

Falling in Love with Fauna – A Second Life Inspired Story

by Rin Elyran (zarudin) and Elly Elyran (alaea 1976)

Beyond the tunnel of darkness, there is a place where many have called home, and where some have called heaven. This place is known as Fauna, and Fauna's setting is beautifully inspired by the Northwest United States.

For Rin Elyran, Fauna marks the end of the monochrome nightmares of his past, and the beginning of new dreams for the present and future, all in technicolor. For Elly Elyran, Fauna provides endless inspiration for photos, and for Zevarius Elyran-Kerensky, Fauna's climate provides cool comfort from the sweltering heat of the rest of the world.

For the Elyrans, the road beyond the dark tunnel is indeed the road that leads to heaven.

Both spiritually and emotionally, Rin was very much a scarred, ill-tempered fox, very disgusted by the fact that, out of the blue, he was dismissed by former coworkers that he once regarded as his "friends". In contempt, Rin washed his hands of all his former jobs and hangouts, choosing to hide in an abandoned underground bunker he found, shutting himself off from the rest of the world. Though his self-inflicted injuries from the past have long since healed, Rin still remained a tired, angry fox.

Rin spent each day and night in the cold and dark of the bunker, his only defense being a solitary loaded revolver on the shelf beside Rin's improvised bed. His fluorescent lantern of late 1980s design was the bunker's sole source of light; though the bunker did have electricity at one point, Rin gave up on constantly trying to patch up the circuit breaker panel, so he lived without electricity for many years.

Rin picked up the revolver and stared at the open end of the barrel.

Rin: Should I kill myself and end it all?

Having paused for a few moments, Rin decided that suicide isn't worth the trouble. Without saying a word, he unloaded the gun and lazily tossed it back onto the shelf. Rin knew deep down that, by killing himself, his ex-friends would automatically win, a victory that Rin would never allow to happen.

As he laid curled up in the bunker, Rin slept without paying any mind to the occasional howl of the wind beyond the bunker's door. His tail offered very little warmth, though it was better than nothing.

Rin had recurring nightmares about the days when he was ousted from his former jobs, with each nightmare starting off innocently and sharing the same ending. One of these nightmares, for example, illustrated how a pack of wolves found him in a cave in the center of a dense forest. They gave him warmth and food, gave him the love he needed, and accepted him as part of their pack. Rin enjoyed their company up until the morning he woke up to his betrayers holding him at gunpoint, pulling their triggers in what felt like slow motion to Rin. The nightmare ended just before the guns' hammers struck the bullets, and as a result, Rin saw kaleidoscopic patterns interspersed with the darkness of the bunker, while his heart pounded with anxiety.

March 1st, 2025. 3:35 AM. Sitting on his bed, Rin stared blankly into the darkness in an attempt to ward off the nightmares, while his empty stomach grumbled. As Rin was about to leave the bunker to gather food, an angel appeared before him, illuminating the bunker with warm, radiant light. The angel, named Melissa, was a dapple gray mare with a silken white fur-trimmed gown and beautifully styled dark hair which seemed to flow with the wind. Standing over a foot taller than Rin, Melissa approached Rin with grace and kindness, having been Rin's guardian angel for all of his life.

Melissa: Rin, one of your past employers has passed away. I think you know who I'm referring to.

Rin thought of all the bad luck and the struggles he had gone through over the years, trying to fit in at the places he once frequented. He also thought about all the 3-hour shifts where he was his own audience, and about how his late former employer's own DJ sets were almost completely packed with visitors. Rin initially felt indifferent, but as the news sank in, he became very livid, knowing full well that this same late former employer went out of her way to continue hurting him. In a fit of rage, Rin got up from his bed and angrily overturned it, kicked around several empty cardboard boxes, and throwing aluminum cans at the windows, until every window was shattered. Knowing not to intervene, Melissa stood aside and let him unleash his fury, and Rin continued to mess up the bunker until he cut his heel on a shard of glass from the windows, the sudden sharp pain bringing Rin back to reality.

Calming himself from his breakdown, Rin hobbled toward Melissa, falling into her and hugging her with all of his strength. Visibly trembling, Rin submissively folded his ears back and buried his face in Melissa's shoulder. Melissa compassionately shared her stole with Rin, and wrapped her wings around him, comforting him as she hugged him tightly.

*Rin: *shakily* Melissa, please forgive me for coming undone.*

Melissa forgave Rin with a kiss between his ears, which quickly eased his trembling.

Melissa: You've bottled up your anger for far too long, Rin, so your breakdown was warranted. After having lived for so long at the absolute bottom, the only way to go is up. Because from here on out, things will only get better for you. I will send two of your most loyal friends from the past to be here by dawn on the day before Easter. They will bring you into their home, and they will restore you to good health, both physically and emotionally. And your bitterest nightmares of the past will no longer haunt you.

