

Faux Pas

By C. Jade Wyton

Isabel Parker is very nervous. She's been meeting all of her niece's friends, one by one, but she isn't sure that she's been doing well with it. Becky always seems so tense when she's around... Does she actually care about Isabel— Is she just tolerating her? Isabel can't tell. But when she meets Malinka, one of Becky's closest and most patient friends, she starts to get a better understanding of what she's been doing wrong.

A collaborative short with my friend Vanessa.

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Isabel was nervous.

Becky had said she was going to introduce her to one of her closest friends, Malinka, and Isabel didn't want to mess it up. Not like she had with that Bianca girl. Or the first time she'd met Jareth— She hoped it would all go smoothly, like when she met Adam.

But she wouldn't know until Malinka actually *got* here. For now, it was just a long, long waiting game.... And Isabel never liked waiting games.

She stroked Becky's pet mimic, Mimi, down its pillow-shaped back and felt it give a low purr and rumble.

At least Mimi liked her. She wasn't sure what Becky would do if the creature didn't. She'd seen how much Becky loved this strange little thing, from the way she always posted about it on her Twitter.

It was a strange texture. Soft, like the pillow it was mimicking, but also... fleshy. Like... flesh.

Isabel looked up to Becky as she paced back and forth in front of the window; watching out into the street as she waited for her friend to arrive. She was texting her, constantly, and it made Isabel wonder if this Malinka was driving or walking— She hoped walking. It wasn't safe to text and drive and she didn't want to see Becky's friends putting themselves in danger.

Suddenly Becky's head shot up, and she made for the front door as a well-kept little blue car pulled up outside; parking just behind Isabel's own junky old thing.

'Is that her?' Isabel asked. Though she received no answer as Becky disappeared into the hall. So, instead, she carefully moved Mimi off her lap onto the couch and stood up to follow her niece into the front yard.

Stepping out of the blue car were two Tabaxis - one tall and lanky, with *huge* ears that almost made him look like a bat! And another, shorter Tabaxi with sleek, dark fur and a brightly coloured dress. Isabel wondered which one was her friend, until Becky ran over to the shorter one and threw her arms around her.

Oh, perhaps she should have guessed. The other tabaxi was clearly a man, while Becky had said Malinka was a *she*.... Although, in this day and age, there was really no way to know!

*Hm...* Isabel watched the two tabaxi closely.

Though they both had black in their fur, the bat-eared boy seemed... *different* from Becky's friend Malinka. He had patches of white. And his face was a different shape....

Isabel took a deep breath, squinting a little as she decided; these two, though they had arrived together, were probably *not* related. And she should definitely *not* ask if they were.

'Sooooooo,' Becky took a deep breath, breaking away from her friend and motioning behind herself. 'This is... my auntie, Isabel.... Like I, like, told you.'

Isabel offered a timid wave, noticing Becky's anxiety and feeling her own nerves coming back.

*She was going to mess this up, wasn't she?*

Becky seemed to think she would....

'Nice to meet you. I'm Malinka.' Becky's friend replied politely, dipping her head a little in greeting. 'Um, this is my boyfriend, Baloney. He's just dropping me off.' Malinka added, linking her arm around the other Tabaxi's affectionately.

Baloney simply waved without saying anything. Then he nudged Malinka gently, and the two of them exchanged a variety of different hand gestures quite rapidly - sign language? Was he deaf? With ears that large it was difficult to imagine he was hard of hearing but - anything was possible, she supposed.

'Hi, yes, I'm Isabel,' Isabel introduced, trying her hardest to be polite as she offered her hand to Malinka. 'Um... Baloney. Can you tell him I said hello?'

The two of them seemed stunned for a few seconds (and Becky let out one of those little distressed noises that she always made when Isabel made a mistake) - then while Baloney shifted a little uncomfortably, Malinka bit her lip while looking somewhat amused.

'Why don't you tell him yourself?' Malinka said with a chuckle, motioning to Baloney.

'Huh?' Isabel felt her brow furrow in confusion, and she cocked her head slightly. 'I uh... I'm afraid I don't know sign language.'

'*He's not deaf,*' Becky mumbled quietly into her hands as she pressed them tight to her face. '*He can hear you.*'

'Oh?' Isabel's eyes widened, at that. 'Then why is he using sign language? Is- Oh, I'm sorry, Malinka, are *you* the one who's hard of hearing? I assumed not because of how Becky spoke to you but i-if I assumed wrong I- Oh, I'm so sorry!'

