The very next moment I pulled my head up, finding that I had somehow been sleeping on my arms. I had possibly been drooling, given the spot of wetness where my mouth had been, and maybe even snoring, considering the lump in my throat. This was all very strange, though, because the last thing I remembered was pressing the confirmation button. ...How had I been asleep? I didn't *remember* falling asleep.... Was I just meant to feel like I had been? If so, it had definitely worked. What a bizarre experience.

Curious, I thought about bringing up the in-game menu, and, as expected, it appeared in front of me. So I *hadn't* isekai'd into a fantasy world, then... Oh well.

I was feeling a bit conflicted about this. Disappointed, in a way, that I hadn't been trapped in another world... But that was probably silly. And probably weird, too, I should've been a lot more bothered by the idea of being trapped as a girl. But, honestly, thinking about it felt eerily similar to the idea of staying sensationless forever... calming, somehow? Of

course, it *was* preferable to being sensationless. Cause, you know, it was being *alive*... but, yeah.

Dismissing the menu and shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I spent a moment orienting myself with my surroundings. I seemed to be sitting at a wooden desk, with bits and bobs of wooden, copper, and iron parts strewn about haphazardly. Probably for artificing? To the side were jars of nails and screws and many other materials I didn't understand — shiny gems, little blue pebbles, black sheets of a rubbery material.

If all of this was for artificing (likely), I did kinda want to figure out how the little pieces all went together, but... well, that would be for later. For now, I needed to find my friend and maybe punch some creatures. I spun my chair around — barely even processing that it was a swivel chair in a fantasy world — and bounced onto my feet.

Wow. For multiple reasons. First of all, I felt great; this body was great. (Randomiser, you spoil me rotten!) Secondly... this room was a *disaster*.

And like, I was a messy person, I knew that I was, so calling this room a disaster was really saying something. There were boxes everywhere, there were hundreds — maybe thousands? — of parts, of all manner of sizes and materials. On a table off to the side there was a stack of dirty plates — gross, not even in a sink? — and, stupidly, they were surrounded by papers and books. Was she(?) — I? — trying to ruin them? Probably just negligence or laziness, but... gosh, it was like whoever made this mess thought they had a maid to clean up after them, or something. Absolutely ridiculous.

As I made my way over, around, and through piles of junk — or, rather, things I didn't understand (there were some interesting looking things in here, so maybe it wasn't all junk?) — I found that it wasn't just that I felt great, but I was actually moving around a lot easier, too. I had always been kinda clumsy in reality, but in here, with this body, I felt like I was pretty dextrous. Whatever magic the game worked on me to allow this was definitely something I appreciated.

Oh. Right. I had a buff to a ton of physical stats, I probably was actually more dextrous.

Dropping down off of a cabinet onto the floor — don't ask, I did say the room was a mess, after all — I finally squeezed my way out the wooden door and into a hall. To the left seemed to be one more side room, whereas to the right seemed to open up into a main room. I chose the main room, padding into what seemed to be the kitchen half. On the far side of the large room was a fireplace and in front of it some fluffy-looking furniture.

I seemed to be in a cabin. That was probably to be expected, considering that my backstory had said this was where I lived, but... *boring*.

Let's take a peek outside, shall we?

I turned the handle on the front door and swung the door open, being blasted backwards by a gust of frigid air and snow. My legs bumped into the arm of the couch and, after pinwheeling my arms, I fell backwards into the fluffy, worn cushions with a *poomf*.

Oh my goodness gracious that wind was so cold! And the door was still open! Oh my gosh! My feet! They were bare! It felt like they were turning closer and closer to little ice cubes every moment the door stayed open!

I hurriedly rolled off the couch and jumped to my feet, rushing over to the door and pushing against it with all my might. A moment later, and after a lot of struggling, the front door was shut tight again, but not before piles of snow had collected all over the floor. My feet were *very* cold.

I shivered, and then I headed back towards the hallway. Since I'd been a dummy and let all the warm air out of the previously nice, cozy cabin, it was time to look for more layers of clothing.

