

Springtime Festival

It was springtime in Armello, and Barnaby found himself dashing through Cedar Vale once again, to get to Blueberry Town. The youthful rabbit felt the breeze on his long ears while trees whizzed by his left and right. He was completely focused on the road ahead, wanting to get there as quickly as possible. Barnaby knew one of his friends resided in Cedar Vale, but he assumed she might be waiting for him just beyond the gates of Blueberry Town. The bunny ran even faster once he reached a clearing beyond the trees, and his destination was in sight. The thought of seeing his best friends in the whole kingdom, and spending the day together warmed his heart. He couldn't wait to see everyone again.

Twiss, one of Barnaby's friends, was lazily leaning against a tree near the gates of Blueberry Town with her arms crossed. The squirrel lady was resting her eyes for a few minutes when one of her round ears twitched. She could have sworn she heard someone calling her name. Twiss shook off some drowsiness and stood up straight. She then scanned the area with her hand on her forehead to help block the sunlight. Sure enough, somebody was trying to seek her out.

“Twiiiiiiiiss! Twi-iiiiiss!” The voice was heard more clearly this time.

A familiar rabbit guy came into Twiss' view as his overstuffed backpack immediately gave his identity away. She recalled Barnaby wearing gold colored knight's armor before, but he was in a much lighter outfit this time. Barnaby was wearing a yellow tunic, along with yellow and black pants featuring a checkerboard pattern. It was a common pattern among the Rabbit Clan, or to anyone residing in the western region of Armello.

Barnaby was having trouble spotting his friend even though the squirrel was in plain sight with her back against a tree. Twiss could have sworn Barnaby made eye contact with her, but her rabbit pal continued his search. Twiss decided to put her hands against her cheeks to call out to Barnaby before he got too far away.

“Barnaby, over here!” Twiss announced her presence while waving her hands in the air.

“Huh?” Barnaby stopped at the squirrel lady calling out to him.

“It's me, Twiss!”

“Oh, it *is* you!”

Twiss was wearing an outfit that was entirely new to Barnaby. She typically wore dark clothing along with her signature black cloak over her head and back. However, Twiss felt like wearing something brighter, but equally comfortable for the festival.

Barnaby skipped playfully towards Twiss while taking a closer look at the squirrel's new clothes.

The squirrel lady wore a simple, soft shirt with sleeves reaching her biceps. The shirt was dyed a pale pink color, which was an unexpected choice for Twiss considering her usual outfits. A short, grayish vest worn over her shirt vaguely resembled her black cloak, and it matched her eyes quite nicely. Her pants had an exotic appeal to them despite being made of common materials. They were slightly puffy at the bottom, and featured a simple belt to hold a satchel of coins on her hip. A brass bangle was around her right wrist, and she also wore a simple necklace with a wooden trinket located at the center of it. It was nothing too pricey, but the accessories complimented her attire nicely. Overall, Twiss seemed to be dressed for an exciting adventure in a desert rather than a springtime festival. Barnaby seemed to enjoy taking in her interesting apparel regardless.

"I didn't recognize you without your cloak," Barnaby admitted. "You look so, um,"

Barnaby tapped his cheek a few times as he tried to think of a particular word to finish his sentence. Twiss conducted an idle flick of her bushy tail as she awaited the answer.

"Different!" Barnaby smiled wide in an attempt to cover up his failure to come up with a better adjective than that.

"It's a good kind of 'different' right?" Twiss prompted Barnaby after a long beat of silence. Barnaby's tone of voice was cheerful and positive, but the squirrel wanted to be sure her look wasn't too unusual.

"Oh, definitely!" Barnaby nodded eagerly with his hands behind his back.

"That's a relief." Twiss chuckled, looking at her own getup for a second.

The excitable rabbit rocked on his toes and heels as he was eager to partake in the springtime festivities. However, the two wanted to find their remaining friends before diving into something fun. Barnaby let Twiss know that Mercurio was expected to be passing through Cedar Vale, so the pair stayed where they were to see if he would make an appearance.

Barnaby and Twiss didn't have to wait long before a familiar rat lad dressed in an ornate red vest and brown slacks was spotted in the distance. In addition to the familiar outfit, he was also wearing his signature sly grin that the rabbit and squirrel were used to seeing. Barnaby stood on his toes, waving joyously at Mercurio. The fancy gentlerat identified the bunny right away, and began to lightly jog up to his buddies.

