

Chilly, cold stone grooved the floor in misshapen lumps, stretching down a path of iron bars blocking off cobweb speckled cells. The jail tucked away in Bristleburg's forgotten judicial district was barely operated. A lone lazy elf warden with a jelly belly that filled her lap, cobweb riddled cells, and cobbled flooring cracked into tiny pieces. At the time of the Trio de Trouble's booking, Ramona was a cognitohazard in cramped spaces, so guards did their best to give her a comfortable spot outside while they worked to sort out her fixations and vent her excess of overheated fumes. The other three were stripped of their belongings, be they spare weapons, tools of the trade, trinkets of any kind, or ill-gotten gains. The warden might have been thorough, but he never would've accounted for any other hidden compartments on their clothes, evident by the howls of a steel harmonica. Gogh's melody reverberated off the stone walls, leaking past the tight gaps of the bars. She chewed her way through an improvised and warbling song from the soul, much to the chagrin of her neighbor cell's occupant. Edna had thrown a pillow over her face to try and dampen out the bluesy sound, though that lackluster amount of down couldn't do the job justice at all. Her breaking point came along when she swung her only means of dampening toward the front of her cell, shot up from her bed, then kicked the wall between her and her partner with gritted teeth.

"Dammit Gogh, stop playing that stupid harmonica!" she commanded, "I'm trying to get some sleep over here!"

From an adjacent cell chuckled the group's leader, stripped of their hood that shrouded their face. One could see the faint outline of short, silver hair, along with the bright blue eyes that pierced through the darkness. In the corner they had been stuffed into, it was hard to discern much more detail of their appearance. "You know when she works herself up, she only stops when she's tired."

Growling, Edna squatted down to the ground and gripped her ears tight. "She should be more considerate to her partners in crime!"

The undistracted leader's ears perked when they heard a heavy, thooming stomping from their left, footsteps far heavier than that of the warden's. Wobbling along, snug in his outfit, still carrying the weight forced upon him hours before, Elias trudged his way across the cell blocks. The sight alone was enough to get Edna to stop cawing, along with pulling Gogh's focus out of her rhythm. Tundra couldn't help but snicker at the wobbling mound of half-bunbid, especially since his belly brushed along the edges of each cold metal bar.

"Didn't mean to interrupt the show." Elias joked, failing to stuff a portion of his moob back beneath his coat and ailing buttons. "Keep playing if you wanna~"

"Y'know, now that I can look at you up close, that Ramona chick did a number on you." Tundra remarked, crossing their arms. "You just wanna show off the blubber, bunny boy? Or do you have a reason for being back here?"

Elias scooted a small stool along beside him, then left it between the three cells. His fingers laced themselves around the bars of Gogh's enclosure, knees wobbling while he lowered himself down to his seat. The tiny piece of wood wailed in peril when six-hundred or so pounds of flab pressed down on top of it and poured over the sides like overworked dough. "Could say this is a brief interrogation."

"Complimentary with being incarcerated." Edna scowled, her hand snatching back the pillow she'd tossed as the other struggled to fluff it. "Alright, spit it out."

"Why the Stained Sapphire?" Elias wondered. "Anyone who would do a cursory glance through its history would know just how cursed it is. I mean, the only reason it's been held away for so long was because every previous owner had experienced terrible misfortune."

Gogh pressed her face against the bars, just so she could more easily see Elias's chubby cheeks in the dim rays of moonlight. Guilelessly, she whistled at the sight of his bulging, wobbling curves. "Cuz we wanted our boss to suffer, duh!"

"See, *now* that makes sense." Elias pointed his finger at the half-orc in a gunshot motion. "I'd never see the likes of you working for those in power. Or at least, those who claim to be in power."

Edna flopped her bony butt back down on her bed, tucking her arms petulantly behind her mane of ruddy orange hair. "We had a whole plan set up, too." she recounted, "Wait for the old crone to croak, then take whatever was left in the ensuing power vacuum she left behind."

"Eds."

"What?" she turned back to her slightly annoyed leader. "Our mission is pretty much over, so why bother hiding it?"

"Late twenties isn't exactly old." Elias quipped with an easy grin, "Well, maybe it is to a full human, but definitely not to your ringmaster over here." He swiveled his body around, that apron of a gut sliding across the floor as it wobbled between his knees. "So, Tundra. Wanna explain to me why you guys decided to take on a job for Queen Cream Cake?"

"Do I want to? Not really. Not much other entertainment though." Arms still crossed, Tundra slid their back up the wall and chuckled. "It's 'cuz she paid well, that's all. Not to mention we'd get to have some fun seeing some belts burst while we make off with our money. On top of all that, a woman that crazy's no real Queen. All she's got to her title is being a squatter in a castle."

"So you have no intention of going back to her once you escape from here?"

"You're putting a lot of faith in us, bunbun." Gogh cut in on Elias's conversation. "What makes you think we're getting out?"

"Please, if that brown-haired runt respects you guys that much, you've gotten out of tighter binds."

"What, the guy that put us away in the first place?" Tundra wondered, with a flattered smile, just the slightest bit of flattery painting their obscured features. "Damn. Didn't know we had a fan."

Elias gripped onto Tundra's bars and grunted. He felt his shoulders shift and push down, arm flab nestled itself onto his top love handles and squeezed inward. Gogh got to witness every moment of his back tail shimmy and wobble, creaking the fabric of his nice, white pants and forcing them so thin that the top of his rump spilled over the waistband of his leggings like gelatin. Once he pulled himself up, he let out a heavy huff.

"Man," he patted his stomach, capturing all three thieves' attention with the ripple, "it's one thing to be a mattress for someone, completely different when I have to wobble around with all this. Losing all of it's gonna throw off my balance for the whole day tomorrow."

"You could just keep it." Gogh not-so subtly suggested. "Y'know, as a memento from fighting Ramona." Tundra nodded sagely along with their partner-in-crime's suggestion.

"Not right now," Elias turned back around. "Gotta stay limber. Once all this excitement dies down though..." He slapped his gut again, just to let it jiggle in the dim light of fairy lanterns. The Half-Bunbid smirked as he heard Edna's breath hitch for a second. "Say, how'd you get Ramona on board anyhow?"

Edna shrugged. "She's a good girl with a weird faith and an exploitable agenda. We just told her there'd be plenty of converts tonight if she followed our plan."

"Tch, poor thing." Elias shook his head. "Shame on you all for tugging at her heart strings like that."

Tundra's pearly whites shimmered in the darkness. "What, we're thieves! We steal valuable things, like gems and hearts...now, you done? We're probably gonna spring by tomorrow morning, and we'd like to get a little bit of shuteye."

"One last thing." Elias pushed himself into Tundra's bars a bit more, leaving them with a snarky grin. "Is your boss still in the old watch tower?"

Streams of water splashed against a water wheel, the groans of iron chains harmonizing with the grumbles of iron on stone. An old iron gate hoisted up, moonlight pouring into the front hall of the dungeon. In trekked a figure draped in dark robes, ones that slithered across the ground with each step they took. The further into the cool, slumbering stone innards of the fortress,, the more they could hear the bickering of other figures. A few turns down some halls and careful steps downward, and the cause of the ruckus became wholly evident. Stuck in her prison cell was the princess of Kyodania, the apple of the eye of all those who lived in Debudake, Raiko Futumomo herself. She had squished herself against her own prison walls, draped in her own attire once more. She lacked awareness of her recovered wardrobe however, on account of her deep, deep slumber, her paws folded underneath her jowls to avoid the cold, wet ground beneath her expanse. In front of her cell stood a wide-hipped, bell-bottomed, double-ponytailed mage, with her two maids by her side as personal body guards. Scolding her was the mastermind behind this whole ordeal, Queen Cream Cake herself.

“So you put her back in her garments?! What were you thinking?!”

Annoyance struck through the heart of the tyrant, screwing up her soft features in steaming aggravation. She glared up to Raiko with contempt; how dare her subordinate take pity on her!

“T-Try to understand, your Excellence!” The green haired twin pulled her pink skirt up slightly in a curtsy to show respect to her boss, her plump rear and tummy bouncing with the motion. “All of our other previous methods of interrogations have ended in bupkis, ribbit!”

“Y-Yeah!” the reddish-brown haired twin pulled up the other side of her skirt, nervously sweating, and yelped when her bend bumped her head against her twin’s, sending a ripple through her plush chest and pooching gut. “P-Plus, I don’t see a reason why we need to extort information out of her anyhow, croak!”

Queen Cream Cake howled in her spot, her pink hair flaring up into a bright, cream-soda orange that fizzed at the ends in sharp hisses. “You DOLTS! In case Kyodania comes down to try and pluck her away!” She pressed her hands down on the two’s heads, then slammed them together. Both post-frog servants yipped and spun about, dazed by the sudden clonk of their noggins.

