I Might Have a Crush on My Video Game Husband But There's No Way He'd Like Me IRL!

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/117.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Categories:	Getting Together, Slash (M/M), Nonbinary
Fandom:	Twisted Wonderland (Video Game)
Relationships:	Idia Shroud/Lilia Vanrouge, Idia Shroud & Yuu | Player, Idia Shroud & Ortho Shroud, Ortho Shroud & Yuu | Player, Lilia Vanrouge & Yuu | Player, Malleus Draconia & Lilia Vanrouge, Malleus Draconia & Yuu | Player, Malleus Draconia ~ Yuu | Player - Mentioned/Background
Characters:	Idia Shroud, Ortho Shroud, Yuu | Player (Twisted Wonderland), Lilia Vanrouge, Malleus Draconia
Additional Tags:	Nonbinary Character(s), Nonbinary Yuu | Player (Twisted Wonderland), Nonbinary Idia Shroud, Idia Shroud Uses He/They Pronouns, AFAB Idia Shroud, Unintentional Misgendering, Video Game Married to IRL Boyfriends, Chatfic Elements, Lilia Vanrouge's Cooking, (it's much less background in the chapter for malleus's birthday), 10k words in and they've had one in-person conversation
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of Much Ado About Yuu
Stats:	Published: 2022-08-20 Updated: 2025-11-25 Words: 17,921 Chapters: 7/?

I Might Have a Crush on My Video Game Husband But There's No Way He'd Like Me IRL!

by GloriousBookwyrm

Summary

Ortho was only trying to get the prefect to try to befriend his brother, but now it looks like they already have a friend in common, who already knows Idia IRL, and they're getting married(in a video game, but still)! Now if only Idia and Muscle Red weren't so stubborn about not knowing each other's IRL identities…

Notes

Note from Present Me:
This is the only WIP going up on ffl right now, since of my other WIPs, one is being cowritten with someone who isn't interested in crossposting to here, and the other two are Not Safe For Canada, on account of the whole "highschoolers fucking" thing.
On the Archive Warnings: I am somewhat unsure whether or not the Homophobia/Transphobia warning applies to this fic. To clarify, Idia sometimes thinks some uncharitable things about themself or Yuu, but it's extremely brief, none of it is said aloud, and it pretty much tops out at being jealous Yuu passes better. If the mod or someone reaches out to inform me that it does, in fact, qualify for the warning, I'll update the tags, but for now I have selected Chose Not To Warn.

Note from Past Me:
Once again beta'd by the incredible TwistedThorn!

Now before you accuse me of being completely self indulgent, I'd just like to say that if that were true I'd have gone full lovesquare with the irl vs online identities.

Also, this is in the same timeline as my other TWST works, but unlike Y&SBJ it's not directly continuous from either of them. The only bit of context you need going in is that this version of Yuu possesses one more braincell than in canon, so they figured out that Hornton is Malleus just before the start of book 3.

As to where it fits in the canon story line, ch1 is probably during the beginning of the second term??? It's after the Bedazzled Suit is added to Idia and Lilia's game, but before Idia gets corpse bride'd, and also definitely happens before that huge cliffhanger book 5 ended on. I

don’t expect the plot of this to interact with the canon timeline much beyond Yuu occasionally being busy with rehearsals.

Chapter 1: Help! My Online BFF Might Go To My School!?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Idia was just about to start their new Premo fic, for real this time, no more procrastinating, when they were interrupted by a knock on the door. They considered just ignoring it, but it might have been Ortho. Their brother had his own room key, and could just let himself in, but he never did when he knew Idia was already inside. Sure enough, Ortho's voice piped up from behind the door. "Idia? It's me, I want to ask a favor so can you open the door?" Premo would have to wait for another time.

Unfortunately for Idia, Ortho was not the only person outside their room. Next to him was some normie they didn't recognize, until he said hello, and they placed his voice. It was that annoying prefect that had fast-talked their way into moderating the weekly housewarden meetings. He had also talked Ortho into helping with this whenever Idia joined via voice call, but outside of that they knew next to nothing about him. They weren't even completely sure if Yuu was even a guy, since if the black carriage fucked up badly enough to summon someone with no magic it could totally have fucked up in other ways, and the prefect managed to hit that sweetspot of androgyny without even needing to rely on baggy clothes or anything. Seven, it made Idia jealous. They shot Ortho a quizzical glance. "A favor?"

"Well, it's not really a favor for *me* , but for Yuu here. They were telling me about how they got into that game you're always playing, but Ramshackle isn't wired for internet, so I said you might be able to help!"

Idia eyed the normie critically. "What, for real? You gotta be, like, a turbo extrovert to befriend almost all the other housewardens as fast as you did. Why on Twisted Wonderland would you willingly spend enough time alone on a computer to get invested in an MMO?"

Yuu raised an eyebrow at the description of him as an extrovert, but didn't comment on it. "Well, I was telling Hornton about some of my favorite games, and he mentioned-"

"Hold on, does Sir Malleus even know what a video game is?"

"Surprisingly, yes. Apparently it's because-"

"You know what, I don't actually care. I'm sorry to disappoint Ortho, but I have neither the time nor energy to help you with this. I've seen Ramshackle, and that place is only up to code in the loosest sense of the word. Frankly, I'm surprised it hasn't burned down by now, there's no way I'm introducing another cable to the mess that's probably in your walls."

The prefect let out a resigned sigh, "Yeah, I went to replace a lightswitch one time, but I had to stop and go do some deep breathing exercises as soon as I saw what the wiring looked like. There's no way I'm touching any of that without an expert, and Ortho said that was you. By

the way, he also said you guys have a bunch of PCs set up in the Ignihyde common room. Since this whole thing was a wash, do you mind if I-"

"Yeah, sure, whatever. I'm going back to work."

Idia shut the door before Yuu could respond, and more importantly before they could see the disappointed look that Ortho probably had. Ortho could definitely have analyzed Ramshackle House on his own and come to the same conclusion Idia had, and then just offered Yuu use of the common room. Him trying to get Idia to help anyway was probably another attempt to convince him to socialize more IRL. He probably thought that the person who managed to befriend the reclusive Malleus Draconia might also stand a chance at prying Idia out of their shell. As if someone who had a pet name for an actual royal prince would want to waste time on a creepy, cursed shut-in.

They eyed the blank doc as they sat back down. Their entire train of thought was gone. Idia sighed, and logged into his game instead. Premo would have to wait. Again. Once they finished collecting his login rewards and checking his dailies, they had two new DMs, one from their closest brother-in-arms, Muscle Red, and one from some n00b he didn't know. He checked the latter first, curious who this Shrimpie was and what they wanted.

<Shrimpie> Hey, it's Yuu

<Shrimpie> Ortho gave me ur id

Idia rolled his eyes, and clicked on the other message.

<Muscle Red> Greetings

<Muscle Red>I thought you were going to be busy today?

<Muscle Red> I'm afraid I can't farm with you right now, I'm helping a friend I introduced to the game

<Gloomurai> np i dont have anything planned

<Gloomurai> all ur student spots are full rn right?

<Gloomurai> i can mentor them for u

<Muscle Red> Thank you very much, I'll send you their ID.

Idia looked at the player ID number Muscle Red sent him. Then he looked back at the prefect's identical ID. He looked back and forth between them as if willing a digit to change. They opened the chat with Shrimpie again.

<Gloomurai> u know Muscle Red???

<Shrimpie> yeah, u cut me off before i got to him

<Shrimpie> i can finish explaining if u wanna listen now

<Gloomurai> no

<Gloomurai> IRL stuff stays out of here

<Gloomurai> dont tell people other people's real names.

<Shrimpie> understood.

<Shrimpie> and dw, i haven't told muscle i know u yet

They sat back, and considered their options. They could tell Muscle Red that they couldn't mentor his friend after all, but he might ask why, and Idia couldn't think of an excuse. He'd definitely accept it if Idia just declined to answer, but then he might ask Yuu if anything happened, and they didn't know if the prefect was any good at deflection. In addition, if Idia thought Ortho was being obvious about trying to get Yuu to befriend him before, giving him Idia's ID blew away any doubt. If he played along, and let Yuu wear himself out on a lost cause, then Idia wouldn't be the one Ortho would be disappointed in when the inevitable happened. That settled it.

[Request <Shrimpie> to be your student?]

[yes] [no]

Once Shrimpie accepted the request, he formed a party with him and Muscle Red, and fast traveled to the lower level fields.

<Gloomurai> kk i just set ur assignments

<Gloomurai> do them to rank up my mentor lvl + ur student lvl

<Gloomurai> u can exchange student coins for cosmetic items + we both get rewards based on ur student lvl when u graduate

<Muscle Red> Additionally, you receive student coins by playing in a party with your mentor, and an exp buff for playing with higher leveled friends

<Shrimpie> got it

<Shrimpie> so 1st task is to do this dungeon, right?

Shrimpie did seem to have some experience with this type of game. Either that or they had some kind of preternatural ability to intuit game mechanics, which didn't even bear thinking about. Despite admitting upfront that they didn't normally pick DPS, they had a fairly decent starter build for their pyromancer (which was basically a standard elemental mage but they put every skill point into the fire spells), and when Idia or Muscle Red gave advice on what gear they'd probably want to aim for, they'd carefully read through the descriptions to check which suggestions best fit what they were going for. They also had hilariously terrible luck, getting only the most common drops from every dungeon, world boss, anything with an element of RNG they tried. If Idia was having this much of an unlucky streak, he'd have

rage-quit ages ago, but Shrimpie said it was “best I work off the bad luck now before the next time I almost die” which was. Morbid. But that really didn’t concern him.

Eventually, Shrimpie had gotten far enough in the main story that they got their first alternate cosmetic outfit, and immediately started scrolling through the menu, checking all the options and their unlock requirements. Muscle Red was answering their questions and giving pointers, which was… Well, Idia loved- Idia *greatly valued* Muscle Red’s companionship and respected his skill at the game. They did not, however, respect his fashion sense. Every time he decided to change his look, without fail, he would pick the gaudiest outfit imaginable, as if he possessed no sense of taste and was just guessing at what humans liked. And if that rubbed off on Shrimpie…Idia shuddered, and pushed the thought down. At least with those two occupied planning outfits, he could sit back a bit and unpack what he learned today.

- Firstly, Yuu knows Muscle Red IRL
- Given that Yuu was only summoned to Twisted Wonderland this year, they have had limited opportunities to leave Sage Island
- Therefore, Muscle Red was most likely a resident of the island.

Idia’s train of thought screeched to a halt. Oh no. What if Muscle Red was an NRC student!? They might have already interacted, and if he ever put the pieces together, or Yuu spilled the beans, he could connect Gloomurai to Idia, and he’d know what a creepy loner his friend really was and, and… An even worse thought occurred to them, and they hurriedly texted Ortho.

“yuu knows im gloomurai!!!”

“Yes? I’ve been watching them play, you’ve known this for 3 hours, 48 minutes, and 19 seconds.”

“im only out as nb online! theyll know as soon as they check my bio!

what if they freak out?

what if they tell people!?!?”

“I sincerely doubt that the former will happen, given that they are themself agender. Additionally, I project that they have a 97% chance of understanding completely if you simply inform them that you do not wish to be out at school.”

Idia blinked slowly.

“theyre what.”

“You didn’t know? They asked one of your classmates, Cater Diamond, to ensure that as many people on campus as possible knew so they wouldn’t have to come out to every individual person they meet.”

“hearing things on the grapevine requires talking to normies

thx for clearing things up tho

i’ll msg them”

Well, that was mortifying. Figures that someone so social would come up with the most extrovert possible way of coming out. Though, if Idia could present gender as well as Yuu did, he probably wouldn’t mind strangers knowing either. They glanced back up at the screen to see where the conversation had got to.

