

Content Warning: Wounds and blood, expansion, popping, cake gore

Dense foliage and spindly limb branches blotted out the sun far above, ancient trees spun above the heads of any traveler that thought to step forward in Glowmire Forest. Mushrooms blossomed to grand sizes, bulb and flatcaps of various colors even stretched past the canopies they once thrived under. Illumination here was constant, one's feet were tickled by the multicolor lights that were strewn about. Batches of cool cyans, comforting magentas, warm oranges, and even sunshine yellows, broke through the gloom of darkness. Where the light didn't bless its grace, one could easily get lost imagining what might be out there. If it weren't obvious from its large mushrooms, glittering spore skies above, and ancient trees, Glowmire Forest was home to fairies and fairykind, mischievous creatures that have a misunderstood sense of reality. Experienced travelers don't bother coming here, while the naive, ignorant, and stubborn push through. Walking along that path were such adventurers. Elias spun his cane around while he kept his eyes on the road, an act so routine he subconsciously knew how to avoid undoing the clasps with swishes of his thumb. Following behind, the chubby woman he recruited to join him along his journey.

Neptune gently adjusted her cap upon her head. Having taken Elias's advice while in Lindsdale, she went to the strange tailor and obtained a new set of traveler's clothes. She kept the choker of her previous outfit, the gold and black paired well with the new belt beneath her breasts to properly hug her outfit into place. Her bosom was held comfortably by the top of her new olive-green top, with darker straps that slung over her shoulders and to the back. Beneath the belt, that top turned to tassels that hugged her portly frame, accented by half-stars at the ends. Beneath that, a plain minty-green shirt and black shorts exposed the upper parts of her thighs, green stockings with white insides were snugly fit into mud-brown shoes, complete with maroon bows. Simple slip on boots that fit like a glove, never would Neptune have to worry about them coming undone. Her arms were gloved in a similar manner to her stockings, with her right hand bound by two golden clasps. Part of her still felt she had to show off her wealth, so why not splurge a little while being tasteful? Atop her head lied that cap she fiddled with earlier. She wasn't used to such snug fits! The cap had the same olive green base with her top, and the same dark green accents. A fuller star was spotted on her right side, while the green lines dithered away at the sides in favor for the plain olive green look at the back end. The most drastic change? Her massive ponytail, the one she had groomed for so long, had been lopped off. If she were to travel, she best not have hair that was easy to grab.

"This is such a lengthy detour..." She grumbled, "If we went through Ghostshire Forest, we could've been there two nights ago."

Eyes still on the road, Elias only angled his head just a tad to the left. "If we went down Creaky Peak Mountain along the Cragginbarry Institute, we would've been there four nights ago." His remark left Neptune uneased, her instinctual response was to grab her shoulder. . "Besides, a leisurely stroll through the lit darkness around us... it's romantic, isn't it?"

Back down to Earth, Neptune and rolled her eyes at Elias's insistence on romance. "Oh, grow up."

"Grow up?" Elias turned around to face Neptune, his back facing the world. "I'll have you know that I'm more than likely older than you."

"Oh you are, are you?" Neptune shook her head. "Nice try. I'm thirty-three, and you look to be, what...twenty two? Twenty three?"

"Harsh." Elias rolled his thumb past his lips. "Twenty-five."

"The point is I'm older than you are, Mister Rabbit." Neptune smirked, she lazily balled her hand into a fist and rolled it along Elias's shoulder. A faux-punch, one more to tease than to hurt. "That means I should be the one leading us, isn't that correct?"

"Half-bunbin, first off." corrected the bard, who caught up to Neptune's pace easily. "Second off, you don't know where you're going. I just so happen to know a thing or two about this side of the continent, unlike you. The moment you start leading us is the moment we get lost."

"Half-bunbin? Where does the other half come into play?"

"Oh, you want me to divulge everything about my home life, don't you?" Her travel companion clapped his hands together. "Well, let's just say a lucky little Bunbid got lucky one day with a tall, beautiful, delighted elven woman..."

"You? Elven?" Neptune teased. "Nothing about you screams elven."

Curling up his ear was Elias's finger, he'd stroke the outer edge before he flicked the rounded tip playfully. "Oh? So these long ears aren't any example of elf lineage? I'm sure your ears don't show your half elven blood either."

Neptune's hand raised up to her mouth to hide her snickering smile. Even if Elias was peculiar, he certainly knew how to keep someone entertained. She shook her head and looked to the darkness beyond. "Well, you're quite the character. My assumptions that you're a stage performer seem to be correct. You're very-"

"Sh."

The sudden shift in mood made Neptune's blood run cold. Elias's smile had faded from his face, his ears twitched about. He stood behind the cleric, back to back against her, and remained still. Eventually, Neptune heard what spooked him; rustling, crunching, movement in the canopy above. Her eyes fixated high, in tandem with her travel buddy's.

"It's coming this way." he warned in hushed tones, readying his cane. "Ready?"

"What do you want me to do?" Neptune wondered, her warhammer gripped tight in both hands.

"Back me up." responded Elias, eyes fixated on a spot in the dark.

The crunching and rustling of leaves from beyond the luminescence put both travelers on edge. Rsst, rsst, rsst, more movement from beyond that locked both of them in place. Prey ready to pounce back against their predator. They need not wait any longer - from the darkness leapt the stranger. Brown hair sat atop a pale body, dotted in light aqua marine splotches all over. A raspberry scarf's torn tongue fluttered in the momentum, a matching beret on top of their head clung on. They could only get a glimpse of their outfit before their lance came down on them. A light coral pink stem with a silver head, deflected by Elias's careful swipe of his cane. Their attacker rolled with the momentum of the strike, landing not too far away. From there, they got a better look of their maroon brown gloves and knee-high boots, their pale teal dress shirt with gold heart buttons, their belt with a pouch and slingshot holster, even their saturated teal shorts. Most of all, they got a glimpse at their eyes; red as an apple, fierce as a flame.

After a deep breath to recuperate, Elias stuck his cane down into the ground. "Look," he called out, "if you're some kind of bandit, then you struck the wrong group. You could've gotten hurt." No response. All Elias was given was a stare that threatened to turn his soul inside-out. "Whoever you think we are, you're mistaken. Now please, walk away. Before you get in trouble." Elias released the clasp on his cane, and revealed the blade within. Even then, this attacker did not flinch.

