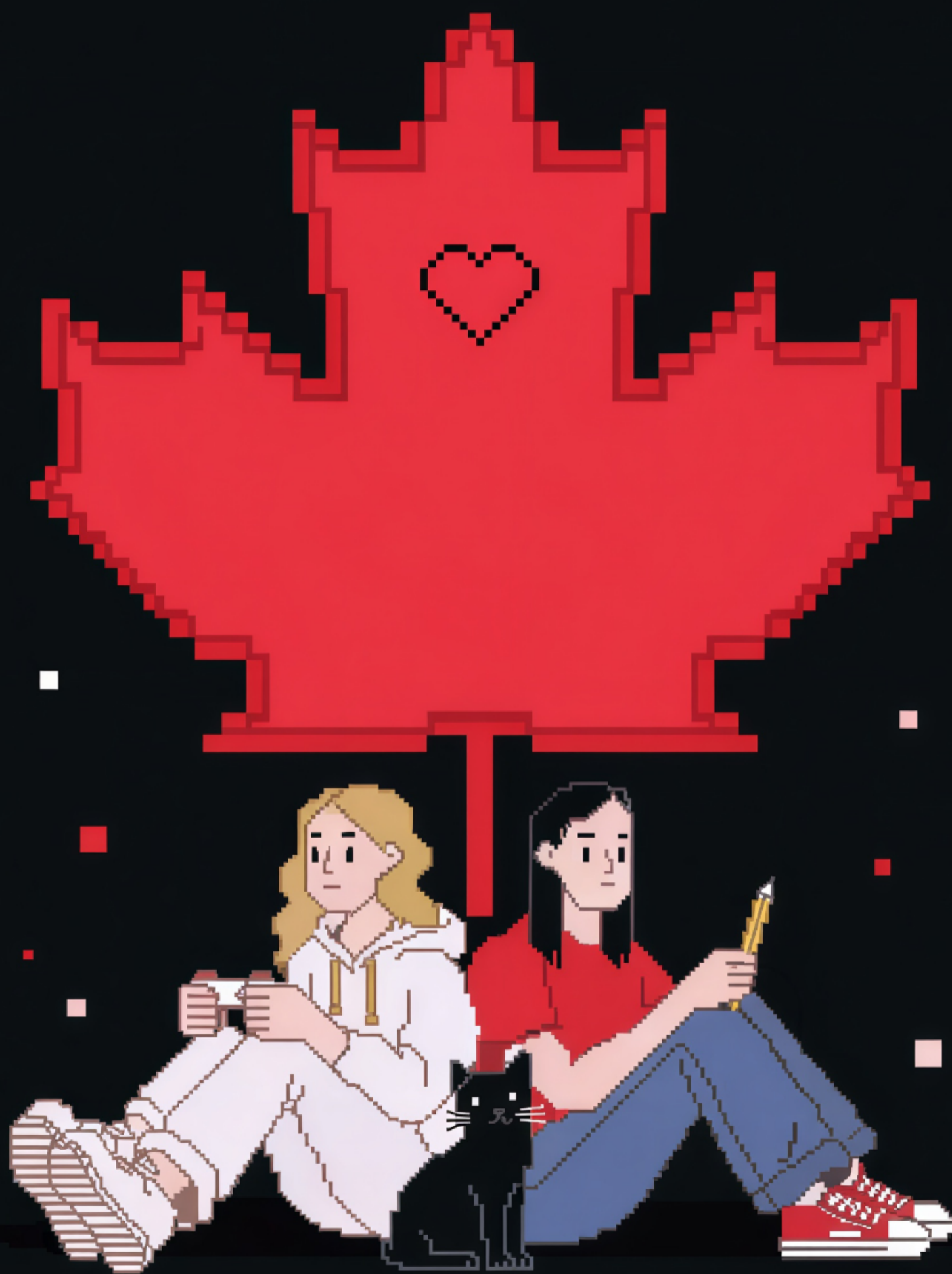


# My Canadian Girlfriend



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## My Canadian Girlfriend Part 1

The lie starts the way all of Sasha's lies start—with someone asking a question she isn't ready to answer.

They're at a work happy hour in Somerville, and her friend Anya's pissed off. She just caught Sasha grinning at her phone for the sixth time in ten minutes. "Hey! We're supposed to be bonding," she says. "Who are you texting? Not one of your gamer friends, I hope. The whole point of dragging you here is so you'll talk to actual humans for once."

"I talk to actual humans all day."

"I mean face-to-face, not on Slack or Discord or whatever you devs use to send memes." Her voice cuts through the speaker fuzz and bar din. She's relentless. "Who is it, Sash?"

"Nobody." She locks her phone. "Just a friend."

It's true. Ethan is just a friend. One who sends her memes at 2:00 a.m., remembers her favorite Hexworth dungeon boss, and, though they've never met in the flesh, always knows when she's sad, or mad, and always says the right thing at the right time in the right way.

So what if they met on an MMO? So what if he lives in a different country? So what if Sasha knows the exact sound of his laugh but not the shape of his hands? Ethan's her best friend, end of story. Also, he's a boy. Well, technically, a man. And Sasha doesn't date men. Not even the pretty ones. Especially not the ones who make her laugh so hard she chokes on her spit.

"A friend." Anya sets down her drink. "Sash—and I say this with love—"

"Oh, fuck."

"—you've been out for what, five years now? And in that time I've watched you go to work, go home, and log into that game. That's your whole rotation. If David Attenborough narrated your life, he'd say: 'Here we see the rare Sasha in her natural habitat, eating frozen dumplings, then logging into a raid.'" Her voice gets louder, brighter. "It's tragic. It's a little bit beautiful. But mostly tragic."

"I... go to the grocery store."

"Liar. You get delivery." Anya leans forward, elbows on the sticky table. "I'm serious. You did this huge, brave, life-changing thing, then you just... stopped. Like transitioning was the last item on a to-do list and now you're retired. You're twenty-seven. You should be living."

Sasha peels the label off her beer bottle in one long strip. The jukebox switches to something acoustic and terrible. "I am living. I have friends. I have you."

