

Content Warning: Inflation, Deflation, Heavy Dog Man, Sudden Weight Gain, Object Vore

Summer for Mitsuru Ryuu and Cerberus swept by. What should have been time off of studies became Mitsy's attempts to catch back up from his depressive slump. Socially, he remained rather distant from his classmates, though he picked back up academically with relative ease. Declining grades were brought back thanks to summer programs and experimentation. Soon enough, he saw his name back on the honor's list! The warm breeze of summer break fizzled out for a cooler, more relaxed winter. The pine mountain only felt Fall's chills compared to other forests that blanketed the kingdom of Serenata, those delightful pinewood trees that sat above Ghostshire Forest still a lovely, faded blue-green. What did change when fall came around was campus activity at Cragginbarry. Students filled the once empty paths and buildings, occupying study halls, resting beneath trees to properly focus on reading or writing, running around and chatting amongst one another. It was all too active for Mitsy. The half-Felinis just stuck by his hellhound boyfriend through thick and thin. His mind wasn't the only one that had grown curious. Every so often, Cerbi would ask Mitsy to find a tome from the library that discussed demons. He'd sit patiently and let Mitsy read it out to him, his ears eventually helping his eyes pair the swipes, stripes, and squiggles that he found difficult to pair together. Cerbi gradually learned how to read on his own, a feat he grasped over the course of a month or so. It all felt so familiar to the hellhound, yet he couldn't quite put his finger on it. The two stayed up some nights, sharing the intrinsic songs of their native tongues with one another. A demon speaking in ancient tongue, a dragonborn half-Felinis muttering demonic groans.

Beginning the academic year, Mitsuru's academic ascent back to the top didn't go unnoticed by faculty. When he requested an order to rent gear for a brief study journey, no one thought to ask him his reasoning, eager to see the products of his research. Him and Cerberus set off to the lower reaches of the mountain, where the river crashed down into a waterfall. It was here, in the slits between damp rock and darkness, that the mage intended to do surface level research. He wasn't prepared, however, for the explosive shift his life was about to take. Carefully treading off path, these lovebirds were strapped with supplies and adventuring gear. Being within the walls of Cragginbarry was an asylum from the outside world and its monsters, though venturing out often left people vulnerable. It was smart to dress appropriately for one's capabilities.

Mitsy's adventuring outfit was quite unconventional compared to most mages in the days of old, but was becoming an increasingly more common style as the sensibilities in Carrago developed. He wore a nice, light blue dress, with bright and dark blue stockings that hugged those thick thighs of his. The frills of the dress at the bottom did nothing to cover up his rump, neither his white and sky-blue striped panties. His battle to conceal them away led to an exhausted surrender. There was a break in the middle of the dress to let the soft, whitish blue fabric with stripes loose, just to let his tum breathe a little more. Cerbi, alongside his comrade, joined him in wearing a skimpy outfit. His scarf and shoes from previous attire remained, but now he had a breastplate, shoulderpads, armor for his sides as well, not to mention a strap around his moobs. He even had guards on his hips, for whatever good that may do him, and

spats that stretched over that wide rump of his. Nothing obscured his wall of a stomach, it freely swayed close to his ankles and shook about with every subtle shift of his body. Loaned to the two boys were weapons provided by campus; to Mitsy, a metal quarterstaff with a cat's head, and to Cerbi, a giant, unwieldy sword, with a tip that resembled a blaze. Settled by a cliffside behind the roaring waterfall, Mitsy and Cerbi finally encroached upon the area the mage had been looking for. While Mitsy confidently treaded on, Cerbi couldn't help but scratch his chin. He had an inkling he'd been told before why they were coming out here, but the memory slipped him.

"So what're we even looking for anyway?" He wondered out loud. "I mean, you haven't said much since we got down here..."

Mitsy bobbed his head back while he hugged the rocky wall, sure not to tumble on the overhang just a leap away. "We're searching for Faewind Caps." He revealed finally, "It's a type of mushroom that glows in direct shade, and no, you can't eat any."

"Awww, you think that I'd eat random things I'd find on the ground like that?" Cerbi grinned, his hands pressed in the tips of his love handles. The two stared at one another with great certainty. Yes, Cerbi *would* eat something right off the ground. "Well, what's so special about them? Didn't someone write down what they do in a book already?"

"Well," Mitsy began to trail off, "anything that involves fairies or fae often go undocumented outside of word of mouth. Faewind Caps in particular don't often grow outside of Glowmire Forest, but if they do, then that implies a fairy's corruptive influence has made its way here. They're probably feeding off the desires and impulses of some woodland critters..."

"So like, they're eating a raccoon's happiness or something?" Cerbi pressed.

"Not necessarily." The mage clarified, hands pressed together. "There's supposedly many types of fairies, but they're all reported to be dangerous in some form or another. Even taking their small statures into account, a group of fairies could overwhelm any inexperienced mage-going with their instinctive flow isn't recommended."

Cerbi chuckled at the idea of a hoard of tiny, winged humanoids bugging someone like Mitsy, "You think fairies are really all that scary? You could probably cup them in your hands!"

"I wouldn't hold a fairy if I were you,," warned Mitsy, "they aren't exactly an inviting species. They're mischievous, they're devious, and they're deceiving. I heard they bite, too..."

Their brief conversation was cut off by a crunch off in the distance. Mitsy had thought nothing of it, Cerbi, on the other hand, seemed cautious. He sniffed up into the air while looking over his shoulder. There was something familiar about that scent he caught a whiff of, but his memory failed him yet again. That fruity scent grew stronger, though there was a mix of something else. The awful, familiar scent of gunpowder..

“Hey, Mitsy?” Cerbi sniffed up into the air again, then turned around. “...You didn’t pack any fruit, didja?”

Mitsy was thrown off by such an odd question. “No, not that I recall.”

The young man’s ears twitched upward with Cerbi’s, the sounds of sloshing and stomping grew closer. Just then, a tremendous **THOOOOOOM** crashed above them. Rocks tumbled ahead to block their path, the waterfall’s path misaligned now that another boulder dictated its trajectory. Cerbi pulled Mitsy back closer to the light of day, the two were quick to rush their way out from underneath the waterfall. Stopping them in their tracks loomed a tall, round, red ball that crashed down in front of them. The dust settled from the rockfall, the beat of bird wings flying away had grown still. In that interlude, the two heard an awfully familiar voice cackle at them. The sudden rockfall was no accident, nor an act of nature. A pair of green eyes peered from the dustcloud, before a military dressed woman, rotund and round, stomped up to them. Red cherry juice dripped from her navel, her fur stained red in most places, green at the hair and ears. She cackled louder, then stomped ten feet away from them. Her tail was quite enormous, something that only identified her even more.

“FINALLY!” The powerful voice of the woman before them was like a ghost from their past, an unwelcome specter that had followed them along. “You know how hard it was to track you maggots down?!”

While Mitsy shook where he stood, Cerbi stood steadfast. Even this woman was taller than he was, even if only by a foot and a half. “How about you pick mushrooms elsewhere, lady?” Cerbi confidently swung that greatsword over his shoulder, with a grin on his face. “Miss What’s-Your-Name.”

The cherry had a wicked cackle, her hands on the bomb bags beside her. “Whether or not you’re being plain old stupid or just intentionally irritating, it ain’t gonna work.” She growled, and rolled her neck some. “Stupid *mutt*. You and your friend reeeeaally made a mess of things, you hear?”

“H-How are you back?!” Mitsy yelped, the staff being the only shield he had against his body. “We...we saw you explode!”

“It’s all thanks to that gem the mutt grabbed.” She darted her pointer finger in Cerbi’s direction, cutting through air. “Oh, I exploded that day, and *boy* did it hurt. You wanna know the upside of being a giant cherry woman?” She pat her gut with pride. “It turned me into a living bomb! I might be stuck like this for the rest of my life, but I know how to make it work at least!”

Cerbi watched the rotund tanuki’s bulbous belly wobble, her smirk fading as he tilted his head in a puppylike manner. “That’s not just berry juice. Kinda looks like you’ve been hitting the snack trays.” It was said so matter-of-factly that Satoka sputtered in rage, her stamping doing

more to prove the hellhound's point. There was a hefty jiggle to her rear, a soft curve to her belly beyond the taut state of juice-filling, and a double chin that rested upon her cherryfied necktie.

"It's called stress eating, runt- it's your fault for dismantling my squad! I'm still just as fit as ever, runt, and it's your fault anyway for getting my squad dismantled!" The massive fruit tanuki grumbled loudly.

Cerbi grinned brightly, feeling accomplished in setting her off. "Ooo, she's like one of those records that don't work down by the student center!"

"A broken record, dear..." Mitsy gently pulled on Cerbi's arm.

"Who needs all that stupid exercise stuff anyway? I'm the proud demolitionist for a new, very well-paying position!" She pointed to her lapel with pride, arm sloshing with the motion.

One new addition to her attire, aside from it being outstretched, was a new pin on her commander's cap. A singular, rectangular slice of cake, etched in a simplistic style. Cerbi took note of this real quick. "So you like cake, too." He grinned, then swung his greatsword in front of him. "How about we forget all about this then and have Mitsy bake us one?"

The cherry woman stopped for a moment, then laughed heartily. "As dumb as ever." She grinned. "I don't *like* cake, I *SERVE* Cake! Cream Cake, to be exact!"

"Cream cake, huh?" Cerbi smirked, "You'll hafta teach me that recipe."

"I don't think you understand the severity of the situation you're in." The demolition woman grinned, her sharp canines glaring in the sunlight, her smile outstretched. "Your friend certainly does. He's shaking in his shoes as we speak..."

It was true. Mitsy chattered his teeth and stepped beside Cerbi, unable to do much else. He'd just seen a person come back to life after what he thought was a gory explosion. Now, he knew it was just a cherry fountain. When Cerbi realized how spooked his pal had become, he gripped his sword tighter and growled. Heat emanated off the blade, and that obsidian slab radiated a bright orange glow.