A moment of silence fell as Rin looked up at Melissa with sadness and longing in his eyes. Lovingly wrapping her arms around Rin, Melissa smiled down at him, and kissed his head once again, in confirmation of the promise that she made. Folding his ears back, a single tear rolled down Rin's face as he smiled up at Melissa, his tail beginning to wag rapidly, and his tension fading away. After many years of darkness and loneliness, Rin finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel... and it was only going to get brighter.

Melissa invited Rin to take her hand and follow her up the stairs of the bunker, where she opened the door effortlessly, without the need to unlock it. Rin followed Melissa up the stairs of the bunker, and outside where he breathed his first breath of fresh air in a long time.

By the light of the moon, Rin examined the cut on his heel more closely. Finding no pieces of glass embedded in his heel, he wrapped it with a piece of cloth taken from an old T-shirt. Glancing up from dressing the wound, Rin looked around for Melissa, though she had already left him. Rin recalled Melissa mentioning his two most loyal friends, and how they will soon be giving him shelter. At first, he thought that Elly and Zevarius were coming to pick him up, but as he remembered Melissa's exact wording, he realized she meant Ember and Nuku. Breathing more of the fresh night air, Rin decided to try walking on his own, not bothered by the sting in his heel.

For quite a number of years, Ember and Nuku have been among the Elyrans' most enduring friends. Every passing year makes their friendship stronger, with Ember and Nuku always remaining beside Rin, Elly, and Zevarius through the good times and the rough times. Of all the living friends they've had prior to 2025, Rin, Elly, and Zevarius have trusted Ember and Nuku the most.

Rin hobbled along the hiking trail of a nearby forest in search of something to soothe his grumbling stomach. As he approached the apple tree he's relied on for years, he found a basket full of crisp apples, and a tag attached to the basket's handle with his name on it. Having washed the apples in a nearby stream, he sat on the bank, sliced some of the apples with his knife, and enjoyed eating them as the moon flickered on the surface of the water. After eating his fill, Rin went to lay down in the middle of a forest clearing, generously leaving the other apples for various creatures to enjoy. He clicked off the lantern and went to sleep, lulled by the chorus of the wolves of the forest. A small group of foxes found Rin as he lay sleeping, choosing to lay beside him and provide warmth. As Melissa had promised, Rin's tired mind banished his past nightmares and began composing new dreams that he had never dreamt before, dreams where he no longer had to worry about being threatened by gun-toting ex-friends... dreams where Rin, his wife Elly, and his brother Zevarius enjoyed the company of Ember and Nuku.

April 19th, 2025. Approximately 5:50 AM. Rin had slept for a month and eighteen days, and though it was far longer than he anticipated, the long sleep left him feeling quite refreshed not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. He carefully removed the cloth from his foot, and though he was disappointed that it hadn't healed over completely, he was quite happy that the cut had never gotten infected; only a trace of dried blood remained in his fur. Returning to the stream, Rin rinsed out the rest of the blood near the cut on his heel, and splashed his face, cleaning out whatever grime had accumulated in the fur of his face and ears. Suddenly, the sounds of the closing doors of a pickup truck, followed by the clip-clop of a horse's hooves in the distance, attracted Rin's attention. Rin switched on his lantern and stood up, listening intently to the voices from beyond the forest. Rin recognized the voices right off, despite their owners being a medium distance away.

???: Aren't these Rin's paw prints?

???: Looks like it... but look at this splotch of blood and tuft of black and white fur next to one of the prints – that's fox blood.

???: I'm very worried about Rin... Last time we saw him, he was much more welcoming and outgoing than this. I just hope he didn't leave the door open only to die in there.

???: He's alive... those paw prints leading over the forest are still fresh.

The beams of their flashlights followed the cascade of paw prints leading up to the forest's trailhead, right to where Rin stood. Recognizing their faces, Rin smiled as he began approaching them with a slightly unsteady gait. Seeing the faces of his two most loyal friends made Rin feel like a lost fox who reunited with his family. Their beams now pointing at Rin, the LED flashlights belonged to Ember, a beautiful purple pegasus, and Nuku, a handsome Ezo red fox. As they hugged each other tightly, Rin's tail wagged very rapidly.

Ember: So good to see you, Rin! How long have you been living in that bunker?

Rin: Quite a long time... I've lost all sense of time while I was in hiding.

Ember: Sounds like a pretty long while. Tell you what: let's collect your things, and we'll take you back to our house to make you all well again, alright?

Rin: Sounds wonderful!

Descending the stairs for the final time, Rin led Ember and Nuku into the bunker and helped gather Rin's belongings, carrying them up the stairs and placing them into the bed of the truck while taking care not to step on the broken glass. Ember saw the revolver on the shelf, along with its ammunition, and asked Rin about them.

