

“Right, it’s here somewhere.” Varius said, holding up the paper map and showing it to their companion. “We’re looking for a flag, like this.”

The two charr looked around with Severa’s brow creasing. “I don’t see a blasted thing of use.”

She hissed as her foot struck an unseen patch of mud splashing a spatter of it up her baggy jeans. “This is gonna be a pain to clean.”

Varius gave a soft apologetic chuckle. “I appreciate you coming with me, Severa. Most friends would either judge me for the weed or tell me to stop being a chicken and get it myself.”

“It’s no worries, not every day you get a reason to explore the swamps, I guess I just wish I’d packed better.” She said, slightly embarrassed at her own lack of foresight but she’d at least been able to borrow a pair of sandals from her friend.

“Well if you just ignore the wetness it’s not all that bad.” They encouraged. “After all, when it’s messed up your clothing enough, a little more doesn’t hurt. It all washes off eventually.”

Severa nodded with a small smile, bolstered by the words. Their search and exploration ran on for a short while before Varius stopped abruptly with an ‘ah!’. The map and enclosed sketch lined up with some of the branches they saw. “This is it, it has to be!”

The two felines pushed through the last few wet puddles and came across a wide, naturally formed clearing, which wasn’t marked on the map. Slightly crestfallen, Varius looked around for more signs before it was Severa’s turn to give an alarmed noise, pointing.

In the centre of the clearing on a small lumpen hill was a tree trunk, the lofty bough it had once supported had been missing for ages from the wear of it, yet, slightly stained by the rain and mud, there was a small limp flag sticking out of the top. “Alright! Let’s get it and get out of here.” Severa said, taking the charge. Her ankles sank into the mud but her concern for cleanliness was buried for the moment. She trudged forward with Varius quickly following to not be left behind.

“Uh, Severa?” Varius said in concern, making her stop half across the clearing. “I love this newfound lack of concern over the mud but...”

“Huh?” She asked, looking down. “Oh cripes, sorry!” The mud was deep, inch by inch she’d fallen until it was up to her knees, likely ruining the baggy jeans. “Uh... uh oh.” She said, the pause in her momentum had let her legs sink a bit further and now they’d been bogged down. She tried to stretch her legs but the mud seemed sticky and stretchy, gurgling and then pulling her back down. As her feet rose the size difference of the sandals revealed itself, allowing thick gooey mud to run in from the sides, making her shiver as her feet squished into the cold.

In their alarm, Varius had stopped too, and they noticed concerningly that the trees and bank around them were rising. “I don’t think this is mud.” They murmured in concern, having to really *tug* just to get their legs to move around. “I’m not stuck but-”

“Yeah...” Severa finished the thought in her own head, they’d both waded far out from the ground they knew was safe. “Nngh, come on, I’m stronger than some dirt!” She growled, half to encourage herself and manifest that, half to try and put Varius at ease. The subsequent squeak she let out didn’t help as the doughy mud passed the line of her belt and the cold wetness struck through the t-shirt she wore. “Gah!” A double pronged attack as in the flinch she managed to dislodge a sandal with the mud squishing fully around her soft toed paw.

Varius was trying to wade back to the shore, but in the act of turning their legs had been mired up to the knees, too, making each step taxing. Their long walk to get to the site hadn’t helped matters, either tiring them even before this misstep.

“Nggh! I’m really stuck here.” Severa said in defeated concern. The thickness squelched as she barely managed to pull her mud drenched forearm out from where she’d attempted to help one leg rise. The thick cling of mess didn’t let go either, hiding her wrist and hand, slowly dripping viscous lumps down.

“Try to spread your weight, if you can hold on until I get to the bank...” Varius said, wincing and hesitating as the greedy mud sucked at one of their sandals, harder than they could move the foot forward while still gripping on. The thick splash of mud rolled down their sole, with the hesitation building inertia and making it even harder to push forward again.

“Maybe we should yell.” Severa said, not wanting to show a lack of confidence but getting increasingly concerned as she did her best to shift her centre of gravity. Still for all her effort it was to seemingly no useful effect, the mud still sucked and slurped loud and greedily with each inch it pulled her.

“Are you kidding? How do we explain what we’re doing here?” Varius replied with more incredulity in their voice than they really felt. “What if we’re heard by... I dunno.”