"Careful pooch, it's not smart to play with fire around explosives!" Out from her bag came a cannon-ball style bomb. She struck a match and brought the pitiful flame to the fuse tip. The explosive hissed aggressively. "You got only two options, kid. Either you two come with me, and serve in MY army to repay the troubles you two caused...or die here, underneath rubble."

Shaking in his boots, Mitsy couldn't bring himself to say much of anything. Cerbi stomped his foot and spoke for his love. "No way in hell or above it! Not after what you did to me! I might be dumb, but I'm not stupid! You put me in a cage, you made me fight people I never wanted to hurt! We'll take our chances on the way down!"

The outstretched grin soon simmered into an evil, yet still toothy smirk. "Then may your last thoughts be about the cherry bomber herself, Satoka Bakudan!"

Her stubby arm hurled the hissing bomb at the two boys. Thinking fast, Cerbi adjusted his position to shield Mitsy, the mage's hands gripped into Cerbi's legs. The moment that the explosive bounced into Cerbi's belly, the fuse had shrunk into the explosive itself. A flash of tangerine, marigold and crimson blew past the waterfall, rocks dislodged from their resting place, grass singed and scattered about in the air. The force of the explosion hurled Cerbi and Mitsy right off the cliff, their trajectory overshooting them from the waterfall and the river below. Both hollered as gravity pulled them closer back down to the earth. Satisfied, Satoka cackled at the two's descent and stomped off. In her mind, she had her revenge.

With wild winds whipping around the boys, Cerbi realized he needed to act fast. Mitsy instinctively clawed on Cerbi's side, his shrill screams warped by how quick the plummet was. Cerbi clenched Mitsy's arms and pulled him over him, using just enough of his limited movement to swivel onto his back. A strange instinct took over the hellhound, something that Mitsy barely had enough focus to process. His boyfriend's skin had a rubbery sheen to it, making staying on him harder considering how slippery he was. Cerbi gave Mitsy a bear hug, waiting for gravity to bring the two back to the ground.

"Hang on...!" His command was desperate. He could only hope his body's reflexes wouldn't fail him.

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Through the fallen leaves forgotten along the path, to a pinewood path, both Brigid and Mars had traveled for around five days or so. Other than themselves, there hasn't been much trouble or strife along their journey. That was all until one midday hour. Through the twisty, gently descending path set near a mountain, the only sounds aside from their footsteps were the chirps of birds, the buzzing of bugs, the winds against tree bark, the *brrt-tut-tut-tut* of a woodpecker's beak to a tree...and their bickering tensions with each other were at wits end, as they continued to trudge and tug themselves down the dirt path.

"It's just a fucking story." Brigid complained, while she hoisted up her new cache of weapons. "Why do you need to defend it so badly?"

Brigid's new outfit bestowed upon her by Char blended fashion and aggression greatly. She had on a long true-purple overcoat, with a brighter magenta color on the inside. Under her jacket was a grape-colored button up shirt that lacked a formal collar. On her shoulders were spikey shoulder pads with studs to keep them on her shoulders, a spiked choker surrounded her neck. Her dark jeans ripped above the ankles, showing off her leather boots. Compared to her wild, unkempt hair from weeks ago, her locks were at the very least brushed now.

“Because stories are what keeps us alive, right?” Mars swished beside Brigid, able to keep a pace up with her pretty easily. “What keeps us going on in the future’s the tales we tell now! That’s how your name’s remembered, Brig.”

Mars had a similar glow up thanks to his connection. A folded, lemon-yellow adventurer’s tunic covered his thin body, giving him a square shape. A beige scarf hung over his front, covering the looped rope binds that pulled his outfit shut. Underneath his tunic was a plain lemon shirt, one paler than him. His leather arm braces kept his forearms safe, while also making sure his hands were unimpeded. Below his belt were a pair of black slacks that folded nicely onto his dark leather boots, bound by belts at his calves.

“Stories about *pirates*, though?” She pointed out. “Mars, you’re reading books for kids. Have you ever tried, I dunno, stealing a book from an academy or something? Figuring out how math works, or actual world history, or, I dunno, something more useful for your time?”

Mars crossed his arms and groaned. “Well maybe if I could have done more than just worry about stealing stale bread to eat, I would’ve worried about catching up on my booksmarts! Excuse me for wanting an escape!”

“Gah, shut UP already!” Brigid clasped her ears shut. “You’re shrill when you yell, you know that?!”

“Well good!” Mars slowed down then flung his arms out. “Cuz that just means I can get my point across louder and further!”

Brigid turned around sharply, with an angry scowl. “No you don’t! You make people want to tear out your throat!”

“Not the first time I heard that! I’ve used that to my advantage! I’ve pretty much heard it all at this point!” He flung his arms up into the air, and clenched his eyes in victory. The only thing missing from his little scene in his head was an audience. “You could tell me cats and dogs were raining from the *sky* and I would-”

Their quick bickers were interrupted by a loud, hard THUD, as two objects squashed Mars beneath them. Brigid tensed up a bit, while the dust of dirt plumed and settled. She stepped forward, heart beating, only to see what just squashed her begrudged friend. Mainly one big, chunky man, with dog ears, small demonic wings, tanned skin, red armor with a yellow scarf. On top of him, a chubby, darker skinned boy, with cat ears and a cat tail, a shocked look on his face, and expressly feminine clothing. She watched the cat boy huff and heave on top of the hellhound’s body, then climb up a little bit.

“Cerbi...” His voice was high and trilly, very much shaky. “I don’t know what you did, or how you did it, but...you did it. You saved my life again!”

The hellhound panted loudly, and wiped the sweat from his brow. "I saved *our* lives." He emphasized, "If I was a second too late in thinking about all those times I turned into a balloon we woulda been pancakes!"

With Mars now presumably eviscerated underneath a meteoric crash, Brigid could have left right then and there. Her obligations were over. Mars was gone. She was free to walk along the other path, those two boys were so focused on their own survival they didn't know just who they landed on. She was free from the favors. She could go... but she couldn't. Her uncovered eye darted over where Mars once stood, throat tight with fear. She recognized how shaky her hands were, but she had to pull herself together. Two people just *killed* the rogue that saved her life. Even if he was an annoying, petulant brat of a man, she owed him her life. She swung her greataxe right in front of the two young men, startling them senseless. The blade itself threatened to lob off the head of the half-Felinis if he chose not to comply.

"You two." Brigid demanded, "Names. Now."

The woman's greataxe shimmered in the light between pine leaves, the look of shock on both boys evident. "C...Cerbi." Cerbi answered, just a tad bit of unease escaping him. "Er, lady, do you mind pulling that axe ba-"

"Now the cat." She pointed over to the mage, able to hold up her greataxe with one arm. "I want his name."

"M-M-M...M-M-Mitsuru..." peeped the young, feminine man, tears in his eyes. "W-Wh, what did we do...?"

Brigid put her other hand back on her greataxe. "I'll tell you exactly what you did. You two just killed the guy who saved my life, that's what you did!"

"L-Look, lady!" Cerbi stood up, tail between his thick legs. He stood up so quickly, Mitsuru was flung upward, stuck on Cerbi's shoulder with a tight grip. Something caught the mage's eyes, his focus diverted from the situation at hand. "I dunno what you're talking about, but maybe we could make it better?!"

"Shut it, mutt!" Brigid gripped her axe tighter. "You wanna make up for it? Then how about I take your damn head!"

Brigid swung for the dog's massive neck, ready to cleave him in two, until...a noise. A familiar voice's noise. A familiar voice's noise muffled by what seemed like layers and layers of padding. Was Brigid imagining it? Whatever had happened, Mitsuru skittered down and took the time to peel something off of Cerbi's rump. Out from behind the man he came, while he draped along a giant, flat flag that looked just like...

“Wait, Mars?!” Brigid’s swing was thrown right off already, but now, all she could do was fling her greataxe to the side and dash on over.

The flag blinked and grunted, he was still very much alive, absolutely no blood or guts forced out of him. He was like a piece of taffy, pulled and stretched until paper thin. “Gh...what happened?” The young man grunted. “I can’t feel anything, I can’t move. How do I look? Is anything broken?”

Brigid took away Mars and pulled him up, she gave him a stretch, too. “Yeah. Your third dimension.” The warrior commented, letting loose a snort now that she knew he was unharmed. “You’re not dead at least...but how the hell did this happen?”

Mitsuru stepped over and tried to think. “This is clearly something magical.” He proposed, “Rarely have I ever heard of a magic that goes off without the original user’s intent...Cerbi, what’d you do?”

In swooped in Cerbi, who bent over to look at the flattened rogue. “Uh, I dunno.” He admitted, “I guess whatever I did to stop our fall made my body full of all kinds of doom-preventing magic, uh... it spread?”

There was a brief silent pause, before Brigid brought up the needed question. “How are we going to fix him?”

“I...guess we fill him with air.” Mitsy presumed, “That seems to be the only thing wrong with him.”

“Like I’m some kinda balloon?” groaned Mars. “Well, unless you two have a magic pump, I don’t think I’ll be getting back to normal anytime soon.”

Brigid gulped, then asked the other pressing question. “So uh...who’s gonna put the...air back in him-”

“No thank you, sorry!”

“Nope!”

Both Mitsy and Cerbi called out before the warrior could even finish, which, for some reason, made the fighter blush a bit. “Fuckers.” She felt a lump in her throat, her lips felt dry. Never before had Brigid even dated a man...and only had a brief stint with a girl that went nowhere. Now she was the one who had to kiss this idiot back to normal? This was going to be awkward.

“Close your eyes.”