A half hour or so had passed, time I spent digging around in the clothes I found in what seemed to be my

bedroom (and yes, that was a mess too). I was finished now, equipped with leggings, some very worn leather pads (almost felt like I was going skating), a pair of thick, woolen socks, and a fluffy, fuzzy, black cloak that had been hiding in the back of the closet behind nearly everything else. (I might've made the mess worse trying to get it out, but it wasn't like this was my bedroom!) When I'd put it on, I had felt some kind of strange, foreboding feeling, but... on the other hand, it warmed me up far more than any of the other clothing in the closet, so I was sure it'd be fine.

For the second time — much more carefully, now — I pulled open the front door. Even with all the extra layers, I still shivered violently, but in the end I managed to leave the house. That is, after struggling for a moment to shut the door behind me.

Turning back around, I took a look at where I was... or tried to, anyway.

Where I was was very, very bright. The sun was hanging a ways off of the horizon still, the rays of light filtering through the dusting of snow that drifted down

slowly from above, bouncing off of the icy mountains and the thick layers of fresh flakes that had accumulated on the ground... all to shine directly into my eyes. At least, that's what it felt like with how blindingly white it was.

After a moment of recovery, I turned away from the front and went to the right instead. Wasn't really interested in permanently damaging my eyes by staring into the sun, after all.

Around ten metres away from the cabin was a ring of rusted iron fence posts, snow having built up around them. I wondered what they were for — considering that they made a very poor fence — but it wasn't as if it really mattered, probably. It wasn't as if I'd be staying here for long, since this was just a starter area... I wanted to explore the whole world with Rus—err, Star!

Where was she, actually? Could I add her to my friends list now? I called up the menu again and found that I didn't even need to add her, she appeared in my list as a "podmate."

Yuki: hi star! where you at?

Earthbound: Not sure where precisely, but I'm in a creepy abandoned village. It's really cold and snowy here. Mountains all around

Yuki: same here but a cabin. see any landmarks?

Earthbound: To the south there's what looks like a mountain that was cut down the middle... at least I think that's a mountain?

Yuki: i see that to my south as well, i think. mebbe it put us close?

Earthbound: Hope so! Hey, idea

An image appeared in the chat, of the mountains to the south. I looked back up at the mountains I saw. They were definitely the same — the colossal, snow-covered peaks were actually quite the landmark. It looked as though a god or giant had driven a massive wedge right down the middle, slicing it cleanly in two. I wondered for a moment what it must look like between the two halves of the mountain — the massive, mountainous

cliffs on either side... We'd have to go there and poke around at some point.

Eventually I realised her purpose behind sending me the image — she wanted to compare the angles. Looking back and forth between her picture and what I was seeing, I finally took my own picture and sent it back.

Yuki: looks like you might be east of me since i see a wider gap from here

Yuki: mebbe higher too?

Earthbound: Great, okay, I'll meet you at your cabin

Yuki: ok!

Well that was that.

Hmm, but I didn't really want to wait for her here. Maybe if I went east to search for the village we'd stumble into each other?

'Twas decided, just like that. Soon after starting east, I reached a slope down into a valley. To the left and right, off a cliff on either side, was thick, coniferous forest. Tall evergreens, wide spruces, bushes, you name

it. They were all covered in snow and actually looked very pretty.

Yeah, I was definitely going to head further out. ‘Cause like, who wants to sit around waiting for someone in a video game? No, I wanted to punch some snow-themed monsters in this pretty forest. It’d be silly not to!

...That being said, what exactly was I supposed to use to punch said monsters? Like, my fists wouldn’t do that much damage, would they? It wasn’t like they were on fire or something.

No, they probably wouldn’t do much damage at all. Rather, I’d probably just hurt myself trying it — bloody my knuckles. And that meant... that meant that I had come out here pointlessly.

Ugh. I breathed a long sigh, and then turned back towards the cabin. Time to grab some more equipment, then.

The slope had other plans for me, though — as I began to walk back up, there was a bit of a gust of wind,

and then I was no longer making forward progress. Instead, I was sliding backwards. Down, and down, and picking up speed, and my attempts to stop it were completely in vain... until I fell backwards and began tumbling head over heels, all the rest of the way to the bottom. Unfortunately, I wasn't in a cartoon, so I didn't end up rolling into a giant snowball. When the dust settled, I was just lying in the snow at the bottom, groaning in pain.

My groaning quickly turned to laughter, though. What a stupid sight that must have been. As I giggled, I rolled over into a more comfortable position, then stared at the grey, cloudy sky. Even when my giggles faded, I was still staring, smiling. Sure, it was cold, but I loved winter. And on top of that, I was free from all my worries, and I felt amazing...

