

Fuzzy



Cuddly, hungry tales of a small wandering Rilakkuma

as told by Chaobang
2022-3



This is a collection of short stories about a curious little bear. He likes to wander around, exploring houses like yours, and making friends he can nuzzle, cuddle and climb. He will also eat up all your food, especially sweets.

In the adventures that follow he makes some very special friends indeed. They include Dari, her alternate-reality counterpart Rida, and Rida's sweetheart Connie (associated in this world with Darkarri); the Ibaraki family and their Chaldea Academy community (associated in this world with Stiff); the divinities Majora and Minora, the undead warrior Cyania, the lynel Una, the human Jorako, and the extremely adorable Creame (all associated in this world with Jora-Bora). All these characters belong to themselves and most have appeared either in [Paths Across the Sea](#) or [The Madness of Iorialus Bóro](#), so reading those first is strongly recommended.

This collection is dedicated to Stiff for his kindness and support in a time of terrible darkness, and for his love that brought the little Rilakkuma to life.

The original Rilakkuma, whose precise relationship with the one in these stories is unclear, is associated with Aki Kondo and San-X.

Palutena is associated with Nintendo.

'We're Going on a Bear Hunt' is from a picture book of the same name by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury (Walker, 1989).

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Contents

1. A Fuzzy Climb.....	4
2. A Fuzzy Day Out.....	7
3. A Fuzzy Appetite.....	11
4. A Fuzzy Helper.....	14
5. A Fuzzy Accomplice.....	18
6. A Fuzzy Headache.....	21
7. A Fuzzy Surprise.....	25
8. A Fuzzy Secret.....	29
9. Fuzzy Friends Forever.....	33

1

A Fuzzy Climb



In he mooched through the Bearway, that network of tunnels between realities which only bears know; a fuzzy little Rilakkuma with a big round head, a bobble tail, and a zipper down the length of his back.

His curious round eyes scanned the darkened room. No immediate sign of friends to play with or tasty treats to devour; those being his fuzzy instincts' priorities, though the question of which takes precedence continues to divide the scientific community.

There was a shape here however. A great solid shadow, looming large as it shifted and groaned atop a massive bed.

Especially curious now, the little bear scooted with silent speed across the carpet – then stopped, as a shaft of moonlight through the windowpanes lit up the sleeping colossus.

Those nosy eyes drank everything in. The strong, smooth slopes of purple skin; those sumptuous sheets, shoved frustratedly down to thigh level as their inhabitant twisted, then turned, shifting and groaning from minute to minute as her search for a good night's sleep came to grief. The little bear could see that on account of this tossing and turning, her mane of indigo hair was as dishevelled as any rolled-around-on heap of grass, while her sternly elegant face – dark lips, gritted teeth, narrow eyebrows bearing far too great a weight of forehead furrows – was the very image of sleep-deprived exasperation.

Perhaps the Rilakkuma was sympathetic to this nightmare-stricken lady, and wished to bring her fuzzy comfort on this longest and darkest of nights. Or perhaps he could sense she was no ordinary individual, indeed could only be a divinity of some kind, and past experience had taught him that sharing fuzzy energy with such beings tended to yield divinely tasty treats in reward. But the real reason he clambered up to her bed and set about assessing promising

A Fuzzy Climb

trailheads was far simpler, and it was a reason all small bears know: that sleeping people, as a matter of absolute principle, must be climbed.

And so, beneath the covers on the mountain range of the sleeper's legs, a little bulge appeared which travelled up, up, up the lengthy slopes; till at last it emerged, bobble-ears first, atop the highest prominence on the goddess's central geographies.

She groaned; the whole world shook as she lumbered onto her side. But the small Rilakkuma held rich experience at those platforming games where you run atop logs or other curved surfaces as they spin, and on attaining the summit, flopped down atop her raised buttock with little difficulty.

He reclined there a while, tiny paws stretched out front and back. It was warm, and comfortable; but as his soft weight sank into the flesh, those bobbly ears of his gave a sudden vibration.

He paused, alert. Waited, keeping as still as he could. Yes – there it was again! The faintest hint of a squeak, from somewhere deep beneath his present position.

This was most puzzling for a small bear like this one. He'd climbed on so many people, yet had never come across one who had demonstrated vocal capabilities at this end of their bodies (although of course such people are plentiful, it's just that they tend to be the sorts whose houses the Bearway doesn't visit). Surely between one end and the other there must be some distinction! And so he jumped up onto his paws, gazed long and curious at the smooth purple surface – then gave it an inquisitive press with his paw-pad.

"Mmff!" came the noise. It was higher in pitch this time; sounded so clear despite the obvious depth from which it struggled to surface.

The little Rilakkuma didn't know what to make of this, but by long habit had come to find much enjoyment in things that made cute sounds when poked. So he became completely distracted in pressing his paw down in different spots, and to varying degrees of pressure, to see how the volume, length and pitch of the tiny squeals changed; and then he got so excited as to push down with his big round head, or roll tubbily left and right, digging his weight as deep into that vast supple surface as possible (goodness, that *really* produced a response!) and so carried on in this way till the huge lady must have sensed it in her sleep, for she gave an aggravated moan, snarled something in a language beyond his comprehension, and with a great shift of her full and awesome mass, crashed round upon her back, sending the hyperactive little bear spinning off onto the bedsheets.

Undeterred, the bear rolled onto his tummy. He waddled for her once more, and after a long and determined scurry made it up onto her pillows. Through that tumbling forest of dark hair, two fuzzy bobble-ears surfaced; then that pair of ever-curious round eyes, followed by the innocent pout of his little snout. The bear crawled out and shuffled onto her forehead, whose creases, by universal law, settled somewhat at the touch of his fuzz.

A Fuzzy Climb

Of course there was only one thing to do. He stretched out his little paws; held them there, steady against the nocturnal winces and grumbles that tremored the face he was balancing on...and then – *there!* – suddenly pressed their pads onto her nose.

He dived for the cover of her hair just in time, for with a slurred howl of annoyance, the divinity spun back onto her side and gave a swipe of a great sharp-nailed hand right past where the little bear had been perching. Had that woken her? No, she was only muttering in her tumultuous half-sleep; something about moons and masks and meals that didn't stay where they should, the little bear gathered, although it was all a little much for a tiny bear to take in. So he merely lurked in her nest of hair, eyes peeking through a gap in that unkempt mass, as he waited for his new friend to settle.

Eventually he decided it was safe, and once more his innocent little gaze surfaced to peer across her burdened visage. Exhaustion must have at last got the better of her, for her murmuring had ceased, replaced by the heavy rhythms of air through her lips. This got him very excited, because it meant it was truly time to play.

On and on he played then, pawing at the marks on her cheeks; nibbling on her fang; climbing right up to press his forehead into hers – *ning ning ning*, just like that – before tumbling down to her ear, where he emitted the softest and faintest of *rawr-rawr* growls: a little louder, then a little louder still, stopping only when they were just the right volume to produce a wince or a grumble, but not so loud as to rouse her from slumber. At one point he took swift shelter in her hair again as he felt the shadow of her arm across him; but it was alright, only a false alarm this time, for it soared the other way and pressed down hard on her rump for some reason: an awesome spectacle to be sure, but too distant now to distract from his fuzzy concern.

At last the small bear's fuzzy work was complete, and he felt his tummy begin to rumble. So he took cautious position beneath the goddess's face – it was important to get this part exactly right – and then...gave her a great big lick with his tiny tongue, all the way from the tip of her chin to the arch of her nose. And that was as far as he got before she sat up awake with a startled yell, but by then the speedy little bear had already leapt off her bed and dashed round the corner, where he ate all her food then went home.

2

A Fuzzy Day Out



From tiny Sayuri, a tiny sleepy yawn. It was that rarest of days at the Chaldea Academy: one on which little was happening; or rather, when it was happening for everyone other than her.

The shrunken purple-haired young woman crawled to her knees from her tabletop nap and stretched out her arms for another yawn. That was when she heard a tiny “rrrrr” behind her.

“Oh! Hello, little bear!”

The small Rilakkuma – her good friend – had appeared out of nowhere, as was his wont. With his soft fuzz and ever-inquiring harmless face, she still found it apt to think of him as *the small Rilakkuma*, even though at her scale he approached the size of a minibus.

“Rrrr. Rrrr.”

Adorable growly sounds issued from the bear’s throat as his very special poofy-haired friend wrapped her arms round his big head. She hugged and squeezed, beaming as all the afternoon’s boredom and loneliness fizzed to steam at the sensation of soft warm fuzz on her skin.

“Rrrr.”

“Oh...um, yeah. They’re all busy today, little bear. Mikoro had to go to the dentist.” Naturally, the corollary – that this was an event of high emotive consequence which required the undivided commitment of Mother Rin and big sister Kiyoko too – went clear enough unsaid.

The bear nuzzled Sayuri’s cheek with his nose. He was a simple creature, and how completely he understood his tiny friend’s complicated circumstances – she’d mysteriously awakened in the Academy corridor one day with no trace of her memories or former size – was anyone’s guess. But he had practiced nostrils for the faintest hint of unease in his friends, at any time, anywhere in the universe,

A Fuzzy Day Out

and so as sure as fire is hot and bears are fuzzy, he would always be there to smother it with cuddly affection.

Sayuri gave a happy squeal. “Aaww, thank you,” she said, hugging him tighter. “But it’s okay, you know? Really. Chaldea is my home now. I can’t complain; I doubt anybody in the world has ever found a more amazing place to belong. I’m surrounded by wonderful and caring friends; even...um, literally sometimes, heheh...”

“Rrrr.”

“So please don’t worry, little bear. It’s not often I’m left to myself like this. It’s just...I guess when I’ve too much time to myself, I start thinking, wondering about...you know...”

The bear rolled around and gave her a gentle headbutt on the backside.

“Wha – oh, Dari?” she replied, correctly. “Er, she’s...”

Dari was a frequent visitor to the Academy and one of Sayuri’s most beloved friends of all. However, certain varieties of *trouble* were well known to follow that green-clad interdimensional explorer almost wherever she went; through no fault of her own intrepid self, it must be added, lest we get the wrong impression.

Sayuri glanced away, to where the wood-panelled door to the guest quarters loomed forbidding on the horizon.

“Dari’s, um...in the middle of something. Rida’s visiting. Have you met Rida?”

In fact the little Rilakkuma had been in the house of Dari’s alternate-world counterpart just yesterday. Or more precisely, in her fridge; which was exactly why the blue-haired titan had come stomping to Chaldea that morning to take Dari to task for letting the hungry creature in.

“Yeah...” Sayuri mumbled, lowering her face with a bashful tinge in her cheeks. “I guess Dari’s going to be in the middle of something for a while, huh?”

The bear made a gurgly sound, and in the next moment manifested a huge shortbread-and-chocolate cake, which he and his good friend the pudding-demon Creame had recently *discovered*, *acquired*, or *stumbled across* during an expedition that morning to the British Museum gift shop. No doubt they’d narrowly avoided tripping over the corner of this treasure where it stuck from the sand or snow, as such things do.

“Oooh! Is this for me?! Where did you...*waah!* This...it looks delicious...”

“Rrrr.”

So there they sat, this pair of friends, fuzzy brown and poofy purple, sharing chunks of cake together and getting the crumbs all over their cheeks.

“Mmm. Did you like it too, little bear? But look: you’ve got chocolate all over your nose now!”

And in it, apparently, as the bear gave the tiniest of rawr-sneezes.