“Barnaby and Twiss!” Mercurio happily rushed to his friends' location. “It's so good to see you guys again.”

“Yay, Mercurio made it!” Barnaby exclaimed as he jumped into Mercurio's open arms, nearly bowling his buddy over. Barnaby was the youngest fellow out of the bunch, but certainly not the lightest.

“Glad you could join us!” Twiss smiled as she received a hug from Mercurio.

Mercurio took a step back to look over Twiss' unique outfit. He had noticed it prior to pulling up his friends.

“You look, ck – ” Mercurio nearly let a certain 4-letter word escape his lips, but he cleverly finished the thought with “ – *quite* stylish today, Twiss!”

Twiss quietly let out a happy chattering sound as she knew what word Mercurio had refrained from saying. She certainly wouldn't have minded if he had used it.

“You're looking dapper as always.”

“My classic look really isn't that fancy, is it?” Mercurio rotated his hips as he examined his own outfit. His attempt at being humble wasn't very convincing.

“It certainly is,” Twiss giggled. “Your red vest makes you easy to recognize.”

“Ah, that's true,” Mercurio nodded.

“Totally,” Barnaby agreed. “I was about to walk right past Twiss because she was wearing something totally different.”

“Your own attire is completely new to us too, Barna-boy,” Twiss reminded the rabbit. “We've only seen you in shiny armor before. It's a good thing your humongous backpack gives you away.”

Barnaby giggled brightly, and the trio soon quieted down. The party knew they needed to find one more friend of theirs: a tall, gentle badger knight named Horace.

“I wonder if Horace is searching for us right now,” Barnaby wondered, “we can't leave him out of the fun.”

“That's true, but you'd think he'd be the first one to be at the gates waiting for us.” Mercurio scratched his chin.

“I hope he's not just working and doing patrols for the day,” Twiss said.

“Aww, that would be so unfair!” Barnaby whined, considering that scenario.

“Well, we could always stick around for a little while longer, or maybe go on the hunt to find him.” Mercurio suggested. “What's the consensus here?”

“Let's go on the lookout for him!” Barnaby raised his index digit in the air and hopped on one foot. “He can't be that hard to spot.”

“Agreed!”

Barnaby began to march away from the gates of Blueberry Town and into a main plaza. He merrily led the group to investigate their first sector of town where the town

guardians checked in before conducting their patrols. There was also an academy where Horace, and many other citizens, taught self-defense lessons. The group quickly discovered that the section of town was being utilized for storage purposes. Merchant carts and lumber was scattered about, as well as other cumbersome items.

“It doesn't look like we'll be able to find Horace by hanging around here,” Mercurio commented as Barnaby scouted out.

“The place seems closed off for the day,” Barnaby assumed as he squeezed between some merchant carts to return to his friends.

“Well, I guess it's time to search the streets,” Twiss shrugged.

The trio did just that as they made their way past a central fountain where Horace had greeted Barnaby and Twiss in the winter of the reunion. The surrounding area was becoming a bit more lively as various furs shopped at the abundant merchant stalls lining the streets. Mercurio and Twiss tried not to lag behind Barnaby as they incidentally eyed some stylish accessories. Barnaby was on a mission and did not steal the slightest glance at what was being peddled.

“Horaaaaaaace! Horaaaaaaace!” Barnaby called out, trying to spot his tall figure among the crowd. Needless to say, the group received some odd looks from passersby.

Barnaby stopped paying attention to the path ahead for a moment as he was growing impatient during the search. Unfortunately, in that short amount of time, he collided with a fox that was shopping at one of the stalls.

The vulpine Armellian let out a quick “oomf!” and gripped a nearby wooden railing. Barnaby took the brunt of the collision and consequently fell onto his bottom. The fox whipped her body around, brandishing an item that resembled a thin, pointy rapier. She held the sword out with the assumption that a pickpocket attempted to steal from her.

“Hey, are you alright?” Twiss asked, noticing Barnaby on his bottom before seeing the fox posed in front of him.

“Eek! She has a sword!” Barnaby exclaimed, crossing his eyes for a moment as the tip was inches from his nose. He scooted backwards while on his bottom before scrambling to his feet. “I'm sorry miss, I didn't mean to run into you I swear!”