<Shrimpie> why not just marry gloomurai?

Chapter End Notes

Note from Past Me:
“An even worse thought occurred to them, and they hurriedly texted Ortho.
’Muscles…Red…What if he’s Coach Vargas!?’ “

Chapter 2: So My Best Friend’s Father Figure is Online Friends With the Guy Whose Internet I’m Mooching Off Of

Chapter Notes

> Note from Past Me:
> Btw, this fic is starting to get seriously chatfic adjacent, I'm currently typing those scenes to look like the chat logs in games i’ve played, but if you all have any suggestions on how to make the formatting more readable, let me know
>
> Note from Present Me:
> Normally, I've been removing or editing the notes asking for suggestions on certain things, but in this case I would still very much like formatting advice, especially to make the chatlog sections more screenreader-friendly (though, that might be a lost cause, what with Idia and Yuu's textspeak abbreviations).

Yuu logged in from one of the common room computers and watched their elementalist load in. Back home they always preferred support, but at this point they were getting pretty sick of not being able to handle their own fights, so DPS it was. Elementalists were pretty versatile anyway, so if they changed their mind they could just reset their skill tree instead of shelling out for a class change. They quickly tapped out a message to the UID Ortho had given them, which they doubted Idia would bother responding to, but the robot kid was being pretty unsubtle about wanting them to befriend him, and those puppy-eyes were top-notch. After that, they texted Lilia that they were online, and went to the town gates to meet him when he logged in.

<Muscle Red> Greetings, I am pleased to see you were able to find your own internet connection.

<Shrimpie> oh im actually borrowing a computer, turns out i cant get ramshackle hooked up safely

<Muscle Red> A shame, but at least you were able to find an arrangement that works for you.

<Shrimpie> btw last time i lvled up it said i can get mentored, is that smthng i shld bother with?

<Muscle Red> Absolutely, it will greatly increase your growth, and there’s an adorable little mortarboard hat you get for graduating! Alas, I cannot take in any more students until one of them graduates.

<Muscle Red> If you like, I can ask one of my friends to be your mentor instead? One of them is online right now, in fact. I assure you, he is perfectly charming, and an excellent teacher. He even helped explain this game's mechanics to me when I first started.

<Shrimpie> sure np

Yuu really wondered how Lilia's keyboard was holding up, with him typing out all those long sentences in seconds. They had once gotten a multi-paragraph response to a question about birthday gifts for Malleus under 30 seconds after they asked, and they were *pretty sure* he didn't just have that whole essay sitting in his notes app to copy-paste whenever he happened to need it.

Behind them, Ortho had gone oddly quiet since Muscle Red had signed on, and they figured out why when, shortly after Lilia had promised to message his other friend, Idia messaged them back.

So. Idia and Lilia were online friends, and neither of them knew they went to the same school. Idia had been adamant about not telling him anything about Lilia, so Yuu promised not to tell him anything about Idia either. When they clicked on Idia's profile to send him the mentorship request, they took a look at his profile, and noticed that he apparently used he/they pronouns. They weren't sure if Idia was out and they just didn't talk to them enough to learn this, or if they'd want them to keep using only "he" at school, and made a mental note to message them and ask before they left today.

In the meantime, they focused on the game. As promised, Idia was an excellent teacher. They initially tried to simplify their explanations, assuming Yuu to not be familiar with the terminology, but once they figured out that Twisted Wonderland's gamer jargon was almost the same as their own world's, they adjusted to match Yuu's level of experience. They also took a look at the pyromancer build Yuu was aiming for, offering pointers on how to fix the stat spread a bit, and what kinds of gear would work well for them at different levels. During combat, Idia and Lilia both tried to hold back a bit, making sure that Yuu was actually playing the game instead of just watching a pair of overleveled beasts one-shot everything they looked at in the level 20 dungeons. In the chat, the two played off each other easily, Idia seeming much more excited in game despite his moniker, and Lilia feeding into and basking in that excitement in equal measure.

Once Yuu unlocked their first alternate outfit, they immediately stopped to scroll through the wardrobe and see what else there was to get. Idia took a break then, sending a short message about going afk for a bit, and Lilia started eagerly giving them suggestions for what outfits to try and pair once they unlocked them. His taste was impeccable, each piece he named turning out to be the exact sort of loud, sparkly item they loved. Eventually, Yuu's gaze and mouse rested on a sequined and rhinestone covered suit.

[Bedazzled Suit] To Unlock: Forever Promise

<Shrimpie> hey red whats a Forever Promise?

<Shrimpie> this suit says i need one to unlock it

<Muscle Red> Oh, that is this game’s marriage ceremony. Two players agree to share their life and move in together.

<Muscle Red> The married characters share a home and household inventory, forcing one of them to sell their house if they both already have one. In addition, your partner can do whatever they want with anything in the shared inventory.

<Muscle Red> There are a number of perks as well, but I have been unable to find a partner willing to take the risk with me.

<Muscle Red> Such a shame, I would have loved to wear such a beautiful suit.

Yuu blinked. Sure, they could see people being nervous, but *no one* ? They could think of at least one player who put that much trust in him right off the top of their head.

<Shrimpie> why not just marry gloomurai?

<Shrimpie> i just watched u give gloom a 5* drop to hold onto b/c u ran out of space in ur own bag. sharing a household doesn’t sound like a far leap 2 make

[Gloomurai] is no longer AFK

<Muscle Red> I did want to ask him, but before I could broach the subject he made his opinions on marriage known.

<Gloomurai> ill do it

<Gloomurai> i mean

<Gloomurai> when i said that i meant in general

<Gloomurai> i didn’t know u wanted 2 ask me

<Gloomurai> ill do the ceremony or whatever if u still want that suit

<Gloomurai> if u still wanna do it w/ me

<Muscle Red> Of course I do! Shrimpie here is correct that a shared box would be a natural progression, and that suit is truly divine.

<Muscle Red> Now, that simply leaves the question of whether we’ll simply bond our characters now, or do a full ceremony with our other friends.

<Gloomurai> i mean, if we’re just doing it 4 the perks i dont see a point to making a big deal of it

<Shrimpie> AMDNFMBIGNRO U GOTTA DOT HE CEREMONY ILPLA N EVERYTHINGGGGGHFKDM

“Ortho, gimme back my keyboard!” Yuu tried to wrestle it back from him, but despite being tiny, Ortho’s metal limbs were *strong* , and he managed to keep control of the keys until he could retype his message more clearly.

<Shrimpie> Please do the ceremony! Planning it will be so much fun! I just browsed the list of furniture on the wiki and I know exactly what would suit the two of you best!

<Shrimpie> sry ur bro was reading over my shldr

<Shrimpie> i swear i tried to stop him

<Gloomurai> brb

[Gloomurai] is now AFK

[Shrimpie] is now AFK

Yuu pushed away from the computer, and spun their chair to face Ortho. “Couldn’t you have just messaged Idia directly or something?”

“Well yes, but I thought maybe if I convinced Lilia Vanrouge, he could help convince Idia.”

Yuu thought about it and nodded, “Yeah, he seems like the type to be into fancy fake weddings.”

Before they could add anything else, Ortho let out a faint *ping!* “That would be Idia, give me a minute.” He closed his eyes, looking like he was concentrating on something. After a couple minutes, he cracked one eye open to look at Yuu, “They think that Muscle Red is going to deduce who they are based on them having a younger brother who’s also at school, and I can’t convince them that this isn’t a disaster, can you help?”

“Okay, first off, tell Idia that Red doesn’t actually know that they attend NRC, he’s way more likely to assume that you chose to message them like that because they’re *not* right upstairs.”

“That’s true, but shouldn’t we convince them that it’s not a bad thing even if Lilia Vanrouge does learn the truth? Idia and Lilia Vanrouge are already quite compatible, but my brother thinks no one would want to be friends with them offline. If they meet each other in real life, he’ll definitely still want to be friends with them because my brother’s super cool, and then they’ll see they’re wrong about themself, and they maybe won’t be so sad all the time, and I’ll have helped him like a *real* little brother, and-!”

“Okay, slow your roll a little, you're getting way ahead of yourself. There’s a lot here I’m not qualified to unpack, so I’ll just leave it unless you’re about to start murdering people over it.”

“Why would you think that!?”

“It’s been a long five months. Anyway, let’s focus on just taking things in steps. You’re not gonna convince anyone of all that at once, so start with how the specific disaster they’re anticipating right now won’t happen, because there’s no evidence pointing specifically to you and Idia, okay?”

Ortho nodded, and Yuu turned back to the game.

<Muscle Red> You have a younger brother? He seems delightful!

<Gloomurai> he is

<Gloomurai> hes always gets super excited about this stuff

<Shrimpie> he says hes srry for bursting in like that btw

<Muscle Red> Oh, there’s nothing to apologize for, I thought it was endearing. In fact, I have no problem with a ceremony if it’ll make him happy, it sounds like fun!

<Gloomurai> well…

<Gloomurai> if ur sure u dont mind

<Gloomurai> lets go for it

Chapter 3: My Older Brother's Best Friend Goes to the Same School As Us But I Can't Figure Out How To Convince Them to Meet IRL!

Chapter Summary

> Ortho has a plan, but it needs some workshopping

Chapter Notes

> Note from Past Me:
> Happy Thanksgiving to everyone reading in America! My gift to you is this chapter! It's the first one not to have any chatlogs in it, which you might think is either a good or bad thing, depending.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ortho continued to watch over Yuu's shoulder while everyone agreed on a date and time for the wedding, and they returned to their dailies. Occasionally they glanced back at him, as if waiting for something, but they didn't say anything themself until they reached the daily EXP cap and pushed away from the computer to face him. "Allright, you're obviously vibrating to ask me something, so spill before you loosen a bolt."

According to his gyroscopes, Ortho's only movement over the past thirty minutes was the gentle bobbing caused by his thrusters periodically firing to keep him a minimum of 0.5 meters above the ground. He explained this to them, but Yuu explained that they meant he was visibly anticipating something, so he logged the turn of phrase for future use before responding to their intended question. "Well, I said I wanted to decorate the wedding venue, but I'm actually IP banned from this game"

"How come?"

"Well, I didn't see a point to using one of Idia's or the dorm's computers when my own processors are more than powerful enough to run the game, and trying to send inputs to my hands to make a controller send different inputs back to me felt really weird, so I just gave the game the exact input data instead, and since I was running the client program locally, the game was sending me all the data on interactable objects and hitbox sizes that other players have to approximate visually…"

“Yeah, I’m starting to get the picture. What do you need me to help with?”

“I already know all the furnishings needed to decorate the venue according to my plan and how they’re obtained. The vast majority can be crafted using materials that even players of your low level have access to, although you will need to grind quite a bit. By the time you craft those items, you will have leveled up enough to gain access to higher grade materials, as well as rare items to trade on the player market. I have a spreadsheet with all the calculations if you want to see them.”

Yuu nodded, so he projected the chart for them. They took a few minutes to skim it before answering. “This has me grinding for two hours every day on top of my dailies and hanging with Idia and Lilia, and still only completes your list a couple days before the ceremony.”

“Yes, well, if we push the wedding date any further back, Idia might get cold feet. I promise I’ll pay the favor back!”

Yuu sighed. “How about tutoring? This chart barely gives me enough time for homework, and if I have someone who actually knows what I was supposed to learn in Magic Middle School helping, it'll go way faster. Oh, and I can’t do the 18th, that’s Hornton’s birthday.”

Ortho nodded, and started revising his schedule to account for tutoring sessions and the day off. “You got it! That said, the projected time to acquire all materials was calculated based on how often you received equivalently graded items as drops today, and your luck was extraordinarily low. It’s entirely possible we won’t need all this time.”