"You have me and a computer screen. That's not—" Anya stops herself, softening. "I'm not trying to be a bitch. But I just want you to have a person. A real, in-your-life person."

Sasha's a little drunk. And, honestly, she just wants Anya to shut the fuck up. Just for a second. Just enough space to breathe. "You know what? I do."

Anya goes still. "What?"

Sasha rolls the label between her fingers. Fuck. Shit. Goddammit. Why'd she open her mouth? She could've said anyone—her mom, a cousin, her landlord. Even a dog would have been safer! Now Anya's looking at her like she's just confessed to murder.

"Yeah. I... I've been seeing someone. She lives in Montreal."

Anya's squeal turns three heads at the bar. Her hands slam flat on the table. "*Excuse me?* Since when? What's her name? How did you meet? Why am I just hearing about this now?"

Sasha's mouth is moving. This is a problem. "Her name's—Elise. We met online. In the game, actually. About three years ago."

The first truth in thirty seconds. Everything else is load-bearing fiction.

"In the *game*?" Anya's volume is incredible. "I take back everything I said. That's adorable. What does she look like? Do you have pics?"

"She's—" Sasha thinks of Ethan on his last video call, that long dark hair, those ridiculous eyelashes. "She's pretty. Private about photos. She's shy."



She's shy. It's a Canadian thing."

"Shy." Anya says it like the most endearing thing she's ever heard. "A shy, pretty Canadian gamer girlfriend. I really need to meet this woman."

"She lives in Montreal."

"So? Montreal's not far. Three hours? Four? Babe, that's practically next door."

The beer label is in pieces on the table. Sasha looks at her phone. She has four unread texts from Ethan, the most recent is a voice memo labeled "listen to this with headphones, it's the dungeon boss's theme slowed down and it's UNHINGED." She finishes her drink.

"What's her last name?" Anya asks, already reaching for her phone. "I'm going to Insta-stalk her."

"She's not on Instagram."

"TikTok?"

Sasha looks Anya dead in the eye. "She doesn't have any social media. She's an artist, and she's really... intentional about her digital footprint. She doesn't want her stuff to be scraped by AI."

That part, at least, is also true. Ethan is an artist—a really good one. He makes Sasha icon packs for her phone, sends her memes that are

basically custom commissions. Once he drew his Hexworth character, the armor so detailed it looked like it belonged in a movie trailer. But he refuses to use anything but Discord and encrypted email. In three years he's never so much as liked a skeet. Sasha's never known anyone more allergic to being perceived.

"No social media." Anya lowers her phone. "I love her. Okay, that's premature. But, like, this is great. You made my night. When are you going to see her?"

Sasha opens her mouth and finds she doesn't have an answer. She's never considered seeing Ethan in person, because why would she? They're perfect as they are—as avatars, voices, video chats, and a thread of private memes. Meeting in person would break the spell, like saying your wishes out loud.

So she just says, "Pretty soon."

That would be the end of it. Anya's mind flits from topic to topic like a goddamn hummingbird. That would be the absolute end of it.

It is not the end of it.

Anya tells Jen before they've paid the check. Jen, who never raises her voice or forgets a thing you say, sips her elderflower mule and nods, as if she'd heard it from the source. That night, Sasha goes home, feeds her lizard, and finds a new group chat waiting for her.

## SASHA'S CANADIAN BAE 🇨🇦🍁🔥

Anya has added Jen and Rosa and has sent eleven messages in the span of three minutes.

Anya: OKAY so

Anya: sasha has been secretly dating someone

Anya: her name is ELISE

Anya: she lives in MONTREAL

Anya: she is SHY and PRETTY and has NO SOCIAL MEDIA

Anya: she is an ARTIST

Anya: and they met IN A VIDEO GAME

Anya: which is the most on-brand thing sasha has ever done

Anya: the way she was smiling at her phone all night

Anya: GIRLS

Anya: GIRLS she is in LOVE

Sasha reads this lying nearly face-down on her couch.

Anya: she's been hiding this from us!!!

Rosa: omg wait like actually in love??

Anya: did you SEE her face when she was texting??

Jen: Yes. She is always on her phone. Even at work. I noticed that weeks ago.

Anya: JEN!!!

Sasha rolls over. Stares at the ceiling. Her apartment is dark except for the blue glow of her monitor across the room, where Hexworth Online is paused mid-loading screen, Luminara's face frozen mid-spell in the static glow.

She picks up her phone and opens her texts. Ethan's last message came in forty minutes ago.

Ethan: okay the dungeon boss theme thing was a bad idea I've been listening to it for an hour and now I feel insane. How do you feel about cheese for dinner?

Sasha types back: only if it's the fancy kind

Ethan: define fancy

Sasha: you know. fancy. like it has a name that isn't "cheddar"

Ethan: I have a comté and a very okay brie

Sasha: wow you really are french

Ethan: How dare you. 🤔 Anyway how was the human bonding thing?

Sasha wants to hear his voice. She taps the call button before her brain can veto it. The Discord ringtone is a sound she could recognize in her sleep. It rings once. Twice. Three times. She almost hangs up.

Ethan answers. "Hey." His voice is scratchy—like he's lying down—but nice. Kinda quiet. Soft. "You're back home?"

"Yeah." Does she sound okay? Even four years of voice training and she still worries. She listens for the weird rasp at the edge of her pitch, the stutter. The part that gives her away. But Ethan doesn't flinch. He never does.

He yawns. "You survive your happy hour?"

She picks at a hangnail. "Barely. I don't get people's obsession with other people's shit. Like, leave me alone. So what if I go to work, come home, and play video games. I mean, my *job* is video games! Do we want games to be made by people who don't play them? That's how you end up with lootboxes and unskippable cutscenes."

Ethan laughs, low and bright. "Unskippable cutscenes are a hate crime."

"Thank you. See, you get it."

He goes quiet. She hears him breathing, like he's curled up on his side. She imagines his hair half in his face, the way it always looks on video.

"Wanna do a raid?" he says.

"Could we? You're tired."

"I'm always tired. Queue us up."

Sasha launches the game. The monitor's blue haze erases the rest of her living room. Luminara—Ethan's avatar—waits for her just inside the city gates, sword slung over one shoulder, boots knee-high and impractical. And here comes Korrath, Sasha's Hexblade, plate armor and all, clunking into frame beside her like a tank that wandered into a



poetry reading.