Ember: *What should we do about this gun?*

Rin: *Let's keep it. I personally don't need it, but maybe Zevarius would want it.*

Nuku: *Yeah, you won't need to worry about defending yourself anymore. You'll be completely safe while you live in Fauna. If that's what you want, of course.*

Rin: *I want to live in Fauna... I've been wanting to come back since at least 2018.*

Ember and Nuku made their way out of the bunker as Rin grabbed his lantern and took one last look before ascending the stairs.

Caressing their faces with its warmth, the 6:00 AM sun peeked above the horizon and beamed down on the three of them, and it was the first sunrise that Rin had seen since 2022. Ember and Nuku helped Rin take off his red sweater, which was heavily soiled with years of dirt. His body showed no signs of injury – no scrapes or broken bones could be found, though Ember was concerned about the cut on Rin's heel.

Nuku offered Rin his hooded jacket to wear for the trip home. To prevent the cut from reopening, Ember wrapped Rin's foot with self-adhering bandaging, taken from an equine first aid kit in the bed of their truck. Nuku pulled a remote out of his pocket and unlocked the truck, its door locks responding with a soft click. After Ember and Nuku helped Rin climb into the back seat of the truck, Nuku climbed up into the driver's seat while Ember sat next to Rin. For extra warmth, Ember blanketed Rin with her luxuriously feathery wings. As they drove along the dirt road, four seemingly random horses ran alongside the truck, among which was a beautiful white horse with silky mane. Though Rin had never seen these horses before, Ember and Nuku knew exactly who they were. Riding on the white horse was Melissa, smiling at the trio and saluting as she proceeded ahead of the truck. Acknowledging her, Nuku, Ember and Rin smiled and waved back at Melissa.

Having driven for most of the morning, the three of them arrive in a suburb of Fauna known as Whitetail. Leaving Rin to Nuku's care, Ember goes into the Aura Outpost convenience store to buy a few things for them to snack on for the trip home. Nuku meanwhile regularly checked on Rin through the mirror in the visor.

Nuku: *How are you holding up back there?*

Rin: *A little tired, a little hungry... but I'm doing fine. How much further until we arrive?*

Nuku: *About 20 miles... we'll be there just after sunset. Hang in there, Rin.*

Having obtained everything else she needed, Ember loaded everything into the flatbed, and got back into the truck, sitting next to Rin once more.

Rin: *So, this is Fauna?*

Nuku: *Yes, this is the new Fauna... new as of 2020, in fact. As you can see, we took a lot of inspiration from the Northwestern U.S. There's lots of places to explore here, and once you feel up to it, we'd love to take you for a tour on horseback... same goes for Elly and Zevarius.*

Rin: *I would really love that. And as much as I liked the way it used to look, I really love the way Fauna looks now.*

Ember: *Thank you! And I'm glad you wanted to come back to us... We really missed you.*

As the sun began to set, they pull into the gravel driveway of Ember's and Nuku's ranch house. Nuku turned off the engine, stepped out of the truck, and helped Rin out of the truck with Ember. Nuku and Ember gently guided Rin through the back door and through the kitchen of the house, where Ember washed Rin's face more thoroughly. After changing into a red T-shirt and lounge pants, Rin put Nuku's coat into the washing machine, while Ember added Rin's sweater and cargo pants to the other laundry that was already inside the washer.

Ember put on the kettle and prepared three bowls of ramen, one for each of them. As the kettle began whistling, Ember halved three hard-boiled eggs, placing the egg halves into the bowls with the ramen noodles and seasonings. Nuku carefully took the kettle off of the stove and filled each bowl almost to the brim. While they waited for their ramen to cool just enough for eating, Rin helped Ember and Nuku unload the groceries. Outside, three of the four horses from earlier made their way into the stable near the paddock, at the back of Ember's and Nuku's property.

After they finished their dinner, Nuku grabbed a set of flannel bedsheets from the first-floor linen closet, and brought them to the first-level bedroom, where he and Rin furnished the bed for Rin to sleep in. While switching off the downstairs lights, Ember heard a tapping sound at the back door. As she opened the door, a little white fox rushed past Ember's hooves, and headed straight for the bedroom, chattering with joy. Smiling, Ember followed the fox into the bedroom, where Nuku and Rin were fluffing the pillows and adding the finishing touches. When they were finished, Ember helped Rin climb into the bed, and then let the fox jump up and get settled into Rin's arms.