Mars didn't get a say when Brigid took a deep breath, then pressed her lips into his. She exhaled harshly, and only pulled away to get more air. Puff, huff, puff, huff, it was a repetitive process to get air back into him. His body swelled outward, arms and legs gained definition again, alongside his torso. His head produced a comical pop when it swelled back to its normal dimensions. The rogue's eyes spun with bewilderment, swirls replaced his typical green glow while he puffed out more and more. Evidently, it seemed like that demand Brigid gave wasn't for him, but for her, since she clenched her eyes shut the entire time. Probably not a good thing, as Mars felt his limbs push outward as they filled up with air. His arms and legs got their lanky tone back a few puffs ago, but each one rounded them out like sausages. He felt dizzy, but that's all he could feel. Whatever pain that should've coursed through him was naught but a tingle.

He tried to protest at swelling larger, but once again, his voice was muffled. There was a hiss in his body, then a creak, as his abdomen started to round out. Then his cheeks, then his arms and legs, his chest puffed out alongside him while he swelled. His shoulders were buried into his spherical-shaped body, looking almost like he was all stomach than he was a Half-Elf. *Hisssssssss*...the sound of air escaping his navel rattled out, leading to more distractions. Even his hands and feet got puffier. His boots blocked viewing of his toes and soles, but the gloves could only hide so much of his palms and fingers swelling to balloon-shapes. The pressure inside Mars was all he could feel, he squinted his eyes shut and just prayed to any random deity he could remember for him not to burst. Brigid's lungs were mighty, probably much too strong for Mars. He easily resembled the balloon he was bickering not to become. His buttons strained against his body, belts tugged and cut in, he had become orb-like. Wriggle, wriggle, wriggle, Mars tried to escape, but no dice.

"M-Ma'am." Mitsy tried to cut in, before any wardrobe malfunctions occurred. "M-Ma'am!"

Brigid opened her eye, then jumped back when she saw her work. "Shit!" She huffed loudly, shocked by what she had done.

"I fink youh ohferdihddid..." The air balloon complained, too heavy to float, but too light to move. It was hard for him to talk, too, given how puffy his cheeks had become. Air clouds puffed from his nostrils, a clear sign of his overinflation practically filling his body. Was the state he was in another sign of this demon's powerful magic? How he could accept so much air into his body with such strong breaths?

Brigid grumbled, arms crossed. "Great. Now we've dug ourselves a different hole."

Mitsy shook his head, then stepped up. "Actually...this will be much easier to deal with. Now that you have air back in your body, we can simply deflate you back to normal."

"So punch him." Brigid pulled up her fists. "Got it."

"No that's not-!"

Mitsy's words fell on deaf ears. The fighter decked her rogue follower in the gut, a heavy gust of air puffed out from his lips. Further, further, further! She punched, kicked, beat the poor guy down, pushed into his cheeks with both of her palms, dropped her elbow into his back. Mitsy winced and flinched at each blow dealt, Cerbi could only look on at the disaster that unfolded before him. All this abuse against the poor guy did seem to be working, since he started to slowly resemble his old self. Down from a round orb to a more bloated figure he went, all Brigid had to do at that point was just push out the air from his body. After the final few punches and slams, one last excess gust of air left Mars' body, and he was back to normal. Shockingly, whatever Char had done to Mars' gear had left it without even a misplaced seam. Mitsy marveled the latent magic in their outfits.

The rogue coughed loudly, and held his side tightly. "Okay..." Mars grunted, then pulled himself back up. "I think I felt that more than being squashed..."

"Oh dear..." Mitsy gripped the brim of his cap. "To be honest, I thought she would finish you off..."

Cerbi gave Brigid a thumbs up from her hard, hard work. "Way to go, lady!" he praised, throwing his thumbs up, "Now that he's safe, you guys can go back to being the bestest of friends, right?"

That's not what Brigid had thought. There was a moment of realization, before she went to grab her greataxe. She glared at the two boys, then started to move over to Mars. "Let's keep going."

"With a bruised rib?" protested Mars, "Hah, no thanks. We're taking the day off."

"I can aid in setting up camp." Mitsy offered, "It's the least I can do for what the two of us have done."

"Yeah, we...kinda caused this, huh?" realized Cerbi, scratching his chin. "Huh. Then uhuh, I guess I'll get tents put up."

"I'll cook." Mitsy promised, tail wagging, "Glad I brought lunch..." He pulled at a sash he had brought with him, then nodded to the group.

Brigid tsk'd as she set her own stuff down. Seems she was going to be stuck here for a bit then. Early afternoon turned to late afternoon pretty quickly, their two guests setting up camp gave both of them time to rest and take a breather. Mars, for one, took his time to bite down into a sandwich Mitsy had prepared. Crunchy lettuce, smoky soft ham, cold squishy cheese, and melts-in-your-mouth bread, a sandwich like that was probably the best he'd ever had.

"Mff!" A gulp, and a sigh, Mars relaxed back. "This Mitsy dude knows what he's doing. I'd never tasted a sandwich like *this*!"

Brigid simply bit into her own sandwich, a salami slice, tomato slice, and ham slice combo. This was probably meant for the hellhound that flattened Mars, but from what she could assume of Mitsy, he probably had a lot more food prepared. The warrior pondered what to say next, before the words finally came out. "You think we can trust them just because they made you a sandwich?"

The awkward comment made Mars pause pre-bite, eyes glanced over to Brigid. His jaw slowly retracted, before the boy sighed. "So that's what you think."

"Quit being a fool." Brigid leaned in, pointer finger directed to the thief. "We don't know these two from a hole in the ground.."

"What happened was an accident." Mars set his sandwich down on his lap. "If you'd just let up, you'll see the two can hold their own."

There was a great glare at Mars, before she simply just flumped back onto the log she sat on. "You're saying they're coming with us?"

"We talked about it a bit ago." Mars revealed, then took a bite of his sandwich. He motioned with his sandwich a bit while he talked. "That half-Felinis, Mitsy, he said he'd be willing to help us find Neptune before he had to go back to his school or whatever."

"Mars-"

"I know nobody's immortal." Mars interrupted, knee brought up to his chest. "She's just tougher than you think, alright? And if we do find her and she's dead, rub it in my face all you want as you leave. Sound like a deal?"

The sounds of birds filled the dead air while Brigid thought to herself. Begrudgingly, she held out her hand. "Fine." The two gripped hands together, and gently shook to cement their shaky, uneasy alliance with one another. The afternoon seemed quiet afterward, followed by the eve, followed by night...

Their long journey had led Neptune, Elias, Avery and Basil down from the enchanted groves to a small community by the riverside. Welcoming them at the front of the village was a large, arched wooden sign, 'Bristleburg' painted in bold, even, yellow lettering. Cobbled paths wove around buildings nestled up together, dark wood and stone roofs contrasting white and stripped wooden structures. Small vendors dotted corners, selling common street snacks to anyone willing to partake. Elves and half elves congregated around the town square, families ran along gathering a few days worth of groceries, alongside some eager outsiders funneling in. Wooden signs hung below canopies painted in the goods sold gently bobbed about in the wind.

It was homey, a small slice of home away from home...to some, at least. Neptune was the only one of the four that could reasonably fit in, her modest forest greens compared to the other three's loud colors blended in better with the crowds of muted colored attire. People especially eyed Basil, utterly bewildered by a fairy fluttering around their flock. She slipped herself into Avery's pouch, knowing innately that she wasn't welcomed.

"I feel a thousand eyes staring right at me..." the fairy mumbled to herself, "Are you sure this is the place, Elias?"

"Bet my money on it." Elias remarks, lifting his cane up in the air. "We'll take some time to rest up, I know a good tavern on the waterfront. You can't miss it, they have one of those water-wheels spinning in the water."

Giddy, Neptune slid up closer into the conversation. "That sounds delightful! I should probably grab us something to eat though, I hear tavern food isn't particularly the best."

"Depends on the place you're going to." Elias remarked. "If you're so sure though, why not get us something? The local cuisine here is pretty good."

"Right, I'll meet up with you later." Neptune nodded, then broke with the group briefly.

The half elf's feet scooted her through the residents of Bristleburg with a little difficulty, her polite excuses and apologies for her thick thighs rubbing up against individuals plentiful and proper. Soon enough, she came across a small bakery sandwiched between a deli and a butcher's. The door to the establishment creaked lightly, its warm and inviting scents a welcome disruption to the cool fall breeze. The floor beneath her was a cozy patterned hodgepodge of dark and white stone bricks, tables placed around were only large enough to wait for orders, not dine on them at the establishment. The counter nearby was surrounded by shelves of already baked goods, either prepared that morning or the morning before. Shelves were sparse, baskets with rolls and cupcakes were slim pickings. The display shelves beneath the doily draped counter had cute samplings of some of the bakery's finest. Donuts, angel cake, bread loaves... the radiance of the oven in the other room was wonderful. Behind that draped counter was an elf lady hard at work, her apron doused with flour and sugar, oven mitts scratchy around the edges. Her hair had been stuffed away in a sizable toque, rolled up to avoid loose hairs from seasoning her snacks. Her ears were longer than her fingers, sharp at the tips. They twitched lightly when Neptune first stepped in, and the lady turned around. Light blonde streaks of bangs and green eyes greeted the customer.

"Oh, just in time!" chirped the baker, "A minute later and I would've closed up shop. Anything I can do for you?"

Neptune dug behind her cape to pull out some coins, doing some guestimating as she examined prices. Once her eyes landed on tags, she'd slip a couple coins out of her hand and

back into her purse. "Oh, baker's suggestion! I'm new to town and need to feed three people and a cat."

"Oh, you brought a cat to town?" the baker clasped her hands tight over her bosom, pressing her arms into her slightly doughy, buttoned up midsection. "I adore cats! What's their name?"

"Oh, her name's Basil!" Neptune chimed back. "You don't need to make a special treat for her or anything, she'll eat anything so long as it's not chocolate. She's not very picky."