“Greetings,” Ethan says in her ear, like always.

Sasha doesn’t answer immediately. She’s looking at Luminara. She does this every time, this half-second recalibration. Luminara is tall, dark-haired, the amber robe catching the game’s perpetual golden light. Ethan spent hours in the character creator on that face and it shows—it’s specific in a way that most player characters aren’t. High cheekbones, dark eyes, a beauty mark near the left eye that Sasha is pretty sure Ethan added manually using the most zoomed-in slider available. She looks like a real person. Like someone you’d see on a rain-wet street and turn around to look at twice.

“You changed her armor,” Sasha says.

“New glamour. Got the constellation set from the seasonal vendor. Took me forty-five minutes to get the gloves. Vendors are fucking thieves.”

Sasha snorts. “Worth it. Luminara looks like she could kick my ass and then read my tarot.”

“Is that a thing you want?”

Sasha zooms out. The new set is dark fabric threaded with gold, like someone stitched a star map into a coat. It’s beautiful. She’s not going

to say that out loud.

“The new armor is very you,” she says instead.

“Is it? I thought the old one was more me.”

“The old one was green. Luminara doesn’t look good in green.”

A pause. “...No,” he says. “She doesn’t.”

They queue into the raid. Three hours pass the way they always do—too fast, punctuated by wipes and arguments about strategy and Ethan doing something reckless that somehow works and Sasha yelling at him about it in the exact tone of someone who isn’t actually mad. At some point she eats the leftover rice from her fridge standing up at the counter without logging off. At some point he puts music on—something instrumental, French, low.

At 2:47 AM Sasha’s eyes are burning and she has a 9:30 standup and she hasn’t thought about the group chat in four hours.

“We should stop,” Ethan says. He sounds half-asleep.

“Yeah.”

Neither of them logs off.

Luminara stands at the edge of a cliff in the Ashenveil zone, looking out at the game’s painted dark sky. It’s an idle animation Sasha’s seen a hundred times—the character just standing there, cape moving in digital wind, stars overhead. Ethan probably didn’t even set it up on purpose. He’s probably already horizontal, phone on his chest, eyes closed.

“Ethan.”

“Mm.”

“Go to sleep.”

“You first.”

Sasha looks at the screen. At Luminara and the stars.

“Goodnight,” she says.

“Night, Sash.”

The call ends. The computer hums. She logs off, closes the laptop, and lies in the dark for a while before her brain finally lets her sleep. The group chat has thirty-six new messages. She doesn’t read them

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Six months later, Sasha is half-asleep in a product roadmap meeting when the room suddenly goes electric. Marketing’s announcing a company “field trip”—three days in Montreal for a gaming expo. She blinks, slow, like she misheard. Across the table, Anya locks eyes with her, mouth already curling into a wolfish grin.

The meeting ends. Sasha closes her laptop and Anya is already there, leaning against the table with her arms crossed, waiting. “On a scale of one to ten, how excited are you to introduce your hot Canadian girlfriend to the whole team?” Anya’s voice is bright, already giddy, like she’s tasted blood.

“She’s not coming to the expo. She’s got work.”

“No.”

“No?”

“Sasha, I’m your best friend. There’s no fucking way in this universe—in this *multiverse*—you’re going to Montreal and not seeing her.” Anya grins, predatory. “I will drag you to her front door myself. I’ll leave a trail of poutine straight to you. Whatever it takes, I’ll do it. I’ll kidnap you. I’ll bring you to her like a sacrificial lamb.”

Sasha shoves her laptop into her backpack. “That’s a wild threat to make in a work environment.”

“It’s not a threat, it’s a promise. Oh god, this is exciting! I’ll look up the nice restaurants we can all go to. Or maybe, like, a cutesy café? Is that more your vibe? We need something romantic but not too romantic. I’m thinking candles. I’m thinking croissants. Does that sound gay enough?”

*Shit, shit, shit, why why why.* Sasha grips the table edge. The laminate is tacky under her palms. “I told you, she’s shy.”

“I don’t care if she’s Banksy or the goddamn Zodiac killer. I want to meet her.”

Sasha’s mouth tastes like battery acid. She wipes her palms on her jeans. “I just don’t think she’d want a big group thing. She gets nervous.”

“Listen, I get it. I mean, I don’t get it. But I understand. Besides, you two probably want to hole up and, you know…” Anya grins. “Hole up.”

“Jesus. I should report you to HR.”

“Do it.” Anya’s eyes are wild. “I want them to know how hard I work for your happiness. Look, all we’re asking for is one dinner.”

“We!?”

“Jen and Rosa,” Anya says. “We’re all going. Don’t try to get out of it. I already texted the group.”

Sasha groans. “You’re a nightmare.”

Anya only grins wider, the whites of her eyes catching the overhead lights. “I know. God, this is going to be so fun.”

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Sasha waits until she’s in the bathroom, second stall from the left, before she opens Discord. Her thumbs hover. She watches the cursor blink in the text field for a full thirty seconds before she switches to voice call.

It rings four times. Background noise when he picks up—steam wand, someone calling out an order.

“Hey.” Muffled. “Two seconds.”

She waits. The espresso noise cuts out. A door.

“Okay. What happened?”

“Why do you assume something happened?”

“You never call during the day.”



She stares at the back of the stall door. Someone has written “call your mom” in Sharpie above the toilet paper dispenser. Good advice. “I need to tell you something and you can’t be weird about it.”

“That’s a terrible opening.”

“I know. Just—okay. So. You know how Anya was bothering me about texting during happy hour back in November?”

“Uh... I do not specifically recall that, but okay. Go on.”

Sasha braces both hands on her knees. The plastic toilet seat is digging into her thigh. “So, she was bugging me about who I was texting, like, all night. And I didn’t want to get into it, so I told her...” She stops. Peels the edge of her thumbnail with her teeth. “I said I was seeing someone. A girl. From Montreal.”

A pause. “Okay.”

“And then she asked questions. A lot of questions. And I just—I kept answering them. And I used—” She closes her eyes. “I used real details. Like, actually real ones.”