Malinka covered her hand with her mouth - but she didn't look upset. If anything, she still looked somewhat entertained. Baloney shrunk back behind her sheepishly.

'No, no! Baloney just uses sign language because it's easier for him to communicate instead of speaking.' Malinka explained rather patiently.

'*Oh,*' Isabel let out a long breath. 'Why? Is there something wrong with him?'

It was an innocent question; but Becky made that noise again, this time ever-so-slightly-louder, and Isabel felt herself tense and flinch.

'Sorry! That- I didn't mean *wrong* as in something *wrong*! I meant it, as in- Uh- Does he have an issue with speaking? With his mouth or...?'

The more Isabel spoke, the more embarrassed Becky seemed, so she

thought it best to stop and simply trailed off.

Baloney gave Malinka another nudge and they exchanged a few more gestures before he leaned down to give her a quick kiss and then hastily returning to his vehicle.

*Oh, no.... She'd scared him away....*

This was clearly *exactly* what Becky was afraid of....

Malinka turned and waved to him as he drove off. As she did so, Isabel was suddenly aware of the fact that she did not have a tail! The other one - Baloney - definitely had one, and she could have sworn that was a common trait for Tabaxi.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, putting a hand to her chest as she stared at the place Malinka's tail should have been. 'You have no tail! Did you lose it in the accident that gave you those scars on your neck?'

'Auntie!' Becky gasped, grabbing Isabel by the arm and hurriedly shaking her head. 'You can't just - Not everyone is *open* about that sort of thing, Auntie!'

Malinka stepped forward, holding her hands out placatingly.

'It's okay, Becky. Why don't we go and sit down and I can explain a little?' She offered.

'*Mmm,*' Becky gave a nervous hum, and loosened her grip on Isabel. 'Okay, Malinka.'

Isabel let out another long breath. 'Yes, that... seems like a good idea.'

At least Malinka seemed to be a patient person.

As they went inside she could hear Becky mumbling apologies to Malinka quietly, and she could feel her cheeks burning with shame.

When they sat down however, Malinka gave her a warm smile that made her feel a little better. She never understood why people always seemed to assume ill-will when she pointed things out - she was just curious after all! Was it so wrong to want to understand the world a little better?

Isabel swallowed as Mimi jumped back in her lap cooing for more attention, and scratched it down its back. It seemed to like that she used her nails to pet it; something Becky clearly couldn't do. Especially now that she was currently biting them even shorter than usual....

Malinka gently lowered Becky's hand, mumbling something about *biting them short enough to draw blood again*, and Isabel let out a long breath that accidentally got her niece's attention.

'Uh, are either of you hungry?' Becky asked. 'We have... snacks. And... drinks.'

'Maybe just some water? Just to have nearby while we chat.' Malinka suggested sensibly.

Somehow, Isabel sensed that Malinka was not suggesting it purely for her own benefit.

'I can see why Becky likes you so much.' Isabel said to Malinka after Becky scrambled away to get them water. Malinka's snout wrinkled in confusion briefly before offering her another polite smile.

'Because I keep her hydrated?' Malinka replied. Isabel frowned. *Oh she wasn't explaining things right at ALL was she?*

'No, I mean - You seem very nice. And patient.' Isabel explained hurriedly. Malinka chuckled and made another placating wave gesture with her hand.

'It's okay, I know what you meant. I was just making a joke.' The Tabaxi replied calmly.

Isabel froze - then felt all of the tension leave her body at once as she let out a nervous chuckle. *It was a joke! She wasn't mad or confused at ALL!*

Oh, what a relief!

Oh, a relief....

Isabel let her shoulders slacken as Malinka gave her a warm smile.

It *was* no wonder Becky liked her so much. She seemed like such a wonderful girl....

'Um... I'm sorry,' Isabel blurted. 'For uh... scaring off your... boyfriend?'

*Was it wrong to guess that? Had she said something about that? Isabel couldn't remember....*

Oh- What if they *were* related and she'd just made things awkward *again*?

'Yes, that's my boyfriend.' Malinka confirmed. 'I, uh, wouldn't introduce him like that if he wasn't...' She added with a sheepish chuckle. 'It's okay, he's a little shy anyway. His...*condition*, is a little difficult for him to explain to strangers.'

