

THE ADVENTURES OF TEMPLETON'S THREE!

EPISODE 2: THESE NEGOTIATIONS ARE OGRE!

BY TROGDOR297

We rejoin our adventuring heroes on the afternoon following the showdown between Templeton's Three and the bandit crew that plagued the poor coastal town of Caliban's Bay. The distraught town was distraught no more, its grateful residents now miles behind the Three as they headed East, the entire continent and all of its problems ahead of them.

But before they could tackle that, they had a more pressing matter to attend to.

A loud growl emanated from the rear of the company, halting the three who walked in front. Blake simply shook his head, while Hrovin chuckled. It was Mistwillow, the prickly elf mercenary, who decided she needed to say something.

"How in all seven hells are you hungry, girl?!" She yelled.

Gabby, who'd walked behind the group the entire way, like an abandoned puppy following a stranger, frowned. "Why are you getting mad at me? It's not my fault I'm hungry...we've been walking all day and haven't eaten since breakfast! How are you not hungry!"

"Oh, we are." Blake said over his shoulder. "But none of us ate a month's worth of food yesterday."

Gabby huffed, rolling her eyes. "I still don't see what the big deal is. I just have a big appetite..."

Hrovin barked a short uproarious laugh "Aye, big. That's a good a word as any."

"We'll get food soon, don't worry" Blake said as he resumed marching onward.

"How soon?" Gabby asked, hurrying to catch up with him.

"We're almost at Windbrisk, we'll stop there for the night."

Gabby nodded, some tension easing in her face. "Alright...I can wait until then."

Her stomach gurgled angrily, disagreeing with the choice to wait, to which Gabby looked down at her midsection and shushed. Blake shook his head once more with disbelief at the oddness of his traveling companion as they continued forward.

He'd been right about the proximity of their destination. Beyond the very next hill they crested, the town of Windbrisk spread out before them. It was larger than Caliban's Rest, a little more developed. The roofs of the buildings were made of wood, not thatch, and there was a modest stone wall around the perimeter of the settlement.

As the Three approached the gate to the city, currently swung wide open in a welcoming manner, they spotted a shady looking man leaning against the outer wall. He stood with his arms crossed impatiently, a cloak wrapped around him with the hood up. Blake clocked him from a distance as a potential threat, and as soon as the man pushed off the wall as they neared, Blake's hand was on his sword.

"Easy. No need for that, Captain" The man said as he stepped before them.

Blake's eyes narrowed. "How do you know who I am?"

"You are Templeton's Three, are you not?" The man said, pulling back the hood on his cloak. His face was lean, a long goatee hanging off his chin. His hair was pitch black and slicked down over his head.

Gabby gasped with excitement. "We're famous!"

Blake shook his head "No we're not. News travels fast, but it doesn't travel that fast. You work for Templeton?"

The man bowed before them. "The name's Dupont. And yes, I'm an associate of the Lord."

Hrovin lifted an eyebrow as he studied the man. "Sir Dupont? Lord Dupont? Mr. Dupont?"

"Just Dupont" He said, giving them a greasy smile. Reaching behind his back he pulled out three bags that audibly clinked. He chucked one to the dwarf, the elf, and the soldier.

"Your pay for your success in Caliban's Bay. Templeton sends his regards and expresses that he had no doubts about your efficacy as a team."

The fighting trio exchanged looks. They silently agreed that it wasn't necessary for them to admit that the success of their first mission had been a stroke of supernatural luck.

"I was only told to bring three coin-pouches..." He said, eyes flitting over to Gabby. It was unclear from his expression how much Templeton had told him about the girl.

"Oh, I don't need money" Gabby said cheerfully. "But thank you for thinking of me!"

"Right..." Dupont said as he gave her a skeptical look before turning back to the remaining members "I also come with a new mission. You're to report to the town Ealdorman. Templeton's contracted you out to perform security for an event this evening."

"What kind of event?" Blake asked.

Dupont shrugged. "Some kind of political banquet? I don't know the details. Talk to the Ealdorman, that's all I know."

"Will they have food there?" Gabby asked, her face lighting up.

Dupont blinked, looking at Gabby with bemusement "It's... it's a banquet? Yes, there'll be food."

"Yes!" Gabby cheered, balling her fists with excitement "Let's go!" Without waiting for confirmation from the others, she took off into the town.

Blake watched her go before extending his hand to Dupont, who took it, shaking firmly. "See you soon" Dupont said, before turning and walking off around the edge of town.

The Three quickly caught up with Gabby, who hadn't gotten very far. The girl was waiting for them only a single block ahead of them in town.

"As soon as I ran off, I remembered that's what got us into trouble yesterday" Gabby said. "Sorry"

"No trouble, lass" Hrovin said with a smile. "Now, let's go find us that banquet!"

The four of them continued deeper into town, heading for the large hall in the center, which was without a doubt the location of the banquet. The streets and lanes of the town were empty of people, though there was plenty of evidence around to suggest that this wasn't the normal state of things.

Wooden tables were set up outside of buildings, typical shop displays, except the surfaces were all completely bare. There were several fire pits present, but none were lit, their depths filled with white ash. Lines stretched over alleys between homes, places to hang laundry, but no sheets or clothing drifted in the wind today.

It was as if the entire town had up and took off hours ago.

"Look." Mistwillow whispered pointing towards the front window of a nearby building. A child peeked over the sill watching them pass. Blake extended his hand to wave a friendly greeting, when an adult appeared behind the child and snatched them, pulling them away from the opening.

"Good lord...Something's not right here" Blake muttered.

Hrovin nodded "Aye, something definitely smells fishy about this place."

Behind them Gabby inhaled loudly through her nose. "Mmm, you're right, I do smell fish! Ooo, and fresh warm bread!"

A short walk later they arrived at the large hall in the center of town, the four of them ascending the broad stone steps that led to a pair of immense wooden doors. Blake rapped hard on the wood, the loud knock echoing in the eerily quiet square.

There was the sound of motion behind the door, as if someone was pacing rapidly. There was definitely someone there, but they seemed to have no interest in letting them in.

"Hello?" Blake said with a raised voice. Immediately the door opened, a nervous looking man standing inside.

"Oh, thank goodness" He said, relief evident in his tone. "You're the hired security, yes?"

Blake nodded "Yes. We... are Templeton's Three."

The man looked out at them, his eyes flicking from one member to the next. His eyes squinted, confusion setting in as he did the math in his head. "Templeton's...Three? Very well, come in, come in."

The man led them in, introducing himself as Ealdorman Thomas. They'd entered into a smaller front room, a second set of double doors in the wall before them led to the main hall. The antechamber they were in was relatively barren, only a few wooden chairs resting against the back wall.

"I'm very glad that you're here" The ealdorman said. He was a balding man in his early forties, his skin unusually pale. "I was afraid that you wouldn't make it in time."

