

I hated getting up for school on Mondays.

It was the middle of December, close to the beginning of winter, which didn't make things any better. It'd just snowed the other day, too, leaving about half a foot of that freezing wet mess for me to trudge through as I walked to school. To make matters worse, I'd woken up late that day, so I found myself having to trudge *quickly*. My friends had already gone on without me - likely thinking I was out sick or something - leaving me to walk through this mess, by myself. What a morning.

Thankfully, even though it was so cold and miserable outside, the halls of Bishop Heights East Secondary School were always warm. Part of me had always been convinced the school's powerful heating system was just to enforce the strict no-coats policy - the teachers and staff hated having to deal with wet floors and seats - but whatever the reason, it was a welcome change from the bitter cold outside.

Once I made my way inside through the front doors, I walked wordlessly down the eastern hall toward my locker, then opened the thin metal door to put my hat and coat inside. Afterward, I knelt down and removed my heavy winter boots, replacing them with the light, slip-on shoes worn around the school. These were less comfortable than my boots, admittedly, but still easier to move in, and they were also dry, preventing any snow and dirt from being tracked all over the building. That in mind, it was hard to complain.

Once I was finished putting my winter gear away, I turned around just in time to find a boy my age sporting long, red hair tied up in low buns running full-tilt toward me. I had about enough time to flinch before he jumped and pounced on me, locking me into a tight hug.

"Skye! You're here!" Elodia, one of my best friends, greeted me with enthusiasm. "Good *morniiiiing*~!"

"Good morning!" I replied, trying to match his enthusiasm despite nearly having the wind knocked out of me. I had absolutely no idea how the boy was able to be so happy so early in the morning, but the mirth was welcome.

"Ikuya and I were waiting for you, you know?" Elodia pulled away and locked eyes with me. "We thought you were sick!"

"Yeah, sorry about that." I laughed sheepishly. "I overslept."

"Aw, that sucks. But at least you're here now! C'mon, let's get to class!"

I nodded, and Elodia let go of me so we could start walking together. We made our way down the hall to our first period class. Along the way, we were joined by Ikuya, my other best friend, a taller boy with short, dark blue hair tied back in a small ponytail. He was calmer than Elodia, and not quite as talkative, but he seemed to be no less happy to see us. I'd met both boys when I'd transferred to this school three years ago, and the three of us had become inseparable ever since. To boot, we all had first period AP World Connections together - a strange class that had us talking about all sorts of weird things, making things especially interesting first thing in the morning. It was to this class that we made our way this

morning, and once we arrived, we took our seats. I sat toward the front, with Ikuya just behind me, Elodia right next to him. It was a little awkward for me, but at least the three of us could continue our conversation.

"Can you believe it?" I asked, turning around in my seat. "Only three more weeks 'til winter break already!" It was easy to cheer myself up with a topic like that. The thought of not having to come to school for two whole weeks was pretty enticing.

"Indeed," Ikuya replied, nodding calmly. "But we still need to get through exams first."

"Ugh. Don't remind me." I shook my head, frowning. "I hope Mrs. Arnold's exam will be merciful. Khi'varaan *sucks*." Interesting as the desert continent's most common language was, it was so different from Common that it was difficult to learn. I should've taken Nuñoa instead, I reminded myself.

"Yeah, but it'll be okay," Elodia chimed in. "We can study for it together, and then it'll be easy!"

I couldn't help but grin a bit. "Right! We should meet up again soon so we can do that."

As we spoke, the class was slowly filling up with fellow students, all taking their seats in turn as the first bell rang out, marking the time as five minutes to eighth hour. It was almost time for the day to begin.

It wasn't long until the class was full, and five minutes later, exactly at eighth hour, the second bell rang. However, while many of the students were here... our teacher wasn't. I exhaled a sigh, shaking my head. *Late again, huh?*

As if my thoughts summoned him, Mr. Corn, a tall, filled-out man with dark silver hair and a beard to match, dressed barely semi-formal enough to be considered school appropriate entered the room and approached the large screen mounted on the front-most wall, hitting a button on it to cause it to flicker to life. The words *AP WORLD CONNECTIONS* appeared in thick, dark green lettering, today's date just under it.

"Alright, good morning!" Mr. Corn greeted us. "Happy Monday. I hope you all had an awesome weekend." Somehow, this early in the morning, even he was able to be cheerful. "As you all well know, we only have two and a half weeks left until our semester exam, and we still have two chapters to cover. So, let's keep working hard. We'll start off this week by opening up Chapter 17 and looking it over."

I did as instructed, pulling up the monitor on my desk and turning it on. There were no textbooks or anything of the sort at this school - everything was entirely computerized. It was just like my old school back in Aurora, the nation's capital. I'd heard not all countries were this high-tech, though - some still required their students to carry around three or four big, clunky textbooks as opposed to, say, a small external hard drive with those same textbooks loaded onto it. I felt bad for those kids.