A Fuzzy Day Out

“It’s just as well they left these napkins here. Look, they’re just our size. Mother Rin really thinks of everything, doesn’t she? Here, hold still while I..”

And after some rigorous scrubbing on the part of her little arms, approximately four fifths of the smudged crumbs and chocolate were accounted for. To show his thanks, the bear gave Sayuri a long and affectionate lick up her face, just as he’d learnt from Mikoro, with the helpful effect of liberating it from its own burden of sugary residues.

Well fuelled up now, the bear shuffled round so as to present Sayuri his long and fuzzy back.

“Ooh?” she reacted, lifting a startled finger to her lips. “Um...now?! Uhh...I..”

She glanced again towards the guest quarters, then to the other door that led out onto the main corridor, as though to make absolutely sure her friends wouldn’t return to find her guiltily absent.

“Well, um...ooh, okay! Why not? You’ve given me so much energy, you sweet little bear! Just make sure we’re back in time for dinner, okay? We mustn’t make Kiyoko worry!”

And with no further encouragement she clambered onto the bear’s back, dug her knees into his downy fur, and grabbed tight onto his zipper.

“Yaay! Let’s go, let’s go!”

The bear torpedoed through the grass and soared through the sky like a fuzzy chubby all-terrain submarine, with his purple-haired passenger giggling and cheering all the way. They must have spent half the excursion zooming about like this for the heck of it, with no care beyond feeling the wind on their faces and soaking their lives in the colours of the wilderness. Their eyes drank in forests and plateaus, volcanoes and icebergs, canyons and coral reefs; they dropped in to play with noisy little birds in their nests, climbed on tubby millipedes trundling across the rainforest floor, and best of all, delved into a tunnel in the earth at the end of which they found a den of baby foxes, all squeaky and fluffy and nibbly and so much fun to ruffle, tickle and cuddle.

This was typical fare for their secret little adventures together, but it was also true that both the little Rilakkuma and his littler passenger had hearts to match those of any of their big friends. So by shared instinct, and almost without noticing, they found themselves making subtle improvements to the world such as their shape and stature uniquely suited them to do.

The Rilakkuma produced a pack of chocolate biscuits he had appropriated, at Dari’s insistence and present squirming and blushing expense, from Rida’s snack stash; and together he and Sayuri popped up here and there, sneaking these treats into all those places where they were most required. One of them appeared in a school lunchbox which had been packed most criminally, that is to say, without

A Fuzzy Day Out

sweets. Further biscuits surfaced on the tables of construction workers employed in dangerous and exploitative conditions, or in the canteens of medical personnel struggling through exhausting shifts as they handled a pandemic without proper wages or protective equipment from their governments. The pack of biscuits was deeper than it looked, and soon first-aid kits, defibrillator boxes, lifeboats and diplomatic briefcases the world over were benefiting from this nourishing, heartening, and in some cases life-saving bounty. It was all in a satisfying afternoon's rocketing about for the flash of fuzz and puff of purple which was all the sharpest-eyed observer ever glimpsed.

"Ooh," said Sayuri, munching on a small piece of chocolate biscuit herself. "Look: there's one biscuit left. What should we do with it, little bear?"

"Rra-rra."

"Um...are you sure that's a good idea? Kiyoko might..."

"Rrrr."

"O-Okay. Well, if you say so. But...no telling, okay? It's got to be our secret!"

So it was that five minutes later, the setting sun found them edging over the skylight of the dental clinic. The final biscuit dangled from the bear's paws as they awaited their moment, making sure to get the angle just right...

...and to this day, Kiyoko has never worked out how, while squeezing Mikoro's hands in support beside the dentist's chair (and thus sure she couldn't have used them) – while the dentist was in the X-ray room, and Mother Rin was outside settling up with the receptionist – she looked away for one instant, just one, then turned back to find her sister munching with blissful glee on a massive chocolate biscuit and decorating her dental bib with a spray of crumbs.

"Tsss," the fox-girl sighed, knowing when there was just no winning an argument with the universe. "Only you. Only my naughty little sister..."

3

A Fuzzy Appetite



The door to the cupboard hung ajar. Yellow light leaked from the crack, as though a by-product of the naughty things surely happening within. It was a huge door, guarding as huge a storage space as befitted the huge appetite it was there to service; but this evening it was the growling, chomping and guzzling of a rather less intended appetite that reverberated forth through the house's walls.

Guarded footsteps closed in, their clomps an easy match for the ravenous din within, but doing it not a hint of disturbance; it appeared the attentions of whoever was in there were fully occupied with the demolition of the cupboard's mouth-watering contents.

"What in the world..."

The door shook on its hinges as a spray of crisp-crumbs fountained from the gap.

It jerked to a stop, as a massive hand took hold of it.

And then, after an age's hesitation...

...the hand flung it open, and in a single practiced motion shot out to grab the fuzzy, chubby little Rilakkuma who, it was clear at a glance, had single-handedly brought about the total annihilation of this month's supplies of crisps, cookies, chocolate, nuts, cakes, popcorn, and all further miscellaneous batteries of high-energy fatty goodness.

"I've got you this time, you gluttonous scamp!" Rida proclaimed, as she heaved the little bear bodily out of her larder: a surprisingly difficult task, not so much because he was heavy as because some unseen force of cosmic attraction seemed to glue his snout to the sorry survivals of her snacks.

Wincing in surprise, the big blue-haired molecular engineer clamped both hands round the body of this long and fuzzy specimen, pulled with all her fearsome strength, and at last succeeded in dragging the hungry interloper away;

A Fuzzy Appetite

at which point the mysterious force gave way, and he felt no longer like a fuzzy dumbbell, only the feather-light, if tubby, little bear that he was.

She twisted her wrist round. “Now then, let’s get a better look at you, you little...huh?”

The creature’s big round eyes gazed back at her with passive curiosity, even as he completed his munch on the last of her supplies.

Chomp, chomp, chomp, he went. “Rrrr.”

“Eeeee – !”

The high-pitched squeak from Rida’s throat was cut off, its subject committed to the embrace of a mighty gulp.

Rida exhaled, content. With two fat fingers she steamrolled the little Rilakkuma’s head with affection.

“There there, you adorable thing. It’s not your fault if you’re a hungry little beast, is it? And there I was thinking my Dari had learned her lesson after what I did the last time she set you loose in my kitchen.” And she raised her voice a little, speaking as if to her own belly: “Looks like you didn’t think your cunning plan through, did you? What’s a legitimately hungry woman gonna eat instead if the regular snacks are taken out of the equation, you crafty little bean?”

The bear’s bobbly ears were more sensitive than a human’s, so perhaps he made out the tiny squeaks from within: “I didn’t! I didn’t! For goodness’s sake Rida, he followed me through by himself!” But at any rate they were quickly drowned out by the satisfied gurgle of Rida’s mighty gut, delighted as ever to accommodate its favourite toy. The huge blue-haired woman gave it a righteous rub, which the little bear on her lap took as a signal to push his tiny paws into it too, right there amidst her huge fingers, as if that was a small Rilakkuma way to offer validation.

His ears vibrated at the sound of a drawer sliding open. Wobbled at the rustling of foil. Then he shuffled around, fast as lightning, and began to roll around hyper on Rida’s lap as she withdrew one of the spare packets of cheese and onion crisps she always kept in the living room table, handily, to spare a tiresome journey to the storage cupboard.

“Here. These are for you,” she said, emptying them into a bowl with a lazy grin. Naturally her new little friend was already tail-deep in the pile by the time it completed its descent.

She gave his bobble-tail a poke as he shuffled within. What an irresistible creature!

She didn’t know why, but for perhaps the first time in her life, it occurred to Rida that she’d be quite happy spending the evening watching Rilakkuma cartoons on the television in the company of her sweet little visitor. And so she did, sharing tasty treats while caressing and stroking him on her lap on those rare occasions she could coax him to sit still. More regularly he took to clambering all over her,

A Fuzzy Appetite

fuzzily and with hyperactive enthusiasm (all the more so, perhaps, on account of just how much there was to climb). And as the bear on her head, the bears on her screen, and the squirming in her stomach coalesced into a sense of all-encompassing bliss, her palms came to rest on her abdomen for a good long squeeze; to which her fuzzy friend, interpreting this as goodness knows what, darted down to squash his nose against her tummy and go “rrrr rrrr,” over and over again.

She scooped up her little kindred spirit and set him on her shoulder, letting her eyelids settle with a smile at the sensation of tiny teeth on her thumb.

“You’re a special one. You come here whenever you like, you hear me? You’ll never miss out on food here, I’ll make sure of that, and I don’t mind a harmless thing like you sprinting around so long as you don’t knock anything down and don’t make a mess on the carpet. You got that?”

“Rrrr.”

And like that, she brought him round so that her eyes, welling now like swimming pools of purple fondness, met his ever-gazing little black round ones; and with lips as large as his face she gave him a great big smooch – MMWAHH! – just like that – which so excited him that he rolled fuzzily left and right on her palm.

“How about I introduce you to my dear friend Connie next time? I warn you, that little sweetheart’s gonna adore you.”

To which suggestion she received a rumbly growl of approval.

She replaced him on her lap. Let loose a good long yawn, with perhaps just a little more wobbling of her belly than was necessary. Then she felt the wetness of a tiny dribble on her skin, and looked down to find the sleepy bear snoozing away on her thigh, his big round head at rest upon his front paws.

The Rilakkuma cartoon had drawn to a close in a cosy, cutesy triumph of beehives and pots of honey. They’d since been replaced on the screen by the starscape of a space documentary, set to a soothing orchestral score. Moonlight glistened in the window. It felt so strange. The little fuzzy body was so light on her leg it felt as though he was scarcely there; but in another sense, Rida felt, she could have sworn he sank in with the weight of one of those stars.

Her drowsy eyes gazed off into space. And through another great yawn, as she dozed off herself, she mumbled: “My delicious little doppelganger...what sort of world did you wander into this time? Where did you find...?”

4

A Fuzzy Helper



Nose stuck in a twitch. Amber eyes glazed in wary fixation. A fang clenched unaccepting into her lip. All in all, a face captured to its tiniest nose-hair by tingly anxiety and apprehensive dismay: no look, that is, which you'd ever think to see Ibaraki Mikoro cast at a pizza.

The fluffy pink-haired cat-girl had been so excited to see a new one on the menu – on a massive crispy Romana base, too! – that she'd ordered it straight away, with no thought for a proper look through the list of toppings. Which was regrettable, really, she reflected in hindsight, as they slid the so-close-to-a-masterpiece onto her table.

It had mushrooms.

Why?

Why conjure forth such perfection only to ruin it?

Those bubbling oceans of melted cheese, that rich tomato sauce, those mouth-watering slices of salami and scorching 'Nduja sausage; who in their right mind would go to the painstaking trouble of shaping this magic circle of luscious, steamy, scrumptious love, this platter of culinary divinity, only to defile it beyond redemption by scattering it with *mushrooms*? Just *why*?

Mikoro's elbows crashed to the tabletop as she clutched her fluffy head, disconsolate.

What should she do?

This was when Mother Rin was supposed to come galloping across the table to the rescue, skewering the offending articles with her righteous fork before extraditing them to the safe distance of her own dish, of course making sure not to miss a single one. Even big sister Kiyoko, after a cursory attempt to coax her to

A Fuzzy Helper

try them, would relent to the inevitable and grumblingly liberate her meal. But she'd come to the restaurant on her own today, with her sister buried in work, the students off on field exercises somewhere, and her mother attending a very important reception at the Mayan Embassy, with much at stake for potential Chaldea Academy involvement in their space programme. Even Dari was away, no doubt getting eaten by somebody other than Mikoro.