Yuu offered their hand to shake, “Aight, it’s a-” For some reason they stopped there, and awkwardly cleared their throat. “Er, let’s just get to it.”

It was a few days later, after a tutoring session that mostly consisted of Ortho explaining a legend that the author of Yuu’s assigned Queendom Lit reading was referencing, followed by an argument about whether the author was secretly hinting that the main couple were bound to break up after the story, since what he clearly *intended* to say about his protagonist’s relationship was completely at odds with the chosen allegory, when the much simpler explanation was that he only had a passing familiarity with the legend, that Ortho explained his full plan.

“…So, you want to contrive some reason for Idia and Lilia to meet IR-” Yuu coughed and tried to move on like they hadn’t started picking up Idia’s speech tics, “-in person, without knowing that they’re already friends online, and then what? Just hope they get along?”

“Of course they will! They’re already best friends online!”

“Yeah, and I get along great with Idia online too, but as soon as they remember I’m an actual person and not a name on a screen, they turn into an enormous asshat. Which is kinda the opposite of what you’d expect, but it’s what we’re working with.”

“Hey! I mean, that’s *true*, but still! And what do you suggest, then!?”

Yuu scratched their head with their pen. “Maybe if there were a buffer? Idia’s usually nicer when you’re around, and Azul says he’s all right at board game club.” Their eyes widened with realization, “Oh! Board Game Club! It meets on a different day from the Pop Music Club, right?”

Ortho couldn’t remember what day Lilia Vanrouge’s club met, but that was easy enough to find. “Cater Diamond always posts club selfies on Friday afternoons, and Idia goes to his club on Wednesdays, so there should be no conflict for whatever you have in mind.”

“I invite Lilia to try out a board game club meet, and make sure he sits with Azul and Idia. Idia’ll be nicer when they’re focused on a game they like, and if they try to exclude Lilia, Azul will stop them. He’s been trying to build a better business relationship with Diasomnia all year, it’ll be too perfect an opportunity to pass up.” Something seemed to occur to Yuu, and their face fell. “Wait, I’m barred from that club, I can’t invite Lilia to somewhere I can’t actually go…”

“What? How!?”

“Well, I like to narrate my turns while I play, spice things up a bit, you know? But *apparently,* I was ‘ranting like the villain of some kind of Twistopoly themed anime’ which was ‘disturbing the rest of the club’ so I got kicked out. It’s not like I could *actually* send anyone’s souls to Board Game Hell!”

Ortho felt his processors spin a little faster as he struggled to absorb this information. “Well, what if instead we invite Idia to Lilia Vanrouge’s club? Wait no, he’s terrified of Cater Diamond and Kalim Al-Asim.”

“Yeah, we won’t exactly be presenting Idia’s best side to Lilia that way…” Yuu tapped their pen against the assignment in front of them thoughtfully. “By the way, what’re you guys doing for that culture fair I’ve been hearing about? I’ve been considering trying to promote the school newspaper, but Ace and Deuce asked me and Grim to audition with them for the SDC and if we make it I won’t have any time to prepare or run a booth.”

Ortho had never heard of NRC having a school newspaper before, but after what he had just learned about Yuu’s brief tenure in the Board Game Club, he was hesitant to ask. The reminder of the club presentations did give him an idea, though. “That’s it! We’re making a VR board game! By the time we have it in a testable form, all the club members will be too familiar with the mechanics to be able to check how accessible it is to visitors, if I suggest that we need a couple friends who haven’t worked on the game to try it-”

“-And I happen to mention to you that I play online games with Lilia sometimes-”

“-then I have a reason to invite Lilia Vanrouge to come over to the Board Game Club and meet Idia on their own turf, without making either of them suspicious!” It was- well maybe not a foolproof plan, and it was definitely a bit convoluted, but was a workable plan, and it was what they were going with. “The game definitely won’t be ready for outside testing for a while, so we can focus on wedding prep for now.”

Yuu nodded, and started clearing their books. “Aight then, I’ve got dance practice in like 10 minutes, so I’ll see you tonight. Save my spot?”

Ortho nodded. He had been nervous about the likelihood of his idea working before, but talking to Yuu and pinning down some specific details had done a lot to assuage those worries.

Operation Matchmaker was a go!

Chapter End Notes

Note from Past Me:
So, obviously Malleus’ birthday is gonna be in the fic, probably next chapter, but I don’t want to write it until I have his Birthday Boy card to check some details. So basically, even if I wind up writing and posting the next Bogus Journey chapter quickly (somewhat doubtful, since it’s gonna be Floyd POV, which I haven’t tried before), the next chapter of this probably wont be ready until, like, late January

Chapter 4: Human Lives Are So Short So Why Do They Celebrate Each Year of Its Passing?

Chapter Summary

Malleus really wants to hang out with Yuu, but they've been so busy lately

Chapter Notes

Note from Past Me:
Okay, so I was originally planning to make this a transitional chapter to skip over a few weeks in January where nothing happens besides a bunch of grinding and, coincidentally, Malleus' birthday, but somehow this turned into the Hornton Day Special. He's my favorite character, sue me.

This chapter *does* contain a couple references to other birthday events, but mostly just as my jokey headcanon that every single birthday event that has been released and will ever be released all take place on the same day.

I'm definitely writing the next chapter of Bogus Journey next, since I left it on kind of a cliffhanger (tho this chapter kind of gives away that everyone turns out fine, lol), but idk if after that I'll do this one or my newest WIP. Btw, I have a third WIP, it's a sequel/continuation to one of Thorn's oneshots, give it a look if you're into noncon and angst.

Note from Present Me:
(the paragraph above is referring to one of the fics that's not getting crossposted)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Malleus had known that after break ended he and Yuu would both be too busy to spend time together whenever he felt like it. However, the sheer volume of additional activities Yuu took on seemingly the same moment that school resumed session still surprised him. Literally that same moment, in the case of their newspaper. Crowley had barely finished greeting the last group of students returning to campus, when Yuu had marched up to him and demanded to speak in his office. When Malleus saw them next, leaving the headmage's office, they were clutching a form he recognized as the same one he had filled out to establish the Gargoyle Appreciation Club. Before he even asked, they sighed loudly and explained.

“Ugh, I was trying to chew Crowley out about the Winter Break Fiasco, maybe convince him that this school really needs on-campus mental health support given all the Overblots, but he just brushed me off like usual, *and* he dumped a new responsibility on me!” They gestured to the form, and the words ‘Journalism Club’ written at the top. “Or maybe this is supposed to be a weird bribe? Anyway, I’ll show him! This is gonna be the best damn school newspaper he’s ever seen! The school’s real bad at circulating information about assemblies and school events anyway, they never even remember to tell me and Grim anything until one of the *students* realizes I don’t know what you’re all doing for Halloween. It’ll be disgustingly easy to become a better source of campus information than the faculty, plus I’ll run other articles about sports stuff and birthdays and whatnot. Then, when everyone and their parents are reading my paper? BAM!” A group of passing sophomores jumped at the exclamation and hurried out of the hall. “A tell-all exposé on Crowley’s incompetence as headmage and all the ways NRC has failed its students! His precious reputation will be ruined!”

Malleus blinked slowly. “That is certainly an ambitious project,” he managed eventually, “but if anyone can manage something that bold, it would certainly be you, Child of Man.”

“Aw, Hornton, you’re making me blush! I gotta go look up what needs to go into a good newspaper and tell Grim about this, so I’ll see you later!” And then they were off like a shot before he could offer his aid.

The next time he managed to meet them, just after classes a week into the term, they were rushing toward the gymnasium with Grim, Spade, and Trappola.

“Hey, Hornton! Me and the guys are auditioning for the SDC, so we’re gonna go practice, wanna come watch and we can talk later?” He nodded, and they grabbed his wrist to drag him with them, ignoring the outraged noises Sebek made from somewhere behind him.

He wound up perched in the bleachers, watching the valiant struggle between the group’s tendency to immediately launch themselves into every new task with more enthusiasm than forethought, and the need to actually know what dance moves to do in which order. Yuu and Trappola figured out the broad strokes first, although they still struggled with the details, while Spade lagged a bit behind. Trappola went to try to guide his arms to the correct position, but he had barely touched the other boy’s arm before jumping back, his ears turning red. Grim immediately started cackling, to Trappola’s mortification and Spade’s apparent confusion, and even Yuu was snickering when they stepped in to help him themself. Malleus was distracted from seeing if they would be any more successful by Lilia appearing beside him. And then he had to hurry Lilia out because he’d been suggesting inviting Yuu to one of his home-cooked dinners, and there was no way he was going to subject them to that even if it would otherwise be a perfect chance to catch up.

After that, Viper and Al-Asim had taken up teaching the four of them, and Viper kept getting distracted from dance lessons watching Malleus out the corner of his eye warily. Which was fair, Malleus was *trying* not to glower too hard, but he really didn’t get how Yuu could trust and befriend those who tried to kill them so quickly, and it was probably showing on his face. He kept having to leave before he could talk to Yuu so Viper could focus, and after a few attempts he gave up on trying.

One afternoon, he had returned to Diasomnia after classes to hear, of all things, their voice coming from the lounge.

"…Sebek, are you sure the staring is nefarious? Actually, who am I kidding, it's Jade we're— Oh, Hornton!" Yuu looked up at Malleus as he entered the room, as did Sebek, sitting next to them, and Lilia, across the table. Silver was next to him, napping on his father's shoulder. "Thanks for asking Lilia to help me with history, by the way! I'm probably gonna need to go find other sources though, it's not like I can cite 'my fae upperclassman who may or may not be a vampire' in my essay."

Lilia sighed dramatically, "Well, there's my dastardly plan to get you to write your assignment on the Leprechaun Mob foiled."

Sebek started at that, "You mean that wasn't true!?" Lilia laughed at his reaction, and Yuu groaned about how much extra work they were gonna have to do to check all their notes now, when their pocket dinged. They reached in and pulled out their phone, glancing at the screen before looking back up apologetically.

"Sorry to cut this short, but I've been talking with Azul about him helping me sell ad space in the student paper to cover printing costs, and he wants me to take a look at the newest version of the contract. Gotta go see how many pages of ads compared to actual articles he's gonna try to push this time," they rolled their eyes as they shoved their notes into their bag, and then turned back toward Lilia as if remembering something, "Oh, while I'm there, do you want me to get a price quote on catering for you-know-what?"

Malleus did not know what, but Lilia nodded and said, "That would be lovely, thank you," and Yuu was once again dashing off. Somehow, he missed the chance to talk to them even when they were in his own dorm.

And sometimes, it was his own unwillingness to see Yuu push themself to exhaustion that cut their meetings short, like the time they actually managed to arrange a time to meet outside Ramshackle dorm. When he got there, they were just wrapping up some kind of appointment with Jade Leech, and were ushering him out the gate.

"This proposed menu is more than doable! In fact, I grow the mushrooms used in the school's mushroom risotto, so it'll bring me great pleasure to serve it at your little get-together. I do so love to see people enjoying the fruits of my labor."

"That's great— Hold on, is *that* why you keep staring at Silver during lunch?" They rolled their eyes, then stopped, noticing Malleus for the first time. They met his gaze for a moment and smiled before turning back to shove a stack of papers into the Leech twin's arms. "Never mind, we can go down that particular rabbit hole of a conversation later. Here's the contract with my revisions, tell Azul that I'm absolutely not signing anything that doesn't give me veto power on all proposed ads, see you tomorrow."

Malleus could feel a smile to match the prefect's tugging at his lips as they ran up to him, until he noticed the dark circles under their eyes, and the distinctive sway to their steps they

took on when totally exhausted. “Are you alright? You don’t have to stay up on my account, you know.”