"You wear her colors." The assailant's voice was peculiar. Threatening wasn't something such a soft tone was used to being, only able to convey their anger through growling. The tone met the perfect middle ground of deep and high-pitched, androgynous as could be. "I know you work with her. You're working with that lady with the waffle cone crown."

Neptune blinked, then stepped back from Elias. Was her other assumption true? He all but confirmed his knowledge of Queen Cream Cake's antics and motives, yet in all her infinite wisdom, she never considered *how* he came about that knowledge. "What are they talking about, Elias?"

"Whoever you think I am, you're wrong." Elias warned. "Back up, and walk away."

Dagger-shooting stares were exchanged from one side of the dirt path to the other, the spores above having been rattled from the earlier canopy strike. Neither the half-bunbid nor this stranger chose to back away. Elias's grip on his concealed rapier tightened, the stranger held their lance with fury. Neither would back down it would seem. Annoyed, Elias sighed.

"Your choice, then."

The first to leap into action was Elias, his rapier unsheathed with a swift motion that cut through the air. The assailant stood their ground, then jabbed their weapon toward the charging attacker with fury. All they'd penetrate was an inch of cloth and a scrape of skin on Elias's right side, he outpredicted where the tip would jab and rolled to the left. A swish of the rapier would leave Elias cutting only air, the lancer dove backwards and balanced on a free hand. One good leap away gave them and the bard a good ten feet of distance, something Elias could easily close the distance on with a precise leap. All he needed was a little brace, then his knees locked and fired him in a straight line. A rapier strike to the tip sent sparks flying across them, the hideous scrape of metal on metal followed suit. Elias had a good view on a non fatal blow to the thigh and went for the stab, though flesh wouldn't be pierced. A flash of light covered their attacker, one of gold glimmer that crafted itself into an elongated shield. His blue eyes darted left, Neptune had spread her legs to brace for the motion of a spell, her hands outstretched and glowing in that gold shimmer.

"What happened to 'cover me'?! " Elias roared out.

"I said what are they talking about," Neptune growled, "now answer me!"

The distraction was enough for their attacker to leap back into the darkness of the leaves above, the rustling grew loud and obvious, leaves falling where they jumped to next. Annoyed, Elias lifted up his free hand and took a deep breath. Channeling power from within, he'd try to outpace his opponent. Rapid fire low-powered projectile blasts were thrown out from the tips of his fingers, his hand the baton, and he was the arcane conductor. Of course, his feet kept him mobile throughout the casting of multi-colored blasts of force. Tree branches snapped and cracked, the trees themselves scarred by blasts that didn't quite hit the mark. It was clear that while he was savvy with magic, he was less so with spellwork. Out from the trees soon came the visage of the attacker, but trailed behind them a glittery dust that illuminated the dark shrouds around. It was clear when the illusion's lance simply splashed into motes of light from Elias's rapier that he'd been fooled. The real assailant was behind him in the canopy the whole time.

Neptune couldn't look away as the attacker plummeted from the darkness, lance aimed right for the middle of Elias' back. Even with the bard's sharp reflexes, he wouldn't be able to deflect or jump away in time. Another shimmering shield formed itself around Elias's midsection, the lethality prevented, but the force still made Elias stumble forward to his knees. When he saw Neptune's spell had defended him, he understood her neutrality. Before the attacker could plunge their lance into his body, Elias rolled out of the way and stood back up on his feet. Both were at another standstill, striking metal on metal in rapid succession. The fiery flickers illuminated past the softer lights in short bursts. Both jumped away from one another, ready to trip one another up with ranged attacks. The assailant pulled out their slingshot and catapulted tiny, glowing fragments at Elias. With one hand, he spun his blade around to cut through each projectile. By the time he was ready to sling out another spell, the lingering sparkles of the magic had gotten to him. His limbs froze in place, the sparkling fragments of those shards had

landed on the bard's clothes, creating a stone barrier to hold parts of him in place. His forearm, his leg, his shoulder, his neck. He was immobilized in place, not fully petrified, but only partially. Only partially was enough. The attacker raised up their lance one more time...

"No!" Neptune called out, she hurried a shield out of her hands, but it couldn't go far. She used up too much of her own limited power.

The tip of the lance grew closer and closer to Elias's chest, wind swishing to its propulsion forward. Neptune's eyes shrunk in horror, she was powerless to do anything. Elias was about to be skewered.

"AVERYYYYYY!"

The lance ceased movement just three inches away from penetration. Not a single one of the three had paid attention to the middle of the path further down. No one had noticed the foot-tall fairy grow closer to the group, not the teal skin she had, her plump belly that hung close to her knees, her chest that was contained by the white, magenta and plum-red dress, nor her purple hair and bright magenta wings. Her eyes matched the glitters of her wings, though she had quite the glare on her face.

"You know better than that!" the woman scolded the attacker, "Letting your anger take over like that, I taught you better!" Her voice was loud and powerful, a stark contrast to her tiny body.

Down went the rapier to the ground, the figure lifting their hand up and backing away. One could see the slow fade-out of the furious red eyes for a more cool, water-pool blue. "S...Sorry."

"Don't say sorry to me." pouted the fairy. "Say sorry to these two fine people!"

They swiveled their body over in the direction of Neptune and backed away, just so Elias could stay within their eyesight. Politely, they bowed and clasped their hands together. "Sorry, to the both of you..."

"My dear child just doesn't know when to contain their anger when it gets to this extreme." sighed the fairy, who helped pull chunks of rock off of Elias. "Once they saw you, I knew there was going to be trouble."

"Look, I understand wanting to fight for something you believe in..." Neptune began. "But I want an explanation from everyone. That includes you too, Elias. Why did you attack, and what did they mean by you 'working with her'?"

Adrenaline still rushed through the three who participated in some form. The canopy-ambusher had quick breaths that de-escalated slowly, while Elias's were slower and shakier. He was more composed, so he offered his side first. "Look, Neppy."

"Don't call me that." Neptune clenched her fist.

"...Fine, Neptune." Elias sheathed his blade back into the cane facade. "I've got inside-knowledge on Queen Cream Cake because...well, cuz I dated her at one point." His ear flicked when he heard the attacker raise their lance back up. "Before you freak out, hear me out first?"

"I think it's only right, dear." soothed the strange fairy, whose calm words were enough to ease the attacker once again.