“Relaaaax,” the feminine fox said in an easygoing tone of voice. “This silly thing couldn't even make a mark in a squishy, overripe tomato if I tried.”

Barnaby felt some relief flow through him knowing the lady wasn't upset about what had just transpired. He brushed off his knees while the fox tucked her rapier away.

“I figured events like these could attract sticky fingers, so maybe this would be a bit of a deterrent.” The vixen patted a velvety sack of coins that was attached at the

hip of her navy blue dress. Barnaby understood her reasoning, but Twiss didn't seem thrilled about the stranger's actions.

"Real or not, do you always point swords at folks you don't know?" Twiss crossed her arms and tapped her foot against the ground a few times.

"Well, I had no idea it was only a rabbit youngster who bumped into me," the vixen shrugged, "but you're right, I apologize for my impulsive action."

"Apology accepted!" Barnaby cheerfully said.

"Do I know you from somewhere?" Twiss' arms remained crossed as she tilted her head.

"You look strangely familiar yourself, squirrely." The unnamed fox smirked.

The lady's playful comment caused Twiss to puff her cheeks out for a moment, but it was strangely difficult for her to get upset with the vixen. There seemed to be an aura of charisma emanating from her.

"Well, I should probably introduce myself," Twiss spoke up. "I'm Twiss, and this is Barnaby and Mercurio."

"It's nice to meet you three," the vixen said, "the name's Scarlet."

"It's a pleasure to meet you too, Scarlet," Mercurio butted into the conversation.

Mercurio brought his hand to his chest, rotated his wrist slightly, and lastly reached outward with a rose suddenly in his grasp. His experience with sleight-of-hand tricks made it seem like he pulled the flower out of thin air. Barnaby let out a small gasp and Scarlet appeared to be impressed by the gesture as well. Twiss was amused despite knowing how such a trick was done.

"Oh, for me?" Scarlet plucked the rose from Mercurio's hand.

Scarlet was assuming Mercurio was being flirtatious, but Twiss snickered quietly knowing that wasn't the case. She was familiar with Mercurio's fondness of roses, and receiving one from the gentlerat was nothing more than a kind gesture.

"I didn't expect to be offered a rose considering you two seem like perfect dance partners." Scarlet looked at Twiss, then directed her attention towards Mercurio. Her bushy tail swished contentedly behind her for a moment.

Twiss and Mercurio looked at one another, but quickly averted their gaze in opposite directions towards the sky.

"We're just friends," Twiss spoke up.

"**Best** friends!" Barnaby decided to chime in, squeezing himself between the two.

"You fellows are a lively bunch," Scarlet remarked. "Would you mind if I joined you in whatever merrymaking you plan on diving into?"

"We wouldn't mind one bit!" Barnaby said, knowing his friends would agree.

“We just need to find our friend Horace. He lives right here in Blueberry Town,” Twiss added. Scarlet's pointy ears wiggled upon hearing the name.

“The more the merrier they say,” Scarlet smiled. “You're in luck because I know just who that is.”

“Wow, really?” Twiss asked, but became slightly suspicious of the fox. “Wait, you're not just busting our chops are you?”

“Absolutely not,” Scarlet assured them. “I have no reason to do such a thing.”

“Alright, then you should have no problem describing Horace's appearance to us, then.” Mercurio crossed his arms with a smirk while Twiss approved of his suggestion.

“We've known each other long enough for him to feel like a father to me, so this will be easy.” Scarlet shrugged while the group awaited proof.

Barnaby already seemed convinced by her comment considering Horace felt like a father figure during the winter adventure with his friends. Scarlet smirked at Mercurio and Twiss who remained doubtful before providing a detailed description of the badger.

“Horace stands taller than just about everyone in town. He could even rival the height of any bear folk here. Let's see, Horace also has black fur on his forehead that stops at the top of his nose, and he has white fur along the top of his otherwise black tail.” Mercurio and Twiss looked impressed, especially when Scarlet added: “Knowing him, he's probably enjoying a book underneath a tree beyond these increasingly busy streets.”

“That definitely sounds like the Horace we know,” Mercurio chuckled. The others were equally convinced after Scarlet had given them a perfect mental image of the fellow.

“Great, now let's literally head for the hills and find him!”

