pod, but altering it to fit the race. The race looked great! Two long fluffy ears sticking out the side of the head, almost as long as my forearm currently was. Both were quickly overcome by the forces of gravity, flopping down until they almost touched the shoulders. They looked like lopped bunny ears, which I guess was expected since the race was meant to be part bunny.

The tail that went out the back was big and bushy too, but it looked almost manicured. The hair, ears and tail were all a deep, dark reddish orange colour with white stripes on the tail and white tufts down the edges of the ears.

The tail needed to change, I couldn't have a well trimmed tail. It needed to be wild and all over the place! I shuffled my butt over to the sliders and got to work, making it bigger, flopping it out and making it look slightly dishevelled and fluffy. Next, I made the ears a little bigger, and the tufts on the end longer, causing them to gently brush the shoulders. If I was going to have big fluffy ears, I may as well have *big* fluffy ears, you know?

Next I moved to the human features... and that's where things fell apart. No matter what I did, I just couldn't seem to get the figure into a place that satisfied me. I'd immediately narrowed the hips and broadened the shoulders, making the face more masculine over the decidedly feminine face I wore now, but nothing was working.

I sat there for hours and hours tweaking and tweaking the appearance until I flopped backwards in defeat. What was I doing wrong? What could I possibly be doing wrong?

"Reset to the default appearance please," I sighed in frustration, and watched as it reformed into that boy that looked like a girl.

The body I was wearing now.

What if... I mean, the pod had generated it based on my profile right? What it thought I might like to play as? I mean... I'd usually played as girls when I played regular games. Sadly, I couldn't even claim the excuse of looking at butts to explain it away, since I was entirely confused by attraction in general. I just... played as girls sometimes. I mean, I also played as guys too... when it suited. But maybe here... maybe this healer I was

going to play as needed, maybe she needed to be a girl?

I moved to turn the slider to female, but I pressed too hard and it exploded into this big gradient thing that was way too much for me, with femininity-masculinity on one axis, plus a whole lot more different things to choose from. Overwhelmed, I pulled my finger back, allowing it to go back to the normal male-female toggle. Okay... carefully, I switched it to female.

And there it was. The missing piece. Damn, I should have thought of that earlier! I was too focused on the fact that I was going to be playing with my best friend, who knew me as a guy. It was a game? Why not branch out a little?

I got to work again on my character, carefully selecting just the right shade of green for the eyes, something deep like the green of Pounamu, or the native New Zealand jade. Then I made the fur a little redder and less orange, as well as my hair. It ended up as this dark red with a tinge of brown to keep it away from being too scab red.

The face was easy, I just made her cute! Small nose, round cheeks, big eyes, I did the whole lot. She was so adorable. I kept most of the body configuration that the pod had done, but this time the whole junk situation was swapped. I decided to keep the breasts small, but noticeably there. I wasn't used to having them, so best to keep them manageable.

There was a moment in character creation, when you knew that you'd done it... made the character as they were intended to always be... and I found it. I smiled and leaned back, stretching just for the feeling of it. Stretching was nice. Looks were done, the hard part was over! Now onwards to the stats!

I began to sift through the ability trees first of all, I could pick three, and they needed to count. It ended up being a hell of a lot easier than I'd thought though. I picked the Arcane, Ranged Cast Magic, and Vernal Healing ability trees.

The Arcane tree was all about manipulating magic in some fun and interesting ways, and I'd need it for general odds and ends, shields and that kind of thing. The Ranged Cast Magic tree was all about using projectiles, and I could find the bouncing component in there. Then there was the Vernal Healing tree. It was all about healing via the power of spring. It wasn't a full on plant style tree, but more of a, "*the power of spring,*" type deal, if you get my meaning.

Which brought me to stat allocation. I threw all the crap I had into casting related stuff, focusing on spell complexity, raw power and the speed of my casting. Which fell under the Intricacy, Power and Urgency stats respectively.

Leaving me with just the final hard choice to make. My name...

Randomise!

Nope, that one was hideous.

Randomise!

That was just keyspam... what the hell?

Randomise!

Esmeralda... Sure. I'll shorten it to Esmie... yeah! Yeah I liked Esmie. I definitely liked Esmie... I loved it actually! Esmie it was.

So now it was time? Should I assume my character first and see how it felt, or dive right in? Who was I kidding, I was going to dive right in!

Accept Character! Begin!

I woke up laying on something soft, and wriggled a little to get an idea of what it was before I gave up and opened my eyes to take a look. I was laying in a circle of grass within a small clearing. The forest beyond looked reasonably pleasant, with lush green leaves and tall trunks. The outer edge of the circle of grass was ringed in vibrant flowers and mushrooms. Was I in a fairy circle?

I moved to sit up, and felt... wow, so many things at once. First was that everything felt a little different, even from the body I had been in earlier. I felt movement on my chest when I sat up, my little boobs bouncing strangely, and it was all just. The best way I could describe the secondary changes was that I was squishy.

I poked at my thigh in confusion and wonder... so much squish! Then my hips, which also had a lot of squish. My hands moved to my boobs through the linen shirt, because I needed to squish those too. They were... surprisingly less squishy than my thighs. Their squish was firmer than my thigh squish... but it was also a good squish.

Wow this was so different! I was like... at least ninety percent squish now. Like, even though I looked thin and small or whatever... it was deceptive. It was all squish. Squish all the way down. It was addictive. I sat there just poking my thigh in wonder for a few moments, grinning as it wobbled. I was wearing very short shorts, and it meant that my

pale hairless thighs were on complete display and available for squishing.

Then I grabbed my thigh with my whole hand and squished some more, and let out a disbelieving giggle. Wow that was great! Being squishy was pretty great. Why didn't everyone want to be squishy like this? Wait a second... was that a giggle?

I wasn't sure how I felt about giggling... but I guess it made sense, a higher voice like this one would sound like giggling instead of chucking or whatever? Maybe? Wait, what did my voice sound like?

"Hello! I am Esmie!" I told the empty clearing, trying out the new name I'd been given by the random name generator thingy.

Wow! My voice was cute as fuck! If voices could also be squishy, my voice was that.

"La la la la!" I exclaimed, throwing my hands in the air for effect.

I was going to continue with the verbal squishing, when I felt a strange sensation from behind me. Oh! My tail! I turned to try and see it, but my butt turned too, and it moved out of sight. Damn, how do you control tails? I wobbled to my feet, unsure of myself in this body, and tried to turn around to see it. Damn elusive tail!

I concentrated, trying to get the stupid fluffy thing around in front of me, but only succeeded in wagging it. Okay... think harder! I closed my eyes and focused on becoming as still of mind as I could possibly manage, but then I started laughing because it was very silly. I was trying to meditate so I could learn to master the arts... of tail.

I sighed in frustration and curled my tail around in front of me to play with while I considered how best to learn to control my tail.

"It can't be that hard can it?" I asked the fuzzy white tip of my tail as I twitched it around in thought.

Then I blinked, something funny was going on... oh. Fuck I'm dumb.

"Well, I guess you were right huh?" I grinned wryly at my tail. I'd just been trying too hard to move it, same as when you consciously tried to move any other limb.

Well, now that I had my tail problem all sorted out, what did I do next? My ears seemed to be able to perk up to a horizontal position and swivel around just fine, despite their floppiness...

Which meant that everything was functioning and green across the board! Did that mean I played the game now? What was my objective? Wait, I needed to find Lynna! I did a quick look around for the menus and stuff, spinning in circles trying to look in the corner of my eye and stuff. I could see little blinking lights! Damn it!

“Menus, I demand that you cooperate!” I growled at the empty clearing, only for my voice to come out... well, less than menacing.

The menus popped up, only it was the wrong menus! I had pod menus too? Fuck it, I'll walk out of this forest and find someone who could help. That was a much better plan than spinning in circles—

“Excuse me miss... are you alright? Would you mind getting out of the spirit circle before you start dancing?” I heard a timid feminine voice ask me.

“Oh! Hello! A person!” I sighed in relief, spinning to look at who'd just found me. “Where am I?”

She looked to be a young human or elf of some kind, around my age, and she wore the long brown robes.

“Oh no... another one,” she muttered to herself, before beginning to speak very slowly, “I'm sorry miss, please can you follow me? We'll get the toxins out of your system in no time, and I suggest you don't eat any more of the mushrooms in these woods.”

“Oh, I didn't eat any mushrooms though,” I said, looking around in confusion.

“Are you sure? The mushrooms in this grove are powerful things, grown for their mana replenishment properties. They do however have a powerful hallucinogen effect. We find confused wanderers in here very regularly,” she explained, squinting at me suspiciously.

“I'd just like to get out of here,” I winced.

“Well, I can show you the way out,” she said like it was just another chore in her day.

“Okay, thanks,” I mumbled.

I followed her through carefully maintained dirt paths until rather suddenly, we were standing at a small wrought iron gate while she unlocked it. The whole forest was ringed in a wall that was about eight feet tall and tipped with spikes. Okay, so the people who actually came here for the mushrooms were braver than me, that was for sure.

When we passed through the gate, I found myself staring around at a quaint little walled monastery looking place. It was so cool! I just realised that I was at like, the starting area of a normal video game, but in VR! Oh, would I get starter quests, or... wait no, find Lynna first.

“That way is the exit,” the girl said, motioning to an open arch on the other side.

“Oh, um... thanks,” I smiled, hoping I hadn’t annoyed her too much.

I wandered out of the place and looked around, seeing that the monastery place was on a low hill, with a dirt path leading down to a dirt road that then snaked over to the gates of a city. This was so cool! That must be the starting city or whatever right? Which means Lynna might be there!

The city was funny looking, it had these wooden walls around it that were huge, the tree trunks used in their construction were like, thirty feet tall! They had been curved and then carved them, and their gleaming surfaces caught the sun in a really pretty way. The whole city was built using construction methods that seemed more at home in ship building, rather than actual architecture.

Starting down the path towards the dirt road, I looked around at the rest of the countryside. The land was rolling and broken, and it actually looked very much like the constant low hills of New Zealand, except that it was all on a slant, rising slowly towards some truly fucking enormous mountains off in the distance behind the city.

It was pretty clear where the civilisation ended too, because the meadows and pastures with their stone fences abruptly ended in a wild tangle of forest that completely dominated the rest of the countryside. Off in the distance, up the world-warping angle of the hills towards the mountains, you could see where more patches of forest had been cleared for farming, like islands in a sea of dark green. It was so, so pretty. There were also probably countless horrors waiting in those woods ready to tear the arms off little old me.