Leaning on his cane, the bunbid explained. "Look, I didn't participate much in her antics, but I had a fling with her at some point. She's got a lot of plan As and Bs, to the point where I couldn't tell you what her next move was because she has so many. I still wear her colors in my hair for, well...personal reasons." His thumb traced along the side of his bangs, a sparkly red finger nail piercing through the strands. "I know about you cuz she was going through all the rich people on the continent she could think of who had piss-poor guards. You came up as number one."

An insult to Neptune's trust and safety ultimately fell on her. She rolled her head on its neck and clenched her warhammer tight, before she slid it over her shoulder. "Okay, there's a point to be had there." she relented through clenched teeth. "The fact you didn't lead with that, though, is particularly insulting."

"Figured you'd rather want her taken down before you knew I stuck my dick in crazy." Elias shook his head, then turned to face his attacker. "Alright, what say you, then?"

After listening to the two talk and bringing themselves down, the other party involved could finally come up with the right words. "Sorry. I thought you were one of her henchmen."

"Henchmen?" Elias couldn't help but chuckle. "Sorry, but I never ran her dirty errands or fought her battles. Afraid our relationship was purely romantic."

"I believe proper introductions are in order?" the fairy clasped her hands tight. "That's the most we owe you for jumping you like this."

Neptune shook her hands lightly, palms faced outward. "Please, your child was just doing what they thought was best. We should introduce ourselves first." She put her hand to her chest. "I'm Neptune Nebula. I own a port in Veni, and I'm a cleric in training."

"No kidding!" the fairy floated closer. "Who do you draw your power from?"

"Well, it's less who and more what..." she chuckles. "I worship the winds of change, fate itself and the stars that guide us."

"So you, worship a wind god?"

"N, No no."

"If you're relying more on nature, wouldn't that make you more of a druid then?"

"No, it's very faith based..." Neptune cleared her throat. "My friend over here is Elias, and he's a-"

It was only by that point Neptune had realized Elias leaned on his side, the cut from earlier finally getting to him. Right above his hip, just below the navel, fresh streaks of crimson were staining his pink and white dress clothes. His hand pressed in on that sticky red tar, now painted lightly at the palm and fingertips. He grumbled, "Guess I picked the wrong adventure to go formal."

"Here..." Neptune ran over to help. "I can at least stop the bleeding..."

Her gentle hands pressed into the fresh wound, flickers of radiant light shimmering over the cut. The continual trickles of droplets came to a standstill, and the fresh pink cut was eaten away by flesh pulling itself to seal the broken seam of the half-bunbid's body. Elias winced- the numbness magic applied didn't take away from the awkward feeling of one's body working on its own. The area around the wound was tingly, the unmarred flesh around it only registering the stretching skin akin to being rubbed by paper scraps. Once reformed, the scrape itself scarred over and eventually flaked off.

"I'm glad I caught this before it got worse." Neptune sighed. "I dunno if I could've-"

"Don't sweat it." Elias brushed Neptune aside, hand clasped on his cane again. "So. Your names?"

"This is my darling Avery." The fairy piped up, "My name is Basil. I must apologize again for my child's rash actions, is there anything I can do?"

Elias pulled on the tear in his clothes by the tip of his thumb and his pointer finger's side. The bloodstains were still pretty fresh. Already, he dreaded thinking about having to get his outfit redone. "You know any way to patch up threads?"

"Oh, dear, I should do more than that for you." Basil offered. She looked behind her to her child. "Shall we lead them back to town?"

Avery mulled over the possibilities in their head, then reluctantly nodded. Wordlessly, they turned back around and led the group up the path they just walked from. Basil's wings beat quickly, proving the plump fairy could keep up with them pretty well. The other two adventurers followed along, Elias leaning his weight on the cane. He could feel Neptune's eyes staring at his back. The half-elf didn't know how to feel; here was a man she trusted just moments ago to help lead her into battle with the woman who humiliated her, now she finds out they were bedmates? She tried to piece together just who Elias really was in her head, though she came up with nothing. He just seemed like your average bard from the outside.

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Beneath the canopy of Glowmire, deep within its dense star-sparkled foliage, a village rests within the heart. A winding dirt path that looked sparsely used connected the village's front and end together, spirals of iridescent fungi and thick tree trunks making for plentiful decoration. Each trunk had small doors and lovingly crafted homes hollowed out, only ever reaching two to three feet in height at most. Each house was colorfully painted in pastel reds, blues, turquoises and chartreuses. Circle windows sometimes illuminated dim yellow glows; faint like the glow of a dying firefly. A hidden fairy village, unimpeded by the troubles and woes of the country it resided in. Quiet. Lonesome. Still. Nary a wing could be seen outside, not a soul seemed brave enough to greet the group. It all felt picturesque, and Neptune couldn't help but feel she walked into a children's illustration. Basil soon turned to the group- it was apparent by the scrunch of pain in her brow the pain being in her empty village brought her.

"Welcome to Highwind." The words eventually left her.

"Where is everyone...?" Neptune wondered, her head swiveled around to get a better look of the village. "It's so empty here, surely...?"

A deep sigh left Basil. "That would be Queen Cream Cake's fault. She took some of our village folk one day, now everyone hides away in fear she might return. Avery and I are the only ones who are going out to do anything."

Avery's footsteps halted once they stood in front of a larger tree, one that encapsulated the middle of the village. Hung from branches were signs made from thick slabs of wood. Flora and crops were etched into the sign, emboldened by black paint. A doorway carved in the tree's trunk had an aqua-marine paintjob, just three feet from that door sat a balcony made for Basil's size. The fairy landed and opened her door to squeeze inside, while her child turned to the other two and held the door open.

"Guests first." insisted their host.

Elias and Neptune followed suit. They were greeted by a homely interior, shaped around the hollow interior of the tree trunk. The walls grooved upward, a terrace was installed from one end to another to make a roof, and the home itself was split in various spots by a crosswalk

made to accommodate Basil. For the mother, her part of the home felt like a dollhouse. A loveseat one could press their fingers into and fill it out, bookshelves made to hold tiny tomes for itty-bitty hands, a clock no larger than a thimble, a chandelier made of small branch clippings with tiny wax candles at the ends, and a bed with old cloth scraps as blankets. Avery's part of the home felt scaled up by comparison, yet it retained the same aesthetic. Both had similar carved-in fireplaces, both had loveseats next to it, both had beds that were sat just under a circular window. The half-bunbid sat down in one of Avery's chairs, shocked by its level of comfort.