“No, no, I’m fine. You were—” They tried and failed to suppress a massive yawn. “You were gonna finish that story about the gargoyle on the southeast corner of the building!”

“Yuu, when was the last time you had a full night’s rest? Not a couple hours here and there, but a proper eight hours.”

Yuu thought about it for long enough that he wondered if they’d fallen asleep with their eyes open before they spoke. “Today’s Thursday, right?”

“It’s Saturday.”

“That explains why I didn’t have any classes.” They yawned again. “Okay, maybe I really do need to sleep. I’m really sorry, Hornton, I’ll just—” They turned to trudge back up the hill into their dorm, but Malleus gently caught their arm and teleported them both up to their room. “Thanks, Malleus, I’ll try to meet up with you again tomorrow. Good night.”

“Sleep well, Child of Man.”

He did not see them the next day, though he was honestly a little relieved, since they apparently spent all their time that day catching up on sleep. Unfortunately, they did not meet up for longer than the briefest moments for the rest of that week either, leaving Malleus with a problem. He hadn’t yet invited them to his birthday party. He knew he was going to have a party, the dorm insisted on throwing one for him every year, on top of everything else the school made students do on their birthdays, but Lilia was being oddly cagey about the whole thing this time. He was reasonably sure that he would remember to invite them, but Malleus still wanted to do it himself, just to make sure.

Even when the actual day arrived, he didn’t have time to slip out, kept busy by all the interviews and traditions and costume changes. Several of them were quite enjoyable, but it truly felt like every year the headmage came up with a new “ancient Night Raven College birthday tradition” and accompanying outfit. Eventually, he stood just outside the dorm lounge, straightening his white suit, the last outfit of the night, and ensuring that he’d magiced all the traces of pie cream out of his hair, and wondering if maybe he could just make the shortest possible obligatory appearance and then duck out, change into his own clothes, and go meet the prefect. But no, it would be rude to ignore the well-wishes of his subjects, and his dormmates considered themselves as such. Much to his surprise and relief, however, when he pushed the door open and entered, the first person he saw was Yuu, standing in the center of the lounge, wielding an odd device that released bright green confetti with a loud bang when they pulled the cord.

“SURPRISE!” Yuu grinned up at him, as did Silver and Sebek standing on either side of them. Behind them, he could see a makeshift stage set up against one wall, where the Pop Music Club waved at him before going back to tuning their instruments. Against a different wall was a buffet, being manned by Ashengrotto and the Leech twins, although Floyd Leech seemed more interested in trying to grab several of the small explosives to set off at once.

The littler Shroud floated near the stage, adjusting the odd black boxes Lilia had told him were called “speakers.” Seeing him, Malleus checked the corners of the room, and sure enough in the darkest back corner was his older brother, fiddling with some kind of large table with cables running out of it. After giving him a moment to look around the room, Yuu spoke up again. “Okay, so technically the party itself isn’t a surprise, since Lilia said you get one every year, but what he described sounded super formal and depressing, so we decided to work together to surprise you with something more fun!”

“Thank you, truly. All of you. This is remarkable.” Sebek preened at the praise and Silver smiled softly, while Yuu’s grin stretched even wider, if that was at all possible.

Most of the party was a bit of a blur. As per usual he had a long line of people looking to wish him a happy birthday, though this year there were a lot more people from outside of his dorm, many of whom he recognized as friends and classmates of either the prefect or his guards, and most of whom came bearing very different gifts than what people normally presented him with. Even the most thoughtless presents seemed obligatory in a “friend of a friend they don’t personally know” way, not an “offering to royalty” way. There were plenty of the latter of course, far more than there were of the friendly gifts, but the overall experience just seemed so much warmer than usual. Even the concerning gifts, like the suspiciously correctly-sized outfit Hunt gave him, or the ones he wasn’t sure how to use, like the automatic shaved ice machine from the younger Shroud.

The food was standard feast fare, mostly an array of traditional Briar Valley dishes. Yuu seemed to enjoy loading their plate with as many different things as they could, asking questions about this or that particular dish as they did so. Oddly enough, Jade Leech seemed slightly distracted, stealing glances at something behind the line while he served people. On a hunch, Malleus followed his gaze, and saw Silver looking utterly entranced by his risotto, and Sebek glaring straight back at the twin. When they had left the buffet table, he mentioned this to Yuu, who snickered lightly. “Yeah, that’s been happening for a couple weeks now, ever since the cafeteria oh-so-suddenly got a new supplier of extra nice tasting mushrooms after Jade’s last camping trip…”

“I confess I accidentally overheard that part of your conversation with him.”

“Oh, right, forgot about that. Anyway, I was *gonna* tell Sebek to quit fussing about it, since Jade’s only interested in the mushrooms, and he’s not gonna do anything weird to them because then Silver’d stop eating them, but then he started yelling about me insinuating that he cares at all about Silver in anything but a strictly professional capacity, so he can sort this one out on his own.”

“Did you—”

“Oh, I didn’t insinuate anything, I outright said I thought he was jealous.” Yuu laughed and pulled Malleus closer to the stage to watch the Pop Music Club perform.

Malleus had been initially slightly worried about Lilia’s singing amplified by human technology, but the group had wisely decided to make Diamond the lead singer for most of the setlist. Most of the songs were ones he recognized, though the group had, as Al-Asim phrased it in their introduction, “put their own spin on them,” and as Yuu put it after the first

song, “each decided to play their own favorite genre but it works somehow?” Malleus could not disagree with that sentiment. In fact, he wondered how much practice it took to make such wildly different styles blend together so well. Or perhaps they had always clicked from the first rehearsal? He shook the question from his head. Diamond was handing the device he sang into (for some reason he thought it was called a microphone, but that couldn’t be right, it looked nothing like the phone in his pocket) to Lilia for the final song of the night, so it was time to abscond. Lilia was saying something about sending everyone off with a traditional Briar Valley lullaby, and Malleus had heard more than enough of Lilia’s lullabies for one lifetime.

“Aw, come on, I’ve been curious about what a thrash metal cover of Once Upon a Dream sounds like ever since Cater tried to warn me!”

“You can find out a safe distance from those speakers. Besides, I should really get started on that cake. It looked awfully large, and I’d rather not see it after the— Ah.” At the buffet table, where he could have sworn he had seen an enormous chocolate cake, there was just an empty platter. Ashengrotto noticed his confusion and stepped in, wearing an apologetic look.

“I’m deeply sorry, but we neglected to anticipate the appetites of some of your guests. I did make sure to set a slice aside for the guest of honor in advance, though,” he placed a plate with a rather large slice on the table.

“Wait, what about the other one?” Yuu asked, and Ashengrotto turned to a freezer box behind him.

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted to save that particular surprise for later, but here you are.” When Malleus heard ‘the other one,’ he had been privately dreading another large cake like the one he had seen before, but Ashengrotto pulled out a small box with a small, single-serving cake inside. It didn’t look like a kind he had seen before, and when he opened the lid to get a closer look, the realization reached him at the same time as Ashengrotto’s explanation. “It’s an ice cream cake, so you should eat it before it melts. Yuu didn’t know what flavor you’d like most, so we chose chocolate and vanilla.”

Malleus picked the plate up out of the box and took the offered spoon gingerly. “An ice cream cake? And you picked it just for me?”

Yuu shuffled their feet and blushed. “Well, Lilia kinda hinted you don’t like normal cakes, and I remembered how much you liked the ice cream at the No One Died party after the whole Scarabia debacle so I thought maybe we could have a normal cake for the guests and a smaller, special cake for you…” they trailed off and looked away, gaze latching onto the other slice of cake still sitting on the table. “A-Anyway, if you want to thank me, just gimme your slice of the other cake. Black Forest is my favorite flavor!” Malleus was pretty sure that that was not what that flavor was called, but he nodded, and they grabbed the plate and a fork, and followed him out to the balcony, just in the nick of time before Lilia started screaming.

“Wow, that’s loud. Did Idia abandon the soundboard or— No, he’s actively turning the volume up. I’m gonna have to tell Ortho to abort the plan. For the sake of the world, he can never talk to Lilia face-to-face.” Malleus blinked and, noticing his confusion, they added,

“It’s kind of a long story, has to do with why I’ve been hanging out at Ignihyde a bunch lately. Oh, I just remembered, Crowley’s been hinting I should conduct some sort of Birthday Interview for the school paper?”

Malleus groaned, “I have done enough interviews for one day, please.”

“Alright, no worries. I’ll just tell him there wasn’t enough notice this month. I can start with Cater instead. Actually, that reminds me, I’ve almost finished the first issue! And a lot of the worst parts were only so bad because I was starting from scratch, so next month’s shouldn’t be nearly so time consuming! Oh, and I’m almost done with the really grind-y part of a project I’ve been doing with Ortho, and the SDC audition is next week, so I’ll have a free week of no dance practice between that and the results being announced. Though if I don’t make it into that, I’m definitely gonna make a Culture Fair booth for the Journalism Club. I wonder how I’m gonna fill an entire classroom, it’s a single-student club! Maybe they’ll have me share space with you or Jade… Nevermind, not the point. I’m *trying* to say, I’m gonna be way less busy soon, so we can finally hang out more!”

“I…admit I have been distressed not being able to talk to you as much lately.”

“Yeah, same here. Now c’mon, you gotta tell me the southeast gargoyle story!”

“Of course, will you tell me what you and the younger Shroud have been conspiring?”

“Sure, but you have to promise not to tell Lilia any of this!”

A cold breeze blew through the balcony, and Yuu pressed into his side as he picked up the story where he last left off. Afterwards, they did indeed tell him about the upcoming ‘Forever Promise Ceremony’, and the plan to set up Lilia and the older Shroud to be friends. He even promised to lend his aid, in exchange for an invitation to the wedding.

“You know they’re not *really* getting married, right?”

“I am not missing any addition to Lilia’s family, even a virtual one.”

Yuu laughed quietly at that, and turned the conversation to another topic. Malleus’ smile lasted the whole night, not even fading when sleep eventually claimed his conversational partner, and he carried them back inside to find a guest room they could stay in. He still did not quite get the point of celebrating the passing of another year of one’s life, but this was certainly the most enjoyable such celebration in a fair while, and he found he was looking forward to spending the next one with Yuu as well. And the ones after, as many as they had to spend with him.

Chapter End Notes

Note from Past Me:
Jade staring at Silver during lunch is from his labwear vignette. Basically everything to

do with the Pop Music Club is from Lilia's ceremonial robes vignette. Rook and Ortho's presents are from Malleus' birthday boy voicelines, which I was blessed with this morning, and there are a bunch of references to his vignette scattered throughout.

Next time, Lilia POV, and he finally talks to Idia

Chapter 5: I Got Talked Into Playtesting A Game By The Brother Of A Surprisingly Cute Shut-In

Chapter Summary

Lilia goes to thank Idia for running the sound for Malleus' birthday party.

Chapter Notes

Note from Past Me:
Ok, I know it's been a while, but I've been really busy this summer.

Minor weeb note, but I personally don't like the translation of "-shi" (the honorific Idia uses for everyone) as "Mister," so I went with the fan translation of "Sir."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the party had wound down and everyone from outside Diasomnia had left, Lilia found himself still wide awake. Silver had unsurprisingly started falling asleep while the party was still ongoing, but eventually Sebek had gotten too tired to keep poking him awake, and Lilia had waved them both off to their own rooms, promising to keep an eye on their liege for them. Malleus himself had bid Lilia goodnight scarcely an hour after that, leading a barely conscious Yuu to a guest room they could stay in overnight. It was still his birthday, so Lilia decided not to rib him for not just sending them straight back to their own dorm with magic. Well, not too much anyway. Malleus had, alas, decided he was too old to be tucked into bed sometime in the last century, so he left him at his door to go make sure Silver had actually made it to bed. He found him standing asleep in his room in his sleep clothes, so he carefully manouvered him into bed, and drew the covers up over him, just as he had ever since his son was just a little boy.