The baker put a hand to her cheek. "Basil is such a wonderful name," she complimented, "You know, I had a cat named Spicy a long while ago. Out of all the pets I've ever owned, Spicy was ironically enough the sweetest little thing." She waved her hand and huffed out a short chortle. "Couldn't get enough of people. Now, Pumpkin? She was a different story. Hated people, no matter what I tried!"

Neptune feigned a giggle, wanting to stay polite even though she'd already lost interest in the conversation. "Really now?"

"Mhm. Nasty little thing. But that's the upside of growing old in a fleeting world! You see so many animals with so many delightful personalities, it actually..."

The baker prattled on about her life, Neptune instinctively nodding and keeping her smile strong on her face. There the elf continued, remarking about her pets of yesteryears...that was when the cleric spotted something underneath the lady's mitt. It was crimson, bright, fresh as the bread in the oven. A nasty cut from the bottom of her thumb to her wrist. It wasn't bleeding, but it would certainly get worse if not treated.

Growing concerned, Neptune interrupted the baker. "Sorry, um, I couldn't help but see that gash right there on your thumb?" She mirrored where the injury is on her hand, sliding a finger down from the joint in her thumb to her wrist joint. "That looks awful, miss."

"Oh, gosh, you saw that?" The lady slowly pulled off her mitten and grumbled. "Yes, Jasper did that to me this morning. I was going to go to the town doctor to have it looked at when I close up, but I don't know if he's in his office at this hour."

"Why don't I take a look?" offered Neptune, holding her hands out. "I'm actually a healer in training, too."

Delighted, the woman brought her hand out. "Well, why didn't you say so? If you can heal up my cut, you can have my recommendation for free."

"Oh, ma'am-

"I insist!" the elf daintily pressed her palm into Neptune's. "There's a festival going on in a few days, I'll be swimming in money with how much has been back-ordered. Me and my husband are going to be working our patooties off!"

Lightly chuckling, Neptune clasped the lady's hand into her's. "Okay, you'll feel a slliiight tingle."

A dim, forest-green glow emanated from the cleric's gloves, contrasting the warm orange glow with its splendidous radiance. Neptune closed her eyes and took a breath, focusing to the best of her ability...but something happened. She twitched, her smile curled left into a slight scowl, her fingers stiffened into the hand of her patient. A little light glow had turned to a sudden, clearing gust. The baker felt her back crack, her arms and legs stiffen and loosen in the same second, her lungs puff quickly and rest. Her heart even pulsed stronger. She stumbled back and shrieked, looking to her hand in surprise. The cut had vanished, not a trace of it on her skin.

"G...Gosh, a slight tingle?" She chuckled. "You knocked the wind outta me! I can't thank you hardly enough!"

"Th...that was maybe a little too much." Neptune nervously chuckled. "Overhealing can sometimes do...a lot to you."

She leaned on the counter, hit with a sudden bout of vertigo. The room spun around her, ankles heavier than before. Her arms wobbled to sustain her, she had to dig her fingers into the doily to pull herself back to her feet. All the while, the baker smiled bright as a street light at night.

"Hhff...pfff...how're...how're you feeling?" Neptune wondered aloud.

A short hiccup escaped the baker. "Really...good..."

A dumb grin spread across her soft face as it grew softer. The baker stumbled back, each stomp shook the sour dough jars in the display with greater ferocity. Her dough belly, once merely a bit pudgy, wobbled and billowed out, straining against her apron and blouse greatly. The familiar sound of *pwip, pwip, pwip* rung out like slingshot fire as her buttons embedded into the walls. Neptune shielded her face with her palm, but the misbalance pulled the healer down to the ground. She could hear the belly of the shop owner groan and slosh, expanding with the radiance pumped into her body. Her absentminded pudgy hands clawed into her growing stomach, digging into the forming rolls as her pants ripped to let her underbelly free.

"Feel so...fuzzy...~" she drooled, her double chins squishing into her bosom.

She'd stomp on one fat-cone leg, her other foot raised up in the air slightly. Just that stomp alone bounced around her prized baked goods. When she smashed her other foot down into the ground, anything not bolted down was thrown about in the air and had been sprung up

and scattered about. Neptune was pelted by falling debris of baguettes, sandwich bread loaves, and apple pies. The growing baker was pinned, her belly encroaching over her counter and her ass slamming back into the wall of the room. The glurps and gorgles of her stomach were an unnatural, unearthly sound. Bogs of rejuvenation bellowed deep in her pit, unsated by her arms uselessly cradling her sides as she swelled faster. Uncontrollable were the roars of her belches, spewing out red smog into the air. Doing the best she could, Neptune scooted back by kicking her way closer to the door. Creeeeaking and groaning, the counter could only withstand so much widening force. Even the baker's body couldn't take the sudden expansion, her wagon-wheel thick legs shook as her clothes were shredded and whipped around. Out spilled her mammaries, all natural, with globs of pink liquid leaking out the teets. Her thumb mindlessly circled her areola while she giggled.

"Why'd the milk shtart...~?"

About ten percent of her could truly process what was happening to her. The other ninety percent had been swaddled by blankets of ignorance and bliss. Down she fell to her ass and belly, the counter crushed beneath her climbing body weight, tables behind her smushed easily. Scraps and glass shards spilled out in waves of rubble from beneath her, as if the simple act of scratching her or embedding themselves in her flab was impossible on account of the rampant internal healing she experienced. Half of the snug little shop was overflowing with a tsunami of blubber, filled up further by the boisterous belches of red, soothing fumes from her maw. Slowly, Neptune grabbed hold of a coat rack to pull her body weight up with. Her eyes fixated on the pale spillage spreading her direction, the baker's blubber forming roll after roll on top of her.

"Eheee...~ Cozy...snug...good~"

"U-U-Uh, I..." Neptune glanced around, throwing her body towards curtains to shut the world off from the fattening hell she'd unleashed. "I think I'm second guessing our arrangement, uh-"

"Stay here...~" the blob wriggled about, her belly alone having filled up the same amount of space her whole body took up just a few moments ago. "Belly warm...belly soft...belly belly belly...~"

"Bye!" Neptune flipped the open sign to closed and slammed the door shut behind her.

The cleric took deep, sharp breaths. She could hear the rumbling gas of the woman from the outside, the creaking and groaning of wood, the turmoil her shop was in. Crunching, gurgling, burping and sloshing... all the cleric could do in disbelief was glance at her hands, irritated that they were capable of this much chaos. Pulling herself along, she'd slide into the deli next door. Put on a smile, act like nothing happened, and maybe she'd choke down this humiliation.

—

The prickly pine trees towering over the heads of Mitsy, Cerbi, Brigid and Mars blotted out a good portion of the sun. Their path had been practically the same since they started walking it a couple days ago, with no end to the winding road in sight. Just dirt, little light rays, and the sounds of their footsteps. Three pairs of normal steps clashing against the ground, and one pair of heavy, thooming stomps, paired with the idle wobbling and slapping of flesh. Cerbi guarded the rear, each shimmying waddle he did giving an alarming amount of stride and distance. He was easily keeping up with the others and their casual walks. If anything, Mitsy seemed like the slowest of the four. His rump bumped into Cerbi's belly wall quite often, Cerbi's gait inevitably caused enough momentum for Mitsy to catch back up to the other two. Mars kept himself occupied by observing the treeline above, eyeing on birds passing by overhead, until a thought popped into his mind.

Rousing Mitsy's attention, Mars poked the back of his neck. "Soooo... while we're just walking around, Mitsy. I've been wondering kinda since yesterday, and I know it's a bit fast to ask, but... are you part of the whole seventy-two-purr?"

There was a beat of silence on part of the feline mage, wrinkling his eyebrows and brushing some hair out of his eyes. "Um...? I don't think it's too much, considering I don't know what that is."

Mars looked genuinely taken aback by that answer. "Oh, I mean... really? I thought most everyone knew, it's sort of a thing around the country. So, the seventy-two-purr is a pun, seventy-two percent of Felinis tend to be—"

"Freaks." Brigid interrupted without looking back. "Perverts, sluts, whatever you wanna call it. Most of them aren't as obvious as that dancer back in Lindsdale, but in the history of Carrago, over seventy-percent of sex workers were made up of Felinis, and they're also the most likely for," To Mitsy's horror, she started counting on her fingers, "Multiple partners, public indecency, accepting service as payment, public—"

Cerbi gasped, crossing his arms over his fatty chest. "No no no! I can tell you my sugarcookie's never been like that since I've known him!"

Mitsy, silent as night, felt his face burn and his mind race. He scoured his mental images in excess, hunching his shoulders as a torrent of... ideas emerged.

"Jeesh, I was just asking, big guy! It's basically the same as goblins," Mars protested in a huff, "Not like I'm trying to pin a guy for something like that, there's nothing WRONG with—"

Their heated conversation was cut off when Brigid halted. She raised her fist in the air to signal the others to stop. Only Cerbi paid attention, coming to a standstill while Mars thumped into Brigid's back, and Mitsy sandwiching the rogue right between the warrior.

"Eep! Uh...a verbal warning would be appreciated next time..." lamented Mitsy, whose ear twitched as he was stirred from his musings. He could finally focus on what was out there in the woods. Something...loud, growing closer. "What is it, Brigid? Do you think it's an enemy?"

"Could be." Brigid slid her handaxe out from behind.

Mars grunted, then popped himself out from between the two. "Sounds like jingling."

"I-Is there a possibility of it being a b...b-bandit?" Mitsy recoiled, his shoulders pressed up to his cheeks.

"Why're they whistling then?" Cerbi wondered aloud. He caught the jovial tune nobody else seemed to recognize, and he wiggled his fingers to the beat of it. "Oooo! I know this one! It's a song about taking a bath in the Stream of Silence!"

"...You mean the river that makes you forget?" Mars blinked, dumbfounded by Cerbi's recognition.

"Yeah! That song was sung to me a lot! Couldn't tell you by who or when though..."