"Thomas" Blake said. "What the hell is going on here? We walked through the town, it looks like it's been abandoned, folks are hiding in their homes, and then we arrive here to find the town's leader jumping at his own shadow! Does this all have something to do with the banquet?"

The ealdorman nodded, wringing his hands before him anxiously. "It does...What you saw does not surprise me; the people are afraid. I'm afraid. But...we *must* go through with this banquet. We have no choice."

"Spit it out, human!" Mistwillow snapped at him. "Who's coming to this banquet that's got the entire town shook up!"

"...Ogres" The ealdorman whispered, as if saying their name would summon them.

"Ogres?" Gabby said, completely unperturbed. "Why would you invite ogres to dinner? I hear they're awfully rude."

"I doubt the ealdorman is concerned about their table manners. However, ogres are awfully quick to anger, and awfully violent when triggered" Blake said. "Gabby's question is fair. Why *did* you invite ogres to dinner?"

The ealdorman sighed "We didn't have a choice! A group of them showed up a few weeks ago, setting up camp just a mile north of town. We hoped they would move on after a few days, but then one of them ran into one of farmers and spoke with him. They told him they liked the area and would be settling in until warmer weather returns... Winter will be upon us soon, after all."

Templeton's Three all nodded solemnly with grim understanding.

"The town came together and we decided that we needed to make a peace offering before the snows set in" The ealdorman continued. "And so, we invited them to a feast. Let them eat their fill from our larders to ensure our safety."

"What did the ogre envoy say when he spoke with the farmer?" Blake asked. "Was he rude or aggressive?"

"No... from what I heard he was perfectly pleasant and polite" The ealdorman replied.

"Did he threaten you?" Mistwillow chimed in.

"No, nothing of the sort"

"Did he use violence? Or steal some livestock?" Hrovin added.

"No! The farmer just talked with him!" The ealdorman said, sounding exasperated.

Blake frowned. "So... why did you feel the need to invite them in? It doesn't sound like they harbored any ill will toward you."

The ealdorman threw his hands up in the air "Because they're ogres! They're dangerous, savage brutes, the lot of them!"

"You sound a little prejudiced..." Mistwillow said, staring the ealdorman down.

The ealdorman stared at her then shook his head. "I don't need to explain myself to you. You're here to be security for the feast this evening, make sure nothing unfortunate happens. Can you do that?"

Blake shrugged then nodded. "Yeah, we can handle it."

“And where is said feast?” Gabby asked, going up on tiptoes to look over Blake’s shoulder.

“In the main hall” Ealdorman Thomas said, leading them to the rear set of doors. Pushing them open he unveiled the main hall, a wave of pleasant aromas hitting them as they stepped in. There were four long tables set up, extending from the front of the room to the rear, each one over thirty feet long. Each table was lined with dishes overflowing with the town’s offerings.

There were several plates of fish, multiple platters of roast beef, a dozen baskets of fresh baked bread, a plethora of bowls of ripe fruit and more. It was clear that the town had gone all out to provide a spread that would impress the ogres.

Gabby eyes widened into sparkling saucers, her jaw falling open in awe. Drool formed at the corner of her mouth as her eyes scanned the room taking in the plentitudes of food that were set out before them.

“Can we have some?” Gabby asked, her voice quiet and reverent as if the five of them weren’t in a rural town hall but within the great cathedral of Hethiseen, God of Gods.

“Of course.” The ealdorman said. “Please, help yourself. I don’t know how much ogres eat, but there should be more than enough for you to have your share.”

Gabby stepped forward when Blake’s hand caught her by the shoulder. “One plate” He said, sternly. “This food is for the ogres.”

Gabby’s head turned to look at Blake, her expression pleading. “What! But there’s so much food! The ogres aren’t going to eat all of it!”

“One plate” Blake repeated, his ice blue eyes locked on to Gabby.

“Good sir, we have plenty of food” The ealdorman said, butting in. “It’s no trouble if the young woman is hungry.”

“You haven’t seen this one eat” Hrovin said with a grin. “She’s got...how did you put it, lass? A ‘Big’ appetite?”

Gabby quietly moaned with disappointment. The ealdorman glanced between them, then shrugged. There was clearly more to the situation than he cared to know.

“Mistwillow, keep an eye on her” Blake said, letting go of Gabby. “Hrovin and I will have a little chat with the ealdorman. I need to know everything you can tell me about these ogres.”

The ealdorman bowed “Of course, of course. Let’s talk out here.”

Blake, Hrovin, and Ealdorman Thomas returned to the antechamber through the set of double doors, closing them behind them. Gabby and Mistwillow were left alone with the food.

“How did I get stuck with babysitting duty” Mistwillow said with a sigh of frustration. If Gabby was upset or annoyed at Mistwillow’s obvious disdain, she didn’t show it. The young blonde in her royal academy uniform rushed into the room, walking down one of the aisles between tables. Her head darted this way and that as she walked, checking out the multitude of choices before her.

Mistwillow stalked after her. "Hey! Girl! One pl-"

"Yes, yes, one plate, I know" Gabby said. "I'm just trying to decide what to put on my one plate! There's so much here, I don't know what to choose!"

Mistwillow stepped up beside Gabby who was leaning over one of the tables, eyes closed as she sniffed one of the dishes. "Mmm, sea bass"

The elf shook her head. "Just pick something, girl. It's all the same."

Gabby opened her eyes and looked at Mistwillow. "It's not all the same! How could you say that?!"

Mistwillow shrugged "Human food all tastes the same to me. Too much salt."

Gabby hummed thoughtfully, as she reached up and tapped her lips with one finger. "So... you don't like salty foods...do you like sweet things?"

Mistwillow gave her a flat stare. "I told you, girl. It all tastes the same."

Gabby turned around and jogged off down the aisle in search of something to please the elf. "Ooo! Misty! Come here!"

"I told you, my name is Mistwillow" She grumbled angrily as she stomped after Gabby. "What. What is it?"

With an elaborate flourish Gabby gestured to the table on their right. There lay a broad brown cylinder that Mistwillow didn't recognize, its surface ridged as if it'd been carved.

Mistwillow stared at it, then back at Gabby shaking her head "What is it?"

"What is it? Misty, it's chocolate cake! Have you never had chocolate cake?!"

Misty frowned at Gabby "Mind your tone, girl. No, I've never had chocolate cake. I don't even know what chocolate is."

"Oh, you'll love it! My father used to bring it back from overseas. I guess it's a little rare here, I'm surprised these people had some!" Gabby looked down at the cake lovingly.

"So, this is what you're going to have?" Mistwillow asked.

Gabby shook her head with a grin. "No, this is what *you're* going to have! I think you'll really like it."

Mistwillow crossed her arms over her chest, tilting her chin up dismissively. "I'm not eating that."

"Oh, come on!" Gabby said. "It's really good!"

"No" Mistwillow replied.

"Misty, please!" Gabby said.