The result was a rare lonely evening, for which what better cure existed than a visit to the pizzeria? She'd even come in her beloved captain's hat and coat, just to make the occasion extra special; not to mention bolster her confidence to treat herself to absolutely whatever she wanted, just, after all, as Mother Rin had said she should (at least, that was the way Mikoro remembered it).

She grimaced.

Should she take the mushrooms off herself? But then, what if they came back to life and bit her?

Maybe she should order a different pizza? No – Mikoro hated wasting food!

Ought she to complain to the manager? But that would cause a scene, and then Kiyoko might find out, and, and...

Chomp. Chomp. Chomp.

“Nyah? What's – ”

“Rrrrrff,” went a tiny fuzzy mouth full of pizza.

“Ooooooh!”

From the far side of the table, clambering onto the pizza's crust to nibble at the closest scary mushroom, a fuzzy little Rilakkuma had come.

“Yaay! It's you, it's you!”

The noisy chatter of the packed restaurant helpfully dampened Mikoro's squeals of glee. “Waah, my favourite little bear! Have you come to rescue my pizza from the mushrooms?!”

Chomp. Chomp.

“Aaaa, you have! Yaay! Here – you can have them all if you like them!” And she seized her knife and fork and proceeded to shovel all the mushrooms to the far side of the pizza as the little bear, his snout in a coat of thick tomato sauce, hoovered up the fearsome fungi with industrial efficiency.

The sight was so fuzzily hypnotic that for a few moments Mikoro forgot all about her own hunger and simply sat there, face leaning in, to watch the adorable little creature work his magic. The mushrooms were disappearing, all of them, one by one.

She blinked.

...and noticed that so too was the crispy crust, the cheese, the tomato sauce, even those succulent slices of salami and 'Nduja sausage...

“Wah! W-Wait, little bear! You can't have *all* of it!” And with no time to lose she plunged for her side of the pizza and set upon a nomfing rampage for all she was

A Fuzzy Helper

worth, racing to secure what she could before the liberator-turned-occupier bear got there first.

“Aamf! Aaaaamf! Nnmf! Nomf! Aahmf!”

“Rrff...rrrr...rnn-rnn-rnn...”

Nothing, now, could stop this mounting hurricane of fluff and fuzz; no mother was present to offer Mikoro a napkin, no big sister to hug her calm. The diners, waiters and chefs could only look on in horrified awe at this spectacle of demolition-devourment which, alas, spun to its natural end all too soon. Not a crumb of crust or drip of sauce remained on the glistening platter. There was only a fuzzy little bear, sprawling chubbily in the middle, while a beaming Mikoro reclined satisfied on her chair.

“Heehee!” The cat-girl giggled through a great glug of Sicilian strawberry lemonade. “I think we got about half each! Are you still hungry, little bear? Would you like more?”

The bear emitted a rumbly high-pitched mewl.

“Aaww, you’re right. We’ve got to leave space for dessert too. Um...excuse me?” She waved her hand at the nearest waiter, who flinched, then mustered the courage to edge nervily towards her. “Um. Could we get the dessert menu please?”

The waiter as much as dangled it into her hands then sped off like a man desperate for the lavatory.

“Ooh...” Mikoro’s finger traced a path down the list of sweet delights. This one looked amazing...and so did this one...and this one...

Her finger halted.

Slowly hovered its way back up.

Lingered, ominous, above the words: ‘Grand Caramel Triple-Decker Chocolate Glory’.

“Rrrehhrawrah.” A big fuzzy head popped up. A tiny paw struck the menu right next to her fingertip.

Mikoro gave a look over her shoulder, as though the mere contemplation was a signal for alarmed big sisters to come crashing through the wall.

She grinned a grin of enormous naughty.

“Heehee! This one, please!”

“Uuuuuu...”

The groan transmitted into the living room even before Mikoro came staggering through the door. It transmitted in particular to the little brunette, who’d arrived to an empty Chaldea Academy and so settled down to relax on the giant sofa as she did her best not to contemplate her latest week of squeezy, splashy hot confinements.

“M-Mikoro? Ah! Mikoro! You look – ”

A Fuzzy Helper

Thoroughly pizza'd and chocolated out was what she looked. Indeed, the cat-girl had so filled herself up on this evening's banquet of banquets that she could only lurch from side to side, ricocheting off furniture as she gurgled and guuu'd a trail to the sofa.

"What have you - aah, no!" Dari panicked, throwing out her arms as the shadow fell. "Mikoro! Waaaaait - "

BOOMPH!

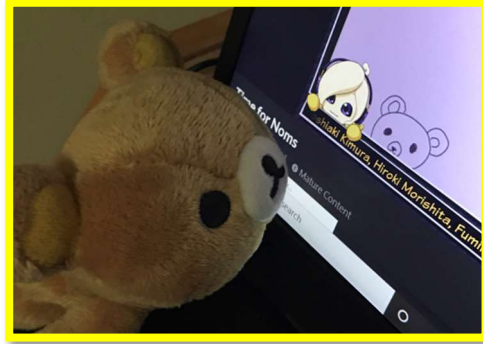
Delirious, oblivious, and at any rate too tired to make it as far as her room, Mikoro crashed upon the cushions arse-first, pivoting on the squirmy little mass she felt there as she curled upon her side and stretched out to fill the space. Within seconds she had snored off; and for the weight of her delicious dinner, a good, long sleep it would be.

A fuzzy little shape flopped upon her head, paws out.

"Rrrr."

5

A Fuzzy Accomplice



A big round head, so like his own! Or so the little Rilakkuma must have believed as he stared, transfixed, at the adorable creature beaming back at him through the wall between the worlds.

In fact her head was not so like his. While he had curious fuzzy round eyes and a no less curious fuzzy snout, she appeared some manner of elemental made entirely out of pudding. But if the bear was at all perturbed by her unusual composition, or, perhaps more to the point, by the frighteningly awesome waves of otherworldly power that came radiating in spades off her cute form, there was no sign his fuzzy little brain deemed it of consequence.

She was listening to something on her headphones. Her delighted head rocked left and right to the beat.

It was hypnotic.

It needed a ning ning.

The bear shuffled right up to the boundary, placed his paws upon her yellow-gloved hands where they grasped the rim, and pressed his nose into her face.

“Rrrr.”

Creame’s mouth formed a little O in surprise. The little bear was back. He was nudging something towards her with his fuzzy little snout.

It was a tiny heart-shaped white chocolate.

Her own heart overflowing with excitement, the fearsomely cute *majin* received it with ravenous glee.

“Rreh,” the little bear bleated at her.

A Fuzzy Accomplice

The next evening he brought a full bar of the stuff: a high-quality organic variety at that, with pods of real Madagascan vanilla.

The evening after that, it was a hefty white chocolate cheesecake with a crumbly shortbread base.

The evening after, it was a colossal Toblerone, which came plunging through like an express train straight into her awaiting big blue maw.

Soon the treats grew so huge – enormous cakes, whole tubs of ice cream – that they looked to Creame like they were shuffling her way by themselves, since she couldn't see the tiny bear behind them.

And then, one night, as the bear headbutted a colossal box of *cannoli* through the boundary...

CRACK!

The world-wall shattered, leaving a gap – and the bear darted through in a rush of electric fuzz and then he was climbing and leaping and rolling all around on his thrilled new friend, licking and rubbing his nose everywhere he could reach.

“Waaait!” peeped a tiny voice from one of the *cannoli* – desperate, but unheard. “I'm in here! M-Mikoro put me here as a joke! The bear, he took it from the Academy reception, he – no, w-wait! Don't, don't...aaaaack!”

SHLURP! – the wail disappeared down Creame's throat. For alas, the fuzzy and creamy pair had been just too exuberant to hear it, still less to spot the little speck whose brown hair and green tube top just happened to make her look so alike those pastries' pistachio and chocolate fillings.

The friendly *majin* patted the satisfied bear on the head till he settled beside her. “Rrrr,” he purred as she gave him a cuddle. Then she lifted a headphone speaker off one ear, and stretched it round his.

What a perfect match! The universe had to admit it, even as it trembled.

“NO! YOU SCOUNDRELS! GET BACK HERE!” The roar resounded from the confectionary store, freezing every pair of shoes on the street as a hundred heads turned to look. They were just in time to spot what looked like a caped pudding-person and fuzzy little bear come soaring out through the shattered window, stacked with sackfuls of sweets all about their persons as the red-faced, aproned proprietor stormed out in pursuit, brandishing a rolling pin and spluttering with expletives.

All the witnesses blinked, of course. No-one knew what to make of this sight, and by the time they'd processed it, the daring duo's escape was well made.

Indeed they were worlds away, sitting on a wall of purple bricks and munching happily on their well-earned spoils together. Chocolates, cookies, toffees, gummy bears, milkshakes: buckets and buckets of mouthwatering sweet treats, enough to propel them both to the heights of sugary bliss.

A Fuzzy Accomplice

And was it not a *good thing*, too? Why shouldn't these partners in mischief, who appreciated the true value of sweets, not liberate what would otherwise end up on the plates of insensible people with too much money?

Better, surely, that it fuel an hour or twenty of hyperactive small fuzzy bear activity which, by definition, benefited everyone. Better yet that it drive whatever *cosmic improvements* would result at the hands, or mouth, of his big cuddly marshmallow of a newfound friend, though of course the detailed nature of such schemes were far beyond the capacity, let alone the attention span, of his fuzzy little brain.

Yep. It was all good. Good enough at any rate that five minutes later they were ready to do it again.

And again.

They'd found a rhythm – and it thrilled them.

What raiding, giggling, guzzling adventures did the universe have in store for this fuzzy-creamy partnership made in cuddly paradise? Or perhaps we should ask: what did that partnership have in store for a universe thrown wide open to their unstoppable – but adorable – hungry ways?

If you see them, it's sure to bring you good luck. Just don't forget to run for your life as well.

6

A Fuzzy Headache



Tap-tap-tap...tap-tap-tap-tap...tap-tap-tap-tap...

“Rrr rrr.”

Kiyoko groaned. She tossed this way, then that, then seized her pillow in both hands and pulled it down on her head.

Then she sat straight up.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap...

“Rrreh.”

“Urrgh! What the hell...”

It was coming from her desk.

She rubbed her eyes in the darkness. Glanced at the clock: 4:42 a.m.

If something – or someone – was puggling around on her desk at four forty-two in the morning, that was a problem.

“Nrre-e-ehh.”

Very much rudely awakened now, the fox-girl fumbled for her bedside switch. Winced as the lights came on. Remembered Sayuri in her stomach, slow down, avoid sudden movements; but no, she recalled, her little charge was sleeping over with her good friend Jorako tonight. It was okay.

It had bloody better be okay.

Tap-tap-tap-tap...

“Gaah, what the heck is making that noise?”

She squinted. Rubbed her tired eyes again. Squinted harder. No-one there; but why was her laptop on?

She’d definitely turned it off before bed. She always did.

The noise – that was its keys.

But how, if no-one was there?

A Fuzzy Headache

A ghost?

A shadowy shuffle – yes, *something* was there! But she couldn't see it. Her chair's backrest was in the way.

