

### Chapter 3: Employment Opportunities

“Yeah, you’re dressed like a boy!” a greenskinned woman with tusks -- definitely an orc -- grunted at Jack. “You’re lucky the gatekeeper didn’t throw a fit at you.”

“Awwh! Don’t worry, I can help you get dressed!” A catgirl said as she rushed forward and wrapped herself around Jack, eagerly nuzzling against his shoulder. “We can make you so purrrretty!”

“Pfft, you’re too small, pipsqueak.” An amazon in a frilly skirt and a midriff baring blouse that showed her abs towered over the catgirl and reached forward to pick her up by the back of her dress. The catgirl flailed uselessly and pouted. “I might have something that can fit you, though. If you’re willin’ to team up with me.”

“Oh no you don’t!” a woman with flowers for hair huffed. “You don’t get dibs on the newbie!”

“Uhm, hey, what--”

“What are you gonna do about it Pansy?” the amazon grunted.

Was that her name or an insult...?

“I think it’s my turn!” a gray skinned woman with blue hair that danced like fire called out.

“No me! I want her! I still need one more for my team!”

The girls shouted over each other, some tugged on Jack. This should have been heaven. Getting fought over by cute girls in cute outfits, all wanting him for some reason he didn’t know! It was every nerd’s fantasy!

But all he could do was squeak in terror at the idea that one of these girls was going to find out he was a guy! And then the gatekeeper would...!

“W-wait! Don’t I get a say in this!?” Jack whined.

“Shut up, you’re new, you don’t know anything!” the amazon growled.

The yelling and tugging started escalating. The catgirl jumped onto the back of the amazon and started clawing at her. The orc laughed as she held off the goblin with a hand on her forehead. Some wolf lady struggled against the plant girl. Everywhere Jack looked, the girls were flailing at each other.

“Enough!” The ground shook. Jack fell right onto his ass. All the girls froze right in place. “What do you think you’re doing!?”

Oh thank god. A voice of reason came to finally help out. A girl in what could only be described as a princess dress walked through the crowd and stood next to him. Her long, brown hair curled in fancy ringlets that probably took hours to get just perfect. The ridiculous ruffles of her dress made her look like she belonged on a cake.

“If any of you had brains even a tenth the size of your thick skulls, you’d realize that this girl is a complete dud!”

...What? Jack wasn’t sure what this girl was on about, but he knew he was being shamed.

“What? Are you blind? Nyaaa~?” the catgirl pouted.

The princess glared over at the catgirl -- still on top of the amazon -- and smiled as she shrank back. “As I was saying, this girl,” she patted Jack right on the head as if he was some lower form of life, “is a complete and utter dud. She’s got nothing. Not even a hint of magic. What you’re seeing is clearly from that other woman. You all did notice her veil, right?”

The crowd of girls started murmuring.

“I don’t--” Jack tried to speak up, but the princess just patted his head and spoke over him.

“Not one of you noticed? Ugh. Your training is going so poorly. How do you expect to be useful if you can’t even see through a veil over something *that* powerful.”

“C-Can I get up?” Jack squeaked.

“No,” the princess huffed. “I’m teaching a lesson. And don’t you dare interrupt again, or I’ll turn you into a familiar, so you can actually be useful.”

“...familiar?” Jack echoed before shutting himself up, half expecting Dama to lecture him.

“What you’re feeling from this dud is the lingering effect of an enchantment. Likely a ward. Or something.”

“You mean, you don’t know?” the plant girl giggled.

“Of course I do!” the princess huffed. “It’s--Clearly it’s a ward!”

A few of the girls giggled while they dispersed. It wasn’t long before most were just shrugging their shoulders and heading back to what they were doing before the visitors got here.

"I'm so confused," Jack pouted.

"Don't concern yourself with things above your station," the princess said with a little huff. "If you ask Lucia nicely, maybe you can be a maid for us and be useful that way."

"...I don't wanna be a maid, though..." Jack whined.

"Well. Then maybe you should have been born with some natural talent. Hrmph!" The princess stormed off. Before he knew it, Jack was pretty much alone, sitting on the grass, wondering what the hell just happened.

"Wow! That was super rude of them!" an overly cheerful voice giggled. "Are you okay? Want a hand?" The green haired elf was the only one who stuck around, and she was even so sweet as to offer a hand to help Jack up.

"Oh. Thank you, but I can get myself up," Jack said before standing up without taking the hand.

"Mm, 'kay!" she chirped. "You're probably really worried about your friend, right?"

"...yeah. I hope she's okay..." Jack looked toward the manor. "Am I allowed inside or...?"