Once my computer had booted up, I started navigating through folders to find chapter 17 of this class's textbook, then started reading. It was customary for us to skim through the chapter and discuss it on the

first day of starting it. This chapter was apparently entitled, "Mana and Magic." The title made me arch and eyebrow. I'd heard of mana - known as the "force of creation," it was responsible for keeping everything in the world alive. Magic, however... that was a dodgy subject. I knew magic existed, but it was hard to learn about it. Few text materials existed on the subject, and what did exist usually didn't for long. So to find it in a school textbook was interesting, to say the least.

What I found wasn't surprising. There was next to nothing on magic itself and its usage - only the beings commonly known to possess magic. Of course the elves were noted first - they were the most common race, second only to humans, and known to be pretty good with magic. However, their strained relationship with our kind made learning about them hard. Other races were listed after that. There were the werebeasts, who appeared human but could transform into beasts; the animagus, the opposite of werebeasts - animals who could take human-like form; the vampires, who also looked human, but were pale, cold as ice, and subsisted on blood... the book went to great lengths to talk about just how dangerous and powerful each race listed was. It was like the writers *wanted* us to fear them.

"Alrighty," Mr. Corn spoke up at one point. "Now that you've had a chance to read through the chapter, let's discuss it. What did you notice?" He paused, letting the students speak up for themselves.

"These monsters are scary," one girl in the back of the room commented. "Why are there so many scary monsters in the world?"

Immediately, I heard the distinct *thump* of something hitting a desk, and turned in my seat to find Ikuya with his head down. Was he sleepy, or did he find today's discussion boring already?

"I don't think they're scary at all," Elodia said. "They sound awesome! I wanna meet one."

"You want to *meet* one of those things?" another student retorted. "They're monsters! They'll rip you to pieces just for looking at them weird!"

"How do you know?"

"You read the book right? Animagus can turn into humans to hide among them - probably to prey on them, I bet. Werebeasts can turn into monsters to rip us limb from limb, and a vampire probably wouldn't see any issue with sucking all the blood right out of you just for a snack!"

"That's silly. If they were really that bad, wouldn't that sort of thing be all over the news?"

"No," a third student replied flatly. "There are no monsters like that in Bishop Heights. The government made sure of it."

"So? It'd still be all over the internet and on the news from elsewhere in the world."

I heard a small groan from behind me. It seemed Ikuya wasn't bored with the discussion, but *annoyed* by it. It made me wonder.

"Alright, alright, settle down," Mr. Corn interjected. "The book does use some pretty strong language regarding these other races, and that does make things interesting for discussion. But, as Elodia here was saying, it's important to base your opinions on what you see, not just what you read. Even if there are just humans in Bishop--"

"How do you know there are only humans here?" Ikuya suddenly asked. I turned around to look at him, surprised. Just by his expression, he appeared to only be slightly annoyed, but knowing him, that meant he was angry.

"Are you stupid or something?" A student rebutted. "Do you see any freaking vampires around? There are no monsters in this city. Never were, never will be."

"You wouldn't see any vampires around anyway. They don't like to be out during the day. It says so in the book."

The student scoffed. He didn't have anything to say to that.

"Ikuya makes an excellent point," Mr. Corn stated. "How *do* we know there are no other races here? The book plainly states they can look just like humans. So, for all we know, they could be everywhere, and we just don't notice."

"It'd be great if they were!" Elodia chirped brightly. "I wanna meet one! I wanna see what kinds of magic they can use."

"I like your optimism, Elodia!" Mr. Corn grinned. "Anyone else have any thoughts? What about you, there, Golden-Eyes?"

I froze, feeling my cheeks get hot. I knew he'd called me out in particular because I kept turning around in my seat, but more embarrassing was the nickname he'd given me - *Golden-Eyes*. It was reference to my eyes, of course. Instead of the greens, blues and browns most people had, my eyes were golden yellow and shone brightly. I was the only one in the school - possibly in the whole city - with eyes like this. It tended to raise a lot of questions about me - many of them I couldn't answer. Sheepishly turning back around in my seat, I cleared my throat so I wouldn't stutter. "Um, well..." I began, searching for a response. "I'm not really sure what to think. The book does talk a lot about how scary they are, but I think I agree with Elodia. I want to meet one to really see for sure if they're dangerous."

"Yay!" Elodia cheered. "We should meet one together, Skye! You and me and Ikuya!"

"Definitely!" I replied, glancing back at him with a grin.

The discussion continued, emotions fluctuating. This was pretty normal for this class - since it was a class about a lot of subjective topics, there was a lot of room for discussion, and instead of leading it, Mr. Corn would often just sit back and let the students pit their opinions against each other's, only reeling it

in when emotions began to run too high. There were several opinions to think about: magic was useful, it was dangerous, the other races were evil and preyed on humans, they were benign... of course, there was no "right" opinion. It was still hard to decide on who I agreed with. The only way to decide anything for sure would be to meet one of these beings in person, but that would be hard. It was nearly impossible to tell who wasn't human among all these humans.