Ember: *This little fox found her way to our door while I was shutting things down in the kitchen. I don't know how she found us, but she... apparently knew you were here.*

Rin: *This is Yuki. I haven't seen her since 2022.*

Nuku: *She's a very cute little fox.*

Rin: *Thank you, you guys. Thank you for taking me under your wing.*

Ember: *You're most certainly welcome. Goodnight, Rin... and goodnight, Yuki.*

Nuku: *Goodnight, Rin. See you in the morning.*

Rin: *Goodnight, Ember and Nuku. I love you both.*

Yuki: **Mrrrrra! **

After having tucked him in, Ember and Nuku took turns kissing Rin on the forehead, and Yuki between her ears. Turning off the lights, Ember and Nuku closed the door behind them as they headed up to their bedroom. On the way upstairs, Ember transferred the clothes from the washer to the dryer, set the end-of-cycle buzzer to silent, and turned on the dryer. While he lay in bed, Rin idly traced his fingers through Yuki's fur and gazed wearily at the pictures on the wall, gently illuminated in orange by a small faceted nightlight. Rin drew a tired but very contented sigh as he pulled the covers tightly above his shoulders, while Melissa remained by Rin's side as he slept.

Rin got out of bed at 7:00 AM the next morning – Easter Sunday. With Yuki in his arm, Rin opened the bedroom door to find Ember and Nuku making eggs, French toast, and bacon for breakfast. Nuku had just finished scrambling some unsalted eggs for Yuki, and compiling a set of directions to their house on his laptop, to send to Elly and Zevarius via email. Rin shuffled toward Ember and Nuku, rubbing his eyes and yawning as the morning sun warmly caressed his face. Sitting at the counter, Rin put Yuki in the chair beside him and slid the dish toward Yuki, who chattered joyfully at Rin as she nibbled the eggs. Ember turned off the burner while Nuku gently set down his knife on the chopping board, both of them looking up at Rin with a smile.

Rin: *Happy Easter, everyone.*

Ember: *Happy Easter, Rin! Did you sleep well?*

Rin: *Better than I have in years. That bowl of ramen really did wonders. Thanks again.*

Ember: *It's my pleasure.*

Nuku: *How would you like your eggs, Rin? With onions? Peppers?*

Rin: *Thank you for making breakfast. I'd like both, please.*

Ember: *Absolutely. The coffee is still hot if you're interested, and the mugs are in the glass cupboard to your left. Oh, and while you and I were asleep, Nuku buffed out the scratches in your watch, gave it a deep clean, and replaced the battery. He was up until 1 AM working hard to get it restored for you.*

Nuku: *It's quite a nice watch for its age, and very satisfying to repair. By the way, I gave your lantern flashlight a little upgrade, too.*

Rin: *Thanks, you guys. The watch was made in 1986, the year I was born, and Elly got it for me as a birthday gift in 2019. The lantern apparently was made in 1988.*

Nuku: *That's pretty awesome. It's been a long time since I've seen a Casio watch like that.*

Ember: *Hey, maybe we should sleep out by the paddock tonight. The forecast says we'll have temperatures in the lower 50s for the next two days and nights – perfect weather for a sleepover under the stars. And perhaps Elly and Zevarius could join us. Oh, and let's take a look at that heel.*

Having carefully removed the self-adhering bandage from his foot, Ember thoroughly examined the cut on Rin's heel. Pleased with how flawless the wound looked, Ember rolled up the used bandage and put it in the wastebasket.

On the counter by the window, Ember's fully-charged smartphone buzzed and rang while Nuku was serving breakfast. Disconnecting it from its charger, Ember activated the phone's video conference mode and answered cordially.

Ember: *Hello, this is Ember.*

???: *Hey, thank you for the directions, you guys. It's very nice to see you again!*

With a few swipes on the smartphone's screen, Ember pulled up the video conference on Nuku's laptop, swiveling the computer around so that the caller could get a better view of the three. Without having to look at the screen, Nuku knew exactly who the voice belonged to, and just to hear her voice again brought him a lot of joy; Ember's wings fluttered gently while she was on camera, and Nuku's tail swished rapidly. Rin's ears perked up, his heart began to pound, and a huge smile came to his face.

Ember: *Of course! How are you and Zevarius?*

Elly: *Doing well. How are things going with you two?*

Ember: *We've been keeping well... we found Rin last night near some bunker, but he's now in our care.*

Elly: *Glad he's still alive... can I talk to him, please?*

Ember: *Sure! One second.*

Grinning, Ember turned the computer toward Rin.