"Your home's quite lovely!" Neptune complimented, "I've never seen something so cozy before, especially reflected like..."

A swivel of Neptune's head revealed something she overlooked. A section of the home that was flourishing with green. Potted plants were lovingly left by a window slightly cracked, morning dew fresh on the sill still. The brick pots several plants were placed in had faded of most of their color, yet still they carried on their duties. Thick leaves dotted the bottom side, red and green bell peppers sprinkled in between. Supported by cages made from thin wood, tomato plants grew proudly along the wall. All of this seemed to grow in defiance of the lack of sunlight, yet everything smelt fresh. Those plants Neptune had yet to identify especially, their scent opened her lungs and comforted her.

"Your garden is so lovely!" she complimented. "Tomatoes, peppers, and..."

"Basils." the host answered, she sat by the edge of her catwalk and smiled. "It's where I get my name from."

"Fairies tend to name themselves after what they like the most." Avery mentioned, "It usually goes with their role."

"Role, huh?" Elias started to pull off his jacket. "I didn't know fairies had structure."

"Somewhat." Bail cut in. "You're only going to find seven types of fairies in this village. Decadence, Metamorphose, Pestilence, Zeppelin, Lethargy, Klepto, and Stewards."

Neptune sat down in the other free seat, her eyes lit up from curiosity. "Tell me more, please!"

"So curious!" Basil gleamed. "Are you sure you have an ear ready?"

"The pursuit of knowledge is always a noble one." Neptune spoke with confidence.

Down came Basil, who pulled Elias's coat over to Avery's table. She'd immediately get to work, using her magic on the outfit to pull its stitching back together near the cut. "Very well! You see, every fairy is known for what they specialize in or what they fixate on. Decadence fairies

tend to live near lavish communities or places abundant with foodstuffs. They're strongest whenever they're near people who overconsume, and can summon a feast if they've been around people gluttonous enough. Sometimes they use themselves as feedees in order to get their urges out."

"Surprised you don't see them more often." Elias snickered.

"Oh you joke," Basil grinned, "but they're shockingly common."

"I've heard of rumors of some back home in Veni," Neptune revealed, "though I didn't think it could be possible!"

Back on track, Basil rubbed around the dried blood splatter. Avery, meanwhile, plucked some of the peppers and began to wash them. "Metamorphose fairies appear to those who're looking to change, physically, mentally, or otherwise. They tend to alter things around them, but if left unchecked, they could turn an industrial city into a beautiful forest with gorgeous dryads and wildlife, with no human left behind. Pestilence fairies tend to appear during plagues or illnesses. They can help you with the common cold or infections, and there's plenty of stories shared about how they've cured dysentery."

"Right, didn't that happen with some mercenaries?" Elias wondered. "These guys, the Power Fists I think. Twenty years ago they were in this all out battle with a group of bandits, most of them almost died from coming down with a bad case of dysentery. They only lived because those pestilence fairies took pity on them. They won the battle, but they all came down with something else after that."

"Oh, poor things..." Neptune put her hands up to her chest. "What was it they contracted?"

"Nobody knows." Elias shook his head. "They had polka dots on their skin for months. Every now and then some of them would glow, but they eventually just peeled off. If I remember right, they didn't even feel them come off."

"Polkinpox." Basil snapped her fingers. "Pestilence fairies often bring fae illnesses with them. Florarhinitis, clear-head, cockroach bed-sweats."

Neptune shivered. "Please tell me that isn't what I think it is."

"It's when you wake up as a giant cockroach." Avery cut in while they cut up the peppers and tomatoes into slices.

"Yes!" Basil beamed. "Good job! Those illnesses can be pretty silly, but they're no joke once it happens to you..." Basil flew over to Elias, whose fingers had already laced through his buttons to let his shirt loose. "Zeppelin fairies tend to show up around airborne creatures and

vessels. When they can't find anyone airborne, they tend to make do by inflating others. They can be helpful in aiding human vessels in flight, but sometimes they round out people through liquids. Fun fact, their wings are just for show! They have their own means of floating around in the air."

Neptune took a glance at the shirtless twink and tilted her head back to Basil. "They sound mischievous."

"Not as mischievous as the Klepto fairies." she remarked. "They're pretty much your standard kleptomaniac, stealing treasures, trinkets, names, eyes, teeth-

"I've never heard of a kleptomaniac that steals EYES before!" Neptune gawked.

"Well, they leave behind features if they steal yours. I met an adventurer once whose whole face had been stolen by a Klepto fairy! He had their razor sharp teeth, no color to his eyes, no hair on his head, no nose to his face..."

"You sure you didn't meet a mimic?" joked Elias.

"He would've been the sweetest, most well mannered mimic that ever graced the Earth." Basil replied, patching back Elias's dress shirt. "Anything they take they have to store somewhere. Sometimes they'll eat what they steal just to avoid getting it taken back. You can usually lure them to you by giving them something they want, then trap them in a cup. Oh, Lethargy fairies, I nearly skipped them. They sip out willpower by biting and draining them from people. They're usually really starved, and they're spindly and thin. You don't tend to feel much if they just go for a quick nibble other than being tired, but if they think you're abundant in energy they'll start sucking out your memories and intellect. You can squeeze the energy they steal out if you're quick enough, but I would advise against doing that if the fairy has more than one victim."

"How come?" Neptune tilted her head.

"Because then you'll be mixing memories into different people." Basil wiped away the dark maroon from the white with swipes of her little hands, then patted off as much fairy dust as she could. "Then there's Steward fairies. Honestly, very normal compared to the other six."

"Mom's a little biased." Avery piped up while slicing bread, "She's a Steward fairy herself. They absolutely *need* to take care of people. Some actually hunt down couples who can't get pregnant and 'change that', if you get where I'm going. Some of them will care for you so much you end up becoming too big to take care of yourself, then you get a whole group of them trying to take care of you."

Basil blushed a little, the bright blue on her cheeks contrasted her aqua marine skin. "Heh, heh...g-got me there." She swishes over to Elias and helps button up his shirt. "That's the

real reason why I brought you back here, Elias. I couldn't help myself in trying to help someone again, especially since it's been a long time since Avery couldn't do something on their own. Well, other than cooking..."