"It's just a merchant then." Mars shook his head, pulling Brigid's arm down. "No bandit's gonna be carrying coin like that *and* singing to themselves. That's basically suicide."

Reluctantly, Brigid put her handaxe back where she pulled it from. "Here I thought we were about to have something exciting happen..."

Everyone turned in the direction of the humming, watching the path in front of them with mild intrigue. It turned to slight confusion when they saw the merchant for themselves, still a good hundred feet away. A short, robed figure wandered alone, the ludicrously sized bag strapped to their back making them up to be Mars's height. The base of their robes were purple, while the ends of their sleeves and the leg-end of the robes themselves had gold accents around them. Their hood was buckled by a golden loop, and on the insides of both the sleeves and the hood itself, naught could be seen of any extremities, only shadow. Mars would have assumed it was just an animate robe if it weren't for the glowing, yellow eyes beneath, gingerly lighting up a small portion of their clothes. The being itself was odd, odd enough for the group to regroup next to each other.

"Demon?" Mars questioned Cerbi, who took a sniff in the air and shook his head. "Okay, maybe some kind of elf."

"The only elves I've seen stay this small are located further North in Kyodania." Mitsy remarked, "Even then, that's only a few."

“Maybe they’re a gnome?” Cerbi suggested.

Brigid shook her head. “No way. Gnomes don’t have eyes that glow unless they’re possessed by something. Neither are they that tall...”

The group’s speculation was interrupted when the robed face butted in on their conversation, having somehow cleared the distance in such a short time. “What’re we talking about, friends?”

Everyone jumped back, even the merchant. The adventurers were just alarmed that they heard the figure. Meanwhile, the merchant only seemed to recoil since everyone else did. No one was prepared for such a sandy, scraggly voice to be so soft and assured. They supposed it was a case of striking it up to another oddity of this individual.

The merchant clapped their sleeves together, baring a sharp-toothed grin beneath that hood. “I see that you’re travellers out on an adventure, mmmm, but you’re a bit light on supplies! Perhaps commerce will help bring you comfort and safety?”

“Well...” Brigid’s eye drifted over to Cerbi, then back to the merchant. “Still got food? We’ve got someone who eats three people’s worth of a share.”

“...I said I was sorry...” Innocently, Cerbi poked his fingers together and looked away.

The merchant simply lifted their hand into their bag and pulled a couple buckles off. They’d dig deep in, then yank out the start of a burlap bag. It practically eclipsed the pocket once part of the bag was pulled out, a group of foodstuffs packed together. It took the merchant their other arm to yank the full bag out, landing to the ground with a heavy, thooming THOOM.

“This should tide you all over for a few days, given the size of your friend back there!” They chittered, “Would say, sixteen-hundred copper coins suffice?”

“Could we round up to sixteen silver...?” Mitsy reached behind him to pull out his handbag, a wide prism canvas pouch with a cat’s face illustrated on the front. He’d slip sixteen silver pieces into his hand, then place it down into the merchant’s grip.

“Ah. Most appreciated.” They seemed a little disappointed, but accepted the money anyhow. “Could I interest you all in anything else?”

“How about a greataxe?” Brigid crossed her arms. “Unfortunately I lost mine ‘cause of...reasons.”

Mars slid his hands in his pockets. “Welll, at least you’re not accusing me of losing it.”

“Friend, I have just the thing for you!” the merchant gleefully pulls their bag down to the ground and opens the top covering.

Brigid watched them worm around and fish for whatever it was that was inside, before they pulled out the almighty motherload. Out came four handaxes; each one had a suit from a deck of playing cards painted on their side, before they hoisted out the real prize. A greataxe larger than her old one, grand and strong. The painted suit sigils on the top portion granted the weapon an aura of luck that could pair fantastically with skill. The merchant offered it to her, and she took it slowly. Already, its weight felt perfect to her. She slung it over her shoulder, held it up by two hands, and slashed at an imaginary foe away from the others. The axe cleaved through the air so cleanly that she could practically hear the metal sing.

“...How much.”

“I think a hundred silver coins for the pair should suffice!” the merchant beamed.

“Eh, wait, what?” Mitsy stepped in. “Nonono, one hundred silver? That’s too much. Does the weapon have any magical properties?”

“Ohhh, but of course it does!” the merchant confirmed, “It helps guide your strikes with bouts of grand luck! Or, was it bad luck? I don’t recall...”

“There’s a difference between good and bad luck, you know...” grumbled Mitsy.

“Luck’s arbitrary.” Brigid dug into her side pouch, procuring the silver coins and some copper change. “Here, this should do it.”

The merchant eagerly scooped at the coins dealt their way, paired with the sixteen silver provided earlier. They opened their maw with glee, their glowing yellow tongue tinged the inside of their maw with gold. Up went their baggy sleeves, before the hundred-plus pile of coins were dumped down their gullet. They could hear the clinking as each coin jingled its way down their throat. Their stomach puffed out from the swallowing, the money resting comfortably at the bottom of their belly, now the size of a medicine ball.

Proudly, the merchant smacked their bloated bump. “Ahhh, delicious!”

Both Mars and Mitsy were aghast. This merchant just single handedly pulled coins out of circulation. Their connections, their stories, the hands they traded between... it mattered not at all now that it sat in the belly of the greedy merchant. Cerbi just wagged his tail, not caring a bit about what just happened. Brigid slung her greataxe over her back and didn’t care a bit. It wasn’t her money anymore, why worry about what the merchant does with it?

“Should be it.” Brigid called, before she started to walk off.

"I hope to see you again, kind stranger!" the merchant waved off the warrior, then continued on their merry way in the opposite direction.

Cerbi watched Brigid walk along, her new greataxe and handaxes in hand. He'd scoop Mars and Mitsy up, then hop behind. "I got the slowpokes! Wait for us!"

—

Nightfall in Bristleburg was peaceful, especially at the tavern on the river. The water wheel spun slowly attached to the building, the open hole in the wall allowing all patrons to see it churn away. Idle stragglers sat in the restaurant portion while buckets sloshed overhead. An avid visitor to the night shift, Sol, returned back with a scowl on their face. The barkeep turned to look at them, leaning over their countertop.

"Rare to see you so glum." she observed, "What's wrong, little birdie?"

A disappointed sigh escaped the half-Volo, who slung themselves onto a stool. "Changin' course from the other bounty. Apparently yesterday, someone turned the baker into a blob. No trace of a culprit."

"You're *kidding*." The bartender recoiled at the news. "How'd they even manage that?"

"Well, her husband says it's overhealing." Sol gripped onto their hat. "The establishment and the two buttin' up next to hers can't be in the same vicinity as her for around a week or two until the magic works its way out of her system."

"There's nothing you can do for an overhealed person?"

"Nope. Any attempt at getting near them puts you at risk of being forced to endure their um... 'healing gusts', if you catch my drift. Too much of that, you'll end up overhealed yourself. With one person it's manageable. Multiple makes it a self-sustaining loop of constant healing magic."

Thinking back, the bartender turned her head over to the wanted board. "Hm...you know, this isn't the first time we've had one of those incidents."

"Come again?"

"The Overheal Bandit, the Good Magic Menace, whatever they're calling 'em. Thought to be a cleric serving the more...indulgent...sides of Vectrok's rule. They'd come in at night and swell up someone into a blob with the hopes they could turn other people into blobs, too. They practically ruined a whole town doing that... nobody goes to Tumblebridge anymore because everyone there is still overhealed. The bandit practically got away with healing a whole town..."

“An’ they never caught them, huh?”

The bartender shook her head. “Maybe that’s something to look into. But it’s weird...if it was them, they’d attack a crowded place, not some lone woman.”

“I’ll at least look into it.” Sol nodded, then slipped out of their seat. “I’m gonna turn in for the night, you try to do so too.”

“Eh. After I kick the regulars out.” she’d joke back, preparing another drink after one of the other patrons drug themselves up.

Sol instinctively strolled their way up the inn’s stairs, giving a patient little nod and tip of their hat to an individual that passed. “Evenin’.”

While Sol walked away, the stranger greeted them with a wave of his hand. He stood still on the steps, his long, color-mismatched lapine ears having caught the whole conversation. Elias shifted his eyes to the room where Neptune and him bunked in and practically jumped back up there. He’d crack the door, seeing the cleric exhausted and resting. For some reason, she came back struggling to hold herself up. Something about exerting herself? It was just peculiar how those accounts seemed to add up...

—

Sometimes, adventuring through the woods can lead to some undesirable encounters. Monsters intercepting the path, bandits pincering adventures in, or what the group of four experienced one morning; a goblin outpost- a hastily built thing, made of sharpened log fencing and hide. The quiet travel had been interrupted when Brigid spotted a scout in the treeline. Now, all four were off the beaten road trying to thwart the goblin force Brigid had aggravated. Arrows whizzed past Mars while he swung from tree to tree, his grappling rope providing more than enough support and velocity to keep his assault from above going. Every now and then, he’d shoot a bow or club out of the hands of an attacking goblin. Brigid took that opportunity to kick aside another short foe, clashing against the larger brutes. With goblin packs came their distant relatives, the hobgoblin. Crosses between taller species of humanoids between goblins, their features mixed plenty among each other. The ones Brigid found herself squared off against had mighty, bovine horns protruding from the sides of their heads. Much like their shorter brethren, their war fatigues were skimpy animal hides and revealing leathers that left naught to the imagination. Whatever flapped between their legs mattered little to Brigid; she kept her eye on fighting. Her greataxe swung against club strikes, slicing through their wooden weapons with ease.