Rin: *Hello?*

Elly: *Hey Rin.*

Rin: *Hey Elly, how you doin'?*

Elly: *Not too bad, though I really miss you. And for someone who's lived in a bunker for several years, you look great. How do you feel?*

Rin: *Now that Nuku and Ember are giving me shelter, I feel great! So what's shaking with you and Zev? I miss you two so much.*

Elly: *Zev and I are in the good old 288, and we're on our way to see you guys. We hope to be there by sunset. Do you think you can be ready by then?*

Rin: *I'll certainly try. Drive safely, and tell Zev that I said NOMP!*

Zevarius: **teasingly* You're gonna get it, bro!*

Elly: **laughing* Well, we'll let you go. Give Ember and Nuku a big hug for us; we'll see you tonight.*

Rin: *See you later... hey, could you stop and get some lantern batteries on your way here?*

Elly: *Anything you want, we'll bring it for you... Love you, Rin.*

Rin: *Love you too.*

When the call ended, Rin slowly closed the laptop, feeling quite stoked about talking to his wife and brother for the first time in several years. With what Elly said in mind, Rin asked about freshening up after breakfast, and Ember and Nuku were more than happy to let him have the shower for as long as he wished. Before they left him to take a shower in total privacy, Rin hugged Ember and Nuku with all of his might. Dismissing themselves to their errands around the ranch, they each kissed Rin's forehead, gently closing the bathroom door behind them.

At 11:50 AM, Ember and Nuku returned from their errands. With Yuki in his arms, Nuku walked in and saw that Rin had already gotten dressed, and is now cleaning the bathroom.

Nuku: *Thank you for cleaning the bathroom, Rin. That's very generous of you.*

Rin: *I was always told to leave a place cleaner than I found it, even if the place was already very clean to begin with.*

Nuku: *Good wisdom to live by. So, how did you like your shower?*

Rin: *It was the finest I had taken in years. Thank you.*

Nuku: *You're most certainly welcome, Rin. Since it is Easter, Ember and I decided to bring you some gifts. Want to check them out upstairs, later?*

Rin: *Sure.*

At the kitchen table, Ember was enjoying a cup of tea while reading up on current events, while Rin and Nuku stood at the sink, washing and peeling carrots to give to the horses. After the carrots were cleaned and put into a container filled with water for freshness, Rin and Nuku worked together to make calzones and tomato soup for lunch.

Having chosen the scenic route, Elly and Zevarius are driving in Elly's red 1984 Ferrari 288 GTO, which was restored to perfect condition. Zevarius is a shirtless Siberian husky whom Rin regards as his brother, and Elly – Rin's wife – is a Corsac fox dressed in a black leather coat, dark red tank top and flared jeans. The two of them drove along a very lovely, scenic, asphalt road lined with pine trees and split-rail fencing, following the directions that Nuku emailed to Elly's phone. Playing from the car's stereo, Elly and Zevarius listened to a 1980s mix CD, which Rin made for Elly back in 2019. Ready for lunch, the two of them made a stop at Aura Outpost.

Elly: Looks like we only have 20 miles to go. We'll totally be there by sunset.

Zevarius: Awesome! I can't wait to see all three of them again.

Outside, two white mares wearing tied flannel crop-tops and brand-new flared blue jeans walked out of the garage next to the convenience store, one carrying automotive cleaning supplies, and the other heading straight for one of the fuel pumps. The mare at the pump opened up the gas cap for Elly's Ferrari, lifted the nozzle marked 'Premium Fuel', and began to refuel the Ferrari. Meanwhile, the other mare began to wash the Ferrari's windows, tires, hubcaps, and side mirrors. Noticing that the mares are tending to her Ferrari, Elly walked out of the store and politely approached the mares with a welcoming expression.

Elly: Thank you both for showing my car some love. How much do I owe you?

Mare #1: For you, Miss, it's free.

Mare #2: Any friend of Ember and Nuku is a friend of ours. And besides, it's Easter. By the way, you have such a beautiful 288 GTO, and a very well-kept one at that. 1984, right?

Elly: Why, thank you! Yes, she's from 1984.

Zevarius approached the counter with a basket full of snacks, two bottles of Pepsi, and three hot sandwiches – one for Elly, and the other two for himself. On his way up to the checkout counter, Zevarius included the lantern batteries that Rin requested earlier. Getting up from her wicker chair, the cashier – a lovely black wolf-husky hybrid – bookmarked the magazine she was reading, and gently rested the magazine in the chair before approaching the counter.

Zevarius: I'd like to buy all of this, please.

Cashier: Oh, you don't need to pay, my dear husky. We want you to have it for free.

Zevarius: Is there a catch?

Cashier: No strings attached. Plus, you're already friends with Ember and Nuku, so we'd like to help out any way we can.

Zevarius: Well, that's very kind of you... thank you.

Cashier: *You're very welcome. Happy Easter, dear husky.*

The cashier winked at Zevarius as he exited the convenience store. Feeling lovestruck, Zevarius smiled as he met Elly back at the Ferrari. Elly and Zevarius discussed how nice everyone has been so far, since their arrival in Fauna. Heading back to the garage, the mares paused, beaming with joy after having overheard Elly's praises. Elly and Zevarius placed their grocery bags in the trunk of the car, and sat on the bench next to the convenience store entrance, chatting as they enjoyed their soft drinks, their sandwiches and a bag of tortilla chips for lunch.