'Oh, so there *is* something wrong with him?' Isabel asked. Then she realised what she said and flinched, glancing towards the kitchen in hopes Becky hadn't heard that. 'I mean... not *wrong* with him-'

Something shattered in the kitchen, and Becky gave a cry before calling out; 'I'm fine! Don't get up!'

'*Oh, dear...*' Isabel mumbled as Mimi leapt from her lap and ran out of the room. 'That didn't sound good.'

Malinka held up one finger, one ear swivelled towards the kitchen.

'That....sounds like I should get up.' She said and hurried into the kitchen before Becky could protest.

'Does it? But she said not to- Uh, well. I suppose you'd know best,' Isabel decided.

She could hear the two of them talking softly. Bickering almost. But it sounded like they had everything sorted. Eventually Becky shooed Malinka out of the kitchen, determined to take care of this on her own.

'Sorry, I um, just wanted to check on her.' Malinka apologised once she had returned to her seat.

'I understand,' Isabel offered the warmest smile she knew to make, before giving a soft chuckle. 'I've heard from Jareth that she's getting a little defensive of the kitchen, actually. Since she's started learning how to cook on her own she's apparently been determined to do it *all* on her own.'

Malinka chuckled softly in return.

'It's good to see her figuring it out. Worrying when you hear glass shattering though.'

'Oh, absolutely,' Isabel nodded. 'Though I think she's rather lucky to be able to shoo people out when she breaks something- When I drop something, it's all yelling and insults. Hah.'

Malinka's ears drooped sadly.

'Ah. Yeah, not everyone is understanding when it comes to accidents.' She responded a little awkwardly. 'Um, so.....Can I ask *you* a question?'

Isabel was taken aback. Nobody ever asked *her* things. It was usually the other way around. 'Oh, yes, of course!'

The Tabaxi shifted around in her seat for a moment, looking somewhat nervous.

'Why um....This is going to sound a little blunt but, why....why do you ask people you haven't met personal questions?' Now Malinka looked tense. 'I'm not- I'm just trying to understand where you're coming from.'

'Are... *are* they personal questions?' Isabel shuffled, awkwardly. 'I thought they were just *questions*. I just- I'm curious about people. A-And I want to know about them. But I never seem to be able to... know what's *appropriate* to ask and what's not. I just. Don't really understand the difference...?' Isabel looked away, desperately fighting the urge to hide her face. Any minute now she was going to be in BIG trouble, she could just feel it.

And who knew how Malinka would tell her off? None of Becky's friends *seemed* aggressive but- You never knew....

After a few agonising moments of silence, she braved a glance over at Malinka. The Tabaxi didn't look angry at all. In fact, she looked somewhat....thoughtful? But maybe not in a scary way?

'Well....I guess a good rule of thumb would be: if it's about something that person doesn't have any control over, like what they look like for example, then it's a personal question. And not that personal questions are *bad* per se, but there are different rules for asking them. Does that make sense?' She explained gently.

Slowly, Isabel nodded. 'I think so,' she answered. 'So... for example.... If someone talks funny. That's a personal question? But if they're wearing a funny shirt, that's... not?'

Malinka smiled and gave an encouraging nod.

'Yeah! 'Cause the shirt is a *choice*. But talking funny isn't.'

Isabel returned Malinka's smile, feeling her confidence growing. But then, it fell again. 'What about... tattoos? I asked about Jareth's tattoos and that was apparently personal; but they were clearly something he *chose* to get....'

Malinka thought on this again quietly.

'Welll.....I can see why that would be confusing. I'll admit: Becky probably knows more about it than I do but - they're not just for decoration. I believe for orcs they're more personal and have deeper meanings to them. I could be wrong but - sometimes tattoos are a personal thing. Regardless of race. 'Cause they're permanent, y'know? So it kinda falls into the 'not having a choice' side of things.' Malinka kept adding to her explanation. If nothing else, Isabel could tell she was trying *really* hard.

Isabel took a moment to contemplate the answer.

It made sense. Jareth *had* said his tattoos were cultural. And- Well, Becky hadn't seemed to get upset until she'd brought up the question of if it *hurt* or not. Maybe it was the way she'd asked about *that*, that was the issue....

'Thank you,' she finally said, her smile returning. 'I really appreciate you answering me like that. I'm usually just told not to ask, because it's rude- Not *why* it's rude. It's helpful to know.'

Malinka nodded, suddenly seeming much more at ease.

'Oh I completely get you! Sometimes getting a straight answer out of

people is so frustrating!’