"Well yeah, of course! I mean, you know, you might get in trouble from Lucia, but that's not too bad! She'll just make you play dolly or something for a day!" Lilah grabbed Jack's hand. "But I'll go with you and try to help out!"

"Oh." Jack felt stupid. Just "Oh." A girl was being nice to him. Really nice. And holding his hand. Her hand was so soft. And small. He shivered. Something was wrong, but he couldn't quite place it. He wanted her to let go more than anything in the world.

"You have a really beautiful name, Cece!" she chirped, happy to pronounce it as "sissy" without an ounce of awareness how much that made Jack's face turn red in a mix of humiliation and anger.

Dama picked that name on purpose, didn't she? Goddammit. God damn her. She could rot! She could go burn! That--! How dare she!

"I'm Lilah! I'm super happy to meet you!" the elf said before giving Jack a soft hug, completely suffocating his rage with sheer awkwardness for a second. "Hee! You're shy, huh? Well, don't worry! I'll help you out! Come on!"

She strengthened her grip on Jack's hand and started tugging him along. He stayed right next to her, but he couldn't help but feel like his hand was clamming up. Why was she being so nice?

Did she want something too? According to the girl dressed like a princess, he didn't have anything to offer.

Maybe it was because he was a guy. Maybe everyone would figure out that him not having magic was because he was a guy, and then he'd be caught, and then that gatekeeper lady would squish him with a giant hammer. He could already see it. He was too busy wandering around in his own head, he wasn't even paying attention where they were going. It wasn't until they turned a corner and he caught sight of a golden suit of armor that he remembered this wasn't some ordinary building.

"Wow, you're really stuck in your own head, huh?" Lilah squeezed Jack's hand. "Mm! If it's about the magic thing, if you stick around, I can try to teach you how to uncover your own magic!"

Between the portraits on the walls with next to doors and the pastel pinks, blues, greens, and yellows on the walls, he felt like he had somehow stepped into the most girly doll house in existence. He recognized some of the girls in the portraits from earlier. Maybe this was their dorms, and this is how they identified who they belonged to.

"Huh? What? My own magic?"

"Mhm!" Lilah chirped. "Everyone has their own sort of magic! Unlocking it can be super hard, but I've never met a human who didn't have some magic!"

A human.

Right.

Jack looked to Lilah's big, pointed ears. "So you're an..."

"A half-elf!" she chirped. "I'm from the Feywoods of Nohrindar!"

What? Where?

"Oh! You must be a human from a different realm, hee! Where are you from?"

"Earth," Jack said a little bluntly.

"Really? Miss Ezala is from Earth! That's so cool! The last Earthling before you was--" Lilah suddenly shushed herself. "Hee! I forgot, that was supposed to be a secret."

"Not good at keeping secrets, I take it?" Jack shifted nervous.

“Nuhuh!” She walked with Jack hand-in-hand up some stairs, around another corner, and finally to a large wooden door. Lilah didn’t bother reassuring Jack before she knocked on the door. It opened a moment later as if on its own volition.

Dama was laid out on a couch with a fresh wardrobe change. Instead of her not-quite-business-suit with the magically attached ballgown skirt, she instead was wearing a rather cute lolita-styled slip that gave her an almost doll-like mystique.

She was also entirely and utterly out of it. But even sleeping, she was still utterly gorgeous.

At her head, dotting on her with a piece of cloth, was a woman with eerily flawless skin and inky black hair. As flawless as her skin was, it was all the more noticeably off with just how pale she was, as if she’d never seen the sun in her entire life. She moved with a casual grace that immediately had the hair on the back of Jack’s neck standing.

“What a pretty thing! Still burning up so much~ Such a sweet dolly, such a beautiful dolly~” the lady cooed.

“Lady Lucia,” Lilah announced herself.

“Mm?” the woman turned around and looked between Lilah and Jack. Jack could see her smile as her eyes glanced over immediately drop into a look of disgust as she looked at Jack.

His blood froze. Whatever ward or magic or whatever Dama had placed on him was able to be seen by that girl in the princess dress. If this was the lady in charge, she could probably see right through the perfume. And given the dress code, she probably had similar opinions about men to the gatekeeper...!

“That won’t do,” she said as she stood up as if she was being lifted by strings. “No, no, no. I can’t have something so ugly in my manor. Absolutely not.”

Jack heard of the expression “if looks could kill” but he didn’t know there was a kernel of truth to it. He could feel her malice. It was like freezing water coiling around him, sucking him down into the depths, preparing to suffocate him. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t so much as breathe. All he could do was look into Lucia’s blank, violet eyes. They consumed his entire vision.