Scarlet conducted a flourish with her rapier, pointing it towards the greener, quieter outskirts of town. She began to lead the group while the others followed her like ducklings, and seemingly took each step forward with confidence. The group ascended a small hill dotted by dandelions. It didn't take them long to spot a black and white figure underneath the shade of a tall oak tree. It was, without a doubt, the badger they were looking for.

Horace was reading peacefully underneath a tree just as Scarlet had imagined. Barnaby was the first to dash up to him, but Horace was too engrossed in the story to notice – even as the entire group stood before him. Scarlet smirked and placed an index finger on top of the spine of the book, finally causing Horace to look up from the enthralling tale.

“Scarlet!” Horace's eyes widened at the sight of the smirking fox. It was apparent the two haven't crossed paths in a while.

“I found your adorable friends. Are you going to join us in the springtime festivities or not?” She looked at her newfound buddies and they all nodded in unison while Horace got to his feet.

“Horace hugs!” Barnaby exclaimed out of the blue. He sprung for Horace's chest without warning, similar to his pounce on Mercurio earlier. Horace caught the excitable rabbit, giving him a quick hug before gently setting him down.

“Nice to see you again, pal.” Mercurio offered up a hug to Horace as well.

Horace crouched down to hug another buddy of his, and it didn't take long for Twiss and Scarlet to offer one up to the kind badger as well. Once everyone got their hugs, it was time to get the fun started. The group merrily headed down the grassy hill to return to the main path while thinking of what activity they could dive into first. Horace tapped his chin as he thought about the layout of the town, and what was nearby.

“Well, the closest activity we can partake in is some archery if anyone would like to head to the range.” Horace spoke up.

“Sounds like fun, but I haven't loosed an arrow in my life!” Barnaby chuckled.

“No worries, I'm sure an instructor will help teach you how it's done,” Horace assured. “Besides, I do believe we aren't much of a competitive party.”

“Well, I'm all for a bit of friendly competition, but I agree.” Scarlet smiled.

“I'm ready for a challenge too, but let's all just enjoy each other's company, and maybe compete in a different event later.” Mercurio flashed his classic smirk.

The group headed to the range and exchanged words with one of Horace's acquaintances. He was an orange fox lad, wearing a leather vest over a simple blue tunic similar to Horace's. The fox fellow handed a short bow for the group to pass around, and another solely for Barnaby, so he can be taught how to shoot one.

Time seemed to fly by as the group took turns firing at targets of varying distances. Twiss and Scarlet seemed to do exceptionally well, while Mercurio felt like we was getting completely outplayed by everyone. Despite that, his smug grin stayed on his face because he was simply having a fun time among his buddies.

“Hey look, I almost hit the center!” Barnaby exclaimed, pointing to his most recent shot.

“Well done, Barnaby!” Scarlet applauded and got a bashful smile in return.

“The guards here are some of the best trainers around,” Horace informed the group. “It's a joy to work with every one of them.”

The rustling of leaves and birdsong created a pleasant atmosphere as they enjoyed each other's company. A few small groups gathered around to play as well, but the surrounding area stayed relatively quiet. The noise didn't pick up until a mighty-looking ibex and his friends arrived. They held large glasses of ale, ignoring the archery range entirely, as they walked past. The group seemed to be having a great time, and others took notice.

"Wow, who's that big guy?" Barnaby asked as he pointed to the stocky ibex.

"That's Ivan, the defending champ of last year's pie-eating contest," Horace explained. "I believe he won the year before, as well."

"Well, I wouldn't doubt that at all, he's ginormous!" Barnaby said just as Ivan walked by. He turned his attention to the towering ibex, then back to his pals.

"We've got enough time to head to where the pie-eating contest takes place, right Horace?" Scarlet asked.

"We certainly do," Horace confirmed. "Is anyone interested in participating?"

"I wanna give it a try!" An excited Barnaby said, raising a hand.

"In that case, let's hurry on over," Horace gestured the others to follow his lead.

"A pie-eating contest huh?" Mercurio pondered, "I'll think about joining too, but I doubt I'll stand a chance against that Ivan guy."

"Stuffing my face isn't really my forte." Scarlet crossed her arms, and it was apparent she had no interest in the event whatsoever.

"Well if nobody else wants to bloody join him, then I'll participate." Twiss placed her hands on her hips while eyeing her hesitant buddies.