Isabel knew exactly what she meant. ‘Well. At least with Becky I think it’s just that she doesn’t know *how* to explain– But then you have people like my father, who just *refuse*. You know that “because I said so” type of man?’ Isabel scrunched her nose up, trying to seem playfully frustrated but not completely sure it came off that way.

And yet again, her confidence fell as she saw Malinka wince a little.

‘Unfortunately I do.’ She replied, with a sort of firmness in her voice that made Isabel wonder if she had just completely undone all of the progress she had made with this person.

For a moment, Isabel wrung her hands. Then, slowly, she reached out a hand to place on Malinka’s own. She gave a comforting squeeze and tried to look empathetic.

Malinka looked down at their hands, seeming surprised.

‘Ah. Sorry, that was not directed at you. The frustration is very real though.’ She said, with a bittersweet note of humour in her voice. ‘ANYWAY - I thought of something else that might be helpful to keep in mind, if you’re up for hearing it?’ She added hurriedly.

‘Oh, yes– Anything to help would be *wonderful!*’ Isabel exclaimed.

‘Well, sometimes, if you’re not sure if it’s a personal question or not - You can ask the person if it’s alright to ask about? That way they get to decide whether or not it’s something they wanna talk about.’

‘Ooh... that is *very* smart!’ Isabel gave a happy clap. ‘Becky was right! You’re–’

‘–Hey! Sorry I took so long!’ Becky exclaimed, hurrying back into the lounge and placing two pitchers of water and several cups down. ‘*Mimi*–’ she picked up one of the pitchers and tickled its side, causing it to turn into a scarf. ‘–wanted to help out.’

‘Good thing you picked her up *before* any of us tried to get a drink.’ Malinka joked, though she was eyeing the mimic rather warily.

‘Yeah, you wanted to *spook* everyone, didn’t you?’ Becky cooed, teasing Mimi before wrapping it around her neck. ‘You wanted to be a naughty, stinky baby!’

‘Mrrp!’ Mimi gave a happy chirp and snuggled down into place, the tip of its tongue sticking out of its mouth in a relaxed manner.

It was cute, and Isabel couldn’t help but chuckle; even if Malinka seemed nervous.

Had Mimi bitten her, before? From what Isabel knew of the creature, it was *very* likely.

‘So, um, I was just telling Isabel about some tips for figuring out if something is too personal to ask about.’ Malinka offered, turning in her seat a little in an attempt to include Becky in the conversation.

‘Oh, yes! Malinka is being so helpful!’ Isabel beamed as Becky looked a little stunned.

Then, Becky gave a smile, and relaxed a little bit before slowly taking a seat next to her aunt. ‘She’s great, isn’t she?’

Malinka shrunk down a little in her seat sheepishly.

‘Um, soo...Would you like to....practise maybe...?’ Malinka suggested.  
Isabel nodded enthusiastically— Until Becky bit her lip, looking nervous.  
Then Isabel’s nods trailed off and she gave a nervous cough.

Malinka tilted her head to one side slightly, giving them that curious thoughtful look once again.

‘I, uh. I dunno,’ Becky shuffled in place. ‘Maybe? I guess? Should we?’  
Isabel swallowed as Becky showed wrung her hands nervously. It was clear Becky thought she was going to mess up and say something terrible to Malinka.  
And... maybe she *would*.

Maybe this *was* a bad idea....

‘Before we do, um, Becky?’ Malinka suddenly spoke up. ‘Could I ask you something, um, in private? Sorry Isabel, we’ll be right back- I just need to ask Becky something.’ She explained hurriedly, taking Becky’s hand before she could protest and dragging her into the kitchen.

At first, Isabel was not worried. After all, Malinka seemed like a nice girl and she took the time to apologise before hurrying away with Becky. Then she could hear them speaking quietly to one another. She couldn’t make out what they were saying, but the way their voices were hushed brought that rising dread back up into her chest once more.

*She’s probably telling Becky how terrible I am.*

*Is that why she suggested we practise?*

*Oh Becky was right, she must have seen this coming a MILE away!*

By the time Malinka reappeared, oddly without Becky, Isabel was wringing her hands over and over.

‘So I just spoke to Becky and- Are you alright?’ Malinka began, suddenly leaning forward with a worried look on her face when she finally took a good look at Isabel.

‘I-It’s alright. I’m fine.’ Isabel replied hurriedly. *No getting emotional. She needed to respond like an ADULT.* ‘I....really appreciate you taking the time to speak with me.’ She said slowly.