Mistwillow's nostrils flared. "My name. Is Mistwillow"

"Just try one bite!" Gabby said, ignoring the elf's anger. With the knife that lay beside the cake, Gabby cut out a tiny sliver of the gooey brown dessert, using a fork to free the miniscule wedge.

Mistwillow eyed the piece of cake with disgust. "If I eat this, will you stop pestering me?"

Gabby nodded, smiling cheerfully as she held the piece of cake before Mistwillow's mouth. The elf rolled her eyes then sighed. "Fine."

With one hand she grabbed the fork that held the piece of cake that Gabby insisted she eat. Sparing it one final look of utter disgust she popped it into her mouth.

"Well?" Gabby asked after a few silent moments. "What do you think?"

Mistwillow hadn't moved after the cake touched her tongue. Her eyes were vacant, staring off ahead of her unfocused. The fork clattered loudly as it hit the floor, dropped from her limp hands. Slowly her mouth resumed motion as she chewed, her tongue rolling the piece of cake around in her mouth to enjoy every single crumb.

After she swallowed, Mistwillow let out a gasp. Tears had formed at the corners of her eyes. "By...by the gods..." She whispered.

"It's good, right?" Gabby said.

Mistwillow blinked the tears from her eyes, remembering where she was. She looked down at Gabby, then subtly nodded. "Yes...that was...incredible..."

Gabby jumped up and down, clapping her hands excitedly. "Yes! I knew you'd love it!"

"More..." Mistwillow said, her voice distant, her motions sluggish as if she were in a trance.

"Need...more..."

"Oh, well help yourself!" Gabby said, grabbing the edge of the large plate that held the cake and pulling it over to the side of the table.

Mistwillow stared at the remainder of the enormous chocolate cake, with desperate desire. Slowly she reached out and then stuck her entire hand into the cake, pulling out a fistful of chocolatey sweetness. She studied the handful of cake she held before as if she gripped an enormous nugget of gold. Then she moved her hand to her mouth, stuffing as much of the cake in as she could, while her other hand reached out to grab more.

"Well... you enjoy that!" Gabby said, lightly patting Mistwillow on the back. "I'm off to figure out what I want on my one plate."

"Here they come!" Ealdorman Thomas hissed as he peeked through the slit in the barely open door.

Blake nodded to Hrovin, the two of them moving to flank the Ealdorman, hands on their weapons. Not a threatening posture, but a defensive one. Together they conveyed the message, *Don't mess with us, and we won't mess with you.*

Beyond the doors they could hear the loud thump of heavy footsteps on the stone steps. Then there was a knock on the door, hard enough that it made the door rattle in its hinges. The Ealdorman gave one last look to Blake who nodded back. They were ready.

The Ealdorman flung open the doors, revealing a group of half a dozen ogres who crowded around the entrance. Each one stood over seven feet tall and was built like a bull rhinoceros. They had no hair on them, their outfits knee-length wraps around their hips made of various animal pelts. Their ears were long and pointed, not unlike Mistwillows. Their skin was the colour of thriving moss.

“Welcome! Welcome!” The ealdorman said as he waved them in. “So glad you could join us for a little feast!”

The lead ogre stepped forward, ducking his head to pass through the threshold. His footsteps shook the floorboards, sending tremors through the building. The ogre’s eyes narrowed as he scanned the three who stood before him, a stern expression on his face.

Hrovin and Blake tightened the grip on their weapons, ready to strike if need be. The lead ogre reached out toward the Ealdorman with a hand the size of a dinner plate. Blake grit his teeth as he watched, fearful that the ogre was going to grab onto the Ealdorman and toss him headfirst through the wall.

Instead, the ogre simply extended his hand, holding it out for Ealdorman Thomas to take. The ealdorman tentatively reached up and placed his hand in the ogre’s who then promptly shook it. The Ealdorman’s arm was jerked up and down violently as the ogre’s face went from stern to delighted.

“The pleasure is all ours, Ealdorman. I can’t tell you how utterly delighted my kin and I were to receive your invitation! Most towns we camp nearby simply ignore us, which, while I understand their trepidation and fear of outsiders, I still think its frightfully rude to not offer hospitality to a guest!”

Ealdorman Thomas looked up at the smiling ogre with disbelief. “Oh...um...of course?”

The ogre let go of the ealdorman’s hand, then turned to Blake and Hrovin, giving them a bow of his head. “There’ll be no need for steel this evening, gentlemen. I promise my compatriots and I will be on our best behavior. We have no desire to ruin the wonderful feast our host has prepared for us! Now then, will there be a round of drinks before dinner? Perhaps a little brandy or port? Or shall we proceed immediately to the dining hall?”

The ealdorman said nothing, words having escaped him. Blake, thankfully, stepped in. “The feast awaits. I believe there are drinks inside.”

“Ah! Most excellent! Thank you, kind sir” The lead ogre said. “Come on in, chaps, no need to be shy!”

Behind him the rest of the ogres filed in, quickly making the town hall’s antechamber rather crowded. The ealdorman squeezed through to find Blake standing by the door.

“My apologies, sir, but I don’t think I’ll need your services anymore. These ogres are...not what I expected.”

Hrovin snorted “So prejudiced...”

Blake clapped the Ealdorman on the shoulder. “No need to apologize. Just remember, don’t do anything to make them angry. They’re charming now, but if you piss them off...”

The ealdorman nodded "Of course. That shouldn't be a problem. Thank you, once again."

"We'll just go fetch our two companions and then leave you to your feast" Blake said.

The ealdorman gestured towards the double doors, raising his voice to address the ogres. "My new friends, the feast awaits! Just through those doors."

"Huzzah!" The sextet of ogres cheered.

"I think you'll be quite pleased with what we've put together" The ealdorman said as he led the way. "We've really gone all out for you. I think you're really going to enjoy..."

The ealdorman trailed off, eyes widening in shock at what he saw. The hall that had housed their feast only an hour before, now housed only scraps.

The four long tables had been cleared, no dish remained full. The plates of fish held only bones, the platters of roast beef were covered in only juices, the baskets of bread had nothing but crumbs, and the bowls of fruit contained nothing at all.

"What...what happened?" The ealdorman said in quiet shock.

Blake stepped past him, took one look at the devastated banquet, then slapped a hand to his forehead.

"Goddammit..." He groaned.

The two men were pushed out of the way as the ogres stepped in, eager for the feast that no longer awaited them. The leader of the ogres stared in stunned silence, the smile falling from his face. When he turned to look at the ealdorman a furious scowl had taken up residence there.

"Is this a joke?" The ogre said, his voice low and terribly menacing. "You think this is funny? Invite us into your home only to mock us with table scraps?! HOW DARE YOU!!!"

By the end, the ogre was roaring, his voice shaking the windows. The ealdorman shook his head, spluttering as he tried to apologize.