On mis-shapen brick plates, Elias and Neptune were given ham sandwiches with basil leaf fillings, tomato slices, and pepper cubes sprinkled in. Avery had one of their own, and bit down into theirs without a second thought. Elias toughed out the slightly strange combo, while Neptune had to work up the courage to take a bite. The half-bunbid nodded at the taste, finding the meal adequate. "Seems fine to me."

"It's when I start trying to bake or cook." Avery laced their fingers through the back of their hair. "That's when things get bad."

"Well, the fruits of your labor are quite delightful." Neptune complimented the fairy. "I'd argue that they overpower the ham!"

The fairy clasped her hands tight. "Aww, delighted, dear!"

"Earlier you mentioned that Avery's your kid." Elias brought up, "Must be hard being a foster mom."

"She's my birth mom." Avery answered for her, "I've been with her all twenty-one years of my life."

The bard blinked in surprise. "...How did you uh..."

"With a lot of hard work." She cut off his question. "My dear Avery is a Fairyfel, when a human becomes so intertwined with fairy magic it turns them partially fae."

"You don't hear about being a Fairyfel from birth." Neptune remarked. "Then again, you never hear of many Fairyfel at all."

"I hope I'm not opening a wound here, but..." Elias set down his plate. "Where's the father?"

Basil looked back to Avery with a bit of concern. All they did was cross their arms and shake their head, abandoning their meal to go outside. When the door clicked shut, Basil sighed. "He...he left."

"Oh, gosh..." Neptune sighed. "I'm so sorry Basil."

"Don't be." The fairy shook her head. "He showed his true colors to me. We're better off now on our own than we were with him in the 'luxury' of Lindsdale."

"He's a noble, then?" the cleric wondered.

"To some degree." Basil picked a leaf off her basil plant, then chewed at it in small bites. "We don't bring him up often because we don't like to. He became a fanatic, he was disappointed in Avery for not conforming to what he wanted them to be."

"What was it he wanted?"

"...He wanted them to stay as his son."

Elias hung his head and scratched the back of his neck. After a beat of silence, he stood back up. "Thanks for the grub."

He made his way to the door too, exiting the home briefly. Outside, he saw Avery sat alone under the tree they called home, deep blue eyes focused on the ground. Wordlessly, he slumped down next to their spot. The swish of the leaves above was the only sound that filled their ears, until Elias chuckled.

"Fuck dads, am I right?"

Avery did not respond.

"They think just because they put a piece of them inside someone, they get all the rights to you. They never think about the difficulty a mother has to go through, or what his kids are gonna go through one day. They just want their perfect little family unit."

"If this is your definition of an apology, it's pretty crummy." Avery finally spoke up.

The bard deliberated on what to say next. "Consider it even for almost impaling me. Look, I mean that I get where you're coming from. My pops walked out on us too. He thought we were just gonna drag him down, he was off hunting the next catch."

"I thought he was a lucky bunbid."

Elias's ears swung back, he grit his teeth and stared away. "Well, he was. You know how it is with people and luck though. They throw it away when they think they can move up the ladder. It's the same everytime, if they don't have a lick of love in their heart."

"Yeah. My dad loved something." Avery picked up a small stone, then chucked it across the street. "He loved chasing power. Too devoted to his little black book to ever consider what we wanted. It was always 'thinking of the greater good' and 'pushing the day closer'. It was never about love. I heard that myself, from his own lips..."

"Yeah well...fuck him." Elias joined them in stone-chucking. "He doesn't wanna be in your life anymore? Who needs him. You and your mom are thriving out here."

"The thing is, I still miss him. Even if I shouldn't, I still do. There's like a hole in me without him, but if I saw him I think I'd just..." They curled their fingers inward, then sighed. "...I get it from him. My anger, I think. Part of me's still him. I still see his dumb face in the mirror sometimes, like it's mocking me, telling me what I'm gonna become."

"Avery, you're-"

Elias' ears flicked right back into place. He sprung up to listen in on what couldn't be heard through normal ears. Something out in the woods approached the little town, something not too far away, but something slow and looming. "...What's out there in the forest?"

Able to pick up on Elias' distress, Avery stood back up. "Just your typical woodland creatures, maybe some fae creatures. Why, what do you hear?"

"...Get back inside." Elias warned, then made his way to the door.

The conversation inside the abode was interrupted with Elias flinging the door open, followed by Avery shutting it behind them. Both women whipped their heads over to the commotion, Elias pacing back and forth in the living room in thought. "Elias? Is something wrong?" Neptune apprehensively approached him.

"He heard something out there." Avery stormed over to their closet wardrobe, pulled the doors open, and searched about. "It's probably that tyrant again..."

"Avery, you're not going out there and throwing yourself at her!" Basil ordered, "You're to stay in here, and that's that!"

"They won't be fighting her alone." Elias waved off. "They won't be fighting *her*, at all." Elias stopped, then turned to Basil. "When was the last time she came here?"

"Well, it was her golem." clarified the fairy. "But we've all heard tales of a woman who can turn anything into food, or even summon it from out of thin air, taking residence down in Gorgantum Town."

"That golem trapped half of the village three days ago." Avery reported, "It took them and swallowed them into cages too hard for them to break out! I saw their spells just bounce off the bars...it's made of food! How does it do that?!"

Elias's shoulders roll back, cracking his neck in two different spots and adjusting his head around. "So she's managed to finally get the hang of her summoning magic. Damn it, she's moving quicker than I thought."

“Well, it’s just one golem, isn’t it?” Neptune pulled herself out of the chair she’d sat comfortably in, hips popping free from the arms of her seating. “The four of us can take it on.”

“It’s going to ignore us.” Elias warned. “All it cares about is capturing the fairies in this town...” he scratched his chin. “How can she get a golem operating if she can’t even hypnotize a half elf?” Then it hit him. He turned back to face the others. “Faires and spells, fairies have latent magic energy! That thing probably has some of the fairies it kidnapped in it still!”

“Then we HAVE to stop it!” Avery shoved ammunition into their pouch, then glared back to Elias. “I’ll go, just let me-”

“Enough!” Neptune howled. “Your mother doesn’t want you to go alone, Elias doesn’t want you to go alone, I don’t want you to go alone! We can all do this together!”