Brigid dealt with the stronger onslaught, Mars kept ranged foes in check, meanwhile Cerbi and Mitsy dealt with the cluster of smaller physical combatants. The half-Felinis spun his staff around and slammed down the base into the ground, summoning ice chunk after ice chunk, sending the short green and blue-skinned people running- a thick hunk of magic frost thumped

right in front of a twinkish goblin with thick hair over his eyes, groaning in shock as his pelvis made contact with hard ice, with only a loincloth to protect him. Cerbi's blade, with a heat warm enough to scorch the ice into half-melted shards, slashed through to send glass-shard projectiles toward the oncoming assailants. The hailstorm slurry would melt upon impact, but the temporary blindness the sword and spear holding assailants faced made their attacks strike against each other more often than not. If they did land a hit, it'd be on Cerbi. Cuts and bruises to him were nothing, his soft flesh practically made conventional weapons bounce off of him. With his position being mostly passive, Mitsy made sure the team's positioning was on point.

"We're...flowing with synergy!" Mitsy gasped.

Mars smirked, pinning a goblin to a pine tree by a shot at her spaghetti-strap bra. "You're not doing too bad yourself down there!"

"Maybe send the big guy over here!" Brigid grumbled, having been pushed back by the onslaught of hobgoblins. "I'm...starting to lose my-"

A club strike to the warrior's hand sent her new axe out of her grasp, slung into the trunk of another pinetree. She recoiled and waved her fingers, her assailant raised his club back over his head. Running on impulse, Mitsy lept from his position with his arm thrown back behind his shoulder. When he felt his knuckles propel his arm forward, he found ice coating his fist for a powerful strike to the cheek. Down went the other hobgoblin, ice shattering across his face in a sparkling diamond mist. The final hobgoblin of that group, Brigid and Mitsy trade shocked glances at one another. After a beat of silence, Brigid lifted up her fists expectantly.

"...That's... dangerous, you know that?"

"So?" Brigid turned her fists toward herself, beckoning Mitsy. "That's cool as fuck."

A disappointed sigh left the kitty, before he granted Brigid those ice fists she desired. Ready to fight once more, Brigid rolled over to a flank of goblins and swatted them down with ease. Cracks in the ice around her knuckles grew deeper, until those makeshift gloves shattered into shards and dust all the same. Cerbi yipped from across the forest floor. Goblins had swarmed in on his sides now that a simple hot sword wouldn't deter them enough. He'd cleave through their spears, but could only singe their swords. Seeing an opportunity to help, Mars swung down from his advantageous high ground and swept a few goblins with a swift momentum-propelled sweeping kick. He'd kick his feet off a tree and shoot down to the ground, drawing his blade out.

"Alright, big man," he'd grin, "small sword and big sword?"

"Hohhh, a small sword and a BIG sword!" Cerbi's voided pupils filled with stars at the suggestion. "Let's goooo!"

Cerbi swung with great force against spears, leaving sear marks at their shafts, while Mars clashed against swords much like his at breakneck pace. The hellhound destroyed weapons, while the rogue bested them with breakneck speed. Opponents were punted or swung to the side, thrown from their instruments of combat. A gaggle of goblins and their hobgoblin superiors, thwarted in rapid succession! Mars wiped the sweat from his brow, leaning up against Cerbi for a moment of reprieve. He was then hoisted up into a hug, where he felt his spine crack and bend in a sudden show of strength.

"Yayyy, good thinking Mars!" complimented the hellhound, who shook his friend around in his arms.

The half-elf grunted and twirled his feet around. "Nngh, yeah, I'm pretty smart...now...could you let me...go...so I can breathe?!"

Realizing what he did, Cerbi dropped Mars in that instant...not taking into account that he swung the rogue above his head. At least most of his fall was cushioned by that soft, warm belly the dog had. Brigid stomped over to one of the groaning goblins lying on the ground, kicking him onto his back with her foot. She'd press her boot down on the goblin's chest, pressing him and his thick thighs down into the grass.

"If I were you, I'd start talking." she demanded, glaring daggers at him.

The goblin squirmed under Brigid's pin, clawing his hands into the underside of her boot. "Nghh, heh! Th-there nothing..."

Brigid recognized when someone hadn't sharpened up on their common language. She shook her head and grumbled, a feral, almost guttural slew of vowels and consonants flying out her lips just as well-strung as her normal dialect. Whimpering, the goblin beneath her foot responded in the same tongue. The three men watched Brigid go along, shocked she was able to keep up a conversation in the language of the goblins.

"She knows their language...?" Mars wondered to himself.

"That makes sense." Cerbi concluded. "You guys said she was a part of those guys that go around doing stuff for money, yeah? Aren't they all half orcish?"

Mitsy blinked, then looked up to Cerbi. "Yes, of course! She's a part of the Power Fists, right! They're all composed of Half-Orcs, and Half-Orcs know the language of the goblins too! They-"

A yelp broke their conversation, Brigid slammed herself down to her knees and rolled the goblin to face the others. "Now tell THEM what you said." She demanded, pressing her fingers into the goblin's cheeks.

“Nngh, hhh! Wuh...white hair lady...with black robe...she gives us shiny to fight your hums!”

Those words left Mars and Cerbi in confusion. A woman with white hair and a black robe? What was so significant about that? The moment Mitsy recognized those words...something else came over him. His ears flicked under his hat, bringing them forward. He'd slowly saunter over and kneel toward the goblin, gently pushing Brigid off of him.

“You can go now.” He ordered softly, yet firmly.

Brigid pushed the goblin away with her foot, while Mitsy gently pulled the little thing to the tree. He'd press his knees down to the grass and pull out a canteen, offering it to the goblin. His little green hands snatched it and tore off the cap, his desperate gulps cut off by loud, obnoxious coughs as water spluttered from his nostril. He'd inhaled the wrong way in his desperate cling.

“A woman with white hair and black robes, you said?” Mitsy appeared unbothered by the coughing fit. “Did she say who she was working for? If she's working for anyone at all?”

“Mmgh...gh...hhh...lady...in...Gorgy-Tum.” the goblin coughed. “Queenie Creamie...?”

“Queen Cream.” Mitsy nodded. “Or, Queen Creamy?”

“Creamy...Cake. Cream Cake.”

“Ah, Queen Cream Cake.” Mitsy slowly pulled himself up. “Do you still have these ‘shinies’?”

“Mmn, no, no. We gave em. Food stash. Waters. Nice sticks. Nice pointy sticks...”

“So you traded them for weapons and supplies...understood. Next time you see this woman, don't go for her money. It's all...ill-gotten gains.”

Mitsy pulled himself up off the ground and dusted himself off, bending over and showing off his pantyclad ass to the group. He snatched his canteen back and turned back to the group, readjusting his hat in the process. He still had that strange, stern, unusual look on his face.

“Uhhh...you good, dude?” Mars put his hands to his hips. “You're giving me the creeps the way you're staring.”

“It's clear you have a history with this woman,” Mitsy turned to look at Brigid, “as do I.”

"I saw her when I was fighting goblins by myself." Brigid grumbled. "I got a decent look, but all I saw was her hair and her clothes. Pretty sure she was the one who gave them that shit that made me into a blueberry."

"Mm." Mitsy rolled his neck. "She deceived me into giving her an unbelievable sum of money. My mistake, surely, but hearing she's doing evil has me...longing for what I've lost."

The half-Felinis walked along, following a pattern of breathing techniques to pull himself down to Earth again. His skin radiated a chilling, frigid air around him, like the moisture in the air itself could freeze over. His tail flicked back and forth like a snake battling for dominance, the only sign of visible, clear frustration in him. Cerbi rushed along to stick by his side, while Brigid and Mars simply looked back to each other. Out of their brief time traveling with these two, Mitsy had *never* acted like that before. And from the shoulder rubs Cerbi offered, it was obvious he'd never seen that behavior either.

—

Pinewood had given way for a clearing by the river, the only change in scenery since the four's adventure. Their days of travel had all culminated in their arrival to Bristleburg, its warm exterior a welcome change to the traveling party who braved the untamed wilderness. Squeezing through town, Cerbi held up the rear, Mitsy ahead of him, with Brigid and Mars sharing the leading position. Cobbled streets, painted houses and smiling people were a welcome change for most. The travelers trekked down the winding paved road, swirling around a fountain where copper coins rested comfortably at the bottom, in solidarity for the wishes their owners once had. A stray gray fox or two nestled themselves hidden amongst the twirly trees above, birds soared from one rooftop to another with bundles of sticks in their beaks, and squirrels chattered somewhere in the brush. Banners were strung across lampposts and businesses, bold lettering dotting them in gold; 'Unveiling of the Stained Sapphire, held at the Lumina Hall'. Such an event had pulled a variety of folks from all over Carrago, from plain old humans, more sophisticated Goblins, Felinis and Volo, to even the stray Simisimi. Locals got along with these guests pleasantly enough, given the smiles on people's faces. The enjoyment Mars, Cerbi, and Mitsy would have had were broken up by the two leaders bickering among each other, drawing a small crowd toward their plight.

"Why the hell are we stopping here?" she'd grumble. "I can feel people's eyes staring at the back of my head..."

Mars groaned, his finger and thumb pinching the bridge of his nose. "Nobody is staring at you. If anything, they're just looking at the giant wall of fat behind us."

"Hey, I'm more like a ham than a wall!" Cerbi piped up with a smile, before Mitsy gently tugged his arm to get him to quit intruding.

"If there's one thing I hate about these towns, it's how they're all packed with the same kinds of people." continued the warrior bitterly, "They're all spoonfed safety off the back of people doing all their dirty work for them. Their guards get to sit back and do nothing because they don't *have* to do anything. They get fat, lazy, and instead of dying in battle, they keel over choking on their own comfort."

"Jeesh, can you say something *nice* about this place?" Mars wondered, waving his hand around. "So what if people are safe, isn't that, I dunno, a good thing? Why'd you even come here if you just want to leave?"

"It breeds incompetence. It breeds reliance on others. And it makes all these rich idiots who just nod to potential would-be killers."

"Sounds like you're just jealous these people actually have nice lives..."