“What, police? Come on, no one’s out here except hikers or maybe your dealer.” She replied.

*I’m more worried about his other customers...* Varius thought but said nothing, they were also feeling the discomfort of the mud pressing above the waist. Worse still in their attempts to keep going Varius had lost the other sandal, mud encasing their legs with a sticky grip that didn’t want to part with them. They were lost in their own thoughts for a moment not hearing anything Severa was still saying before, with a scary shock, they realised they couldn’t get the momentum to move forward. The bank was now tantalisingly close but still out of reach.

Varius turned to look back, about to admit the fix they were in but their eyes widened when they saw how much deeper Severa had fallen. For a mercy it had slowed now, yet doubts crept in over whether Varius even had the strength to get her free if they made it. "You... may be right..."

With a shared nod, the two cats began to cry out into the air. Worries over who or what might come were dwarfed as the boggy mire rose higher and their cries grew more desperate.

Severa's arms were in contact with the surface, raised above the shoulders as she had given up on struggling, especially since that had only made things worse. "Please... someone find us." She groaned before letting out another yell.

Varius' ears flicked, head swivelling to a rustling. "I think I heard something! Hello? Is someone there?!"

The rustling grew as something big pushed through, two tall Norn emerged from out of the brush, taller than the charr, themselves. "What on Tyria are we lookin' at?!" One of them said, seemingly trying to stifle a laugh. "This isn't a mud-spa, cats!"

"Please, you can make all the jokes you want, just help my friend before she sinks!" Varius said.

The two shared a look and then the other broke his silence with a chuckle. "Yeah yeah, hold your horses, we're not gonna let you sink." Already his companion was digging around in a bag, pulling out a sturdy looking rope and tying it around a tree trunk. "Man she's in deep... you'll need more than that, Den."

"I know what I'm about." He replied, slinging the rope over a sturdy branch before he took the still generous length and threw it outward. It sailed over Varius head, landing close to Severa.

"Please be quick!" She grunted as her flailing hand found it and pulled it closer. She wrapped a length over her arm and then dropped her hands to get a stronger two-fisted grip, costing her the remaining space she had left and making the goopy bog let out one last gurgle before it flowed over her head.

The Norn wasted no time, grabbing the rope and using the branch as a pulley. One of them would haul on it while the other held, then would heave after the other regained a grip. The rope carved a furrow through the mud, but it was a few concerning seconds of effort before the mud's surface rose around Severa's heavy-set shoulders. She spit and puffed to clear mud from her face, the clinging layers had bulked her out to look at first glance like some kind of monster. It groaned and slurped as her head was kept squarely in the air now.

Inch by painfully exerting inch they dragged the large feline to the shore, with the first Norn doing all the pulling now while the second moved to his bag. Severa's arms and chest slapped solid ground, fingers digging in as she tried to haul up, but the pull was still too much

for her to overcome on her own. Still, she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth and would let them notice and finish the rescue in their own time.

The Norn pulled out a second rope, yet rather than building a pulley for Varius he carried it over to Severa, bending and picking up her arm before he lashed it around. "The one rope is fine, I just need you lads to haul it." Severa said to stop him, but he drew the rope into a knot, a tight one at that.

"Oh we're done hauling. Now put your arms behind your back."

"What?" Severa asked, eyes widened and an eerie feeling creeping over her. "What are you trying to pull?" She demanded with more fire. Trying to tug and brush off the rope. "Just haul me by hand if you have to!"

"You're smarter than that, even if you did nearly drown in a bog. You know what this is about." He said, indicating his bag, which had a few too many unusual 'tools' to be purely innocent. "Now, arms back."

"You're joking if you think I'll agree to that."

The other Norn had strode over to Varius and waited for Severa to look his way before his leg extended out, resting a boot on Varius' horns. "I think you will." He said. "Else we see how quick the bog can slurp up a cat with a little more ... encouragement."

"W-wait- please!" Varius said, eyes wide, vision blocked by the shadow of the rough sole.

"You would dare?! Just what kind of assholes are you?!" Severa growled.