It took me a minute before I got up again, brushing off the fuzzy black cloak I was wearing and looking up the hill I had fallen down. I'd gone quite a ways... was it worth it to go back up, or would it be better to search for Star? On the one hand, I'd waste a ton of time trekking

back up that hill, but on the other, it was probably dangerous to head out without a weapon of some kind.

Well, this *was* a starter area though, right? That's why we'd spawned here? I'd probably be fine. Maybe.

Yuki: im heading east to meet you in the middle

I had gone into the forest half expecting to run into a bunch of creatures I was going to struggle with, but that definitely didn't happen. Instead, it was very quiet. "*Too* quiet," I said, in my best impression of some kind of detective or something. Unfortunately, it didn't really work with how cutesy my voice sounded, which made me laugh, and then I couldn't help but snort.

And, anyway, it *wasn't* actually too quiet, it just felt... peaceful. Calming. Honestly, if I hadn't been so cold, I would have thought I was having a really nice walk.

Even *with* the cold, I guess I was still having a really nice walk.

I must have jinxed myself, thinking such things, because immediately after that I stumbled into my very first mob. I'd just been walking along, weaving between trees in the forest, and then... there it was. It was a little... round, black, fuzzy... person? Humanoid? It looked about two feet tall, and, sticking awkwardly out of the fur, I saw big, bluish feet and a long, bluish nose, along with massive, dark grey antlers that looked incredibly unwieldy. I squinted. What in the world was the point of it having antlers the same size as its body?

I stared at the fuzzy black creature for a while, unmoving. The fuzzy black creature stared back.

And then, as suddenly as it had appeared in front of me, the creature suddenly flared its nostrils, grunted, and bounded off, leaving a trail of large, three-toed footprints in its wake.

Well that was an interesting encounter.

A minute went by, a minute I spent staring after the trail of footprints. Then, I glanced up, my eyes tracing up the massive redwood trunks, through the lazily drifting snow and the canopy of needles, finally settling on the dim, cloudy sky.

I shivered. As it was getting dimmer, I was pretty sure it was also getting colder. Hopefully it was just due to the time... that it wasn't getting cloudier than it had been earlier. More clouds felt like it'd mean more snowfall, and we didn't need more snowfall than this; it'd make it a lot harder to meet up... and to get back. I glanced nervously at my own trail of footprints.

On the other hand, if it did start coming down harder, I really needed to find and meet up with Star, and soon. It would probably not be pleasant for her to freeze to death — even if the death didn't hurt that much, and she'd respawn, she'd respawn back in her "creepy village," and be stuck there, alone, overnight... And that meant that I would be alone in the cabin, too. I shivered at the thought.

My eyes finally fell back to the ground, where I quickly glanced around to make sure I was still safe. Though up to that point I hadn't run into anything except that strange, furry creature, I *had* just seen it and... well, it made me worried I'd be seeing more.

But on the other hand, I didn't really have much idea where I was. And that meant that not only did I not know where I was going (I'd just been going east-ish), I didn't know how to get back, either. If not for those footprints I was leaving, I doubted I'd be able to find my way back to the cabin.

Luckily, the fact that I had no idea where I was didn't matter, because not a moment later I received a message.

Earthbound: I just found some footprints in the snow, have you been dragging your feet?

Yuki: hehehe...

Earthbound: I'll take that as a yes. Should I wait here for you?

Yuki: yeah give me a minute

A warm feeling in my gut to replace the nervousness, I began to make my way back the way I came, even finding myself skipping a little bit. I was very excited. Excited to meet up with her, to hike through the woods with her... to stay in the cabin with her. That last one was making my chest feel tight to think about. *Why* was I so excited to go home and spend the night in a cabin with her? It was completely beyond me... Like, how was this going to be different from any of the past couple years? We'd shared a flat for ages already, after all...

Anyway, since I didn't really understand, I didn't bother thinking about it anymore either. The answer was probably the simplest — I was just enjoying the roleplay.

Oh! There! A flash of blue! Gosh, her hair was so pretty... *she* was so pretty... she was wearing a thick, white cloak, and even though it was obscuring a lot of her lines, you *could* still see curves... You could tell *just* how unabashedly feminine she was. The cloak hung over her shoulders, her thin arms out in front of her and bent

at the elbow and... her hands, the fingers were so thin and long... and the way they just slightly curled as she cupped them in front her mouth, breathing out into them, trying to retain warmth...

