

Armello Reunion

The skies were gray over Armello's terrain as winter weather was imminent. It was business as usual for most, despite the threat of icy conditions coming soon. Rain or shine, there were places to go, fellow Armellians to meet, and coins to be made. Armellians came in all different shapes and sizes ranging from small rodents such as rats and squirrels, to the mighty wolves and bears. No matter what size the animal folk came in, it was almost certain they had a big personality, and perhaps most importantly, a big heart to go with it. Armello as a whole was a remarkable place in its own regard. Hilly green plains could be seen throughout the land as well as verdant forests and breathtaking mountain peaks. Snug villages consisting of simple log houses were frequent in addition to the well-beaten paths created by centuries of trading. The trade routes linked villages to thriving, more pronounced settlements throughout Armello.

It was not rare to see a castle somewhere in the distance. Some were long abandoned by its denizens and left to become one with nature, while others were well-maintained throughout the years. The most famous castle stood at the center of Armello. It once held a king driven mad by dark powers – a dark, magic-fueled disease known as the Rot. The fate of the king was unknown as only one lone hero either bested him in combat, or banished him from Armello via the use of Spirit Stones. Only the broken bricks, breached walls, and remnants of a palace could tell the tale of the realm's showdown. Some Armellians dubbed the time of chaos the "Race For the Throne" as many animal folk competed not only to save their towns, but to have their very own chance at the crown.

Sometimes a castle or some other grandiose structure was not in sight at all. This was definitely the case in Cedar Vale. The forest was home to many chipmunk and squirrel villagers who lived off the land as much as possible. Barnaby, a tan colored rabbit was trekking through the area. He was wearing a gold colored helmet, tipped upwards so he could see where he was going. Barnaby typically wore a gold colored suit of armor too, but instead had some lighter leather armor on his chest. The young-looking rabbit carried a remarkably hefty backpack with him. In his grip was an equally impressive war hammer. The end of said hammer saw more smithing action than battle, however. Barnaby was an easy fellow to identify because of his gear. A lantern dangling from a tree branch that had been stuffed in his bag was strictly part of Barnaby's distinctive look.

Barnaby pulled out a tattered map from his backpack. He unfolded it, then spun it around 180 degrees because it was upside-down. Barnaby studied the map as he continued to traverse the uneven terrain. He was hoping to approach a town where he could stay the night before continuing on with his journey. The poor lighting was making it difficult for the rabbit to see how much further he had to walk according the map. Just then, Barnaby's foot struck a tree root causing him to come crashing down to earth.

"Oof!" Barnaby cried out, his palms and upper arms smacked some hard soil.

“That hurt, owwww.” Barnaby sat down with his back against a tree, feeling a bit under the weather from the mishap.

“Hm?” An Armellian in the distance heard the sound of the rabbit’s distress. It was a squirrel named Twiss.

Twiss had crossed paths with Barnaby during the Race For the Throne. The two were neutral towards one another during that time. They never fought or attempted to outshine the other. In fact, Twiss always admired Barnaby’s excitable personality and desire to impress the townsfolk with his abilities. The tan squirrel wore her signature black cloak as she hastily headed towards the noise. She was very much surprised when she was Barnaby’s lantern softly glowing on the forest floor along with the bunny himself, of course.

“Hey there, Barnaby. Long time no see,” Twiss approached and squatted down next to the youngster. “What happened?”

“I tripped on a root and fell on my arm,” Barnaby continued to whimper even though his scrape wasn’t that serious. He was a bit overdramatic at times.

“There there, let me see,” Twiss helped herself to Barnaby’s lantern to get a closer look at Barnaby’s wound. “Oh, that’s not bad at all. I’ll take care of this.”

“Thanks Twiss, you’re the best,” Barnaby sniffled, but soon smiled. Seeing a familiar face made him forget all about his fall.

Twiss fished through the handmade pockets of her cloak, pulling out a small wooden container from one of them. She unscrewed the top of the sealed container, revealing a viscous orange substance. Twiss dipped one of her digits into the container and was applying the gel to Barnaby’s arm shortly after. It had the consistency of honey with a sweet smell to it, too. The squirrel finished the treatment by wrapping Barnaby’s wrist with some simple white silk.

“You should be in ship-shape by tomorrow morning,” Twiss cheerfully said. “By the way, may I ask what brings you here to quiet little Cedar Vale?”

“I’m just trying to get to the next town,” Barnaby explained while getting to his feet. “There’s an inventor’s fair in Dawn’s Call that I don’t wanna miss. I mean, I’ve got plenty of time to make it there already, but it’s just so exciting that I want to be in town as soon as possible.”

“Well, that sounds jolly good to me,” Twiss looked amused as the classic enthusiastic Barnaby was raring to hit the road again. “Would you have time to stop by my cabin for some biscuits and tea by any chance?”

“Uhhmm,” Barnaby pondered for a moment, standing on his toes while putting an index finger to his lower lip. “Sure! I’ve got time to take a little break.”

“Oh how I just love having company,” Twiss’ tail flicked a few times in delight while Barnaby grinned at her side.

The two furs reached Twiss’ cabin within a few minutes. It was a roomy, rectangular home full of wooden furnishings. Baskets filled with pine cones were a common sight in

Twiss' place. The squirrel also kept an impressive amount of acorns stored in wooden bowls throughout the cabin. It never hurt to be prepared for winter.

"Make yourself at home while I get the tea going." Twiss headed outside to get a pot of water boiling outside.

"Will do!" Barnaby happily parked his rump on a wooden stool. It had a soft cushion underneath it, and one of Twiss' cloaks hanging on the back of it as well.

Twiss prepared some hot water over a small fire pit. She headed back to her cabin and sought out her tea stash. The squirrel picked out a simple, minty brew that was liked by many Armellians, whether or not they drank tea much. She headed to a wooden table where Barnaby was sitting at, pouring each of them a cup.

Barnaby sipped the tea and was pleased by the taste. He was even happier when Twiss offered some biscuits to go with it. Barnaby dunked one into the tea and munched on it hungrily. Twiss was more delicate with hers, but didn't mind Barnaby's manners. It wasn't like they were at some fancy home belonging to a prestigious face in Armello. Barnaby chuckled, feeling slightly embarrassed as he noticed how Twiss held her biscuit between her thumb and index finger while Barnaby held one in each hand as he was simply shoving the tasty treats into his mouth. He slowed down, savoring the last biscuit and gulp of tea properly.