Grumbling and groaning about naughty little sisters and four-in-the-morning pranks, Kiyoko hauled her tired limbs from the bedsheets, then padded about till her feet found her slippers and hauled herself up on them. Adrenaline kicked in, her vulpine instincts, a sharp wariness, whetted over years in the relentless currents of little-sister spontaneity that had honed her reaction time down to zero. Thus awake and ready, though none the less annoyed at being so, the fox-girl advanced on her desk with resolute footsteps...

"Mikoro...whatever you've done this *tiwhatthell!*!"

She stood, mouth wide open – for rolling around on the keyboard was a fuzzy little Rilakkuma, his body stretched out like a long and fuzzy log with a zipper down its back.

He saw her. He stopped rolling. "Rrreh," he bawled at her, wiggling his paws in excitement.

Then he carried on rolling again.

Kiyoko now realised that on her screen were the spreadsheets for the Chaldea Academy's latest round of purchase orders. She'd been checking through them the previous evening. But – how then had this mischievous, if admittedly adorable, little creature turned her computer on? Come to think of it, how did he get in here in the first place?

Blinking again, the fox-girl saw that even though the bear was rolling around in a completely random manner, the effect, purely by chance, had been to hit the quantity box for chocolate brownies and replace whatever was in it with – she peered harder – 9,427,634,217,057,130,919,028...and lengthening, by several orders of magnitude per roll.

"Aaaah, no!" she barked. "What do you think you're doing, you naughty bear? You can't do that!" And she flung herself into the chair, made to sweep him off the keyboard – though he jumped onto her arm just in time – and set about shaving the figure lest the Academy be struck with chocolate brownie calamity when they sent it off in the morning.

"Rreh," burbled the bear, now perched between her fox-ears and pawing at her forehead, distractingly, as she racked her memory for the correct figure.

"Forty? Was it forty or – no, Mikoro ate six in one go last week, so – *aahh, stop that!*" And she made another grab at her fuzzy visitor, only to find he wasn't up there anymore, he was at the edge of her desk, pawing at her kettle.

"Fifty-two units. That was it. Fifty-two for the next...huh?"

The bear's large round head had turned to regard her. Big round eyes, fuzzy little snout: such an innocent expression.

"Rrrr."

A Fuzzy Headache

“You want...tea? Really?”

“Rrrr.”

“Coffee? Or...what, you want me to mix tea and coffee?”

“Rrrr.”

Kiyoko had no idea how or indeed whether she was understanding this fuzzy early-morning troublemaker. If in one moment his desire seemed obvious, by the next he had switched his attention to something else entirely.

“You – hang on, no! No, you can’t just eat my sugar cubes! Hey! Get out of there!”

She launched herself at the ravenous little thing...

...and it was just at that moment, of all moments, that a tiny rift opened on Kiyoko’s desk, from which tumbled a familiar shape in green clothes and brown hair.

“Wha – Kiyoko! Oh, thank goodness! I – ”

But the fox-girl was now completely consumed by a rush of compulsion to get her hungry visitor under control. “Not now Dari!” she barked as she automatically grabbed up the new arrival, still moist from her latest adventures, and plunged her away, startled and squeaking, into her bust (which, it should be mentioned, heaved hot under her present aggravations). An instant later she’d locked a committed hand round the bear’s long and fuzzy body, and from there proceeded, with considerable difficulty, to haul his ravenous snout out of her sugar pot.

She strained; the determined creature shuffled tubbily in her fingers, and made cunning use of his large head to anchor himself within. But at last the fox-girl prised him loose and yanked him away; whereupon he wriggled onto his back in her hands and gazed at her, just gazed, gazed that gaze of blameless curiosity – even as the sugar still crunched to the tiny motions of his sugar-encrusted maw, followed by a tiny swallow; then a tiny bleat: “Rreh.”

Marshalling the sum of her many years’ experience at wrestling through naughty-shields of heart-melting cuteness, Kiyoko raised the little bear to her face.

“Now look here you. Did my sister put you up to this? What did she – hey!”

She recoiled, for as soon as he got in range, the bear had surprised her with a cheeky sugary lick up her face: *nnmlah*, just like that.

And now she knew for sure, because there was only one person in the world he could have learnt that from.

At the mere thought of whom, she felt her exhaustion catch up with her. The adrenaline was wearing off. It was the middle of the night: a time for sleep, not for chasing hyperactive bears round and round.

She clasped her free hand to her forehead and yawned. “Urgh. What time is it?” she asked of no-one in particular.

“Rrrr. Rrrr.” The bear had caught a strand of her hair and was playing with it.

A Fuzzy Headache

“Look – it’s not even five in the morning. This is ridiculous. I’m going back to bed, and you’re staying with me, little bear, so you can’t eat my room down before you, Mikoro and I have a little *talk* tomorrow.”

And when big sister Kiyoko said it, that was that: she shuffled back beneath the bedsheets, flipped off the light, and curled her arms round her chest with the little bear clasped tight in both hands, before drifting off to the comforting nuzzles of a fuzzy little snout on her chin.

A Fuzzy Surprise



At the windowsill, two tubby ears.

A pair of curious round eyes.

The top of a fuzzily inquisitive snout.

The little Rilakkuma peered into the house, his hungry gaze absorbing the scenes within.

“Harder! Harder Dari! Come on, you can push harder than that!”

In response, the faintest huffing and squeaking: “Ahhh...haah...nnngh...”

Amidst the weights, training dummies, and diverse contraptions too complicated for a little bear in want of a concept of warfare, let alone of exercise, a woman of extraordinary blue-green fitness lay on a mat, propping herself up on her forearms. She had her legs spaced apart, and appeared to be addressing something between them.

“Well look at that! You made it through round nine this time! Hah, don’t think you’re getting time to pat yourself on the back though. Quick break, then onto the finale!”

“Haah...haah...haah...”

“Aaaand, break’s up! Final round! This is it, I’m going all out! *Start!*”

A high-pitched yelp: “Eeeeeep! Nnngh! Hnnnghh!”

“Hahaah! Come on, come on! Just fifty-five seconds more! Fifty-four, fifty-three...aah, it feels so good! That’s right Dari! Squirm, squirm just like...just...like...huh?”

Even in the midst of so engrossing an exercise, and so crucial a service to a friend she deemed well in requirement of it at that, the undead warrior’s ears caught a tiny shuffle of fuzz from the window.

A Fuzzy Surprise

She glanced at it. Squinted hard through blurry eyes. Was that a flash of brown, just then?

Nah, it was probably nothing. Whatever tricks her eyes didn't play on her, the mist of the fields and forests more than made up for.

Back to business.

"You're slipping Dari! Come on come on – Forty! Thirty-nine! Thirty-eight! You remember what happens if you can't hold on, yes? *There*, that's the way, yes! Thirty-one! Thirty! Halfway there, Dari! This is it, you're finally going to make it this time!"

Yes, *I am* thought Dari, even as in a single thirsty pulsation, her dedicated trainer's most definitely dedicated vaginal muscles slurped her up to her armpits. Yelping once more, the tiny trainee threw out her arms and braced them taut upon the supple folds: "Nnngh...no! N-Not...this time! Hnngh...hnnnghhh!" Yet for all her twisting and struggling, Cyania's giant body only rocked and shuddered in swelling ecstasy at those squirms, while her present apparatus of training grew greedier still to swallow and savour its flavoursome captive.

"N-No! I...I...haah! I've *g-got* you...*th-this t-time*...Cy! Nnnnnnnggh! I've...hah...haah...wha...?"

Through her hazed-up mind and the curtain of assorted fluids – hers and Cyania's – across her view, Dari cognised a familiar fuzzy little face staring back at her.

The tiny Rilakkuma was waddling up to her. Up the valley of mat between Cyania's legs.

"Wha...wha...ahh! Nnnnnnggh!"

The flesh-continent reverberated around her: "Don't slip now Dari, you're almost there! Ten! Nine! Aaaah! *That's right, that's right!* Yes Dari, yes! Nine! Eight! Seven!"

"Rrrr?"

Wh-Wha...*what are you doing?*! Dari's lungs tried to yell; though she couldn't, not while she panted and strained for all she was worth.

Right in front of her now, the curious creature pushed up on his belly and raised a tiny paw.

Wiggled it in front of her face.

"Rreh."

"No!" she blurted out. "N-No! Wait! Don't – "

Bap! A tiny bop on the nose.

"Eeeeeeeeeee...!!" Her squeal went echoing into Cyania's abyss, for in that instant of lost concentration the flaps of the fleshy whirlpool clomped shut, and Dari was gulped away, squirtily and sloshily, into the briny deeps.

The nosy bear was a little startled by this spectacle, truth be told. It certainly was not the sort of sight a little bear sees every day. And so he scurried away so

A Fuzzy Surprise

fast that by the time Cyania recovered from her lengthy spasm of pleasure and pushed up onto her hands, there was nothing to suggest he'd been there at all.

"Aahh, so close! So close this time Dari! Three seconds, would you believe it? You really gave it your all this time, didn't you? But still – not quite enough! Not yet!"

She placed a satisfied hand over her crotch. Shut her eyes, bit her lip – and smiled as she worked her muscles to fasten the still-squirming mass within.

"Well, fair's fair. You know the drill by now: it caught you, it eats you. But hey, at least you get to cool off with a nice long massage for those stiff little limbs, right?"

At this Cyania felt the squirming intensify. Unusually so. As if to say, *no, this time fair isn't fair!*

"Uh-uh. You know how it goes, little Dari! *The-e-ere* you go! Hey hey, steady now. Oof, tetchy today aren't you? Come on, there's always next time!"

And with that, she sprang to her feet. Shook out her limbs with satisfying cracks. Pulled her pants back on.

"Hoo. Time for a drink."

With a spring in her step – how heartening, to watch Dari come so far under her tutelage! – Cyania jogged down the stairs to the former crypt. For all her passion for gadgets and gizmos she'd still had no joy with those prototype Gnomish refrigeration boxes, which till they cooperated would serve well enough for her own training instead (up the Alterac Mountains and back with one strapped to her shoulders made for a perfect morning routine). Till then, the coldest room in the house more than sufficed for its ironically vitalising repurpose.

"Huh. Now why's the slab open...?"

From the crack in the vault: tiny bubbles. The cascading clinks of bottles falling against bottles. A tiny gurgly burp.

".....!"

The undead warrior dashed back upstairs. Returned, five seconds later, with her sword.

"Rreh."

"Well you're a lively one aren't you?"

"Grrehrereh."

"You know, if you wanted beer, you should have just asked me."

"Rrehhh."

"Yeah. You didn't have to – you know – empty every bottle I had. You – aaww come on, don't do that. I'm not sure you're even allowed to be so adorable up here in the Plaguelands you know?"

Ning ning. Ning ning.

A Fuzzy Surprise

“Yeah. We’re kind of out in the sticks here. Are you even related to the bears we get around here? Where’d you even put it all anyhow? Not into this tubby little tummy of yours, surely?”

“Rrrruu.”

“Aaw no, not this one too? You...they brew this stuff on a boat you know? Yeah. In Thousand Needles. Know how expensive it is to get this shipped all the way out here?”

Mleh.

“And you’re licky too. Of course you are. So guzzling it all isn’t enough, you’ve also got to smear it all over my face with that little tongue?”

“Rrre-e-eh.”

“Proud of yourself, aren’t you? Well...looks like I’m trekking all the way into town for my pint today.”

“Rrr.”

“Want to come for a walk?”

“Rrehhhh!”

“...yeah, alright. Ride on my head it is then.”