“You poor, poor thing,” Lucia gently poked Jack’s nose, breaking him out of the panic that had settled in him. “To be dressed like that! That’s not even fit for the worst of criminals! No, no, let me fix that. Let’s play, dolly. I’ll take care of you. Make you so pretty, so cute. You can get to know the other dollies. Maybe you’ll like it. And want to stay forever.”

The malice flooded back over Jack, but it was mixed with something else this time. Possessiveness. As he trembled at the sight of the 5'2" woman who probably didn't weigh 100lbs soaking wet, he finally understood, at least instinctually, what magic was.

"Lucia, control yourself!" a tiny voice called from right above Jack.

Jack tilted his head to look up and felt something jump off him. The fluttering of wings met his ears, and he found himself looking right up the skirt of the fairy from before. "We've been over this! You can't just turn people into your playthings because you want them."

"But she's so...! So deprived! Look at her! Not even any magic! And so awkward in her own body! I just want to help her. Want to... mold her..." Lucia's voice trailed off into lustful fantasizing. "...fix her. Play with her. Make her beautiful. Beautiful and perfect and obedient and happy. Always smiling... nnngh...~" A bit of drool escaped from her lips.

"Hee! You're so funny, Lady Lucia!" Lilah chirped.

Jack looked down at her hand still holding his. His knuckles were white. He had been squeezing with all his might, but she didn't so much as complain. Even now, she must have been in pain, but...

"Is Dama okay?" Jack managed to say.

"Mm. Who? Oh. Is that her name? Mm, I much prefer the one I picked for her. Isn't Aurora such a fitting name for such a sleeping beauty?" Lucia cooed and gently brushed Ezala out of her face. "So beautiful. So pretty. Deep asleep. Just like a precious dolly. I just want to... want to..." she started trembling. "Mm... I can't wait until she wakes up. I'm going to convince her to be my dolly. Just a few weeks. She should be awake in just a few weeks. I can wait til then. Just til then."

"Weeks?" Jack squeaked. "What am I going to do for weeks...?"

"You can become a delivery girl!" Lilah suggested.

"Oh. That's a great idea, Lilah! I've always loved how sweet and naive you are. Would you like to play dollies again sometime soon? You're one of my favorites, you know. Always so happy. So obedient. I don't even have to play with your mind. You're such a good dolly already..." Lucia sighed. "Mmm... I can't play with the guests, but maybe you will help me Lilah? Maybe you will be my dolly again, just to satisfy me...? Your head is already so empty, so innocent, so pure, maybe this time I will just keep you..."

"Lucia! Stop that! You have to control yourself!" Ezala flew between Lucia and Lilah.

“Thanks!” Lilah chirped.

“You’re not supposed to take that as a compliment!” Ezala flew to Lilah’s head and started pulling on her hair. “This is why you always get into trouble! This is why the messages get lost!”

“Owww! Heeey!” Lilah whine.

“You’re still some dumb rookie! Some completely empty headed ditz! There’s not a thought going through that head that isn’t bunnies or rainbows is there? This is why you don’t get to go out anymore! This is why--” she paused and looked over to Jack, then back down to Lilah, then finally to Lucia. “This is why you’re absolutely brilliant and why I love you even though you cause so many problems! Yes! This is perfect!”

“Oh! Did I do good?” Lilah chirped way too happily.

“Very good!” Ezala fluttered from Lilah’s head right to Jack’s face. “You! You can’t do any magic, right? None at all? Not even, like, a tiny, itty-bitty-bit?”

Jack shook his head. “N-no? I didn’t--until today, I didn’t even know it was real. I thought it was all just--”

“Don’t care!” Ezala interrupted. “Heehee~ Perfect. From today forward, you’re now a delivery girl for Dollihome!”

“W-wait, what? No! I have a job! And a life! I just need help getting home!”

The fairy smiled and rubbed her hands together. “Oh. Even though we’re taking care of your friend? Even though we’re offering to house you, feed you, clothe you, and shelter you, you don’t want to work? I mean, you know, we can’t tolerate that. Your friend we can take care of, I’m sure she’ll be able to pay us back, but you...” Ezala shook her head. “No one has use for a girl without a bit of magic in her. Except for me, that is.”

Jack gulped. He could see the unrestrained greed in Ezala’s eyes. Lucia might be scary, but this fairy was dangerous.

“Aaah! Understand? Good! From now on, you’re going to be going with Lilah for her deliveries! And tomorrow, you’re going to be taking something to a dragon, got it?”

“...dragon’s exist...?” Jack squeaked.