Malinka’s ears drooped sadly.

‘That’s okay! I don’t mind.’ She replied. ‘I just saw you getting nervous when Becky got nervous and I thought maybe we could practise without her a couple of times? Until you’re more comfortable.’

Isabel blinked, taking in what Malinka had told her.

*Becky had been the one whose behaviour was bothering Malinka? Really?*

She wouldn’t have thought that would be the case... but then, she didn’t know enough about social situations to know whether or not Becky was actually good at it, either.

Though if the girls had simply talked it out it couldn’t have been so terrible? Maybe?

*Oh, goodness, stop just staring at her! Say something!*

‘Ah, yes. Well. I’m rarely comfortable, anyway,’ Isabel gave a nervous laugh. ‘This honestly isn’t too different from what I’m used to.’

Malinka’s ears drooped and she looked a little sad again.

‘What....what do you mean?’ She asked softly. She didn’t look like she was being judgemental, but with her nerves rattled it was a little hard to tell.

‘Oh, you know,’ Isabel almost kicked herself as the words came out— *Obviously she didn’t know, you idiot! Or she wouldn’t have asked!* ‘Just when you’re...’ she waved a hand as she tried to find the words. ‘Walking on eggshells? I think that’s the term. I’m *never* sure if what I’m doing is right and, well, with some people it always seems to *change* depending on their mood.’

Malinka nodded.

‘You, um....it’s not like that with *everybody* though, right? Like, not with your friends, I hope?’ She offered.

Isabel took a deep breath, letting her mouth hang open for a moment as she tried to think of a way to delicately explain that she didn’t have any friends. Though, as she met eyes with Malinka, she thought it might be clear to the tabaxi what she was about to say.

‘I... uh... don’t get out much,’ she decided was the best way to say it. ‘It’s mostly just me and Dad.’

‘Ah. I am familiar with that sort of set-up.’ Malinka nodded sagely. ‘Well....I know it might sound like, the OPPOSITE of helpful but, maybe you should get out more? Meet new people? Experience new things?’

That seemed *terrifying*.

Though, Isabel could see the sense in it.

The way to fix being lonely and having no social skills was to go outside and meet people to develop them.

‘I know, it sounds *horrible*.’ Malinka said almost breathlessly. ‘But...well, I can say from experience, it’s also the *best*.’

Isabel felt the edges of her lips twitch into a weak smile. ‘It *does* seem like it would be nice. I’ve seen how happy Becky is when she’s with her friends... though I wouldn’t know where to start— Perhaps that... website I saw Becky mention. Tin... der? Tinder?’

Malinka’s eyes widened and she sat up straighter.

‘No! No, not that one. I don’t think that’s the one for you.’ She said hurriedly. ‘Ummmm.....let’s see...do you have any hobbies?’ She seemed quite eager to change the subject for some reason.

*Hmm...* Isabel wasn’t sure why Malinka was so worried about this “Tinder” site. Becky had mentioned she’d been trying to meet people with it.

She made a mental note to check it out, but to be *cautious* while doing so, before biting her lip and thinking.

‘*Hobbies...*’ she echoed, quietly. ‘Hobbies.... N... no. Not anymore. Not in a long time.’

‘Not....’anymore’? But, you had hobbies at some point?’

‘Oh, yes, well, back in high school my sisters and I used to go out shopping and to movies, sometimes Barbra and I would sneak out and try and find rare birds, hah! But, after I started working I just, uh. Didn’t really have the time for it,’ Isabel shrugged. ‘And the few things I would have had time for were too childish.’

‘Ah, well. I’m sure that probably isn’t the case but, hey! You could always try something new? There’s lots of classes and stuff at the community centre.’ Malinka suggested.

‘Community centre?’ Isabel asked. ‘There’s a community centre? Oh— I



think we have one of those in Warm Waters, too! I've always wondered what those were for.'

Malinka let out a soft chuckle.

'Well, they're for all sorts of things! But yeah: they run classes and events and stuff. It's a good way to meet people and sometimes you can help out the community too! So it's kind of a win-win situation, y'know?'

'Ooh, that sounds interesting!' Isabel gave an enthusiastic nod, and felt herself breaking into a smile. 'How would I go about doing that, do you have any idea?'

'You can always go in and ask. I think that's how my Mom ended up finding a knitting group. Mind you, she already knows how to knit, she just wanted some company.' Malinka explained.