8

A Fuzzy Secret



Starry skies. Tropical warmth. The fresh scent of peppermint on the evening breeze.

A sip; then the clink of cup on saucer. Ibaraki Rin exhaled as she reclined in comfort on the veranda.

These family breaks were precious. Even a day or two could be tough to prise from the neverending demands of her calendar. But to this particular Director of the Chaldea Academy, the right to do so was non-negotiable. Mother Rin's adopted daughters deserved to bond with her outside its structures once in a while, she insisted; not to mention relax, run loose, and learn on their own terms in exotic environments, be they equatorial rainforests, polar icefields, or merely a beautiful little cove like the one she'd sailed them to on this occasion. That was how she'd brought them up, to value their relationships and take no guilt in giving themselves healthy rest, and she'd done so in the way that all good parents do: by example.

She smiled at the faint buzz of a games console, transmitting through the wall to twitch her feline ears. No doubt Mikoro was terrorising people in *Mario Kart* again, if her giggling glee was anything to go by.

And there was Kiyoko down on the beach, a silhouette against the sinking sun. She wasn't alone of course. Even if the shape of beloved little Sayuri was too small to distinguish, the fox-girl's subtle motions gave her presence away: the shift of an arm that indicated a hair-stroke, or a lift to the lips for a kiss.

The thought led Rin back to her own little guest, who she'd brought for the ride on a spur-of-the-moment decision.

A Fuzzy Secret

“Shhh,” she spoke soothingly, placing a hand on her chest. “You know you need this, Dari darling. It’s been one thing after another for you of late, hmm?”

The other hand too, now: a long, soft press from both sides.

“Shhhh. Sweet girl. It’s okay. You’re safe now. Mother will make sure no-one catches you till you’re ready to head out again. You stay right here and relax, alright?”

Feeling her dear friend’s squirms settle – eventually – Rin patted her bust before settling back in her deckchair, once more releasing a contented sigh.

She shut her eyes.

Opened them again, surprised, at the gnaw of tiny teeth on her tail.

She raised it before her, and what should be dangling off it but a fuzzy little Rilakkuma, his tubby body swaying in the breeze?

“Oh! Why hello there, little bear!”

“Mmph!” came the muffled exclamation from Rin’s bosom, and with it a new round of restless wriggling.

“Shhh,” Rin whispered again, placing an arm round her chest this time and sustaining a gentle clasp till those motions calmed. Then, with a quick glance left and right, she curled a hand round the Rilakkuma’s body, detached his tiny chops from her tail, and raised his cute little face close to hers.

“Rrr-e-ehh.”

“Arara. Such a cute little bear!”

And he was.

“Well then, little bear? Did you do as Mother asked?”

The bear shuffled in her grip, stretching till he was close enough to lick her chin.

“Very good!” She gave his snout a little kiss. “Well, here are some treats for a reliable little bear. You’ve made Mother so pleased!”

And filling a bowl with a tin of sweetcorn, the delighted Director sat back and watched him tunnel gluttonously into the pile.

For you see: it was true that the demands on Rin’s position never ceased, not even for a couple of days’ holiday with her family. That did not diminish her fair entitlement to such a break, make no mistake. And yet, she was too responsible a figurehead to leave it unaccounted for either.

There were several options. The most obvious was to deputise. But that only meant she’d be twice as busy after she got back, because – this was simply the way of things – for no-one else did problems seem to just amenably disappear as they did at the touch of Mother Rin. Alternatively, she could postpone things. Or, if really desperate – which, to be sure, she rarely was – she could cancel them altogether.

Or...she could avail herself of the recently-discovered fact that, sent out in the right direction at the right time, a fuzzy little bear could accomplish things that took months, even years, for huge and dedicated teams of people.

A Fuzzy Secret

Like the Palermo Conference for instance. It was a closely-guarded secret that it was the Chaldea Academy, working behind the scenes, that had brought the parties together at the negotiating table. Still, the exhausting and expensive talks had looked likely to drag on and on until Mother Rin, during an especially tedious video call with irate ambassadors, had let herself be distracted by the small Rilakkuma crawling across her desk and, watching his waddles, been struck with a brainwave. And now, a few noses nosed and dishes adorably munched in front of their owners – all off the record, of course – and there you had it: the administrative framework for a free and open Sicily effectively shared by the Italians, Libyans and Greeks was all ready to go, with lasting goodwill, material contributions, and strategic cooperation with the Academy to be expected from all three; and all without shaving a minute off Rin's vacation.

So it had gone for the successful organisation of occupied Madrid into Mexican, Mayan and Incan zones; the reunification of the Yorkshire Democratic Republic (a.k.a. 'North Yorkshire') and the Democratic Republic of Yorkshire (a.k.a. 'South Yorkshire'), a tentative but oh-so-symbolic first step, perhaps, towards a settlement for the English Warring States at long last; the discreet extrication of an Academy research team, carrying sensitive equipment, from a dispute it had been drawn into between the Inuit League central government and its little protectorate, the Canadian Pale, over the embarrassing result of an ice hockey match; and best of all, the securing of a place for one of the Academy's finest engineers on the upcoming Eighty-Seventh International Lunar Expedition.

It was amazing, when you thought about it, what a fuzzy little Rilakkuma could do with his little nuzzles, little tongue, and not-quite-so-little appetite.

Rin sipped her peppermint tea as she watched the chubby creature, now full up with corn, returning his attentions to her tail. Indeed he was quite fixated with it now, so she coiled it up on her lap, making something of a furry black nest, then dropped him in the middle to sniff, poke, and nibble around at his leisure.

"Rrrr," he went. His ears bobbed about in the gap, inviting Rin's loving finger to stroke in between. She shut her eyes, sighing happily, and allowed a subconscious dreaminess to guide her hand for awhile: first caressing the little Rilakkuma, enjoying his fuzzy fur; then lifting away, eventually to find its way into her cleavage, where two fingers enveloped the little friend she'd tucked away there and administered a full-body massage. They took their time, working her all the way up the ladder of flustered squirming, before slowly descending it back to comforted calm.

"Ooh," Rin said suddenly, to no-one in particular. "You know...I just remembered. Didn't Tamamo warn us that the trade and industry minister's been threatening our Niigata lab with inspections again? Oh dear, we can't have that. Not when that unit's so close to unlocking the secrets of that *dogū*. Hmm...now

A Fuzzy Secret

that I think of it, I hear the minister's very fond of sweet bean dumplings. In fact, the kitchen of her house in Nagatachō is said to be constantly full of...oh!"

She giggled, hand to lips, as the little bear zoomed off the veranda at supersonic speed, emitting an animated "r-r-rreehh" and wiggling his bobble tail behind him.

What a refreshing break this was turning out to be! Indeed, Rin marvelled, she was getting more work done just lounging out here than in a typical day's directing at her desk.

It was so handy, having a little bear around.

She could rule the world like this, if she wanted too.

It was just as well she was, well, Mother Rin.

"Right!" she said, sitting up with a clap of her hands. "Let's see about dinner then! Oh Mikoro? Would you like to help Mother prepare the sashimi?"

And she strolled into the cabin, as a pair of bobbly ears rose up at the veranda's edge; followed by two hungry eyes and a curious fuzzy snout, smeared all over with sweet bean jam.

9

Fuzzy Friends Forever



Hazel eyes, skittish as a squirrel's – but not now. Now they were purposeful, unblinking, as they scanned the notes spread about Mother Rin's tabletop.

They shut.

Through gritted teeth, the tiny explorer drew in a deep breath.

Held it.

Huffed it out in one go.

“Right,” she said, significantly.

It all added up now. No mistake.

And it was just as well, for the supreme efforts it had taken Dari to extract these accounts from her hungry, horny friends, who as ever had given her her due of hot, wet time to reflect on them. And as her mind threaded together these evidence trails, out had sprung the invisible dotted lines, stretching onwards, ever onwards through space and time, towards the tiny fuzzy spot where they finally, definitely converged.

She set her papers down. Racked her brains extra hard, just to be sure. Realised she was.

Flexed her fingers: open, shut, open, shut.

“Right,” she said again.

She stood. Shook out her hands, then her arms. Tossed back her chestnut hair. Checked about her to make absolutely certain she wouldn't get interrupted (or at any rate, as close to certain as she, Dari, could be: which is to say, not really).

She muttered: “Get me stuffed, squashed, and splashed over and over, will you? As if I needed more help with that? You're out there somewhere, you little rascal...”

Arms out. Eyes shut. Concentrate. No, harder. Harder. Good. Now, feel for it. Feel...

“Come on Dari, you silly girl. You can do this.”

Fuzzy Friends Forever

Feel...feel...feel – *there!*

Beautiful! A *beautiful* rift: smoothly discerned, skilfully engaged, drawn out to impeccable size and symmetry...

“And there you go again Dari,” she reproached herself, even as her nerves still rushed with that thrill of satisfaction. “You opened one. Good for you. Need you a reminder of what’s happened within five seconds, every time you’ve dropped your guard round these things to congratulate your smart little backside? Really?”

Still...she had to admit – yes, she had to – that she’d improved. And also admit, with flushed cheeks, that at a certain level of meaning, the rifts always took her exactly where she was needed.

“Right then. Fuzzy fuzzy fuzzy – I’m coming, you little...”

Across the realities she leapt.

“Huh? This is...”

A cave.

Well, it makes sense, does it not? – Dari told herself. What’s so surprising about bears living in caves? That’s what they do isn’t it?

Come to think of it, wasn’t there a song or something about that? Now how did it...?

I’m going on a bear hunt.

I’m going to catch a big one.

What a beautiful day!

I’m not scared!

A flicker of distant memories, ghost butterflies with slides for wings flittering through her consciousness: a spirited little girl, brown hair swinging behind her as she bounded through the long, wavy grass (*Swishy swashy! Swishy swashy!*), waded through thick, oozy mud (*Squelch, squirch! Squelch, squirch!*), clambered shivering out of rivers chillier than they’d looked (*Splash, splosh! Splash, splosh!*); got lost in dense, bushy forests and fissures in the cliffs; that sensation of shifting, smothering pressure from all about, the awe, the dread that she might never find her way out, yet, once she did, felt so bashfully curious to experience it again...

I can’t go over it.

I can’t go under it.

She was grinning, she realised.

At the back of her mind, a tiny voice: “Really Dari. I worry for you sometimes...”

Well it got one thing right. She wasn’t scared. Caves, of the good old-fashioned variety, were one thing that didn’t intimidate Dari. With such comprehensive experience of every variant of deep, dark hole that *did* intimidate her, a plain old tunnel in the rock was no trouble at all.

A narrow, gloomy cave!

Fuzzy Friends Forever

I can't go over it.

I can't go under it.

Oh, no!

I've got to go through it!

Tip-toe...tip-toe...

"Heh. There's just no helping you, is there Dari?"

It wasn't even that gloomy. Crystalline slivers in the rock gave off a hazy shimmer which, together with her well-developed night vision (that is, "night" vision), more than sufficed to navigate her through the darkness.

"Now then. I know you're in here, Mr. Bear..."

Her voice bounced off the earthen walls as she trod forth, footfall after footfall of firm determination.

"And I'm going to find you...and when I do, you've got some explaining to do..."

Deeper and deeper Dari delved, as only Dari knew how. How long now? Minutes? Hours? It didn't matter, she realised; this was one of those places where time stretches and shrinks without regard for its own rules.

That was odd, come to think of it.