Elly: *You look stoked. What happened inside the store?*

Zevarius: *I think that cashier is in love with me, even though I've never even seen her before.*

Elly: *D'aww!*

Zevarius: *And I can't believe bro's still using that old lantern... Rin and his vintage stuff, I'll tell ya.*

Elly: *As much as I love to rib on him for collecting old tech... if it works, why get rid of it, right? And besides, those types of flashlights are getting harder and harder to find batteries for.*

Zevarius: *I'm surprised that they let me have those batteries for free.*

Working as a team, Ember and Nuku washed and rinsed the lunch dishes, while Yuki helped Rin dry them. When finished, Ember led Nuku and Rin to a stand of oaks and maples on the edge of their property, with Yuki close by Rin's side. It is here where three of Ember's and Nuku's horses are seen galloping around, chasing each other and having a blast: Ditko, a brown stallion with crisp white markings on his legs and muzzle; Brandi, a brown and white pinto mare; and Royal, a dominantly gray gelding. Ditko saw Nuku and ran toward him, slowing down to a trot as he came close to Nuku, whose arms are open and ready to embrace Ditko. Having spotted Ember, Brandi took off toward them at full force, flipping her mane and whinnying joyfully before she stopped near Ditko.

Ember: *Rin, I'd love you to meet Ditko and Brandi. Of the twelve horses we have, these two are my most favorite.*

Having never been among horses before, Rin slowly approached both Ditko and Brandi, smiling while letting the horses sniff the backs of Rin's hands. Ditko and Brandi each responded by lovingly nuzzling Rin's hands, insisting that Rin pet them. In the distance, Royal caught sight of Rin, curiously staring at him, and it took about three seconds before Rin realized he was being watched. Making eye contact, Rin felt a bond form between him and Royal, despite them never having met before. Royal calmly and confidently cantered toward Rin, each clop synchronized with Rin's heartbeat.

Royal's gentle gaze had let Rin know that he means no harm, and once within reach, Rin allowed Royal to sniff the back of Rin's hand. Sensing Rin's calmness, Royal trustingly rested his head on Rin's shoulder, and Rin gently wrapped his arms around the gelding's neck, gently brushing his mane with a medium-bristle brush he hung from the pocket of his jeans. When Rin finished brushing Royal, he began petting him, starting from the muzzle and progressing further up Royal's head, eventually stopping to pet his ears. Feeling contented, Royal laid down in the grass beside his newfound vulpine friend, and Rin sat next to him with no hesitation. Eager to receive Rin's petting, Brandi and Ditko rested their heads on Rin's shoulders, looking at Rin very lovingly. It was then that Rin opened the containers and started lovingly feeding the carrots to the horses, an experience that helped Rin rebuild his self-confidence. Ember and Nuku beamed as they watched Rin interact with the horses.

Thirty minutes later, Rin, Yuki, Ember and Nuku returned to the house, heading up to the second-story bedroom where Rin's gifts awaited. While Rin knelt on the floor with his gifts, Nuku sat on the couch with Ember, lovingly placing his arm around her as Yuki settled in on Ember's lap. Rin took the smallest box from the top of the stack, unwrapped it, and opened the box, revealing a solid bronze house key and a silver automotive key, both attached to a keyring. Rin tilted his head curiously as he examined the keys.

Rin: So, what are the keys for?

*Ember: *smiling* There's a townhome we want to give to you, Elly and Zevarius, but we can wait until tomorrow to check it out together. Oh, and the car key is for your new truck, which is waiting for you guys at the townhome; Elly and I teamed up to buy it for you.*

Rin: Oh, neat! Thank you.

Nuku: You're very welcome. Go ahead – open the rest of your gifts.

Rin continued to unwrap his gifts, starting with the smaller boxes at the top and working his way to the bottom. The second gift was a vintage graphing calculator, followed by a box of DJ software, a high-performance laptop, a four terabyte solid-state drive, a four-channel mixer, two digital turntable controllers, a pair of speakers, a drum machine, and some software synthesizers. Getting up off the floor, Rin hugged Nuku and Ember firmly, thanking them again for the gifts.

Nuku then got up from the couch and took out two small but long boxes that he had cleverly hidden, giving one to Rin and the other to Ember, who opened it immediately. Seeing the beautiful gold necklace that awaited her in the box, Ember's wings fluttered joyfully as she kissed Nuku.

Ember: Such a pretty necklace... thank you, Nuku.

Nuku: You're very welcome, Ember. And Rin, you can give that one to Elly on my behalf.

Rin: Thank you for thinking of Elly... I know she's going to love it.