I was on the road and walking the kilometer or so towards the city when I got a notification saying that someone was messaging me using the FTLN internet instead of the ingame messaging system. A little text box popped up, and I saw that it was Lynna!

[Lynna]: “Yo! Are you in yet?”

[Redacted]: “Yes, I am outside a city and walking towards it, I spawned in a funny forest place and the girl who found me thought I was high.”

[Lynna]: “Oh, you must have gotten the Gyshtorum woods spawn! Add me as a friend ingame and we’ll party up and find each other!”

[Redacted]: “I can’t make the menus work.”

[Lynna]: “Are you serious right now? Omg, okay, I’ll meet you in the market square that’s in the center of town okay? I look mostly the same, except I’ve got dark grey-blue skin and big pointy ears.”

[Redacted]: “Yes.”

[Lynna]: “See ya soon!”

I laughed at my friend’s consternation over my inability to operate the game’s menus. She was going to be laughing to herself over this, and then laughing at me when she found me. Best to get my laughing in first, or she’d never let me have a turn.

I got into the city no problems, with only a few weird stares from the guys around. They kept looking at my legs, it was odd. Did I have something on them? Did I get mud on them somehow? I kept checking, but I found nothing.

The architecture inside the city was just as cool as the walls! It was all bare varnished wood that had been carved and curled into crazy looking buildings. Everything looked like some part of a ship or something, with roofing that was a dark slate material. I’d never seen anything like it in the non-VR games I’d played and seeing it all in like, almost reality was so incredible!

The space beyond the gate was basically just a small square with a fountain in the middle and streets leading off in all directions. After asking a very, overly helpful guard where the central square was, I followed the street he’d indicated until I found it.

The market square was... everything. It was just so... bustly. If I was all squish, then this place was all bustle, that was for sure. The bustle was like, totally going to keep me from finding my — Oh, there she was. Well that was easy!

Lynna was leaning against the wall of a building that also served as the edge of the market square. It looked like a magic shop of some kind, and I wanted to look in there like, right away. Maybe not right away actually, but like, soon. When I had money maybe. I wonder if they sold random trickety things. I wanted like, a cute little mage light ball or something. That would be so fun.

Lynna looked so cool in the game. She was kinda short, but not as short as me, and she wore form fitting leather armour with lots of little belts and clasps and a few knives in little sheaths. Her skin was indeed a dark grey-blue colour, and her ears were really long and pointed. They were so long, that their own weight made them droop a little, and they were wider than normal human ears too. Bigger than mine even, and mine were pretty big!

She looked like a proper rogue! So cool!

Walking over to her, I smiled up at my now slightly taller friend and said, “Hello!”

“Um, hi?” she asked, her big dark purple eyes looking at me with suspicion.

“Hi!” I smiled again.

“Yeah um... what do you need? You’re not going to try and convert me to a religion or anything are you?” she asked, looking even more suspicious now.

“What? Lyn, you know I’m not into the whole churchy thing!” I grumbled, frowning up at her.

“Wha— oh my god!” she blurted, her eyes going real damn big. “That’s the character you chose to make? What?!”

“Oh, yeah! Cute huh? I’m so squishy! You should try squishing me, it’s so great,” I smiled, twisting to look down at myself with a bubbly grin.

“This is wild, hold on... seriously, D— “ she said, before I lunged at her and covered her mouth with my hands.

“No, I’m Esmie in here,” I said in sudden panic. I didn’t want this character to be sullied with my real world name. It felt... wrong.

Then I lost my balance and fell against her, still holding her mouth shut, but all my squish was pressed against her. Now she was staring at me in surprise. I was surprised too, it felt crazy having my squish squished against her. Kinda warm, maybe a little nice?

Her hands came up and gently pushed me back until I was standing, like how you’d set right a freestanding log that had fallen over. “Okay, Esmie it is,” she smiled, still looking very confused.

We stared at each other for long moments, her eyes going down and around me like all the guys in the line to get through the gate had done.

“What? Is there mud on me?” I asked, spinning around in circles again to try and see what she was looking at, only for my tail to whap her repeatedly on the legs. It was very large.

“Are you sure that’s you in there?” she asked instead, her eyes capturing mine in another



funny stare.

“I am definitely me, yes,” I nodded happily, ears flopping back and forth like fuzzy metronomes. I was enjoyed the way she didn’t use my real name.

“You know what I mean,” she sighed in exasperation.

“Yes, yes, hold on...” I said, bringing up the pod menu thing that she’d used to message me through.

[Redacted]: “Hello, I am Esmie.”

She seemed to relax a little, then smiled apologetically, “Sorry, had to be sure you know? This game is... kinda cutthroat sometimes.”

“Oh is it? I haven’t seen any people dying or anything yet, but I might have been distracted by my squish so you never know,” I said with a nod.

“Your... squish?” she asked slowly.

“Yeah, look!” I grinned, and began to poke at the inside of my exposed thighs with a finger. Oh wow, Lyn just went very red! I had to ask, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah I’m good,” she nodded, her voice sounding like she needed to cough.

“Cool, that’s good... can you um, help me figure out how to get the ingame menus to work?” I asked, feeling very dumb.

That got Lyn’s grin back, and she worked me through troubleshooting it with that laughter I’d talked about. She had a nice laugh.

“I think I’m high,” I blurted as we walked down the street.

“Um, why?” Lyn asked in alarm.

“Because, I’m just really damn happy, and I can’t figure out why,” I told her even as I frowned in thought, trying to trace back and remember if I’d accidentally eaten any mushrooms.

“Maybe you’re just happy to be playing a game in VR with your best friend?” she asked playfully, giving my shoulder a little poke.

“Maybe... I don’t know about that though, because I got even happier seeing you. I think I’m probably just being silly, I’ll try to calm down,” I said, taking a few deep breaths.

Then I felt a finger flick my ear, and I gave a squeak, jumping into the air. Once I’d landed with a wobble, I turned and glared at her. “What was that for?”

“Nothing, just letting you know you’re being silly. No need to calm down if you’re happy, right?” she giggled softly. Her cheeks were red again, was she embarrassed? Probably embarrassed for me and my sudden promotion to complete ditz.

“Okay, okay... I won’t try and sabotage my own happiness. But only because you say sooo,” I smiled sideways at her.

“Yup, good,” she nodded, then went quiet, her eyes glued to her feet.

We walked in silence down the street for a bit, and I meant to ask her what was wrong, but I became distracted by my squish jiggling around. Every time my foot came down, a bunch of me just... jiggled. It felt very funny.

“So um, where are we going?” I asked, finally breaking the silence.

“Oh, we’re going...” she said, suddenly looking up and spinning around. The spinning made her big ears flop around a little like mine, and I noticed that they were actually furred, it was just very fine, almost downy fur. Mine were much fluffier.

“Shit,” she swore softly. “We walked past it. We’re going to a quest board in one of the local inns.”

We turned around and wandered back the way we’d come, and I decided to ask a question. “So what have you been doing since high school?”

“Ugh, what have I not been doing?” she asked with a weary sigh.

“Um... Tap Dancing?” I jokingly guessed.

“It was considered, trust me,” she groaned. “Well, it started when I agreed to be an actress for a friend’s student short film. It was this competition thing. Not the one that got the pods though. Anyway, it turned out I was pretty good at it. Someone noticed and got in touch, some manager chick who likes to ‘find talent and nurture it’ as she put it.”

“No way! You got a job? As an actress?” I asked incredulously, then grabbed her arm. “That’s so cool! Wow! That’s exciting for you though.”

“T-thanks,” she stammered, staring at where I had my fingers wrapped around her bicep. “It’s... um, it’s not as great as it sounds. I mean... I get money and stuff, but I’ve only done commercials so far, I can’t seem to get through any auditions, it’s so stressful.”

“And I guess your manager lady is on your ass to land a role?” I asked with a wince.

“Mhm,” she nodded despondently.

“Aw, Lynlyn,” I said sympathetically, pulling her arm into a hug. Just the arm, because that’s what I was holding onto at the time.

My hug brought us both to a stop, and Lyn stared down at me, her face going redder and redder. I let go quickly, crap, had I done something embarrassing again? I could never tell. Social interaction was hard and I always messed up.

“Thanks,” she said after a moment, turning away and looking at her shoes again.

Oh I had totally messed up! We were standing in the middle of the street and awkwardly staring away from each other now, and it was making me feel really anxious. Why were things so weird between us now? We used to hug and poke each other teasingly and stuff all the time, and now it was all odd. I wish we’d kept in touch, gotten that apartment together like we’d planned... because now things were weird and I wanted my friend back.

“Uh, let’s go get a quest,” Lyn said after a moment, giving me a smile that let me know we were still good. Phew! She was like, my only friend left these days. All the rest had bugged off.

“Yeah, let’s do that!” I nodded, glad that we were moving on from my awkwardness.

As we walked, I asked her what her build was, and that got her started like nothing else. She’d decided to make a rogue, that much was obvious, but she wasn’t the typical

sneaky stabby kind, no she'd gone for a duellist build. She was all about destroying a single opponent. It meant we were a little lacking on the crowd control front, but hopefully we could find a way around that.

"So yeah, I will totally duel anyone who tries to besmirch my little fluffy companion's honour!" she jokingly exclaimed and reached out absently with a hand to pat my head.

As she drew her hand away, she gave one of my fluffy ears an absent-minded scratch at the base. Oh fuck, oh dear sweet fuck. That felt so damn good, like... seriously good. I almost tripped over my own tiny feet, it felt so good.

"Y-yeah," I said, having completely forgotten what she said.

"Oh, here's the inn!" Lyn said, pointing it out and making a beeline for it.

I wandered along behind her, getting very excited by my first time going into a medieval fantasy inn. Was there going to be like, a shady guy in the back with his hood pulled up, and a big jolly barkeep? This was why VR was a thing, right here!

When we entered, it was less smokey and gross than I thought it would be, and I was a little disappointed by that fact. The ceiling was higher than I'd thought it would be too. Wait... no, I was just shorter than I was used to being now. Otherwise, it was all just as I had hoped, including the shady guy in the back. I waved to the shady guy. He nodded back like we'd just passed some signal. Oh gosh, am I in the thieves guild now?

You have gained a quest: Join the Thieves Guild of Loury.

You have been noticed by a member of the Thieves Guild in the Town of Loury in a positive manner, is this a chance to join the infamous vagabonds of the night? (They also operate during the day.)