"Wouldn't you be?"

"Nah. That just means I get a new target if they're par~ticularly douchey. Isn't that what the point of your band of mercs is for? Making sure people are safe?"

"Look around you, Mars. Everyone here is a villain in some form or another. They had to step over a thousand yous to be one of them."

The argument prolonged, while Mitsy slowed down to be close to Cerbi's side. The heavysset hellhound had to scooch aside from people, hoist his ginormous tummy over small carts, and stumble away from darting blurs in the crowd.

"Maybe joining these two wasn't such a good idea." Mitsy gulped, "Cerbi, we aren't that far out from campus. We could retreat, we have no purpose being here..."

With a shake of his head, Cerbi continued onward. "If we leave these two now, then I'll never get to know how they get together!"

"Get to...what?!" Mitsy's ears flicked back, he was shocked that was what kept Cerbi's interest so peaked.

The dog nodded, then pointed at Mars and Brigid. Both had their arms crossed, both focused away from each other when they weren't spitting venomously. "Yeah, look at them! They're doing that thing that couples do in your stories."

"What do you-" Mitsy glanced over to them both, then turned back to Cerbi confused. "Cerbi, they're looking away from each other."

"Yeah but, remember that one book with the one guy and that one girl?" The chunky himbo vaguely described, expressingly broadly with hand gestures. "They got together in the end, but like, at the start they were really upset with each other."

Mitsy scratched his head, then looked back up to the big man. "Cerbi, I don't own any books similar to what you're describing."

"Oh. What was I reading, then?"

That was all Cerbi could say, he rubbed the back of his head and hummed slightly. There was a bit of an awkward air, since Mitsy knew Cerbi couldn't possibly have read any of his books. He didn't want to say it out loud, but he knew his boyfriend was challenged by big words and flowery language. He'd barely gotten through picture books without asking questions, young adult novels would be the end of him.

"N...Nevermind." Mitsy had to change his thought process. "I don't think they're attracted to each other in any way. Mars is socially strong, but physically inept. He seems like the type of person to talk himself out of anything. Brigid is strong and powerful, but she has no understanding of how people work. She seems like she has a basic understanding, but even then it's more power driven than anything. She wanted to push Mars on, even with him being injured."

"Hm. Strong and stupid, chirpy and smart." Cerbi hummed, then snapped his fingers. "Now I know what I was thinking of! They remind me of me and you!"

That flipped Mitsy for a loop. The boy twiddled his fingers together, then gave it some thought. Well, when he put it like that... "I-I mean, I'm not...chirpy. A-And don't insult Brigid's intelligence like that. I believe she's smart, just...impulsive."

"See, you know what people are like!" Cerbi gleamed, "I mean, you just read Mars and Brigid like, uh, like books! Yeah!"

"Whatever it is you two are talking about, shut it." Brigid cocked her head slightly back toward them, and barked in her usual ordering tone. That got them both to quiet down for the time being, but both the boys looked back toward each other. It seemed that Cerbi had convinced the boy of his view...well hey, at least he wasn't the only socially awkward weirdo in the group.

Brigid felt the crowd close in on her. They came, went, sped on by, slowed down to observe their surroundings, it was creepy. Like everything was on display, and Brigid was just another side attraction. Why was she dragged out here? To some lowlife, old-timey neck in the woods? She'd rather be at home, cozy in a tent, the smell of smoked ham the only stimulating scent. She would rather have fought some big monster and ignored everything else around her. Now, she had to smell the stink of folks she would never meet again, that gagging woosh of

going from one cleanly person, to one rank with working in the sun, to one that stunk of flowers and perfume. Nauseating, much like how the fighter felt. This wasn't her habitat, and she wanted out.

In a bid to escape the tensions between the other two, Mitsy slid to look at various trinkets for sale, though he did his best to keep up with the group. "This is quite a lively town..." He observed carefully, sure not to touch anything. He passed by weapons handed down from generations, big confectionaries, an empty fish bowl...in his excitement, he tugged at Cerbi's sleeve. "Cerbi! Cerbi!"

The big dog turned around, Mitsy pointing at a strange, bramble-like pastry in a napkin, which got him interested quickly. "Ooo, what's that?!"

"Funnel cake." Mitsy lifted it up to him, the excitement had distracted Brigid and Mars just enough to turn around.

Running the funnel cake stand was an unassuming individual, with white unkempt hair, ending in chocolatey curls, and tanned skin. She had plenty of people crowded around her stand, trying her funnel cakes. "You know...couples can get funnel cakes for free!"

Brigid stomped over to the two, ready to break them up. "Okay, we don't have time for-"

"Oh, how sweet of youuu~!" Mitsy trilled, excited to be handed a pristine, festive pastry. "This is what I love most about celebrations like these, funnel cake is one of my favorite snacks!"

"Well, I'm just excited to make your day wonderful~!" the shopkeep gleamed.

Brigid halted when Cerbi took a big bite out of the new treat, over three-fourths of it was gone. He savored the sugary top, the strawberry he'd gotten in the bite, the pastry itself. Cheap, delectable heaven! He finished the rest right after, then put both hands on his gargantuan tum. "Good stuff!"

It only took Mars a few seconds for him to turn back around. "Starting to see why they're boyfriends now..."

"Come on." Brigid gripped Mars by the collar, clearly fed up with her time being squandered. She practically dragged him in the dirt, dust came from his boots.

"Ack, hey, let go!"

The two boys turned their attention to Brigid, who lost grasp of Mars when he slipped out of his coat. Despite the huge scene, people slid on by, uncaring of their plights. That, however, didn't stop Brigid from her rant. "I'm already sick of this place!" She chucked the jacket to the ground. "What, you brought us to a fun fair?!"

"I didn't know this place would be packed!" The brown haired boy defended himself. "What is up with you?! It's just a town!"

"This place is packed shoulder to shoulder with pompous pricks!" *That*, on the other hand, finally drew eyes. The stares Brigid had imagined finally manifested, as onlookers stared confusedly at the bickering brawler. "Look at all of these rich fucks, walking around like they have nothing better going on in their lives! Like, like what, spending a night here will magically make their problems go away?!"

"What is WITH you?!"

"What?! WHAT?!"

"Always assuming the worst in people! Oh, people are here at a celebration, clearly they're all lords!"

"Why the hells aren't YOU thinking the same way?!"

"Uh, cuz I know that most people who go to festivals just want to get away from whatever's stressing them out?! People like doing something good with their lives?! Are you dense?!"

By that point, Brigid and Mars got aggressively closer to each other, a comical staredown given their height differences.

"G-Guys...you're making a scene..." Mitsy tried to step in to defuse the situation, though Mars quickly overpowered him.

"People are here to see a piece of history get unveiled for the first time in, I dunno, over half a century! Excuse me for not planning around if there would be people in this town! Don't be godsdamned stupid!"

"M-Mars, please stop-" Brigid cut off Mitsy next.

"You know people get cut from neck to hip almost every day?! Fighting just to keep, whatever THIS is?! This is what people fight for?!"

"I knew you were jealous! You're jealous that people are having a festival, mad that they can actually feel good about themselves! What is wrong with you?! Do you want everyone to constantly fight?!"

"Excuse me, you two!" A stern voice came from the crowd, and quickly pushed the bickering duo aside. The portly woman in mostly green stepped her way through the crowd,

covered by them for the most part. "You're causing a scene right in the middle of public! I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you both to calm down."

"That brat started it!" Brigid flung her pointer finger in the shorter perpetrator's direction. "You just had to drag me out here!"

"Shut it!" He retorted back. "You're just mad because you can't handle people not being as miserable as you!"

"I'm mad because you tugged me out here to go find some woman who's a hundred percent dead!"

"She's not dead!"

"Well if she isn't dead, then she doesn't give a shit about you!"

"That's not true!"

"Then how come she didn't come find you? How come you just kept wandering through life hoping SHE'D find you instead of the other way around?! Why did it take you only NOW to start looking for her?!"

"You don't think I've BEEN doing that?! Spending all my life searching for her?! Hard to do that when you have no one by your side except yourself!"

"Grow up, Mars! If she was alive, she forgot all about you!"

Mars. The word Mars. That's what clicked in that lady's mind. Everything else became white noise to the stranger, before her brown eyes darted down to the young man by her side. She watched words fly out from his mouth, him howl and yell at this brute, ball up his fists like he could have thrown a punch. It made the woman think back to when Mars was but a young child. He went up to her knees, with curly blonde hair just like hers. His eyes were a striking, vibrant green, he got that from his father. He always wore that star shaped locket around his neck, even in times where it would have made noise clunking together.

There was that time they played hide-and-go-seek in an old cathedral, or the time they slept in an abandoned dungeon and took the candles with them because Mars loved their color, or that time she showed him how to swing a dagger to defend himself. It made her heart feel light, before it sank back down again. She remembered her hand slipped, Mars had fallen down a chasm with her glove gripped tightly in his left hand. She instinctually rubbed her right in the present, a vacant stare. The weight of her actions, or, inaction, had finally caught up to her. He was nowhere near what she thought he'd look like. Tall, muscular, well groomed...this was a shabby hobo with cheaply dyed hair. But, it was the closest thing to her old home she had left.

Her brother, Mars. Whatever Mars had said next to Brigid, it didn't matter. All Neptune could do was fall to her knees, and embrace him.

"The fuck are you-"

"H-Hey, get off me!"

Brigid was stunned silent by this woman's intrusion. Mars did his best to squirm out of the grips of this stranger, anger still billowing in his heart. His head began to clear when he noticed something peculiar; the way this woman held him was familiar, the flaxy texture of her braids so close to something that sparked a memory in him. He was taken back in time to when he was younger, when a brown eyed, blonde haired girl pulled him into her grasp and comforted him from a thunderstorm roaring above. Every move she did mimicked that very same girl to the dot. Her left hand cupped his head, her right curled up in between his shoulder blades.