Avery stood firm, nostrils flared. “It’s our village. I took it upon myself to try and protect it. I owe that to everyone who got captured.”

“And they want you to make it out of this fight with all your limbs intact.” reasoned Elias. “Besides, you’re just gonna turn down free help?”

Basil put her hand to Avery’s shoulder, her eyes glistening with a low glow that Avery recognized as visible sorrow. “Please don’t bear this burden alone.”

After some consideration, Avery clutched their lance and gave Elias a slow nod. “I’ll join you two. Now, how do we keep it from getting into town?”

Basil raised a hand slowly. “Might I make a suggestion?” Everyone turned to her with bated breath...

—

Nestled away in a lonesome spot off the trail, surrounded by those glowing mushrooms and tall trees, Basil sat all by her lonesome underneath a butterfly net. She’d tap her chin in wait, her left hand folded into her right arm. Her obnoxious sighs were long, drawn out, and irritating to listen to. She tightened the ribbon around her waist, which snaked underneath fallen leaves and grass blades over to where Avery, Neptune, and Elias were hiding, just a few yards away. All three kept their eyes on the trapped fairy, Avery’s nerves tense with worry.

“Are you sure she has to be bait...?” they whispered to the other two.

Elias kept his eyes focused on the net, rather than turn to look at the others. “It’s the only way that golem’s gonna fall for it. Besides, she willingly volunteered...”

Playing up the role of the damsel, Basil put the back of her hand up to her forehead, her body leaning away. "Oh, woe is me! To be trapped under this wretched net! The humiliation, the bane of my existence! If *only* someone, or something, could scoop me up and save me!"

"Does she really have to sell it more than she already is just by being under there..." Neptune pinched the bridge of her nose with her pointer and her thumb with a groan.

The soft vibrations of something further ahead shook the forest floor lightly, gradually growing in intensity with each impact. *Thoom...thoom...thoom...* Elias's focus narrowed in, his ears slumped forward to take in the sound and determine where their assailant would come from. Thankfully, it was like he predicted- the golem was coming in from the south. The beast finally pulled itself from the trees and mushrooms, what an odd sight to behold it was. Strawberry pink icing coated the creature's top layer, its cream-yellow base a strong contrast outside of the bright red strawberries in a ring on top of the icing. Each layer below the top was wider than the previous for its torso, pink cream from inside the top layer oozed out of both sides and was shaped into arms and fingers with a hardened dark chocolate shell. Its legs were of a similar mold, though unlike its massive hands, its feet were more cylinder-shaped with tiny toes that dug into the ground. Atop this three layer monster was its face, more like a carving into the cake where the cream didn't flow. A grumpy scowl creased into the fluffy caking, two extended pieces scrunched into angry eyebrows over luminescent strawberry decorations. The golem lumbered its way over to Basil slowly.

"I'm pulling her back-"

"Wait." Elias clasped his hand over Avery's, "If we pull back now, we risk it losing interest."

"Oh, hark, my day grows ever more worrisome!" Basil hammed, "A beast, a towering, magnificent beast! You wouldn't capture a fine fairy such as myself, would you, beastie?"

An answer came when the middle layer of cake peeled back laterally. Deep within, a hardened fondue cavity had been formed to contain several fairies, all of varying shapes and colors. Plump, round, thin, lanky, short hair, long hair, little clothes, head-to-toe... At least one of each fairy type was accounted for within the cavity. A short haired Klepto Fairy grasped their tiny hands around the bars of their enclosure.

"Basil, what're you doing?!" They roared out. "How'd you even get yourself in that mess?!"

The motherly Steward put a finger to her own lip and shushed the prisoner. "It's all a part of the plan!" she promised.

"Well you better enact that plan soon..." A gravely thin lethargy fairy pressed his own hands into the curvy bars of his prison. "Some of us haven't eaten in a while."

The golem bent over and reached its hands toward the net, taking great care to scoop up Basil from the bottom and keep a hold of the net's handle. The giant monster got to feel the fairy's power- it was time to take it away. "Now!"

Elias's cue came with an eager tug of the ribbon from Avery. Basil slipped out from the net, the golem reacted too late with a firm twist of its fingers, only to be met with air. That little slip had the Steward slip back to the other three, who hopped from their hiding places. Neptune clasped her warhammer tightly in her right hand, Elias's sword drawn from its hidden hilt, Avery's lance tightly grasped in both hands. Basil slinked away back into Avery's pouch and taunted the golem with a raspberry.

"You want to pillage my home?" Avery growled. "You gotta pay for it."

A burbling groan rumbled out from the golem, pawing its left foot before charging into the group, its arm a makeshift battering shield. The advance was slow enough for Elias and Avery to leap out of the way, though Neptune took a calculated risk in going prone on the ground. The leg gap was just enough for her to avoid being trampled, her first strike was into the middle space between the legs. She hopped out right after, icing and pastry remains from the impact showering over her and a nasty looking dent left in the golem's abdomen. The creature dug its free arm into the ground to correct its trajectory, clawing the dirt while it curved back to the others. Avery leapt into the canopies above, using their slingshot to pelt the monster with explosive fairy magic charges. Each pelt of ammunition just bounced off. The beast made a slow advance on the other two, both hands wagging their fingers in preparation for the next attack. Elias went to slice at the beast's hand, only to find it recognized no pain from its cream-bleeding palm. A swipe of the forearm flung Neptune four feet away, another swipe crunched Elias into the bushes six feet further.

The other two had to get their bearings, while Avery was left to deal with the beast alone. Already in their mind, they recognized a plunge down would risk hurting the prisoners inside the 'chest' cavity. That didn't mean they couldn't try. They prepared for a leap, while the golem grabbed a hold of a nearby boulder in the clearing. It hoisted the rock over its head and chucked it in Avery's direction, a narrow leap from one tree branch to another saved them from being flattened. The fairyfel took a leap and landed their lance right into the monster's shoulder, gushes of white cream spitting from the wound.

"I think all you're doing is making it mad!" hollered a Decadence fairy from inside.

Avery twisted their lance in anyhow, their eyes tinged crimson red. They were so focused on twisting the lance in further, they didn't notice that the beast's other hand had twisted over until it grabbed them by the face. Pulled from their spear, the fairyfel was flailed into the ground with great force, cracking into the ground once, twice, three times, until discarded by an underhand throw. The prisoners all called out to Avery and their concerns to them while the

golem stomped closer. Basil slipped out from her hiding spot to press her hands into her child's side, sending rejuvenating magic into them.

