February 14th 2016 Shadowcrest, Gotham City, New Jersey, 7:00 PM EST

The first thing I did after finishing the Pomme de Sang was to check my stats. A Legendary item gave me a full hundred thousand XP, which was enough for at least three levels even in my current advanced state. Sure enough, when I checked my stat sheet:

[Name: Leon Halcyon
Affiliation: The Club (Iron)
Level: 26
XP: 6,400/34,000
Class: Artificer (Epic) : Nine stats per level.
Race: Banesidhe
Keyblade: Oblivion
Statistics: Strength- 14 (29)
Endurance- 70 (73)
Agility- 15 (16)
Intelligence- 136 (138)
Wisdom- 40
Willpower- 150
Defense:3

HP: 1,460/1,460 (1,480/1,480)
MP: 4,080/4,080 (4,140/4,140)

Skills (11/20):Jewelcrafting (E)- Lvl 47, Sanctification (L)- lvl 33, Reduce (C) - Lvl 24, Refine (R) - Lvl 29, Identify (R) - Lvl 50, Northern Broad Strike (Un) - Lvl 34, Synthesize (M)- 100, Disenchant (E)- Lvl 17, Magic Missile (C)- Lvl 27 Extraction (L)- lvl 82, Haki(L)-lvl 74, Banesidhe Song (L)- lvl 6

Three levels. I'd netted myself twenty seven points, and after the fight with KGBeast I was feeling a little exposed, so I made the executive decision to dump it all into Endurance. Nearly fifteen hundred HP put me at almost fifteen times the base of a hundred, which seemed like a great start at keeping myself safe.

Unfortunately, that safety proved to be an illusion, because I realized when I made my way into the kitchen to give Lia her ring that the table had been set with four settings and was covered with rose petals. It took me exactly two minutes to realize what the date was…and how unbelievably fucked I was that I'd forgotten. I whirled on Zee to see her grinning like an idiot and holding out her hand. Rose, who was pouting, slapped a hundred into her palm.

"You cheated," she accused our grinning sorceress. "You distracted him with nerd shit."

She shrugged. "What can I say, my man loves to work with his hands. My backup plan was sex, but it didn't turn out to be necessary."

“You KNEW?” I gasped. “But why would you want me to forget Valentines?”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Because WE wanted to do something nice for YOU, dunce.” She jerked her thumb over to the stove, where a familiar bubbly redhead was setting a steaming casserole dish on the counter. “Apparently Red can cook her ass off. Zee found out and decided we would surprise you with a home cooked Valentines dinner. She was supposed to distract you while I kept the kitten on task.”

Lia pouted cutely. “I don’t NEED to be kept on TASK. I’m a grown woman who is fully capable of paying attention to-”

“You need to take the cheesecake out,” Rose said casually.

With a squeak, Lia whirled and darted over to the over, yanking it open and pulling out a round cake tin. “Ouch! Hot, hot, hot, darn it!” She shook her hands out as she dropped it on the counter, blowing on her fingers. I frowned, moving forward to check on her, but she waved her hands at me. “No, go sit down, I’m fine. Vampire fingers. I’m already healed.”

“I guess…” I said slowly. Walking over to the table, I sat at one of the settings, Zee plopping down in the chair next to me. Rose, meanwhile, proceeded to help Lia carry everything over to the table. “So, you know how to cook, kitten?”

She nodded shyly. “Home ec was always my favorite class in school. I was Mrs. Ashburn’s favorite. Rose helped me out a bunch too. She’s actually really good in the kitchen.”

“I know,” I grinned. “But don’t mention it outside the house, she gets self conscious.”

Rose glared at us as they both sat down. “I do NOT. I don’t give a shit what anyone thinks. It’s just none of their fucking business. Besides, Batty Crocker over here has way more fun with it and her food is ten times better.”

“Seems like we can all cook,” I said with a grin. “Maybe I can do my famous omelettes for breakfast tomorrow. Tonight though, I just want to try this food. It smells amazing, kitten.”

Lia blushed. “It’s nothing much. Just chicken madeira. Mama taught me this one actually, since we couldn’t use wine to cook at school.” Blushing, she started serving each of us the chicken. “So what did you two do today? You were working on the cup thing right?”

“At first,” I beamed. “But it wasn’t my main focus. I was paying more attention to finishing THIS.” I reached into my inventory, withdrawing the small black velvet box I’d snagged from Zee’s workroom. “I finished your ring. It’s pretty special. It’s called Pomme de Sang. It means apple of blood.” I couldn’t help but flush slightly as I admitted. “Because you’re the apple of my eye.”

Rose snorted derisively. “Gay.”

“Rose!” Zee snorted, trying not to crack up. Despite the feigned disapproval, it was clear she thought the comment was hilarious.

My white haired valkyrie shrugged. “What? I have sex with chicks. I can say that.” Then she glanced at me a little worriedly, before adding. “But, I mean I guess it’s kind of sweet and stuff. If you like that sort of thing.”