Welp, there went my heart again. I had half a mind it was going to fly away, but it wasn't as if I had wings. Star was the one with those.

Would she let me touch her wings? What would they feel like? What if they were ticklish, and she got all red-faced when I did? Oh *lord*, did *that* sound fun. Even if her wings weren't ticklish, the idea of tickling her when she least expected it sounded like the best thing ever. I found myself giggling aloud when I thought of what her laugh would sound like as I tickled her. Ahhhh! I couldn't wait!

Unfortunately, my time to just stare at her without her noticing had ended, because my giggling had attracted her attention. As if in slow motion — or maybe that was just my brain malfunctioning? — she looked up

in my direction, past a curtain of sky-blue hair... and her eyes locked onto mine.

We stared at each other for a while, just taking each other in, and then... the smile on her face.

The smile.

On.

Her.

Face.

She had completely lit up, a neutral expression shifting quickly into one of wonder and joy. Was she *that* happy to see me? What had I done to make her *that happy*? Not as if I was complaining, seeing her so happy was making me just as happy, if not happier... Gosh... My heart was pounding, and my face felt hot. Hadn't it been getting colder a minute ago? Why did it suddenly feel like spring had already arrived?

I really wanted to hug her. Was that allowed? I didn't know why I wanted to hug her, or why I was feeling any of the feelings I was feeling, but like... I just really wanted to hug her. It was allowed, right? It was

just roleplay, after all. This must be the kind of thing that the really good actors can do, where they like, become the character?

It couldn't be anything else, after all. Because I definitely had never felt anything like this before. Never would I have wanted to run up and hug her outside of the game. Or Russ, for that matter. Whether or not they were the same person.

But here... well, I just couldn't stop myself, now could I?

I was probably about two metres from her, dashing in for a hug... and that's when I heard a loud grunt, very nearly tripping over my feet in surprise.

Both Star and I froze, still staring at each other. It was probably comical, the way we both turned towards the noise at the same time... but, well, that's what happened.

There wasn't just one of those weird fuzzy black creatures standing there, but... Twenty? No, they were still piling into view... Thirty? There were some jumping

up and down, a few sniffing, a lot shuffling their feet, and even a couple whose antlers were intertwined and didn't seem able to separate.

In the front of the crowd of creatures stood a bigger one. A few moments passed, before it grunted again, a loud, rumbling sound, then turned its nose in my direction and poked a tiny little hand out of its fur towards me. I almost snorted, seeing that little hand, but the tenseness of having this crowd of mobs standing there — and no weapons if I needed to fight them — overwhelmed the comedy.

I glanced back at Star. She was looking back and forth between the creatures and me, confused. I shrugged.

And then the big one grunted again, and it was like a dam had burst. The thirty or more little creatures had stopped idling, and instead all charged for me simultaneously.

What the hell had I done? Why were they attacking me? I paled, frozen in place.

“Yuki!” she shouted, diving for me and grabbing my hand.

“S-star,” I choked, my short legs struggling to catch up with her pace as she dragged me into a panicked run from the pack of little fuzzies. Hey, no fair, I was sure I had a higher speed stat than her... was it because my legs were so much shorter? Well, regardless, even *my* legs were long enough that we were gaining distance from the scary little creatures chasing us, but... not by much, and only because we were in a forest. See, they seemed to run by bouncing, mostly, rather than by bending their knees — as a result, I had a feeling that their slower speed was mostly caused by needing to weave around trees.

Star yanked me around a particularly wide redwood, making a sharp angle back towards my trail of footprints. Due to the way the little fuzzy creatures ran, they failed to make the same turn, their momentum carrying the whole crowd far past where we had turned. Good, now we’d have a lot more distance on them.

She must have noticed it too, because she took the chance to speak up. “What the heck did you do, you massive idiot? How did you manage to anger the whole mooslin camp?”

“Mooslin? I don’t know, I didn’t do anything!”

She gave me a withering glare, and I winced. After a moment, she asked, her voice a bit strained, “Did you not look at them in the UI?”

“I... uh... no... you can do that?”