“This whole plan is ridiculous.” Out came Grendel’s disdain, her voice small and raspy, yet chock full of venom. Her blue eyes squinted in the direction of her superior. “We’re only keeping her here because of the king’s ransom. A ransom we don’t even know will come.”

“A ransom I have PLANS for.” Queen Cream Cake bent over and pulled Grendel’s face up by the tuck up of the chin. “Now, why don’t you make our prisoner indecent as a part of the PROPER humiliating interrogation tactic?”

Grendel's squint became a down-right death-dagger glare, her arms crossed in defiance. "Make me."

Queen Cream Cake took a deep breath, and raised her hand toward Grendel's temple, only to be sidetracked by an annoyed yowl deeper within the tower. Up came Arabas from her chambers, a pillow tucked underneath her arm.

"Who DARES ruin my respite with all this needless commotion?!" she bellowed, arching the bare hip of her cloak in frustration. "I retire early to retain my beauty, I need not be forced to listen to this ceaseless-" she stopped in her tracks to look at the familiar robes that occupied the other end of the hall. Awkwardly, she raised her hand and swished it in a wave. "Hello, Bev."

Queen Cream Cake's whole mood shifted once she heard the name of her familiar servant. Her angry disdain had melted into giddy excitement, something apparent in the glitter of her pupils. Down pulled the hood of the robed figure, so Queen Cream Cake could be greeted by the woman's distinctively tired face and half-shaved head. The pink collar of her maid outfit poked out from the robe's hooded fold. Beverly, her recruiter, her servant, her most loyal follower since the beginning. Just a mundane human outwardly, complete with her brown eyes and bored expression.

"It's ready, your highness." she coldly relayed.

"Wonderful!" the royal clapped her hands together and grinned. "Alright then, it's time for a day triiiip~ Ara-Ara sweetheart, we leave tomorrow morning. Bev and Satoka will keep watch of the tower. If anything goes wrong, you know where the crystal ball is~ And you." Queen Cream Cake pointed her finger into Grendel's chest. "...Why don't you take a break, little miss 'doesn't eat the treats I send her and just feeds them all to the maids even though Cream Cake worked SO HARD on them'?" Every other word, the royal poked right into the witch's soft and sizable bosom. Grendel's scowl reddened.

"Eheh, i-is it that obvious?" Hop orbited her pointer finger tips around one another, her knees pressed together on the ground.

Trot felt a lump in her throat, waving her arm up to gesture to the sky. "Heheh, the cupcakes and pies and such are so much nicer than flies. You can't blame us for taking that opportunity, rrbt..."

Queen Cream Cake crossed her arms and 'harumphed', continuing her command. "Find a nice little retreat for the 'big monster' to rest in. Maybe that will help you find your dastardliness again. Find your sweet, not your sour."

Grendel gave her boss no more than an angered glance, before she pulled back her maids by the underarms.

“H-Here we go...”

“We won’t let you down, master...!”

The witch shushed those plump maids of hers, gentle in her tone. “It’s time to retire to our chambers.” Grendel comforted her dazed servants, then dragged them away by the underarms. Her wobbling, massive rear end bounced her skirt up with each step, lacy-white panties digging deeper between her crack the more she stomped away.

Bev sighed, then put her hand on Cake’s shoulder. “You sure you want to leave Satoka of all people here?”

“She’ll do swimmingly. If there’s one thing I know about her is that she always sees her missions through.” Queen Cream Cake assured, “Now, you get a good night’s sleep! No intruder is ever going to expect what’s coming next~”

Chortling a sforzando of ‘fufufu’s to herself, wriggling her fingers in front of her. Arabas slipped beside Beverly, curiously glancing up toward her.

“How is it that you are able to quell the tempestuous turnings of her emotions?” she wondered, “I presumed when she gets into one of these bouts of anger, it only peters out when she runs out of steam.”

Blinking, Bev turned her head away. “Maybe I’m just...good at getting to what’s underneath all of her, y’know?”

“Elaborate?”

“...No thanks. Later.” Bev walked off from Arabas, leaving the cult leader clutching her pillow in confusion. The tower needed one last line of defense before the eventual confrontation between those inside, and the would-be heroes trying to save their prized prisoner.

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A few days out from the elven town of Bristleburg, along the riverbank, and between the Ghostshire and Glowmire Forests, a good deal of plains stretched out close toward the riverbank. The croaking of frogs and chirping of crickets were a welcome change to the low grumble of far, far off wolves and hooting of owls. The travelers had set up camp once the sun had slipped beneath the distant pines of Ghostshire, their base of operations lit by crude torches and campfire. Bereft of his bulk from before and working his slender limbs limberly, Elias had taken it upon himself to map out the layout of the tower. More specifically, the immediate surrounding area, and the interior. All that was sketched was whatever would prove advantageous, and nothing more. The bard’s hand glided across the parchment, a quill pen dribbled ink gently behind. The front end had four circles, unfilled with any detail. Mars and

Mitsy watched his penmanship, Sol kept their back to a nearby tree, while Brigid seemed more preoccupied with observing the bard himself. Not out of admiration, judging from her glare. Everyone had on casual night-wear for the war-room meeting, Brigid in a simple tank top and spats that revealed the scar on her left abdomen, Mars in a white tunic and black slacks, complimented by a yellow striped undershirt, Mitsy in quite a literal pair of pajamas completed by a nightcap and unbuttoned bottom button to his shirt to let his belly breathe, Sol in a light orange button up shirt and thin pair of pants around their waist devoid of a weapon on their left stump, and Elias in what looked more like a bright pink poncho and pink stockings than actual sleepwear.

“A tower like this more than likely belonged to an old wizard at some point,” Elias mused, “it might’ve doubled as a watch tower for anything coming south of it. That’d explain why the reports of it being bigger on the inside than the outside would track.”

“That means there’s more than likely traps slotted within.” Mitsy warned, “Traps I’d presume Satoka’s chief and her accomplices hesitate to disarm since it could be used to their advantage.”

Mars snapped his fingers. “I can get those easily. The last thousand years of traps are nothing but thin wires and loose stone bricks.”

“More than likely, the front’d have no guards patrollin’ outside whatsoever. They’s got a crew that repels the rational and the right like moths to ice.” Sol presumed, “It’s not just us that hafta go through there, it’s their easiest way in too.”

“I say we split into two teams.” Elias spun his pen around, swirling four more circles behind the building. “There’s a waterway in the back that helps power everything arcane. Now, it’s supposed to house the princess herself. Since it has plenty of traps, bringing our biggest probably wouldn’t be the smartest.”

“Those thieves tell you all about this?” Brigid wondered, her head tilted upward.

Elias smirked up to her. “They pretty much told me all I need to know.”

The warrior took a moment of silence, then threw her gaze toward the campfire. “...Sure.”

“Anyway.” Elias pointed toward the four dots. “Mars, Mitsy, you two should be apart of this group. Slick fingers and arcane knowledge will get you pulling her out in no time. You’ll need some half-decent coordination and muscle to avoid traps, so Brigid’ll join you. As for our last-”

“You should go up front.” Brigid commented, “Wouldn’t hurt to drag Neptune with us.”

Mars thought about it some, then nodded. "Yeah. Brigid's right, Neptune used to explore dungeons with all kinds of hidden traps before. She'll know her way around the back of this one pretty easy."

Elias scribbled in four faces- a sopping wet cat's, an angry ogre with hair over her eye, a radiant Half-Elf, and a mischievous goblin of a Half-Elf. Mitsy's face reflected his little sketch as Mars ribbed the Half-Felinis with an impish cackle. "Which leaves the front assault to be me, Cerbi, Avery, then you, Sol." The front circles would be struck through with a gorgeous Half-Bunbid that received far more artistic effort than the rest of the blueprint combined, a dopey Hellhound, a swoopy haired Human, and a cowpoke with hair in front of their face. "Any objections?"

"I say both teams have their niches filled." Sol concluded. "Healer, hitter, spell slinger an' an extra other thing, jack of all trades. Well planned out."

"Right." Elias rolled up the parchment and thumbed a piece of twine around it. "We'll be hitting the tower tomorrow around noon if all goes right, once you guys get the princess out of her cell, don't even worry about subtlety. Just make a bee-line for the front- we probably don't have the time to make it discreet, so go all out."

Mitsy hummed to himself. "So we're going to use her to bring down the foundation of the tower then? I imagine even with its magic, it can't handle the structural damage the princess will no doubt cause. Do you expect us to just...rush to the front once we obtain her?"

"Pretty much, gives us more time to escape if our enemy's too worried about getting squashed." Elias tied up the plans and stowed it in his coat pocket. "Trust me, they won't get splattered."

"I say this concludes our plotting then." Sol yawned aloud. "I'm gonna go hit the hay. Who's on first watch?"

"Elias and Neptune." Brigid piped up, pointing at each of them in turn. "Then it's me and Mars, Cerbi and Mitsy, then you and Avery."

"Good, I'm an early riser anyhow." Sol slid their hand in their pocket and wandered off.