"Thanks for treating me to all of this," Barnaby clasped his hands together.

"Don't mention it," Twiss giggled, getting up from her seat and pushing her chair in. "By the way, I think the next town you'll come across is called Blueberry Town. I haven't left Cedar Vale in quite some time, so you mind if I tag along with you?"

"Oh no, not at all," Barnaby said. "Company while I walk sounds great!"

Barnaby got out of his chair and headed towards the cabin's front door where Twiss was waiting for him. It seemed the squirrel was eager to witness a change in scenery. The two strolled past wooden cabins similar to Twiss' before the trees and shrubbery became less dense. Soon, some tall iron gates came into view, indicating the entrance of the town they were seeking out.

Twiss and Barnaby approached the tall opened gates of Blueberry Town. It was a much larger place than Barnaby had imagined. Tall stone buildings lined brick roads as far as he could see. Elegant banners were hung high along the walls of various structures, blowing in the winter breeze. The two walked by a few statues depicting famous faces from many years ago, presumably. One work of art was simply a chiseled block of stone in the shape of a blueberry bush. The duo soon reached what appeared to be the center of town. One of the tallest buildings in Armello stood before the rabbit and squirrel. A large blue banner with a black wolf symbol hung under each of the structure's many archways.

"Woaaaaow, look at this place," Barnaby spoke up.

"For being called 'Blueberry Town' this place sure is a lot to take in," Twiss said.

Barnaby stared up at the building in front of him, and then brought his gaze towards a footbridge that rested between rows of perfectly aligned trees. He then laid his eyes on a gated area within the town not too far from where they were standing. A tall badger seemed to

be guarding the entrance of the place. Suddenly, Barnaby bumped shoulders with Twiss as he let out a gasp.

“Oh!” Twiss looked at a seemingly startled Barnaby. “What’s wrong? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“Th-that’s Horace!” Barnaby pointed at the mighty-looking badger.

“Yeah? You know the guy?” Twiss leaned back against the fountain, not looking too bothered by the guard in the distance.

“Sort of,” Barnaby tapped his digits together with a nervous look on his face. “We were going to have a duel one time, but then I kind of...chickened out.”

“That might have been a wise choice,” Twiss pushed herself off of the edge of the fountain to stand up straight. “Anyway, come on, let’s explore a bit.”

“Barnaby?” A voice in the distance was heard.

“Eep!” Barnaby bumped hips with Twiss. He froze in place as it was too late to do anything else. The badger, standing at around 6 feet, had already made his way to the two.

“Salute!” Horace gave the bunny a proper greeting now that he was directly in front of him. He held a halberd horizontally in his grip as he bowed his head in a noble fashion to the two. He clearly meant no harm.

“H-hey. Hi, hi!” Barnaby stuttered even though his tense body had relaxed a little bit.

“Long time no see. It looks like you’ve grown a little taller, hm?” Horace’s posture mimicked the tall buildings behind him. His size even rivaled the bear folks within the area.

“Oh, maybe I did.” Barnaby rubbed the back of his neck. He soon smiled as Horace seemed to be quite friendly.

“What brings you to Blueberry Town?” Horace asked. The badger then turned to face Twiss and bowed to her. She simply giggled before giving a friendly nod in return.

“I’m looking for a place to stay before I continue my journey,” Barnaby stood on his toes while striking a pose like a brave knight.

“He’s going to show off his skills at an inventor’s fair,” Twiss explained, “I’m just tagging along. It can get a little boring in Cedar Vale.”

“Ah, Cedar Vale,” Horace looked towards the sky, daydreaming for a moment, “Quiet little forest, but full of beauty.”

“Are you a guard for anyone in particular?” A curious Barnaby asked.

“I’m a member of a group called the ‘Town Guardians’,” Horace said, “many a prestigious face visits this town, whether it’s for business purposes or just for entertainment. I stand guard to keep citizens safe while events go on, and I also patrol the streets to prevent theft and other unsavory activities. On the side, I do combat training classes at this small academy behind us.”

“That sounds interesting,” Twiss said, “I’m sure the town appreciates someone with your talents. You look like a perfect fit for the job.”

“Thank you,” Horace smiled. “The pay is decent, and I like the town itself as well.”

“I think we both have time to spend while we’re here, right Barnaby?” Twiss asked.

“Yuh-huh, maybe you can show us around,” Barnaby suggested as he smiled wide.

“Sounds wondrous,” Horace obliged. “Let me have a quick exchange of words with my fellow guards and we can be on our way.”

Barnaby and Twiss stood by while Horace spoke with a raccoon and a fox, both in matching suits of armor. Horace handed his halberd over and was given a wooden staff in return. The badger didn’t necessarily need it, but the guardians issued them whenever patrols were conducted. Horace soon returned to the two friendly faces, and the party was off on their way to do more sightseeing.

The first place the trio visited was Horace’s home. It was a sturdy building just like the others in Blueberry Town with dark grey stone and blue banners hanging from its walls. Horace opened a heavy iron door while letting his guests know in advance that there wasn’t anything too interesting to his living quarters. Barnaby and Twiss seemed to like what they saw regardless.

The interior of the badger knight’s home was in the shape of a ‘T’. In front of them was a round pillar adorned with various paintings, shelving, and candles. Behind that was Horace’s food storage area and cooking station. The left side of his room seemed to be an area where Horace spent most of his time. He had two fairly large bookshelves that were almost fully stocked with books. There was a cozy place where Horace could sit and read nearby as well. Some stained glass was above his reading spot, making that part of the room seem extra inviting. In the daytime, the sunlight would shine on the glass, creating gentle glows of red and blue on the tile floor below. Lastly, the other end of the ‘T’ shaped living space featured a long white carpet with a red stripe down it. It led to a simple wooden chair and marble table. The table featured a plethora of ink bottles, writing utensils, and of course, paper.

“While you’re here, would you like to stay for lunch?” Horace asked his guests.

“I had biscuits and tea before I left,” Twiss politely declined.

