

This dream of mine was shockingly detailed. That or I thought it was shockingly detailed because I was dreaming. One or the other, not that it mattered as I took notes on anything and everything I saw.

Saw. 'Saw'. So what? If I found the right marketing people, I was sure I could have this commercialized in no time. Light novels. Manga.

Merchandise.

If I forgot all of this before breakfast, like I did with most of my dreams that weren't horrifying nightmares, I was going to be so pissed.

"Man... That's a thought for sure." I scratched my chin on my shoulder, making Aqua huff as my head got a little too close to hers; she'd given up trying to put her head higher than mine about five minutes ago, finding that to be too much effort, and settled for being a backpack. "You think I could pull off making this into an anime or something when I wake up?"

Isekai was still popular, right? I mean...not being Japanese or knowing anyone in the business were some big hurdles when it came to this sort of thing but, well, dreaming.

Might as well dream big, right?

...Bigger than a girl that thought that underwear was more of a suggestion than a requirement when wearing a skirt that stopped just an inch past her crotch.

A girl that was shamelessly wrapped around me at that, while in public.

As the pointing passersby and the continued removal of children from the street kept on reminding me.

...Hah, I'd have been so freaking embarrassed if this was real.

"You're already awake, you idiot," Aqua grumbled in tired contrast. "And sure. Why not? It's got me in it to make up for you writing it."

I clicked my tongue and thought on that one, hunting boots (I hadn't worn those in almost two years) clicking and thumping on the cobblestone. "... Damn, imposter syndrome. You've got hands."

It was true though. A cute girl made up for many, many sins. Cute and or well endowed. Entertainment industries everywhere had discovered this one simple trick to market dominance and had refused to let go of it since.

There was a reason why the most common superpower besides absurd amounts of money was tits, and it wasn't because your average female olympian had the fat to spare.

Just saying.

...I wrote smut for a living, okay?

"My name is *Aqua*," my latent professional insecurities stressed, irritated... Her being on my back and refusing to let go was more relevant than I'd thought it to be. *Dream science*. "When did you mortals start getting so disrespectful, huh?"

Trick question.

"Sometime around the Garden of Eden," I tried with a hum anyway. "That or when we crawled out of the ocean as extremely ambitious lungfish. Around there."

Buzzwords.

Buzzwords everywhere.

"Huh... Yeah. Probably there." Aqua's hair tickled my nose when she nodded. I sneezed. "Probably should have picked up that that was how it was going to go when you guys started living on land instead of in the ocean like the *smart* animals did."

"That's debatable. So we evolved, huh?" I'd heard of dolphins. Anything that lived near those things willingly was not what I'd call smart. Good job, primordial ancestors. Thumbs up. "Nice to know."

"Eeeeh... Some of one thing, some of the other."

The plot thickened.

Like microwave oatmeal.

But it thickened.

"So there *was* a Garden?" I lead as her arms around my shoulders shifted their hold. "And a flaming sword?"

"Well, duh. Of course, there was a Garden. Not that you got to enjoy it for all that long." She scoffed as we made a turn to what was the biggest building around here that I'd seen so far. Past the marketplace and down the street...as good a place to start as any, I'd say "And of course, there was a flaming sword."

...Okay.

One second though.

“And this was *underwater*?” I frowned. “So, tracking this... Just repeating myself to make sure I got this right.” If I could have crossed my arms, I would have. I instead busied myself with rearranging Aqua on my back, her uneven weight starting to bother me. “We were blob fish when we got kicked out for eating a-”

“Look here, dumbass,” she growled before I could finish that... Man. If what I was thinking was anything like how my dreams were saying, the Sistine Chapel would have been a much funnier place to visit. “Creation is a messy place. That happened. Lots of things happened. There are a lot of worlds and a lot of gods and a lot of stuff going on. You wouldn't get it. So stop asking.”

“I wouldn't get it, huh?”

...I knew that phrase. I'd heard that one before, several times. More times than anyone should ever have to hear it; so existence was just a bunch of divine beings throwing shit at the wall then? And mismanaged guesswork, like schoolchildren working on a project from eight different angles? Was that it?

That was...new? Ish? Certainly novel.

It was what I'd heard just now. Or close enough. I couldn't remember anything like it being done before. So why not? A throwaway line here and there would work whenever religion suddenly mattered in story.

Just every once in a while. Not like anyone actually *cared* about anime cosmology and overarching lore outside of the forums. Anyone sitting down and watching this was here for the spectacle fighting. And the fat anime tits with a side of a *maybe* decent waifu they were attached to.

Couldn't forget those if you wanted to get anywhere these days.

Again, I wrote erotica for a living. I knew what I was talking about.