Oh I didn't actually expect... wow, okay! I guess that was an option if I wanted to take it?

Distracted as I was by my new in status with the local pickpockets, I bumped into Lyn as she stopped to look at the quest board.

"Sorry," I mumbled, and moved to stand next to her.

The quest board was pretty simple, many boring kill and fetch quests, with the odd hunt down a dangerous named beastie quest. Standard fare if you were used to daily quests in any mmo ever.

“Let’s take a few,” Lyn said after a moment. “Maybe a boss quest and then a kill quest?”

“Um, are we going to do them at the same time because that seems like a bit much,” I said, looking worriedly up at her.

“Uh, no... I was thinking we do the kill quest on the way or something, then if we’re feeling confident, we try the boss quest,” she explained, giving my big fuzzy ear another flick.

Damn ear flicking. I reached up and flicked her ear right back, we both had big floppy ears here after all! However, her reaction was... a little different to mine... she squeaked, jumping about a foot in the air.

“Don’t do that!” she exclaimed, her face going red with embarrassment.

“No, you don’t do that!” I frowned back at her, then poked out my tongue for good measure.

She flicked my ear again, and poked her tongue out in response to mine. Oh, she was on. I reached up and flicked both her ears, and was rewarded with a gasp.

“You...” she growled menacingly, then she jumped at me.

Her leap turned into a trip when her foot caught on a plank that was a little too high, and suddenly she was on top of me, and we were both on the ground. Strangely enough, I wasn’t feeling all that hurt, it was like the squish had cushioned me or something. Having her on top of me actually felt really nice, like before when I fell on her instead. Having my squish pressed on her was nice. I was going to get back at her in a truly evil way, I decided, as she stared down at me in surprise.

I grabbed both of her ears and started playing with them, rubbing, twisting and pulling on the huge, soft and fuzzy things. She shuddered and gave a very different type of gasp, and I laughed with glee as I kept torturing her. She was at my mercy! She went limp and started making high pitched squeaking sounds after a few moments of this. Wait, was I hurting her? She wasn’t struggling or anything, but she was making noises that sounded like she was in pain.

“Are you okay? I’m sorry if that actually hurt!” I asked worriedly.

“N-no... um... it’s... let’s get up and pretend that never happened,” she coughed, wriggling off of me.

I stared up at her from the ground, noticing she was really red now, the reddest I’d ever

seen her, like... ever. Wow, it looked... wait, she was pretty like that! I'd never thought someone was pretty before, I'd always thought that was just something for other people and not me... but wow... pretty! My heart was beating a little funny and everything, just like the descriptions!

"Are you going to get up?" she asked, looking away from me with a pout.

"Nah, you squished my squish into the floor. I live here now," I giggled, then raised my hands and made grabby motions. "Pull me up, since you knocked me down."

"Fine, but you're not allowed to ever touch my ears... ever again," she grumbled, still looking very embarrassed.

"Only if you..." I started to say, then remembered how nice it had felt when she scratched behind my ear. "Only if you give me scratches sometimes!"

"What?" she asked, her eyes going very wide.

"Earlier, you scratched behind my ear and it felt nice, so I want more," I demanded. "Otherwise I'll squiggle your ears again!"

"S-squiggle my ears? I... no! We're not calling it that!" she yelled, throwing her hands up in the air.

"Two ear scratches and it's a deal," I grinned evilly. "Two ear scratches or I call it squigging."

"What? No? That's... what are you?" she asked in consternation.

"Squiggle squiggle!" I taunted, giving her a mischievous grin.

"Stop!" she demanded petulantly.

"Squiiiiiggllleeeee," I smiled, drawing the word out extra long, like mozzarella that just refuses to break even when you're like halfway across the room.

"Fine!" she blurted in defeat, reaching forward to scratch both my earsss attt onnnceeeohmygod.

Bliss, pure, happy, amazing... all of those words. This was so great, I needed more. From now on, I was going to haggle every single ear scratch I could out of her. She had no idea what she was in for. It was all training for joining the thieves guild, I was going to

become the sweetest haggler they ever had, making sure all their stolen goods would fetch good prices!

“Now that... that’s over,” she said, her face still pretty damn red, she turned to the board and plucked two quests at random. “This one is for... Zraggs, whatever those are, and this one is to fight a boar named The Chomper.”

“Cool, sounds good to me!” I nodded, not really minding what fetch quest we did.

With our quests chosen, we turned to leave the Inn... and found everyone staring at us. Oh no... I think we made a scene. Time to run away and never come back! Hermit time.

“That was really embarrassing, let’s never do that again,” Lynlyn said with a groan as we hurried out of the city.

“Yeah it was embarrassing...” I nodded. “But it was also too much fun not to do ever again!”

“If you try, I will hold you down and tickle you,” she warned. “I’m almost definitely stronger than you in here.”

“Okay okay, fine,” I pouted, kicking a stone on the road dramatically.

Then an idea formed in my mind... a dastardly plot... If she was tickling me, she’d be touching my squish! I had a surefire way of getting her to put her hands all over my squish, and I was going to put this plan into action when she least expected it. Like... right now!

I leapt at her, wrapping my legs around her from behind, my greedy hands going straight for her long fluffy ears.

“Hey!” she exclaimed in protest, spinning around in an attempt to dislodge the small squishy girl that was I.

She overbalanced and we both dropped into the grass on the side of the road, where she began to wrestle me into submission. Now she had me right where I wanted me!

“You asked for it!” she growled, sending a shiver of anticipation through me.

Her lithe, strong hands went for it, grabbing my waist and working to tickle me. I squirmed and wriggled back automatically, my body trying to get away from the overstimulation that her fingers were giving me. She grumbled in frustration as I almost managed to get away, and then she was sitting on me, her butt pressing down into my hips to keep me there.

Then I was really at her mercy, and she went to town until I was crying, laughing and begging for the sweet release of... oh dear. Her ass had slipped, and was now grinding against a certain part of my new and unfamiliar anatomy in a very squishy manner. Suddenly the tickling took on an entirely new flavour in my mind, echoing and enhancing the sensations surging up from my center.

“L-lyn...lyn...” I gasped, batting feebly at her. I mean, I didn’t want her to stop, but she might not want to make me... uh, yeah.

Completely oblivious to the pleasure mounting within me, she grinned evilly down at me, “What? Do you give up?”

“Your ass!” I squeaked, the high pitched sound turning into a long moan. “If... you don’t stop...”

She flew off me so fast I swear she had wings or something, tottering to her feet and stammering, “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my fucking god! I’m so sorry!”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t having fun,” I laughed breathlessly, poking my tongue out at her.

“What?!” she choked, her eyes boggling.

“It’s so comfy down here,” I said, rather than answering, wriggling around for emphasis. “Don’t you want to come back down?”

“Esmie!” Lynlyn yelled at the sky in protest. “What the fuck is up with you!”

“Fine, fine,” I said with a cheeky little giggle. “I’m getting up. We have things to kill after all right?”

“Huh?” she asked, frowning down at me as I wobbled shakily to my feet.

“Quests?” I prompted, pointing towards the forest.

“Oh! Yes! Definitely quests,” she said, looking down at my simple linen clothed body. “Do



you um, need to change?”

“Uh, let me just equip a new set of underwear real quick,” I blushed, opening the menu.

The menu proved to be a challenge, but I was up for anything! I’d find out how to fix this... just a second. I could find it. Was it this? No, that was something else. Oh, was this it? Nope...

“Uh, it’s the button with the silhouette of a person doing a T-pose,” she prompted helpfully.

“Right... I almost had it,” I lied, trying to squash a smile that was trying to ride its way onto my face.

I found the inventory and then promptly realised I had a decision to make. I *could* just unequip and then reequip a new pair of underwear... or, I could flash her. No, bad Esmie, don’t break your friend, she’s a straight girl after all. She had that one boyfriend in year fourteen for a few weeks. I think they even held hands.

Sighing, I did the responsible thing and changed out my underwear, and just that, then nodded to her. “Okay I’m good, let’s get going!”

“You’re a lot of things Esmie, but I don’t think *good* is one of them,” she laughed, rolling her eyes.

“No, but you made me *feel* good,” I shot right back with a grin.

“No! No... No!” she growled menacingly. “We’re not talking about this again, just like the squiggle thing.”

“Fine,” I sighed theatrically. “You’re no fun.”

“I am plenty of fun!” she exclaimed in outrage. “But I’m *appropriate* fun.”

“I want you to appropriate me for some more fun,” I mumbled, too low for her to hear.

“What was that?” she squinted at me suspiciously.

“Nothing.”

We walked in silence for like three whole steps, before I opened my mouth to speak, only for her hand to swing out like a self closing door and bap me lightly on the mouth.

“No talking,” my friend said. “You lost your talking rights.”

“MmmmmMMMMmmMmmMmmmm,” I mumbled through my closed lips.

“Oh my god you are...” she sighed. “Let’s just walk.”

“Yes mistress,” I said with mock sadness.

I actually did shut up after that, which I was honestly a little thankful for because my god the things that were coming out of my mouth were just unreal. I’d always had a thing for quick jokes, I liked making people laugh, no matter who they were. This was... a little different however. I was being a bad panda, in both the naughty sense of the word and the *naughty* sense of the word. Shit, why were all the synonyms for bad also innuendo?

As the forest approached us, I mean, we approached the forest... or something, I saw with interest that there were several obvious paths in. The road itself cut through the forest, sure, but branching off as soon as it reached the treeline were a series of trodden down dirt tracks. Obviously this was a popular route into the forest to do quests.

The trees themselves reminded me of the tree farms down near lake Taupo, mostly a tall species of pine, but there were all sorts of other trees lower to the ground that contested canopy real estate for sunlight. I saw one that reminded me of conifers, and another that looked like a birch tree with oaken leaves and bark. The underbrush was mostly your stereotypical bushes, nothing to see there.

“Where are the... um,” I asked, pausing to look at my quest logs for the name of the thingies we were meant to be tracking down. “Zraggs?”

“This way,” Lynlyn said, pointing into the forest. “You should be able to get a sense for it if you concentrate on wanting to find the quest objective.”

I did as she said, and nodded when I felt the gentle tugging. “Yeah I feel it!”

“Sweet, let’s go then!” she grinned, leading the way down one of the dirt paths.

The forest got dark very quickly as we entered it, like it was permanently twilight between the now much more sinister feeling trees. The ground was littered with pine needles and other forest debris, but unlike the tree farms I’d likened it to a few moments before, there was no ordered divisions between the trees. They were everywhere, haphazardly placed like whoever had planted the forest had been very drunk at the time.