The winds howled around them, what little leaves that had turned and had fluttered by seeming highly noticeable now. "I'm so sorry..." Her voice was raspy, phlegm starting to find its way into her throat. "I told myself I'd never give up, but I did. I did and I never should have..."

That was when the dots connected to Mars. There was only one woman he knew with a voice like that. Promises of keeping him safe flooded his mind, stories of their parents, idyllic fantasies of their new home... Brigid, realizing the situation, stepped back and thumped into Cerbi. She felt a peculiar emotion strike her heart; one she hadn't felt ever in her life. Was this some sort of pity? If so, then why did she feel genuinely glad to see this situation resolve? Was it more guilt over what she'd said before that drew the woman over to her? Nothing made sense.... The fighter's hair fluttered in the wind as people became disinterested again. Mitsy silently directed Cerbi away, just so the two siblings could have their time to reunite. With shaky hands, Mars gripped his left hand in between her ponytail, his right tucked around her arm.

"But I didn't..." Mars swore, his eyes welted. "Nep...Where've you been all this time?"

Relief should have washed over Brigid, here these two idiots were, finally reunited, and peacefully so too. There was something, yet again, that tugged at her. It was like a knife had been stabbed into her thigh the moment she entered Bristleburg. The calmness, the wind through her hair, the smiles. Why did they get to her? Why did Mars wanting to find his sister, and now, finally finding her, get to her? Was it because...no. She had to shake that thought out of her head. Brigid rolled her shoulder, then tried to fixate her eye on something else. Mars. Mars was lucky. He had blood he could go back to.

There was a gentle tap of the hand on Neptune's shoulder. Her travel buddies had finally caught up to her. Elias held a bag of goods to his side, Avery held a funnel cake in their hands, and Basil simply nestled herself into Avery's pouch. "Do you uh, need a moment longer?"

"I just..." Neptune croaked, she felt the tears from her eyes touch the crusty mop of hair Mars had. "I'm so glad you're okay..."

"Me too..." Mars's voice cracked, he reached up to press his cheek against hers, content with being there for a little while longer. It made up for lost time. "You're a hard woman to find, you know that?"

"You're even harder to find..." Slowly, Neptune pulled away from Mars's side, then thumbed his hardened hair. "Mars, you're dirty...and you dyed your hair? Why? It was so gorgeous blonde..."

Mars pulled out the locket around his neck, then opened it. Inside was an old, faded portrait of a young girl, with bright blonde hair, brown eyes, and a polite posture. She couldn't have been no older than thirteen. Behind her, a confident male human, with those same blonde locks trimmed militaristically and those same brown pools for eyes, his mustache the most fashionable thing about him, what with him in his uniform. To his right, an infant was being held by an elven woman with wavy brown hair, vibrant green eyes, and a cute smile.

"I was always jealous." He chuckled through a voice filled with tears. "You looked like you got all of dad's features, yet, all I got from mom was her eyes..."

"You kept it..." Neptune gently clasped the locket shut, before she scrambled in her bag. "Oh, where did I put mine?! I had it on, but- but I took it off because, I, I..." In the dainty hand of her second fiddle, her locket gently rested.

Neptune took no time in retrieving it; she quickly opened it to show Mars a waxy, colorful scribble, with no discernable reasoning behind any of the streaks at all. It was rudimentary, crude, completely unrecognizable to anyone outside of the one who drew it. That someone, being Mars.

"No way..." Mars gently lifted Neptune's locket up. "Y...You still have this? Th..." He pointed toward brown and red scribbles. "That's...that's..."

"The house..." Neptune led, while she pointed to a yellow and pink scribble. "Then there's me...and then..."

"Me..." Mars's finger went to a blue and yellow doodle. "W-Well, one thing didn't change...I'm still bad at art..."

The two slowly separated, Neptune scooted on her knees before she stood back up, Mars dusted himself off and retreated backward to the other four. Cerbi, despite having been 'lead away', still watched from the sidelines with Mitsy. Brigid crossed her arms, then finally made eye contact with Neptune.

What was the right thing to say? She didn't know. The only thing that could leave the warrior's mouth was a simple "Sorry."

"Sorry?" Neptune chuckled. "Don't be, you...you helped bring him back. All of you did. You brought my little Mars back to me..."

Mitsy slowly stepped closer. "Ma'am, I don't think we did much of anything." He admitted sheepishly, "if anything, the two of us made things more difficult for him along the way."

"Hey, water under the bridge." Mars sniffed, then turned over to Brigid, his hand extended. "Same with you. Sorry I blew up on you."

That was a shock, she wasn't being demanded an apology, she just...got one. Brigid accepted the handshake. "Yeah. Whatever, didn't matter."

"As much as I love happy endings," Elias butted in, with a genuine, heartfelt smile, bowing graciously at the newfound collection of acquaintances. "I don't think we should reunite in public of all places. Why don't we make this evening special?"

Mitsy wondered where this man led them on to, before it clicked. "The event?"

"The unveiling of the Stained Sapphire." Elias corrected. "Hasn't been shown in fifty-five years. It'd be perfect to have some food, have a drink too, and just unwind and let the day come to a close. Sounds rather wonderful, no?"

"I'd like that..." Mars chuckled, before he stood by Neptune's side. "I think we've got a lot of stories to tell..."

"That we do." Neptune promised, never once letting go of her little brother's hand. "Please, you all are free to join, I'll pay for any eating expenses."

Cerbi smiled, though, not at the mention of food oddly enough. "Hey, so long as you two are happy, I'm happy!" His tail wagged rapidly, glad to see Mars finally smile around them.

United once again, Neptune and Mars took the lead. Elias, Avery and Basil slotted in behind them, both wordlessly acknowledging the importance of familial unity. Mitsy and Cerbi took the rear position which left Brigid stranded. She weighed her options. Her mission was over, even if she didn't have her payment yet. The payment wasn't what was important, it was getting the job done. She could hear the kind, somewhat bumpkiny-voice of her superior in her head. It told her that she still had a lot of learning about the world to do. Did she? Maybe she did. Hesitant, Brigid trailed behind the other seven, fists slightly less balled up than they were before. The group walked on, while the boots of another stranger clacked on the streets further off. Pulling down their hat, Sol smirked.

“Well whatd’ya know...she was right after all.”

“So it works?” The nasally, goofy voice of Queen Cream Cake’s broke through the silence of the ginormous dungeon.

Stone bricks towered into geometric maze walls among the dark and damp room, giant, flimsy iron bars stretching for thirty feet upward and into the hasty rush-job wooden ceiling. Around a few months of building, and this was the best they could come up with. It was good enough; not like they were going to live here. The woman of the hour adjusted her crown, which now sported a blueberry instead of a cherry, and resembled that of yogurt. Her thematic dress was replaced with a much more subdued black one, which showed much of her breasts, and revealed her dark blue spats-covered butt. She had arm warmers and stockings, both of bright and dark blue striped fashion, and pale purple shoes. Her violet hair had strange stacked buns on each side, with two purple hair-licks at the front. Her eyes, once a brown color, were a bright yellow. That cowbell was now replaced by a cat bell, of which still sat comfy in her cleavage. Beside her, a short woman in dark gray robes, with yellow symbols strewn about.

“The fool I tested it on turned into a berry within seconds.” she reported, a sly smirk spread up her right lip, “My fellow believers in Circe will be delighted to hear of its success.”

QCC playfully waved at her consort, too self-absorbed in her own personal routine. “I love the way you all think, Arabas.” she giggled. “Almost makes me think of the fools that came and passed me up.”

The floor and walls creaked around them, as a creature emerged from the shadows. The kidnapped princess herself had sat patiently in her cell, and awaited the two to finish their conversation. “I hope I’m not interrupting,” She meekly commented, raising her hand politely as best she could, “but, is dinner just about prepared? I’m absolutely famished.”

With a roll of her eyes, the tyrant waved her prisoner back with the back of her hand. “It’ll be ready soon!” She barked, “Ara, do me a favor and get Bev to cook our ‘guest’ something to eat!”

“Ah, that is the other reason I came here your heaviness.” Arabas slowly bowed. “Beverly has not returned here in some time. I’m afraid she is possibly with Satoka.”

“Of course...” grumbled the Queen. “Grendel must have mistaken the order or something. Fine, get Hop and Trot on it.”

“As you wish.” Arabas provided a dutiful bow to her boss, then turned about face and strutted out of the room.

The white and black panda sat silently alone, her butt alone squished up on each side of her cell. She blinked down at QCC, a tiny woman she could easily overpower, yet held no desire to do so. "So." Raiko cleared her throat. "When is it time for me to return home...?"

"Oh, that's just it." Cake commented with a guileless grin. "You don't. You are a permanent resident of Queen Cream Cake's kingdom! And I need your help in taking over that old fashioned snoozefest Kyodania...as soon as I can figure out how to affect you with my bell." She rang her cat bell, only, for nothing to happen. "Tch, can't power you up, can't hypnotize you...I must truly be weaker than I thought. Must be because you're so big..."

"I'm to be used as a pawn...?"

"Bingo!" Cake cackled. "Keeping you here means we've got the power to ransom your kingdom out of its precious, hard-earned tax dollars, and we'll be positively drowning in cash! Now, wait here while I go watch over your dinner. It's your faaaa-vorite! Bratwurst and pie! Deserving of a prisoner like you!"

The villainous madam had a guffaw of grand proportions when she walked away, slimmed down to a size where she could reasonably walk rather than waddle. Raiko sighed, mainly upset rather than panicking at all. She looked over to what little sunlight peered in through the cracks. Oh, if only she knew how to get out of these diplomatic situations. She yearned for her human body again, so she could easily slip through these iron bars. Maybe she'll be saved somehow. That's the only thing that kept her hopes up. What was she to do when she was captured? Nobody had ever told her. For now, all she could do is be obedient and wait.