“Mmhm! Twiss shared with me.” Barnaby sat down on the long carpet and sprawled out on his back. “Mind if I rest my legs for a few minutes before we go outside?”

“Not at all,” Horace said.

The trio spent some time indoors making small-talk for about twenty minutes or so. Barnaby and Twiss relaxed while Horace mentioned his writing endeavors. It was no secret that Horace was a bookworm, and a considerably creative fellow. They also enjoyed hearing about how Horace sleeps under the stars on his rooftop whenever possible. Twiss chatted about forest life in Cedar Vale, which was pleasant to hear about as well. Once the group felt caught up on things, they agreed to continue on with the tour. Barnaby got to his feet after lazing about on the floor. He was excited to see more of Blueberry Town.

“Brrr, did it get colder out here?” Barnaby asked as the group stepped foot outside.

“Feels like it did,” Horace agreed, “I heard a good portion of Armello is going to get hit by a snowstorm tonight.”

“Let’s hope we can find some cover around here if that happens,” Twiss said.

“There’s a number of exquisite places to stay at,” Horace rubbed his chin as he thought for a moment. “If you don’t feel like parting with a hefty amount of gold, I’m sure we can find a humble tavern to rest up in too.”

“That sounds good. I just hope a bunch of snow won’t slow down my travels tomorrow,” a worried Barnaby mentioned.

“Aw, cheer up,” Twiss comforted Barnaby, tugging him close to her side. Barnaby let out a bright giggle and continued on his way with a smile.

“You should come back to this place in the spring,” Horace spoke up, “this place may not be a spectacle right now, but there’s lots of festivities that occur when the weather is warmer. There’s outdoor plays and events like bake-offs, and even pie-eating contests.”

“Have you ever entered a contest like that?” Barnaby asked, hopping into the air to make eye contact with Horace just for a second.

“I’m afraid I have not yet,” Horace put a hand on his flat armored stomach. “As much as I enjoy a good blueberry pie, I prefer spending most of my time under the trees with a book.”

“Sounds peaceful, but it might be fun to try something new once in a while,” Twiss said. “Even I like a good ol’ ax-throwing contest every now and then.”

The trio continued to take in the sights and sounds of Blueberry Town until a strangely familiar figure was spotted by Barnaby. The rabbit’s eyes went slightly wider for a second as he realized who the fellow in the distance was.

“Hey, look!” Barnaby pointed, looking excited, “I know that rat, it’s Mercurio!”

It was quite easy to distinguish the rat Barnaby was pointing at from the rest of the crowd because of how he was dressed. He seemed to be in classy-looking attire as he pulled a cart made of rich mahogany behind himself. The currently empty cart looked almost just as fancy as his outfit. The rat’s red vest blew in the breeze while his long sleeved white shirt kept him warm in the chilly winter air. Mercurio parked his cart in between some empty marketplace stands and scouted around, looking confused.

“I want to go say hi to him,” Barnaby announced, looking up at Horace.

“Hm, something about him says ‘scoundrel’ to me,” Horace propped his staff up by a nearby wall and crossed his arms. “You sure this rat isn’t bad news?”

“Pfff, he’s practically one of those prestigious faces you mentioned earlier.”

“If you say so.”

Barnaby happily made his way towards the stationary Mercurio. The rat identified the excitable rabbit right away due to his overstuffed backpack and hammer. Twiss and a reluctant Horace soon arrived behind Barnaby.

“I remember you during those ‘Race For the Throne’ times,” Twiss and Horace listened to Mercurio. “You’re a pretty clever fellow. One day a settlement is on my side, singing songs of my achievements, but then the next day they’re singing about a genius bunny who will make a humongous palace in the center of Armello.”

“That’s me!” Barnaby laughed while Mercurio smirked.

“What brings you here?” Horace asked out of the blue.

“Oh, you brought a guard?” Mercurio asked, being facetious.

“They’re familiar faces just like you,” Barnaby said. “We’ve been just taking in the sights for now, but we’ll be looking for a place to stay the night soon.”

“I see, don’t worry about me. I’m no trouble. Honest!” Mercurio waved his gloved hands while shaking his head in a playful manner. He chuckled sheepishly as all he got was a stone-faced look from Horace in return. Twiss snickered and fluffed her bushy tail, at least.

“So, what brings you to Blueberry Town?” Horace asked again.

“Well, I’m doing an ingredient run for my tavern back at my hometown,” Mercurio explained while crossing his arms and tapping one of his feet impatiently. “I thought this would be just a quick grab-and-go, but apparently nobody wants to do business around here.”

“Ah, well I believe everyone is packing up for a storm that is supposed to hit soon.” Horace looked up at the cloudy sky.

“That’s a shame,” Mercurio snapped his fingers while looking towards his empty cart, “I really wanted to get this all taken care of today.”

“I’m sure the streets will be busy again in the morning,” Twiss spoke up, “perhaps we can all chip in for a place to stay till the storm passes.”

“Twiss is right,” Horace said, “the marketplace will be busy no matter how much snow we get tonight. Now, shall we get going? It’s nearly sundown.”

“Y-yeah,” Barnaby shivered as a blast of cold air hit the group.

Horace turned around since the party had reached the other edge of town. He began to retrace his steps in search of a place to stay. The badger marched with his staff in hand again, unfazed by the cold air. Twiss braved the cold and was very much used to the chilly weather from her forest living. Barnaby and Mercurio looked slightly uneasy, but it wasn’t enough to make any complaints.

The first building the group laid eyes on was slightly different from Blueberry Town’s typical architecture. It was oblong in shape, splitting two separate paths in half before meeting up again. There seemed to be a noticeable amount of activity around it as well. Cheery music could be heard any time somebody entered or exited the place. Barnaby touched a plaque on one of the building’s walls that seemed to have lettering made of solid gold. The group almost decided to pick a path to continue on their way, with the exception of Mercurio. He seemed to have a trick up his sleeve.

“Oooh, now *this* is my kind of place,” Mercurio smiled, strolling up to the massive archways and entering the establishment without a care in the world.