“Yes,” she said, simply, yanking me around a tree and then letting go of my hand. It was okay, I was keeping up now, but still... I hadn’t wanted to let go.

We finally met back up with my footprints, the mooslin hot on our tails. Well, just mine, actually, since Star didn’t have one. I snorted to myself, and she gave me a look that was probably supposed to be angry, but she was kinda laughing a little bit as well.

“Dumdum,” Star turned back to wink at me. Was she... was she doing the ‘fatso’ thing? But she changed it since I’m not fat in here? I felt a warm blush appear on

my cheeks. That was *definitely* flirting, and it worked *way* too well.

"J-jerk," I shot back. That was my usual response, but it still worked, right? I couldn't tell, I was still feeling *far* too flustered.

"I hadn't expected our first time in-game to go like this," Star noted, leaping over a frozen stream that on my way out I had slipped on.

I followed her in the jump, just barely managing to make it to the other side. "It's kinda funny though, isn't it?"

She didn't respond, and I had a feeling she had probably rolled her eyes.

"Hmmph, fine. Well, I thought it was funny," I grumbled.

"Yeah, up until we get impaled by those antlers."

"Touché."

As I crested a hill, Star just ahead, I heard that loud grunt behind me again. Glancing back nervously, I saw that the leader of the pack had slipped on the icy river

and fallen face-forwards, its antlers getting stuck in the snowy riverbank. It was wiggling its feet uselessly in an effort to get unstuck.

"Pffft," I couldn't help but burst into a fit of giggles.

"Run now, laugh later!" Star complained.

"Yes, ma'am!" I giggled.

She blushed.

After that, with their leader stuck in the snow, we managed to gain a lot of distance on them. By the time we reached the slope I had tumbled down, they weren't even in view. We were going to make it! And just in time, too, because the light was getting dimmer and the tint was getting more orangey, and on top of that, the snow was starting to come down harder and faster.

"Yuki... did you fall down this hill?" Star snorted.

I blushed. "Maybe."

"Clumsy dork."

"I blame the hill. It was slippery, okay?"

"Uh huh."

Halfway up, we started hearing the sounds of the mooslin once more, tempting a glance behind. The leader was back in front, a bunch of clumps of snow and frozen dirt stuck in its antlers. The others weren't far behind.

"They're here," I panted.

She didn't respond, probably to conserve energy. I didn't blame her. It'd be okay, though, it wasn't as if they'd be able to catch up anymore. There was no way they'd be able to get up the hill that fast, even if they were faster out of the for—

Whump. The ground shook behind me, startling me and nearly causing me to trip again. I looked back to see the mooslin leader, and choked. Why had I even considered it! Of course I'd jinx it again!

"Holy heck!" I exclaimed, running a little bit more desperately now. "That thing can... can *jump*!"

"Then run, idiot!"

We made it to the top of the hill, only for the bigger mooslin to land in front of us with another *whump*.

There was the cabin... it was right there... But the mooslin was between it and us.

"Now what," I murmured.

"I guess we fight," she suggested. "What are your abilities?"

"Uhh..."

"You didn't look at those either, did you?"

"Err..."

She sighed, exasperated, holding out her hands towards the mooslin leader. A small, shimmery purple shield appeared in the air against her hand, about half a metre in diameter. "Well, okay, all we really need to do is get *me* to the cabin. You'll respawn there already."

I took a shocked step backwards, sputtering, "Y-you're going to let me die?!"

"Well, ideally you won't, but—"

The mooslin suddenly grunted, and its shape seemed to stretch out as it flew towards me, antlers first. Oh lord! Too late now, I really was going to die!

Luckily, the surprise of being attacked so suddenly combined with being in the middle of taking a step backwards managed to cause me to slip again, falling on my butt (so much for dexterity), and the mooslin flew straight overhead, its fur brushing against my face. Ooh, it was soft! And familiar, somehow?

It flew back down the hill, where it must have bowled into the crowd of its brethren, because I heard a long cascade of grunting. I sat back up slowly, looking down the hill, and... gosh, it was a mosh pit down there. Antlers and black fur and snow... it looked like an amorphous blob of mooslin.

I snorted.

"Well, I guess that's that," Star giggled.

I looked to her incredulously. There was probably a really dumb expression on my face, because she started giggling even harder. And then, of course, I couldn't help but join in.

What a night.