“Yeah. Okay. Sure.” I was just going to chalk this up to a ‘all creation myths are real’ explanation then. For now. Otherwise, we'd be here till my dream ended, arguing about how everything could possibly mesh together, end of the world prophecies and all, and that would be a shame. “And what does that have to do with me being sent here to save the world?”

“...I didn't get to give you the spiel before you kidnapped me,” Aqua breathed. “Crap.”

Was that how it had gone?

"More like you wanted me gone as soon as possible and explanations got in the way of that," I corrected calmly. She made a funny choking sound, the opposite of calm. "But we've got time now, right?"

We were just getting to the good parts. So we damn well better have the time.

"Y-yeah. We've got time now."

"Sweet."

"Be grateful, okay?" She coughed into a hand, forcing me to shift her again unless I wanted to drop her...and if anything proved this was a dream to me, it was me carrying a hundred moving, uneven pounds on my back for more than five minutes without collapsing. Amazing. "Oh. Oh, you poor soul, whose time on Earth has been cut tragically short-

"You did this part."

"I'm setting the mood!" She snapped at me, soft tones disappearing from one sentence to the next. Then reappeared without even a scratching vinyl sound, both of her hands spreading out and waving in the air with all the energy of an orchestral conductor. "Heaven has found you worthy of new life. A new chance in a new world. Of new challenges. New joys...if you can take it from the evil that besieges it, our most holy champion."

"Ooooooh. Ahhhhhh."

Aqua straightened up in pride...then fell back onto me with a yelp, arms around me again in a death grip as I leaned forward to catch her.

Oof. I'd almost felt that one.

And anyone that hadn't disappeared into a nearby building or scurried away into an alley to avoid us was now watching with the sick interest inherent to disaster tourists.

"The Devil King and his armies run rampant! My people cry out for a chosen one! For someone that can save them from damnation!" She gave me several insistent pats on the shoulder. And kept doing so until I bent a knee to let her down where she started fixing up her hair, some of which had fallen out of place. "Will that hero be you? You, that has been chosen by the heavens themselves and given our blessings? Or shall it be another, lesser champion that will step forward to take your place in Destiny?"

I waited a while longer. As did the small audience we'd gathered.

When she didn't say anything further after a long ten seconds, I started walking again and the crowd began to disperse, muttering about how their show had ended far too soon. "I could hear the capitalization at the end there."

It had been pretty good, I couldn't lie.

"I made sure to practice. I just make it look easy." Hands on her hips and breathing much more even as she hurried after me, she nodded. "Good though, right?"

Yet again, I thought on what she'd said. And I rubbed my neck, which felt like it had a crick in it now. "It sounds like the sort of stuff you tell socially maladapted, aimless, still confused from dying nerds to get them to sign on the dotted line before they get a chance to think."

"You have to work with your audience."

"...Damn. You got me there."

She skipped around me, irritatingly smug in body language and...all the other language to look me in the eyes. "I did. I did get you there." She pointed down. "And right here."

That was right. I was here.

If it worked, it worked.

"I'm not going to fight you on that. Even if I didn't get the whole deal, I'm here. Good job." My neck cracked as I let it go to, finally, cross my arms with a frown. A deep, deep frown. The story's shift into social commentary was going to need some careful handling, I think. Most people didn't enjoy being reminded of how empty and lonely their lives were. So, careful. "And watch out for the stairs."

"What stai-"

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It was just another day in Axel.

...And that was it. Really. That was it. It was another day in Axel. No more explanations needed.

It was the same thing with the Guild too. Drinks were served. Food was cooked. Jobs were posted and were either left to sit for days on end because any adventurer that could take them and survive was a lazy drunk, or some poor kid took it and got wrecked.

It was the little things in life that got you through the day when they were all the same.

And you were single.

Painfully, painfully single.

Luna, chin in hand while her other hand rapped a beat out on her counter, sighed and tried not to fall asleep standing; all of the tables were still intact even. No one was trying to (seriously) grope the waitresses. There'd been no reported toad casualties besides a loose goat that hadn't had long to regret its choices.

"Just another day," Luna grumped.

It was nice, not having to worry about dying horribly at any given moment, but boredom had a habit of making it so that things like that didn't matter.

As did being single. Which she wasn't at all bitter about. Of course not... But that was another problem for another time.

She was twenty. She was still young. She still had time. No matter what some assholes might say.

*Dust.*

A high-pitched scream outside of the Guild's front door made her turn her head, but nothing else.

There wasn't an axe chopping through it. Arrows hadn't blown out the windows. Nothing was on fire and the alarm bells at the church weren't ringing.