"N-n-no! I'm so sorry! Th-there w-was a feast! It was here! I-I-I don't know what happened!"

The ogre leaned down and jabbed the ealdorman in the chest with a finger the thickness of a broom handle. "You'll pay for this. You and your entire town will pay for this. No one mocks an ogre and gets away with it."

Blake and Hrovin immediately stepped in beside the ealdorman, drawing their weapons. The ogre's eyes darted from one to another, his shoulders and arms tensing as his anger built.

Blake took a long slow breath as he waited for the ogre to decide what would happen next. Hrovin and him couldn't take six ogres at once even if they were unarmed, but the ogre didn't know that... he hoped.

The ogre stood up straight, then turned to the others. "Come on, let's go. We'll deal with these charlatans later."

The group slowly filed out of the hall, stomping down the stone steps before heading out of town. Blake and Hrovin watched the ogres tromp away from the top of the steps. The last they saw of them before they turned a corner and disappeared out of sight was the leader giving them a long hard stare, his jaw set with fury as he pointed at them with one hand.

His meaning was clear; This was not over.

Blake shut the doors and then immediately turned and headed for the hall. "WHERE IS SHE!" He yelled as he barged through the second set of double doors. It didn't take him long to find the person he was looking for...she was hard to miss.

Gabby sat at the end of one of the tables, finishing off a plate of cookies. She sat facing the side, her distended belly making it impossible for her to face the table. It was an enormous orb, arcing nearly horizontally out from underneath her chest, easily reaching three feet in front of her. It spread out to either side of her, extending past the edge of her torso by half a foot. It completely covered the lap it rested on, slumping out past her knees.

Despite the signs of obvious carnage that had occurred in the short period since they'd left, her clothing was immaculate. Her academy jacket, blue with red trim, was completely free of crumbs and stains. The red silk bow tied around her neck was free from slop and debris, affixed perfectly as always. Her brilliant white shirt had been unbuttoned at her midsection to allow her belly to be free, the massive creamy globe of skin resting comfortably. It quietly gurgled, a sign of contentment from Gabby's overstuffed organ. If they could've seen her skirt beneath her belly, it likely would've been equally spotless.

"Mmf, oh, hello Blake!" Gabby said cheerfully as she swallowed a mouthful of cookies.

"What happened to *one plate*" Blake said through gritted teeth.

Gabby reached out and grabbed the platter that had just been filled with cookies. "Here it is." She said, holding it up "I only used this one plate."

Blake looked back at the room full of eviscerated dishes of food. "You fit *all* of the food in the room on that single plate?!"

"Well...I refilled it a few times" Gabby said. Then with a happy sigh, she closed her eyes and leaned back into her seat. She was lucky that the ealdorman had been expecting ogres; the sturdy oversized chair built for his guests was strong enough to support Gabby's immense stomach.

"How..." The ealdorman said, walking up beside Blake, staring at Gabby with wonderment.

"How indeed..." Blake muttered. "Where the hell is Mistwillow! She was supposed to make sure this didn't happen!"

"Uh...Grummond" Hrovin called. "Over here..."

Blake hurried to where the dwarf stood two tables over. There, lying on the ground between the tables, was Mistwillow, though in a state that neither of them had ever seen her in before.

The elf was flat on her back, her hands cradling her stomach which, if you ignore the benchmark set by Gabby, was quite large. Her forest green cloth armor was pulled tight around her distended midsection

that looked as if she was nearing the third trimester of a pregnancy. Some of the laces had been stretched loose at the apex of her belly, showing hints of skin beneath.

Her eyes were lidded as she stared upward at the ceiling. Her entire lower face was painted brown, as if someone had smeared her with mud. When Blake stepped over her, crouching down by her head, she barely acknowledged his presence.

“Mistwillow...what the hell happened?” He said softly.

“Ch...ch...chocolate...” Was all she said.

“Come on, let’s *move!*” Blake yelled over his shoulder.

“Stop yelling, I’m going as fast as I can!” Mistwillow barked back.

It was the following morning and Templeton’s Three were slogging through the thick forest north of Windbrisk in search of one thing: redemption.

Blake had apologized to the ealdorman for the series of mishaps that had occurred regarding his team and the feast. Then he’d promised to make things right. Templeton’s Three were the reason the ogres were angry at the people of Windbrisk, and so they would be the ones to make it right.

Though, not all members of The Three agreed with this assessment.

“Just give them Gabby! Let her deal with them! She’s the one who ate their feast!”

Mistwillow had been very forthcoming with her opinion on the matter before they’d set out that morning, standing outside Ealdorman Thomas’s home where they’d spent the night. The ealdorman had wanted to throw the four of them out of town before they made things worse but had begrudgingly agreed to let them stay after Blake had worn him down with promises that they would fix things.

“Hey!” Gabby had cried indignantly. “How could you say something like that!? I thought we were friends, Misty!”

Mistwillow’s face twisted in anger as she whirled on Gabby. She opened her mouth to unleash what likely would’ve been a wholly unpleasant stream of vitriol at the young blond, but it never made it out of her. Instead, her face winced as a rather nasty gurgling emanated from her stomach.

On this crisp autumn morning Gabby’s figure was naturally showing no signs whatsoever of the wanton gluttony she’d displayed the evening before. After eating the entire feast her belly had grown as large as it had when she’d consumed an entire bandit camp’s worth of stew, but yesterday she hadn’t been pinned underneath its bulk. With that one small change, her mobility wasn’t impeded, and so it had been quite an impressive sight when she’d pushed herself out of that broad wooden chair and waddled her way to their place for the night.

All had gaped at the spectacle of her massive, heavy belly, hanging off of her, extending far in front of her, but ultimately not holding her back whatsoever. With each step it had jostled back and forth, though there was no sloshing this evening. That night's feast had been far more solid in composition.

When they'd gone to rest, it had taken up much of the bed that she'd laid in; by morning it was gone. The same could not be said for Mistwillow and her gut.

Twelve hours after gorging herself on that humungous chocolate cake, and her belly still showed a slight curve to it as it struggled to process the surplus of food she'd forced upon it. It was clear from the pained expressions she made when her stomach rumbled that it was not comfortable.

"We're not going to abandon one of our crew with a band of ogres. And besides... she's not the only one responsible for destroying that feast" Blake had said, butting in between them, looking knowingly at Mistwillow.

Mistwillow's lips curled in anger, ready to turn her ire on him, but another long, drawn-out groan from her abdomen silenced her rage.

Hours later and still she suffered, though the bouts of pain were fewer and farther in between. Blake led their way through the forest, following the vague directions the Ealdorman had given him, while Gabby followed not far behind, a cheerful smile on her face. Hrovin walked behind them, often stopping to wait for Mistwillow who trailed near the rear, one hand still clutching her stomach.

"I still don't understand" The dwarf said as he pulled Mistwillow up a short rocky ridge that bisected the path they trod. "You pointy-ears are known for your bloody self-control! How the hell did you end up like that?"