Elias flung his hand up, then wandered toward the center of camp. "I'll go pry sleeping beauty from her knapsack then." he'd chortle. "Sleep well!"

Mars and Brigid retired to their shared tent, while Mitsy let out a small yawn. He'd been longing for the warmth of his partner tonight, his feet practically pulling him toward their tent for the night. The fire's crackle made for good ambience late that night, the whining call of wind whistling across the camp's tents. The occasional cicada chatter or buzzy chirps broke the monotony, nature in its most soothing element. Mitsy hadn't experienced nature up close like

this in a long, long time, so being able to most nights was such a change of pace. He sat by the tent's flap, eyes fixated on a nest of birds nestled between the safety of a tree's hollow. His tail slithered across the ground, only to bat itself to and fro at the end of its arc. Sometimes, he caught his eyelids growing heavy, but that was nothing that couldn't be shaken off temporarily. He felt the ground shift and shimmy beneath him, the heft his partner had enough to make rocks bounce and rattle outside.

"Aren't you comin' to bed...?" Cerbi pressed with concern, one hand curled up to one closed eye.

A scent of river water from the north blew through the tent, Mitsy feeling his ears twitch instinctively to answer nature's question. "I'm just...enjoying this for a little bit longer." Mitsy answered honestly. "I never knew travelling would be so calm at times."

"I'm glad our watch's not 'til later." Cerbi mentioned, then sat down beside Mitsy. His care in assuring he wouldn't stir others out of their sleep was to take a careful squat, be sure his belly touched the ground first, then plop himself down. "That means more time focusing on you, huh?"

The innocence Cerbi exuded was always a delight. His unintentional flattering flustered the kitty every time, enough to where he had to brush his fingers through his tail and tuck it close to his soft belly in order to regain focus. "Aw, sugar cookie..." He cooed, "Why not focus on you too? You're the light of my life, and I'll always be interested in what you have to say."

"I wish I got something to say I hadn't said before." Cerbi admitted, leaning close into his partner. His soft, warm blubber repelled the chills of autumn away from the two. "I don't remember things the best, so I know I don't got much to offer. That's why I like letting you talk. You always got something interesting on your mind, and I know I can be a good listening Cerbi."

"Sometimes I prefer hearing what you have to say." Mitsy tilted his head toward Cerbi, leaned in some. "Even if you think you said it before, when you repeat yourself, it just means that I know for a fact what you feel is true."

There was a pause on Cerbi's end, before he looked down to Mitsy. "You know...I kind of wish you were the taller one." He blurted out.

An idea like that came as a surprise to the Half-Felinis, he tilted his head inquisitively. "Really now?"

"Yup. It stinks that sometimes I can only see you if you're on my side, or if I'm leaning down, or if I have to suck in my weight. I'd rather just look up and see you smile. That makes things a lot easier..."

"But darling, you can change your height. And I'll always smile for you."

There was a brief blink on Cerbi's part. "Oh yeah. Well, this is different. I want to be able to not have to change my size. It's so much thought putting in my head what I want to look like versus what I actually look like, sometimes I just wanna look up and be the small one."

"Seven feet tall isn't exactly small...does my height not satisfy you?"

"It's no deal breaker!" Cerbi's assurance was coupled with a wrap of his arm around Mitsy's shoulder. "You're still my dragon fruit, nothing's gonna change that."

Instinctively, Mitsy purred in Cerbi's embrace. His hands gravitated toward the hellhound's arm, the heat alone convincing his body now was the time to retire the night. The vague outline of Elias stepped toward the campfire to stoke it some more...both of them knew they would be watched over thoroughly. There was no need to stay up. With a careful nod, Mitsy scooted backward into the veil of darkness and laid down on his bedroll. Not long after, he was embraced by the warmth of Cerbi's stomach that went up from his face down to his curled knees. It was a warm pillow to the normally chilled, cold cat...something about this warmth in particular, specifically the warmth of his boyfriend, was an exception to his typical cold slumbers. Was it closeness? Was it their embrace? Was it all the work that got the two here? Mitsy had no answer, just one question. How much longer would his body let him enjoy this before *'it'* became inescapable?

Across from the loverboys, Brigid slipped down onto her cot and folded her leg up to her chest. Camp and planning like this wasn't unfamiliar to a Power Fist, but something had ticked the back of her mind throughout the session. The tone of confidence in Elias's voice, his sureness in his source, it didn't sit right with her. Mars folded over on his left side, his eyes met Brigid's silhouette in the dimness.

"Can't sleep?"

"Takes a bit for me to wind down." Brigid admitted. "...You think we can trust that guy? Elias, whatever his name is?"

"He's told you his name like ten times unprompted." Mars snickered. "'The Great Elias', 'Elias the Performer', 'Heartthrob Elias' -"

"He collects titles for himself like a damn curator collects old rocks."

Mars couldn't hold back a laugh from Brigid's remark, even if she was stone-cold serious. "I think I'll pass on the Pervert Rabbit House of Historical Sluttery, thank you very much."

"I mean it when I asked you if we could trust him." Brigid turned her head toward Mars. "He just, he seems to know more than he lets on is all."

Mars pulled his blanket over his body, a snarky feline-esque smirk on his face. "You're overreacting, Bridge. Of course I know he's up to something, but him having that knowledge is making things easier for us. He wouldn't be chasing after my sister so hard if he was just gonna betray us out of nowhere."

The warrior's train of thought had been derailed by the nickname. "Bridge?"

"Yeah. Bridge. Short for Brigid."

"Yeah, in syllables maybe. If you spelt it out it'd be the same amount of letters."

"Eh, who's gonna go through the effort to write that down though?" Mars rolled over onto his back and sighed. "You're Bridge to me. Brigid in serious moments, Bridge like this."

"It sounds like a pet nickname." Brigid lowered her back onto her cot, arching her neck off of her pillow. "What, do you want me to roll over for you next?"

"I don't think I could train you." Mars joked.

"You better not. I bite."

Mars blinked, then turned to look at Brigid, a silly grin plastered on his face that made Brigid irrationally upset. "Good joke~"

"Stuff it. Go to bed. Leave me alone. Die." The fighter pulled her hair back over her right eye, then grumbled. "Just take what I say into consideration."

The two remained quiet for a while longer. Mars drifted off into sleep soon after, in a light and easy posture that spoke to his thief's upbringing, leaving Brigid in the dead of night with nothing but the sound of bugs outside, and the ringing of her ears in the silence abound. With her lids shut, she'd try to get a wink of sleep in through the night. Maybe their watch shift would be more exciting tonight, though given the stillness of the main road, maybe not.

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Further up the straight path, near the river's streak along the grassy null, an old tower stood all on its lonesome. Surrounded by scant trees and dipping hills, the tower bent and buckled in crooked zags up in the air. An old water wheel chugged away along the babbling river edge, an iron gate crossed off anyone that dared enter. Stood at the front, the short-tempered Avery, the blubberous Cerberus, the charismatic Elias, and the quick thinker Sol. This massive, almost impossible zagging structure loomed far above their heads. Vines and moss hung from higher up, some strands baked by the sun, some thriving in the cool shade. Life hadn't propagated here in quite some time, judging by the architecture itself. That was,

however, until now. The bard slipped over to the front and hummed, there was no way they were just going to walk into this one yet.

"Y'know, I didn't account for an iron gate." Elias mumbled to himself and stroked his chin. "Must be new."

Cerbi leaned over, his head swung to the side in curiosity. "How can you tell?"

"Just looks new is all." Elias shifted his eyes away, his confident tone betraying his body language. "No scratches at all."

Sol loaded up their arm and pulled back the safety on their augment. Attached to their left arm this time was not their trusty revolver cannon. Instead, a silver glimmer shimmered off of two cylindrical barrels, the wooden base a similar latching that engulfed their stump fully. "Well, let's get this heated up then. Steel melts under 'streme heat, all it takes after that is a good blast to dislodge it. About sixteen-hundred celsius'll slag it, but careful y'all don't get any shrapnel comin' yer way."

Cerbi blinked, then cupped his hand toward Avery. "Hey, what's a celsius?"

"Temperature, I think?" they assumed, unsure, "It's probably like, three-hundred fahrenheit."

"Ohhh...what's a fahrenheit?"

"So all we need then's a nice, low heat to dislodge it." Basil squeaked out from her pocket pouch, hands gripped on the leather edges. "Cerbi? Could you do us the honors?"

Pulled away from his conversation, the hellhound excitedly nodded. He inhaled deep, deep enough to pull his shoulders and head back, then to swell his belly...then swell it some more, then some more, as it lost definition of rolls and became properly round.

"Cerb." Elias thumped the hellhound's side. "That's good enough."

FWOOSH! Out streamed a low concentration of bright blue flames, sizzling the tops of the iron bars that blocked their path. Avery pulled out a small piece of parchment while the others waited.

"Hey, Sol?" They slid beside the cowpoke. "You were showing off those blueprints the other day, remember?"