And so, with all his usual charges safe and sound in their rooms, and one temporary charge in a guest room, Lilia decided to log on and see if Gloomurai was up as well. It would be far from the latest that they had been online, though they might have decided to turn in early with both Yuu and himself unavailable. He spawned in the guildhouse, taking a curious look at the large section of the main hall that Yuu, under the direction of Gloomurai's brother, had partitioned off. Over the past few weeks, Yuu had spent hours on preparations. Additionally, word had gotten around to the rest of the guild, and Gloomurai the Younger's enthusiasm was proving incredibly infectious even through Yuu as a proxy. Everyone seemed oddly excited about the whole affair, even though this was hardly the first Forever Promise ceremony, even

within the guild. Lilia kept getting messages of congratulations, and a quick perusal of the comments on Gloomurai's avatar fashion blog showed much of the same. Lilia was starting to wonder if there had been a misunderstanding somewhere and everyone was under the impression that he and his friend were getting married for real.

All this was to say that there was a *lot* of buzz about the whole thing, and Lilia hadn't gotten a chance to see what Yuu and their friend had put together yet, and here he was, in the guildhouse, without anyone who might distract him from taking a look online at the moment…

[Gloomurai] is now online

<Gloomurai> ur still up? arent u in TWST -8 too? its like 2am here

<Muscle Red> I could say the same to you, you know. In any case, I was unable to sign on at our usual time today, so I thought to try to run my dailies now before they reset.

<Gloomurai> same here. some1 asked me for a favor and it took almost all night. glad i got delayed if it meant i wouldve missed u earlier tho

<Muscle Red> The feeling is mutual. Now, how about we see about those daily quests?

<Gloomurai> aaaand thats the reset. glad we got everything done first

<Gloomurai> i gtg do in person things in a few hrs so im gonna catch some zs

<Muscle Red> Of course, don't let me keep you. Sleep well!

<Gloomurai> u too, k?

[Gloomurai] is now offline.

Lilia leaned back in his chair and looked out the window. This time of year, the sky was only just starting to lighten up at the very edge of the horizon, and the sun would not be up for hours yet, but soon Sebek would be waking Silver up for their morning spar, and he liked the chance to watch their progress. Though this morning his joints didn't seem eager to haul him downstairs. Ah well, the boys surely didn't need him hovering over them *every* morning, perhaps he could take Gloomurai's advice and get some sleep before the day really started. He'd get up in time to surprise them with breakfast before they ran to class. There was some ground beef in the fridge, that would be good protein to put in their oatmeal, especially with some melted blue cheese for the calcium. Putting a plan together in his head he rolled into bed.

He woke reluctantly to the beeping of his alarm, set to go off a few minutes before the veritable cacophony that Silver scheduled in case he fell asleep after his morning spar. Checking the time in case it was somehow not already 6:45, he sighed in disappointment. No time to cook anything for breakfast now. The rest had done him some good at least, and he was able to get through his morning calisthenics before he went downstairs. Malleus and

Silver were enjoying the remains of their morning coffee, while Sebek scraped the last helping of scrambled eggs onto his plate. When he noticed Lilia entering, he looked at the eggs, and then pushed half of them onto a fresh plate, putting it at Lilia's place before grabbing himself a bowl of cereal.

"Good morning, Fa-Lilia," Silver half-mumbled into his mug, "you just missed Yuu, they had to get their school supplies from Ramshackle and make sure Grim was up."

"Oh well, I was gonna make you all breakfast this morning but I slept in too late. Tell them I'm sorry I missed them if you see them today."

Malleus muttered something like *"Well that's just as well then"* , but met Lilia's raised eyebrow with an entirely-too-innocent expression.

After everyone was breakfasted and had their things together was a largely uneventful school day. He did get the chance to talk to his clubmates at lunch though, and brought up wanting to thank Idia for helping with the setup. "He's in your class, right, Cater? Do you know where I'm likely to catch him?"

"Ooh, tough question. He barely shows up to class in person, let alone hang around campus. We have an exam in Ritual Magic today though, so you might be able to- Oh, right! He's in the Board Game Club, and they meet today, you can just go there after class."

Lilia thanked him for the information, and after the rest of his classes were finished made his way over to the classroom where the Board Game Club held their meetings. They were setting up to work on their Culture Fair booth, some students gathered around a pile of papers and a holographic screen discussing something to do with the frequency of different types of spaces, while the rest were watching a different screen, showing a first-person view of a boat sailing across a sea next to Azul, wearing some kind of headset and holding a pair of controllers, as he turned his head side to side to direct the camera. Idia was with that group, taking notes, so Lilia stood back and waited until Azul pulled the headset off, shaking his head to clear it.

"We're going to have to cut the naval combat challenge, even calm, smooth sailing is too unnerving. Players will definitely get motion-sick."

"Yeah, that's what I figured," Idia grumbled, "Ignihyde Student B is gonna complain though, he's gotten really attached to the sea monster model he did, I even overheard him babytalking it while working on the death animation."

Lilia crept up to them, waiting until he was hanging right behind Idia to speak up, "You know, you should really learn your dorm mates' names."

Idia let out a delightful little *'Eep!'* of surprise and jumped in his chair, before twisting around to spot Lilia. "Sir Lilia!? What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I just wanted to thank you for helping out with the sound system last night. The performance went splendidly, especially the last song!"

“Splendidly!?” Azul protested, “I could feel my rib cage *vibrate!* ”

“That’s the best part!” said Idia, “When the bass line goes so hard your heart and lungs have no choice but to pump in time to the music, that’s when you know the song’s captured your soul! It’s one of the reasons I wish I could see a Premo concert live, plugging subwoofers into my PC just isn’t the *same* .”

Premo? That sounded familiar, Lilia cast about his mind for a moment. “Ah, you mean the band Precipice Moirai?”

“Wait, do you actually know them?” Idia raised a skeptical eyebrow, not quite hiding his earnest excitement.

“A friend of mine is a fan. I’ve seen a few of their music videos, but I’m afraid I can’t claim to be an ardent follower.”

“Pfft, he can’t be that big a fan if he hasn’t even made you listen to any of their albums.” Idia rolled his eyes and rummaged through his bag, pulling out a CD in a thick case. “Here, this one came with a random order bonus so I bought a bunch in order to get them all. I was gonna give most of these to Azul, but I guess you can have one, since your friend is clearly slacking on the job.”

Lilia took the proffered album, noting the figures of three women, holding a skein of some fiber, a spindle, and a pair of shears respectively, silhouetted in black against a brownish-orange, reminiscent of ancient pottery from the Land of Heroes. As he put it away in his bag, he heard the telltale hum of Ortho flying through the doorway.

“I got the extra holographic monitors from the dorm, where should I- Oh! Lilia Vanrouge!” Ortho quickly offloaded the small black projectors onto one of the club members and flew over to Idia, Azul, and Lilia.

“Hello Ortho, I was just thanking your brother for helping out last night. And thank you too, for whatever you said to convince him.”

“It was no problem at all, we had fun, right Idia?”

Idia stammered but did not contradict the sentiment.

“Anyway, I’ll be on my way now, you all seem very busy.”

“Yep! Idia’s club is making a VR board game.” Ortho’s face lit up. “Actually, that reminds me, once we’re ready for proper playtests, we might need someone who hasn’t been staring at the game for weeks to try it, would you like to help us out then?”

“Of course, if I could borrow one of you boys to help with the speaker set up again for the Pop Music Club’s booth?”

Ortho nodded, “Sure, we’ll be setting up the SDC first, but I can come over once that’s done.”

“That’s perfect.” Lilia wrote his phone number down on a handy sheet of graph paper (most of which had been dedicated to a map of some kind of forest), and turned to face Idia, who looked like he wanted to object. “Text me if you want me to come and help. I’ll listen to the album later today, and tell you what I think next time we see each other, okay?” Idia cut off whatever he’d been about to say and nodded.

Lilia turned and left the club. Once he was out the door, he heard the faint sounds of Azul trying to convince someone to let him look at a notebook, followed by a minor scuffle. He chuckled to himself, and started planning what to make for dinner tonight. Barley pilaf sounded good, and he could add sardines and the blue cheese he didn’t get to use at breakfast to round it out, nutritionally. Maybe tomato sauce too, to make it look more colorful and appetizing.

Chapter End Notes

Note from Past Me:
Next time; Idia is jealous of himself

In the context of this fic, TWST stands for Twisted Wonderland Standard Time. Also, UTC-8 is the time zone that the english server uses for everything, so that’s why I put Sage Island in TWST-8. In an alternate universe where I was basing this fic off the Japanese server, it’d be in TWST+9

I’m gonna work on the last chapter of Yuu & Sebek next, and then I’ll only have two concurrent WIPs instead of three! (Watch me immediately come up with another fic idea as soon as I finish that fic lol)

Chapter 6: Help! My Online BFF Might Go To My School!? (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

Idia and Muscle Red meet up for some questing, just the two of them

Chapter Notes

Note from Past Me:
Hoo boy, this took a while. Writing the quest was just so much fun that when I looked up it was months later and the chapter was almost half as long as the entire rest of the fic so far, after I edited out the unnecessary digressions into what online discourse would look like if catboys were real.
Also, if you've read part 2 of book 7, you know Ortho and Idia say some stuff that contradicts things established in this fic. We're just gonna ignore that, because if I tried to retroactively make this story match canon better I'd never finish it, and we're already pretty AU anyway since it's a sequel to other, deliberately diverging fics.

This chapter contains spoilers for the H.C. Anderson story The Little Match Girl.

Note from Present Me:
Maybe someday I should write a dedicated Catboy Twitter Discourse fic...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"…Clotho blushed and buried her face in her pillow. She had always thought Atropos was beautiful, ever since they had formed their group together with Lachesis, and years of living together, first in the dorms, and then in a shared apartment when the agency had wanted to give the dorm space to a newer group, had only intensified her attraction, rather than dimming it. However, in all those years she had never voiced her feelings aloud, and since Atropos had never said anything either, she had long since despaired at the idea of her feelings ever being requited. But Morta's messages gave her the same fluttery feeling that Atropos's praise always had, and she wanted to meet her in person! Maybe pursuing a relationship with someone she met online wasn't the wisest idea, but it was high time she stopped carrying that flame for her groupmate, and here was someone who actually—"

Idia was interrupted from his writing by the alert tone of a direct message in his game. He had logged on a little while ago, but SDC auditions were today so Yuu was busy, and Muscle

Red didn’t seem to be online either. After doing most of their dailies, Idia had opted to leave their character afk and work on their fic while they waited to see if either of them would log on later. They tabbed back to the game to see which of his online friends had messaged him.

<Muscle Red> My apologies for being late. I had an engagement that ran longer than expected.

While he composed his reply, a text came in from Ortho simply saying that auditions had just finished, and that Yuu had said to tell him they had promised a friend to hang out afterwards, so they wouldn’t be online.

<Gloomurai> np, i wasnt waiting too long

<Gloomurai> btw shrimpies taking a rain check on today so its just us

<Muscle Red> That’s perfectly alright. The most recent update added a new side questline they won’t be able to do for a while anyway, so let’s say we go questing together, just the two of us?