“What kind of real details.”

“Like. That she’s an artist. And that she’s funny. And that she doesn’t use social media. And that we met in Hexworth three years ago.”

Nothing from his end.

“Ethan.” Still nothing. She wipes a clammy palm on her jeans. “You there? I... I named her Elise.”

The silence goes on long enough that she pulls the phone away from her ear to check that the call is still connected. It is. Thirty-one seconds.

“You told your friends,” he says finally, “that you have a Canadian girlfriend.”

“Yes.”

“Who is an artist.”

“Yep.”

“Who you met in Hexworth.”

“Correct.”

“And her name is Elise.”

“Yeah.”

“And this is based on...?”

Sasha says nothing.

“Sasha.”

“You.”

Another silence. Shorter this time. “Me.”

“It just—it came out. I wasn’t planning it. Anya was right there and she had this look on her face and I said the first true thing I could think of and then I couldn’t stop.”

“How long ago was this.”

“November, I think.”

“It’s April,” he says.

“I know.”

“That’s six months.”

“I... yeah... It is.”

He exhales, long and slow. She hears him sit down—the particular creak she recognizes as his kitchen chair. “Do they think we’re, like. Actually together.”

“They think we’ve been long-distance dating for six months, yes.”

“And you’ve been—what, telling them things? About this relationship?”

“Mostly just confirming things they assumed. I never—I didn’t make up elaborate stuff. I just didn’t correct them. When they said she sounded sweet I said yeah. When Anya said she must really like me because of how much we text I said.” She stops. “Yeah.”

“Because of how much we text.”

“Ethan.”

“No, I just want to make sure I understand the full picture.” His voice is completely neutral, which is somehow worse than if he were angry. “Your friends think you have a girlfriend named Elise who you met in a video game and who lives in Montreal and who texts you constantly and who is... me.”

“In broad strokes.”

She hears him get up. His footsteps cross the apartment—she can map it, knows the layout from every video call. Kitchen to living room. Past the easel. “Okay. So why are you telling me now? After six months of not telling me?”

“My company is sending us to Montreal in six weeks. For a gaming expo.” Nothing. “And Anya has already texted the group chat.” Nothing. “Ethan...”

“You are *not* about to say what I think you’re about to say.”

Sasha thunks her head against the stall wall. “Please. Please, please, please. I need you to be my girlfriend for one night.” There’s a clatter. Mug hitting counter, maybe.

“You want me to be Elise.”

“I know how crazy—”

“Are you high?” Ethan says. “Like, I know drugs scare the shit out of you, but this sounds like a top-shelf edible hallucination.”

Sasha closes her eyes. The bathroom light is migraine-bright. Her knee won’t stop bouncing. “I’m not high. I’m desperate.”

“No. Tell them Elise fell in front of a bus. Or got kidnapped. Or joined a cult.”

“They’ll want to video call. Or to meet her anyway. Anya’s like a dog with a bone.” Sasha braces her arm against the metal stall. “If I say Elise is busy, they’ll show up at her place. I sorta kinda already gave them your address.”

“They know where I live?”

“I had to!” She bites off the words, too loud for a work bathroom. “It was the only way to get Anya to shut up about it. She wanted proof Elise was real. I panicked. I sent her a screenshot of your building from Google Maps and I said that was where she lived. I gave them the street. I gave them the floor. I said you had a cat named Jupiter and that you liked the bakery downstairs.” Her voice echoes off the tile. “I made it really, really real.”

“That all is really real.”

“I know.”

“Except the part where I’m a girl.”

“Right.”

“And that we’re *dating!*”

“Yeah.”

“Sash...” Ethan just sounds sad now, which makes her want to crawl right through the toilet paper holder and vanish. She’d rather he be angry. Or weirded out. But he’s just quiet. Maybe he’s picturing her at the bar, lying through her teeth, or in her bathroom now, forehead pressed to the stall like she’s in a hostage situation. It doesn’t matter. She did this. She made this all up. Why? Why the fuck does she care what Anya or Jen or Rosa think? Why isn’t she just a normal person who lies about easy things, like her salary or how often she flosses?

Maybe because this isn’t just a lie. It’s also the thing she wants most in the world. A person who knows her, even the weird parts. Who sends



her the custom memes and four-minute voice notes. A person she can text about nothing for hours and never run out of content or get bored. Someone who makes the day move faster and the nights less lonely. Someone who never expects her to be easier, or quieter, or more normal. Someone who'll stay on the call, even after the raid ends. Someone who always picks up.

She wipes her eyes. "You hate me."

"I don't. I just..." He sighs. "You could've told me."

"That's the whole problem. I can't tell anyone anything."

"You tell me things."

"Yeah," she says. "I guess I do. Look, I know this is a little crazy—"

He snorts. "A little?"

"It's one night—"

"Sasha, I'm a man."

"Sure, but you're the prettiest man I've ever—"

"Do not finish that sentence as if it helps your case."

She drops her forehead against the stall door again. If she keeps that up, maybe she can undo whatever brain damage led to this disaster. "Please. I'll do anything. I'll carry you through every raid tier for a year. I'll never complain about your healing rotations again—"

“You complain about my healing rotations because *you* run into AOE on purpose.”

“I run into AOE because I’m brave. Ethan. Please. It’s one dinner. You don’t even have to do anything, just—”

“Just be your fake girlfriend.”

“Just be present. And female-presenting. And answer to Elise when—”

“I’m hanging up.”

“I’ll pay for everything. I’ll buy whatever clothes you need, I’ll fly up early to help you get ready—”

“Get ready.” He says it like he’s testing the words. “You mean...”

“I mean I’ll help. Like, with... the look. If you need help.”

She waits for him to hang up. Instead, there’s a soft exhale, throatier than usual. Like he’s run out of air. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re flying up early—”

“Right, I already said—”

“—and we do a beta test.”

Sasha waits, breath held. Her knee is bouncing so hard the whole stall shakes. “A beta test.”

“Yeah. You fly up, like, two days before your friends. We see if I can even pull this off. If it’s terrible—which it will be—you swear on Korrath that you’ll tell your friends you broke up with Elise because she slept with a hockey player or whatever.”