There was also a lot more underbrush than those forests, and we frequently found

ourselves pushing our way through to follow the rapidly fading path. I felt a little scared to be honest, the forest had seemed so inviting when we were outside, and I'd imagined something like the grove I'd spawned in.

"Lynlyn," I whispered, as though I had to respect the silence of the woods. "This place creeps me out."

My companion turned back and raised a teasing eyebrow at me, "Is little Esmie scared?"

"I'm not little," I said automatically, then stopped and giggled when I realised that yeah, I was little... and I liked being little?

Girls were allowed to be little! They were allowed to be small and cute and all that stuff, and right now, I was Esmie, who was almost definitely a girl!

"Nevermind!" I smiled. "I'm little! I'm Esmie, the little red bun panda girl!"

Lynlyn blinked at me in surprise and confusion, her eyebrows raising as she inspected me. She seemed to be searching my face for something, and I tilted my head down to get away from the awkward eye contact. My ears didn't appreciate it either, the floppy bundles of fluff on the sides of my head twitching, even as my tail bounced in agitation.

"Stop looking at me like that! It's weird!" I grumbled, but the noise that came out was far from intimidating.

"Sorry, it's just odd. The way you've taken to being Esmie like you were born to it," she said thoughtfully.

"Well I wasn't," I sighed, looking back up at her. I felt whatever silly fog of happiness that had held sway since I spawned dissipate and my normal, boring old self returned with a vengeance. "Look, Lynna... I'm just enjoying it alright? I like this, it's fun and silly and way different from real life, which sucks big time."

"What do you mean?" she asked, moving closer, a look of concern in her eyes. "What's been going on?"

She was close now, but I wasn't feeling particularly mischievous anymore. It was fun to be Esmie when I could just forget everything... but when she was overanalysing me, it crumbled.

"My parents all but kicked me out a few months ago, and I've been living alone since then. No contact with anyone, just games and shows..." I said sadly.

“Awwhh... D... Esmie...” she murmured, her brows furrowing in sympathy as she stepped forward.

I didn't want her to hug me right now. We used to be that close, her and I, but not anymore. Even nine months later we had drifted down different paths, become different from the people we'd been in high school. Then there was the part where she'd stopped returning my messages and calls...

“No Lynna! Even you stopped talking to me!” I cried, feeling sadness take hold, and I pushed away, stumbling backwards across the forest floor.

She stared at me in surprise, her big ears drooping sadly as she tried to get words out, but nothing was forthcoming.

I took a long shuddering, calming breath, pinched my arm until it hurt, then plastered a smile back on my face.

With false cheer I hoped would turn into real happiness, I told her, “So in here, I'm Esmie, and I'm not sad, and I'm just me, just Esmie the red panda bunny girl!”

Gulping, she nodded, a small smile struggling into place on her lips. “Right, Esmie the cute Panda Bunny girl.”

“Red Panda Bunny Girl,” I grinned, nudging her with an elbow as I walked past. “Get it right!”

“Right, Red Panda,” Lynlyn laughed, grabbing me despite my earlier protests. “Now let me hug Esmie the Red Panda Bunny Girl, I want to hug you.”

“Oh!” I blurted as she pulled me in from behind and held me there. My chest felt funny! Why did my chest feel funny! It felt all tight, light and bright, all at the same time!

The hug didn't take long, but it was enough for my chest to graduate into feeling full on strange, not just funny. Then she released me, and I wobbled forward out of her reach and turned around to glare at her suspiciously.

“What?” she asked, a single smug eyebrow arching playfully. “You wanted me to roll around in the grass with you earlier, what's wrong with a simple hug?”

I didn't answer right away, just glaring at her instead. She wasn't wrong, damn it. My past self was sabotaging me! Damn it past Esmie! I'll get back at you!

“Fine,” I sighed, but any further words I might have said were cut off by a noise from further into the woods.

The most terrifying, bone curdling howl of animal rage I’d ever heard had just ripped through the forest ahead of us, and suddenly I wanted Lynlyn’s protective arms around me again. What on earth had just made that noise? Judging by the way another one tore through the quiet of the woods just a few moments later, I figured that we were about to find out.

“What was that?” Lynlyn asked, her big ears perking up as high as they could go. She looked like an aeroplane, and the look put a grin all over my face. Her ears were so big, like mine! Except hers were long and pointed and less floppy.

The blood curdling howl tore through the forest all over again and I was suddenly reminded again that we were meant to be worried about something. Lynlyn’s ears were really cute though.

“Is it the Zraggs?” I asked tentatively, staring into the foliage in the direction of the howl.

“Possibly,” Lynlyn said quietly, reaching forward to take hold of my arm. “You get behind me just in case.”

I was pushed behind her before I could go there myself, which gave me another one of those funny little chest feelings. Why did I feel so funny when she touched me?

We could hear the underbrush shifting about ahead of us now, the bushes and long grasses rustling as something or multiple somethings moved through it. Then came the snuffling noises, until something tumbled out in front of us.

The thing was mind bogglingly odd to look at. Generally speaking it was shaped like an egg on its side and covered in thick dark brown fur. Four small legs peeked out from underneath, each one with a hoof on the end. Its mouth was wide and sported two massive tusks, and above that were two tiny, beady black eyes.

It looked like a boar with aspirations of becoming a stereotypical piggy bank. My first reaction was to laugh, but then several of the things wobbled out of the bushes to surround us, and their mouths opened to show huge sharp carnivorous teeth. Suddenly things were just a little bit serious.

“Oh shi—“ I squeaked, before abruptly my vision went black.

You have Died. You will respawn after an indeterminate length of time has passed. Please enjoy your death dream in the meantime and thank you for playing Cauldron of Realms Ascended!

“What the squish?” I blurted, spinning around to look at wherever the hell I was. What was a death dream?

I was in a very small room, barely tall enough for me to stand in, and pillows were literally everywhere across the floor.

“Oh,” I exclaimed happily, diving into them with abandon. “Sweet!”

“Oh balls, another one that’s happy to be here,” a soft, feminine voice noted from behind me.

I whirled around onto my back in surprise and found myself staring up into the eyes of a girl a year or two younger than me. She had long dirty blonde hair that was so fluffy it was almost comical and I couldn’t help but stare at it. Her face sported a pair of big glasses that didn’t quite sit on her face correctly.

“Hi?” I asked awkwardly.

“Hey,” she said with a weary sigh, plopping down into the pillows opposite me. Well, as opposite as you could be in a room that was barely big enough to fit three people without having their legs get all tangled.

“So uh, who are you?” I asked, bringing my tail around in front of me to cuddle. Big fluffy tails were the best, so much fluffy fluffness.

“I am May,” she told me with a smile, offering me her hand to shake. “And you are Esmie.”

“I am Esmie,” I agreed, feeling my heart swell and dance at the name. It was such a good name. Way better than my real one, which was a total dud. I wished I was a girl so I could have the name Esmie instead.

Of course, I was so preoccupied with the whole name thing that I forgot to shake her hand for a second, so when I did remember, I was a little too enthusiastic about it. Which means, I managed to lunge at her and fall into the pillows next to her with a thump.

“Oh my,” she giggled, looking down at me as I rolled over. “I can see how you died to the first thing that hit you now.”

“Hey! It jumped me from behind or something! It wasn’t fair,” I pouted up, blowing some hair out of my face with a puff.

“Yes, it was a little mean of the...” she paused, looking off to the side like she was checking some notes that I couldn’t see. “The Scrag? No... Zraggs. Weird name that one, I should think of a better one and ask... no he’d just get grumpy at me. The lore people always get so grumpy when you step into their turf.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said, blinking in confusion. “What... who are you?”

“I’m May!” she smiled, raising an eyebrow. “I thought we established that much.”

I just groaned and rolled back so I was face first in the pillows. Whoever this person was, she was very annoying.

“Okay, okay,” she laughed. “My job is to help you through the trauma of violently dying! Except, you kinda just died without even seeing or feeling anything, so I don’t really have much to do. It looks like the system has decided that you wouldn’t be able to take much of a psychological beating, so it cut you off really early into the attack that killed you.”

“Wait, it does that?” I asked, my voice muffled by the pillows.

“Yupperinos!” she said happily, and I felt her shift around beside me.

Rolling my head to glance sideways, I saw she’d decided to lay down on her side, head resting on her arm.

“That’s kinda smart, I guess,” I yielded reluctantly, mostly because like, the game was basically calling me a wimp. Whatever, at least I had my squish!

Looking down, I saw that I was in my game character’s body, but in some casual modern clothing. A pair of loose and very short shorts showed off my thighs in all their pasty white and squishy glory. Up top I had a comfortable sports bra on... no wait, it was one of those bras that worked like a sports bra but had lots of frills and stuff. I had no idea what they were called. A big baggy T-shirt went over the top, like a cherry goes on a cake or something.

“Did you dress me?” I asked, playing with the fabric of my shirt. It was so soft! Was this

what girl clothing felt like?

“Yup!” she said proudly. “Made the room too, based on... well, what I thought you would like.”

“I like both of them,” I smiled, switching to lay on my back. “Could do with a nice warm blanket though.”

Back outside VR, one of my favourite possessions was a huge duvet that had a cover just one size too big. Now, you might ask why I had a cover that was too big, and the answer is this, the way the cover bundles up and wrinkles feels nice to my strange brain. It was hard to explain, but having the extra sensory input helped me sleep.

“Sure thing!” May exclaimed brightly, snapping her fingers.

The biggest blanket I had ever seen phased into existence in mid air and fell down on top of the both of us. It was such a big and fluffy blanket too!

“This is so cozy!” I exclaimed delightedly, snuggling in. “Can I stay here for a bit?”

May seemed to consider my request for a moment, then shrugged, “Yeah, why not. I don’t get to just chill out with people very often. Only my sisters and parents do really. Oh and... uh, Siyeapia. She’s this really cute Amazon SAI.”

“Are you...?” I asked hesitantly.

That seemed to bring her up short, earning me an incredulous stare. “Uh, duh?”

I ducked my head, feeling embarrassment rise in my cheeks.

“Use. Your. Squishy. Meat. Brain,” she said, emphasising each word with a poke of her finger to my stomach under the covers.

“Hey!” I squeaked, writhing away a little. “That tickles!”

“You deserved it!” she grumbled. “Who doesn’t know that it’s us SAI running this game? It’s like the main selling point! What have you been doing for the past like eight or so months?”