Idia felt the ever-present warmth of their hair intensify, and they just knew that if they checked their reflection there would be hints of pink. It wasn’t even like adventuring one-on-one with Muscle Red was at all rare even after Shrimpie had started playing. Yuu just didn’t have as much time to commit to the game, what with all their normie social commitments (Though somehow their normie social life didn’t seem to lead to a normie sleep schedule, as the bags under their eyes were starting to rival Idia’s). Yet, something about how Muscle Red always phrased it just felt so—! Idia shook his head to clear it and typed a response. The quest began in a town near the northern end of the map, so he arranged to meet Muscle Red there once they were partied up.

<Gloomurai> ok, the npc is somewhere in the marketplace, but i didnt wanna see any spoilers so i dont know their coords. lets split up and look 4 them

Muscle Red agreed and ran off to the east end of the market, while Idia stayed on the west end and started wandering around. While he was there, he checked in on a few of the shops. The ones that were available in every town, such as the blacksmith that gave access to equipment crafting, or the general item shop that carried basic potions and other essentials, were in the east side where Muscle Red was searching. Idia’s side had things like regional monster drops in limited quantities for people who really didn’t want to trek out into the snowy plains for one single Dire Snow Hare pelt, or a record shop, which sold magitools (which, entirely coincidentally to be sure, looked exactly like vinyl records) that allowed you to play the region’s soundtrack in your home. Right next to the record shop, he found a little girl npc looping a somewhat melodramatic sobbing emote. To confirm that this was the very npc he was looking for, a line of dialogue appeared in the chat box when he approached.

[System Messages]

<Dorte> Boohoo…

[Private]

<Gloomurai> meet at [my coords]. npc is a crying little girl.

<Muscle Red> Wonderful. By the by, I only need a couple more hare pelts to craft this lovely winter coat that can hold the Freeze Immunity gem I got yesterday, so feel free to accept the quest and figure out where we're going next while I do that.

<Gloomurai> k

Clicking on poor Dorte opened her dialogue, and she stopped crying and started trying to sell him matchsticks. Not even, like, a box of matches. Just individual sticks. Out of curiosity, Idia clicked the "I don't need your matches, I can just start fires with magic" option, which just closed the dialogue without accepting the quest. Fortunately clicking the npc again didn't make him go through her whole sales pitch again, she just asked if he changed his mind and offered the same dialogue prompts again. Accepting this time opened a shop, where the only items for sale were the matchsticks. He bought one, and when he closed the shop his quest list updated.

"Matches in the Snow:

You bought a matchstick from little Dorte.

Light a match 0/1"

<Gloomurai> first step is to light a match. buy it from the npc and then click it in ur inventory

<Gloomurai> tell me when u get 1 and well light them 2gthr?

Muscle Red finished his running back and forth between the east and west sides of the market and approached Idia and Dorte, new armor equipped and set as visible. It was a nice design, the clean lines of the coat complemented his avatar's silhouette and the fur trim provided a cute touch. The developers had made the somewhat odd decision not to put any sleeves on an outfit supposedly designed for cold weather, but Idia wasn't exactly complaining— true to his handle, Muscle Red's avatar had some extremely well-defined arms. Shortly, he finished reading Dorte's dialogue.

<Muscle Red> Ah, I see, we're doing a Little Match Girl story.

<Gloomurai> ?

<Muscle Red> It's a fairy tale from the Sunshine Lands about a matchstick seller much like little Dorte here.

<Gloomurai> nvr hrd of it before

<Gloomurai> hows it go?

<Muscle Red> Are you sure you want to know? I was under the impression you wanted to experience this quest blind.

<Gloomurai> yeah ur right. tell me the story after were done tho, i wanna see how they compare

<Muscle Red> Of course. Ready to light our matches?

<Gloomurai> 1 moment

Seeing Muscle Red in his new gear made Idia want to get into the wintery mood too, so he opened up his closet and selected a cosmetic outfit he'd spent a couple weeks grinding for during a Yuletide event a few years back.

<Muscle Red> Oh, is that a traditional Harveston Applepom outfit? Nice choice of dye colors, it's quite fetching.

<Gloomurai> ye, theres a rlly good anime about the sledathon there where all the characters wear outfits like this.

<Gloomurai> I picked the colors to match best girl Ai

<Gloomurai> her determination to win brings her team together and inspires them all and shes just so cute on top of that

<Gloomurai> its called Sled Over Heels: Tearing Up The Snow and its streaming on makiroll if u wanna see

<Muscle Red> I used to visit Harveston to watch the Sledathon occasionally in my travels. They get quite spirited, so I'm sure a series about one would be delightful! I'll be sure to give it a watch when I have the chance.

Great Seven, Idia wished he could see a Sledathon in person. Sometimes he found himself wondering what kind of life Muscle Red must lead, based on the brief insights he let slip occasionally. It had to be far more interesting than the only life Idia would ever see, holed up in his room at NRC until senior internships started, and then holed up in STYX for the rest of his life. He shook his head to try to clear out that depressing thought, and told Muscle Red he was ready to light the match.

Using the item sent him to a quest instance. Looking around, it appeared to be the capital of the eastern country that samurai characters were supposed to come from. Muscle Red was nowhere to be seen, and the party panel indicated that they could not teleport to each other at the moment. Perhaps he had been sent to his own class's home? A moment later a message from Muscle Red confirmed his guess. His instance was of a small port village in the northern country they were currently in, which warriors called home. He had also seen a couple npcs in the distance he wanted to try to talk to. Idia scanned his screen again, and spotted a cluster of npcs outside a large estate in his own instance as well. Walking up to them caused several lines of radiant dialogue to appear in his chat box, mostly variations on "Welcome home," and then the instance closed and he was teleported back to the market in front of Dorte. He checked the quest, the next objective was to talk to her again.

[System Messages]

<Dorte> Sir? Are you okay?

[Private]

<Muscle Red> Hold on a moment.

<Muscle Red> Check your status effects, there's something odd in mine.

There was, in fact, a blue debuff icon above his health bar that wasn't there before, sandwiched between the green indicator for improved recovery in safe zones and a gold buff icon for some food he had eaten before starting the quest. It was a snowflake, like the freeze icon, but he didn't appear to be frozen. Opening the more detailed status window, he found the description, "Deep Cold- You have spent too long exposed to the elements, and the cold has set into your bones. -10% movement speed, -10% attack speed (2:53 left)"

<Gloomurai> i see it

<Muscle Red> It must be related to the quest. I suppose there isn't anything for it except to talk to the match girl again.

The dialog confirmed what the debuff's description implied. According to Dorte, it was a day later, and he had been standing out in the snow the whole time. He asked to buy another match, to confirm what had just happened, and Dorte eagerly sold it to him. Then he and Muscle Red arranged to light their matches together again.

This time, it took a little longer to load the instance, but they were sent to the same one, which was a relief. It would've been a major bummer if they had been separated for the whole quest. The devs must have really wanted to do the class-specific zones for the first match. The new instance was of a massive banquet hall. The tables were laden with massive, glistening roasts and they were surrounded by a cheering crowd. Idia inspected the npc closest to them and realized he looked an awful lot like a member of their guild who spent almost all his time tending the crops in the guild lot, roleplaying as a farmer, and occasionally saying oddly morbid things in chat.

<Gloomurai> hey the guy next to me looks like reaperman for some reason

<Muscle Red> Yes, and this fellow behind me has his armor dyed just like Kuro Shadow's.

<Gloomurai> the quest says we gotta eat the food to progress, so lets see who we can find in here first

Idia looked around the room, admiring the illusion—in multiple senses—of their friends gathered around. Internally, they tried to guess at what exactly the system was doing. Most likely, it had gone down their friends list, picked several players, and then loaded the avatars corresponding to those IDs. They and Muscle Red were definitely seeing the same avatars in the same places, so this was being done on the server-side, not the client-side. Was it picking from both their friend lists, or just Idia's, since they were party leader? Their friends had too much overlap with Muscle Red to tell, they both recognized every character in the room. For

that matter, what happened if the quest was run by a solo player with no friends? They would have to look it up, or ask around after finishing the quest to find out.

Once they had both thoroughly inspected the crowd, they moved back to standing next to each other in front of the table, and interacted with it to eat the food together. Sure enough, they were sent back to the village again. This time, in addition to the debuff, they each lost a chunk of their magic. It didn't take long to recover, Idia's MP bar was full again by the time they had finished typing an annoyed message to Muscle Red (whose magic was taking much longer to regenerate, but only a couple of warrior skills even used it anyway). The quest panel once again said to light another match, so Idia spoke to Dorte once more. They hoped this wouldn't keep repeating, they could see the novelty of the illusions wearing off if they had to keep doing them.

Dorte actually seemed hesitant to sell them the match this time, even bringing up how, at the beginning, Gloomurai had told her he didn't need matches to start a fire. However, she eventually admitted that her father wouldn't let her come home each day until she sold a match to *someone* , and was convinced to sell one to them. Idia decided to try to put their thoughts on the quest into words before continuing.

<Gloomurai> ok so dorte and/or her dad are def turbo sus

<Gloomurai> she clearly knows that theres smthng up with the matches

<Gloomurai> and these things are like 1g each, shes practically giving them away

<Gloomurai> and i could see her dad insisting that she sell them if it was necessary to put food on the table, but at 1g each!? a single loaf of bread costs 100g!

<Gloomurai> based on the player apartment rents, food prices, etc, at 1g a match a household of two would be barely scraping by if she sold an entire box of matches to every person in this town every day! but her dads apparently fine with her going back after selling to just us!

<Gloomurai> even without the weird illusions shed be beyond sus

<Muscle Red> To be fair to Dorte and her father, the price might just be that low because players aren't meant to be gated from the quest based on how much gold they possess.

<Gloomurai> no thatd be dumb

Whatever the truth was, they wouldn't learn it unless they continued, so Idia and Muscle Red lit their next matches. This time, they were in an endless snowy plain together. Looking into the distance, Idia saw an NPC he recognized as the former princess of the central country on the map, who had died in a particularly devastating main story quest a few months ago. He ran towards her without stopping to check the quest tracker, but just before he got in range to see if she had any dialogue, he was removed from the instance, and transported back to the village, this time with the Frozen debuff.

Well, that explained why Yuu couldn't accept the quest yet. Nothing so far had really seemed to require a high level or anything, but this illusion just wouldn't hurt them the right way

until they actually got to that part of the story. Maybe he should show them some of the sad GMVs that got made about her when they do. A moment after Idia unfroze, Muscle Red spawned in, having presumably taken his time instead of rushing straight for Princess Amina. He wasn't frozen, which raised some interesting questions about how quest status effects were applied Idia could ponder some other time.

<Muscle Red> Odd, there isn't a debuff this time. I would have expected things to continue escalating.

<Gloomurai> actually i got frozen

<Gloomurai> ur just immune lol

Looking around, Dorte seemed conspicuously absent. The quest panel even said "Find Dorte." Auto-navigation was disabled, and there wasn't even a marker on the map, so it was time to do things the old fashioned way. First, they checked the alley she was usually near. It wasn't quite wide enough for them to stand next to each other without a bit of clipping, so they walked single file, with Muscle Red in the lead. A little ways in, and the ground transitioned from cobblestone to snow, and Idia spotted footprints leading the way.

<Muscle Red> Well spotted! My eyes just aren't so keen these days, you know.

<Gloomurai> eh might be ur eyes, might be my screen contrast settings lol

The pair followed the footprints through the alley, out of town, and towards a small crevice in a nearby rocky outcropping. Approaching revealed it to be the entrance portal to a quest dungeon. Idia and Muscle Red were both well above the suggested level, so in they went. The pair were greeted by a long passageway and the faint sound of Dorte crying from further in. Heading down the path put them face-to-swirling-mass-of-wind-and-ice-approximating-a-face with a group of ice elementals. They were annoying, especially since they could all inflict Freeze on Idia, but they weren't too hard to get past, especially with Muscle Red's new gear. Soon enough, they reached the boss chamber, where Dorte awaited them alongside an adult male NPC, and entered, triggering a cutscene.