"Yay!" Barnaby jumped for joy before happily marching alongside Twiss.

The party made it to a clearing just outside Blueberry Town's central fountain. Many folks were gathered around a bear wearing heavy knight's armor to claim a seat. The bear informed Horace's group that he had enough seating for all five of them to participate. Twiss and Barnaby stepped forward, as expected, but Horace also decided to claim a seat.

"I wasn't expecting Horace to give it a try." Mercurio chuckled, looking over at Scarlet. "I guess anything can happen when you're in a group of friends."

"It looks like it's just us two now." Scarlet glanced over at Mercurio.

The diverse group of Armellians began to quiet down as a ferret lad in charge of the event spoke up. He was brimming with excitement as he mentioned Ivan, the former champ, and the new faces who were ready to dethrone him. He also mentioned Horace, and gave him a pat on the shoulder. Some cheers and whistles were heard among the crowd because of his willingness to compete for the first time. It was also

because it was a well-known fact that he did a great job at keeping Blueberry Town safe for all.

“Begin!” The energetic ferret eventually exclaimed.

Mercurio and Scarlet watched their pals participate, sharing a good laugh as Barnaby quickly dropped out of the competition. He said that the pies were too good to eat so fast. Horace was next out of the gang to back out. He politely excused himself, and spectated along with the three.

Surprisingly, Twiss was giving the champ a run for his coins. She had her sights firmly set on victory, and had a look of determination while she scarfed bites of pie alongside her opponent. Ivan glanced over at the serious squirrel lady, and looked shaken for a moment, but he was no pushover. He held his lead, but Twiss never backed down, eating as fast as she could and was just about to finish one final pie. In the final moments, Ivan managed to pull ahead and eat the last of his pie just before Twiss. It was a close call, but Ivan came out on top once again.

“There we have it, Ivan protected his title and wins the coveted silver pie tin!” The ferret announced as another mustelid held the tin over his head for all to see. He then handed it off to Ivan, who had a big grin on his face.

“Also, let's give a round-of-a-paws for the runner-up, Twiss!” The ferret also announced. “That was quite the contest all the way up to the last few bites!”

Twiss felt a bit shy because of the sudden attention on her. She felt her cheeks heat up while the participants applauded her effort, but relaxed once she focused on the familiar faces. The squirrel lady brushed her cheeks to make sure she didn't have any crumbs stuck in her whiskers while the ferret reached out to hand some goodies off to her. She was gifted a shiny cooking pan, and a small satchel of coins for placing second. Once the contestants returned to their groups of pals, Twiss and her friends stood around to brainstorm the next activity.

“There's still plenty of daylight.” Horace crossed his arms as he looked skyward.

“How about a game of stars?” Mercurio suggested with a snap his gloved fingers.

“Stars? What's stars?” Horace looked over at the smirking rat lad.

“Throwing stars!” Twiss answered for Mercurio with enthusiasm.

“Ah, I nearly forgot about that pastime,” Horace admitted. “Perhaps I've spent too much time in solitude with my creative projects, and away from the hubbub.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Scarlet chimed in.

“I do believe there's a place near the archery range where we can play a few rounds,” Horace confirmed, and began to head back to the range.

The group went past the grounds where they played earlier, noticing a new guard in the place of the fox that was teaching Barnaby. It was apparent that the security, and

the ones in charge of activities, worked in shifts so everyone involved could have some fun. The lanes to throw stars were unsurprisingly similar to ones for archery, and the group was able to snag a lane along with three throwing stars to pass around.

Scarlet decided to be the first to throw. She threw each one in a graceful manner – even twirling around while crouched, and using her non-dominant hand for the third star. The last one hit the outer ring of the bullseye, and her total for the turn was a solid 20.

Twiss was next to throw her stars. She displayed a serious expression as her competitive nature showed. A confident smirk, almost rivaling Mercurio's signature grin crept across her face as she moved her wrist towards her chest. With some lightning-fast flicks, she threw the shurikens in rapid succession, and they hit the target with an equally quick *tok-tok-tok*. Twiss hit the bullseye dead center, as well as the outer ring to the left and right of it netting herself 40 points. It was the maximum score a player could get in one turn. Scarlet's eyes widened as she finally remembered why Twiss looked so familiar after witnessing such skill.

