

I emerged from my bedroom in time to Cresta being dragged out of Remmy's room by a cluster of slime tentacles. Her claws scraped against the floorboards, desperately and vainly resisting being thrown away.

"Cresta... I'm busy setting a new speedrun record on Paper Mario... please come back later," Remmy could be heard saying from within.

The door slammed shut in Cresta's face.

"Are you bothering Remmy again?" I asked.

Cresta pounced and knocked me to the ground, her face dripping with tears and snot.

"Remmy won't play with me! I thought we were best friends!" the cat girl wept.

The door to Remmy's room opened, and the slime occupant poked her head out.

"We are friends... but Cresta picked my lock when I told her I was busy," Remmy said before shutting the door again.

"You claw-picked her door?" I glared.

"W-Well, you know what they say. Best friends look out for each other! How do I know if Remmy's okay without seeing for myself?" Cresta pouted.

Cresta broke the number one roommate rule: never invade the privacy of your roommates. Someone's bedroom was their temple. Their holy place. Not to be pillaged or traipsed upon. The rule of thumb was if a door was wide open and the occupant was inside, you were welcome to walk right in. If it was shut, knock and ask permission to enter. If it was locked, knock and especially don't try to unlock it.

"You know what? I think this calls for a dorm meeting," I said.

In the afternoon, I gathered everyone into the living room for an emergency dormitory meeting. This was our largest yet, totalling nine tenants now that we have Isla and ten when I was counted into the mix.

Cresta, Remmy, Ivory, and Ines were fooling around on the couch to the left of the fireplace. Ange, Tamara, and Irapesha sat patiently together on the L-shaped couch. Val, holding Isla, occupied a rocking chair with a small spray bottle to wet the alraune's leaves.

"You all may be wondering why I gathered you here today. There's something very important that we, as dormitory roommates, need to discuss. The key to living in harmony is by setting rules and boundaries between each other. That way, we keep the roommate squabbles to a minimum," I explained.

"Oh, oh!" Ivory shot a hand up.

"Yes, living mimic?" I pointed to Ivory to give them the floor.

"Like setting up a schedule about when and who uses the kitchen so we aren't all packing the place like a can of sardines?" they asked.

"Yeah, kind of! Though I don't have to worry about that. The number of people who can cook can only be counted on less than one hand anyway."

Remmy timidly raises her hand to add something. When I pointed to her, a second head popped out of her neck to speak.

"Or like Cresta barging into our room, right?" the second Remmy said.

Cresta went bug-eyed, gawking at the original Remmy.

"Yes. That's precisely it. Which is what sparked this whole meeting. So together, as roommates and friends, let's have a constructive discussion on some things that might peeve one another that we'd like addressed. Anyone want to start?" I asked, opening the floor to the tenants.

Everyone except Cresta, Isla, and Ines shot their hands up.

"Uh, Akira. I think we need to talk," Ines said, casting me a concerned look.

"We're about to. How about we have Isla serve as our speaking stick? We'll let her decide who speaks, and everyone has to listen," I suggested.

"You want to pass Isla around like a baton?" Val squinted at me.

I shrugged.

Isla looked on board with the idea, extending her roots across the coffee table to Ivory, who reached out and reeled in the alraune girl into their arms.

"I don't got much to say, but I'd like for Cresta to stop scratching up my back," Ivory said.

"I can't help it!" Cresta exclaimed defensively. "You're a lot more durable than anything else in the dorm!"

"Cresta, Ivory's the one holding Isla right now," I gently reminded her.

Isla returned to Val's embrace.

"My garden is well on the way to returning to its former glory. However, a rather pesky kitten continues to make use of the garden beds as her napping place. She also sometimes uproots my beloved flowers in her sleep," Val said.

Cresta sank in the couch and pressed her index fingers together out of embarrassment. At the same time, Isla chose to hug Irapesha next.

"I also take issue with too many of Cresta's burger ingredients in the fridge and cabinets. I don't have anywhere to put whey protein. They can't go in my room because the powder clumps up when it gets too hot," Irapesha said.

"Wait, you're using protein supplements? Why?" I asked.

"What a strange question. To continue to grow stronger," she answered as a matter of factly.

"You're telling me... You can still get bigger?"

The dragonewt nodded.

I took a long gander at Irapesha. She was already a giant woman to begin with. Big mommy status, if you would. If she got bigger, then the rest of her proportions followed suit.

"Alright, Cresta. We're getting rid of some excess burger buns from the cabinets to make room for Irapesha's whey containers," I said.

"Why?" Cresta wailed.

"Irapesha wants to get bigger. Who am I to deny her that?"

Cresta's lower lip started quivering like she was on the verge of tears.

"How come everyone has a problem with me?" she asked, meeting each of her fellow dormmates' gaze in turn. "You know what? Don't answer. I'll excuse myself..."

Cresta stormed out of the dormitory entirely and slammed the front door.

"Cresta?" Isla called while extending her short arm roots as far as she could to the foyer.

"I'll go get her." I headed for the door until Ines snatched my arm.

"Okay, everyone. Let's disperse. I'm going to have a talk with Akira." Ines clapped her hands twice to spur the tenants up.

"Is Cresta okay? I'm worried about her..." Tamara said.

"Don't wring him up too hard, you hear?" Ange patted Ines on the shoulder, then took Tamara by the hand. "Come, dear. Cresta will be fine. You know she's a strong girl."

Once soon as everyone was gone, Ines pinched me by the ear and dragged me to the seat Val was just occupying.

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked, rubbing my ear.

"You did everything wrong. The meeting turned into a one-sided intervention for Cresta." Ines folded her arms and frowned.