"I guess it's up to you. Are we the kind hearted pair who found two kitties lost in the woods needing a new home or are we the cruel jerks who grabbed a camera and filmed their final moments?" Severa felt her hairs stand on end at the threat and after a moment of hesitation moved her arms behind her back. "Good choice." The Norn said, pulling the mud caked rope out of the way and shoving the new one to bind her wrists together. The thick mud oozed over them, as he knotted it very securely, testing and unable to budge the knot with simple motions. "Need a hand here." He said to his friend. "Though, you know what, I don't like that look on your face, I think we should fetch something to keep you busy before you say something you'll regret." Moving away for a moment.

The other norn gave one last teasing push, making sure to sink Varius up to the neck before he strode to Severa. "Please!" they squeaked feeling that the disruption to their balance was now pulling again.

A large round shape fell on the ground in front of Severa, a red ball affixed to a clump of straps. "Open wide."

"You clowns will be sorry for this." Severa said with a growl.

“See, that’s the kind of thing you could regret saying.” He said, kneeling to start pushing it closer. Severa resisted just enough to show she wasn’t happy with it, before parting her jaw. The grass had concealed just how big the gag was, once shoved into her maw it stretched it wide. It was buckled tightly, a harness going over her skull and connecting around her horns. Like it had been made for a charr.

Off to the side, Varius felt the mud creeping closer to their jaw, rolling up their neck all while transfixed by the horror of watching Severa being gagged and wrenched out of the mud, then pinned by the two who took the rope down to her legs. Her exhaustion was clear to see from how her frustrated struggles seemed only a token effort. Varius winced at the tight bend they forced her legs into binding the ankle to the thigh and then connecting the short tether to her hands.

The muddy blob that was left behind made it hard to see from their position just how secure the ropes were. “Mmmh, hmmmhgrghs!” Severa growled at them as they walked away, securing the mudded rope to the hogtie, to ensure she had even less room to squirm.

“Now for the other one.” The second Norn said, wiping the mud from his hands.

“Pft, why bother cleaning, they’ll just get dirty again. Besides...” On closing up to Varius, the first Norn leant down and put his hand directly on their head, pushing, giving them just enough time to close their eyes. “Your friend over there made me appreciate how much cuter you charr look when completely covered.”

The push was followed with a wet splattering as they scooped more mud over the charr’s horns and arms, coating them fully, true to their threat. “Mmmh! Mmmmhhh!” They squealed, panicked in darkness and desperate for air and mercy.

Hands plunged into the bog, seizing their arms and tugging them upwards. “Now, charr, you’re going to be a nice calm creature and submit. It’d just take a kick to reintroduce your pal there to the swamp.”

Varius had no real choice but to go along. Still it felt like they took their time to wrench the doughy mud coated charr out of the bog and onto the soil falling on them with even more rope. Tight knots kissed their wrists and elbows, tying their arms within an inch of each other. The same strong hands guided their feet upwards and bent them toward the shoulders before another lash captured the heels and ankles, then as with Severa, Varius’ ankles were tied to their thighs and the rope was connected to their arms.

It had looked intense on Severa but that still hadn’t adequately prepared them for how pinching and tight it would feel! “Gaah!” They cried at one wrench, with the gasp being chased with a second ball gag.

“Good of you.” The second Norn said as he moved to secure the straps, mockingly complimenting them for their obedience. “Now kitties, about that adoption...”

“Mmmhghh..” Severa growled, while Varius let out a grumble of their own, squirming and kicking in the tie. The Norn removed the rope from the branch and stowed it in his bag.

“Good to go?” One asked the other.

“Yeah, I’ll take this one.” He said, moving to Severa and with a final heave, hauling her over his shoulder. He stumbled a step to the side as she tried to buck and disrupt him but he was quick to compensate and level out.

Varius’ world pitched from under them as the other Norn lifted them in the same way, bearing their weight on a shoulder with an arm supporting them. They thrashed as much as they could to, the tight ropes punishing them but not enough to dissuade them from making the effort. “Ghh! Mmhm-mhhrhm!”

“Yeah probably a good idea to shake off as much as you can now. The mud will probably dry by the time we’re back. I guess we’ll all get to learn together if it hardens or just falls off.” He said filling both charr with a new concern.

The two charr let out muffled cries into their gags, yet their confident captors didn’t try to stop them, that sure they’d gotten away with their snatch and grab.

At least neither Norn had noticed the flag or the parcel in all of that. A glimmer of hope remained that Varius’ dealer might check up on the spot and somehow save them, or at least know something was wrong...