Lia, completely oblivious to their banter, had taken the box from my hand gently, her red eyes wide as she opened it. “It’s…it’s so beautiful,” she whispered as she took it out and slipped it onto her finger. Her irises, normally blood red, flashes with a slightly more carmine light before returning to normal, and she gasped. “This is…what’s happening?”

“Pomme de Sang is a Legendary ring,” I told her excitedly. “As long as you’re wearing it, you won’t need to drink blood. You still CAN,” I clarified as her face fell. “When it’s just us, but you won’t go hungry if I’m not available.” I didn’t mind Lia’s love bites, and I didn’t want her to feel bad about feeding on me, so I made sure she knew her attentions were still welcome, even if they weren’t necessary anymore. Judging by how she calmed down, she’d immediately jumped to the conclusion that I was rejecting her, so I was glad I’d clarified.

Zee was watching us both with a soft smile. I shot her a guilty look. “I feel even worse I didn’t make anything for you now. Rose got her armor and I made Lia this ring. Now I find out it’s valentines…”

She just rolled her eyes. “I told you that I don’t care about that. I just…this is wonderful.” Her face was so joyful it almost broke my heart. “I’ve been lonely here a long time. Even on Valentines I’d maybe go out on a date or with some girlfriends. But this…having you all here with me. Being together like this. It’s so special to me. No magic item would mean as much to me as this.”

Lia, whose gaze had been pinned to her ring, teared up a little. “Zee!” she wailed, throwing herself on the other girl and squeezing her tight. “I’m really happy too! I love you guys so much!”

“Yeah, me too I guess,” Rose muttered, shrugging slightly. “I love you guys or whatever.”

Zee giggled at her. “It’s just us, you know. You don’t have to act all tough all the time. We know you’re a badass.” While Rose had told me she loved me, saying it to the other two girls was clearly new for her.

I expected her to brush that off, but to my surprise, she frowned self-consciously. “I just…it’s a lot,” she admitted. “This is all a lot. I like it, and I’m not going anywhere. But like, I don’t know if I’m really cool talking about it like that yet?” She looked around at us uncertainly. “That’s not bad, right?”

“Talking about what?” I asked with a wolfish grin. “We were just telling Lia how great the food is, right?”

She snorted softly, but nodded. “Hell yeah, it’s awesome, Red. Hey, where’s Tabby? I expected that thirsty bitch to be hanging around the kitchen panting the whole day. Or maybe challenging me to a fight. She’s been weirdly quiet.”

“It’s Valentines,” Zee said placidly. “I think she wanted to give us private time. She’s in the house. I think she was in the pool last time I checked.”

I blinked at her. “We have a POOL?” I asked incredulously.

“We have seven,” she chuckled. “And three saunas. Also a botanical garden, but I haven’t seen it in a few years. I think it might be hiding from me. I planted Blackberries in there secretly as a kid and they went NUTS. It’s been a little afraid of me ever since. Though that’s preferable to the hat closet. That thing kept sneaking up on me every time I went into a room for YEARS after dad left. I had to magically seal it to make it stop.”

“How self aware IS Shadowcrest?” I asked uneasily, looking around the kitchen.

She shrugged. “Completely? Not at all? Somewhere in between? It kind of varies day to day. It likes all of you well enough at this point. Or didn’t you notice you don’t need a wisp to wander around here anymore?”

“Yeah, I was wondering about that,” I said curiously.

Zee frowned, her shoulders slumping a bit. “After my dad…well, after what happened, happened, I kind of shut down. The house responded to that. I was alone and I was fine with that. This place was my sanctuary, and I didn’t bring people back here, at least not for more than a visit. It was just for me.

“But once I met you…” she smiled softly at me. “It’s part of why I love you so much. Not just because you care, or because we share interests. You reached out to me, helped me connect again. You kind of brought me back to life, and the house came with me.” She reached out to take my hand, squeezing my fingers tightly. Then she glanced at the others and cleared her throat. “I mean all of you guys, not just Leon.”

Lia beamed at her. “I think it’s SUPER sweet. I’m so glad he was there for you, and that I can be here now. Although speaking of which…what about when your dad gets back?”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem,” she said quietly. “I get to see my dad for an hour a year, but he’s just…he’s so tired. Honestly before Leon gave me hope, I was getting a little worried he might just give up. It’s going to take a lot of work to get back to the person he was. I don’t think he’s going to feel up to making trouble for my boyfriend. And my dad is old fashioned, so I doubt

he'd even know how to approach you or Rose. He'll probably just act like you guys are friends who live here with me and ignore any signs of anything more going on."

Lia giggled. "Yeah, my dad is like that with stuff he doesn't want to think about."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Rose's head dip a little, her expression flickering. I cleared my throat. "Anyway, even if he gets mad, I've got ways to take care of things. Worst case I just build us a new place. Might be tough getting materials but I bet I could make something totally kickass."

That drew them all into an excited conversation about architecture preferences and their dream houses, and honestly, it was just…nice. After dessert, we all went up to Zee's room and crashed on her huge bed together. Given it was Valentines I'd wondered if things would turn sexual, but we just cuddled together and fell asleep, and really, I couldn't have wished for a better end to the night. Sometimes just being with the people you love was all you needed. It was the best Valentines I'd ever had.