So was the unease that chewed at her confidence, which, pausing to catch her breath, she decided she might want to acknowledge, right now in fact, before it sent her headfirst into a hole.

"I know he's here," she muttered to herself. "But...why?"

It was a cave as good for one bear as for any other, she'd thought.

Wasn't it?

No. Something wasn't right. Her present target was too much of a small, soft fuzzy for this kind of cave. If he belonged in a cave, it would be a warm and cosy one lit by electric lighting and piled high with chocolates, plushy animals and cuddly friends.

"I...don't understand. And, what's - there, that! What's that noise?"

The explorer hushed; pressed herself into a wall. In fact the strange sound had prickled in her ears all along - "and if you hadn't been singing stupid songs over it, Dari, you might have noticed," - yet only now grew sharp enough to distinguish from the rumbling earth and drip-drip-drip of ancient water off stalactites.

Rrr-e-ehh...

"That's..."

Rrrrr-e-e-e-ehhhh...rrrr-e-e-e-e-ehhhh...

"...crying?"

Her heart plunged in her chest as if it'd suddenly turned to lead.

Rrrrr-e-e-e-e-e-ehhhh...

And it was then she realised: this deep, dark cave was no habitat.

No: this was a place as far away as possible from everything, and everyone. A place to run away, to flee, to hide; a place where tears so heartbreaking that a

Fuzzy Friends Forever

single drop might drown the stars in misery could be released where they'd never trouble anyone's attention, instead to dissolve in depthless shadow, unseen, unheard...

Rrrrrr-e-e-e-e-ehhhh...

"My god. What a sad sound..."

Heartbreaking; no, heartbreak itself, in its elemental purity. To hear those throaty bawls was to feel all the sorrows of all the worlds soak into your skin; to feel your gut wrench in grief, your heart twist in despair, your lungs gasp desperate for a gust of deliverance...

"No...it's unbearable. Stop, stop it, please please stop..."

The tears were welling in Dari's own eyelids now, and she thrust a hand against the cold cavern wall to steady herself. Her legs felt heavy as bricks; as though the hopelessness in those cries, now suffusing the chilly air around her, sapped the strength from her sinews and with it all her will to go on. Only the cries themselves could go on, and as they did, each plaintive bleat seemed to roll through her ears into eternity, a wrung-out torrent of neverending anguish...

No – an anguish which had to stop, which she decided, had already decided, that *she* had to stop; only the very perfection of the pain in those cries defied all possible plans to soothe it.

"Well it's just as well you never were one for plans, with a life like yours, were you Dari?!" – she screamed herself back to her senses. And then, seizing that iron resolve and hurling it outwards, she yelled in as penetrating a voice as she could:

"Hold on! I'm coming!"

All indignation forgotten now, the tiny explorer sprinted for the source of the cries as fast as her legs could carry her, stumbling over cracks and crevices here, hurling herself round rugged boulders and rock columns there. On and on she hurtled into the deepest, darkest depths, where invisible skittering things tumbled out of her way, the craggy walls made frightened faces, and the woeful bleats grew so loud, so strident in their misery, that it was all she could do wrestle down the drive to slam her hands over her ears, to flee the way she had come, lest she, too, be washed away by those tears into the final pits of dejection.

RRE-E-E-E-E-EHH...RRRRE-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-EHH...

"Come on, Dari! Almost there! There, it's coming from just round that – *oh, by the...*"

She'd reached the final chamber – and stood there, horrified, speechless, gasping for breath.

The fuzzy Rilakkuma lay slumped in a heap against the cavern wall.

"N-No way...you...y-you...how did you..."

He was a terrible sight. His cuddly furry body was gashed all over with hideous wounds, from which dark blood trickled and dripped into puddles, some of them fresh, some almost dry. His bobbly ears and tail, his chubby face, his tiny paws, his

Fuzzy Friends Forever

tummy: no part of him had been spared. It looked as though he'd been set upon by a merciless army, or else mauled by some pack of savage creatures; none else could have done him the fullness or ferocity of injury that now ravaged his once-adorable – still adorable – hide. He was hunched up, shuddering, convulsing in pain, swollen eyelids flooding the floor with molten tears...

...tears which melted Dari's heart as his great round head revolved towards her; regarded her; and though that tiny little maw, with its tiny little tongue, emitted the feeblest of whines: "rrrrwwaaa..."

"Oh, no. No, no, no," Dari stammered for words as she fell to his side. "You sweet, sweet bear, what happened to you? Did somebody do this to you?"

"Rrre-e-ehh..."

...What should she do?

It was in situations like these that her embarrassing extent of medical expertise – that is, none at all – caught up with her. A woman with a mysteriously, divinely-enhanced core which insured her against all substantial injuries had simply never needed to learn to do it the hard way. All she had was a smattering of first aid instruction, picked up, as usual, from one or two of those with relevant skills by whom she herself had been picked up. But even that had assumed the casualties were humans, not bears; and at any rate, it didn't matter. Even to her untrained eye, this was already far, far beyond a first aid situation.

And yet...

"Rrrre-e-e-ehh..."

...somehow she knew, just knew, what she ought to do.

With all irritation forgotten as concerned the tight predicaments this bear had got her into – which, when she faced up to it, were the story of her life anyway and hardly his fault – Dari crouched down by the Rilakkuma's dismal gaze and steadily, gently, placed her arms round his head. His sodden fur was still so soft; the sensation of her arms sinking in did so much to soothe her nerves.

She squeezed.

"Shhh. It'll be okay, bear. It's going to be okay. I haven't worked out how yet, but I'll get you out of here and get you the attention you need. Shhh."

"Rreehh...rraaaaawrrh..."

"Shhh...it's all alright now. It's alright. You're my friend. I'm here for you, and I'm not going away. I'll stay with you as long as you need."

And she did.

She cuddled his head. Went down by his face, and wiped off his tears with her arms. Stroked his back, taking care not to further damage his broken zipper (which, now smashed asunder, revealed that hidden within his fuzzy hide was, well, more fuzz).

"It's all going to be alright."

Fuzzy Friends Forever

How long she stayed at his side, even she didn't know. But somehow she did know, even if she'd never explicitly learnt, that these hugs, this caring and loving friendship which only she, right now, was in a position to offer, were the only effective remedy for this stricken bear's particular wounds.

For as she stroked, the bleeding slowed. The gashes and gouges remained heart-shattering to look at, but as the bear's cries softened, and his crackled, heavy breaths grew steady, if still hoarse, the tiny explorer and devoted friend knew by instinct that his injuries were no longer critical.

"Look: I have something for you here. Would you like it? It's chocolate. Just a chip I'm afraid; a whole cookie would be a little heavy for me, heh. Sayuri gave it to me. Sayuri's your friend too, right?"

She slid it into his tiny mouth. Watched it disappear. A little munch; a tiny gulp. "Rrrehh."

He heaved, suddenly; the startled Dari fell back onto her hands as the bear attempted to raise himself, to shuffle forwards – only to crash back onto his tummy with a helpless whimper.

"Sshhh...don't force it. You'll need time. And more than that, you'll need..."

Yes. She understood now.

This sweet little bear was no-one's enemy, had no natural predators. It wasn't weapons that had done this to him. Nor teeth.

Friendship, acceptance, cuddles, love: those were what he was made of. Those were his life force.

Therein too, in their inversion, lay the only possible dangers to him.

"But...how?" said Dari, clasping his bobble-ear. "I mean, *who*? Who, where, could possibly hurt a bear like you?"

It didn't make sense. It was impossible.

And yet – she knew – impossible places did exist out there.

"Is...is that why? But why, little bear? Why did you go somewhere like..."

She didn't need to finish. Wasn't the answer obvious?

"Is that what happened, little bear? Did you go there because you have friends there too? *Especiallly* because they're there; because you're too dear a friend to leave them all alone in a world like that? And while you were there...something happened to you? Or...to your friends there? Are you hurt because your friends got hurt too, or hurt each other, and you weren't able to help them?"

As if in reply, a forlorn gurgle: "Rrr-e-ehh..."

"Oh, my dear, dear friend. I'm so sorry..."

And she embraced his head with the full spread of her athletic limbs, hugging and squeezing and nuzzling with all her strength.

"Look," she said at last, with resolution. "You're my friend, and I know you're friends with all my closest friends and family too. And I know what they're like sometimes, with their big fat arses, and their slavering maws – trust me, I do – but

Fuzzy Friends Forever

believe me: we all love you very, very much, and we won't let anyone ever put you through this again. You deserve better than this. Do you understand?"

"Rrrraahh...rawrahhh..."

"Yes, I know. And you won't have to abandon those friends there either. We'll find a way. Trust me, little bear; I know a thing or two about crossing the worlds too. But for now, you need to rest, and surround yourself with those who'll take care of you."

And with that, Dari grimaced, as though asking herself inwardly whether what she was about to do was honestly a good idea; as though any other option, any at all, would be her preference.

"You'll regret it," said that little voice in the background which was always so annoyingly right.

No, she decided. It was too urgent. Alone in a cold, dark cave at the remotest edge of reality was no place for a beloved little Rilakkuma like this one.

She opened her mouth: to call for help? Invoke? *Pray*? She still hadn't decided how to conceptualise it, her relationships with them were so unique; but it didn't matter, she was so *connected* by now that the thought alone guaranteed to be noticed.

Whoooosh!

Now *that* was a rift! Whirling, glistening, radiant, it filled the tunnel like liquid starlight, infusing the bleak walls to life in a kaleidoscope of colours. And from the other side...

"No! *She's mine!*"

"*I was here first!*"

"*Her appeal was obviously addressed to me!*"

"Aaahh, *stop it!*" Dari's voice rolled like tiny thunder. "I *don't care* who, can't you see this is an emergency?"

The goddesses' quarrel halted at once, as though a universe-sized tablecloth had been dropped on it. Then, in a silent instant, a massive emerald iris filled the opening.

It blinked.

"P-Palutena!" yelled Dari. "Help me with this! I need to get this bear somewhere safe!"

The eye withdrew – replaced in the next moment by a gigantic hand, so purposeful, so elegant, so reflexively intimidating to Dari's nerve cells that every last one of them danced mad in the rush of warmth...

...but the tiny explorer held firm. "Careful...*careful!* No, like this!" she instructed, heaving and tugging to adjust her backup's fingers so they fastened round the bear to her satisfaction: no chance of dropping him, no pressure on his wounds. And then, as if coordinating a helicopter, she raised her arms and swayed them this

Fuzzy Friends Forever

way and that, as she watched the holy hand lift and ferry her fuzzy little friend to safety.

And...exhaled.

She'd done it.

She wasn't entirely sure what it was, but she'd done it.

She'd done it!

She braced herself against the cave wall, dazzling in the light from beyond, and allowed her chest to heave with the fresh, clean air that gusted in, while blessed relief washed through her muscles and veins.

She smiled.

Grinned: the cheesiest grin she could manage.

"How about that then, Dari?" she chuckled to herself.

Then she yelped – "Gyaaaaaa...!" as the fingers launched back in, wrapped her up and whisked her bodily away.

"N-No, wait, not now! You can't just – "

I can't go over it.

"Ah, ah, ah, aaahh!..."

I can't go under it.

"Ahh! Aaaaaack..."

Oh, no! I've got to go THROUGH –

"Mmmpphhh!"

Fuzzy bobble-ears wobbled as a rift appeared above the plushiest sofa in the Chaldea Academy students' lounge.

Spinning, spinning, spinning...

"Eeeeeee – oof!"