Ironically, Mercurio’s attire caused him to blend in somewhat as well-dressed citizens talked and drank. A rabbit with fur as white as snow played a stringed instrument with a bow alongside a chipmunk who tapped some various-sized drums. A flirtatious feline was strumming a small mandolin and another giggled at him while enjoying his tune. Mercurio was offered a small pastry on a stick from a chubby, mustachioed skunk cook. He happily accepted the treat, hungrily stuffing it into his face. A ferret in the distance made eye contact with the rat and began to approach him. He gulped as his cheeky grin faded.

“You don’t look familiar,” the ferret commented. “Does thou have a sleeping quarters?”

“Yes good sir, about that,” Mercurio stayed cool, “I’m looking for a room for some friends and I—multiple rooms actually. This should suffice, correct?”

Mercurio presented a decently-sized satchel of coins to the ferret. He also bounced it in the palm of his hand to make the offer seem more enticing. The ferret, however, seemed displeased towards the situation.

“We do not have anything open, especially not with that pocket change. You cannot just saunter on in here without spending gold for at least one night’s stay.” The ferret scoffed, “I suggest you keep on searching for a more suitable place to stay.”

Mercurio’s cheeks started to heat up and he quietly turned around, heading towards the exit. He sighed heavily, his breath making a misty cloud in the cold air. The group continued to seek shelter as the wind started to whip up worse than before. Mercurio seemed to shrug the cold off as he was too busy stewing over the “pocket change” comment earlier. Horace soon pointed out a second tavern. This time, the group of four entered the place together. Unfortunately, they were told that no rooms were available and had to return outside to the biting cold air.

"This is getting on my nerves," Mercurio looked towards the sky as snowflakes swirled all around his snout. "I don't like this place very much."

"Mercurio, if worse comes to worse we can all stay at my home," Horace tried to calm the flustered rat. "It's not Blueberry Town's fault that the weather is like this."

The group continued to look around while rounding a corner featuring the same sturdy buildings and blue wolf banners. They seemed to be the only ones not settled in somewhere. Everyone but Horace looked slightly worried as there suddenly wasn't a structure in sight for a few minutes. Barnaby dragged his heavy hammer behind him, letting out a groan every now and then. Mercurio held onto his elbows while watching the snow accumulate under his furless pink feet. Fortunately, it wasn't enough to hinder their walking just yet.

Suddenly, Twiss let out a small gasp in delight as more homes came into view. This time, there were modest huts of varying shapes and sizes. The party was still in Blueberry Town according to Horace, except they were walking through a small hamlet where the main town first got its roots. A squirrel and fox were frolicking nearby despite the whipping wind. They seemed to be using acorns as a form of currency as they played pretend.

"The king declares it's tax time, which means I take two acorns," the squirrel said, helping herself to two acorns from a pile.

"Not so fast," the fox countered, "I use the help of my bandits to take one back."

"Watch out, now there's guards after you."

"Eep!"

The fox laughed while the squirrel chased him around a tree. Barnaby stopped abruptly as the boy tripped and fell onto his belly in front of him. The squirrel dove and got a hold of the fox's bushy tail while letting out a "Gotcha!"

"Oh, hello mister knight," the fox said to Barnaby.

Horace was amused by the fact that the youngster thought Barnaby was a knight. Barnaby helped the fox to his feet and the two little ones were soon playing once again. A parental figure was heard calling for them a few minutes later, and the little duo was off to the races to settle down indoors. A soft yellow glow was seen as a door to one of the huts was opened. It reminded the bunch that they still needed to find a place to stay.

"This place isn't too bad," Mercurio said quietly, feeling a hint of joy from watching the youngsters play.

Twiss was glad that Mercurio's sour mood was fading. She looked to Horace in hopes that he would find a warm, cozy place for them to stay in. They were in luck as Horace pointed to a sign blowing in the harsh wind. It didn't look like much, but it was their last try before they would have to pile into Horace's place. The sign squeaked in the whistling wind. At times, it would slap against the wooden exterior of the tavern. An impatient Barnaby opened the front door to the place, stumbling inside.

"Well hello, dearie," an elderly porcupine lady greeted the bunny.

Twiss, Mercurio, and Horace entered the place as Barnaby regained his balance. Horace had to duck under the door frame in order to get inside.

"We would like a place to stay. Pretty please!" Barnaby begged while on his knees.

"Oh my, you poor dears look chilled to the bone. Come."

The porcupine lady fetched a candle and began to walk towards a hallway where the sleeping quarters were kept. Barnaby followed her carefully while holding his lantern. He didn't want to step on the back of her long, oversized robe that dragged on the ground behind her. The lady opened a creaky door, revealing a basic room with wooden furnishings. Two simplistic beds with two feather pillows each was the main highlight of the place. A small square window was iced over on both sides, making it difficult to see out of. Horace was the first to pay up, giving the porcupine a few extra coins to show his gratefulness. Barnaby, Twiss, and Mercurio chipped in as well. Mercurio even tipped a little extra, causing Horace to give a quick nod in approval.

"Wyld bless you," the porcupine smiled. "Enjoy your stay, sweeties."

The porcupine headed off for a few minutes, leaving the group to their own devices. Barnaby propped his hammer up by the closest wall and claimed one of the edges of the beds to rest his tired legs. Twiss sat next to Barnaby, letting her bushy tail rest behind the bunny in a friendly manner. Horace left the room to change out of his guard's attire, returning in just a pair of reddish-grey slacks. He didn't appear to be bothered by the slight chill of the room.

"Ooh, good idea," Barnaby noticed Horace's lack of armor on his now bare badger belly and scurried out of the room for a moment.

Since Barnaby had planned on staying the night somewhere, he had a change of clothing with him. He discarded his leather armor for the night and returned in some simple soft clothes with his helmet tucked under his arm. Barnaby's new pants featured a pattern of gold and black diamond shapes. They almost resembled a modern-day pair of pajama pants. The legs of them were slightly long with the material bunching up on top of his feet – not that

Barnaby minded. He set his helmet down by Horace's armor before parking his rump on one of the room's fairly soft beds.

Just then, the porcupine lady returned to the room with a few goodies. She rested a salad featuring plenty of dried fruits as well as a hefty bowl of piping hot broth and carrots. Horace thanked her and bowed. She left the room with a smile on her face since the guests seemed very appreciative of the delivery.