'So... I could do something I already know how to do?' Isabel sat back, placing her hand to her chest and averting her eyes as she thought about that. 'That's *very* interesting.... I can cook. Would that be something?'

'Yeah! Absolutely! And who knows? You might even end up learning even more than you already do.' The Tabaxi said enthusiastically.

'Hah, oh yes, I *definitely* would learn something!' Isabel chuckled. 'I said I cooked, but I didn't say I was any *good* at it! Especially when it comes to spices. I know how to use *salt*. But according to my father, *pepper* is too hot!'

Malinka giggled a little too. Isabel felt wonderful after that. She made someone *laugh*! And they weren't laughing *at* her— Not at her expense! They'd laughed at *something she'd said*!

It made her so giddy. And she knew she must have looked like a fool but she couldn't help but clap her hands together as her chuckle became less nervous. Malinka didn't seem to mind though. In fact, she seemed to be smiling along with her.

'Why don't I go get Becky and we can tell her about our plan? Unless you're not comfortable with that.' She added, her face suddenly growing serious. 'I won't tell her anything you don't want me to.'

'Oh, no, you can tell Becky anything!' Isabel beamed. 'I don't mind. I don't think she's going to judge me. *Well*. Maybe she'll judge me. But I don't think she's going to judge me *poorly*. We're trying to be open, you know?'

Malinka gave a nod and left to retrieve Becky. When she returned, Becky had the body language of someone who had been told they were about to approach a crime scene, with how stiff and nervous she looked. Malinka seemed to be trying her best to placate her as she settled onto the couch with her, but Becky didn't seem entirely convinced.

Isabel took a deep breath, trying not to let herself tense up again as she cleared her throat. 'Becky, Malinka is a *wonderful* young woman, you know. You have such good tastes in friends.'

'Uh, yeah, she— She is,' Becky said, seemingly taken off guard and relaxing her shoulders. 'Malinka's really great.'

Malinka seemed to shrink down into herself bashfully, awkwardly dropping her gaze to the floor.

'She's, um... we were talking, and she suggested that I take a course at a community centre,' Isabel explained, slowly. 'To meet new people.'

‘On your *own*?’ Becky asked, sounding more surprised than Isabel had been expecting.

‘Well... *yes*,’ Isabel answered, casting a glance at Malinka for confidence. ‘I mean, it’s not like I can’t look after myself. I’ve survived over forty years on this Earth!’ she gave a nervous chuckle. ‘*Somehow*.’

Becky looked a little bit queasy, though she nodded. ‘Y... yeah. You’re right. Sorry. I don’t mean to be so nervous it’s just— I think there’s a lot on my plate, right now. With the... *everything* going on.’

Isabel gave a comforting nod, and reached over to put her hand on Becky’s. ‘Well. Don’t let me be a part of that everything, alright? I’m not the smartest, but I’m capable of looking after myself when I need to.’

Malinka looked up then, and gave Becky an encouraging nod, as if assuring her that yes, this was in fact, true.

Isabel couldn’t tell if Becky looked less or *more* nervous at Malinka’s confirmation, but the girl put her other hand on top of the hand that was holding hers, and gave it a squeeze.

‘Okay. You’re right,’ she said again. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be, like. Overbearing. I just... really care about you. And I don’t want you to get hurt.’

It took all of Isabel’s self-control not to leap to her feet screaming as Becky said those words.

*Becky— Becky cared about her!*

She swallowed, trying to make her smile look at least *somewhat* normal.

She hadn’t been sure if her niece liked her or was just tolerating her, but hearing that made her heart flutter.

And her hands sweat.

Uh-oh, now she was *sweating*!

She was sweating, and smiling like an idiot, and shuffling in her seat as she tried to hold back a *very* extreme reaction.

‘Auntie? Are you alright?’ Becky asked— And let out a surprised grunt as Isabel grabbed her into a hug, embracing her tightly.

‘Oh, Becky, I love you so much!’ she exclaimed.

‘Auntie— Auntie—’ Becky wiggled in Isabel’s grip. ‘Okay— Yeah. you too I guess but— *Breathing!* Is a *thing!* And I need to do it!’

‘Well that’s just too bad,’ Isabel joked as Becky heaved a sigh and accepted that she wasn’t about to be released. ‘Because I love you too much to let go!’

Behind them, Malinka let out a muffled chuckle and leant back, settling down to watch the pair with amusement.... Like what was happening was ironic, somehow.

—END—

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