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Context: The main characters, Emi and Beatrice have just met for the second time and have decided to go out on a casual date together. They both have huge crushes on each other but aren't sure about how the other feels.

Chapter 14: An Evening in Balarand

Beatrice and Emi met back that evening at the front of the library, and Beatrice dragged Emi the short distance back over to the marketplace, the same one where they had first seen each other all those weeks ago.

The sun had begun to set, and two of the moons were already visible in the evening sky. Some street lamps had been lit, and the scene around them glowed warmly, even as the weather grew colder and colder. It was as if the whole world had suddenly become tinted blue and orange.

"My parents always told me to stay away from places like this," Emi said.

"Well, your parents are too overprotective," Beatrice said. "Though, considering you're a member of the L'Hime Family, they might be in the right. I can't believe you're the brother of Reo L'Hime! He's so cool."

"He's... cool...?" Emi did not want to know the answer to this question.

Beatrice gave the answer anyway. "My classmates talk about him all the time. Some of the girls in my class have posters of him on their bedroom walls."

"R-really...?"

"No."

They walked side by side down the long marketplace road, surrounded by shops and stands all over the place, and jam-packed with people in all directions. Emi tried to ignore the crowds but she was still getting apprehensive being so close to so many in such a small area.

Beatrice noticed. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah... I'm fine. Let's just keep going."

Neither of them intended to do any shopping this evening, but the smoky meat stands and glittering jewelry shining against the copious lanterns made the whole area fun to walk around in. The smell made it even better.

“And so you’re a junior priest, right...?” asked Emi, her smile wilting before Beatrice’s eyes.

Beatrice felt the color drain from her cheeks and promptly replied, “Well, a junior priest is just that. I don’t know if I’ll do it for real. It’s a big step, obviously. You know.” Beatrice rubbed the back of her neck. Emi felt satisfied with that answer for now.

“Of course. The future is always in motion, after all,” Emi then said.

“What do you mean by that?”

“It means I have no idea what I want to do with my life,” she said with a chortle.

Before Beatrice could say anything else, Emi’s eyes took notice of a booth displaying a set of bright, ruby-red earrings. She paused and let Beatrice walk ahead of her while she examined it.

They looked like they might make a wonderful present...

Emi glanced at Beatrice, then back at the earrings, then back at her. They were beautiful, but they wouldn’t suit her, she thought. Part of her appeal was the way she exhibited some sort of warm aura with her plain outfits and subdued smile, some sort of magnet where Emi was a very reactive metal. The way she walked, even, exuded a strong sense of herself; she swayed her hips like she had a specific purpose in every step, and yet carried herself lightly. These earrings didn’t capture that aura at all.

Beatrice, noticing Emi had fallen behind, stopped in her steps and turned back towards her. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“N-nothing,” Emi said.

She noticed the stand selling earrings next to Emi, some of them about as red as the girl’s own face. Was Emi trying to buy her a present this soon into their... their evening together? A bit weird. Still, she was unable to stop a giddy smile forming across her face. “I don’t need anything,” Beatrice told her. “That kind of stuff they sell is usually junk anyway.”

“Oh, no,” Emi said, her voice perking up at the sound of being vindicated. “Don’t worry, I wasn’t going to buy them. They don’t suit you.”

“Hey!”

“Wait, no, I mean...”

Beatrice's stomach gurgled.

"I mean, I think I should buy us food first instead." Good save, both of them thought. "I don't think either of us have eaten since we went to the library, right?"

"I think you're right. But I can buy my own food, you know!" What Beatrice didn't say was that she only had three silver coins to spend and that was her entire allowance for the week. Emi, with a coin purse with more than Beatrice got in a year, hadn't even considered the idea of running out of cash.

They stopped at a food stand offering one of Balarand's signature dishes, the stuffed salmon bind. There were so many varieties it was hard to choose from, including fried rice, cream cheese, sour cream, and a near-infinite variety of vinegars and sauces.

Emi was a bit bewildered by the selection and decided to choose one at random. "I'll have the spinach," Emi told the cook at the stand.

"Ah, sorry, fresh out."

"I'll have the... grape?" That didn't sound particularly appealing, but—

"Don't got that either."

"I'll have the fried rice, then," she said dejectedly. She liked fried rice salmon binds, but... they were far from her favorite, and on a night like this, for some reason, she was hoping for the absolute best.

Beatrice continued to look at the variety of options for stuffing, and her ears perked when she came across one unfamiliar term. "Crabspice?"

This question sparked a flash in the cook's eyes. "Crabspice, yes. It's a very strong spice found way out in the Torano Islands. You ever heard of there?"