"I told you, I don't want to talk about it" Mistwillow hissed as she rose up the rocks with his help before stomping off.

"You're welcome..." Hrovin grunted, wiping his hands off on his bare chest.

The trees grew thicker, the path dispersing into nothing. Blake grimaced as he held his hands in front of his face to avoid getting assaulted by the tangled weave of pine boughs. The ealdorman had said to follow the hunting path that led though the pine grove...well they were definitely going through it now.

"Blake" Gabby said, her voice coming from right behind him.

"Mmm?" He grunted as he pushed forward blindly through the trees.

"I'm sorry for getting us into this mess" She said, her voice soft.

"It's fine" Blake said.

"I was just...so hungry. And when I start eating, I just can't stop! It just tasted so good! Before I could help myself...I'd eaten everything..."

"I said it's fine, Gabby" Blake grunted, an errant branch catching him on the right cheek.

"Ok, well thank you for not being mad at me" She said.

“Oh, I’m plenty mad, but there’ll be time for that after we somehow manage to placate a band of furious ogres.”

“Right...” Gabby said. “How do you propose we do that?”

Blake was silent for a moment, then “Well, I suppose first we need to find their camp, but not let ourselves be seen. Then we can watch them and make a plan. I doubt we could take them in a head-to-head confrontation, but maybe if we have surprise on our side...”

Blake pushed through a notably thick tangle of pine branches and stumbled forward into...empty air. Empty air which was promptly filled with spearheads the length of Blake’s foot. For the second time in two days Blake found himself at the end of a deadly weapon, caught completely unawares.

“Goddammit...” He muttered.

“Well, well, well!” A familiar voice gloated. “Who do we have here? The ealdorman’s band of merry mercenaries? A quartet of fools come to slit our throats on his behalf and solve his sticky little conundrum?”

Blake raised his hands beside his head, as he was hauled into the middle of the clearing, he’d accidentally discovered, which by rotten luck was also the Ogre’s campground. The rest of Templeton’s Three were pulled forth from the trees then forced to sit on a fallen log that the ogres had laid along the edge of the clearing. The lead ogre, the same one who’d just spoken, stood before them, arms crossed as he gazed sternly upon them, like a schoolteacher chiding a truant student.

“Explain yourselves” He said.

Blake took a breath then said. “We didn’t come to attack you; we came to make peace...although I fear it may be too late.”

The ogres that they’d met the previous day were intimidating enough on their own, even in their simple garb of hides and pelts. The ogres that stood around the clearing today were far more menacing, dressed for war. Each bore a hodge podge of armor, cast in an angry dark iron. Pauldrons, greaves, gauntlets, and helmets. No single ogre had a full set, but that did not lessen the fearsomeness of their appearance. Vicious symbols had been painted on their bare green torsos in something red. Blake hoped that it was paint.

“Your observation skills are to be commended” The ogre said, lips curling into a dangerous smile.

“Windbrisk will soon feel our thunderous wrath as we raze the city until nothing remains except rubble and cinders. The gods themselves will cower at the brutality we inflict upon those wretched souls.”

“All this over a damned feast?” Hrovin yelled. “It’s just food!”

“It’s not about the food!” The ogre roared. “The ealdorman and his weaselly little town thought they could disrespect us by rubbing their wealth and prosperity in our faces. It was a foolhardy decision that they will come to deeply regret.”

“But that’s not what happened!” Gabby cried.

“Oh? Please, enlighten us all, won’t you?” Around the clearing the ogres leaned in, curious to hear what excuse they would come up with.

“There *was* a feast for you, it was decadent and lavish. The townsfolk made it all for you to enjoy; they had no desire to snub you.”

The ogre leaned forward, his intimidating form casting a shadow over Gabby. “If that is the case...then what happened to it?”

Gabby looked up and met the ogre’s eyes, somehow unafraid. “Well...I ate it.”

The ogre stood up, eyes widening slightly as he looked Gabby up and down, or more accurately her lithe frame. Then he, and all the other ogres, burst out laughing.

Gabby looked to either side at the other members of the Three with a hopeful smile. “So...now that I’ve explained what happened...everything’s good?”

The lead ogre stopped laughing in an instant as he loomed over them. His voice was a low rumble, his anger palpable. “No. Everything is *not* good. Do you think us simpletons? Do you think us moronic imbeciles that you can stupefy and bewilder with your obviously ludicrous fabrications?! I give you a chance to explain yourself and then you lie right to my face!”

Gabby sat up as she stared back defiantly. “I didn’t lie!”

The ogre snorted “Please. Do you really think us gullible enough to believe that a tiny little thing like you ate an entire hall’s worth of food? If you wanted to make your story at least an ounce believable than you could’ve said that the fat elf did it” He gestured with one thumb to the end of the log where Mistwillow sat.

“I am not fa-” Mistwillow’s retort was cut off when her stomach gave another groan of distress. “Oh gods, kill me...” She moaned.

Gabby stood up “You have to believe me, I ate it! All of it!”

“Enough of this farce” The ogre said, turning away. “Unless you have anything else to say, we’re leaving. We have business to attend to with the good folk of Windbrisk.”

“You’re not going to kill us?” Gabby asked.

“You’re obviously not locals.” The lead ogre said as he waved for his company to move out. “We have no quarrel with you, and your attempt to save the town did give us all a good laugh.”

Gabby sat back down on the log in shock. The ogres were beginning to file out of the clearing when Blake stood. He knew this was likely foolish, likely to get them killed, but he had to do something.

“We stand for Windbrisk! We demand that we be considered their champions in a contest to decide their fate!”

Beside him Hrovin hissed. “Laddy?! What the bloody hell are you doing!”

Blake looked back at him. “Making things right?”

“Committing suicide is more like it” Mistwillow added.

The ogre's paused their march, turning about to face them. The lead ogre strode forward, his steps shaking the soft earth. "Is that so? Let it not be said that we ogres are without honor and decency. We shall give the champions of Windbrisk their moment. We shall give them their contest!"

The ogres returned to the clearing lining up around the edge one by one. Two of them disappeared behind the trees, perhaps to fetch something, though what they were looking for wasn't immediately obvious.

"Thank you for honoring our wishes" Blake said as he stepped forward.

The lead ogre bowed his head. "It's no trouble at all. Besides, our victory is certain, and why not give my companions a chance to indulge?"

Blake sighed. The ogre was right, what chance did Templeton's Three have against an entire band of ogres. Still...they had to try. With solemn resignation, Blake reached for his sword sheathed at his side. He hadn't gotten half the blade out, when the lead ogre stepped in.

"There'll be no need for steel, human. As hosts, we choose the contest."

Blake slid his sword back in its sheath. "Very well...what do you choose?"