The group dug into the salad using some run-of-the-mill pairs of chopsticks. Barnaby hoarded the carrots while Twiss called dibs on the nuts. Mercurio finished eating and simply sat back in a wooden chair, resting his eyes for a moment. Horace noticed a small collection of books in the room. They were classics he had read many times already, but he helped himself to one and began reading regardless. Twiss asked for a book to read as well, to help pass the time. Barnaby quietly observed the three for a few minutes before getting a little antsy. He decided to politely ask Horace if he had any writing instruments on him so he could draw a picture. Horace gladly helped the rabbit out, offering him a pen with some ink and some spare, loose paper of his. The group kept busy for a few minutes until a question that had been on everyone's minds was asked.

"So, who will be sleeping where?" Horace casually asked, without even looking up from his book.

"Ooh, good question," Barnaby replied, looking around the room to see if one of his pals had an answer. The room was silent for less than a minute until an idea came to someone.

"What if we roll dice to see who sleeps where?" Twiss suggested, "I always leave home with one of my Oaken Glory dice. What about you guys?"

"I have a die somewhere," Barnaby said, heading to the armor stash in the corner of the room. He started frantically searching for it.

Horace joined Barnaby in the hunt to find his die. He managed to find it in a coin satchel, returning to his seat with it secure in his fist. Twiss fished in her cloak pocket and came up with her aforementioned Oaken Glory die. Mercurio, being a fan of games of chance, carried a silken bag full of his favorite dice.

"Okay so the plan is we roll dice until someone gets a pair of matching symbols," Twiss explained. "If more than two of us roll the same symbol, then we obviously all re-roll."

"Wait, I'm not ready yet!" Barnaby called out. Oddly enough, Barnaby shook his helmet a few times and an orange colored die came tumbling out of it.

The excited rabbit was the first one to roll his die. It hit the table where Horace was seated with a *tick...tack...tack* sound. The result of the die was a tree symbol.

"Oh, a Wyld!" Barnaby smiled. "What does that mean?"

"Not sure yet," Twiss said before the remaining party flung their dice onto the table.

Twiss' wooden die tumbled a few times before coming to a stop. Her result was a shield symbol. Mercurio's reddish wine-colored die rolled and spun like a top for a few seconds before revealing its symbol which resembled a crescent moon. Horace's die was black with

white markings, similar to his fur. His die tumbled and landed with the crescent moon symbol face-up just like Mercurio's.

"Look, it only took one attempt to get a matching pair," Barnaby pointed out.

"Yep, it's settled," Twiss nodded, feeling clever for coming up with the idea. "Barnaby and I will share a bed while Mercurio and Horace claim the other one."

"That's fine by me," Horace commented, returning to his book.

Mercurio returned the die he had rolled to his silken bag. The rat didn't think too much about the upcoming slumber. He guessed that Horace would simply sleep like a log, and he'd have enough space to nestle into. Mercurio sat in silence as the other three in the room had something to occupy their time with. Twiss was reading peacefully on one of the beds with her right foot rested upon her left knee. Barnaby was drawing with his belly to the floor, swinging his feet behind him while putting ink to paper. His lantern came in handy as it illuminated the canvas nicely. Horace's nose was also buried in a book. His posture was similar to how he stood, tall and sturdy. The badger's physically fit chest was all that was visible from behind the table he was parked at. Mercurio leaned back in his seat, tapping his leather-gloved digits together. He didn't want to interrupt the rest of the group by starting a conversation.

Fortunately for Mercurio, a gust of wind howled past the tavern. It caused the tree branches outside to creak and the tavern's sign to slap against the building's wall. Mercurio had a chance to stand up from his chair without distracting the others.

"Would you listen to that wind," Horace said from behind his book.

Mercurio headed to a flat hanging shelf by the icy window, retrieving some small glassware from it. He quietly returned to the table and set the glasses down. He then neatly hung his vest on the back of the wooden chair. Meanwhile, Horace placed the book face-down in his lap for a moment to give his eyes a break. He looked around the room, making eye contact with Barnaby who cheerfully smiled back at him. The badger then turned his attention towards Mercurio who was removing his leather gloves at the time.

"If you have a moment, would you care for a drink?" Mercurio offered, "I have enough ingredients on-hand to mix you a Grinning Blade's Delight."

"Sounds intriguing, I would very much like to try it," Horace responded.

Mercurio's eyes lit up for a moment as he gathered the items needed to make the drink he mentioned. He worked hastily, creating the concoction for himself at first, but then worked on Horace's mix with extra care and precision. Mercurio stirred his own drink using a chopstick off of the table while slowly sliding Horace's glass towards him with his free hand. Horace helped himself to a chopstick to stir his beverage as well. He then firmly gripped the glass in his hand, bringing it up to his snout.

"What makes this drink unique is the small amount of plum. I haven't come across a single drink that uses it so far. It also has some blackberry and a secret mix of my favorite spices." Mercurio advertised his specialty while looking at Horace with a smug smirk. "Oh, be sure to take slow sips because a Grinning Blade's Delight is known to have some bite to it."

Horace took a whiff of the contents in the glass. It smelled sweet, so he was unsure how the drink could possibly have a "bite" to it. He brought the glass to his lips, taking a cautious sip. He felt a hint of spice on his tongue, but not an intense amount. Perhaps his palate was slightly different than the rat's. Horace took another gulp of the beverage and soon felt a warm sensation in his stomach.

"That's not bad," Horace gave his honest opinion. "It's quite refreshing."

"I'm glad you think so," Mercurio chuckled somewhat.

Mercurio had hoped to receive more praise than just a "not bad" but he didn't dwell on it. He felt fortunate enough that the serious badger tried the drink in the first place. The rat tipped his glass back, gulping most of it down in one go. Horace finished his glass, gave Mercurio a little nod, and returned to his book.

"Thank you for sharing that," Horace said as he turned a page.

"N-no problem," Mercurio rubbed the back of his neck.

The wind outside could be heard once more when the room quieted down. The sound of wood creaking and the occasional thump of the tavern sign reminded the group of the bitter cold. Mercurio rubbed his arms and glared at the small window on the room's far wall. Twiss also let out a sigh as her bushy tail flicked. It was better to enjoy the company of others, with a good conversation or activity, than to hear the racket outside. Luckily, Barnaby spoke up to brighten the mood.