“You still have what it takes, Little Lightpaw.” Scarlet complimented Twiss on her accuracy as memories flooded back to her.

Twiss gasped upon hearing that old nickname. She stood with her mouth agape for several seconds, unable to come up with a witty comeback. It felt like ages since she had been coined “The Little Lightpaw”.

“Wait, what's going on between you two?” Mercurio was out of the loop.

“Oh, not much,” Scarlet assured Mercurio. “I just remembered where I know this sneaky little lady from, that's all.”

“So it's like another Armello reunion!” Barnaby exclaimed.

“Blueberry Town sure brings familiar faces together doesn't it?” Mercurio noted.

“We made quite a team back in the day,” Scarlet winked, dropping Twiss a hint towards her identity. “Oh, and we seldom went by our proper names, so don't think too much about-”

“The Bandit King!” Twiss recalled Scarlet's nickname.

“Very good, Little Lightpaw.” The former bandit clan leader smirked. “I believe our big friend Horace is quite familiar with the Bandit Clan, right?”

“Of course, but I don't recall Twiss being part of it, so pardon me for forgetting,” Horace answered.

“No worries, those days of adventure and peril are far behind us now,” Twiss said.

“Wait, you called yourselves bandits? And Horace was a part of it?” Mercurio's eyes glistened as the information about Scarlet's team was new to him.

“We may have been dubbed a 'Bandit Clan' but I assure you, our goal was unite Armello and vanquish the corrupt king.” Scarlet twirled in delight, then continued to boast about the Bandit Clan. “With well-trained Armellians such as Horace, we were able to liberate settlements. We also got plenty of valuables out of the hands of those cruel king's guards, and even intercepted some of the king's wild decrees.”

“That sounds amazing!” Barnaby clenched his fists in excitement.

“Given enough time I bet little Twiss could have plucked the crown straight off the old, crazy king's head and gotten away with it.” Scarlet added while patting Twiss' shoulder.

“That's right, I was unstoppable!” Twiss giggled, feeling proud she was part of the noble cause.

Barnaby and Mercurio felt silly due to their unfamiliarity with Twiss' adventurous history. Her favorite black cloak should have been a giveaway that she was no ordinary Armellian. They had always assumed it was a neat, comfortable garment that Twiss was simply fond of.

“Twiss you are just full of surprises.” Mercurio smiled.

The friends continued their game without paying much attention to their scores. Mercurio secretly kept track of everyone's score in his head, and he was currently comfortably in the middle in terms of points. Twiss was obviously the leader crushing the competition, and Scarlet was also an impressive player out of Mercurio's reach.

“This final throw will secure my victory,” Twiss jokingly said as he closed one eye while aiming.

“Actually, you can miss with all of those and still be out of reach,” Mercurio said.

“Hey, you've been keeping score the whole time?” Barnaby asked, getting a snicker and a shrug from Mercurio. Meanwhile, Twiss threw one of her stars, hitting the bullseye as expected from her.

“At-choo.” Scarlet pretended to sneeze, causing Twiss to giggle since she knew her intent.

Twiss chucked the remaining stars simultaneously with a more relaxed posture. She quickly fetched them from the target and handed them off to Mercurio. The group hastily finished up their game so they could grab a bite to eat.

There was food aplenty as the party made their way towards the center of town. They gathered just outside the busiest section near the fountain to indulge in a large selection of food from all over Armello. Barnaby was nearly drooling over the sight of a huge salad bowl nearly overflowing with a variety of veggies like ripe tomatoes and carrots. Horace was soon happily sampling a mushroom pasty, while Twiss was enjoying various cooked veggies on a stick.

Scarlet noticed Mercurio eyeing a nearby stack of bite-sized cheese chunks that were available for the table to enjoy. Although nearly everyone in Armello enjoyed cheese, Mercurio looked hesitant about being the first to grab some. It was rumored that rats in Armello love cheese even more than fame or riches, so maybe Mercurio was trying to prove he was not your average rat.

Scarlet rolled her eyes as she could swear Mercurio was starting to sweat from the temptation. She decided to ease his silly worry by swooping behind Mercurio's chair and plucking the first cheese chunk from the pyramid. She popped the treat into her mouth while returning to her seat.

"Mmmm, *delicious*," Scarlet deliberately voiced.