The arrival grunted at the impact. For a while she stayed just like that, splayed-out on the cushion, her head too woozy and limbs too stiff to move.

Still feeling the weight.

"Urrgh. W-Why..."

Lleh. Lleh. A curious lick-lick-lick on her leg.

"Rrrehh."

"Oh! H-Hello you. Sorry, I-let me..."

Fuzzy Friends Forever

She groaned as she pushed up onto her backside. Slid her arms together, trying to wipe off a slick film of residual fluids. The fuzzy Rilakkuma was right there in her face.

“H-Hey. You’re looking much better already. Have they been taking good care of you?”

Sniff sniff sniff. *Mlemlemlem...*

“Err...I’m not sure you want to lick that, little bear. It’s from...her...uhh...”

“Rrrrawh.”

“Yeah. I know. Sorry to have kept you waiting. She – I mean, it was that time – erm, about every two weeks, you see, she...urgh. Look, never mind alright? I’m here now, and I’m so glad to see...”

Mleh. Mleh. Mleh.

“Yeah. Sweet, isn’t it. No, I don’t understand why any better than you do. Go on then. I won’t complain. You can lick it all up if you like.”

She stroked his big energetic head, as one does.

“Is...Mother Rin around then, do you know? Or Kiyoko? I’ve, er, been thinking...”

“Rrerreh?”

The Rilakkuma puffed out his cheeks and gazed at her.

“Yes. About how to help you, and your friends. I’ve had plenty of time – eheh – to come up with an idea. It’s...kinda crazy, and I don’t know if it’ll work, but I’m willing to wager it will at least do some good. I hope. But...I’ll need to get some help to do it properly, so it’s going to take a little time, alright? I’ll have to – ”

“Yaaaay! Dari! It’s Dari!” And in it came, a pink fluffy whirlwind crashing through the door, tumbling across the room, launching both hands to sweep up the little explorer with a startled squeal...

“Aaaa – Mi – ko – ro – aa – aa -aa – ”

And now it was the ecstatic cat-girl’s turn to sniff her too.

“Heehee! Dari smells nice!” Charmingly observed, but through the naughtiest of cute grins.

On the cushion below, the little bear had stood on his back paws and was waving his front ones out at Mikoro.

“Rrehh. Rrreehh...”

“Heh. Thanks, Mikoro. For looking after our fuzzy friend here, I mean. I can see most of his wounds have healed nicely, thanks to you.”

“Aaww, that’s okay! You’re both adorable friends and need looking after!”

The cat-girl giggled as she parked herself on the sofa. She set Dari down on her lap, then, scooping up the eager little bear, deposited him right next to her little friend; on top, it would have been, had she not rolled aside just in time.

“Oof. Careful!”

“Rrah-rrahh!”

Fuzzy Friends Forever

On top it was, then, for the bear wasted no time in clambering onto Dari and padding at her face with his little paws.

“Heheh. You’re a little rascal, you know that? But you’re *our* rascal. Don’t you forget it, alright?”

A delighted bleat: “Gwuuhhh.”

“Now. Mikoro? Would you like to help me arrange something special for our fuzzy little friend here?”

“What kind of something special? Oohh, you mean tasty treats?!”

“Later, maybe. I’ve something more important in mind.”

“Um. What’s more important than having tasty treats?”

“I’ll show you. First, I’ll need you to go in there and get...”

“There! Just like that! Is that okay?”

“That’s *perfect*, Mikoro.”

“Ooh. No no, wait, I have to add this! And *this*; and then...”

“Mikoro, what are you – ohh. Right. *Captain*. Of course.”

“Heehee! You didn’t forget, did you?”

“As if I could.”

“So what’s next?”

“Kiyoko’s next. Is she around?”

“Um...nope. I think she went to the museum with Sayuri.”

“Oh. Alright, then. I’ll hang around till she gets back.”

“Yaay! That means we can play! I’m free all day today! Ooh, let’s see if the students want to get involved in this too!”

“That’s a good idea Mikoro, why don’t we go find Anna, Hina, Kurumi and Nagisa and see if they – w-wait! Mikoro! What are you – *gyaah!*”

Nomf!

“Mmm! So Dari goes in my tummy, and fuzzy here goes...”

“Rrreeh! Rrreeh!”

“...on my head, like that! Ooh. Why are you nibbling my ear? Are you hungry too, little fuzzy? Shall we go look for some bear snacks?”

“Urrgh.”

“Sorry about that Dari.”

“...It’s okay Kiyoko.”

“No. No, it really isn’t.”

“Please, don’t worry. I’ve known for years now what your sister’s like. And this...well, it’ll come off eventually. Things usually do.”

Fuzzy Friends Forever

“No, Mikoro and I will be having a little *talk* tonight. It’s bad enough that she knows wolfing people down without asking first is a bad habit, heavens know how many times I’ve had to teach her that. But that she’d forget about *this*, too? Even after the incident with the cake?”

“Yeah. I know. Well...it’s only pizza, I guess.”

“The cheese is stuck all through your hair, Dari! That’s going to get real stinky unless you – ”

“N-No, really, it’s okay! I’ll, er, wash it out, or something. But Kiyoko – did you...”

“Oh! Yes. Here, just as you asked.”

“That’s wonderful. Thank you so much, Kiyoko. And now I’d better – ”

“Nuh-uh. I’m not letting you wander around the Academy like that, little lady. Come on, I need a wash too.”

“What? You d-don’t mean – eek! Kiyoko! P-Put me down!”

“Hmhmm. Like this?”

“Nnnnn...nnnngh...”

“Shhh. Come on, let’s go clean up and relax a while in the bath together. I’ll just get my towel...”

“Mmmph...”

“Wow, Dari! So squeaky clean!”

“Heh. Yeah. Kiyoko...saw to that. She really did.”

Chu~

“Aaww. Come here Sayuri. You’re real good friends to me here, you know that? The best family I could ever have dreamed of.”

“Right? I know exactly what you mean!”

“And Sayuri? Thank you for taking good care of the little bear while I was – erm – away. Yeah. I heard you took him on an outing last night. That’ll have done him a world of good. Speaking of which...”

“Oh? So what you’ve brought here...this is for our fuzzy friend too?”

“Yep. The more we can help his faraway friends, the more it’ll help him too. So if you could just...”

“Ooh? In that case...right here, next to Kiyoko’s, okay?”

“Aaww. That’s so sweet Sayuri.”

“So are you going to get...um, everyone’s? That sounds like a lot of work...”

“Well, as many as I can. And yeah. It will be. And it’ll keep me away from the Academy for a time, you know what my...friends, out there, are like. I have a feeling most of it isn’t going to be travel time exactly. But it’ll be worth it. It’s the best thing I can think of to reduce the chances of Mr. Fuzzy getting hurt like that again.”

“Oh...I see. Aaww, Dari...”

“Come here you.”

Fuzzy Friends Forever

Mnmh mnmh.

“I’m so happy for our fuzzy friend – to have a friend so dedicated as you...”

“Heh, right back at you Sayuri. The pair of you are made for each other, you know that? So I know I don’t need to ask you this, but: take good care of one another while I’m gone, alright? I’ll be back soon. I promise.”

“Nnngh! Wh-What was I th-thinking, lugging this here all b-by my – ah! Rida...th- there you are...”

“Well! What’ve you got there, my little pistachio nut? What’s with all your extra wrapping today?”

“Ugh. How about a hand helping me unroll it instead of standing there drooling? It’s kind of unwieldy for me, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Yeah, yeah. What is it?”

“It’s for that little bear. You know, the one who – ”

“The one you set loose in here to eat me out of house and home, thinking it’d get me jogging to the shops for exercise?”

“That – n-no, I told you I did nothing of the sort! He followed me through the rift by himself, he – aahh, Ridaaaa!”

“Mhmm. You know, you still haven’t made that up to me.”

“Y-You ate me instead! Have you already forgotten?”

“Yeah, that was for the snacks. You still owe me for the other part in its own right. You know: the part about letting a hungry bear rampage through my house?”

“A tiny bear! He’s fuzzy – he was – ahh, aahh, *whatareyoudoing?* Aaahh, not in there, you fat – ”

CLOMP.

“Eh? What’s that about my butt? Louder so it can hear you!”

“Mmff...mmmffff!...”

“Ahhh. Much better. Now, let’s have a look at what we’ve got here. ...Oh? Right. Right, I see! Well, isn’t that just like you, my tender thing. I don’t know whether that’s ingenious, or just another of your rash little schemes that’s gonna get you in more trouble than you bargained for – *shove, shove* – but...hey, why not? Well then – *theeere* we go! Nice and huge. And in that case...Connie? Connie, you there? Get in here, you’ll want in on this too before Dari gets stuck in your ear about it.”

“Haah...haah. Whew. F-Finally out from under her corpulent, too-big-for-its-own-good – *gyaah!*”

“Hey there, green bean!”

“Ahh...h-hey Jora. You surprised me there, heheh.”

Fuzzy Friends Forever

“And you me. It’s been a while, Dari. What’s all this I’ve been hearing about some fuzzy little bear, magically appearing at everyone’s places and making short work of their food?”

“He’s – oh. You mean...you haven’t met him yet?”

“Met him? So you’re telling me it’s true.”

“Well...yeah. The bear’s our friend now. I’m kinda surprised you’ve not...”

“You don’t say. Look: to be honest I was having a hard time imagining it. I mean, a bear, Dari. A *bear*. In real life – I mean, around here – a bear getting in your house isn’t exactly good news. But, if you say it’s real...”

“Yeah. I know it’s kinda hard to believe. Let’s just say he’s a rather...unique kind of bear, alright? Goodness knows where he came from, but it’s true he’s been scurrying around climbing and licking all my friends of late, so I’m sure you’ll get your turn soon. Positive in fact, if you’ll help me out with this.”

“And there I was thinking you’d come specially to join my coffee break. You’re just in time too, you know? Alright, go on, show me what you’ve got there.”

“Do you...think you could put me down first? You’re...squeezing me a little tight...”

“Oh. Was I? Mm, sorry. Didn’t mean to. That’s weird. Just for a moment there, I’d swear I felt some kind of...”

“Uhh...Jora? Are you alright?”

“Ahh, never mind. Let me see that.”

“You see? Rida, Connie, the Ibarakis – ”

“And Jorako there, is that what you’d like?”

“Please. You’d be doing him – and me – a huge favour.”

“Well, alright. I can’t say I understand any of this, but hey, if even Rida’s okay with it...”

“Thanks Jora. And...yeah, you’d better keep your food locked away for now. Just ask Rida, her kitchen got completely cleaned out. Not that he wasn’t doing her a favour with some of the fatty atrocities she keeps in that cupboard...”

“Why are you mumbling? What was that, Dari?”

“Oh, um...n-nothing. Not a thing! Oh, you, uhh, might not want to get in the habit of leaving your coffee right next to your computer like that. You know. Just in case. He kind of...runs around everywhere.”

“Heh. A little terror then, is he? No worries, I’ll be careful. What about this lunchtime snack here though?”

“What lunchti – *aahh! Jora! What are –* ”

“Mmm, yep. Too delicious to leave lying around.” *Slurp. Slurp.*

“Ahhnn...y-you people...nnnghh...you n-never change...”

“Yeah we do. See, we get this mouth-watering bean that drops into our lives, and soon our tongues are slobbering and stomachs churning and hearts fluttering in ways they never knew how to before, and then we’re visiting these places we

Fuzzy Friends Forever

never imagined existed, like Rida's place and the Chaldea Academy, and learning these crazy things like, you know, how to share, or getting an insightful taste of our own medicine at times; so, yeah, I guess we could say you're..."