"Well, yes," Beatrice said. She knew of the Torano Islands, though only from their history with the ancient art of soul-taking. I've visited those islands only once; they are beautiful, but are a very limited trading partner these days, now that the fishing industry in Kent has become so prominent.

"But... what's a crab?" Emi asked.

"I don't much know myself," the cook said, "but I've heard they are gigantic, terrifying creatures with pincers that could snap you or me in half in an instant. Whatever brave souls actually killed one, well... they're heroes. Bringing it all the way to me, so I can offer it to the world. You wanna try?"

“Sure thing,” Beatrice said.

“It’s a bit spicy, you know.”

“Well... it IS called crabspice.”

“Are you sure, Beatrice?” Emi asked, having chosen the fried rice salmon bind. She hated spicy foods.

Beatrice shot a glare at her. She took the salmon, wrapped up in wax paper, and began chomping at what was once a member of one of the mighty Balarand Salmon shoals. Salty and savory.

“Spicy? Oh, this is nothing,” Beatrice said. “Emi, you’ve got to try this. It’s really tasty.”

“No thank you.”

She bit further into the salmon and reached a point of higher crabspice concentration. Extremely sweet at first. It was a bit hot, but Beatrice couldn’t resist eating more and more. But then...

“Yack!”



The cook handed her a cup of water and she gulped it down in a single moment.

Beatrice, panting out of her mouth, said, "It's... a bit spicy after all– Hic!" she put her hands over her mouth. "Oh– Hic! No..."

"You've got the hiccups?" Emi laughed.

Beatrice growled like a frightened animal. "Hic!" She grabbed another glass of water and drank it down. "Hic!"

"I've heard if you hold your breath a really long time they'll go away."

"I've heard you need to swallow a lot of sugar," the vendor said, "I have a cream-filled salmon if you want it. Half-price."

"No– Hic!– thank you," Beatrice muttered.

They continued on towards their nonexistent destination, all the hustle and bustle of the marketplace at night a mere backdrop to these two girls hopelessly engaged with each other.

"I never stay out this late," Emi said.

"Are your parents going to be mad at you?" Beatrice asked.

"Well, my housekeeper will."

"Oh yeah, I forgot you're–Hic!– a L'Hime. You have a very tough life."

"Very. It's not fun and games being in a diplomat's family. Everyone blames your family for everything that happens, and my parents are always away, and then there's so much pressure for you to act like– You're making fun of me."

"No, I'd be much too frightened to tease a diplomat's daughter," said Beatrice. She winked. Emi pushed her away playfully.

"I'll have you know, my family–"

Emi shrieked as a small greyback bear skittered by.

Beatrice broke out in a riot of laughs and hiccups. "A greyback?"

"It's not my fault!" Emi exclaimed. "They roam around the city all day and pop out of nowhere. They freak me out is all."

"The most adorable animal in Balarand, and you're scared of them... Oh, Emi..."

“What’s that supposed to mean...”

They were near the edge of the marketplace by now, the last few shops before the street ended and the city turned back into an orderly row of businesses and houses. The market stands here were quaint, often elderly people selling knick-knacks, or the down-on-their-luck hawking whatever they could find. They usually didn’t have much besides old junk.

Something odd caught Beatrice’s eye, though, and made her turn towards one of the booths. There were various metal objects placed around on the table. It certainly looked like old junk, but...

The seller, a mustached man in a turban, looked at the girls, his mouth neutral but his eyes smiling wide. “I see you’re interested in my machine.”

“Machine?” Beatrice asked.

Emi smirked, realizing she knew something that Beatrice didn’t. “Machines are little contraptions made of different parts. Put them all together, and they do stuff.”

“Do... what?”

“Uh... I don’t know.” That was the extent of her knowledge.

The man laughed. “They can do all sorts of things. This one, for instance...” He pointed to a large device with numbers protruding out of the front. “This one can calculate any math equation known to man. It’s the ultimate powerhouse. But, for you, maybe this will be more interesting.” He motioned to a small cube with a lever sticking out at its side. “Just crank this, and you can power the machine... giving it life...”

He began turning the lever in a circular motion, and a tiny twinkling bell started to play from inside the metal box. It was a simplistic nursery tune, but the fact that it was playing by itself just by moving the part outside... How did it work?

Suddenly, Emi was captivated. What kind of creation was this, that could—

BOING! A fuzzy greyback bear puppet popped out of the top of the box, its paws sticking out as if it were greeting you. Emi jumped backwards a full foot. Beatrice was, once again, incapacitated with laughter and hiccups.

“H-How did you...” Emi was at a loss for words, partly from shock.

“It’s the magic of machines,” the seller said.

“Magic?!”