Someone had probably seen their Eris Order tithe for the month, is all... It was why Luna, personally, didn't go to church. Besides her just not having the time for it.

Her wallet had a napkin in it and half of the Guild's unresolved receipts. The local bishop glaring at her when the donation dish came around and she dropped in her debts would be just what she needed to make the rest of her month.

...Eris knew who her followers were and she was a good person, damn it.

Luna yawned as the door opened, then forced herself to straighten up as a pair of new...

Huh.

She blinked at the - *colorful* - pair, her hands meeting in the middle of her desk for a more professional look on reflex. Even if it didn't feel like she needed to be for once.

A tall, bored-looking, oddly dressed man carrying a sniffling, even more oddly dressed woman in on his back was hard to take seriously at a glance...but at least it was something new.

"I told you to watch out for the stairs," the man said calmly as he looked around the room. Far too calmly for someone that had a woman making a mess of his collar and the side of his neck with tears and snot, in Luna's opinion. "Walking backward like that is dangerous and I hope we learned something from this."

"I learned that stairs hurt when you fall on them with your back," she said back with another round of sniffling, dark blue eyes welling with tears... Which sounded like a good response to what she'd just said, also in Luna's opinion. "And that I can't - count on you to tell me things on time."

Luna leaned forward as they approached, the man's odd boots (that dappled color scheme was just horrid), sounding strangely on the wood flooring; the most entertaining thing Luna was going to see today was here and, with the rest of the Guild quieting down around her, they realized it too.

By Eris was she *bored*.

"I didn't want to stop you when you were on a roll."

The blue-haired woman gasped and slapped him on the shoulder. "I didn't *roll*."

The blue-haired woman had a hearing problem.

"You bounced," he dryly agreed to the tune of yet another gasp and limp slap as he reached Luna's desk. "Hello there."

"Hello," the blonde said back with a slight bow, falling back on habit; she was surprised when his eyes dipped below her neck for only a second before returning to her face. *With eye contact...* The girls usually drew the eye for at *least* seven seconds. What a gentleman. "And welcome to the Adventurer's Guild. Can I help you?"

"Adventurer's Guild?" The woman echoed as she looked around the room. "I thought this was a bar?"

"An honest mistake." Luna suppressed the awkward chuckle that wanted to come out at that. Not the first time she'd heard that. Or thought that either. The pile of unconscious drunks against the walls didn't help with that image any and everyone knew it. "But...?"

"We'd like to register to become adventurers," he got straight to the point. Again, a gentleman. "That's a thing we have to do if we want to take jobs, right?"

"That is how it normally works, yes."

"I see, I see. Good to know." He grinned as he rearranged his hold on his rider's thighs. If she noticed, or cared that he was squeezing hard enough for his fingers to sink into them somewhat, she didn't show it. "Consistency is good."

Luna's polite smile became a touch brittle as the woman on his back rolled her eyes.

That was a strange thing to say. Weird even.

Her fault for getting her hopes up even a little.

...Not that she had. That would be silly.

"Ignore him. He hit his head earlier. It's made Pidge a little *silly*," the other woman said, voice lowered to a whisper as she peered over his shoulder at her. He, Pidge that is, didn't look amused. "We're saving up for a healer."

"Oh!" Luna put a hand up to her mouth... If it was just *that*, well, maybe there was still a chance... Not that that was something she was thinking about, of course. "How bad is it?"

"Have you seen how he's dressed?"

She had. And, knowing what she knew now, it all made sense. "I'm sorry to hear it."

"I'm right here," Pidge interrupted flatly, making Luna flush with embarrassment. "But thanks."

...He was right here, wasn't he?

"A-ah. You're welcome. And I apologize." Luna waved a hand, touching a finger to her lips and clearing her throat; this wasn't the kind of diversion she liked, not even a little. "Your names?"

"Aqua!"

"Pidge."

Luna wrote those both down, more to help keep them in mind than anything else. The real identification would come with their assessment. "And do you have the registration fee?"

The silence wasn't encouraging. Neither was the exchange of confused looks between them.

"...Do we?" He asked.

"If you don't, I don't." Aqua (like the goddess?) shrugged. "I didn't have enough time to grab my purse before we came here."

"And I kind of died."

Luna did a double-take when Aqua didn't deny it, just nodding along.

Someone had spent the time and effort to resurrect him? And to find him an Archpriest? Really?

Luna eyed Aqua carefully, fingering the sleeves of her blouse.

No point in chasing after someone that was already spoken for... Not that she had been. But it was just common sense not to waste time and effort on something like that.

"Not exactly carrying my life savings with me after what happened, you understand," he finished, unfocused eyes turning back to Luna. "Do you do loans?"