“Elise wouldn’t do that.”

“I swear to the Hexlord that if you argue about the moral purity of your fake girlfriend, I will log off and move to the Yukon.”

She almost laughs. The stall wall is cold under her forehead, but the panic’s receding, replaced by something rawer. Familiar. Ethan is too good at this. Too good at being the only person who shows up. No matter what she does. No matter how stupid.

“You don’t have to do this,” she says. “I mean, I know it’s a lot. Completely bonkers. If you want to block my number and never talk to me again, I understand.”

“Hey. This is insane, but I’d never want that for you.” His voice is softer than she’s ever heard him. “You’re my best friend. If you need me to do this, I’ll do it. But...”

“Yeah?”

“Well, in order to keep my dignity, I think I deserve a little... compensation.”

Sasha’s first instinct is panic. She’s not sure what Ethan will name as his price. There’s a beat of silence, and she’s gripping her phone so hard her wrist aches.

Ethan’s voice returns, steady and light: “Your Legendary mount drop from last season’s event. You know the one.”

This time she does laugh. “The Hexwurm? *That’s* your price?”

“The *gold* Hexwurm. And I want it on my main, not an alt.”

“You’re a monster,” she says, smiling.



“Yeah, but I’m your monster.”

And for some reason that makes absolutely no sense considering her sexuality and Ethan's gender, her face gets hot and her heart rate spikes like she's just run into AOE on purpose.

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She lands on a Thursday. Montreal is overcast, the sky the color of lint. Ethan meets her at the airport in battered jeans and a navy windbreaker; hair loose, posture already defensive. He holds a sign that says “HEXWORTH RAID LEADER” which he has illustrated with a little chibi version of her Hexblade, sword raised, eyes the size of dimes.

It’s dumb. It’s so dumb. She can’t stop grinning.

Ethan looks up, sees her, and the edges of his mouth twitch. Not a full smile—she’s not sure she has ever seen him fully grin—but he’s happy to see her. She can tell. He tucks a loose strand of hair behind his ear and lifts the sign a little higher, like maybe she’s in danger of missing it. His hands are shaking. Probably he’s just cold.

Sasha wants to drop her backpack, run over, and hug him, but she’s not sure if the rules are different in person. It’s one thing to say you love

someone's brain at three in the morning over Discord; it's another to see their hands, their real face, the way they hold themselves, small and braced for impact.

She should say something cute. What would be cute? It has to be effortless and chill, like it's totally normal to travel four hundred miles to meet your best friend for the first time and immediately ask him to cross-dress for your reputation's sake.

"Hey," she says.

*Dumb, dumb, dumb. You are the dumbest person alive. Why did you say "hey?" Hey!? That's what you say to the random dude at Dunkin, not your best friend. Not the person who's been on call every night for the last two years. Not the person about to let you upend their entire identity for the sake of a stupid lie.*

Ethan blinks at her. The sign wobbles in his hands. "Hey yourself."

Sasha watches the way he shifts his weight, left to right and back again, never quite settled. His lashes are as ridiculous as she remembers. His windbreaker is too big and the sleeves are shredded at the cuffs. There's a stain on the thigh of his jeans, paint maybe, something blue.

He clears his throat. "Do you want to get out of here? The arrivals lounge is a nightmare."

"God, yes." She shoulders her bag. "Lead the way, Raid Leader."

The Uber is silent except for the driver's radio, some pop song Sasha doesn't know. Is that what being old feels like? She's only twenty-seven, but the song isn't even in English, it's some thin autotuned French, and every drumbeat shakes the Uber's backseat. The city out the window is gray, smeared with rain, towers and old drab brick. She keeps looking sideways at Ethan. Up close, in super high-resolution 3D, his face is even prettier. The kind of pretty that makes her stomach weird and jumpy, which is not supposed to happen with boys.

Fuck, is she bi? God, that would be so annoying. Sasha tries to say something normal. She can be normal, can't she? "So, uh. How's the weather up here?"

He looks at her. Then out the window. "Mostly gray. Sometimes it rains for, like, three minutes, just to fuck with you."

She nods. "Boston's like that, too. But with more rats."

"We got rats."

"Of unusual size?"

"Naturally."

Another silence. He's biting his thumbnail, eyes on the city lights. She wants to reach over and pull his hand away, but that would be a move, and moves aren't allowed. Not yet.

The car drops them in front of a narrow brick building with a battered green door. Ethan unlocks it, pushes through, and leads her up two flights of stairs, the steps creaking under their feet. His apartment smells like coffee and old books. It's nice. Most boys have apartments

that smell like wet laundry or the inside of an empty fridge. Ethan's place is small but somehow full. Every shelf jammed tight with paperbacks, the covers battered at the corners, spines broken from rereads. The windowsill is crowded with succulents and a single, defiant orchid. A cat watches her from the arm of the sofa. Black, with a white streak on the forehead like he's been anointed. He blinks at her, slow, then turns his face away. Typical.

Ethan puts down her bag by the door. "Jupiter, be nice." He sounds embarrassed, like the cat's reaction reflects on him personally.

Sasha feels awkward, too. She never learned the etiquette for meeting your best friend offline for the first time. She wants to say something clever, but she is not clever, so instead she stands in the middle of the room, hands in jacket pockets, like she's at an open house and not sure if she can sit. The walls are gray, the couch is green corduroy, and the table is covered in sketches. Loose paper everywhere. Most of them are girls. One has a sword twice her height, another is wrapped in stars, a beauty mark under her left eye. Luminara, obviously.

Ethan sees her looking. He scoops the papers into a stack, face pink. "I was working."

"Sorry, I like them." She means it. The art is better in person. Shading, color, lines so careful they look almost like calligraphy.

He lets out a deep sigh. "Sash, can we just get it over with?"

She shakes her head. "Um, what is 'it' in this context?"

"I want to be honest with you. You know I'm honest. I've been having anxiety shits for three days about this. So let's just get it over with." He doesn't meet her eyes. Just keeps stacking the sketches, pressing the edges straight, over and over.