"I'm afraid they might be right," Basil yelled. "All you're doing is making it angry!"

Elias pulled himself up with a branch, dotted with several scratches spouting blood. His hair was a frumpled mess, those silky curls now knotted from the impact. "I'd like to see a better plan!" he growled out.

Neptune pulled herself up last, her braids slightly undone from her own trajectory. She went to open her mouth, only for her lungs to interject on her sentence. She coughed, her hand reflexively curled up to cover it up. Something sticky coated her knuckles and fingers, and when she pulled back, to her horror, she found traces of blood. "We're going to need some time to heal ourselves up..."

"On it." Avery rolled their neck, then took another shot at the golem.

The ammo lodged into its lower cake layer, its strawberry eyes fixated on the fairyfel. They hopped out of distance the best they could, while Basil floated behind those wavy spikes in Avery's hair. Elias and Neptune took time to rejuvenate themselves with their magic, the internal bleeding Neptune had subsided from what felt like the last of her spells, while Elias' minor scratches healed over. Neptune glanced at Elias after he used his spell, shocked.

"You can heal yourself...?"

"Call me an educated man." Elias smirked. "That in the way of theatric magic."

Rolling her eyes, Neptune jumped back into the fray. She charged in and took a swipe at the beast's left leg, the impact just hard enough to throw it off balance. Avery jumped up onto the top cake layer and rushed to their lance, left in the right shoulder of the golem. A jumping leap was all the force they needed to pull the weapon out from the wound, a rush of cream gushed out and sprayed all over the leaves above like a geyser. Avery rolled back down onto the ground, Basil swishing herself back into their pouch. The state of the creature meant the three had the opportunity to let loose, Elias slashed his blade into the golem's left arm, Avery into its right, while Neptune threw out heavy swings into the monster's face. Despite a well delivered flurry of blows and stabs, the golem shook them off and stood back up. Its first attack was to spin its arms around, catching the other three off guard. Its upper torso spun, spun, spun, then launched the three into the trees ahead. Neptune and Elias cracked their backs on the floor, Avery just about came close to being impaled on a log. They all pulled themselves back to their feet, haggard and staggering.

"This thing's just shrugging off whatever we dish out..." Elias grunted, then popped his shoulder back into place.

“Suggestions would be appreciated right about now...” Neptune huffed.

Avery leaned onto their lance, shallow breaths indicating just how exhausted they were. Basil slipped out from her pouch, then took a glance at the golem. “Isn’t it a little...bigger than before?”

Gone unnoticed by the others, the creature’s cake layers had puffed out in size. The strawberry eyes were pushed further away from the median, arms a little more swollen, its cakey wounds smoothing over in lumpy indents. Avery had an epiphany and arched their back up. “This thing sucks down magic...”

“Yeah, what’re we gonna do about that?” Elias wondered, the beast’s slow lumberings making a rush attack more complicated.

“Give it what it wants.” Avery grumbled.

The golem quickly brought down its arm toward Elias. He’d been distracted just enough by Avery’s plan that he couldn’t jump away in time, only noticing the flicker of dark chocolate and flinching from his fate...only to find himself still standing. Neptune clasped her hands around the beast’s arm and grunted, she just barely jumped in to hold the limb up with her left hand dug into its wrist. Her right still clung to her warhammer valiantly.

“If you’re going to do something, do it now!” she demanded.

Elias wasted no time. He pressed his hands into the creature’s cake layer and pulsed whatever magic he had into it. He could see the monster’s limbs swell just a tad from what he’d pumped in. Avery took this as a sign to join in, and dug their fingers into the creature’s side. Basil flew out from her pouch to contribute as well, pulsing a steady stream of whatever magic was leftover. Neptune dug her fingernails past the outer shell of dark chocolate in the arms of the monster and tried her best to pulse her own magic deep in. The sparks of whatever she thought she had left was funneled right into the monster’s body, much like everyone else’s spells. The cake layers grew thicker, limbs swelling tighter, the strawberry eyes being pushed further apart. Cream leaked out the scrunched maw of the monster, while the other fairies inside whimpered at the noises from within. The grumbles, gurgles, splashes and churns. Soon, the cake body felt taut, something Avery took note of.

“Neptune!” they commanded, “Whack this thing!”

A careful breath gave Neptune just enough focus to jump out of the crushing blow. She rolled to the left, the massive third layer of the cake groaning with how much cream built up. The other wounds they dealt to the monster spit and gushed the filling out as fast as it could, but it wasn’t faster than what they built in. The beast’s layers looked less like cakes and more akin to giant donut rolls. Down came the star-shaped warhammer into the monster’s ‘belly’, the force alone was enough to shake it about and make it rumble, but not enough to rupture.

“Again!” Elias commanded.

Neptune dove in with another blow, a crack formed in the caking.

“Again!” Basil hollered out.

“I’m trying here!” Neptune promised, then took another overhead swing.

That final blow was enough. The beast’s lower body ruptured and split apart, spewing icing, cake bits, and more cream about the clearing. One split was enough for the monster to split apart elsewhere, the arm scratches exploding out with dark chocolate shrapnel, the cage the other fairies were held in collapsed and spilled with cream filling, the glowing strawberry eyes of the beast popped out its sockets and got impaled by branches above. Legs popped off, arms following, until the beast could no longer be recognized as a monster. Just as a swollen, massive mound of dessert. The fairies crawled their way out from the center, wooing their saviours when they recognized their captor’s fate.

“Our heroes!” one called out.

“You actually saved us!” another cooed.

“Way to go, Avery!” another hollered.

The three fighters were coated in icing, something they had to wipe off of their faces themselves. Basil just narrowly avoided being splattered since she hid behind Avery. “You and your friends did a great job!” she praised. “How about you all get some rest now?”

“...Think we earned that.” Avery’s eyes faded back to their normal blue hue, and they smiled at Basil with warmth and sincerity.

—

Once empty and desolate, the return of seven fairies brought many fairies out from their hiding spaces. Once again, Highwind was bustling. Pestilence fairies shared fruits with Lethargy fairies, Metamorphose fairies spun around fallen leaves to morph them into decorations, Decadence fairies ate bits of the exploded golem from earlier in the day together. While most celebrated the return of their friends and loved ones, it wasn’t all cheerful. The Klepto fairy from within the golem’s prison had met back with Basil to inform her that three more Zeppelin fairies lay in the clutches of their enemy. While rest came easy to the group, their journey wasn’t over. Avery had already clutched their lance, ready to rush out...