Dorte glared up at the man, fists balled at her sides. Her voice trembled as she spoke, "I can't do this anymore, Father! You're killing people!"

Her father had his back to both Dorte and the questing pair, answering without turning around, "Please, we give them sweet dreams, don't we? A welcoming home, a warm feast, a lost loved one… Those fools seek these visions out on their own, and don't even notice me drain the warmth from their bodies and souls."

"B-but—"

"But what? I took you in, didn't I? Fed you? Clothed you? And all I ask is that you distribute my matchstick lures—" He turned as he spoke, and finally caught sight of Idia and Muscle Red in the entrance, "Intruders? Dorte, I thought you said our latest victims had been fully drained!?"

Dorte turned as well, and gasped in shock, “But they were frozen solid!”

Her father *tsk* -ed, “Adventurers. A word of advice, Dorte. Never assume an adventurer is dead unless you’ve personally confirmed they no longer have a pulse. And sometimes not even then.” He stepped toward the center of the room, an icy wind whipping up to conceal him from view. “It would have been nice to drain you all slowly as you retreated to a warm dream and never noticed yourself freezing, but we’re clearly past that now. Dorte, we’ll continue our little *discussion* after I’ve cleaned up your mess.” The wind cleared, revealing a massive ice wraith. It roared, and the cutscene ended, a boss HP bar appearing at the top of the screen for Dorte’s Father.

<Muscle Red> For the record, this did not happen in the fairy tale.

They ran towards the boss, Muscle Red charging straight into melee range while Idia lined up his opening skill. It sent him dashing forward in a straight line, dealing a bunch of damage to an enemy in his path once his character finished the dash and sheathed his sword. From there, he could chain another of his skills, rapidly unsheathing and sheathing his sword to deal a bunch more hits. He could only keep using it while his character stood in place, but that’s why Muscle Red was primarily using skills that drew aggro. Idia finished his opener just as the ground under him lit up red. The ice wraith was clearly winding up for a wide range attack, one that would most likely inflict Freeze. Muscle Red just kept swinging, since he was immune to the debuff and could afford to soak up the damage, but Idia didn’t feel like being stuck in place for a few precious seconds. The range of the attack looked a little too far for his character to run out of in time, so he used his dash move again, but pointed away from the boss, to get to safety. It was a little wasteful of MP, but that’s what potions were for. The two of them worked together like this, Muscle Red keeping Dorte’s dad’s attention with his massive warrior’s greatsword and Idia using fast-paced samurai combos from midrange until the boss was brought to its knees (well, it was a floating chunk of ice, so it didn’t have knees, but it was brought to them nonetheless). The dungeon rewards dropped, and Idia opened his, then sighed.

<Muscle Red> Oh lovely, a new sword! It’s not quite as good as what I’m using, but this icy design will look lovely hanging in the kitchen! What did you get?

<Gloomurai> [Freeze Immunity Gem]

<Gloomurai> and there isnt even anything else i wanna do in this region

<Muscle Red> Oh, I’m sure it’ll be useful again sooner or later.

From there, the quest wrapped up fairly quickly. They talked to Dorte again, who was distraught, but otherwise holding up surprisingly well, then brought her back to town to find the orphanage. When they got there, they conveniently happened to run into the mayor, a rich old woman who occasionally lamented not having had children when she had the chance if you spoke to her in her manor. Apparently she had decided to actually do something about that regret. She was quickly charmed by Dorte, and agreed to take her in, promising to buy her some shiny new shoes to replace the rough, worn out pair she was wearing as they walked away together. After they were gone, Idia noticed something on the ground. Going to

pick it up revealed it to be a dropped matchbox, the tooltip saying that the matches inside were just ordinary sticks now, with no magical power.

<Gloomurai> well that all worked out conveniently

<Gloomurai> i was starting to wonder whatd happen to dorte once we dealt w her dad

<Muscle Red> Yes, this isn't how the original went either.

<Gloomurai> oh yeah, u said u'd tell me about that after

<Muscle Red> Yes, let's see…

<Muscle Red> I'm sure you can find the full story on the internet nowadays, but roughly abridged, it goes as follows;

<Muscle Red> Once upon a time, there was a little girl trying to sell matchsticks. It was a cold winter night, but her father would punish her if she returned without selling any matches, and no one was buying any. She tried lighting one to warm herself up, and saw a vision of a warm home, decorated for the winter holidays. The next match showed her a grand feast, and the next one her dearly departed grandmother. She lit match after match trying to prolong the vision of her grandmother, but eventually ran out. When her smiling, frozen body was found the next morning, no one guessed that she was happy because she had been reunited with her grandmother in the Spectral Realm. The End.

<Gloomurai> wait thats it? her life sucks and then she dies? no happily ever after?

<Muscle Red> That was supposed to be her "happily ever after," actually

<Gloomurai> ???

<Muscle Red> The original author was not what one would call a happy man. He had his charms, he had quite the silver tounge for one, but he was also deeply convinced of his own eternal suffering. This isn't the only story he wrote where the protagonist's happy ending lies in their death.

<Gloomurai> u sound like u knew the guy lol

<Muscle Red> Do I?

Idia snickered lightly at the thought of their friend having met that author. Muscle Red made jokes like that all the time. Talking about some long dead author like an old boyfriend was probably one of the less weird things he'd said. Idia liked to think they could separate the real things he'd discussed from the jokes and exaggerations, though they supposed for all they knew, he might never have really seen a Sledathon.

Speaking of their real lives… Idia glanced at the stack of Premo albums next to his computer. He still had quite a few of them on hand, even after giving some out to Yuu, Azul, and Lilia. He knew Yuu knew Muscle Red, and Muscle Red knew that Yuu hung out with his brother at NRC. He'd sent Muscle Red links to Premo MVs and fancams before, but he'd be remiss in

his duties as a fan not to try to get him to listen to a full album. Maybe he could tell Muscle Red he was sending the album to Yuu by way of his brother to give him (and then wait a few days to actually hand the album to Yuu to handoff, so Muscle Red wouldn't wonder about the shipping time, if he really was on Sage's Island)? Then he could share the album, without either of them exposing more of their real world identities then they already had. The plan solidifying in his mind, he started typing his message before he could chicken out.

<Gloomurai> hey so this premo album came out recently and it had a random order bonus

<Muscle Red> Ah yes, an acquaintance of mine was telling me about it. You always like to collect all the gifts from these sorts of things, correct? I hope your quest was fruitful.

Idia blinked at the new information. Muscle Red had never mentioned knowing any other Premo fans before. He had always gotten the impression that he was the only person who told him about this stuff. Before he could decide whether to comment on it, Muscle Red continued on with his standard, absurdly fast typing speed.

<Muscle Red> My acquaintance apparently needed to amass quite a trove of albums in his own quest. He even gave one to me! I've already started listening to a few of the tracks, and they're quite electrifying.

So, not only did Muscle Red make friends with some other Premo stan, but whoever this guy was had even given him the new album before they could!? Idia supposed this should be a good thing, their friend was getting into the best idol group after all. But at the same time, they had wanted to be the one to bring him into the fold and show him why it was that Premo was the best, not some rando who probably didn't even really appreciate Premo on the level Idia did. Muscle Red had only called him an acquaintance anyway, not a friend or anything. Who just gave out CDs to near strangers? No one who really understood those CDs' worth, that's who. Reassuring themself with this idea, Idia typed up a response that hopefully wouldn't betray the crisis they'd just had.

<Gloomurai> yeah, i got everything thx

<Gloomurai> tell me when u finish the album btw

<Gloomurai> i had an idea for a fic about the last main story quest based on it, and itll make more sense once uve listened to the whole thing

<Gloomurai> dont worry about needing to hurry up tho im working on a chapter for one of my premo fics rn

<Muscle Red> That sounds lovely, I'm looking forward to it.

<Muscle Red> Oh my, look at the time, I almost forgot I was planning to make dinner tonight! I'd best be on my way, do be sure to keep me updated on that story you're writing, and I'll see you tomorrow!

It occurred to Idia that just because that particular gift idea had been shot down, it didn't mean the whole plan was a bust. He had multiple copies of some older albums too, he could

send him some real classics instead of just the newest release like that mystery acquaintance, or something else all together. On the other hand, there wasn't any real reason to send Muscle Red a gift. His birthday had come and gone nearly three weeks ago, a birthday gift that late would just be insulting. And worse, it was only a few weeks until a couple's holiday, any gift Idia sent in the near future might get misconstrued, and that would just be mortifying. He could just about imagine Muscle Red's disgust receiving a gift like that from him. It was better not to bring the topic up at all.

<Gloomurai> cya

[Muscle Red is offline]

Chapter End Notes

Note from Past Me:
Okay. So, Hans Christian Anderson appears as a character in The Little Mermaid TV show. I'm declaring that all spinoffs and side material are canon, and therefore he also exists in Twisted Wonderland's history, and Lilia could plausibly know him. You're welcome.

Chapter 7: I Got Talked Into Playtesting A Game By The Brother Of A Surprisingly Cute Shut-In (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

It’s time for the “wedding!”

Chapter Notes

Note from Past Me:
A lot has happened since I last updated this fic…uh…just two months shy of a year ago, apparently. I started HRT, broke a toe, wrote two other, much shorter, fics…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was finally the day of the “wedding” and Lilia could not be more excited. Yuu and Gloomurai’s brother had reported that the wedding venue in the guildhouse was finished a few days ahead of schedule, and the anticipation of knowing that it was done and he couldn’t look at it yet was almost enough to send Lilia to an early grave. But today was the day, and classes were finally finished, and soon he’d get to see what Gloomurai the Younger had designed and unlock that gorgeous sparkly suit.

He booted up his PC, Malleus leaning over his shoulder, having been caught between grinning and pouting all day. Grinning, because Yuu finishing their grinding and waiting on the audition results meant they were spending much more time with him then the last few weeks (they were also clearly conspiring something together, though Lilia was trying not to pry too much). Pouting, because Idia found out about what happened to Malleus’s last several phones and banned him from Ignihyde’s computer lab, so he couldn’t watch them play the game. Yuu had apparently described some of the wedding venue to him (a description he refused to share, the ungrateful hatchling), but he hadn’t actually seen any more of it than Lilia. The game loaded, and Muscle Red spawned in his house, where Lilia had left him last night. His plot was larger than Gloomurai’s, so they agreed to sell their home and move into his. Lilia had accordingly spent last night moving his things around to make space for his “fiancé” to decorate to their tastes. There was plenty of room on the plot to add an extra wing to be entirely Gloomurai’s, but Lilia thought it’d be fun to let them leave their mark on his half of the build, too. Shortly afterwards, he was notified that Gloomurai and Shrimpie were online, and the message panel pinged at him.

<Shrimpie> every1 ready?

<Gloomurai> last chance 2 back out if u want muscle

<Muscle Red> And disappoint your darling brother? Perish the thought!

<Muscle Red> Besides, I still need that suit.

A moment later, an information panel appeared on his screen.

[Your fiancé, <Gloomurai>, would like to hold a Forever Promise Ceremony

[Groom]: <Gloomurai>

[Bride]/**[Groom]**: <Muscle Red>

Location: <Guild Base>

Guests: 11/20 <Edit Guest List>

Confirm to start event?]

[yes] [no]

Pressing “yes” teleported Lilia to the guildhouse, and he saw that the partitions around the venue Yuu built had been taken down. The guildhouse as a whole was a dark building, decorated largely in various shades of gray, the sleek lines and minimalist furniture that Gloomurai preferred occasionally broken up by trophies from various raids and events the guild had participated in, and by Lilia’s fondness for imposing stone statues and tapestries in color schemes most often found in a goth teen’s art portfolio. Gloomurai griped about the clutter sometimes, but he also chose to arrange the main hall to display and draw attention to those items, so that the effect a viewer was left with was of a brutalist corporate office that a bunch of vampires had taken over.