He chuckled. “Only the magic of man, that is. The gears and coils inside work together to form a creation so divine, it rivals the Gods. We are our own clockmakers.”

Beatrice furrowed her brows, but didn’t say anything.

“And what’s this one called? This, uh, scary thing?”

“I call it the jack-in-the-box. Great for children. Do you want it?”

“Wow. How do you make one of these...” Emi was completely bewildered, but fascinated. You and I may take gear-powered devices for granted these days, but in Emi’s youth, it was almost mythical to see something as intricate as a clock being created for entertainment.

You could learn a lot from her. Or maybe not, what with all your gear rockets. You better clean those up after I finish this story.

“Buy it, and I’ll sell you the schematic,” the seller told her. “Then you can build your very own.”

Emi took a satchel of coins from her purse and plopped it onto the table. The money clanged against the wood with a loud thud. “How much?”

The seller smiled.

So that was how Emi ended up with a jack-in-the-box, and how Beatrice, the one with the school bag, ended up carrying it for the rest of their evening together. It was heavier than it looked, Beatrice came to learn.

After a while further, they finally reached the end of the marketplace, and there was a split. Directly ahead of them were two paths; north, with a short tunnel passing under the Grand Concourse that encircled the capital district, carriages and chariots speeding by at all hours; or south, in the direction of Beatrice’s apartment, and where Knoll Park and the Balarand Theatre had been situated for centuries and the cultured made frequent visits.

Without much deliberating, the two of them went south and walked across the narrow pedestrian bridge, passing over one of the countless canals running east-to-west throughout the city. Below them, a gondola floated gently in place, tied up to rest for the evening. The sun had finally disappeared under the curvature of the continent, and all five moons were shining on full display. It was like something out of a painting.

Emi stopped walking and looked out at the night sky, only the faint shadow of Gonda Tower sticking out as the buildings stretched on across the floodplains.

They were very close to one another, standing on this bridge. Beatrice exhaled, and her breath turned into a fine vapor in front of her. Emi's did the same, and Beatrice watched as the girl breathed in again, and then shivered.

"Sure is getting cold out," Beatrice said.

"Sure is."

Emi felt a tickle of fabric on the back of her hand. It was from Beatrice's coat; the two of them were so close that they were practically touching. With her eyes fixated on the canal and the rest of Balarand, she moved her hand just a little bit closer, continuing to brush it against the coat. If she really wanted to, she could reach out and touch Beatrice's face, rub her fingers against her freckles. The only thing stopping her was the fact that that would be really strange and probably make her hate her forever.

It was a cliché to say she felt warm even in this sort of weather. But also, no matter her proximity to the girl next to her, Emi was too cold.

Beatrice, on the other hand, felt a little too hot, and wondered when she'd be able to set down her school bag. She was very concerned that her back was going to be all sweaty by the time she got back home. But she, too, felt the same feelings going through Emi's head, I'm sure. As loath as she would be to admit it, Beatrice was smitten, her heart pulsing fast enough Emi could hear it. Nearly feel it.

They stood close to each other, angling their head to face the other without their noses getting in the way. They were very, very close.

Then Beatrice said, "I really like you," and Emi, without thinking, took a full step backwards. "Oh."

"S-sorry. I really like you too. I mean, I think you're a likeable person. I, um, yeah." Emi stepped back to her previous position, but Beatrice had already turned around and started walking away. Oh, Gods, why was she so bad at all of this...

There were more Dannark soldiers out patrolling past the pedestrian bridge, where the two were headed. This area, being the most "cultured" part of Balarand, was more tightly watched than anywhere else in the city, the pewter-gray armor of the foreign soldiers having become a fixture throughout the southern half of the city.

In front of the Balarand Theatre, built three thousand years ago by the Demigod Dramaturge, there was a small park consisting of scattered trees and sculpture. In front of the statue to Empress Nievol, there was a bench that the two sat down on.

Being the Empress's own visage and a common source for protests, there were even more guards posted around this statue. But they didn't seem to pay the girls any mind. They let their minds ease and let the rest of the evening pass them by.

It was the perfect place for people-watching, the perfect spot to gaze on the pretty, soft atmosphere of an evening in Balarand. Neither of them were concerned with that right now.

"I don't— Hic!— do this enough anymore," Beatrice said.

"This is the first time I've been out at night without my family," Emi said. "Sounds like we're both a bit unfashionable as human beings, huh?"

"We're not very interesting at all, the two of us."

"Not really."

Beatrice put her hand through her hair for a moment, feeling uneasy about being close to such a beautiful girl with her hair so messy right now.

Emi couldn't stop thinking about how much she wanted to play with the curls in such a beautiful girl's hair.