“Sorry, it's not happening.” Elias blocked the door with his arm. “We nearly got rocked by one of her mindless minions, you think we can do that again on our own against her and her cronies?”

Avery blinked, then shook their head. “We should at least try.”

“I know you're antsy to save them,” Basil comforted, “but you have to recognize your own limitations, dear.”

“Come with us.” Neptune offered with a smile. “We're searching for people to fight against Cream Cake, you guys just showed us you're more than capable of holding your own in battle. Heck, better than me...”

Avery spun around to Neptune, her smile spread to them. “You...really think so?”

“I know so.” she nodded. “You fight with passion, that I can tell.”

“Well...” Avery tapped their chest with their fist excitedly. “Swear on my heart, I'll do the best I can.”

Basil floated over with a chuckle. “I'm going with you, dear.” she insisted. “I've got to be there to clean up your scratches after every fight, don't I?”

“Add two more to our roster then.” Elias chuckled. “We'll leave in the morning, consider you two joined.”

The evening afterward was spent enjoying more peppers and sharing tales. Elias's times on stage, Avery's shared stories from various fairies, some of Basil's interactions with human society. The four had grown closer over the battle that took place that day.

When the sun set far above the treeline, the mushrooms outside only glowed brighter. Neptune and Elias retired to an inn in the village, one that barely had enough room for the both of them. Elias slipped into his casual clothes, a long sleeved robe with a hood and some striped socks. He was about to brace himself for sleep when he noticed Neptune outside all by her lonesome. The village had grown quiet again as all the other fairies went to sleep, yet she remained awake. After some consideration, Elias pulled himself from the comforts of his blanket and shuffled outside with her. Crickets and croaks filled the night air, fireflies offered little spots of yellow glow to the other neon colors. Neptune's acknowledgement of Elias's arrival outdoors was a roll of her shoulders, yet her gaze remained fixated on something in her hands. A locket, shaped like a star, golden and well preserved.

“Didn't know a lady like you would carry something like that around.” Elias teased, hands hidden in his long sleeves. “Who's the admirer?”

Neptune didn't answer at first. She thumbed the latch down on the side and opened up the locket. Elias's joking manner dissolved once he saw what was inside; a child's illustration of a family. A man with a mustache, a brown haired elf, a young girl in pink, and a baby. The paper itself was crumpled, slightly singed on the side, and was a faded yellow. She clutched the locket shut and pressed it to her heart.

"They remind me of someone." Neptune choked out. "The way Avery fought like everything was on the line, Basil guiding them along every step..."

"Family, I take it?" Elias sat down on the ground. "Lemme guess-"

"They're dead, before you guess anything." Neptune cut Elias off coldly. She took a while to breathe, then nod. "It's my brother they remind me of. I lost him so long ago..."

Elias scratched the back of his neck. "You think he's still alive?"

Neptune took a beat to collect her thoughts. "I'm not so sure. I want him to be, but..."

"If he's your brother, he's probably still going strong out there." encouraged the half-bunbid. "You're made of stronger stuff, so your brother's probably stronger than you give him credit for."

The comfort of Elias's words brought a smile to Neptune's face, yet the emotions of thinking of her lost brother had let a tear trickle down her cheek. "...Perhaps you're right." She turned her head down to him. "Maybe fate will let me find him soon." Her head turned back up to the sky, hands outreached toward the heavens. Her fingers curled into her palm, symbolically grasping something out from the night. "Stars, guide me back to Mars. I plead with you one more time..."

—

Night fell over the elven village of Bristleburg, a settlement nestled between the borders of Serenata's three great forests. A large tavern set by the river still operated this late at night, and the water wheel outside still revolved and cranked, giving the inside its revolving interior. Spinning wooden gears flowed water into the establishment through various chutes, pouring them away in a tap used for customers, dumping the excess into a system of buckets outside, or back into the lake when those buckets were filled. The barkeep, an elven woman with caramel skin and bright green eyes, polished off mugs previously used that night. The doors swung open, and in walked a lonesome traveler. Leather boots, leather jacket, leather hat, and a cannon for an arm. Sol had been traveling all across the kingdom in order to hunt down the assailant on the temple they once roamed, living off bounty hunting in the meantime. Down came a written notice from the town's guards, something the bartender only needed to glance at.

“Well done once again.” She reached under the counter and pulled out a burlap sack. When it hit the counter, the coins inside jingled and rattled against one another. “I take it you’re done here?”

“Not quite.” Sol hoisted the bag over their shoulder. “Figured since all you’ve been giving me is small fry, I’d at least try the big fish before I go. You got anything I can do?”

“Only one.” The bartender pulled out a slip of parchment, then slapped it down.

Sketched in blank ink was the smug face of a thief, his wavy long hair, and scratchy cheeks. Above was inscribed; *WANTED: 10,000 SILVER COIN; MARS NEBULA. TURN IN ALIVE FOR FULL REWARD.*

“Mars Nebula, hm.” Sol hummed. “Yeah, I heard of this fella before. Know where I can find him?”

“He turns up from time to time.” The bartender relayed. “Now that you’ve got his contacts, he’s got nobody to turn to. He’ll probably try and snatch up easy game. Honestly...you might not even need to hunt him down. You can have him come to you.”

“Oh really?” Sol tilted up their hat. “Why’s that?”

“There’s a festival here in town soon.” The bartender leaned in. “And the main event’s a very worthwhile gem. He’ll be too focused on trying to snatch that up. Even if he doesn’t, he’s wanted in the whole kingdom for stealing from rich hands.”

Sol furrowed their brow slightly. “This is the big fish to fry? He just sounds like a gnat y’all want swatted out from the air.”

“He’s stolen hundreds of gold coins in total. He may be a rookie, but he knows who to single out and who to avoid. Worst off? He stole from the prince.”

“Ah. That’d net him a bounty for sure.” Sol weighed their options in their head. On one hand, this was a know-not who’d gotten lucky. On the other hand, he might just rob this village of a great cultural treasure. Decisions, decisions... After a bit of deliberating, they snatched up the wanted poster. “Consider it done.”