

After leaving the library, they headed back to their room at the inn to put the map in a safer place and they left again to find something to eat.

“We’ll stock up on food for the road before leaving the city tomorrow,” Meryn said. Takumi was a little sad that they would be leaving so soon but considering how many bad memories seemed to loom over her, Takumi felt it was best to just go and get that part of the journey over with as fast and as soon as possible.

“Sounds good. Bread and cheese and stuff then?” he asked. She nodded.

“And maybe some other snacks, bread and cheese can get old after a while. Plus, we’ll want to make sure that what we get are things that won’t go bad quickly,” she said. He nodded and followed her as she headed towards a street that was filled with cafes and restaurants. She picked a small cafe with an outdoor seating area big enough for her tail to fit with her back facing the wall so as to not hit anyone. Their server showed up quickly, took their order and was gone just as fast as he had shown up. Meryn had ordered both of them some sort of fish pies that Takumi found that he had liked so much more than he thought he would. He was never very adventurous with food back home so having someone like Meryn having him try new things was nice.

After they paid at the cafe, they left to walk around to explore the city and map out which places they would stock up on before their trip to the next layer. As they walked, they talked about what sorts of things they liked to draw and read and write about when a kid ran up to them and shyly presented Takumi with a flower.

“An aurelion’s bounty to give to your love,” said the child before she ran off, disappearing into the crowd.

Takumi tried to say something but anything that he was trying was dying in stutters on his tongue as his face and ears turned red. Despite the awkwardness of the situation, Meryn giggled. When he looked at her, she smiled.

“I had no idea someone could turn so red when their regular color is blue,” she said with a chuckle. Usually, remarks like that said back at home made him feel frustrated and upset or embarrassed but her saying that he knew was genuine and not mocking him. So he smiled sheepishly and looked at the flower before moving to stick it in her hair, being careful not to touch her horns.

“Then we can both be red,” he said as he grinned and she blushed back at him. She smirked and rolled her eyes.

“Still not as bad as you, Umi,” she said with a chuckle, playfully pushing him. He nudged her back and they continued walking, taking samples of food here and there. They made sure to stop and get some special food for Puff and Stitches, taking special note of things they should get specifically for them.

By the time the night was winding down, the two of them were exhausted from traveling and walking around all day and full from all the food they had eaten. As they laid down to go to sleep, they talked about some of their favorite foods they had found in the city and all the things they had on a mental list to try if they ever came back this way again. Takumi turned to his side to look over at her in the dark.

“Does this mean y-you’ll st-stick with me until we make it to Elysium?” he asked, nervous about the answer. She looked over at him, seeing his eagerness.

“I’ll stick with you, promise,” she said. He grinned and laid back down.

“Thank you, Ryn. I couldn’t have asked for a better friend,” he said. She smiled.

“And I think you’re my first real one,” she whispered.

“Really? After everywhere you’ve traveled?” he asked. She sighed.

“Well, as you can imagine, I’ve never been the friendliest. But also being back-stabbed so many times, it gets hard to know who you can trust and who you can’t when the mask of friendship and comradery looks the same as the genuine article,” she admitted.

“I can understand that. You’re the first person to not point out my stuttering or make fun of it. Same thing with talking to myself,” he said.

“The talking to myself I did too before Stitches joined up with me,” she said, Stitches rolling over on the pillow he made for himself next to Puff on her bed. “Besides, the stuttering is cute. It’s what made me trust you, actually. Besides the saving Stitches thing,” she said. He grinned through his blush and snuggled into his blankets.

“I’m glad. Good night, Ryn.”

“G’ night, Umi.”