"Yeah?" Sol tilted their head. "What about them?"

“Uh, I mighta...copied down a few of your notes.” They rubbed the back of their head and chuckled. “Just wondering though, that big one that’s a huge barrel. You spelled it ‘C-A-N-O-N’, when it’s...’C-A-N-N-O-N’?”

Sol’s hand snatched the paper to look at it, then hummed to themselves. “Shoot, guess I did. Heh, sometimes I get so excited I make silly little mistakes...welp. Guess it’s C-A-N-O-N now, hope no one noticed.”

“Look alive.” Elias cut the chit-chat in the back, Cerbi’s belly had deflated back down to its normal, ankle blocking flabby self. “Sol, make some noise.”

Parting their legs slightly, Sol readied themselves for the kickback. “Out of the cone of fire!”

The other three were quick to hop behind the inventor, their right hand wrapped to the trigger. One quick pull was all they needed to blast two small paper rockets toward their blockade. The crackling of gunpowder and the subsequent blast propelled the cowpoke back into the air. Those fireworks crackled and exploded into the bars, dislodging the weakened beams and throwing them inside. The shot, the explosion, and the clanging across the cobbled ground had birds retreating from the catastrophic noise. Sol just barely landed on their feet, amused by their underestimation of the kickback.

“Alright, let’s go!” Elias flicked his pointer finger inside with his left hand, his right hand gripped his cane tight.

Cerbi drew his massive greatsword over his shoulders, giving Elias a determined nod. Sol cracked open their firearm to reload, the fizzling of the previous ignition pooling out as black smoke. Avery safely latched Basil back into the pouch, before they twirled their lance about in their grasp. The noise from the outside was enough to draw out some of the leftover monsters Queen Cream Cake had left behind to guard the tower, all of whom hadn’t been prepared for an infiltration of the front to this degree. Gumdrops soldiers with licorice limbs and cinnamon spears readied for the offensive took the first row.

“Don’t feel bad for any of these things,” Elias reminded Cerbi with a grin. “It’s just food made to move around.”

“Heheeee, y’know what Mitsy never lets me do?” In a demonstration of his strength, Cerbi spun that massive obsidian slab around with only his right hand. He stabbed his sword into the ground, then twisted his wrist around the grip. Suddenly, that black obelisk of stone lit up in a furious blaze of colors; yellows, oranges, reds, and cyans, all in a glowing, thrumming gradient to the top of the blade. “He *never* lets me cook without him.”

The explosion at the front was the infiltrating group's signal forward. Behind the tower, an opening for the river to come trickling in had been made. Mars slipped his lockpick into the keyhole and ticked away at the pins, grooving it along until each one clicked into place. In under a few seconds, he slipped the group through the backway. Mitsy, Brigid, and Neptune folded in and shut the door behind them gently. What awaited them was a dark stairwell, one that was quickly illuminated by a gentle tapping of Mitsy's staff. The cute little cat eyes at the front beamed a dim, twenty-foot cone of light forward, making their surroundings just a little more discernable.

"Thanks, catman." Brigid gave him a thumbs up, her greataxe slung across her back.

"Remember, don't pick fights unless we gotta." Mars warned, shimmying slowly across the edge of the steps. "Mits? You see anything?"

"The stairs are fine." the mage cleared, "I expect the traps will be further in."

Neptune nods, bringing up the rear of the group as Mitsy led them along. "Alright, bring us forward."

Mitsy did just that, stepping cautiously and quietly throughout the back entrance's spiraling staircase hallway, its cold chartreuse walls illuminated with sunbeam yellows the whole way through.

—

The obsidian slash of Cerbi's sword cleaved through a small grouping of gumdrops, felling their little bodies with a charred sizzle out the top. The hellhound charged forward, cleaving two waffle-cone ice cream scoop lancers in half, bubbling their dairy insides until they combusted into milky puddles. He swung his blade around with fervor, going by its whims rather than his own, a dance of fire and brimstone that led its wielder around rather than the inverse. For so long it had been deprived of a proper battle, and now that it was getting its desire for combat, its rigid edges burned with ozone-melting joy. The eye that extended from hilt to blade spun around, seeing the candy coated visceral mess it caused flung about. Even with such a bulky body, Cerbi's reach was tremendous. Left behind in his wake, Sol picked through their jacket pocket for concoctions that they prepared for battles such as these, thumbing into protected vials. They slid one out between their fingers, an unfortunate stack of jello crumbled from the acidic mixture and sizzled into a blistering, popping contagion. The perp leapt away, unfurling their wings to take to the tower's higher staircase just to avoid the popping splashes.

Along the walls they flew beside, Avery had sped along the bricks to gain a proper height advantage. Their eyes were set on an upright lemon meringue, its crust crackling and bending to hold a heavy pie-crust club over its head. All the Fairyfel needed was a good kick off the wall, and down they flew back to the earth. Their lance broke their fall into the head of the round guard, the lemon filling deeper within its body spurting out of its wound as it slid with the impact

of being Avery's crash mat. Avery twisted the lance deeper, a sparkle of fae magic spurting out from its head. The midsection of the meringue started to swell from within, the top layer of its structure puffing outward until its creamy insides splattered across the walls. Out from the crust came a conglomerate of light motes, congealed together into the shapes of butterflies. All the while, closer to the entrance, Elias had been surrounded by fluffy cookie dough cream puffs, each one with a chocolate chip cookie shield and grasping a blade of sharpened chocolate. He let them draw closer and closer to him, to the point where their blades could pierce him from any wrong move. Suddenly, his hand shifted down to his cane, and in a blink of the eye, he had vanished for just a moment. Left in his place were only sharp cuts through the air, where he appeared on the other side of the surrounding puffs, brushing his hair from his eyes. Each one caught in the crossfire would explode into a wild gush of chocolate, stragglers left behind were stunned by him batting them with the holster of hidden blade, then properly skewered.

The heroes drew in closer, their backs pressed to one another as more confectionary fodder filed out. Cerbi gripped his blade tight, the grip throbbing in his palms. Sol landed and aimed their firearm upward with a smirk, a gleam of rowdy orange eyes flickering from beneath the white mop of hair. Avery landed on their feet, their lance held up at skewering range. Elias just spun his way toward his friends, clasping his cane shut again.

"Reinforcements." Sol cocked the safety on their firearm. "I say we blow them to kingdom come."

"Not yet." Elias chuckled. "Don't let excitement take you over again."

"So what do we wanna do?" Cerbi wondered.

Avery twisted the grip of their lance with confidence. "More of what we've **been** doing."

—

Deeper within the tower, the infiltrating party had slinked into the bowels, in a long hallway devoid of guards. Well, all but one guard, a lone slice of cheesecake gripping onto their wafer shield, keeping its sight on anything from further within the tower itself. It never saw Mars skewer his blade deep into its side, nor did it get the chance to react to being sliced from its awkward back leg structure down to its front where its arms rested. Poor thing lost its custard hands from its arms, leaving it unable to crawl for help. A brutal fate, lest one be reminded of its lack of sentience. Mars nodded, then hopped back over to the others.

"Only guard in the room." he promised. "They're all distracted by the fighting upstairs, I think."

"See anything?" Brigid wondered under her breath.

Mitsy spun his staff around some more, trying to get a lay of the land. Mars busied himself with investigating the walls and floors for loose panels and wires. Both turned to each other and shook their heads, unable to discern anything from an obvious glance over. Assured the coast was clear, the group moved forward.

"It's strange." Mitsy hummed, "Usually wizards leave behind some sort of sign as to who built their tower in the event of their death. I've not been able to find *any* kind of signifier so far."

"What's that mean?" Mars wondered.

Mitsy came to one conclusion; "It must mean they're still alive somewhere."

"Well, perhaps we can bring them on our side if we-"

Ksssssssk~

Neptune was caught off guard when her foot slotted into a panel on the ground, tripping her up where she stood.

"Shit, I thought I checked there!" Mars pulled Brigid forward first, Mitsy leaping away.

Neptune just about hopped off, heel raised until she was caught off guard by a sudden gust of pink air. She coughed loudly, waving the fragrance away as fast as she could. The fumes were quick to ventilate upward, though dispersed pretty quick once they hit the cleric in the head. She stepped back, her hand pressed against her head.

"Nep, you good?!" Mars called out to her out of panic, while the other two tried to shush him.

"I...I think?" she wondered, her shoulder drooped to the side. "I feel...kind of cozy, honestly."

Mitsy gulped, then slammed his staff back down into the ground. He channeled much more energy into the detection spell, enough to where one could see icicles form along his arms and frost creep across the webbing of his veins. Soon enough, ice balls floated over various spots in the hallway.

"Great..." sighed Mitsy. "Whoever made this tower put a lot more effort into hiding their traps."

Brigid recoiled when she watched Neptune's concerned frown slowly creep into a dim smile. She could see the glitter and glow from the Half-Elf's eyes diminish slowly, and see her head tilt to the right as her left ear hissed out air. A subsequent amount of air leaked from spots on her ear no holes seemed to appear on, yet she wasn't losing definition. She was gaining it.