At 3:00 PM, the sound of gravel crunching under tires caused Rin's ears to pivot toward the exterior door of the bedroom. Getting up, Rin slid the door open and looked down from the platform at the top of the steps, seeing a very familiar red Ferrari parked in the driveway. Yuki raced down the steps to meet the passenger and driver in the driveway, while Rin joyfully motioned Ember and Nuku to come quickly.

Ember and Nuku excitedly ran down the steps, with Rin following just five steps behind. As the pop-up headlights swiveled into their closed position and the engine switched off, the Ferrari's two doors swung open simultaneously; out came Elly from the passenger's side, and Zevarius stepped out from the driver's side. Elly was met by Ember and Nuku in the middle of the driveway. Hugging them tightly as they entered through the back door, they welcomed Elly and Zevarius into their home. Ember and Nuku took turns kissing each of Elly's and Zevarius's cheeks in greeting.

Nuku: We're so glad you guys could make it.

Elly: It's wonderful to be here... thank you for inviting us.

Nuku: Our pleasure.

Zevarius: How's my brother? You know I can never be without him.

Rin: I'm right here, hooski.

Zevarius and Rin hugged each other very tightly, and Elly kissed Rin, a kiss that seemed to last forever. Rin playfully grabbed Zevarius's snout and gently wiggled it around.

Ember: I'm so glad you guys made it. Let's have pizza and stromboli for dinner.

Rin: Would you like some help?

*Ember: *smiling* Sure!*

While Ember and Rin worked in the kitchen, Nuku gave Elly and Zevarius a tour of their home. Elly gazed at the portraits on the wall of Ember and Nuku together, each step instilling a sense of love in Elly's heart. As she looked at the pictures, Elly tearfully smiled as she thought about Sirocco, her loving late uncle who passed away in 2020, and the day Siro introduced Rin and Elly to Ember and Nuku.

After the tour, Rin helped Ember set the table, placing two potholders and a pizza slicer in the middle of the table. Wearing oven mitts, Rin brought a homemade stromboli out of the oven, while Ember brought out a pizza with sausage, pepperoni, bacon and cheese. Rin steadied the pizza while Ember cut it into eighths, letting the piping-hot pizza and stromboli rest for two minutes while they finished setting the table. Once everyone else was seated, Nuku poured everyone a glass of freshly made sangria.

By sunset, the pizza and the stromboli were eaten, save for a few errant crumbs, and the five of them enjoyed their sangria, telling stories, reminiscing about the past, and catching up with one another.

Elly: I will admit that I am pleased with how well they treated us at Aura Outpost earlier. It's like they knew I wanted to have my Ferrari refueled and washed.

Zevarius: And their customer service was phenomenal.

Ember: That's a very lovely thing to say.

Rin: So yeah, I'd like to thank you – all four of you – for being with me today, and for helping me get through all of the turmoil in my life – I really love you all.

Ember: We truly are glad you all wanted to come back to Fauna. We miss hanging out with you.

Nuku: We would be honored to have you three live with us in Fauna. This is why, Rin, we gifted you the key to the townhome, if you should decide you want to live there.

Rin: I know we haven't seen it yet, but I so want to live there. And one more thing.

Rin pulled out the box that Nuku gave him earlier, opened it, and took out the gold necklace, standing behind Elly and lovingly helping her put it on. Rin rested his chin on Elly's shoulder, kissing her cheek.

Rin: Happy Easter, Elly.

Elly leaned her head back and kissed Rin's nose.

After the sun went down, Ember led Nuku, Elly, Rin, and Zevarius from the back porch, and into the grass between the paddock and the stables. It was here that, by the light of a dusk-to-dawn mercury-vapor lamp mounted on the corner of the stable, Ember and Nuku arranged generously-sized sleeping bags for everyone to rest in. Ember manually switched off the lamp, so that everyone could enjoy the moonlit night sky, speckled with stars in every color. Zevarius settled in closest to the stables, snuggling with three jackals that had found their way onto Ember's and Nuku's property.

While Yuki slept curled up on Rin's chest, Rin gazed around the moonlit ranch within Elly's arms. Watching the others sleep in silent lucidity, Rin breathed deeply, and quietly released a sigh of contentment. Rin pulled the sleeping bag tightly over himself and Elly, and kissed Elly and Yuki before drifting off to sleep. Having been let out of the stables by Melissa, Brandi, Ditko and Royal joined the group, with Brandi sleeping next to Ember and Nuku, Ditko resting next to Zevarius and the jackals, and Royal nestling into Elly and Rin. For the first time in quite a long time, the Elyrans were very eager to see what tomorrow – and the future – would bring.

As spring turned to summer, Rin's confidence grew even further, and by June 19th, 2025, the Elyran trio had gotten settled into their second-floor townhome apartment, located not far from the onramp that leads back to Whitetail. Once completely moved in, Ember and Nuku invited Rin, Elly and Zevarius to take a horseback tour of Fauna at sunset. Melissa led the way, while Ember and Nuku rode together on Brandi, Zevarius rode on Ditko, and Rin and Elly rode on Royal. Yuki curled herself around Elly's neck, making it appear as though Elly was wearing a fur stole.