"Look guys, I finished my drawing," Barnaby stood up with a proud smile. "It's me slaying a Bane, see? That's me!"

Barnaby pointed to a character resembling his rabbity self in his work of art. He was swinging his hammer in a downward motion at the head of a monster that looked like an abnormally large crow. He then pointed at a character with black triangular markings on his face, claiming that was Horace. Barnaby had drawn a speech bubble over Horace, having the badger in the picture saying "Wow."

"Impressive work, Barnaby," Horace praised.

"Nice job drawing your mighty hammer there," Twiss said.

"I quite like it," Mercurio rubbed his chin, studying his work as Barnaby slowly panned the canvas to the right so everyone had a chance at seeing it.

The room went quiet for a minute or two until Barnaby saved the night yet again. He walked to his backpack and started rummaging through it. His rump and bunny tail wiggled in the air as he searched the seemingly bottomless bag. Barnaby let out a victorious "Aha!" as he had found the item he was looking for. He returned to the group, holding something that was wrapped in a thick cloth. It was a simple deck of playing cards. The cards had a moderate amount of wear on the edges, but they would suffice either way.

"Would anyone be up for a quick game of something?" Barnaby asked.

The group was more than happy to play a game with their cheerful pal. The goal was to match up any face-up cards in play in order to empty one's hand. It was a game that focused on bluffing, since that was another method to get cards out of one's hand, as long as the

player didn't get caught, that is. Barnaby didn't excel at the game as he would almost always begin to quietly snicker whenever he was bluffing. He had plenty of fun regardless, even when he was the first to be eliminated from the game. Horace was soon out of the game too, courtesy of Twiss. The badger seldom bluffed, and Twiss was a force to be reckoned with while competing. Horace shuffled the deck, dealing new cards for Twiss and Mercurio to continue their match. He swapped places with Twiss, so the two witty rodents could duke it out face to face.

Mercurio was quite the trickster as he twirled one of his cards between two fingers with a confident smile. Twiss misplayed a few times as the rat kept her guessing. Sometimes Mercurio would sit quietly and bluff. Other times, he would be a little showy about it and smirk or flip a coin. The squirrel gal kept her cool as Mercurio held onto a single card in each hand while Twiss was holding four. If Mercurio was able to play his last cards, he would be the winner. Twiss made a bold move as she bluffed, claiming to have three cards that matched with the current face-up one. Mercurio flicked his two cards against each other as he tried to remember what he saw from previous hands.

"Sure, you're good," Mercurio ended up letting Twiss place her cards down, leaving her with only one left.

Luckily for Twiss, the next card revealed from the deck matched with the last card she was holding. She slapped it down onto the table while chittering in delight. Barnaby rapidly clapped his hands, impressed with how skillful the two played.

"Well done, I think you let a couple rounds slip right by me," Mercurio collected the cards and wrapped them back in their cloth. He handed them back to Barnaby afterwards.

"Indeed I did, but you did the same," Twiss said, swishing her squirrel tail contentedly as they discussed the final few rounds. "Tricky, tricky."

"Anyone else tired now?" Barnaby asked, fiddling with one of his long ears.

"I'm just about ready for bed," Twiss answered. "I might as well settle in now, actually."

"I suppose I'll make some bedtime preparations soon as well," Horace said.

Barnaby pulled the blanket back on one of the beds and climbed in. He rested on his back while Twiss scurried around to the other side of the bed. She slipped in like a ninja and pulled the blanket up to Barnaby's and her shoulders. At first, the gal rested on her back for a few seconds. Then, she settled with resting on her side. Her bushy tail was rested on Barnaby's stomach, incidentally providing the rabbit with some extra warmth.

"Nighty night, Barnaby," Twiss said quietly. She giggled as the rabbit already seemed to be snoring peacefully.

"Shall we hit the hay too?" Horace asked, circling behind Mercurio's wooden chair.

"Sure, let's call it a night," Mercurio agreed.

Mercurio noticed he still had a swig of the drink he had mixed earlier, so he took care of that before standing up. Mercurio removed his colorful vest, draping it over the chair he was at before heading over to the unoccupied bed.

The surrounding area was slightly chillier than at the table. Mercurio could feel a difference in temperature, but Horace looked unconcerned. The two pulled back the blanket together and simultaneously slipped into bed, one leg at a time. There was adequate room for the two, with the blanket being decently comfortable. The actual bedding itself was overly stiff, however. Funnily enough, the rat and badger were both accustomed to sleeping on less than luxurious beds, so neither of them complained about it.

Mercurio's assumption from earlier was correct. Horace was on his back in the same manner as if he was standing. His footpaws pointed upwards, unable to be covered by the bottom of the blanket, due to his height. His heels nearly drooped off the bedding completely, but the badger seemed fine. Horace also seemed to ignore the persistent howling from just beyond the wall. Meanwhile, Mercurio lowered his brows, frowning for a moment because of the pesky reminder of the lousy weather.

Horace made a rumbling sound in his throat and rolled onto his side, facing the nearby wall. Mercurio let out a sigh, resting his hands on his belly. He felt he had missed a chance to tell the badger to have a good night. Mercurio felt oddly alone, despite being inches away from somebody. The rat turned his back to Horace, later clutching his tail and closing his eyes. A sound sleep didn't come to him though. Mercurio rolled over, wondering if Horace was in a deep slumber already. He reached out and touched Horace's back, gliding his hand upwards between his shoulder blades. Horace's fur was short and bristly. Mercurio pulled his hand away and rolled onto his back again, just wishing he could ease his restless mind.

Meanwhile, Horace was not quite sleeping yet either. He opened his eyes when he felt Mercurio's touch, but strangely no words followed. The badger shifted onto his back, turning his head to look at the rat.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" Horace asked quietly, knowing full well he did not.

"No, I haven't settled down yet," Mercurio admitted.