Her left ear started to swell outward, losing opacity so the others could see right through it. Instead of blood vessels, nerve endings, organic matter at all, Neptune's ear had become translucent. It slightly puffed down once the other ear swelled outward, hissing that same leakage of air. Neptune started to giggle, her face puffing out cheeks first. That smile lost its definition, going from an entry way into her maw to a simple, painted-on image of a grin, flashing different images whenever she moved her lips.

"Eheeeee, guys~ You gotta try this..." The cleric cooed.

Brigid pulled out her axe. "The hell's happening to her?"

"I...think it's a brain drain spell." Mitsy remarked. "This one takes the form of turning someone's head into an inflatable blimp."

"Just the head?" Mars shivered. "How can we stop it?"

"Um, I think it's better to let it go away on its own." Mitsy suggested nervously. "These don't tend to last long anyway. They're meant to blow people away in the wind harmlessly, not to cause harm."

Neptune's hands slinked up to under her puffed cheeks. She playfully giggled while her head puffed out further, the hat on top of her head bounced once the air shot up into her forehead. Her eyes spread apart from the constant stretching of her whole cranium, garnering the same painted-on texture her grin had been given. Her gaze averted upward, the rubbery texture her head had been given spreading all across her. Her hair strands became rounded and softened by the second. Those playful, dim-witted giggles raised in pitch the further the inflation went along. Her braids too started to hiss and puff out into rubber balloons, their weaves resembling that of balloon animals sold at carnivals. At some point, the diameter of her head had stretched past her shoulders. Her balance was all thrown off, though quickly, she'd been taken up into the air from the pressure of her mind.

"Heheeeeeee...air thoughts~...Marrrrrrrs...eehehehee...you're like...you're my brother~ ehehehe, wow..." cooed the cleric, squeezing the underside of her head some more. "Air braaaaaain..."

"Glad I can't see her brain." Mars shivered at the thought. "Does she really gotta sound like that though? A-And speak like a Kappa?"

"Or an Imp?" Mitsy added on, before he rattled on his explanation, taking a step back. "Air brain tends to leave people dumber, but they at least retain their memories. It's just a matter of recalling them."

Brigid pulled her eye anywhere but the humiliating inflation that was taking place before her attention was drawn to something that made the whole ordeal worse. Guards flooded into

the room, a collection of gumdrop minions with spears and shields stood to block the way forward.

“Hey, look.” Brigid slung her greataxe off her back. “Something to kill the time while we wait on airhead to deflate.”

“Egheeeee, Brigid, bri, buh...you said *airhead*~” Neptune squirmed in affirmation over the insult. “Ehehehe... you’re my friend! Swingy swingy axeeeeee!”

Mars watched Mitsy prepare himself for a volley of spells, before he got an idea. He knew Brigid would just swing with reckless abandon, proving dangerous when part of his sister’s body had become a squeaky, creaky film of rubber. From his satchel, he whipped out his grappling hook and clasped it around Neptune’s leg. The only straight line not dotted in ice ball dots was the walls. He took a deep breath, had a running start, then leapt up on the wall to pull his sister along.

“*Wheee-eeee~*”

Neptune cheered while her body and head were pulled backward by her rushing brother. At the front of the hall, Brigid slashed through guards with reckless abandon. Mitsy took the time to make sure that none of those gumdrops could escape her wrath, though he was quickly caught off guard when one chucked their spear over the two. If it weren’t for his quick thinking, Neptune might’ve popped before the spell ended, and neither he nor Mars wanted to know what would happen then. He froze the spear in the air with a large trickle of magic, a force so strong it practically encased his left hand up to his elbow in icicles. A little panicked, he tried to shake them off to no avail. Brigid clasped one guard with one arm, then drove him right into another’s spear. One managed to get a good knick on her thigh, but that scratch was nothing in terms of pain to her. She slid out one of her handaxes and chopped it clean through.

“Fun...showwww...” Neptune’s voice reached an impossible high, to the point where her tones themselves sounded like rubber squeaking.

Cringing a tad, Mars shut his eyes and kicked himself off the wall, finally at the end. He could see more guards spill in, before he got an idea. “Cover your mouths and noses!”

“Is he-”

Brigid let loose a growl, slamming one gumdrop into another. “He’s set his mind to it.” Brigid growled.

She pulled Mitsy over to the corner, then clasped her hand over her mouth and pinched her nose shut after a deep breath. Mitsy reluctantly did the same. Mars aimed his crossbow at the middle ice ball in the room, then sprung the bolt loose. He’d throw his weapon away to cover his airways just in time, as the resulting explosion of ice ricocheted to every other ball in the

room. Those gumdrops were quickly hit by the onslaught of magical ice skewers, and the mist found holes to seep into. An insane play like this was risky, but Mars knew how to act fast. On his own dwindling timer, he kicked off the wall and his sister, using the motion of his leg to crash through any icicle debris launched its way toward Neptune's swelling head.

"Ghooooo, pretty colorssss...~"

Off went the grappling hook around Mars's wrist, it retracted back to the rogue and shattered other bits of debris that flew close to Neptune's head. One shard had managed to make it through, his eyes swelled in their sockets with fear from what could happen. The glimmering shard propelled itself forward, pressed into Neptune's head, then simply bounced right off, giving him some level of relief. The onslaught of enemies, thankfully, had started to puff and bloat outward and upward toward the ceiling, resigned to their fates easily. The pink fumes dissipated, allowing the winded and dizzy rogue to finally breathe again. Brigid pushed Mitsy away and stomped toward Mars.

"The hell was that?!" she howled. "You were really willing to take that risk?!"

Mars huffed, leaning up toward the wall. "Look..." he pointed up to the ceiling, where Brigid craned her head upward.

Up in the rafters of the hall must've been dozens of the gumdrop enemies, bouncing off one another and creaking as they grew rounder. Just when Brigid thought she could comprehend how many there were, she'd notice another dozen nestled underneath one pile. Then another dozen, then another... With two people, it would've been an impossible wave to fight.

"Shit, man." She huffed. "Just don't tell your sister that-"

"Geheeeeee, b-boom~"

Neptune's words were concerning, even more so was the sudden flash of red that shimmered across her head. Seams had formed and curved in where a blimp of her shape would have naturally been sealed, the paint of her small eyes and giant grin didn't even move when she spoke anymore. That hissing turned to furious whistling, the diameter of her head pushing past what the hall's width would allow. Even her braids now encompassed a width beyond Mitsy's size, and those seams leaked air at a remarkable rate.

"Cover your ears!"

Mars' advice was quickly taken, Brigid and Mitsy hurriedly throwing their hands over their ears, with Mars following suit. That doofy grin on Neptune's cheeks flashed bright in the scant light within the room.

“Boom, boom, boom, boom~”

Her chanting grew squeakier and squeakier, until it couldn't be parsed as words anymore. Just the delirious, horny creakings of an airbrained blimp. Neptune's face rumbled, the rubber started to tear in small patches. It couldn't last much longer, until it couldn't.

“GYNAAAAHHH~!”

One final send off to the transformation, her bulbous head's paint smearing her cheeky grin into a perverted, drooling maw, the eyes shifted up into her 'head', before the rubber tore itself asunder from the internal pressure. The resulting, cataclysmic bang ricocheted across the hall. Neptune's chubby body propelled down with a soft thump. There was a brief flash of her normal head through the dangles of her braids before she made a solid impact into the front end of her brother. The expulsion of air rocketed a harsh wind throughout the hall, enough to blow Brigid's hair mop behind her, and flutter Mitsy's skirt upward. The force even shot upward into the rafters, where various other popping and confetti shreds shot down. Both siblings were rocketed backward, bumped into the corner from the explosion. Neptune's inflated face sprinkled down like a rain of confetti onto the ground, her perverted smile somehow the most intact of every other part of her body. Her hat fluttered down on top of Brigid's head, before she swung it off the top. Groaning, Neptune pulled herself up. Mars crawled out from his crater as well, grumbling at his position. She took a moment to realize what happened, her eyes shrunk to pinhole size. She was *horrified* at just how dim-witted she acted, even more at the inherent pleasure the deepest part of her got out of it. After she collected her hat, she cleared her throat.

“All in favor of, um, forgetting that ever happened?”

The rest awkwardly nodded, Mars' hand clutched into his discarded crossbow.

“Good. Um...good. Let's just go before anyone else steps on one of those.”

—

Further up in the main entrance of the tower, more animated desserts littered about the floors. Cleaved éclair knights, bubbling shortcakes with half their bodies eroded by acid, skewered dangos scattered on the ground, and seared macaroons currently stabbed into Cerbi's sword. Hungry enough for a break, he chomped right down into the snacks and pulled them off the edge of his blade, his tail wagging from the flavor.