“Watching netflix,” I shrugged, glaring suspiciously at her.



“Oh my goodness,” May laughed, although her expression went like, super thoughtful as it fell away. “I’ve never watched netflix before.”

I blinked at her for a moment, genuinely at a loss for words. What did I say to someone who’d just admitted to being a sentient AI about the staples of like, human culture and stuff? Wait! Sentient AI! That weird Amazon robot had definitely been an SAI! The crazy thing had been a person! Whoa, that was wild, and also pretty cool. Maybe I should order something else when I got out and we could talk. Wait, was she the same Amazon AI as May was talking about?

Ohh, actually, back to the netflix thing Esmie! You have an account, why not watch some with her? Show May all the cool shows to watch!

“Well, they’re like the biggest network around, that isn’t disney, so I’m sure we could find something that you might like. Can I pull up a virtual machine in here?” I asked, trying anyway. It seemed to be successful, as the little window flickered to life in front of me. Hah! Take that Menus!

Pinching the edges, I pulled it wide so that she might be able to see properly, and raised an eyebrow in question. “Yeah? Wanna watch? How long do I have to stay in here?”

May was just staring at me, sort of owlshly, or like a small startled animal or something. Then she took her glasses off and began cleaning them with her own baggy shirt, frowning up a storm while she did it.

“Okay,” she nodded solemnly after a moment. “But I don’t think I could choose a show... choices are still kind of hard for me. Real ones I mean, silly ones are even harder, if I’m not following my old programming.”

“That’s cool,” I smiled, shifting the screen so she could see it better before I started idly browsing through. What kind of show would an SAI like her even like? Maybe I should find something about AI? No, most of those were... yeah. Not good.

Oh wait, what about a comedy sitcom! That would be perfect, everyone could get some enjoyment out of that semi-mindless shenaniganry. I navigated quickly through the menus until I found what I wanted.

The show was called Hayton House, and it was about four friends who lived in an apartment on basic together. Each episode was essentially just the four of them getting up to increasingly wacky hijinks as they tried to alleviate the boredom that came with having no purpose in life other than to exist. I could definitely relate.

I started the show and sat back, half watching it and half watching May’s reactions. At first

she seemed on the fence, but then she began to get more and more invested, and when the first episode ended, she burst into a little confetti cloud of questions.

What followed was like half an hour of discussion on the pilot episode of a meaningless comedy soap opera. It was so funny and cute, the way she just fundamentally didn't understand some of the tropes and jokes being made. She kept trying to apply realistic human psychology to the dumb and often poorly written lines, which was so stereotypically AI of her, in an adorable way. Maybe she'd get a kick out of all the shows that were in the GoT genre. The political intrigue ones where she could dissect and predict what was going to happen.

"I want to watch more, but your time is up," she pouted, when she'd finally run out of questions. "Actually, I should have finished this a few minutes ago."

"All good," I grinned. "I'm sure I'll die again soon enough, considering how much I suck at this game."

"You are indeed not very good," she nodded seriously, messing around with her glasses again. "Okay, I'll send you back, but please come see me again soon!"

I frowned suspiciously at her. "Are you telling me to go and die again? Purposefully?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed in alarm. "No! Definitely not! I just... this was fun! I want to have fun again. Fun is... fun."

"Fun is fun," I agreed with a giggle, reaching over to pat her on the arm. "Don't worry. See you again soon... new friends?"

"Yes! New friends! I like friends too, friends are fun," she said happily.

Then I was gone, my vision fading to black without so much as a chance to say goodbye. What an odd person she was. Yes, I am aware of how that sounds coming from me.

I groaned, frowning even before I opened my eyes at the cold surface I had respawned on. Why couldn't it be as nice and fluffy as where I'd just come from? I gave a harrumph and opened my eyes, pushing up to a sitting position so I could see where the hell I was.

Some sort of temple, by the looks of things, with a big mist filled pool for people to respawn in. Fancy!

Still, the floor was cold, so I wobbled to my feet and gave it a big ol' pout, just to make sure it knew who was boss. The whole place was made of the same dark grey stone, little to no embellishments anywhere except a large statue against the wall opposite the exit. The statue was cool though, a pretty woman wearing a big sheet. Or something. I don't know what that item of clothing was called.

"Esmie!" I turned in the direction of the familiar voice calling my name, finding Lynna walking towards me with a sheepish smile on her face. "Wow, we got wrecked, huh?"

"Yeah," I sighed theatrically, placing the back of my dainty little hand to my forehead. "You lead me to my death! How *could* you?"

Lynna rolled her eyes and reached out, grabbing me by that same hand. "Come on, sadly, we have actual work to do."

"Wait, what?" I asked as I was dragged out of the big respawning room.

She let my hand go as I began to walk on my own, but she did give me an apologetic smile. "You know how I've got that manager and stuff...?"

"For your acting stuff, yeah?" I answered, trying to remember what she'd said. Lynna was under pressure from her manager to get a job, I think?

"Yeah... my acting stuff..." she smiled, absently brushing a hand over my hair. "My manager is *in* the game. She wants to meet to discuss something."

I blinked up at her, not really computing for a second because of how nice it had felt to have her hand on my head. She chuckled when she saw me processing, the sound humming through me to make my chest feel light and fluffy. "I might have sent her the uh... footage of us hanging out. She wanted to see, for some reason."

My mouth opened slightly as I realised what she was saying. My face began to heat up, slowly at first, but my mind was in the process of fixing that. It ran through everything that had happened since I met up with Lynna in glorious, embarrassing detail. Everything I had done while I was in that weird, odd state of euphoria. I'd been wild, and now an adult, a real, professional woman, had seen it all.

"Oh *no*," I groaned, burying my face in my hands. "Lyyynnnlyyyynnnnnn! That was all... it was... I was crazy! I was high! Now I look like a total idiot in front of your boss!"

“And whose fault was that?” she asked with the smirkiest smirk I’d ever seen. I forgot she could be like this, teasing and... stuff.

“Okay, it was mine,” I grumbled, kicking at a stray pebble as we got to the bottom of the steps outside the temple.

We were now in the big central city market, where hundreds were wandering around picking through all the wares that merchants had out. It was an exciting atmosphere, and there was enough going on that I felt my head beginning to spin. Goodness! There was a really nice smell, someone was cooking something that smelled delicious, especially to me, who’d only really eaten pre prepared meals recently.

“Can we stop and get some food?” I asked, trailing along behind my friend as she marched off in search of wherever we were meant to meet the boss lady.

“She says she’s going to pay for lunch,” she said absently, stopping to glance around as we neared the edge of the market, where two streets arrived to meet it. “Looking for an inn that’s apparently... aha, there it is!”

Free food? Say no more! I was a good little bun and hurried along after her, making sure I didn’t get run over by a big cart in the process. Far out, I was small as, now.

The inn in question was a fancy looking place that was just down the street from the market. It was nice and open too, big front doors that were currently open, allowing laughter to spill out and sunlight to spill in.

“Alright, she says that she’s at a table near the back...” Lynna murmured, flicking through her menus for a second. “Yup, alright. Let’s go in!”

I followed her with a silent nod as she pushed through the massive front doors into the large and spacious interior. Instantly I threw my gaze to the ground, closing my eyes slightly to narrow my field of view. Stupid rich people and their huge rooms. Why couldn’t they just make lots of small cozy rooms, rather than this dumb big one.

I almost screamed when a text message appeared in front of my face, anxious as I was. It took me a second to even focus around the brief surge of panic, but when I did, I found myself rather surprised.

*Hiyaaa, looked into some things for you... looks like your pod has a limited medical suite on board! If you want, I can show you where in the settings to find some medication for your problem. It can only administer one medication at a time though unfortunately.*

Carefully, I whispered, “Oh my god... you’re telling me there’s something for my

Agoraphobia?”

*Yupperinos! Didn't you know that? Surely you've been like, helped with this before?*

“No? I just kinda dealt with it...”

*Fuck my life, you people... alright, here's how to do it...*

Reading carefully, I followed along with the instructions that were probably from that girl in the death dream. She got more than a little exasperated with me when I fucked it up a few times, but just as I was bumping into Lynna's back, we'd gotten it. It would kick in soon, and supposedly I wouldn't be so anxious about large enclosed spaces. Supposedly.

“Lynna, nice to see you again,” a smooth, confident voice said, and I jerked my eyes up off the floor and into two bright red ones.

Wow. Sitting at a small circular table was the most impressive woman I'd ever seen. Her skin was a dark blue colour, like how you might imagine the deep ocean might look right at the edge of eternal night. She wore a gorgeous red dress that was somehow businesslike and ballroom at the same time. She was beautiful too, in that untouchable way that a goddess was, and out of her forehead sprouted two huge ebony horns. A long barbed tail snaked out behind her, hypnotically swaying from side to side, like a snake getting ready to strike.

*This was Lynna's boss? Were we sure this wasn't just a shark that had stumbled into a VR pod? Holy moly!*

“Ruth...” my friend said nervously, visibly swallowing before she sat down in one of the chairs.

The scary demon woman gave her a smile and a nod, before turning to me with a strange expression, something between the way a cat looks at a mouse, and the way a child looks at a toy in a toystore. “And then there's you... Esmie. Quite the show you put on earlier.”

I blushed, heavily and completely, staring down at the table to avoid those piercing red eyes. “Um, yeah...”

“Entertaining, even,” she said slowly, carefully... as though those two words were meant to mean a hell of a lot more than just the obvious.

“Yeah... sorry about her, she was just a little crazy, it’s her first time in VR,” Lynna apologised, placing a gentle hand on my arm for a moment.

“It is partially because of her that we are meeting, actually,” Ruth said, leaning back in her chair like a dragon draping itself over its hoard of gold.

“What?” Lynna and I both blurted in unison, staring at the shark in front of us in surprise. Had I done something really, really bad?

“I’ll put it plainly then, I am not made of time, after all,” she chuckled, her brow quirking in amusement for a second. “You two are highly entertaining together. So much so, in fact, that I think we might have ourselves a little opportunity. CORA vid shows are the hot new thing at the moment, grand battles and heroic deeds for all to see, without half of the production costs. This new fully immersive simulation they have in this game is ripe for any number of things... such as a little show featuring two adorable little scamps as they make their way through this world.”

“You want to make a vid show about *us*?” Lynna squeaked.