The lead ogre grinned. "Drinking"

The two ogres who'd stepped away returned from the depths of the forest, each of them carrying two enormous casks. A rousing cheer rose through the clearing as large wooden mugs were pulled out of sacks.

"The rules are simple!" The lead ogre said. "You drink until you can drink no more. Once one side is out of contestants, they lose."

"Wait..." Hrovin said. "So, you mean it's all of us...against all of you?"

"That is correct" The lead ogre said. "Who... would like to go first?"

Blake turned to his team, pleadingly. He hadn't exactly consulted with them before getting them involved, and now he needed their help. He didn't know how much Ogre's could drink, but Blake knew he couldn't put all six of them under the table by himself.

Mistwillow was the first to respond, unsurprisingly with outright refusal.

"If you think I'm putting anything in my body to solve the girl's mess, you are gravely mistaken" The elf said, crossing her arms as she stayed put on her spot on the log.

Hrovin was next, standing up and patting him on the arm. "I'm with you, laddy. I'm always down for a good bout of drinking, though methinks the ogre is correct. Have you ever seen an ogre drink?"

Blake shook his head.

"They're...quite good at it" Hrovin said. "And that's coming from a dwarf."

Blake at last turned to the final member of Templeton's Three. Gabby frowned and shrugged. "I don't drink..."

Blake sighed and nodded. He'd hoped Gabby's unnatural appetite would help, but he wasn't that lucky. Alright then, it was up to him and Hrovin. He slowly turned back to face the eager ogres.

"I'll go first."

With a mighty thud, the ogres set down the massive kegs of ale, while others brought forth the wooden mugs. Blake was ushered forward to sit on a large stump, while his opponent, the smallest of the band of ogres, sat down across from him. Smallest was a relative term of course; he still stood a head taller than Blake and likely weighed two hundred pounds more than him.

The ogre leaned forward, giving Blake a sanguine smile as he extended his hand. Not wishing to rock the boat further, Blake took it, letting his arm be violently jerked up and down as the ogre shook it.

"A pleasure and an honor to face off against you in this most timeless of ogre traditions" His opponent said. His voice was higher pitched and more nasally than the lead ogre.

"Thanks..." Blake said, shaking his hand to get some blood back into it after the ogre relinquished it.

"So...how does this work? Do we drink until someone passes out?"

"That won't be necessary" The lead ogre said. He stood between the two of them, where perhaps a referee might take up position. "We ogres are veterans of the alcoholic arts and have a keen intuition to when someone's had enough."

Blake frowned "So...its solely based upon your judgment? That seems a little biased."

The lead ogre frowned, his brows scrunching. "I'm going to ignore that you just dared to besmirch my honor. I would never, *never*, sully the sanctity of drinking games with transgressive behavior!"

"Sorry, sorry" Blake muttered. "Alright, let's go."

Large mugs of frothy amber ale were filled and brought forth; one handed to each competitor. Blake had never sampled ogre ale, but he assumed it likely tasted better than the swill they used to serve the troops in the royal army. As he tilted the mug back and began to drink, he was grateful to be correct.

Mug after mug was emptied as Blake did his best to not pay attention to the efforts of the ogre across from him. After his seventh mug he was already feeling quite tipsy, a buzzing warmth filling his insides. Still...he reckoned he could at least have that many mugs again.

"You're out!" The lead ogre roared pointing a clawed finger at Blake.

"W-what!" Blake yelled. "This...this is an outrage!" Blake rose to his feet in anger, then nearly sat back down again. As soon as he was upright his world began to spin, a queasiness replacing that pleasant warmth in his innards.

Damn, he thought, *those ogres really can tell when someone's had enough*. Slowly he turned and stumbled away, passing Hrovin who patted him on the arm.

"Not bad, Laddy. Now it's my turn."

The competition resumed with Hrovin taking his spot upon the stump. He chugged the mugs of ale with gusto, uncaring about the overflow that slopped over the rim and drenched his beard. After four mugs, the ogre across from him was called out, two of his comrades helping him rise to his feet and walk away. This would've been a moment for celebration, if not for the immense chubby ogre that sat down across from Hrovin.

"Bugger..." Hrovin grunted as he waved for more ale.

The dwarf pounded down another ten mugs, but his efforts were for naught as his opponent matched him with ease. After finishing that tenth mug the lead ogre turned to Hrovin, opening his mouth to speak when Hrovin cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"I know, I know, I'm done. Ugh..." Hrovin said as he wiped his beard with one muscly forearm before he slid himself off the stump and wobbled away to flop down on the log where the rest of Templeton's Three waited.

"You have my respect, dwarf. I've never seen a non-ogre drink so much of our Brimstone Amber Ale" The lead ogre said, clapping his hands together. "That being said, the impressiveness of his actions is irrelevant. With the dwarf vanquished you're out of competitors, and so, according to the rules lay down by the sacred ogre tenets, that means that we are--"

"Wait!"

All eyes turned to the source of the high-pitched voice that had cried out. Gabby stood, an anxious look on her face.

"Yes, my dear?" The lead ogre said.

"I...I'm in. I want to compete" She said, biting her lip nervously.

The ogre retinue burst out in uproarious mocking laughter. That all came to an end shortly at the sound of their leader's voice. "Silence! There is no shame in the girl wishing to compete! Please, step forth and we'll pour you some ale."

Blake lurched unsteadily to his feet, stumbling forward a step, his mind spinning as he reached out to catch Gabby's shoulder. "Gabby...you don't have to do this. We *urp* did our best... sometimes things don't work out."

Gabby nodded, giving him a small smile. "I understand. Still, I caused this mess...I should at least try to fix it".

Then she pulled free from Blake, his inebriation making him easy to elude. Carefully she crossed the clearing, then daintily sat herself down upon the edge of the stump, taking a moment to smooth out her skirt and jacket.

"Here you are" The lead ogre said, handing her a mug as long as her forearm, and as thick as her thigh.

The massive ogre across from her had already begun to chug his own drink eagerly, as Gabby looked with great trepidation at her own sudsy mug. Gently she lifted the wood tankard to her lips and tilted it back, taking a small sip. Then she took a swig, then a gulp. She lowered the mug momentarily, staring down at it with wonderment, before she lifted it high, draining the rest in a single long chug.

Blake, who sat with his head in his hands, depressed at their failure, hadn't noticed, until Hrovin gave him a push, nearly knocking him off the log.

"Look, laddy!" Hrovin hissed.

Blake looked up to see the final moments of Gabby finishing the first mug. She tossed aside the empty tankard, the wood clonking off a nearby rock. She exhaled loudly, her enjoyment obvious.

"Gabby...You...you said you di...didn't d-drink?" Blake's slurred voice called across the clearing.

Gabby looked over her shoulder and flashed him an excited smile. "Yeah! That was before I knew how good it tasted! My parents always told me alcohol was gross and that I'd hate it, but this is delicious!" She turned back and waved for the ogres to give her another mug of ale, which she immediately brought to her lips so that she could slurp it all down.