"Okay, maybe I could have steered the conversation better. But if everyone had something to say about Cresta, it's not like I planned for it like that!"

"Sure. And do you think it could have done it differently? Without Cresta being the center of attention?" she asked.

I opened my mouth to retort, but only a groan came out.

"Like anonymously or something... Shit, you're right. I'm sorry." I sighed.

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to. You made Cresta feel alienated. No one likes that," Ines said.

"And... That's why you sent everyone away before confronting me, huh?"

An empathetic grin was all Ines answered me with.

"Let's go grab our housecat?" Ines asked.

On our way out, Remmy stopped us at the foyer.

"Cresta... probably doesn't want to see me right now... Can you tell her, I'm sorry?" Remmy asked.

"I'm the only one who's at fault. You don't need to apologize, but I'll tell her. Hang tight, and I'll bring Cresta right back." I patted Remmy on the head.

Together with Ines, we drove out to Vandice. All the tenants had their phones installed with a friend finder app, which tracked their GPS location as long as the device was on. Sure it was a creepy, helicopter-like parent thing to do, but taking care of netherfolks was extraordinary in and of itself. After the scare with Isla and Tamara, this was necessary.

Cresta was currently at the pet store where we had gone to buy toys for her last time.

We rushed into a frantically barking dog, leash pulled taut by the owner trying to hold their pet back. A few of the employees were whispering amongst each other at the registers, and a crowd had gathered at the back of the store.

"Akira?" Rushing out of an employees-only room in a panic was Sara, phone pressed to her ear and a bag of cat treats in the other hand. "Oh, thank goodness. I didn't know whether to call animal control or the department of defense."

"Where's Cresta?" I asked.

"This way." Sara led to a fenced off pen where prospective owners were given an opportunity to bond or play with a potential adoptee.

However, there were no adopters. Only a small group of confused, mildly amused pet store patrons and staff. We pushed past them to find Cresta flat on her back under a pyramid-shaped cardboard structure, surrounded by cats that were cuddled up next to her.

"You guys are unwanted, too?" Cresta asked.

"Mew!" a young calico responded.

"Looks like we're all in the same boat," she sulked as another cat rubbed its face against her cheek.

"Cresta hasn't moved an inch for twenty minutes now," Sara said.

"Bonding with fellow cats now?" I asked, walking up to the fence with both hands to my hips.

Only Cresta's eyes snapped up to meet me.

"At least they accept me." Cresta pouted.

"Is it okay if we step in?" I asked Sara.

The bright-eyed employee nodded.

Ines and I entered the pen, causing most of the cats next to Cresta to hiss and dart away. Those that were brave or undeterred by our presence started climbing all over us like we were new toys.

"Cresta, where do I begin? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put you on the spot like that. You're not unwanted. Everyone loves you. Especially me. You're my first tenant, and I love you to death," I said.

"Then how come everyone's got a problem with me? It sounds like the dorm would be a lot happier without me there to annoy them." Cresta picked up two cats by the scruffs of their necks and pulled them closer to cover her face.

Ines shot me a look, warning me to pick my words carefully.

"I'm telling you now, everyone would hate it if you just up and left. Like just earlier. Right after Irapesha finished, Isla chose you next. Tamara was the first to ask if you were going to be okay, and Remmy wanted me to tell you she's sorry."

At the mention of her friends, Cresta's ears perked up.

"They did?" Cresta asked, gazing up from the cats that shielded her.

"Yeah! The thing is, you can't go barging into someone's room. We went over this a long time ago when you picked my lock, remember? Imagine if Val came blasting magic at the gates

to Tarcosa's castle. You think he would be very happy about that?" I posed a scenario, hoping it might make sense in that mind of hers.

Whatever image appeared in Cresta's head, it elicited a giggle.

"I guess not," Cresta said, heaving a sigh. "Okay, no more picking locks."

"Also no sleeping in Val's garden beds that are in use, and no scratching Ivory anymore," Ines chimed in.

"Roger! What about my buns?" she asked.

"Can we negotiate to remove half so that Irapesha has room to put her whey?" I bargained in return

Cresta had to think about that for a second, but she ultimately agreed.

"Okay..."

"This is what setting boundaries means. A give and take. Talking one on one. I didn't consider the second part and made it look like everyone was against you. They aren't. So, what do you say about coming back with us? Give me a paw for yes." I offered Cresta a hand, and Ines did the same with hers.

Cresta took both our hands. Ines and I stood up, pulling the trouble-making catassassin to her feet.

"Looks like we're adopting this one." I grinned at Sara.

"Is that so? Then let me get the paperwork ready for you," Sara teased.

We bought some burgers from Rocket Burger on the way home. Right through the front door Remmy, Tamara, and Ivory as a flower pot with Isla inside were waiting for us at the foot of the stairs. The four of them rushed to mob Cresta.

"I thought you were going to leave us forever!" Tamara exclaimed.

"Were you guys waiting for me the entire time?" Cresta asked, stunned by their touching show of affection.

"We wanted to make sure... you were going to be okay," Remmy said.

"Look, if you wanna scratch me so badly, then the best I can offer you is once a week. At least it helps me with places I can't reach," Ivory added, transforming back to their humanoid elven form and handing Isla over.

Cresta cradled the alraune, whose roots stretched up to wipe a tear rolling down her cheek.

"Cresta, friend!" Isla beamed like the sun.

Blinded and overwhelmed by their kindness, Cresta drew all four of them into a bear hug.

"Uu... You guys... You're the best roommates in both worlds! I'll be better from now on, I promise!" Cresta wailed.