Sasha sits on the arm of the couch. There's a spring digging into her leg, but the pain is good. Wakes her up. She's jetlagged, or maybe just sleep-deprived, but either way she feels unreal. Like she's watching this from behind glass.

"Okay," she says, softer. "Beta test."

Ethan makes a face. "Don't call it that."

"*You* called it that."

"I know, but it's a bad idea. Now it makes me think of 'beta' as in, like, beta male. You know, like those psycho YouTube guys who think oat milk makes you less of a man." Ethan looks at her. "Which, for the record, I drink exclusively. But it's not because I'm... Look, I'm just lactose intolerant. Which is fine, actually. It's normal." Ethan's voice gets thinner with every word. "I don't even miss real milk. I don't care what anyone says."

This is a nose dive. They are going down in flames and Ethan's going to eject out the canopy and leave her to crash and burn alone. She can't blame him. She'd leave herself too.

Sasha clears her throat. "Okay."

"I'm sorry this is so weird. Honestly, half the reason I agreed to this



fucked-up plan is because I wanted to see you. In person, I mean. Not just through a screen.” Ethan’s voice cracks. “But now I’m really nervous about the dinner.”

“I’m going to make you look good.” Sasha stands. Her knees pop. She’s been traveling for six hours and her back is killing her, but she tries for a heroic pose. “I’ve successfully girlbossed my own face since 2022. I can definitely do yours. And you’re, like, way prettier than I was before my surgery.”

He flinches. “You keep saying that like it’s a compliment.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No. Hell, Sash, we’ve talked about this. You’ve told me how shitty people were in school. Guys who thought you were a gay boy, who called you a fag because of how you walked and talked.”

Sasha blinks, not understanding. “Yeah, that sucked.”

“Sasha.” He says her name like a period. “You know they called me that too, right?”

She stops.

He’s not looking at her. He’s looking at the stack of sketches, pressing the corner of the top page with his thumb, over and over, like he’s trying to leave a mark. “In school. Not for the same reason as you,

but... the same word. Because I was too pretty. Because my hair was too long and I wouldn't cut it. Because I cried once in eighth grade when someone stepped on my sketchbook and that was, apparently, the funniest thing that had ever happened." He says it all very evenly. Like he's read it off a paper he's memorized. "So when you say I'm 'prettier than you were before,' I know you mean it nice. But it doesn't feel nice."

The radiator clicks. Jupiter has moved to the windowsill and is watching the street below with professional detachment.

"Oh, shit," Sasha says. "I'm sorry." She sits with her hands folded, her jaw clenched so hard it aches. There's a tightness at the back of her throat. She wants to fix it, but she's never been good at this part.

Ethan's not looking at her. He's still lining up the edges of the sketches, over and over, like they'll fall apart if he stops.

"I didn't mean it like that," Sasha tries again. "You know I didn't."

"I know," he says. Still quiet. "It's fine."

Sasha watches his hands. They're slim, delicate, ink-stained at the side of his pinky. For a second she remembers Luminara's hands, the way he drew them, always elegant, always in motion, like he'd studied them in a mirror for hours. Maybe he did.

"I was a mess in high school," Sasha says. "Really. You wouldn't have wanted to know me."

Ethan shrugs. "I would've gotten it."

He means it. Sasha can feel the truth of it, like a cold glass pressed against her skin. She tries to picture Ethan at sixteen. Same hair. Same hands. Same pretty face.

"Okay," she says. "Okay, yeah, we're not doing this. I'm an idiot, and I'm selfish, and because of that, I didn't realize that I was, like, dancing through a minefield of your feelings, and I just stomped on one. I'm the worst."

Ethan shrugs. "You're not the worst."

"Yeah, but I am. I'm the fucking worst." Her hands keep twisting in her lap. She can't stop. "I'm sorry. I never even thought about, like, what it would be like for you. Or if this would be hard for you. I just needed to fix my own shit and I threw you into it. I didn't even ask."

"You're asking now," he says, so gently it makes her want to die.

The radiator clicks again. The only other sound is Jupiter's little rumbling snore, and the rain tapping the window, slow and steady. Sasha keeps her eyes on the carpet. There's a coffee spill on the edge, ringed like a solar eclipse. She could stare at it forever. "Don't worry. We'll spend the next couple of days just hanging out. Okay? It'll be fun. I'll tell them we broke up. I'll make up anything. I'll say Elise got a job in, like, Chile. Or she's off the grid. I'll be so normal about it. You won't have to do anything."

Ethan shakes his head slowly, like he's rebooting. Maybe he is. He looks at Sasha for the first time in minutes, and there's nothing mean in his face. Just a kind of tiredness. Maybe relief. "No. I want to try. I want to see if I can do this. For you."



Sasha bites the inside of her cheek. There's a warm, sick feeling in her gut, the kind she gets before a standup when she's behind on her tickets and can't remember what she said last week. "You're sure?"

"Yeah. And, I mean, if I turn out prettier than you, that'll be one more thing I'm better at than you," he says, which is such a stupid thing to say that Sasha laughs before she can stop herself, loud and undignified, and Ethan's mouth finally does the full thing, the real smile, and it's—

It's a lot. She looks away.

"Okay," she says. "Tomorrow we go hard. Full transformation montage."

"Cool. I get to pick the music."

"Deal."

They order Thai because Ethan's fridge contains exactly one comté, more "very okay" brie, and expired cornichons. "I'm an artist," he says, scrolling through the delivery app. "We suffer for our craft. Also, I forgot to go to the store."

They eat on the floor because the table is covered in pencil sketches Ethan won't move. "They're drying," he says, which makes no sense, but Sasha doesn't push it. She's too tired. The pad thai is good, the floor is

warm, and Jupiter has wedged himself between them like a furry, judgmental chaperone.

“I still can’t believe you gave them my street address,” Ethan says, chopsticks in his mouth.

“I was under duress.”

“You were at brunch.”

“Anya’s brunches *are* duress. She does this thing with mimosas where she just keeps pouring until you confess something. She should work for the CIA. She’d have world peace inside a week. Or World War Three.”

Ethan laughs and leans back against the couch, stretches his legs out, ankles crossed, and for a second he looks exactly like he sounds on call—loose, easy, like the world is a joke he’s in on. “For the record,” he says, “if your friends google my building, the reviews are terrible. Someone called the elevator a death trap, and they’re not wrong.”