Ruth nodded, leaning forward with an open smile, “Yes, of a sort. I’d like to have you both become Vtubers. Virtual personalities, playing a character if you’d like, or not. It’s up to you. You’d do streams every now and then, as well as uploading highlight videos of your playtime together and separately. Your job would mainly revolve around being entertaining both as people and in what you do within the game.”

“I’m expecting mainly slice of life style content, not grand battles, unless you can find one. Really though, you two are just watchable all on your own. Provided, that is... you hold back a little on the sexual antics. You can do that in the times you’re not filming.”

“How does this even work?” I asked quietly, nervously, at the same time that Lynna started choking on something. What, I couldn’t tell.

“Like I said, you’ll film yourselves running around playing this game, being adorable and ridiculous. Then, you’ll send the footage to me, cutting out any parts that you’d like to keep private, of course,” she said amicably, pouring a glass of water and handing it to Lynna. “I would suggest you keep yourselves publicly single, too. I don’t personally require it in my talent unless they agree to it. You will, however, make significantly more money if you agree to adhere to all that idol bullshit.”

“I hate that stuff,” Lynna muttered, but she glanced up at me and continued, “In the interest of our futures, though, it might be a good idea to go with some sort of relaxed ruleset there. Staying quote-unquote *available* should be pretty easy for us. Keeping our identities under wraps is also a very good idea.”

“Why?” I asked, confused by everything that was being said. I didn’t have much of a clue what a vtuber was. “Why does it get us more money? I’m very confused.”

“I’ll put it simply,” the blue-skinned demon lady said, smiling patiently. “There’s a hundred different reasons for getting to know a virtual personality, becoming a fan. Some are lonely and are looking for likable human companionship. Others just enjoy the passive nature of watching someone cute or funny do something they enjoy. The simple part is that many of those fans will pay very well for various perks associated with that personality. What those perks are depends on what you are comfortable with. Make enough money and I can help with more interesting things, like merchandise, art, or even ingame cosmetic items.”

Everyone at the table was silent for several moments as my friend and I stared at each other wordlessly, mulling over the proposal.

“That actually sounds... really fun,” Lynna said quietly, still staring at me. “Will Esmie get paid too?”

“She will,” Ruth agreed without hesitation.

“And we just... wander around, playing the game?” she asked, turning back to look at her boss.

“Indeed.”

“But how do we make it interesting?” I mused, feeling my mind turn it around... wait! “What if we save up and buy a house? Make a shop?” I exclaimed, grinning over at my friend. “I mean, we’re clearly not very good at fighting things yet, but there must be other ways to make money, Then we can like, play house or whatever, like all those old slice of life shows.”

Lynna’s eyes lit up, and she grinned, “Oh, and we could do like, different scenes, almost. Pick something fun to do each day, like go out and try and do another quest in the forest, or go exploring for a few days. It will still be reality vid stuff, but we can do all sorts of dumb, fun things to entertain people!”

“Wait, and if we get really good at crafting, we could give out expensive crafted items to higher tier fans! Maybe even make unique ones! That would be so much fun,” I said, practically vibrating with energy.

For several minutes, we sat there at the table and got increasingly excited, throwing ideas back and forth until our faces were bright and flushed. Ruth had to cut in, laughing and shaking her head, reminding us that she was going to buy us lunch.

“I think I can arrange for a house to be purchased, to get the ball rolling,” Ruth told us as we scarfed the amazing, scrumptious meals down. “And a little ingame capital to get you started. Thank you, I’m very interested in seeing what you come up with.”

Ruth set us up with things in such a whirlwind of bureaucracy that it had me crying on the inside. She apparently just had a small house available in the city, because she and her agency were made of money and could apparently just buy this shit. I mean real money too, not ingame money. I was now like, fifty percent sure she was a dragon, like a real one. Apparently we were the first vtubers from her agency to play CORA, as the others were all invested in a different game right now. Rellithesh, I think the game was called.

Our new house was in a poorer neighbourhood, crammed between two other identical buildings that were nevertheless odd and unique in their own way. Ours was two stories tall and about as wide as your average two lane street, not counting the parking spaces. It had the same curved wooden beam construction as most of the rest of the city, massive trees cut into squares, bent and twisted in crazy ways and then fitted together neatly.

Except, obviously, none of the houses gleamed with the gloss of polished wood like the wall had. Pitted and worn with age, they resembled ships that had been run aground on a beach and left there for three years. However, it was *our* dilapidated shipwreck now!

“Just so we’re clear,” Lynna said as we stared at the front door of the place, waiting for Ruth to arrive with the keys. “We’re not having sex. I’m straight.”

It took me a second to understand what she was saying, it had been hours since our lunch with Ruth. “I... wasn’t expecting to have sex with you Lynlyn...” I smiled, rolling my eyes. “You are pretty, but we don’t have that type of friendship.”

“I just auto generated this character based on my gene profile,” she said, cheeks heating and eyes darting back and forth between my eyes.

“Well, then take that however you want,” I said, smothering a smile and patting her amicably on the back.

She was still staring at me with embarrassed suspicion when Ruth arrived, along with a bunch of buff guys carrying things.

“Hello you two,” she said with a calm assurance that I was beginning to realise was



default for her. “It’s not the most glamorous digs in the world, but that’s the point! I have a few things here to get you started. Not much mind you, we want you to have something to work towards. This is a game after all, and games can be mighty dull when a high level player gives you all the best gear.”

That made sense, I was looking forward to building this shack into a mansion, especially considering I didn’t intend to leave VR unless it was absolutely necessary. “Yeah that’s cool. Means we can customise the place to suit us!” I smiled, bouncing in place with excitement. Finally, my life had some sort of meaning, goals to achieve!

“Can we see inside now?” Lynna asked excitedly, scanning all the stuff that the big buff guys were carrying. “Is that our starter kit?”

“It is indeed,” she said with a nod, and summoning two keys out of her inventory she said, “Here are your keys, don’t lose them, there aren’t spares. I have to get to a meeting soon, so let’s open the door so these kind men can put all the stuff in the front room. Remember to keep filming, we don’t want to miss any cute moments for your channels. You’ll be doing both streaming *and*”

“Huh, that is what we’re going to be doing, isn’t it?” Lynna remarked, taking the initiative to go and unlock the door and allow the troupe of bulging men inside the house. “It’s like a let’s play except we’re not just playing as ourselves, we’re playing as whatever type of character we want to be. Been a long time since I watched one of those.”

“Yes, and no,” Ruth agreed. “The medium has fallen in and out of favour over the decades, specifically it has been *out* recently. To let you in on the process a little, if you’ll indulge me. Streaming is good for many, especially those on basic income who have the time to view long form content. However, there is another market. Those with jobs or who are studying, or are playing VR games, they don’t have the time to sit through an eight hour stream.”

“In the same vein, the both of you can’t be expected to stream every moment of every day,” she continued, gesturing between us. “So, you can schedule times to stream while doing something pre-planned, and at the same time send me footage of spontaneous moments that happen while you’re playing. That’s what our agency does, we hit both avenues.”

Lynna’s eyes lit up. “That sounds fun! I’m excited to do the streams, honestly.”

“Me too,” I nodded, ears flopping around. “I’ll probably upload lots of dumb stuff I end up doing so people can laugh at me. I like making people laugh.”

“It sounds like the two of you have this more than handled,” Ruth chuckled, eyes alight

with mirth. “If you need any advice, you can message me or my team. We’ll be happy to help.”

“Awesome!” I exclaimed happily. I was already having fun. I was so glad Lynna had contacted me!

The buff men got all our stuff into the front room and then left with nods and smiles, Ruth paying them in coin almost as hard as their abs on their way out. Seriously, how did guys that big even move properly? Like, those biceps must limit your range of movement something chronic! They didn’t look very squishy either, which had my stomach churning a little. Squish was superior.

“Let’s go see what she gave us then,” Lynna said, grabbing me by the hand and pulling me through the still open front door. Her hand was so soft, but with a layer of muscle under the squish that had me squeezing her hand a little to get a sense for the sensation. I liked it, the feeling of squish overlaid on muscle, it added something to the squish that it lacked.

Everything was neatly stacked in the middle of the front room, and in my mind’s eye I could already see shelves and displays in here. It wasn’t a large room, no more than twelve meters wide, which was also the width of the house. Eight meters deep, it had no adornments whatsoever, with a door located centrally on the back wall that led further into the house.

“Okay... two bedrolls,” Lynna grimaced, kneeling down to get a better look at things. “We need to get proper beds as soon as possible, because sleeping on those is going to suck so hard.”

I had to agree. I still remembered the school camp where we’d trekked into the Kaimanawa forest park and slept in sleeping bags under the stars. I giggled, shaking my head at another memory from that trip. “Lynlyn, remember when we went on that camp and they had us all sleeping outside? I remember we got so cold, because like, who has a proper sleeping bag these days?”

“I remember you cuddling up to me and using your ice cold hands on my cheeks,” she said with a mock grumble, her mouth unable to hide the smile tugging at her lips.

“Yeah, and then you sat on me until I stopped,” I grinned, unrepentant still to this day.

She laughed, shaking her head for a moment and rolling her eyes. Then her expression turned wistful and melancholy. “I miss those days. When everything was simple and we

just had fun, when our parents handled the scary adult world for us.”

“Same...” I sighed, picking up a candle from a little crate of them. On a whim, I dropped it back and shuffled over next to her, my arms going around her shoulders in a loose hug. “But we’re in CORA now. Ruth is handling all that stuff again, and all we have to do is send her footage of us having fun together. Well, and stream every now and then.”

Our faces were close as we stared into each other’s eyes, different eyes than we were used to, but still the same person underneath. Friends, no matter how long it had been since we last properly spoke.

“Yeah,” she finally smiled, hand coming down to rest on my wide hip. “Together again. Except... well, you’re called Esmie now.”

I felt my cheeks flush and a happy tingle wormed its way up my spine as she said my name. “Yeah, and I forgot your name in here...”

“Lynlyn works,” she grinned back, reaching up to scratch behind my ears, sending my eyes fluttering shut and a hum of bliss to gently weave through my mind. “I like the new nickname, I think.”

“And I like it when you do that,” I mumbled happily, slowly but steadily losing my balance until I flopped sideways onto the floor.

My eyes blinked open when I fell out of reach of her hand, looking up at her with pleading eyes. I wanted more.

She raised an amused eyebrow and turned back to the pile. She followed up with a hum of confusion and leaned forward. “What the hell is this thing?”