Avery took a deep breath, able to rest up for just a moment. “What's taking them so long...” they complained, “They said they'd be out by now.”

KER-POPPPP! Pahp, papahp pahp, pahp!

The commotion from downstairs shook their feet, the others alerted by the snafu they ran right into. Sol loaded back up their firearm and cocked the safety. "Sounds like they're in hot water."

"Stick to the plan." Elias raised his hand. "We got more important things to be worrying about now."

"And what would you suppose *THAT* would be, maggot?"

The familiar voice of the living cherry herself swung Cerbi's mood from pleased to frustrated. The bodies of those half-eaten, half-skewered, half-seared macaroons were flung toward the other scattered remains just out of sight of the Hellhound. He stared up toward the rotund, portly lady, in all her sloshy wobbly glory, those military fatigues a smidge bit tighter around her frame. He didn't even greet her with her name, just a furious growl, baring his razor sharp teeth.

"Awww, puppy mad?" teased the bomber from afar. "Puppy wanna have his revenge? Well come on!"

Elias was about to reach out for Cerbi, but the tank took off with a roaring yell. Never before today had he felt the rush of violence, and now that he saw someone he *truly* hated, he wanted her to be properly put in her place. Unfortunately for him, something blocked the impact of his fist to her cheek. Something soft, yet something stubborn enough to stick in place. When the dust cleared from the force of the punch, Cerbi could see what it was exactly that blocked him. Another food creature, though this time one who was much more humanoid. Parts of its body were segmented by marshmallows, held together through joints of graham cracker or cooled chocolate plating. Its hair was hardened chocolate, with the sides and back drizzling ever so slightly. In its four-fingered hand was Cerbi's fist, pushed into the soft body and slightly coated in its marshmallow goo. The marshmallows on its head looked like adorable hair buns, and bobbed softly from slight motion. It shocked the others by opening its mouth.

"Howdy!" A friendly, chippy, feminine voice escaped the marshmallow humanoid. "My name is Miss Small S'more! Though, you can just call me Small S'more or S'more for short."

Cerbi's ears flicked, the anger practically evaporated from his body. The void, however, was rapidly filled with confusion. "Huh."

She'd been standing on Cerbi's belly to keep with his eye level long enough. Off she hopped and landed on the ground, her chocolate-plated bosom bounced in a simple up-and-down, mechanical motion. "I'm the world's smartest, most intelligent, most keee-yew-tist artifice yet!"

"Artifice?!" Sol sprung up and practically bapped Cerbi aside with their firearm. They wanted a closer look at the technological marvel. "Y'mean you're artificial?!"

“Uhhhh?” Avery scratched the side of her head. “What’s so special about her? She’s just a walking talking marshmallow?”

Elias shifted his gaze away, gripping his arm furiously. “Damn it, she actually finished the thing.”

“I didn’t *just* finish it.”

Elias’s eyes shifted over to the stairs, where Beverly stepped down further to get closer to the others. Having discarded her robes, all she was left in was her work uniform. The pink, flowy maid outfit that all of Queen Cream Cake’s maids wore. “You could say I perfected her. Properly trained her, even.”

Avery glanced up to the maid, then back toward the marshmallow woman on the other side of the room. “Wait, you mean *you* built her? You don’t look like a scientist.”

“Hol’ up.” Sol turned their head toward Beverly. “You know Elias?”

“Know him?!” Satoka guffawed. “Everybody here knows about the Queen’s royal bed and breakfast after she got bored of his singing! She got this doofus so blubbery, he couldn’t move without begging for HER to push him around! Guess that’s something he forgot when he decided to hop away!”

On the defensive, Elias pulled his sword out and readied it. The truth, however, had come out enough. Sol’s glance was on him now, their judgmental stare broke through the void of silence. “That was then. This is now.”

“I just didn’t think you were her bed.” Avery remarked, seemingly on the same page.

“Now hol’ on a damn minute.” Sol cocked their gun toward Elias. “You mean t’tell us you had insider knowledge cuz you were workin’ with her?”

Beverly came down to the bottom rung of the stairs. “She wasn’t always like this.” she professed. “There used to be someone sweeter in her. But...” There was a pause, before Bev simply slid her fingers through her hair. “I guess you couldn’t handle her at her worst, could you? Just a little bit of pushback and you ran.”

“You’ve got some nerve!”

Elias swung his blade toward Bev, a pink glimmer indicating some type of enchantment. That blade’s swing was thrown right off its trajectory after a glob of marshmallow filling had been shot toward it. The Half-Bunbid swung his head back to the Artifice, who chuckled to herself.

“Dearie oh dearie-earie mearie me! You’re not familiar with my prerogative, are you?” Where her left hand once was, now a peppermint stick with a hollow hole broke through a void of darkness. “I’m afraid I’m more than just a servant. I’m a combatant! Most of her highness’s maids have to be in tip-top tubby shape, so that leaves puffy ol’ me to fill the gap~!”

“Afraid you’ll be too busy fighting her to get your revenge on me!” Satoka bounced backward, then stuck out her tongue. “La-ter, lo-ser~!”

“Sorry Dia.” Bev backed up on the stairs, taking a long look at the scowling rabbit man. “You’re a big boy. You know how to hold yourself in a fight.”

Hiding her guilt, Beverly rushed back up the stairs while Satoka retreated further into the tower. The click of Small S’more’s projectile weapon sounded out in the open room packed with food scraps. “I dunno about you, but I’m itching for a fight, hehe~”

In a flash, the firearm withdrew back into her arm. She disappeared from the naked eye and reappeared right in front of Elias, her kneepad colliding with his stomach. The wind got knocked right out of his lungs, enough time for her to truly pummel him. First, she stomped her nanaimo bar foot into the ground to send an electric shock through his body, a searing pummeling punch into his ribcage with her left fist, an electric strike to the chin with her right fist, then a sudden grapple to the shoulder. In one, two, three swings, Elias was rocketed into the wall. While the dust settled, Small S’more stood upright and swiveled her head a whole one-hundred-eighty degrees to her next opponent; Avery.

“Next up?”

Her upper torso followed suit, her head kept in place while she readied her right hand for firearm globs. Panicking, Avery readied themselves to dodge rather than attack the speedy robot. A rapid fire burst of marshmallow globs tracked Avery’s movements, something that even they couldn’t keep up with forever. Sol did their best to keep Small S’more’s aim off track, quickly spreading their wings and flying up into the air. With careful aim, Sol took a firework potshot right toward S’more’s chest, flinging them backward from the motion. The firework lodged itself into her breastplate, then exploded into a crackle of fireworks, chocolate chunk, and marshmallow fluff. Those chocolate dots on her face scrunched into pain, her chocolate tongue rolled up to the root of her mouth. Their left arm twitched on the ground, each digit curling like a decapitated chicken.

“Oh, GODS!” she wailed, followed by chocolate milk tears streaking down her face. “Not my beautiful body! It huuurts!”

Cerbi stomped forward with a roar, before the Artifice spun her upper torso around and plugged his mouth with her peppermint gun.

“Kidding~”

She shot marshmallow round after marshmallow round into Cerbi's maw, puffing his cheeks with the treats. She easily kicked his slightly puffer belly away, rolling him a couple dozen feet across the floor like a grand bowling ball. That's when her body did the most miraculous thing; the wound where she'd been struck had congealed over easily with more marshmallow bits, her arm reforming at a rapid pace.

"Wh-what the?" Avery's astonishment led them to slow down, something they shouldn't have done. Their brief astonishment left their maw open to an onslaught of marshmallow blasts.

Elias groaned and peeled himself off the wall, funneling healing magic into his body just to keep himself upright. "She's...she can-"

"Regenerate!" Small S'more cut him off, pummeling poor Avery's maw with more of her smooth mallow blasts. "Her highness blessed me with some of her magic that I can use, which I'm able to tap into when fighting funny little things like you~"

"How about you chew on this then!" Sol cocked their gun in her direction. "Artifices have an operating source, so let's see what happens when yours is blown clean off!"

Down came another propulsion of a firework rocket, lodged right into her head. The marshmallow splatter covered the bloated belly of Avery, whose body was quickly assaulted by the caloric glut they were forced to endure. The side of their stomach popped through their shorts and luffed out the front, their chest stuck out further ahead until they couldn't see beneath them anymore, their legs growing stocky and wobbly, with their shoes swollen from cankle fat. Down they went, winded for a moment while they collected themselves. The beheaded Small S'more wobbled around goofily, their free hand tapping at the hole where their head used to be, chocolate sauce sputtering out. The wound crowned out a brown head, and out popped a new one good as the old.

"Come on, you have to be smarter than that." giggled S'more. "I thought I'd be fighting capable warriors, not a bunch of doofuses."