Mercurio couldn't resist the urge any longer, and reached for some delectable cheese with both hands. His desire to stay fancy and cool vanished as he chowed down without a care. He soon slowed down to savor the food, especially after realizing his manners might have slipped for a moment.

Clinking glasses were frequently heard as well as music in the distance coming from the main stretch of town. Booming drums and loud cheers were common as the festival seemed to be in full swing, despite it being nighttime.

"I believe the fireworks should be starting soon," Horace mentioned in between sips of mead.

"Oh, fireworks!" Barnaby nearly hopped out of his seat with excitement. "The Rabbit Capital has displays during spring and summer too!"

As if on queue, an orange flash of light filled the sky for a second, followed by a bang. The area around them hushed, and many rose from their seats to find an ideal place to view the upcoming show.

"Let's go find a better spot to watch them!"

Barnaby was the first to rush towards an open area of town with Scarlet and Twiss not too far behind. They all ended up on the same hill where Horace was reading earlier. Barnaby sat in the grass with Scarlet and Twiss following suit. Horace stood with his back against a tree while Mercurio found a spot next to Twiss to spectate. They all looked up at the starry sky as a lone orange spark briefly lit it up. The real show began shortly after as they became more frequent and colorful.

"That one's my favorite so far," Mercurio said with a grin. "It reminds me of the Rat Clan's glorious red banners."

"Wow, I've never seen fireworks this huge before!" Barnaby said, pointing to a brilliant yellow one that was even larger than the red one.

The show continued with pops of red, orange and yellow followed by a collective “Ooooooh” from the group as a spectacular blue firework lit up the night sky with a thunderous boom.

“These displays get better every year,” Horace said.

“Seeing this makes me wanna learn to craft my own fireworks,” Barnaby grinned ear to ear. “I’ll make the biggest, sparkliest ones Armello has ever seen!”

“I’d very much like to see that.” Twiss looked over at Barnaby while nodding in approval.

Mercurio watched the fireworks with a smile similar to Barnaby’s typical, excited grin. He leaned back in relaxation, causing his fingertips to brush across Twiss’ hand. They both reacted to the gentle touch and locked eyes with each other. Mercurio was distracted for a moment as he caught a brilliant orange firework fizzle out in the reflection of her eye.

“Cheerio!” Twiss exclaimed with a gentle smile, getting a bashful chuckle out of Mercurio in return.

Twiss took notice of his shyness and giggled to herself, feeling her affection for him growing. Twiss was entranced by Mercurio’s eyes while Mercurio was drawn further in to her gaze. As the fireworks continued to burst overhead, they felt the world around them slip away, and they moved closer together. A moment of tension hung between them as their hearts began to race and their faces eased closer to one another. The moment was interrupted by laughter and applause from a nearby crowd as the remaining fireworks went off in the night sky.

“What a magical night,” Horace said as the music, drumming, and conversing around them started to pick up again.

“I’d hate to leave so soon, but I’d better pick out a place to stay for the night before continuing my journey.” Scarlet stood up and informed the others.

“Aww, leaving so soon?” Barnaby wondered.

“This fox can’t stay in one place for long, I guess.” Scarlet smirked while shrugging. “Besides, I have some places up north I want to visit soon.”

“Maybe we can meet up for breakfast before heading home!” Barnaby suggested.

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Scarlet agreed.

“Come to think of it, I never made plans to stay the night somewhere.” Mercurio rubbed the back of his neck.

“Oh I’m sure a fancy lad like you will find a lavish place to stay,” Scarlet tapped Mercurio’s nose with the rose he had given her earlier. She then walked past him to seek out a tavern with a spring in her step, and her bushy tail swishing in delight.

“My door is always open, so if anyone wants to stay the night, I'll easily welcome you in,” Horace suggested.

“I didn't make plans either, so that sounds perfect to me,” Twiss said.

“Count me in!” Barnaby exclaimed.

“I think I like the sound of that too,” Mercurio considered.

“Wondrous, let's get going.” Horace stopped propping himself against the tree, and begun his march to his place.

The group weaved their way through the still-busy paths to Horace's humble abode. Horace opened the heavy iron door, and closed it behind him once everyone was inside. He let out a sigh of content as he headed to his favorite chair. Meanwhile, Barnaby climbed aboard Horace's bed and sprawled out as if it was his own. Horace didn't mind in the slightest as Barnaby seemed to have been more tired than he thought.