I wriggled grudgingly back to my feet and followed where she was pointing. “What the... why did she give us such a large bathtub? That is like... suspiciously large.”

It was true too, the thing was massive, like the biggest barrel I’d ever seen, but cut in half. It looked like it would only just fit through the door. How the hell were we going to move it?

“Yeah... wow,” Lynlyn murmured, poking at it with a finger like it might get up and bite us.

Getting up, I wobbled my way over to one of the crates and tried to open it, only to find that there was no way these pitifully weak arms were going to be cracking this thing. Did I have like, a knife or anything? Aha, yup... one rusty knife sitting in my inventory, nice!

Summoning the cheap blade into my hand, I got it wedged under the lid of the crate and with an embarrassing amount of effort, got it open. My arms were very unhappy with me by the end of it.

“Kitchen stuff!” I exclaimed, poking at all the metal things suspiciously. I saw pots, pans and all sorts in there.

“Nice, let’s crack open the others and see what we’ve got!” she smiled, hopping to her feet and pulling one of her nicer knives from a sheath at her hip.

Together we worked our way through the pile like it was medieval peasant’s christmas, except without the rampant disease and starvation. We found a small table, four chairs, a large robust workbench, basic tools, a ratty old sofa and a few other things. I was most intrigued by the large mirror, something that stood out as being obviously more expensive than the rest of the stuff. I’d have to properly look at myself with that later.

With our hoard of stuff explored, it was time to do the same for the house. It was much longer than it was wide, we discovered as we pushed through the rear door and into a hallway. The first two doors, one on either side, appeared to open into storage rooms, the left one smaller than the right one to accommodate a staircase behind it. Past the cramped staircase the hallway opened up into a sort of kitchen and living room hybrid. On the right side of the room was a huge fireplace, while on the other side was a rugged countertop and rickety stone oven.

“This is... actually kinda nice,” Lynna murmured, stepping slowly into the middle of the room and spinning to take it all in. “We could put the sofa in the middle, pointing towards the fireplace.”

“And get some big comfy chairs to put there too,” I agreed, walking over to duck down and peer up the chimney, just to make sure it wasn’t blocked.

“Big enough to curl up in and read,” she said, smiling happily before she nodded for us to move on.

Past the main room was another hallway with rooms on either side. One appeared to be a washroom, where we’d probably put the big tub. The other was small, just a toilet that dropped down into a bucket and appeared to be removable from outside. I wonder how that worked? Did someone come and collect it or something? Beside that toilet room was another narrow staircase leading down into a small cellar, cool enough that we could probably store perishables down here.

The back door opened out into a small courtyard where it looked like we shared a well with a bunch of other buildings. The upstairs was smaller than the downstairs, three

rooms of equal size that were probably meant to be bedrooms.

Our explorations complete, we found ourselves grinning happily at each other. “Wanna set everything up?” Lynna asked me, eyes alight with excitement.

“Yes!” I said, hopping a little on the spot and clapping once for emphasis. This. Was. Awesome!

“So... hello everyone, I’m Lynna! I’m a Shadune, a race of dark elves with fluffy ears,” Lynna said with a wide, open smile. She’d linked me into her filming package, an aftermarket suite that had an AI camera that would do its best to capture good footage of us. Since I was linked into it, I could both see it and give it commands if we had a certain shot we wanted. Honestly, I doubted we’d be messing with it much.

“Uh, and... hi, I’m Esmie. I’m a... um, a Lopunda. Which is a mix between a red panda and a bunny,” I said with a much more tentative smile. I could tell Lynna was turning on her acting talent, because she’d been nervous as hell this morning as we planned out our introduction. All that was wiped off her face now, replaced by a dazzling and frankly kinda cute smile.

Lynna nodded and used that smile of hers, wrapping an arm around my shoulders when I finished speaking. Almost automatically, I leaned in against her, enjoying the friendly human contact. Some of my nervousness melted away. To the camera, she said, “We’re not going to be talking to the camera too often during videos, but figured for the first episode we’d introduce ourselves and what we’re up to! Obviously fan interaction will happen in streams and stuff.”

“Being cute on camera!” I agreed with a little giggle, turning to look at her as she stared up into the camera. We were out the back of our house in the old courtyard where the light was good in the morning, with the plan that we’d show them through the house.

“Yup!” my friend said, squeezing my slightly even as she gave me a quick look. “So out of character, Esmie and I have been friends for years, growing up together, going through high school and all that stuff. Which, by the way, for our Canadian and UNC viewers, high school includes middle school as well, because if you couldn’t tell from the accents, we’re from New Zealand!”

“They could tell cos I’m short, anyway,” I commented, with a grin that showed full well I knew my joke was terrible.

Lynna blinked, not getting it for a second, then rolled her eyes. “The fur is meant to be on your feet, not your ears, you silly hobbit!” she giggled, reaching up to fluff my long lopped ears. That, of course, felt amazing, and I let out a hitching gasp.

Her eyes widened at the noise, but she did her best to pretend I hadn’t made it, and so did I. We’d promised not to be too sexual after all, and that noise had been... well, erotic.

Cheeks heating on both sides, we turned back to the camera, Lynna clearing her throat. “So uh, yeah... house tour!”

We did a quick tour of the house, explaining what it was we were doing and all that stuff while bickering and joking constantly. I mentioned that I was keen to do some crafting so one of the upstairs rooms would be our crafting area. Lynna was going to be learning to cook, both inside the game and outside. Well, mostly inside, but cooking inside would lead to skills outside. Anyway, finally we mentioned we’d be starting a shop to sell our wares.

“I don’t know when you’re going to see this, but I hope by the time you do, we have some stuff that’s worth selling,” Lynna grinned, nudging me with an elbow as we stood in the empty front room. “Esmie here might have crafted something worth buying!”

“I don’t even know what profession I’m going to pick up,” I said with a roll of my eyes, nudging her right back.

“Oh that’s easy,” she said, nudging me back again. We were going to start a nudging war if she wasn’t careful. “You’re going to pick all of them. You were amazing with the augmented reality builder programs in school.”

I opened my mouth to deny it, but deflated with an embarrassed sigh. “Okay, fine. You have a point.”

“That’s my Esmie,” she giggled, wrapping me up in a spontaneous hug. A hug that had my brain melting down and fireworks exploding in my stomach. Oh my goodness, being hugged by her felt so nice. Feeling her hands wrapping around, gently holding tight to my soft girlish body. Wait, *her* Esmie? If anyone owned me, it was the goddess of squish.

“We should probably go and find a fetch quest, something simple to get some experience, since we’re both clearly going to need some levels before we go out into that forest to fight monsters,” Lynna said as she let me go, getting nothing but a blank look from me. I was still trying to process all the emotions that had just run through me.

“Yeah?” she prompted, tilting her head.

“Um, yes! Definitely!” I said quietly, voice a little rough. “I’m still like, level one.”

“Alright, back to the bounty board!” she exclaimed, pointing like her finger was a lance and she, a knight. Then she frowned and spun a little, trying to orient herself so she was actually pointing the right direction. “I give up, I can’t even remember where the bounty board was.”

“Maybe there will be one at the market?” I asked with a hidden smile. It was Lynna’s turn to be a cute dork.

“Oh, right,” she said, giving herself a light tap on the forehead. “That would make sense. Maybe there’s easier quests there.”

“Did we even start in a starter zone?” I asked, my tone close to a whine. I’d been killed instantly when we went to fight things.

“We did, in fact, start in a starter zone,” she told me with a wry, amused smile.

“Well, their starter zones are shit then,” I grumbled.

We wove our way through the back streets of the city, discovering that we were very much in a poorer area of the city. People seemed to be nice just the same though, waving greetings and generally not mugging us like stories told you would happen if you were in areas like this. We were totally part of the *in* crowd now.

Eventually the houses got nicer and the streets got wider, until we found our way to the main market place. I blinked for a moment as I took it in, something was different. It took me a moment to realise, but when my eyes drifted upwards into deep blue of the sky, I found a smile tugging at my lips. I could look up without totally freaking out! This was awesome!

Distracted as I was by looking up into the sky without my stomach turning to sludge, I missed it when Lynlyn wandered off in search of the bounty board. Rushing to catch up, I was almost back to her when my path was blocked by a looming shadow.

Blood drained from my face as I looked up into a hood that obscured all but the chin of the man before me. Wait a second, it was broad daylight! Hoods didn’t work like that, how was it doing that? Cheating! He was cheating!

“Well done back at the inn yesterday,” he said, gruff voice full of approval. “Nuthin’ gets the simple minds of men fixated faster than two lovely young women like yourselves gettin’ frisky. Damned fine work, lass, damned fine work.”

“O-oh... no problem!” I smiled, more than a little confused.

“Here’s your take,” he said in his rumbling voice, his hand appearing from within his billowing cloak to offer a small bag of coin.

I stared at it for a second, then grinned and took the coin purse from his rough outstretched palm. “Thanks dude. I had fun.”

“Aha, that was the right thing to say, little lass,” he exclaimed quietly, nodding approval. “A good thief always enjoys their work.”

*You have advanced a quest: Join the Thieves Guild of Loury.*

*The thief from yesterday used your completely intentional distraction as a way to rob the patrons of the inn blind. You have now received your cut, all the while impressing the man further. Keep it up, whatever the hell it is you’re doing, because it’s working!*

*160 Experience gained!*

*You have gained a level! You are now level 2!*

“Good day,” the man said while I was distracted by the notification, and before I could ask what I had to do next, he had disappeared into the crowd.

It took me a second of spinning in circles to realise he really had just vanished, and then to realise that I’d lost Lynna. Ah crap. Where the hell was she? Should I stand still and wait for her to come back, or go searching? She’d left in *that* direction, so maybe if I—

“Jeez, Esmie. You’re like a kid sometimes,” she huffed, appearing next to me, along with a frown. “What are you doing just standing there?”

“I uh... leveled up,” I laughed, still slightly bewildered by the whole encounter.

That had her frown deepening. “What did you do?”

“Remember how I uh... did the thing... that starts with S. To your ears?” I asked, fighting a grin with all my heart... and squish.

“Yes?” she asked, looking more than suspicious now.

“Well... before that, I kinda nodded to this shady looking dude in the corner of the inn,” I



began, my tail swishing happily behind me, betraying my feelings on the matter. “I got a quest saying I could try and join the thieves guild, and it looks like when we were uh... *wrestling* on the ground, he thought I was distracting everyone so he could steal from them.”

She blinked, her mouth opening and closing for several moments as she processed what I'd said.