Their firearm aimed right at Sol, before they took the bird down with globs of marshmallow to the wings. The poor thing crashed into a discarded key-lime pie guard, stuck within its filling. She jolted toward Sol, then continued to unload into their maw. The cowpoke was filled with caloric sweetness, their button up shirt struggling over the added blubber. Their belt around their stub tightened as their shoulders grew fatter, their cheeks puffed out, their bosom pushed out further over their belly. Over it draped over their legs, legs that shred through the fine chaps they had worn throughout most of their travels. Those boots swelled up faster, faster, faster, then split at the seams to let their waddlestompers free, consumed by ankle fat. Their hand pressed and puffed against their glove, until those chunky digits tore right through the craftsmanship. Not even their short jacket was safe, tearing asunder and scattering various vials out of their reach. Their blubber filled up the crust of the pie they once easily dispatched with a

single shot, that massive tush spilling over the edges alongside the belly. Shreds of what was left came in patches, stuffed into their rolls that quickly accelerated and stacked up. When S'more got bored of puffing them up, poor Sol was left the width and length of a hulking king-sized bed, wobbling and sloshing from all the marshmallow fluff.

Avery rolled themselves up and puffed, Elias and Cerbi joined back up shoulder to shoulder.

"Hey, Elly-belly?" Cerbi gripped his sword tight. "You got a plan for this?"

Elias's throat went dry, and all that could leave his throat was a haggard "No."

-

The set of crushes, explosions, and hectic chaos from above obviously meant the plan hadn't gone well. From up above, the rescue party could hear their friends getting curbstomped and bloated. Even without the context, they knew whatever was going on meant they were losing. Subtlety had been thrown out the window in favor for just rushing along, even when they met a long hallway, one with obvious slits in the sides where darts would lie in wait.

"W...We'll have to-"

"No time!" Brigid grabbed onto Mitsy's arm. "Whatever dumb kinky shit we get hit with we'll just have to take!"

-

Down in the belly of the magic tower, Raiko stirred from her slumber. The boredom of being stuck in prison had gotten to her, to the point where her only form of entertainment was spinning around the bed she crushed once she was pushed in. She hummed to herself and tilted her head around, her chin roll quaking at the slightest movement. Once her ears picked up movement from further down the hall, she stowed the bed away behind her massive bow and looked away. While the stomps grew closer, she heard a click and a hiss, an indistinct swear, then the groaning of fabric. Those footsteps rushed toward her cell, a set of four that grew more frantic with each step.

"N-Nope, wasn't playing with the bed again!" she denied, lying through her teeth. "I would never do something as silly as-"

Her eyes caught the most peculiar thing. A set of adventurers, namely a short haired, long braided maiden, a tough purple-robed fighter, a chunky mage in feminine blue, and a rogue in bright yellow garb. All four of them seemed to be a little haggard, all of which had clothes snug against their bloated frames. Bellies that hung past their knees, pants spilling ass cheeks out the top ends, breasts that hung past their sightline, cheeks puffy and flustered. It was clear

from the darts in their sides and heavy breaths this group wasn't a part of Queen Cream Cake's posse. Even more so when she noticed the group was still growing and creaking their clothes. She blinked, then twisted around in her cell to get a better look at them.

"...Hi?"

"That's gotta be her." Brigid huffed. "Mars, unlock the cell."

"Wait, wait huh?" Raiko spun on her knees, bumping the top of her noggin on the ceiling. "You mean you're here to rescue me?! Did father send you?! Oh goodness, I bet he's worried sick about me."

"A little birdie told us about you," Neptune soothed, "and now we're here to spring you out!" She coughed and cleared her throat afterward, a little bit of that squeak was still in the back of her throat.

"You are?" Raiko blinked, "Oh, um, that's great!"

Mitsy gripped his staff, his belly plopping down to the ground and gurgling. "W-Well, um, you don't sound too excit- **HUAAAARRBBHGGHHHH!**" Out forced a gust of cold, chilly winds from his gullet. He covered his mouth in shock with one plump hand, then grimaced. "E-Excuse me..."

"Well, I think I'm a guest here?" Raiko wondered aloud. "It's difficult to tell, really, given my treatment is abhorrent and they're constantly trying to make me say things I don't necessarily know."

Brigid used her whole plumpening palm to curl her fat fingers around her nose, frustrated with Raiko's outlook. "You gotta be fucking kidding me..."

"Hey, guys?" Mars grumbled, his fat fingers fumbling with his lockpick. "I-I can't get this in here with all the weight." He yipped when his body grew plumper, arms hammier, chest bustier, belly rolling out further. "Especially considering I'm fighting LITERAL man tits and fat fingers!"

"We are NEVER not taking our time again." Mitsy hissed, a little bit of venom in his voice. Hard to take him seriously with such a puffy face though.

Raiko rubbed the back of her neck nervously. "Well, I can't say I like it here, but I don't necessarily like it at home either, so I assume everywhere is like this."

"Wait." Neptune held up her hand. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nevermind her damn feelings!" Brigid growled. "You wanna get out of here, trust me on that! You just gotta put some force into it!"

“But-”

“No butts, damn it!” Brigid rumbled, trying to ignore her own ass ripping free from her pants. “How about you fight for your own damn self?! You’re taller than any GIANT I’ve ever seen before! Help us out here!”

Mitsy whimpered as a shoe ripped open, his cankles smothering his foot in fat. “P-Please hurry before we have any more wardrobe malfunctions.”

Mars yipped when his underwear snapped, resting between his fupa and his ass crack. He’d glance over to Mitsy’s pair of striped panties, squeezing his ass for dear life even still without a single tear. “How the hell’s your BUTT FLOSS still on?!”

Raiko took a deep breath and pressed her paws into the iron bars. Mitsy, meanwhile, pulled up his panties and slid them deeper into his crack with a red blush all over his face. “N-No reason, luck, I guess!”

“Wait a minute;” Mars squinted. “You had those hanging the other day on the clothes line! How’d they go from maroon to blue and white?!”

“Look, I still have a bit of a headache from when my head was the size of an airship.” Neptune bickered around the force of a bubbling belch. “Could we just-”

“GUUH-RAH!”

Raiko finally tore the massive, sturdy iron bars that kept her prisoner away, the giant chunks either in her palms or nestled behind her. Brigid couldn’t help but stare in awe- she didn’t actually think the princess could manage to free herself on command. A little sheen of pink slathered itself across her puffy cheeks, something both Mars and Mitsy picked up on.

“Are you surprised she could do that?” Mars wondered.

“Are you blushing?” Mitsy asked in a low, awestruck tone.

Brigid thumped her massive chest and cleared her throat. “Shut up.” She offered her hand up to Raiko. “We can get you out of here, you just gotta trust us.”

“How about I pick you guys up?” Raiko wondered. “In case you become too big to move?”

“I think I’d appreciate that.” whimpered Mitsy. “Be sure to grab the shreds of my shoe. Maybe I can get that repaired from a friend...”

—

The splats of marshmallow across the room echoed about, Avery doing their best to cover their mouth from anymore caloric blows. Elias wiped his mouth as another one had landed in his gullet, his belly rolling out on top of his pants and straining his coat buttons. Cerbi did his best to use his bulk to block each blast, though when S'more retracted both hands and opted for the long range spiral shots. Giddy with marshmallow blasting glee, the chubby Artifice just let her upper torso spin about while she shot indiscriminately. It was clear she was just playing with her foes at this point, something that grew increasingly obvious while she sang to herself. Cerbi propped his back toward the food splatterer, covering his face from the side in case she got a good shot in. Avery and Elias took shelter briefly behind his belly, both ready to bolt in the off chance she came running.

"I don't think running is helping!" Cerbi yelled.

"I said run around until we had a good idea!" Elias corrected. "Any good ideas yet?!"

"Aren't you the ideas guy, Elly-Jelly?" wondered Cerbi who flinched at a marshmallow glob pelting his back folds. "Kinda stinks we're falling now."

"Wait." Avery blinked, then snapped their fingers. "From the inside! We can take her out from the inside!"

"I'm SORRY?" Elias growled.

Avery pointed to Elias. "Think about it. She doesn't have a digestive system, it's just regenerative goop and a core...somewhere. All we gotta do is cut her up into tiny pieces from the inside, find the others, and get out of here!"

"That...sounds so dumb." Elias growled. "We're more likely to get stuffed into her gut while being stuffed *IN* her gut at that rate! Damn it, we're getting beaten by a roasted marshmallow!"

Something clicked in Cerbi's brain, before he snapped his fingers. "Oh! I'll be right back."

He threw his sword to the side and rushed toward Small S'more, roaring the whole way. Both the portly Avery and Elias watched their only wall leap onto the psychotic artifice. She splattered her projectile blasts into his shoulders to try and pry him off, flustered by his sudden jump.

"Hey, what're you—"

She was cut off when Cerbi forced his mouth into hers. He braced his arms around her, preventing her from escaping her fate. Those chocolate dollops for eyes grew thin from shock,

feeling heat pour itself right down her throat. Her body grew a little roasted, her stomach puffed out, her shooters retracting in for proper hands once again. Cerbi's bright idea was to breathe fire down her gullet to roast her like her namesake, something he learned from his time baking with Mitsy. The sudden heat had made bits of her chocolate run along her bulking frame, her legs grew puffier and rounder, same with her arms. She slowly and surely puffed into a stack of marshmallow blubber, her belly jutting out the furthest from any other part of her.