"Eeeeeep!"

Glug.

"Mmmh. Delicious."

"Urgh. How long have I – ahh! Come on Dari, you know better than to ask that by now. Alright. Focus, now. Creame usually comes by here, doesn't she? So where could she – "

BOOOMF!

"Mmmmmph! Mmmff, mmmmmfff!"

"Ooooooh! What's this? I'll catch it, I'll catch it – got it!"

"Mmmnnnn....nnnnphhh..."

"Waaah! It's so cute! Oooh, I'm gonna do some too! Lots and lots..."

"Mnnngh...nnngh...*glmphh!* Nnnnnn!! Nnnnn – "

SCHLP.

"Lots and lots...lots and lots and lots..."

"Seventy-seven! Seventy-eight! Seventy-nine! Come on Dari! Come on!"

"Nnnnnngh! Cy! I c-can't..."

"Yes you can, Dari! Yes you can! Yes you...oh. Uhh...Dari? Slipped in already?"

"Mmnph...mmnff..."

"Heh. Not your best round, that. You've been overdoing it again, haven't you? Well...fair's still fair. Now you rest up in there, nice and tight, and my muscles will have you ready to go again in no time. Ahhhh...yes, that they will. That's right."

"Mmnn...mmnn...mmnn..."

"And in the meantime...sure, I'll consider this little request of yours. This...huh. This is it? This mushy thing? What's this got to do with that little fuzball?"

"....."

"Dari? What, don't tell me you've actually fallen asleep in there? Hoo, that's a first. You must really be exhausted. So, I suppose you want me to do one of these too, do you? You're joking right?"

"....."

"Hah. Well, I suppose it couldn't hurt to add a little something. But in my own style, you got that? Yeah. On my terms. So I'll have to give them *this*, of course, but then, how about...hmm. Well, why not? That ought to hold them steady."

"....."

Fuzzy Friends Forever

“Yeah. That’s what matters, you said, isn’t it? There, all done. Oh, and – I know he’s insufferably cute and all that, but...ask him if he could at least bring his own drinks next time, alright?”

“Trust me, you said. It’ll be worth it, you said. Nnghh. Come on Dari. Almost there. Just think what it’ll add to this if you can get that lynel. Yes, she’s terrifying. You know she is. But what’s the worst she can do to you, after all you’ve...”

Clop-clop-clop-clop-clop...

“After all...you’ve...”

CLOP!-CLOP!-CLOP!-CLOP!-CLOP!-CLOP!

“...if you can get that lynel’s attention, which you didn’t think so far ahead to because you’re a hopeless, silly little aaahh, aahh, aahh – eeeeeeeeeek – ”

SQQCHH!

Clop-clop-clop-clop-clop-clop-clop...

“Nnngh...n-no way...nnnnhhh! H-How...nnnnggh...h-how did I – nnmph...nnd np nn...nnrr...glmmppfff...”

SQCH...SQCH...SQCH...SQCH...

“Mmff!...Mmff!...Mmff!...Mmff!...”

“Ufufufu. Are you not privileged to have such a generous goddess looking out for you, my inattentive little wanderer?”

“Urrgh. Th-Thank you, Majora. Really. And for – ”

“Mmhh, yeah, I guessed this was important to you. You’ve invested a great deal of energy in it, haven’t you? Here, I’ve even seen fit to take on myself the nuisance of fusing it back together for you, *and* translating your stomp friend’s...contribution, to a size and form more manageable, I suppose, for your purposes.”

“Nnhhh.”

“On which note: would you care to explain?”

“Aah! S-Sorry, sorry. Still so...dizzy...”

“Mmm. Well. You know, my little pet, you become familiar with many things when you’ve watched the realities revolve as long as I have. But I’d swear you’re the only creature in all existence who, sent flying by a stampeding taurid in heat, is *simply guaranteed* to soar straight into her dripping...”

“Nnnnnhhh! M-Majora! You don’t need to – ”

“Fufufu. I know. Stated out loud, it rings so absurd that it couldn’t possibly be true, correct? And yet, such is the reality you know; the path on which you are carried; the trajectory on which you’re flung, and caught, and flung, and caught...”

“Nnghhh...”

Fuzzy Friends Forever

“...the tube through which you’re squeezed, squeaking and squirming delectably all the way...”

“Nnnnnnghh! G-Goddess...”

“...all along with these sweet little cheeks lit up, just as the stars themselves light up with passion at the sight of you!”

“M-Majora...p-please...the...the...”

“Hmmh? Oh yes, that. The answer’s no.”

“Wh-What? But...”

“I shall not participate in the machinations of mortals. They are beneath me. Do you forget who I am, my little confection? *What I am?*”

“But – that’s what I – you’re a goddess – it’ll mean so much – please...”

“No.”

“You care about the balance, don’t you? Well this is for the balance of – ”

“No.”

“Look, I don’t even know how it’ll turn out! You know my plans never go how I think they will! That’s just your kind of chaos, isn’t it? All I’m trying to do here is – I just want to do my best for – ”

“Oh alright, alright, give it here! You know I’m toying with you Dari. Of course you’d eventually say – no, don’t say it – you’re *doing it for your friends*, yes, that; and once you’ve decided that, you’ve decided it, and it’s a wall that neither bends nor breaks to any will in the universe. You’re impossible sometimes, you know that?”

“I...suppose. Eheh. Yeah. Even after all this time I still find it so difficult to believe sometimes; that all this is more than a dream, or something. I mean, I’m just Dari; but, look at me...sitting here in your fingers, talking with – M-Majora, *what the heck is that?*”

“Bleh. What does it look like?”

“I’m honestly not sure I want to guess. It’s...kind of terrifying really. I thought it’d be a bit more...you know...”

“More...what? *Befitting my awe-inspiring deific stature?* You don’t seriously want them to *believe* I’m out here watching their every move, do you? Where’d the fun be in that? If they’re *expecting* it when I slurp them up through the cosmic gateway I’ve hidden herein?”

“Majora...”

“Mmlehh, I suppose anything *could* happen if it’s taken to that place. Well, suits me. I’ve not had the bother of going near it since, oh, you’ll be too young to remember. They nearly drove me insane you know, proving to me that I don’t exist. Well do as you will with it. If they’re to that fuzzy phenomenon’s concern then all the best to him I say. And...”

“Huh? What is it?”

“.....”

Fuzzy Friends Forever

“Majora...are you – ”

“You send him straight here if he starts getting hurt again, understood? I swear, that pitiful bawling will terminally shatter the equilibrium of all existence if I have to hear it again.”

“Uh, you mean you – ”

“I heard it. I never want to hear it again. Let him clamber all over me in my sleep again for all I care. Just keep him happy.”

“...Thanks, Majora. I really, really appreciate this.”

“I know. Now appreciate this, too.”

“Ah! Nononowaithwatareyou – ”

SCHLOPP!

“Mmmmmphhhh...!”

“Mmff...mmmmff! Mnnn...haah, haah! Minora, p-please...!”

“Hush, little one. Why must you always squirm so? Did I not sufficiently advise you last time as to what happens when you interrupt my meditations?”

“Mnhh! Mmmph! Glnmphh!”

“Now settle. I promised to consider your appeal, so I shall, but first you must learn to approach me with a little more patience. Not everyone enjoys such ready access to my person, you know?”

“Nnmnnn...nn gnvv nnp...”

“Theeere we are! And that about wraps it up, Dari dear, does it not?”

“Thanks Mother. I...think it does, yes. And please pardon me just this once, but *thank fuck for that.*”

“Arara. My dear, just look at all the loving and supportive friends you’ve made! Oh, just laying eyes on this warms my heart. It’s clear they all care so *much* for you!”

“Yeah. So much. Eheh.”

“Still, I hope they didn’t put you through too much for this?”

“Put me through – ”

“Rrreeeh!”

“Ah. There you are. Well? Do you like it, Mr. Fuzzy? Tell me you like it. Please, please, tell me you like it. Do you know what I had to – yes – *go through*, literally, to get these for you? Every single one? Yes, that’s right, go on. Sniff them, just like that. Lick them if you – no, please don’t munch them. I’m not doing this again if you eat it up. Once was more than enough.”

“Rrre-rre-rarara.”

Fuzzy Friends Forever

“Look at you. Staring at me with that harmless little face. I don’t get it, you know. How do you do it? How do you manage to get me *even more* soaked, squished and swallowed than I already do?”

“Rreh.”

“Sometimes I really don’t know. My life: is it real? Can this be real? Is Fuzz-Fuzz here real? Does it all exist? Well, don’t ask me. I don’t suppose you’d happen to know, Mother?”

“Hmmm. Well, they’ve been debating that one for thousands of years, Dari darling. Oh, I know! Why don’t we ask my dear Mikoro?”

“Yeeeeeah – no. Please don’t. It doesn’t *need* an answer I guess. We could, you know, just settle for the question. Yeah. Let’s do that.”

“Now then, how many copies?”

“Erm. That’s also a good question. How many copies, bear?”

“Rreh. Rreh. Rreh. Rreh.”

“I guess you’re keen to be off again, right? I won’t even ask how you come and go. You’ve probably got your own rifts I suppose. Or portals. Bear-shaped ones, or something. With the ears. Yeah. But – look here. Before you go...”

“Rehhh-rereh.”

“Here. No – here. I want you to listen *carefully* to this, okay? Now look. No matter how much trouble you get me in, you fuzzy little scoundrel; no matter how much you annoy my friends by eating all their food or climbing about on them in the night; we’re your *friends*, you got that? All of us. You’ll always, *always* have a home among us. We’re never letting you get hurt like that again, and if ever you’re lost, or in pain, or just want somebody to cuddle, you call out to us, or come to whichever of us is nearest, and we’ll make sure you’re safe, and warm, and cosy, and have plenty to eat and all the love and cuddles that a sweet little bear like you deserves. Do you understand me? Tell me clearly, because I want to be *really, really sure* you understand me.”

“Rrr. Rrr.”

“Good. Now then, off you go, you fuzzy fuzzy fuzzy you. I’m sure we’ll see you again soon.”

“And there he goes! Arara. Isn’t he a sweetheart?”

“Look at that. Wobble wobble wobble. Every day’s a surprise. You know, I don’t even remember which reality I first bumped into him in. I just turned around one day and there he was, following me around, or watching me from the bushes, or...”

“Hmhmhm. A mysterious little friend from far away. You know, that sounds much like you, my dear.”

“Wahh! M-Mother...”

Chu~

“Eheh. Thanks. Thank you, Mother. For everything. And, uhh...Mother?”

“Yes Dari?”

Fuzzy Friends Forever

“Do you mind if I, erm...that is to say...”

“Hehehe! Oh, sweet girl, your blush says it all. You needn’t even ask. I can tell you’ve been in enough mouths and holes for...mmm, how many days since you set out? Now you know I can’t do anything if one of your more...*celestial* friends decides to pick you up, but, to the best of my ability, I’ll keep you dry and out in the open for the rest of your stay. Mother’s word.”

“Fuzzy fuzzy fuzzy fuzzy...”

“Dari dear? Are you alright?”

“Oh? Ah, sorry. I...ehh, got distracted.”

“Aaww, that’s alright dear. He’s that good a bear, isn’t he?”

“That he is, Mother. A very, very good bear.”