The room that Yuu, under the direction of Gloomurai’s brother, had converted into a chapel was similarly sleek and gray, but they had added several large windows, making it seem much more open than the rest of the base. There was technically no “outside” of the guildhouse, the windows just displayed a set outdoor scenery, but you could choose what weather was in that scenery, and the tone and brightness of the light streaming through. Yuu had opted for a bright, sunny day, which made everything look warmer in color, even though Lilia was sure if he checked the build details he would see the room was using the exact same walls and flooring as the hall he entered from. The game did have themed wedding furniture, but it had only been obtainable from a limited-time event when the Forever Promise Ceremony was first implemented in their server, and now sold for a rather high price on the player market. Instead, the young designer had gotten creative. The pews were park benches, with a stone texture that matched the rest of the room. The aisle up to the altar was lined with small plinths, on top of which were placed vases of roses, alternating between red for Muscle Red and blue for Gloomurai. The altar itself was flanked by tall, potted rose bushes in the same colors which also lined the walls between the windows, further contributing to the room’s livelier appearance compared to the rest of the building. Some details (like the altar

being a dining table with a white tablecloth) definitely spoke to the constraints it was built under, but it was lovely nonetheless, and its creators certainly deserved praise.

<Muscle Red> You did a wonderful job, putting this all together in so little time, Shrimpie! And give my regards to Gloomurai's brother, too!

<Gloomurai> yeah he did good

<Shrimpie> he says thanks

<Shrimpie> now get ur suits on and get over to the altar so we can do this

Lilia opened the wardrobe, scrolling to the Bedazzled Suit, which had unlocked as soon as the event started. He'd prepared some dye items ahead of time, and looked through the different color options, before choosing his character's namesake red for the jacket, pants, and tie, and white for the shirt. Malleus leaned in, asking, "Is this supposed to be your digital representation?" Lilia nodded, and spun his avatar around, so he could see it from all angles. "It isn't a particularly accurate recreation…"

Lilia laughed, "Being different from reality is half the point! I'm already adorable in my day-to-day life, why not be 'jacked,' as the kids say, here?"

"I see," Malleus nodded thoughtfully, "Do all players design their 'avatar' not to resemble themself?"

"Most of them, probably. Yuu's avatar is a very far cry from their true appearance, and I don't know what Gloomurai looks like, but he's indicated that there isn't much of a resemblance as well." Lilia closed his menu to see that Gloomurai himself had also finished changing, and was waiting by the altar. He had opted to color most of the outfit black, except for the shirt, which was a dark blue. With his sharp features and usual low ponytail in a blue so dark it was almost black, it almost would have had a somber, formal look, if it wasn't so sparkly. The devs had really done excellent work rendering all those sequins without making the outfit take forever to load. Lilia thought he remembered something mentioned about procedural generation, but that was really more Gloomurai's area of expertise than his. He walked up next to him and looked at the pews to see the rest of the guild either seated or finding a spot.

Technically, there was no need for an officiant, Gloomurai was the host of the event and could simply press the button to finalize the marriage at any time. Yuu had seemed to want to give some sort of speech, however, and somehow got Gloomurai to let them (Lilia suspected that his mysterious little brother's puppy eyes were involved). To that end they had dressed their avatar up in plain white robes (incidentally, Shrimpie was a male character with long, dark hair and striking green eyes. Yuu had declared during character creation that something they were going to stare at for hours had better be pretty. Lilia nudged Malleus slightly when they had spawned in, but he didn't seem to notice anything about their design choices.) and positioned themself between the grooms.

<Shrimpie> every1 ready?

There was a chorus of agreement in the chat.

<Shrimpie> Fowevah Pwomise. Fowevah Pwomise is what bwings us togethah today.

<Gloomurai> no

<Gloomurai> absolutely not

<Shrimpie> yeah ur right

<Shrimpie> Spawkwy Suits. Spawkwy Suits awe what bwing us togethah today.

<Gloomurai> i swear 2 the 7 if u dont stop that rn u will never have a ping below triple digits again

<Shrimpie> Noted. Skipping ahead.

<Shrimpie> If anyone objects, speak now or forever hold your peace.

<KuroShadow> stop the wedding!

Behind him, Lilia could feel the crackle of lightning, before another message quickly popped up.

<KuroShadow> sry always wanted to do that

<KuroShadow> go ahead

<Shrimpie> anyway i cant actually declare u husbands, gloom has the button so take it away dude

<System> Congratulations to <Gloomurai> and <Muscle Red> for performing the 68th Forever Promise on the server!

<Gloomurai> damn maybe we shouldve waited a lil longer

<Muscle Red> If only we'd checked the number of bonded players on the server before scheduling the ceremony for today. Truly, we have forever missed a priceless opportunity!

Malleus made a confused noise, but fortunately did not ask Lilia to explain the significance of the number. Yuu steered the guests out into the guildhall's dining room, where a feast had been prepared for the guests. Apparently, this had not been part of Gloomurai the Younger's initial plan. It had actually been suggested by one of their guildmates, who had also been the one to prepare all the food, as he had the highest possible cooking skill level. The spread didn't initially seem to adhere to any particular theme, representing an eclectic mix of normal feast fare, breakfast items, and lighter snacks, from a variety of cultures, but as Lilia moused over them and read their descriptions, he noticed a connection.

<Muscle Red> Is it just me, or does everything here boost luck?

<Meatie> yeah, i mathed it out so if u eat one of each dish u get the max possible luck buff

<Meatie> itll also max ur sat tho

<Muscle Red> I see, Shrimpie warned us yesterday not to eat anything so our satiety would be empty, this must be why.

<Meatie> u and gloom should start ur new life with as much luck as possible lol

<Meatie> also we're gonna raid the new dungeon after this and try to get the boss trophy for the guildhall

<Gloomurai> so thats ur real motive lol

"I see," Malleus seemed thoughtful, "Many cultures have traditions meant to bless a new marriage with luck. Your guildmates are quite thoughtful, finding a way to adapt that to this virtual world." He said it so seriously that Lilia couldn't help but laugh, but he did agree it was sweet. Yuu signed out after chatting with the others for a bit, since they were still too low level for the particular dungeon the guild wanted to raid. A minute later, Malleus's phone dinged, and he pulled it out to peer at the screen before looking back at Lilia with a slightly conflicted expression.

"Oh, go hang out with your friend," said Lilia, guessing what the text was about. "You can watch me raid a dungeon any night, I know you haven't had as much time with Yuu lately."

"You really shouldn't stay up playing your game *every* night," Malleus replied, but he smiled, and let Lilia ruffle his hair before he teleported away.

Lilia turned his attention back to the game, and accepted the invite to the raid party. The dungeon, the ruined and monster-infested castle of a former kingdom that a local archeologist wanted photos of, and its boss, a magical construct set to guard the long-abandoned throne room, were quite fun the first time. Solo, it would have been significantly less fun the tenth time in a row, which was how many tries it took for someone to get the trophy. Fortunately, Lilia had Gloomurai and the rest of the group to joke around with, so the grind didn't become too monotonous. He knew Gloomurai had been a solo player before they met each other, and he'd had no idea how they'd had the patience to clear the same dungeon over and over in their pursuit to own every item worth bragging about on their own. Now that he knew they had a brother, he figured that he must have kept them company in person.

After they had gotten the trophy, the construct's broken but still beautifully ornate sword, they decided to display it against the back wall of the wedding chapel, behind the altar (which they had all decided to leave up and maybe use again someday, although probably not for another Forever Promise). Then the rest of the guild started logging out, most of them leaving messages of congratulations to him and Gloomurai. Neither of them were ready to retire for the night, but there was nothing in particular they wanted to do in the game, so they moved over to private messages on Magicam.

gloomurai: okay that was actually kinda fun

gloomurai: im glad i let my bro talk us into doing a whole ceremony

muscle.red: Indeed, perhaps we should do more events like that with the guild?

gloomurai: do gotta wonder what all the congratz were about tho

gloomurai: sure getting an exclusive cosmetic is cool but that was a bit much lol

gloomurai: my mentions have been blowing up too

gloomurai: and how broken is the forever promise that everyone thinks we need so much luck??

muscle.red: Oh, I looked at the comments on your last post and it seemed there'd been some confusion and people thought we were engaged outside of the game. Perhaps that misunderstanding reached the guild?

gloomurai: what

Lilia was surprised that Gloomurai hadn't noticed. Perhaps the flood of notifications had prevented him from reading any of the messages particularly closely. He screenshotted one that seemed most obvious and sent it to them.

gloomurai: wow ok lol

gloomurai: where did they even get that idea?

gloomurai: even putting aside that im p sure u already have a family y would u wanna marry me

muscle.red: Oh, I don't know, perhaps because we get along so well? You hardly spend any time with the rest of the guild outside of raids and the like, it makes sense they'd assume we must have some form of relationship outside of gaming to spend so much time together. Not to mention how charming you can be! I wouldn't be surprised if there's someone waiting to sweep you away, wherever you are.

gloomurai: anosnet u cant just say that

Gloomurai did not keysmash often, since his preferred keyboard layout rendered the result unrecognizable, but it was always a delight to see him get so flustered he went for it anyway. Lilia considered pushing further, perhaps mentioning that while he did have a family that did not mean he had a spouse, but that might be too far, and invite Gloomurai too close. It would be better to change the subject.

muscle.red: By the way, I finished listening to the Premo album my acquaintance gave me. I can see why you both wanted to share this with me, I loved it.

gloomurai: ikr?? all the songs were individually good and the theme of cherishing what you have because your thread will inevitably be cut tied them all together really well

gloomurai: that fic i mentioned im writing is actually partly inspired by this album

gloomurai: i finished another chapter of it btw, do you have time to beta it?

Lilia agreed, and Gloomurai sent them the chapter. After he finished marking up the grammar and sent back his thoughts, the conversation turned to an upcoming update in the game, and then to some programming projects Gloomurai was working on. One of them was apparently some sort of game with different types of levels.

gloomurai: yeah theres gonna be a level where you have to light a campfire while fighting off the forest fairies that try to stop you

muscle.red: Can't you talk things out with the fairies? After all, I'm sure they're only worried about their forest, surely you could explain how you're being careful not to let the fire spread.

gloomurai: thatd be nice but how would they even communicate?

gloomurai: no one except the tiny fairies can speak or understand their language

muscle.red: Oh there's actually a magitool for that. It's called a translation bell, and it's mostly used in mixed gatherings of larger and smaller fae, such as the Fairy Gala.

gloomurai: wow u rlly know everything! next ull say uve been to one of those on ur travels

muscle.red: Oh, you're making me blush! Alas, I am not someone the denizens of Fairyland would want at one of their most important celebrations.

gloomurai: oh yeah they rlly dont like humans huh

muscle.red: Let's go with that.

gloomurai: anyway i guess i could work that in somehow? like, if u get the special item in a previous level then u can skip the challenge in this one

They continued to talk about this and that until eventually Lilia glanced at the clock and realized he had been sitting at his computer for nearly eight hours. His back was going to murder him when he got up for school (which would be in about four more hours). Reluctantly, he bid Gloomurai good night and toppled into bed, smiling for a reason he couldn't quite name.

Chapter End Notes

Note from Past Me:
Idia uses a Dvorak keyboard, based on his dorm card.

Note from Present Me:
This is the last chapter written as of today, June 2, 2026. I will update here at the same

time as I update the fic on ao3, whenever that happens to be (I am juggling so many writing projects right now, lol)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!