Sasha snorts. “Elise has character. She doesn’t need a nice building.”

“Elise sounds pretty pretentious,” he smiles. “Like, would you even date a girl this pretentious? Or would you just, like, worship her from afar and make shrine art.”

Sasha throws a pad thai noodle at him. “Eat your food.”

He grins, mouth crooked. “She’d probably make me eat it with a fork and knife.”

“That’s the French way.”

She laughs. This is the thing about Ethan. He’s funniest when he’s not trying, when the jokes come sideways out of something real, and every single one of them is an invitation. Laugh with me. Stay here. Don’t go.

Jupiter climbs into Sasha’s lap. She scratches behind his ears and he purrs, low and rattling, like a small engine.

“Hey,” Ethan says. He’s leaning forward, reaching past her for the last spring roll, and his hair swings into his face. “I have something. Hang on.” He gets up, disappears into his room, and comes back holding a smaller, more battered sketchbook, its cover soft from handling.

He sits back down. Flips past pages she isn’t supposed to see—she catches flashes of color, a girl in armor, a hand study, something with wings—and then stops. Holds it out.

It’s Korrath. Not the game version with blocky plate armor and a glowing sword. It’s her. Sasha’s jaw, Sasha’s eyes, the exact slope of her nose. The scar on her chin from when she was twelve and tripped into a mailbox. Korrath’s armor, but Sasha’s face, rendered in colored pencil so careful it looks like it took days. She’s standing on the Ashenveil cliff, the one with the painted sky—looking out at something the viewer can’t see, cape in the wind, sword at rest. She looks brave. She looks like someone worth drawing.

Sasha stares at it. Her mouth opens but nothing useful comes out.

“It’s not done,” Ethan says. He’s already back to eating, like he’s handed her a napkin and not a grenade. “The gauntlets are wrong. I couldn’t get the filigree right, there’s like nine hundred tiny lines and my hand was cramping, so.”

“When did you—”

“Couple months ago. February, maybe? You were having that shit week at work and you said you felt like a fake and I thought—” He shrugs. “I don’t know. I just wanted to draw you the way I see you.”

Jupiter purrs. The radiator clicks. Sasha looks at the drawing and the drawing looks back. She thinks, very clearly, with the kind of brutal simplicity that only happens when you’re too tired to lie to yourself: *I am so fucked.*

“The gauntlets are amazing,” she says.

“They’re not.”

“Ethan. They’re *amazing.*”

He smiles. Not the half-thing, not the mouth-twitch. The real one. The one she’s only ever heard through a headset, late at night, when she’s said something that caught him off guard.

“Okay,” he says. “They’re fine.”

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A few hours sleep. A breakfast of burnt toast and bitter coffee. Then Sasha stands at the threshold of Ethan’s bathroom, ring light already set up. If there’s a heaven for girls like her, this is it: the giddy, anxious, high-wire thrill of making someone over for the first time, with the added bonus that this particular someone is Ethan, and every time she looks at his face, her brain tries to melt out her ears—*especially* now that he shaved.

“Ready?” she says.

“I guess.”

She’s supposed to be making this easy for him, but the sight of Ethan—hair loose, face washed, in a tight faded black tank—makes her feel like she’s been unplugged from her own body. She’s known him for years, but he’s different in person. Narrow shoulders, sharp collarbones, wrists so fine she could snap them like twigs. God, that’s a weird thing to think. She tries to shake it off, but the image sticks: blue veins under skin. The way he stands, arms crossed, bracing himself. There’s nothing masculine about it. Never was.

He sits on the closed toilet lid, hands folded, gaze fixed on a middle distance. Silent. Still. The kind she only sees in low-health moments on call, when he’s too tired to banter.

Sasha lines up her weapons: foundation, powder, eyeliner, lip gloss. The palette is battered, half the pans crumbled to dust, but it’s enough. She holds up the first brush. “You ready?”

“You keep asking me that.”

“Sorry.”



He shrugs. “I’m ready. Hit me.”

She starts gentle. Moisturizer, primer, the slow *pat-pat-pat* of her fingertips against his jaw. His skin is stupidly nice. Pores barely visible, a few old acne marks, but nothing she can’t cover. Foundation melts in. She’s good at this. Years of practice, hard-won tricks of blending down the neck, setting with powder, ignoring the urge to apologize every five seconds.

She watches his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows. The only thing that gives him away.

Ethan’s playlist is running on the counter speaker. French pop, bright and a little sleazy. She works in silence, except for the music and the brushstrokes, and the way Ethan’s breathing gets slower, steadier as she goes.

She shapes his brows with tweezers, then gel. He flinches at the first pinch, but recovers fast. The arch is perfect. She’s jealous. On her, everything was an uphill battle. On Ethan, every change is an improvement, like she’s not building so much as excavating. Like he was always waiting for someone to clear away the extra.

“Close your eyes.” She dusts gold shadow over his lids, then amber, then burnt orange at the crease. Luminara palette. She can’t help it. The

brush moves on autopilot, replicating the exact shading she's stared at for hundreds of hours. His lashes are so long she doesn't even need mascara. She does it anyway, because it feels good to fuss.

He's not talking, not even joking about how he looks. Just letting her work. It's unnerving. She's used to Ethan narrating their raids, making jokes, always filling the empty air. Now nothing. Not even a quip about looking like a drag queen or K-pop idol. Right now, he's just breathing, eyelids twitching under her brush.

She does the eyeliner last. Amber wing, flicked sharp. Then, she adds the beauty mark just below his left eye.

"There," Sasha says, voice thin. "Perfect. Now for the dress."

He opens his eyes and Sasha has to stop herself from gasping. They're gold at the edges, bright under the ring light, the sharp amber shadow making them foxlike.

He blinks. Sasha breaks eye contact, turns to the dress, and almost drops it.

The wrap dress is thrifted—the color of honey, fluttery at the sleeves. She picked it because it looked easy, but now her hands are shaking. "Okay," she says, voice strained. "Ready for the main event?"

Ethan shrugs. "Might as well. The sooner we know it's a disaster, the sooner you can buy my silence with loot drops."