Blake stood, excitement filling him. If Gabby was competing...this changed things. It wasn't a sure guarantee though, eating and drinking were very different things. At some point she'd get drunk and then the competition would be over, regardless of her unused capacity.

Gabby effortlessly downed ten more mugs, chugging eagerly each fresh vessel of amber ale. Through it all, her cheeks remain unflushed, her speech unslurred, her balance unimpeded. The only evidence that she'd consumed as much as she had was the dome forming on her abdomen.

After the sixteenth mug, the fat ogre across from her, easily five times her normal body weight, tapped out. Murmurs began to spread through the ogre crew, shocked to see their comrade soundly thrashed. As the fat ogre stumbled away and another came to replace him, Gabby took some time to take stock of herself and prepare for the rest of the competition.

First, she removed her jacket; she'd already spilled a little on the lapels, and she didn't want to stain it further. Secondly, she reached down and undid the buttons on her shirt across her belly. Her stomach curved out noticeably beneath her bust, making her blouse taut, gaps forming between the buttons where they were strained. As she undid the buttons over her gut, it surged forward more and more until she undid the final one, pulling the shirt away. With the tension removed her belly flopped forward landing on her lap with an audible sloshing, wobbling in place like a plate of jelly.

"Ooo!" She cooed with delight. "The bubbles feel so good in my belly! I've never had anything so fizzy before!"

Reaching forward with both hands she lightly pressed her fingers into the soft dome of her stomach, tossing her belly from one side to the other, feeling the contents and carbonation jostle within. She began to giggle with delight at the pleasant tickling that soon filled her belly. If only she knew that all the motion was just increasing the pressure inside, pressure that would continue to build until...

BUUUUURRRRRPPP

"Oops! Excuse me" She said, blushing as she covered her mouth.

With the next ogre in place, the competition continued in full force, with Gabby not slowing down in the slightest. Mug after mug disappeared down her gullet, her throat bobbing eagerly as she gulped down mouthful after mouthful of the sweet golden booze.

Her countenance remained unbothered by the copious amounts of alcohol she drank...and it was very copious. Slowly but surely her stomach swelled larger and larger, the round distended form of her gut sliding further and further down her thighs. By the time that she'd knocked out the third ogre, her belly had filled her lap completely, spreading wide and starting to crest over the edge of her knees.

This must have caused her some level of discomfort, as she paused a moment to adjust herself. Reaching forward she scooped up her belly, the gallons of ale within sloshing loudly, then one after the other pulled her legs apart. Then she let her belly drop. It fell between her legs and bounced off the edge of the stump below. Her expression became much more content after that, an easy smile on her face as she waved for her next mug.

Even without her legs to support her belly, it still sloped out a great distance from her, almost reaching her knees.

The remaining two ogres looked to their leader, unsure of how to proceed in the face of such an impossibility. The dwarf had impressed them with his ability to drink. Gabby comparatively had consumed almost four times that much and appeared as sober as a priest. The lead ogre said nothing, waving for the next one to begin.

The fourth and fifth ogre fell just as readily as the previous two, with Gabby left standing... or well, sitting... undefeated. Her belly had swollen quite large, resting on the cold ground before her between her straddled legs. As the fifth ogre crawled away in shame, Gabby giggled with glee as she used her knees to push her belly back and forth, enjoying the feeling of the bubbles inside bubbling away.

The lead ogre watched his fifth fallen brethren slink away before he turned to Gabby. "I don't know what sort of devilry is at work here, but I know it must have a limit. You'll face me now, girl, and I have never lost. Are you sure you wish to continue?"

Gabby looked up from playing with her belly to the stern ogre who now sat across from her. "Of course! This stuff is fantastic, I just wish I could drink it faster!"

The lead ogre snorted "Is that so? Well, in that case, now that we're down to the final two, let us kick things up a notch. Boys, heave them up, won't you?"

The two ogres who'd gone first nodded, as they walked over to the kegs. Up to this point in the competition, they'd been filling mugs from one keg at a time, and they were nearly finished the second one. The ogres walked past the keg in use instead each hefting up one of the unused kegs. Together they brought the mighty casks over, grunting with strain from the weight. Each found their spot directly behind both Gabby and the ogre leader.

"Ready?" The ogre asked.

Gabby nodded with a friendly smile "Ready when you are. Good luck!"

The ogre snarled, then tilted his head back, opening his mouth. Gabby followed suit, craning her own head back and opening her mouth eagerly. Together, the two standing ogres opened the valves, causing cold amber ale to flow freely from the keg, falling four feet through the air to land directly in each competitor's waiting maw.

The ogre swallowed eagerly, his expertise and experience immediately evident. Gabby spluttered a bit, not used to having it poured down her throat; however, it didn't take long for her to become accustomed to it, and soon she too swallowed with ease, her throat rapidly bobbing as she swallowed continuously.

Blake and Hrovin sat on the edge of their logs, watching with intense anticipation. Neither understood how Gabby had made it this far without succumbing to inebriation, but she'd done it! Now she just had to outdrink their leader, how hard could that be?

The ale continued to flow, falling like golden frothy waterfalls into the competitor's mouths who guzzled it greedily. The ogre sat with his head turned to the side so he could keep an eye on Gabby, who he was certain would tap out soon.

Giving up was the furthest thing from Gabby's mind at that moment. With her head lolled back, tongue extended out over her lower lips she blissfully chugged the ceaseless deluge of beer that poured from above, nectar from the heavens. Her hands rested on the upper surface of her enormous belly, gently rubbing as she felt the swell of its massive curves, curves that continued to grow moment by moment.

Like an enormous wineskin being filled, her belly expanded with each passing minute, sliding forth along the ground as it distended further from her, while at the same time stretching wider. Despite the fact that her belly rested on the ground, the top of her gut sloped nearly horizontally from her, curving down to its furthest point, her belly button resting four feet away from her.

Abruptly the ogre's eyes widened and his head turned away, as he was overcome by a spluttering coughing fit. The ogres around him looked on anxiously. The one who'd held the keg for their leader attempted to move in closer, to allow him to continue drinking, but instead he was pushed away.

"I'm...I'm finished" The ogre leader said.

"YES!" Blake cheered as he jumped up, nearly keeling over, his current tipsiness momentarily forgotten.

Hrovin gave a whoop of delight, while Mistwillow just rolled her eyes. "Bloody girl..."

Gabby, unaware of their celebrations, continued to drink, gleefully chugging the ale being poured for her. Her belly stretched further, rounding out just a little bit more before stopping. Not because Gabby had given up...the keg had run out of ale.

Gabby blinked, lifting her head as if she was coming out of a trance. "What...why did you stop?"

"Gabby!" Blake said, as he stumbled up behind her, grabbing on to her shoulders and shaking her excitedly. "You did it!"