Sol squirmed where they were forced to rest, huffing slowly. "The big guy actually has a pretty damn good idea!" They praised.

"Hff...do we use this time to go find the others?" Avery wondered.

Their train of thought was cut off by loud stomping from below, slowly rising its way up to the top. Elias turned to the Fairyfel and shook his head. "Sounds like they're coming up to *us*."

Puff, puff, puff. Cerbi continued to plume fire down the marshmallow's gullet, her smooth white skin roasting closer to a bright golden color. Her graham kneepads clinked together, arms pushed outward over her head from surprise, her chocolate breastplate running down her cleavage revealing the double-fused marshmallow that gave it form. Her neck rolled out over her graham shoulder pads, those dots for eyes spun into dazed swirls. The Artifice's balance had grown shaky, she soon landed on her fat ass where Cerbi fell on top of her. Her belly contested with his, pushing beneath it and pulling the two of them upward. Her cheeks collided with the Hellhound's, her tits with his man boobs, even her arm fat started pressing into his! Soon enough, Cerbi's feet were swept off the ground by this roasted, golden-brown treat, and he let his lips separate. There was a moment of silence before he violently turned around and spat on the ground.

"Bleck! Yuck! Eghhhh!" He scrubbed his tongue furiously with his nails.

"W-what's wrong, big man?" Avery approached Cerbi.

"Is her tongue poisoned?!" Sol yelled out.

"Is her chocolate poisoning you?" Elias asked out of concern.

"Was her tongue boiling?" Avery wondered with fear.

Cerbi shook his head and cringed. "Blegggh, I kissed a *GIRL!*" he grimaced. "Gross, yucky! Eghghhhh!"

The other three took a collective, relieved sigh, their greatest foe dazed on the floor as a wobbling mound of marshmallow fat. "Well, we know what side of the fence he's loyal to at least..."

“Bwhehhhhhh?” Small S’more’s head spun on top of her fat neck. “Every part of me’s like a furnace...”

The haggard, hefty Half-Bunbid stomped over to S’more’s stomach, then pressed his foot into it. “That’s...a taste of your own medicine.”

The heavy stomping soon turned to loud quakes, shaking that of the whole tower. Chunks of the wall collapsed when Raiko bumped her shoulder through one, the ceiling above the group rumbling from how unstable the mage’s tower suddenly became. The other four hitched a ride on the princess’s paws, something that now seemed a bit more cramped now that the others took a good look at the immobile Sol, the waddling Elias, and the floor-bellied Avery. Cerbi blinked, then waved over to Mitsy.

“Hi hon~! You look cute with those chubby cheeks!”

“Oh, um, ehehehe...” Misty nervously curled his hair between his finger.

Mars, on the other hand, just leaned over Raiko’s right paw. “If you guys wanna avoid becoming pancakes, hop on somewhere!”

—

Further up in the tower, Satoka rushed over to the private chambers the wizard once had to himself, her whole body sloshing and jostling. She practically threw open the door that Bev had holed herself away behind with a scowl.

“YOUR MACHINE MESSED UP!” she roared.

Bev ignored her the best she could, pulling up the orb and shaking it around. Slowly, Cake’s face appeared behind the glass. “Ah, Beverly, Beverly, Beverly~ Are things going okay?”

“Um, your highness? We’ve failed you.” she commented. “The whole tower is coming down and the prisoner is escaping.”

Her highness blinked blankly into the eyes of her maid, before her hands curled around the orb she was holding in a violent, frazzled scream. “WHAT?!”

“It’s that dumb machine’s fault!” Satoka butted into the conversation. “It MUST’VE done nothing against them!”

“If that’s true I can pull her memories from her,” Bev explained, “I’ll just improve her! Look, what’s the next course of action?!”

“THERE IS NONE!” Queen Cream Cake roared. “Damn it, our one bargaining chip’s gone out the door! Just get out of there! I’ll meet you back at the castle. Nghhhhraaaahhhh!!”

The image of her face quickly disappeared, the two servants left in the rumbling silence. Bev just pulled herself up out of her seat and looked out the window, she could see Raiko running toward the setting sun, so there’s at least some idea of where she was heading other than just ‘home’. Satoka turned around and growled, clenching her fists tight.

“That stupid dog has humiliated me again!” she rumbled, “If I could grab him by his blubbery neck and POP myself just to see HIM become a miserable cherry, I-” she swiveled back around, only to find no trace of Beverly at all. “...Where the HELL did you go?!” she paced to and fro, only to growl and go for an escape.

Satoka jumped into the window sill, getting clogged up mid-jump. She grumbled and squirmed, angrily belching and cherry juice leaking out of her navel from the pressure clamping around her. After enough thrusts forward, out she popped and rolled down the surface of the tower. She’d tumble right into a tree, bringing the poor thing down and toppling the grass aside it with a mighty **KEERRRR-ACK!!!** The tanuki grumbled, then flopped down on her back from exhaustion.

—

Across the river, ducked in a clearing in Ghostshire Forest, the group had slowly set up camp. Tired from such a long day, everyone took turns with Basil in getting the fat melted right out of them. Elias lifted up his arm, still a bit wobbly as it was relieved of its blubber. The group had been brought back down to comfortable weights again, or at least, weights they were used to. Basil, meanwhile, sighed and flopped on her back.

“You all know how to drain a woman...” she grumbled, directing the large orb of energy that came from all the lost lard. “Geez Louise...”

Mars watched his blubber, combined with much of the rest balled up in that glowing light show, slowly dissipate away. “Where does all of that go, even?”

“Um...when I reach that chapter in my studies, you’ll be the first to know.” Mitsy muttered to himself.

Elias brushed off his shoulder and slipped on the last garment he needed to be comfy; a plain shirt he kept in case of emergencies. “I’d presume our clothes being fixed will be a ‘throughout our travels’ thing, then?”

Basil angrily rose a fist up in the air, then flopped it back down to her side. Avery carefully pulled their mom over to their pocket of another pair of shorts they had, thankful to be

back in just their slightly chubby state. “Well, we got the princess.” they remarked. “All’s well that ends well?”

“Oh, goodness...” Raiko pressed a paw onto her cheek. “If I knew I was going to be this much trouble, I would’ve stayed at home. All of this is my fault, really.”

“Getting kidnapped by an insane tyrant is all your fault?” Elias crossed his arms and chuckled. “Please, she was barking up the wrong tree trying to kidnap you.”

“I bet you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you, Elias?” Sol’s accusatory tone stoked tension over the campground.

Heads turned toward the Half-Bunbid, confusion perplexing the others, while some had little pits of reassurance that were ready to be filled. Elias could feel the cold stares of some of the other adventurers pierce him, he instinctively raised his hand over his neck and dug his fingers around it.

The bard sighed. “Look. There were some things I kept to myself because they...didn’t really matter too much.” He pulled his hand back down to his side, shifting toward the others. “But now I guess that’s gone out the window, huh?”

“I fuckin’ knew it.” Brigid clenched her fist tight. “You’re some kind of double agent, aren’t you? After all this time, you fighting alongside us was just some kinda rouse, huh?! I bet we were all supposed to stay immobile in that stupid wizard’s tower!”

“Now hey-” Mitsy tried to pull Brigid back, who responded by swatting at his hand.

The warrior stepped forward, her finger pressed into Elias’s chest. “I knew something was shifty about you!”

“Calm down.” Neptune stepped beside, bringing her palms up halfway to push them back down. “Elias *used* to work with her, but what she was doing was wrong. He left her side!”

“Dammit, guys-”

Brigid pushed Neptune away. “Don’t tell me to calm down! You were hiding something too?!”

“Guys-”

“I bet you got something else under your sleeve, huh, you merchant prick?!”

Neptune’s eyes shifted into a scowl. “Now what’s that supposed to mean?”

Brigid threw back her fist. "I aughta-"

"GUYS!"

Finally, Mars caught everyone's attention with a loud enough holler. Everyone's heads turned over to him, before he pressed his palms together. "...Look. We're in a bit of a bind right now I get that, but we can't point the finger at one another. If we're gonna bring Raiko back, we're gonna need to put our trust in one another."

"Our trust?!" Brigid hollered. "That trust was broken when-"

"We're ALL a team." Mars cut the fighter off. "So, let's just...take a breath, and do a 'team building exercise'."

The others remained silent as Mars walked over to his satchel, having been ripped open from the day's long, grueling challenge. He slid one of his smaller daggers out from within, then stomped closer to beside the campfire. Methodically, he carved a circle into the dusty dirt beneath his feet into a long, wide circle, before he left the dagger right in the middle.

"Okay. Everyone, come over here. We're gonna play a game called 'Spin the Dagger'."