“I think I'll head to the rooftop to sleep under the stars, like how you do sometimes.” Twiss informed Horace.

“It's a lovely night for that,” Horace mentioned with a sleepy smile.

“Could I head up there too?” Mercurio clasped his hands together.

“Of course, silly,” Twiss gestured for him to follow her up the steps.

Horace made an appearance on the rooftop, offering tea to his two pals. They were grateful for his hospitality, especially when he returned one more time to provide a quilt for them to relax on. Since it was big enough to adequately cover the tall, mighty badger, it was a perfect size for Mercurio and Twiss. Horace said goodnight before heading to his bedroom, while the duo enjoyed the aromatic tea and peaceful setting.

“I'm starting to feel tiredness creep up on me, how about you?” Twiss asked.

“I think I'm feeling the same way,” Mercurio answered, then took a sip of tea.

“It's getting quiet, and the breeze feels good, huh?” Twiss sipped her tea and her bushy tail bobbed a few times.

“It does, and I'm definitely glad I'm not shopping, or finding a place for the night. I'm kind of worn out from all the games.” Mercurio rubbed his wrist for a second.

“Same here,” Twiss agreed. “Besides, what else could we do, dance?”

Mercurio and Twiss paused, imagining themselves in one of the upscale places in Blueberry Town with their fingers interlocked as they swayed. Mercurio even visualized himself holding a flower sideways in his mouth as he gracefully twirled Twiss. The idea was pleasant, but the two knew it wouldn't be as perfect as they had dreamed. The two looked at each other, stifling their laughter.

“You thought about it, didn't you?” Mercurio flashed his expected grin. His golden tooth even caught some starlight.

“I did, but I'd probably be a disaster.” Twiss put a hand over the bridge of her nose, feeling a bit embarrassed. “I don't think I could get the hang of it.”

“I bet you could lean quickly and easily.” Mercurio's confident smile refused to fade. “I'll have you know I'm an excellent dancer, and I bet you could be too.”

Twiss felt her cheeks warm up similar to when she was in Mercurio's company under the fireworks. The flustered squirrel lady pointed her feet inward and outward as she sat, while the oblivious rat lad gulped the rest of his tea down. Twiss chugged her remaining tea while the thought of a fancy dance session crossed her mind one more time. She then watched as Mercurio fell onto his back in an exaggerated fashion with his heels lifting off the quilt for a second, then resting back on it.

“Ah, that's better.” Mercurio let out a happy sigh while resting his hands on his stomach. He looked over at Twiss who was still sitting with her legs outstretched.

“It appears we're running out of stuff to talk about, but I can't seem to sleep quite yet,” Twiss said while easing herself down onto her back. She looked at the twinkling stars with one foot draped over her knee.

“I'm not quite ready to drift off either, which is odd because I'm definitely pretty beat.” Mercurio rested his hands behind his head and closed his eyes for a moment.

“Hmmm...what do you think of Scarlet?” Twiss suddenly asked, turning to see how Mercurio would react.

“Hm?” Mercurio opened his eyes and looked over at Twiss. “Well, she added some extra energy to our little group, I'll say.”

“She definitely did,” Twiss agreed. “It was definitely nice to meet her again.”

“Her blue dress went nicely with her orange fur, but what I liked the most was her personality.”

“Did you get any feelings for her, perhaps?” A curious Twiss asked. “Did she steal your heart a little?”

Mercurio was somewhat caught off-guard by her question, and wasn't quite sure if he experienced that type of connection.

“I don't think so, but I would be happy to serve her at my tavern sometime.”

“Ah, gotcha.” Twiss giggled from hearing Mercurio's response. She then added: “Well, there's nothing in this kingdom that I can't steal.”

Twiss smiled and closed her eyes, ready to call it a night. Meanwhile, her playful comment lingered in Mercurio's head. It was clear by her tone of voice that she wasn't entirely joking. Mercurio touched one of his cheeks, feeling that it was warmer than usual. He was feeling excited about spending more time Twiss, but tiredness was finally catching up to him. His eyelids began to flutter shut, and he was soon dozing off alongside his bushy-tailed friend. There was no place he'd rather be.