By the end of August 2025, Rin was very confident and excited about getting back into what he loved doing – DJing, a gift that Rin felt honored to give, in gratitude for the support that Ember and Nuku had given him since their meeting in 2017. Using “DJ Rinbeast” as his new DJ identity, Rin was ready to share his music with the world again, and most importantly, Rin was ready to know once again what having fun is like. On the night of August 29, 2025, Rin confidently hosted a two-hour DJ set at Moonlight Rollerway, his first DJ set in a very long time... and he greatly enjoyed it. The sparkle in Rin's eye gleamed like it did when he first took interest in DJing, albeit a lot brighter this time. Ember and Nuku were very happy for Rin, as were Zevarius, Elly, and Yuki.

Rin: And that's a wrap, everyone! Thank you all for hanging out with us at Moonlight Rollerway. I have yet another “Rintastic” DJ set lined up for next Friday at 7:00 PM, and we hope that you come back and party with us again soon. Until then, this is DJ Rinbeast signing off. Have an awesome weekend, stay safe, and I will see you next time. Goodnight everybody!

At the conclusion of Rin's speech, the crowd roared with excitement. Though the DJ set was over, Rin was still reeling from the love that Fauna had to offer.

On January 1, 2026, the Elyran trio met a lovely mare named Tamara, the owner of a pub known as Ye Olde Cosy Mare. Rin and Elly were especially very welcoming of Tamara, and as time progressed, the four of them formed a very tight bond with one another, oftentimes spending evenings together in the second- and third-floor lounges of the pub, and also in Whitetail. It was during these serene moments that Elly felt as though Tamara was not merely a neighbor; she felt like Tamara was her sister. Even Yuki developed a liking for Tamara.

On February 14th, Fauna celebrated the premiere of DJ Murdock, a chestnut bay stallion who is not only very handsome, but also quite a pleasure to hang out with. Murdock's premiere was acclaimed by not only Rin and Elly, but by Ember, Nuku, and all of Fauna as well. Murdock plays damn good music, and that's all there is to it.

On April 17th, as tokens of his ever-growing love and appreciation for Fauna, Rin presented two new original compositions that he had been lovingly working on for months. The first song is a dance-oriented tune titled “Friday at the Rollerway,” in reference to the fun Rin has while DJing at Moonlight Rollerway. The second song is an instrumental ballad titled “Sunset Over Fauna” as a tribute to all of the beautiful sunsets over the docks at the wharf.

In May, Rin, Zevarius and Elly decided to further explore a cavernous area near Berylwell Station, located along the same railroad line that rolls through Whitetail and Midori Stations. Save for the warm-white glow of Rin's newly purchased LED flashlight, the magical cavern is primarily dark, illuminated solely by crystals, foxfire, and bioluminescent fungi. Curious, Rin took off his backpack and swapped out the regular flashlight for his UV flashlight, causing the colors of the cave stand out, like fluorescent paint under a blacklight at a rave party.

As they explored the flora, the trio encountered four horses they had never seen before: two Belgian Draft mares, and two Irish Cob stallions – one speckled with black and white, and the other with black mane, white muzzle, and white hooves. These horses quickly befriended the Elyrans, and so Elly named the mares “Lisa” and “Linn”, and Rin named the stallions “Rhys” and “Johan.”

After visiting the bioluminescent cavern, Rin, Zevarius and Elly walked with the horses, exploring Deergrove, Midori, and Boötes Road, eventually stopping to rest in a pasture just outside of Boötes Arena, while the 1:30 PM sun warmed them. Later that afternoon, Elly ordered a large volume of pizzas by phone from Pizza Pi's Pizza Place, requesting that they be delivered to the wharf. Rin, Elly, and Zevarius rode the horses to the wharf to host a late-afternoon pizza party, inviting all of Fauna's residents, plus Melissa, Ember, Nuku, Tamara, and Murdock. Later on, further inland, while Zevarius and Melissa enjoyed the sunset with their favorite three jackals on the river bank below, Rin, Elly, Ember, and Nuku enjoyed the sunset together up above, on a footbridge near Ember's and Nuku's farm.

At Fauna, every new day brings more adventures for the Elyrans to embark on, more discoveries to be made, and more inspiration to unlock. Whether they venture through the caves, walk the road with horses, ride the rails in Whitetail, or enjoy sunsets on the docks and footbridges, Rin, Elly, and Zevarius will always be falling in love with Fauna, be it the scenery, the beautiful horses, or the kind, generous, and loving residents, visitors, vendors, and staff of Fauna.