Luna's smile became a great deal more genuine; he rose a brow and narrowed his eyes, his fitted, metal spectacles positively *screaming* money; easy choice. "Let me get you a pen."

She slid the papers across, more than ready for the occasion.

That commission wouldn't get made on its own~.

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In another shocking turn of events, Pidge(?) read the entirety of the paperwork before signing. He asked for clarification at several points. Asked about options. Extensions. Penalties and tax breaks as Aqua's head lolled on his shoulder, eyes glazed over with boredom as her partner meticulously scratched his name out on paper.

Enough money for the assessment to start. Money for base equipment and clothing. Money for a week of decent accommodations and feed with some leftover if carefully managed, all of it planned out with the obsessive attention to detail of an accountant.

For someone that had hit their head badly enough it had affected their dress sense, he was remarkably on the ball.

The torture, eventually, ended. Luna eventually gained her future commission, cheeks hurting from holding her smile as she deducted the required fees and started up the crystal orb.

"Who's going first?"

Pidge looked askance at Aqua.

Aqua drooled on his collar, eyes blank.

Pidge turned back to her, lips twitching with patient amusement. "Me."

"Alright then." Luna laughed through her nose with her own good humor. "Put your hand over the crystal, please."

He looked askance at Aqua again, fingers squishing her thighs in preparation for what he had to do, then bent the knee.

Aqua continued to drool, asleep with her eyes open as Pidge carefully set her down on her feet. That she stayed up was an impressive show of balance, coordination, and other words that Luna didn't know.

That she ended up leaning on Pidge's side when he stood up, one of her legs giving way to give her a lean that he caught with that same patient amusement, was just adorable.

"Sorry about that." He hummed as he raised a hand. "Over the crystal?"

"Uh-huh."

He did so with no more questions. Just clear interest as the crystal spun to life with a whirl, brown eyes bright as the lens of his glasses began to darken in response to the light... Money. *All* the money. "That's more of a spectacle than I was expecting." He tilted his head as lines of light burnt runes into the paper, spells of durability and authenticity laying themselves down. "For a printer, I mean."

"Adventurer cards *are* magic. And magic is spectacle." Luna didn't know what a printer was but, from the name, she could guess. It also sounded depressingly mundane; that urge to defend her job didn't come up often, but when it did... "We're not just another adventurer mill, even if we are the furthest town from the Devil King."

Even if the people that came from here gave them a bad name...

"So I see. And I didn't mean anything by it." His smile didn't quite reach ear-to-ear, but it was approaching that quickly as his stats burnt themselves in. "Presentation is important. And this is great."

Maybe she'd been too quick again.

"...As long as you understand." Luna, mollified, flushed again; when his card was finished, it didn't even get a chance to cool before she had it between her fingers, waving it to dry ink that was already dry. "Now let's see what we've got, shall we?"

Aqua mumbled against him, face burrowing into his arm as Luna flipped the card the right way around.

"Pidge. No last name." And she'd thought that had been a joke. "Your stats are - not bad at all!" She looked up from his card to give him an approving nod. "Well, except for Luck. That's rock bottom. And your Agility score could use some work..."

He nodded back with a long-suffering expression. "Sounds about right."

"But your Intelligence and Strength aren't anything to scoff at! And everything else is average to just above average!" She flicked his card with her fingers for emphasis. "I wouldn't become a Merchant or a Gymnast but, if you work hard and stay committed, the sky's the limit!"

A round of polite clapping ensued at the announcement; as bad as the local adventurers could be, they knew their cues and basic etiquette.

"Way to go, bird guy!"

*Some* of them knew their cues and basic etiquette.

"I love you too, random citizen." He waved, setting the whole room to laughing into their drinks... That someone started sobbing at that was, respectfully, ignored. "What else?"

"Well, now you choose your class. Which *can* take a while. It doesn't happen often, but it does," Luna began to explain as she passed him his card. "With how broad your stat range is, you have more than enough options to keep you busy for the rest of the week."

Poking at his card, face lighting up with a simple joy as he did so, he nodded. "A week, huh? Sounds like fun."

If he took his time and thought things over, of course. The allure of the first Advanced class that crept into view was a hard one to resist, she'd heard...and he had a couple to choose from, from what she knew. None of the specialized classes, like Paladin or Archwizard, but more than enough to be someone respectable just for having them.

"Do you need Aqua's hand too?" He asked, forcing himself to pull attention away from his new toy to look her in the eyes. "Or does she need to be awake?"

"It shouldn't matter...?" Luna's statement came out as more of a question, even to her. She'd never heard of it being done before, but why not? "Go ahead."