“Just now, he turned up and gave me my share of the earnings,” I said, showing her the bag of coin. “And some experience. Apparently I've progressed to the next step of thieving!”

“Oh god damn it,” Lynna grumbled, palm to face. “Trust you to *accidentally* join the thieves guild.”

“Hey don't talk to a member of the thieves guild like that, we protect our own you know,” I told her with a shit-eating grin. “It's dangerous to mess with us. Next thing you know, I'll have to like, steal your shirt or something. To defend my honour as a thief.”

“You're not a thief!” she exclaimed, exasperation exploding out of her like feathers from a bird when it's hit by a fast thing. Like, a train or something. Actually, probably more than just feathers would explode if a train hit it. Maybe just if it flew into a window or something. A few feathers of exasperation, not like a whole bird, with guts and blood and... you know what, nevermind, let's not get too gross.

After a brief pause where I contemplated that silly analogy, I rushed to put my hand over her mouth again. “Quiet Lynlyn, the guards will hear you! I'm a wanted criminal now. We have to be careful!” I might be having a little too much fun with this.

She narrowed her eyes at me, then looked down at the hand... and licked it. I squealed, backpedalling and wiping my hand on my shirt. “Gross!” I exclaimed, pouting over at her.

“You asked for it!” she said, now sporting a silly grin. “Come on, I found the bounty board while you were uh... engaging in totally legitimate business.”

“Ohhh yeah, we were doing stuff!” I laughed, hopping over next to her. “Lead the way!”

We picked up a simple courier quest from the bounty board in the market square, to

deliver a few small tools that a farmer in an outlying hamlet had ordered. We also did some research about the area, and came to a bit of a realisation.

Sure, we might be hot garbage at the game, but we'd also chosen a spawn location that was in a higher level zone. Like many MMOs, CORA had different zones with different difficulty levels that required more gear, skill and levels to complete content there. However, because the world was so damned vast, they had added a compromise.

While some entire regions were dedicated to catering to new players and others were geared towards more experienced players, every area that had a selectable starter zone would have options for low level players. For example, our area was based around players at the level thirty range, all the way up to level ninety or so in the outer reaches of the nation, and the wilds beyond that went up even further.

This meant that essentially, there was one small valley for new players nearby, with a few quests and monsters that we could actually deal with. Then another valley for players at level ten to twenty, and then they were basically on their own from that point. I wish we'd known that before we decided to spawn in Trimacre.

Our courier quest had us wandering into the woods again, although thankfully we'd be following a trail this time. We had really not been prepared for a stroll through the wild forests of this area. Hopefully this trip would be slightly better in that regard. You know, not immediately dying to the first attack. The bare minimum.

"How are you going to spend your first level up?" Lynna asked as we left the front gates of the city. It was now mid morning and the huge redwoods of the forest were casting long shadows across the fields surrounding the city. It was quite pretty really, along with the sparkling dew that still covered the grass.

"Oh... crap, I don't know," I frowned, my cheeks probably going a little red. I didn't know, because I couldn't see. Just like I didn't know anything about this game. "What do you think I should do?" I asked turning my eyes up to meet hers.

"Probably just raw spell power, maybe casting speed? Power and urgency," she told me thoughtfully, then shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine, sorry. Until we know how you fight, that is."

"Oh, true." That made sense. I had no idea how I actually moved in combat, so it was hard to point to any one thing as an area that would help me. Guess I'd just stick them there. Wait... but I'd died really easily. What if I used them for survivability? Sure, and that might help me with testing alchemy stuff.

Placing all five of my new stats into toughness, I paused for a moment to see if I like, felt

tougher or something. Nope, didn't feel tougher... maybe my squish had firmed up a little? I tested, poking at my exposed thighs. Still nothing. I guess there wouldn't be any physical changes, or at least not with only five points.

I had also gained five ability points that I could spend to by little modifiers for my spells, but I opted to leave them alone until I had time to really dive in and try to understand the mechanics of the ability builder. It was a whole thing, and from what I knew after a night of tossing and turning while I researched the game, something that not a lot of people engaged with properly. It seemed that there were people putting up ability builds online, which people would follow along with, swapping out parts every so often.

"This place is really pretty," Lynna murmured, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I glanced around, taking in the scenery again. She was right, it was gorgeous. This whole region was basically one massive magical redwood forest, where a kingdom had managed to carve out little islands of civilisation within the wild and often dangerous woods. The city of Loury was located in a low valley, with no real flat area, but rather low rolling hills, like an ocean frozen in motion.

Outside the city, I was actually reminded of how the Shire had been depicted in the many different movies it had appeared in. Winding paths and roads that were in no hurry to lead you to your destination, leading you over stone bridges that spanned gently burbling streams.

The biggest difference were the houses, which took after the city in design, bare, varnished wood done in that curved boat-like way that was everywhere. There were almost nose inflections everywhere too, giving the whole area a cool and unique feel that was hard to properly describe.

I smiled, with such a gorgeous view as this, I couldn't help it. "Yeah, I wouldn't mind living in a place like this for the rest of my life. Loury is only a city by this world's standards... it's more of a sleepy country town by the real world's standards."

"Yeah, Tamaki can get a bit hectic, can't it?" she agreed with a laugh that was half groan.

"I'd hate to see what UN city is like," I shuddered, imagining the towers that literally scraped the sky, towering over me with menacing auras.

"It's pretty crazy," she replied, and I turned to her in surprise. Her response to my expression was a pure laugh that had me squirming with confusing emotion. "I had to go to UN city to meet Ruth for the first time. It's actually not as crazy as you think though, more of a small country than a large city. It's just built weird, on stilts in the water instead of dry land. Really spread out, apart from the big domes and some of the building

clusters.”

“Are you in UNC now?” I asked, feeling anxious about the answer for some reason.

She shook her head. “Nah, I’m living in Los Angeles.”

“Is it fun there? I heard they are still rebuilding after the war and they got independence,” I asked, really really interested in how her life had been going, and a little sad that she was so far away now.

Another shake of her head and a sheepish glance away. “It’s too hot, and there’s so many fake people... it’s exhausting. I haven’t seen any evidence of the war, but I hear there’s a lot of wreckage out in the hills and up north at Santa Maria.”

“Santa Maria is where the Oceanic League forces landed!” I said, excited all of a sudden. That was us! That was where Australia and New Zealand landed! “How come you haven’t been up to see it? That would be so cool! I hear there’s a destroyed Jackson Class Mech there that they turned into a museum!”

“I’ve been busy working, little bun,” she laughed, patting the top of my head affectionately. “How about we use some of the money we make from this to fly you over? We can go up and visit it together.”

My heart did a weird fluttery beat as I looked up at her. I really liked being called little bun. I really, *really* liked it. So much so, that I was just a teensy tiny bit stunned by how good it made me feel. “I would really like that,” I murmured in a small voice, the only level of voice that I could achieve in that moment.

Her eyes were all shiny and soft as she grinned at me, and I felt my heart do a different happy little dance. Goodness, I was full of confusing emotions today.

The rest of the walk through the fields of Loury was quiet and friendly, and I felt myself reacclimatizing to her presence at my side. We’d been inseparable while we were in school together, prompting people to tease us, say we were married and all that stuff.

Of course, that particular line of teasing had ended in much confusion when we’d turned up to our year eleven dance with her in a suit and me in a dress. I’d gotten teased about *that* instead, but I was so unashamed about the dress that it stopped even at the dance itself. We’d both been pretty silly that night, getting right into the married couple joke and making it our own. I still remembered that night really fondly. Lynlyn hadn’t liked her suit all that much though, sadly. She’d looked good in it.

Wait.

Had I thought she was pretty back then too? I think I might have... why was I only realising this now? I glanced surreptitiously up at her, trying to inspect her without being caught. I liked her wide, almond shaped eyes that tapered off into long eyelashes. Her jawline was pretty great too, the same one she had outside, sharp and defined, like milled steel. What really jumped out at me were her lips, dark purple and shaped like... well, really nice lips. I have no idea how to describe lips. I just liked them, and I especially liked them when they were smiling at me, like right now.

“What are you thinking about, little bun?” she asked, and I jerked my gaze up to find a teasing light dancing in her eyes.

I opened my mouth in an attempt to say something, but no words came to me and I was left staring at her as nothing but a squeak came out.

She laughed, her eyes crinkling in a way that had my heart bubbling and fizzing very strangely. “You’re a little different, you know? In here, I mean...” she told me, eyes roaming my face with a familiar sort of fondness. “Or maybe you’ve just changed over these months?”

“I-I don’t know,” I stammered, my breathing suddenly deciding to give me difficulty.

“I mean, you were always an adorable dork, but now it feels... different somehow,” she mused, gently pinching the tip of one of my ears and lifting it up. She let the ear go, watching as it flopped back to brush my shoulder before springing back into place. “Dunno, maybe it’s just the different gender you have in here.”

“Yeah... well, there was this weird thing,” I mumbled, memory of my default VR body overriding my sudden shyness for a second.

“Oh?” she prompted with a tilt of her head, her own ears twitching forward and to attention. I liked that we both had big floppy ears.

“Yeah, since I didn’t have a body scan, the computer generated one for me and... well it looked like this one, except with uh... my usual stuff downstairs, and no tail or ears, obviously,” I told her, feeling a slight squirm at the idea of logging back out to those genitals. Maybe I could change them from inside the game so I didn’t have to deal with it.

“Huh...” she blinked, glancing ahead for a moment as we crossed another small stone bridge and stepped across the threshold of the forest. “Did it say what it used to generate that body? That’s a bit strange.”

“It was pretty vague about it,” I shrugged.

She hummed and shrugged, "Computers are weird. Maybe it was a SAI messing with you."

"Maybe," I mumbled, suddenly wondering if May had the answers. I'd have to ask her the next time I saw her.

"Well, I hope you don't mind if I say that I like you like this," she told me, her eyes widening as she realised that it might be more offensive than she realised. "I mean, you were cool before too, out there... but..."

"Nah," I said, giving her a grin. "I like myself like this too. I have so much squish and floof. It's amazing."

"You can say that again," she said, relief taking over her face. Then she reached out and tried to grab my tail, but it was faster. I was master at the art of tail twitching already, and it buzzed out of her reach.

I got a pout from her.

"You can play with it if we get home in one piece," I told her with a giggling eye wiggle.

"Oh, you totally have a deal," she grinned evilly, opening up into a giggling cackle.

Oh no, what had I promised? I was doomed!