"Did it? Oh...did I win?" She said, a smile dawning on her face as she looked up at Blake.

"You did! I don't know how, but you did! How do you feel?"

"Mmm...good." She said, reaching out with both hands to rub the enormous orb that was her ale filled stomach. Every little push and prod she impelled upon it, made the entire thing wobble, the ale within producing a subdued sloshing.

"You're not drunk?" Blake asked.

Gabby shook her head “No? I feel fine! Was...that all the ale?”

The ogre leader who sat across from her, bent over resting his elbows on his knees gave her a bemused look. “There’s still the rest of my keg if you really want it...”

“Yes please!” Gabby said with a grin, clapping excitedly, before she let her head roll back once more, opening her mouth to await the renewed flow of Brimstone Amber Ale.

Blake walked over and extended his hand to the ogre leader. The ogre took it, letting Blake help haul him to his feet.

“We have a deal?” Blake said, still gripping the ogre’s meaty hand.

The ogre nodded. “Of course. As champions of Windbrisk, you have defeated us in the contest of our choosing. The town will be spared our wrath...though I’m beginning to think maybe they never deserved it in the first place.”

Blake followed the ogres gaze to Gabby who’d resumed guzzling ale, finishing off the remaining third of the keg that the ogre leader had been unable to quaff. Her belly slowly grew, stretching outward more and more.

“She really did eat that entire feast by herself, didn’t she?” The ogre said with a mystified tone.

Blake nodded.

“How?”

Blake shrugged, smiling as he looked at Gabby. “She’s a girl with a big appetite.”

“On behalf of the people of Windbrisk, let me offer our apologies for the misunderstanding that occurred, and hope that this fresh feast be a worthy offering to express our condolences.”

Ealdorman Thomas stood within the town hall, the people of Windbrisk gathered behind him. Before him stood the ogre crew, their leader standing proud at the fore front.

“Ealdorman, your apologies are not necessary; your champions kindly explained that you were never at fault. Regardless, we thank you for welcoming us and offer our eternal gratitude for such wonderful hospitality. Let this be the act that forges a new alliance between our people. From now until all time, let it be known that the people of Windbrisk are friends of the ogres. Now then, shall we partake?”

The ealdorman bowed. “We shall!”

The ogres strode forward into the town hall, finding seats amongst the tables. The townsfolk quickly joined them, filling in the space around them. Soon lively conversation filled the air, followed by the sound of cutlery clinking on plates.

At the rear of the hall Templeton's Three stood upon a raised platform, watching quietly from a distance. After besting the ogres, the Three had returned to Windbrisk to report the good news to the Ealdorman. Gabby had surprisingly been quite capable of making the trek, after the ogres gave her a little help getting her to her feet. She'd waddled the entire way back, her massive belly swaying back and forth with each step, its distended shape hanging down to her knees, and reaching just as far in front of her. Despite its enormous size and assumed weight, the girl hadn't complained once. The only sounds that came out of her were semi-frequent hums of smug satisfaction with her situation, and the occasional belch when the pendulous sway of her belly shook up the carbonated contents of her overfull organ to the point of eruption.

The following morning, which also happened to be this morning, the Three had arisen to learn that a new feast would be held for the ogres that evening, and they'd been requested to attend as guests of honor. Gabby, to the shock of none, came down to breakfast as slender as an elm sapling, her mood as unflappably effervescent as ever. The same could not be said for her colleagues.

Mistwillow's stomach was flat once more, having finally finished digesting the massive cake she'd consumed, but when offered food she turned her nose up at it, muttering angrily about never touching human food again. Blake and Hrovin also passed on breakfast, though for different reasons. The two helped themselves to only a steaming mug of black coffee each, their dreary mood and bloodshot eyes hinting at the dreadful hangovers both were suffering.

"My friends!" Ealdorman Thomas said, meandering his way through the crowded hall towards the Three. "Won't you come and partake of the feast? I insist!"

Mistwillow said nothing, her crossed arms and upturned nose making her decision clear. Surprisingly, Gabby also shook her head when the Ealdorman turned to her.

"Thank you, but...I shouldn't. I'm...I'm not hungry" Her stomach growled loud enough to be heard over the hubbub of the crowded hall, expressing both its bewilderment and frustration with her obvious lies. Gabby pursed her lips as she ignored it. "Blake, Hrovin, you should eat, the people of Windbrisk are excellent cooks."

Blake, who held one hand to his temple, eyes closed as he tried to shut out the clamoring around them, simply shook his head. Hrovin leaned around him to address her. "It's a lovely offer, lass, but Grummond and I are both in a sorry state. Eating's not in the cards right now"

"No, I insist, you must!" Gabby said. Grabbing both of them by the shoulders she pulled them away from the wall, leading them down the stairs that led up to the raised stage they stood upon.

Blake groaned as he was forcibly moved. "Gabby, we were being serious. We're both far too...what?"

Blake blinked, collecting himself for a moment before he looked over at Hrovin. The dwarf was already looking at him, an expression of reverent awe on his face.

"Laddy...is your..." The dwarf murmured.

Blake nodded. His hangover was gone, cleared from his mind like a maid had come in with a broom and swept it all away. With his stomach no longer turning and his head no longer pounding, the feast before them became a whole lot more welcoming.

Gabby nodded as she watched her two rejuvenated companions make their way to a pair of open seats so that they too could enjoy the feast. She returned to the wall to stand beside Mistwillow, resigned to wait without eating.

“Miss Gabriella!” A sonorous voice called across the hall. It was the ogre leader, waving at her from the center of the room. “My brothers and I would like to see if you really can eat like you drink! Won’t you join us?”

Gabby waved back. “Thank you, but-”

“I insist! Feast with us champion of Windbrisk!”

Gabby grinned, her self-control quickly vanishing. “Well...Okay!” She skipped down the steps, turning at the bottom to look back at Mistwillow. “You want anything, Misty?”

“No!” Mistwillow spat. “I’m never touching this disgusting human-”

Gabby tilted her nose up, taking a deep sniff. She gave Mistwillow a knowing look. “They’ve got another chocolate cake...”

Mistwillow froze, her nostrils flared, her eyes glazed over, her jaw fell open slightly. Suddenly aware of herself, she composed herself...before quickly trotting down the stairs to follow Gabby into the feast. Gabby smiled back at the elf as they made their way through the crowd to where the ogre leader sat.

“Just...shut up” Mistwillow grumbled.

Gabby giggled “I didn’t say anything...”

Another town saved from peril...Well, saved from self-inflicted peril... by Templeton’s Three! With peace brokered between the good people of Windbrisk and the ogres, the Three were able to set off further into the continent with a clear conscience...and bellies full of food.

Speaking of bellies full of food: Mistwillow only consumed half the cake at this second feast...but only because Gabby ate the other half before the elf could get it!

Templeton’s Three will return in “Slimes are a Girl’s Best Friend!”