Sasha grins, trying to keep it small, but it hurts her cheeks anyway. "Want help?"

He stands. The tiny bathroom barely has room for both of them, knees and elbows everywhere. Ethan takes the dress and just...looks at it. The color, the length, the fluttery sleeves. For a minute, Sasha thinks he might bail. Or throw the dress out the window. Instead, he just holds it up to his chest, considering.

"Turn around," he says.

Sasha obeys, staring at the bathroom door. Someone's painted pale blue flowers on it, curling through peeling white. She tries not to listen. There's rustling, denim hitting tile, then the softer slap of bare feet. Ethan's breathing thins, tight, then he says, "Okay."

Sasha turns.

She's not prepared. It's just a thrifted wrap dress, nothing special. But on Ethan it's... She can't even finish the thought. The color is perfect, warm on his skin; the neckline sits just right, and her little cleavage trick is working, too. He knots the tie at his waist, slow and careful, then lets his hands drop. He stands in front of the mirror, not moving.

Sasha says nothing. The music has stopped. Now there's only the faint whir of the shower vent and Jupiter's claws tapping tile in the hall.

Ethan touches his hip, the hem, then his hair. He pushes it behind his ear, lets it fall. His lips are a little parted, like he's about to speak. He doesn't.

She should say something. A joke, maybe. But her throat locks, her eyes burn, and she can't. Ethan is standing in a thrifted wrap dress in a



Montreal bathroom, looking like someone she dreamed up.

Ethan touches the beauty mark. Fingers light, like he's checking if it's real. It's not. None of this is. That's the problem.

"Well?" His voice is soft, careful, not quite the same.

Sasha opens her mouth. What comes out is: "You look really good."

Which is the understatement of her entire life. What she means is: *You look incredible, and also like the person I invented so I wouldn't have to explain why you're the most important human in my life. You look like Elise. And Elise is a lie I told in a bar because I'm too chickenshit to say the truth—that I found someone perfect, and you're a boy, and I'm gay, and the math doesn't work and it never will.*

Except right now. Right now, in this bathroom, the math almost works. And that's worse. That's so much worse, because tomorrow night they'll do the dinner and Anya will love her and Jen will nod and Rosa will take a photo for the group chat and then it'll be over. Elise will come off with a makeup wipe and a change of clothes. Sasha will go back to Boston with a suitcase full of dirty laundry and a best friend she can't kiss.

She is not going to cry in this bathroom. Absolutely not.

"Really good?" Ethan turns from the mirror, a tiny, unsure smile

pulling at his mouth. “That’s what you’re going with? A full femme makeover and all I get is ‘really good’?”

“Shut up. You look—” She gestures. “You know what you look like.”

“I don’t, actually.” He turns back to the mirror, touches the skirt’s again, smooths it against his thigh. “I look like someone.”

*Yeah, Sasha thinks. Shit. You look like someone I’m going to miss.*

Jupiter appears in the doorway. Blinks once. Leaves.

“Okay,” Ethan says, smoothing the dress one more time, both hands, as if pressing a crease into place. Deciding something. “This works. Right? Convincing?”

“Yeah.” Her voice comes out scraped. “Super convincing.”

“Cool.” He picks at the tie at his waist. “So we’re doing this.”

“We’re doing this.”

He looks at her in the mirror. She looks back. Two reflections, shoulder to shoulder, her face bare and puffy, his perfect and borrowed. Sasha thinks of her own face after surgery—the shock of recognition, the strange grief of meeting someone who’d been waiting for you. This isn’t that. She knows it isn’t. But it rhymes.

Her phone buzzes on the counter. She picks it up. Thirteen new messages in the group chat. Anya sent a photo of a restaurant with fairy lights and the caption ELISE DATE NIGHT HEADQUARTERS???, with fire emojis.

Sasha types back: *She’ll love it.*

She locks the phone, sets it face-down on the counter. In the mirror, Ethan still looks at himself, one hand on his hip, head tilted, as if listening for something only he can hear.

Sasha doesn’t look away. She should. But she doesn’t.







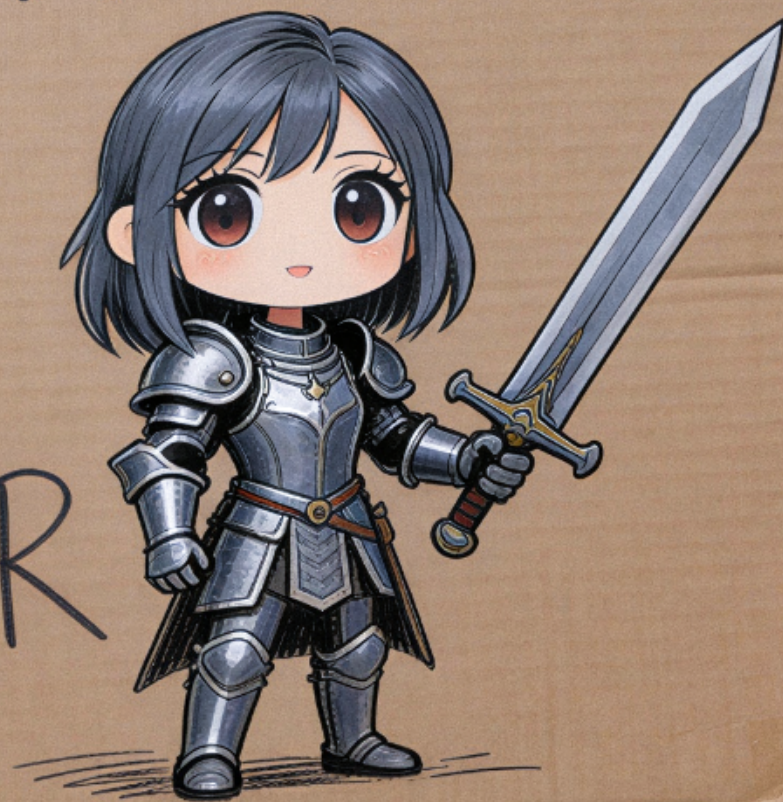




HEXWORTH

RAID

LEADER



↑ Arrival