Aqua, proving herself to be the deepest sleeper Luna had ever heard of, even in stories, didn't stir when Pidge lifted one of her arms to put it within range of the orb... If Luna was being honest with herself, she was starting to feel sort of uncomfortable.

Like she'd stumbled in on something personal. And intimate.

The blonde shifted from one foot to the other. "She really trusts you, huh?"

"...I mean, I guess...?" Pidge, his brow furrowed, shrugged as he held Aqua's hand at the wrist. "I think she's just tired though. And setting up flags."

What?

Luna blinked. "Flags?"

What did that even mean?

"It's nothing. Sorry." He shook his head and waved a dismissive hand as he let go of Aqua's; the woman, this time did stir to look around with bleary eyes and get back on her own two feet with a yawn. "Just letting my mouth get away from me again. And tired stereotypes that need putting away."

"...If you say so." Luna decided to let it lie in favor of picking up the new card and give it a shake as well. For new tradition's sake. "Let's see what we've got here then."

Luna felt that she could be forgiven for being confused for a split second. Then for having her heart skip a beat.

"I've *never* seen stats this high!" She gasped, entirely serious as she lost what there was of her composure. "I - I mean, yes, your Luck is even worse than Pidge's-"

He pumped his fist, nose buried in his card while everyone in the room turned towards her as one.

"And your Intelligence stat is somewhat low..." Luna was being kind there. Extremely kind. But with stats like *these*, none of that mattered. "But everything else has to have shattered records! You - as long as you don't try for one of the Mage classes, you could be anything you want!"

The entire Guild erupted into cheers. Yells and stomps rattled the windows, forcibly jolting Aqua all the way to wakefulness with an unladylike snort from her mouth and a small yell of her own.

"A real hero!?"

"Heaven does care!"

"The Devil King is toast!"

And so on and so forth, the good cheer being infectious; Luna reaching out as Aqua pinwheeled her arms, bleary shock throwing off her balance, proved to be unneeded as a frowning Pidge supported her with a hand at her back.

Then Aqua started to cheer too, making it even worse.

Luna suspected that she didn't know why she was cheering. But good for her.

"Like opening for the Beatles, I swear..." He muttered loudly, somehow working his card with a single hand as his words barely reached Luna's ears in all the noise. "I'm sorry for interrupting, but my card isn't working, I think."

Luna beckoned him closer, not quite willing to wreck her voice as she put a hand out.

"It looks like the class is stuck? I didn't even get a chance to choose."

She took it.

She looked. And, as high as her heart had risen not a minute past, it couldn't save her from the new, new lows she was reaching.

*Farmer. Subclass: Literature.*

When Luna looked back up again, what she saw wasn't a person. It wasn't a nice, reasonably attractive, and more than reasonably rich young man.

It was one of the walking dead.

She'd never heard of this subclass before. Or even thought it could exist... it all came out the same.

Farmers didn't tend to have long life spans. And if they did, they saw more battle in a month than many soldiers saw in their entire lives.

What kind of life was that for someone so young? All that toil? All that blood and sweat?

What was it all about?

...Besides delicious food and absurd amounts of experience points.

What was it about?

"What? ... It's stuck, isn't it? I can see it on your face. Damn." Taking off his glasses with a sigh, he began to clean them with the hem of his shirt. "I guess I know how this is going to go then."

Luna, with an effort of will to keep the tears in, gave him a pat on the arm.

"It's fine. I'll figure something out," he said as he gave her hand a pat in return, smile smaller but no less bright. "Not exactly classing into an Azata or something, but I can work with this."

"Yes. Of course, you can." She blinked away her tears before they could begin to fall. He wasn't crying. She couldn't either. "You're so brave."

A true man.

"I try to be," he replied bashfully. "This looks like it's going to be a slice of life though, so I think I'll be fine." He nodded to himself, almost sagely; Luna, remembering that he'd hit his head earlier all at once thanks to that reminder, looked up at him in dawning horror. "Being a Farmer of words in this wonderful new world doesn't sound too bad."

As if it had been strangled, then had its throat cut, then had garlic shoved into the gaping neck wound to make sure it wouldn't rise as a vampire, all jubilation in the Guild died a terrible, horrible death.

"A farmer?" Aqua rasped, hand to her chest.

Men put hats to their chests. Adventurers rose their drinks to his memory.

"Read the room, jackass!"

And Dust said what needed to be said.

For once.

Pidge, after some time cleaning his glasses, put them back on. He blinked. Worked his jaw and looked around the room and at the sad, depressed faces...and sagged. "Damn, imposter syndrome. Lay off me for a fucking second, will ya?"