Horace could hear some gloominess in Mercurio's tone of voice. He looked towards the ceiling, thinking he had a clever fix to his mood. Horace closed his eyes, beginning to hum a tune. He hummed in a low octave that stayed in-tune quite nicely. Horace did the best he could to sound decent while staying relatively quiet out of courtesy for those already sleeping. Mercurio's eyelids started to feel heavy as the humming was rather soothing to listen to, until the badger stopped abruptly. Mercurio blinked a few times and propped himself up on his shoulder, wondering why he had stopped.

"I sometimes do patrols by places that have musical performances going on. It's also quite common to hear bards putting on shows while on the road." Horace quietly explained while idly tapping his index digits together. "My humming doesn't really do it justice."

"I was enjoying it," Mercurio whispered back, cracking a smile. His eyes glistened in what little lighting there was in the room.

"You're a good friend, Mercurio," Horace responded.

Those simple words caused Mercurio to feel at least five degrees warmer. In addition to that, a smile Mercurio hadn't seen before appeared on Horace's face. Horace made a gentle

"hmm" noise as he hovered his left arm over Mercurio's chest, giving Mercurio's right shoulder a caring pat-pat with his hand before pulling it away.

"I'm happy to hear that, pal," Mercurio let out a happy squeak.

Mercurio flung his upper body towards his newfound friend. He tucked his arms underneath Horace's underarms and placed his hands on Horace's back the best he could. Horace chuckled softly, returning the hug. The two began to break their embrace after a few seconds, but an overjoyed Mercurio went back in for another one. Horace was fine with that, even gently running his fingertips across the back of the rat's silky neck fur this time around. He gripped the back of Mercurio's shirt with his other hand for a second before the two finally agreed on letting go. Both friends returned with their backs against the hard bedding without a care.

"Good night Mercurio," Horace whispered, closing his eyes. The badger only received a soft "mhhh" sound of a relaxed Mercurio in return, not that it mattered. He soon drifted off to a comfortable sleep next to him.

* * * * *

Barnaby was the first to wake out of the group. He stretched his arms and legs out wide while yawning in a cutesy, cartoonish manner. Twiss was soon awake shortly after, sitting on the edge of the bed while Barnaby worked on getting his leather armor back on. Barnaby's bandage was no longer on his wrist from yesterday. The two turned their attention towards Horace and Mercurio, who were both still snoozing away. Twiss giggled as she noticed how the blanket couldn't cover poor Horace's feet.

Horace's eyelids fluttered and he woke to the sight of Twiss' and Barnaby's gentle smiles. He sat up and yawned, minding his manners and covering his maw while doing so. Horace slipped out of bed, putting his hands just above the base of his tail while leaning back. He seemed to stand as tall as ever after that.

"Good morning to you two," Horace said with a nod. "Did you sleep well?"

"I slept great!" Barnaby grinned, ready to face the day.

"How did you two fare?" Twiss asked, giggling at the fact that Mercurio was still sleeping peacefully. The sunlight from the small window was shining almost directly on the rat's cheek.

"We managed to sleep just fine," Horace crossed his arms, looking equally amused as Twiss. "As you can see, Mercurio had no complaints about the bedding whatsoever."

Mercurio let out a "mnnhh" and his eyes finally opened. The drowsy rat sat up, putting a hand on his cheek. The sunlight had been on it for a while, causing it to be quite warm despite the actual weather conditions.

"There he is," Horace chuckled quietly, "good morning."

"Good morning everyone," Mercurio also let out a chuckle as everyone seemed to be waiting for him. "Let's get fixed up and continue our adventure shall we?"

Mercurio hopped out of bed and pocketed his leather gloves. He then slipped his fancy red and yellow vest back on his body. Horace knew Barnaby was eager to head out, so he made haste getting his guard's attire back on his bare chest. He let the energetic rabbit lead the way towards the front door of the tavern while he made sure the buckle on his hips was snug, and that the leather guards on his shins were secure.

The porcupine lady who ran the tavern was sitting on a bench with some familiar-smelling tea as they headed past.

"Have a wonderful day, dearies," the porcupine waved. "Come again soon."

"Thanks, and yes, it would be excellent to stop by again," Twiss said.

Barnaby opened the front door, letting out a small gasp as took a look around. The town was coated in a surprisingly light dusting of snow. The leafless trees were painted with a light coating of snow as well. A few larger snow mounds were bunched up in pockets between structures in town, based on where the wind had blown. It was a pleasant sight to take in.

"It looks like last night's storm was more gusty than anything," Horace said.

"The air doesn't feel too bad now either," Mercurio added.

"This is great!" Barnaby jumped for joy. "I can make it to Dawn's Call in no time, then!"

"Indeed, but how about we partake in some breakfast first?" Horace suggested. "I'll treat the lot of you to some blueberry bread before I report back to the Town Guardians."

"Sounds nice, thanks Horace," Mercurio said.

Twiss glanced over at Mercurio with a twinkle in her eyes. It seemed Mercurio was in high spirits, which was refreshing to see. The party of four passed by the more costly places where they had been denied a room, but didn't think much of it now. Their focus was on one thing only: blueberry bread.

"Whoops!" Barnaby had overshot the location by a few steps as Horace took a sharp turn to the desired storefront behind him.

Horace was greeted by a friendly ferret about a head shorter than the badger. The slim fellow had on some simplistic garb, with a colorful berry juice stain here and there on his shirt. It was apparent that Horace was a regular at the location, and the ferret seemed delighted to see him with a band of followers this time.

"One loaf of blueberry bread will do," Horace ordered up, paying the ferret graciously.

"Coming right up!" The ferret disappeared around a corner in his humble abode, soon returning with a warm, steamy loaf of fresh blueberry bread on a platter.

The four had a seat at a round table, with Barnaby already licking his chops. The ferret sliced the bread in quarters and gave a little bow as he headed back to probably do some more baking for the day. The group dug in, indulging in the exceptional flavor before speaking up.

"Oooh, this is so moist and gooey," Barnaby praised, "it's the best!"

"This is bloody amazing indeed," Twiss agreed. "I'd love to have this again, but with one of my favorite tea flavors back home."

"Yes, this is quite delightful," Mercurio smiled as he turned to look at Horace.

Horace didn't seem to be tired of blueberry bread, and was enjoying it just as much as his group of friends. He left a few coins as a tip, even though there wasn't a single crumb remaining on their platter. The badger began walking towards the gathering place for the Town Guardians, and the fountain where he had met Barnaby and Twiss.