Emi's right hand and Beatrice's left hand were both on the bench, the sides of their pinky fingers touching. Beatrice moved her hand a bit closer, just to see what would happen, and her finger rested right above Emi's. Emi pulled her hand away and closer to herself.

Trying to ignore what she thought was another embarrassing moment, Emi began a new topic of conversation. "I can't understand how we never met before in the library," she began. "Your father works there. I go about once a week. I think it's some sort of force field that's been intentionally trying to get us to avoid each other."

"The Gods have their ways," Beatrice said. "They didn't want us to meet—Hic!—before, but now they do."

"The Gods did this?"

"Well, yeah."

"I highly doubt that. Maybe we've met before, but we just don't remember."

"I highly doubt THAT."

"You're right. I'd never forget you."

Beatrice winked. Emi chuckled.

“But wait, there must have been some specific days we both were in there. What about National Reading Day?”

“I never go to that,” Beatrice said. “It’s always so busy in the library on that day I just stay home.” She gave it more thought. “What about King Kline’s Birthday? I did a lot of reading that day last year.”

“Nope,” Emi said. “I had to go to all the stupid parties for those celebrations.”

“I’ve never really thought about–Hic!– Ugh, nevermind...”

Emi giggled and blushed. Even her hiccups accentuated her magnetic aura. “You’re just so cute. Has anyone told you that?”

“Not really. So, uh, thanks.”

“You’re welcome...” Her blush certainly wasn’t going away.

“What about you?” Beatrice asked.

“Well... people constantly compliment me, but it’s mostly because they want to get in my skirt.”

“And this situation is different?” she joked. She tried to narrow her eyes and give a lascivious smile, but this look was interrupted by a, “Hic!” She sighed.

Emi was paralyzed with embarrassment at the very mention of that, joking or not, and tried to steer the conversation away. “Anyway, tonight’s been really fun.”

“It really has.”

“I don’t really want it to– Ack!”

Beatrice suddenly grabbed Emi’s hand and squeezed it tight. Emi struggled to get loose for a second, but when she realized what was going on, she relented and let Beatrice slide her fingers in between hers.

For everything that came before, this was the moment when Beatrice and Emi’s story truly began. It changed their lives. In a way, it changed mine too. One simple act of putting hands together, fingers intertwined.

They walked away from the marketplace, holding hands, not caring what anyone else would think about a junior priest and a rich layabout displaying their affection so publicly.

And they just walked around.

Eventually they ended up in Emi's neighborhood, where Beatrice was taken aback by how large the houses were.

"This is crazy..."

"Have you seen the mansions around Lake Geoffrey?" Emi asked. "These are just dingy apartments compared to those."

"Hey..."

"I mean, apartments are fine. I just, uh..."

"I guess apartments don't have a whole maid staff, or butlers and servants doing your every bidding."

"That's not... I mean, they usually don't do everything I tell them to unless I pay them extra, though!" Emi stammered as she tried fruitlessly to offer a defense of her bizarre affluent lifestyle.

Beatrice shook her head jokingly, then asked, "Which one is yours?"

"That one." Emi pointed over to her home with currently only two windows lit by candle, looking pretty uninviting in the middle of the night like this. "I'm probably going to get in a lot of trouble when I get back."

"Well you don't have to go back just yet."

"I do... Any later and my parents will call the police to search for me. They'll think I'm being ransomed or something." Emi let go of Beatrice's hand, slowly. "But tonight was great."

"It was." Beatrice set down her school bag and gave Emi the toy she bought. "Here's your thing."

"This is so cool..."

"So are you," Beatrice said. "Um, when do you want to meet again?"

Emi tried not to let her good mood fade, but it was hard when she thought about a question like that. "About that... I don't know. I have to help prepare for my parents' big winter house party soon. Guests from all over Elince and Dannark will be there. And then I have to attend the party..."

"Parties are fun," Beatrice said.

“You’ve never been to a rich party.”

That was true, though Beatrice thought it could never be any worse than those parties for Summer Break they always had at the end of the school term. The food they brought in was always pretty bad and the teachers played all the music, which usually meant it was done poorly. “Well, I’ll see you at the library sometime soon then.”

“I’ll... I’ll go every chance I get.”

“Me too.”

“Well...”

“Well.”

“Good...”

“Good what?”

“I don’t want to say it.” Emi was tearing up again; twice in one day. She couldn’t finish that word, because that would mean this night would be over, and time would have to pass before the next time she saw this girl. She couldn’t let it end.

“Then I’ll say it.” Beatrice took a step forward and extended her hand. “Goodbye.”

Emi shook it and cried. “Beatrice,” was all she could say. Beatrice gave a crooked smile—and then hiccuped one last time.