"I'll be returning to work today," Horace informed the others. "Today will include some combat training sessions, followed by routine patrols. If you ever want to practice archery, or simply whack some scarecrows, you can stop by the academy in the daytime whenever you like."

"I might be interested in some good ol' bow and arrow action," Twiss said. "Maybe in the springtime I'll take a trip or two to this town."

"It would be worth it just for the blueberry bread!" Barnaby added, getting a chuckle out of the group.

Horace waved at an armored fox that Barnaby and Twiss had seen yesterday. He noticed the badger's party and nodded, making a gesture with both hands to let Horace know he could spend time with his friends before checking in with the guards. Horace turned to face the group as they spread out, standing shoulder to shoulder.

"The marketplace should be open for that ingredient run you were hoping to do yesterday," Horace mentioned to Mercurio. "It is still quite early in the day, so maybe you can claim some uncontested deals as well."

"Thanks for the information, I appreciate it," Mercurio said with a nod.

Mercurio took a few steps to stand side-by-side with Horace. He stood on one foot, leaning towards the badger's shoulder, and gave him a few friendly pats on the back before pulling himself away. Twiss winked at Mercurio as she had caught him sneaking a note into his pocket.

"It was a pleasure to meet all of you: Barnaby, Twiss, and Mercurio," Horace said.

"It was a nice little reunion," Barnaby said, smiling wide.

"We have a little something for you," Twiss then said, reaching into her cloak pocket.

Twiss revealed a wooden container in the shape of an acorn from her pocket and handed it over to Horace. Horace first admired the outside of it, running a hand along its smooth, round surface. He then gave the container a curious shake before emptying the container's contents into his palm. As expected, three colorful dice landed into his open hand. It was one of Twiss' Oaken Glory dice, Barnaby's orange one, and Mercurio's wine die.

"This is a wonderful gift," Horace said, returning the dice to the container for safe-keeping. "Thank you, I will proudly put this on display back home."

"I should hit the marketplace pretty soon," Mercurio put a hand on the back of his neck, wishing he could spend the whole morning with his pals.

"I'll be heading back to Cedar Vale in a bit," Twiss let out a happy sigh, but then paused. "Oh, I think I'll browse the marketplace for some clothes or accessories before I head off."

"Yeah, why not?" Barnaby said.

"See you soon Horace, and thanks for this little adventure," Twiss swished her bushy squirrel tail and offered up a quick hug.

Horace gladly hugged the friendly squirrel. He then looked to Barnaby, who let out a giggle at first, but also hugged the fellow badger. Mercurio smirked as Horace turned his attention to him. He gave his friend a warm hug, nearly getting lifted off his feet as Horace returned it.

"Off to work, see you all soon," Horace said.

"See ya!" The group waved, watching their friend check in with the guards.

Twiss mingled with Barnaby and Mercurio at the marketplace for a few minutes. Horace's hunch regarding the marketplace was correct, they had plenty of time and space for window shopping. Twiss purchased a warm-looking scarf and got some leathery fingerless gloves as a sort of impulse buy. She thought they looked neat.

Barnaby was just about to continue his journey to Dawn's Call when he crossed paths with Mercurio. The rabbit was surprised that the rat stocked up so quickly, but he didn't appear to be on his way just yet. He was talking to a brown bear at the moment, with his mahogany cart loaded up with the goodies he desired yesterday. Barnaby jogged lightly towards him, wanting to chat while he could.

"Hey Mercurio, did everything go alright at the market?" Barnaby asked.

"It went better than I had anticipated," Mercurio said with a grin. "I'm looking forward to restocking my shelves back at my tavern."

Mercurio paid the bear some coins and seemed ready to roll out of Blueberry Town when an idea popped into the rat's head.

"Hey, you're headed to Dawn's Call right?" Mercurio asked, getting an animated nod-nod from Barnaby in return. "This road is almost a straight shot to my town and your destination. I have an idea."

Mercurio and the worker bear swapped out some containers within his wooden cart. He held onto some while the bear slung a bag over his shoulders. Mercurio then draped a cloth over the end of the cart, giving it a pat. Barnaby knew just what to do as he had a seat in the freed space within the card. His heels draped over the edge of the cart, resting on the cloth.

The bear circled the loaded cart and decided to push it instead of pulling it behind him. The bear chuckled, getting a kick out of the idea. Barnaby was enjoying this plan even more so, chuckling while looking at Mercurio's witty smirk. The group walked at a steady pace on the mostly flat path. Barnaby put his hands behind his head without a care until Mercurio spoke up.

"You might want to hang on for this part," Mercurio reminded, pointing to a slight decline in the path. "Ready for it?"

"Oh, sure!" Barnaby said, gripping to the sides of the cart. "Wheeeeeee!"

Mercurio and the bear jogged for a minute or so until the path flattened out once more. The goods, and Barnaby, stayed inside the cart just fine. The bunny laughed, but hopped out of the cart afterwards. He thanked the two for the quick ride and wanted to walk casually

alongside Mercurio the rest of the way. Mercurio was more than fine with that, giving Barnaby a pat on the back. The empty space in the cart was refilled, and the trio continued their pleasant walk to their towns.

Back at Blueberry Town, Horace was waiting for combat training students to arrive alongside his fellow guards. A fox guard let out a yawn, reminding Horace of the still weather and dull situation. Horace reached into his pocket, discovering a sheet of paper folded into thirds. He pulled the loose sheet from out of his pocket, and read it aloud.

“To my new friend Horace,” Horace began, “turn this sheet into my amazing tavern in Arrowrest and receive the drink of your choice at half price.”

Horace tilted his head, but unfolded the other part of the note: “Just kidding! Have it free on me, of course! Your pal-”

There wasn’t a signature at the end of the note. In its place was a drawing of a rose. Given the context, he knew Mercurio had slipped the paper in his pocket. He found it interesting that the signature was a picture instead of a name, and the drawing was impressive in his eyes as well. Horace was amused by the letter and cracked a smile. He joyously looked up at the blue, partly cloudy sky and knew he would have a pleasant rest of the day.

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